

**MIGRATING SUBJECTS: THE PROBLEM OF THE “PEASANT” IN
CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART**

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My dissertation, *Migrating Subjects: The Problem of the “peasant” in contemporary Chinese Art* presents the narrative of contemporary artworks in China made about marginalized communities, as exemplified by migrant workers and rural inhabitants, from the 1990s to the present. These groups, often referred to as *nongmin* in popular discourse, were upheld as revolutionary heroes throughout much of the 20th century, but lost their cultural valence with the onset of China’s integration with global market mechanisms in the late 1970s. By examining artworks involving *nongmin* participation from the 1990s to the present, this study explores, for the first time, the ways in which Chinese artists have continued to make art with the goal of helping these communities against the background of contemporary artists’ own cultural marginalization in the early 1990s, their acceptance into the international art arena over the turn of the century, and their provisional embrace by the Chinese central government at the beginning of the 21st century. It considers the new relational possibilities introduced when a time-honored subject (the “peasant”) is approached through the direct participation of *nongmin* communities in comparison to imagistic renderings in traditional media. Through this historical narrative, I argue that the Chinese “peasant” in contemporary art, as in the early 20th century, continues to be considered a key factor for the indigenous development of a utopian Chinese society under the changing circumstances brought about by globalization.

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PREFACE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In 1997, artist Zhang Huan (张洵) posed for a photograph standing in a pond with forty migrant workers, rural “peasants” who had moved to the city to make living under the conditions of market reform. This was the first time a Chinese artist invited migrant workers to pose and perform in a work of contemporary art, initiating a trend that lasted for the next seven years. In 2010 artist Cai Guo-Qiang (蔡国强) curated an exhibition titled *Peasant Da Vincis* 《蔡国强：农民达芬奇》，in which he exhibited the inventions of over fifty “peasants” from throughout China at the Rockbund Museum in Shanghai. Set to open at the same time as the Shanghai Expo, a modern world’s fair touting Shanghai’s growing cultural and economic prominence as a global super-city, Cai’s project was meant to draw attention to the creative spirit of the lower rungs of Chinese society who had been responsible for the physical construction of cities like Shanghai. In 2012 artist and curator Qu Yan (渠岩) established an international arts festival and commune in Xucun Village 《许村国际公社》，Shanxi province, inviting international artists to participate in a three week residency program, ending with a festival in which the villagers perform and exhibit local dance and folk art and the international artists exhibit their painting, which remain in the commune as part of a local museum after the artists depart. What all of these works have in common is that they deal with a persistent problem in Chinese modern history: the problem of the cultural and economic disparity between China’s urban centers and vast rural hinterland.

Starting with Zhang Huan's 1997 work titled *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond* 《为鱼塘增高水位》, this is the first study to trace the narrative of the relationship between contemporary artists and marginalized communities as exemplified by rural inhabitants and migrant workers from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the present day. It brings to light the important history of the changing relationship between Chinese contemporary artists and vulnerable communities against the backdrop of the early-and mid-20th century preoccupation with the “peasant” as revolutionary hero and the internationalization of contemporary art. It argues that the figure of the Chinese “peasant” remains an important subject for contemporary artists under the conditions of globalization.

1.1 THE “PEASANT” IN CHINA

The title of this dissertation references the Chinese “peasant.” I use this word in quotation marks to point to its referential instability. Throughout the dissertation, rather than using the English word “peasant,” I use the Chinese word “*nongmin*” (农民) as it more precisely describes the subject matter with which I am dealing. Although *nongmin* is also the generally accepted translation of the English word “peasant,” it has its own unique set of historically grounded connotations. In Chinese “nong” refers to the “countryside” or “agricultural land” while “min” means “citizen.” The word was introduced into the Chinese lexicon from Japan in the late 19th and early 20th century and referred to peasants within a feudalist system.¹ Myron Cohen argues

¹ Y.M. Feuerwerker, *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant “Other” in Modern Chinese Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 25-32.

that because it was a loanword without historical baggage, it was appropriated by intellectuals of the early 20th century as a term to refer to China's vast uneducated and impoverished rural population. It was a rhetorical device used by urban intellectuals to name the feudal, backward, and ignorant elements of society that needed to be changed in order to modernize the country.² Once the Communist Party rose to power, it became an official class designation, and those considered "nongmin" were held in high esteem as the heroes of the revolution. In 1958 Mao Zedong incorporated the household registration (*hukou* 户口) system into law, in which individuals were given one of two registration identities: *nongye hukou* 农业户口 (agricultural registration) or *feinong hukou* 非农户口 (urban registration). Since its inception, those with a *nongye hukou* could not freely travel to the cities without special permission. Furthermore, those with *feinong hukous* were eligible for state-funded jobs and welfare, unlike those with rural *hukous*.³ In the 1980s, after Deng Xiaoping's initiation of economic reforms at the end of the Cultural Revolution, agricultural land was decollectivized, but with the introduction of a private sector, many individual farms could not compete. As China's economic base changed from agricultural to industrial, the *hukou* system remained intact, creating extreme economic and social turmoil for the millions of migrant workers who moved to the cities for the chance at a better life. Because they lack a city *hukou*, they are also ineligible for social benefits such as healthcare and education that those with a *fei-nongye hukou* continue to enjoy. Now, the term *nongmin* is commonly used to describe those with a *nongye hukou*, rather than as a designation for a farmer or landless peasant. Therefore, migrant workers (although their official translation is

² Myron Cohen, "Cultural and Political Inventions in modern China: the case of the Chinese "peasant," *Daedalus* 122.2 (Spring 1993): 153.

³ Sally Sargeson, "A Predictable End? China's Peasantry as a class, past, peasant and imagined future" in *Handbook on class and social stratification in China*, ed. Yingjie Guo (Cheltenham and Camberly, UK, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016), 386.

nongmingong 农民工, or “agricultural worker”) and rural inhabitants alike are referred to as *nongmin* in popular discourse. Although the works described in this dissertation begin with urban centers and end with rural villages, all are concerned with *nongmin*, ie. people with agricultural *hukous* whose lives have become more precarious because of the changes brought on by globalization. Because of the structural inequalities faced by those with *nongye hukou*, *nongmin* and *nongmingong* are commonly described in Chinese as representatives of *ruoshi qunti* 弱势群体, or “vulnerable communities” within the social stratification of contemporary Chinese society. Throughout the dissertation, therefore, following the terms used by the artists themselves, I use the terms *nongmin* and “vulnerable communities” as general terms to describe the rural-and urban-based non-artist participants in the artworks described.

The phrase “the problem of the “peasant” in the title of this dissertation is borrowed from social scientist Wen Tiejun’s 温铁军 seminal article written in 1999 in which he points out that the central government’s plan for modernization (based on market-oriented urban development), since the 1980s has overlooked the multidimensional needs of the countryside. He argued that the only way that China could save the countryside was through sustained attention to the needs of rural inhabitants, rural culture, and agriculture.⁴ Wen’s theory had a huge impact on dominant discourse surrounding China’s continued modernization after the turn of the century and influenced a shift in governmental policy which redirected attention back to the development of the countryside after a long period of market-based development relying on modernization of urban centers. By evoking Wen’s theory, this dissertation argues that the issue of the *nongmin* has remained an important subject in Chinese contemporary art to the present day. By including

⁴ See Wen Tiejun 温铁军, “‘Three Rural Problems:’ Reflections at the End of the Century” 《三农问题：世纪末的反思》, *Dushu* 《读书》 (December 12, 1999) :3-11.

urban-based works from the late 1990s within this framework, I argue that since the end of the Cultural Revolution, “the problem of the peasant,” as conceptualized in the realm of contemporary art, is not necessarily geographically tied to the countryside itself. Rather, it has deeply impacted urban, semi-urban, and rural China, with artists undertaking projects related to this issue in all three of these locales.

1.2 *NONGMIN*, POLITICS, AND ART UNDER MAO

Mao Zedong’s unique revolutionary theory, based on Marxism/Leninism modified for China’s specific situation, relied on rural China as its revolutionary base, ultimately differentiating it as an agrarian and populist revolution in contrast to the urban-based Nationalist party and Marxist models of proletariat revolution. Art and literature played an important role in Mao’s vision for revolution and throughout most of the 20th century, politics were indelibly tied to art creation.⁵ In 1942 Mao Zedong delivered his well-known speech, now referred to in English as his *Yan’an Talks on Art and Literature* 《在延安文艺座谈会的讲话》, in which he called for artists to “...identify with the masses and with the CCP; ...to be clear that their audience was the workers, peasants, and soldiers” and “ ...to be familiar with and sympathetic to the workers, peasants, and soldiers...”⁶ This meant that they were to use everyday scenes from the lives of the masses in order to awaken them with inspiration to unite and struggle to transform their environment. He wanted a fusion of the thoughts and feelings of the writers and artists with those of the workers,

⁵ For a thorough analysis of the relationship between art and politics during the Mao era, see Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁶ Bonnie S. McDougall and Mao Zedong, “Mao Zedong’s ‘Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art’: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary,” *Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies*, no. 39 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1980).

peasants, and soldiers. At various periods throughout the next four decades, professional artists and their students were among those to be “sent down” to the countryside to fulfill Mao’s mission. In addition to participating in manual labor, artists were responsible for creating paintings and drawings which recorded the process. Amateur peasants also attended painting classes and two times throughout the 20th century their paintings were upheld as model socialist art.⁷ Propaganda paintings were mass-produced and distributed widely, typically portraying happy and healthy peasants, soldiers, and workers toiling to achieve an ideal socialist reality. Mao’s revolutionary strategy involved a strong focus on industrialization and relied heavily on the labor of the vast rural population (who were restricted by the *hukou* law from leaving the countryside after 1958) to fund urban industrial projects. Meeting the ever-expanding grain and steel quotas enforced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) made rural commune life difficult. Propaganda paintings (in the form of murals, paintings, and poster reproductions) were meant to raise the spirits of the peasant population, demonstrating the importance of their hard work for the creation of an ideal socialist world. The Cultural Revolution began in 1966. It was during these ten years that the greatest amount of effort was put into eliminating the difference between the classes of the “masses” and the artist/intellectual. In fact, Gao Minglu explains that by the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the proletarian masses “...were no longer the objects served by art; instead they became the masters of art. Workers and peasants could themselves be artists...”⁸ In the art world, the result, theoretically, was the further development of style and content that represented all the people. There were no longer specific art styles designated for specific classes. This led to a blurring of the line between artist and masses, subject and object.

⁷ Peasant paintings were celebrated most by the CCP in 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, and in the 1970s, at the height of the Cultural Revolution.

⁸ Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Beijing and Buffalo, NY: China Millennium Art Museum, Albright Knox Art Gallery, and University at Buffalo Art Galleries), 58.

The art promoted by Jiang Qing 江青(Mao's wife), was "Red, Light, and Bright" (红光亮), following many of the conventions of Soviet Socialist Realism developed in the 1950s, featuring happy and healthy workers, peasants, and soldiers, and Mao Zedong depicted in bright monochromatic colors, thick black outlines, accompanied by communist slogans. Collaborative production of art was encouraged, with many oil paintings produced by teams of professional and non-professional artists. Art was to be created through mass criticism and joint discussion between three groups: the Party, the worker/masses, and artistic professionals. In this way the idealism promoted by Mao in the Yan'an talks was perpetuated in the 1970s.

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 with the death of Mao Zedong. After Mao's death, many artists who had been "sent down youth" during the Cultural Revolution,⁹ continued to paint the rural subject. Rather than using Soviet Socialist Realism, a style that dominated propaganda paintings of the previous ten years, they experimented with various other forms of realism in their attempt to reveal the truth about the effects that Mao's revolution had on this population, a reality that the artists witnessed firsthand as youngsters.

Artist Chen Danqing (陈丹青), for example, used French Realism to depict Tibetan people, and artist Luo Zhongli (罗中立) used photo-realism to depict a peasant. These stylistic choices by Chen and Luo were a direct result of the influx of Western art into China through exhibitions and art journals in the late 1970s. Chen, for example, was inspired by an exhibition of French 19th century rustic landscape painting exhibition held in 1978 at the National Museum of Art.¹⁰ Luo was inspired by reproductions of photo-realist drawings by Chuck Close that he

⁹ "Sent down youth" refers to educated urban youth who were sent to the countryside under the orders of Mao Zedong for the purpose of re-education at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

¹⁰ This exhibition was organized as a token of reconciliation between China and France. The French Ministry of Culture offered to let China borrow any artworks from the top museums in Paris. Because of the cultural controls

had seen in an art journal.¹¹ Both examples indicate the impact of Western styles and reveal the specificity with which certain types of realism were associated with varied ideological connotations. The Chinese public were shocked by the new forms of realism they saw, amazed at its ability to express so much more about the subject than its revolutionary precursor. However, in reading criticism about these works, especially those published about Luo Zhongli's *Father* 《父亲》 in *Meishu* 《美术》, China's leading official art journal, it is clear that the world of art criticism in China was still very much ensconced in a socialist world view. For example, Zeng Jingchu (曾景初), in a particularly celebratory article, argued "He is not just anyone's father, he is the father of the 800 million peasants who have experienced ten years of great calamity in my country. It is also the image of the contemporary Chinese peasant."¹² With regards to beauty, a long-held yard stick for art criticism in China, Zeng argued that as long as the form is familiar to the masses, so they can understand, then it is beautiful. Shao Yangde (邵养德), on the other hand, vehemently criticized Luo's painting for highlighting the negative physical attributes of the peasant's face, arguing that the job of guarding manure was not as difficult as his weathered face may suggest. Even though Luo declared this figure to be a "new" peasant, as opposed to an "old" peasant, Shao argues that it is clearly an old peasant. A new peasant, according to Shao, labors for the purpose of finding happiness in the future, while the old peasant did not have that kind of hope. In the end, Shao concludes that Luo only emphasized the "dark" aspects of the peasant's

still in place, China was only able to accept landscape and peasant paintings. This was the first show of foreign art in Beijing since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Chen Danqing, interview with author, June 2015, Beijing.

¹¹ Luo Zhongli 罗中立, "Sichuanese young Artist Discusses his Creation" 《四川青年画家谈创作》, *Meishu* 《美术》 (1981.1): 44.

¹² Zeng Jingchu 曾景初, "What to paint, how to paint, where is the beauty" 《画什么·怎么画·美在哪里》, *Meishu* No. 3 (1981): 23. (quotation translated by author).

appearance to show off his own painting ability.¹³ These arguments reveal that for some time after the death of Mao Zedong, the peasant remained an important symbol for China as a whole; the peasant's destiny was China's destiny.

1.3 *NONGMIN*, POLITICS, AND CONTEMPORARY ART SINCE THE 1980S

The politicized nature of the “peasant” throughout most of the 20th century and the ideological connotations of class identity with mainland China up to present-day means that any visual representation of the *nongmin* must be examined within the context of socio-political developments. This dissertation argues that the changes in the relationship between artists and *nongmin* from the 1990s to the present are related to larger economic and political reforms related to urban/rural integration and household registration for rural inhabitants. Because the works throughout this dissertation demonstrate, in diverse ways, a desire to help economically underprivileged *nongmin* communities, their works can be seen as reacting against, supplementing, or supporting governmental policies which are themselves aimed at both integrating into the global market economy and working towards greater social equality.

The economic reforms announced by Deng Xiaoping at the end of the 1970s involved the introduction of foreign investment, which largely funded the development of primary urban centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.¹⁴ During the 1980s, China's rural areas

¹³ Shao Yangde 邵养德, “Create, Appreciate, Discuss – Reading Father with commentators’ analysis” 《创作·欣赏·评论——读《父亲》并与有关评论者商榷》, *Meishu* No. 9 (1981): 56-59.

¹⁴ Youqing Huang, “Urban Development in Contemporary China,” in *China's Geography: Globalization and the Dynamics of Political, Economic, and Social Change*, ed. Gregory Veek, Clifton W. Pannell, Christopher J. Smith, and Youqin Huang (Boulder, CO: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 246.

transitioned fully from communes to the Household Responsibility System (家庭联产承包责任制), which gave individual families control over plots of land, lowered the grain quotas required by the government, and allowed individual enterprises to sell remaining grain on the market. This was a happy medium between state and market control as families continued to enjoy state subsidies, but could also make a profit on the market. It was effective at first, but by the 1990s the economic pressures on the countryside, including the continuation of a centuries-old agricultural tax, lack of state support for infrastructural development, and the state's placing of caps on the price of agricultural goods for the continued benefit of urbanization, caused many farmers to go out of business.¹⁵ By the mid-1980s, the government had set up millions of Township and Village enterprises (TVEs) throughout the country, which were market-oriented, but under the purview of the central government. In 1984, the State Council issued a policy that allowed peasants to legally travel to cities as long as they had somewhere to sleep.¹⁶ Millions of former farmers moved to nearby villages and towns and provided cheap labor (they did not receive subsidized housing, pensions, medical care, or other benefits) for the TVEs. However, by the mid-1990s, most had gone bankrupt, and farmers who had left their land to work at TVEs in the villages were left without a job. Many had no choice but to move to the cities to work and live, often illegally, barred from the social support (health insurance, children's education, pensions, etc.) that comes with an urban-based *hukou*.

The maintenance of the *hukou* system, the emphasis on urban development as part of China's economic reform, and the process of de-collectivization resulted in a heightening of the urban-rural cultural and economic disparities. This phenomenon was reflected in film, literature,

¹⁵ For more information about the problems facing the Household Responsibility System in the age of reforms, see Minzi Su, *China's Rural Development Policy: Exploring the "New Socialist Countryside"* (Boulder and London: First Forum Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Youqing Huang, 247.

and art in the 1980s and 1990s in which the rural and urban were envisioned in a dialectical relationship. For example, a group of film directors who became known as the “Sixth Generation” or “Urban Generation,” focused on down-and-out or “regular” inhabitants within city centers. This shift in focus differentiated them from the “Fifth Generation” who made epic films set in China’s rural hinterlands as allegories for the deleterious effects of China’s modernization. In the realm of literature, *xungen* literature 寻根 (“root searching” literature), inspired by magical realism, was also set in the countryside and focused on minority groups, local cultures, and the countryside to metaphorically explore and critique China’s path to modernization. This was in stark contrast to “hooligan literature,” a genre spearheaded by writer Wang Shuo (王朔), who focused his attention on disaffected youth who were un-tethered to a State-run work unit, trying any means possible to take advantage of the new market economy and make money in China’s growing urban centers. During the middle of the 1980s, a loosening of governmental controls over the production of contemporary art led to the formation of hundreds of artist groups throughout the country, a phenomenon that was coined by Gao Minglu as “The ’85 Movement.” Although it was called a movement, there was no single style or artistic approach that unified the participating artists. Within the ’85 movement there is also a discernible rural/urban dichotomy, with city-based artists such as Li Guijun (李贵君) and Yuan Qingyi (袁庆一) making rationalist realist paintings of themselves and their close friends, depicted as intellectuals in sparse, modern interiors. The “Current of Life” painters, on the other hand, depicted primitivistic and abstracted scenes set in the countryside as a way of pushing against urban-based modernization.

Artist Song Yongping’s (宋永平) early countryside projects reveal another important association that contemporary artists made with rural China in the 1980s and 1990s. While

xungen literature, 5th generation filmmakers, and rustic realists depicted the countryside and rural people with various forms of romantic realism, using it as a symbol for historically grounded societal problems in the wake of economic reforms, other artists saw the countryside as an escape from governmental censorship.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Song initiated a series of projects to take place in the countryside, outside of his hometown of Taiyuan in Shanxi province. Of these, two were not realized because of lack of funding. The two that were completed were a day-long project in the countryside for a documentary film about the '85 Movement headed by Gao Minglu and director of CCTV at the time, Li Shaowu, and a longer-term project initiated in 1993. For the latter, more comprehensive project, titled the *Country Life Plan* 《乡村计划》, Song and artist Wang Yazhong (王亚中) organized a group of artists to spend 45 days in Liujiashan village, Liulin county, Shanxi province, living, creating, and discussing art. While their initial idea was to live with local families and make art in their homes, in the end they realized this was an impractical idea.¹⁷ Instead, they lived in an empty temple dedicated to a folk doctor. Wang Yazhong describes that they hoped that being in this new environment and speaking with the *nongmin* would allow them to feel that which is “innate and fundamental about humanity.”¹⁸ Such a romantic view of the countryside aligns with the ideas of the roots-seeking (*xungen*) authors. In this project, the most interesting thing for Song and his colleagues was not the response of the local people to the art, but rather the new meaning that the setting of the countryside could add to modern art works. Karen Smith writes, “It was hoped to rediscover why they themselves were driven to create, to make art in an environment that implied it futile; through this, to comprehend

¹⁷ Song Yongping, interview with the author, January 2015, Beijing, China.

¹⁸ Wang Yazhong, *Countryside Project, 1993* 《乡村计划 1993》(Taiyuan: Shanxi Accessible Cultural Dissemination Company), 5. Unofficial publication, Gao Minglu Archive, Pittsburgh, PA.

more of the nature of culture that dictates art as it inspires the activity.”¹⁹ While the work did not take rural themes as its subject matter, it was indirectly inspired by their surroundings. Smith goes on to say

The artists won a slow bond of trust with the people. Their existence offered a way for the artists to gain a new perspective on their own lives and their role within society as modern artists. The hardships of the people’s reality seeped into the artists work as a bleak pessimism, painted worlds with harsh features, reflecting human propensity for creating a social machine which they can not [sic] control, with no known antidotes for the viruses that cause it to break down.²⁰

The relationship between two such disparate entities (modern art/urban artists, and the countryside) created a new significance that could not be found in the culturally oppressive environment of urban centers. The artists saw the countryside as a place of freedom where they could hold discussions and create work without impediments by the local authorities. In a small publication about the project, Song celebrated the freedom he felt in the countryside in comparison to the city. Song wrote, “The museum and gallery are the graveyards of art.”²¹ It was also attractive because it was much cheaper than the cities, where the cost of living was rising daily. Song’s project garnered much attention and an exhibition of the work made while in the countryside was scheduled for August of 1993 at the China Art Gallery in Beijing. However, the exhibition was shut down by authorities before its opening.

Two years later, Song and Wang wanted to initiate *Country Life Plan: Stage Two*, a project that was never realized due to lack of funding. The proposed project foreshadowed recent projects in the countryside involving the participation of international contemporary artists. However, in this case, too, the countryside was seen as the locale where contemporary artists could discover themselves, rather than being a means to understanding more about the

¹⁹ Karen Smith, *Country Life Plan Stage Two plan* (unpublished), given to author by Song Yongping, page 2.

²⁰ Smith, 2.

²¹ Song Yongping, *Countryside Project* 1993, 5.

countryside. The incorporation of foreigners was seen as an antidote to the relatively closed-off culture of the Chinese contemporary art world, in which “. . . Chinese artists create within an intimate artistic exchange between friends and acquaintances, with work hung within the confines of studios where the artists can be offered little new perspective on their work.”²² The project was meant to provide the opportunity to discuss contemporary art across national boundaries as well as provide “a unique experience for foreign artists.”²³ It was organized to begin with an initial week in Beijing, a month in the Shanxi countryside, and a month of preparation for an exhibition of work made during the residency, to be held in a venue in Beijing. Due to financial restrictions, this project was never completed, but the effort provides further indication of artists’ vision and use of the countryside in the 1980s and 1990s, which differs immensely from more recent rural-based projects.

In the 1990s some policy reforms were put into place to try to deal with the overabundance of rural labor. For example, in 1992, the government released its “blue stamp” *hukou* policy which allowed for those who invested in urban real estate, those who obtained a white collar jobs, and those who were willing to pay a large sum of money to transfer their *hukou* status from rural to urban.²⁴ Overall, however, the central government put most of its resources into urban development while overlooking the enormous toll this neglect was taking on rural and impoverished Chinese citizens. An illustrative example of the government’s lack of focus on rural development throughout the 1990s is the fact that throughout the 1980s, and again after 2004, the government released an annual Document Number 1, which outlined its plans for agricultural development and reform. Throughout the 1990s and early years of the 21st century, it

²² Smith, 3.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ C. Cindy Fan, “Migration, Hukou, and the Chinese City,” in *China Urbanizes: Consequences, Strategies, and Policies*, ed. Shahid Yusuf and Anthony Saich (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2008), 67.

did not. Meanwhile, in the 1990s China relied heavily on the manufacturing sector, as part of its export-processing industry, that employed millions of unskilled migrant workers with rural *hukous*.²⁵ Although governmental policies did little to support migrant workers at the time, Kam Wing Chan argues that “By the mid-1990s, workers with a rural *hukou* had become the backbone of the export industry, and, more generally, the manufacturing sector.”²⁶ The economic disparities between rural and urban China increased during this time²⁷ and much of the art created throughout the 1990s is a direct response to the influx of illegal migrant workers, rapid urban development, and cultural materialism brought about by the wholesale embrace of the market economy. The works in chapter 1, which all took place between 1997 and 2003, though different in their outcome, all sought to make visible this population that had been overlooked and discriminated against by both mainstream culture and the policies of the CCP. In this way, works like these could be seen as a criticism of governmental policies that led to the internal migration of millions of laborers, but did not provide support. However, in 2003, according to a report by Ye Xingqing,

...the government shifted to encouraging and supporting rural labour entering the cities, demanding that a unified urban-rural human resource market be established, carrying out training to facilitate occupational transfer, and strengthening the protection of the rights of the rural-to-urban migrants.²⁸

This was also the year that UNESCO and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (affiliated with the PRC’s State Council) sponsored the first art exhibition dedicated to the problem of

²⁵ Kam Wing Chan, “The Global Financial Crisis and Migrant Workers in China: ‘There is no Future as a Laborer; Returning to the village has no meaning,’” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34.3 (Sept. 2010): 662-663.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For more information on the urban-rural economic gap in the 1990s, see Terry Sicular, Yue Ximing, Björn Gustafsson, Li Shi, “The Urban-Rural Income Gap and Inequality in China,” *The Review of Income and Wealth* 53.1 (March 2007): 93-126; Albert Park, “Rural-Urban Inequality in China” in *China Urbanizes: Consequences, Strategies, and Policies*, ed. Shahid Yusuf and Anthony Saich (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2008), 41-63.

²⁸ Ye Xingqing, 129.

internal migration in China, which featured both Wang Jin's *100%* and Song Dong's *Together with Migrant Workers* (both of which will be discussed in Chapter 1). This event may have been directly related to the central government's change in policy.

In 2001 China entered the World Trade Organization. One effect of this was further liberalization of the economy and the increase of foreign owned companies, and factories, on Chinese soil. As foreign owned firms tended to pay their workers better and provide safer work conditions, members of the WTO hoped that this would improve China's human rights issues.²⁹ One year later, at the 2002 Sixteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, it was announced that the central government would begin to focus on rural-urban integration. This was a direct result of Wen Tiejun's pivotal 1999 publication "'Three Rural Problems: Reflections at the End of the Century'" 《'三农问题' 世纪末的反思》 in which he renounced economic reforms throughout the 1990s because of the fact that they envisioned the countryside and the city as two separate entities, rather than an integrated whole.³⁰ In 2004, the aforementioned Document Number 1 once again began to be published. In 2006, President Hu Jintao announced plans to develop a "new socialist countryside." Part of this involved the elimination of the agricultural tax, removing some of the financial burden of rural dwellers. In the 2008 Third Plenary session of the Seventeenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the central government announced a plan to encourage development in the countryside through sending highly qualified teachers to rural areas and to make internal migration easier through increasing the conditions under which the rural *hukous* can be transferred to small and medium sized urban *hukous*, and strengthening migrant workers' rights and remuneration within cities.

²⁹ Betül Yüce Dural, "What has Changed After the World Trade Organization Membership in China: Opportunities and Challenges," pg. 4, 2007, accessed March 8, 2018, <http://www.etsg.org/ETSG2007/papers/yuce.pdf>.

³⁰ Wen Tiejun, "'Three Rural Problems,..." translated into English as "Centenary Reflections on the 'Three Dimensional Problem' of Rural China," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (August 2001): 287-95.

This marks an initial phase of the central government's shifting attention from urban development to issues of internal migration and rural development in order to deal with increased urban-rural economic disparities as a result of increased international investment, which often took the form of factories in the outskirts of large urban centers.

The further internationalization of the market economy as demonstrated by the accession of China into the World Trade Organization and the continued growth of China's economy through increased bilateral trade, provides a context within which to understand the works discussed in Chapter 2. These economic reforms impacted the contemporary Chinese art world.

Paul Gladston describes:

The accelerated development of PRC's infrastructure since the early 2000s has not only included manufacturing, finance, and communications, but also the art market and creative industries sector...One of the consequences of this growth was a major and increasingly large injection of international capital into the indigenous Chinese art market.³¹

These developments are evident in at least three aspects of the artworks discussed in Chapter 2, most of which occurred in the first decade of the 21st century. First of all, many of the artists discussed (especially in the first "mode") had already reaped the benefits of the international investment into Chinese art. Their attempts to draw the world's attention to the creations of *nongmin* communities could not have been possible if they themselves had not already been accepted within this world. Secondly, these works could also be seen as a reaction to the popular global perception of China during this period, which primarily focused on China's booming economy and rapid urbanization. Gladston has pointed out, for example, that works like *The Long March Project: A Walking Visual Display* (2002) were an attempt to "open up new

³¹ Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 226.

perspectives on China's political, social, cultural and economic history.”³² I argue that other works discussed throughout Chapter 2 similarly try to reveal other aspects of Chinese reality, beyond those directly observable in international reportage. Thirdly, the works that engage with migrant workers in Chapter 2 are significantly different than those in Chapter 1. While in Chapter 1, the artists primarily engaged with construction laborers in the cities, those in Chapter 2 focus on factory workers in internationally-owned companies on mainland China. This reflects the increase in international investment in Chinese manufacturing as a result of the liberalization of trading laws due to accession into the WTO and the attraction of China's cheap labor force for international corporations.

In 2008, the entire world reeled from the global economic crisis. The Chinese government conceded that the social group most affected (domestically) by the global financial crisis were migrant workers.³³ Hundreds of thousands of factories were closed as a result and millions of migrant workers were let go without pay, leading to many migrant labor protests throughout the country, but especially in the centers of manufacturing in and around big cities on the East Coast.³⁴ In response, the government announced a campaign called “back to the village to construct a new countryside” that encouraged migrant workers to return to the countryside and start their own businesses or to farm their land.³⁵ The government also sent money to local governments for vocational training programs for migrant workers who had returned home. In November of 2016, the central government released a series of guidelines that encouraged

³² Gladston, 229.

³³ Fu, J. and T. Si (2009) “Migrant workers ‘worst hit’ by financial crisis,” *China Daily*, March 12, 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2009npc/2009-03/12/content_7571944.htm.

³⁴ “China: Recession; Taiwan, Hong Kong,” *Migration News*, July, 2010, https://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=3534_0_3_0

³⁵ “Managing the country: Energetic support for migrant workers returning to the villages to commit themselves to building a new countryside” 《国办:大力支持农民工返乡创业和投身新农村建》, *Xinhua Net* 《新华网》, December 21, 2008, http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2008-12/21/content_16982435.htm

migrant workers to set up their own enterprises in rural areas as part of its larger attempt at rural development.³⁶ In February of 2018, the government announced a plan to further invest in rural farming and “development in digital agriculture” as part of its plan to reduce rural poverty.³⁷ The Number 1 Document, released in 2018, reaffirmed its commitment to agricultural development, stating the need for proper planning, involving the relocation of rural inhabitants from areas of harsh living conditions, the increase of public services in well-developed villages, and the protection of rural areas with rich natural and cultural resources.³⁸

Works involving *nongmin* participation in the last 15 years or so, have followed a parallel trajectory to governmental initiatives in that both have redirected their attention to the solving the problems that still plague China’s rural inhabitants. Both the official policies and the artworks discussed in Chapter 3 share the common goal of solving China’s continuing “peasant problem.” While the government takes a top-down approach, resulting in uneven implementation, interpretation, and effectiveness of rural reforms depending on local conditions and the dependability of local cadres, recent artworks in impoverished communities take a grass-roots approach which share much in common with NGOs dedicated to rural poverty relief. In fact, the projects explored in Chapter 3 function in ways that do not directly engage with the exhibition and funding mechanisms of the international art world the way they did in Chapter 2. This could be seen as a result of the dampening enthusiasm in the promises of international market integration improving the most basic problems of economic inequality that continue to plague

³⁶ “Migrant workers return home to thrive in creative new business enterprises,” *China Daily*, December 5, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-12/05/content_27567499.htm.

³⁷ Dominique Patton, “China seeks to rejuvenate countryside with 2018 rural policy,” *Reuters*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-policy-agriculture/china-seeks-to-rejuvenate-countryside-with-2018-rural-policy-idUKKBN1FPONO>

³⁸ “The opinion of the Chinese Communist Central Committee concerning how to carry out a rural development strategy” 《中共中央 国务院关于实施乡村振兴战略的意见》, *Xinhua News Agency* 《新华社》, February 4, 2018, accessed March 27, 2018, http://www.moa.gov.cn/ztl/yhwj2018/zyyhj/201802/t20180205_6136410.htm.

China. Art practice related to China's *nongmin* population, like governmental policy, seems to be making an inward turn, or perhaps a better term is a "return" to the countryside after decades of focus on international investment in urban development.

1.4 THE MARGINALIZED ARTIST

During the last few years of the 1980s, the central government once again tightened restrictions on free cultural expression. This tense environment came to a head with the democracy demonstrations of 1989. Spearheaded by university students from throughout China, the protesters, among other things, demanded an end to the one-party rule governing China. Intellectuals from all parts of the country participated, hoping that the government would hear their voices in the process of great economic reform and an increasingly conservative cultural environment.³⁹ This group included journalists, artists, musicians, writers, theorists, students, workers etc. and was primarily urban-based. Throughout the demonstrations, there was an undertone of prejudice among many of these urban-based intellectuals against rural "peasants":

To many activists, peasants were simply the enemy of democracy. Intellectuals and workers alike distrusted peasants. The ill will, which intensified after troop movements began around Beijing and other cities in 1989, derived partly from the perception that peasants were the backbone of the government's armed threat. City dwellers were frightened of China's peasant army. They perceived the military (recruited mainly from the countryside) as a force of simple-minded soldiers readily manipulated by the government.⁴⁰

³⁹ For more on the variety of reasons behind the demonstrations, see Wang Hui, "The 1989 Social Movement and the Historical Roots of China's Neoliberalism," *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, ed. Theodore Huters (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 46-77.

⁴⁰ Daniel Kelliher, "Keeping Democracy Safe from the Masses Intellectuals and Elitism in the Chinese Protest Movement," *Comparative Politics* 25.4 (1993): 388.

The demonstrations ended in tragedy when the central government declared martial law in Beijing, sending troops and tanks into Tiananmen Square, the headquarters of the protest, killing hundreds, if not thousands, of protesters in the process.

After 1989, the intellectuals who had been most overtly complicit with the government were simply absorbed into its orbit. However, many intellectuals who marched with the student protesters were fired from their jobs, imprisoned, and ultimately ostracized from mainstream society. The cultural climate shut down any possibility for creative experimentation and the making and exhibition of contemporary art was not tolerated by the State. Many contemporary artists left the country and those that remained were forced to find alternative, underground methods to make and exhibit art. At the same time, many young contemporary Chinese artists took advantage of the opportunities provided by the market reforms (including a loosening on rules related to interior migration) to move to larger cities in order to make a living through their art. They were generally very poor and lived in communities with other societal “outsiders” including migrant workers. While all cultural workers making experimental art outside of the realm of official academic realism and traditional ink paintings were marginalized from both official and commercial support in the early- and middle-1990s, those with an urban *hukou* (either through affiliation with an academy or work-unit or through place-of-birth) were less suspect to local authorities. For example, in 1994 artists Ma Liuming (马六明), Zhu Ming (朱銘), and Zhang Huan were arrested in the East Village for pornography after staging performance artworks in the nude and having nude photographs of themselves in their studios. While Zhang Huan had also done a violent performance in the nude that day, he was released because of his affiliation as a graduate student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, while the

other two were imprisoned for 3 (Ma) and 4 (Zhu) month periods.⁴¹ By the turn of the 21st century, however, the *hukou* designation became less important for artists who started to make money from the international art market, thanks to the 1992 *hukou* reform which allowed those with enough money to purchase an urban-based *hukou*. This can, in part, explain why artworks involving artists assuming the subject-position of migrant worker began to fade out of popularity by the end of the decade. Almost all of the artists discussed within this dissertation are currently successful on an international level, and are considered elites within the domestic cultural economy. Therefore, an essential element of interpreting these works involving *nongmin* participation is the clear economic and cultural status differentiation that is inherent in each project. This explains why each chapter includes the designation “Other” to refer to the *nongmin* participants whose lives are still very much affected by the segregation inherent in the *hukou* system. While they make up a majority of the population, they still are marginalized from mainstream (urban, wealthy) culture.

Due to the vast political, socio-economic, and cultural changes that have occurred in China over the course of the 20th century, contemporary Chinese art is often historicized according to generations. Beyond the socio-political context, which this dissertation emphasizes, artists’ life experiences undoubtedly influence their choices of and approach to specific subject matter. This is particularly apropos when discussing works involving the Chinese “peasant,” given that a whole generation of artists came of age during the Cultural Revolution, many of whom were sent to the countryside during their youth. In fact, most of the artists working in the styles of Rustic Realism and Scar Painting in the late 1970s and early 1980s used their personal

⁴¹ Details of account found in Thomas Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2006), 110. This story was corroborated through a personal conversation with photographer Xing Danwen, who helped to get Zhang Huan out of prison through the connections of a foreign friend. Xing Danwen, personal communication with author, March 2015, Beijing.

experiences as Red Guards or sent down youth as the subject matter of their painting. Only two of the artists discussed in this dissertation, Qu Yan and Wu Wenguang (吴文光), are old enough to have felt the effects of the Cultural Revolution first-hand. Other artists became interested in the topic of the *nongmin* for varied, yet equally biographical reasons. Some artists, such as Song Dong (宋冬), Cao Fei (曹斐), Wang Wei (王卫), and Sun Yuan (孙原), were born in large urban centers such as Beijing and Guangzhou. They spent their formative years witnessing the extreme influx of migrant workers as part of China's urbanization, a process that altered their living environment in profound ways. By making work with and about *nongmin*, they were directly responding to changes in their living and working environments. Others, such as Zhang Huan, Ou Ning (欧宁), Jin Le (靳勒), Cai Guo-Qiang, and Li Mu(李牧) were raised in rural China, but have since moved to larger cities and travelled internationally for professional opportunities, a process which highlighted for them the vast cultural and economic discrepancies between cosmopolitan urban centers and their rural villages. For their rural-based projects, both Jin Le and Li Mu returned home, attempting to use the capital and networks accrued while away to improve the lives of their fellow villagers. Both Zhang Huan and Cai Guo-Qiang, two of the most internationally famous contemporary Chinese artists today, use the Chinese countryside and *nongmin* participants as a distinctly local foil to the globalized context in which they work, often emphasizing their rural origins for an international audience. The preponderance of works that engage with *nongmin* by artists across varying generations and from varying backgrounds testifies to the widespread and sustained influence of urban/rural inequality on multiple levels of Chinese culture.

1.5 INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Despite, and in part because of, this domestic cultural and political marginalization, the 1990s was the decade in which Chinese contemporary artists began to be embraced by the international contemporary art world. In fact, 1989 was the first year contemporary Chinese artists were invited to participate in an exhibition outside of China. Huang Yongping (黄永砵), Gu Dexin (顾德新), and Yang Jiechang (杨诒苍) were invited to participate in *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Georges Pompidou Center. This exhibition was groundbreaking in the world of contemporary art because it was the first to incorporate artists from East Asia and the global South and initiated many postcolonial debates about the politics of representation and identity in a globalized world.⁴² In January of 1993 *China's New Art, Post-1989* opened at the Hong Kong Art Center and subsequently traveled to Australia. This exhibition included around fifty artists and was highly influential in the promotion of contemporary Chinese art on a global scale.⁴³ 1993 was also the first year Chinese artists were invited to participate in the Venice Biennial, although they did not yet have their own pavilion.⁴⁴ This exposure gained some Chinese artists, especially those working in Cynical Realist and Political Pop styles, international fame and economic

⁴² For more information on the legacy of *Magiciens de la Terre* from a global perspective, see Lucy Steeds, Pablo Lafuente, *Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la Terre' 1989* (London: Afterall, 2013).

⁴³ See *China's New Art: Post-1989* 《后八九中国新艺术》, exhibition catalog (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993). For international reportage on the exhibition that travelled (in a pared down form) in Australia and the United States, see Geraldine Norman, "Art Market: A pot of paint in the face of Mao; Idealism died in China with the victims of Tiananmen Square. A bitter new avant-garde now mocks past icons," *The Independent* (UK), December 5, 1993: 100; Suzy Freeman-Greene, "McDonald's, Madonna and Mao," *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia), June 2, 1993, 19; David M. Raddock, "Regarding China's New Avant-Garde Artists," *The New Art Examiner* (Chicago) (February 1995): 30-33.

⁴⁴ For a critical perspective on the inclusion of Chinese artists in the 45th Venice Beinnale, see Wang Lin 王林, "Oliva is not the savior of Chinese Art," 《奥利瓦不是中国艺术的救星》, *Dushu* no. 10, (1993): 123-126; Hou Hanru, "Towards an 'Un-Unofficial Art': De-ideologicalisation of China's Contemporary Art in the 1990s," in *On the Mid-Ground: Hou Hanru*, ed. Yu Hsiao-Hwei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002).

stability. Gao Minglu's 1998 exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* in the Asia Society Galleries and P.S. 1 Museum in New York City was significant in introducing the world to artists working in less marketable media such as installation and performance, including many artists discussed in this dissertation.⁴⁵ Some of the same artists included in *Inside Out* were also included in the 48th Venice Biennial the following year.

Throughout this period, the Chinese central government was still wary of contemporary art creation and opportunities were limited by the self-censorship of artists and curators, as well as the frequent closing of exhibitions of contemporary art by local officials. Therefore, the 1990s was an interesting period in which contemporary artists remained largely unknown and unexhibited in mainland China but began to gain recognition in the international sphere. Subsequently, this international recognition was influential in the central government's conditional embrace of contemporary Chinese art as a form of soft power in the global context. Cai Guo-Qiang's *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* at the 1999 Venice Biennial won the Golden Lion Award.⁴⁶ In 2001, the third Shanghai Biennial was the first officially sponsored Chinese biennial to include international artists, and was a watershed moment in the central government's support of experimental avant-garde art on the mainland.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Gao Minglu, ed. *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, exhibition catalog (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); See also the following reviews of the exhibition/catalog: Judy Chungwa Ho, "Reviewed Work: *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* by Gao Minglu," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 58 no. 3 (Aug. 1999): 801-803; Michael Sullivan, "Reviewed Work: *Inside out: New Chinese Art* by Gao Minglu," *The China Quarterly*, No. 162 (June 2000): 583-585.

⁴⁶ "Seeing Red: Two Leading Art Fairs are showcasing new art from China," *The Economist*, June 23, 2005, <http://www.economist.com/node/4102281>. Fan Di'an is quoted as saying "Ever since Mr. Cai won the Golden Lion, the government has realized that art can be a good ambassador for China."

⁴⁷ For more on the larger importance of the 2000 Shanghai Biennial from a Chinese perspective, see Zhang Qing 张晴, "Transcending Left and Right The Shanghai Biennale Amid Transitions" 《超越左右—转折中的上海双年展》, *Jiangsu Huakan* 《江苏画刊》 240, no. 12 (2000): 4; Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生, "China's First Legitimate Modern Art Exhibition: The 2000 Shanghai Biennale (2000/2003)" "《中国第一次合法的现代艺术展：关于上海双年展》 in *Era of Criticism* 《批评的时代》, ed. Jia Fangzhou (Guangxi: Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003), 347-352; Wu Hung, "The 2000 Shanghai Biennale- The Making of a historical event," *ART AsiaPacific*, no. 31

The internationalization of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s, also resulting from the return to China of some artists who had moved abroad in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the exhibition of a small number of international contemporary artists within China's urban centers, inspired Chinese artists to experiment with new approaches and styles beyond the traditional forms of realist painting and sculpture that continued to dominate the Chinese academy.⁴⁸ Specifically, they began to experiment with new media, installation, and performance. These art forms could be created at a relatively low price and with minimal space, traits that were conducive to artists working in marginalization without institutional or commercial support. What is significant about this experimentation with new media for this study is that it changed the relational possibilities between contemporary artists and *nongmin* participants beyond that which was available in the traditional media of painting and sculpture. I argue that contemporary artworks involving *nongmin* communities are driven by a historically-grounded utopian desire for social equality that remains an important part of cultural production in postsocialist China today. In the first decade of the 21st century, this continuation of the humanitarian/socialist interest in the "peasant," among contemporary artists, resonated with postcolonial theories of global identity, center, and periphery that dominated the international art world at the time.⁴⁹

(2001): 42-49; Hou Hanru, "A Naked City: Curatorial Notes around the 2000 Shanghai Biennale" in *ART AsiaPacific* no. 31 (2001), 59-63.

⁴⁸ In the mid-1990s many artists returned to China after moving abroad in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They brought with them new ideas for the creation and exhibition of contemporary art. For example, in 1995 Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin returned to Beijing after living in New York City since the mid-1980s; Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing in 1993 after living in New York City for twelve years; Zhu Jinshi and Qin Yufen returned to China after living in Germany since 1986. Two of the most important exhibitions of foreign contemporary art in China during the 1980s and 1990s were Robert Rauschenberg's exhibition *ROCI CHINA* at the National Art Museum of China in 1985 and the exhibition of the British duo Gilbert and George at the same venue in 1993.

⁴⁹ An important example of an influential international exhibition organized around these themes is the 2002 *Documenta XI* which could be seen as both a reaction to and an extension of the goals of such exhibitions as *Magiciens de la Terre*. It was held at five different platforms with themes meant to reverse modernist notions of the (Western, Euro-American) center and the (Asian, global South, "third world") periphery. For more about its importance, see Anthony Downey, "The Spectacular Difference of Documenta XI," *Third Text* vol. 17 issue 1 (March 2003): 85-92.

The significance of these works in both the historical context of socialist paintings of and by “peasants” in Chinese modern art, along with the diversification of media and approach brought about by the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art, were the unique circumstances out of which “social practice” art involving *nongmin* developed.

1.6 INTERVENTION

This is the first study to introduce the narrative of contemporary works of art made since 1990 that centrally involve the participation of *nongmin*. The works I have chosen to discuss have, of course, been explored within larger surveys of contemporary art from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the present, or more narrow studies about topics such as peasants in art in the 1990s or urbanization, but have never been situated within this specific narrative.

The narrative presented in this dissertation is one that has been largely overlooked in both Chinese and English language surveys of the history of contemporary Chinese art. Most of these are organized chronologically and do not go past the year 2010. Therefore, when these studies were written, this narrative had perhaps not yet fully emerged. Gao Minglu is one of the historians to discuss performance works involving migrant workers, and has clearly held a sustained interest in them, as seen in his use of Zhang Huan’s *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond* on the cover of *the Inside Out: New Chinese Art* catalog and Wang Jin’s *100%* on the cover of his *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*. In both his exhibition catalog for *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (2006) and his survey on contemporary Chinese art, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (2011), he positions these works as part of a larger documentary trend in response to

urbanization in the 1990s. He argues this trend went beyond artists simply recording and intervening on their rapidly changing surroundings, to include works involving artists engaging in new ways with other members of society, who were also an important element of their daily reality.⁵⁰ This is interesting in light of Wu Hung's writings about urbanization and contemporary Chinese art, a topic that is part of his larger historicization in his exhibition *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* and his survey publication *Contemporary Chinese Art: 1970s-2000s*. In both cases, he is careful to discuss the changes brought about in contemporary Chinese art as a result of urbanization, including a tendency toward intervention and documentation. In his *Contemporary Chinese Art: 1970s-2000s*, he even points out that experimental artists in the 1990s moved beyond representation of subjects envisioned as separate from the self. "Experimental artists," he argues, "...found meaning only in their interaction with the surrounding world."⁵¹ While he includes many performances in which artists took on the subject position of migrant workers (such as Zhu Fadong (朱发东), Luo Zidan (罗子丹), and Lin Yilin(林一林), he does not include any works involving migrant workers themselves, thus foreclosing the possibility that these works contributed to the re-imagining of the artists relationship with the *nongmin* subject, and, on a broader level, society at large.

Other relevant surveys of contemporary Chinese art are Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen's *Art of Modern China* and Paul Gladston's *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History*. In both instances, the authors take note of the changes in content, media, and approach found in contemporary Chinese art as a result of the internationalization of Chinese art in the 1990s.

⁵⁰ Gao Minglu, *The Wall...; Gao Minglu, Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

⁵¹ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s-2000s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014).

Andrews and Shen, for example, argue that after Chinese artists began to be incorporated into international art exhibitions,

...artists increasingly began to turn their attention to social issues, phenomena such as migration, urban development, social dislocation, poverty, environmental pollution, and public health. In the new millennium some Chinese artists transformed postcolonial approaches—in particular those probing the interactions of center and periphery, hegemonic powers and subaltern groups, or the conflicts between global and local that were prevalent in international exhibitions—to suit China’s particular situation.⁵²

While they do mention Liu Xiaodong’s works about the dislocation that occurred as a result of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, they do not reference any works with migrant workers or rural-based works that actually seek to envision a new relationship with China’s “periphery.” Paul Gladston also argued that

On the one hand, artists, curators, and critics involved in the making and showing of contemporary Chinese art felt the need to position their work (both for reasons of artistic credibility and commerciality) in relation to the established postmodernist-deconstructivist positions of the international art world, which at the time were increasingly focused on questions of identity and postcolonial discourse. On the other, these same artists, curators and critics---and in particular those resident in the PRC—also felt the need to address more localized political concerns. It is, therefore, possible to view contemporary Chinese art of the 1990s not just as one focused on issues of formal experimentation but also as a continuation of socially interventionist tendencies first explored by Chinese artists in the 1920s and 1930s as well as aspects of the ‘pure’ model of cultural production established during the Cultural Revolution.⁵³

Like Andrews and Shen, he does not mention the use of the countryside or rural/migrant worker participants within this larger trend. This dissertation argues that the continued and sustained attention to *nongmin* communities within contemporary Chinese art is an important and often overlooked example of these “socially interventionist tendencies.”

In terms of writings about works in the 1990s involving migrant workers, Chinese literature tends to discuss these works within the context of the perceived relationship between

⁵² Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 286.

⁵³Gladston, 202.

the artist and the *nongmin*, also within the context of socialist realist and academic realist depictions of “peasants” from the Mao era and the Post-Cultural-Revolution era. It was a common trend to discuss such works according to the angle of “gaze” taken by the artist in dealing with the *nongmin* subject matter, with ‘overlooking’ and ‘looking down at’ having negative connotations and ‘looking straight at’ being ideal.⁵⁴ Qian Gangnan took this a step further, arguing that all of these relational types involve a passive *nongmin* participant, while certain works at the end of the ‘90s and beginning of the 20th century, such as those by Chen Shaofeng and Song Dong, initiated a new form of active engagement that could be seen as a bi-directional exchange between artist and *nongmin*, rather than uni-directional.⁵⁵ The perceived angle of the gaze is both related to what can be seen in the image, and the status of the artist within society. In this light, the simultaneity of the timing of these works and their artists being recognized by the international art community elicited particularly severe critique by some, who argued that by this time Chinese artists were no longer marginalized and had no choice but to look down at the migrant worker from an elite position.⁵⁶ All of these critiques contain the underlying assumption that performance art involving migrant workers operate on a similar representational level as paintings and sculpture involving migrant workers.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Cheng Zhen’s 程征 “Looking down, looking up, looking straight- peasants in twenty paintings” 《俯视，仰视与平视——二十实际上半叶绘画中农民》，and Liu Xi Lin’s 刘羲林 “Three perspectives for examining farmers” 《审视农民的三种视角》，both papers given at the symposium held in conjunction with the 2006 symposium connected with the exhibition *Peasant-Peasant: Collection and Invitational Exhibition 农民·农民* ——藏品暨邀请展 at the National Museum of Art, November 1- November 26, 2006.

⁵⁵ Qian Gangnan 钱岗南, “Only After you liberate yourself can you liberate “others”: an analysis of works about peasants” 《只有解放“他者”，才能最后解放自己——对农民题材创作倾向的一种分析》，*Wenyi Yanjiu* 《文艺研究》 no. 7 (2007): 117-128, 176.

⁵⁶ See Ge Shiheng 葛士恒, “Superiority of the viewer: the “fever for peasants” in contemporary art” 《观者的优越——当代艺术中的‘民工潮’》 in *2009 Central Academy of Art Collection of Essays about the Youth Critics Award* 《中央美术学院青年艺术批评奖论文集》 (Beijing: Central Academy of Art, 2009), 50-63.

Very little English scholarship exists about these works, but when they are mentioned, they tend to be critiqued according to the extent to which artists comply with or push against dominant (objectifying or instrumentalizing) treatment of marginalized members of society.⁵⁷ These critiques overlook the socialist origin of the works' subject matter and assume a level of social and eventually economic stability for the artists involved that was not true at the time. My dissertation argues that these works represent important experiments in the transition from passive, realist representation of this vulnerable social group through painting, sculpture, and even photography, to a new form of active engagement that remains dominant in the Chinese contemporary art world today.

The topic of Chinese “social practice art” has not been critically theorized within China, in part because it only has become a dominant phenomenon in the last ten years. Most Chinese-language studies on this topic are still in the explanation and compilation stage, paying particular attention to what sets “social practice art” apart from other traditional object-based forms.⁵⁸ Art historian Wang Zhiliang, however, has taken a step further by arguing that a dominant mode of avant-garde art in China today is what he refers to as “mutualism”(共生), referring to social practice art in which a mutual relationship is established between the artist and the location where they create their art. He differentiates this from ready-made works where artists take the

⁵⁷ See, for example, Elizabeth Parke, “Migrant workers and the imaging of human infrastructure in Chinese contemporary art,” *China Information* (June 10, 2015): 234; Dror Kochan, “Visual Representation of Internal Migration and Social Change in China,” *China Information* (June 19, 2009): 294.

⁵⁸ See Li Zhu 李竹, “The Path of Social Practice Art: An Undefinable Real Picture” 《当代艺术的参与式实践: 无法定义的现实图景》, *Yishu Dangdai* 《艺术当代》 no. 2 (2017) :28-31; Zhou Yanhua 周彦华, “Keywords of Social Engagement,” 《参与式艺术的关键词》, *Yishu Dangdai* no. 2 (2017):24-27; Chen Xiaoyang, “A New Realism: The Entrance and Exit of Social Practice Art” 《一种新现实主义: 社会参与式艺术的进路与出路》, *Meishu GuanCha* 《美术观察》 no. 12 (2017) : 23-25.

creations of rural people into the art museum and re-define it as contemporary art.⁵⁹ My own differentiation between these two modes has been, in part, inspired by Wang's thesis.

In English-language literature, Zheng Bo has been on the forefront of discussing the phenomenon of social practice art in China. In his 2012 dissertation, *The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Contemporary Art Projects*, he discusses notions of publicness, civil discourse, and the commons in relation to social practice art, but does not focus specifically on rural-based projects or the change in relationship that has occurred between urban-based artists and rural participants since the turn of the century. More recently, in 2016, Zheng Bo also taught a public-access course through Future Learn titled *Discovering Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China*.⁶⁰ The six-week class provides an overview of socially engaged art in China since the 1990s, including a few rural-based projects. In this course too, he provides snapshots into these works without a clear focus on the changing nature of the relationship between the art and “the public” in recent years. Gu Yi, in her article “The Peasant Problem and Time in Contemporary Chinese Art,” draws attention to the politics of time in social practice art involving rural inhabitants, arguing that in these works, like *The Long March Project: A Walking Visual Display* (2002) and Cai Guo-Qiang's *Peasant Da Vincis* (2010), temporal duration is used as proof of the authentic interaction between the artists and rural participants.⁶¹ Meiqin Wang also recently published an article titled “The Socially Engaged Practices of Artists in Contemporary China” in which she focuses on works by Ai Weiwei, Wang Jiuliang, and Qu Yan, arguing that the recent

⁵⁹ Wang Zhiliang 王志亮, “Mutualist Practice in Recent Rural-Based Contemporary Art” 《近年来中国当代艺术在乡村的共生实践（引论）》，contribution to *Overwhelming Imagination: Achieving and Undermining Contradictions* conference, July 2016, Sishang Art Museum, Beijing. <https://www.overwhelmingimagination.com/>

⁶⁰ Zheng Bo, “Discovering Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China,” online course, accessed November 11, 2017, <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/socially-engaged-art>.

⁶¹ Gu Yi, “The ‘Peasant Problem’ and Time in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Representations* vol. 136 no. 1 (Fall 2016): 54-76.

popularity of these types of works reflects a rising civic consciousness among intellectuals in China.⁶² While all of these examples describe the ways social practice art has been used as a means for civic action under a totalitarian government, they do not discuss the implications of these works in relation to possibilities of autonomy from the international contemporary art world or international funding, nor do they acknowledge that the lineage of contemporary social practice art can be traced back to interventionist experiments in the 1990s in response to urbanization.

One of the key sources for the research has been artist interviews I conducted from 2014-2015 while living in Beijing with the support of a Fulbright student fellowship. This, in combination with the rich primary resources made available through the archive of my primary adviser, Gao Minglu, allowed me to incorporate never-before published insights about these works into my overall argument. In terms of secondary sources, readers will note that I rely heavily on English-language discussion of these works. This is especially true in relation to the works discussed in chapters 1 and 2. This can be explained by the fact that many of these works were ultimately designed for display in international contemporary art galleries and museums, a world whose lingua franca is English. National and local newspaper reports about the works discussed have also been of considerable use to me as they often include interviews with the *nongmin* participants involved in these projects.

⁶² Meiqin Wang, "The Socially Engaged Practices of Artists in Contemporary China," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* vol. 16 issue 1 (2017): 15-38.

1.7 TEMPORAL FRAMING AND WORKS CHOSEN

The narrative of this dissertation begins in the 1990s because it was during this decade that contemporary artists began to use new experimental art approaches in dealing with the subject of the *nongmin*, which, in the Chinese context, had previously primarily been depicted using socialist realist or academic realist styles and the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture. In fact, the beginning of the trend of artists using actual migrant workers in their performance art coincides with the moment that those same artists were beginning to gain international fame. In this dissertation I focus primarily on artworks that involve the active participation of *nongmin* as opposed to drawings or paintings in which the subject is passively depicted by the artist. Throughout the 1990s, some artists continued to depict migrant workers using various forms of realism as part of a larger trend of realistically capturing the everyday lives of city dwellers. For example, Liu Xiaodong (刘小东) is known for his academic realist oil paintings of migrant workers. In his 1996 painting, *Disobeying the Rules*, for example, a group of migrant workers ride nude in the back of a truck along with several drums of oil. Similarly, Xin Haizhou (忻海州) completed a series of oil and charcoal paintings on canvas depicting migrant workers going about their everyday lives within the urban center. Liang Shuo(梁硕)has also sculpted three separate series of life-sized migrant workers, which he often exhibits in public locales such as city streets and shopping malls. Similarly, some Chinese contemporary artists have made documentary-like films in an attempt to capture the lives of both urban and rural dwellers. For example, in 1998 Wang Jianwei (王建伟) completed his project titled *Production*, in which he filmed people in public tea houses, the primary “public square” in small villages around Chengdu in Sichuan Province. Ou Ning and Cao Fei directed the film *San Yuan Li* in 2003 in

which they mobilized twelve artists to capture the lives of those living in the agrarian village of San Yuan Li as it is swallowed by the unstoppable expansion of the huge city of Guangzhou. Yang Fudong (杨福东) shifted focus from his usual subject matter of listless youth in the cities to the countryside in his 2007 *East of Que Village*, in which he juxtaposed the slow-moving lives of the villagers with the fierce and violent competition for survival among wild dogs. These works follow a trend in Chinese documentary film of attempting to authentically capture the lives of vulnerable populations. These works are also outside of the purview of this dissertation in that they, similar to paintings or sculpture, capture the subject of vulnerable communities through the subjective eye of the director. Through the process of filming, editing, and adding music, these artists often take license to shape the narrative of the story outside of the domain of documentary film. The works which are my primary focus in Chapter 1, on the other hand, involve the living and breathing bodies of *nongmin*, in performance. Although in some cases they seem to function in a similar way to a sculpture, their identities as embodied humans adds a level of interpretive difficulty that is not true for traditional media. In these works, are the migrant workers both the subject and the object? Are they presenting themselves, or are they being presented by the artist? Is the artist manipulating the tableaux of the workers' bodies to such an extent that it could be considered representation? By incorporating living participants in these works, they are infused with unpredictability and the possibility for open-endedness, elements which, according to theorists of Chinese documentary film of the 1990s and international social practice art, hold a greater possibility for authentic interaction.⁶³ Finally,

⁶³ See Claire Bishop, "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," *October* 140 (Spring, 2012): 91-112; Wu Wenguang, "DV: Individual Filmmaking" 《DV: 一个人的影像》 in *The Camera is the Same as Your Eyes* 《镜头像自己的眼睛一样》 (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Publishing, 2001), 257-63. Reprinted in English translation as "DV: Individual Filmmaking," trans. Cathryn Clayton in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 49-54.

some projects that could be described as “social practice,” have been undertaken by organizers who identify as social activists rather than contemporary artists. Both the Grass Stage theater collective 草台班 organized by Zhao Chuan (赵川) and the Picun Migrant Worker and Cultural Activism Center 皮村中心, are organizations which provide a variety of opportunities for migrant workers to be educated about their rights and empowered to stand up for those rights in the workplace. While these projects are compelling, I do not include them in this dissertation because the organizers do not identify as contemporary artists. This dissertation is framed around the distinct position of the contemporary artist in relation to the State, the international exhibition system, and society in general under the conditions of globalization in China. Further, this dissertation presents the narrative of the relationship between professional, contemporary artists and *nongmin* since the beginning of the 1990s within the historical context of artists’ sustained interaction with these communities since the early 20th century. I also discuss these works within the context of various governmental campaigns and policies meant to ameliorate the harsh cultural and economic conditions of the countryside, exploring the ways artists work against, with, or as a supplement to national and local government initiatives. In this sense, this dissertation is just as much about contemporary artists’ changing role within society as it is about the depiction of *nongmin* communities.

1.8 ORGANIZATION OF DISSERTATION

The three chapters that make up this dissertation all include the descriptor “Other” in reference to the *nongmin* participants.⁶⁴ I invoke this concept, borrowed from postcolonial studies, to emphasize the marginal position of the participants in relation to the organizing artists. This frames the scope of this dissertation around works involving socially vulnerable communities within the larger category of “social practice art,” which could include the participation of any member of society. It also emphasizes the political nature of these artworks in that they strive towards both socialist and democratic ideals of economic and social equality. Chapter 1, “Rediscovering the Other: Performance art with Migrant Workers over the Turn of the Century,” explores examples of works, produced in the years around 2000, in which artists invited migrant workers to physically participate in performance works. I discuss these works in comparison to socialist realist or academic realist paintings of *nongmin*, arguing that while the participating *nongmin* function in some ways that are similar to their function in more traditional media, the incorporation of their actual bodies opened new relational possibilities between the artist and the *nongmin*. This chapter argues that their new approach can be seen as an attempt to rediscover a population who had been depicted as metonymic symbols for revolutionary ideas (before and during the Cultural Revolution) or societal ills (in the post-Cultural Revolution period) over the previous fifty years. Their meanings are in some ways fixed, in that they continued to rely on the classificatory world-view of socialist realism in their use of simple visual signifiers of class identity, but also open-ended in that they incorporate experimentation and unpredictability in their emphasis on affect and their invitation of non-artist participants. I argue that the layering of

⁶⁴ For information about postcolonial theories about the Other of Western modernity, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

the indigenous socialist subject matter with international contemporary art approaches resulted in a conceptualization of the relationship between artists and *nongmin* that was entirely new in the context of the history of modern and contemporary Chinese art. By beginning with these works, which were created at the same time Chinese artists were beginning to be accepted in the international art world, this dissertation will show, for the first time, the various ways Chinese contemporary artists have positioned themselves against, in alliance with, or as supplement to, both the Chinese state apparatus and the international contemporary art world in their attempts to help socially and economically vulnerable communities.

In Chapters 2 and 3 I examine longer-term projects involving *nongmin* in both factory and rural settings. I have organized these chapters according to four modes or trends related to the relationship between artists and their participants that I have observed in artworks involving *nongmin* since the turn of the century. These modes are presented in a loosely chronological order, coinciding with the time in which I argue the trend became dominant. I do not wish, however, to imply that when one mode ended, another began. In fact, Chinese artists continue to engage, to this day, with *nongmin* participants in ways that correspond with one or more of the modes I have identified. Nor do I wish to imply that the modes I have identified are mutually exclusive. Projects involving *nongmin* participants are incredibly complex, and often involve a variety of different types or a hybridity of relational exchanges. These modes are simply meant to provide a broad framework for understanding the changes that have occurred in the relationship between professional Chinese artists and *nongmin* communities as they relate to socio-political and economic changes. Chapter 2, titled “Transforming the Other: *Nongmin* Art Projects in the early 21st Century” is divided into two relational modes. Mode 1 describes amateur creations by marginalized communities exhibited *as* contemporary art while Mode 2

describes marginalized communities creating contemporary art as a tool for their own spiritual liberation. In the first mode, which frames my discussion of works by Lu Jie (卢杰), Cai Guo-Qiang, Sun Yuan, and Peng Yu (彭禹), artists act as curators to re-contextualize the inventions or folk art of *nongmin* as contemporary art in contemporary art museums and galleries, all of which were geared towards an international audience. In the second mode, which frames my discussion of works by Cao Fei, Alessandro Rolandi, and Li Mu, artists facilitate situations in which rural dwellers or factory workers (who do not identify as artists) are asked to create contemporary art as a means of expanding their world-view or shifting their perspective. What these two modes have in common is their ultimate orientation as a challenge to the common practices of art creation and exhibition that dominated the contemporary art world at the time. Those both seek to transform the identities of their *nongmin* participants into “artists.” Unlike the works in Chapter 1, which were largely geared toward either a limited audience of Chinese artists and curators or the international art world, these works must be discussed considering two primary audiences: the *nongmin* participants and the international art world. Their ultimate meaning and impact differ according to which audience is being taken into account.

The two Modes explored in Chapter 3, titled “Empowering the Other: Socially Engaged Projects in Recent Years” are Mode 3: Contemporary art as a tool for cultural enlightenment and salvation of rural populations, and Mode 4: Contemporary art as a tool for research and micro-interventions. Unlike the projects discussed in Chapter 2, these works are not conceptually driven by their ultimate exhibition in a contemporary art museum or gallery. Rather, they are site-specific, long-term projects undertaken with vulnerable communities in both rural and urban settings for the purpose of improving their living and working conditions. Mode 3 frames my discussion of the projects of Ou Ning and Qu Yan, both of which, I will show, are modeled to a

certain extent after the Rural Reconstruction projects of James Yen and Liang Shuming in the early 20th century. In both cases, the artists moved (at least part-time) to a rural community in which they initiated a series of programs to improve the socio-cultural and economic situations of the inhabitants. In both cases, the fate of China as a nation rests in the salvation of its countryside. In describing Mode 4, I focus on Jin Le's Shijiezi Village Museum (2009- the present) and the Chengdu-based Art Practice Group's *Kunshan—Under Construction* (2010- the present). Like Ou Ning's and Qu Yan's, these are also site-specific works based on long-term research into the problems of their collaborators, designed to improve the lives of the communities in which they take place. Whereas Ou and Qu's projects envision the salvation of the countryside as synonymous with that of the nation as a whole, the works described within the context of Mode 4 could be characterized as micro-interventions based on intimate communication between individual members of the communities. The fact that these works are not geared towards the international exhibition system, and the fact that these projects are either self-funded, supported by local governments, or supported by Chinese universities, as opposed to international museums or corporations (as was common in the works discussed in Chapter 2), indicates that the Chinese countryside and the *nongmin* in recent years have become a means through which Chinese artists are establishing distinctly indigenous art creation and exhibition practices independent of the international art world. However, this also means that contemporary artists must participate in new negotiations with local governments who are simultaneously drawn to contemporary art as a means to increase village revenue and wary of the subversive power of contemporary art. The title of the chapter, "Empowering the Other" is derived from the fact that all of the projects discussed seek to improve the conditions of *nongmin* communities in ways that can become self-sustaining. However, because many of these projects occurred very

recently or are ongoing, it is still unclear whether or not they will actually meet their intended goal.

2.0 REDISCOVERING THE OTHER: PERFORMANCE ART WITH MIGRANT WORKERS OVER THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

The first Chinese contemporary artwork to incorporate living migrant workers is Zhang Huan's *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond* from 1997. For this work, Zhang invited forty migrant laborers to walk together into a pond, pose for a photograph, and walk out. The final artwork consists of a documentary video of the entire event and a now-iconic photograph of the men and Zhang, with a small child balancing on his shoulders, standing chest-deep in water, staring resolutely into the camera's lens. The video documents the process of Zhang corralling the workers to strip down to their underwear and instructing them what to do upon entering the water. They first circle the pond, silently gazing into the water. They then slowly enter, mill around briefly, eventually stopping, dispersed somewhat randomly within the space of the pond. Zhang then enters the water, himself stripped down to his underwear, with the child of the pond's owner balanced onto his shoulders. Once he has arrived at a central position, he joins the rest of the group to pose for the photograph. After the photograph is taken, they form a straight line, dividing the pond into two halves. The serious tone of the event is then lifted; the workers splash around a bit more, and walk out of the pond. For the next seven years, the act of inviting migrant workers to participate in performance artworks became a notable trend.

In Chinese scholarship, these works are often discussed within the larger trend of painting and sculpture using the migrant worker subject.⁶⁵ Throughout the 1990s and early 21st century, some artists, such as Liu Xiaodong (刘小东), Xin Haizhou (忻海州) and Liang Shuo 梁硕 depicted migrant workers using academic realist painting and sculpture styles to convey the realities of their everyday lives. These works can be seen as a formal and conceptual extension of Rustic Realism in that the artists use romantic realist approaches to reveal something about their subject that has been overlooked by mainstream culture. In other scholarship, these works are aligned with a trend in the 1990s among experimental artists that take as their subject the plight of the lowest rungs of society (底层群体), as a way to draw attention to the injustices of society. This includes realist painting and sculpture, but expands to other approaches such as the pop style of the Gao Brothers' *Catching a Prostitute* 《抓小姐》 (2007), and the documentary photography of the early 1990s.⁶⁶ What these writings overlook is the interpretational challenges posed by works that involve the participation of living humans. As scholars of performance and social practice art have discovered, critiques of works involving living humans requires a different conceptualization of 'representation,' 'subject,' and 'object,' than would be used for painting or sculpture.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ See, for example, Ge Shiheng 葛士恒, "Superiority of the viewer: the "fever for peasants," Qian Gangnan 钱岗南, "You first have to liberate the "other" before you can liberate yourself—An explanation of the trend of making art about peasants," Gu Chengfeng 顾丞峰, "From host to visitor—An explanation of the images of the peasant in art since 1942."

⁶⁶ Gu Shiheng, "Superiority of the viewer. . .," Zhu Qi 朱其, "How does contemporary art describe the lower levels of society?" 《中国当代艺术如何言说底层社会? 》, *Oriental Morning Post* 《东方早报》, September 3, 2008, <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/22219/7764981.html>.

⁶⁷ For example, see Grant Kester's theorization of socially engaged art in Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) and Kester's *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Clair Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso,

In this chapter I argue that these works operate under both the logic of an international, contemporary art language, one which emphasizes experimentation, authenticity, and open-endedness, but are also inseparable from a much earlier and engrained Socialist Realist artistic trope, relying on prototypical class-based typologies to make sense of the world. This paradox finds its social counterpart in Chinese society in the 1990s which continues to operate under the logic of postsocialism. A postsocialist society, as theorized by Arif Dirlik and Sheldon S. Lu, is one that is simultaneously subject to the hegemony of the central government (still operating under the banner of socialism) and the emerging capitalist market.⁶⁸ The works that I will discuss in this chapter reflect the conflicting pressures of both systems in that they exhibit a socialist desire to criticize inequalities brought on by global capitalism; however, through their overt commodification of migrant workers' bodies, they are also contributors to the biopolitical inequalities of global capitalist modernity. The artists purchase the bodies of migrant workers for a brief period of time in accordance with their commodity value under the logic of global capitalism as part of a critique of this very logic. Visually, they also straddle both world views in that they resemble tableau vivant of realist paintings depicting migrant workers, but are in fact performance artworks, a form that became popular in China in the 1990s as a direct result of Chinese artists' exposure to performance art by foreign artists.⁶⁹ This layering of approaches and styles is also fascinating in the political context of China at the time, where academic realist painting was celebrated by the central government who remain, to this day, suspicious of

2012). For an exploration of embodied subjectivity in modern and contemporary art history see Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁶⁸ Arif Dirlik was one of the most prominent theorists on postsocialism in China. See Arif Dirlik, "Postsocialism? Reflections on 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,'" in *Marxism and the Chinese Experience: Issues in Contemporary Chinese Socialism* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1989), 362-684. See also Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 130-131.

⁶⁹ For example, performance artist Ma Liuming (马六明) famously became interested in performance art after Gilbert & George visited the East Village.

performance art. This chapter examines the new relational and interpretive possibilities (and impediments) introduced when traditional socialist subject matter is explored using new experimental methods and media for an international audience. By analyzing these performances, I seek to shed light on how contemporary Chinese artists grappled with contradictory expectations of the relationship between society and art, based on personal upbringing and values, domestic collective socialist history, marketization of society, and a gradual and uneven acceptance into the international art world. I also frame this as a transitional period in Chinese contemporary art history as the precursor to Chinese social practice art.

2.1 ZHANG HUAN 张洵, TO RAISE THE LEVEL OF A FISHPOND 《为鱼塘增高水位》, 1997

The use of migrant workers in Zhan Huan's *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond* was a product of the artists' specific socio-economic and professional position at the end of the 1990s. Before creating *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond*, Zhang had made a name for himself in the Chinese art world as a performance artist living in the East Village of Beijing where he performed extreme and often violent works for a small group of artist friends. In a work called *12 Square Meters* 《12平方米》 (1994), for example, he covered his naked body in fish juice and honey and sat in a public restroom for one hour. This combination attracted dozens of flies and mosquitoes, which covered his body throughout the duration of the performance, ending with him walking out the

door and plunging into a nearby pond. In another work, titled *65 Kilograms* 《65 公斤》 (1994), Zhang hung his body from the rafters of a small warehouse in his village, and a nurse inserted an IV into a vein on his arm, connected to a plastic tube, from which blood dripped onto a hotplate that had been placed on the ground below, filling the entire room with the smell of burning human blood. These works were violent and visceral, and all well-documented by photographers such as Rong Rong (荣荣) and Xing Danwen (邢丹文) who spent time in the East Village.

By the early 1990s, some contemporary artists had already reached a certain level of economic and cultural success as contemporary Chinese art began to be accepted into the international art market. Specifically, Cynical Realist and Political Pop artists living in Yuanming Yuan, and later, Song Zhuang, two artist villages on the periphery of the capital city that had begun to reap the benefits of the developing market economy. Artists in the East Village, on the other hand, had not yet sold their works on the international market and made uncommodifiable performances that were only seen by other artist friends. In that it focused on the limits of the individual body and was uncommodifiable, Zhang's work from that period can be seen in opposition to the ideological propaganda art promoted by the central government and to the burgeoning commercial culture with its accompanying materialist values. But, at the same time the East Village artists were distancing themselves from the mainstream economic reforms and political leadership of their homeland, they were also attempting to ally themselves with another "main stream:" that of the international art world. The East Village was named after New York's East Village, which they learned about from Ai Weiwei who had just returned to China after a ten-year period in the United States.⁷⁰ Following this, Winnie Won Ying Wong argues for

⁷⁰ Winnie Won Yin Wong, *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 115.

the significance of their positioning in the Eastern suburbs of Beijing, which is in closer proximity to the airport (a symbol of international mobility) than the “nationalist heritage of the Yuangming Yuan,” referring to the fact that Yuanming Yuan is the former imperial summer residence.⁷¹ By this time, however, Zhang’s work had not yet been exhibited outside of China, and because of political restrictions against contemporary art, and performance art in particular, it was not well-publicized outside of his small circle of artist friends.

To Raise the Level of a Fishpond was not the first time Zhang involved multiple participants within a work. Two years prior to this he completed a performance titled *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* 《为无名山增高一米》. For this performance, Zhang and a group of nine artists from the East village climbed a mountain in the nearby Miaofeng mountain range. They removed their clothing and piled their bodies on top of each other, all face-down, in a pyramidal composition, according to their weight, with the heaviest on the bottom. They brought surveyors to measure the mountain before and after the action, confirming that they had, in fact, added one meter to the mountain. The resulting photograph captures the artists piled atop a foundation of dry yellow grass, surrounded by gnarled bushes and hay. In the background, a mountain range is visible, each mountain standing visually taller than the backside of the top-most artist, alluding to the saying that inspired Zhang to make the work in the first place: “Beyond the mountain, there are more mountains.”⁷²

In Zhang’s discussion of this work, it is evident that he was thinking about many of the same things he thought about in his earlier performances, including stretching the limits of one’s own body: “It is about humility. Climb this mountain and you will find an even bigger mountain

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Roselee Goldberg, “Interview with Zhang Huan” in *Zhang Huan*, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior, Roselee Goldberg, Robert Storr (New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2009), 19-20.

in front of you. It's about changing the natural state of things, about the idea of possibilities."⁷³

In an interview with Michele Robecchi, Zhang explains:

I wanted to measure myself against insurmountable limits even though I didn't have the energy needed to do so. I wanted to raise a mountain or move a building. That's how works like *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995) and *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997) were born. Even though they were impossible events, my inner strength didn't exhaust itself because of these limits. It settled inside my heart and my body, pushing me in the opposite direction, making me come out of myself and explore the limits of my body.⁷⁴

By taking these performances outside the private spaces in the East Village, he pits the human body against the larger forces of nature. His descriptions do not pay attention to the identities of the collaborators as part of the meaning of the work, and it famously became embroiled in controversy when other participants in the performance also wanted to claim authorship.⁷⁵

In 2007 he reflected on both *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* and *To Raise the Level of a Fish Pond*, saying "I had created pieces related to mountains, so I wanted to make some related to water; this work fulfilled that desire."⁷⁶ Indeed, the two projects are similar in content and approach. In both, Zhang and a group of people position themselves within and against nature to inspire consideration of man's futility in the face of larger forces. Using migrant workers in the second performance could have been a response to the authorial controversy of

⁷³ Phaidon, "My Body of Art- Zhang Huan on Mountain," accessed February 7, 2018, <http://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/october/15/my-body-of-art-zhang-huan-on-mountain/>.

⁷⁴ Michele Robecchi, "Zhang Huan Speaks with Michele Robecchi," *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, second edition, ed. Kristine Stiles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 948.

⁷⁵ Zhang later recalled that the artists involved felt that he should only be credited as an organizer of the event. But Zhang maintains "...I would insist that it was based on and named by my ideas and thoughts." Zhang Huan, "A Piece of Nothing," in *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, ed. Melissa Chiu (New York: Asian Society, 2007), 66. According to the *iwishicoulddescribeittoyoubetter* blog, written by Cassidy Cui, Anouchka Van Driel, Elaine W. Ho, Chang Liu, Maya Li, Fei Fei Lu, Dennis Reudink, and Stone and Stella Wi, in the end the artists decided that they could each claim full authorship over five of the prints. This decision was come to after much bargaining and many of the artists involved continue to have bad memories about the experience. See Cassidy Cui, *et al.* "A Bootleg Project, Beijing, CN, 2005." *I wish I could describe it to you better* blog, accessed November 17, 2017, <http://www.iwishicoulddescribeittoyoubetter.net/wework/mountain.html>.

⁷⁶ Zhang Huan, *Zhang Huang: Altered States*, 70.

his earlier performance. Angie Baecker, in her article “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Zhang Huan,” saw this connection: “By this time,” says Baecker, “it seems Zhang had learned how to protect the sovereignty of his work- he hired migrant workers to enter the pond instead of collaborating with his peers.”⁷⁷ Because they were not part of the art world and did not consider themselves artists, migrant workers would not be as likely to feel that they were owed authorial credit. By balancing the child on his shoulders, Zhang visually differentiates himself from the surrounding migrant workers, drawing attention to himself as the author of the work.

After this work was created, the act of inviting migrant workers to perform or pose for artworks became a trend in the Beijing art world. In a 2007 essay, Zhang indicates that in hindsight, he understood the importance of this move when he said, “To my knowledge, it was the first time that an artist collaborated with immigrant workers. In the following year the piece was exhibited in New York and received great attention.”⁷⁸ In an interview with Mathieu Borysevicz he stated, “I received the most benefit from the fishpond piece... This piece changed my situation, my life. Everybody likes this piece.”⁷⁹ Although he is quick to point out the fact that the participants were migrant workers, his explanation of the work does not focus on their identities as such. On his website, for instance, he explains the logistics of the work, identifying the participants as “construction workers, fishermen and labourers, all from the bottom of society.”⁸⁰ He even says that they reminded him of his uncles and brothers when he was a child.⁸¹ He then goes on to say, “In the Chinese tradition, fish is the symbol of sex while water is the source of life. This work expresses, in fact, one kind of understanding and explanation of

⁷⁷ Angie Baecker, “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Zhang Huan,” *Art Asia Pacific* no. 66 (2009): 92.

⁷⁸ Zhang Huan, *Zhang Huan: Altered States* (Milan and New York: Charta and Asian Society, 2001), 70.

⁷⁹ Mathieu Borysevicz, “Before and After: an interview with Zhang Huan,” *Art Asia Pacific*, no. 30 (2001):61.

⁸⁰ Zhang Huan, “To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond, 1997, Performance, Beijing, China,” accessed November 15, 2017, http://www.zhanghuan.com/worken/info_71.aspx?itemid=974&parent&lcid=190.

⁸¹ *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, 70.

water. That the water in the pond was raised one metre higher is an action of no avail.”⁸² Zhang’s statements about the work indicate that although he was the first to incorporate migrant workers in a performance artwork, it was not about migrant workers. This view is shared by Chinese art historian Ge Shiheng, who argues “...even though he uses many migrant workers and some fishermen, its primary focus is not migrant workers. Rather, it is about raising the water level, the joining of people and water, and the realization of life.”⁸³ The viewer is left uncertain of the extent to which the identity of the migrant workers is important for the interpretation of the work. If they are, does the fact that Zhang performs with them and they remind him of his family members indicate that Zhang identifies with them? Or is the group only meant to be read as a symbol for humanity in the face of nature?

This work changed Zhang’s situation as a professional artist through its inclusion in the 1998 exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* curated by Gao Minglu, sponsored by the Asia Society and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and held at the Asia Society Galleries and the MoMA P.S. 1 Museum in New York City. *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond* was chosen as the cover illustration for the exhibition’s catalog and promotional materials, becoming a ubiquitous sight in advertising posters plastered throughout New York City. It was then featured in the 1999 Venice Biennale. Its inclusion in *Inside Out*, especially as the iconic cover photo, was instrumental in launching Zhang to international stardom. In fact, this was the last performance he did in China before moving to New York from 1998- 2005. As further proof of the work’s international popularity, on the advent of its translation into Chinese, the *Beijing News* excitedly reported that in his second edition of *Art Since 1940* (2000), a survey of modern

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ge Shiheng, 51. Translation by author.

and contemporary art from around the world, art historian Jonathan Fineberg included many works of contemporary Chinese art, including two images, one of which was *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond*.⁸⁴ In the article, professor at the Central Academy of Fine Art Yi Ying 易英 is quoted as saying that this inclusion is directly related to the rise of contemporary Chinese art. However, he also points out that the West has a homogenous view of Chinese art, and therefore interpretations like Fineberg's cannot be considered to be objective.⁸⁵ The critical nature of Yi's comments is reflective of the dissatisfaction of some Chinese critics and artists at the turn of the century over the cultural hegemony of the West in the exhibition and interpretation of contemporary Chinese art during this process of internationalization. Many critics felt that the theories of postmodernism and postcolonialism, dominating the international contemporary art world at the time, did more to maintain representational inequalities and orientalist practices than to subvert them. Such a viewpoint is clearly stated by Gu Shiheng in an article concerning art related to "peasants" in China:

At the time that the resources and power of discourse are held by foreigners, arising from the perspective of postcolonial discourse, these works about migrant workers pander to Western cultural colonial politics, pander to their hunt for novelty. Western culture acknowledges that migrant workers are China's "local specialty."⁸⁶

Zhu Qi (朱其) has also pointed out that a trend of depicting the lower levels of society (底层形象) temporally corresponded with contemporary Chinese artists' acceptance into the international art world, and that such works received much attention in foreign exhibitions and the art market. He argues that "...this embezzling of societal images was primarily used for

⁸⁴ In his assessment of the work, Fineberg emphasized the identity of the participants, stating that the artist "invited people who had lost their jobs in a recent ruthless modernization of Chinese industry to stand in a pond, raising the level of water—a poetic assertion of their social presence." Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Beijing*, second edition (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), 486.

⁸⁵ *Beijing News* 《新京报》, "Chinese Art Enters the "teaching material" of art history" 《中国艺术进入艺术史 "教材" 》, November 23, 2006, <http://cul.sohu.com/20061123/n246561709.shtml>.

⁸⁶ Gu Shiheng, 54. Translation by author.

exploration of formal characteristics, or to improve artists' status in the international art system."⁸⁷ Such a reaction is reflective of how the connotation of works like these shifts dramatically when moved from a local, socialist context to a global, postcolonial context.

The inclusion of *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond* in the 1999 Venice Biennale, one of the first in which Chinese artists were included, precipitated many interpretations that highlight its Chineseness within an international context over the social status of the migrant worker participants. For example, Jane Chin Davidson, as recently as 2016, discussed the work in terms of the meaning of water in a Chinese context, echoing the artists' own interests. She relates this work to the Chinese vernacular genre of Water Margin literature. In these tales, according to Davidson, the water margin represents the place where societal outcasts reside, away from mainstream society. "Zhang's performance," according to Davidson, "reminds the Chinese viewer, who is accustomed to some folk version or other of the *Shuihu zhuan* [water margin], about the way in which social status has always been a matter of belonging to a particular place - - geographically or metaphorically -- and in this way, Zhang's performance connects to past artistic performances in the vernacular tradition of the *Shuihu zhuan*."⁸⁸ Although this could apply to migrant workers living and working on the margins of Chinese society, she goes on to say

...the photographic documentary form of the body expresses movements across borders and the transgressing of nationalist margins in the most poignant and effective way. As opposed to a representative 'art object', performance art's body-oriented expression could reveal the meaning of the human individual as identified by nationality but ultimately as representative of a culturally ethnic Chinese artist.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Zhu Qi 朱其, "How does contemporary art describe..."

⁸⁸ Jane Chin Davidson's "The body of the archive: Chineseness at the Venice Biennale (1993-2005)," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, v. 3, n. 1-2 (June 2016): 41.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Richard Vine takes a similar approach in his explanation of the work, arguing, “Symbolically (despite more complicated sociological facts), such works implied that independent Chinese artists in those days had, like the poor, only their bodies with which to make a small but measurable difference in the world.”⁹⁰

Here, both writers focus on Zhang’s identity as a Chinese artist at a time when his peers were relatively new to the international biennale circuit, as they were focusing on the marginality of Chinese artists in the international exhibition complex rather than the marginality of migrant workers in Chinese society.⁹¹

Other English-language articles, on the other hand, rely solely on the identity of the migrant workers for their interpretation. Dror Kochan, for example, in his 2009 article, “Visual Representations of Internal Migration and Social Change in China,” argues that *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond* reflects the migrants’ “liminal discursive and physical existence” because they are neither shown as completely free or completely subjugated:

While treating them not as individuals but as part of a large migrant group, he [Zhang] grants them dignity and agency, as they are the authors of change and although the participants can seem somewhat alienated, they also seem to be comfortable and at ease. Raising the water level is a negligible and even useless act, but it is also a conscious act of a group of individuals standing in contrast to the raging, uncontrollable water flow associated with migration in the dominant discourse.⁹²

For Elizabeth Parke, on the other hand, the role of this image in launching Zhang’s career testifies to Zhang’s extreme objectification of the migrant workers:

The displacement of the water due to the introduction of the bodies is the result of simple fluid mechanics, yet the resulting waves of this performance were enormous for Zhang Huan’s career as he was propelled into global prominence. Therefore, we have to

⁹⁰ Richard Vine, *New China New Art* (New York: Prestel, 2008), 86.

⁹¹ The first time Chinese artists were invited to participate in the Venice Biennale was in 1993. The China pavilion was not established until 2003.

⁹² Kochan, 294.

consider that this work does two things: it makes visible the marginal status of migrants, but in that same moment it is also exploitative of this marginality.⁹³

Further, she argues:

In Zhang Huan's work the labor of the participants goes unpaid or at least unacknowledged—the migrant workers are only described collectively, never as individual subjects- the mechanics of the economic exchange remain obscured and therefore unexamined and accepting of a system where bodies are available for nothing more than the cost of their labour.⁹⁴

While it is true that the objectification of migrant workers in these and other works at the time should be acknowledged, this dissertation seeks to find a more nuanced reading that accounts for the specific socio-economic and life circumstances under which the artists chose to work with this population. Kochan and Parke's interpretations operate under the (I argue, false) assumption that there already was an enormous socio-economic gap between the author and the migrant worker participants, that the work was conceptualized from the beginning as being *about* the topic of migrant workers, and the latter seems to indicate that Zhang knew it would gain him international fame.

Beyond the aforementioned hypothesis that the migrant workers would have provided a way around multiple claims to authorship as encountered in *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, Zhang probably chose them because they were his neighbors. It was common in the 1990s for artists to live in the same village or neighborhood as migrant workers, as both groups were marginalized from mainstream culture and economy. Many artists living in Beijing at the time were technically migrant workers, though they often were referred to as *mangliu* 盲流 (a word meaning free-flowing, referring to *hukou*-less young bohemian artists in the cities) due to

⁹³ Parke, 234.

⁹⁴ Parke, 235.

their higher cultural status as artists, rather than *nongmin* 农民 or *nongmingong* 农民工, words used to designate physical laborers. Some artists in the mid-1990s even did performances in which they dressed as migrant workers, walking the streets imitating the movements of their daily lives, indicating a certain level of identification.⁹⁵ Throughout the 1990s (and even today), it was common for artists to hire migrant workers to help fabricate their works because their labor was cheaper than professional art handlers and because many contemporary artists were still marginalized from either the official or the commercial art worlds, leaving them with a paucity of financial resources. The very fact that Zhang was living in a migrant village on the outskirts of the city hints at his own precarious economic situation, which was probably not much different from 1995 when he made *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*. Gao Minglu's interpretation of the 1995 work points to the fact that at this time he and the other participating artists were still living in cultural and economic isolation. He argues, "Artists and the mountain, trees and grass, can all be read as lost and homeless. Although the 'unknown mountain' appears to be much different than the artists, they are all 'unknown,' naked, primitive, and exposed to the wild."⁹⁶ Therefore, unlike many Western artists working with marginalized populations in participatory works in the 1990s, the social and economic situation of artists at the time were still unstable, a point which, I argue, complicates a dichotomous reading of artists/migrant worker as one between oppressor and oppressed.

This close living and working relationship between migrant workers and artists might also explain the elision that occurs when Zhang himself talks about this work, not as about

⁹⁵ For example, in 1994 Zhu Fadong performed *This Person is for Sale*, a yearlong performance in which he wandered the streets of Beijing dressed as a migrant worker with a sign reading "This Person is for Sale" pinned to his back. Another example is Luo Zidan's 1996 *Half White-Collar/Half Peasant* in which he wandered the streets of Chengdu with one half of his body dressed as a migrant worker and the other half a white-collar worker. He used different parts of his body to imitate the daily habits and labor of the respective social groups.

⁹⁶ Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity...*, 282.

migrant workers, but as concerning the relationship between humans and nature, or an exploration of the boundaries of the self. Although he was the first to incorporate migrant workers into a performance, working with them would not have been a novel experience, and their identities may not have been obvious as the central subject of the work to either the artist himself or the original audience.

This work was originally created for a catalog that served as a small portable exhibition for a year-long project organized by Song Dong titled *Wildlife: Starting from the day of jingzhe, 1997* 《野生：1997年惊蛰始》. For this project, Song invited artists from all over the country to contribute works that contained ‘chance-encounters’ with ordinary people outside of the traditional exhibition complex. In this way, Song wanted to forge a new relationship between artists and society as a whole.⁹⁷ Catalog exhibitions of this type were common in the Chinese art world at the time as a way for artists from various locations throughout China to “exhibit” their work together and share their ideas at a time when venues for the exhibition of contemporary art were virtually non-existent. They could be easily and cheaply reproduced and exchanged in the mail. Other similar catalog projects include Geng Jianyi (耿建翌) and Wang Qiang’s (王强) *November 26 as a Reason* and *45 Degrees as a Reason*. They not only featured documentation of finished works, they also served as venues for artists to share ideas for works that possibly would never be realized. These catalogues have been framed by Gao Minglu as part of the larger trend of “apartment art” in the 1990s, in which artists found many strategies to share their work in the absence of supportive contemporary art institutions. Importantly, “apartment art” was not directed towards broad domestic or international audiences, but was meant to be shared with a

⁹⁷ Song Dong and Guo Rui, *Wildlife: Starting from 1997 Jingzhe* 《野生：1997年惊蛰始》, informal publication. Courtesy of Gao Minglu Archive.

very limited audience of fellow artists and curators. By including apartment art in the exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, Gao Minglu was instrumental in bringing documentation of these highly site-specific works to an international audience. Artists' preoccupation with documentation as a result of their exhibition format (booklets), made it possible for these transient works, made for an audience of a small group of Chinese artists, to be exhibited internationally. When he first created it, therefore, it is unlikely that Zhang would have had the premonition that this work would launch him to international fame.

I have outlined the layered interpretive variations and creative motivations of this work in order to introduce the complex context within which works like these have been made and interpreted. I will argue throughout this chapter that works like these must be interpreted on multiple levels which reflect China's postsocialist condition at the time, in that they both mirror a class-based worldview of Maoist socialism and incorporate experimental elements that align with international artistic trends, two seemingly conflicting approaches. Interestingly, although they gained notoriety through a variety of international exhibitions, these works are rarely included in either Chinese- or English-language surveys of Chinese contemporary art (in general) or performance art (more specifically). Furthermore, during my fieldwork, I observed a reticence on the part of the artists and some curators to discuss these works.⁹⁸ When artists did open up about them, they always downplayed the identity of the migrant workers as integral to the meaning of the work, instead focusing on more general abstract concepts such as the experience of space, the relationship between humans and nature, and global conflict. I consider these works

⁹⁸ In my interview with Wang Jin, for example, he encouraged me not to write about his work *100%* (1999), but rather to focus on a series he had been working on since 1997 called *Chinese Dream* in which he fashioned ancient Chinese robes out of transparent PVC material and nylon thread. Yang Xinyi, curator of the first exhibition in China about migrant workers in 2003 encouraged me to write about something more sophisticated, such as Xu Bing's experimentation with language. Wang Jin, interview with author, January 2015, Beijing, China.

to be important in the history of contemporary Chinese art in that they are some of the first that incorporate non-artist *nongmin* participants. Although they take place in urban spaces and on one level can be compared to realist painting or sculpture in that they are representational, I argue that they should be read as a precursor to the rural-based social practice works that have become a trend in Chinese art since the beginning of the 21st century.

2.2 WANG JIN 王晋, 100% 《百分之百》, 1999

The most frequently published photograph in Wang Jin's black-and-white photographic series titled *100%* takes place under an elevated traffic overpass. A group of about twenty men occupy the central visual position. They are posed around one column that bears the weight of a portion of the bridge. This weight is distributed downward through a bracket that extends across the width of the highway. About half of the men stand on the other half's shoulders, arms extending upwards to touch its structural underside. Some appear to stretch to reach the bracket above, while others' arms are bent as if solidly supporting the weight above them. The group on the bottom level stand sturdily, feet planted shoulder-width apart, hands supporting the feet of the men on their shoulders, most staring straight into the camera. The man on the top level to the left with long hair is the artist himself. The highway extends behind the group, losing definition as it moves further into the background and swerves to the left, out of the frame of the photograph. The only other objects that are visible on the ground beneath the traffic overpass, besides the men, are a few trees, a street light, and a small patch of land to the right that appears to have been cultivated and planted. The earth surrounding the men's feet has been trampled, leaving visual evidence of the process that led to such a precarious pose.

The other less known photographs from the series are set in the basement of a nearby building, the migrant workers and artist posing in pairs in imitation of multiple columns supporting the cement ceiling. This was not Wang's initial idea for this project. In the first round of photographing the series, the artist covered every participant from head to toe with cement to give them more pillar-like qualities. In the end, after reviewing the images, he scrapped that idea because he felt it would be too theatrical, too unnatural.⁹⁹ Instead, in the final version, shot about a week after his original attempt, each participant wears casual, everyday clothing, posing together to symbolically represent a pillar.

It should be noted that, like Wang's *100%*, the vast majority of artworks using migrant workers during this period only featured groups of young male workers.¹⁰⁰ This can be partially explained because throughout this history, young males are the dominant social group that had the freedom to migrate so far from home, leaving entire villages primarily inhabited by women, children, and the elderly.¹⁰¹ There were, however, many young women who saw China's intense industrialization during this period as an opportunity for greater freedom away from the nuclear home. Young women from throughout the country moved to China's Special Economic Zones to work in factories where they also lived, worked, and ate. Besides factory work, the state newspaper, *People's Daily*, "exhorted women to work as maids, an occupation generally denigrated as suitable only for young and uneducated peasants: stating, 'domestic help is a new route for solving the re-employment problem of laid-off women.'" ¹⁰² The point here

⁹⁹ Wan Jin, interview with author, January 2015, Beijing, China.

¹⁰⁰ Some exceptions to this are Wang Wei's *Temporary Space* (2003) and Yu Ji's *Records of Pretty Girls Washing my Feet* (2002)

¹⁰¹ For example, in her 1993 report on the floating population of Shanghai, K.D. Roberts reports that $\frac{3}{4}$ of all rural laborers surveyed were between the ages of 18 and 34 years old and that almost $\frac{3}{4}$ were men. K.D. Roberts, "The Determinants of Job Choice by Rural Labor Migrants in Shanghai" in *Urbanization and Social Welfare in China*, ed. Aimin Chen, Gordon G. Liu, and Kevin H. Zhang. (Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 230.

¹⁰² K.D. Roberts, 222.

communicates that women migrant workers were not as publicly visible as their male counterparts. Furthermore, artists in urban centers, especially Beijing in the early 1990s, like Zhang Huan, had a history of hiring migrant workers to help with the execution of artworks, which often required heavy lifting. This, in combination with the fact that in the early 1990s most migrant workers hired to do heavy construction (one of the most visible and common types of migrant labor) were male, was probably part of the reason contemporary Chinese artists generally chose males as representatives of this social group.

The fact that migrant laborers are almost always depicted in groups is also noteworthy. After a decade of intellectuals and artists alike fighting for recognition of the individual, it seems that this was only geared toward a portion of the population, namely the intellectual or artist him/herself as differentiated from the masses and the party. The works that I discuss in this chapter do not focus on the individual subjectivity of each participating migrant worker. Rather, they call on the migrant workers to pose or perform in groups, often reenacting the actions of their labor or imitating the built environment.

Wang found his participants by soliciting the help of a foreman who regularly hired migrant workers. He paid each worker for their participation, but no longer has records of how much. He did not keep a list of the names of migrant workers because he did not think their names were very essential for the meaning of the work. Although he recognizes that this seems important for American students of democracy, he argues that these names are not so important in the context of China's history. For example, the names of the workers who built the Forbidden City or the Great Wall of China were never recorded. Even in the case of voting, Chinese people often let other people represent them. Only in the process of household registration do ordinary

people need to sign their names. The only way to comprehend this work of art, according to Wang, is to understand this Chinese tradition.¹⁰³

Wang was first inspired to make the photographic series *100%* after he moved to Tongxian district in the Southeast of Beijing. He often took public transportation into and out of the city, always passing over the Li Jiao bridge, the bridge under which the group poses in the photograph. “Actually at that time I was going back and forth just for the purpose of supporting the bridge...” Wang explained, “If people didn’t use the bridge, it would not stand. You can only cross this bridge because of the pillar that’s holding it up. This is a very simple argument, so I decided to do something related to the bridge’s pillar, related to its support.”¹⁰⁴ This quotation implies that for the author, the main idea behind this work is the relationship between humans and architecture; without human traffic, the bridge is useless. Without the bridge, there would be no human traffic. In another layer of explanation, Wang recalled that this work was made right around the time that the U.S. bombed the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia. For Wang, this event made the work seem more meaningful. He saw a connection between the bombing and the idea of banding together to hold up something powerful and heavy like a bridge. The experience of posing beneath the bridge itself felt very dangerous. Wang describes himself as continuously shaking from head to toe throughout the shooting session. The migrant workers on the bottom row supporting those on their shoulders were out of breath; the group toppled to the ground many times during the process.¹⁰⁵ In an interview with curator Leng Lin(冷林), in describing this work, Wang emphasized that it demonstrates many “contemporary art concepts” (“当代艺术概

¹⁰³ Wang Jin, interview with author, January 2015, Beijing, China.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

念”) , including its focus on a numerical arrangement, its technical skill, and the fact that it has an aura of precarity, but doesn't actually present any real danger.¹⁰⁶

It is interesting to note that in these descriptions of the work he emphasizes more abstract or formalist elements (international violence, individual sense of danger, the relationship between a human subject and his/her everyday surroundings, and Chinese history) over what I argue is the most obvious subject: the relationship between migrant workers and the built environment. In fact, in all descriptions I have read about the work (which are not exhaustive), the migrant workers' identities are foregrounded while the fact that the artist poses with the migrant workers is not usually mentioned. Their identity *as* migrant workers would have been apparent to contemporary local viewers because of their inexpensive and ill-fitting clothing, the fact that they are posing in a group, their pose is related to their labor, and they are all men, all common visual signifiers of migrant laborer identity. The chosen location and pose of the workers is related to their role within the process of urbanization of China's vast cities. The dense column of bodies occupies a central position within an otherwise desolate landscape. Their bodies are bound vertically to the ground below them and that which they support above. They are load-bearing and therefore immobile; if one moves, all others will also fall. From a strictly visual perspective, if the column itself falls, the entire bridge will come crashing down, hinting at the indispensability of migrant workers for the infrastructure of the city. The work lays bare their bodies which perform the labor responsible for the city's erection, bodies that are always both visible but also invisible on the streets of the ever-changing city.

¹⁰⁶ Wang Jin, "Staying the Course + 100%-- An Interview with Wang Jin, in Leng Lin 冷林" 《一意孤行+100%---王晋访谈》, *Its Me* 《是我》, ed. Leng Lin (Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, 2000), 135.

Wang's presence within the photograph introduces further interpretive difficulties. Why did Wang, not a migrant worker himself, pose with the migrant workers? Was this an act of identification with the migrant workers? How can this image elucidate for us his understanding of the relationship between himself and his subject? His response to these questions are as follows:

. . . the person next to you could be a peasant (*nongmin*), even though he could be wearing Western-style leather shoes, he could be a peasant. They [peasants] sometimes write poetry and novels very well, sometimes they are very good at school . . . sometimes they are very smart. They have very clever people. There are so many things in China, things that you don't even know about, that lead them to be in this temporary position. Tomorrow or the day after, they might go to another place to do something else. I think the whole city is like this. . . Now the changes are really big. China is like that. Today that store front could sell shoes, the next day it could sell steamed buns, now it could sell cellphones . . . The change is that quick, like the rhythm of music. Society might not need steamed buns anymore, it might need cell phones, so everyone sells cell phones . . . So sometimes they will come to participate in the building of the city. Today they will come help me stand under a bridge, tomorrow they will be the boss of a cell phone store. The boss of a cell phone store standing beneath my feet.¹⁰⁷

This statement is revealing in a number of ways. It indicates that the artist feels that the economic reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s created many opportunities for social mobility. The artist focuses on the positive aspects of this, never referencing the workers' situations before they were likely forced to move to the city, or the true impediments for upward mobility and security faced by migrant workers without a city *hukou*. Secondly, Wang's extensive use of the term "they" to describe "peasants" indicates that while "they" do change jobs from day to day, "their" identity, in the eyes of the artist, is still bound up with "their" origins in the countryside, or at least as outsiders of Beijing. In comparison, the artist seems to view his own identity as an artist as static against the changing identities of the migrant workers, whose opportunities probably do not include becoming professional artists themselves.

¹⁰⁷ Wang Jin, interview with author, January 2015, Beijing, China.

Only photographs were taken of the event, no video. Wang did not invite an audience to the performance itself. Therefore, the subsequent distribution of photographic documentation became the only means for it to reach a secondary audience. However, this work was not only distributed to a typical art-viewing audience in the context of a museum or gallery setting. In fact, one of the photographs from this series was originally distributed under very unconventional circumstances. In July of 1999 Wang Jin, together with artists Zhang Dali (张大力), Zhu Fadong, including the help of curator Wu Xiaojun (吴小军), put together a pamphlet in imitation of an insert to a larger newspaper and distributed them to the crowds at the International Exhibition Center in Beijing. Zhang Dali's contribution was an English-language explanation of his *Dialogue* series (photographs of his spray-painted bald head on walls throughout Beijing) along with a drawing of the outline of his head and an interview about whether or not graffiti is a legitimate art form. Zhu Fadong's *Identity Card* 《居民身份证》, a fake identity card he made for himself permitting him to live in the city for fifty years, took centerfold position. Wang Jin's contribution consisted of two images. One was the photograph taken in the basement of the building under construction before he took the iconic photo under the bridge as part of the *100%* series. The other was the same image, but in the place of his own and the migrant workers' bodies, are columns of common buzzwords in print media at the time, including "insurance," "environmental protection," "beauty," "shopping," "art," "democracy," and "public square." On the bottom he has written "names in no particular order."¹⁰⁸

By replacing the bodies of the migrant workers with words related to globalization and urbanization, Wang's work is conceptually connected with Socialist Realism, and later academic

¹⁰⁸Wang Jin, *100%*, 1999. Independent Publication. Published in Mia Yu, "A Great Disturbance in the Force: Art and Mass Media in the 1990s," trans. Katy Pinke, *Leap* 36 (January 21, 2016), <http://www.leapleap.com/2016/01/a-great-disturbance-in-the-force-art-and-mass-media-in-the-1990s/>.

realism, in that the figures of the migrant workers came to serve as metonyms for larger societal issues. The cacophonous array of words in this work, in some ways, illustrates his description of *100%*, quoted above. The infrastructure of the building is supported by random, unstable, and often contradictory concepts, mimicking the instability of the lives of migrant workers, whose identities, according to Wang, are in constant states of flux.

Their chosen method of distribution, passing out flyers to the general public in imitation of the mass media, is also significant within the context of the artists' position in relation to domestic popular culture. In her article "A Great Disturbance in the Force: Art and Mass Media in the 1990s," Mia Yu argues

These three artists, having found themselves outside the system, did not wish to remain on the margins of society to create underground exhibitions that would only be seen by other artists. Drawing inspiration from the leaflets and street advertisements of the time, they promoted their ideas like urban guerillas.¹⁰⁹

This act of self-promotion was in response to Wang's own alienation from domestic mainstream society. However, Wang had already achieved a great deal of success in the international art world. His *Chinese Dreams* 《中国梦》, a Qing Dynasty robe made of PVC material and embroidered with nylon thread had been exhibited in Gao's *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* exhibition in 1998, and the *APERTO overALL* exhibition at the 1999 Venice Biennial, both of which included Zhang Huan's *To Raise the Level of a Fishpond*. By distributing pamphlets, he imitated one way in which the migrant workers would have advertised their own labor for sale. And indeed, the work of migrant workers' labor *is* made visible in this image. However, this action, in which the artwork as a whole is signed by Wang Jin, while the migrant workers' bodies are interchangeable for larger societal issues related to urbanization, is more successful in

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

highlighting the difference between Wang and the migrant workers, than indicating their similarities. Like Zhang Huan's work, it illustrates the complex relationship between subject and object in many performance works utilizing the physical presence of migrant workers in the '90s and early 21st century after contemporary Chinese artists began to distinguish themselves as separate from other marginalized societal groups. Unlike the migrant workers, the artist has a tripled presence: in front of the camera's lens, behind the camera's lens, and countless times in the reproductions of this work as the claimant to authorship, a fact which is highlighted considering his guerilla distribution of this work on the streets of Beijing. The acknowledgement of this tripling of the artist's authorial presence brings to the forefront the fictional and uncomfortable nature of the scene he has organized.

2.3 DOCUMENTARY TURN

All of the primary works discussed in this dissertation take a semi-documentary approach. This impulse for documentation in the 1990s has been noted by many scholars of both film and contemporary visual art. Gao Minglu, for example, has pointed out what he calls the "documentary perspective" which emerged in the mid-1990s as an artistic reaction to the physical changes in the cities around them and the political events of the recent past:

The urban 'spectacle' makes people believe their own eyes. A credo of 'what can be seen is true' has sparked the development of a documentary style...When artists focus on the visible spaces around them, this sort of documentary perspective is itself a sort of incision into and fragmentation of the entire social context.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Gao Minglu, *The Wall...*, 214.

When Gao refers to a documentary perspective, however, he is especially speaking of the tendency of artists in the early 1990s to observe and document the relationship between avant-garde art spaces and society at large. He is also referring to the common practice of documenting urban ruins, the result of constant destruction and construction of China's urbanization, a necessary act in a place where ruins will not be preserved as historic and romantic symbols of a lost past, the way they have been in Western countries. Wu Hung's 1999 exhibition, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, also drew attention to this tendency. Interestingly, he interprets this documentary trend as a "domestic turn in contemporary Chinese art," arguing that many artists in the mid-1990s were

. . . most fascinated by China's transformation: the rapid disappearance of the traditional city and its neighborhoods and the changes in human relationships, lifestyle, taste, and values. Their works rarely represent these changes realistically, however. Instead the artists are often inclined to develop symbolic images, which help them capture their own fresh responses to such changes, including their confusion about their own place in the fast-changing environment.¹¹¹

Zhu Qi has argued that the preponderance of images of lower levels of society in contemporary art in the 1990s was one aspect of this documentary trend. However, he claims that most are superficial records of the external appearance of society and fail to analyze the deep processes of societal change occurring at the time.¹¹² In his critique, however, he fails to acknowledge the difference between images of lower levels of society and the inclusion of actual human bodies within an artwork. This ontological shift, I argue, offers new relational possibilities between artist and subject that were not possible with sculpture or painting. Because of the preponderance

¹¹¹ Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, exhibition catalog (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 24.

¹¹²Zhu Qi 朱其, "How does contemporary art describe..."

of vulnerable communities in Chinese documentary film in the 1990s, I will turn to Chinese film theory to aid in interpreting these works.

In 2001, Yomi Braester, coined the phrase “documentary impulse” in examining Chinese independent films in the 1990s and early 21st century, which sought to record elements of the city that would soon disappear within the cycle of demolition and construction characterized by rapid urbanization.¹¹³ In the same essay he also acknowledged a similar trend in visual art, citing works such as Zhan Wang’s (展望) *Refurbishing the Ruins* 《废墟清洗计划》 (1994), in which the artist cleaned and painted a portion of a half-destroyed building before a bulldozer came to demolish it entirely. This “documentary impulse” in the realm of film can be seen in developments which first occurred in China with the work of Wu Wenguang in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In the 1980s, the dominant form of documentary became known as the state produced celluloid and video *zhuanti pian* (special topics film). These works were pre-scripted talking-head exposés, aired on state television. The most famous of these was *River Elegy* 《河殇》, a program that lamented China’s persistent feudalism and isolationism. What sets documentary film of the 1990s apart, is a distinct lack of mediation such as music, scripts, or voice-overs. This periodization also overlaps with the transition in film making from the Fifth Generation to the Sixth Generation of Chinese film makers. The former were known for monumental and heroic stories set in the countryside, while the latter tended to focus on mundane aspects of daily life in urban settings. While the earlier documentaries of the 1990s focused on young musicians and

¹¹³ This term was first used in Yomi Braester’s conference paper “Shards of Memory: Chinese Urban Cinema from Trauma to Nostalgia,” presented at *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society in Transformation*, a symposium held at New York University in 2001. He later developed this paper into an essay which was published as “Tracing the City’s Scars: Demolition and the Limits of the Documentary Impulse in the New Urban Cinema” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 161-180.

artists who were marginalized by the restricting political environment and the growing market economy, depicted in the films *Bumming in Beijing* (a documentary focusing on young *mangliu* artists in Beijing) and *Beijing Bastards* (a semi-documentary film about young rock musicians in Beijing, starring the rock musician Cui Jian as himself), by the middle of the decade, film makers began to turn their attention to economically and socially vulnerable groups. Chris Berry has pointed out:

For not only do these new documentaries regularly “go down to the people” but they also give (or appear to give) the ordinary people a direct voice, which enables (or appears to enable) them to speak directly to other ordinary people and resonates with the economic agency that the development of a market sector gives (or appears to give) them.¹¹⁴

The caveats in this statement reveal the inherent limitations of the documentary format to allow its subjects to fully express themselves, but it also associates this documentary approach with the democratic promises of the newly developing market economy.

The works I discuss in this chapter also take a documentary approach, but, apart from *Dancing With Farm Workers* (2001), which was both a performance and documentary film, have never been explicitly discussed as such. One reason may be that their ontological definition is very hard to pin down, many of them crossing the boundaries between performance, documentary video, and photography. Because of this, they cannot strictly be critiqued in the same terms as the documentary films featuring vulnerable communities or documentary photography that was made contemporaneously, which attempted to authentically capture the objective world through the subjective perspective of the film maker or photographer.¹¹⁵ Rather

¹¹⁴ Chris Berry, “Getting Real” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 121-122.

¹¹⁵ This explanation of the relationship between the “real” and the documentary film comes from Cecile Lagesse’s exploration of the legacy of Andrew Bazin in Chinese documentary practices in the 1980s and 1990s. See Cecile Lagesse, “Bazin and the Politics of Realism in Mainland China,” in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew with Herve Joubert-Laurencin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 316-323.

than maintaining the (seemingly) open format of many documentary films of the time, these are highly choreographed (some more than others), with the artist instructing the migrant worker participants how to pose or move. What they share in common with the documentary films of the 1990s is an almost ethnographic interest on the part of Chinese artists of vulnerable communities. This could be explained by the rising position of artist within Chinese society, but also, according to Philip Tinari, by “Beijing's emergence from the global periphery into a newly and increasingly central position.”¹¹⁶ The ambiguity between realism and choreography in these works presents even more interpretive difficulties, considering the position of the contemporary artist as an interlocutor between the local and the global.

2.4 WANG WEI 王卫, TEMPORARY SPACE 《临时空间》, 2003

In 2003, artist Wang Wei hired a group of ten migrant workers to help him execute the work *Temporary Space* at Lu Jie's 25000 Cultural Transmission Center in Beijing's 798 district. As Philip Tinari points out in his astute essay about the exhibition, the location of this work is particularly suited for the subject matter. The 798 Art District was formerly a complex of electronics factories built in the Bauhaus style with the help of East Germany in the 1950s. Due to economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, it was eventually shut down and, in 2002, was appropriated as a center for contemporary art. The natural lighting from overhead skylights and the starkness of the open layouts made these defunct factories the perfect location for the exhibition of contemporary art. This series of economic reforms was also responsible for

¹¹⁶ Phillip Tinari, "What Does Not Stand Cannot Fall: Wang Wei's Temporary Spaces," in *Temporary Space*, exhibition catalog (Beijing: 25000 Cultural Transmission Center, 2003).

millions of migrant workers being forced from their land in the countryside or from bankrupt factories in smaller cities to, instead, come work in larger urban centers as temporary laborers.

Wang Wei initially became interested in making art about migrant workers when he was employed as a photo-journalist for the popular newspaper *Beijing Youth Daily*. His friend had already been shooting a documentary about a group of migrant workers whom he introduced to Wang. Wang then spent two days with the group who were stationed outside of the East Fifth Ring Road, and shot pictures of them for a photo-essay. A year later he remained interested in this subject matter, and decided he wanted to incorporate it into an artwork. He returned to the location of his photo-essay, seeking to use the workers with whom he already had a relationship, but he could not find them. Instead, he found another group, all from the same hometown in Hebei Province, who were willing to participate in his performance. This group had all been farmers, but because of the Sloping Land Conversion Program (退耕还林), a reforestation program initiated by the government, which, by 2003 had already “retired” 7.2 million hectares of cropland,¹¹⁷ was no longer allowed to farm their land. In response, they came to Beijing to make a living. Many of the members of the group were married and had children who worked and played beside them. They bought bricks from the owners of demolished buildings in the outskirts of the city, cleaned them, and sold them to construction companies. In this way, the group members made approximately 30 to 40 RMB a day.¹¹⁸

For his artwork, Wang paid this group of migrant workers for 25,000 cleaned bricks, which they transported into the 798 Art District on carts pulled by donkeys. For the next twelve days, these men and women erected a four-walled structure inside of the gallery space. On the

¹¹⁷ Michael T. Bennett and Jintao Xu, “China’s Sloping Land Conversion Program: Institutional Innovation or Business as Usual?,” accessed April 14, 2016, http://www.cifor.org/pes/publications/pdf_files/China_paper.pdf.

¹¹⁸ According to Wang Wei, interview with the author, July 2015, Beijing.

thirteenth day, an opening reception was held. Visitors walked the narrow passageway between the windowless brick box and the walls of the gallery. A series of black and white glossy photos of the process of building the structure were exhibited on one wall, and Wang's eight-minute documentary film made by Wang of the daily working lives of the group was also shown. Over the next few days, the workers dismantled the structure, bought back the bricks from Wang, cleaned them, piled them in their donkey carts, and left to sell them to the next buyer. After the end of the project, Wang finished the cycle of photographs to include the process of dismantling the wall and loading the bricks back onto the donkey cart. The photographic series is titled *What Does Not Stand Cannot Fall* 《不立不破》.

This work resonates deeply with both the social-economic situation of Beijing at the time and developments within the local art world in which Wang was very much involved. First of all, like Wang Jin's *100%*, it draws attention to the work force behind the never-ending cycle of construction and destruction within the city, arguably the main theme behind the work. He uses the space of the city beautifully to reconstruct the movement of one of the vast networks of people and material necessary for an urbanization project of such immense scale. The sense of movement between various nodes within the city is reinforced by the title of the eight-minute documentary film, *Dong Ba* 《东坝》, derived from the name of the former village outside of the 5th ring road where the workers usually harvest their bricks. The procession of donkey-pulled carts into the 798 Art District would have further drawn attention to this movement, but would not have been an uncommon site within the newly emerging arts district where many factory spaces were being renovated into art studios, galleries, or commercial spaces, also at the hands of migrant workers. What sets this work apart from the every-day, is not the carts' entrance into one of the gallery spaces, but the act of inversion that Wang creates, drawing forth, as art, that which

is usually its background, including both the architectural structure and the workers who build, demolish, and recycle them. Their procession out of 798 and into the city lyrically highlights the endless cycle of movement.

One way in which this project distinguishes itself, is the absence of the bodies of the migrant workers at the onset. By the time of the audience's arrival, the structure was built, and the migrant workers were absent. This, therefore, could be seen as a re-creation of the experience of the migrant worker him/herself, who must remain on the outside of the structures they build, structures, that in the case of 798, were formerly the domain of workers like themselves, rather than the elite world of high art. While throughout the twelve days leading up to the opening, the bodies of the migrant workers were highly visible and active within the space, their absence at the opening is highlighted by their mediated presence in the photos and videos. Their real bodies disappear at the moment the process is redefined as art, and reappear when it stops being so. Their work, therefore, is as much about presence as about absence, as much about space as lack of it. But it is also about *time*. Wang has said of this work

I want to make the audience think that something has happened, that builders have just freshly built a wall for example. They use donkeys to deliver the bricks, which are everywhere. I want to give an essence to this. This is essential to me. I want to almost confuse people into thinking that it references real life but is somehow stranger. But real life for me is very strange.¹¹⁹

Indeed, this work is strange, but oddly real as well. Wang does not ask the workers to do anything they would not normally do, except build the structure inside the gallery, which is outside their usual job of cleaning and reselling bricks. But it was the recycling of bricks, in combination with the speed of construction and destruction, that Beijingers observed on a regular basis, that he found so interesting. The documentation of each day of the process adds a temporal

¹¹⁹ Nav Haq, "Sites of Construction and Encounter: An Interview with Wang Wei," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* vol. 6 no. 2 (June 2007): 97.

element, exposing the process which led to the construction of art zones like 798 in the first place.

Wang's emphasis on time is notable in relation to art historian Gu Yi's theory about the relationship between time and authenticity in works involving "peasants" in China. She argues that the concept of *duration* became a key criterion among contemporary Chinese artist working with *nongmin* populations for achieving authenticity:

Once works on peasants began suddenly to prosper and to win quick market success, a durational investment became the only reliable benchmark for determining whether artists were sincere enough to work with a marginalized group living in a "time zone" different from the one of the metropolitan, with its rapid and incessant global flow of personnel, ideas, and capital.¹²⁰

Rather than drawing attention to the difference in "time zones" between *nongmin* and the artist, however, Wang's project draws attention to their shared temporality. By aligning his own project with the real-time cycle of migrant workers' labor, Wang's project gains a greater level of authentic reality in which the line between art and the every-day becomes blurred. Gu's theory is perhaps instructive of the difference between artworks dealing with rural and urban *nongmin* in that once migrant workers come to the city, they must adapt to the metropolitan flows of "personnel, ideas, and capital" in a way that rural-based *nongmin* do not.

Like Wang Jin, Wang Wei does not emphasize the importance of the subject of the migrant worker in his published and verbal explanations of the work. For Wang Wei, the concept of *space* was the primary subject of the exhibition, and something that he had been working with for a long time before this. We can see this clearly in his photographic installation titled *1/30th of a Second Underwater* 《水下三十分之一秒》 from the 1999 exhibition *Post-Sense Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion* 《后感性：异形与妄想》, in which he installed a series

¹²⁰ Gu Yi, 63.

of light boxes in a row, exhibited on the ground for visitors to step over. Each light box contained a photograph of a person's face (the artist and his friends) appearing to be stuck underwater, just below the surface, bubbles streaming from their mouths, hands pressed against the glass, eyes full of panic. The installation is accompanied by a subtle sound track of underwater noises. This, in combination with the fact that the audience was forced to walk within a very small hallway when it was originally exhibited, enhanced the viewer's feeling of claustrophobia. Another example of a work dealing with the concept of space, this time touching more explicitly on the relationship between space and architecture, is his 2002 *Hypocritical Room* 《虚伪的空间》. In this work, Wang created a large-scale light-box cube on wheels. Before the opening of the exhibition, he photographed the exhibition space and inserted life-sized photographs of each of the walls of the exhibition space into each side of the light-boxes. The boxes were then pushed around the exhibition space by volunteers wearing white coats and breathing masks throughout the opening of the exhibition. For Wang, the experience of space the viewer occupies is as much a part of these works as the objects themselves. He has said "The space I create is something that people can't get into. It's useless. When the room moves towards them, they need to find a way around it. It's a bit of a fight. People find it intriguing to fight with a room."¹²¹ In an interview with the author, Wang suggested that this artistic focus comes from his preoccupation with the human desire for space and power. Because of the economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese society became more and more stratified and private property became of sign of luxury and wealth, private space a commodity. Wang believes that these desires are stifling and a direct result of the influx of Western cultural standards into China.¹²² In some ways, therefore, the stifling spatial atmosphere created by the structure inside the gallery in

¹²¹ Nav Haq, "Sites of Construction and Encounter: An Interview with Wang Wei," 98.

¹²² Wang Wei, interview with the author, July 2015, Beijing.

Temporary Space could be read as a metaphor for this phenomenon, which is all the more appropriate considering the fact that the 798 Art District became a center for international culture; many of the earliest galleries to open were foreign-run spaces, and the fact that contemporary art itself has always been considered a Western import by the general population. In keeping with his previous preoccupation, the concept of space itself and our relationship with it was foregrounded at the opening. Most of the space of the gallery was taken up by the hollow four-walled structure. The only way to experience it was to amble around it, leaving no comfortable space for socializing. In this way, Wang subverted the two primary benefits of using an old factory as an exhibition venue: light and open space. It was not until the exhibition was over, the contract between Wang and the migrant workers finished, that those elements of the gallery environment were returned.

2.5 SONG DONG 宋冬, TOGETHER WITH MIGRANT WORKERS 《和民工在一起》, 2003

In 2003 the first exhibition ever to deal specifically with art concerning the migrant worker was held at the Today Art Museum in Beijing. Called *Together with Migrants* (《我们在一起》), it was organized in conjunction with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (which is affiliated with the Chinese State Council) and UNESCO. In fact, both organizations had spent the previous two decades working together, researching the problem of economic migration in China. They sought to find a way to bring the public's attention to this problem in a way that would be

engaging and attractive. Therefore, Yang Xinyi (杨心一), the exhibition's head curator, proposed this exhibition to showcase how artists have imagined this problem. The timing of the exhibition aligns with a new developments in public policy which added more safeguards for rural to urban migrant workers, and could have been a way for the government to promote public empathy towards the plight of the migrant worker.¹²³

The central focus of the opening of the exhibition, occurring on November 22, was Song Dong's performance with the same English name as the exhibition (it's Chinese name is 《和民工在一起》). For this work, Song invited around 200 migrant workers to occupy the space of the museum for the duration of the opening. All shirtless, the workers were divided into four groups. The first group consisted of seven workers who remained in the elevator which could only hold thirteen people. The second group stood in the window sill at the entrance to the exhibition. The third group, referred to as a "wall" of migrant workers, stood at the entrance to the main exhibition hall. The last group occupied the third floor of the museum, enacting a performance with Song Dong, himself shirtless. The migrant workers in this group were connected by elastic ropes. They stood in a square-shaped military formation. When Song blew a whistle, they moved together into a tight pack. When he blew it again, they dispersed again into the square formation. The performance, scheduled to last three hours, lasted only one once it became evident that the migrant workers were very cold.

The idea for the work, one which he had been considering since his 2001 *Dancing with Farm Workers* (discussed at the end of this chapter), was to create a situation in which migrant workers outnumbered the audience, thus reversing the traditional museological hierarchy of the

¹²³ This new take on internal migration was part of the 2003 "New Paradigm for Development." For more information, see Zhan Shaohua, "Rural Labour Migration in China: Changes for Policies," *Management of Social Transformations, Policy Papers* (Paris: UNESCO, 2005), 10.

viewers and the viewed. Through numbers alone, he sought to enact a social reversal: to marginalize the “center,” in this case, the art-world elite. By filling the exhibition space with the migrant workers, the audience was forced to come face to face with them in an uncomfortable way. The only way to enter the exhibition was to press through the “wall” of migrant workers. The space was hot, and according to one news report, some visitors covered their noses because of the smell of body odor.¹²⁴ Multiple news sources reported the discomfort of walking past the group of migrant workers in the window near the entrance to the exhibition, one even declaring that some women were so uncomfortable they sought other ways to enter the exhibition.¹²⁵ For Qian Gangnan, this and other works by Song Dong counter the daily habits of city dwellers, who often ignore migrant workers when they are encountered on the city streets. By organizing them en masse, Qian believes that Song creates the power of shock (“震慑力”) that forces the viewer to really look at this population.¹²⁶ Song also played with this concept in a work called *Bonsai* 《盆景》, (2003) in which he paid a group of more than 100 migrant workers to view movies on a screen placed above of the entrance, thus when visitors entered the exhibition, they immediately felt as if they were the subject of the migrant workers’ gaze.

In Claire Bishop’s 2012 article “Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity,” she noted the tendency in the West, starting in the 1990s, for artists, instead of performing themselves, to invite non-artist participants to perform in their place. As this dissertation points out, this trend was also a dominant tendency in China. Bishop argues that we need to find a more complicated reading of these works than the common Marxist, one that focuses on the fact that

¹²⁴ *Yangzi Evening News* 《扬子晚报》, “200 Half-Naked Migrants Exhibit “art” 《两百民工半裸展示 “艺术”》, November 23, 2003, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2003-11-23/12071171632s.shtml>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Qian Gangnan 钱岗南, ““You first have to liberate the “other”...”, 120.

these works tend to reify the labor relations of late capitalism. She divides these types of works into “art-fair art” or “gala art,” in which artists invite non-artist actors to perform as a form of superficial spectacular entertainment, from “work that reifies *precisely in order to discuss reification*, or that exploits *precisely to thematize exploitation itself*.”¹²⁷ She points out that most works that fit within the second category, (Santiago Sierra serves as her primary example), highlight the economic details of the exchange between the artist and the paid performers as one of its primary mediums. She notes that Sierra’s work lacks the tongue-in-cheek humor that is found in many works taking place in so-called “first world” countries because his works “...frequently take place in countries already at the disadvantaged end of globalization...”¹²⁸ China similarly has historically been at the disadvantaged end of globalization and delegated performances involving migrant workers can only be understood within this context.

Song’s *Together with Migrant Workers*, in particular, seems to want to draw attention to the exploitation of migrant labor through reification in a museum setting. As in Wang Jin’s work, Song performs with the migrant workers. But in contrast to Wang’s work, he differentiates himself from the mass of migrant worker participants by blowing an instructive whistle to which they must respond. This sense of purposeful reification is further emphasized by the fact that that the migrant workers were instructed to perform without shirts, the reason for which, Song Dong explained to the press, was to realistically show what the workers look like in their day to day work lives;¹²⁹ and the fact that while the audience was served hors d’oeuvres and champagne at the opening reception, Chinese cabbage and rice was served for the migrant workers. The

¹²⁷ Claire Bishop, “Delegated Performance...,” 112.

¹²⁸ Bishop, 94.

¹²⁹ Reported in both “200 Half-Naked Migrants...” *Yangzi Evening News* 《扬子晚报》 (November 23, 2003) and *Beijing Daily* 《京华时报》, “200 at-the-ready shirtless migrant workers” 《200名民工现场赤膊上阵》, November 23, 2003, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2003-11-23/02251168777s.shtml>. Translations by author.

director of the museum assured the press that this was not discrimination, rather, it was meant to reflect reality. In an interview with the press, curator Yang Xinyi further stated, "We want to allow the visitors to open themselves to experience the living situation of the migrant worker."¹³⁰ Further, there is no indication that Song desired to give the migrant worker participants any form of expressive agency.

The participating migrant workers seemed to have had some faith in the stated goal of the project once they began rehearsing. The *Yangzi Newspaper* reported on one of the participating migrant workers, referred to as "Old Li:"

I haven't eaten since this morning" said Old Li. Although the staff gave each participant three steamed buns, two bottles of water, and three eggs, they haven't had time to eat. Old Li added, "when we came, our boss told us he was taking us to see a new construction site, he didn't tell us the truth. Seeing it, there is nothing." Old Li is still very happy, even though they are naked above the waist and constantly standing, and people keep taking pictures, he doesn't feel embarrassed.¹³¹

Not all of the workers were tricked into participating. *The Beijing Times* interviewed another participant:

I came to Beijing about a month ago, I heard here there was an activity that you could get thirty RMB for not working, so I came. We started practicing at 9 am, we worked until 5 pm. I don't really understand this art, but through this art exhibition, we can lead everyone to care about migrants. I think it's very good . . . Song Dong asked us all to take off our shirts, I feel it will damage our dignity. But if this will cause society to pay attention to us, everything is worth it.¹³²

The ambiguity here seems to stem from the fact that this work obviously reifies the oppressive working conditions of the migrant workers, thus imbricating the artist and the museum itself within this system, but also explicitly offers the hope (to both migrant workers themselves and

¹³⁰ "200 Half-Naked Migrants..." *Yangzi Evening News*.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² "200 at-the-ready shirtless workers." Translation by author.

the audience) that such an exhibition will do something to improve their situation. The museum and artist, therefore, occupy a double position of the capitalist oppressor and socialist emancipator, a position which is, in the end, impossible.

The primary thrust of Bishop's article is that this tendency in the West for artists to recruit non-artist participants in their performance art works is tied to a desire for authenticity.

"The performers," she says,

....also delegate something to the artist: a guarantee of authenticity, through their proximity to everyday social reality, conventionally denied to the artist, who deals merely in representations. By relocating sovereign and self-constituting authenticity away from the singular artist (who is naked, masturbates, is shot in the arm, etc.) and onto the collective presence of the performers, who metonymically signify a solidly sociopolitical issue (homelessness, race, immigration, disability, etc.), the artist outsources authenticity and relies on his performers to supply this more vividly, without the disruptive filter of celebrity.¹³³

Bishop's argument is particularly interesting in the context of these Chinese artists, who had not yet achieved stardom within China, but were beginning to gain notoriety in the art world outside of China. Because of their precarious social positions within their own country, it is unlikely that their incorporation of migrant workers would have given a domestic audience the impression of greater authenticity. But, this interpretation may have been reached by an international audience, for whom participatory art with marginalized communities was already a familiar trope. The notion of "authenticity" has great significance in Chinese contemporary art discourse, and is an integral concept for understanding the fraught implications of the concept of the "avant-garde" in the 1990s. This idea was primarily drawn out in debates over the concept of "site specificity," *xianchang* 现场 in Chinese, in both documentary film and visual art.

¹³³ Bishop, 110.

2.6 XIANCHANG

The word *xianchang* (现场) in Chinese can be roughly translated as “site” or “location,” and has been used in theories of both film and contemporary experimental art in the 1990s. Renowned film historian and scholar Zhang Zhen has argued that the “essence of *xianchang* is embedded in the sensitivity toward the relationship between subject and object, in the conscious reflection on the aesthetic treatment of this relationship. It is a cinematic practice and theory about space and temporality, which is charged with a sense of urgency and social responsibility.”¹³⁴ Film historian Luke Robinson contextualizes *xianchang* in the early 1990s as

... the term for location shooting, a practice codified by Chinese directors, both feature and documentary filmmakers, in the early 1990s. It is closely associated with the new realist aesthetic of *jishi zhuyi* ---“documentary realism”—that these artists were seeking to develop as an alternative to the by then discredited *xianshi zhuyi*, or socialist realism, that had characterized studio-based Chinese documentary practice up until the late 1980s.¹³⁵

These two explanations reveal an interesting conundrum in the ideological implications of *xianchang*. In one sense, it is a strategy whose underlying assumption is that art has a societal responsibility that it must fulfil, and that *xianchang* itself provides the artist or documentarian with “a space for intervention.”¹³⁶ On the other hand, the use of *xianchang*, on-location shooting, has been used by film makers as a strategy of self-positioning in opposition to the tropes of Socialist Realism in that it is meant to reveal a more “authentic” or “true” reality rather than intervention.

¹³⁴ Zhang Zhen, “Building on the Ruins: The Exploration of New Urban Cinema of the 1990s,” in *The First Guangzhou Triennial, Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Art (1990-2000)*, ed. Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng, Feng Boyi, exhibition catalog (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 116.

¹³⁵ Luke Robinson, “From ‘Public’ to ‘Private’: Chinese Documentary and the Logic of Xianchang,” in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 180.

¹³⁶ Zhang Zhen, “Building on the ruins...,” 117.

Luke Robinson's quote above is from his article "From "Public" to "Private": Chinese Documentary and the Logic of *Xianchang*," in which he explores the shift in meaning and use of *xianchang* in documentary film making over the course of the 1990s as being one from "public" to "private." He describes the works of earlier, "public" documentarians as "quasi-anthropological" in that these directors often turn their lens toward subaltern people, frequently incorporate non-actors, while spending extensive time researching their subject before beginning the process of filming. This intensive preparation allows the directors to better incorporate contingent elements into the director's narrative within the "limits of the *xianchang* aesthetic."¹³⁷ This ethnographic approach, in addition to the sense of social responsibility apparent in most of these films, according to Robinson, demonstrate some of the same tropes of Socialist Realism. By this, he means that these directors use specific subjects to stand as metaphors for elements of society as a whole:

Socialist realism is noted for its use of "models," the most famous being the model characters that peopled revolutionary opera. Derived from the concept of *dianxing*, or the "typical," outlined by Mao in his *Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art* (1942), such characters were broadly imitative, in that they were intended for emulation: they were a key way in which individuals could be constructed in the basic categories of Maoist political thought. But in consequence they were also archetypes, images fashioned from material that was already understood as present within the body politic, but presented in an idealized form. Through such images broader social and political issues could be articulated. Therefore, at their most extreme, socialist realist characters could become stock figures in an allegorization of social processes, the outcome of which was pre-determined: There was little space for development, change, or the unexpected in a narrative where revolutionary history was "epic, futuristic, and always victorious in the end."¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Robinson, 182.

¹³⁸ Robinson, 192.

To demonstrate his point, Robinson sites documentarian Duan Jinchuan (段锦川) as saying that “without metaphors to connect the sites of his films to everyday activity, shooting such locations would be pointless.”¹³⁹ He also paraphrases Wu Wenguang in regards to his film *Jiang Hu* 《江湖》, a documentary about *hukou*-less traveling tent performers:

Jiang Hu, he insists, should not be understood as a film that is merely about the experience of “other people,” namely those without urban residency, who effectively constitute the subjects of the documentary. Rather, it should be understood as a film about everyone in China, urban or rural: now everyone’s life is “on the road,” in a constant state of flux in which the old rules no longer apply, and the new ones have yet to be created.¹⁴⁰

Despite the fact that Sixth Generation film makers, including Wu Wenguang, have been historicized as enacting a distinct break from the Socialist Realism of documentaries of the 1980s, Robinson points out that the historical development of experimental film in China must be understood not only in terms of rupture, but also in terms of continuity with the socialist past. The goal of these early documentary film makers, including Wu Wenguang, Jiang Yue (蒋越), Duan Jinchuan, and Zhang Yuan (张元), is to use specific subject matter to make a greater statement about society as a whole.

The concept of *xianchang* also became a focal point in the world of video art, performance, and installation art in the late 1990s. In the case of performance art, the term been interpreted by Thomas Berghuis as “the actual scene (of an incident), but is also used to identify the precedence of *live action* over documentation.”¹⁴¹ The most outspoken artist, critic, and curator to employ this concept was Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰) who himself curated a series of exhibitions called *Post-Sense Sensibility*, and published a book of essays titled *The Scene*

¹³⁹ Duan Jinchuan, unpublished interview with Luke Robinson, August 14 2005, Beijing. Cited in Robinson, 187.

¹⁴⁰ Robinson, 186-187.

¹⁴¹ Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2007), 135.

[*xianchang*] is *Most Important*¹⁴² 《重要的是现场》 all of which give precedence to “the scene” over other concerns such as object-hood or concept. In the forward to the aforementioned book, Qiu describes his stakes in “*xianchang*.”

Xianchang implies: You need to be there at the time; rather than someone venting his/her own feelings, *xianchang* is prepared for you, it astutely calculates your experience---*xianchang* is not like traditional artworks that precede your existence, *xianchang* is something that happens after you arrive within the space, so it is post-sensible . . . The current mission of new media art is to “marginalize media,” its power is in the hybrid forms of performance and theater. Marginalization means throwing new media art from the concept of new media art, throwing it towards something that is a less stable, more dangerous *xianchang*. That is definitely post-sensible...*xianchang* is not an outcome of media. Rather, *xianchang*, at its basic level, is a media. Compared to video, digital photography, and interactive multimedia installations, *xianchang* is an even newer media.¹⁴³

The reference he made to “throwing new media art from the concept of new media art” was in response to his disgust with the state of contemporary art at the time, which for him was too conceptual and esoteric. He connected the “meaning,” meant to be conveyed in conceptual art at the time, with “essentialist attitudes,”¹⁴⁴ that which he deemed dangerous and sought to avoid. He saw *xianchang* as a way to purify art, to hone it down to the basic human senses. What is notable in this assessment of *xianchang* is that it is used in quite a different way and for quite different purposes than in film theory from the early 1990s. Here, Qiu, an influential member of Beijing’s avant-garde art community, uses the concept as a tactic which actively seeks to remove art from all conceptual or societal references. Rather, it is about individual experience on a sensorial, almost primitive level. Also notable is the fact that he conceptualized *xianchang* as a

¹⁴² Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰, *The Scene is Most Important* 《重要的是现场》 (Beijing: Renmin University Publishing House, 2003) .

¹⁴³ Qiu Zhijie, 2. Translation by the author.

¹⁴⁴ As described by Lü Peng in *Fragmented Reality: Contemporary Art in 21st Century China* (Milan, Italy: Charta Publishing House, 2012), 172.

distinctly indigenous exhibition model, in response to works that he considered to be pandering to Western postcolonial expectations.

A revealing example of how his approach differs from the use of *xianchang* in documentary film can be seen in his second iteration of *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibitions, titled “Spree.” Held at the Beijing film academy, this exhibition featured some sculptural and installation works, but was primarily an afternoon of performances. Upon entrance into the exhibition, the visitor first encountered the refreshment table which was covered with a variety of different meat products on plates, including ham, sausage, soy-sauce beef, and lamb.¹⁴⁵ Among the plates of meat, three human heads had been pushed through holes in the table, also appearing to rest on plates. The heads were those of three living migrant workers whose bodies were crouched, hidden beneath the table. Behind the plates of meat and workers’ heads, stood a statue of Buddha and a sign reading “All the Meat Here is Clean,” thereby equating the meat on the table with the bodies of the living migrant workers. When I asked about *All the Meat Here is Clean* 《这里的肉都是干净的》 and its explicit conflation of living migrant workers and meat in *Post-Sense Sensibility: Spree*, Qiu explained:

On the table is all meat, it doesn't have vegetables, and I added a Buddha. He didn't eat meat, right? It has to do with our relationship with meat. If you think about it carefully, they [all the meat on the table] are all corpses . . . In Buddhism they don't view the body so extremely, it is a leather sack . . . You are supposed to hate your body. Your body is not clean, it is a leather sack, holding your bones.¹⁴⁶

Unlike the documentary films and performance works which were meant to draw societal attention to the plight of the migrant worker, in the case of Qiu, the body of the migrant worker became a site at which he explicitly sought to divorce the human body from ideological connotations, and, by extension, was also an attempt at divorcing art from ideology. In this case,

¹⁴⁵ “From the Perspective of an Eye Witness,” document given to author by Qiu Zhijie, pg. 1.

¹⁴⁶ Qiu Zhijie, Interview with author, October 2015, Beijing, China.

“ideology” referred to both the ideological connotations of realism in a domestic sense, and what he considered as a pandering to the conceptual tastes of the hegemonic Western-based international exhibition system. Qiu probably chose migrant workers because they were inexpensive to hire, not because of their class identity. However, because of the strong historical ideological symbolism connected to the peasant-turned-migrant-worker, knowledge of this identity adds greater extremity to the work. He used the idea of the “meaninglessness” of the transitory objects of this world found in Buddhism to reinforce this idea.

This way of thinking about *xianchang* can also be detected in both Wang Wei’s *Temporary Space* and Song Dong’s *Together with Migrants*. In the former, this can be seen in Wang’s preoccupation with the visitor’s sense of space within the exhibition. Wang may have been directly influenced by Qiu’s ideas because he participated in all six *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibitions. In Song’s work, the sheer number of migrant workers involved were meant to create physical and psychological discomfort for the visitors to the exhibition, on a spatial and sensorial level. This is particularly evident in the elevator, in which seven workers remained throughout the performance, one more than half of its maximum numbers of occupants. Or the “wall” of workers through which visitors had to shove, thus coming into close physical contact with the workers, in order to continue viewing the exhibition.

Qiu Zhijie was drawn to the unpredictable qualities of *xianchang* as an experimental art practice. In the context of documentary film, entering into the living space of the filmed subject could also generate unpredictable circumstances. However, the continued preoccupation with *dianxing*, or prototypical representations of a person as defined by his/her socio-economic class position, limits the interpretive scope of the work. Even more so than in the “public” documentary works described by Robinson, the performance works in this chapter are

conceptually reliant on the audience's ability to read the subject as the migrant worker, and read the migrant worker as metaphor for a larger social issue. Each artist uses specific tropes to make this identity clear, inviting groups of men, requesting that the migrant workers imitate their everyday labor in the museum, perform as a group, and, in the case of Song Dong, perform shirtless. However, Bishop has pointed out that while the economic practice of "outsourcing labor" finds its art historical parallel in "delegated performance," the outcomes tend to be very different. In economics, the goal is to use the cheap labor of un-developed countries to ensure stable economic growth, thus decreasing risk. In the art world, "artists frequently use it as a means to *increase* unpredictability--- even if this means that a work might risk failing altogether."¹⁴⁷ Although it might be possible for the works discussed in this chapter to also introduce unpredictability by inviting so many non-artists to perform, they do not. Rather, in each case, the artist maintained full control of the choreography, dress, and overall presentation of the migrant workers. All of these choices were in keeping with the artist's understanding of that specific social identity, one based on physical appearance and prescribed actions. This is perhaps more fully controlled in the case of Wang Jin and Wang Wei in which the bodies of the migrant workers are only presented through the mediated form of photography and video. In Song Dong's work, the possibility for unpredictability was greater because of the forced interaction he created between the workers and the audience, yet those interactions were always already somewhat prescribed, due to the fact that the performance itself was based on class difference between audience and subject, which itself was based on simplistic visual signifiers.

This analysis of two very different notions of *xianchang*, as they relate to works involving migrant workers elucidates the unique connotations of documentary realism in China

¹⁴⁷ Bishop, 104.

at the end of the 21st century. For many contemporary Chinese artists in postsocialist China, the idea of making art for the people, or to improve society, is suspicious because of its connection to propaganda of the Mao period and the authoritarian demands of the central government. Because of this, the idea of completely separating art from society became a strategy that was ultimately meant to forge a healthier relationship between art and society. However, artists' continued attention to marginalized communities indicates a sustained socialist desire for social equality in the face of great societal change. The two uses of *xianchang*, as outlined in this chapter, represent two theoretical poles within a continuum. This chapter argues that both conceptions are often found within singular works of art, as exemplified by performance artworks involving migrant workers. Its use in documentary film was employed to realistically record societally vulnerable communities, and as a method of societal intervention, while its use in contemporary art practice became a strategy to completely separate art from society. The ambiguity present in works like *100%*, *Temporary Space*, and *Together with Migrants* reflects the presence of both conceptions of *xianchang*. In their use of migrant workers as a metonymic symbol for a societal problem, and in their humanist care for this underprivileged group, they preserve the class-based world-view and "art for the people" approach established in the Socialist Realism of the Mao period, which continues in officially sanctioned academic realism. However, these works also contain distinctly experimental and open-ended elements such as the manipulation of sensorial stimulation, highly curated art space (separate from social space), and the possibility for spontaneous interaction between two groups of people who do not usually occupy the same space. Furthermore, they simultaneously seek to authentically reflect reality and manipulate reality for artistic purposes. These works, therefore, can be read on multiple, seemingly contradictory, levels: one which relies on the identity of the participants as migrant

workers, and one in which the participants' bodies are used as props for the artists to manipulate the spatial and sensorial experience of the audience, an interpretation that is not dependent on the participants' identities as migrant workers. Such a paradox can be read as a strategy for the artists to engage with society while distancing themselves from the ideological connotations of realism. The visual affinity these works have with Socialist Realism, and, later, officially sanctioned academic Realism, causes them to appear less suspicious to the central government (even though they are performance artworks- an art form that has been officially denounced), thus allowing artists to operate more freely under the radar of state censorship. This allowed for the possibility of an open-ended interpretation, which ultimately held the potential for a re-envisioning of the relationship between art and society.

2.7 EARLY EXAMPLES OF A NEW METHODOLOGY

The word *xianchang* (现场) in Chinese can be roughly translated as “site” or “location,” and has been used in theories of both film and contemporary experimental art in the 1990s. Renowned film historian and scholar Zhang Zhen has argued that the “essence of *xianchang* is embedded in the sensitivity toward the relationship between subject and object, in the conscious reflection on the aesthetic treatment of this relationship. It is a cinematic practice and theory about space and temporality, which is charged with a sense of urgency and social responsibility.”¹⁴⁸ Film historian Luke Robinson contextualizes *xianchang* in the early 1990s as

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... the term for location shooting, a practice codified by Chinese directors, both feature and documentary filmmakers, in the early 1990s. It is closely associated with the new realist aesthetic of *jishi zhuyi* ---“documentary realism”—that these artists were seeking to develop as an alternative to the by then discredited *xianshi zhuyi*, or socialist realism, that had characterized studio-based Chinese documentary practice up until the late 1980s.¹⁴⁹

These two explanations reveal an interesting conundrum in the ideological implications of *xianchang*. In one sense, it is a strategy whose underlying assumption is that art has a societal responsibility that it must fulfil, and that *xianchang* itself provides the artist or documentarian with “a space for intervention.”¹⁵⁰ On the other hand, the use of *xianchang*, on-location shooting, has been used by film makers as a strategy of self-positioning in opposition to the tropes of Socialist Realism in that it is meant to reveal a more “authentic” or “true” reality rather than intervention.

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¹⁵¹ Robinson, 182.

these films, according to Robinson, demonstrate some of the same tropes of Socialist Realism. By this, he means that these directors use specific subjects to stand as metaphors for elements of society as a whole:

Socialist realism is noted for its use of “models,” the most famous being the model characters that peopled revolutionary opera. Derived from the concept of *dianxing*, or the “typical,” outlined by Mao in his *Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art* (1942), such characters were broadly imitative, in that they were intended for emulation: they were a key way in which individuals could be constructed in the basic categories of Maoist political thought. But in consequence they were also archetypes, images fashioned from material that was already understood as present within the body politic, but presented in an idealized form. Through such images broader social and political issues could be articulated. Therefore, at their most extreme, socialist realist characters could become stock figures in an allegorization of social processes, the outcome of which was pre-determined: There was little space for development, change, or the unexpected in a narrative where revolutionary history was “epic, futuristic, and always victorious in the end.”¹⁵²

To demonstrate his point, Robinson sites documentarian Duan Jinchuan (段锦川) as saying that “without metaphors to connect the sites of his films to everyday activity, shooting such locations would be pointless.”¹⁵³ He also paraphrases Wu Wenguang in regards to his film *Jiang Hu* 《江湖》, a documentary about *hukou*-less traveling tent performers:

Jiang Hu, he insists, should not be understood as a film that is merely about the experience of “other people,” namely those without urban residency, who effectively constitute the subjects of the documentary. Rather, it should be understood as a film about everyone in China, urban or rural: now everyone’s life is “on the road,” in a constant state of flux in which the old rules no longer apply, and the new ones have yet to be created.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Robinson, 192.

¹⁵³ Duan Jichuan, unpublished interview with Luke Robinson, August 14 2005, Beijing. Cited in Robinson, 187.

¹⁵⁴ Robinson, 186-187.

Despite the fact that Sixth Generation film makers, including Wu Wenguang, have been historicized as enacting a distinct break from the Socialist Realism of documentaries of the 1980s, Robinson points out that the historical development of experimental film in China must be understood not only in terms of rupture, but also in terms of continuity with the socialist past. The goal of these early documentary film makers, including Wu Wenguang, Jiang Yue (蒋越), Duan Jinchuan, and Zhang Yuan (张元), is to use specific subject matter to make a greater statement about society as a whole.

The concept of *xianchang* also became a focal point in the world of video art, performance, and installation art in the late 1990s. In the case of performance art, the term been interpreted by Thomas Berghuis as “the actual scene (of an incident), but is also used to identify the precedence of *live action* over documentation.”¹⁵⁵ The most outspoken artist, critic, and curator to employ this concept was Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰) who himself curated a series of exhibitions called *Post-Sense Sensibility*, and published a book of essays titled *The Scene [xianchang] is Most Important*¹⁵⁶ 《重要的是现场》 all of which give precedence to “the scene” over other concerns such as object-hood or concept. In the forward to the aforementioned book, Qiu describes his stakes in “xianchang:”

Xianchang implies: You need to be there at the time; rather than someone venting his/her own feelings, xianchang is prepared for you, it astutely calculates your experience--- xianchang is not like traditional artworks that precede your existence, xianchang is something that happens after you arrive within the space, so it is post-sensible . . . The current mission of new media art is to “marginalize media,” its power is in the hybrid forms of performance and theater. Marginalization means throwing new media art from the concept of new media art, throwing it towards something that is a less stable, more dangerous xianchang. That is definitely post-sensible...xianchang is not an outcome of

¹⁵⁵ Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2007), 135.

¹⁵⁶ Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰, *The Scene is Most Important* 《重要的是现场》 (Beijing: Renmin University Publishing House, 2003) .

media. Rather, *xianchang*, at its basic level, is a media. Compared to video, digital photography, and interactive multimedia installations, *xianchang* is an even newer media.¹⁵⁷

The reference he made to “throwing new media art from the concept of new media art” was in response to his disgust with the state of contemporary art at the time, which for him was too conceptual and esoteric. He connected the “meaning,” meant to be conveyed in conceptual art at the time, with “essentialist attitudes,”¹⁵⁸ that which he deemed dangerous and sought to avoid. He saw *xianchang* as a way to purify art, to hone it down to the basic human senses. What is notable in this assessment of *xianchang* is that it is used in quite a different way and for quite different purposes than in film theory from the early 1990s. Here, Qiu, an influential member of Beijing’s avant-garde art community, uses the concept as a tactic which actively seeks to remove art from all conceptual or societal references. Rather, it is about individual experience on a sensorial, almost primitive level. Also notable is the fact that he conceptualized *xianchang* as a distinctly indigenous exhibition model, in response to works that he considered to be pandering to Western postcolonial expectations.

A revealing example of how his approach differs from the use of *xianchang* in documentary film can be seen in his second iteration of *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibitions, titled “Spree.” Held at the Beijing film academy, this exhibition featured some sculptural and installation works, but was primarily an afternoon of performances. Upon entrance into the exhibition, the visitor first encountered the refreshment table which was covered with a variety of different meat products on plates, including ham, sausage, soy-sauce beef, and lamb.¹⁵⁹ Among the plates of meat, three human heads had been pushed through holes in the table, also

¹⁵⁷ Qiu Zhijie, 2. Translation by the author.

¹⁵⁸ As described by Lü Peng in *Fragmented Reality: Contemporary Art in 21st Century China* (Milan, Italy: Charta Publishing House, 2012), 172.

¹⁵⁹ “From the Perspective of an Eye Witness,” document given to author by Qiu Zhijie, pg. 1.

appearing to rest on plates. The heads were those of three living migrant workers whose bodies were crouched, hidden beneath the table. Behind the plates of meat and workers' heads, stood a statue of Buddha and a sign reading "All the Meat Here is Clean," thereby equating the meat on the table with the bodies of the living migrant workers. When I asked about *All the Meat Here is Clean* 《这里的肉都是干净的》 and its explicit conflation of living migrant workers and meat in *Post-Sense Sensibility: Spree*, Qiu explained:

On the table is all meat, it doesn't have vegetables, and I added a Buddha. He didn't eat meat, right? It has to do with our relationship with meat. If you think about it carefully, they [all the meat on the table] are all corpses . . . In Buddhism they don't view the body so extremely, it is a leather sack . . . You are supposed to hate your body. Your body is not clean, it is a leather sack, holding your bones.¹⁶⁰

Unlike the documentary films and performance works which were meant to draw societal attention to the plight of the migrant worker, in the case of Qiu, the body of the migrant worker became a site at which he explicitly sought to divorce the human body from ideological connotations, and, by extension, was also an attempt at divorcing art from ideology. In this case, "ideology" referred to both the ideological connotations of realism in a domestic sense, and what he considered as a pandering to the conceptual tastes of the hegemonic Western-based international exhibition system. Qiu probably chose migrant workers because they were inexpensive to hire, not because of their class identity. However, because of the strong historical ideological symbolism connected to the peasant-turned-migrant-worker, knowledge of this identity adds greater extremity to the work. He used the idea of the "meaninglessness" of the transitory objects of this world found in Buddhism to reinforce this idea.

This way of thinking about *xianchang* can also be detected in both Wang Wei's *Temporary Space* and Song Dong's *Together with Migrants*. In the former, this can be seen in

¹⁶⁰ Qiu Zhijie, Interview with author, October 2015, Beijing, China.

Wang's preoccupation with the visitor's sense of space within the exhibition. Wang may have been directly influenced by Qiu's ideas because he participated in all six *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibitions. In Song's work, the sheer number of migrant workers involved were meant to create physical and psychological discomfort for the visitors to the exhibition, on a spatial and sensorial level. This is particularly evident in the elevator, in which seven workers remained throughout the performance, one more than half of its maximum numbers of occupants. Or the "wall" of workers through which visitors had to shove, thus coming into close physical contact with the workers, in order to continue viewing the exhibition.

Qiu Zhijie was drawn to the unpredictable qualities of *xianchang* as an experimental art practice. In the context of documentary film, entering into the living space of the filmed subject could also generate unpredictable circumstances. However, the continued preoccupation with *dianxing*, or prototypical representations of a person as defined by his/her socio-economic class position, limits the interpretive scope of the work. Even more so than in the "public" documentary works described by Robinson, the performance works in this chapter are conceptually reliant on the audience's ability to read the subject as the migrant worker, and read the migrant worker as metaphor for a larger social issue. Each artist uses specific tropes to make this identity clear, inviting groups of men, requesting that the migrant workers imitate their everyday labor in the museum, perform as a group, and, in the case of Song Dong, perform shirtless. However, Bishop has pointed out that while the economic practice of "outsourcing labor" finds its art historical parallel in "delegated performance," the outcomes tend to be very different. In economics, the goal is to use the cheap labor of un-developed countries to ensure stable economic growth, thus decreasing risk. In the art world, "artists frequently use it as a means to *increase* unpredictability--- even if this means that a work might risk failing

altogether.”¹⁶¹ Although it might be possible for the works discussed in this chapter to also introduce unpredictability by inviting so many non-artists to perform, they do not. Rather, in each case, the artist maintained full control of the choreography, dress, and overall presentation of the migrant workers. All of these choices were in keeping with the artist’s understanding of that specific social identity, one based on physical appearance and prescribed actions. This is perhaps more fully controlled in the case of Wang Jin and Wang Wei in which the bodies of the migrant workers are only presented through the mediated form of photography and video. In Song Dong’s work, the possibility for unpredictability was greater because of the forced interaction he created between the workers and the audience, yet those interactions were always already somewhat prescribed, due to the fact that the performance itself was based on class difference between audience and subject, which itself was based on simplistic visual signifiers.

This analysis of two very different notions of *xianchang*, as they relate to works involving migrant workers elucidates the unique connotations of documentary realism in China at the end of the 21st century. For many contemporary Chinese artists in postsocialist China, the idea of making art for the people, or to improve society, is suspicious because of its connection to propaganda of the Mao period and the authoritarian demands of the central government. Because of this, the idea of completely separating art from society became a strategy that was ultimately meant to forge a healthier relationship between art and society. However, artists’ continued attention to marginalized communities indicates a sustained socialist desire for social equality in the face of great societal change. The two uses of *xianchang*, as outlined in this chapter, represent two theoretical poles within a continuum. This chapter argues that both conceptions are often found within singular works of art, as exemplified by performance

¹⁶¹ Bishop, 104.

artworks involving migrant workers. Its use in documentary film was employed to realistically record societally vulnerable communities, and as a method of societal intervention, while its use in contemporary art practice became a strategy to completely separate art from society. The ambiguity present in works like *100%*, *Temporary Space*, and *Together with Migrants* reflects the presence of both conceptions of *xianchang*. In their use of migrant workers as a metonymic symbol for a societal problem, and in their humanist care for this underprivileged group, they preserve the class-based world-view and “art for the people” approach established in the Socialist Realism of the Mao period, which continues in officially sanctioned academic realism. However, these works also contain distinctly experimental and open-ended elements such as the manipulation of sensorial stimulation, highly curated art space (separate from social space), and the possibility for spontaneous interaction between two groups of people who do not usually occupy the same space. Furthermore, they simultaneously seek to authentically reflect reality and manipulate reality for artistic purposes. These works, therefore, can be read on multiple, seemingly contradictory, levels: one which relies on the identity of the participants as migrant workers, and one in which the participants’ bodies are used as props for the artists to manipulate the spatial and sensorial experience of the audience, an interpretation that is not dependent on the participants’ identities as migrant workers. Such a paradox can be read as a strategy for the artists to engage with society while distancing themselves from the ideological connotations of realism. The visual affinity these works have with Socialist Realism, and, later, officially sanctioned academic Realism, causes them to appear less suspicious to the central government (even though they are performance artworks- an art form that has been officially denounced), thus allowing artists to operate more freely under the radar of state censorship. This allowed for

the possibility of an open-ended interpretation, which ultimately held the potential for a re-envisioning of the relationship between art and society.

**2.7.1 Song Dong 宋冬, Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍, Wu Wenguang 吴文光, Wen Hui 文慧,
Dancing with Farm Workers 《与民工一起舞蹈》, 2001**

In 2001, Song Dong, together with his artist wife, Yin Xiuzhen and the Living Dance Studio, run by choreographer Wen Hui and director (and Wen Hui's spouse at the time) Wu Wenguang, organized a project called *Dancing with Farm Workers*. For this project, the group invited 30 migrant workers employed in Beijing, but from Sichuan province, to collaborate with members of the Living Dance Studio to choreograph a dance based on their every-day labor movements. On the 10th day, an audience was invited to watch the performance, standing along the periphery of an abandoned textile factory, donated by a local real estate project, Beijing Ocean Paradise Art Center,¹⁶² where the group had also rehearsed. Wu Wenguang made a documentary film about the work, recording the daily process of preparation for the performance, involving constant negotiation between the participating workers and the professional dancers. The migrant workers were paid 30 RMB per day for their participation. The film debuted at the Berlin Film Festival in 2002.

In some ways, this work is very similar to Song Dong's 2003 work *Together with Migrant Workers*. In both projects he invited a group of migrant workers to perform movements for an audience in a space designated for the exhibition of art. However, *Dance with Farm Workers* is distinct in its approach, due to the collaborative element. Wu Wenguang's

¹⁶² Lu Peng, *Fragmented Reality...*, 94.

documentary about the project, with the same name, is revealing of the collaborative approach taken by the artist/dancer team. On the first day, a couple of the workers (who have probably been encouraged by Wen Hui) sing a song together from their hometown, which was sung multiple times during the final performance. On another day, the workers and dancers stand in a circle and introduce themselves by shouting their names and performing a movement that the others must then imitate. Later that day, the dancers and migrant workers are shown crouching in pairs, apparently telling each other their life stories. When Wen Hui introduces a movement for the group to perform together, she insists, “Those were all your movements. I cannot move my body like you guys do.” At one point, the workers are asked to respond to the movements of the dancers, who lean on the workers while shifting their weight from one shoulder to another. The workers are asked to pick up the dancers and hold them on their shoulders, as if they are sacks of materials needing to be transported. When one worker comes up with a particularly interesting series of movements, Wen Hui asks him to come forward and demonstrate for the group, who applaud. Many of the movements making up the final dance, including tossing bricks, rolling oil cans, and shoving past each other as if to catch a train, may have come from the stories told by the workers about their lives throughout the nine days of rehearsal, but they may also have derived from the imaginations of the choreographers. It was most likely a combination of both.

The workers seem relatively happy with the arrangement, particularly after reviewing the terms of their employment on the first day, and asking about the purpose of the project on the third day. On the first day, one man bursts out, “When you asked us to come here, you didn’t tell us anything. You have to clarify the pay first or else I don’t want to do it. I work for money and I can only do it for four hours per day.” Another said to Wu, “The person who hired us said that if one person drops out, the rest of us will not get paid.” Wu Wenguang tells them that that this is

not true, but asks that the workers to let them know as early as possible if they do not wish to participate. One man leaves. On the third day one worker asks Wen Hui to clarify what exactly they are doing. He asks whether or not it is for a movie. Wen Hui responds:

...no, it's not for a movie. 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 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 change of Beijing. Without your work, the city could not have been like this. Therefore, we try to express what you want to express or want to say... You can give us advices [sic], tell us what you want to express so that more people will understand what you want. This is our goal.¹⁶³

But the extent to which such an endeavor could reach those goals becomes clear when one worker responds:

We came to Beijing for work. We work to make money. But some people don't want to pay us after we finish the work. Would this performance help us get the unpaid wages? Another question is that we are required to get a residential certificate in Beijing. We all got it. But when the cop caught us, ... we showed him our certificates, but he tore it apart and told us to take the train to go home. What should we do when we have to deal with things like that? Beijing already won the bid for the Olympics. It will need more construction and more people like us. Why do they treat us like this?¹⁶⁴

Wen responds, "These problems, I am afraid that I cannot solve them for you."¹⁶⁵

The documentary also included varied layers of *xianchang*, including returning with the migrant workers to their neighborhood. The first night, the cameraperson follows the men into their living spaces, where he/she sits down at a table with the workers who are eating bowls of rice and drinking beer. The second time, the camera rides with the migrant workers on their bus home, where they talk about one French and one American dancer who are part of the Living

¹⁶³ Wu, Wenguang, "Dance with Farm Workers," YouTube video, 57:18, accessed December 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33HFpoZcgoY>.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Dance team, one expressing fondness for the American. Some also talked about how they were happy to have participated in the project. The next morning, the camera meets the workers in their neighborhood before they catch the bus. As if in proof of the biographical truth of one part of the dance, in which the workers shove past each other to catch a train, the workers similarly push through the bottle neck of the bus door as they board. The choice of location for the final performance is also related to the concept of *xianchang*. Originally Wen Hui wanted to stage the performance outdoors in the former lot of residential complexes that had been demolished near her house. However, it was soon deemed an “off-limits construction zone,” so the group chose the former textile factory instead. Such a choice was also significant in that it is one of millions of buildings being destroyed everyday as the urban center expands and modernizes. Zhang Zhen connects this with the documentary impulse of the 1990s and turn of the century, linking the *xianchang* aesthetic with the goal of documenting the disappearing elements of the city in the process of urbanization. He argues:

Dance with Farm Workers exemplifies the promise and ambivalence of *xianchang* in vivid ways. It underscores the urgency of documenting the dramatic and sometimes horrific transformations in Chinese society as well as the awareness of the limits of representation through either dance or video alone. The combination of the two produces a larger range of possibilities but also challenges. By linking the past and the present, the embodied and cinematic motion on a haunted site of labor history, the project creates, to borrow architecture critic Marcos Novak’s term, a miniature “transphysical city” by returning time and memory, hence life, back to architecture.¹⁶⁶

For the former textile factory, however, the performance was more of a death-rattle, for the building was slated to be renovated into a contemporary art center by well-known designer Zhang Yonghe (张永和), soon after the performance.

¹⁶⁶ 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* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010) 111.

This work reveals a tension between art and documentary that others discussed in this chapter did not. As Zhang Zhen argues, “There is an unsettling sense that the surfacing of all the practical issues and ethical questions, while surprising or embarrassing the artists somewhat, became quickly assimilated into the avant-gardist disjunctive vocabularies and reflexive open-ended framework . . .”¹⁶⁷ While it is clear that more effort is being put in to learning about the lives of the migrant workers (through conversation, song, and sharing movements) than in past projects using migrant workers, some ambiguity remains about whether or not the movements are actually related to the lived reality of the workers. The inclusion of movements related to construction work alongside movements utilizing vintage sewing machines- two very different types of labor, the latter of which is not at all related to these workers, but is related to the abandoned textile factory in which they performed, give the impression that while the choreographers sought to capture some of the specificity of the participating workers, they also were interested in the labor of migrants in general. The performance concludes with the workers walking through a door, around which Song Dong’s video *Broken Mirror* 《砸碎镜子》 (1999) is projected. In *Broken Mirror*, Song filmed a mirror reflecting numerous scenes around Beijing. Seemingly out of nowhere, a hammer appears and breaks the glass, revealing another urban scene behind the reflected one. The video is then shown reversed, the mirror quickly repairs itself, then slows down to focus on the original reflected image. Song’s video contextualizes the performance within the greater story of urbanization in China, and hints at an alternate reality behind our own mirrored reflection, one which is based on the sweat of underpaid migrant workers. Zhang Zhen describes the migrant workers emerging from the screen on which Song’s video is projected as symbolizing a new “rite of passage.” For Zhang, the act of collaboration

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

between the artists and migrant workers, as well as the hopeful last seen, indicates that “Instead of filming the victims, the filmmaker will play the role of facilitator for social change. . . .”¹⁶⁸

This, for Zhang, marks a new approach to documentary film. Zhang argues that *Dance with Farm Workers*

“ . . . encapsulates Wu’s attempt to close the gap between subject and object. Rather than posing as a disembodied voyeur, the filmmaker and his cameras literally dance with the workers. The project tries to reconnect the intellectual and the masses, art and life, for the purpose of forming a new alliance between these “opposites” to counter the hegemonic forces of globalization.”¹⁶⁹

While it is questionable whether or not the artists achieved this goal, this work is significant in that the artists sought the input of the migrant worker participants. Although they still could not be considered “collaborators,” it was an important first step in the re-envisioning of the relational dynamic between artists and *nongmin*, which, since the early 21st century, has been a key point of consideration for “social practice” artists in China until the present day.

2.8 CONCLUSION

The *nongmin* or “peasant” was one of the most prevalent subject matters in the art of 20th century China because of their heroic ideological position as heroes of Mao’s rural-based revolution. The nature of the relationship between artists and “peasants” at that time was dictated by directives of the central government for artists to make art for and with “the people,” using idealistic painting and sculpture inspired by Soviet Socialist Realism. In the post-Cultural Revolution period, artists used different forms of realism to uncover the raw truth of the peasants that had been hidden

¹⁶⁸ Zhang, “Transfiguring...”, 112.

¹⁶⁹ Zhang, “Transfiguring...”, 109.

during the Mao period. In both cases, the interpretive possibilities for the works remained closed because of the ideological connotations of realism and “the peasant.” Currently, Chinese contemporary artists continue to make work for and with *nongmin* populations, but the nature of the relationship between the two has changed, with artists employing open-ended and experimental approaches that seek to provide *nongmin* with a platform to actively express themselves rather than being the passive objects of representation. Using the case study of works made with migrant workers over the turn of the century, this chapter seeks to elucidate some of the factors that led to this transition from realist representation to open-ended social practice in the world of contemporary art. Because these were the first works made in China in which the *nongmin* was asked to participate as part of a contemporary performance work, I argue that these were the precursors to “social practice” art in China. It was through the synthesis of multiple and varied conceptualizations of the relationship between art and society, based on the socialist tradition in art that still dominated the Chinese academy, international trends in contemporary art making, and Chinese contemporary artists’ responses to both, that contemporary artists began to envision new possibilities for the relationship between themselves and China’s vast *nongmin* population. The following two chapters describe the continuing development of this relationship through the lens of social practice art since the turn of the 21st century.

3.0 TRANSFORMING THE OTHER: *NONGMIN* ART PROJECTS IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

In 2001, the People's Republic of China was accessioned into the World Trade Organization, further integrating China into the global economy. Developments in the Chinese art world in the first decade of the 21st century reflected changes in the larger economy in that there was an increase in foreign investment in contemporary Chinese art. Contemporary Chinese artists were more fully integrated into the international biennale art circuit, even establishing an international biennale culture of its own, beginning with the 2000 Shanghai Biennale. Domestically, the central government began to understand the potential of contemporary art as a soft power in the international context, and loosened many legal restraints on the creation and exhibition of contemporary art.¹⁷⁰ Through this process, contemporary artists gained back much of the cultural valence they had lost during the 1990s. The works discussed in this chapter demonstrate a continued desire to help *nongmin* communities under these new economic and social conditions. As they themselves had already become integrated into the international contemporary art world, these artists used their elite position to draw the world's attention to populations whose lives did not fit comfortably into the popular narrative of China's economic rise after the turn of the

¹⁷⁰ The Shanghai Biennale of 2000 was the first official venue to exhibit contemporary art since the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. It was also the first biennial to invite non-Chinese contemporary artists and curators. Although it was criticized by some contemporary artists for its conservative tone, it was a symbolic action that indicated a willingness on the central government to support certain types of contemporary art creation.

century. This chapter argues that China's further economic integration into the global economy, and the related changing status of the contemporary Chinese artist, led artists working with *nongmin* communities to orient their works toward an international audience. Most of the works described in this chapter were commissioned or funded by international organizations or museums, or were organized with the intention of exhibiting in contemporary international galleries or museums. While the works discussed in Chapter 1 had a documentary quality in which the artist drew attention to the plight of the migrant workers by assembling their actual bodies for the art world to view, artists' approaches to *nongmin* communities after the turn of the century involved a more active approach, seeking ways to help solve, rather than just drawing attention to, their problems.

In China, the practice of "socially engaged" or "participatory art," most commonly translated as *canyu shi yishu* 参与式艺术, has become increasingly popular in recent years, with a growing number of exhibitions, symposia, other events organized around the topic. Much has been written in the West about this type of art, with theorists such as Claire Bishop, Nicholas Bourriaud, and Grant Kester proposing their own definitions and ethics of the practice. However, such writings are still not well-known to Chinese artists, and their theories do not usually align comfortably with the Chinese postsocialist context. I use the phrase "socially engaged" loosely to describe works in which artists engage with non-artist communities to make contemporary art. The works in this dissertation, because they engage with non-artist, *nongmin* communities, are one part of the larger category of "social practice" art in China and around the globe. They are especially significant because they demonstrate the continuation of a uniquely Chinese, historically grounded, socialist desire to help rural inhabitants who have remained the victims of the systemic inequalities established during the Mao period that continue today.

The works explored in Chapter 1 are the first in which Chinese artists invited *nongmin* to physically participate in works of contemporary art. In this way, I consider them the initial step towards social practice art with *nongmin* communities. However, as I have demonstrated, they still function within the realm of representation, with the figure of the migrant worker presented as a symbol for a larger societal problem. Because the *nongmin* participants are largely curated or choreographed according to the artists' wishes, these works cannot be fully considered social practice artworks, which, I argue, require a certain degree of acknowledgement of the agency and embodied subjectivity of the participants. Chapter 1 concluded with works by Song Dong and Wu Wenguang because they represent a transition within contemporary Chinese artworks involving *nongmin* communities from representational and metonymic to participatory and relational.

While the previous chapter focused on artworks that engaged one segment of the population, the migrant worker (*nongmingong* 农民工), the artists whose works are explored in the next two chapters engage with a variety of vulnerable communities (弱势群体), including rural inhabitants, factory workers, and those living in impoverished communities within urban centers. This chapter begins with *The Long March Project: A Walking Visual Display*, a project organized by Lu Jie in 2002. This project is an important precursor for the works discussed in this chapter, as it introduced into the Chinese contemporary art world a reconsideration of rural China, the peasantry, and socialist history *within the context of the international contemporary art world*. Furthermore, it expanded the (at that time) standard audience for contemporary art beyond urban/cosmopolitan viewers to *nongmin* communities, who themselves were the primary audience, artists, and collaborators. This project marked a conceptual and geographic inward turn after a decade in which the majority of opportunities for the exhibition of contemporary art was

only available overseas, or in China's urban centers. It has had a great impact on the contemporary Chinese art world, in part, because of the huge quantity of artists involved, many of whom are themselves well-established and internationally renowned. Lu Jie continues to uphold its legacy through the projects and initiatives of the 2500 Cultural Transmission Center, now known as the Long March Space Gallery, and the Long March Foundation, established in 2002.

3.1 LU JIE 卢杰 AND QIU ZHIJIE 邱志杰, THE LONG MARCH PROJECT: A WALKING VISUAL DISPLAY 《长征---一个行走中的视觉展示》, 2002

In 2002, Lu Jie carried out his three-month long curatorial project titled *The Long March Project: A Walking Visual Display*, which he had been planning for the previous four years. For this project, he and co-organizer Qiu Zhijie, along with a group of 250 local and international artists, some of whom joined for short periods while others travelled to each destination, began a journey which included twenty stops along the path of the historical Long March. The original Long March was a moment in the history of the Chinese Civil War, when, in the years 1934-1935, the Communist army escaped the Nationalist army, moving West and then North into some of the harshest terrain in the country. While it was technically a retreat, it resulted in a victory for the Communist party and the ultimate consolidation of power by Mao Zedong. This project is important for the narrative of this dissertation because it was one of the earliest in China in which the artists re-envisioned their primary audience and the nature of their interaction with that audience. Instead of creating work for the viewing pleasure of the elite art and urban-based world, the works in this project were displayed for the inhabitants in the small villages

along their journey, who were asked to take an active role in responding to the work and sharing their own perspectives on history, culture, and art through dialogue and creative acts. The individual works in this project were so varied, that, taken as a whole, *The Long March Project: A Walking Visual Display* introduced new relational modes between artists and *nongmin* that are evident in many subsequent works involving *nongmin* participation.

At each site there was an element of creation, display, and debate. Some artists were chosen to participate because one or more of their previously-made works resonated with the chosen sites. Their works were displayed in public venues for locals and participants to consider in relation to other works created on-site and the historical context of the venue. Examples include Zhan Wang's *Artificial Jiashanshi* at the Yeping Revolutionary Memorial site (site one), consisting of artificial scholar's rocks made from molds of actual scholar's rocks using shiny stainless steel, Sui Jianguo's sculptures *Jesus in China* and *Marx in China* (2002), exhibited on a floating raft (site two), and Wang Gongxin's (王功新) *Karaoke*, a video/sound installation of people singing karaoke projected onto a zoomed-in image of a person's teeth at Kunming, Yunnan Province (site four).

Also part of the "display" component were the viewing of films, many made by Western directors or artists, including Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* at site one (Ruijin), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chongkuo* at site two (Jinggangshan Mountain), and *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China* by David Hockney and Philip Haas at site three (On the road in Guangxi Province).

Other artists were commissioned to make new works on-site. Wang Jin performed *Hanging Swords on the Cliff with Swords Hung Up-Side Down* (site two), in which he hung himself upside down, secured to the edge of a cliff by a rope tied to one leg, next to a hanging

cluster of swords dating from the Ming dynasty to the present. Artist Qin Ga participated remotely. He had a map of China tattooed on his back, upon which he had the route of the Long Marchers tattooed in red ink as the group visited each site.

Some artists, such as Jiang Jie (姜杰), contacted Lu while the group was on the road, volunteering to contribute to the project. She asked Qiu Zhijie and Lu Jie to take a ceramic baby she had made on the road with them, searching for a family willing to adopt it as they made their journey. One family did adopt and agreed to send family photos with the baby every year, a tradition they have continued to the present day.¹⁷¹ Xiao Xiong's (肖雄) project also involved the participation of locals. He travelled the route of the Long March, beginning in Yan'an and ending in Ruijin, the opposite direction of the rest of the group. In each site, he found someone with whom to trade an object, starting in Yan'an with a ceramic bust of Mao. The final trade ended with the exchange of two thermometers and a red cloth braided with yak hair.

For site six, Lugu Lake (considered to be one of the last remaining matriarchal societies), which was organized around the theme of feminism, the organizers put out a call for participants. As one of the organizers of the activities around the site, Judy Chicago helped choose which artists would participate. Works realized at this site included performances, installations, and videos by fourteen female artists.¹⁷² At site eight (Zunyi, Guizhou Province), the group held an international symposium around the theme "Curating and the Chinese Context," involving art professionals from both China and abroad.

¹⁷¹ Lu Jie, interview with author, July 2016, Beijing, China. He also mentioned that Jiang originally wanted them to do this with twelve ceramic babies, but in the end they only took one.

¹⁷² This site proved to be the most controversial as many Chinese female artists were unhappy that there were so few women invited to join the entire project, but were marginalized together at Lugu Lake. There was also animosity among Chinese female artists that so much of the budget was allocated to the international travels of Judy Chicago instead of being given to Chinese artists to travel to the remote Yun'an town. For more details, see Sasha S. Wellang, "The Long March to Lugu Lake: A Dialogue with Judy Chicago," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* v. 1 n. 3 (Fall 2002): 69-75.

At each site, local artists were also invited to exhibit their work for other locals and the Long March artists to view. At site one, the Ruijin Calligraphers Association and the Ruijin Photographers Association both held exhibitions of their work. Some artists organized art projects for the locals, including a group painting project in the style of Jackson Pollock, after a screening of the movie *Pollock* at Maotai in Guizhou Province (site nine). Ma Han held a drawing seminar for local children who were invited to sketch the forms of many white collared shirts that had been hung sculpturally from a ceiling in Kunming (site four). And at Jiangwutang Military School in Kunmin, the artists gave away originals of Xu Bing's New English Calligraphy to school children so they could take them home to study.¹⁷³ Throughout the project, locals, many of whom lived through the events of the historical Long March, or grew up hearing stories about the Communists' harrowing journey, were invited to participate in symposia and discussions, engage in art projects, or simply view what the artists had to offer.

The artists participating in the Long March even "discovered" some rural-based artists who were subsequently included in international exhibitions of contemporary art. For example, they met Li Tianbing (李天炳), a photographer in a mountain town in Fujian province, who bought a camera from an English visitor in the 1940s and has been using it ever since to photograph the people and scenery of his and neighboring villages. Because he lacked electricity, he used the light coming through his doorway to expose and enlarge the photographs. The Long March organizers saw the artistic and historical significance of Li's photographs, and through their connections, Li's work was included in the 2004 Shanghai Biennial. He was given a solo exhibition in 2005 at Lu Jie's gallery, Long March Space in Beijing. They also met Wang Wenhai (王文海), an artisan from Yenan, China, who made a living sculpting small statues of

¹⁷³ "2002 Zunyi International Symposium," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* v.1 n. 3 (Fall 2002): 89.

Mao and other Communist subjects. After his initial interaction with the Long March team, he traveled to Beijing to gain an understanding of contemporary art and ended up collaborating with contemporary artist Sui Jianguo on a Mao-themed sculpture. They also met Guo Fengyi (郭凤仪), a Xi'an native, who used the art of *qigong* to alleviate the symptoms of arthritis. She began having visions and recorded them using India ink on paper, indicating the paths of qi as defined by qigong over the original figure.¹⁷⁴ These works were enthusiastically welcomed into the international art world and have been exhibited in many venues both domestically and internationally.¹⁷⁵

While the project was originally meant to include twenty stops, the group only finished twelve before they returned to Beijing. For Qiu Zhijie, part of the reason for this was that the project lost some momentum because of the ease with which the artists and curators were able to create, exhibit, and collaborate in each city. He thought there would be more negotiation between the locals and the visiting artists, but in general, they experienced very welcoming and congenial city governments and local participants. Because of this, according to Qiu, some of the meaning was lost.¹⁷⁶ Lu Jie, however, who conceptualized the project somewhat differently from Qiu, argued that the journey was cut short because the artists themselves became impatient with its long duration and wanted to get back to their homes to make new art and continue to earn money. This is indicative of larger differences between the two men: Qiu Zhijie's approach remained goal-oriented, while Lu insisted on an open-ended approach without expectations that

¹⁷⁴ For further information about the careers of these artists, see Gu Yi, "The 'peasant problem' and time..."

¹⁷⁵ For example, after participating in *The Long March Project: A Walking Visual Display*, Guo Fengyi has had solo exhibitions at the Galerie Barbara Gross in Munich, Germany (2008), the Galerie Christian Berst in Paris, France (2010), the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, Canada (2012), the Andrew Edlin Gallery in New York City (2015), among others. She has also been included in important group exhibitions such as the 2010 Gwangju Biennial, and the 2015 Carnegie International, among others.

¹⁷⁶ Qiu Zhijie, interview with author, October 2015, Beijing, China.

could be fulfilled or dashed. Part of this experimental approach also involved trying to convince his colleague Qiu that there is no such thing as good or bad art, just creation.¹⁷⁷

The story of the historical Long March continues to resonate in contemporary China through the persistent preoccupation with the idea of political/cultural utopia, which continues to be conceptually tied to the countryside and the rural “masses.” Engagement with locals outside of the contemporary art centers of Beijing and Shanghai was an essential element of the project. Qiu proclaimed that

When we take contemporary artists to the people, one goal is transmission, but another is to have the art examined by these viewers. It is also a chance to enfranchise otherwise ignored artists, people like the natural-light photographer Li Tianbing, or the man who has carved a mountain with bas reliefs of Chinese leaders, Jiang Jiwei.¹⁷⁸

Lu took as his basic assumption the idea that rural people are no less able to understand contemporary art than a professor of art in an urban center.¹⁷⁹ Philip Tinari once asked Lu in an interview: “How do you reconcile the idea of creating for “the people” and the temptation to force art on people to make ourselves feel better?” Lu answered:

It’s always a double-layered thing. Bring art to people, not only to deliver something to them, but to be examined by them. In the meantime, examine yourself. At the same time, examine the people. The challenge is to go in all directions . . . When we initiated this project, people were joking, “what, you want to parachute art into the villages, to make people understand that?” My answer is always, well how did Chairman Mao teach Marxism, which is totally an imported theory, to make a local landlord abandon his family’s thousand years’ property, and make thousands of people leave their lands to join the Long March, to die on the road? How would you be able to do that? It’s simple: to speak in their language and become real, and to convince people.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Lu Jie, interview with author, July 2016, Beijing, China.

¹⁷⁸ “2002 Zunyi International Symposium,” 89.

¹⁷⁹ Philip Tinari, “A Conversation with Lu Jie,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* vol.1 no. 3 (Fall 2002): 66.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

This quotation is a bit misleading in that Lu Jie's goal was always open-ended, never articulating what exactly it was that he wanted to convince "the people" of, except perhaps the importance of analyzing the continued influence of socialism and the Long March upon contemporary visual culture.

The artists recognized the uneasy relationship between urban, cosmopolitan artists and rural China, and embraced it as a key element of the project; the failures in communication resulting from misunderstandings became an integral part of the project as a whole. For example, Lu explains that "The project also included several important collaborations with the community; however, artists were often unwilling to participate since they were accustomed to counterfeit interactions with the community. In this regard, only The Long March could fill this gap."¹⁸¹

Internationally recognized curator, academic, and writer, Wu Hung summarized this tension in the conference held in Zunyi (site eight) in this way:

So the question on a lot of our minds I think is, to what degree the average person needs what we are doing. It is very likely that the people singing karaoke downstairs are finding that as spiritually fulfilling as they would like. So is what we're doing significant to them, or is it significant only to us? Are we driven by another kind of exoticism, a certain aspiration to Shangri-la, the Shangri-la being a position in the official museum hierarchy?¹⁸²

These are questions that have continued to haunt artists who initiate projects with *nongmin* communities, and which are answered in a multitude of ways throughout this chapter. I believe that Lu would argue that at times, this is exactly what happened, while at other times, true communication, on even ground was achieved.

Lu Jie came up with the idea for this project in a 90-page Master's thesis at Goldsmith's College in London in 1999. Upon his return to China, he approached Qiu Zhijie, by that time a

¹⁸¹ Lu Jie, "The Paradox of the Curatist: The Long March As Author," *Manifesta Journal*, no. 5 (summer 2005): 207.

¹⁸² "2002 Zunyi International Symposium," 93.

leader in the contemporary Chinese art world, who agreed to help him make this project a reality. Lu chose Qiu as a collaborator because he already had so many connections in the local art world, and because he was what Lu describes as a “doer” who knows how to effectively bring ideas to fruition.¹⁸³ More than just an art project, Lu’s idea was to become the conceptual foundation upon which all subsequent Long March projects were based. This concept is an open-formed curatorial experiment that is more about the process of learning and communication than the final object.

Throughout his studies at Goldsmiths, he continuously reflected upon the problems with the contemporary Chinese art world. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, domestic support for contemporary art was virtually non-existent. Because of that, and because of the increasing popularity of international biennials over the course of the 1990s, the Chinese art world had no choice but to look to overseas venues for support for their artistic careers. This, according to Lu, led more and more Chinese artists to make work that was desirable and accessible to a foreign audience. An example of this is the popularity of Political Pop art (such as Wang Guangyi’s *Great Castigation Series*) in the international market. “In this way” according to Lu, “art was made once again into a footnote of ideology.”¹⁸⁴ He therefore saw in the creative output of Chinese artists an unidirectional movement from the inside to the outside. In response to this, Lu felt a need for a complex re-visitation of the Chinese, local, or regional context. “In other words,” he wrote, “we wish to re-examine the fixed interpretation of the ‘local context’ which has come to seem conventional. This method of turning the telescope around, looking

¹⁸³ Lu Jie, interview with the author, July 2016, Beijing, China.

¹⁸⁴ Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie, “Long March: A Walking Visual Exhibition,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* vol.1 no. 3 (Fall 2002): 56.

‘from the outside in’ may be beneficial to art both in China and abroad.”¹⁸⁵ By choosing the theme of the Long March, Lu wanted to “assess the impact of socialism on contemporary visual culture.”¹⁸⁶ The organizers also saw the Long March as a suitable metaphor for discussing many aspects of Chinese society beyond contemporary art, such as China’s

. . . centuries-long encounter with modernity, the gain and loss of its quest for utopia, the completeness or incompleteness of its revolution, and the mutually constitutive relationship between nationalism and internationalism, and the contributions, errors, misreadings, rebirths, restructurings, and localizations of Western ideologies in the process of entering China.¹⁸⁷

It also served as a metaphor for the process of modernization. In an interview with Philip Tinari, Lu explicates:

. . . in every Chinese mind, the Long March is the narration, the story of beginning from conflict, the rupture with tradition, the problem with modernity, and then the search for utopia. In it we encounter the problem of how important theory can be in a local context, and the relationship between theory and practice. The historical Long March is just that. Imagine this army on the run, every day making very practical decisions about where to move next. But at the same time, they were constantly thinking the unthinkable, trying to imagine a new society that must have seemed decades away from the cold grasslands of Gansu or the treacherous rapids of whichever river they were trying to cross. I was struck by this uncanny, romantic clash between idealism and pragmatism, and in it I found what we now call “The Long March Methodology” in our curatorial ranks.¹⁸⁸

In some ways it was a demystifying process, a re-visitation- from the perspective of non-artists and artists, foreigners and Chinese alike -- of the foundation story upon which the current administration was built. It was also an attempt to destabilize the simplistic dialectics often used in descriptions of Chinese art (by both Chinese and foreigners alike), such as modernity vs. tradition, rural vs. urban, and international vs. local. While contemporary art may have been a

¹⁸⁵ Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie, “Curators’ Words,” *Long March- A Walking Visual Display* (New York: Long March Foundation, 2003), 7.

¹⁸⁶ Lu Jie, “Long March: A Walking Visual Display,” 55.

¹⁸⁷ Lu Jie, “Long March: A Walking Visual Display,” 57.

¹⁸⁸ Tinari, “A Conversation with Lu Jie,” 62.

foreign concept to the rural people encountered along the road, the overarching theme of the Long March could be a compelling catalyst for exploration of the historical precedent of utopia from multiple perspectives. This project was important for the history of contemporary Chinese art in that it was an initial attempt to geographically and conceptually re-orient the contemporary art world to the Chinese context. Furthermore, it introduced a myriad of relational modes which have, since then, been further developed by other artists in socially engaged artworks with *nongmin* communities. I have identified four relational trends or “modes” as a way to describe and explore artworks involving the participation of *nongmin* communities since the turn of the 21st century. The first two modes, explored throughout the remainder of this chapter, are oriented towards an international contemporary art exhibition system. One is exhibiting amateur creations by *nongmin* communities in international contemporary art exhibitions as contemporary art, the other is inviting *nongmin* communities to create contemporary art as a tool for their own spiritual liberation. These relational modes are based on observed trends, and should not be considered a priori or mutually-exclusive categories. Rather, they demonstrate certain common relational trends evident in artworks involving *nongmin* participation that, I argue, are related to larger political and socio-economic changes occurring in China as a result of globalization.

3.2 MODE 1: AMATEUR CREATIONS BY *NONMIN* COMMUNITIES EXHIBITED AS CONTEMPORARY ART

The first mode I will discuss is one in which professional artists use contemporary art spaces as a platform for exhibiting the creations of non-artist, economically impoverished, vulnerable communities. This recontextualization is meant to provide a platform to showcase the creative

output of those at the bottom level of society, ultimately attempting to question the negative or “backwards” connotations of rural China held by both urban China and the international community. Spatially, these works are “discovered” by contemporary artists in locales that are separate from contemporary art spaces, such as the homes and work places of rural inhabitants or migrant workers, but are transported to art galleries or museums, an act which re-contextualizes the work as contemporary art.¹⁸⁹ The works I will discuss in this section include: *The Great Survey of Paper-Cutting in Yanchuan County: Long March Project* (2004), Cai Guo-Qiang’s *Peasant Da Vincis* (2010), Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s *Farmer Du Wenda’s Flying Saucer* at the 2005 Venice Biennale, and Hu Zhijun’s *Sculpting Contemporary Chinese Art History* (2015) in Cai Guo-Qiang’s curated exhibition *What About the Art? Contemporary Art From China*, at the Qatar Museum (2016). Although these works demonstrate a humanist desire to improve the lives of the *nongmin* participants, I argue that in the end, the *nongmin* creations are overshadowed through their absorption into the contemporary artists’ overall project. The act of inviting *nongmin* to exhibit their work in a contemporary art setting turns into a conceptual project

¹⁸⁹ In China, the term “contemporary art” is used to differentiate certain art practices from traditional ink painting, academic realist painting and sculpture, and folk art. It generally refers to works incorporating new and experimental media outside of the realm of traditional forms. In this dissertation, the term “contemporary artist” refers to those who identify as such, and those who exhibit and are funded by institutions that identify as “contemporary art” institutions. In China, “contemporary art” has always been equated with foreign art and would not have been something that rural artisans would have identified with. For more information on debates around the definition of “contemporary art” in a Chinese context, see Wu Hung, “A Case of Being “Contemporary”: Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2008), 290-306; Zhu Qi 朱其, “Two Art Histories: Which Can Represent China? 《两个艺术史: 哪些艺术才能代表中国? 》”, in *What is Chinese Contemporary Art? A Collection of Essays of 2009 Beijing International Conference on Art Theory and Criticism* 《什么是中国当代艺术? 2009 中国当代艺术理论批评研究论文集》 1st edition (Chengdu: Sichuan Academy of Art, 2010), 539-563; and Wang Lin 王林, “Post Avant-garde: An Issue about the Stance of Chinese Contemporary Art” 《后先锋: 中国当代艺术的立场问题》, in *What is Chinese Contemporary Art? A Collection of Essays of 2009 Beijing International Conference on Art Theory and Criticism* 《什么是中国当代艺术? 2009 中国当代艺术理论批评研究论文集》 1st edition (Chengdu: Sichuan Academy of Art, 2010), 374-384.

authored by the contemporary artist that relies on the marginalized identities of the *nongmin* participants and their amateur or folk aesthetics for its conceptual power.

3.2.1 Peasant Paintings in 20th Century China

The act of exhibiting “peasant” art on a national and international level has historical precedence in 20th century China. During the Great Leap Forward (1958) and for a period during the 1970s, peasant painting was upheld by the CCP as a model for revolutionary art. “For China,” writes Ralph Crozier, “where, more than in most societies, mastery of the writing/painting brush, and thus monopoly of literary/cultural production, had demarcated the basic line between classes, putting brushes in the hands of peasants had truly revolutionary implications.”¹⁹⁰ Before this period, peasant painting was not an established tradition in China. However, many painters incorporated visual elements of well-established traditional folk art such as the simple abstracted forms of paper-cutting and the bright colors and black outlines of New Year prints.

The Great Leap Forward was a campaign launched by Mao Zedong which sought to industrialize the countryside, transforming China from an agrarian society into a socialist one. In the same year, Mao established the *hukou* registration system that barred rural dwellers from freely moving to urban centers. Farmers’ land was collectivized and Mao used China’s agricultural output to finance the development of cities and industrial infrastructure. During this period many officials and others were sent to the countryside to live in rural communes and help the peasants contribute to the national cause, including artists. Initially, peasants were encouraged to paint records of the abundance of their crops in wall murals featuring livestock

¹⁹⁰ Ralph Crozier, “Hu Xian Peasant Painting,” in *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76*, ed. Richard King, Ralph Crozier, Scott Watson, Sheng Tian Zheng (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 137.

and produce.¹⁹¹ Peasants then began to paint on paper, a material which was easily transportable for exhibition purposes.¹⁹² Early examples are crude renderings of peasants tilling their fields, smelting iron in backyard furnaces, or catching moths. The style indicates that they were truly amateur artists who lacked professional training.

In the 1970s, during the Cultural Revolution, Hu County in Shaanxi province was upheld by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, as a model peasant painting region. The timing of this endorsement fell just after the Lin Biao incident¹⁹³ and could also be seen as a counter-example to the art promoted by Zhou Enlai and other more moderate members of the Politburo, who wanted to allow for greater amounts of freedom and professionalization in cultural production. Jiang celebrated peasant painting as an amateur art form, claiming that because the peasants had never had any formal art training, their successes were symbolic of the success of the Cultural Revolution.

Peasants from Hu county had actually been engaging in painting since a graduate from the Xi'an Provincial Art Academy began holding lessons during the Great Leap Forward. Soon after the Great Leap Forward, there was an exhibition of their paintings in Xi'an, and the Hu Xian Peasant Painter Association was formed. Since that period, other artists have been sent to Hu county to teach new generations of peasant painters. The peasants painted scenes from their daily labor records of "the three histories:" village history, family history, and commune history, to illustrate the superiority of socialism. Their stated goal was to lead viewers to share the same

¹⁹¹ Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 147.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ The Lin Biao incident refers to the governmental accusations that member of the Politburo and Mao's chosen successor Lin Biao was scheming to assassinate Mao Zedong. In 1971 Lin died in a plane crash on the way to the Soviet Union. Many suspect that it was a planned assassination by Mao.

wants and desires of peasant workers.¹⁹⁴ Their art education was accompanied by extensive training in Mao Zedong thought, with special emphasis on Mao's 1942 Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature.¹⁹⁵ Peasant painters became model revolutionary soldiers through combining study with labor and art creation. As one 1973 newspaper article from the State-run People's Daily states, "In the new China, under the mighty leader Mao Zedong, workers are becoming the direct creators of socialist culture."¹⁹⁶

Their extensive training and experience (some had been painting professionally since the Great Leap Forward) undermines the party claim that the peasants were untrained amateurs who were magically adept at painting, justifying their position as the heroes of the revolution. Ellen Johnston Laing argues that "Although the professional was in official disfavor, his art was not abolished, but submerged; it resurfaced in the guise of amateur peasant painting."¹⁹⁷ In fact, after extensive visual analysis of these peasant paintings, Laing, in her pivotal 1984 study of the topic, convincingly argues that the peasants were actually trained by professional artists in multiple styles, including traditional brush and ink painting and socialist realism. The works that have gained the most acclaim, however, are those that combine socialist realism with folk styles. For example, in the 1973 painting *The Commune's Fishpond* by Dong Zhengyi, the artist uses the

¹⁹⁴ Zhong Nan 钟南, "Workers and Peasants paint workers and peasants—remembering the amateur art troops of Huxian County in Shaanxi Province" 《来自工农画工农——记陕西户县的农村业余美术队伍》, *People's Daily*, December 5, 1972, 4.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ "Upholding the path of "Produce for workers peasants and soldiers, make use of workers, peasants, and soldiers," implementing "Let one hundred flowers bloom, discard the old, produce the new" guidelines, "National Lianhua painting, Chinese painting exhibition," "Hu County Peasant Painting Exhibition," and "1973 National photography exhibition" open in October in Beijing." 《坚持“为工农兵而创作，为工农兵所利用”的方向，贯彻“百花齐放，推陈出新”的方针 《全国连环画、中国画展览》和《户县农民画展》、《一九七三年全国摄影艺术展览》十月一日在京开幕》, *People's Daily*, September 30 1973, 3.

¹⁹⁷ Ellen Johnston Laing, "Chinese Peasant Painting, 1958-1976: Amateur and Professional," *Art International* 27 no. 1 (January-March 1984): 2.

bright, monochromatic colors, dark outlines, and absence of horizon line common to folk prints, while certain realistic details, such as the glistening water droplets, indicate the precision of a professional realist painter.

In 1972, 318 paintings by Hu County peasants were shown at an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, China's topmost officially sanctioned art gallery. According to Ralph Croizier, the show garnered national attention. A documentary film was made about the peasant paintings, special postage stamps featuring the peasant paintings were released, and many publishing houses adapted Hu county peasant paintings for their New Year's prints.¹⁹⁸

By hosting the exhibition in the National Art Gallery, the CCP upheld the paintings as models to be emulated throughout the country. However, it was also used as a tool for international relations. Ralph Croizier's study points out that many newspaper articles from the time emphasized how the exhibition attracted international visitors.¹⁹⁹ After the exhibition, the government began to take foreign visitors to Hu County. A delegation of peasants and their paintings was sent to Vietnam in 1973, and another to Albania the following year. In 1975, a group of peasant paintings was also sent to a biennial in Paris. A delegation was even sent to Washington DC, travelling around the U.S. for twelve months.²⁰⁰ Even after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Hu County paintings continued to travel abroad. From 1977-1978, the Brooklyn Museum held a five-week exhibition of Hu Xian peasant painting.²⁰¹ For many of those who saw these exhibitions abroad, peasant paintings would have been their only view of

¹⁹⁸Ralph Croizier, "Hu Xian Peasant Painting," 143.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ This account of the peasant painting's international travels come from Ralph Croizier's article "Hu Xian Peasant Painting."

²⁰¹ "Magnificent painting, good friendship---remembering the New York exhibition of Chinese Hu County peasant paintings" 《绚丽的画幅 友好的情谊——记中国户县农民画在纽约展出》, *The People's Daily*, February 1, 1978,5.

Chinese art. They became the representatives of China at a time when China was relatively closed off from the world, demonstrating the success of Chinese Communism to an international audience.

The contemporary works discussed in this chapter were also created by amateur workers or rural inhabitants, and have been exhibited for both domestic and international audiences, often with the contemporary artist playing the role of curator. Although the two modes differ, both seek to draw attention to the creativity of vulnerable members of society. Unlike the peasant paintings of the 20th century, these projects were not instigated by the central government. Rather, they were initiated by contemporary artists, often with the support of international corporations. The works discussed in the first mode, like the peasant paintings in the 20th century, are conceptually dependent on the class status of the amateur participants. Those in the second mode, on the other hand, seek to complicate the relationship between class status and cultural production. The question this chapter poses is whether contemporary artists in these examples instrumentalize the symbol of “the peasant” in a similar way as the CCP has since its inception, or if their projects offer new perspectives and values in considering the creations of *nongmin* populations.

3.2.2 The Long March Foundation, The Great Survey of Paper-Cutting in Yanchuan County 《延川县剪纸大普查》, 2004

The first example is a re-contextualization of a prominent form of Chinese folk art: paper cutting. Throughout the 20th century, Chinese intellectuals appropriated the folk-art styles of rural peasants for propagandistic purposes. In the Yan'an period, professional artists were discouraged from using styles derived from the West or Japan because Mao thought of them as bourgeoisie.

Instead, they were sent to the countryside to learn the folk styles of the peasants. They then produced works which incorporated Communist messages, but maintained a traditional style in order to be more approachable and appealing to the peasants, the primary population that the Communist Party wished to consolidate. As described above, later in the 20th century, during the Great Leap Forward (1958), and during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Communist Party once again used peasant painting, often influenced by the aesthetics of folk New Year prints, for propagandistic purposes. However, the purposes were slightly different than during the Yan'an period. During the Cultural Revolution, peasant paintings were exhibited to an international audience as proof that Mao's rural-based revolution had been successful, celebrating the peasants as producers of both art and revolution. During that period, professional artists also had to undergo critique by peasants and party members before they could be exhibited because, according to Richard Kraus and Richard P. Suttmeier, they "were imagined to embody a more reliable political purity, untarnished by the elitism of the conservatory and academy of fine arts."²⁰² This practice terminated after the end of the Cultural Revolution, but, as the preponderance of folk-art forms on propagandistic billboards throughout China's urban centers attests, some of the general assumptions about the ideological purity of rural China remain part of the Communist Party's rhetoric to this day.

In 2004, Lu Jie initiated a project in Yanchuan County, the same location that was originally planned as the final stop in *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display* had the project not been terminated after the twelfth site. For this project, which lasted six months, Lu and the Long March Foundation enlisted the help of around seventy volunteers to visit every home in

²⁰² Richard Kraus and Richard P. Suttmeier, "Reconstituting the Arts and Sciences," in *Transition from Communism in China: Institutional and Comparative Analyses*, ed. Edwin A. Winckler (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 209.

every village in Yanchuan county, Shaanxi province, one of many counties that is well known for its tradition of paper-cutting, to conduct a survey of all the paper-cutters in the county. In all, they collected 15,006 different paper-cut designs. Instead of mobilizing a team of artists to interact with locals, this time, the foundation found volunteers (not necessarily artists) who spoke the local dialect for ease of communication.

The project was featured at the 5th Shanghai Biennial (2004), the most important international biennial in China at the time, alongside hundreds of works of contemporary domestic and international artists. Lu Jie felt that this was a significant aspect of the work in that it re-framed paper-cutting, an art form that has had a reputation as stagnant and of the past, as a work of contemporary art. Indeed, Lu has stated,

I believe that the art of paper cutting has been continually developing and is not becoming extinct. To overly exaggerate preservation in actuality is to overlook that it is indeed currently developing. This is because people are unwilling to recognize that paper-cuttings are a part of contemporary art; they were thousands of years ago and still are today...The largest contribution of the “Long March” was to say out loud that paper-cuttings are contemporary and to bring it into the most important international site of contemporary art in Asia, the Shanghai Biennial.²⁰³

In fact, for Lu, the acceptance of this project into the Shanghai Biennial marked a resistant stance against the orthodoxy of "the explanatory power regarding what is art and what is contemporary art."²⁰⁴ Lu believes that paper-cutting, because it continues to be created and developed by artists living in China today, is a living art form that should be included in displays of contemporary Chinese art. He believed that the juxtaposition between works we consider “contemporary” and

²⁰³ Jia Bu and Lu Jie, “From ‘Urban to Rural’ to ‘Rural to Urban,’ The Long March Project: The Great Survey of Paper-Cuttings in Yanchuan County, Dialogue between Jia Bu and Lu Jie,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* vol. 3 no. 4 (December 2004): 105.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

“international” with the paper-cuttings can provide a re-thinking of the definition of contemporary Chinese art:

The interaction that exists between the paper-cuttings and the individual images, and the contrast that is created between them and the individual works of great artists presented at the Shanghai Biennial, will provide a site to subjectively re-think the role of paper-cuttings in the realm of art; to see paper-cuttings as a constructive article of creativity as opposed to an object that is just passively holding on.²⁰⁵

After its initial debut at the Shanghai Biennial, it was also included in the Taiwan Art Biennial of 2004, and exhibitions in the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2005, and Sao Paulo in 2007.

Beyond this symbolic re-framing of contemporary Chinese art within the international context of the biennial, Lu was also motivated by practical concerns for the paper-cutters themselves. He believed that by drawing the world's attention to these paper-cutters and their unique creations through an intense cataloging project, he could help them develop a self-sustaining market, thus helping a population who had been left behind since the economic developments of the 1980s. In this way, according to Lu, China could develop its own unique economic system which valued the cultural production of all levels of society and geographic locations. He also sought to resist the traditional orthodoxy of "the folk being opposed to the literati, and utility being opposed to pure art."²⁰⁶ For Lu, utility and contemporary art can reside together.

Lu admitted that the surveyors encountered many different reactions, some positive, some negative, from paper-cutters in each village, which are recorded in the book published alongside the project titled *The Great Survey of Paper-Cutting in Yanchuan County: Long March*

²⁰⁵Ibid., 110.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 108.

*Project 2004.01- 2004.08.*²⁰⁷ Some negative responses were recounted by Ka-Ming Wu in her book *Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism*, who interviewed Liu Jieqiong, one of the volunteers in the project, who is herself a famous paper-cutting artist. According to Liu,

...the difficulty involved was enormous as villagers were suspicious of the outsiders' visit and mistakenly took the surveyors as government officials responsible for executing the one-child policy. Many villagers ran away from the surveyors and simply refused to talk. In addition, there were no monetary rewards for participating in the survey, which also reduced the number of willing subjects.²⁰⁸

In fact, the most surprising realization of the volunteers when conducting their survey was the extreme poverty they encountered, with one volunteer remarking with astonishment that some villagers she interviewed only had watermelon rinds to cook.²⁰⁹

Wu argues that the rhetoric of the volunteers, which expresses hope that paper-cutting could itself become a self-sufficient industry to pull the villagers out of poverty (following Lu Jie's hopeful tone), aligns with the neo-liberal assumptions of the central government, carried out by local officials, when they "encourage rural residents to become self-enterprising citizen-subjects, competitive and efficient, yet ignoring the structural problems they face."²¹⁰ Such an assumption is evident in Lu Jie's statement:

At that time, the "Strive to Renew Yourself" of Naniwan is the same as the idea of "DIY" that we so fashionably import from the outside today. The revolutionary areas cannot rely on those in higher positions to continue financially supporting them forever, and they also

²⁰⁷ Lu Jie, *The Great Survey of Paper-Cutting in Yanchuan County: Long March Project 2004.01-2004.08* (Beijing:25000 Cultural Transmission Center, 2004).

²⁰⁸ Ka-Ming Wu, *Reinventing Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 56.

²⁰⁹ Wu, 57.

²¹⁰ Wu, 58.

cannot simply wait for the cultural policies and creativity of those above them to improve their situation.²¹¹

One strategy for making sure the project supported the locales from which the paper-cuts were collected was through the establishment of a Long March headquarters in the county. The foundation invited scholars and local paper-cutters to collaborate on a textbook, the first ever to be published featuring Chinese paper-cuts. It was distributed to the local grade school and high school. Students attended an hour of paper-cutting class per week, the first time art education was incorporated into their curriculum. Lu hoped that this textbook would allow their project to have sustained impact on the community long after the end of the project, which is of key import to the Long March methodology. However, two years later when Lu's team returned to the area, they discovered the schools had been closed and all the children had been relocated to schools in the city. Lu considered this a "failure," but acknowledges that when you base your practice on open-ended experimentation, failure becomes an important part of the process.²¹²

The Great Survey of Paper-Cutting in Yanchuan County maintains a similar approach to the one established in the *Long March Project: A Walking Visual Display* in that its primary audience was envisioned as those who would find it to be the most helpful: the paper-cutters of Yanchuan and their communities. The creation of a paper-cutting textbook encouraged the continuation of this artistic tradition by teaching it to younger generations. The final compilation into a book was an act of cultural preservation and could be used as an advertising tool, drawing wider interest in this traditional art form. By exhibiting this project in the Shanghai Biennial, Lu shifted the audience from the paper-cutters themselves to the elite international art world. Each

²¹¹ Jia Bu, 103. A footnote in the article explains that "Naniwan is a village In [sic] near Yan'an where Mao Zedong and the Red Army practiced a self-sufficient economy. In common usage today, it has come to denote being independent and braving and conquering nature." 111, footnote 5.

²¹² Lu Jie, interview with author, July 2016, Beijing, China.

participant was represented through identically framed documents that included the names, pictures, responses to survey questions, and photographs of the paper-cuts of each artist, thereby acknowledging their individuality.

How does this act compare with the use of peasant paintings during the Cultural Revolution? While Ellen Johnson Laing convincingly argues that that in the 1970s, the figure of the professional artist was hidden in the work of the peasant artists, in this work both the professional artists and folk artists are fully revealed. Rather than being politically coerced into making these works, paper cutters of Yanchuan county were already practicing their art long before the Long March team came to record it. Both were compiled and exhibited for a national and then international audience. Whereas during the Cultural Revolution, this type of display was done propagandistically as proof of the success of Maoist revolution, the Long March's intervention was meant to reveal the artistic value of an art form that has been underrated, considered primitive and old-fashioned on both a national and global level. While artists like Lu Jie and his team have benefitted socially and financially from the changes in China brought on by its entrance into the global market economy, the rural-based paper cutters were at the losing end of China's economic reforms. *The Great Survey of Paper-Cutting in Yanchuan County* addresses this injustice head-on, with globally renowned contemporary artists using their own cultural capital to try to improve the lives of those less fortunate by promoting their artistic creations.

This project raises the question of the effectiveness of contemporary art in making an actual difference in the lives of China's less fortunate. As Ka-Ming Wu's criticism of the project indicates, it may not be practical to expect this act of collecting and exhibiting paper cuts to establish a market that would ultimately raise this group out of poverty. In the end, the paper cuts

may have been of interest to the contemporary art community only within the context of the exhibition under the banner of The Long March Project. Juxtaposing this with works from the international contemporary art world, demonstrated the concept of contemporaneity in a compelling manner. Terry Smith theorizes that

...contemporaneity consists precisely in the constant experience of radical disjunctions of perceptions, mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.²¹³

The theme of that year's biennial (2004) was "Techniques of the Visible" and primarily featured works that focused on the relationship between art and technology, such as Xu Zhen's contribution, in which he rigged the clock on the clock tower of the museum to cause the hour hand to spin at 100 revolutions per minute, ruminated on the ways modern technologies have changed our sense of reality in an urban context, the relation to time expressed in the papercuts is connected with agricultural cycles and human fertility. The inclusions of two such different conceptions of time reflected the social multiplicities and inequalities that characterize China's postsocialist condition. It is doubtful that such a project would inspire a huge interest in papercuts, in their independent state, to the point that it would make a sustainable difference in the lives of the paper-cutters. It is also doubtful whether or not the incorporation of papercutting, in an international contemporary art biennial, would fulfill Lu's stated goal of destabilizing the established hierarchies in the contemporary art world by expanding its borders to include Chinese folk papercutting. Again, once the project was re-contextualized as a work of contemporary art, the authorial power was passed to the Long March project. It is this marriage

²¹³ Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 703.

of the local and the global, the urban-based artists and the rural artisans that give it its power within the cultural economy of the contemporary art world.

Although this project may not have achieved some of Lu's more pragmatic goals, it did succeed in exposing a wider audience to an indigenous art form they might not have otherwise known. It also raised important questions about the cultural, geographic, and classist biases under which the contemporary art world functions, which may not inspire immediate change, but could contribute to long-term systemic transformation.

3.2.3 Cai Guo-Qiang 蔡国强, *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis* 《蔡国强：农民达芬奇》，2010

In 2010, Cai Guo-Qiang curated an exhibition called *Peasant Da Vincis* at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai with a slogan of “Peasants: Making a Better City, a Better Life.” This slogan, as well as the quote, “Never learned how to land,” a quote by peasant-inventor Du Wenda (杜文达), were spray-painted onto the walls of the courtyard of the museum. Du Wenda's contribution, a flying saucer, was also displayed on the roof of the museum, visible from the courtyard. In the exhibition, Cai showcased the inventions of more than fifty *nongmin*, including submarines, helicopters, and robots. The first floor displayed the wreckage of a plane made by Shandong peasant Tan Chengnian (谭成年) who died April 8, 2007, during a test flight. This wreckage was included, according to the exhibition catalogue, “as a eulogy to the peasant inventors, and a reminder that this is a true story that took place in the real world.”²¹⁴ In the

²¹⁴ “Tan Chengnian,” *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant da Vincis*, exhibition catalogue (Guilin, China: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010), 186.

lobby of the second floor, all the names of the peasant inventors were written on the wall, including their birthplaces and the names of their inventions. The exhibition hall on the second floor featured a whimsical installation by Cai of fifty kites blowing in the wind of fifty fans. Projected on each kite was a short film featuring one of the peasants explaining their invention to Cai and giving it a test run. The third floor was occupied by inventor Wu Yulu (吴玉禄) and his family, who set up a robot-making workshop and showroom. Throughout the previous decade, Wu had created twenty-seven robots, each with a unique talent, such as jumping, dancing, or somersaulting. The robot, named “Twenty-fifth Wu,” pulls a rickshaw that can support an adult and says, “Wu Yulu is my dad. I’m pulling my dad to go shopping. Thank you.”²¹⁵ Wu’s robots were all on display, frenetically walking, dancing, and jumping throughout the showroom. For this exhibition, Cai commissioned Wu and his family to make robots of modern artists. For example, a robot of version of Yves Klein leapt from the wall, and one of Jackson Pollock splashed paint on canvases. Within the atrium shared by the 3rd, 4th, and 5th floor, hung five submarines created by a peasant from Hubei named Li Yuming (李玉明), as well as four airplanes and helicopters created by other peasants. Many smaller flying saucers were visible through the glass roof of the atrium. The former bank building next door also hosted a part of the exhibition. Outside of its grand hall, a submarine welded from old oil drums by inventor Tao Xiangli (陶相礼), was displayed with images of its test-run projected onto a white flag standing within its access hatch. Inside the hall stood a twenty-meter-long aircraft carrier commissioned by Cai, inside of which was shown the Soviet documentary, *Our Century*, about Soviet space exploration. Within the vault another film titled *Out of the Present*, a documentary about the

²¹⁵ “Wu Yulu,” *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant da Vincis*, exhibition catalogue, 160.

Soviet space station Mir was also shown. In his artist statement about these inclusions, Cai explains,

These two documentaries share the Chinese peasants' exploratory spirit and both express the courage and hardships seen as humanity explores the unknown. Yet there is a great contrast between an act of state directed by the totalitarian power of the former Soviet Union and the energy of an individual Chinese peasant.²¹⁶

This was the inaugural exhibition for the museum, and was purposefully scheduled to coincide with the World Expo in Shanghai, a contemporary world's fair featuring national pavilions for participating countries. Framing of this exhibition in conjunction with the World Expo is significant in that Cai wanted to draw attention to the fact that it is the ingenuity of *nongmin* like these that has made China's modernization possible. In fact, the theme of the Expo that year was "Better City-Better Life," and served as a celebration of Shanghai's status as the "next great world city." By holding the exhibition in the newly opened Rockbund museum, located on the world-famous Shanghai bund, also a symbol of China's modernization, Cai sought to draw attention to the invisible and undervalued forces that made this development possible. Cai is acutely aware of the price the countryside has paid for the modernization of the cities. This project brings to international attention that despite the fact that China's countryside still suffers from lack of resources, rural inhabitants continue to be resourceful and creative. For Cai, this project was interesting and important because it is the first time a "peasant" invention could "enter into dialogue with the rest of the world, rather than remain isolated."²¹⁷ Moving beyond focusing on the labor contributions made by migrant workers in literally building the city's

²¹⁶ Cai Guo-Qiang, "A Little About Me and Peasant Da Vincis," in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis*, exhibition catalogue, 22.

²¹⁷ "Seeing Red: Two Leading Art Fairs are showcasing new art from China," *The Economist*, June 23, 2005, <http://www.economist.com/node/4102281>.

infrastructure, this exhibition showcased individual projects initiated on their inventors' own volition, beyond the labor necessary to make a living.

In this exhibition, the artist stepped aside to play the role of the curator, re-contextualizing a creation by a "peasant" as contemporary art. However, the exhibition does not go so far as to re-contextualize the "peasant" as a contemporary artist. In fact, by including his name in the title of the exhibition, an uncommon practice for exhibition curators, Cai firmly maintains his position as a contemporary artist. Gu Yi, in her article "The 'Peasant Problem' and Time in Contemporary Chinese Art," points out the fact that in the catalog for the exhibition, Cai's temporal investment in collecting the works and visiting the *nongmin* in their homes is repeatedly emphasized. For Gu, this is proof of the equation between temporal investment and authenticity in contemporary Chinese art related to *nongmin* communities.²¹⁸ By emphasizing this durational investment, Cai wishes to point out the authenticity of his relationship with the *nongmin* as well as the authenticity of his desire to uphold them as bold and creative inventors. Cai's repeated emphasis on his own process and his own biographical background emphasizes his central role in the exhibition. While the individual inventions were created by the "peasant" contributors, the entire exhibition can be seen as a conceptual work by Cai that encompasses the inventions, their origin stories, and Cai's process of collecting them.

Cai himself grew up in a rural village, and therefore identifies with the peasants he invited to participate. He says,

My concern for these peasants are not from a socio-political angle. Rather, my first impression was they are very similar to me. They are curious, they have a pioneering spirit, and their interests in creation are very similar to mine as an artist. I see myself in them. My hometown is Quanzhou in Fujian Province. It used to be a small town, so I feel

²¹⁸ Gu Yi, 63.

personally close to peasants. When I'm overseas, and people ask me about my identity, I often reply "I am an Asian peasant."²¹⁹

In another article in the catalog, Cai writes:

I often wonder why I collect these things. Is it because they retain a handcrafted charm? Or because they were born out of a desire to escape the gravity of one's circumstances? Perhaps most importantly, I have been gathering peasants' dreams, and within these dreams I see myself: I am a child of this land, I am a son of peasants-no-I am a peasant.²²⁰

These are two of the many times Cai had identified as a peasant, a Chinese peasant, or an Asian peasant. Much like his emphasis on duration, it seems that Cai, himself one of the most notable contemporary Chinese artists in the global art world since the 1990s, uses this distinctly indigenous identity as another indicator of his "authenticity" within a global art context. While, in a sense, he is a Chinese "peasant" in that he comes from the countryside, this identification overlooks the larger political, social, and economic structures that keep the Chinese *nongmin* in positions of economic and legal precarity, a position which certainly does not define Cai.

In the same article mentioned above, Gu Yi argues that this exhibition is commendable for its lack of emphasis on a linear, modernist conception of time: "In Peasant Da Vincis," she claims, "the peasant inventors were certainly not behind, but neither were they ahead of time. Linear time had no place here, nor could creativity be evaluated using a temporal measure."²²¹ I argue, rather, that the whole conception of the exhibition relies on the emphasis on two distinct perceptions of time: one as exemplified by Cai as a jet-setting internationally renowned artist, the international Expo, and the hyper-modern city of Shanghai, and one as exemplified by the inventions from peasants whose identities as outsiders of Shanghai and the contemporary art

²¹⁹ Cai Guo-Qiang, " 'I See Myself in Them' About the artist, collector and curator," Rockbund Museum, accessed October 26, 2017, <http://www.rockbundartmuseum.org/en/event/overview/5d0fwz>.

²²⁰ Cai Guo-Qiang, "A Little About Me...", 25.

²²¹ Gu Yi, 70.

world are brought to the forefront. In fact, the power of the exhibition relies on the fact that the “peasants” are not contemporary artists. The aesthetics of their creations, which, although sometimes functional, are often clumsily welded together with scrap metal, live up to our expectations of what “peasant” inventions might look like. Furthermore, the works had all already been collected by Cai for a previously agreed-upon price before the opening of the exhibition, so the “peasant” participants did not benefit financially from the re-valuation of their works as contemporary art. Cai’s apparent intention was to use a contemporary art museum as a platform to bring the world’s attention to the creativity of an under-valued socio-economic group, thus elevating their status within a global context. Ironically, Cai’s gesture is more revealing of the elitism of the mainstream international art world that relies on the maintenance of just such social stratification for its survival.

3.2.4 Sun Yuan 孙原 and Peng Yu 彭禹, Farmer Du Wenda’s Flying Saucer 《农民杜文达的飞碟》, 2005

Cai's interest in peasant inventors originated in 2005 when he was the curator of the China Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennial. Two of the artists he chose to participate were Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, an artist couple who had already made a name for themselves in the Beijing art world by the end of the 1990s. For their project, titled *Farmer Du Wenda’s Flying Saucer*, they invited peasant Du Wenda to test-fly a flying saucer he had invented.²²²

The couple learned of this peasant inventor, living in Anhui province, through a small news article which claimed Du had invented and successfully test-driven a UFO. In fact, the

²²² Du Wenda’s UFO was also part of *Peasant Da Vincis*, displayed on the roof of the entrance to the museum.

UFO was a simple flying device that was designed to resemble a short and wide version of a UFO. Sun and Peng visited the farmer and found that he had a reputation throughout the province for his amazing invention, with many claiming to have seen him successfully fly the machine. Sun and Peng met with him, bringing with them some specialists to inspect the machine, all of whom declared that it would never work. Instead of asking him to fly the machine there and then, they invited him to come to the Venice Biennial to test out his contraption, as an experimental performance. On the opening day of the exhibition, Du started his machine, but it would not fly. Sun was not disappointed by this outcome because, according to him, what defined this work as *art* was its experimental nature.²²³ Had they already verified that the machine would fly before the opening of the exhibition, the work would be more in line with an official performance than an artwork. This was difficult for some Chinese viewers of the work to accept, as they saw the failure as a form of "losing face," but for Sun and Peng the artwork was not dependent on the success or failure of the flight, but rather, the attempt in and of itself.²²⁴

In order to fully understand Cai's approach to the rural inventors found in this curatorial project, it is useful to compare it to a large-scale project he did for the 1999 Venice Biennial, titled *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, for which he won a Golden Lion award. This project was based on a well-known Socialist Realist sculptural tableau created by Ye Yushan (叶毓山), and a group of sculptors from Sichuan Academy of Fine art in 1965 named the *Rent Collection Courtyard* 《收租院》. The tableau illustrates an evil and wealthy landlord collecting money from the poor peasants who occupy his land. This work drew national attention and

²²³ Sun Yuan, interview with the author, September 2015, Beijing, China.

²²⁴ Ibid.

traveled extensively throughout China as well as to other socialist countries such as Cuba and Albania. It was a piece of propaganda about the many ways the land-owner exploited peasants. It celebrated the superiority of socialist systems over capitalism. For Cai's project, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, he hired a group of ten academically-trained Chinese sculptors, led by artist Long Xu Li (龙绪理), (one of the artists who created the original 1965 version), as well as enlisting the help of some contemporary art colleagues such as Ai Weiwei (艾未未), Zhang Huan, and Chen Zhen (陈箴), to spend the five days before the opening of the exhibition recreating 108 of the original 114 life-sized figures in the sculpture. The artists continued to work on the sculptures throughout the exhibition's opening, incorporating their real-time labor into the content of the artwork. After the opening, the artists stopped working, leaving the unfired clay sculptures to deteriorate over the course of the exhibition. The work, therefore, can be seen as a statement about the deterioration of the socialist dream, a letting-go of the Maoist goals of a peasant-led revolution leading to a classless society. It was criticized by many in the contemporary Chinese art world, who argued that such an act was one of self-orientalization in a culture dominated by post-colonial rhetoric.²²⁵

Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard demonstrates certain helplessness and melancholy in regards to the absent peasant in *Peasant Da Vincis*, held eleven years later. While the former shows the peasant as a helpless victim of economic development, deteriorating over time, the latter re-frames the peasant as an inventor. Or, as Zhang Yiwu argues in his contribution to the exhibition catalogue,

²²⁵For example, Zhu Qi discusses this phenomenon in his article "We are all too sensitive when it comes to awards!—Cai Guo-Qiang and the copyright infringement problems surrounding Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard," in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads*, ed. Wu Hung (Hong Kong: New Art Media; London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001), 56-65.

Their attitude is one of unprecedented optimism and interest, to bid farewell through their dreams to China's sorrow and depression, and to say goodbye to the role of peasants in the 20th century. *Rent Collection Courtyard* is a story of 20th-century China, but *Peasant da Vincis* is a new dream for peasants in 21st-century China.²²⁶

This re-framing is, of course, largely symbolic, as the inventions exhibited in *Peasant Da Vincis* fashioned from outdated material, do not often work, and thus are not commodities that are marketable to anyone beyond specialist collectors like Cai. Zhang's quotation, in its division between "old peasants" and "new peasants" recalls the arguments surrounding Luo Zhongli's *Father*, as quoted in the introduction, indicating that rather than providing a new framework with which to view China's rural population, Cai's projects with "peasant" inventions are based upon post-Cultural Revolutionary ideas claiming that the path of the "peasant" is synonymous with the path of China's modernization. By presenting *Farmer Du Wenda's Flying Saucer* at the Venice Biennale and *Peasant Da Vincis* in Shanghai during the World Expo, Cai introduced this view of the Chinese peasant to a global community, similar to the preoccupation with the presence of a foreign audience at the Hu County Peasant Painting exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in 1973. Furthermore, this view of China's peasantry was clearly supported by the central government, that has been in charge of choosing the curator of the Chinese pavilion of the Venice Biennale since its inception, that very year. This is made clear in a 2005 article in *The Economist*, in which Fan Di'an, then vice-president of the Central Academy of Fine Art is quoted as saying, "Ever since Mr. Cai won the Golden Lion, the government has realized that art can be a good ambassador for China."²²⁷

²²⁶ Zhang Yiwu, "Anti-Gravity": A Surge of Chinese Imagination and the Significance of Peasant Da Vincis", in *Peasant da Vincis*, exhibition catalogue, 35.

²²⁷"Seeing Red..." *The Economist*

3.2.5 Hu Zhijun 胡志军, *Sculpting Contemporary Chinese Art History* 《泥塑中国当代艺术史》, 2015

Cai continued this kind of approach to amateur artists in the 2016 exhibition *What About the Art? Contemporary Art From China*, at the Qatar Museum. The exhibition, curated by Cai, includes the works of fifteen Chinese artists, one of whom, Hu Zhijun, does not identify as a contemporary Chinese artist. In the exhibition catalog, Hu is referred to as a “peasant” from Hunan Province. In 2013, as part of his grieving process after the death of his wife, Hu moved to Beijing to be closer to his son and started to sculpt small figures out of clay, sometimes making entire scenes that, when lined up next to each other, tell a narrative, like a 3-dimensional comic-book. When Cai first visited Hu’s studio, Hu had already made over 1,000 figures. In an interview between Cai and Hu, Hu explains that one of his favorites is a sculpture he made of coal miners being transported into a mine. He previously worked as a miner and had seen many miners in his village, so he was comfortable with the subject matter.²²⁸ In a gesture similar to his commissioning of Wu Yulu to make robots of contemporary Western artists, Cai commissioned Hu to make figurines which interpreted key events and figures in the history of contemporary Chinese art. Cai was particularly interested in the fact that Hu was not familiar with this history, so he would provide a fresh perspective to the topic. He was also drawn to Hu’s lack of formal art training, saying, “If Hu were to use a strict, scientific approach to make these figures, he might lose his personal aesthetic intuition and the naïveté in his work.”²²⁹ Cai goes on to express concern about Hu becoming too technically adept, because once an artist is trained, “Their work

²²⁸ Cai Guo-Qiang and Hu Zhijun, “Hu Zhijun in Conversation with Cai Guo-Qiang,”49.

²²⁹ Cai Guo-Qiang, “Sculptural Comic Book,” trans. Chinyan Wong, in *What About the Art? Contemporary Art from China*, 44.

becomes rudimentary demonstrations of their skills to show the human anatomy, yet the pleasure of directly addressing and sculpting clay itself, and the fundamental nature of emotional catharsis in art, are forgotten.”²³⁰ This concern over the influence of too much training on an “amateur” artists’ style is reminiscent of a story told by Michael Sullivan when he interviewed a member of the Hu County painting society in 1988: “My host told me that after the peasants have been painting for some time they want to learn more about technique, become self-conscious and dissatisfied with their work, and often stop painting altogether. “What happens then?” I asked. “There are always plenty more coming along,” he replied.”²³¹

Interestingly, in his translations of photographs of paintings, sculptures, performances and other art events, Hu sometimes changes details to make them look better. For example, in his recreation of Huang Yong-Ping’s *Classic of Mountain and Seas*, he changed the poses of the animals so they are fighting each other. In an interview between Cai and Hu, Cai tells Hu, “You are judging these artists and their works from a peasant’s perspective instead of an artist’s. You’ve identified their most interesting points, as well as transforming them.” Hu replies, “I don’t have the credentials to judge them. I am a farmer, not an artist!”²³² Like those overseeing the Hu County peasant paintings, Cai appears to value Hu’s work because it demonstrates a purely indigenous world view, untainted by the concerns and tastes of the global, contemporary art world. Cai seems to incorporate Hu into this exhibition as another strategy to demonstrate his own authenticity (through proximity) to a purely indigenous world view.

The works described in the first mode rely on the unlikely meeting between amateur or traditional creations by non-contemporary artists and the global art world. While the artists and

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Sullivan, 149.

²³² “Hu Zhijun in Conversation with Cai Guo-Qiang,” in *What About the Art?*, 51.

curators involved (Lu Jie, Cai Guo-Qiang, Sun Yuan, and Peng Yu) have not always been supported by the central government (in fact, the latter two were known for their shocking experiments with cadavers in the 1990s- an act that was explicitly condemned by the Ministry of Culture),²³³ their very inclusion in the Shanghai Biennale and the Venice Biennale are implicit indications that their works align with the interests of the central government. Their actions appear to be an attempt to introduce the work of marginalized communities into the global art world, parallel to their own acceptance into the international art world over the course of the 1990s. But much like the clumsy introduction of contemporary Chinese art into the Venice Biennale in 1993, showcasing artworks that fulfilled the Western post-Cold War expectations of Communist China, these works also do more to maintain fixed class divisions within China than to subvert them. While Lu Jie wanted to introduce the Yanchuan paper cuttings in the Shanghai Biennale to question our hierarchical categorization of “contemporary art,” this act seems somewhat gestural without a deep exploration of the intimate ties between “contemporary art” and the global contemporary art complex, from which the Yanchuan paper cutters are firmly excluded. However, the sustained work of the Long March Foundation in the region indicates a desire to promote economic and educational development in the region in an attempt to lessen the economic and cultural disparities between China’s rural hinterlands and its cosmopolitan urban centers. Despite Cai Guo-Qiang’s repeated insistence that he is a peasant, his various projects with “peasants” or amateur creators, rely on these cultural and economic disparities as their conceptual foundation.

²³³ In 2001 the Ministry of Culture issued a notice banning artists from using human or animal corpses in art. This notification was reprinted in Chen Lüsheng’s 陈履生 *In the Name of Art* 《以艺术的名义》 (Beijing: People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 2002). For an English translation, see “Ministry of Culture Notice,” translated by Lee Ambrozy in *Chinese Contemporary Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010): 276-277.

3.3 MODE 2: *NONGMIN* COMMUNITIES CREATING CONTEMPORARY ART AS A TOOL FOR THEIR OWN SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

Another way that artists began to engage with *nongmin* communities in the first decade of the 21st century is through inviting them to make art themselves in their work or living spaces. The act of art creation is envisioned as a means toward the psychological and spiritual liberation of the participating *nongmin*, providing relief from mundane working and living conditions. Like those discussed above, these works demonstrate a continued desire to help *nongmin* communities, but on a highly symbolic level, using art creation as a means to envision the world, and the position of the *nongmin* participants within this world, in a different light. In that each example described below was sponsored by an international corporation, was created using media, approaches, and styles that were common to contemporary art practice at the time, and was ultimately exhibited in contemporary museums or galleries, these works, like those explored under “Mode 1,” were oriented towards an international, contemporary art-viewing community. The incorporation of *nongmin* art creations within the contemporary art complex can be seen as a strategy to push against the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that dominate the field. They demonstrate a continued desire to help *nongmin* communities using the cultural and economic capital at their disposal, which primarily came from international/contemporary art sources.

3.3.1 Cao Fei 曹斐, *Whose Utopia?* 《谁的乌托邦?》, 2006

From 2005-2006, young Guangzhou-born artist Cao Fei created her participatory project titled *What Are You Doing Here?* that concluded with a semi-documentary film called *Whose Utopia?*. This project was created as part of the Siemen's Art Project, an artist residency program that took

place from 2001-2006, which invited Chinese artists to engage with workers from industrial factories throughout the country for periods of six months. Cao's project took place at the Osram Lighting Factory in Foshan city, Guangdong province. Foshan is part of the Pearl River Delta, which was one of the earliest areas of China to undergo heavy industrialization after Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992. Consequently, the area is full of migrant laborers who have left their hometowns to make a living in factories, often both living and working on the factory grounds. This situation was only exacerbated by China's addition into the World Trade Organization, which resulted in the establishment of more internationally-owned factories that provided more employment opportunities for migrant workers.

For this project, Cao initially sent out a questionnaire to all workers at the factory. Participants answered questions about their reason for coming to work for the factory, their backgrounds, and their dreams for the future. Based on these responses, Cao chose about 50 workers to participate. The structure of the project loosely followed certain elements of production in the factory. For example, the philosophy of the factory is represented by the acronym "TPM," meaning "total productive maintenance." Cao divided the 50 participants into multiple groups, each in charge of creating a performance or installation based on a theme. She re-named the acronym as "team people motivation," and labeled the groups according to TPM numbers. TPM Stream-line 03, for example, was the group in charge of the idea of "dreams." The resulting projects were exhibited and performed for the workers and their families at the First Utopia Festival, held at the factory. One group from the TPM Stream-line 03 group fashioned an elevated bed-like structure covered in a mosquito net, filled with small toys and lights. The toys represented their material dreams for the future, such as a miniature car. Once music began playing, the participants began to break dance around the structure. The

performance ended with one of the participants on the phone, pretending to be closing on a multi-million RMB deal.

The film *Whose Utopia?* consists of three parts. The first, titled "Imagination of Product," focuses on the production of the factory itself, displaying light bulbs moving along the factory line, edited to syncopate with rhythmic ambient music. The second, also accompanied by ambient music, titled "Factory Fairytale," shows the participants performing within the factory space, including a woman dressed as a ballerina, dancing gracefully among tall shelves and other employees who continue to go about their daily work, seemingly unaware of the performer in their midst. The third section, titled "Whose Utopia?," includes still-shots of many of the workers, who gaze straight into the lens of the camera. It concludes with a group wearing t-shirts that they designed by themselves, spelling out the phrase "My future is not a dream." This section is accompanied by an English language song, sounding as if it is being performed by an East Asian singer.²³⁴

The film reveals the disconnection between the mechanized labor of the factory and the dreams of the individuals working within. The project was meant to give a platform for the workers to express themselves, highlighting their individuality in a culture and work environment that often overlooks the importance of the individual, especially in the case of migrant workers. Like other artists discussed in this chapter, although Cao understands that she comes from an entirely different world than the workers (her father is famous sculptor Cao Chong'en (曹崇恩)), she feels that they share the same dreams for the future. In her artist's statement about the work she says "Their utopia is also my utopia, and the utopia of many more

²³⁴ A series of photographs from the film, as one element of the project, are titled *My Future is not a Dream*, starting with the photograph of the workers' rock band wearing these t-shirts. "My future is not a dream" was also the title of a hit song by Taiwanese singer Zhang Yusheng (Tom Chang) in a 1989 pop song that was popular throughout Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

with hopes. I hope that utopia will stop to be an ideal and will one day turn into reality."²³⁵ This statement differs from Cai Guo-Qiang's insistence on his own peasant identity in that she focuses on their shared hopes and dreams while acknowledging her own privileged socio-economic position in comparison with the workers.

Chris Berry, in his article, "Images of Urban China in Cao Fei's "Magical Metropolises,"" argues that the world Cao creates with this work and others, all based on participatory role playing, either in the real world or in video games, is a heterotopia, a concept developed by Michele Foucault as a critique of globalization. A heterotopia, rather than reflecting reality as it is, represents, challenges, and overturns reality.²³⁶ This argument is reinforced by this statement by Cao:

What this project does is release the workers from a standardized notion of productivity. What we are doing is production, but a type of production that connects back to the personal. I am like a social worker. They don't regard me as an artist. They think I'm an event organizer, a social worker. This is fine with me as it was always my intention to have the artist's role disappear. What I noticed is that through these activities the workers become interested in things. Now they have a relationship to art. Their products are connected to art.²³⁷

Here Cao expresses a desire to reverse the isolation of the worker that comes with capitalist industry, emotionally connecting them with the products that they create in this art project, and, by extension, the products they produce in the factory. This approach is starkly different from those discussed in the last chapter. While performance works utilizing migrant workers further alienated the workers from their labor by bringing them into a gallery setting and asking them to imitate the labor without actually producing anything, this project encourages an entirely new

²³⁵ Cao Fei, "Whose Utopia?" (artist statement), accessed October 19, 2017, <http://www.caofei.com/works.aspx?id=10&year=2006&wtid=3>.

²³⁶ Chris Berry, "Images of Urban China in Cao Fei's 'magical metropolises,'" *China Information* vol. 29.2 (June 23, 2015): 205.

²³⁷ Jordan Strom and Cao Fei, "Your Utopia is Ours," Fall, 2006, accessed October 19, 2017, <http://www.caofei.com/texts.aspx?id=50&year=2006&aitid=1>.

way of perceiving the relationship between the workers and the products of their labor, one in which the laborer has creative power in its implementation.

While Cao knows that such a project cannot monetarily or materially improve the lives of the worker, she has faith that such projects can improve society in an indirect way. When discussing the dispersal of identity that comes with the internet and games such as “Second Life,” she has said: “...I think this individual multiplicity has the potential to lead to greater civic participation and breed democratic values.”²³⁸ In projects like *Whose Utopia?*, the goal is to expand the mind of the worker participants to enable them to re-imagine their own position within society. In that it was made as part of an artists’ residency, the film *Whose Utopia?* was always imagined as a work of art under the authorship of Cao, and has been exhibited extensively in international exhibitions. After its initial showing in the *What Are You Doing Here?* exhibition in the Osram Factory, Foshan, Guangzhou, it was exhibited at the Orange County Museum of Art, the San Francisco Art Institute, the Center for Contemporary Art in Kitakyushu, Japan in 2007, at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in Moscow in 2009, at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2010, and many more times since then, including at the recent *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World* at the Guggenheim in New York City in 2017-2018.

The relational mode apparent in this project differs from those described in mode 1. This project can be seen as an extension of the digital works Cao has done in “Second Life,” in which the audience can adopt any identity they choose, thus envisioning new possibilities for living in the world. This work differs from either the Hu County peasant paintings or Cai Guo-Qiang’s various projects involving “peasants,” in that the identity of the participants does not define the

²³⁸ Cao Fei, “An Interview” in *The Body at Stake: Experiments in Chinese Contemporary Art and Theatre*, ed. Jörg Huber and Zhao Chuan (Bielefeld, Germany: 2013), 259.

type of art they are asked to make. Rather, the open-ended nature of the project inspires a reconsideration of the power of human creativity in the face of the monotony of capitalist industrial development, an issue that is of global concern, rather than distinctly local or indigenous. In this way, Cao avoids any superficial claims to “authenticity” linked with the “purity” of amateur art. Like *The Long March Project: A Walking Visual Display* and *The Great Survey of Paper-Cutting in Yanchuan County: Long March Project*, this project includes two distinct audiences: the factory workers and the international art world. In terms of the first audience, it is possible and likely that this project influenced the participants in both quantifiable and non-quantifiable ways. However, because the project lasted only six months, it is unlikely that it has had a sustained impact on the factory, or the participating workers beyond the life of the project. On the other hand, it has had a longer effect on the international art world in that it continues to be exhibited both in China and abroad. This, once again, raises questions about the power of contemporary art to make a difference in the lives of underprivileged communities. In the end, the work is more successful in raising questions about the power of creative expression, the difference between industrial and creative production, and the hierarchies that define the contemporary art world for an international art viewing audience, than in actually transforming the lives of the factory-worker participants, who have no stakes in the international or local art worlds themselves.

3.3.2 Alessandro Rolandi, *Social Sensibility R&D*, 2009-present

In 2010, Beijing-based Italian artist Alessandro Rolandi, began a long-term factory-based project that overlaps in key ways with Cao Fei’s *Whose Utopia?*, yet its longer duration and continued implementation offers new ways of conceptualizing the role art can play in the lives of factory

workers. In 2010 Rolandi answered a call for artists issued by Guillaume Bernard, CEO of French-owned Bernard Controls, a company that manufactures electronic valves for oil pipes. The residency would take place in a Chinese factory, located in the outskirts of Beijing. Bernard believed that art could really make a difference in the lives of the factory workers and, in the end, chose Rolandi to be the artist-in-residence. For the first six months of the project, he came to the factory as a volunteer, and initiated the first project titled *Suibian* (随便), the Chinese word for “whatever you want” or “as you wish.” In the first month, he gave a small booklet to each worker who was willing to participate, so they could record anything they wanted to communicate to the artist, which included poems, drawing, songs, and informal notes. In the second month, he brought art books to the factory to show the workers and asked them to begin designing an original artwork. In the third month, each worker was given thirty minutes to complete the action or artwork that they had prepared. One worker created a realist sculpture of a piece of feces out of oil, another decided to move her work-station outdoors, so she could work in the sun for the first half of her shift, and another wrote a message of welcome to Rolandi using the screws at her work-station. After this initial project, Rolandi realized that it would be better if he could be an actual employee at the factory, so Bernard established the Social Sensibility Research and Development Department (Social Sensibility R&D), appointing Rolandi as its director. “Social Sensibility” is a term Rolandi defines as “ a capacity to respond in a very organic but precise way to very complex external stimulation.”²³⁹ Independent scholar and curator Zandie Brockett further explicates this concept as an exploration of

²³⁹ Alessandro Rolandi, “Artist Interview: Alessandro Rolandi,” part of Zheng Bo’s Futurelearn open-access course, *Discovering Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China*, accessed October 16, 2017, video, 5:02, <http://seachina.net>.

...how unregulated “spaces for play,” reflection and experimentation can provide workers egalitarian opportunities to “use” art, re-activate natural dispositions of spontaneity, creativity and criticality —or as Rolandi calls them, “social sensibilities” — and finally, re-construct faltering commons. By producing environments that challenge optimized urban and labor systems that impact social behavior, individuals are temporarily given an opportunity to build and restore symbiotic relationships with their community.²⁴⁰

In this way, Rolandi’s project was envisioned as having larger implications for societal transformation beyond the factory and beyond China.

After the establishment of Social Sensibility R &D department, Rolandi transformed the project into a residency program, inviting Chinese and international artists to come to the factory twice a week for up to six months to create art projects that engage with the workers. Since the project’s inception, he has invited over thirty artists to participate.

The invited artists each took a unique approach, but had to align with Rolandi’s guidelines: “...the engagement between artists and people is not compulsory but voluntary and the projects need to be inspired and informed by a first period in which an informal but relevant relational bond is established between the two parties.”²⁴¹ Artist Lulu Li (李心路), in her project *Human Products*, negotiated with the factory’s management to give the workers one hour per week to listen to music. She passed out speakers to each of the workers and brought her collection of CDs so that they could use her music if they did not have any. However, when the first music hour arrived, much to the artist’s surprise, nobody used the speakers. In another project, Chinese artist Zhao Tianji (赵天汲) and Australian artist Matther Greaves observed that the workers preferred to take their breaks in the bicycle park shed rather than in the rec-room

²⁴⁰ Zandie Brockett, “A Space for Play: On Aimlessly Oriented Artistic Practices in Urban China,” conference paper presented at *Overwhelming Imagination: Achieving and Undermining Contradictions*, Sishang Museum, Beijing, June 4-5, 2016. <https://www.overwhelmingimagination.com/>

²⁴¹ Alessandro Rolandi, personal communication with author, October 16, 2017.

provided. They decided they wanted to improve the conditions of the shed for the workers. In order to accomplish this, they put tables and chairs in the bicycle park shed and served coffee and tea to the workers while on break, asking them what they thought would improve the shed. One year later, Zhao returned with an architect to build a new shed/break room for the workers, using their ideas as inspiration for the new design. Artist Yanzi (燕子) was interested in fabric and weaving, and decided to make changes to the workers' uniforms after asking them what improvements they would suggest. She is particularly interested in the relationship between the type of labor performed and the design of the uniforms, noting that a uniform with many pockets is appropriate for a job in which workers might be able to carry many tools with them rather than leaving them in the workspace.²⁴² For Project 18, *Untitled (reciprocal message)*, young artist Yaowei (姚薇) used a spinning wheel to randomly pair two employees to give each other a massage at 10 am and 4 pm, switching the giver and receiver from the morning to the afternoon. According to the artist,

This constructed situation bypasses working hierarchies and structures but also social etiquette, as in fact allow people who are eventually linked only by a working environment to exchange a moment suspended between subtle irony and uncomfortable shyness. Presence, cultural identity and social bonds and [sic] tested through a rather odd physical interaction that become [sic] an instrument to suspend the reality of working life and reconnect with human nature in a demanding and challenging way.²⁴³

It is evident that most of the artists created works that were meant as practical improvements to the working conditions of the workers, rather than asking the workers to express themselves creatively as Rolandi did in his first project, *Suibian*, and as Rolandi theorized the project from its inception.

²⁴² Alessandro Rolandi, "Project 15, Yanzi 燕子, untitled," accessed October 16, 2017, <http://www.socialsensitivity.org/project-15-Yanzi-Untitled-workers-uniform>.

²⁴³ Yao Wei, artist statement for "Project 18 Untitled (reciprocal message)," accessed October 16, 2017, <http://www.socialsensitivity.org/project-18-Yaowei-Untitled-ongoing-project>.

This project was, in part, inspired by Rolandi's reading of Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.²⁴⁴ In this book, Rancière suggests a new and radical way of thinking about education, one in which we can teach that which we do not know, one based on the assumption that everyone has the innate ability to learn, and that it is our irrational social hierarchy that maintains the illusion of the necessity for the enlightened master to impart knowledge onto the ignorant masses. In this way, even those with the least amount of education, money, or social status, possess the ability to "emancipate" themselves or their children. Rather than providing a platform for the employees to express their work-place grievances, Rolandi uses art to provide new forms of communication outside of the hierarchy of the factory management. He writes:

By creating a constant, non-mediated interaction between artists, workers, managers and employees, in their working place during working hours, the Social Sensibility R & D Department aims to transform both the role of the artist and that of the company/corporate system. The artist becomes the creative and positive disturbance in the company's daily routine, which will influence at different levels (through mere presence, discussion, practice, confrontation, empathy) the whole relational aspect of the working place. The territory where the artist and the employee/manager/worker meet is negotiable and will affect the optimized structure of codes and rules of the company. The art-project will be the context where this constant negotiation between the artist and the people working in the company takes place.²⁴⁵

Rolandi argues that he does not aim to teach the workers about their condition, because they are already quite aware of it. For him, the purpose of the project is not for artists to impose their own world-views or ideas upon the workers, but to bring something new and interesting into the workers' lives that they "don't want to define."²⁴⁶ A key aspect of the project is that the visiting artists are forced into a new environment, necessitating that they fit their schedules around the

²⁴⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991)

²⁴⁵ This quotation comes from an announcement for a salon led by Rolandi at i:projectspace in Beijing, China, on June 11, 2015. Unpublished.

²⁴⁶ Alessandro Rolandi, "Artist Interview: Alessandro Rolandi," <http://seachina.net>.

workers' schedules and the demands of the factory. According to Rolandi, there is a lot of time spent waiting around, doing apparently nothing, and many of the artists' plans are frustrated, thus creating a non-functional and non-optimized relationship to time and efficiency. Rolandi explains, "It's possibility to mutate and change in order to become fresh and lively, partly responding to people's growing commitment and demands and partly defying them to remain a disturbance are the characteristics of the practice."²⁴⁷ This conception of time is reminiscent of Wang Wei's *Temporary Space* in which he organized the timing of the project to coincide with the timing of the migrant workers' labor, not vice-versa.

In 2015, Rolandi was invited by Bernard Controls to set up a similar department in a factory in Paris, France. As he was establishing the department in the new setting, Rolandi expressed concern that the project would encounter problems due to racial tensions among the workers.²⁴⁸ However, now that the project has taken off, he argues that it has been successful, in part, because of the cultural diversity in the workshop, with many of the workers making art reflecting their own cultural identities and backgrounds. He eventually invited artist Blandine de la Taille to take over the Paris-based department in order that he could focus more attention on the one in Beijing, with the two maintaining close contact and collaboration.

In 2015, Rolandi, Zhao Tianji (who has taken on a co-director role), Guillaume and Christine Bernard, and Blandine de la Taille established the Social Sensibility Institute (registered in Hong Kong). The idea of creating an institution separate from the company was something that Guillaume Bernard and Rolandi had been discussing since they first began

²⁴⁷ Alessandro Rolandi, personal communication with the author, October 16, 2017.

²⁴⁸ Alessandro Rolandi, informal talk at art salon held at i:projectspace in Beijing, China, on June 11, 2015. Racial tensions were an issue specific to the French factory. Rolandi did not mention racial tensions being an issue in the Beijing factory. In fact, in all of the projects discussed in this dissertation, artists respond to social divisions along class-based boundaries, rather than racial boundaries.

working together. The purpose of the institute is to “promote and propose the idea of the Social Sensibility R&D and to facilitate the creation of similar departments in other companies and institutions.”²⁴⁹ Bernard Controls is the first company or institution to ever create a Social Sensibility Research and Development Department. By establishing an institute separate from Bernard Controls, the originators can promote and explore its possibilities for Social Sensibility in varied contexts.

The project would not be possible without the perseverance of the Bernards, who are uniquely committed to the establishment of more socially responsible corporations. In fact, Etienne Bernard, the president of Bernard Controls, and his wife, are currently working on a manifesto arguing for viewing a company not only as a profit-making entity, but as a socially engaged one, contributing to society in a more complex way.²⁵⁰ Rolandi sees the Social Sensibility R & D as a symbol of this commitment. This is re-enforced by the fact that when the department was created, Bernard Controls was not doing well financially, and were given the chance to sell out, but instead they decided to go ahead with this social experiment. Furthermore, by envisioning their factory in China as a site of experimental innovation, rather than as a source of cheap labor, they are actively working towards a more just distribution of wealth and resources under the conditions of global capitalism.

The project has recently undergone some changes that align it more closely with Rolandi’s original ideals for the department. For example, the residency program has changed as a result of feedback from workers, participating artists, and other followers of the project. This feedback indicated that the people in the factory would prefer a fewer number of artists to come in for longer-term projects so that a more substantial relationship could be developed. Now, more

²⁴⁹ Alessandro Rolandi, personal communication with the author, October 16, 2017.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

artists are invited to come for short-term 1- to 2-day visits, during which they give many informal presentations and engage in conversations about their work with Rolandi, Zhao, and the workers. Rolandi and Zhao then choose some artists to participate in longer-term projects at the factory, based on their feelings about the artists' commitment and desire to engage with the people, on feedback from the workers based on their impressions of the artists, and on interest in their works. Rolandi sees his role as "that of observing and listening to what happens in order to spot new possible and different dynamics to overlap to the current ones and maintain the experimental quality of the project, while providing more and more input from local artists in the existing frame."²⁵¹

After Rolandi invited artist Zhao Tianji to become involved in the project to a greater degree, she suggested they re-focus the attention on the creative expression of the workers and employees at the factory, as in Rolandi's first project. This inspired the birth of a parallel project to the artist residency project called the "Work/Live" program. This is a long-term voluntary project allowing workers and employees to develop actions and projects supported by regular meetings with Rolandi or Zhao. So far, eight to ten workers and employees have created works through this program. Many have also been offered exhibitions in art galleries in Shanghai and Beijing. They have participated in solo or group exhibitions in the Arrow Factory Gallery in Beijing, Cache Space in 798, YAM Museum, and Ming Contemporary Art Museum in Shanghai, where four of the participants were invited to give talks and workshops as artists.²⁵² Rolandi sees this aspect as another disturbance of the status quo. He has observed that art world elites are generally willing to accept artworks by workers or refugees if it looks like workers' art, but if it

²⁵¹ Alessandro Rolandi, personal communication with the author, October 16, 2017.

²⁵² Information about the Work/Live project: Alessandro Rolandi, personal communication with the author, October 16, 2017.

looks too much like “real artwork,” it is a problem. Because of this, he does not mediate by encouraging the workers to make art that looks a certain way. Rolandi has stated:

I think one of the very few important claims the project tries to make is that through the experience of making an artwork a person can for a moment imagine him/herself somewhere else, in a different social context from the one he/she belongs and is often trapped within. To claim this right, this space...is what can subvert the order for a moment and change the self-esteem and the relationship with the ‘normal condition’ of the person...this shift in how a person is perceived because what she/he is allowed to claim is revealing many codes of power within the artworld itself. Workers and refugees should only make workers’ art and refugees’ art, so they should remain in their misery in order to remain the material of artists’ critical statements about society. I think this is a trap and makes politically and socially engaged art ‘part of the problem’ instead of part of a possible solution.²⁵³

Rolandi’s words are particularly apropos in the context of China, in which class-based social hierarchies are explicitly and regularly defined and regulated on all levels of society. This attitude also differentiates him from the peasant painting of the 20th century and the works in mode 1, both of which relied heavily on the aesthetics of “peasant” or “amateur” art for the concept of the work. In comparison to Cao Fei’s *Whose Utopia?*, Rolandi’s, Zhao Tianji’s, and the Bernard’s long- term commitment to transforming the neo-capitalist culture of labor in factories around the world attests to a greater focus on the first audience, namely, the factories and the workers therein, than an international art audience. The *nongmin* in Rolandi’s project, therefore, moves beyond a specifically Chinese symbol of either national purity or backwardness, but rather, serves as a testing ground for the creation of a more just global society under the conditions of neo-capitalism.

²⁵³ Alessandro Rolandi, personal communication with the author, October 16, 2017.

3.3.3 Li Mu 李牧, Qiuzhuang Project 《仇庄项目》, 2013-2014

In 2010, artist Li Mu met director of the Dutch Van Abbemuseum, Charles Esche, in Shanghai when he participated in the exhibition *Double Infinity*, organized jointly by the Van Abbemuseum and Art Hub Asia. At this event, he talked to Esche about his desire to reconnect with the people of his home town, a tiny, impoverished village in Jiangsu province. Having left home to attend school as a teenager, and only visiting once a year for Chinese New Year, he felt an ever-widening chasm between himself and his old neighbors, friends, and family members. In 2011, Esche invited Li to spend two weeks at the museum researching its collection. Ultimately, Li decided he wanted to recreate some of the works from the museum's collection in his home town, using local materials and labor. The works he chose to reproduce were by Andy Warhol, Sol Lewitt, Dan Flavin, Richard Long, Carl Andre, John Körmeling, and Daniel Buren. He also brought with him a copy of a compilation video of works by Marina Abramovic and Ulay. Li also established a library stocked with books about art from all over the world, and wrote a blog documenting his daily actions, publishing it on his website throughout the project's duration.²⁵⁴ In January of 2013 he returned to his hometown to initiate the project, which lasted for one year. Over time, he realized that the focal point of the project was not the works themselves, or even the new context of the works in rural China, but rather, the relationships formed and the dialogues held between himself and the local people, including his father, in the process.

In an interview at OCAT in Xi'an with Orianna Cachione and Mia Yu he said

To talk about public participation, I can't avoid talking about the big gap between myself and the other villagers. When I returned to the village, I had a sincere hope to improve my relationship with everybody. This is one of the original motivations for my project. When I first began the project, I founded a library with the intention of giving the village

²⁵⁴Li Mu's blog can be found at: <http://www.iamlimu.org/default.asp?viewType=byCate&cateID=14>.

something useful and valuable. Before starting the project I had a certain idea of “participation.” But I was constantly disappointed because many people didn’t understand the value of it. They would rather see me spend the money on repairing the country road or installing the street lamps or sponsoring young people to go to university.²⁵⁵

Although he did try to raise some money for the village by painting beautiful watercolors of the installed work within the village and giving the proceeds to the villagers, Li’s blog indicates that the project yielded less measurable, but valuable, or at least interesting results. One example is the participation of villager Lu Daode (卢道德) who paints deities and devils which he sells for around 200 RMB a piece. When initially approached about the idea of reproducing Sol LeWitt’s wall paintings, Lu blatantly refused, saying he was busy, he did not like Western art, and he was afraid of heights. But after Li explained to him what it would entail, Lu became enthusiastic about the project and agreed. Li recalls that after he and Lu painted Sol LeWitt’s *Wall Painting No. 256* together, “Lu Daode was very happy. He drank a lot during dinner and spoke a lot. It seemed he enjoyed the process of painting and the collaboration between us.”²⁵⁶ After completing the second one, *Wall Painting No. 480*, he wrote:

Lu Daode enjoyed the process and was very dedicated. He seemed to like the wall paintings produced by us very much. I could feel his happiness. In the village, he doesn’t have a good reputation and people don’t pay him respect for his painting skills. Apparently, he also looks down upon his fellow villagers. He is an arrogant man and always holds his head up.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Conversation between Oriana Cacchione, Mia Yu, Song Yongping, Jin Lie, Li Mu, and Dai Zhuoqun, “Going to the Country: Reconsidering Chinese Art Practices and Participation in the Rural Context”, *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* vol. 14, no. 2 (2015): 21-22.

²⁵⁶ Li Mu, “Sol Lewitt wall painting-2,” *Qiuzhuang Project* (blog), April 23, 2013, <http://www.iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=234>. (all Li Mu blog quotations translated by author)

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

In a later interview, Lu said that "...it's a pity that our collaboration came to an end too soon."²⁵⁸ Another example of the impact the project had on the locals took place in the local shop, run by Wang Gaoqi (王高启), where the Abramovic and Ulay videos were shown. Wang is a man who, according to Li's descriptions, is in a perpetual state of depression. In describing his conversations with Wang, and most customers' utter confusion about the videos, Li wrote "Wang Gaoqi said he liked *The Lovers – The Great Wall Walk* the most, and was always thinking about how to explain this video to others."²⁵⁹ The project seemed to also have positively influenced Li's relationship with his father, who he felt always looked down on him for becoming an artist. In a diary entry from May 27, 2013, he wrote of the visit by an American video artist and poet, Ellen Zweig, saying, "My father was very happy and he told Ellen he was proud of me. That was the first time I heard him say that. I often feel he looks down upon me as he never praises or says anything positive about me."²⁶⁰ More importantly, his diary entry from October 25th, 2013, indicates that he may have fulfilled the most important goal he had: to forge a deeper relationship with his home town. "I can feel certain changes taking place," he writes,

Earlier this year when I started the Qiuzhuang Project, what I truly thought of was cities. I wanted to spend more time in Shanghai, to attend exhibitions and discussions. I worried that spending too much time at Qiuzhuang would isolate me from the outside world. But now that I live in the city, I think about Qiuzhuang all the time and want to go back there as soon as possible. It seems I can only feel at ease when I am there.²⁶¹

These quotations frame Li's conception of the artworks as catalysts for drawing him closer to the

²⁵⁸ Li Mu, "My dream is to not live in the countryside" 《我的理想是不要在农村生活》, *Qiuzhuang Project* (blog), March 10, 2013, <http://iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=321>.

²⁵⁹ Li Mu, "Ulay/Abromovic," *Qiuzhuang Project* (blog), June 28, 2013, <http://iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=251>

²⁶⁰ Li Mu, "Letter to Charles 6" 《给查尔斯的信 6》, *Qiuzhuang Project* (blog), May 27, 2013, <http://www.iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=246>

²⁶¹ Li Mu, "diary", *Qiuzhuang Project* (blog), October 25, 2013, <http://www.iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=274>.

community, and as something to spark the interest of the community, rather than valuing the final product of the art objects themselves.

Li wanted to bring something to the village that they lacked: “culture.” Li’s conceptualization of “culture” is partially revealed in this quotation from a press release for the project by the Van Abbemuseum: “I always have faith in the power of culture. I hope that through art, the villagers can understand the outside world, other people, different lifestyles and values.”²⁶² While this indicates that he wanted the project to open the minds of the villagers, he did not consider it his duty to improve the behavior and actions of the townspeople. In his blog entry from January 31, 2013, he describes a visit from one of his old classmates: “Hong Wei, my childhood playmate, sat down. He smoked, and spit on the floor I had just mopped clean. Can I forbid people to spit here? Can I forbid people to smoke? No. The habit of spitting is like tobacco addiction, and is already embedded in their bodies.”²⁶³ This marks a distinct difference from the projects explored in the next model, which use contemporary art and foreign tourists as a catalyst to encourage local villagers to change their behavior in order to present a respectable image to the outside world. The difference in approach can, in part, be explained by the nature of Li’s project, in which he did not seek to attract tourists from outside the village, nor did he establish expectations that this project would earn money for the village and raise the standard of living.

The main criticism levelled at this project is that it is an example of cultural colonialism. In his blog, Li relates the story of a conversation he had with his brother-in-law at the dinner table: “He said I was ‘smart,’ making use of the ignorance of villagers to make art. I

²⁶² Van Abbemuseum, “Qiuzhuang Project—a dispersed museum project” (press release), May 2013 <http://arthubasia.org/arthub/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Press-Release-Li-Mu-Qiuzhuang.pdf>

²⁶³ Li Mu, “library,” *Qiuzhuang Project* (blog), January 31, 2013, <http://www.iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=206>.

demonstrated to the world the ignorance of this village through this library. I didn't explain much and just said 'you can think so.'"²⁶⁴ In another instance, Xiao Tong, a friend who had lived in L.A. argued that "...to turn something very familiar to the villagers into western contemporary art through the villagers' own hands was a highly violent act."²⁶⁵ Li himself has also questioned the value of this project for the lack of sustained interest of the local people: "When I give talks about the Qiuzhuang project to people in the art world, the project sounded significant and meaningful. But when I returned to the village, it was like a pebble sinking into a pond. The effects had already gone."²⁶⁶ In my view, the problem with the project was not cultural colonialism because he did not use the works in any attempt to instill values found in those works upon the villager participants. Rather, he wanted to use the works because they were something familiar to the artist who represented his own life as a contemporary artist, as a catalyst for dialogue and communication. His approach was very hands-off, since he saw it as his role to observe what happened when these two worlds collided, rather than to facilitate a harmonious blending.

Li's project was partially shaped by the sponsorship of the Van Abbemuseum. The director of the Van Abbemuseum museum, Charles Esche, has been at the forefront of theorizing the politics of art institutions under the conditions of global capitalism, aiming to confront the myth of Modernism that many Euro-Americans still cling to, a myth revolving around such concepts as "progress," "nationalism," and "enlightenment." He believes it is the museum's current responsibility to envision new ways that art can function in society, distinct from its market function, and to address the current state of the world, on a local and planetary level.

²⁶⁴ Li Mu, "family," *Qiuzhuang Project* (blog), February 15, 2013 <http://www.iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=209>.

²⁶⁵ Li Mu, "Xiao Tong pays a visit" 《晓通来访》, *Qiuzhuang Project* (blog), March 30, 2013, <http://www.iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=225>

²⁶⁶ Oriana Cacchione, et. al, "Going to the Country...", 22.

One of his strategies to shift the political imagination of the art museum is attempting to expand the museum's audiences beyond art audiences. He argues that the art audience "...is the most unlikely audience to be transformed by an artwork, because they already have a rather strict view of what art can do in the world based on a set of outdated modernist assumptions about form, content, autonomy and the primacy of visibility."²⁶⁷ Esche has begun to address this goal by holding more and more art exhibitions and events away from the museum's building, in what he refers to as a "dispersed museum," whose "principle content would be to instill the idea that art is a way to imagine the world otherwise and to create those imaginations in three dimensions for others to experience."²⁶⁸ He conceptualizes this strategy as a way of re-organizing the hierarchical power dynamic between Europe and American and the rest of the world. Before the *Qiuzhuang Project*, the Van Abbemuseum collaborated on a project named *Picasso in Palestine* (2011) with the International Academy of Art, Palestine in Ramallah. The project required overcoming all of the political, economic, and geographical obstacles of shipping a Picasso painting, *Buste de Femme* (1943), to Palestine for the first time. The painting was installed in a private room in the museum and flanked by armed guards, from June 24- July 22. Like the *Qiuzhuang Project*, this project was meant to bring an iconic work of art to an audience who otherwise would never have the chance to see it, but also to contemplate its changed meaning within a new cultural context.

A key to this approach to collections and audience expansion is open-ended experimentation, and an abandonment of previously held expectations of the relationship between art and audiences. Li's role as the organizing artist was to observe and accept how the

²⁶⁷ Charles Esche, "The Deviant Art Institution," pg. 14, accessed October 1, 2016, http://www.academia.edu/2583026/The_Deviant_Art_Institution.

²⁶⁸ Esche, 16.

villagers respond to and what they do with the works. For example, he had varied responses when distributing Warhol's Mao portraits. Some did not like them, reasoning that they were disrespectful because of all the gaudy colors. Some would not accept them because they were Christians and therefore would not venerate Warhol's images of Mao in their homes. Still others accepted them openly, welcoming any portrait of Mao, no matter what color.²⁶⁹ Li also distributed Sol LeWitt's *Untitled (Wall Structure)* to a number of the households in his village. Some hung their Warhol work on a wall and used it as a picture frame, or a set of shelves to hold valuable belongings. Li's father mounted his on the ceiling and hung his bird cages from its rungs, while others mounted it to a wall the way it was probably originally meant to be displayed, as art in and of itself. After three months, the village's re-creation of Richard Long's *Wood Circle* completely disappeared; only a small pile of sticks remained as evidence that it ever existed. One of the nearby residents had taken most of the wood to burn.²⁷⁰ In another instance, Wan Xueyi's wife built a herring-bone shelf in front of the installation of John Körmeling's "*HI HA*". After a while string beans began to grow, climbing up the wooden slats, partially covering the installation.²⁷¹ Regardless of how these artworks were treated, Li Mu considered these outcomes as part of the project, not an impediment. In his diary entry from July 10, 2013, he states: "When art is in conflict with people's practical interests, art needs to be compromised. Only in this way can they co-exist. Otherwise, art will have no room to survive."²⁷²

In this project the participation of Chinese *nongmin* is used as part of a larger strategy to upend the hierarchies that dominate the global contemporary art exhibition system. Also, like

²⁶⁹ Li Mu, "Andy Warhol-Mao Tse Tung," *Qiu Zhuang Project* (blog), June 29, 2013, <http://www.iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=253>

²⁷⁰ Li Mu, "Richard Long's Wooden Circle disappeared!" 《Richard Long 的树枝圆圈消失了》 *Qiu Zhuang Project* (blog), May 26, 2014 <http://iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=301>.

²⁷¹ Li Mu, "Letter to Charles Esche 6," *Qiu Zhuang Project* (blog), October 9, 2013, <http://iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=272>.

²⁷² Ibid.

many of the projects above, the Qiuzhuang project was geared for two very different audiences: the artist and the local community, and the international art world. On a local level, the project offers both successes and failures, but in the end seems to have had a very limited lasting effect on the community. Since Li moved back to Suzhou, the library has closed and many of the works installed in public places have disappeared either through lack of upkeep or because they were removed when the government installed a new paved road through the center of the village.²⁷³ The project seems to have had the most lasting effect on the artist himself, who has found a new appreciation for his village and has developed a deeper connection with his family and fellow villagers throughout the extended process of living in his home village. Li saw it as a way to bridge his current life as an internationally mobile contemporary artist and as a villager from Qiuzhuang, two very different identities. In terms of the aims of the project for an international arena, its purpose was to expand the audience of the museum's collection, and to explore the new interpretive possibilities offered by this recontextualization. In the end, it revealed what most probably already suspected: that impoverished villagers are motivated by practical concerns of survival, and will use whatever is at their disposal to creatively adapt to their circumstances.

3.4 CONCLUSION

The works in this chapter all involve the contemporary artist acting as an intermediary between *nongmin* communities and the art world. They were all envisioned, in one way or another, to respond to the established global contemporary art world. The inclusion of the Chinese *nongmin*

²⁷³ Li Mu, interview with author, April 2015, Suzhou, China.

was used as a strategy to re-consider the ingrained hierarchies and biases under which this world operates. The artists in mode 1 act as curators for works that were already created within very specific contexts. By reframing the works within a contemporary art institution for an international audience, the artists treat both the works and their creators as ready-mades, transforming them into conceptual artworks under the authorship of the organizing artist. In these works, as in the peasant paintings of the 20th century, the identity of the artist as “peasant” or “migrant worker” is essential to the overall idea of the work, and the folk or amateur aesthetics are necessary components. Also, similar to peasant paintings in the 20th century, these artists use the work of underprivileged classes to represent “China” for an international audience. However, the socio-political situation has changed entirely since the Mao period, and the “peasant” is no longer nationally regarded as a hero; rather, it is nationally accepted as a vulnerable class. These works seek to remind both national and international audiences of the heroism and creativity of this formerly valorized population. Because artists do not remunerate their amateur participants as if they were also contemporary artists, and because they rely on their class identity, I argue that they maintain the class-based status quo. Artists in the second mode also rely on the class identity of their participants as part of their overall concept. Like the works explored under mode 1 and the peasant paintings, they were also envisioned to be exhibited in art institutions for domestic and international audiences. The works in the second mode, however, were initiated when the artist came into contact with the participants, not before. This emphasizes the importance of the process of creating an artwork over the final object itself. The act of creation is seen as a way for workers and *nongmin* to open their minds to new possibilities within their monotonous working and living environments. While the immediate and most important audience for these works are the worker/*nongmin* participants, they all were eventually exhibited

for an international art-viewing audience, and therefore require interpretation according to both levels.

The works in the next, and final, chapter, are similar in that they are also examples of long-term social practice projects with *nongmin* communities. They have also been exhibited for both domestic and international audiences in art museum and gallery settings. However, from their inception, they were not envisioned to be exhibited as artworks for an art-viewing audience or as a strategy to question common practices in the international exhibition complex. Rather, they were organized for the purpose of improving the living conditions of rural people, responding to their specific local needs. These projects are less confined to the field of art creation, straddling the boundaries of social-work, sociology, art, and ethnography.

4.0 EMPOWERING THE OTHER: SOCIALLY ENGAGED PROJECTS IN RECENT YEARS

This chapter explores long-term social practice projects in rural areas with *nongmin* communities. In each case, the artist attempts to make practical and sustainable improvements to the lives of *nongmin* communities. It is organized according to the last two relational modes that I have identified in social practice art in China that engages with *nongmin* communities: mode 3 describes artists who use contemporary art as a tool for cultural enlightenment of rural populations, and mode 4 describes artists who use contemporary art as a tool for research and micro-interventions. Mode 3 includes exploration of Ou Ning's *Bishan Project* and Qu Yan's *Xucun International Arts Commune*. Mode 4 includes explorations of Jin Le's *Shijiezi Art Museum*, The Art Group Praxis' *Kunshan Under Construction*, as well as a few other smaller-scale projects initiated by museums or universities. What sets these works apart from the works discussed in Chapter 2 is their differences as to intention and audience. The stated aim of these projects is to improve the outlooks, living situations, and future possibilities of China's rural inhabitants, on a grass-roots and pragmatic level. Their primary audience, therefore, are their rural collaborators themselves, rather than the artworld. This is not to say that these projects have not been exhibited in museum settings. In fact, some of them, such as Ou Ning's *Bishan Project*, could not have been possible without the support garnered from international exhibition. However, the exhibition serves as a means for the further development of the rural project, not

vice-versa, as seen in most of the works described in the previous chapter. The artists use their elite societal position and accompanying social and professional networks for the benefit of the communities with whom they work. These projects are also less dependent on the creation of art objects than those in the previous chapter. Their interventions take all sorts of forms, from brief conversations to arts festivals, from sporting events to questionnaires. The works featured in this chapter are chronologically the most recent projects discussed in this dissertation. I argue that these modes, especially the final one I describe, will become the dominant form of socially engaged art that engages with *nongmin* communities in the coming years.

These projects are framed around the belief that the Chinese countryside is still in trouble and that its improvement is necessary for the healthy economic and social development of the Chinese mainland. Through organizing projects that they believe will ameliorate the economic and cultural poverty of the countryside, these artists, either implicitly or explicitly, take up the mantle of artists and intellectuals in the early 20th century, who implemented various programs and experiments in the Chinese countryside for the express purpose of saving the country in the face of greedy warlords, foreign imperialism, and civil war. While the early 20th century rural experiments could ultimately be classified as a “failure” because historical circumstances (Second Sino-Japanese war, civil war) brought them to a premature end, the works discussed in this chapter represent a renewed effort in a completely changed socio-political context. The sheer number of contemporary artworks about and within China’s countryside indicate that to many cultural producers, the problem of the Chinese countryside has not disappeared. In fact, many of rural China’s most pressing problems of the early twentieth century have been exacerbated by the economic reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when China was integrated into the global economy. This chapter explores the creative strategies of contemporary Chinese artists to

improve the countryside within China's current moment of globalization and ongoing urbanization.

4.1 RURAL RECONSTRUCTION 1930-1937

The historical precedent for the works in this chapter can be traced back to the enormous rural reconstruction projects that popped up throughout China in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It was around this time that many political factions, including the Kuomintang, the Communist Party, and individual entities began to see the benefit of mobilizing China's vast countryside. Leaders of the Rural Reconstruction Movement (乡村建设运动), unlike those directly affiliated with the Communist Party or the KMT, did not wish to mobilize the countryside for their own personal political gain. While the Nanjing government partially funded many of these projects, especially Liang Shuming's (梁漱溟) Zouping County (邹平县) Rural Reconstruction Institute and the accompanying schools, the purpose of the Rural Reconstruction movement was to modernize China in the face of a huge uneducated and impoverished rural population, internal civil war, and the continuous threats of foreign invasion. Rural reconstruction was also envisioned as a uniquely Chinese path towards modernization as opposed to the urban-based industrial development of many Western nations. In fact, many of the criticisms leveled against rural reconstruction projects claimed that they were too dependent on foreign influence and funding, a criticism that has also been aimed at Ou Ning's *Bishan Project*.

The two most important model counties in the Rural Reconstruction movement were James Yen's (晏阳初) Ding County 定县 in Hebei province and Liang Shuming's Rural

Reconstruction Institute in Zouping County, Shandong Province. Both models sought to establish a rural communal structure autonomous of the central government. Both men believed that the self-motivated education and development of rural people would eventually save the Chinese countryside, China, and even the world. As China's peasantry at the time was extremely vulnerable and uneducated, both felt that grass-roots education was the key to raising the living standards of rural China and mobilizing the country for defeat against foreign invaders.

In addition to the fact that the Chinese countryside was impoverished and uneducated, both Liang and Yen had other reasons that they considered the countryside as the perfect setting for societal reconstruction. James Yen argued that the farmer, due to his diligence, was the perfect choice of subject for societal reconstruction. He also felt that there were fewer distractions in the countryside, and the farmer's schedule, which left evenings and winters for open studying (at least in Northern China), was conducive to the educational program required of the movement.²⁷⁴ Because of this, he believed that the new China should be based on the "village republic."²⁷⁵ Liang Shuming was a staunch believer in reviving the Confucian value of *lixing* 理性 or "reason" (which he equated with Confucian morality), believing it to be almost absent from modern China. He believed that the last remnants of traditional *lixing* could only be found in the countryside, not the cities.²⁷⁶

Liang Shuming established his Rural Reconstruction Institute in the early 1930s in Shandong Province. It was highly organized along a tiered system, relying on "middle peasants" to implement Liang's ideas at a local level. Liang distained bureaucracy and established a school system on both the village and county level through which the government would communicate

²⁷⁴ Charles W. Hayford, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 104.

²⁷⁵ James Yen, "New Citizens for China," *Yale Review* 18.2 (December 1929): 262-276.

²⁷⁶ Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, *The Theory of Rural Reconstruction* 《乡村建设理论》 (Zouping: 1937): 184.

with the villagers. The bedrock upon which Liang's ideas rested was economic autonomy through the establishment of local cooperatives run by the desires of the villagers themselves, practical education through a village- and county-level school system, and moral education.

Upon the establishment of the Institute, Liang set up training centers for villagers in the county seat, who then returned to their village and established peasant schools for men, women, and children, focusing on moral and practical education such as hygiene and farming. The Institute also established a farm school where new farming techniques and seed strands were studied and, when successful, promoted among the local farmers through festivals and fairs. They created cooperative societies that freed villagers from needing to borrow money from rich peasants and landlords who were often exploitative. Some of the most successful were the credit cooperatives, the forestry and sericulture cooperatives, and the cotton-marketing cooperative. In some cases, the success of such cooperatives relied on the purchase of foreign livestock and seeds. For example, in 1931 the farm bought three Poland-China boars from Ohio in the U.S.A., which they bred with local sows and increased the hog raisers' income by 144,914 yuan.²⁷⁷ None of these initiatives would have been implemented, however, without the impetus and stated desire of the villagers themselves. Liang believed that the only way for the rural reconstruction movement to succeed was for villagers to want it to succeed without coercion from above and for it to respond directly to local needs.

James Yen's model village was also based on a desire for grass-roots implementation of ideas that responded to real local needs, independent from governmental bureaucracy. The Ding County experiment was sponsored by his Mass Education Movement (中华平民教育促进会)

²⁷⁷ Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-Ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1979), 263.

,²⁷⁸ that had already garnered much foreign support. Yen, who graduated from Yale University and joined the Chinese Labor Corps in France to support the allies in WWI, returned to his country to help save the rural masses. He was inspired to do so in part because of the close contact he had with many rural uneducated Chinese workers in France. He recognized four problems that plagued China which he sought to fix: poverty, ignorance, disease, and misgovernment. Like Liang, he also set up village schools and cooperatives in response to these problems. Also like Liang, he was a proponent of grass-roots education, training un-educated villagers to be teachers to other un-educated villagers. Yen invited scholars from other parts of China and abroad to come to Ding County to observe and give their opinions of how to improve rural society.²⁷⁹ However, Yen was insistent that while his experiment depended upon their continued support, there was no room for them as leaders. Furthermore, he relied on the traditional village educational system already in place rather than importing foreign educators or educational philosophies. The key to the project's success, for Yen, was to retain the youth of the villages. One way they did this was to create a number of non-professional roles that "did not require foreign training or even leaving the village," including "the village health worker, co-op leader, alumni association head, the guide student, and even the reformed village teacher."²⁸⁰ In this way, Yen hoped to set up a system that would one day be self-sufficient and self-sustainable.

The difference in Liang and Yen's approach was that Liang's was less influenced by foreign money or ideas. Having lived in America for several formative years, James Yen made

²⁷⁸ The Mass Education Movement was initiated by James Yen in the early 1920s as an effort to educate and train China's vast masses in the face of political unrest and the accompanying lack of established public educational institutions. Like the rural reconstruction movement, it was envisioned as a nationwide project and focused on practical education such as hygiene, farming, as well as vocational education, such as the training of secretaries. Ding County became an experimental county for the Mass Education Movement before the Rural Reconstruction Movement was established.

²⁷⁹ Hayford, 143.

²⁸⁰ Hayford, 142.

many influential and moneyed American friends (many of whom were missionaries), who offered financial support for both the Mass Education Movement and his Rural Reconstruction Experiment. The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, was one of the key sponsors of Yen's Ding County experiment. Guy S. Alitto explains that Ding County was ". . . conceived as a kind of philanthropic relief movement to 'save others' . . . [Zouping] on the other hand, was based on the premise that only the peasants could save themselves."²⁸¹ Furthermore, Yen's project seemed to have been more interested in the scientific and technological development of the countryside while Liang's was primarily interested in the moral, Confucian cultivation of rural people. He continuously emphasized that spiritual education was much more important than practical education. The purpose the former was to change the villager's daily habits and philosophies of life,²⁸² a goal which practical education could not achieve as effectively.

Liang and Yen both were met with considerable domestic criticism. The primary critique of Liang's approach was that it was too traditional and un-scientific. Detractors such as Wu Jingchao (吴景超), He Yueseng (贺岳僧), and Chen Xujing (陈序经) believed that instead of focusing on developing rural China, they should follow the Western path of urbanization and industrialization in order to alleviate the burden on the countryside.²⁸³ Chen Xujing argued that although Liang's model had been envisioned as uniquely Chinese, it was in fact very similar to

²⁸¹ Alitto, 240.

²⁸² Liang Shuming, *General account of the Shandong rural reconstruction institute and the Zouping experimental district* 《山东乡村建设研究院及邹平实验区概况》 (Zouping: 1936).

²⁸³ Wu Jingchao 吴景超, "Develop the Cities to relieve the villages" 《发展都市以救济农村》 *Independent Critic* 独立评论 no. 118 (1934): 5-7; He Yueseng 贺岳僧, "The Road to be Taken to Solve China's Economic Problems" 《解决中国经济问题应走的路》 *Independent Critic* 独立评论 no. 131, 11-15; Chen Xujing 陈序经, "Review of Rural Reconstruction Theories" 《乡村建设理论的检讨》 *Independent Critic* 独立评论 no. 199 (May 3, 1936):15-17.

Western models, comparing it with the “utopian failure” of the Welshman Robert Owen.²⁸⁴ Once, after visiting Zouping, Chen complained that the rural reconstruction movement had not improved the poverty or the backwardness of the countryside, and therefore was not a success.²⁸⁵

James Yen, on the other hand, was accused of creating class friction by coming into the village as an outsider and, with his family and friends, dressing up in expensive clothing and creating jealousy among the locals.²⁸⁶ Others argued that his small intervention would have no effect in a country ravaged by “poverty, ignorance, disease, and civic inertia,” the four most severe problems facing the countryside. What was needed instead was a large-scale country-wide revolution.²⁸⁷ Although Yen’s original plan was to develop Ding County to the point that it would be economically autonomous, some were also displeased with his dependence on foreign money.²⁸⁸ Others argued that Yen did not fully understand China’s societal situation. Qian Jaju (千家驹), for example, argued that Yen attributed China’s downfall to the four (aforementioned) problems of the Chinese countryside, but in reality, those are symptoms of larger societal problems, rather than their roots.²⁸⁹

Liang and Yen’s emphasis on self-initiative, self-governance, and self-reliance through self-cultivation on a village level, as well as a general impetus to “serve the people,” had something in common with Mao Zedong’s ideas, who was influenced by the movement. In the face of the Japanese invasion, Liang argued that the only possibility for China to protect itself

²⁸⁴ Chen Xujing 陈序经, “Rural Culture and Urban Culture” 《农村文化与都市文化》, *Independent Critic* 独立评论 no. 126 (Nov. 11, 1935): 18.

²⁸⁵ Chen Xujing 陈序经, “Rural Culture and Urban Culture,” 16-17.

²⁸⁶ Yen Shutang 燕树棠, “The MEM and Ding Xian” 《平教会与定县》, *Independent Critic* 独立评论 no. 74 (Oct. 29, 1933):2-7.

²⁸⁷ T.F. Tsiang, “A Note to Mr. Yen Shu T’ang’s Article” 《把燕树棠先生提论文》, *Independent Critic* 独立评论 no. 74 (Oct. 29, 1933): 9-10.

²⁸⁸ Yan Shutang 燕树棠, “The MEM and Ding Xian,” 2-7.

²⁸⁹ Qian Jiaju 千家驹, “Where is the Path to China’s Rural Reconstruction?” 《中国农村建设之路何在?》 in *Critiques of China’s Rural Reconstruction* (中国乡村建设批判) (Shanghai: New Knowledge Bookstore, 1936), 142.

was through “protracted guerrilla struggle, which could succeed only if the government had the active support of the peasant masses and if the masses had a grass-roots organization.”²⁹⁰ This tactic is very similar to the peasant-based guerrilla warfare adopted by Mao in his consolidation of communist power. Additionally, Mao was influenced by James Yen’s focus on mass literacy, which he used for his revolutionary ends. Mao’s version of rural reconstruction is most clearly evident in his establishment of rural communes in 1958, which were not dismantled until the 1980s. The true difference between the rural reconstruction advocated by Yen and Liang and Mao’s ideas was Mao’s focus on class warfare while Liang, in particular, advocated for harmony among all classes.

The Rural Reconstruction Movement in mainland China came to an abrupt end with the Japanese invasion in 1937. James Yen subsequently founded the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement in 1943 and in 1960 founded the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction in Cavite, Philippines, still in operation today. Liang and Yen’s legacies also live on in the mainland through the New Rural Reconstruction Movement, begun in the early 21st century. A key figure in this most recent iteration is social scientist Wen Tiejun who founded the James Yen Rural Reconstruction Institute in Hebei Province in 2003.²⁹¹ In 2004 he became the Dean of the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at Renmin University in Beijing. In the same year he supported the establishment of the Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Center by activist Liu Xiangbo (刘湘波), establishing a branch at Renmin University in 2005.

²⁹⁰ Alitto, 267.

²⁹¹ This institute was shut down by the government in 2006. According to Ou Ning, it was shut down because “it had built an environmentally friendly building without official approval, missed the annual inspection by the local government and advised farmers on petition matters.” See Ou Ning, “Social Change and Rediscovering Rural Reconstruction in China,” in *New Worlds From Below: Informal Life Politics and Grassroots Action in twenty-first-century Northeast China*, ed. Tessa Morris-Suzuki and Eun Jeong Soh (Canberra: Australian National University, 2017), 45.

4.2 WEN TIEJUN'S THREE COUNTRYSIDE PROBLEMS (三农问题)

The origin of the crisis of the Chinese countryside, according to Wen Tiejun, finds its roots in the Maoist path to modernization which relied on the excess agriculture produced by rural peasants to fund industrialization through what Wen called “State Capitalist Primitive Accumulation.”²⁹² After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Wen observed that throughout the first two rural reforms, and following Mao’s industrialization plan, the rural sector was made to sacrifice for the benefit of urban development. The second period of reform (starting around 1992), in particular, focused heavily on marketization and urbanization as a way to improve the countryside and was inspired by Western models of industrialization. Wen argued that this method was ineffective in that it continued to bleed resources from the countryside, which could not compete within the global market economy. In fact, he believed that the urbanization/marketization plan for saving the rural economy was not effective and would eventually lead to the “Latin-Americanization” of China, referring to cities full of impoverished slums of migrant workers. Furthermore, according to Liu Laoshi (刘老石), a leading member of China’s New Rural Reconstruction Movement, and many others, the household responsibility system (the replacement of communal-based agriculture, initiated in the 1980s) led to an atomization of rural society,²⁹³ posing a considerable impediment to its mobilization in the face of neoliberal globalization.

By the late 1990s Wen had developed his *sannong wenti* theory, or “Three countryside problems” theory, referring to *nongmin* (peasants), *nongcun* (rural society), and *nongye* (agriculture). His theory redirected the mainstream discourse around rural society from the marketization of agriculture to considerations of the well-being of the peasant and excess labor,

²⁹² Wen Tiejun, “‘Three Rural Problems:’ Reflections at the End of the Century.”

²⁹³ Liu Laoshi, personal interview with Alexander Day, 2006, Beijing. Cited in Day, 62.

which in a larger sense meant a spatial re-direction of attention and resources from urban centers back to rural China. The New Rural Reconstruction Movement, of which Wen is perhaps the most vociferous advocate and theorizer, focuses its attention on the creation of semi-autonomous peasant cooperatives. Along these lines, many social theorists began to realize that a new approach to rural reconstruction, based on rural cooperatives, could provide a workable alternative to Western industrial models, which created intense divisions between the urban and rural.

The intellectuals involved in the New Rural Reconstruction movement have had sufficient influence on the central government to permanently change its policy towards the Chinese countryside. In fact, in 2006 the Fifth Plenum of the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party “resolved to create a ‘new socialist countryside’ (社会主义新农村) to address the ‘three rural problems.’”²⁹⁴ According to Alexander Day,

In the first years of the twenty-first century, the *sannong wenti* formulation became shorthand for all rural problems, largely replacing the categories of agricultural economics (*nongye jingji*) and rural development (*nongcun fazhan*). Now, whenever state officials, intellectuals, or the media discuss rural issues, *sannong wenti* is the category they use.²⁹⁵

Since the turn of the century numerous experiments have been initiated in the countryside by peasants and intellectuals to create peasant cooperatives, many of which have eventually been subsumed under the name of the Rural Reconstruction Movement.²⁹⁶

Contemporary artists’ renewed interest in rural-based marginalized communities over the turn of the century broadly follows in line with these developments. Taking an experimental approach similar to Wen Tiejun, many artists also initiated long-term projects in the countryside.

²⁹⁴ Ou Ning, “Social Change and Rediscovering Rural Reconstruction in China,” 44.

²⁹⁵ Alexander Day, “The End of the Peasant? New Rural Reconstruction in China,” *boundary 2* (summer 2008): 52.

²⁹⁶ Day, “The End of the Peasant?,” 62.

Although “art” was the name under which these projects were formed, the ultimate goal was often similar to activists in the New Rural Reconstruction movement: improving the quality of life for China’s rural inhabitants and reducing the cultural and economic disparity between the urban and rural spheres. Some artists, such as Ou Ning in his *Bishan Project*, even consider themselves to be part of the movement.

4.3 XI JINPING’S 2014 SPEECH ON ART AND LITERATURE

In 2014, on the anniversary of Mao Zedong’s 1942 Speech at Yan’an in which he exhorted artists and writers to go to the countryside to learn from the peasants, Chinese president Xi Jinping gave a speech which recalled many of Mao’s original ideas. In the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art, which took place at a conference at the National Art Museum, President Xi Jinping outlined five points that he saw as the most important for the creation of art and literature today. The five points were “The restoration of the Chinese people requires the flourishing of Chinese culture,” “Creating excellent artwork that is not shameful to the era,” “Following the path of upholding the people as the center,” “The Chinese spirit is the soul of socialism,” and “Strengthen and improve the leadership of the party over art labor.”²⁹⁷ Throughout the speech, Xi reiterates the importance of art and literature for promoting China’s unique culture in a globalized society, especially after Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms. He warns artists against falling into the capitalist trap of embracing a work’s economic value over its social value. He reminds creative workers that art should penetrate society and the lives of the people. Out of the

²⁹⁷ Xi Jinping, “Speech at the Literature and Arts Conference” 《在文艺座谈会上的讲话》, *Meishu* 《美术》 No. 11 (2015): 4-11.

entire speech, the most time is paid to the third issue: upholding the people as the core of artistic practice (坚持以人民为中心的创作导向). He tells the story of his meeting with an author named Wang Yuanjian, who encouraged him to go to the countryside and live with the peasants in the manner of author Liu Qing (柳青), whose descriptions of the farmers in his books were only possible because he lived in a rural village for fourteen years. The farmer/peasant/农民 is the only social group in this section that he implicitly equates with “the people” (人民), indicating the maintenance of the ideological equation of the rural people with “the masses,” or society at large within the president’s worldview.

The speech indicated a tightening of the control of the party over artistic creation and a renewed effort to uphold socialism as the primary criterion for art-creation. Although by this time, long-term projects in the countryside had become a normal practice for contemporary Chinese artists, many were wary of the totalitarian, Maoist tone of his speech. It became clear that simply engaging with “the people,” is not enough, and that correct socialist engagement must be achieved, not only for the strength of the nation in general, but for the strength of the nation within a global market economy. In other words, his interest in socialist art creation, going to the countryside, and following the party’s guidelines are inflected with a distinctly nationalistic tone. At one point he explicitly dismisses artworks that rely on Western theory in the place of Chinese aesthetics, equating them with commodities.

Xi’s speech is important for the purpose of this narrative in that it demonstrates the continuation of the countryside and “peasant” as nationalistic symbol within the realm of the rhetoric of the Communist Party. While many contemporary artists enact rural-based projects to help, even “save” China’s countryside, Xi’s speech maintains a political tone that truly harkens back to Mao’s 1942 speech, in which art should “reflect” the lives of “the people,” inspiring

viewers to feel love and care for “the people,” on a very representational level. While it would appear that the geographic interest in the countryside and the care for rural inhabitants demonstrated by so many contemporary artists would adhere to the goals outlined in Xi’s speech, that is not always the case. Furthermore, lack of adherence to Xi’s directives is not always the only reason why these projects do not succeed. Other reasons for the “failure” of these projects include suspicion by local officials who question whether or not the projects align with Xi’s directives, as well as the pragmatism of the locals, who themselves may not welcome such projects. The first project that I will discuss fell victim to just such circumstances.

4.4 MODE 3: CONTEMPORARY ART AS A TOOL FOR CULTURAL ENLIGHTENMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

The third mode represents an approach more embedded in Chinese cultural tradition than those discussed in Chapter 2, and involves artists engaging in long-term rural-based projects with the hopes of renewing the vitality of the countryside and its people. Artists like these use the Rural Reconstruction Movement of the early 20th century as a model. The two examples I will explore are Ou Ning’s *Bishan Project* (2012-2016) and Qu Yan’s *Xucun Project* (2011 – present). In both cases, the artists chose a rural village where they would live and work full or part time, with the hopes of revitalizing the local culture and economy. In both cases the artists took on the historical role of the Chinese intellectual, an important figure in Chinese culture since the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. As part of the 20th century drive to modernize a vast countryside primarily inhabited by peasant farmers, Chinese intellectuals have engaged with the countryside in order to preserve ancient traditions, local folk culture, and increase education. While Japan’s

invasion of China in 1937 brought an end to the Rural Reconstruction Movement, Mao's Cultural Revolution further derailed projects of preserving and recording local folk culture, declaring all traditional customs and artifacts to be feudal and anti-revolutionary, while at the same time continuing to direct attention to the mobilization of the countryside. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the country has initiated a series of economic reforms that ultimately favored the development of urban centers, leaving the countryside both economically and culturally impoverished. Qu Yan and Ou Ning employ diverse strategies to attempt to renew local folk customs and traditions. They simultaneously seek to preserve traditional architecture, modernize dilapidated infrastructure, and revive the local culture.

4.4.1 Ou Ning 欧宁 and Zuo Jing 左靖, Bishan Project 《璧山计划》, 2011-2016

In 2011, artists Ou Ning and Zuo Jing initiated the *Bishan Project* in Bishan Village, Anhui Province, Yi County.²⁹⁸ Although Ou was born in the countryside, he first became interested in issues surrounding rural China in 2002 when filming a documentary film in Guangzhou's urban village called *San Yuan Li*, in collaboration with Cao Fei. He writes that at that time he "realized that urban villages and slums were actually rooted in the failure of the rural economy."²⁹⁹ Ou based his project in Bishan on three themes: village construction, cultural production, and societal engineering. Village construction is related to reviving traditional Qing-dynasty homes and temples, but is also about constructing a cohesive community. His notion of cultural production is bound to reviving local craft traditions and helping local craftsmen sell their wares on the internet. Societal engineering, for Ou, involves the introduction of contemporary art into

²⁹⁸ Zuo Jing has since left the project.

²⁹⁹ Ou Ning, "Social Change and Rediscovering Rural Reconstruction in China," 57.

the village, an experimental strategy to generate new ideas from the meeting of two worlds. The ultimate goal of the project was “to restore traditional rural society based on clan and neighborhood relations, and inspire young people to return to their hometowns, engage in farming, and preserve traditional crafts.”³⁰⁰

The project was initially sponsored by Moleskine, Italian book manufacturing company, who invited Ou to sketch out his ideas for the project on a Moleskine notebook for the 2010 exhibition *Detour: A Moleskine Experience* in Shanghai. He began to implement some of these ideas the following year in Bishan. The notebook continues to be shown in exhibitions about the project throughout the world.³⁰¹

Ou was inspired by both domestic and international models. In terms of international influences, Ou was particularly influenced by intentional communes he visited in New Zealand and Australia and the autonomous anarchist district of Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen.³⁰² He was also interested in the global anti-neoliberal philosophy of David Graeber.³⁰³ He felt that certain ideas such as replenishment of the countryside, collaborative living, and public decision-

³⁰⁰ “The floundering Bishan Project,” *Global Times*, September 30 2014, <http://gbtimes.com/floundering-bishan-project>.

³⁰¹ Recent exhibitions that feature the *Bishan Project* include *Detour: The Moleskine Notebook Experience*, Bund 18, Shanghai (2010), *Bishan Project*, Times Museum, Guangzhou (2011), The Auckland Triennial: *If You Were to Live Here... Eastern Promises: Contemporary Architecture and Spatial Practices in East Asia*, MAK, Vienna (2013), *Cloud of Unknowing: A City of Seven Streets*, Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2014), *Foresporgsler I jord og kunst*, Sonderholm 64, Aarhus, Denmark (2014), *Bishan Project*, Florence National Library (2015), *Back to the Land: School of the Tillers in Shanghai*, The Blank Space, Shanghai (2015), *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World*, Guggenheim, New York City (2017-2018).

³⁰² The communes he visited in New Zealand include the Riverside Community in Lower Moutere (visited in 2013), the Rainbow Valley Community in Takaka (visited in 2013), and the Earthsong ECO-Neighbourhood in Ranhui (visited in 2013). The communes he visited in Australia include the Tumble Falls Community (visited in 2015) and the Dharmananda (visited in 2015). Wall text, *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World*, Guggenheim Museum, New York City, October 6, 2017-January 7, 2018.

³⁰³ Ou Ning, *Bishan Commune: How to Start your Own Utopia* (Copenhagen: OVO Press and Antipyrine, 2015).

making could translate well to the situation of rural China.³⁰⁴ His original plan seems to have been more influenced by the international utopian models rather than the historical Chinese precedents. It included designs for clothing for commune members to wear, a banner, and a special passport. While the simple linen clothing designs are on display in photographs on the walls of the coffee shop, worn by an attractive couple and a baby, posing in various locations throughout the villages, and in Ou's published book *How to Build a Utopia*, they were never adopted on the ground level. In fact, it was the Chinese-based historical models that proved to be the most influential on the final project.

Ou was particularly drawn to the neo-Confucian practices of Liang Shuming and Western-inspired experiments of James Yen, both of which heavily influenced Wen Tiejun's New Rural Reconstruction Movement. As described above, the New Rural Reconstruction movement follows in the grass roots tradition of its predecessor, relying on NGOs, academic institutions, and volunteers to help establish rural cooperatives. Ou considers the *Bishan Project* to be part of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement. The influence of the Rural Reconstruction Movement and the New Rural Reconstruction Movement on Ou's project is evident on many levels, including an emphasis on education, an emphasis on the preservation and marketization of local agricultural and handicraft traditions, sustainable and autonomous economic development, and an attempt to attract the village youth to return to Bishan and support its development.

In terms of education, Ou's project provided some new resources to the local villagers that they previously had no access to. For example, one of Ou's major projects was the

³⁰⁴ "The Bishan Project leads to disagreement between Harvard PhD Student Zhou Yun and curator Ou Ning" 《碧山计划引哈佛博士周韵与策展人欧宁笔战》, Guancha 《观察》, July 6, 2014, http://www.guancha.cn/culture/2014_07_06_244166.shtml

renovation of a Qing dynasty temple into a satellite branch of a Nanjing Bookstore and the creation of a public meeting space that includes a gallery and coffee shop, as well as free wi-fi for the locals. Ou also regularly invited both Chinese and international scholars to give lectures about themes that touch the lives of the locals and invited contemporary artists to hold exhibitions in the small gallery space in a renovated traditional complex he named The School of Tillers.

The *Bishan Project's* emphasis on independent and sustainable development can be seen in its preservation and marketization of local agriculture and handicrafts, a project which is also supported by other independent entities who have set up projects in Bishan beside Ou and Zuo's project. Zuo and a group of students from Anhui University, where he is a professor, have published a book which documents local handicrafts. Zuo's original plan was to invite city-based designers to come to work with the local craftsmen to help them market their works to a wider audience. Local farm goods were also sold at the book store and gift shop in The School of Tillers. For the first two years of the project, Ou also held an annual festival called the Harvestival, in which international contemporary artists and filmmakers, as well as local artisans performed or displayed their work. Poetry classes were held, and lectures on rural reconstruction were delivered. The festival also united artists and craftsmen from all over the country with those working in Bishan "to create modern versions of traditional objects."³⁰⁵ The first festival (which only involved Chinese participants) went off without a hitch, but in the second year (which invited Chinese and international participants) it was officially shut down by the local government due to a conservative cultural environment in anticipation of the presidential

³⁰⁵ Ou, "Social Change and Rediscovering Rural Reconstruction in China," 47.

handover (to Xi Jinping) taking place later that year. However, many artists had already arrived, so some of the programming went ahead behind closed doors.

The *Bishan Project* also attracted other independent volunteers who joined in the experiment. For example, a young woman named Zheng Yu, who was assigned to work in a nearby village after graduation and volunteered at both Harvestivals, has dedicated herself to improving the lives of those living in Bishan. She does not believe that tourism will help restore Bishan's economy. Rather, she has established an initiative to help local farmers preserve traditional farming techniques by creating a website that sells local agricultural goods to consumers throughout the country. Through modern design and technology, she is helping them commodify their local agricultural products, such as honey and preserved daikon, in a way that is appealing to consumers throughout the country. This kind of project draws attention to the fact that a contributing factor in urban/rural economic disparity is lack of access to and knowledge about technology, specifically the Internet. In 2015, she leased a plot of land for ten years where she will cultivate organic rice. She plans on using the Internet to recruit international volunteers who will work the field in exchange for free room and board.³⁰⁶ Another independent project that has been established in Bishan since the beginning of Ou's project is Hun.Studio, a furniture store founded by a young architect and a local carpenter. They work together to design and fabricate furniture which they sell on the Internet.³⁰⁷ Also of interest is the small independent

³⁰⁶ Sun Yunfan and Leah Thompson, "Down to the Countryside," *NPR* video, 11:32, January 5, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/01/05/372491552/chinas-villages-are-dying-a-new-film-asks-if-they-can-be-saved>.

³⁰⁷ Zhao Kunfang, "Food Activism in Urban and Rural China: Michael Leung, Zhao Kunfang, and Jay Brown," in *Food and Museums*, ed. Nina Levent and Irina D. Mihalache (London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2016), 332.

WOW art space, which was established by a young artist beside one of Bishan's many rapeseed fields.³⁰⁸

These methods for developing the economy were upheld by Ou and Zuo as alternatives to industrialization and the tourism. The model of the tourist village is particularly apropos for a discussion of Bishan as it is not far from the villages of Xidi (西递) and Hongcun (宏村), both of which are UNESCO heritage sights. While both villages have more successfully preserved their traditional architecture than Bishan, Ou dislikes this model because visitors have to pay an entrance ticket and inhabitants must open their homes to tourists, often selling fake antiques to supplement income from ticket sales. Furthermore, these tourist villages have raised prices of goods and services throughout the entire region. For Ou, this seems to be more about the superficial performance of tradition than about reconstructing the village as a whole, including developing community. Some of the inhabitants of Bishan disagree with Ou, believing that the only way for an economic revival of their village is to turn it into a similar tourist destination.

Most villagers also don't understand Ou's stance against urbanization. For Ou, this is not surprising as many of them have never travelled to large urban centers. Without ever having been to a city it would be impossible for them to be against urbanization.³⁰⁹ Furthermore, mainstream culture has led them to be ashamed of living in the countryside, encouraging children to move to cities to become educated and get a job. Like his rural reconstruction predecessors, Ou has attempted to entice young villagers back to Bishan. During Spring Festival of 2014, the local government organized a meeting for local migrant workers who had returned home for the holiday to discuss what could be done to improve the lives of the locals, in hopes of improving retention of young villagers. Ou was the only one to show up. He filled out a feedback form with

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ According to Ou in "Down to the Countryside" (video).

ideas of what could be done to improve the village. He suggested that the local government clean up the river, teach villagers how to use computers and the Internet, install streetlights and street signs, and establish a platform to retain young professionals within the city.³¹⁰ Ou has also arranged lunches with local young migrant workers, trying to convince them to stay, but nobody wants to because if they could find a job in the village, the salaries would be too low, and wouldn't coincide with their level of education.³¹¹

A feud between Ou Ning and Harvard graduate student in Sociology, Zhou Yun (周韵), published on two popular social media websites *Dou Ban* and *Weibo*, and reprinted in the Chinese online news media outlet *Guancha* in 2014, is further revealing of the similarities between Ou's project and the Rural Reconstruction Movement. In 2014 Zhou had visited Bishan with 40 other students through an international summer course at Nanjing University titled "China Research." She initiated the discussion through an article titled "Whose Countryside, Whose Community?—Taste, Difference, and the Bishan Project."³¹² Her main argument is that while Ou claims that the primary goal of the project is to establish a community, there seems to be an insurmountable chasm between the desires of the elitist intellectuals, represented by Ou Ning and Zuo Jing, as well as those invited to visit Bishan, and the local community. She points out that Ou has spent so much effort on his project, but it does not provide them with street lights, which, for Zuo, is a more pressing need than some of Ou's other initiatives. While the locals would like to raise money through selling tourist tickets to visit the village (like Hongcun and Xidi) to fix the roads and install street lights, elites from the cities would prefer the village

³¹⁰ Sun Yunfan and Leah Thompson, "Down to the Countryside."

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Zhou Yun (周韵), "Whose Countryside, Whose Community?—Taste, Difference, and the Bishan Project" 《谁的乡村? 谁的同体? --品味, 区隔与璧山计划》, *Guancha* 《观察》, July 6, 2014.

http://www.guancha.cn/culture/2014_07_06_244166.shtml

without them, so as to be able to better see the stars. This is but one example, for Zhou, of how elitists want Bishan to be their own personal heavenly escape from the city. She argues that this type of interaction between locals and elites turns into a similar kind of “othering” as that between the East and the West in Colonial and Post-Colonial discourse. She recalls a conversation she had with a local man who told her that the projects of Ou Ning and other urban-based intellectual visitors had nothing to do with him or his life. She contends that the elitist disdain for gentrification is based on fear that it would result in the disappearance of the peasant, overlooking the locals’ belief that they would benefit from it, as it would raise their standard of living. Furthermore, she argues that the souvenirs and books sold at the bookstore as well as the food at the Pig’s Inn Number 3, a higher-end restaurant established on the outskirts of Bishan, are too expensive to be accessible to the locals. She also criticizes Ou’s use of English in a PowerPoint given to the University group during her visit and the fact he seemed to be bragging about Moleskin’s sponsorship of the project. Overall, she argues that the elitist language used by the organizers of the Bishan project creates more divisions than cohesions between the outside elitist intellectuals and the locals whose families have lived there for generations.

Zhou’s complaints resonate with some of the experiences I had during my two-day encounter with the project in May of 2015. My visit coincided with the opening of an exhibition called *Timekeepers* by Beijing-based Slovenian artist Matjaž Tančič whose works were large-scale 3-D photographs of inhabitants of Bishan and other nearby villages sitting in the courtyard of their traditional homes. The visitors to the opening viewed the photograph with re-usable 3-D glasses. After the exhibition opening I attended a talk about “the commons” by Goldsmiths professor of sociology and cultural studies, Scott Lash. Though I wasn’t able to interview any of the locals about their experience with the project, there did seem to be a large chasm between the

locals and the activities of Ou and the invited intellectuals. For example, because the lecture was given in English and the translator had disappeared, many Chinese people who did not speak English began to trail out. Also, the cost of the coffee at the coffee shop, the food at the Pig's Inn Number 3, and the books at the book store were all equal to or higher than prices in large cities like Beijing.

Ou Ning published a rebuttal to Zhou's criticism. He reiterates a statement he had already made about the streetlights, saying that he wished he had the resources to install them, but outside of the Harvestivals, he doesn't have enough money to do so. In response to her criticism of the expense of the restaurant, he wonders if she knows how much time and resources were put into renovating the old buildings and paying taxes, and how many locals they employ. He also argues that she was there for such a short time, she didn't see how many locals regularly visit the bookstore to look at the art books, and how many children come in to use the free internet. He argues that her own elitism blinds her to the reality of Bishan, causing her to over-exaggerate the huge difference between the locals and the organizers of the Bishan project. "Defeat isn't shameful," he says, "The intellectual isn't some huge force. The masses don't have the bitter hatred that you imagine."³¹³

Zhou responds by acknowledging her elitist origins, yet remains steadfast in her criticism that Ou's project is also elitist, and provides some advice for how the project might continue. She brings up the fact that Ou repeatedly has referenced models of foreign communes from New

³¹³ Ou Ning, "Ou Ning Responds to Zhou Yun's criticism" 《欧宁回应周韵对碧山计划的质疑》, *Guancha* 《观察》, July 6, 2014, http://www.guancha.cn/culture/2014_07_06_244166.shtml.

Zealand, the U.S., and Japan, but she thinks he should spend more time thinking about how those foreign ideas can and cannot be incorporated into a Chinese context.³¹⁴

Zhou's criticism of elitism and international funding/influence echoes that levelled against James Yen's Rural Reconstruction movement. As has been outlined above, Professor Yen Shu-t'ang condemned Yen for choosing as a model village a location that is not in his home-town or even home province arguing that, "...all the newcomers contributed was piles of foreign money, snobbish attitudes, and imported pigs as big as cows and (like foreigners in general) were fussy eaters."³¹⁵ This argument also extended to the expensive clothing worn by the Yen family which may have aroused jealousy in the villagers.³¹⁶ The similarity in criticism indicates that many of the problems faced by Yen and Liang in the 1930s remain a problem today, especially the cultural and economic divide between outsider, urban dwellers and villagers. By explicitly following in James Yen's footsteps, Ou acknowledges his intellectual elitist position, but, like the intellectuals of the early 20th century, believes that his responsibility as an intellectual is to rescue the countryside using the resources at his disposal.

Ou admits that his efforts seem futile and has described three almost insurmountable obstacles faced by those attempting to carry out rural reconstruction in the countryside. The first is maintaining a distanced relationship with local authorities in order to remain autonomous. This is often impossible on the village level as can be seen in the official closure of the second Harvestival. His second point is that accepting governmental or corporate funding would also compromise the autonomous sustainability of the projects. However, outside of these sources, it is almost impossible to find sufficient funding. While Zhou Yan and others can easily criticize

³¹⁴ Zhou Yan, "A Response to Ou Ning" 《回应欧宁》, *Guancha* 《观察》, July 6, 2014, http://www.guancha.cn/culture/2014_07_06_244166.shtml.

³¹⁵ Yan Shutang 燕树棠, "The MEM and Ding Xian."

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

him for not fixing the road or the street lights, Ou also lacks unlimited personal resources to meet these needs. Even if he did, it would undermine the goal of creating a sustainable local economy. Third, as is evident by the locals' desire to turn Bishan into a tourist village against Ou's wishes as well as the lack of desire among the youth to return to Bishan, the local villagers don't always see eye-to-eye with the organizing intellectuals. As in Liang and Yen's experimental villages, without the grass-roots impetus of the locals to improve their village along the lines laid out by the organizers, effective cooperation will not be achieved.³¹⁷

Ultimately, Ou's project failed. In 2016, Chinese authorities closed down Ou's cultural center, cut off water and electricity to his home, and set fire to the tea house, forcing him to leave Bishan. A journalist for the British news agency *The Times*, Calum MacLeod, reports that Ou's project was closed because it was viewed by authorities as not complying with president Xi Jinping's 2014 declaration that artists should go back to the countryside and form healthy relationships with the masses. He reports the opinion of one volunteer for the *Bishan Project* who said that Ou "attracted the authorities' attention. Politically and ideologically it crossed the border of what is acceptable under Mr. Xi...Ou's an idealist, and sometimes I feel he's living in his own world. The authorities feel uneasy, as it seems to be out of their control."³¹⁸

In the *Bishan Project*, Ou and Zuo used their connections in the Chinese academy (Zuo) and the international art world (Ou) to infuse new life into the village of Bishan. The rural dwellers were envisioned as the primary audience and participants within the project, with the primary goal being to create a sustainable local economy through creative marketing and cultural education. Furthermore, in its stated affinity with Rural Reconstruction and New Rural

³¹⁷These three obstacles were explained in Ou's article "Social Change and Rediscovering Rural Reconstruction in China," 10.

³¹⁸ Calum MacLeod, "FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT; One man's dream of a communal utopia in rural China has been crushed by party officials resistant to new ideas," *The Times*, May 2 2016, 32.

Reconstruction, this was envisioned as an experimental space to devise new ways to improve the plight of China's countryside, and by extension, China as a whole. In comparison to the approach and goals in the works discussed in the last chapter, the *Bishan Project* aligns more closely with the field of social science. In fact, it seems that while Ou and Zuo wanted to use their cultural capital as contemporary curators, artists, and educators, this identity actually hindered the development of the project. The steady stream of foreigners and urban-based artists and intellectuals aroused the suspicion of the local government and made the cultural and economic gulf between the organizers and the villagers even more apparent. Despite their efforts, they never fully achieved a grass-roots, self-propelling movement, which, in the end, led to the project's demise.

4.4.2 Qu Yan 渠岩, Xucun International Art Commune 《许村国际公社》, 2011-present

Artist, architect, and curator Qu Yan first discovered the village of Xucun when he was invited to give a lecture in Heshun County about photography and was given a tour of the small Shanxi village by Fan Naiwen (范乃文). He was astounded by the number of traditional buildings in disrepair and observed a lack of pride of place in the villagers, noting that many young people moved to the cities to find work, and those that stayed wanted to replace the old buildings with new modern ones. His project was initiated, at the invitation of Fan Naiwen, to revive the architecture and culture of the village. Qu used his experience and resources as an artist, architect, and curator to achieve these goals. The project now involves an international residency program in which he invites artists from all over the world to stay in the village for three-week periods every two years. Each year the program culminates in an arts festival in which the artists

show their works and the villagers have a chance to perform traditional dances and songs for the visiting artists. According to Qu, the villagers enjoy interacting with the international artists, and have even created their own art club, which meets regularly.³¹⁹ The residency program has enjoyed great success and continues to be held every two years.

The *Xucun Project* is not the first time Qu has shown interest in the problems of the countryside. In 2007 and 2008 he completed three different series entitled *Religion Space* 《信仰空间》, *Power Space* 《权利空间》, and *Life Space* 《生命空间》 in which he photographically recorded the reality of Chinese rural villages. *Religion Space* is a series of photographs of Christian churches in the Chinese countryside. They demonstrate the intermingling of Chinese folk and traditional religions with Christian imagery and reveal a wide range of spaces, from large, cathedral-like churches, to simple home-based chapels. In *Power Space* Qu photographed the offices of village officials. Some are extremely luxurious, while others are very humble. In this series he wanted to reveal the corruption of local officials who are guilty of misuse of their constituents' money for their own comfort. It also demonstrates the huge economic discrepancy from village to village. *Life Space* captured scenes of people receiving medical treatment in rural villages, exposing the sometimes-dire conditions in which rural doctors must treat their patients. From these photographic series to the *Xucun Project* three years later, we see a clear shift in approach to rural problems, from representation to societal interventions. While the photographs sought to critique the structural inequalities that keep the Chinese countryside impoverished, in the *Xucun Project*, Qu has moved beyond representation, integrating himself into the countryside and attempting to initiate changes. His primary audience also changed, from drawing the art world's attention to the plight of the countryside to

³¹⁹Qu Yan, interview with author, March 2015, Beijing, China.

instructing rural people on how to improve their own lives, a move which represents a shift in his conception of the countryside from passive object to active agent.

The meeting of the local with the international is an important element of the *Xucun Project*. In an introduction to a catalogue about the program, Qu explains the reasons for using international contemporary art as part of a rural revitalization project: “There is a Chinese saying,” he says,

‘Let the ancient serve the present, let the foreign serve the national’ . . . Borrowing and adopting cultural and artistic forms from other countries and regions, combined with a deep root in Chinese tradition can better carry on and inspire traditional cultures and resources, strengthening the overall development of Chinese society and helping further enhance its ‘cultural soft power.’³²⁰

Qu purposefully invited artists whose chosen medium was painting rather than more avant-garde forms such as installation or performance. He knew the townspeople, unfamiliar with contemporary art in general, would be more open to painting, which has been part of Chinese art history for thousands of years.³²¹ When the residency is over, each artist donates two paintings, which remain on display in the village as a further draw for possible visitors.³²² In 2013, Qu built a museum to house the artworks.

The artworks themselves, however, are not the most impactful aspect of the residency program. Rather, it is the very presence of Chinese and foreign contemporary artists within the village, something that never happened before the residency was established. According to Qu, the villagers’ behavior became more civilized once the foreigners arrived in their city, littering less and treating each other and the village with more respect. The villagers are helped in this

³²⁰Qu Yan, “Create New Culture, Bring Ancient Villages Back to Life” in *A Dialogue Between East and West* (Xucun: Xucun International Art Commune, 2011), 20.

³²¹Qu Yan, interview with author, March 2015, Beijing, China.

³²²Qu Yan, “Back to the Traditional --- Art Promotes Village Rejuvenation and “Xucun” Plan” (《归去来兮》——艺术推动村落复兴与“许村计划”), *Architectural Journal* 《建设学报》 12 (2013), 22.

endeavor with an instructional booklet, written by Qu, that provides instruction on “polite language” and “civilized behavior.”³²³ Qu has remarked that this is all part of cultural rebuilding: “I came here to help the village conduct a cultural construction,” said Qu, adding “Only in this way we can help the villagers to rediscover their self-esteem and live with dignity in their sacrosanct homeland.”³²⁴ According to Qu, the presence of outsiders and foreigners paying money to come stay in their village re-framed their perspective on the value of their rural village and inspired them to take better care of their surroundings.

Qu insists that the concept of “revival” is more central to his aim than “conservation” or “protection.” He argues that the local people must revive or re-find that which was lost during the Cultural Revolution, including both architecture and local religion. In terms of architecture, during the First International Arts Festival (2011), the first year of the residency, a committee, consisting of artists, architects, and other professionals was formed to research and create a plan for the revival of the Ming and Qing dynasty buildings and roads within the village. Their job is to recruit volunteers and planners to research the remaining traditional architecture, assess what is worth saving, and come up with a plan for stabilization and revival. Qu hopes that in the future this committee will extend their reach to other community projects such as building a kindergarten, old folks home, hospital, etc. In preparation for the residency program, Qu restored a group of traditional buildings that were once used in the set for a TV show called *Son of Dashan* (大山的儿子), which was never aired.³²⁵ He stabilized the infrastructure and modernized the interiors of these buildings while maintaining their unique architectural elements. He hoped that this would convince the village dwellers, who tend to favor new, modern-style

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Qu Yan, “Back to the Traditional...,” 23. In 1987 Wu Tianming’s *Old Well* was also filmed in the area.

architecture, that it is possible to live a modern lifestyle in these traditional buildings. While many were impressed with Qu's efforts, most do not have the funds to initiate this kind of reconstruction project on their own.³²⁶

More important for Qu, however, is the restoration of the locals' belief system. According to Qu, while Western belief and moral systems are based on organized religion, a major component of China's traditional belief system (apart from Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism) is ancestor worship and worship of local gods. Qu observed that while the local people still build ancestor shrines and shrines to the local god of land, this type of worship is becoming less and less common. He argues that this is directly related to rural people moving away from the countryside as a result of urbanization. The shrines to ancestors and local gods are built in one's ancestral home. When these homes are destroyed and the locals leave the village and do not return, the belief system also vanishes. While Westerners limit their behavior through remorse or atonement, argues Qu, Chinese limit their behavior through respecting their ancestors and family.³²⁷ Qu believes that for Xucun and other rural villages like it in China, the bond has been broken between oneself and one's ancestors, leaving a morally rudderless population.

Beyond these very local concerns, Qu has also been influenced by the theories of the last president of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel. Qu lived in Prague from 1992-1997 and was inspired by his peaceful Velvet Revolution. Beyond this, Meiqin Wang points out that Havel's theory "...advocates for rejecting the lies produced by the regime and engaging in small-scale work and politics from below to build 'parallel structures' in the fields of culture, education,

³²⁶Ding Yi, "Art Rejuvenates Ancient Chinese Village," *Sino-US.com*, August 5, 2013, <http://www.sino-us.com/10/Art-rejuvenates-ancient-Chinese-village.html>.

³²⁷ Qu Yan, "Back to the Traditional...", 22.

economy, etc. for a better society.”³²⁸ Qu’s approach was similarly aimed at building culture, education, and economy on a grassroots level.

The yearly arts festival, commune, and residency program have also resulted in more practical, utilitarian improvements for village dwellers. For example, Zhang Shenglin (张圣琳), an associate professor at National Taiwan University, started an English teaching project in the village in conjunction with the first arts festival. Zhang Jingyu, a Xucun native who studied English at Shanxi Datong University, returned to Xucun to volunteer in the program. For Professor Zhang, “the major goal of organizing an English education project is to use Zhang, a Xucun native, as an example to inspire her peers in the village to realize that there are really some jobs to do in their homeland.”³²⁹ Qu also asked Zhang to bring students to the village to work together with the villagers to reinforce the exteriors of the traditional households while making the interior more comfortable for its inhabitants. The student, artist, researcher visitors have also allowed the townspeople to increase their income. Visitors stay in the villagers’ houses for twenty yuan (about \$3.17) per night, and the cost per meal at a villagers’ household has raised to 240 yuan (about \$38.00) per table, enabling each household to make up to 1,045 yuan (about \$165) during each festival.³³⁰ The town square, often peopled with visitors, has become a popular place for locals to sell their wares. A village gift shop also sells local farm goods such as plum and apricot wine as well as dried fruit.³³¹ Additionally, the businesses begun as part of the commune, including a country bar and restaurant, have created more job opportunities for the

³²⁸ Meiqin Wang, “The Socially Engaged Practices of Artists in contemporary China,” *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 16.1 (January 2017): 32. For more on Havel’s theories, see Vaclav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” accessed March 20, 2018, http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=2_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML; Vaclav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York, Vintage Books, 1991).

³²⁹ Ding Yi, “Art Rejuvenates Ancient Chinese Village”

³³⁰ Zhu Xiaojia 朱晓佳 and Xiao Yanlin 肖妍琳, “The case of an artists’ Xucun” 《艺术家的许村案例》, *Southern Weekly* 《南方周末》, August 29 013, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_3ce7bb660102elpv.html

³³¹ Ibid.

locals, increasing the possibility of population retention. Qu has also received a little foreign support. He has been in consultation with the Australia Contemporary Art Foundation about arranging free piano, painting, and photography classes for the villagers for which the Foundation has donated a piano.³³² Qu knows that these means of income are not necessarily self-sustaining. However, he believes that by exposing the children of the village to an arts education and instilling in them a pride in their hometown, they might grow up to continue the efforts initiated by Fan Naiwen and himself.

Unlike Ou Ning's *Bishan Project*, Qu's has not yet been shut down by local authorities. Qu claims that a key to maintaining the project's existence is compromise. When Qu first encountered Xucun, Fan Naiwen, in addition to being a member of the local photographers association, was the a chairperson of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (中国人民政治协商会议全国委员会) (a political advisory body for the PRC). In 2011, he retired and was replaced by Sun Yongsheng (孙永胜). Since then, Sun and Qu have disagreed on a number of issues. For example, Sun wanted the festival to be named "The Cowherd and Weaving Maid Culture Festival" (牛郎织女文化节). Although Qu did not like this name, in the end, he complied with Sun's wishes. Furthermore, as was customary for local festivals, Sun wanted the road connecting the entrance of the village to the cafe to be lined with lanterns. Qu did not like this idea, maintaining it was too gaudy, yet he conceded by allowing the lanterns to be hung, just not directly around the café. Sun is also wary of the foreign and domestic "artists with radical thoughts," saying "We've always thought that letting foreigners come makes China

³³² Ibid.

lose face, makes the party lose face."³³³ This is in part because of an experience he once had in which he invited a local leader to come and view the visiting artists' paintings. The leader interpreted the abstract lines and shapes to be indicative of the dissatisfaction of the artist and it is against the CCP's policy to allow dissenters to gather together in groups. Zuo Jing, co-founder of the *Bishan Project* once visited Xucun and surmised that Bishan's second Harvestival wouldn't have been shut down by the authorities had they had someone like Fan Naiwen as a liaison between the artists and the local government.³³⁴

When I asked Qu how his project differs from other rural-based art projects, he said that he takes a specifically "intellectual" (知识分子) approach. By this, he meant, "A contemporary artist should assume the responsibility of inheriting the traditional culture and have insights into social problems. Xucun village serves as a window into China's serious (social and cultural) problems."³³⁵ Like Ou Ning, Qu recognizes his elite position in relation to the villagers. Both artists use their cultural capital as internationally renowned artists and curators to draw attention to the problems plaguing the Chinese countryside. What sets them apart as "intellectuals" is their deep knowledge of traditional Chinese history, culture, and philosophy, which they wish to impart upon the villagers for the purpose of changing their values, self-esteem, and pride of place. What sets them apart from the Rural Reconstruction and New Rural Reconstruction Movements is their identities as contemporary artists and curators. As Sun Yongsheng's fears about the artists gathering in Xucun, based on their chosen painting styles attests, the incorporation of foreign artists and foreign art styles to the project may be a hindrance to their ultimate goals of culturally reviving the countryside in that they draw unwanted suspicion.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Qu Yan, as quoted by Ding Yi in "Art Rejuvenates Ancient Chinese Village."

However, the fact that their presence in the village draws more tourists than ever before, thus raising the village's revenue, is perhaps one reason why the local government is willing to continue working with Qu. Although they may seem out of place, Qu and Ou's incorporation of contemporary artists and art attests to their pragmatism—they are making use of the resources to which they have access.

Ou's and Qu's projects both envision the villagers to be the primary audience for their projects. Their thinking, in some ways, aligns with that of Lu Jie in his initial conception for the *Long March Project: A Walking Visual Display* in that they wanted to redirect their artistic practice from inside looking out, to outside looking in. They both incorporated international participants. However, their role was to interact, collaborate with, and exhibit for the audience of the villagers, not the other way around, as was typical for the peasant paintings of the 1970s, the realist paintings of peasants in the 1980s, and the works with migrant workers in the 1990s. These projects are somewhat problematic for me in that they contain the underlying assumption that while the villagers have the potential to improve themselves and their surroundings, without the help of educated and internationally mobile contemporary artists, they would remain backward and uncultured. This is especially true in the case of Qu's pamphlet that instructs the villagers about proper public behavior in front of visitors. However, both projects exhibit a genuine humanist care on the part of the artists for the improvement of China's countryside. Qu's has perhaps been more successful (in that it hasn't been shut down) because of his constant negotiations with the local government and his willingness to adapt the project (including invited artists) according to the needs and interests of the locals.

Although these are projects organized by individual artists, the act of organizing annual or bi-annual contemporary art festivals in rural locations has become a common trend in recent

years. Liu Pengfei (刘鹏飞) attributes this trend in part to the influential popularity of the *Echigo-Tsumari Art Field Triennial* in Japan, an international art festival which exhibits site-specific contemporary art across 200 villages in Niigata Prefecture.³³⁶ Whether or not this is true, it is clear that officials in rural China understand the potential of contemporary international art festivals for boosting the local economy through tourism. Other notable singular or recurring arts festivals organized between artists and local governments, all initiated in the year 2016, include the *Utopia-Heterotopia: Wu Zhen International Art Invitational Exhibition* 《乌托邦·异托邦——乌镇国际当代艺术邀请展》 in Wu Zhen Village in the Jiangnan Region, the Dao Jiao New Arts Festival 《道滘新艺术节》 in Dao Jiao Village in Guangdong Province, the Long Li International New Media Art Festival 《隆里国际新媒体艺术节》 in the village of Long Lin, Jinping county in Guizhou Province, and the Yangcheng Lake Landscape Installation Art Season 《阳澄湖地景装置艺术季》, at Yancheng lake, north of Suzhou in Jiangsu Province.

These festivals, like Ou and Qu's projects, acknowledge the economic power of contemporary art for developing the countryside. Ou and Qu's projects are unique in that they are modeled on historical precedents which seek to not only change the economic situation, but also the spiritual mentality of rural inhabitants. In comparison, the artists in the fourth, and final mode presented in this chapter, believe that the only way they can make a difference as contemporary artists is through literally changing the conditions in which rural people live, not necessarily their spiritual values or education level.

³³⁶ Liu Pingfei 刘鹏飞, "Art Enters the Countryside—An Inventory of Site-Specific Work in the Chinese Countryside" 《当艺术介入乡村——中国乡村在地性创作盘点》, *Art China* 《艺术中国》, September 12, 2017, http://culture.ifeng.com/a/20170912/51963581_0.shtml.

4.5 MODEL 4: CONTEMPORARY ART AS A TOOL FOR RESEARCH AND MICRO-INTERVENTIONS

The relationship between artist and *nongmin* participants observed in the works in this section use the creation of contemporary art as the method through which to intervene. In other words, every intervention, be it small or large, is framed as a work of art. Their research-based approach is more concerned with what the artists can learn from the rural inhabitants than what rural inhabitants can learn from artists. In some ways this could be seen as an answer to Qian Jiaju's criticism of James Yen's project, noted above, who argued that the problems of the countryside, including ignorance and poverty, are symptoms of larger systemic problems that need to be addressed, not the main problems themselves. Unlike Ou and Qu's projects, which are explicitly modeled after Rural Reconstruction and its accompanying lofty claims for national salvation, these works are very minimalist, with artists using their art to solve small-scale individual problems faced by the communities with which they engage. They are also very local in that they do not involve the participation of international artists or the sponsorship of international corporations. Rather, when they do receive support, it comes from either Chinese universities or museums, institutions which have only recently begun to sponsor "social practice" art projects of this nature.³³⁷ The artists in this section take advantage of the elite position of contemporary art and artists to improve the economic conditions of the local communities. Further, they make art that directly responds to the needs of the community, often blurring the boundaries between art and social work. Unlike Bishan and Xucun, these projects tend to take place in locations that are

³³⁷ Chinese art academies have a long history of taking students to the countryside to paint "peasants" and rural landscapes, but only recently have academies begun to sponsor research-based "social practice" projects that involve other art forms than academic realist painting.

not valued for their beautiful scenery or traditional architecture. Perhaps because of this, they do not focus on reviving traditional values, architecture, or handicrafts, relying solely on the power of contemporary art to improve local conditions, often on a microcosmic level.

4.5.1 Jin Le 靳勒, Shijiezi Village Museum 《石节子美术馆计划》, 2009-present

After graduating from the sculpture department of the Xi'an Academy of Art and living for a period in Beijing, artist Jin Le returned to his home town of Shijiezi, a rural village in the mountains of Gansu Province, and slowly began introducing the local villagers to contemporary art. Shijiezi is located in an area notorious for droughts. The town itself lacks natural resources to support its tiny population of thirteen households, especially after the government instituted a reforestation policy that prevented them from farming cereal grains.³³⁸ The town primarily relies on fruit trees and peppercorn plants for what meager income they manage. Like Xucun and Bishan, one of the biggest problems for Shijiezi is that the young people leave for University and do not return because of lack of job opportunities. Considering his hometown's economic precarity, Jin Le felt it was his duty to return to do what he could to help.

Like Ou Ning and Qu Yan, Jin decided to use what he knew best, contemporary art, as a tool to revive the spirit of the village. For example, in 2007 he and four of his fellow villagers participated in Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale*, in which Ai sponsored 1,001 Chinese people from different social classes in China to fly to Kassel, Germany as his artwork for Documenta. In 2007 Jin invited Zhao Bandi (赵半狄) and his panda troupe to come to Shijiezi and perform for the

³³⁸ See "This person allows "villagers and art to form a relationship" 《让“村民跟艺术发生关系”的人》, *Xinhua Net* 新华网, April 22 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2016-04/22/c_135302038.htm.

villagers. These efforts won him the affection and respect of his fellow villagers and he was elected as village chief. Since then, he has opened the Shijiezi Museum, in which he transformed the whole village, including the villagers' homes, into an art museum. Not only does he regularly invite contemporary artists to come to make artworks to contribute to the museum, he also encourages the locals to make their own artworks and handicrafts in a workshop he built for public use. Additionally, he has invited groups of students from the sculpture department of the Xi'an Academy of Art to stay in the village to study art; their final projects remain as part of the museum's permanent collection.

In 2015 Jin Le teamed up with Qin Ga (琴嘎), owner of Zao Space in Beijing, to create the project *Fly Together-The Shijiezi Village Art Project* (一起飞——石节子村艺术实践计划). In this year-long project contemporary artists were invited to come to the village to make collaborative works with the villagers. Upon arrival, they drew lots to randomly pair with a villager. The official description of the project explains:

Due to differences in life experiences and in ways of thinking, the pairs went through a process of collision and conflict, communication and coordination, through which they arrived at a form of collaboration that both found feasible. By connecting with each other in a difficult situation characterized by poverty, these pairs attempted to find a way to change local issues. "Fly Together" can be seen as an action that attempts to bring contemporary art into the daily life of Shijiezi Village, exploring the possibilities that art can create in specific circumstances. By offering multiple ways to change reality, these collaborations created replicable models for life and politics that will influence the future.³³⁹

Some of the projects were fanciful, while others sought to directly meet the needs of the villagers. An example of the former is a collaboration in which a villager drew a golden horse, and the artist transferred the drawing into a carving on the side of the cliff. The golden horse is

³³⁹ Zao Space, Description of *Fly Together* project on Facebook, April 24 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/zaospace/videos/1774192016148749/>

significant to villagers as it relates to a story that has been told for generations in the village, according to which there was once a golden horse that ran through Kuoming Lock all the way to Shijiezi, after which time the village began to develop at an unprecedented rate. Because of this, the golden horse has remained a lucky symbol for the village. Of the more practical projects, artist Xia Xing (夏星) teamed up with the villager Ye Yufang (叶玉芳). They wanted to address the fact that the water in the village tastes salty and bitter. In response, Xia Xing bought a filtered tea pot and replaced the filter with perilla leaves grown by Ye to improve the water's taste. Artist Ge Lei (葛磊) worked together with Luo Fan'er (雒反儿) to make and install five solar-power streetlights. Artist Wen Gaozhong (吴高钟) saw the deformed hand of Ye Diaodiao (叶调调), brought on by sickness, and bought tickets for her to travel to Beijing to be treated by a doctor. The final artwork, called *The Weight of Art* was a simple recording of the weight of the tickets and the medicine. Artist Zhang Zhaohong (张兆宏) teamed up with villager Jin Hailu (靳海禄) to design a modern-style bed and breakfast for Jin to run in the village. Zhang invited architect Feng Xiao to come to the village and undertake an extensive survey of the land, designing a plan for the B & B. While the digging has begun, the project is expected to take ten years to finish.

The project is not sponsored by the government or any sort of NGO or corporation, so Jin continues to run the museum with little to no resources. He admits that after ten years, the villagers are still not seeing any monetary benefit from the museum, and there is still no infrastructure such as hotels or restaurants that would bring in income. He is currently brainstorming ways to improve this situation. One idea is to create a menu for visitors to the museum that highlights the specialty foods of each household, so the purchasing of food from the villagers would be standardized. He also wants to create a basic standard of cleanliness and comfort for villagers' guest rooms. This would draw visitors to not only come for the afternoon

to view the art, but to also stay the night and purchase food.³⁴⁰ Additionally, he is working with a company in Shanxi province to add bar codes to the back of every work of art in the museum that visitors can swipe with their phones for more detailed information about the works. Each swipe will cost one yuan, which will be added revenue for the villagers.³⁴¹

While the monetary benefits are still lacking, Jin argues that the attention that the museum has attracted brings the villagers great pride. Jin has said

In the last ten years, there have been about 400-500 people who have intermittently come, if you add the media, and tourists, there are at least five or six thousand people. At this time even though Shijiezi only has 13 households, it will not be forgotten, it is becoming more and more exciting.³⁴²

In fact, his initial reason for wanting to move back to his hometown was to bring some of the excitement (热闹) of Beijing to the villagers of Shijiezi. The media attention has also drawn the attention of the local government, who have, since the establishment of the museum, paved their dirt roads in 2010, helped them build a reservoir for the installation of running water in 2014, and added thirteen streetlights the same year.³⁴³

While this project has a lot in common with Xucun and Bishan, such as the desire to heighten the self-esteem and pride of place of the villagers, there are also key differences. First of all, unlike Ou Ning and Qu Yan, Jin is from Shijiezi, so the power dynamic between the artist and the villagers, many of whom are his family members, is less hierarchically oriented towards Jin. Jin is also the village chief, which may give him more clout in dealing with the local government than Ou and Qu. Furthermore, Jin's primary method is to use contemporary art to

³⁴⁰“Qin'an's Shijiezi: big art in small village” 《秦安石节子：小村庄里的大艺术》，*Tian Tian Shui Wang* 《天·天水网》，July 3, 2017,

http://toutiao.chinaso.com/bj/detail/20170703/1000200032986441499054779970907454_1.html.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Zhang Yu, “Influence by Ai Weiwei, a remote village evolves into a lab for performance artists,” *Global Times*, March 10, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/973095.shtml>.

draw resources to the community and improve the lives of the villagers, not to improve the behavior of the villagers, preserve traditional architecture, or revive folk customs. This is partly explained by the fact that the village is not beautiful nor does it contain valuable traditional architecture like Xucun and Bishan. Third, there seems to be more of a focus on creative collaboration between artists and villagers in the Shijiezi village which is simultaneously focused on practical problem-solving and the liberating possibilities of creative expression. In an interview with a local online newspaper, villager Sun Yinzong (孙应忠) proclaimed "Before we thought the other people were artists and we were old peasants. We wouldn't dare to imagine collaborating with artists. But it's not the same now. After we finished participating in *Fly Together*, I realized that the artists were the same as us. There are even lots of artworks that we can do ourselves."³⁴⁴

The model of the Shijiezi museum project takes the needs of individual villagers as its primary impetus. The villagers are imagined as both artists and the primary audience while the visitors who come to see the museum are considered a secondary audience. Art creation is used both as a means to address the specific needs of the villagers and as a way to generate money for the villagers. As in the Xucun International Art Commune, Jin Le's position as village chief may have an impact on the positive support they have received from the local government, indicating that the success of these projects is very much dependent on the relationship between artist organizers, villagers, and local government.

³⁴⁴ "Qin'an's Shijiezi: big art in small village"

4.5.2 Art Praxis Group 实验工作坊, *Kunshan—Under Construction* 《昆山再造》, 2010-2012

From 2012, the Art Praxis Group made up of three Chengdu-based artists, Chen Zhou (陈胄), Chen Jianjun (陈建军), and Cao Minghao (曹明浩), initiated a long-term research-based project called *Kunshan—Under Construction* in Kunshan New Village, Shuangliu County, Chengdu. New Kunshan Village had been “under construction” for a number of years before the project began since being designated as a “New Countryside Pilot Region” as part of the “Building a New Socialist Countryside” initiative started with the Fifth plenary session of the 16th Central Committee in 2006 (the initiative inspired by Wen Tiejun’s Three Countryside Problem theory). The goal of this initiative was to re-direct attention to the development of China’s rural areas and agricultural production. By 2006, the Party became aware that the urbanization model it had been relying on for the previous two decades was no longer sustainable, stating:

China's economic and social development have entered a new historical period when the government is more economically competent to render support to the development of agriculture and rural areas, and in a better position to coordinate the economic and social development between urban and rural areas than ever before.³⁴⁵

Part of the impetus behind this initiative was to raise the income of rural dwellers in order to increase their purchasing power, heightening the domestic demand for products made in China. In Kunshan, this meant a re-organization of the living, working, and farming areas that had been integral to the town for generations. The government combined small plots of farmland that were

³⁴⁵ Chen Xiwen, “Full Text: Press Conference on building new socialist countryside,” *Gov.cn*, February 23, 2006 http://www.gov.cn/english/2006-02/23/content_208437.htm

previously owned by individuals and relocated the farmers into collective housing in modern-style high-rise apartments. This has significantly changed the inhabitants' lifestyles and relationship with the land and led to the destruction of hundreds of traditional houses.

The three artists that make up the nucleus of the Chengdu-based Art Praxis all grew up in the countryside or in small villages in the 1980s and are keenly aware of the problems rural China has faced over the last three decades.³⁴⁶ They decided to initiate this project as a way to research the current state of the countryside through close observation and communication with the villagers. Most of the works made for this project were not grand gestures that resulted in a clear and objective improvement to the village or the lives of the villagers. Rather, they are micro-interventions that blur the boundary between research and art. In fact, many of them take on a documentary approach, seeking to preserve on film the lifestyles and architecture that will soon disappear with the continued development of Kunshan. Such an approach recalls the documentary works of the early 1990s in which artists sought to record their surroundings in urban centers such as Beijing and Shanghai in the face of rapid urbanization. These projects differ, however, in their attention to the reactions to these changes by the locals, incorporating symbolic and practical actions that encourage a reclamation of land, history, and memory.

Chen Jianjun's performance *2.92 Square Kilometers* (2012) 《2.92 平方公里》 clearly exemplifies the type of approach advocated by Art Praxis. In it, he walked southward from New Kunshan Village for about six kilometers, holding a sign reading "Boundary of New Kunshan Village." As he walked, many villagers assumed he was a representative from the local government and engaged in conversation with him. The performance was captured in a 23 minute-long-video, which highlights these interactions, recording villagers' responses to Chen's

³⁴⁶ Organhaus Gallery, "Kunshan- Under Construction," exhibition announcement, accessed September 15, 2017, <https://www.douban.com/note/205713663/>.

questions about their feeling towards the changes in their living and working environment. This performance stands in stark contrast to many rural-based initiatives by local governments, which do not include extensive research about the wants and needs of the local people whose lives will be completely altered as a result.

Chen Zhou's work *Everlasting Pavilion* 《长在亭子》 responded to a governmental directive that prohibited the burial of bodies in the countryside to repurpose more land for agricultural development. The burial of intact bodies is an important aspect of Chinese traditional death culture, and many rural inhabitants are unhappy with the idea of cremating their loved ones. Furthermore, in the case of Kunshan, where farmers are relocated from homes that had been occupied by their families for generations, they must also relocate the graves of their deceased family members. Chen Zhou designed a portable grave atop a wheel-barrow-like structure that can easily transport the remains of loved ones, suitable for the temporary graves that occupy Kunshan. The project includes a documentary film in which locals are interviewed about the prospect of moving ancestral graves as the artist advertises his invention to the locals.

Cao Minghao made a series of documentaries about a family of migrant workers who moved to Kunshan to farm mushrooms called *An Individual's Geographic Annals* 《一个个体的地理志》. The first is a three-channel video showing the workers in the process of caring for the planted mushrooms in a greenhouse. The second is a two-channel video, one of which shows the family being interviewed in the back of a van used to transport the mushrooms, the second shows the landscape passing by as seen from the window of the van. The family boisterously tells their story of all of the jobs they have performed as migrant laborers throughout the 1990s, including working in a leather factory, raising pigs, building a dam, and hunting wild geese. They recall their salaries for each job, the reasons they left, and illnesses they experienced. It is a

touching work in that it gives an intimate view of the bravery and ingenuity of the family, as well as the physical and economic difficulties faced by China's migrant worker population.

The group organized a celebration called "Kunshan Labor Day," inviting other artists to participate in the activities. Artist Liu Weiwei (刘伟伟), for example, installed suggestion boxes throughout the town to initiate conversations with the locals, artist Liang Jiancheng (梁建成) organized an athletic competition, including a hoeing competition and an opening ceremony where a drum and sword dance was performed. Cell Art Group (细胞小组) organized a bizarre "to encourage urban-rural exchange," which included urban dwellers exchanging their second-hand items for fresh produce grown by the villagers.³⁴⁷ Photographic documentation of the event shows urbanites excitedly choosing mushrooms from a large box in the town square.

In the cases of both Shijiezi and Kunshan, the artists' primary goal seems to be to discover the needs of the communities through research and make small-scale works in response, that blur the boundaries between the fields of social work, anthropology, and art. In the case of *Kunshan Under Construction*, the artists have positioned themselves as a supplement to governmental initiatives to improve the problem of the countryside. Through taking an entirely different approach, they draw attention to the human element that is overlooked in mass governmental policy, addressing the individual needs of a population whose lives have been upturned by powers beyond their control.

³⁴⁷ Art Praxis Group, "Kunshan Under Construction," accessed October 18, 2017, part of Zheng Bo's Futurelearn open-access course, *Discovering Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China*, <http://seachina.net/kunshan>.

4.5.3 Institutionally-Sponsored Projects

Many art institutions throughout the country have added departments of experimental art that lead groups of students to research and make art for/about vulnerable communities, a practice which also fits under the fourth category. Some examples of this are the Nanting Research Project 《南亭研究项目》 organized by a professor at the Guangzhou Academy of Art, the Xiaogang of Xiaogang-Research of Xiaogang Village 《小刚的小刚 –安徽小刚村研究创作》, organized by professors from the School of Experimental Art at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, the Yang Deng Art Collaboration Society 《羊磴艺术合作社》, initiated by the vice-president of the Sichuan Academy of Art, Jiao Xing Tao 焦兴涛 in 2012, and Guizhou Yubulu village Creation 《贵州雨补鲁村创作》 organized by the sculpture department at the Central Academy of Art in 2016.

The *Nanting Research Project* was initiated by artist Chen Xiaoyang (陈晓阳) with her students from the Guangzhou Academy of Arts. Each semester Chen takes students from her socially engaged art class to the small village of Nanting on the ancient fishing island of Xiaoguwei, which has recently been developed into a college town after a number of Universities were erected in the area. Each semester the students must conduct research to discover what problems the villagers are facing and come up with an art project that attempts to solve the problem. While the students are expected to come up with concrete solutions to the problems faced by the villagers, in a recent online interview, Chen states “This course isn’t

designed to offer charity help, nor does it aim at concrete effects. Its primary goal is to change the students' point of view, and enable them to see something different."³⁴⁸

For the *Xiaogang of Xiaogang-Research of Xiaogang Village project*, students and teachers interviewed villagers along the Yingbing Avenue, Xiaogang Village, Anhui Province, about their aesthetic preferences for such things as home décor and clothing, taking photographs of their living and working environments. In 1985 this village volunteered to be an “experimental lab” for an early form of rural reform. The research project was meant to record the ways this reform has influenced the aesthetic values of the village, which the researchers suspected would betray “certain characteristics of the times and buried feelings of the village.”³⁴⁹ In the inaugural exhibition of the Minsheng Art Museum in Beijing in 2015, titled *Civil Power* 《民间的力量》, this work was exhibited alongside another project titled *National Road Project- Fanpai Village: the Other Side of the Moon* 《国道计划：反排一月的另一面》. This was a contribution to *The National Road Project*, initiated in 2012 to conduct research about rural China. For this exhibition, Minsheng Art Museum sponsored a group of eight people from Beijing, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou to conduct extensive research about Fanpai Village and display their findings through photographs and other documentation as part of the exhibition.

The Yang Deng Art Collaboration Society is in the village of Yang Deng in Guizhou Province. Under the slogan "It's not collecting folk songs, it's not experiencing life, it's not cultural welfare, it's not delivering culture to the countryside...,"³⁵⁰ teachers and students from

³⁴⁸Chen Xiaoyang, “Artist Interview: Chen Xiaoyang,” accessed October 16, 2017, part of Zheng Bo’s Futurelearn open-access course, *Discovering Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China*, video, 4:38, <http://seachina.net>.

³⁴⁹ “Xiaogang of Xiaogang- Research on Xiaogang Village” 《小岗的小岗—安徽小岗村研究创作》 in *The Civil Power* 《民间的力量》, exhibition catalog (Beijing: Minsheng Art Museum, 2015), 125.

³⁵⁰ Liu Pingfei 刘鹏飞, “Art Enters the Countryside...”

the Sichuan Academy of Art work together with village carpenters to collaborate on works of art. Students and teachers pair up with the carpenters and they each choose a piece of wood found somewhere in a building or outside in nature. They then work together to make a new object that often turns out to be utilitarian and humorous.

Guizhou Yubulu Village Creation is a project begun by the fifth workshop of the Central Academy of Art sculpture department. Initiated in Yubulu Village in Guizhou province, teachers and students envisioned this as an artistic intervention, meant to foster cooperation and exchange with the locals. In the 2016 version, students worked with locals to re-envision new uses for old objects laying around the villagers' houses, such as clothing and pots and pans, to make sculptural textiles or what they call "bonsais."

While the artistic results of each of these projects are varied, it is significant that more and more institutions in China, including academies and art museums are using their own resources to finance research-based art projects like these. As we have seen from the continued preponderance of academic realism in the work of many contemporary Chinese artists, academic institutions have great power in shaping the aesthetic and conceptual interests of the country's young creative producers. Because Universities provide the support and the projects are low-cost, it is probable that this fourth mode of engagement with *nongmin* communities will become the dominant form in the upcoming years.

4.6 CONCLUSION

The works in this chapter demonstrate that in the last ten years, contemporary artworks involving the participation of *nongmin* communities, in terms of target audience and funding sources, have taken an inward turn. In each instance, the primary audience is envisioned as the *nongmin* participants and they are funded either by the artists themselves, or, in recent projects, by Chinese institutions. This is distinct from the works discussed in the first chapter, in which the primary audience was envisioned as the domestic or international art world. The changing identity of contemporary Chinese artists as a result of their acceptance into the international artworld and the loosening of restrictions over creative output by the central government changed the conditions and resources available to artists interacting with *nongmin* communities. The outward gaze to the international artworld is reflective of the larger context of China's outward gaze toward global market integration after its accession into the WTO. The works in this chapter similarly reflect larger trends in governmental policy, which, since 2006, have begun focusing heavily on rural development and rural-urban integration.

Considering this trajectory, it is possible that one impetus for the more recent projects with *nongmin* in the countryside is that they provide alternative, distinctly indigenous avenues for the creation and exhibition of contemporary art outside of the confines of the international contemporary art world. However, the *Xucun Project* and *Bishan Project* attest, when contemporary art is brought to the countryside, an entirely new set of challenges is introduced by the local government. Instead of negotiating with the expectations of the international art world, artists must negotiate with those of local officials who often know nothing about contemporary art. Projects initiated by academic institutions, most of which are overseen by the central government in China, may circumvent issues faced by independent artists in that they operate

under a semi-official capacity. In these works, the *nongmin* and the countryside provide a platform for the development of a distinctly local set of creative and exhibition practices, in negotiation with, and as supplement to, governmental policies designed to solve the ongoing problem of the Chinese peasant.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This dissertation examines the shifting relationship between contemporary artists and *nongmin* from the 1990s to the present as seen in contemporary artworks involving the active participation of *nongmin*. While imagistic depiction of *nongmin* in painting, drawing, documentary photography are still being created in China today, I have chosen to focus on direct forms of engagement because they are the most conducive to analysis of the relational dynamics between *nongmin* and artists during the process of creation. Furthermore, works involving active participation and collaboration with *nongmin* participants have become a dominant approach (in comparison to traditional mediums of painting and sculpture) in contemporary art practice in China since the 1990s. In analyzing these works, I have paid particular attention to the type, level, and duration of engagement in order to assess the artists' view of their own relationship with, and obligation to, the most vulnerable members of society. This is of importance within the contemporary Chinese context because of the ideologically-laden history of the relationship between the artist/intellectual and the "peasant" throughout of the 20th century. While the choice of painting peasants, workers, and soldiers in a Socialist Realist style was dictated by governmental policy throughout the Mao period, this dissertation describes projects undertaken under conditions of relative artistic freedom, in which artists engaged with these communities on their own volition. Whereas propaganda paintings of happy, healthy, and productive peasants before and during the Cultural Revolution were projections of an idealized socialist society, the

works described in this dissertation respond to China's current postsocialist condition. Such responses demonstrate an acknowledgement of the problems brought on by China's embrace of global capitalism, of which urban/rural economic disparities is one of the most severe. The artists are also responding to new policies, organizational structures, and ways of being to help improve the situation. In 1989 Arif Dirlik predicted an optimistic future for postsocialist China:

Freed of the commitment to ...an inexorable future, socialism may be conceived in a new way: as a [re]source for imagining future possibilities that derive their inspiration not from a congealed utopia, which postpones to the future problems that await resolution today, but from the impulses to liberation that represent present responses to problems of oppression and inequality.³⁵¹

While it is unclear if recent artistic projects aimed at improving the conditions of impoverished communities will effectively achieve these goals, they do demonstrate imaginative negotiations between the complex networks of capital and power that define China's current situation.

This dissertation touches upon several key themes, some of which are deeply local and historical and others of which have to do with the globalization of contemporary art practices. The most important theme is contemporary Chinese artists' continued dedication to the historically grounded, socialist goal of social equality under the conditions of postsocialism. This is the first study to draw attention to the fact that the Chinese "peasant," as a nexus around which concerns of social equality are explored, remains an important focus for Chinese artists even after the immense societal transformations brought about by economic reforms since the end of the Cultural Revolution. It explores the new languages and approaches that artists have chosen in efforts to help communities in need, arguing that the dominant approach has shifted from imagistic and representational to process-based and participatory. This study demonstrates that the changing approaches to the *nongmin* subject are in some ways responses to the changing

³⁵¹ Arif Dirlik, "Postsocialism? Reflections...", 247.

status of the contemporary Chinese artist within the nexus of the international art world and the State, both of which have been inextricably linked since the turn of the 21st century.

During the early and middle 1990s, Chinese contemporary artists lacked state or market support for their work, forcing them to create and exhibit in underground and unofficial venues using inexpensive, easily obtainable materials, including their own bodies in performance artworks. During this period artists made work about themselves as marginalized subjects, sometimes even dressing and acting as migrant workers (arguably the most marginalized societal group at the time) in an act of identification. The life situations of many of the artists discussed in this dissertation changed significantly at the end of the 1990s and early 21st century. Because of increased acceptance into international art exhibitions such as *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* in New York in 1998 or the Venice Biennial the following year, and their concomitant successes in the international art market, many of the protagonists of this dissertation became internationally mobile and monetarily stable (if not wealthy) in the late 1990s and early 21st century. This in turn increased the opportunities and resources available to artists wanting to make work that would help economically depressed communities.

This transitional period coincides temporally with the trend of artists inviting migrant workers to participate in urban-based performances, the topic of the first chapter. Such projects sought to make visible to a domestic mainstream (urban) culture those communities that were most victimized by the social and economic reforms of the 1990s. The 2000 Shanghai Biennial was an important milestone in the history of the acceptance of contemporary art by the central government because it was the first time since 1989 that a contemporary art exhibition was held in an “official” (government-run) museum. It was also the first time that international curators and artists were invited to participate in a Chinese-based biennial. From this point forward, the

central government has provisionally accepted the development of contemporary art in mainland China, embracing it as a form of soft-power in a globalizing world. This was further evidenced by the fact that 2003 was the first year that China was given its own national pavilion at the Venice Biennial, an event which is ultimately overseen by national governments. This sea-change demonstrates the government's acknowledgement of the power of contemporary art to generate economic and cultural capital for China within a global context. It also gave artists more freedom to engage in critiques of the very same power structures that facilitated their rise to fame.

Chapter 2 focuses on works which use the platform of the international contemporary art world as a venue to help *nongmin* communities. Their foregrounding of communities that had previously been ignored by the international contemporary art world could also be seen as institutional critique, an act that would be impossible before the artists themselves had been accepted into this world. As a population that saw immense benefits from the process of globalization, contemporary artists in the first decade of the 21st century attempted to use their rising status and capital to draw international attention to the creativity and ingenuity of *nongmin* communities. Generally, these works sought to improve their situation on a highly symbolic level, giving them a voice and the power of self-representation within the international art world. For some of the artists, the very act of creating art was seen to have potential for individual spiritual liberation, providing *nongmin* with the tools to imagine the world differently. However, works involving *nongmin* during this period did not involve efforts to establish a sustainable model to improve the economic situation of the *nongmin* participants. Contemporary artists stayed well within the field of contemporary art creation with their primary audience being the international art world.

In the last ten years or so, the approach to *nongmin* participants by contemporary artists has undergone yet another change. This change, the theme of Chapter 3, has involved an expansion into various other fields such as social work, social science, and even agricultural development under the name of contemporary art. These works demonstrate a shift in primary audience from the international art world to the *nongmin* participants themselves, with a focus on long-term research-based projects meant to identify and address the practical needs of these communities. In this way, these works could be seen as a supplement or alternative to governmental initiatives also targeted at poverty relief and closing the economic and cultural gap between urban and rural centers. While the current administration has never been as direct as Mao Zedong about artists' responsibilities towards the "peasant" population, Xi Jinping recently re-politicized the issue by once again calling for artists to return to the countryside to make art that serves "the people" (*nongmin*) in his 2014 speech on art and literature. However, he did not clearly outline the types of art and interaction he had in mind, and more recent rural-based contemporary art projects are often at the mercy of local government officials, who support or refute them according to local social, economic, and political needs. In many cases, the success and resilience of such projects are dependent on the cooperation between the artist, the community, and local government officials. In that most of these projects were only possible because of the income and social networks of relatively established organizing artists, these works also involve a negotiation between the market economy and socialist collectivist strategies for poverty relief. This also contrasts with many of the aims of contemporary artists in the 1990s who often oriented their practices against the cultural materialism brought about by the development of the market economy. The increase in support of these types of projects in both rural and urban areas by Chinese academic and art institutions over recent years has created new

possibilities for distinctly local forms of art creation and exhibition, outside of the contemporary international art world.

An important theme in contemporary and modern and contemporary Chinese art since the early 20th century has been that of resistance or opposition. Works involving the participation of the *nongmin* are particularly difficult to discuss within the context of resistance, especially in relation to the central government. This is a result of the fact that the CCP continues to function under the label of “socialism,” promoting cultural labor that improves the lives of those less fortunate, but also embraces a globally integrated, market-oriented economic system, which has exacerbated the problem of social inequality within urban centers and between rural and urban areas. As I demonstrated in the first chapter artists used subjects common in socialist art, but for the purpose of pointing out societal ills brought on by urbanization and modernization, both of which were central to the CCP’s agenda throughout the 1990s. Despite their critical nature, none of the works discussed were censored by government officials. In fact, some were even supported by the central government. Wang Jin’s work *100%* and Song Dong’s *Together with Migrant Workers* were both included in an exhibition sponsored by UNESCO and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which is under direct state control. In the first decade of the 21st century, as seen in the works discussed in Chapter 2, the concept of resistance within works involving *nongmin* participants can be primarily seen not in relation to the central government, but rather, in relation to the international exhibition system. In each case, a contemporary artist who had already become integrated into the international art world inserted the creations of *nongmin* participants into a contemporary art setting. I interpreted this as an act of institutional critique in that it attempts to redraw the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within an elitist and hierarchical art world. However, because this form of institutional critique had already been

institutionalized in the Western contemporary art world, the possibility that these works would pose any real resistance was questionable. In Chapter 3, instead of resistance against the central government, a key element of the works discussed is negotiation. As outlined in the beginning of the chapter, by the second decade of the 21st century, the central government had fully committed itself to rural development and reconstruction, a goal shared by many of the artists discussed. In that these works tend to mimic some of the approaches taken by leaders of the new rural reconstruction movement, such as Wen Tiejun, who enjoy the support of governmentally-backed institutions, they can be said to be working with the government towards this goal. However, as in the example of *Kunshan-Under Construction*, they also provide alternatives or supplements to the top-down approach that the central government continues to take in matters of rural policy. Although these works were not made specifically to be shown in an art museum, an act of negotiation with the contemporary art world is also evident. Many artists (such as Ou Ning) often use their elite status to do high-paying projects in the international art world in order support their rural-based projects. In some cases (such as Qu Yan) their status and connections attract international participants and visitors, improving the economic situation of the villages involved, which itself is used as a negotiating tool with local officials who are also invested in rural economic development. In recent years, therefore, artworks involving *nongmin* participants have required a constant balancing act between the desires of the artists, the needs of the participants, and the support and limitations presented by the central and local government as well as the international art world.

The subject of the *nongmin* is just one of a myriad of topics addressed by Chinese contemporary artists since the 1980s. The popularity of these types of works have waxed and waned according to larger market, exhibition, and theoretical trends popular on a domestic and

international level. While the works discussed in Chapter 1 could be characterized as a visible trend at the time, they represent a minority within the Chinese contemporary art world of the late 1990s. Most artists at the time who identified as “contemporary artists” shied away from works taking marginalized people as their subject, as they were more interested in formal and conceptual experimentation with new media in ways that explicitly sought to question and distance themselves from the socialist function of art in society. The works discussed in Chapter 2, in which artists facilitated the creation and exhibition of works by *nongmin* were part of a larger trend within the global art world, but, because of their orientation towards the international art exhibition system, could not be considered a widespread trend within the domestic setting. Some of these artists, such as Cai Guo-Qiang and Alessandro Rolandi continue to engage *nongmin* in this way, but others, such as Song Dong, Wu Wenguang, and Cao Fei have moved on to focus on different subject matter. The works discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation are part of the larger trend, popular in China since the 1990s, of “participatory art.” In the few books and articles that take participatory art in China as their subjects, the authors focus on works that engage with the Chinese public in a more general sense, often involving site-specific projects in public spaces where passers-by or an intentional audience are invited to engage in some way with a situation created by the artist. These works are often discussed according to the extent to which they create or foster a space for civil society under a totalitarian state regime.³⁵² Their historical precedents are site-specific performances and exhibitions in the 1980s in which Chinese artists attempted to forge a new relationship with the public sphere, seen as an alternative to the instrumentalized interactions between the artist and the “masses” in the years leading up to, and throughout the Cultural Revolution. Within the literature of participatory art in

³⁵² See Zheng Bo, *The Pursuit of Publicness...*, and Meiqin Wang, “The Socially Engaged Practices of Artists in Contemporary China”

China, works involving *nongmin* are not often included. This is perhaps because only recently (as in the rural-based artworks discussed in Chapter 3) have artists used these projects engaging with *nongmin* in ways that might foster civil society. Because these projects are so recent and ongoing, they will most likely be included in future studies of participatory art in China. I argue that within the scope of art creation in China today, long-term art projects in rural or urban economically depressed areas are becoming a dominant trend, especially since the University system began initiating them as part of their curriculum.

While the works discussed in this dissertation have their roots in the socialist art and rural reconstruction projects of China in the 20th century, they are also related to larger trends in the contemporary art world. Many Chinese artists in the 1980s were highly influenced by Joseph Beuys' ideas about social sculpture and the interconnections between art and life.³⁵³ The works discussed throughout the dissertation demonstrate a desire to merge art with life in ways that were distinct from the political instrumentalization of art by the communist party. Beuys' theory provided a model for artists as independent agents, separate from the state, to engage with non-artist communities and society at large. However, what is unique about these works in the context of contemporary art more generally is a sustained attention to the rural disenfranchised subject, which is reflective of the unique circumstances in China in recent decades, burdened with extreme rural/urban inequalities. The works discussed in Chapter 1 conceptually and formally align in some ways with “delegated performance,” which Claire Bishop has defined as “the act of hiring non-professionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being

³⁵³ Joseph Beuys was first introduced to Chinese artists in the late 1980s. In 1990, Taiwanese artist Wu Mali translated Heiner Stachelhaus' 1987 book *Joseph Beuys*, into Chinese. See Thomas Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 84, footnote 163. In fact, Fan Di'an and Hou Hanru argued in a 1989 interview published in *Meishu* that conceptual art in China was most likely initiated by the reproductions of Beuys' work appearing in China. See Fan Di'an and Hou Hanru, “Elongation and Evolution- a Dialogue about Performance Art” 《延伸与嬗变—关于行为艺术的对话》, *Meishu* (1989.7), 17.

present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his/her strategy.³⁵⁴ Her examples include Maurizio Cattelan's *Southern Suppliers FC* (1999), in which the artist organized a football team composed of North African immigrants to play local football matches in Italy, or Santiago Sierra's *250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People* (1999) in which the artist paid migrant laborers 30 dollars each to have a line tattooed across their backs in a gallery space. As in the works from China explored in this dissertation, these works often ask people to perform elements of their own cultural or sociopolitical identity and call into question notions of human and labor value under the conditions of global capitalism. This dissertation brings to light the significance of works like this within China's unique postsocialist context. As has been explored in Chapter 2, Chinese artists' interest in drawing attention to marginalized members of society is related to the post-colonialist exhibition practices in the early 21st century, which directed attention to social groups from parts of the globe that had been previously overlooked or ignored by the Western-centric contemporary art system. Certainly, an important element of this was the incorporation of Chinese contemporary artists into international exhibitions, starting with *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989. By the first decade of the 21st century many Chinese artists had become regular participants in international exhibitions, biennials, and triennials. For example, exhibitions such as *Documenta XI* (2002), directed by Okwui Enwezor, introduced groundbreaking curatorial ideas meant to destabilize notions of "center" and "periphery" by dispersing the spaces of the exhibition beyond Kassel, Germany to Vienna, Austria, New Delhi, India, St. Lucia and Lagos, Nigeria.³⁵⁵ In a similar way

³⁵⁴ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 219.

³⁵⁵ For more information on Documenta XI, see catalogs published with exhibition: *Democracy Unrealized—Documenta 11, Platform 1*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, et. al. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), *Experiments with Truth—Documenta 11, Platform 2*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta

as they themselves were recently initiated into the international art world, artists such as Lu Jie, Cai Guo-Qiang, Sun Yuan, and Peng Yu also sought to expose the world to the creations of works by those marginalized within a country that had already been marginalized within a global context. Within the domestic art world, the initiation of the Shanghai Biennial (and its incorporation of international artists starting in 2000) was important for establishing a space where Chinese artists and curators could contribute to defining and shaping the practices and discourses of contemporary art. The act of curating the creations of folk or amateur artists from China can be seen as attempts to redefine and expand what is “contemporary art” from a distinctly Chinese perspective.³⁵⁶ As described above, the works explored in Chapter 3 are part of a subset of “social practice art” in China and in a global context. As they are concerned with issues of rural/urban disparities, the conceptually overlap with many projects created with rural communities such as the Danish group Superflex’s *Guaraná Power* (2003), in which the group worked with Brazilian berry farmers to make and market an energy drink as a strategy to create economic stability, or the Argentinian collective Ala Plastica’s work with communities in the Rio de la Plata Basin (late 1990s, early 21st century), or the works created by Mumbai artist Navjot Altaf, and Kondagaon artists Rajkumar, Shantibai, and Gessuram that engage with the Adivasi and peasant communities in the areas outside Kopaweda in Chhattisgarh, India (first decade of the 21st century).³⁵⁷ This dissertation aims to contextualize the specificities of Chinese

Bauer, et. al. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002); *Créolité and Creolization—Documenta 11, Platform 3*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002); *Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*, Documenta 11, Platform 4, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, et. al. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002).

³⁵⁶ This is especially evident in the inclusion of Long March Project’s *The Great Survey of Paper-Cutting in Yanchuan Province* in the 2004 Shanghai Biennial, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s *Farmer Du Wenda’s Flying Saucer* at the 2005 Venice Biennial, and the fact that Cai Guo-Qiang’s *Peasant Da Vincis* was held at the Rockbund Museum in Shanghai at the same time as the 2010 Shanghai Expo.

³⁵⁷ For more on these types of projects, see Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

instances of these types of projects within China's own postsocialist moment and socialist history.

This dissertation brings forth a narrative that has never previously been explored. In this way it is a provisional mapping of a phenomenon that will require deeper analysis in the future. As this is a trend in Chinese contemporary art that continues to unfold, the long-term effect of the most recent types of research-based micro-intervention art projects (discussed in Chapter 3) cannot currently be assessed. It will be my job and that of others in the field to keep an eye on the long-term implications of the trends I have drawn attention to in this dissertation. This dissertation is in part a story of the reframing of the relationship between the artist and *nongmin* within the context of the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art. More research must be done on the international reception and exhibition of works involving *nongmin* participants over the turn of the 21st century as part of the larger project of unearthing the ideological mechanisms behind the process of globalization of the art world. There is also a need for further research into the influence of the courses, departments, and initiatives of university art programs in China on the practice of individual artists engaging with economically depressed communities. It remains to be seen if the recent upsurge in university-led, research-based art projects with marginalized communities will have a notable impact on the future art practice of the students involved or the lives of the *nongmin* communities with whom they engage. Additionally, there is still a dearth of scholarship on “participatory art” in China. This dissertation points out the historical, cultural, and political specificities of participatory projects in China that engage *nongmin* subjects. Further research must be done on the possibilities or impediments present in the class-based participatory projects on the development of civil society in China. This dissertation also draws attention to the need for further theorization about the

conceptual overlaps and dissimilarities between social practice art in postsocialist countries (such as China and those in the former Soviet Union) and those in capitalist contexts.³⁵⁸

On November 18, 2017 a fire broke out in a migrant worker community called Daxing in the suburbs of Beijing, killing 19 people. Many migrant worker communities like Daxing are overcrowded, contain illegal businesses, and house workers lacking registrations to live and work in the city. In response, governmental officials shut down and demolished the neighborhood, giving its tenants just hours to pack up their belongings and evacuate. While some moved to other parts of the city, many who had lived in Beijing for decades, or even their whole lives as second-generation migrant workers, were forced to move back to their familial hometowns in other parts of China to begin to rebuild. The incident in Daxing initiated a widespread campaign to rid the city of migrant worker communities, with thousands of inhabitants given just 48 hours to evacuate, many ending up homeless. Many netizens have protested the actions of the government,³⁵⁹ arguing that it seemed to negate Xi Jinping's apparent dedication to poverty reduction and social equality as exemplified in his 2018 annual New Year Address in which he announced that these were explicit priorities for his second five years in office.³⁶⁰ While Xi's administration is sending illegal migrant workers in cities back to their rural hometowns, he has also initiated a series of campaigns that relocate impoverished populations in

³⁵⁸ Work on this is just beginning. For example, Izabel Galliera has written a highly informative book on socially-engaged art in Central and Eastern Europe. See Izabel Galliera, *Socially Engaged Art After Socialism: Art and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

³⁵⁹ Chinese-language articles about this are sparse due to domestic censorship of the press, but for more on this incident in English, see Josh Rudolph, "Protesters Condemn Beijing Migrant Crackdown," *China Digital Times*, December 11, 2017, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2017/12/protesters-condemn-beijing-migrant-crackdown/>; Chris Buckley, "Why Parts of Beijing Look like a Devastated War Zone," *The New York Times* (November 30, 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/asia/china-beijing-migrants.html>; Chris Buckley, Sui-Lee Wee, and Adam Wu, "Campaign to Drive out Migrants Slams Beijing's Best and Brightest," *The New York Times* (December 11, 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/11/world/asia/china-beijing-migrants-tech.html>

³⁶⁰ An English transcript of his announcement was published on December 31, 2018 on China.org.cn, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2017-12/31/content_50181054.htm

rural areas to government-subsidized homes in less impoverished areas.³⁶¹ While such relocations are a blessing in that they provide families with modern homes equipped with heating, electricity, and running water, they are further examples of a top-down approach to poverty reduction that overlooks the psychological effects of forced relocation on individuals, families, and communities. It remains to be seen how effective these relocations will be in Xi's overall poverty-reduction campaign and in the goal of creating a sustainable and developed countryside. As Xi's actions to relieve rural/urban economic disparities become more and more radical, it will be exciting to see the ways in which artists engaged with this subject matter continue to work together with, separate from, or explicitly against governmental initiatives, grass roots social activism, and the international art world.

³⁶¹ See Wang Zhen, "China to Move Millions of People from Homes in Anti-Poverty Drive," *The Guardian*, January 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/07/china-move-millions-people-homes-anti-poverty-drive>.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF ARTISTS CITED

- Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957)
- Cai Guo-Qiang 蔡国强 (b. 1957)
- Cao Chong'en 曹崇恩 (b. 1933)
- Cao Fei 曹斐 (b.1978)
- Cao Minghao 曹明浩 (b. 1982)
- Chen Danqing 陈丹青 (b. 1953)
- Chen Jianjun 陈建军 (b. 1981)
- Chen Shaofeng 陈少峰 (b. 1961)
- Chen Xiaoyang 陈晓阳 (b. 1971)
- Chen Zhen 陈箴 (b. 1995, d. 2000)
- Chen Zhou 陈胄 (b. 1975)
- Du Wenda 杜文达 (b. 1966)
- Duan Jinchuan 段锦川 (b. 1962)
- Ge Lei 葛磊 (b. 1982)

Geng Jianyi 耿建翌 (b. 1962)

Gu Dexin 顾德新 (b. 1962)

Guo Fengyi 郭凤仪 (b. 1942-2010)

Huang Yongping 黄永砅 (b. 1954)

Jiang Jie 姜杰 (b. 1963)

Jin Le 靳勒 (b. 1966)

Liang Jiancheng 梁建成 (b. 1972)

Liang Shuo 梁硕 (b. 1976)

Li Guijun 李贵君 (b. 1964)

Li Mu 李牧 (b. 1974)

Li Tianbing 李天炳 (b. 1933)

Li Yuming 李玉明 (b. 1941)

Lin Yilin 林一林 (b. 1964)

Liu Weiwei 刘伟伟 (b. 1988)

Liu Xiaodong 刘小东 (b. 1963)

Long Xu Li 龙绪理 (b. 1941)

Lu Jie 卢杰 (b. 1964)

Lu Daode 卢道德 (1940)

Lulu Li 李心路 (b. 1972)

Luo Zhongli 罗中立 (b. 1948)

Luo Zidan 罗子丹 (b. 1971)

Ma Liuming 马六明 (b. 1969)

Ou Ning 欧宁 (b. 1969)

Peng Yu 彭禹 (b. 1974)

Qin Ga 琴嘎 (b. 1971)

Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 (b. 1969)

Qu Yan 渠岩 (b. 1955)

Rolandi, Alessandro 李山 (b. 1971)

Rong Rong 荣荣 (b. 1964)

Song Dong 宋冬 (b. 1966)

Song Yongping 宋永平 (b. 1961)

Sun Yuan 孙原 (b. 1972)

Tan Chengnian 谭成年 (b. 1957, d. 2007)

Tao Xiangli 陶相礼 (b. 1974)

Wang Gongxin 王功新 (b. 1960)

Wang Jianwei 王建伟 (b. 1958)

Wang Jin 王晋 (b. 1962)

Wang Qiang 王强 (b. 1957)

Wang Wenhai 王文海 (b. 1951)

Wang Wei 王卫 (b. 1972)

Wang Yazhong 王亚中 (b. 1962)

Wen Gaozhong 吴高钟 (b. 1962)

Wen Hui 文慧 (b. 1960)

Wu Wenguang 吴文光 (b. 1956)

Wu Yulu 吴玉禄 (b. 1962)

Xia Xing 夏星 (b. 1958)

Xiao Xiong 肖雄 (b. 1962)

Xin Haizhou 忻海州 (b. 1966)

Xing Danwen 邢丹文 (b. 1967)

Yang Fudong 杨福东 (b. 1971)

Yang Jiechang 杨诒苍 (b. 1956)

Yanzi 燕子 (b. 1981)

Yaowei 姚薇 (b. 1983)

Ye Yushan 叶毓山 (b. 1935, d. 2017)

Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍 (b. 1963)

Yuan Qingyi 袁庆一 (b. 1959)

Zhan Wang 展望 (b. 1962)

Zhang Dali 张大力 (b. 1963)

Zhang Huan 张洄 (b. 1965)

Zhang Zhaohong 张兆宏 (b. 1969)

Zhao Bandi 赵半狄 (b. 1963)

Zhao Tianji 赵天汲 (b. 1985)

Zhu Fadong 朱发东 (b. 1960)

Zhu Ming 朱铭 (b. 1972)

Zuo Jing 左靖 (b. 1970)

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