

Paper title:

Place-Making for the People: Socially engaged art in Rural China

This paper examines the work of a number of contemporary Chinese artists and curators who have devoted themselves to small-scale place construction in the battered countryside through artistic and cultural activities. Positioning this movement in the backdrop of the strikingly widening gap between the rural and the urban, I argue that the works of these art professionals not only provide critical reflections and bottom-up alternatives to the dominant social developmental discourse, but also activate and expand the potential of art as agent of social intervention, community building, and cultural change.

1. The Social Turn of Art in Contemporary China

Wang Nanming (Fig 1), the vocal Chinese art critic and curator, advocates the significance of socially engaged art, or social practices as he calls it, endeavored by a number of contemporary Chinese artists: “The avant-gardism of contemporary Chinese art lies in social volunteerism, a concept with endless potentials. ...The practice and theory of artists as social workers lifts art to a boundless field, in which art could penetrate into every small part of the society.”¹ Wang argues that “artist social workers” who employ their art to investigate current Chinese social problems and to initiate local-specific strategies of intervention and real social changes has become an important force of contemporary Chinese art.² In his writing, there is a strong anticipation in the power and responsibility of art to engage with Chinese social reality. His theoretical inquiry echoes the effort of a growing number of Chinese artists and cultural professionals who have involved with various local communities and society at large in their artistic practices. It is evident that socially engaged art, a category widely discussed since the 1990s in the Euro-American contexts, has built an increasing momentum among contemporary art circles in Mainland China in the past decade.³

This moving away from the production of art objects and this emerging interest in linking art to the betterment of conditions for human living is evident in the work of many contemporary Chinese art professionals who have engaged in various types of social practices. In this line of practices, art is not

¹ Wang Nanming, ‘Meigeren chixu di zuoyigong, zhejiushi yishu’ (Everyone continues to volunteer, this is art), in *Exhibition Changes Art*, ed. Ma Lin (Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 2013), p. 3.

² Wang Nanming, ‘Meigeren’, pp. 1-2.

³ Meiqin Wang, ‘The Socially Engaged Practices’.

conceived to be something done by artists and their assistants in their studios and then exhibited in galleries or museums, but is conceived to be a form of social intervention and is taken to the public spaces. It is not about the creation of concrete artworks from individual artists, although artworks are often involved. Fundamentally, it is about processes, dialogues, experiences, and community participation with the goals of raising awareness of real social problems and seeking creative solutions collaboratively.

The trend of Rural Reconstruction through Art (RRA) in China has emerged amid this social turn of contemporary Chinese art in the past decade and has constituted an important component of Chinese socially engaged art. RRA has acquired increasing momentum since 2011, with exhibitions and events on rural reconstruction began appearing in museums in Guangzhou, Beijing, Xi'an, Chengdu, among other cities (Fig.2), although some art professionals had initiated their rural reconstruction projects earlier. This demonstrates a growing effort from critical-minded art professionals, or 'social workers', to engage with various problems in the countryside brought about by China's top-down, GDP-driven urbanization in the past decade.



Fig. 2

2. The Crisis of the Countryside and Rural Reconstruction through Art

After been neglected for several decades, the countryside entered public discussion as a crisis in China in 2000 when Li Changping, a rural cadre from Hubei Province, wrote an open letter to Premier Zhu Rongji that year calling attention to the sufferings of peasant population.⁴ The letter stirred a nationwide debate and many intellectuals expressed similar critical assessment

⁴ Li Changping sent the letter to Premier Zhu Rongji in early 2000 and later published it in Southern Weekend in the issue dated August 24, 2000. See Li Changping, *Wo xiang zongli shuo shihua* [I spoke the truth to the premier] (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 2002), 20.

in their writings of the predicaments the whole rural China is facing. As it is widely acknowledged, China's urban-focused development strategies since the early 1990s have contributed to the dramatic decline of the countryside, burdening it with numerous problems such as economic stagnation, environmental degradation, cultural and heritage destruction, education and medical service deprivation.⁵ The widening socioeconomic and cultural gap between the countryside and the city has driven millions of young peasants migrating into the cities, draining the countryside of its active human resource and leaving numerous villages with only children and elderly people if not empty all together.⁶ Agricultural economist and intellectual activist Wen Tiejun warns that the process is detrimental to numerous rural families and communities while destroying the indigenous traditional knowledge that has developed over centuries in different rural regions.⁷ According to Wen and others, the decline of the Chinese countryside is a devastating trend and a crisis, risking the survival of Chinese culture as a whole.⁸

Many art professionals were certainly alarmed by this crisis and they turned to various rural villages and towns as the main space of their artistic practice, seeking to bring together rural communities and outside professionals in finding solutions to the above mentioned problems and challenges. Through various art projects and drawing on their resources in the cultural field, they hoped to revitalize the social, economic, and cultural life of rural China. As early as 2000, the year when the rural crisis emerged to be a national topic, Shanghai artist Hu Xiangcheng (b. 1949) initiated Jinze Project in a rural town of Shanghai municipality, aiming to revive traditional rural architecture and ritual practices in this region. Hu spent 10 years renovating No. 1 Xiatang Street, a dilapidated complex located at urban-rural fringe of Jinze town covering an area of about 40,000 square feet (Fig. 3). He and his team made of local craftsmen who were trained in traditional construction methods restored countryside-style buildings from

⁵ See Cao Jinqing, *Huanghe bian de Zhongguo* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2000), translated as *China Along the Yellow River: Reflections on Rural Society* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005); Huang Ping, "Bupingheng fazhan geju xia de nongcun kunjing" (The predicament of rural China under uneven development), *Shijie* 9 (2002): 29-52; He Xuefeng, *Xin xiangtu Zhongguo* (New rural China) (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2003); Wen Tiejun, "Deconstructing Modernization," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 39, no. 4 (2007): 10-25. For a detailed account of the abuse of power and mistreatment of peasants in the countryside, see Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao. 2004 *Zhongguo Nongmin Diaocha* (The Life of Chinese Peasants). Beijing: People's literature press. An English version of this book as available as Guidi, Chen and Chuntao, Wu. 2006 *Will the Boat Sink the Water?: The Life of China's Peasants*. Translated by Zhu Hong. New York: Public Affairs.

⁶ See Liu Yansui et al, *Zhongguo xiangcun fazhan yanjiu baogao* (Report on Chinese Rural Development Research) (Beijing: Science Press, 2011), Wang Yongji, "Zhongguo meitian xiaoshi baige zirancun, chuantong cunluo jixu baohu," *Hainan Daily*, January 14, 2013, and Ian Johnson, "In China, 'Once the Villages Are Gone, the Culture Is Gone'," *New York Times*, 1 February 2014

⁷ Wen Tiejun et al, 'Ecological Civilization, Indigenous Culture, and Rural Reconstruction in China', *Monthly Review-an Independent Socialist Magazine*, 63.9 (2012), pp. 30-31.

⁸ *Ibid.*; Cao Jinqing, *China Along the Yellow River: Reflections on Rural Society* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005); He Xuefeng, *Xin xiangtu Zhongguo* [New rural China] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2003).

different historical periods in the complex and established a few new ones that resembled the rustic architectural style of southern China. (Fig.4) Since 2011, No. 1 Xiatang Street has been put in operation as a community center and a living space for artists, craftsmen, musicians, and scholars. It has hosted traditional rituals such as Lantern Festival, New Year celebration, the Dragon Boat Festival, and wedding ceremonies (Fig.5), during which participants included peasants from nearby villages as well as urban residents such as artists, poets, and academics. These traditional rituals in Jinze Project are meant to function as platforms to reconnect people to the roots of Chinese culture.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

In the remote and small mountainous Shijiezi village of Gansu province in northwestern China (Fig.6), local born artist Jin Le (b. 1966) began engaging with the public space of the village in 2005 through installing his sculptural works at different locations of the village. In 2007 he persuaded several villagers to participate in the renowned artist Ai Weiwei's project *Fairytale*, which provided them a free trip to Germany for the famous international art exhibition Documenta 12. With his continuous effort to bring art into the life of local villagers, according to Jin, "the villagers started to believe that art could bring hope to their hard lives."⁹ They democratically elected Jin the village head in 2008. Supported by the villagers, Jin founded Shijiezi Village Art Museum and has organized periodical art events to foster collaborations between visiting artists and villagers in making art projects (Fig.7). My conversations with many villagers recently informed me that most of them were consciously embracing the presence of art in their everyday outdoor and indoor living space, which could be seen as one of the positive outcomes of Jin's socially engaged effort.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

The presentations by Qu Yan, Weng Fen, and Zuo Jing offer a close look into three different projects each of them has been engaging. Besides them, another rural reconstruction project that received wide-spread attention among the art

⁹ Orianna Cacchione and Mia Yu, "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): 14

circles was Bishan Project, which unfolded in an idyllic rural village of Anhui Province in southern China. It was founded in 2011 by artist Ou Ning (b. 1969) and curator Zuo Jing (b. 1970), aspiring to address the widening rural-urban gap through art and cultural programs. They launched the 2011 Bishan Harvestival (Harvest Ceremony), an international art festival that aimed to stimulate the public cultural life of the countryside (Fig. 8). Widely reported in both print and online media, Bishan Project became known as a highly anticipated rural reconstruction project and attracted many visitors coming to discover this previously unknown rural village. Even after local government canceled the 2012 Harvestival, both Ou and Zuo continued to initiate sub-projects to carry on rural reconstruction through art and cultural activities, such as transforming historical architecture into public structure (Fig. 9), researching and publishing local craftworks and customs (Fig. 10), and organizing farmer's market that aimed to foster a sense of pride towards local traditions and the growth of public life among local communities.



Fig. 8

School of Tillers



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

Also in 2011, artist Sun Jun (b. 1961, Anhui province) and the above-mentioned Li Changping, who had lost his official job after speaking out about rural crisis, co-founded China New Rural Planning and Design (CNRPD).¹⁰ This private firm is the first of its kind to provide professional and wholesale services in planning, design, and construction for rural villages. Rejecting the mainstream practice of reconstructing villages according to the lifestyle of the city, the CNRPD advances the theory of constructing rural villages into real rural villages. Its most famous product has been the reconstruction of Haotang village in Henan province (Fig. 11). As Sun emphasizes that “a beautiful village must have a complete ecosystem,” the project targeted many aspects of rural living, such as proper trash disposal, soil improvement, ecological balance, agricultural production and business, industry, branding and tourism, and finance as well as subtle social and spatial relations that had developed over time.¹¹ The resulting transformation of Haotang village (Fig. 12) was regarded as a major success and the village has since won many honorary titles, including one of the first twelve “beautiful livable villages” awarded by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of PRC and the 2014 Top Ten beautiful village of Henan province.”¹²

¹⁰ <http://www.cnrpd.com/index.html>

¹¹ Sun Jun, “Ba nongcun jianse de gengxiang nongcun,” *Zhongguo xiangcun Faxian* (Discovering rural China) 22 (January 2013), <http://www.zgxcfx.com/Article/85563.html>.

¹² Liu Xiangqin, “Xinyang Haotang cun de meili” (The beauty of Haotang village in Xinyang), *Guangming Daily*, July 31, 2015. Also see http://www.mohurd.gov.cn/zcfg/jsbwj_0/jsbwjczghyjs/201311/t20131120_216282.html

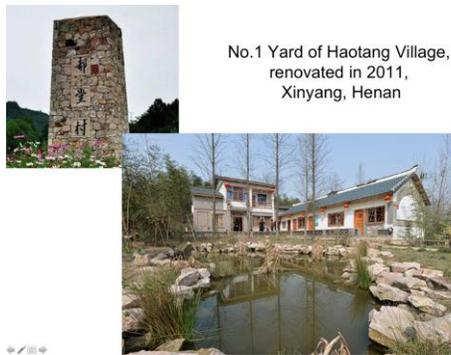


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

3. Place Construction for the People

These are but a few examples from a wide range of discursive social practices that many critical-minded contemporary Chinese art professionals have taken up in the countryside as they strive to raise awareness of or seek creative solutions to various by-products of China's pro-urban and market-oriented socioeconomic development in the past two and a half decades. Although coming from different personal experiences and motivated by different conceptions of social intervention, they all share the criticism on mainstream urbanism and the geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural inequalities imposed upon the countryside, which has de-humanized numerous rural villages and rendered them desolate and placeless. Consciously or unconsciously, the social experimentation of these rural reconstruction activists who aim to revitalize local-specific built environments, cultural traditions, and socioeconomic patterns function as a form of place-making that helps to restore the lost sense of place and the dignity of local living among ordinary rural residents.

This artistic approach is strikingly different from the mainstream place-making approach adopted by the Chinese government since 2005 with its nationwide "socialist new countryside construction" movement and its urban-

rural integration policies that aim to urbanize and commercialize rural regions in order to soften the gap between the rural and the urban.¹³ The latter has largely been transpired as wholesale redevelopment through demolition and construction under command planning. The approach of rural urbanization and commercialization, as some scholars maintain, has generated many new problems.¹⁴ Led by government and implemented by real estate developers, the construction of many so called socialist new countryside often entails the destruction of rural population's original habitats and their social relations, the disappearance of distinctive historical built environment and diverse cultural legacies of individual villages, and the loss of community identity and sense of place.

The major difference lies in a sensibility towards local cultural and spatial specificities of rural villages and thus a desire to give back substances and characters to each rural villages to make them meaningful places for local residents. Li Changping sums up: "We want to construct the countryside into a real countryside."¹⁵ He points out that, instead of urbanizing the countryside like the government adopts, their concept of rural reconstruction is to help every rural village to develop based on its own characteristics in order to form unique local cultural and spatial identity that villagers would identify with.¹⁶ It is the idea of homeland that he is talking about. Philosopher David Harvey insightfully points out that "there is a much deeper crisis of homelessness to be found in the modern world; many people have lost their roots, their connection to homeland."¹⁷ He thus asserts that place construction should be about the recovery of roots and homeland."¹⁸ Art professionals discussed in this paper are engaged in this type of place construction, roots recovery, and rebuilding connection with homeland in the broadest sense. Their small-scale, continuous, and locality-bound effort ultimately opens up possibilities for the participation of grassroots population in the production of cultural forms, social interactions, and spatial relations that are meaningful to their localized existence. Theirs is a kind of place-making that, instead of producing manageable placeless spaces suitable for top-down supervision and administration, contributes to the

¹³ See Introduction of this book; also see Ye Xingqing, "China's Urban-Rural Integration Policies," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38, no. 4 (2009), 118-119.

¹⁴ Anna L Ahlers and Gunter Schubert, "'Building a new socialist countryside' – only a political slogan?" *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38 (4) (2009): 35-61; Hui-Qin Yang, "Typical problems and proposals in the 'village construction'," In 2011 International Conference on Electric Technology and Civil Engineering (ICETCE), 7063-66.

¹⁵ Li Changping, "Women de xinnongcun jianshe" (Our new rural construction), March 2012, <http://www.cnrdp.com/html/team/secretary/lichangping/2013/1203/195.html>.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Harvey, David. 1996. "From Space to Place and Back Again." 291-326. In *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 301.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

bottom-up production of local specific living spaces. It is place-making for the people.