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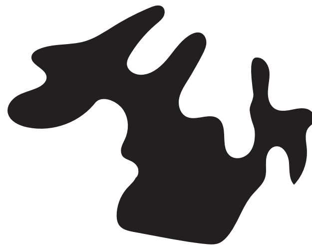
In honour of David Graeber
In memory of Huang Xiaopeng

Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless — like water.
Now you put water in a cup, it becomes the cup;
You put water into a bottle it becomes the bottle;
You put it in a teapot it becomes the teapot.
Now water can flow or it can crash.
Be water, my friend.

— Bruce Lee



The State needs to subordinate hydraulic force to conduits, pipes, embankments, which prevent turbulence, which constrain movement to go from one point to another, and space itself to be striated and measured, which makes the fluid depend on the solid, and flows proceed by parallel, laminar layers. The hydraulic model of nomad science and the war machine, on the other hand, consists in being distributed by turbulence across a smooth space, in producing a movement that holds space and simultaneously affects all of its points, instead of being held by space in a local movement from one specified point to another.

— Deleuze and Guattari
(1987: 363)

Introduction

If you think of critical art in/from China, what will come to your mind? One might come away from some discussions of Chinese contemporary art with the impression that the field brims with confrontational, defiant practices that challenge the Chinese authorities. This spirit of confrontation is exemplified by some of Ai Weiwei's works. Think, for example, of Ai's series of works that concern his secret detention by the Chinese police.[1] Or of He Yunchang's One-meter Democracy (2010), a shocking and painful performance that mocked Chinese democracy. In this work, he conducted a pseudo-democratic vote. He invited twenty-five friends to cast ballots on whether his body should be cut open. That was to be one meter long and have a depth of between half a centimetre and a full centimetre. He navigated the voting process so as to yield an affirmative result. After the poll, he was cut open without anaesthesia (Wangwright 2014, 23).

These two examples are both oppositional in that they criticise the oppressive regime by either dramatising and aesthetically transforming political suppression or embodying the pain of living in the absence of democracy. As de Kloet has observed, though, the global art world's demand that artists be critical can function as a straitjacket for Chinese art (2010). In the main, the global media and international art world still focus on the oppositional voices, gestures, and interventions in Chinese art, in the ways in which artists oppose the authoritarian regime. However, there are critical practices that cannot be easily identifiable as opposition.

This book departs from this dominant grasp of Chinese art. Art in China, I argue, can be critical without being oppositional. What is the relationship between criticality in Chinese contemporary art (especially socially engaged art) and oppressive powers? If the practices that embody criticality do not oppose the authorities directly, is it necessarily the case that they avoid tackling the pressures and restrictions from the system? These questions suggest a need to interrogate notions of artistic criticality in China (and beyond). In this book, I undertake the task by way of an investigation of socially engaged art practices that go beyond the paradigm of opposition, that are becoming water.

Critical art needs neither to take a stance that is openly against the authorities, nor to perform or embody dissensus. What strategies do socially-engaged art practices employ in urbanising China? What forms of non-oppositional criticality do these practices embody? Therefore, my book tries to answer this question:

1. Ai is widely seen as an outspoken critic of the Chinese government. He was detained in 2011 amid what human rights campaigners have described as the harshest crackdown on activists and dissidents in over a decade (Branigan and Watts 2011).

What are the non-oppositional forms of criticality adopted and embodied by socially engaged art practices in urban China? How do these practices respond to urban issues in China? How do they become water?

For me, socially engaged art names artistic practices that are called upon to act on certain matters of concern through art and other forms of practice. They engage with people in their social contexts in which various social, political, and economic forces are at play. These practices do not necessarily resemble the art objects that are widely displayed in museums. Still, they employ various methodologies derived from contemporary art, popular culture, theatre, happenings, social research, and social and political activism. What is more, they draw on media strategies and tactics, guerrilla practices, collaborative and cooperative approaches, long-term space making, and community cultivation. This echoes what Nato Thompson describes as contemporary art's strategic turn towards relational art in the 1990s. Through this turn, socially engaged art became more local, durational, and community-based (Thompson 2012, 31). Relational aesthetics is a theory and a form of art that stresses human relationships and their social contexts. A famous example is Rirkrit Tiravanija cooking pad thai in museums and galleries (Bourriaud 1998). However, unlike those in the West, socially engaged art practices enjoy little institutional and infrastructural support in China.[2]

Admittedly there are a few curators in China who try to use institutional resources to facilitate this kind of projects. However, their affiliation with institutions tends to be short-lived. Art organisations tend to avoid projects that are socially or politically sensitive, for they might endanger a whole exhibition or prompt the authorities to put the institution's name down on a list for close inspection. Consider a socially and politically provocative work by the artist Liu Weiwei, who invited people in Wukan Village, Guangdong, to bet on horse racing in Hong Kong[3]. This caused the exhibition in Guangdong Times Museum to be shut down (UnitedMotion 2016). A member of staff told me that every new show underwent tougher censorship for more than a year afterwards.

Socially engaged art practices often have to avoid censorship and surveillance. Their durations are heavily influenced by the political system under which they operate. Projects might be shut down, for instance, if an intolerant governor comes to power in a sub-district office or village government, or the central government orders controls over the arts and culture to be tightened so as to maintain "stability". As a case in point, consider Bishan Project (2011-2016). This anarchist rural reconstruction project, which took place in the village of Bishan (Anhui Province), was initiated by an editor, artist, and filmmaker named Ou Ning and a curator named Zuo Jing. In 2012 the second Bishan Harvestival was to be held in the village. It was to be a festival celebrating the agricultural harvest, with (socially engaged) art, music, poetry, and discussion. Before the celebrations could go ahead, however, the event "was mysteriously cancelled by government officials with 12 hours' notice"

2. As Tania Bruguera's commission from the Tate Modern indicates, socially engaged art is gaining institutional support in the West (see Tate Modern 2019).

(Wainwright, 2014). Bishan Project discontinued the Harvestival, and started to focus on dialogue and collaboration with the villagers. Henceforth, it would organise reading groups, small exhibitions, researcher-in-residence programmes, concerts, magazines, local handicrafts traditions, a community supported agriculture project, and many other kinds of activities (Corlin, 2020). In this way, the basis of the Bishan Commune shifted "from an idea of an anarchist utopian endeavour focused on art and cultural issues to an incorporation of economic concerns into the Bishan Project scheme" (ibid.). Despite this concession, it was forced to close in February 2016. Corlin suggests that the local authorities might have deemed the project unprofitable, insufficiently able to redistribute tourist revenues among the village at large, or crossed a political line by introducing anarchism and consensus democracy (ibid.). The actual reasons behind the project's closure are still unknown; officials have never been transparent about the line or lines that the project had crossed. Socially engaged art projects, then, are often rather precarious in that they need to navigate local political landscapes and negotiate unclear red lines. These conditions necessitate non-oppositional forms of criticality.

Figure 1
p.344

During my fieldwork, I have observed that in China, socially engaged art practices exhibit various modes of criticality. At times they seek to reconfigure open urban spaces such that they become public civic spaces. I term this reconfigurative criticality. At others they try to connect people (at local and translocal levels) in finding otherwise ways of living and learning in cities. I term this connective criticality. In some cases, these practice trigger uneasy reflections, interactions, and responses among different actors involved, especially when it comes to the issue of migration. I term this uneasy criticality. Furthermore, they facilitate those in urban villages who are often migrant workers to emerge as individuals with agency and aspiration, and to reclaim local knowledge as part of everyday life. I term this quotidian criticality. These (four modes of) categorisation, which I would explain in details later, are neither comprehensive (there may be other modes) nor definitive (this is not an exercise in definition). Instead, I seek to articulate what these interconnected modes reveal about the potential of socially engaged art in China and the concept of non-oppositional criticality in thinking and working with these practices.

The four modes of criticality outlined here are drawn from five cases that I have observed during my fieldwork between September 2015 and August 2016. They have been selected according to four categories: genre, locality, form, and thematic focus. These criteria are important, for different genres

3. In the coastal village of Wukan in Guangdong, which has a population of around 10,000, people revolted against the government's confiscation of farmland and communal land without proper compensation in September 2011. Despite being suppressed by riot police, the movement lasted until December of that year. The authorities laid siege to Wukan. Still, the villagers persisted until they secured promises that they would receive fair and just treatment (see Patience 2011). In 2016, Wukan's elected chief Lin Zuluan was arrested having written a letter complaining about the corruption underlying the land seizures. He later confessed to taking bribes on state television. Again, this sparked protest in Wukan, where it was seen as a forced confession (BBC News 2016).

of socially engaged art use different methods to engage people on the ground and address social issues. The thematic focuses and forms affect each other in the unfolding of the practices. Localities set the stages, as well as the restrictions for the practices to take shape. In terms of genre, I have chosen to attend to instances of art and theatre. Although they sometimes overlap, practices in these two fields enroll different tools in broaching and processing social problems. As for forms, I have selected cooperative art, spatial intervention, urban roaming performance, documentary theatre, and socially engaged cultural practices. These respond to the themes of the diminishment of civic space and civil society in urban China, urban villages that are deemed as undesirable, and forms of inequality suffered by migrant workers in cities. Drawing on the different forms, the practices approach the problematics from a variety of angles and with a variety of effects.

I conducted my fieldwork in Beijing for nine months so as to gather data about *5+1=6* (2014-2015), an investigative socially engaged art project about urban villages, and *Home* (2016), a piece of documentary theatre about migrant workers. During my fieldwork in Beijing, I realised that practices related to my topic were also going on in other parts of China and that I should investigate further projects in order to present the rich landscape of socially engaged practices that address the conundra of urbanisation.

In January 2016 I attended a roundtable discussion in Xi'an Art Museum as part of the art project *On Practice* (2015-ongoing). During the proceedings I encountered Chen Yun from the Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society (henceforth DM-AS), a space in which young creative practitioners developed mutually nurturing social practices. I also met two old friends from Guangzhou: an artist named Zhu Jianlin and a writer and independent publisher named Feng Junhua. Later the pair and others would start the roaming Theatre 44 in Guangzhou, a fluid group of practitioners who explore collaborative ways of addressing social issues through arts. These interconnections among practitioners and practices across different locations led me to expand my fieldwork to Shanghai and Guangzhou.

Figure 2
p.344

These three cities are each distinct from one another. Compared to other big cities in China, Beijing has the most urban villages situated on its fringes. In 2015 there were more than 300 (Wong, Qiao, and Zheng 2018, 603). Migrant workers from rural China and artists used to live in these urban villages, at least till 2017 (as I will explain later in Chapter 5). Some artists have responded to the environments of urban villages and interact with migrant workers there in their happenings, performances, and interventions (I discuss examples of this in the next subsection). This prompted me to investigate the tensions and possibilities of socially engaged art projects (such as *5+1=6* and

4. Artists including Shi Qing and Huang Songhao have gathered to work collaboratively on extracting and activating forms "radicalness" in everyday life. This involved the Shanghai Redux: Film Geography Program (2016) and fieldwork-based project DIFANG Work — Henan Province (2016) (see Radical Space 2020).

Home) situated in Beijing's urban villages and involved migrant workers.

Shanghai has multiple layers of histories. It was occupied by the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War, for instance, and became home to leftist writers, artists, and intellectuals in the 1930s. Its architecture and cityscape markedly eclectic in terms of its style and historical significance. Some artists in Shanghai have formed collectives and opened spaces (such as the Radical Space) to explore the city's politics and histories.[4] This led me to wonder whether the connectivity exhibited by socially engaged cultural practices (such as the Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society's in Chapter 3) played a role in responding to social and political issues in Shanghai and beyond. Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, has an anarchist and revolutionary legacy derived from the early twentieth century.[5] During the Republican Era (1911-1949), it enjoyed relative autonomy from the central Chinese government (Snow 2004, 135). The influence of this political freedom has lingered on, even as the authorities in the south have tightened their control over the city in recent years.[6] Being from Guangzhou myself, I have several cultural practitioner friends working there who like to roam and appropriate open spaces in the city as part of their arts practice. This incited me to wonder whether socially engaged art projects in Guangzhou (such as Theatre 44) also engaged with open spaces, transforming them in the process.

5. In Anarchism in early twentieth century China, Arif Dirlik offers the following pasage: A new generation of anarchists appeared in South China around the figure of an assassin turned anarchist, Liu Shifu (1884–1915), better known by his adopted name of Shifu. The Cock-Crow Society (Huiming xueshe) that Shifu established in 1912 and its journal, The People's Voice (Minsheng), served in the mid 1910s as the most important organs of anarchism in China. Despite some apparent affinity to Buddhism in the group's activities, these affinities do not seem to have had any significant influence on the anarchism they espoused. Shifu promoted the social anarchism of Kropotkin, and while not a particularly original thinker, played an important part in his polemics with the socialist Jiang Kanghu (1883–1954) in clarifying differences between anarchism (pure socialism) and other currents in socialism (2012, 135).

6. For a good example of this legacy, consider the change undergone by the Southern Media Group, which is based in Guangzhou. Founded in the early 1990s, its newspapers and magazines were beacons of liberalism. They featured opinion pieces by public intellectuals who promoted values such as freedom and democracy, and dared to reveal injustice and criticise the government. However, censorship of these publications has tightened increasingly since 2011. Then, in 2013, one year after Xi assumed power, the authorities clamped down on the Southern Media Group.

7. In the United States, about 5% of the population lived in cities in 1800, but about 50% of the population lived in cities by 1920. Throughout the 19th century, the US was urbanizing. The same was true for most European societies during the 19th century, such as UK, France etc (Xu 2012, 4).

8. See Migrant Labor in China (China Today) (2016) by Pun Ngai. See State-Led Urbanization in China: Skyscrapers, Land Revenue and *Concentrated Villages* (2014) by Lynette H. Ong. See Rapidly Changing Dynamics of Urbanization in China; Escalating Regional Inequalities and Urban Management Problems (2010) by Ghulam Akhmat and Yu Bochun.

Urban issues in China and socially engaged art

China has been urbanised rapidly since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Urbanisation accelerated at a staggering pace after 1979, which saw the country's opening up to the global market and introduction of reformist policies that encouraged privatisation, marketisation, and opening up for foreign investments. Together, these developments have led to an economic boom in China. In 1949 only 7.3% of China was urbanised. By the end of 1991, however, it had grown to 26.94% (Chen 2021). The rate has risen steadily over the last three decades, reaching 60.31% by 2019 (ibid.). The rapidity of Chinese urbanisation in this short span of decades is stunning as compared to more developed countries.[7] In China, urbanisation has gathered pace in tandem with the development of commercialisation and the market economy.

Urbanisation is considered a driving force of industrialisation and modernisation in that it can boost economic growth. The main five city clusters cover 11% of China's surface, accommodate 40% of the whole population, and generate 55% of the country's GDP (Industry Information 2017). The speed and scale of China's urbanisation are unprecedented in world history. On the one hand, the party-state proclaims that top-down urbanisation policies aim to lift a certain population from poverty. It emphasises this so as to shore up its legitimacy in the eyes of a growing population, which is rapidly stratifying into different classes. Indeed, through urbanisation the Chinese state has lifted a considerable portion of the population out of poverty. On the other hand, though, rapid urbanisation has been fuelled by land expropriation, real estate development, and global capital investment and speculation (Wang 2017, 45). This, in turn, has led to an increasingly unequal and divided society.

A large body of scholarship addresses urbanisation in China. It foregrounds a number of key problematics, including migration from the countryside to the cities; the rapid development of urban real estate; the causes underlying the speed of Chinese urbanisation; and the inequalities endemic to this process.[8] Although it draws on this research, this book is focused on how socially engaged art projects address certain issues arising from urbanisation in China. These issues are: migrant workers and urban villages, socio-cultural-economic disparities in urban areas, and civil society in urbanising areas. These three issues are intertwined with artists' lives and works. A lot of artists have themselves migrated to big cities such as Beijing from other parts of the country. They live and have their studios in urban villages, where space is more affordable. As such, they have witnessed the inequalities attendant on urban life. Indeed, some of these artists broach issues regarding urban public space and civic rights in their practices.

Context:
Disparities in the urban population, migrant workers, and urban villages

According to the International Monetary Fund, the past two decades have seen a sharp reduction of poverty in China, but also a significant increase in inequality (Jain-Chandra et al., 2018). It is widely held that China's current high income-inequality is largely driven by structural factors to do with the Chinese political system. These structural determinants include the rural/urban divide and regional variations in economic well-being (Xie and Zhou, 2014). A new economic elite has arisen in urban China, which has benefited from the policies of Reform and Opening-up, and Marketisation.[9] Still, the same process has conditioned the emergence of newly impoverished classes. Migrant workers constitute a major group of the new poor.

By "migrant workers", I am referring to rural Chinese people that have migrated to cities, where they now work and live. China's internal migration first became prominent in the early 1990s on account of two major developments. The first is the national reforms implemented under Deng Xiaoping, which included rural reform that released agricultural workers from being tethered to their localities. The second is the global economic and political shifts (not least a new international division of labour), which have led to a rising demand for labour in urban China as a consequence of the globalised market economy these reforms (Bork, Kraas, Xue, and Li 2011, 17). As China's major source of cheap labour, migrant workers have propelled rapid economic growth in the country's big cities from the early 1990s.

The commodification of land – rather than human capital or advanced technology – has proven instrumental in the growth and transformation of Chinese cities (Lin 2014, 1814). Since 1951 China's population has been governed and managed through a household registration system (hukou or 户口) system. Although this system has undergone a series of reforms since the 1990s, the main structure remains intact. It ties the access to social welfare and infrastructures to one's residential status (Wong, Li, and Song 2007). Although many rural people have migrated to bigger cities to work in factories, construction sites, and the service industries, the household registration system makes it very difficult for them to settle down in cities. Accordingly, most migrant workers are forced to join the ranks of a precarious and exploitable urban labour force.[10] In cities, migrant workers have become the de facto working poor (Wu 2016, 341). Institutionally excluded from the regular labour market and urban public services, they are subject to informal employment; low and unstable income; extra living costs; and lack of welfare security. All of this causes many migrant workers to fall into poverty (Liu, He, and Wu 2008, 33).

9. See The New Rich in China: Future Rulers, Present Lives (1 edition) (2008) edited by David Goodman.

10. See China Workers Under Assault: Exploitation and Abuse in a Globalizing Economy (2001) by Anita Chan.

In addition to socio-economic inequality, migrant workers also face cultural discrimination. A migrant worker is set apart on the grounds that they are seen as a non-local resident (外地人), peasant (农民), or rural person (乡下人) (Zhan, 2011). This identity-based discrimination also entails cultural exclusion: in dominant cultural narratives in China, the urban symbolises abundance, modernity, progress, civilisation, bourgeois lifestyles, and cosmopolitanism. The rural, in contrast, is represented as backward, poor, lagged-behind, agricultural, and even vulgar (Lei 2003). Migrant workers are always portrayed as insufficiently urban. Everyday interactions among migrant workers and urbanites have led not to a dissolution of the rural-urban divide, but rather to its reconstitution in the form of distinct economic and cultural formations within city limits (Lei, 2003, 638).

Most migrant workers live in urban villages in the expanded cities. Urban villages, known as "villages in the city" (城中村), are produced by China's unique land development process, in which urban and rural land ownership and management treated separately (Wang 2015). Urban villages are literally villages that have been engulfed by the expansion of urban areas. Although they were once physically located inside the city, they are now de facto urban areas. And yet, the land on which they stand is managed by farmers or their collectives (ibid.). Although city governments may have acquired farmland that previously stood on the fringes of cities, land for housing is still owned by village collectives and is allocated to village residents (S. Zheng, Long, Fan, and Gu 2009, 426). Many urban villagers have given up farming. Instead, they build or extended houses to rent to migrant workers. Rent has become their main source of income (ibid.).

Figure 3
p.344

On the one hand, urban villages are crucial in that they provide migrant workers (and other groups of the growing urban population) with socially accessible and affordable housing (Zhang et al. 2003). These villages feature living places, small markets, and even small workshops (e.g. the clothing market in Kangle village in Guangzhou). These play a role in the production and global circulation of goods (Wu 2016, 342). Given the lack of government resources and assistance, urban villages have been seen as a form of autonomous housing, an innovative and positive agent of urbanisation in contemporary China (Zhang et al., 2003). Urban villages were eulogised in the 2017 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (held in Shenzhen and Hong Kong), which addressed the theme of "Cities, Grow in Difference". Here, urban villages were presented as an otherwise and convivial urban housing model.[11] However, low-cost housing complexes in urban villages are far from ideal. Examples of chaotic land use, substandard housing construction, infrastructure deficiency, and a lack of open spaces are common. These factors are believed to be associated with social problems, safety risks, and health hazard (Hao 2012, 6).

11. This edition of the biennale claimed to learn from, intervene into, and reform urban villages, especially those in Shenzhen. However, it was also criticised as a complicit art event that paved the way for gentrification from the city government and commercial powers.

On 18 Nov 2017, a fire in an apartment in the village of Xinjian (Daxing District, Beijing) killed nineteen people and injured eight, most of whom were migrant workers. Right a fter this incident, the officials in Beijing had investigated the city, identifying 25,395 buildings as a fire hazard to be demolished within forty days (anonymous activists, 2018). In just forty days, this notorious "low-end population eviction campaign" displaced tens of thousands of migrant workers during the winter. This enraged creative practitioners, including some data activists who anonymously spread information on the evictions online and mobilised people to help the migrant workers. These artists employed their skills in visual communication to support migrant workers' demonstrations and to visualise the data of the eviction for the public. These practices of direct action were critical in that they facilitated aid on the part of civil society in the context of a crisis for migrant workers.

With respect to the issue of migrant workers, in chapter 4, I prompt the question: what form of non-oppositional criticality is demonstrated by socially engaged art practices that address the increasingly sensitive topic of inequality with regard to migrant workers? As for urban villages, I posit in chapter 5: what form of non-oppositional criticality is manifested in socially engaged art practices that deal with everyday life in urban villages that are deemed undesirable?

Context:
Civil society in the urbanising areas

The aforementioned event, in which artists challenged the 2017 campaign to evict migrant workers, could be seen as a step towards a civil society in urbanised China. However, the spaces available for creative practitioners and other social actors to take such actions are restricted. In a large number of countries, including China, civic space – the gap among state, business, and family in which citizens organise, debate, and act – is being structurally and purposefully squeezed (Buyse, 2018, 967).

Civil society is commonly defined as "the area outside the family, market and state". As such, it includes a wide range of both organised and organic groups, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, social movements, grassroots organisations, online networks and communities, and faith groups (World Economic Forum, 2013, 8). Although social organisations that fall under "public welfare" or "charitable institutions" have been allowed to continue their operations, ever since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 there has been a sustained and brutal repression of activists and lawyers engaged in rights protection and advocacy. There have been smear campaigns, forced confessions, and strong ideological controls over universities, media, and the internet. National security laws have been passed, such as the National Security Law, Law of the People's Republic of China on Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organisations in the Mainland of China (hereafter the Foreign NGO Law), and Cybersecurity Law (Shieh 2018). Living and working in squeezed civic spaces and shrinking civil societies in

Chinese cities, artists and other creative practitioners have felt called upon as citizens to create non-oppositional spaces for civic gathering, initiations, and actions.

Regarding the issue of civic space in the city, I put forward the question in chapter 2: what form of non-oppositional criticality is demonstrated in socially engaged art practices concerned to make public civic spaces in contexts of surveillance and control? I will address another question concerning civil society in Chinese cities in chapter 3: what form of non-oppositional criticality is exhibited by socially engaged art practices that connect people so as to explore otherwise forms of living and learning in the absence of freedom of assembly and association? This study argues that in urbanising China civic public space is not a given, but always contingent and in the making.

Preceding examples of socially engaged art responding to urbanisation

In the following section, I introduce three art projects to foreground the different non-confrontational modes of practice employed by socially engaged art practices responding to urbanisation in China. These projects preceded my fieldwork. Given that my research focuses on another period and set of locations, I do not intend to enroll these three projects with in-depth analysis. Rather, they serve to paint a broader picture of a particular strand of socially engaged art in urbanising China. What is more, they underline the urgent need of systematic theorisation. In this part, although these socially engaged art projects that are not the case studies of my book, the visuality of them is essential for the readers to grasp a sense of the cityscape and the art's interventions in Chinese cities. Therefore, photos of these projects will be used as illustrations rather than materials for visual analysis.

In 2014, the artist Li Binyuan put on an action/performance titled *Reservoir Dogs* (2014). He borrowed the English title borrowed from Quentin Tarantino's 1992 film. The Chinese title of this performance "何弃疗", however, literally translates as: "why do you give up your medical treatment?"[12] In an interview about the performance, he recounted his perception of the urban village of Heiqiao, which lies to the east of Beijing, outside of the Fifth Ring Road. Before their eviction, both artists and migrant workers had lived and worked in Heiqiao. "It was a very magical place", he said, "because it constituted an urban-rural interface (城乡结合部), and it's a place where anything can happen, like something unexpected. It's like a big lab" (Wallpost 2014).

Figure 4
p.344

12. In Chinese, "何弃疗" is a derogatory internet slang, which is to call someone insane. The undertone is: the person is so insane that he/she must be mentally ill, but he/she gives up on the treatment. Most of the time, it is used half-jokingly.

The main part of his action consisted of dancing and interacting with different people and places in the village. He wore a pink wig and sunglasses, and carried around a loud speaker blasting out dance music. He has chosen music tracks that were especially popular among young people in urban villages. In this delirious and exciting dance, he both embodied and danced in accompaniment to Heiqiao's various dynamics and rhythms. On the busy main street, he jumped on top of cars as they waited in front of a tollbooth (where there had been protests against extortionate parking fees). He cradled a small child (whose parents may well have been migrant workers) in his arms while sitting on his loudspeaker. He hopped onto a tricycle and travelled along beside a migrant worker for a while. He took up a broom to sweep the ground outside the Community Service Centre (社区服务中心), while dancing continually.

Li's audience was made up of fellow artists living in the village, other art professionals coming from other urban villages, and migrant workers who happened to encounter him in Heiqiao. The action held back from criticising the terrible living and working conditions in Heiqiao (such as a reeking polluted creek running through the village) and lack of organised management. Instead, through his affective and visceral performance (he danced himself to exhaustion four times), Li explored the vivid unpredictability and conviviality of life in the urban village.

Figure 5
p.345

Another project, *Gaze from the Top Floor* (2014) by artists Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, collaborated with migrant worker families in the village of Kangle in Guangzhou[13]. With the help from the Qi Chuang Social Work Development Association, an NGO that is dedicated to supporting the children of migrant workers, they conducted fieldwork in Kangle Village and organised two workshops on storytelling through art. They asked children to design clothes as a way of storytelling. They were to realise these ideas with the help of their parents, who worked in different sectors of the garment processing industry in the village (Cao and Chen 2014). In the project, the task of collaboratively developing stories and clothes prompted the parents to talk with their children more than they usually would. What is more, the parents had to collaborate with one another: given that the parents each worked on a specialised part of the manufacturing process, they had to consult colleagues' advice if they were to fabricate a whole garment (ibid.).

These are just two instances of a growing body of artistic practices in urban China that respond to urgent social, political, or economic issues. Often, such practices do not directly critique or contest political conditions. Rather, they immerse themselves in urban village life as a means of interacting, affecting, and connecting. Ultimately, such practices challenge industrial alienation and social segregation. In this book I am interested in unpacking the forms of criticality presented in socially engaged art practices that, although they respond to issues afflicting migrant workers and urban villages, they do not directly

13. Kangle Village is an urban village adjacent to Sun Yat-sen University, one of the best universities in China. The village does not only house migrant workers but also serves as cloth and fabric wholesale market and a hub for garment processing.

critique or acting against imposing authorities.

Looking beyond urban villages and migrant workers, some art projects also address how open spaces in the city are being commercialised and privatised. A good example is *Everyone's East Lake* (2010-2014) in the city of Wuhan, which is famous for its *East Lake* (Donghu). The project sought to reclaim open spaces for the public by inviting citizens to use creative means of occupations. Hence, *Everyone's East Lake* protested against capitalist encroachment on public space. Wuhan's government had signed an illegal lease with a state-owned real estate development company named Overseas Chinese Town (OCT). The agreement allowed the latter to encroach upon the protected the East Lake Scenic Area without a proper appraisal of the possible ecological or social consequences. The revelation of this opaque, corrupted, and lucrative deal triggered fierce criticism online, which focused on the development plan's environmental impacts on public safety, as well as on gentrification and privatisation (Hu 2010)[14].

Still, the local authorities thwarted citizens' attempts in mounting protests.[15] With online discussions dying down due to a combination of fear of reprisals and the state's control over the media, creative practitioners felt the urge to act (Hu 2010). They invited citizens in Wuhan to create their own artwork to reclaim the East Lake. In June 2010, two artists named Li Juchuan and Li Yu began *Everyone's East Lake*. They posted an open call online for participation. The participants might be locals and whoever else wished to participate. Creating artwork about the East Lake was perceived by the organisers as a mean to reclaim accessibility to public space. The artworks were to be publicised on the website donghu2010.org. The project went through three rounds: the first took place in 2010, the second in 2012, and the third in 2014. The first round included more than forty projects that addressed the privatisation of East Lake from different angles. They included the *T-Junctions of East Lake: Social Architecture Naming Series* (2010), *BMX Lake Jumping in East Lake* (2010), *30-Metre Memorial Wall* (2010), and *Selling East Lake Water Project* (2010). [16]

Figure 6
p.345

14. In December 2009, OCT (Overseas Chinese Town) Co., Ltd, a state-owned real estate development company signed a long-term lease with the local government for 4.3 billion yuan (630 million US dollars) – the most lucrative lease of the year for rapidly-expanding Wuhan. This transaction was illegal since 14.2 % (30 hectares out of 211 hectares) of the leased area fell within the nationally-protected East Lake Scenic Area, and the local government had not obtained permission to develop the land from the central government. Thugs were hired to thwart the petition of the evicted villagers and fishing workers for proper compensations. The aforementioned information was disclosed by the Guangzhou-based newspaper Time Weekly (时代周报) in a report called An Investigation into OCT's Development of East Lake in Wuhan (武汉华侨城开发东湖调查), which received this information leaked by government officials disgruntled with corruption in the development proceedings. OCT's plan included an amusement park (Happy Valley) and upscale shopping areas, hotels and condominiums. See Hu, 2010.

15. QQ was the most popular social media application in the 2000s in China. QQ groups were formed as citizens were trying to organise a milder form of protest that was commonly referred to as "going for a stroll". Supposedly, citizens would stage a protest march without banners and if they were being questioned, they would claim they each of them was "just going for a stroll". However, this was thwarted by the authorities: local police have infiltrated into the (online chat) groups in order to sabotage the protest. At the same time, student counsellors in universities warned the students against joining the protest to avoid getting into trouble. See Hu, 2010.

Zheng Bo argues that Everyone's East Lake was not only an attempt to resist privatisation, gentrification, and the government's ban on public discussion of the development. More importantly, it evoked a sense of common ownership and public life (Zheng, 2014). I would like to further posit that instead of confronting the local government and real estate company, Li Juchuan and Li Yu called on their fellow citizens to express their discontent with their actions in the name of art. By occupying open spaces, citizens were to transform them into public spaces in which citizens could voice their discontent in embodied and creative ways. This project is one of a number of cases in China that address issues at the intersection of urbanisation and the development of civil society not through open activism or contestation, but by way of decentralised civic and artistic action. This prompts me to investigate the modes of criticality at stake in the arts projects that open up civic spaces without opposing the authorities upfront.

A common feature stands out across these three examples of socially engaged art projects addressing urban issues in China: that they adopt a non-oppositional approach. This does not mean that the practitioners are afraid of suppression and thus censor themselves, nor that they have given up on criticising the system of authority in China. On the contrary, in the given circumstances and contexts in which they must operate, non-oppositionality allows practitioners to be critical in a different way. Avoiding direct confrontation means that it need not express the kind of negative criticism that the global art world expects from "critical Chinese art." The projects mentioned here have led me to inquire into the ways in which can socially engaged art be critical without being oppositional in urbanising China.

16. In Everyone's East Lake: Social Architecture Naming Series (2010), Social Architect Group named eight T-Junctures around the East Lake and wrote them on the rubbles gathered from the demolished villages, the construction site of this OCT development plan, and neighbourhoods nearby. They invited the public to read out the poems, proses, investigation report, notification from the government, and advertisement and so on about East Lake in one of the T-juncture.

According to the legislation on the management and development of lakes and wetlands, area within 30 metre from the shoreline of the lake is not allowed to be developed. However, the East Lake Fish Pond, which was within the shoreline, was filled by OCT, and the dormitories of fishers were demolished. Wu Yun, Zi Jie, and Mai Dian marked the remaining wall of the dormitories with 30 Metre Memorial Wall and asked others to write and draw whatever they wanted on this wall.

In Selling East Lake Water Project, the creative practitioner who named him/herself Dangerous Object, bottled East Lake water and sold it outside of the Lingbo Gate of Wuhan University and at the ticket office of East Lake's Moshan Park.

17. For example, Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy (2011) edited by Karin de Boer and Ruth Sonderegger.

18. https://www.zdic.net/hans/批

19. https://www.zdic.net/hans/判20. Launched by Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution stated in 1966 and lasted till 1976, when Mao died. Its goal was to preserve Chinese communism by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society, and to re-impose Mao Zedong Thought as the dominant ideology in the PRC. Mao called upon people to rebel against bourgeois authorities through class struggles including violent ones, to which China's youth, as well as urban workers, responded by forming Red Guards and "rebel groups" around the country. The "great criticism" (大批判) was to criticise people as anti-Party and anti-revolution if they had different opinions with their superiors, and to humiliate and torture them. Started in 1957 during the Anti-rightist Campaign, it became one of the key tasks of the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution has badly damaged China's economy and traditional culture, with an estimated death toll of 1.5 million (see https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2016/12/14/china-the-cultural-revolution/)

Non-oppositional criticality

This book is not a philosophical investigation of criticality, but cultural studies research of criticality as it emerges from socially engaged art practices in China. It is a conjunctural study that focus on modes of everyday practice and cultural articulations of criticality as evidenced in interactions and interventions in civic spaces.

In this section, I will first explain what I mean by criticality and non-oppositional criticality. I will then introduce the four forms of non-oppositional criticality that are explored in this book.

From critique to non-oppositional criticality

In Chinese, critique is expressed as "批判" (pi pan). In classical Chinese, this compound word has two key meanings. Firstly, it is to distinguish and judge; secondly, it is to comment and to judge (Wu, Zhang, and Wu, 2015, 12). The convergence of meanings between pi pan and Western notions of critique has led some translators to substitute the two terms for one another. In 1935, Hu Renyuan used this term 批判 or pi pan to translate Kritik in the title of Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Critique of Pure Reason). In modern Chinese, "批" (pi) means to slap (as in, to slap someone in the face), annotate, write an instruction, analyse, and to.[18] "判" (pan) means to distinguish, decide, judge, or to pass verdict.[19] Together, these two characters connote the power exercised through analysis and judgement.

In the context of mainland China, however, notions of pi pan are tainted with negativity and even terror. During the Cultural Revolution,[20] many people were condemned as "counter-revolutionaries". The activity of accusing and attacking them was called "great criticism" (大批判) (Wu, Zhang, and Wu, 2015, 14). Decades have passed and the fear has faded. Now the term "critical" (as in "critical theory") is translated into Chinese as "批判 [性] 的." Here, the character "性" connotes innate quality; "的" is the adjectival form of the word .

In the canon of critical theory, critique contains a promise of emancipation. As Max Horkheimer writes:

> however extensive the interaction between the critical theory and the special sciences whose progress the theory must respect and on which it has for decades exercised a liberating and stimulating influence, the theory never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery. (1972, 246)

The implication here is that critical theory is not a form of navel-gazing, restrained within the field of theory. Rather, it aims to trigger radical changes in the social and political realm. Since 1930s, many interdisciplinary critical theories "have emerged in connection with the many social movements that identify varied dimensions of the domination of human beings in modern societies" (Bohman et al. 2019). Critique, then, is a dialectical practice that interlaces theory and practice in a way that contributes towards overthrowing forms of domination.

In cultural studies, critique largely conveys negativity in that it is sets out to unveil problematic assumptions that are taken-for-granted in a given society. As Foucault puts it: "a critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest" (1988, 154). Work in cultural studies often analyses and critiques concrete contemporary cultural discourses and distinctions that reproduce economic and political inequities (Surber 1998, 7). The ultimate goal, in doing this, is to pursue more just forms of society in the future. As Foucault has once again argued:

> Critique exists only in relation to something other than itself: it is an instrument, the means to a future, or a truth that critique will neither know nor be, it is a perspective onto a domain where it would like to act as police and where it is incapable of making the law. (2015, 36)

Often, scholars in cultural studies direct their critiques at crises catalysed by inequalities. They do so by revealing the underlying conditions and processes at work in the practical realm of everyday life.

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the words "critique" and "crisis" have a common etymology. They derive from the Greek krī́nein, which means "to separate, choose, decide, judge". Quoting Aristotle, Koselleck notes that "'crisis' also meant 'decision' in the sense of reaching a verdict or judgment, what today is meant by criticism (*Kritik*) (2006, 359). The Chinese word that is often used to translate crisis is "危機" (*wei ji*). The first character connotes danger; the second opportunity. The double meaning layered into this Chinese word implies that there are positive possibilities latent in crises, critique, and the critique of crisis. Resonating with this semantic complexity, this study demonstrates how critical socially engaged art practices responding to urban issues – often crises – do not simply criticise the system or directly oppose the authorities. Instead, they generate different possibilities for living and relating to one another in the city.

How are these debates addressed in the cultural and artistic domains? To what extent can artworks be perceived in terms of their "criticality"? How does criticality appear, or rather, what shape does it take in artistic performance and expression? These questions bring to

mind Irit Rogoff's call to turn away from critique in favour of criticality. She argues that we must move from criticism which is a form of finding fault and of exercising judgement according to a consensus of values, to critique which is examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to criticality which is operating from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness. (Rogoff, 2003)

The ground upon which criticality operates is uncertain because it is not based on binaries, above all that of for or against. Instead, criticality is articulated in and through contextually embedded practices that explore otherwise ways of living. As Rogoff puts it:

> We have opted for a 'looking away' or a 'looking aside' or a spatial appropriation, which lets us get on with what we need to do or to imagine without reiterating that which we oppose ...'Smuggling' exists in precisely such an illegitimate relation to a main event or a dominant economy without being in conflict with it and without producing a direct critical response to it. (2003)

Following Rogoff, it can be said that criticality is embodied in the act of looking away from actors and processes in the centre stage of cultural and social discourse (be they an institutional art event, deeply rooted social problem, or exploding political crisis). Instead, criticality means attending to practices that are offstage or backstage. These practices might be less eye-catching, but they are more embodied. In this, criticality figures a means of imagining and exploring the otherwise to the status quo and of smuggling these possibilities from the outside into the inside.

Similarly, Rita Felski moves away from the negativity of critique. "Both aesthetic and social worth," she writes, "can only be cashed out in terms of a rhetoric of againstness" (2015, 17). Unlike Rogoff, though, Felski holds that criticality emerges when works of art engage in oppositional critique (2015, 16). She proposes "postcritical reading" in which the reader-critic would place herself before the text, "reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible" (2015, 12). Instead of looking behind or beneath the text so as to uncover something to critique, Felski's approach is to come face-to-face with the artwork and let it speak. It entails critically channeling what the work brings forth and, in this way, transforming received perceptions and presumptions. Like Felski, I immersed myself in process-based, socially engaged art projects and let them speak for themselves. That said, I still engage with the notion of criticality, as Rogoff presents the term.
As Rogoff indicates, criticality involves relinquishing opposition. To highlight this potent aspect of the concept, I speak of "non-oppositional criticality" instead of just "criticality" alone.Non-oppositionality can also be found in Derrida's work. "What must occur then", he writes:

> is not merely a suppression of all hierarchy, of an-archy only consolidates just as surely the established order of a metaphysical hierarchy; nor is it a simple change

> or reversal in the terms of any given hierarchy. Rather the *Umdrehung* must be a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself. (1978, 81)

This point of view is useful in thinking about non-oppositional modes of criticality. Critical practices might not aim at instigating a sort of revolution, this passage suggests, or replacing current hierarchies with others. Instead, they might venture slightly off the grid of a given hierarchical structure, pass slightly under the system's radar, without being crushed by reigning authorities. This does not mean that non-oppositional critical practices can eventually dissolve restricting and controlling structures. Indeed, some systems can evolve by extending their grid of control and expanding their censorship regimes.

Derrida gives up on the term *dialectic*. Instead, he holds onto the "fatal necessity of contamination" (what he terms "unperceived entailment or dissimulated contamination") between the two poles of any given opposition (1990, xv). Any system, this premise suggests, is always contaminated by what it tries to exclude. The flip-side of this, though, is that what resists a system also implicitly keeps it in place. As a philosophical discourse, deconstruction "must proceed through a strategy of displacement—what Derrida calls a 'double writing', which is a form of critique neither strictly inside, nor strictly outside philosophy" (2001, 11). Similarly, non-oppositional criticality operates through displacing an oppositional logic, according to which something must be either inside or outside of a system, either working with or working against the authorities. Non-oppositional critical practices also displace themselves in relation to a given system. As I have phrased it above, they are "slightly off" with respect to mainstream society and structures of power. Although they sometimes differ from practices mandated by the system, the authorities might still struggle to identify and condemn them, at least immediately.

In the same line, Povenelli argues that "every arrangement installs its own possible derangements and rearrangements. The otherwise is these immanent derangements and rearrangements" (Povinelli 2014). Becoming otherwise is critical in that it affirms potentials derangements and rearrangements that constantly reconfigure a given arrangement's boundaries as they struggle to define inside and outside. This echoes Donna Haraway's approach, which simultaneously affirms both "radical constructivism" and "feminist critical empiricism" (1988, 580). "To be an 'inappropriate/d other' means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality," Haraway writes; it is to be "in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality—as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination" (ibid., 299). To become "slightly off" and critical is not to become the wholly other, but an "*inappropriate/d* other" who does not reflect the domination by inversing it or subverting it. Instead, an "*inappropriate/d* other" extends the tentacles to connect with others to explore possibilities that are beyond dominant imaginations and structures of power. Non-oppositional criticality does not rely on a dialectical logic. Instead, it explores, experiments with, and embodies possibilities for living, relating, and learning otherwise that are not offered by existing systems (whether they be capitalist authoritarian or capitalist democratic). In my book, the point of reference is China's political system.

This system may be authoritarian, but the restrictions that it imposes are not entirely clear, which means that there are some spaces in which different voices and practices can arise (Repnikova 2017; Han 2018).

The fact that criticality avoids negativity and opposition does not mean that it affirms the legitimacy of dominant structures. On the contrary, it disputes such legitimacy, not by opposing it, but by making space for otherwise practices that slightly deviate from prevailing norms. These practices are not entirely different: that would mean radical exteriority and otherness. This brings me back to Derrida. Biesta and Stams write that

> deconstruction is an affirmation of what is wholly other (*tout autre*), of what is unforeseeable from the present ... It is from this concern for what is totally other, a concern to which Derrida sometimes refers as justice, that deconstruction derives its right to be critical, its right to deconstruct. (2001, 68)

In quoting this passage, I do not mean to equate non-oppositional criticality with radical exteriority; attempts to move outside a system are critical, although it is impossible to totally leave a system behind.

> Derrida makes the insightful point that "justice remains, is yet, to come, *à venir,* the very dimension of events is irreducibly to come. It will always have it, this *à-venir,* and always has. Perhaps it is for this reason that justice, insofar as it is not only a juridical or political concept, opens up for l'avenir the transformation, the recasting or refounding of law and politics. (Derrida, 1992, 27)

This does not mean that criticality has no hope of achieving change. This form of justice is critical because it is not set in opposition to certain form of injustice. Rather, it goes hand-in-hand with radical exteriority. We can approach this radically exterior justice, which is always still to come, by venturing slightly off the prevailing system.

At the theoretical level, my book aims to explore and articulate the different modes of non-oppositional criticality manifested in socially engaged art practices. This task has become only more urgent as the Chinese authorities' grip on civic space and civil society has tightened under the current president, rendering confrontational approaches increasingly dangerous. I present four forms of non-oppositional criticality: *reconfigurative criticality, connective criticality, uneasy criticality*, and *quotidian criticality*. Although I elaborate on each of these modes in their respective chapters, in what follows I briefly introduce each concept,the case studies through which I explored them, and the methods that I used to do so.

CHAPTER ONE

Fluvial encounters: criticality, urbanity, and social engagement

This chapter tells the fluvial encounters between non-oppositional criticality with discourses of critical art in China (especially those that address urbanisation in China) and socially engaged art. These encounters explain the follows. How do the socially engaged art projects at stake in this study stand in relation to Chinese critical art more widely since 1970s? How is my book situated in relation to the broader discourses on the arts in urbanising China? How does my concept of non-oppositional criticality differ from what has been called “spectral criticality” in Chinese contemporary art? What is its relationship to forms of publicness in China? What characterises the landscape of socially engaged art in China? What are the main global narratives of socially engaged art and how is my book positioned in relation to these?

Four turning points of critical art in China

In this section I will discuss four turning points in the flowing history of critical contemporary art in China. Since the central problematic running through this book is that of criticality, as embodied in socially engaged art in China, my concern here is to describe events and movements that have shaped the landscape of critical art in China. Four are especially relevant to my topic. Although they will be discussed chronologically, the preceded period did not necessarily lead to next one. They are rather rivulets in the landscape of critical art.

The first is the Stars Group's exhibitions and protests in 1979, which are considered to have been significant in catalysing contemporary art in China.[21] In mounting a critique of conservative art institutions and politics, the work of the Stars Group was bound up with waves of cultural liberalisation and democracy movements in China. The second is the 1985 New Wave, which culminated in the *China Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989. The mid to late 1980s were seen as an exciting period, in which artists broke free from restrictions and experimented with Western modern and contemporary arts practice. They also addressed Chinese political contexts and drew on traditional Chinese thought and practice.[22] The third is the emergence of performance art in the 1990s. Some of these practices engaged with societal issues and social spaces. As such, performance art can be seen as the precursor of socially engaged art[23] in China. As part of this broad movement, mail art was radically marginal and anti-institutional in adopting a directly oppositional form of critique. The fourth is an exhibition titled *Fuck off*, which was held in Shanghai in 2000. In the global art scene, the show was revered as a critical and shocking showcase of Chinese contemporary art. Indeed, in breaking taboos and challenging moral limits, the exhibited artworks demonstrated another form of oppositional critique.

At least to some extent, these four events stand as critiques of official art institutions, the dominant political system, and prevailing discourses and approaches in the art world. In this section, I will show these critiques were, in large part, oppositional in characters, although they sometimes compromised with the authorities. This emphasis on opposition has influenced how people think of critical art in China. Thanks to these precedents, the predominant view today is that critical art opposes, that it rebels against the powers or dominant orders. This is the perspective from which this book deviates.

21. See Wu (1999, 17-18),Gladston (2014, 93-104).
22. See Wu (1999, 17-22), Gladston (2014, 105-164).
23. Mail art began in the 1960s when artists sent postcards inscribed with poems or drawings through the post rather than exhibiting or selling them through conventional commercial channels. (see https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/mail-art)

The Stars Group

The Stars Group's actions in 1979 can be seen not only as breaking away from the kinds of practice that were allowed by the state, but as a means of fighting for freedom of expression in art and democracy. In 1978, just after the end of Cultural Revolution, a period of reform and opening up began in China. That same year, "a small democratic movement reopened the old question of how a powerful government might be reconciled with the exercise of influence from below" (Nathan, 2012, xiii). Students and factory workers launched poster campaigns and underground journals to push forward an anti-authoritarian and anti-bureaucratic movement (Stars Group, 2010). Among these underground journals was the influential Today, which counted some members of the Stars Group among its editors.

Cultural practitioners in China were inspired by both modern Western writers and artists, such as Coleridge and Picasso, and traditional Chinese literature that had been banned during Cultural Revolution, such as the *Classics of Mountains and Seas* [山海經] and Verses of Chu [楚辭].[24] Although they were inspired by these sources, they also aspired to find their own ways of expressing thought and feeling through art (Zang, 2014). Zhang Xudong argues that although these developments appear to take the form of a dialogue between East and West, this belies a more significant internal narrative: namely, that of China's continuous efforts to grapple with its own broken traditions, unfinished utopia, and ongoing crises and dilemmas (Wang, 1998, 210). Despite these efforts, which go back to the turbulent beginning of the twentieth century, official art institutions remained as rigid and authoritative as ever (Lv, 2013, 1044).

Without much institutional support, some writers and painters, most of whom also worked in factories, sought to organise an exhibition at the gallery of the Beijing Art Association in 1979. Although their proposal was accepted, the gallery's full schedule dictated that the exhibition be postponed by a year. The artists, however, wanted to display their works as soon as possible. Accordingly, they decided to put on an open-air exhibition on 27 September 1979. Works were hung on the iron fence surrounding a small garden adjoining the National Art Gallery (Lv, 2013, 1046). More than 150 oil paintings, ink and wash paintings, pen drawings, woodcut prints, and carved wooden statues were exhibited, attracting considerable attention, including works from full-time artists (ibid.). From 1980, the group began calling themselves the Stars Group (星星画会). In so doing, they may have been critically opposing themselves to the Red Sun (红太阳), a term used to refer to Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution.

24. *The Classic of Mountains* is a Chinese classic text, and a compilation of mythic geography, (mythic) fauna and flora, witchcrafts, shamanism, mythologies and so on. Verses of Chu or Chu Ci is an anthology of Chinese poetry traditionally attributed mainly to Qu Yuan and Song Yu from the Warring States period (ended 221 BC). However, about half of the poems seem to have been composed several centuries later, during the Han dynasty.

The group included Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Yan Li, Wang Keping, Zhong Acheng, Li Shuang, and Ai Weiwei. The works deviated from socialist realism, which was authorised by the state (Zheng, 2012a, 1). Indeed, the artworks exhibit a variety of styles (including expressionism, abstraction, and absurdism, to name but a few) and feature motifs concerned individual feelings, love, and sex, alongside political symbolism.

On the second day of the exhibition, the local police requested that the artworks to be taken down. Still, the artists persisted with the exhibition. On the third day, the police accused them of “disturbing the mass’s normal life and social order” and shut the exhibition down (Stars Group 2010). On 1 October 1979, the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the PRC, the artists sued Dongcheng District Police. What is more, they staged what they called a “Demonstration to Uphold the Constitution”, which they marched from the Xidan Democracy Wall to the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China. This protest demanded freedom of expression (including in the arts) and democratic rights. After negotiations, which were mediated by the semi-official Artists Association, the Starts show was permitted to continue in the Huafang Pavilion in Beihai Park (Zheng, 2012a, 3).

A second Stars exhibition took place in the National Art Gallery in August 1980, attracting more than 80,000 visitors (ibid.). For Zheng Bo, these shows were put on in the pursuit of publicness. Artists and their allies, Zheng suggests, strove to establish free expression in public for both individual citizens and collectives, so that issues of common concern could be defined and addressed (2012a, 6).

Figure 7
p.345

By experimenting in modernist art, the Stars Group liberated themselves from established approaches to the arts, which served official politics. Furthermore, their direct protest calling for democracy and freedom accounted to an oppositional critique.
That said, the Stars exhibition was also critical in a less oppositional way. It was the first time, since 1949, that self-taught artists acted as an unauthorised collective in public space, outside of art institutions. Arguably the exhibition was preceded by independent literature magazines, which had already reached out to not only the literati, but the general public too. Nonetheless, the Stars exhibition was the first such initiative to have been undertaken in public space and to attract passersby as well as professional artists. Without intending to mount a campaign of political mobilisation or public denunciation (such as the Cultural Revolution), the Stars activated public space as a forum for exhibition, expression, and discussion. This form of collective action can also be discerned in some of the projects studied in this research, most obviously in the case of DM-AS (see p257) in the chapter on connective criticality. Still, there are differences. Nowadays, collectives tend to be more fluid and heterogeneous. Moreover, they create public space for self-organisation and civic negotiation – this was the case, for instance, with *Sunset Haircut Booth and Theatre* 44 (see p235) in the chapter on reconfigurative criticality.

1985 New Wave and China/Avant-Garde in 1989

In the 1980s, artists continued along the path forged in the late 1970s and strove for freedom in the artistic domain. As I have mentioned, the decade between 1979 and 1989 was marked by reform and modernisation. Translated Western philosophy and literature garnered the attention of many young people in China, including poets and artists. Sartre, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Freud, and Bergson were among artists' favourite thinkers. Different schools of literature (including expressionism, futurism, existentialism, absurdism, and magical realism) inspired new forms of artistic creation.

In 1985, some art critics from Chinese Research Institute of Fine Arts coined the term "New Wave" to describe burgeoning avant-garde movements in various regions of China at the time. These movements spanned various artistic fields, from literature (both prose and poetry), film, and to art and music. Artists gathered to experiment with different strands of modern art, including abstraction, dadaism, surrealism, and pop art (Kong, 2009, 34). This theory-inspired approach to artistic creation, which characterised Chinese art in the 1980s, is also evident in the contemporary work of Theatre 44 (see p. 345). This group's practices, however, are inspired not by modernist thought by rather by the situationists, as well as Deleuze and Guattari.

Figure 8
p.345

From 1986, however, official institutions made an effort to organise these disparate independent activities into a cohesive "movement" (Grube, 2013). Wu Hung argues that the '85 New Wave movement's "modern" identity and agenda appears to be a theoretical construct articulated by its leading academics; the actual movement was much more complex and diverse (2011, 7). Although many avant-garde artists worked within the painterly repertoire of Euro-American modernisms (Grube, 2013), others deviated from this. Notable in this regard, the Southern Artists Salon was established in Guangzhou in March 1986. Instead of pursuing experimentation in Modernist art, this group focused on making contemporary art that connected to its surrounding social and cultural environment (Wang and Yung, 2008, 4).[25]

Although it only lasted for one year (1986-1987), the Southern Artists Salon gathered young people from a wide range of different disciplines, including philosophy, social science, film studies, science, and dance (Wang and Yung, 2008). The Salon did not have a fixed location. Still, the group met to read philosophy, discuss

25. The key figure in the Southern Artists Salon, artist Wang Du, attended the Zhuhai Meeting (85 New Wave Large Scale Slide Show and Conference) in which the representatives of the artist groups presented their artworks in slides. Interestingly, Wang stated: "in my opinion, modern art is the type of art at the beginning of the (20th) century, and it's not what we should talk about now. If there's someone who doesn't know about modern art, he can go home and make up the missed lessons by himself. If we take modern art as the main topic of our discussion today and mislead so many exciting young artists, that would be too ridiculous!". He later pointed out that artists were contemporary beings and thus should make contemporary art, which should relate to the society and cultural environment (D. Wang & Yung, 2008).

radical scientific research, exchange ideas across disciplinary divisions, and break the boundaries of different art forms. They produced art works that mixed painting, sculpture, dance, music, and performance art.

Their first exhibition, which presented collectively created experiments, was held in 1986 (Lin and Wu, 2013). The interdisciplinary, multimedia, and experimental work of Southern Artists Salon demonstrated a critical turn towards the contemporary in Chinese art during in 1980s.

In 1986, a meeting took place in Zhuhai in southern China, at which artists and critics discussed the artworks presented in slides sent from all around China. The participants wanted to deepen their exploration of emerging art movements. To that end, they resolved to organise a national exhibition of modern art (Lv, 2013, 1182). The exhibition, which was hosted by the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, opened on 5 February 1989. It displayed 297 artworks by 186 officially selected artists (this count does not include a few happenings and performance pieces by unselected artists that took place during the opening (Ma 2007).

The exhibition was a deliberate effort to legitimise avant-garde art in the 1980s by presenting it to the public in an official national institution. Although it was not entirely inclusive, it tried to showcase different trends that had set in in Chinese art since the emergence of New Wave.[26] The show featured some provocative works that reacted critically to prominent issues in Chinese culture and society. With biting humour, Huang Yongping's installation The History of Chinese Art and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes (1987) commented on the struggles and possibilities thrown up by merging Eastern and Western artistic traditions. This had been a topic of experiment and debate since late 1970s.

Figure 9
p.346

There were also unannounced performance art pieces, such as Wu Shanzhuan's Big Business (1989), in which the artist sold prawns in the museum. In mimicking the commercialisation of society, this work would prove prescient given the two decades of market expansion to come. Another intervention was made by Xiao Lu in front of her installation Dialogue (1989). The installation was made up of two telephone booths, one of which contained the image of a woman with her back to the viewer, the other featuring the image of a man. A telephone's earpiece dangled before a mirror standing between the booths. Taking up a pistol, Xiao shot her own reflection in the mirror twice.[27] This work, she explained, was about her personal emotions and relationship (Hu, 2011). As such, it had nothing to do with politics, although others interpreted it as an artistic reflection of political

26. However, the contemporary art practices in the south were not sufficiently presented in the exhibition.

27 . After the first gunshot, the artist she liked back then, Tang Song, who had known about her plan and who was on the scene, yelled "another shot!". He was arrested; later, she surrendered herself to the police and claimed that this was her artwork. Y et art critics considered the work as authored by both of them. (Hu, 2011)

unrest in the time. It was seen as “the closing ceremony of avant-garde art”, which “pushed avant-garde art towards the critical point: the limit of the new concepts and new forms that avant-garde artists imposed on society” (Li, 2000, 254)

Figure 10
p.346

The exhibition was shut down for two days due to Xiao’s performance. After a second closure, it reopened for a few more days[28]. The performances that accompanied it drew attention from the media both at home and abroad, triggering heated debates about avant-garde art in China. Gao Minglu, one of the exhibition’s organisers, commented that:

> compared to the works in 1985 New Wave, the art works in the show were less serious, and performances were rather absurd, and more Dadaist … the roughness is due to the mental state [of the artists] … This exhibition, facing the society and the fine art world, it creates a tragic atmosphere, and it presents a rogue mentality [流氓意识]. It plummets from heroism and a sense of tragedy to a condition of life that resembles the Chinese Dionysian spirit in Red Sorghum. (Quoted in Lv, 2013, 1188)[29]

According to Wu Hung:

> First, although it included many works that were radical and even shocking, the notion of a comprehensive, ‘national’, exhibition was traditional and, ironically, found its immediate origin in the official National Art Exhibitions. Second, although its organisers gave much thought to the location of this exhibition, there was little discussion about how to change the system of art exhibition in China. (2008a, 158)

These passages indicate that, on the one hand, the exhibition epitomised the liberal, individualist spirit of experimental artistic practices in 1980s. In this, the works reflected the tragedy of contemporaneous democratic movements. On the other hand, though, it did not refresh the art system. Instead, it betrayed a wish to enter official art institutions and to be recognised by the authorities.

Some of the works in the exhibition responded to social and political issues of the time, such as commercialisation and China’s political relationship with the United

28. The second closure was caused by the anonymous bomb that was sent to the museum, the municipal government, and Beijing Public Security Bureau.

29. Red Sorghum is a 1988 Chinese film about a young woman’s life working on a distillery for sorghum liquor. It is based on the novel Red Sorghum Clan by Nobel laureate Mo Yan.

States. This aspect of the show can be compared with current socially engaged art projects, which tackle sensitive social issues. These resonances are brought into focus by the following passage by Paul Gladston:

> Avant-garde art produced within the PRC since the 1980s can thus be understood to occupy a highly indeterminate position in relation to t he prevailing socio-political/economic mainstream within the PRC; one in which it has shuttled continually. ... The relationship between public political discourse and artistic practice in the PRC may then be described as a fundamentally entangled and highly context dependent one, in which the latter is (in much the same way as the scholar-gentry art that preceded it) simultaneously complicit with and a recognised site of largely oblique moral-critical resistance to established political authority (2016a, 113).

For Gladston, arts practices that antagonise and critique official art institutions are simultaneously complicit with and resistant to the authorities.

Experimental art and mail art in the 1990s

The reforms of the 1990s brought about unprecedented changes in China's economy, politics, and culture. Chinese society was transformed: having been in thrall to communist ideology, it now embraced consumerism. Art's responsibilities, and the social problems that it faced, were shifting (Liang, 2007, 4). Performance art in China emerged in late 1980s. In late 1980s and in the 1990s the genre flourished. "Performance art", Hentyle Yapp proposes, "is a site that involves locating the body at a particular historical moment, physical space, and aesthetic experience. As such, this art form provides the opportunity to not simply reflect on politics, but also to shape its contours" (2013). With this in mind, I now introduce some performance artworks and one mail art project that critically reflected on and reacted to society and politics.

According to artist Zhuang Hui, the environment for art deteriorated in the wake of the suppression of democratic movements in 1989. Initiated by the Communist Party in 1986, the anti-capitalist liberalisation program had culminated in bloodshed in 1989. All artworks made after 1985 that were once perceived as modernist were now deemed to be cultural artefacts of Western capitalist liberalisation and thus suppressed. The art world was silent (Xu and Zhuang 2014). Zhuang Hui recounts how he and other artists "organised a performance art project named *Serving People* (1992), in which we went to the rural area to screen films for farmers, and put up a huge slogan 'Serving People'

in the square of the village" (ibid.). Dressing themselves in the same clothes, they were immediately noticed by the police. In the same evening, they were investigated by police and their homes searched. They were released the following day (ibid.). Zhuang's reaction to the suffocating cultural environment in Chinese society drew on the official socialist narrative of the Mao's era, which was a non-oppositional strategy to make space for art to tackle cultural and social issues.

According to art historian Wu Hung:

> in the mid- to late 1990s, as the marketisation of Chinese avant-garde art became possible, artists began to stop regarding official recognition as the ultimate objective of their endeavours. Instead, the 'inner circle' came into being and took its place. As art dealers, galleries, curators, and art critics constituted every sector of the new ecology, designating 'artists' as such was the result of a 'collaborative' process (2010, 309).

The inner circle and art market were not necessarily inclusive. Indeed, the market did not encompass artists working outside the main centres of art, such as Beijing.

Figure 11
p.346

Another critical performance was Lin Yilin's Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road (1995). In this action, Lin built a wall out of bricks across Lin He Road in Guangzhou, a busy main road leading to train station. One by one, he stacked the bricks on top of one another until the wall blacked the width of the road. This took him ninety minutes. Reflecting on the performance, the curator Hou Hanru writes:

> hours of labour rendered the commonplace brick into a moving wall, but this moving wall itself was like a surprising monster that interrupted and intercepted the busy traffic ... this unexpected interruption created a void in the busy and dense city. If the rapid changes to the cityscape and people's busier lives are due to the demands of economic growth, the temporary 'hollowness' created by Lin is the moment when people in the metropolis contemplate what has changed inside them (Hou, 2016).

Lin's performance/intervention reacted to the transformation of the city by interrupting the urban flow by building a brick wall – the very symbol of construction and development. In this way he temporally transformed a space usually dedicated to traffic into a site of performance and reflection.

In the 1990s Lin was the member of a group of four Guangzhou-based artists named the Big Tail Elephants. Three members (Lin included) had been part of the Southern Artists Salon in mid 1980s. Unlike other artists groups of the time, which had a centralised structure, the Big Tail Elephants consciously opted for a dispersed and non-hierarchical approach. As such, the group "had a strong anarchistic inclination" (Philip Tarini quoted in Fu, 2017). As one of its members, Chen Shaoxiong (1962-2016), put it:

> we must guarantee each member's independence and rights. When we chatted with each other, we knew that in artists' groups such as the Southern Artists Salon, there were some leaders who had great energy, whose art was great, but this would lead to the loss of some other members' individuality, which was the thing that we Big Tail Elephants wanted to secure. We had the one vote veto rule because of that (Chen Shaoxiong quoted in Fu, 2017).

This structure constituted a form of criticality in that the group cut against the contemporaneous trend towards centralisation. Instead, in organising themselves they adopted Derridean anarchy.

Another artist who felt rejected by the "inner circle" in Beijing, Datong-born Zhang Shengquan mounted strong critique of institutionalism in his experimental art practices and in works of mail art. First, he edited and printed ideas and sketches for art installations and performances, along with his poems, notes of art and proposals for other projects in the form of a thirteen-page periodical. He then produced fifty copies of the periodical, and mailed them to important artists and critics in major cities (Zhu 2016). In 1997, he wrote the Confession Manifesto, in which he states: "from 1 July 1997, anybody can realise any of my sketches and ideas or alter them as they will; the authorship belongs to whoever realises it first" (Zhang quoted in Zhu 2016). He radically denounced the exclusivity and enclosure of artistic circles, in addition to the conception of the artist as author of art and artworks. He also rejected that art is simply a commercial product authored and produced by the artist.

30. In the Chinese context, the term "public relationship ladies" (公关小姐) is associated with prostitution.

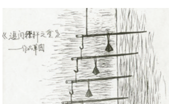


Figure 12
p.346

Fuck Off (2000)

On 4 November 2000, an exhibition titled *Fuck Off* in English and *Uncooperative Approach* (不合作方式) in Chinese took place in a warehouse near Suzhou Creek in the suburbs of Shanghai. It coincided with the first official contemporary art biennale in China, the Shanghai Biennale in 2000. In this exhibition, which was curated by Ai Weiwei and art

critic and curator Feng Boyi, artists presented all kinds of visceral work under the pretext of art (Berghuis, 2004, 712). In comparison with the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, *Fuck Off* broke taboos in more daring ways. A censored piece by Xu Tan named Reconstruction Project for NO.14 Sanyu Road (1995) presented photographs that suggested a man and woman having sexual intercourse alongside with photos of the building of NO.14 Sanyu Road, and a sketch of the reconstruction plan for this building. He An's work *Fifteen Reasons for Fashion No. 2: Hurt* (2000) featured a half-naked woman displaying a wound on her thigh. A description to one side stated: "the parts chosen to bear the wounds: abdomen and leg; the types of the wounds chosen: burn and knife wound; favourite entertainment: Ecstasy and Meth; profession: Ms. PR" (He 2000, 47).[30] Yang Zhichao's Planting Grass (2000) involved two young nurses planting three stalks of young grass onto the artist's back. The performance took place without anaesthetic (Berghuis 2004, 711-712).

The most controversial work of the exhibition was a performance titled *Eating People* (2000) by Zhu Yu, which was often referred to as "Eating Baby". According to theatre maker Zhao Chuan, who was present at the exhibition's opening, Eating People was not actually displayed, although it was included in the catalogue (Zhao, 2010). Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's installation Killing Soul (2000) featured a fierce dog that had been embalmed under an intense spotlight. Smoke emanated from its head due to the temperature generated by the light.

There were some unsettling works by female artists. Cao Fei's video Chain (2000), which drew upon the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and subcultures, focused on fleshliness and organs. Chen Lingyang's work Hanging Scroll (1999) was comprised of a long scroll of toilet paper stained with her menstrual blood. Gladston characterises these two works as "neo avant-garde attempts both to transgress and to question the legitimacy of established moral boundaries" (2016b, 129). Much the same could be said of other works in the show, not least Zhu Yu's.

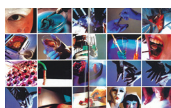


Figure 13
p.347

These provocative and daring works expressed the organisers' critical and resistant attitude. In the curatorial statement, they claimed that:

> in today's art, the 'otherwise' is playing the role of revising and criticising the discourse of power and mass convention. In an uncooperative and uncompromisable way, it self-consciously resists the threat of assimilation and vulgarisation. ... Such a cultural attitude is obviously exclusive and alienated. It aims at dealing with such themes as cultural power, art institutions, artistic trends, communication between the East and West, exoticism, post-modernism and post-colonialism, etc. (Ai and Feng 2000, 9).
> Feng Boyi further clarified their position in an interview: "Do not cooperate with contemporary mainstream trends in China," he said, "do not cooperate with the established

> structure of today's art world, do not cooperate with the Western standard" (Ai et al., 2001). By presenting this uncooperative stance to the authorities and trendy discourses circulating in the art world, *Fuck Off* positioned itself as a transgressive otherwise form of exhibition. It was considered as a piece of " iconoclastic posturing [that] not only stole the limelight from the official Biennial, but also significantly contributed to the counter-exhibition's legacy as a provocative albeit conflicted phenomenon, both posited against and symptomatic of this new age of internationalism" (Teo 2012, 176).

Interestingly, for all their radical and critical posturing, the organisers including the curators Ai and Feng, the Australian Chinese director of the Eastlink Gallery Li Liang, and participating artists confirmed that the exhibition had conducted self-censorship or "self-inspection" (自我监控) before the exhibition opened (Berghuis, 2004: 718). This compromise can be seen as a strategy to save the exhibition from being shut down, at least before its opening. Still, complaints from some visitors and reports about the live performance *Planting Grass* (2000) led to a police crackdown of the exhibition. (ibid.).

Reflecting on the criticality at stake in this exhibition, Wu Hung questions what "other-wise" it had put forward, beyond their organisers' self-positioning, attitude, and verbal assertions (2008a, 183). Indeed, there was no real confrontation between the Biennale and *Fuck Off* found in the artworks which were shown– neither did they pursue stylistic and ideological solidarity (Wu 2008a, 183). For Zhao Chuan, *Fuck Off* (2000) was the last breath of the "radical" art movement that began in the late 1970s:

> The distinctive features of this kind of exhibition in the 1990s included refusing to be involved in a conventional exhibiting system, risking being cut short or closed down for their radical approaches, proclaiming their status as the avant-garde with radical actions and gestures, and having difficulties with spaces and funding (Zhao, 2010).

Fuck Off put forward critiques in an oppositional manner. Resisting mainstream ap-proaches and established centres of authority in the art system, it focused instead on the otherwise and provocative. As such, it continued the legacy of the avant-garde. Some of the artworks were visually or viscerally shocking, while others challenged social taboos and moral boundaries. On a practical level, however, the exhibition played by the rules.

Echoing Zhao, fuck-off marks the departure point of how avant-garde attitudes and its critical discourse have been abandoned by artists as socially engaged practitioners.

Art and Criticality in China

In this section, I will discuss the entanglements of art and criticality in China.
They are like creeks meandering into social responsibility and engagement,
experimental art, publicness, socially engaged art, and communist legacy.

Art's sociological turn and critical art

In the early to mid 2000s, some art critics called for a sociological turn in Chinese art in China, by which they meant that contemporary art should delve into social issues and take social responsibility. It should be said that there were precursors for this turn towards the social. One was Yin Xiuzhen, whose art addressed issues such as water pollution in the 1990s. Nonetheless, by 2000s critics were calling for art that oriented towards society. One of the key figures in this was Li Gongming, who argued that contemporary art should reflect upon and critique affairs in the public sphere. Artists, he proposed, should exercise the function of the intellectual and shoulder their share of responsibility in addressing social issues (Li, 2003). As intellectuals, artists were to take ethical stances, intervene publicly in issues affecting the lower rungs of the social ladder, and fight for justice and equality. Li called on artists to deploy sociological methods, frameworks and theories in their practices to examine power structure, social mechanism, class interests, equal rights, procedural justice, and moral system in the society (Li ,2005, 149).

Figure 14
p.347

> In terms of art's function, contemporary art's sociological turn emphasises art's intervention and interference in society and that contemporary art should care for social reality and have the courage to confront it and tackle social issues. (Sun and Lu, 2006, 7).

The sociological turn is a call for art and artists to use art to engage with society in the public sphere. It is a call to regard art as a form of political and moral action that intervenes in society. Although these theorists do not use the term "socially engaged art", these calls can be seen as advocating the kinds of practice that go under that rubric.

Alongside callings for a "sociological turn", another concept is often used to promote art that tackles social issues—"critical art", which has been put forward by the curator, artist, and theorist Wang Nanming. Wang stress how critical art triggers public discussion. Critical art, he suggests, is a form of civic politics:

> Artistic participation constitutes one of the many forms of participation and seeks to enrich multiple dimensions of social democracy. Participation as such also rejects grand narratives and pays attention to the daily experience and practice of ordinary people, and issues of their concerns and problems related to their civic rights. (2011, 251)

"The practice and theory of artists as social workers", he expands elsewhere, "lifts art to a boundless field, in which art could penetrate into every aspect of society" (Wang 2013, 3). Drawing on the repertoire of their training, artists might invent grounded strategies for bringing about social change (ibid., 1-2). Wang makes the insightful point that, as a form of civic politics, critical art opposed a "politics of centralism" – which involves rapid top-down change – "by emphasising the diversity and triviality of politics" (2011, 251-252).

Socially engaged art and oppositional criticality

Socially engaged art in China addresses various issues, including environmental protection (as in Yin Xiuzhen's *Washing the River*, 1995) social problems following earthquakes (as in Ai Weiwei's *Nian*, 2008), the human rights of Foxconn workers (as in Li Liao's *Consumption*, 2013), and urbanisation (as in the collective project *Everyone's East Lake,* 2010). Although these practices are not antagonistic, they are still critical with respect to issues of concern. In global art discourse, however, Ai Weiwei is often heroised as the Chinese critical artist, fearlessly confronting the authoritarian state in his antagonistic

works. The oppositional criticality that characterises some of his works, however, is not the only form of criticality on offer in socially engaged art in China. What is more, Ai's strategies are not always confrontational.

William A. Callahan sheds light on Ai Weiwei's seemingly confrontational and critical practices by identifying the artist's four narrative personas. First, "Ai the Heroic Warrior", who criticises the Chinese government. Second, "Ai the Court Jester", who plays with the Chinese state and Western media. Third, "Ai the Middleman", who acts as a broker between China and the West, young and old people, and civil society and the state. Fourth, "Ai the Citizen Intellectual", who variously works with and against the state, but always for the good of China (Callahan ,2014). As Callahan shows, Ai is only critical in an oppositional sense when in assumes the role of the heroic warrior. Yet, to a large extent, this guide has come to define the predominant impression of critical Chinese art. This makes exploring non-oppositional critical practices by less-knower artists and collectives only more crucial.

31. *Washing the River*: in August 1995, on Fu and Nan Rivers (Jin River), Yin Xiuzhen made ten cubic meters of river water into ice and placed it on the street. She invited passersby to wash the ice. When the ice blocks finally melted away, sludge remained on the ground, which reminded people of water pollution (*A Wall Project* ,2020).

Nian: On April 24, 2010 at 00:51, Ai Weiwei (@aiww) started a Twitter campaign to commemorate students who perished in the earthquake in Sichuan on May 12, 2008. 3,444 friends from the Internet delivered voice recordings, the names of 5, 205 perished were recited 12,140 times (Ai, 2010).

Consumption: Li Liao worked in an assembly-line, making iPads, and forty-five days later, he used his wages to buy one. As an exhibit, he put the iPad on a pedestal, tacked up his uniform and badges, and framed his contract (Osnos, 2013).

Establishing the theoretical interlocutions:
Non-oppositionality, critical art, and publicness

This subsection reviews some scholarly works that broach the criticality at stake in Chinese contemporary art. Paul Gladston writes that in contemporary China,

> It is simply not possible, as recent events surrounding the detention and effective silencing of Ai Weiwei amply demonstrate, to sustain any sort of public anti-authoritarian artistic practice, or to avoid the recuperation of such practices by the State. As a consequence, the vast majority of artists working either eschew any form of critical art or pursue forms of artistic criticality that are in plain sight of and do not take up definitively oppositional/seditionary positions in relation to governmental authority. (2016a, 113)

Art practices that directly confront and critique the authoritarian regime, Gladston suggests, are risky and unviable. It should be said, though, that Gladston's definition of

artistic criticality is based on the opposition of right and wrong. This is based on the idea that critique, as I noted in the introduction, is what Foucault calls: "a police and where it is incapable of making the law" (2015, 36). This study deviates from this understanding of criticality. Instead, I investigate forms of criticality that are not oppositional or seditious.

Given that Gladston thinks that oppositional criticality in art cannot present itself directly, he focuses on how some works and practices manifest what he terms "spectral criticality". Artworks that exhibit this form of criticality find knowing ways of making critical propositions, rather than assuming an oppositional stance outright. They affirm the possibility of difference within Chinese society, without making obvious reference to the country's crisis-laden recent past (Gladston, 2016a, 114). In making this point, Gladston analyses photographs by a pair of artists who name themselves Birdhead. These images, he argues, display spectral criticality, which is, by turns, present and absent. In this way, he "affirms the possibility of a 'radically critical' play intersecting immanently/intermittently with rather than in conspicuous opposition to prevailing discursive conditions within the PRC" (ibid.). Spectral criticality, he expands, occupies "a position of problematic discursive entanglement with established political authority" (2016a, 115). This type of artwork is elite, market friendly, relational, related to sub- and supra-national identities, and non-antagonistic (ibid.). In these non-oppositional approaches, Gladston sees "the potential to channel long-term effects of saprophytic socio-political decomposition and displacement in contrast to the all too easily recuperable antagonism espoused by Ai Weiwei" (2016a, 115). By this he means that this form of non-oppositional criticality, in the long run, might shift discursive conditions in China. In this shift, ideologies that promote a homogenous national identity and patriotism might be overtaken by discourses of local identity and place boundedness. Eventually, the solidity of such ideas might dissolve altogether.

Spectral criticality, however, does not ground and involve people. As its name suggests, it rather haunts and hovers. It avoids not only opposition to dominant powers, but also concrete engagement with social issues on the ground. The non-oppositional critical practices explored in this study, by contrast, do not engage in a critical play with dominant discourses and the political authorities. Nor do they present themselves to the art market. In adopting non-oppositional modes of criticality, these socially engaged practices do not decompose and displace, but reconfigure, nurture, and connect.

Quoting Sean Cubitt, Robin Peckham sees politics as "a site that determines the boundaries of a system and the exclusion of other objects from the same rather than a question of the status of objects within this system" (2012, 252). He argues that:

> an understanding of criticality – not, it should be noted, the activity of critique but rather the qualities of the category of the critical – might emerge to differentiate between the political and the critical, proposing criticality as a core aspect of contemporary cultural practice that focuses on the hyperreal, a lived reshuffling of what

might have once, in pre-Althusserian times, been called the superstructure. (ibid.)

For Peckham, the criticality of some Chinese contemporary artworks lies in the difference between politics and critique. This difference is manifested in the creation of a potently ambiguous hyperreal, which deviates from dominant systems. Peckham's articulation of criticality moves away from oppositionality in political critique, institutional critique, and the art world's critique of political and social power structures. He sees criticality as simultaneously political and apolitical (2012, 261). Peckham's approach, however, focuses largely on artistic languages and object-oriented ontologies in relation to artworks that do not directly engage with social issues and sometimes even exclude human relationships. This book, in contrast, does not see art's engagement with society as a form of politics. My articulation of criticality emphasises art's non-oppositional mode of addressing social problems and the relationships that this facilitates both among people and between people and places.

Bright Hopfener reflects on the understanding of critique in European philosophies such as Kant's and Foucault's, and she departs from this notion of criticality as "confrontational and oppositional questioning of authority in order to reach autonomy" (2012, 204). In analysing moving-image installations by two Chinese artists (Zhang Peili and Wang Gongxin), Hopfener contends that both artists "seem to critically negotiate criticality between a European genealogy of dualistic critique as outlined by Foucault and an involved or embodied criticality that implies critique not outside but inside, as criticality of 'reality' as lived" (2012, 205). For her, criticality is about "confusing and dis-harmonising certain cosmic structures or societal hierarchies" (2012, 204).

In a similar vein, in setting out my conception of non-oppositional criticality I have referred to Irit Rogoff's notion of "embodied criticality". Also, Hopfener reflects on criticality by ways of the relations among reality, lived experience, and video installations. She shows how Zhang's and Wang's works "implicitly propose the concept of the artist and the viewer as embodied participants and constituents of the artwork" (2012, 194). Moving from video art to socially engaged art, I have chosen to mobilise the term "embodied criticality" in investigating embodied actions in this field confuse and trouble the harmony of certain power structures.

Thomas Berghuis contends that experimental art in China in the 1990s and early 2000s, and above all performance art, sought to both demystify and politicise art. In positioning itself as a means of initiating direct public action, art became a vehicle for social recognition. What is more, artists were motivated by a desire to bring about a new social consciousness of the challenges to be faced by Chinese society in the context of rapid and far-reading social and economic change (Berghuis 2012, 150-151). According to Berghuis, the criticality of experimental art is bound up with publicness. Quoting Adorno, Berghuis argues that "publicness is central to the 'reconstituting [of] political democracy'" (2012, 143). Hence, art becomes critical when it "reclaims public space and organs

of public opinion" (2012, 148). For Berghuis, criticality entails not only an overcoming of the established dominance of ideological consciousness over art within China, but also the deliberate provoking of a social consciousness to address ongoing problems within Chinese politics and society, as well as a blind reliance on humanist principles and their didactic positioning in relation to social and political change in China (2012, 150).

Although it is closely related to publicness, Berghuis's definition of criticality in Chinese experimental art is still caught up in the dialectical logic of critique. Here, art sets out to critique and overcome dominant ideologies in the art world. In seeking to instigate social change, critical art assumes a higher vantage point with respect to what it critiques.

Zheng Bo also urges the importance of publicness to art. His argumentation differs from Berghuis's, however. On Zheng's view, the pursuit of publicness has been a driver behind the development of Chinese contemporary art from the avant-garde art movements in the 1970s onwards (2012, 6-7). Behind the marketisation of art that set in during the 1990s, an undercurrent of practices have been increasingly concerned with publicness and public issues (2012, 8). A number of artists (including Zheng himself) have positioned their work in China's fledging civil society and integrated art and activism (ibid.). Zheng suggests that socially engaged art "may nudge Chinese contemporary art towards a future that is not shaped exclusively by the market and the state but also takes root in a dynamic civil society" (ibid.). The notion of publicness, he proposes, connects the various major concerns that characterise socially engaged art. As the diagram presented as figure 10 indicates, socially engaged art requires three sets of conditions (2012, 9).

For Zheng, in China all public pursuits are both public and counterpublic and Chinese public art features both public and counterpublic strategies (2012, 46). According to Zheng, this is caused by the lack of both guaranteed freedom of expression and a non-state social imaginary around which people can organise (ibid.). I agree that the institutional and legislative conditions that safeguard freedom of expression are lacking in China. In Chapter 2, my analysis of reconfigurative criticality in art is focused on public space, however, I do not draw on Zheng's framework. This is because I have reservations about his premise that in China there is no social imaginary around which people might organise autonomously. As my analysis of *Sunset Haircut Booth* shows, people are capable of organising themselves and deliberating matters of concern in their neighbourhood. Socially engaged art, I claim, can help invigorate and sustain grassroots civic initiatives. It is in this space that criticality emerges.

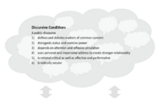


Figure 15
p.353

Whereas Zheng sees the public sphere as an independent space outside of the market and state, in this book I employ Philip Huang's conceptualisation. For Huang, public space (which he terms "third space") is a domain in which state and society negotiate and coexist with one another (1993, 216). The concept of third space allows me to investigate

the non-oppositional criticality at work in how creative practitioners react to surveillance and intervention from above. Specifically, it allows me to recognise the presence of the authorities without then claiming that public spaces are not truly public or reaching for the public/counterpublic dichotomy.

Socially engaged art: the communist legacy and non-oppositionality

One strand of non-oppositional socially engaged art in China can be related to the communist legacy. Art critic, theorist, and curator Wang Chunchen argues that China has solid theoretical and practical traditions of socially interventionist art. In the 1920s, left-wing cultural groups called for "proletarian arts" (Wang, 2010, 15-16). In 1930, the writer Lu Xun put forward the slogan "art for society's sake", urging that "artists must take close heed of the affairs of society" and "spread our ideas" through painting (quoted in Wang 2010,16). In Mao Zedong's speeches on art and literature in Yan'an in 1942, he asserted that the life of the people is the only source for literature and art (Mao 1942).

Like Wang, Tan Chang argues that socially engaged art practices, which first become prominent in China in the 1960s, are explicitly connected to the Marxist-Communist heritage (2012, 177). Chinese artists did not passively receive the legacy of Marxism and Western theories of art, Tan claims; rather, they deciphered and digested their histories, responding critically to theoretical discourse set in motion by avant-gardists in the West (ibid.). A utopian vision of communism is still alive in Chinese contemporary art. In the analysis of *Long March Project–A Walking Visual Display* (2002),[32] quoting John Roberts's article on art and communist imaginary (Roberts, 2009: 367), Tan considers this project invents a new model—a communal art envisioned by Roberts that examines and reflects on community, and extends community across various forms and practices, as an engagement with notions of collectivity and democracy outside their inherited (Socialist and capitalist) state forms (Tan, 2012: 194).[33] DM-AS (see Chapter 3), one of my case studies, also involves the communal. However, its practices neither draw directly on the communist heritage nor adopt a vision of communal art. Instead, it focuses on a series of assemblages, which create connections of different kinds. As I argue later, this is critical at the time in which the authorities severely restrict grassroots organisations.

Figure 16
p.347

Wang Chunchen's book does not only relate contemporary socially engaged practices to the communist past, but it also offers variously stories of artistic interventions in contemporary Chinese society. "As freedom of speech is not fully secured and affirmed in this country," Wang argues, "intervening in society in an artistic way becomes an indirect yet effective way of speaking and communicating" (2010, 26).

Wang argues that these artistic social interventions play a role in the construction of Chinese civil society and democratisation processes, in much the same way as the discourse of the sociological turn of contemporary art and critical art in the 2000s (ibid.). This argument resonates with Zheng's idea that socially engaged art pursues publicness. It also echoes two chapters in this study, both of which treat arts projects that contribute to the development of civil society. Chapter 2 addresses the issue of the lack of public space for civic initiatives in China; chapter 3 looks at the restricted rights of assembly and association.

Also relevant is Wang's view of critique and criticality. Art's uniqueness, he claims, lies not in its didactic function, but in its criticality (2010, 71). The term "intervention", he suggests, is the mildest among "intervention, interference, critique". Although "critique" is the strongest, it is a taboo in China (ibid.). If critique turns into outright opposition in the Chinese context, he warns, it can bring about the brutal destruction of both the critique and those who articulate it: "Any slip in diction could result in making it [critique] the critique of weapons rather than the weapon of critique" (ibid.). The possibility of a crackdown, Wang argues, artistic critique is often carefully disguised and seldom direct (ibid.), despite the fact that the word "criticality" is used frequently in discourses around art. This helps explain why artists turn to non-oppositional strategies: it is a means of avoiding directly criticising the authorities and social problems. Although Wang's case studies are non-oppositional, this is not reflected in his theory. This study, in contrast, is dedicated to shedding some light on non-oppositional criticality.

32. Taking its title from the Chinese Red Army's historical Long March from 1934 to 1936, *Long March—A Walking Visual Display* set out to recreate 20 sites along the 6000-mile historical trek, eventually realizing 12 over the span of 4 months, each composed of site-specific displays and discussions http://longmarchproject.com/category/project/long-march-a-walking-visual-display/ last access 8th March 2019. Works include traditional Chinese ink painting, the Western stand-bys of oil and sculpture, the contemporary norms of conceptual art, performance, video, sound, and site-specific installations, non-art, and so-called "folk" and amateur art. Many of the projects realised on-site during the journey also include workshops, symposiums and special methodologies of *Long March*, namely the authorless or non-art happenings we call Long March installations and Long March events. Participants work together, turning local resources into the international language of contemporary art, and conversely imbuing international art with a local context and significance — making, as the Maoist dictum goes, "art for the people".

https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/library/long-march-a-walking-visual-display last access 8th March 2019

33. Taking its title from the Chinese Red Army's historical Long March from 1934 to 1936, *Long March—A Walking Visual Display* set out to recreate twenty sites along the 6000-mile historical trek, eventually realising twelve over four months, each composed of site-specific displays and discussions (Long March Project, 2002).

Works include traditional Chinese ink painting, oil painting and sculpture, conceptual art, performance, video, sound, and site-specific installations, non-art, and so-called "folk" and amateur art. Many of the projects realised on-site during the journey also include workshops, symposiums, and the authorless or non-art happenings called Long March installations and Long March events. Participants work together, turning local resources into the international language of contemporary art, and conversely imbuing international art with a local context and meaning-making, as the Maoist dictum goes, "art for the people"(Asia Art Archive, 2020)

34. In Jinggang Mountain, one of the most important locations in the history of the Chinese Communist Party, Li Fang made his work Memory of Memory (2002). For his project, Li Fang first formed a long line of straw mats, and on top of them wrote words that remained in his memory from when he was a child. Gradually, he started to incorporate comments from onlookers, which led him to include traffic signs, as well as name brands such as McDonald's. Under the burning sun, Li Fang's calligraphy of propaganda slogans lasted four hours. The artist was completely worn out after the project's completion.

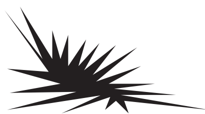
http://longmarchproject.com/en/project/dierzhanjiangxijinggangshan/

Art, visual culture, and urbanising China

A sizeable scholarship could be found addressing the relationship between art and visual culture on the one hand and urbanisation in China in the other. Yomi Braester's book *Painting the City Red* (2010) analyses how film and theatre both shapes and records urban spaces in China and Taiwan since the 1940s. Wu Hung's *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (2013), examines the changing significance of ruins as vehicles for cultural remembrance in Chinese art and visual culture from ancient times up to the present. It attends to an array of traditional and contemporary visual materials, including painting, architecture, photography, prints, and cinema, and looks at urban ruins in the works of the contemporary artists Yin Xiuzhen, Rong Rong, and Zhang Dali.

Wang Meiqin's book *Urbanisation and Contemporary Chinese Art* (2015) attends to eight case studies in exploring artists' provocative responses to different urbanisation processes. Still, it does not foreground socially engaged art. In her new book, *Socially engaged art in China—Voices from Below (*2019), Wang investigates socially engaged art's critical responses to and interventions in China's socioeconomic transformation. Analysing the practices of eight professionals and three interrelated themes (social criticism, place construction, and personal development), Wang suggests that socially engaged art manifests a desire for a civil and just society among Chinese intellectuals. This desire, in turn, shapes socially engaged art. In Part II of the book, Wang investigates the connections among art, urban renewal, and grassroots community building in relation to lifestyle activism. She analyses the practice of Zheng Dazhen, a Quanzhou-based artist and curator turned cultural entrepreneur who, from 2011 onwards, has endeavoured to revitalise an old urban neighbourhood. Specifically, Zheng has tapped into the city government's cultural heritage conservation discourse and promotion of cultural and creative industries (2019, 11).

In an article of 2015, Elizabeth Parke compares scrawled telephone numbers advertising a variety of services to migrant workers in Beijing with contemporary Chinese artworks. Whereas the telephone numbers amount, she claims, to an "unsigned public calligraphic practice", the artworks depict, exploit, and represent migrant workers in order to shed new light on their (in)visbility as the "human infrastructure" of Chinese cities (2015, 226).



The three common global discourses on socially engaged art

Western scholars and artists have theorised and experimented with relational art, participatory art, socially engaged art, and socially engaged art for decades, building upon earlier urban interventions on the part of the Situationist International in the 1960s. I do not intend to summarise the abundant literature on socially engaged art. Rather, to situate my research in relation to global discussions, this section introduces three strands of discourse. Firstly, socially engaged art is presented as a catalyst for social transformation; secondly, participatory or socially collaborative art is seen as a nightmare for democratic systems; and finally, socially engaged art is grasped as a way of imagining sustainable social institutions.

Socially engaged art as a catalyst for social transformation

In 1991 the American artist, writer and educator Suzanne Lacy coined the term "new genre public art" to define instances of public art that were not sculptures in public space, but works of art made in the public interest. The spaces in which such works are situated, Lacy suggests, are "filled with the relationship between artist and audience" (1994, 35). New genre public art has the urge to involve the marginalised social groups and bring people together to deal with key issues of the day (ibid.).

In a similar vein, Grant Kester emphasises how some contemporary artists and art collectives have defined their practice around facilitating dialogue among diverse communities. Kester calls this "dialogical art." Dialogical art, he shows, adopts performative and process-based approaches so as to contrive creative and collaborative encounters and conversations that go well beyond the confines of art institutions (2004, 1). These exchanges can precipitate powerful changes in their participants' consciousness, potentially leading to substantial change in policy or society at large (ibid.). "It's the promise of collaborative aesthetic experience", writes Kester, "to prefigure another set of possibilities, to enact change and not simply represent a priori positions" (2005, 32). Kester also argues that collaborative practices have proliferated since the mid-2000s, as

> part of a cyclical paradigm shift within the field of art, even as the nature of this shift involves an increasing permeability between "art" and other zones of symbolic production (urbanism, environmental activism, social work, etc.) While they may be implicated in forms of collective action that take up an oppositional or antagonistic relationship to particular sites of power, they differentiate this antagonism from the modes of self-reflexive sociality necessary to create solidarity within a given organisational structure. (2011, 65).

Despite the fact that some of his works directly oppose the authorities, Ai Weiwei's practice can be seen as motivated by a similar impulse – namely, to pursue social justice, provoke political reaction, and trigger social change.

In his analysis of performance art, Thomas Berghuis also presumes that socially engaged art has progressive potential and is ethically responsibility. This also applies to some of Wang Chunchen's examples. I am thinking particularly of Guan Shi's project on the former mining town of Baiyin, which sought to trigger reflection and even change (Wang, 2010, 63).

My research partly resonates with this discourse. This goes especially for the case studies that manifest reconfigurative criticality, which reconfigure open spaces such that they become civic public spaces. It also applies to the practices presented in chapter 5 on quotidian criticality. These socially engaged art practices made it possible for people to reclaim quotidian knowledge and effect how it is presented. Yet the practitioners behind these projects never explicitly promised to bring about social change through their projects. What is more, they have deliberately foregone antagonistic critique so as to help garner support among others. Given that in China infrastructural support for socially engaged art is lacking and the political situation unfavourable to civic initiatives, socially engaged art practitioners often find themselves having to negotiate with the authorities. This is necessary if they are to create spaces and social institutions in which civic initiatives can take place.[35]

Socially engaged art as a way of imagining sustainable social institutions

Drawing on the daily lessons learned by theatre ensembles, Shannon Jackson suggests that as an art form theatrical performance has always been cross-disciplinary, duration, and collective, requiring systemic coordination (2011, 14). Accordingly, she explores how art practices contribute to interdependent forms of social imagining. "Whether cast in aesthetic or social terms," she writes, "freedom and expression are not opposed to obligation and care, but in fact depend upon each other" (ibid.).Jackson points out that the debates between Claire Bishop versus others such as Grant Kester and Liam Gillick have stymied critical discussions across art and politics as well as the visual and the theatrical by reifying them as distinct realms and situating artists as either properly critical and antagonistic or complicit.

Jackson suggests moving on from disputes over whether aesthetics or social engagement should be at the centre of discussion of socially engaged art, or

35. Direct activism has been suppressed in mainland China. See Cohen 2017, Fu 2017.

36. Similar to "third space" of Philip Huang quoted in the introduction, "third way" also stresses on the non-binary way of thinking and doing in complex contexts.

whether socially engaged artists are critical or complicit with the system. Instead, she suggests that socially engaged art imagines a third way or rather third ways. As a “supported and supporting apparatus”, socially engaged art searches for “third ways” between art’s autonomy and heteronomous demands placed upon it (2011, 27).[36] A “variety of third ways practices” Jackson writes, “mobilise autonomous and heteronomous zones to respond adequately to the mixed economies, mixed ambitions, and mixed appreciations of both art and social repair” (2011, 224). On this basis, she calls for art that “help us to imagine sustainable social institutions” (2011, 14).

In his study of socially engaged art and publicness in China, Zheng Bo analyses two case studies that can be read as imagining an otherwise social structure. In 2008 Zheng worked with the Beijing LGBT Cultural Center to organise a series of conversations (2012 a, 47). In these exchanges, Zheng used videos from his Karibu Island project (2004-ongoing), which is about an imaginary place in which time travels backwards, as a catalyst for discussion. “Participants, queer and straight, imagined their lives in this hypothetical place and debated issues of sexuality and progress” (ibid.), he has written. Through inviting people to discuss Karibu Island, Zheng has encouraged people to imagine a place in which people with different sexualities might live together without fear within a more progressive social structure.

Figure 17
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Participatory or socially collaborative art as a nightmare for democratic systems

Claire Bishop criticises the automatic assumption that relational art is politically emancipatory. Bishop argues that an antagonistic approach, aiming at “exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of [social] harmony”, would “provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other” (2004, 79). She expresses her discontent that theorists such as Nicolas Bourriaud and Grant Kester evaluate socially engaged art not by aesthetics, but rather according to notions of efficacy or ethics. Some other people evaluate it by Platonic ideas about art’s truthfulness and educational function (Bishop 2012).

Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), Bishop argues that the politics of participatory art lies in the dynamics of antagonism, in which relations of conflict are sustained rather than erased (2004, 66.[37] Yet antagonism, on Bishop’s view, should be articulated aesthetically, or at least in tandem with aesthetics. She refers to Rancière’s reworking of aesthetics as a

regime dictating what is visible and audible and what is not. In this light, she suggests that an aesthetic judgment is simultaneously a political judgment. She disapproves of both the descriptors “socially engaged” or “participatory” being unquestioningly equated with “good” and artistic criteria being left out of the analysis. The “aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change,” Bishop writes, “because it always already contains this ameliorative promise” (2012, 29). Participatory art projects that avoid confronting aesthetics, she maintains, preserve the very status quo that they profess to challenge (2012, 38).

In his book *The Nightmare of Participation* (2010), Markus Miessen points out that now, under pressure from politicians, it is almost obligatory for art to be participatory. Quoted by Miessen, Jeremy Till remarks: “participation too often becomes an expedient method of placation rather than a real process of transformation” (Till 2006). This leads to participatory practices that are often uncritical, “participation has become a radical chic, one that is en vogue with politicians who want to make sure that, rather than producing critical content, the tool itself becomes what is supposed to be read as criticality” (Miessen 2010, 44). Against this backdrop, Miessen promotes “conflictual participation”, in which adversaries, rather than friends and enemies, leaving their own fields to create space for new form of knowledge (Miessen 2010, 92-98). This is to become a “crossbench practitioner”, who is not limited by existing protocols and disciplines, and thus instigates critical change that “breaks the consensus machine” (Obrist quoted by Miessen 2010, 21).

Likewise, Sruti Bala, in her book *The Gestures of Participatory Art* (2018), poignantly indicates the dilemma that participation poses for art and politics in democratic systems. “The insistence on the participatory, or the involvement of marginalised sections of the population,” she writes,

> has been critiqued as concealing inequalities or differences through an apparently inclusive false gesture, an ideal turned into the tyranny of an imperative and absorbed into the mechanisms of neoliberal governance, a form of placation and coercion rather than a means of democratic citizenship, where the responsibility of the artist is outsourced to the audience or to others invited to participate. (Bala 2018, 43).

37. Laclau and Mouffe are better known for their later conceptualisation of agonism, which differentiates from the friend or enemy logic of antagonism.

“With the distinction between antagonism (friend/enemy relation) and agonism (relation between adversaries) in place, we are better able to understand why the agonistic confrontation, far from representing a danger for democracy, is, in reality, the very condition of its existence” (Mouffe 2006).

She further puts forward “agonistic pluralism”. “Envisaged from the point of view of ‘agonistic pluralism’, the aim of democratic politics is to construct the “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an “adversary”, i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question” (Mouffe 1999, 755).

For Bala, unsolicited participation and refusal of participation amount to critical gestures that reconfigure civic practice in public spaces and resist co-optation in unexpected ways (Bala 2018, 19).

38. See H. Fu 2018.

Positioning my book

In terms of the history of critical art in China, my book moves away from the oppositional critique that characterised the China Avant-Garde exhibition, mail art, and *Fuck-off* exhibition. In the 1990s, the Big Tail Elephants group took urban daily life as the focus and stage of their practices. This interest is sustained in my focus on reconfigurative criticality and quotidian criticality.

Also, the way in which the Stars group's exhibition appropriated open spaces in the city resonates with my discussion of reconfigurative criticality. The socio-political contexts in which such appropriations take place, however, have changed. Direct protest is much riskier today than in the late 1970s. *Sunset Haircut Booth* and Theatre 44 (Chapter 2) go beyond simply using open spaces in the city as an exhibition space. They reconfigure public spaces such that it becomes possible for civic, political, and aesthetic initiatives to take place in them.

The projects featured in this book indicate the variety of paths that artists have taken after art's sociological turn in the 2000s. Nonetheless, they all depart from the notions of critical art that I have discussed here. These include Ai Weiwei's confrontational and oppositional art, which explicitly criticises the regime; Gladston's spectral criticality, which stresses the importance of changing the conditions of discourse, yet does not engage with social issues in a grounded way; and Berghuis's account, for which criticality generates public opinion and reaction.

Unlike these existing accounts, my concept of non-oppositional criticality goes beyond critique. Instead, the kinds of practice featured in this book explore new possibilities. Rather than criticising reigning systems, they partially deviate from them. What is more, such non-oppositional practices do not remain at the level of spectral discourse: rather, they engage with matters of with actual embeddedness (on this, see my discussion of Rogoff in the introduction pxxx). The creative practitioners behind the works of socially engaged art at stake in this study assume a variety of roles. In addition to the role of instigator, they might work as co-operators (Chapter 2: *Sunset Haircut Booth*), nomads (also Chapter 2: Theatre 44), care givers and co-practitioners (Chapter 3: DM-AS's services), co-learners and co-strugglers (Chapter 4: Home), and facilitators (Chapter 5: subprojects of *5+1=6*).

In incorporating these roles, these projects all endeavour to deviate from the system, if only partially. They strive to become inappropriate/d and explore the possibilities latent

in the tension between inside and outside, all without directly opposing the authorities and thus provoking oppression. To some extent, these practices echo China's socialist legacy of collectivity and communalism. Yet in my case studies collectivity and connectivity assume a more fluid and networked form; they are fuelled by the top-down socialist ideology.

In relation to global discourses, socially engaged art in China generally remains rather marginal. Art institutions are not very interested in supporting it. Miessen's book mainly features Western locations that are markedly different from China in terms of society, economics, and politics. Given the specific circumstances in China, socially engaged or participatory practices are unable even to demand obligatory participation or perform outsourced social services (as has become common under neoliberalism). Socially engaged art in China is not limited to the binary of aesthetics versus social change, on which Bishop places so much emphasis.

As a number of artists have attested, under the current Chinese regime the label of "art" provides cover for projects that address social issues. These might include the exploitation and living conditions of migrant workers. Journalists and social workers have had difficulties approaching problems around migrant workers, especially after China's crackdown on human rights lawyers on 9 July 2015.[38] Under these circumstances, aesthetics can help socially engaged art practices to survive and spread behind a veneer of seeming harmlessness. This is demonstrated by the two subprojects of *5+1=6* that I discuss in chapter 5. In contemporary China, some socially engaged art practices work in grounded, gentle ways to nurture gradual change at the grassroots level. This is evident in the *Sunset Haircut Booth* (Chapter 2) and DM-AS's work (Chapter 3). As such, they resonate with Kester's account of how participatory practices stimulate social change and Jackson's plea for socially engaged art that imagines supportive social institutions. Indeed, in the case of DM-AS, creative practitioners connect with various people so as to explore otherwise ways of learning and living, without solidifying into an institution (which would imply structure and hierarchy). In the case of *Sunset Haircut Booth*, public space takes up certain functions of a social institution.

In short, this book does not respond to the issue of art's autonomy or heteronomy, or socially engaged art's entanglement with neo-liberalism. I am more concerned with how creative practitioners deal with social situations and channel the imperative to intervene in society. I am interested in how these practices play out in particular contexts in China, in which possibilities for direct action (such as demonstration) are severely restricted, local leadership and government policy are unpredictable, state infrastructural and institutional support is lacking, and the scope for bottom-up policy change is limited. My book sets out to answer these key questions. What strategies have artists employed to engage with society and politics without explicitly opposing the authorities? In the context of contemporary China, how are these projects critical without being oppositional?

CHAPTER TWO

Reconfigurative criticality: reconfiguring open spaces into public spaces in Guangzhou

Usually a governmental commission, a sculpture in an open square is typically considered as “public art”, but it does not necessarily inhere “publicness.” Rather, a space that is not planned for social, political, and aesthetic use is appropriated, crafted, and animated by local citizens as such can be called public space. How, then, are art and public space entangled? What is the relationship between socially engaged art and public spaces in a Chinese megacity like Guangzhou?

In providing insights into how socially engaged art critically reconfigures urban public space, this chapter addresses the above questions and the overarching problematics at stake with this book: Socially engaged art can be critical without resorting to confrontational languages and means. Looking at the case of Guangzhou, I argue that the criticality of much socially engaged art practice and performance lies in how it appropriates and activates open spaces and reconfiguring them into public spaces. In making that argument, I analyse two art projects that I encountered during my fieldwork: *Sunset Haircut Booth* (2016-ongoing) and the first iteration of Theatre 44 with the theme of becoming urban nomads from late 2016 to early 2017.

My first case study, *Sunset Haircut Booth*, was conceived and executed by an artist named Yu Xudong and his team, in collaboration with Liang Guangnian, a senior citizen. The project's title derives from an existing haircut booth built by Liang, under a highway which flies over the Xisan village in Guangzhou. He has offered free haircuts from this booth since 2012. Setting out to learn from Liang's practice of civic public space-making, Yu's project amplifies the publicness and sociality of the *Sunset Haircut Booth* by cooperative and aesthetic means.

My second case study, the first iteration of Theater 44, tested the limits of what is possible in Guangzhou's open spaces through workshops and roaming performances held in the city at night in December 2016 and January 2017. During these nocturnal walks, participants read out a dramatic poem and performed improvisations. This project turned open spaces into momentary fluid public spaces for encounters (between humans and between human and non-human), poetic-political discourses, art, and affects.

Public space and (its) publicness

There are various definitions of the concept of public space. Many commentators equate public space with the physical space in which public, political life, and democratic deliberation takes place. Hénaff and Strong argue that public space is 1) open as one can locate her/himself; 2) a human construct; 3) theatrical, in that it is a place in which one is seen and displays oneself before others (Hénaff & Strong 2001, 5-6). What makes a space public, Don Mitchelle argues, is not some preordained "publicness". Rather, a space becomes public when a particular group actively takes it up and makes it public so as to fulfil a pressing need (Mitchell 2003, 35). These two accounts each resonate to a certain degree with recent reworkings of the Habermasian notion of the bourgeois public sphere, which aim to make the concept more inclusive for other social groups apart from the Western bourgeois. It entails not just discursive, but also aesthetic-affective modes of communication (Dahlberg 2005). Following Mitchelle and Dahlberg, I do not conceive publicness in socially engaged art in urban spaces as in any way preordained or innate. It is not a quality that inheres in space; rather, it is always in the making, and political, aesthetic, and affective practices play an important role in its construction.

What about public space in China? Public space is rendered "公共空间" in Chinese: "公" means non-private, "共" means common, "空" means void, and "间" means in between. As a whole, the word connotes commonly owned spaces that exist between private/commercial spaces. According to urban geographer Piper Gaubatz, China's post-reform modernisation and hyper-urbanisation have given rise to new types of urban public space. She identifies five: unwalled landscapes, squares, commercial spaces (such as shopping malls), "green" spaces, and transitional spaces (such as vacant lots destined for reconstruction). For Gaubatz, these spaces are public because they are open and freely accessible to urban citizens. Despite the fact that they are highly regulated and

surveilled, people use them for socialisation and recreation (Gaubatz 2008).

Whereas urbanists and geographers such as Gaubatz tend to identify public spaces in China based on how they function with respect to urban planning, other scholars relate them to civil society. Some of them critically engage with Jüngen Habermas's concept of the "bourgeois public sphere". This space, which is distinct from the state, provides the conditions for the development of a public-minded rational consensus (Habermas, 1992). Let's consider this salient remark made by Nancy Fraser: "any conception of the public sphere that requires a sharp separation between (associational) civil society and the state will be unable to imagine the forms of self-management, interpublic coordination, and political accountability that are essential to a democratic and egalitarian society" (1997, 92).

Philip Huang argues that the dichotomy between state and society at stake in the concept of "bourgeois public sphere" and "civil society" does not apply to China (1993, 216). He puts forward the term "third space" or "third realm" that is simultaneously influenced by both state and society but could be reduced to neither (Huang, 1993, 225). This term, however, should not to be confused with Soja and Lefebvre's concept thirdspace that exists in the trialecticts of Spatiality, Historicality, and Sociality (Soja 1996, 71). Huang's concept of third space emphasises on the possibility that lies between the authority and the citizens.

Another perspective is offered by artist, curator, and educator Qiu Zhijie, who has been deeply influenced by Joseph Beuys's Total Art and employs socially engaged methods in both his practices and teaching. Qiu puts forward the following account of public space in China: "both Greek agora and clan temple and well in rural China are public spaces. It is not because they are open spaces, but because in these spaces people can exchange views, live together, and become communities ...public space is a space in which the occupants have a say" (2011).

Following Huang, I approach public space as third space. In this domain, the government controls, disciplines, polices, surveils, and negotiates with citizens. And the citizens, for their part, undertake individual and/or collective initiatives in response to matters of concern. As Huang suggests, this third space is not dichotomous and its dynamics are not necessarily confrontational. Echoing Qiu, in this chapter I aim to analyse how artists and other citizens use art to critically appropriate open spaces and reconfigure them as public spaces. I pay particular attention to how these practices of public space-making are performed in negotiation with governmental forces, and the ways in which they enrol aesthetics and affect.

If an artwork or artistic practice is physically located so as to be open and accessible to the public, does it automatically become public art? In the 1990s, Suzanne Lacy among others began to practise and theorise a new genre of public art. Moving beyond the traditional definition of public art (which centred on sculpture sited in parks and plazas), this new mode of practice seeks to bring artists into direct engagement with audiences around

pressing social issues. What is more, it brings political activism to the fore (Lacy, 1994). Termed “new genre public art”, this new conception places great stress on the activist and social dimensions of public art. It emphasises the importance of being socially engaged and interactive, and foregrounds collaborations between artists and communities (Lacy, 1994). It privileges process over product and values the unpredictable relationships that arise among artists and audiences (Lacy, 1994).

Scholars and artists have approached the publicness at stake with public art in China. Some argue that publicness is closely related to visibility: if an artwork is visually legible to the general public, then audiences can grasp and make use of it. As such, they make the work public (Zou, 2015, 41). Another argument about publicness concerns the extent to which an artwork is a product of civil society. That is to say, public art must be democratic, open, subject to public opinion, participatory, communicative, and discursive if they are to be considered “public” (Sun, 2002, 32). A work of public art, therefore, is not merely a work of art in public space; if it is to become public art, it must interact with the public, environment, and society (Li 2017, 70).

One body of scholarship situates the publicness of public art within social power structures, emphasising the role of public participation in public art (Wang, 2004; Sun, 2003; Yin, 2004; Weng, 2002). In 2011 Qiu Zhijie called on artists and scholars to refresh the concept of public art:

> public art should extend from visual art: community theatre, education, assembly, festival, ritual etc., all forms of work that enable social organising and public association can be public art. We should include more temporal, dynamic, and functional artist activities into this genre. Community reformation, living environment and activity design, when these kinds of practical activities not only fulfil functional needs, but also actively and imaginatively refresh our symbolic system, they are a new public art ... the symbolic ability of public art is to facilitate social organising a nd social mobilisation (for progressive purposes) in public space. (Qiu 2011)

Qiu’s proposition is based on the common view of public art as urban sculptures. This type of urban sculptures usually disregards the aesthetic and practical needs of people in the neighbourhood, and neglects the spatial connectivity that public art could engender. On Qiu’s definition, then, the publicness of public art is a political and aesthetic quality that forges social bonds among (temporary) communities and facilitates collective deliberation. It creates new forms of symbolic signification that inspire people to relate to each other, space, society, and the state in the new ways.

In analysing socially engaged art and public space in this chapter, I have adopted this notion of publicness, which emphasises what Qiu (in the quotation above) calls “the temporal, dynamic, and functional”. I begin by probing the aesthetic and functional aspects of

Sunset Haircut Booth, emphasising how the project employed non-confrontational artistic practices to ease tensions among different occupants of a particular public space and, in this way, helped secure its ongoing existence. I then travel with the nomadic Theatre 44 so as to shed light on how art activates urban open spaces. Through a flowing, poetic, political, and affective performance, the first iteration of Theatre 44 refreshes city inhabitants' sensorial experience of the city and inspires new ways of imagining how public space can be employed. In sum, this chapter explores how these projects display what I term a "reconfigurative criticality", which opens public spaces up to civic deliberation and aesthetic-political expression.

Sunset Haircut Booth: Reconfigurations of public space in an urban village

In this case study, I analyse how the collaborative project *Sunset Haircut Booth* (夕陽為民剪髮點, 2016-ongoing) reconfigured a suburban open space in such that it became a public third space (to use Huang's term). As a third space, this newly reconfigured urban site allowed people to gather and socialise, undergo aesthetic experience, and debate matters of concern. *Sunset Haircut Booth* forms part of a self-organised, socially engaged art practice project titled Residents!, which began in August 2016 in the Pearl River Delta. According to the project's website, Residents! focuses on "the on-site observation and intervention of the micro politics concerning the rights of residents and their living space" (2016). Artists, writers, designers, social workers, architects, psychologists, and people with other occupations were invited to initiate their own projects. *Sunset Haircut Booth* was the project initiated by Yu Xudong's team (which consisted of Yu Xudong himself, Li Yanming, Wu Huansong, and He Yuliang).

Urban villages are pockets of space leftover from the past. They consist of low-rise buildings (that are constructed by their occupants), which are inhabited by a small number of villagers and a larger number of migrant workers. The original *Sunset Haircut Booth* occupied this engulfed, in-between space between the urban village of Xisan and a high-rise, gate community named Jinxiu Peninsula. The Nanpu Highway cut across the sky of the village. The space under the highway served as a passage connecting the village with the gated community. Before the highway was constructed, this patch of land belonged to the village; now it belongs to the highway company.

Liang Guangnian constructed and ran *Sunset Haircut Booth*.[39] Affectionately called Grandpa Liang, he lived in a high-rise near Xisan. After retiring from the navy in 2012, Grandpa Liang wanted to do something to both occupy himself and contribute to people in the neighbourhood. Having discovered that the space under

39. To differentiate the booth as a space run by Liang, and the art project by Liang, Yu and his team, the latter is italicised.

the highway has been left unused, he began to build structures with abandoned planks. The major one was the shed-like *Sunset Haircut Booth,* in which Liang cut local residents' hair for free. Liang also enjoyed calligraphy and he practised it on the planks of wood that he collected. He also invited some other residents to write on them. Some inscriptions sang the praises of Liang's haircutting skills and good deeds; others conveyed positive messages such as "giving love is happiness" (付出愛是福); others quoted traditional Chinese literary texts.

Liang went to the booth almost every day, maintaining a convivial space amid the hectic city of Guangzhou. He cut locals' hair for free, chatting with them about daily affairs. He and a few acquaintances would practise calligraphy and he sometimes adjusted the structures that made up this space. He even attached a small Chinese national flag to the roof of the booth – this exhibition of patriotism meant that the booth would not be demolished easily. Liang told Yu that some urban management officers had intended to demolish the booth in 2014. The structure, they reasoned, was a temporary construction built on illegally occupied land. In the end, however, they turned a blind eye to the booth because they found that all planks of the structure conveyed positive messages. As Yu put it, this was Grandpa Liang's "wisdom of spatial struggle" at work: his calligraphy and show of patriotism were effective strategies in protecting both himself and the space that he had made (Yu, 2016).

In participating in *Residents!,* Yu and three then-art students decided to learn from and work with Grandpa Liang by taking part in the space-making practice that was *Sunset Haircut Booth* (Yu, 2016). In this way, Yu and his team hoped to enrich the public space in and around Sunset Haircut Booth. Along with Liang and other local residents, they sought to reconfigure it as a public square that would facilitate community initiatives and quotidian political engagement.

Reconfigurative action I: maintaining and amplifying the publicness of public space

The first time I visited *Sunset Haircut Booth,* on 25th December 2016, Grandpa Liang was looking at another elderly man writing calligraphy on one of the planks. I was struck by the spectacularity and the aesthetic immersion of the booth and the surrounding structure since they were fully covered by calligraphies in different styles, on planks of various materials and shapes. After the aesthetic seizure, I started to read the texts: they varied from Party propogandist slogan "the child's heart is facing to the Party; Forever follows the Party", to idioms such as "when walking with other two you must be able to learn from them" to praises for Grandpa Liang "the joy of contributing, the kung fu of the top" (a pun that means the craft of haircutting and the top craft), to security warning "safety is the first", to public behaviour advise: "travel in a civilised manner and let the elderly, women,

and children pass first", to auspicious wish "may all go well with you", to a poem mourning the passing of love. Some were fading and weather-worn; some were freshly written with the smell of paint. I could tell that they were written by different people in their encounters with Grandpa Liang. Grandpa Liang himself liked calligraphy, and he offered this in-between space, the passage space between the gated community Jinxiu Peninsula and Xisan Village, to people in the neighbourhood to practise calligraphy, no matter which side they resided.

There was no communal space for people from Jinxiu Peninsula and those from Xisan Village to share and use. As for calligraphy, Yuehping Yen argues that social calligraphy such as calligraphic inscriptions in both natural and artificial landscapes by political leaders and celebrities are the situations when the significance of calligraphy has escaped the confines of literati's studies, aestheticians' theoretical rumination and art historians' stylistic analysis, when calligraphy becomes part of everyday life and carries with it the power and influence that affects people's social life (Yen, 2005: 3-4). Calligraphy researcher Laura Vermeeren observes that water calligraphy or ground writing in public parks in Beijing and some other cities in China has become a part of the everyday life of people, especially the elderly in China for recreation (Vermeeren, 2017). The content is congruent to "normal" calligraphers' subjects of choice: Maoist poetry, Tang poetry and Chinese proverbs (Vermeeren, 2017). Although during Cultural Revolution, "big-character posters" [大字报] was encouraged as a form of classless expression to spread information and to criticise the political status quo and officials in public space, it was banned in 1979 and calligraphy as a cultural practice to air one's opinion in public space has become less common. Therefore, calligraphy is a common cultural practice in contemporary China, both as a way of exerting symbolic power and as recreation. What is unusual in contemporary China, however, is the use of calligraphy to express ideas in open space. That is why the public space created by Grandpa Liang, which embraced such a rich variety of different messages, is so intriguing.

Figure 18
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Then Yu and I started to chat with Grandpa Liang. He told me that he had been doing something else before, but he has broken his leg and became less active. Yet he said "I don't resign myself to declining years [不認老]". Five years ago, he discovered that it was very inconvenient for people in his neighbourhood to visit the barber's shop. Not only did they have to take the ferry across the river; they also had to pay 20 RMB per haircut. So, he began to build a small booth and cut hair for free in this once abandoned corner in the neighbourhood.

Yu told me that this path had been a muddy trod five years ago. After the booth was constructed, the path was turned into a concrete one by some of those who came to have their hair cut and chat with Grandpa Liang. Gradually he moved the booth to a better spot and enlarged it, and he built "walls" with discarded planks. People did not only stop by to

chat but also practised calligraphy if they felt like it. When I asked him whether the local authority interfered him, he said:

> when the three-story building here was pulled down by the comprehensive law enforcement team, they saw me and my booth (and they wanted to tear it down). The residents told them that I am an old man who is providing convenience to the people and the mass [人民群众] and doing a good deed. Later the Nanpu Subdistrict Office sent a patrol here twice a day, and the patrollers said: 'Grandpa, you can just do it. We will protect you and no one would dare to disturb you.' (With their endorsement) I began to improve it (G. Liang, personal communication, 3 January, 2017).

Foucault considers that space is tightly related to power: "space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power"(Foucault, 1986: 252). Liang invented some techniques to make and maintain this public space as third space in the nexus of power from various actors: local authorities such as residents' committee from Jinxiu Peninsula gated community, Xisan Villagers' Committee, and Nanpu Subdistrict Office, also the urban policing and disciplining power: urban management officers [*chengguan* 城管], and different people in the neighbourhood with different interests. Merry points out that new urban social orders are increasingly based on the governance of space rather than on the discipline of offenders or the punishment of offenses (Merry, 2001). Although from my interviews, I could not tell whether Liang was a follower of the mainstream ideology and pro-government, in *Sunset Haircut Booth*, Liang employed the technique of discourse to protect the space from being destroyed. He adopted the vocabulary of the authority to justify his spatial practices: "harmonious society" could be found in some of the plank calligraphies, and most of the texts were full of "positive energy"—a popular term that is used to describe things that are positive in the eyes of the authority. This be seen as third spacing/making third space, during which the authority and a citizen negotiate and influence each other. He created this public space that encouraged residents to connect to each other, whether they were from the gated community or the village, to enjoy the conviviality and sociality of the space.

In practice, Liang's discursive strategy involved continuous day-to-day acts of creating and maintaining a space of encounter and conviviality. He was not an artist venturing outside of the art institution to engage with people beyond art's traditional audiences, as is common in Western socially engaged art projects (Rasmussen 2017). Rather, Liang is a local resident keen to enrich his retirement. As for Yu Xudong, he did not approach the project as an elite outsider descending on a neighbourhood in order to realise a preconceived project. Rather, he was inspired by Liang's local civic initiative, which he had previously encountered as part of his daily life. Accordingly, he assumed the humble role of learning from a senior citizen. By attending to Liang's practice, he hoped to further this project of third spacing by helping to amplify the publicness of this public space and sustain its conviviality. Yet neither the booth nor the social connections to which it gave rise depended on an artist's vision. To the contrary, *Sunset Haircut Booth* was sustained by the spatial

practice of numerous people who used this space as public space on a quotidian basis. The artist and his team played a part, to be sure, but only alongside Liang and people living in the neighbourhood.

Yu also expressed in the interview his doubts and reservations of similar practices in the Chinese context "(my project) it's not like entering a community with an art proposal and artistic imagination" (Yu, 2017). On the contrary, Yu took another path: he was a resident who passed by the booth almost every day when he worked in his studio, and who witnessed the creation of the space and the changes that have taken place in and around the booth. He was one of those who take part in constructing this space by bringing Grandpa Liang a plank, or writing calligraphy for him or helping him to build the structure, or chit-chatting, or asking him to cut his hair. When Yu was invited to *Residents!* (2016-2017) in August 2016, the artistic collaboration between Yu and Liang came rather naturally since it grew out from the daily interactions and friendship.

In the article on 1st December 2016, published on WeChat, Yu announced that he and his team would work on four small projects under the umbrella of *Sunset Haircut Booth*: 1. neighbours' forum, to discuss and act on local issues that are in the neighbourhood with local residents; 2. To make a newspaper clipping board curated and updated every ten days by Liang; 3. To build a "Flower Photo Studio" to take photos of people in front of the booth with the flowers at their will, and give them the printed photo for free afterwards (this would be funded by the artist himself); 4. To organise an "abandoned planks exchange and calligraphy writing" activity in a suitable time (Yu, 2016). These four sections were following the flows of interactions and political potentials that the space already held, amplifying and diversifying them: the neighbours' forum was to encourage people in the neighbourhood to actively use the space of *Sunset Haircut Booth* to deliberate on their issues of concern, like what they did before, initiated by Grandpa Liang; news board was to amplify the function of information circulation of the space, which was previously mainly achieved orally; the Flower Photo Studio was aimed at bringing some accessible and approachable aesthetic experience to people in the neighbourhood, which would add to the aesthetic interactions facilitated by the calligraphy planks; planks exchange and calligraphy writing activity was to intentionally strengthen the function of the space as a small square for gathering and conviviality. The artistic engagement of Yu and his team thus was expected to amplify and re-configure the already existing structures and possibilities of this space, rather than inventing completely new ones. The cooperation between Liang and Yu's team was a Derridarian double writing and third spacing effort, which negotiated with the controlling and surveillance power inside the system in the village such as the urban management officers, while reconfigured the inside space to stand a bit outside of the systems, to become more civic.

Reconfigurative action II:
integrating a heterogenous space into the public space

When I visited on 3 January 2017, I saw the recently constructed Flower Photo Studio, which was in the same style as the haircut booth. But no one was there taking and printing photos. Liang had told Yu and his team that the roof of the photo booth was leaking, so they decided to mend it first.

Figure 19
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However, on 16 January, when Yu returned from a business trip, he found that the photo studio had been pulled down. Liang told Yu that it was done by Old Zheng, a middle-aged villager who found the photo booth to be a good spot to sell his live chicken. He started to build a store immediately. Yu told me that when he and Liu Sheng, another artist, went inside the store under construction, Old Zheng blushed and was slightly embarrassed. He then started to become territorial with this “new turf”. Yu and Liu immediately assured Old Zheng by telling him that they wanted to know when the construction would be finished, so they could buy chicken from him, and the atmosphere became less tense.

Later, Yu proposed to Old Zheng that his team could paint colourful and pleasant roosters on the front door/façade of the chicken store, which could serve as advertisement for Zheng on the one hand, on the other could continue the photo booth project by adding the photogenic aesthetic element to the store. Zheng happily agreed to their proposal. The once tense and even confrontational relationship between Old Zheng and Grandpa Liang started to improve because of the painting project: Grandpa Liang was glad to see people in the neighbourhood and those who went to the restaurants in the village from downtown (Xisan village is famous for its food) liked to pose and to be photographed in front of the booth. Gradually, Old Zheng and Liang started to speak with each other.

Through this aesthetic and relational intervention, the function of the Flower Photo Studio was accomplished by this painted façade, and the sociality of the space was maintained and enriched since Grandpa Liang gradually changed his attitude towards Old Zheng. He no longer considered Old Zheng as an invader of this public space, but as a co-maintainer of it. The publicness of this space was extended since it also included the commercial-private space of the chicken store as a convivial space. This unexpected change showed that an embedded spatial project would always exist on the axis of the temporal and under the influence of different actors in time. The observation echoes what I have quoted from Rogoff in the introduction: criticality is operating from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness (Rogoff, 2003). This relational and aesthetic cooperation among the artist and other citizens in the locale demonstrates a form of reconfigurative criticality. It maintains and amplifies a third space with actual embeddedness that is open to uncertainty.

Figure 20
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Later, in July 2017, I asked Yu about the other projects they have planned. He told me that Liang and himself had tried a few times with the newspaper clipping board but they could not find an appropriate way to realise it. In terms of the neighbourhood forum, Yu said that, unlike formal forums in art or educational institution, it was conducted with casual discussions, around the booth and the chicken store, together with Old Zheng and a few other residents. They have discussed public issues such as trash problem in the village. Old Zheng, who once tore down the Flower Photo Booth for his own interest, partook in the discussions of problems with communal concerns. Yu considered the flower photo studio project as an entry point into the textures and logics of the development of this urban village. Without this incident, there would be no chicken store and Old Zhao's participation in public issues. This change allowed the whole project to become more embedded in its locality and to grow with the village, rather than an autonomous art project, which only acts accordingly to a fixed script or a set proposal. Yu did not record any conversations from the space nor did he present them as part of his neighbourhood forum project. He did not claim these dialogues as art, and he rather regarded them as part of the public life in Xisan village, which might still take place without the facilitation nor triggers by an art project.

Sunset Haircut Booth was a cooperative art project and it sought to "reintegrate art into society as [a form of] cultural expression rather than as strictly personal gesture" (Finkelpearl 2013, 98). Cooperative art has an "anti-spectatorial character" in that it is "created through shared action, not by active artists for inactive spectators" (Finkelpearl 2013, 343). The *Sunset Haircut Booth* project, then, was shaped by the people involved. They were no passive spectators. Rather, they included people living in the neighbourhood such as Grandpa Liang, Yu, members of Yu's team, and Old Zheng. They also included employees of the local authority, such as the urban management officers. Some people became involved in the project knew about Yu's role as an artist; others did not.

Overall, *Sunset Haircut Booth* served to maintain, diversify, and facilitate cultural expressions in public space. Developing alongside the *Sunset Haircut Booth* itself, the project has been reconfigured to embrace the heterogeneity of the site, which came to include the private commercial space of a chicken store. Yu, Grandpa Liang, and Old Zheng integrated the store into the public space without depriving its initial public functions. The project enriched the space and its occupants became more

40. An article on Reuters says "but now, Wukan, once famous in China as the 'democracy village', has succumbed to China's tightening grip over civil society and individual rights, said Zhuang Liehong, a former Wukan protest leader who helped lead an uprising against local authorities in 2011."What is happening in Wukan is what is happening in China," said Zhuang. "It's a dark reflection of China, with no freedom of expression. No individual rights" (Pomfret, 2017).

41. An article on the website Transparency and Accountability in 2018 points out: "arrests of activists and actors within the civic space have been on the rise – or at least covered more prominently by the media" (Chen, 2018).

42. Mr. M, who prefers to remain anonymous, works in a workers' organisation in Jiangsu Province, and he informed me that the organisation has to remain low-key so that they could still act.

engaged in public deliberation. Public space, as Qiu Zhijie has claimed, “is a space in which the occupants have a say” (2011).

To borrow Rogoff’s formulation, Yu “opted for a ‘looking away’ or a ‘looking aside’ or a spatial appropriation” (2003). The artist (and his team) did not consider *Sunset Haircut Booth* as a self-imposed art project nor it could be exectued through the lens of “art making”. Instead, he looked aside from the existing system of art. In collaboration with different local actors. They embodied what I termed reconfigurative criticality through the relational, cooperative, spatial and aesthetic cooperations that were day-to-day, humble, and contingent. *Sunset Haircut Booth* performed two reconfigurative actions – namely, maintaining and diversifying public space. These can be seen as critical on the grounds that civic and civil initiatives occupied a precarious position under prevailing political circumstances in China. Chinese authorities have been targeting grassroots democratic movements.[40] The government keeps close control over registered NGOs.[41] Smaller groups (such as those focusing on workers’ rights) are either forced to operate underground or they must keep a low profile.[42] The police surveil and control small spaces organised by young cultural practitioners.[43]

Although *Sunset Haircut Booth* did not explicitly claim to promote civic and civil society, it performed critical functions. The project turned away from systemic forms of art making, focusing instead on maintaining such a public space that was partially outside reigning systems of control. This was achieved not by avoiding any dealings with the authorities, but rather by negotiating with them in this third space. The project amplified the booth’s civic functions by introducing new socially engaged art practices that became embedded in the site. This third space can be understood as “a necessary sphere ... where interdependence is not imagined in compromised terms or where a recognition of heteronomous personhood comes only after grudging acceptance ... It is to make a self from, not despite, contingency” (Jackson, 2011, 36). The interdependence discussed here lies in the heart of the publicness of third space. Publicness does not inhere in the nature of a given space. Rather, it is conjured in and through various configurations and reconfigurations of relations among bodies, images, words, spaces, and times. Together, these relations allow people to live together as interdependent subjects. At a time when both civic and civil societies are shrinking, this third space provided a fulcrum around with different actors (including representatives of the local authority and citizens) collectively negotiated with one another at the grassroots level.

43. This happened to a self-organised youth space in Guangzhou, and one could tell that by checking their WeChat platform and finding no new public activity since February 2019, while before that they hosted activities every week.

44. The concept of “site”/现场xianchang was interpreted differently by the two initiators of the first edition of On Practice in 2015: Zheng Hongbin considered “site” as the social site, and the site of exhibition and performance; Feng Junhua thought that “site “could be seen as local/grounded site, and the site where practitioners could put their talents to use, and these two might not be set apart when the practitioner is at work (Zheng and Feng quoted by Liu 2016).

Theatre 44: Creating nomadic and performative public space

Theatre 44 grew out of an on-going art project named *On Practice* (2015-ongoing). *On Practice* aims to explore different ways of collaborating across disciplines and domains in ways that manifest a "prefigurative ethics of practice" (*On Practice* 2015). The "prefigurative" at stake in this statement resonates closely with Luke Yate's reflection on prefigurative politics: "prefigurative politics", he writes, "combines five processes: collective experimentation, the imagining, production and circulation of political meanings, the creating of new and future-oriented social norms or 'conduct', their consolidation in movement infrastructure, and the diffusion and contamination of ideas, messages and goals to wider networks and constituencies" (Yates, 2015, 1). Here, I would like to pose Yates' analysis alongside a passage explaining *On Practice* put out by its organisers. "*On Practice* entails being concerned and observing things, not only intervening in society, being an activist. 'Art practice' is the overflow of the conjoining of various themes and sites (现场) in our times.[44] The purpose of *On Practice* is to help art creators to locate themselves and new sites for artistic creation outside of the studio. The site of practice is the core of practice" (Zheng and Feng quoted in Liu, 2016).

As this explanation indicates, the project seeks to locate art making and practice in social space, such that it bears on pressing issues. Three iterations of the project took place in art spaces before late 2016. By and large, these versions of *On Practice* entailed collaborative performances based on literary texts by the poet and writer Wang Wei. Having put on these indoor performances, the practitioners determined that they would venture out into social, public space. Through these transitions, *On Practice* became Theatre 44, a fluid collective of artists, writers, and other creative practitioners who conduct their socially engaged art practices in a relatively flexible and inclusive framework. "Rather than having a unified voice and rigid labor division, Theatre 44 seeks to bring together individual creativities by designing conceptual frameworks that is open to all" (Theatre 44, 2016).

This transition was accelerated by the incarceration of Ou Feihong, an outside-of-system/institution artist who was a member of the preparatory group that became Theatre 44. Ou's rebellious project, *Night Watch* (夜巡) lasted from September to November 2016. Through graffiti, it tested the limitations of public space at night: "in order to satisfy the masses' increasingly large consumptive needs, I catch the pulse of the time and sincerely accept all kinds of commissions for brutal graffiti. The charge is fucking cheap: 1 RMB for 1 character" (Ou 2016). He finished the project in November 2016. Due to one commis-

45. Someone commissioned him to write "I wanna be on top of Mama Pxxx" (Mama Pxxx is the nickname of the wife of the Chinese authority), and he sprayed it on the wall in Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Centre, the cluster of universities in the suburb of Guangzhou.

sion that the authorities deemed offensive, Ou was arrested later that same month.[45] This enraged and shocked his friends among Guangzhou's creative practitioners. Following Ou's imprisonment, they continued his practice of testing the boundaries of public spaces by roaming around and performing at night.

The initiators of Theatre 44 chose to work with Wang Wei's poetic drama *Roman von Ungern-Sternberg* (2015). In March 2015 they had already read the piece aloud in the Observatory Society (an independent non-profit art space in Guangzhou) as part of *On Practice* in 2017. They rehearsed and performed this new incarnation of the work in public spaces in Guangzhou. The piece uses the language of poetry to narrate, interrupt, and clarify the entangled things in inland Asia with characters including Roman von Ungern-Sternberg, a Mongolian guide, a Japanese solider, French, German, English, Manchu, Uighur, Tibetan, and the Tubo people. Using polyphonic voices, it creates a world of poetry and dynamic geopolitics that is relevant to the contemporary world (Wang, 2015).

According to Feng Junhua, who worked on both *On Practice* and Theatre 44, the group started debating in 2015 as to whether they should perform in the streets, as opposed to art spaces (Feng et al., 2017). He was against both going onto the streets and making their performances into radical gestures as a mean to test control mechanisms in the city. Reorienting the group's practice in this way, he thought, would be harmful if they were not prepared for this new way of working (ibid.).

Following Ou Feihong's arrest in 2016, it became more urgent for cultural practitioners to reclaim the city and to test public spaces. For more than a year, the cultural practitioners in Guangzhou who were affiliated with *On Practice* worked by themselves or with others locally and trans-locally, exploring and testing the relations among bodies, public space, and spatial production. Eventually, they felt that they were ready to go onto the street as a fluid, nomadic and temporary collective to work in and on urban open spaces. The transition was accelerated and facilitated by a project titled *Banyan Travel Agent* (2016). Initiated by three artists based in Guanghzou (Shi Zhenhao, Li Zhiyong, and Zhu Jianlin), the project was supported by the Guangdong Times Museum. It consisted of a series of trips to various locales in East Asia. Aimed at artists, zai-di practitioners (see 330), and interested citizens, the trips were organised so as to allow people to learn from various activists' and practitioners' experiences and tactics. What is more, it facilitated translocal connections and encouraged practitioners to create new situations and to generate new forms of spatial production in the city.

46. Fong Fo is an art zine founded in March 2013 by young artists Feng Weijing and Zhu Jianlin. Both by then just graduated from Guangzhou Fine Art Academy. It publishes artistic creations in various forms: novel, comics, some experimental combinations of words and images, poems, and so on. There is a sarcastic comic column that mimicks the art world, which was developed in July 2014 called "I'm Ah Shi" by artist Zhu Jianlin. It is an independent hand-made zine funded by low-price "advertisements" of art institutes or art practitioners. Zhu Jianlin, in his casual chat with me, said: "Fong Fo is a rather anarchistic zine: no censorship, no editing, no proofreading. It can't be collected as an artwork because it's forever very cheap — only 1RMB" (2017).

The organisational structure of Theatre 44 is decentralised. There is no curator or director with overarching power over the project. This resonates not only with Derrida's advocacy of the non-hierarchical, but also the working practices of the group of artists named Big Tail Elephants, which I mentioned in Chapter 1. Some members of the group volunteer to fulfil coordinating functions. In these roles, they take care of administrative and financial work, and manage the relationships both among the practitioners and between Theatre 44 and art institutions.

Feng Junhua and Pan He served as coordinators of the first edition of Theatre 44. Feng is a Guangzhou-based independent publisher and writer; Pan He used to run Roaming Bookshop, a non-profit library-bookstore in Shenyang. Participants in the project included Zhang Hanlu, a curator based in Shanghai (she moved to Guangzhou in 2020); Zhu Jianlin, Shi Zhenhao, Li Zhiyong, and Liu Jiawen, artists working in Guangzhou; Elaine W. Ho, an artist and activist based in Hong Kong; Zi Jie, an anarchist and comic artist who usually works in Wuhan; Tong Mo, an anthropologist and children's book writer based in Beijing; and Wang Wei, poet and writer, the author of poetic drama that was going to be performed by Theatre 44. Some of these people had participated in *On Practice* (2015-ongoing). These "old participants" invited the others to take part in Theatre 44. The participants came to Guangzhou at their own expense. They gathered at *Fong Fo* Publishing House, which was the project's unofficial "headquarter". This is where the independent zine *Fong Fo*[46] is printed, and it is the home of artist couple Zhu Jianlin and Liu Jiawen, as well as a guest house for visiting creative practitioners.

Next, the members of Theatre 44 collectively planned routes for four nocturnal walking performances in January 2017. To do so, they adopted a working method common among Guangzhou artists, by which one wanders around sensing and perceiving the urban context before assembling records of observations and artistic practices. These walks were not revealed to the public in advance, since the group was concerned that releasing detailed plans for people to roam around in Guangzhou at night might attract the authorities' attention, which would put the walks at risk of being intercepted beforehand. In addition to these nocturnal wanderings, Theatre 44 also organised public activities, including talks, close-reading sessions, image and moving image study sessions, and performances.

Although I saw one iteration of *On Practice*, I had not been very involved in the group's previous work. Nevertheless, as the main portion of my participatory action research on this project, I took part in Theatre 44's first two nocturnal walks, which took place on 2 and 4 January 2017. Despite the fact that I did not attend preparatory meetings ahead of the walking performances, I am friends with most of the participants, who trusted me and welcomed me into the project. The first walk started from the Second Worker Movement Palace, and went through Binjiang Road and Yuejiang Road, then entered Modiesha Park, and ended at Liede Highway central reservation.

47. Even though arguably one could not hide from the surveillance power if they carry their mobile phone with them on which WeChat is logged in and GPS is on.

Reconfiguring spaces for traffic to temporary playground

At the first night walk, we rented bikes from bike sharing systems and cycled along the pre-planned route. We as a group of around 14 people, creative practitioners from Guangzhou and other places, was guided by those who were familiar with the routes either from their everyday urban walking practice, or from the scouting prior to the night walks.

With specially made bags, loud speakers, placards on our backs, we biked in a line and sometimes rang our bell together as an improvised sound performance. We were excited with different feelings and affect: the feeling of freedom in using the urban space as a mobile and transient playground, the feeling of reclaiming the right to the city by moving in it freely at night; a feeling of fleeing from urban surveillance and control (when the guard dogs were asleep)[47]; the bodily tension and enjoyment of speed and movement at night in semi-darkness as a group. The affect of collectivising and being together in the flow was transmitted among us. We felt that we were energised and empowered in this trip and our capacity to act expanded since we could act in the city and reconfigured open spaces into public spaces in such a way.

In Massumi's notes, Deleuze and Guattari's term "line of flight" in French is "ligne de fuite". "Fuite" covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance (the vanishing point in a painting is a point de fuite) (Massumi, 1987: xvi). We were experiencing the lines of flight outside of the normative ways of using urban spaces, outside of urban daily routine, outside of the disciplined ways of acting in the city. We embodied the lines of flights in our flowing movements, our fleeing from the daytime urban surveillance and control, the leaking of urban normality and authority-approved uses of urban public spaces.

Eventually we arrived at the triangular Liede Highway central reservation, the place discovered by the artist, by Zhu Jianlin, the artist and one of the initiators of Theatre 44, and his then-girlfriend-now-wife, artist Liu Jiawen. Their discovery was captured in their 26-minute film *Garden* (2015), which was about their daily interventions in the city (stealing a cement roll at midnight and rolling it between two lanes of Binjiang Road to the green area in front of their apartment in order to make a flower bed), the mundane extraordinariness of living together (Liu trimming Zhu's beard with scissors) and their personal and intimate appropriation of public space (kissing at the tip of the fly-over highway central reservation).

Although this film was not screened in Theatre 44, the triangular enclave where we went in the first nocturnal roaming was the spot where they kissed in the film, and where they personalised the public venue by occupying it temporarily with a romantic and intimate

act. When we arrived, we set up the screen and the projector powered by a generator. We asked the Malaysian artist Ray Chan to present his urban interventions in his home city. We rehearsed the performance by reading out loud the script of the poetic drama on this "island", well-lit by the lamps of the high ways, surrounded by bushes, and probably a few homeless people who take refuge in the bushes, with vehicles passing by underneath, as one can see from the image below.

Figure 21
p.348

Deleuze and Guattari contend that the difference "between a smooth (vectorial, projective, or topological) space and a striated (metric) space: in the first case 'space is occupied without being counted,' and in the second case 'space is counted in order to be occupied' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 361-362)." The central reservation is designed to be the separation of roads and greening—it is planned and calculated—a striated space. During our performative and artistic appropriation of it, this striated space turned into a stage for artistic presentation, rehearsal of a poetic drama, and improvisation of music; a backstage for relaxing, joking, and zooming out. While the striated space is visual, "it (the smooth space) is a space of contact, of small tactile or manual actions of contact, rather than a visual space like Euclid's striated space" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 371). Yet this is not to say that Deleuze and Guattari want to simply oppose two senses, but rather to talk about the way all of the senses can engage space differently—a perceptual semiotics (Adkins, 2015: 241).

In the temporary smooth space, different sets of perceptual relations permeated it: the voices of the participants were flying in the wind; the operating projector was becoming warmer while it was shedding a beam of light on the screen, and it was powered by the generator that emanated a smell of petrol fuel; the rhythms of the participants' readings and sonic improvisations were undulating in the yellow light, the words such as "I love Canton Wong (the name of the WeChat public account run by the arrested artist Ou Feihong)" were written on white placards; the self-made loudspeaker was attached to the mouth of a participant like a big green beak; the bikes were lying on the grass like resting antelopes. The space was not divided and counted as pieces to be occupied for certain use, but it was filled by flows of haptic encounters between (both organic and non-organic) bodies, sounds, smells, lights, temperatures, affects.

In the roaming on bicycles, Theatre 44 momentarily reconfigured the roads—striated spaces planned for traffic, into a floating playground—a smooth space for people to ride *lines of flight*, to claim the urban space as public space for aesthetic improvisation and nomadic roaming. The aesthetic and tactile occupation of the central reservation reconfigured the planned space into a smooth space, a public space for young people to gather at midnight without being harassed by police, to rehearse a politically-charged poetic drama, and to enjoy the temporary right to the city. These *inappropriate/d* reconfigurative acts made the planned space a bit off—for an evening it shifted outside of the imposed

purpose from the authority and became a stage and backstage for performance and civic congregation.

Reconfiguring open spaces to flowing aesthetic and affective spaces

In the second night of wandering, we followed the route Peasant Movement Training Institute (PMTI)-Zhongshan Fourth Road-Donghao Creek-Xiaobei Road. PMTI has political and symbolic significance because of its operation from 1923 to 1926. During the First United Front between the Nationalists and Communists to end warlordism, it was the base where young idealists from all over China were trained. These young people then went out to educate the masses in rural China (Berkley, 1975). Now it serves as a museum of Guangzhou's revolutionary past. It is deeply ideological since it is a space that proclaims the legitimisation of the communist party and hence calls for patriotism and worship for the party. We found a roller shutter door of a store that was already close nearby PMTI, and we projected the script in slides onto the door while reading it aloud with loudspeakers. In one segment, the poetic drama read as follows.

"Tibetan soldier:

The captives don't need to know the place
You only need to wait for the lighting from the one who falls behind
In this reeking massive graveyard
In your myopic eyes will also flows, the hygienic clouds of the party

Very soon you will have that random eyesight
Om Mani Padme Hum
(Shoots dead the Northeast Soldier)

(Wang, 2016:68)

Not to mention Roman von Ungern-Sternberg's anti-communist revolution attitude in reality and also in the play, this segment, by employing poetic and symbolic language instead of direct narration of facts, already conveys some doubts towards the triad of empire-progress-massacre in Ungern-Sternberg's pursuit, but also towards radical projects that try to impose certain ideal to the world, including the communist revolutions. Although the poetic drama was rather metaphoric and coded, the performance of it engendered a poetic space that was imbued with political symbolism, which was heterogeneous from the symbolic space of PMTI. Dieel Guik, a musician of Miao ethnicity, was improvising with the bell on his knee and the traditional Miao hand drum, while Jin Te, a writer of Manchu ethnicity, was playing tanpura, with a KT board saying "I Love Canton Wong" next to him. The soundscape they constructed was musical, unfamiliar, and incongruous with the surrounding soundscape—the humming traffic of the busy Third Zhongshan Road, yet it was different from the music produced by usual street artists. In the meanwhile, Zijie, a comic artist and an anarchist, was reading out loud the text through a loudspeaker. Another

artist was synchronising the projection of the text with the reading. As one can see in the image, we attracted some curious passers-by to pause and listen, and to watch our performance.

Figure 22
p.348

The loudspeakers and placards might remind people of protest or movement mobilisation, yet the aesthetic aspects and the equipment of the performance, on the other hand, drew upon civil disobedience. The participants tried to create an atmosphere of a performance: the improvised music with not-so-common music instruments, the projection from a portable projector, the special white canvas bags that artists Liu Jiawen and Elaine W. Ho made for this series of night walks, the small foldable stools we prepared for audiences to sit on. All of these was recorded with a video camera by artist Wu Wenli. This less spectacular but more cautious form allowed us to be agile in setting up a "stage" quickly and inserting a porous space of alternative discourse and aesthetics into the environs of PMTI—a politically charged space. The presence of a cameraman could serve the purpose of documenting the practice while we moved, and also a good excuse in case the authority questioned us–"we are from Academy of Art and we are making a film".

Perhaps back then in the 1990s, when Lin Yilin moved a wall of bricks across the busy Linhe Road in Guangzhou (see Chapter 1), he did not think about the exit strategy since there were not many CCTV in the city yet. But Theatre 44 echoed with Lin's action since they both occupied the spaces that were planned for traffic with their movements and smuggled in something a bit off, a bit odd, a bit unusual; something that triggered the passers-by to pause, to feel, and to think what public space could become. "Smuggling" as a model allows us to "rethink the relations between that which is in plain sight, that which is in partial sight and that which is invisible" (Rogoff, 2003). By smuggling this multi-media poetic-political performance into an open space that was charged with dominant ideology of the party-state, Theatre 44 invited people to rethink what they were seeing and hearing, why it was very rare for something like this to happen in an open space, and what the relations between this inappropriate/d use of open space and the power that designed and decided the appropriate use of it were.

Not long after we had set up came a patrolling urban security guard, who asked what we were doing. Liu Jiawen said: "we're just playing". For a moment I wondered whether he would stop us from continuing and disperse us, but he stood and watched for a while, then he left. He did not call for the urban management officer or the police. Perhaps he considered our performance might not generate considerable influence that would disturb public order given we were just "playing", or perhaps he thought that what we were performing was interesting and we should be allowed to play.

As Deleuze and Guattari point out, every assemblage has both molar lines and mo-

lecular lines: molar lines are the rigid segmentation that leads to a dualist organisation of segments in social space, which implies a state apparatus; molecular lines are the supple segmentation, in which the social space is constituted by territorial and lineal segmentations (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 222). The ratio of the molar to the molecular determines how open a thing is to change, and the more molecular something is, the greater the possibility that some of its lines will become *lines of flight* (Adkins, 2015: 131). When we appropriated the space on the pedestrian way near PMTI, we were not sure how long we could perform there, since it could be chalked out by molar lines of surveillance and control. Yet our performance was not stopped by policing forces till the end, and it tested the space and reconfigured the molar lines into molecular lines, and showed that the molar lines in the urban open spaces were not as solid as they seemed and they could become porous and supple when *lines of flight* glided in. The performance poked some holes and opened some gaps and cracks in the seemingly rigidly segmented, controlled space through its poetic-political discourse on geopolitics and revolution, not-so-common music improvisation, guerrilla performance, and occupying the open space, and turning it into an open stage with its things, people, relations, and affect.

One middle aged woman, after observing for a while, asked Liu Jiawen who stood close to her: “Where did you guys graduate from?” “Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts”. “You guys are really the fairies of art!” Although I was not sure what she meant by “fairies of art”, it seemed that she appreciated this unconventional performance in public space and she perceived this as art that might provoke a sense of line of flight, a feeling of escaping from consuming the usual forms of cultural products such as television and films, provided by the dominant regime of the sensible and censored and filtered by the dominant ideology of the authority. This was a moment when the lesser known knowledge, the lesser seen art form, the lesser heard music were spread and distributed. The fairies of art might signify the agents who turned the unseen seeable, the unheard hearable, the indivisible visible, as if by magic, and thus approximated what Rancière calls “a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms” (Rancière, 2006: 63), even though momentarily.

Figure 23
p.348

After the performance, we continued along Donghao Creek, one of the most ancient creeks in Guangzhou, and it was cleaned and beautified in preparation for the 2010 Asian Games, which was then hosted in Guangzhou. In the evening along the Creek, some people were taking a stroll, or walking their dogs, some were jogging after dinner, some were sitting by the creek and chatting, and some casted a curious look when they passed by. It was a semi-public and semi-intimate space where people could occupy the space and relax, and theoretically it was carved by molecular lines, which were less rigid. Unlike the part of the performance near the PMTI, in which the participants were gathering on one spot, during this part by the Creek, practitioners moved along the water and sensitively acted and reacted to each other in the reading of the poetic drama and the music improvisation. In this flowing space, the responsive performance and aesthetics grew into

a weaving form of perpetual relations, and thickened the bonds among participants who were not familiar with each other before. As Qiu mentions, in public spaces, people can exchange views, live together, and become communities (Qiu, 2011). Through this flowing-responding, the participants became a community in this flowing public space for art. Apart from responding to each other, we also reacted to the environments, as one can see in the image above: the rocks, the streams of water, the sounds from the highway above, the echoes from the concrete surfaces of the bottom of the highway, the plants on the side, the dispersed, dim but soft light, the humidity of the air. All these became actors in this performance. They were not the planned components of a landscape translated from an urban design plan, nor were they part of a stage for performances, but they became the dynamic actors that connected to each other rhizomatically in the creation of a nomadic performance: the sounds from our instruments mixed with the sound of traffic and water, echoed by the bottom of the highway; the humid air along the Creek carried the sound in a meandering manner; the yellow lights coated the performance with a sense of uncertainty; the plants' murmurs in the breeze merged into the music; the stones in the Creek changed the direction of the floating KT boards, which were released by some of us.

Through this confluence of actors, the performance reconfigured a space of molecular lines. *Lines of flight* temporarily prevailed in a space of supple segments, which had been planned for recreation. For the duration of the piece the space allowed for the creation of fluid sensitivities. Through affective and aesthetic performances, enacted by human and non-human actors, we explored the multiple forms that a public space could take. Things and people acted together to produce a fluid and destabilised public space, which was a bit off in relation to anthropocentric and utilitarian spatial planning.

After 1989, open spaces in China have been depoliticised. Nevertheless, public political statements that do not follow party ideology are often silenced in the name of stability.[48] Rancière contends that political and literary locutions provide models for speech and action more generally. What is more, he holds that they establish regimes of sensible intensity. "They draft maps of the visible", he writes, "trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making" (Rancière, 2006, 39). The poetic drama Roman von Ungern-Sternberg, for example, was articulated nomadically in the city. In this way, it drafted the trajectories of urban topography as well as those between the visible and the sayable. These varied trajectories concerned the histories that gave rise to contemporary China and how open urban spaces in Guangzhou might be used.

The rehearsals and performances of Theatre 44 can therefore be seen as critical. Through poetic and political locutions, the group reconfigured different open urban spaces such that they temporarily became public

48. Wang Hui, an important public intellectual in China, remarks: "in contemporary China, although the apparatus still strives to perform an ideological function, it faces insurmountable obstacles. It has therefore largely turned into a repressive one; its control of media and other spheres is not primarily ideological, but rather is based on the need to preserve stability. Yet because all state apparatuses penetrate deeply into the institutions of daily life, the fundamental and existential character of the state itself assumes a kind of depoliticized political form. Increasingly, this is now supplemented by the ideological hegemony of the market" (Wang 2006, 40-41).

spaces. These happenings loosened up both rigidly- and more lightly-segmented spaces. They presented urban citizens with forms of art that were “a bit off”, that is, outside of dominant cultural forms. Some observers, we hoped, became curious about art, and imagined the possibility of repoliticising public space. These performances echoed what, for Zheng Bo, is one of the key discursive conditions of publicness, namely that a space or practice be “rational-critical as well as affective and performative” (2012, 13). I argue, however, that this form of socially engaged art practice is critical and public because it is reconfigurative as well as affective and performative.

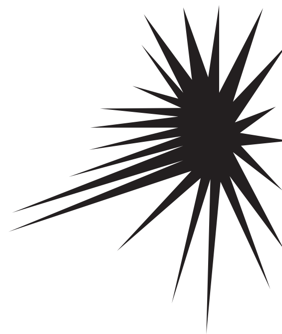
On 8 January 2017, in the Cultural Park in Guangzhou, Theatre 44 undertook another activity: a midnight emoji competition.[49] A group of young people sat by the park’s gate tapping on their smart phones. Simultaneously, the chat group on which the competition was taking place was projected onto a wall. Unlike the other performances, the police interrupted this event. This calls into question Piper Gaubatz’s definition of public space in China (which I quoted in the introduction to this chapter), to wit, that newly open spaces are public spaces by default (2008). It can be said that in China public space is never a given – at least if pubic space is understood as entailing the workings of civil and civic society. Gathering in public space is highly restricted, unless it is for the purposes of recreation or match-making (People’s Park in Shanghai, for example, has a corner for parents who want to find a partner for their children).[50] The act of reconfiguring open spaces as public spaces is critical, therefore, for it provides temporal-spatial-situational configurations for civic gatherings, civic engagement, and unconventional public art. If only ephemerally, it exercises a public right to the city.

49. A competition of emojis and sticker-like images with short texts that engenders brisk and fast visual-textual conversations in a chat group.

50. Freedom of assembly in China is under considerable restrain. See *International Service for Human Rights*, 2016.

51. Although I do not want to stray from my focus, I have to mention the gender and power imbalance in socially engaged art in China. Awareness and discussions of gender imbalance from previous projects partially lead to the micro-politics of Theater 44, which sees gender equality as the basis of the ethics of prefigurative politics.

The issue of indoor smoking triggered the reflection on gender equality and power relation within the group in the second round of *On Practice*: some practitioners, mainly male, smoked inside while others preferred an smoke-free environment. Yet, the needs of the non-smokers was not respected. In Theatre 44, it was finally addressed when female curators Zhang Hanlu and Li Xiaotian, among others, raised the issue and pushed through a house rule that banned smoking indoor.



CHAPTER THREE

Connective criticality: Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society

While I was conducting my fieldwork in Beijing in late 2015, Man Yu informed me that one of the initiators of *5+1=6* (2014-2015) was going to organise a workshop and an exhibition. It was to explore art and literature as a socially engaged art practice, as part of the first incarnation of the project *On Practice* (2015-ongoing) in Xi'an Art Museum. Given that the prospective project related closely to my topic, I booked a ticket on a bullet train to Xi'an and went to participate. Although I cannot recall much of the roundtable discussion in which I participated as a researcher, I remember that there were five male presenters and only just two female speakers: Huang Jingyuan, a socially engaged artist, and Chen Yun, who initiated the Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society (DM-AS, 定海桥互助社).

At the end of the day, I was a bit tired of the discussion, which was dominated by men. Some of the men involved in the discussion said that they were impressed by Chen's less logocentric and more embodied approach, which foregrounded care. Realising that *Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society* DM-AS could be one of my case studies, I asked Chen whether I could interview her. "Of course", she replied, "but I think it will be way more productive for both you and DM-AS if you can come to work with us for a period of time, not as an observer, but as a practitioner". I started to recognise the embodiness was one of important aspects of DM-AS's practices, which could not be observed from a distance, and I had to go there and practice with them in order to conduct my research.

Introduction

Before I went to DM-AS I looked up their WeChat account, where I found this:

> It is a self-organised venue for study, communication, reflection, and social services. We seek a union that can construct community culture/value, produce art/knowledge, and more broadly, undertake interaction, assistance, and cooperation with the local people and our comrades according to the principle of reciprocity.

By stressing on reciprocity and cooperation in this way, DM-AS tries to adopt a non-hierarchical approach. I also read a publication about the art project that brought DM-AS together in the first place: *Dinghaiqiao: An Art Practice into History* (2014), which introduces Dinghaiqiao's historical, cultural, and spatial complexities. The project in question was one of three proposals featured in the first annual Emerging Curators Project, which was held in the Power Station of Art (PSA) in Shanghai in 2014. It lasted for more than a year. During this period of time, nine artworks in the galleries of PSA were chosen to stimulate four workshops, which took place in Dinghaiqiao. These workshops were then mirrored in an exhibition, after which researchers (including artists, writers, and curators) continued working based on on-site observations, community activities, interviews, and archival research (Chen, 2015, 5). Consider the following précis:

52. DM-AS has changed their structure since the summer of 2018, and their practices have included more dimension. I will explain a little in a note after this chapter.

> The Dinghaiqiao Project does not work as a community art project that aims at social change. Instead, it expects practice that is based on self-reflection and critique...The purpose is to rethink the responsibility of art to a very recent but disclosed history that intertwines with present and future, to open up the avenues and to find methods to take on this responsibility. (ibid)

To me, it seems that from the very outset DM-AS orientated itself towards something different from community art. It tries to deviate slightly from mainstream forms of knowledge and adopt a critical approach in growing their practices. Their work is anchored by mutual-aid. This model of relating has long existed in Chinese grassroots society, and is "developed through the long-term needs for each other and co-living with people in the neighbourhood" (Chen, 2015, 13). DM-AS has evolved in their efforts to take root in Dinghaiqiao, which is a working-class neighbourhood in Shanghai. Since 2015, it has become a self-organised space concerned with "practising into" histories of the area. Dinghaiqiao is a nexus at which multiple layers of histories meet, including those of

the Japanese occupation, state owned factories, the Cultural Revolution, domestic migration, and urban regeneration.

According to my observations, DM-AS's practices were threefold. Firstly, it explored and collected local memories and cultures, documenting changes in the neighbourhood and engaging with the community. In this role, it provided mutually nurturing services for local people. These included a storytelling and writing workshop, which aimed to preserve histories of Dinghaiqiao, and an after-school care service, which provided creative activities for primary school children. Secondly, it created trans-local connections and produced knowledge that goes beyond the reproduction in official institutions. Thirdly, it explored otherwise ways of living. These encompassed the "dumbass underground culture" advocated by Matsumoto Hajime, a Japanese leftist activist and anarchist. Here, "dumbass" means that this is not an idea-driven movement that has a threshold, but is of the grassroots. Everyone can join in the activities, including drinking and eating together, protesting while having fun together. In this counterculture, people "take the liberty to create their own lives" in ways that deviate from capitalism and consumerism (Matsumoto, 2013).

This chapter addresses the following question: how did DM-AS connect with people, not just in the neighbourhood but elsewhere in Asia too? To what extent could the different forms of connectivity at stake in DM-AS's practice be critical, given the restrictions imposed on freedom of assembly and association in China? To answer these questions, I analysed DM-AS's practices by both studying their archive and conducting seven weeks of field work with DM-AS, from July to September 2016. In terms of methodology, my fieldwork entailed interviews and participatory action research (PAR). This active, engaged, and engaging method allowed me not only to observe what members of DM-AS did. It meant that I could also participate in their activities and initiate actions with them. In addition to being a researcher, then, I was a co-practitioner in DM-AS.

Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey contend that the practices of thinking are not separated from the realm of the body. Indeed, they are implicated in the passion, emotions, and materiality associated with lived embodiment and socially engaged art practices (Stacey and Ahmed, 2001, 3), With this in mind, my discussion in this chapter tries to think through my embodied experience of working with different people at DM-AS. At the same time, though, I have been careful not to neglect or dismiss the narratives from the members of DM-AS that differed from those of the initiator and the coordinator. During the seven weeks of my fieldwork, I lived on the second floor of DM-AS, sharing with DM-AS coordinator Zhao Yiren. When I looked out from the window, I saw the low houses built by the inhabitants snuggled together, further away, there was the abandoned red-brick building—a former Japanese cotton mill, and right next to it, a high-rise residential building. I participated in five Dinghai talks (I will explain these below), one meal in the People's Cuisine Dining Room, and three guided tours. (The latter were organised for a Swiss geographer, Indian urbanist, and art professor

from Guangzhou, who has a background in visual anthropology and teaches socially engaged art practice.) I co-organised street vending (Dinghai street vending) on two occasions, curated one cooking session (in which a cook leads a conversation inspired by the food), and two small exhibitions (one inside DM-AS, another in the Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou). In the following sections I analyse two forms of critical connectivity at work in socially engaged art practices of DM-AS: zai-di connectivity and rhizomatic connectivity. In so doing, I draw mainly on my first-hand experiences and previous practices of DM-AS in which I was not involved.

Figure 24
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Zai-Di connectivity: Making grounded and local connections

This section introduces two vernacular concepts in Chinese-speaking contexts: *zai-di* and *kai-fong*. It then goes on to analyse two examples of connectivity in DM-AS's local and grounded practices: its after-school care service, which ran in 2015 and 2016, and Dinghai street vending in 2016. Throughout, I am concerned to explain how these practices are critical.

In his essay *Zai-Di is a Mirror: A Reflection on Hong Kong's Localism Movement* (2016), Taiwanese artist and writer Kao Jun-honn compares the concepts of *ben-tu* (本土) and *zai-di* (在地). Quoting E. Probyn's term "location", he contends that *ben-tu* is built upon "location" that involves a certain order or arrangement, and it even conceals knowledge domination and ideology. In contrast, zai-di is more related to the local places and incidents that concern the underprivileged, the grassroots and the subaltern, which is defined by Probyn as "locate". (Kao, 2016, 124).

Whereas *zai-di* relates to daily life, he explains, *ben-tu* is closely related to identity. As such, *ben-tu* might become a political tool (ibid). In an editor's note, Lee Chun-Fung complements Kao's argument: *zai-di* is usually set in contrast with the "global" (as in the phrase "think globally, act locally", for example 2016a). However, the global and *zai-di* do not form a dichotomy, but rather they are interrelated and chiasmic. As we shall see in the following sections, DM-AS's practices are inspired and informed by global practices. Indeed, its rhizomatic form of connectivity especially take place in a *zai-di* way.

Chen Yun and other members of DM-AS often refer to *Kai-fong* (街坊). DM-AS has close connection with the non-profit art organisation Wooferten (2009-2015) in Hong Kong.

Lee Chun-Fung, one of those who ran Wooferten, uses Kai-fong in both his writing and conversations. Wooferten aimed to introduce a lively conception of contemporary art that would engage the community. In Lee's "Imagine if it Weren't All for Nothing—A Few Musings on Communities, Art and Activism" (2016), he defines kai-fong in the following way:

> In Cantonese, we commonly use the term *'kai-fong'* to speak of our neighbours. This term is incredibly useful because it synthesises, in one conceptual compound, 'community' and 'neighbourhood'. The prefix 'kai' literally refers to the street, whereas 'fong' refers to the place where one lives and works. Thus, *'kai-fong'* refer to the web or the dense tangle of relationships that accrete over a territory, a network of mutual aid composed of those in which one depends, places one's trust in. (Lee, 2016, 22)

Although it is important to stress that Shanghai is rather different to Hong Kong, this passage indicates that the term can refer to the people who live in a neighbourhood. In the context of DM-AS, *kai-fong* can be used to designate those who lived in the neighbourhood and who consciously took part in DM-AS with their own differences and agencies. Lee alertly points out that every *kai-fong* is a singularity, a difference (ibid.), which means that assemblages with *kai-fongs* are collectives of practice that try to realise their capacities and to address their needs. These assemblages are fluid and temporal. Connecting with *kai-fongs* is an important component of DM-AS's *zai-di* practices. This goes especially for the after-school care service and Dinghai street vending, which I will analyse in this section.

The after-school care service: Connecting via otherwise education

I asked Chen Yun, who founded DM-AS and was then the curator of an art project, "what does DM-AS mean to you?" She pondered the question in silence for a moment, before answering: "it is a necessity" (Chen, 2016). In the epilogue of the publication accompanying an exhibition held in 2014, she wrote that "art is also a field of struggle, and this field does not only present itself in the exhibition hall or the art world, but more importantly in a specific place among a specific group of people" (Chen et al., 2015, 169). It was urgently important, Chen felt, that DM-AS practise and act on the ground of this specific place, Dinghaiqiao, and engage with kai-fongs from the neighbourhood.

When members of DM-AS discussed how to ground their practices in Dinghaiqiao, they looked into the needs of people living there. They wanted to see whether they could provide services that would both meet the community's needs and nurture their own cultural practices. Most of the children in the neighbourhood, DM-AS found, attended after-

school classes. They had a great deal of homework to do and their parents lacked the time to pick them up from school and provide home tuition. Businesses saw this as a commercial opportunity; numerous after-school care services and tutoring classes are on offer. DM-AS did not mean to compete with these professional service providers or profit from providing after-school care. Its members rather saw it as a way of sustaining themselves and connecting with local people.

DM-AS set out to attract pupils living on Dinghaigang Road and Dinghai Road. The idea was that the children could have dinner at home and enjoy time with their families. This differed markedly from the all-in-one service offered by professional after-school care. Alongside tutoring and disciplining, professional services provide dinner and send children home at eight o'clock. In forcing children to spend so much time away from the household, it would seem that the education system and its extension in after-school care services estrange children from their homes and strip them of playtime.

In early January 2016, during schools' winter vacation, DM-AS started its after-school class, providing tutoring on homework and art workshops. They tried to "heed the formation of children's habits and their mental states" (DM-AS 2016). At first, they attracted no more than four children. The "tutors" (members of DM-AS, most of whom studied or worked in the arts) took turns to teach and care for them. They also tried to give children more diverse and creative educational experiences, which did not focus on exam preparation or skills training.

"As cities historically have been rough and tumble places", AbdouMaliq Simone writes, "where some people can acquire a great deal of money and live in increasingly spectacular conditions while others barely scrape by, the diversity of the city can easily foster highly competitive relationships" (2010, 6). In megacities such as Shanghai, children are taught to compete with their peers from an early age. They have to learn to be competitive, their parents suppose, if they are to survive in the city. This is why it is common for school children to be sent to after-school classes to finish their homework. What is more, they often take extra classes such as art and Olympic mathematics. Parents hope that this might give them an edge over their peers when they come to compete for a place in a good secondary school. In short, there is a sense in which children become urban by learning to be competitive.

Tutoring children was not as easy as DM-AS had imagined. While the project went on, its members felt that the pupils and parents, and even themselves were all being consumed by the education system. This came to the fore in a discussion between Chen Yun and one of the tutors, Wang Xin, a young writer and then university student in civil engineering. They agreed that after-school care at DM-AS should neither oppress children unduly by extending approach adopted in the school system nor extend the space of the family (Wang 2016). Zhao Yiren, the coordinator of DM-AS, held that the after-school classes and workshops to be independent from school and family (Zhao et al., 2016). Accordingly, members of DM-AS tried to provide something that would deviate from both institutional

education and parental discipline. This presented considerably difficulties. The tutors' major responsibility was to help children with their homework so as to guarantee that they would finish it. Inevitably, this reaffirmed the school system's disciplinary power and helped further its goal of preparing children for competitions such as exams.

Although they remained vigilant against the risk of becoming accomplices of the school's power structure, the tutors inevitably had to situate their practice within it. Ultimately, their aim became that of making after-school care less estranging. Rather than denying the necessity to finish homework, they made the process less stressful and more interesting by providing a more personal and humane tutoring. Through artistic activities and games, they endeavoured to create a space that was a bit off, in which children could learn, play, and enjoy themselves without the pressure of having to excel or to compete. Growing up in the city and becoming urban subjects can be very stressful, especially if children are constantly disciplined to be competitive and rivalrous.

Providing otherwise forms of education can be positive for the development children's identities as urban subjects. DM-AS's tutors did not use coercive means to school them. Instead, they encouraged the children's curiosity, imagination, and creativity, whether in playing Cajon drum, drawing and painting, or blowing bubbles. Children could spend some time with their parents during dinner before going to the after-school class to finish their homework and play. They certainly enjoyed the latter.

"At the heart of city life", AbdouMaliq Simone proposes, "is the capacity for its different people, spaces, activities, and things in the city interact in ways that exceed any attempts to regulate them" (2010, 3). Playing may come naturally to children, but it is often deemed inappropriate or squeezed out in favour of extra classes. "The overthrow of these micro-powers", Foucault points out, "does not obey the law of all or nothing" (Foucault, 1979, 126). In the case of the Dinghai afterschool care service, the tutors consciously decided not to help mould competitive urban subject. This suggests that there is an otherwise way of becoming urban, including play and the use of cultural resources. In this way, DM-AS sought to go a bit off the grid of control from the disciplining and shaping power of the educational system, and thereby allow the children to become children again. The image below shows a boy named Pang concentrating on blowing a bubble. It has become bigger than his head. This photograph draws the viewers into his fascination. The bubble is on the brink of popping: this liminality serves as a metaphor for the role of play, which essentially entails openness towards otherness (Vilhauer, 2013). In playing, children and adults open themselves up to possibilities open themselves to possibilities of becoming, for instance, becoming children, becoming urban subjects otherwise, which is critical in this competitive success-oriented city.

Figure 25
p.349

The tutors/cultural practitioners learned from the children. In the minutes of their third meeting, the tutors discuss the possibility of translating their experiences of tutoring and playing with the children into art. Taking the ￥1 monthly independent zine *Fong Fo* (冯火) (see footnote 46 at pxx) as an example, they wanted to create works that would be “interesting, positive, and ironic” (Zhao et al., 2016). These works, they emphasised, should be grounded in their experiences, rather than being didactic and unreflective (ibid). Zheng Limin, a young man who worked in a state-owned water purification plant and wanted to become an artist, was one of the tutors there. In his article, in a humorous and self-reflective manner, it includes a few photos with some witty and funny words written over them. Wang Xin (one of DM-AS’s tutors) was writing a non-fiction work titled *The Spring of After-school Care*. To Chinese readers, this recalls the Chinese title of the film “Les Choristes” – *The Spring of the Class for Falling-behind Pupils* (放牛班的春天). Although DM-AS has not produced the planned publication, individual texts and images (such as these by Zheng and Wang) have been completed. They were created by drawing on their experiences of conducting the after-school class: most of them have established close personal relationships with the children.

The image below shows Pang playing the melodica. Against the background of a blue movable shelf, the boy’s head under flash shines like the Sun. The wider scene is dim: it is dusk on the street during Dinghai street vending activity, and the light is fading. With respect to this image, Zheng writes: “God said: Let there be –> [this typographic arrow points to Pang’s shining head]: and there was light”. This humorous reference to religion echoes something that Zheng writes in his article: “Kids, untainted kids, have some sort of divinity...” (Zheng, 2016). This divinity indicated here is not religious. Rather, it is a rhetorical device that evokes children’s sensibility, perceptions, and creativity. What is more, it signals their capacity to deviate creatively from prevailing norms, to become inappropriate/d . It is this that adults at the DM-AS such as Zheng admired and wanted to share.

Through the after-school classes, the network among these children, their parents, and DM-AS began to grow. In the late summer of 2016, we sold donated, second-hand items on the street and spread the information of the services provided by DMAS. The parents allowed their children to join us on their own. This was a sign of deep trust. Having children beside us during our street vending activities made it easier for us to blend into the neighbourhood. With the children at our side, we became a friendly group of people, which garnered the curiosity of passers-by.

Figure 26
p.349

For Deleuze, an assemblage is “a multiplicity constituted by heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them” (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007, 52). The network of trust and mutual aid established by DM-AS turned some local residents and DM-AS members into kai-fongs. As such, they connected with one another in

Dinghaiqiao, forming an assemblage of people from different backgrounds and pursuing different goals. "An assemblage is a ratio of its tendencies toward both stability and change", writes Brent Adkins (2015, 13). In forming an assemblage with kai-fongs, DM-AS put down roots in the neighbourhood. What is more, their practices became more *zai-di* – that is, more grounded in the local area without being localist. Through this process, the *kai-fongs'* needs, thoughts, actions and interactions with DM-AS would lead to changes in its practices. As DM-AS wove itself into the neighbourhood's social fabric, it became a heterogenous assemblage of people.

The after-school care service can be considered as a form of *zai-di* slow activism in that it helped DM-AS grow in the locality in a sustainable way. In his discussion of the slow activism enacted through conversational art, Wallace Heim argues that "slowness refers not only to the duration of the event and the drift which can be momentary or extend over years, but to its temper. There is a resistance in slowness which responds to the reductive aspects of haste and frenzy" (2003, 187). Chinese cities are characterised by speed. Shanghai's central business district in Pudong took shape in approximately fifteenth years.[53] What is more, 100 museums were built in the city between 2000 and 2005 (Allsop, 2011). Whereas art projects are usually fast, or at least short-term, slowness in cultural practices and education can counterbalance frenetic urban development. It can also further notions of sustainability.

According to artist, educator, and activist Zheng Bo, education is a form of slow activism that tries to occupy space tactically and strive for sustainability within the Chinese political environment (Zheng, 2015, 330). Following Zheng's claim, I would suggest that DM-AS's after-school care was a form of critical slow activism. Although admittedly it only lasted for a little over six months, the initiative explored education for children to become urban subjects otherwise. These methods stressed neither speed nor efficiency, but art, play, and creativity. This was critical also because it built trust and connection with *kai-fongs* as *zai-di* assemblage, which helped DMAS to further explore ways to live in the city otherwise with people in the neighbourhood.

DM-AS's after-school care service assumed responsibility not only for caring for children, but for providing a different form of education. Its members took the liberty of drawing on their experience in creating artworks. "Whether cast in aesthetic or social terms," Shannon Jackson writes, "freedom and expression are not opposed to obligation and care, but in fact depend upon each other" (2011, 14). Through two-way practices of nurturing and education, social art practice can "contribute to inter-dependent social imagining" (Jackson, 2011, 14). When they began this educational experiment, however, it was unclear whether DM-AS had thought through either the ethical dimensions or their pedagogical approach.

53. Pudong's CBD construction is extremely fast when compared to Lower Manhattan in New York, which took a few decades in the early 1900s to build.

Dinghai street vending:
Expanding connectivity via aesthetic experiences

In this section, I examine how DM-AS tested the social and spatial configuration of the street as a public space by means of Dinghai street vending. Through this practice, they created bridges among people in the neighbourhood, bringing *kai-fongs* onboard with DM-AS. In sum, Dinghai street vending used aesthetic experiences to produce an assemblage that cut against the street's policed spatial order.

The practice of Dinghai street vending was initiated by a Shanghai-based architect named Cao Feile. As a form of small and day-to-day business, street vending offered DM-AS an opportunity to connect with people in the neighbourhood and thus become more embedded in the area, form greater assemblages, and establish different means of otherwise learning. Through street vending, DM-AS could experiment with new formats and ways of exhibiting, performing, selling, and connecting. Alongside *kai-fongs*, members of DM-AS could express their creativity and exercise the right to the city.

Interested in the gadgets, machines, tools, and practices that go into street vending, Cao Feile started observing street vendors. She sought to learn from their vernacular creativities and design a new cart for street vending. It would allow sellers to display and put away their wares swiftly. In this way, they could flee urban management officers (chengguan, 城管) more easily and thus avoid punishment.

In his *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau argues that the microbe-like practices are administered or suppressed by the urban system, but they are not eliminated; instead, they have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy and used their surreptitious creativities to infiltrate the surveillance system (1984, 96). Day-to-day practices (such as building informal settlements and street vending) are more tenacious than one might think. They can find loopholes and leeway to deal with or even insinuate into and the disciplining and controlling system. Therefore, they "proliferate illegitimacy" and resist by persisting (de Certeau 1984, 96). Drawing on de Certeau, we can grasp street vending as political and critical on the grounds that urban authorities often see it as undermining their efforts to establish a clean and organised city. Illegitimate street vending proliferates by finding blind spots and loopholes in systems of surveillance and control. It negotiates with those in charge of spatial order in a given urban space (sometimes through small briberies, such as a packet of cigarettes).

In the city of Shanghai, street vending is policed and controlled by urban management officers. Nevertheless, as Cao Feile has shown, street vendors infiltrated the city, developing their tactics to get around efforts at suppressing them. They persisted amid urban management officers and urban infrastructures configured to repel or punish them, such as the spikes erected under highways in order to prevent the homeless people from resting and street vendors selling their goods there. Although I do not know the extent

to which street vendors have seeped into the fabric of Shanghai, Cao wrote that they saw street vending as a long-term, stable livelihood, and they have formed “certain familiarity and stickiness with the urban spaces and social resources” (Cao, 2017). Street vending interrupts forms of urban control, creating pockets of heterogeneous space that urban planners and authorities neither desire nor welcome. Still, these spaces make the city livelier and more liveable.

Adopting a grounded practice, DM-AS learned from street vendors about their survival strategies in the urban space, and their vernacular creativities in dealing with the policing power in the city. This was to connect with more *kai-fongs* and other cultural practitioners through street vending in Dinghaiqiao, so that they could together to explore otherwise possibilities for living in the city.

In collaboration with Cao Feile and Zhao Yiren, I co-curated the second street vending outing, during which we exhibited materials from DM-AS’s practices; played music with some children who had previously attended the after-school class; introduced mutually nurturing services for local people, such as a summer art workshop; and sold second-hand wares that *kai-fongs* had donated. We encountered some interested *kai-fongs*, who scanned DM-AS’s QR code so as to receive information about its activities and services. However, we were dispersed by urban management officers. At that point, we realised that we were the only street vendors on the street that day. This reminded us to pay attention to the ecosystem of street vendors in Dinghaiqiao.

In the third round of Dinghai street vending, DM-AS took a step forward and challenged the spatial order imposed on the street. On 12 October 2016 Mr Li Yong (who taught art education at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou) led around 20 second-year students on a field trip – commonly referred as “going to the countryside”. He chose DM-AS as a field for his students to observe, experience, and perhaps to participate. Zhao suggested his students to take part in DM-AS’s Street vending practice. Zhao asked the students to provide a text promoting their street vending that she could post on DM-AS’s WeChat platform. So the class monitor (a student who assists the teacher) presented Zhao with a mind map of their ideas of “community” (*she-qu*, 社区). It mentions “elders’ associations, elderly home, and places where old people entertain themselves” and also other comments: “community has many circles”, “gated community, kindergarten? Don’t know much about community”, and “community is a small society”.

After roaming around in Dinghaiqiao with information provided by Zhao, the students gathered at DM-AS, where Zhao briefly presented their practices. As Zhao put it, “the students were indifferent” to what they had seen and heard. It seems that bringing a group of people without much interest in informal and creative practice into Dinghaiqiao, even for just one day, runs the risk of turning the “community” *(she-qu)* into a superficial, even touristic spectacle. That said, the students joined us in Dinghai street vending in Dinghaiqiao, which became a field of practice for both the students and DM-AS.

Figure 27
p.349

At 6:30 in the evening, the students joined Cao Feile and Zhao Yiren in front of a bank where the first and second street vending activities had taken place. Students from the art academy chose to participate in the activity by drawing portrait for people in the neighbourhood. The students chatted with their sitters, not only as a way of keeping them engaged but also helping themselves to grasp their characters. In this way, the students engaged personally with migrant workers living in Dinghaiqiao, elderly people who have lived in this place for decades, as well as other residents. A good many people stood around the portraitists as they worked, watching with interest. This round of street vending, Zhao said, had attracted most people.

Figure 28
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Image above shows a student and an old woman holiding her portrait. The student has made skilful use of her training to produce a realistic sketch of her subject. The old woman smiles happily, probably because she finds that the drawing bears a strong resemblance to herself. Perhaps she feels respected. In China, the most accepted form of art among the general public has been realism. Realism has been taught in art schools and popularised in various was since the 1910s. Expectedly, residents without much knowledge of art could relate to realistic portraits. This, perhaps, was one of the reasons why this version of Dinghai street vending attracted a large number of people.

Around 8 o'clock, auxiliary neighbourhood patrol guards Songjun arrived and tried to dispel the students and the crowd. For the first time, the sitters and some other residents spoke up for the students and DM-AS. They argued with Songjun, probably because they enjoyed the activity and wanted it to continue. Zhao considered this as the most rewarding street vending activity that DM-AS had conducted. It aligned Dinghaiqiao's *kai-fongs* with DM-AS and the students against the urban authorities.

For Deleuze, "the only unity of assemblage is that of 'co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind" (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007, 52). It can be said that the students, kai-fongs, and DM-AS formed an alliance to defy an order imposed on urban space. Together, they not only formed but guarded a temporary assemblage comprised of aesthetic experiences, artistic practice, interpersonal exchanges, and being together. This resonates with Zheng Bo's call for practices that encourage people to imagine a social infrastructure in which people from different backgrounds can live together (2012, 47). Although this assemblage soon dispersed after the street vending activity was over, the kai-fongs received their portraits. They served as reminders of how they were portrayed as dignified subjects, each with a distinct character

and story. The students, for their part, went away with new ideas about what *she-qu* or community could be.

In this activity, the process of imaging and making was also a process of sense making and space making. The portraits were not drawn in a studio in their academy. Rather, they were the result of the students' engagement with kai-fongs in their social context. The students had to adapt their artistic practice to a public space. What is more, they had to interact with kai-fongs in their neighbourhood in attentive and affective ways. While the portraits were being drawn, a space was also being made in which those marginalised by dominant cultural representations (such as migrant workers and local elders) were made visible in their singularities.[56]

The process of making portraits built a three-way bridge among different people. First, by taking part in this way, the art academy students could better understand DM-AS's practice. Second, by drawing and getting to know local people in Dinghaiqiao, students had affective interpersonal experiences in the neighbourhood. Third, the kai-fongs became more interested and involved in DM-AS's activity.

In some ways, this mode of occupying open space resembles the practices of reconfigurative criticality that I addressed in the previous chapter. In others, though, it is distinct: Dinghai street vending is concerned less with the issue of public space, than the social connections that appropriating such space can bring about. The nurturing activity of portraiture, for example, led the students and *kai-fongs* to get to know each other and promised to draw more people into DM-AS. It extended DM-AS's geographical reach beyond the vicinity of its own physical space to the neighbourhood at large. It connected DM-AS's members with more *kai-fongs*, forging new, if temporary alliances and assemblages. It gave rise to other forms of *zai-di* practice, without jettisoning previous means of connecting with the community, such as the after-school care service. They presented themselves as neither a commercial community service provider nor a social work organisation. Rather, it was a group of creative young people who were interested in the neighbourhood and wanted to connect with *kai-fongs*. Through mutually nurturing practices, DM-AS sought to develop relationships that were different from that between service provider and customer, which prevails in the commercial world.

This form of *zai-di* connectivity is critical. Consider how at a moment of crisis – when a patrol guards came to break up the activity – *kai-fongs* defended the students and DM-AS.

56. This version of Dinghai Street Vending is comparable to another art project with activist characteristics in the city: Flyingpig's [飛天豬] 100 free portraits project for kai-fongs in Kai Fong Pai Dong, Yau Ma Tei, Hong Kong. On their website, Kai Fong Pai Dong describes themselves as "a self-organised neighbourhood market stall in Yau Ma Tei, which opened in November 2015 to build something with the neighbourhood from the bottom-up" (Kai Fong Pai Dong 2016). Horizontally-run by 11 people: artists, farmers, a hairdresser, a barista/social worker, a tarot card reader, teachers and community workers, the market stall offers an expansive range of products and services, from locally grown organic bananas to neighbourhood portraits, from fruit tree seedlings to communal jam-making, and from irregular film screenings to monthly storytelling events (ibid.).
Flyingpig started her project *Neighbour Faces* in YMT in Kai Fong Pai Dong on 8th November 2015. She spent one hour during weekdays and two hours on weekends to slowly portray *kai-fongs* and listen to their stories until she accomplished 100 portraits (Flyingpig 2015).

As the Chinese word for "crisis" implies (as I explained in the introduction), this incident became an opportunity. In repelling the guard's efforts, all three groups of actors (students, DM-AS, and the *kai-fongs*) were able to connect to one another, forming an assemblage that dared to defy and deviate slightly from the grid of control imposed from above.

Rhizomatic connectivity: Dinghai Chuan and Dinghai talk

In this section, firstly, I analyse how DM-AS connected rhizomatically with artists, activists, anarchists, and creative practitioners in different parts of Asia and learned from each other on living and learning otherwise through Dinghai Chuan (定海串). Secondly, I discuss Dinghai Talk (定海谈), and explore how DM-AS produced unofficial knowledge, and the knowledge that engendered inter-Asia connectivity and solidarity.

Dinghai Chuan: Asia connecting to live differently

The *"chuan"* in Dingahi Chaun is from the word *chuanlian* (串联), which means to establish ties with others. Dinghai Chuan was the practice of making trans-local connections, bridging different groups and collectives that shared similar values and objectives. This practice was inspired by Matsumoto Hajime, who visited DM-AS in mid-September 2015. In late 2000s, Matsumoto initiated the *Shirōto no Ran* (素人之乱) or *Amateur Riot* movement (Kindstrand, Nishimura, and Slater, 2017, 152). He organised the anti-nuclear demonstration in Koejin, Tokyo, at which 15,000 people voiced their discontent. He also runs a second-hand shop that shares the same name as the movement. "*Amateur Riot* provides an interesting insight", he writes, "if we are never to really achieve true equality, then at least we can attempt to provide more opportunities for development under the current framework, that will allow those who have time but not money to be happy and free, and live life with dignity" (Yang, 2013). This is important because thinking and acting beyond the dualism of "all or nothing" and the dualism of capitalism and revolutionary alternatives is more pertinent in making resistance possible. Being happy as a "dumbass" like Matsumoto means to refuse to work in the system of capitalism, but to live otherwise. It is to decondition oneself from what Fisher terms as "depressive hedonia" –an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure (Fisher, 2009: 21-22). Being happy is a way of being and living, not a goal that capitalism disseminates and promises to fulfil. It is a practice of de-alienation and rehumanisation.

Amateur Riot employs various strategies, which include repurposing abandoned spaces as sites for otherwise ways of life; opening second-hand shops to confront the wastefulness of consumerist culture; organising playful political protests: and inventing daily practices of resistance that can be performed by everyone, anywhere. For Matsumoto, connections and collaborations among activists and practitioners in Asia are very important. Not only do they challenge nationalism (which has become rampant in countries such as China and Japan), but also allow artists and activists to draw on and learn from each other's experiences.

This necessity and urgency of making connections with other practitioners inspired DM-AS to start the practice of Dinghai Chuan. It entailed embarking on trips to connect and co-practise with other people and groups.

In this section I analyse how DM-AS participated in *Banyan Travel Agency*, which was initiated by Huangbian Station (a research centre focused on contemporary art) in the autumn of 2016, with an exhibition in Guangdong Times Museum. In so doing, I mean to answer these questions: how did DM-AS connect to *zai-di* cultural practitioners in other localities? What assemblage of collaborative practise did they form? Did the strategies of cultivating *zai-di* practices and going elsewhere contradict each other?

Figure 29
p.349

The *Banyan Travel Agency* was an art project that promoted and facilitated trans-local connections among *zai-di* practitioners such as members of DM-AS and citizens who were curious about this form of cultural practice (for the locations, see the map above). It subsidised transport and accommodation to those admitted to the project after a series of interviews. *Zai-di* cultural partitioners played the role of travel guides in various destinations. Artist Feng Weijing would show people the third Dice King Competition (骰盅王) in Shunde. DM-AS would show people around Dinghaiqiao and Fuxing Island, and invite participants to curate cooking sessions and street-vend together. Pan He, the shopkeeper and owner of Roaming Bookshop in Shenyang, would talk about the collage of cultures in Shenyang and guide studio visits to young local artists. Matsumoto Hajime would welcome people to the Tokyo No Limit Autonomous Zone, in which they could participate in a demonstration advocating peace. Zijie, an anarchist and comic artist, would lead people around the youth anarchist utopia in Wuhan. Elaine W. Ho and Lailai Lo of Display Distribute ("is a now and again exhibition space, distribution service, thematic inquiry, and sometimes shop in Kowloon, Hong Kong") would invite people to work with cultural practitioners who were involved in the urban farming movement and independent initiatives.

The *Banyan Travel Agency* was initiated and organised by young artists based in Guangzhou: Zhu Jianlin, Shi Zhenhao, and Li Zhiyong. They were both researchers at Huangbian Station and later participants in Theatre 44. They felt the urge to connect with other *zai-di*

practitioners in China and other parts of Asia. They were also familiar with Matsumoto Hajime. The travel guides were asked to showcase their practices and activities on the ground floor of Times Museum so as to attract people to sign up to the *Banyan Travel Agency*.

I acted as DM-AS's "special envoy" to Guangzhou. As such, I set up our stall for the *Banyan Travel Agency*. Zhao Yiren, Cao Feile, and myself had decided to "street vend" in the lobby or on the terrace of the museum; street vending, we reasoned, was a form of exhibiting. I curated this special performance of Dinghai street vending. In so doing, I tried to display all the facets of DM-AS's practice in hopes of attracting practitioners and *kai-fong* in Guangzhou to be involved. Vending in the museum served to inform people about Dinghai talks, storytelling workshops, Dinghai street vending, and cooking sessions that probed into the intertwined stories of food and people.

Between 11 and 17 September 2016, all of the hosts and organisers gathered in the *No Limit Tokyo Autonomous Zone*.[58] On 23 September 2016, a group from Guangzhou arrived. That same afternoon they began a Dinghai working meeting titled "Community Economy and Cantonese Dessert Tasting", which was organised by Zhao Yiren from DM-AS. During the meeting they shared observations and experiences of Tokyo and the groups from Guangzhou and Shanghai presented their practices. They participated in a demonstration named "Permanent Peace in Asia" and saw live music performances and talks by activists about fostering forms of resistance. They attended book launches and exhibitions, and a meeting named "dumbass insurrection/revolt/riot", which was organised by Matsumoto and other "dumbasses" from East Asia. During the demonstration, people marched with the black flag of anarchism, while Zhao Yiren conducted street-vended. In selling DM-AS's publications and other products, she connected with a broader range of people than those participating in the *Banyan Travel Agency*.

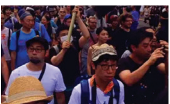

Figure 30
p.350

Zhao also gave a presentation on DM-AS and her observations about community/*she-qu* (社区) and economics. For her, self-funding was a key issue for DM-AS, which for the most part had been financially supported by its founder, Chen Yun. This seemed unsustainable. Some other members of DM-AS, such as Wang Xin, had tried to find other means to support the organisation economically, such as offering paid online courses. She raised the issue of financing DM-AS and learned about other practitioners' approaches to self-funding. For instance, she found out how Matsumoto's guesthouse was run, and why Nantoka Bar (an alternative public space that Matsumoto had set up in the neighbourhood and run by irregular "hosts" on an irregular base) had a funding deficit (Zhao 2016). She was surprised when an underground musician from Korea told her that they had applied for funding from the government to organise anti-capitalist

57. https://displaydistribute.com

58. For the schedule and different components of this gathering, see the website http://nolimit.tokyonantoka.xyz/events/

activities. Following a discussion with Feng Junhua, who is one of the coordinators of Huangbian Station and participants with Theatre 44, Zhao realised that one should not be too quick to jump into judgement about this form of resistance, for the context in Korea might be very different from China (ibid.).

By participating in the *Banyan Travel Agency*, DM-AS wove itself into a rhizomatic network of *zai-di* artists, activists, anarchists, and other cultural practitioners. All of these actors were concerned to explore otherwise ways of working and living with cultural practices. “The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple”, write Deleuze and Guattari. “It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added (n + 1). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills” 1987, 21). With this in mind, we can observe that the *Banyan Travel Agency*’s network of *zai-di* practitioners did not expand outwards like a tree from one centre (a megacity such as Beijing, for example). Nor did it have a main point of focus that dominated other nodes in the network. As the map presented above indicates, the localities in which the participants congregated were dispersed. What is more, the range of activities offered to visiting practitioners suggests that these were independent and distinctive *zai-di* practices, which emerged in and through local conditions. Through the *Banyan Travel Agency*, these practices overspilled their initial locales to connect up with others.

According to Huangbian Station, these trips aimed to “stimulate new situations of being together with people, with localities, and with communities/she-qun [社群], to reconsider the visibilities of cities that are assigned by capitalisation” (2016). “Through the nomadisation of our bodies and the flow of overbrimming geographical experiences,” the text continues, “we can investigate the different dimensions of locales/*di-fang* (地方), rooted practices and embeddedness/*zai-di*(在地), local(ism)/ben-di (本地), locality /dang-di (当地), and we can untangle the threads of the relationships between these aspects and our work/(artistic) creation, in order to seek the possibilities of co-practising … for new spatial production” (ibid.). Connecting, here, does not mean developing art projects with a relational aesthetic. Rather, it entails entering a connective rhizome of zai-di practitioners and localities in which the various dimensions of practices they create can be reached and explored by others in the network. By leaving one’s own locality, focusing on *zai-di* experiences and problematics, and becoming nomads in the rhizome, practitioners can learn from each other. They can exchange ideas about how to live differently under conditions of rampant neoliberal capitalism and rising nationalism. What is more, it enables them to collaborate around pertinent issues.

Zhao’s bewilderment at how activism is funded in South Korea underlines the fact that *zai-di* practices and tactics are always grounded in specific places. Still, this does not rule out the possibility of interconnections: strategies can be analysed and carefully deployed in other contexts. Chen Yun expressed this point in the form of a question: “How can we work on a ‘place’ that is difficult to disappear?[59]

If we try to combine '*zai-di* work' with 'connections with different places and sites', and with 'the imagination of association', we can reimagine and reconstruct the practice of 'connecting and associating'" (Chen 2016). Practitioners working in a given place are never isolated from other zai-di practitioners – they always share some commonalities with artists and activists elsewhere. As Chen points out, bringing together perspectives that grew out from very different places serves to prevent *zai-di* practitioners from falling into parochialism. What is more, it allows them to think about their problems through the lens of others' practices. Forming fluid assemblages or rhizomatic networks is critical in that it allows practitioners to foster a sense of solidarity, borrow each other's strategies for use in another locale, and collaborate. It allows them to discern lines of flight through which they might escape from the hegemony of capitalism, the nation-state, and the global system.

DM-AS was inspired by anarchist groups in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and other places involved in the Dinghai Chuan. Eventually, they themselves adopted a horizontal (non-hierarchal) structure, in which the members share rents and responsibilities and all have the same right to initiate activities (I will explain in the note after this chapter).

59. My interpretation of this quote is: a "place" that would leave traces even after urban regeneration and gentrification in the forms of knowledge production, archive, storytelling, collective memory, and relations between people.

Dinghai talk: Rhizomatic knowledge production

In this section I discuss Dinghai Talks – an important part of DM-AS's practice. It addresses two questions: how was rhizomatically connected knowledge produced through this practice? How did it facilitate rhizomatic connectivity among different people with different histories and from different locales? I answer these questions through two analyses. Firstly, I look at connectivity in relation to the space and format of the Dinghai Talks. I consider that the socio-spatial environment in which the talks took place allowed for a less-hierarchical and more equal connections among the speakers, participants, and hosts. Secondly, I attend to the connectivity at stake in the talks' topics. The keywords and assemblages of knowledge production that emerged from the talks largely related to inter-Asia studies, everyday life, and spatial struggles in urban settings.

After establishing DM-AS, Chen Yun and Liang Jie initiated the practice of Dinghai talk. It involved inviting scholars, artists, architects, directors, writers and other cultural practitioners and professionals to give presentations or to screen films. Chen Yun had worked in contemporary art institutions in Shanghai and Beijing since 2007. In March 2010 she joined West Heavens as a researcher and project manager. West Heavens is an "integrated cross-cultural exchange programme", which aims to use social reflection and contemporary art to promote interaction and mutual interconnections between India and China (West Heavens, 2012). Liang Jie teaches in the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics. He holds a PhD in economics and has a strong interest in the history of

economic thoughts, developmental economics, political philosophy, and South Asia studies. The first Dinghai talk took place on 30 July 2015. Given by Ren Chao, it was titled "Sensing Bangladesh: Area and Trans-area Perspectives". The seventy-fourth and most recent talk (at the time of writing) was held on May 2017. It was named "Contemporary Jogja Art in the Context of Current Political Circumstances" and delivered by Antonius Wiriadjaja. Chen Yun summarised the initiative in the following way:

> [The] Dinghai talk series gradually formed three major directions of concern: (1) 'Another Asia' [如此亚洲]: To understand histories surrounding China, with a particular focus on South East Asian societies, politics and culture (especially left-winged movements and the Chinese diaspora and historical Chinese migrants in other countries). (2) 'In the Town' [城中有事]: Understanding the history and reality of cities in China and surrounding countries; discussing and analysing the historical and recent urban renewal projects in Shanghai; constructing a vision of city life and urban transformation; understanding the rights to the city. (3) 'Working through Art' [艺术做功]: How individual and collective artists, researchers and activists work in specific urban and rural context to push forward social and intellectual issues via art creation, knowledge production and strategies of social organisation.
> (Chen, 2018, 489-490)

Retrospectively, we can say that first talk belonged to the "Another Asia" strand and the most recent one to "Working Through art". These examples indicate the variety of topics covered in the series. The placement of the venue for the Dinghai Talks meant that people coming to see a presentation would leave a metro station and walk past Aiguo Road. On one side was a high-rise gated community; the other was an old compound where residents were protesting every day to demand relocation. They then walked along a busy street market on Dinghai Road, before finally turning into the small lane in which DM-AS was located. It was in one of old self-built, low-rise houses in this small lane called Dinghaigang Road.

The participants entered a place with distinct urban fabrics and histories. This gave them an impression of the immediate context where DM-AS's work was situated in. When they stepped into the building of DM-AS, they would sit around the table in a room that was unlike a lecture hall or formal meeting room. In one corner by the door, you could see a collection of independent publications, side by side; in another corner, shelves of books, from children's stories to histories of Southeast Asia. There was a blue notice board displaying information concerning collectives and self-organised groups in other locations, as well as a student's desk that had been turned into a table for cooking utensils and a rice cooker. These last objects made the space semi-domestic. This was a semi-public space in which knowledge could be shared in a friendly, relaxed, and intimate way. The ground floor, which was used for screening, could only accommodate around sixteen people.
The fact that everyone sat around the same table as the speaker served to level the hierarchy between the speaker, the hosts and the participants. The way in which DM-AS

publicised the talks also served to create a safe space in which different topics could be broached. Here people could avoid being intercepted by the authorities, while details of the talks were only publicised two or three days in advance. Participants were asked to send an e-mail to DM-AS to register their attendance. Besides, DM-AS maintained a good relationship with Dinghaiqiao's residents' committee.[60] Mr. Kong, an open-minded young clerk who had been invited to the talks, said that he did not find DM-AS's activities problematic enough to report them to higher authorities. Before the presentation, all participants were asked to briefly introduce themselves. Furthermore, it was considered acceptable for them to interrupt the speaker to pose questions, even before the question-and-answer session began. Afterwards, they could hang out with the speaker and others in DM-AS.

Through these Dinghai talks, people connected with each other and DM-AS, forming a variety of shifting assemblages. These were in a state of continual flux: people gathered temporarily to discuss certain issues, before dispersing. Sometimes people revisited these issues by attending further Dinghai talks that addressed similar topics; sometimes people who had met at the talks got together on their own, to probe the issue further and discuss what kinds of practice might be generated from the knowledge they had gleaned from the speaker. Others attended one talk and never returned.

In DM-AS's ground floor, people could connect to knowledge and each other in a way that was impossible in a lecture hall or auditorium. These talks did not feature serried rows of faceless listeners staring at the speaker on the podium. Rather, knowledge became more accessible in the safe space of DM-AS. This setting did not only allow the speaker to dig deeply into the problematics without fearing censorship; it also makes room for anyone to contest the speaker's and each other's perspectives. This rhizomatic connectivity among people and different forms of knowledge DM-AS was critical in that participants could momentarily duck under the authorities' radar. Evading censorship in this way, DM-AS facilitated non-hierarchical form of debate and learning, outside of official institutions.

In late August 2016, Zhao Yiren and I mapped out the forty-nine talks that had taken place thus far (image below). We extrapolated keywords from the talks and wrote these down on white cards. They include history, mobility, movement, action, zai-di, everyday practice, community, urbanisation, gentrification, demolition and relocation, the rural, citizen's life, connecting, youth, postcolonial, institution, body, resistance, humour, migration, bottom-up, citizen's life, capital(ism), and leftism.

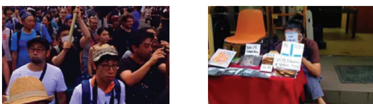

Figure 30
p.350

The pink strips of paper visible in this map of the talks relate to the topic of "working through art" (艺术做功), the blue strips to that of "in the town" (城中有事), and the yellow strips to that of "another Asia" (如此亚洲). The heading "working through art" was intended to capture the rhizomatic ways in which artists presented their zai-di practices, many

60. The residents' committee (居委会) is the administrative institute on the grassroots level in Chinese cities.

of which were socially engaged, and issues that they were working on. The rubric of "in the town" indicates the rhizomatic dialogue through which scholars, urban planners, urbanists, artists, and other practitioners shared research on urban issues, often in relation to Shanghai and other Chinese cities. With the title of "another Asia" we presented rhizomatic conversations concerning zai-di works, made by a range of cultural practitioners, who were rooted in politically significant places across Asia. The white cards were the keywords that we derived from the talks. In the map, they function as the nodes connecting different parts of the rhizomes. The white cards of the map's top-left corner, for instance, read "history" and "trans-regional perspective". The connect yellow strips of text, which read "(009) Iran: inside and outside", "(043) Meandering in post-USSR spaces".

The rhizome, write Deleuze and Guattari, "is a map, not a tracing" (1987, 12). "It [the map] is itself a part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification" (ibid.). True to Deleuze and Guattari's conception, our map of the Dinghai talks was open to change. Some white cards were left blank on purpose so that both members of DM-AS and visitors could write new keywords on them. What is more, the existing cards could be moved around and new cards could be added. This map would always be provisional, allowing new relations among different forms of knowledge to arise and new nodes to be established. Mapping the talks out in this way helped me to analyse the talks from a bird's eye view. Attending to connections between the substance of the talks, however, requires adopting an ant's perspective, and be able to meander through the rhizomes.

The rhizome of inter-Asia knowledge production comprised a fair number of talks on Southeast Asia and South Asia. Most of these were curated by Liang Jie and Chen Yun. The talks included *A Brief History of Leftist Movements in Sarawak* by Tian Yingcheng, *Returning to Malaya: History and Identification* by Liang Jie, and *Seven Days in Thailand: Ethnic Chinese, Overseas Chinese, and Chinese Language fragments* by Chen Yun. In these talks, cultural imaginations of China, and how China related to other parts of Asia, were re-articulated and rethought by ways of Southeast Asia. Seeing China through the lens of Southeast Asia countered the nationalist understanding of China and Chinese that prevails in mainland China. For Chen Kuan-Hsing, nationalism, nativism and civilisationalism are three dominant forms assumed by identity politics under conditions of decolonisation (2005, 7). Unlike Southeast Asian countries, China has never been fully colonised. Still, the effort to change China's cultural imaginary and points of reference can be seen as a form of decolonisation. In this context, the question of how to de-centre the imaginary of modernity expressed in Mao's injunction that China must "surpass Britain and catch up with America" arose? [61]

This inter-Asian perspective and methodology become more and more pertinent with the upsurge of Chinese nationalism over the last decade. Frantz Fanon insightfully points out that "if it [nationalism] is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley" (1963, 204). In the case of China, it would seem, this blind alley leads

to a refusal to recognise its Asian neighbours outside the terms set by the mainstream narratives. (Increasingly people alternate between state-engineered hatred towards some Asian countries and consumerist/touristic fetishism towards others).

In producing non-institutional inter-Asian knowledge, these talks utilised a method informed by the concept of min-jian. Min-jian (民間) describes a folk's, people's, or commoners' society. These translations, though, are not exact: whereas min means people or populace, jian connotes "space" and "in-betweenness" (Chen, 2010, 237). To use the concept of min-jian as a means of getting to know other Asian people and places is to deviate from official ways of approaching the continent. Knowing more about ethnic Chinese and overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, for example, can help people from mainland China reflect on communication and connection between (southern) China and Southeast Asia beyond the scope of nation-state.[63] Mr. Tian's talk on leftist movements shed light on how people in Sarawak and other Southeast Asian nations fought against colonialism. What is more, he highlighted how the Chinese diaspora has been involved in local communist parties and autonomous movements.

Such perspectives entail thinking beyond the myopic framework of the nation-state, and above all a narcissistic obsession with "Chineseness", so as to recognise how Asian cultures share interconnected histories. The rhizome grew around the notion of min-jian, which emphasises the shared knowledge that exists in between Asian people and places, was critical in several respects. It prompted people to consider about Asia (and China's place in Asia) from an otherwise perspective, which transcended narratives of nationalism and the nation-state. Moreover, it connected those who participated in the talks to a larger rhizome consisting of interconnected histories and political discourses in Asia.

Another set of connections linked the different perspectives put forward on everyday urban life and struggle. The talks named *Tianlin New Village: the Power and Future of A Bottom-up Life* and *Group Learning About the Government's Action of Demolishing 'Illegal Constructions'* in Shanghai, for example, were connected. These two talks both addressed grassroots and *zai-di* daily practices in Shanghai. The first presented a case study of a workers' village in Shanghai, which was built in the 1970s for those employed by a state-owned factory. It focused on how they organised to fight for residents' rights. The latter talk, which was given by members of DM-AS and others, was concerned with urban transformation. It invited participants to exchange ideas about how to slow down the demolition of urban spaces that, though full of livelihoods and vigour, were deemed illegal and messy by the authorities. These two examples show the aspect of citizens' self-education and self-

61. This is a slogan put forward by Mao Zedong in the Great Leap Forward, which was a disaster "characterised by a collapse in grain production and a widespread famine in China between 1959 and 1961.
This disaster is found attributable to a systemic failure in central planning. Wishfully expecting a great leap in agricultural productivity from collectivisation, the Chinese government accelerated its aggressive industrialisation timetable. Grain output fell sharply as the government diverted agricultural resources to industry and imposed an excessive grain procurement burden on peasants, leaving them with insufficient calories to sustain labour productivity" (Li and Yang, 2005, 840).
This led to a great famine, which killed at least 30 million, making the Great Leap Forward the deadliest famine in the history of China and in the history of the world (Ashton et al., 1992).

organisation in and through Dinghai Talk. At Dinghai Talks, people exchanged practical knowledge concerning how to preserve diverse urban fabrics and livelihoods through everyday grassroots struggles.

However, not everyone in DM-AS could organise Dinghai Talks. The power dynamics at work within the organisation needed to be questioned. After the talk named *On the Demolition and Relocation of Xiangming Middle School* in July 2016, I held a private conversation with its initiator, Zheng Limin. He voiced his opinion of the hierarchical power relationship and hierarchy within DM-AS. He told me that neither Chen Yun nor Zhao Yiren were encouraging/ positive with his proposal. They thought that the talk might not be accessible to those who did not graduate from this middle school. The invited speaker Zhu Tianhua said that he had hoped to publicly interrogate personal memory so as to establish whether nostalgia among young people bears any problematics concerning memory and history (Zhu, 2016).

As it turned out, Chen Yun and Zhao Yiren were right to be concerned: the talk became little more than a gathering of schoolmates. It was attended by only the speaker, four discussants, the initiators and two of their friends, and myself. Most of this group had graduated from Xiangming Middle School. Nevertheless, questions around DM-AS's hierarchical structure should not be neglected. Who could make the final decision concerning a proposal for a Dinghai Talk? Who had more intellectual resources and could thus initiate more talks? Moreover, DM-AS promoted the talks primarily on their WeChat platform. Accordingly, the information could only reach a particular audience: those who followed its account or came across it in posts by their WeChat friends. The limited circulation of promotional information on the talks begs a larger question concerning knowledge production: who had access to the knowledge generated at the Dinghai Talks and who did not?

There were limitations to connectivity of the rhizomatic network of knowledge and people that gathered around the Dinghai Talks. Still, knowledge production flourished in the gaps and openings of the grid of power. The Dinghai Talks were critical given that they made space for non-compliant knowledge production, public debate on socio-political issues, and dissidence. They allowed artists and researchers to share uncensored information, which has become more and more stifled since 2013.[64] Public intellectuals whose work was deemed politically incorrect or sensitive have been expelled by institutions. Some have even been detained by the authorities – this has become increasingly frequent in recent years (Goldman, 2009).

In this worsening political environment, Dinghai Talks preserved a form of criticality. Evading censorship and control, they created a space that was partially "off the grid". This allowed for the production of connective knowledge about everyday struggles, inter-Asia histories, critical art, and politically sensitive issues. What is more, it encouraged people to learn, connect to each other,

62. This includes the looting in Japanese-owned shops and vandalism on cars of Japanese brands in 2012 in Shenzhen, and the boycott of Korean goods, shops and tourism to Korea in 2017.

63. People in the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian started to emigrate to South-East Asia centuries ago for trading or a better life, way before the founding of PRC. See Skeldon 1996.

become friends, and put their new knowledge into practice.

Note

Since the July 2018, DM-AS has started DM-AS Being Together Project (定海桥互助社共治计划), transforming their funding and organisational structure. This means DM-AS stopped being funded by Chen Yun. The rent and the daily cost started to be shared by members. The members with different social-economic backgrounds organise themselves democratically, make decisions collectively, and run DM-AS collegially in their free time. They summarised from their previous collegial experiment and wrote a charter that they can refer to. Another important component of the organisational framework is work groups that initiated and operated by members and other practitioners who are interested. These work groups include Living (in Dinghaiqiao) Work Group, Locale-Action Study Group, Locale Theatre Work Group, Daily Life Mutual Help Promotion Group/Clothes Swap Work Group, Dinghai Annals Work Group, Self-Help Canteen Promotion Group, Dinghai Road Concern Group, Mutual-Help Roaming Group, Dinghai Screen Group, Freelancer Alliance Organisational Committee, Mutual-Aid (Moving) Image Group etc. They also invite practitioners such as scholar of anthropology and activist to work with them as practitioner-in-residency.[65]

In my conversation with one of the member Wong Yik in late 2021, he told me that Daily Life Mutual Help Promotion Group has been important to them, since the work group gives a structure for mutual support among the group members. They do not have to feel the emotional burden of asking for help when they encounter difficulty in their daily life, since the members would come together to discuss solutions, to offer emotional support, and to see whether it is possible to transform personal experiences into public knowledge. Since I did not conduct participatory action research with them after the transformation, I do not write about their practices for the lack of first-hand experience.

64. See Creemers 2015.

65. See https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/p-2PKUZwEDD9umxclk__TA

CHAPTER FOUR

Uneasy Criticality in Socially Engaged Art with Migrant Workers:

Home (2016), a Documentary Theatre

The one-year rehearsal [and production] of Home for me was purgatory ...
For me, class is a very profound subject, but it also touched too much on issues that the students wanted to avoid, and the whole process was very, very painful.

Li Yinan, 2016
(teacher and theatre director)

Then we can only do it and perhaps we can change the world.
But we still have doubts: can theatre change the world?
So there's this layer of meaning [in Home] for us — it's an irony.

Wang Shaolei, 2016
(then-student, scriptwriter, and production assistant)

Therefore, this theatre piece was about the relationship between us and them [the migrant workers], a satire of ourselves. It's as if we were doing something for them, but we were not: we were consuming their stories, and that's it.

Liu Shanshan, 2016
(then-student/scriptwriter/performer)

These quotations were taken from interviews with a teacher and students who were involved in a year-long dramaturgy course that led to a documentary theatre titled *Home* (2016). It focused on the issue of migrant workers in Beijing. It was readily apparent that the process of developing Home had been painful. My interviewees were riven by doubts and introspection. How did this happen? Why was the process of staging Home so uneasy?

Introduction

Home was produced and performed by third-year students of the theatre and literature, as the result of a one-year course in dramaturgy. Their teacher was Li Yinan, a dramaturg, theatre director, theorist and a professor in Theatre Studies at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. Li studied theatre at Columbia University in New York before going on to study and work in dramaturgy in Germany between 1998 and 2007. Since 2009, her work has been dedicated to bringing the ideas and methodologies of German *dramaturgie* to China.

Li's practice and teaching is concerned with social issues such as those surrounding migrant workers. Although migrant workers have been indispensable to urban development in China, they are seldom recognised by either the authorities or mainstream narratives. Through her pedagogy, Li employs sociological methods such as interviews and participatory observation so as to gather documentary materials for performances.

During the process of devising Home, each student was asked to find and interview a migrant worker in Beijing. The worker was to be of the same sex, around the same age, and from the same province as the student interviewer. The students not only had to interview the same young migrants several times over a period of six months, and if possible, they were also to follow their interviewees back to their home towns in the provinces during winter vocation. The students conducted semi-structured interviews with the migrant workers. The questions they asked are as follows:

1. How are your living conditions in Beijing?
2. Are you satisfied with this "home"?
3. Where or in what kind of environment did you grow up?
4. Are you satisfied with this "old home"?
5. Why did you leave your hometown and stay in Beijing?
6. What is "home" to you?
7. If you don't have your own apartment or house,
   where do you want to buy or build your own house?

In the mid-1980s, the government began to loosen the household registration system (*hukou*, which I explained in the introduction) This allowed rural citizens to seek economic opportunities in cities (Hu 2012). At the same time, China's "Reform and Open" economic policy led to huge foreign investment in the manufacturing industry in Eastern urban areas.

Whereas the cities prospered from this, income growth was much slower in rural areas (ibid.). “The increased demand for cheap labour in China’s new manufacturing sector, and booming development that encroached on rural lands”, Xiaochu Hu explains, pushed a large amount of rural surplus labour to the cities” (ibid.). Although both urban and rural people now enjoy greater mobility, migrant workers are still subjected to prejudice and discrimination. This is due to institutionalised inequality in urban China, which permeates the household registration system, social administration, and government policy (Cui and Cui, 2009).

Some of Beijing’s migrant workers are employed in the service sector. Although students at the Central Academy of Drama (CAD) frequented restaurants, cafés, hair salons, and manicure salons in which these migrants worked, the two groups seldom connected with each other. This might be one of the reasons that Prof. Li wanted to use documentary theatre to prompt the students to engage with migrant workers.

Starting in September 2015, Li instructed the third-year Theatre Studies students to read books on critical theory and the political economy of Chinese villages. In this way, she hoped to lay down the theoretical and contextual foundation of their subsequent investigation.[66] In late October, the students began investigating and documenting young migrant workers’ experiences of living and working in both Beijing and their home towns. This work focused particularly on their shifting ideas and experiences of “home”. During the fieldwork, the students found that the relationship between the migrant workers and themselves, though friendly on the surface, was awkward and could even dissolve all of a sudden. They began questioning the barriers that separated one group from the other.

These rather painful reflections on the stilted interviews led to the emergence of a key theme in the subsequent play: class and class difference. A German dramaturg and theatre director named Kai Tuchmann, who worked closely with Li, suggested this manifestation of class difference could be represented by incorporating aliens from the future into the play, drawing on H. G. Wells’ *Time Machine* (1895). This science fiction novel dramatised the unbridgeable class difference and inevitable conflicts between members of an upper class (Wells named them the “Elois”) and those belonging to a working class (the “Morlocks”).

The students performed *Home* in July 2016. It was put on in the independent theatre Penghao (蓬蒿剧场), which is situated near CAD in Beijing. For the three nights when *Home* was shown, the theatre’s main hall was packed. During certain scenes, some members of the audience were moved to tears. *Home* could, therefore, be hailed as a success. Yet during the six months of devising and rehearsal, the script was modified numerous times. Arguments and doubts arose, with both the teacher and students

66. These books included *The Production of Space* (Chinese translation) (1986) by Henri Lefebvre, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste(Chinese translation) (2015), *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Chinese translation) (2003) by Friedrich Engels, *Going Out of Liang Village* (出梁庄记) (2013) by Liang Hong, China in Liang Village (中国在梁庄) (2010) by Liang Hong, *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley* (Chinese translation) (1986) by Fei Xiaotong, and The End of the Village: *The Story of Yangcheng Village* (村落的终结：羊城村的故事) (2010) by Li Peilin.

struggling with an uneasy process of thinking, questioning, reflecting, and creating.

They chose to work in the genre of documentary theatre, which is often enroled to tackle social and political issues. “The core of documentary theatre”, Li explains,

> is the understanding and reenactment of histories (things that took place) by the people living in the present time. Kai Tuchmann, a German dramaturg, considers documentary theatre as “an otherwise way of writing history”, compared to the mainstream historical narratives (eg. history textbooks, historical documentary produced and broadcasted in mainstream media) that closely intertwined with the structure of social powers. It is mostly p layed by non-professional actors in public or semi-public social spaces, and it presents historical events, processes, figures and so on through theatrical means (eg. costumes, role-play, rehearsal etc.) ... documentary theatre does not intend to tell a story, but to stage social discussion and discourse. It aims at exposing contemporary and current social and political situations, rather than constructing theatrical events through historical stories and real figures. (Li, 2017a)

As this passage made clear, documentary theatre engages with contemporary society in three ways. Firstly, it draws on (and documents) quotidian realities and histories. Secondly, it probes a specific social political issue that is pertinent to people in society at large. Thirdly, it seeks to stage performances in public spaces so as to provoke discursive and affective interaction and reflection. Documentary theatre, then, tends to be socially engaged at the levels both tis thematic substance and creative methods.

In my fieldwork, I employed the methodology of participatory observation. Between December 2015 and July 2016, I audited the course’s classes, followed its rehearsals, participated in in-class practices and discussions, joined two students for dinner so as to have informal discussions, and attended the final performance of Home. In this chapter, I intend to explore three different layers of uneasy criticality in the process of devising the final performance of Home: the uneasy class politics at play during the fieldwork and preparation of the performance; the uneasy and self-critical production process and dramaturgy; and the uneasy staging, reception, and what I shall term “response-ability” of the audience.

“Can we be friends?”: Uneasy relations between students and migrant workers

On the day that Home was to performed for the public for the first time, the students held a dress rehearsal. Afterwards, they gathered for a group interview with me. Wang Shaolei, one of the students involved, gave the following account of his classmate Sun’s interaction with a migrant worker. “Sun’s interviewee”, he said, “was a manicurist who’s a bit older than her. Prof Li said that she [Sun] might have realised, but she couldn’t convince herself that the relationship between her and the manicurist was instrumental and consumptive. That’s to say, you know that you two are different from each other, but you can’t accept this reality, and you still say that ‘we are friends; we are still the same’” (Spoken as part of Shanshan Liu et al. 2016). This passage raises a number of questions, which I address in this section. Was it impossible for the theatre students and young migrant workers to be friends? Could they understand and connect with each other? What were the differences that lay between these two groups? Was the relationship between them only instrumental? What form criticality arises from discussing uneasy class politics with the students?

During a group discussion among the students and Professor Li, a student named Yang Le said that “at the beginning” of the devising process “we hadn’t discovered this thing” – that is, the issue of class (阶级性):

> Sometimes we feel that maybe the issue of class exists, as always. But sometimes I feel that [the interviewees] are quite similar to us and the money that they earn and their living environment are quite good. Yet later I asked myself: ‘if you could live life like theirs, will you be willing to do so?’ I gave myself an answer: I will not do that because that kind of life doesn’t suit me. And I’ve been studying for such a long time, and I am now here, in such a place [the CAD], I won’t live that sort of life. So suddenly I have a feeling that as if I am superior to them. But when I need to work with people in the outside world (outside of the Academy), for example with (TV) producers, I have to hide this kind of thoughts and doubts about class, about my study, about this thing [Home], about the Academy, and to show that I am a student of theatre and literature at the CAD and I’m very good at playwriting. I need to perform the fact that I am definitely capable of [doing this job and] earning this money.” (Class discussion, 2016).

Yang described how the class difference between him and his interviewee, a young migrant worker, surfaced during the interviews. He sometimes struggled to face up to this differ-

ence. He struggled to admit that he wanted to maintain a certain lifestyle, which he considered superior to that of his interviewee. In his position as a theatre student, he sometimes tried to overlook issues relating to class and migrant workers. Putting this source of tension out of sight and out of mind allowed him to continue doing what he was supposed (or even programmed) to do. He found interactions with his interviewee unsettling, as it confronted him that his sense of superiority came from his own lifestyle.

One of the books that the students were required to read was Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984). In *Distinction,* Bourdieu contends that the different lifestyles and tastes associated with people from different classes are constituted by unequal distributions of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Most of the students admitted that they found it difficult to keep in touch with the migrant workers because "we don't have many common interests to talk about" (Class discussion, 2015). This situation is reflected in Bourdieu's argument:

> the low interest which working-class people show in the works of legitimate culture to which they could have access—especially through television—is not solely the effect of a lack of competence and familiarity: just as supposedly vulgar subjects, such as television, are banished from bourgeois conversation, so the favourite subjects of bourgeois conversation, exhibitions, theatre, concerts or even cinema, are excluded, de facto and de jure, from working class conversation, in which they could only express the pretension to distinguish oneself (1984, 381).

It might be the case that whereas migrant workers like pop and internet culture (including, for example, television series and celebrities' live-streams), the theatre students enjoy drama and exhibitions (in addition to TV series). It seems that the teacher Li Yinan included Bourdieu on the course's reading list in a deliberate effort to make the students conscious of the issue of class in preparation of their fieldwork. Yet, did the differences between these two groups of young people really stem from class and class-based tastes? Did this interpretation risk overlooking the connections and nuances at work between them? Is it possible to address these issues from a perspective that does not assume a superior position?

Chen Ting, another student, interviewed a young woman named Liu Yiting, who worked in a shop selling Guilin rice noodles. After the first interview, Chen discovered that Liu had unfriended her on WeChat, their only means of communication. Rather than asking Liu why she had done this, Chen make many polite comments in the hope that Liu would befriend her on Wechat again. Although she eventually succeeded, when Chen tried to organise a second interview, she realised that Liu had unfriended her again. This time she asked Liu why she had done this. "I don't like that when it's always the same people in my social circle", Liu replied (Li, Chen, et al. 2016). Once Chen had managed to squeeze back into Liu's social circle, she decided to make an effort in maintaining the relationship between

them. She messaged Liu every now and then, and invited her to see theatre performances at CAD. Nevertheless, Liu did not take up these invitations – "maybe she's too busy", Chen wondered (Li, Chen et al., 2016).

In inviting Liu to see theatre, Chen endeavoured to bring their two worlds closer together. This could be seen as an effort at redistributing cultural capital by making certain art form (in this case, theatre) available to a migrant worker. Availability is not equivalent to accessibility, however. Perhaps Liu found theatre inaccessible or felt that she would not understand or enjoy "high art". Having tried to connect to Liu in this way, Chen has been rejected multiple times. Liu deleted her from WeChat for the third time and stopped working at the rice noodle store, disappearing into the megacity. Had Liu admitted Chen into circle, if only momentarily? Maybe not. By literally disappearing, this migrant worker refused to speak. She severed her connection with a member of the cultural elite, who wanted to understand and represent her life story in an inaccessible (and to Liu perhaps irrelevant) cultural form.

Chen's fraught interaction with Liu brings to mind Spivak's famous query: can the subaltern speak? The term "subaltern" here is not reproduction Gramsci's monolithic grasp of the subaltern as the oppressed proletariat, who assert their autonomy in the face of hegemonic power to which they have no access (Gramsci, 2005). Spivak does neither homogenise nor romanticise the oppressed (she actually criticises the Subaltern Studies Group on these very grounds) (1993, 66-111). I use the term subaltern here less in relation to postcolonial studies and more in line with subaltern studies in China.

During the Maoist era, rural people internalised their denigrated status, despite constituting the majority of China's population. Accordingly, many saw migration to the city as their only means of upward social mobility (Lu interviewed by Zhao, 2010). As a result of the social polarisation that has taken hold since the market-oriented reforms of the 1990s, these migrant workers have become the subaltern (Zhao, 2010). Under conditions of China's rapid urbanisation, modernisation, and economic development migrant workers and their families have benefited from the economic opportunities. Nevertheless, they still suffer from inequitable distributions of wealth, citizens' rights, investment in social infrastructure, and cultural capital. What is more, they are discriminated against for not being urban enough. In this context, Spivak's concept of subalternity is strikingly pertinent. For Spivak, subalternity does not only imply being inferiority to social, economic, and cultural elites. Rather, it describes the condition in which a group has little or no access to structures and institutions that would allow its grievances to be recognised or indeed recognisable (2010, 228). This rings true in contemporary Chinese cities. The news contains reports about migrant workers not being paid for months or advocates for labour rights for migrant workers being obstructed or even arrested.[67]

There is a considerable body of subaltern studies scholarship in China. Pun Ngai's early work on young female migrant workers (dagongmei, 打工妹) emphasises how their subalternity has been conditioned by a matrix of different forms of domination. Rural-urban

67. See Hawkins and Thorpe, 2019 and Elmer, 2019.

disparities, state policing, gender difference, family and kinship, production relations, and consumerism all come together to brand female migrant worker subaltern. No single oppositional logic (such as class) predominates (Pun, 2005, 196). "Can the subalterns speak?", Pun asks. "Or do they have to scream?" (2005, 165). Screams, bodily pain, and other embodied forms of resistance on the part of dagongmei, Pun argues, should be considered political (2005, 193). Dong Haijun analyses the Chinese peasantry's strategy of employing the identity of the weak as weapon in fighting for their rights. This, he suggests, is the subaltern politics (Dong, 2008). Yan Hairong's research on female domestic workers from rural China establishes that, given their subalternity, cannot speak discursively. Instead, in their determination to go on living in the city, they manifest a "conscious tactic" of the subaltern (Yan, 2008).

Sun Wanning's book juxtaposes mainstream representations of migrant workers with the ways in which they represent themselves. In this way, she shows how rural migrant workers negotiate a politics of voice, visibility, and agency through media and cultural practices. Against the backdrop of deepening social inequality, they reconstitute their subject positions in reciprocal relation to the state, cultural elites, and urbanites (Sun, 2014a). As I have mentioned in discussing the difficult encounter between Chen and Liu, I follow Sun in recognising how, as subaltern subjects, migrant workers can refuse to speak rather than subjugate themselves to cultural elites (in this case theatre students). The subaltern can refuse to be expressed in elite terms or fabricate stories rather than speaking the truth. Some students grew suspicious of what they gathered in their encounters with young migrant workers. Some stories were inconsistent: the interviewee would say something in the first interview only to contradict themselves in the second. Other stories sounded too miserable or slick. The migrant workers, it seemed, were performing their subalternity by telling the students what they expected to hear. Many are sad life stories: a rural youth was mistreated by their family and disappointed by the village, in which work is scarce, they then struggled to survive and fit in in the big city, constantly failing in one way or another. Telling this hackneyed story may have been a tactic for the migrants to protect themselves. Perhaps it allowed them to avoid revealing their lives and being vulnerable in front of a stranger, thus rejecting an unequal power relationship imposed by their elite urban interviewers.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, waiters working in cafés realised their condition: they play the game of being a waiter, "their condition is wholly one of ceremony. The public demands of them that they realise it as a ceremony; there is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavor to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor. A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer because he is not wholly a grocer" (1956, 59-60). This applies not only to professional roles, but social identities too. When the students approached their young interviewees as migrant workers, some played up to this role. In this way, the migrant workers demonstrated their subalternity. Economically strained, these people belong to neither the country nor the city, and are exploited and mistreated to boot. By dramatising their life stories according to a recognised narrative arch, the interviewees met the students' expectations.

In an interview with the students after the dress rehearsal, a student told me that one of the migrant workers had apologised to her after her story had not been selected for elaboration in the play. Had it been passed over, the migrant worker asked, because she had not spoken about certain things (Li, 2016)? This prompts the question as to whether she was apologising for not being subaltern enough. Can the subaltern speak in a way that transcends their subaltern position?

The students were also doubtful as to whether they could speak on behalf of the migrant workers. In April 2016, the class was invited to perform in the Phoenix Media Centre, where they decided to stage the story of Xiao Jie, Yuan Ye's interviewee. At the age of fifteen, Xiao Jie had left his hometown in Anhui Province to work in the big cities. By 2016, when Yuan conducted the interviews, he was a twenty-nine-year-old hairdresser. One of his leg was disabled and he had only visited his hometown three times in fourteen years. According to Yuan, "he always has a slick and slightly wretched look on his face" (Dramaturgy in Central Academy of Drama, 2016). Xiao told Yuan that he wanted to move away from the heavy smog in Beijing. "I might be a person without home", he said (ibid.). In the performance, some students made a cutting motion using pruning shears. This gesture, which was repeated in time with a monotonous rhythm, could be read as the director's and students' interpretation of Xiao Jie's hairdressing job – repetitive, mechanical, boring, even soulless. Xiao Jie's photograph was projected on the screen at the back of the stage, as can be seen in the image below.

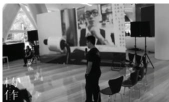

Figure 31
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Despite all of this, Xiao Jie was not invited to the performance. After the show, Yuan Ye felt ashamed to see Xiao Jie again, for he had depicted Xiao Jie as a miserable and alienated figure. For the same reason, he chose not to invite Xiao Jie to be one of the audience members. Xiao Jie himself would not have seen himself the same way. "Can I speak for Xiao Jie?" (Yuan in class discussion, 2016). His doubts were aggravated after the performance. Some students in the class felt unsettled when their teacher confronted them with the question: "are you exploiting your interviewees by only getting their sad life stories?" Unexpectedly, the exploitative relationship was also raised by the subaltern themselves: sometime after the show, when Yuan Ye went to the hair salon where Xiao Jie worked to interview him one more time, Xiao Jie and the salon's female owner asked him for remuneration. They probably saw Yuan's interviews as transactional. In this case, the subaltern did not want to be represented by the cultural elite if they were to be denied access tothe resulting representation. The performance exhibited the teacher's and the students' judgements, not Xiao Jie's voice and perspective. Can the subaltern speak through a cultural elite when they do not know what the elite is saying and how they are being spoken about?

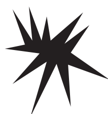
Preparing for Home was an unsettling process, during which the students' social consciousness changed. It began with the assumption that they were the same as the migrant workers, they realised during the six-month interview process that they were separated

from the migrant workers by class. When they tried to bridge that distance and to speak for the subaltern, however, they came up against various forms of resistance and rejection. In the wake of this, they were left to ponder the unease ethical issues surrounding the exercise.

This unsettling acknowledgement of class dynamics is a form of critical refection. It is especially illuminating because it emerged not as a theoretical observation or a presumption put forward by the teacher, but from the students' experiences and their reflections from talking with migrant workers. Having initially dominated socialist revolutionary discourse, notions of "class" and "class inequality" have been abandoned and are now avoided in contemporary China. Class difference may be repressed, but the students came to the uneasy realisation that it determined the relationships between them and the migrant workers. Beijing is adorned with propaganda slogans extolling patriotism and prosperity and shiny billboards advertising goods. In this context, as young members of the urban elite, the students exhibited critical imagination in recognising the problem of class inequality. Through critical reflection they were able to become aware of their complicity in the structures that have produced the migrant working class and urban inequality. In this way, they deviated somewhat from the consumerist, docile, and apolitical mentality preferred by the authorities.

On the other side of the ledger, the subaltern's refusal to speak also manifested a form of criticality. Through this refusal, migrant workers could reject an unequal power relationship and refuse to be represented and consumed by cultural elites. Faced with this rejection, the students became self-critical about how they approached the migrant workers. They came to reflect on the utilitarian motivation behind the interviews – namely to obtain information with which to devise a play. This gave rise to a criticality, then, in that the students entered in to what Haraway has termed "deconstructive relationality": "a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality" with the migrant workers (1992, 299). The migrant workers deconstructed their inequality with respect to the students. Rather than letting the students project what they wanted on them, the migrant workers compelled the students to recognise their agency, and diffract and change how the students treated them.

Given that the students came to realise that they neither could nor should speak for the subaltern, how could they continue to produce the performance about migrant workers? This question leads in to the next section on the production process and dramaturgy. How, I ask, did the class construct a theatrical performance out of their encounters with migrant workers? What struggles, questions, and doubts did they wrestle with along the way?



The uneasy production and dramaturgy of *Home*

During the process of making *Home*, some students raised questions not only about how the play should be made, but also concerning the purpose of staging such a piece. They each submitted a piece of non-fiction writing based on the interviews they had conducted. Professor Li selected some of these stories and asked the students, based on each of these stories, to work in groups to produce short, stand-alone performances. The students decided their roles by themselves: someone would be the dramaturg, another would serve as the scriptwriter, others would be the actors, and so on. The collective deliberations of these seven groups, like the play that they devised, varied in terms of the stories they had chosen, their approach to the issue of class, their dramaturgical choices, and their performative renditions of the stories. Not all of the chosen stories made it to the final performance. Some groups found it difficult to translates the stories into theatre, and the director Professor Li, who was also the director, took out some stories for various reasons.

Arguments, doubt, questions, confusion, and frustration featured throughout the production process. This section analyses three aspects of the uneasy process of composing the performance. Firstly, I look at the uneasy transition by which the students went from attempting to stage a conventional piece of theatre that represented the migrant workers' lives to self-reflective and critical re-presentation of their encounters with the migrant workers. As part of this shift, the students took the decision to adopt ideas from the science fiction novel *The Time Machine* as their dramaturgical framework. Secondly, I explore the unsettling collision between two different perspectives on how to write a script based on the story of a manicurist. Whereas the teacher insisted that the relationship between the student and her interviewee (the manicurist) based solely on class difference, with the student exploiting her subject, the student held that they were friends. And lastly, I observed one of the student groups and their unsettling critical interrogation with art's engagement with society which led to un productivity in their creative process.

Uneasy re-presentation and a fictional dramaturgical framework

Soon after their performance at the Phoenix Media Centre, the students already had doubts about speaking on behalf of migrant workers on stage. This issue was exacerbated by the play's dramaturgy. In the second half of collective creative process of *Home*, the dramaturg Kai Tuchmann questioned the legitimacy of the representation (Li, 2017b). If the students followed conventional modes of theatre making, Tuchmann contended, then they would superimpose their own points of views over of those of the interviewees (ibid.). This echoes the issue of whether the subaltern can speak. Now that the students had realised that they were unable to speak for their interviewees, could they still rely on theatrical representa-

tion, through which they would stand in for the absent migrant workers? In struggling with this issue alongside Professor Li, the students tried theatrically "re-presenting" their encounters with the migrant workers rather than representing the latter's stories. "Re-presentation" (or *'darstellen'*), as Spivak understands it, is a constitutive act, which means to "make present again" (1993, 66-111). How could the students make their uneasy experiences with migrant workers and their unsettling critical reflections "present again" onstage? A student named Wang Shaolei reenacted a conversation that he had had with his younger male cousin, whom he called Didi (弟弟, meaning younger brother). The piece stressed both his frustration with the exchange and subsequent reflection. Wang was presented as a pre-recorded voice and his cousin was played by Liu Shanshan, a female student. A young man from a small town in Shandong Province, Didi worked in a kitchenware factory in Shunyi, a suburb of Beijing. He gave the following account of his experience of the city:

> Beijing—people here are just richer, and a lot of them drive luxurious cars. When we go for a walk, we always see the second generation of rich people racing their sport cars. Well, we are all humans, but why do we live such different lives? ... living in such an environment as Beijing, the only thing is money, money; [working under] huge pressure, but earning just a little. You won't have a sense of security, (Li, Chen, et al., 2016)

In the recording, Wang expressed his puzzlement and powerlessness: "I don't know how to answer this question. Should I act like a liberal and tell him that he doesn't work hard enough? Or should I act as a fatalist and tell him that fate is obscure? Or should I act as a socialist and tell him that labour is honourable, but that reality is full of cruel exploitation and suppression? I can't answer my didi [younger cousin]; I can't answer myself either." (ibid.)

Wang neither conjectured as to what his cousin thought nor placed any judgement on him in order to represent him. Instead, he made his conundrum "present again" on the stage. Although Wang felt indignant about social and economic inequality, and disagreed with his cousin's belief in meritocracy and material wealth, he did not propose solutions to these issues, despite being familiar with different social theories. Nevertheless, an overarching structure was needed in order to thread together the different re-presentations such as Wang's.

Inspired by *The Time Machine* (1895), a science fiction narrative that portrays extreme class division, Professor Li created a series of scenes. Three aliens embarked on a journey to the Earth in search of an egalitarian utopia. Upon their arrival they encountered students from CAD.

In the first of these scenes, which depicted the three aliens' journey, a video was projected on a stretched screen. It featured a montage that alternated hectically between footage of

speeches being given by Lenin, Hitler, Churchill, and other political leaders. Image below presents a screenshot of the video sequence. It shows the moment when “Little Boy” (the first atomic bomb used in warfare) was dropped on Hiroshima. As such, it depicts one of the final catastrophes of the Second World War, which developed from the fascist “ideal” of a “pure” society, all of which indicated a paradoxical yet dangerous affinity between utopia and dystopia running through modern history. The video added a historical dimension to the play’s exploration of the theme of class and its role in the promise of communism.

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After they have landed, the three aliens arrive at a café where the students are discussing the process of producing *Home*. Curious about human civilisation, the aliens ask about a book that one of the students were holding: *The Time Machine* (1895). In response, the students explained the dystopia described in the book:

> He [H. G. Wells] wrote about a time traveller who arrived in the far future. To his surprise, although the necessities of life became abundant and money money could self-generate in banks and stock markets, human beings did not attain utopia. On the contrary, they degenerate into two species ... one species is called Eloi ... they spent all their time playing gently ... They did’t work or labour, and they’re interested in nothing. Yet the other species, Morocks, lived underground ... they worked all day long in a mechanical factory to support the livelihood of Eloi. When the night falls, they came above the ground and captured Eloi for food... Cannibalism didn’t only happen in times of famine; it might also occur in the materially rich future. (Li, Chen, et al., 2016)

Although the term “class” was not pronounced once during the whole performance to avoid censorship, *Home* drew on the dramatised class division from H. G. Wells, in its most extreme form. In this way, the play implicitly foregrounded the issue of class, which served to connect different stories in the performance.

The combination was intriguing but tricky – can documentary theatre be framed by fiction? Although the genre promises to foreground factuality in its main content, documentary theatre does not enact historical events. Nor does it make drama using historical elements and figures (Li, 2017b). Rather, it reenacts an event that took place so as to stage social discourse (ibid.). This definition of documentary theatre guided Professor Li in directing *Home*. According to this conception of documentary theatre, the class issue was put forward by using a fictional structure from *The Time Machine* to elicit and elucidate the discursive themes as a part of Home. It is important, however, to ensure that the fictional framing did not distort the facts. This was not the case with *Home,* which respected the factuality of the interviews.

Professor Li held that plays such as *Home* should be staged publicly, not as an insider gathering. It was therefore necessary to apply for permission to put on the performance, which entailed clearance from the censors at the Municipal Culture Bureau. In China's censorship system, using a fictional framework might be seen as a strategy through which an artwork could subtly hint at political issues that are deemed sensitive. Familiar with the bureaucracy and censorship surrounding the performance arts in China, Professor Li and her students knew that it might be safer to present reality in the guise of fiction. In the case of *Home*, this meant presenting social and economic inequality and class division behind a fictional veneer.

Liu Shanshan, a student who played different roles in the final performance, said: "I told Professor Li back then: 'if we dig deeper, we will face all those problems: urban-rural disparity, left-behind children…etc., and the performance would become rather acute. Professor Li said that we should forsake all those and stay on this layer'" (Shanshan Liu et al., 2016). For the team of *Home* (2016), using *The Time Machine* as a framing device was a practical strategy by which they could address social issues while avoiding censorship. On the one hand, it allowed the play to pass through the censorship procedure without neutering its content. On the other, they could still suggest forms of critical reflection on the issue of class by means of fiction and irony.

The criticality manifest in the choice of *The Time Machine* (1895) as a metaphorical and structural framework lies in how *Home* painstakingly combined factuality and fictionality. In adopting a fictional facade, the play struck an uneasy balance between critically raising social issues and navigating censorship. It presented a partial means of transgressing the boundaries of official institutions.

Unsettling the production of social discourse

Professor Li decided that class would be the main theme of *Home*. Accordingly, some stories that did not reflect on this topic were not selected for inclusion in the final performance. One was even removed from the script merely a week or two before the opening. This story was that of Sun Jianan's encounter with her manicurist Han Bing:

> Is it really like what our teacher Professor Li has said: in the relationship between me and Han Bing, I am only a consumer? Am I consuming my manicurist Han Bing, including her miseries in life? (Li, Sun, et al., 2016)

These were the closing lines from the script. Although they were voiced by Sun Jianan, Professor Li added them herself. This question posed in this passage was not only rhetori-

cal; the audience were meant to ponder with it. Sun seemed unconvinced by her teacher's her relationship with the manicurist Han Bing could not be considered as friendship. She had got to know Han Bing through regulars visits to manicure salon.

> Every time I do my nails in the manicure salon where Han Bing works, she always talks to me and tells me about all the suffering she has endured in her life. She has such a hard life! She was abused by her mother since she was a child. When she came to Beijing, she met a boyfriend who swindled money from her. I really sympathised with her, and I always call her 'elder sister'. When Prof. Li asked us to find a migrant worker, she was the first person that came to mind. So, I went to the salon to interview her, and I recorded all she said, in total more than two hours (Sun, 2016).

After hearing Han Bing lay bare her wounds and sadness, Sun felt that they had become close friends. Nevertheless, it was uncertain whether Han's stories were true. In my interview with Professor Li, in contrast, she expressed her dismay at being unable to make *Sun* to recognise the unequal relationship between her and Han:

> she uttered the words from my edited script on stage, but I felt that she was very reluctant to pronounce them. I reveal the truth but for the students that's hard to accept. She told me that Han Bing might come to see the performance, and she didn't know what to do. She thought that it would be very cruel to say these words to Han. This was the cruel reality of life, but I can't even make the students, who were creating this piece with me, to face it (Li, 2016).

Sun and Professor Li had two conflicting perceptions of of the friendship she had with Han Bing. Although Sun felt the she and Han Bing was not close enough for her to share the unhappy moments from her life, she felt that her sympathy for and affinity with Han was real. For Professor Li, this "friendship" was a make-belief on Sun's part. Whether or not Sun acknowledged the fact, Li considered that their relationship was exploitative. Still, it is important to remember that the relationship between manicurists/beauticians and their customers runs in both ways, as pointed out by Penn Ip. Customers can become affective labourers for the manicurists if they feel very empathetic and close to them. This means that customers can be affected by the manicurists and work in their interest, not least by becoming regulars and thus paying them regularly. Ip describes how in one case a customer even helped her beautician buy stocks in Shanghai (2017). Seen in this light, the fact that Han voluntarily told Sun of her misery could be interpreted as a strategy for retaining a customer by triggering her sympathy. Yet this could not cancel out the fact that Sun was affected by Han's stories and felt sympathetic towards her.

Although both Professor Li's and Sun's perspectives were based on the same documents (Sun's interviews with Han), they gave rise to very different stories. As Janelle Reinelt points out, in the context of documentary theatre, a document's value is predicated on a realist epistemology (2009). This means that documentary theatre is based on the facts of what has happened, rather than fiction. Yet plays in this genre do not merely corroborate historical documentation; rather, they employ documents to (re)compose a certain reality. "The inability of the documents to tell their stories without narrative intervention", Reinelt writes, "becomes in film and theatre the inability of the documents to appear without the creative treatment of film and theatre makers" (2009, 9). Hence, theatre makers' judgements are predicated on how documents select and interpret dimensions of the real. Based on the documentary evidence about Sun's encounters with Han, Professor Li judged that this relation was exploitative. The main narrative focused on the unbridgeable gap between the students and the migrant workers, excluding Sun's opinion.

During an interview conducted a few months after the completion of *Home*, Professor Li told me that she had selected five out of the thirty-five stories so as to present the theme of class, which had emerged during the production process (2016). As the director, she had applied this criterion to all the stories submitted by each student. In retrospect, though, she thought that this was improper. In October 2017 she created another piece of documentary theatre, *Black Temple* (2017), in collaboration with the dramaturg Kai Tuchmann, musician Yuan Ye, and three students. It was based on the investigation of an urban village named Bai Miao (White Temple), which is situated near the CAD's Changping Campus. In a discussion of this performance, which had been initiated by Xu Wanru (a student involved in creating Home), Professor Li stressed the importance of preserving and presenting multiple views. Having gradually come to appreciate this during the year-long process of collectively creating Home, Professor Li had made sure to incorporate various perspectives in Black Temple (Xu and Li 2017). Through this learning process, she realised that the differences between people had to be respected and her perspectives were very different from her students (ibid.). The nuanced views of each individual must be recognised and discussed before a performance, "otherwise it will cause a lot of confusion and frustration" (ibid.).

Both Professor Li and her students felt confused and frustrated during the process of devising *Home*, especially when their interpretations of reality clashed. When an overarching point of view was imposed onto the performance, the way in which the documentary evidence was narrated had to be adjusted in accordance with it. Sun's claim that her unequal relationship with Han as friendship may have been unconvincing. Still, forcing Sun to recite an interpretation of the reality in which she did not believe undermined *Home*'s veracity. In any case, Sun's story was removed from the piece just three or four days before the final presentation out of the consideration with "the overall length of the performance and the fact that this story did not reflect on the theme deeply enough", as a student named Li Liyuan recalled (2016).

The moments of criticality that arose during the collective creation of *Home* may not have

made it into the final performance. Still, they were critical nonetheless. They included situations such as Sun's story being deemed less pertinent and subsequently removed from the project, despite the laborious process. Multiple interpretations of the reality were not allowed to play out onstage: instead, they were subsumed into a single overarching social discourse. This process of investigating, deliberating, and contesting interpretations of the real is crucial in the pedagogy of documentary theatre. The process of making *Home* not only pushed the students to reflect on how they grasped reality, but also critically questioned the teacher/director's perspective. The power dynamics between the teacher and students structured the whole process of collective creation.

Deleuze has written on non-representational performance, which is defined as much by its form as its contents. Non-representational performance negates not only representations of power (such as the images projected by kings and rulers) but representation as power to (Deleuze quoted by Cull, 2009, 5). In creating *Home*, students such as Wang Shaolei moved uneasily away from the paradigm of representation, which implied an imbalanced of power with their interviewees. Despite this, their polyvocal renditions of *Home* were subsumed under and filtered through the director's lens. In consequence, the performance represented the director's reading of reality. Professor Li's strong discursive voice insisted that people should open their eyes to class segregation, inequality, and their complicity in these issues. Those voices that did not strengthen this narrative were filtered out. To some extent, this turned what had been a representation of the students' experiences into a representation of the director's critique.

This process of producing a social discourse about class was critical in that the students started to question the hierarchies of representation at work in theatre production. These hierarchies structured not only the relationship between themselves and their interviewees, but the relations among those involved in the creative process. "The Umdrehung" or revolution, writes Derrida, "must be a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself" (1978, 81). Critically reflecting on hierarchies made the students uneasy, however, for the equal power structures embedded in academic and arts institutions are not easily transformed.

"Unproductive" critical doubts and reflections on *Home*

> Back then, it seemed that we were screwing this thing [*Home*] up. Alas, that was the scope of our discussions. For example, we even have doubted about the meaning of the teacher's decision to make this piece [together]. (Li, 2017)

More than a year after *Home*, I reached out to one of the students, Li Liyuan in October 2017. She took the opportunity to reflect upon the process. She was studying Chinese traditional operas as a Master's student. She told me that she only then realised that their group's inquiry had had a deconstructive effect with the whole class, which she regretted at

some level (Li, 2017). The discussions that "went out of hand" concerned what art could do in changing social problems and the students themselves. "We attempted to search for some 'truth' that could change ourselves and others in the making of a theatre performance," Li said, "or maybe that's the meaning of doing theatre? I'm not quite sure" (Li, 2017). The production confronted the students with social inequality and class disparity, as revealed in their encounters with migrant workers. Eventually, they had to find creative ways of addressing these encounters and the social problems that underlay them.

Li Liyuan's group did not restrain themselves in thinking either about theatre as an institution or art's agency in social engagement and change. They became frustrated when they realised that a theatre performance like *Home*, which was produced by people within an institution and bound to be staged within it, could only reach a rather small audience, most of whom would be either theatre professionals or people from the art world: namely, well-educated middle-class people. Although the students employed social science methods in interviewing migrant workers and even accompanying them to their home towns, they did not think that these could be justified as forms of social engagement.

Professor Li considers the works of documentary theatre that she makes to be a form of art, not activism (Y. Li, 2017). Although Li Liyuan and her group were disillusioned by institutional art, they had no means of approaching these issues in a different way because they had to operate within the collective framework of *Home*. Their critique of institutional art might coincide with a form of arts practice known as institutional critique, which criticises art institutions on the grounds that they exclude less privileged social groups. In addition, Bojana Kunst remarks that in a post-political situation, in which capitalism has permeated the artistic domain, art practitioners feel uneasy when discussing the relationship between art and politics (2015, 7-8). On the one hand, activist art seems to be insufficiently engaged and it is rather powerless to effect wider social change. On the other, it is topical, provocative, fostering participation, ceaselessly critical, and reflexive. Nonetheless, its activism is only skin deep, for its criticality is absorbed by the market.

This uneasiness, which presents in Western contemporary art, resonates with what Li Liyuan and her group had experienced. They felt powerless that their socially engaged art practice was not socially engaged enough, at least in ways that might lead to substantial social change. The uneasiness here, however, differs from Kunst's observation, as critical theatre is discouraged in China. It can be politically sensitive and is subjected to censorship (Zhang, 2014).[68] This was why *Home* was staged exclusively in the independent, non-profit Penghao Theatre, which can only host eighty-six people. In this context, *Home*'s critical dimensions were not easily subsumed by the commercial theatre. Nor was the play produced to quench the theatre world for "criticality". The uneasiness that characterised *Home*, therefore, was not a pseudo-activist form of criticality. Rather, it was bound up with a critical education process in which the students doubted the criticality ascribed to art and reflected on how art could matter in a broader sense.

68. An example in case will be the Ai Weiwei: his works sold quite well outside of China, yet his works were removed from exhibitions in China since 2014. See Larry Lsit 2015, and Steinhauer 2014.

Rogoff maintains that criticality operates “from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness” (2003). The uncertainty surrounding how the students were actually embedded in social engagement through art meant that their deliberations were often unproductive: they could not convince themselves to make a piece of “socially engaged theatre”. But these “unproductive” doubts were actually unsettlingly productive in the context of education. In making *Home* the students performed the kind of critical thinking that art education is supposed to inculcate. The students questioned what they had been taught, what art they were making, and what kind of art that would matter in society. In this way, they challenged the strictken control on educational institutions in China – one example being that Chinese universities have stripped “freedom of thought” from their charters.[69]

The unsettling performance and the audience’s response-ability to the audience

69. See Reuters 2019.

This section analyses the affectivity generated by the performance of Home and the audience’s response to it. Indeed, I stress what I shall term “response-ability” – the ability to respond and to take responsibility. In so doing, I mean to articulate the uneasy relationship between the act of art making on the one hand and that of reception on the other, to use Lehmann’s parlance (2006, 17).

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted two students, one of whom referred to irony, the other satire. How did the student actors perform in a way that expressed irony concerning their own experiences? How did the audiences relate and react to the performance? I will answer these questions by analysing live-streaming in the theatre space, two acts, and a personal conversation between a student and the migrant worker who she had interviewed (who had watched *Home*) after the play.

Alien live-streaming: The double absence of migrant workers

Besides serving as a means of avoiding censorship, *Home*’s fictional framework created another layer of reality. Using digital media, the group merged the plot from *The Time Machine* (in which aliens visited Earth) with documentary elements. In the first scene of the play, the students told the aliens about the forms of technology and social media used in China, such as WeChat. One alien was awestruck by a student’s mobile phone, and asked the question, "has the technologically advanced utopia that we have discussed already

been realised on Earth?" (Li, Chen, et al., 2016). In *Home*, mobile phones served as a tool for maintaining the fragile relationships between the students and interviewees. Ironically, this also rendered the differences between them more visible – Earth, it seemed, was far from the aliens' ideal of an egalitarian and rich utopia. The students invited the aliens to acquaint themselves with Beijing by given them the task of finding three young migrant workers that had been featured in *Home*. In live-streaming the process, the aliens could participate in the theatre performance too. The audience inside the theatre saw three students re-presented their encounters with these three migrant workers, and the live-streamed video of the three aliens wandering the enormous city, searching for these three migrant workers, with no avail.

Figure 33 shows Xu Wanru (the student in the middle), who interviewed her high school classmate and childhood friend Miaomiao. Miaomiao worked in her uncle's company, which sold construction materials, and lived in Caochangdi urban village. Xu stood in the middle, playing herself. Two other students flanked Xu and reenacted Xu and Miaomiao's childhood in symbolic movements. Accompanied by a dialogue about Miaomiao between Xu and Li Liyuan, these two actors made a heart shape with their hands. At first "Miaomiao" had tried to imitate and catch up with "Xu's" elegant dance moves, but failed awkwardly. This symbolised that Xu and Miaomiao were once quite close, but then they drifted apart because Miaomiao felt that she fell behind Xu. In the dialogue, Xu said that she could not find common topics among them.

A live-stream video was projected onto the screen behind them. It was filmed by the alien whilst looking for Miaomiao. Although the alien was already in the suburb, he had not yet gone far enough. The alien was waiting to transfer to another bus. The surrounding cityscape that looked unlike downtown areas: it featured dusty and grey surroundings and low-rise buildings. It resembled the urban fringe or smaller cities and towns in northern China. The alien was bewildered and frustrated, for the bus had been travelling away from the city centre for some time but was yet to reach Miaomiao: "My Chinese friends gave me the route to Miaomiao. Now I am waiting to change to Bus 909. Caochangdi is seventeen stops from here ... it's really far ... Beijing is really gigantic. Does it [Caochangdi] still count as Beijing?" (Li, Chen, et al., 2016).

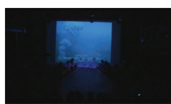

Figure 33
p.351

Live-streaming has been a part of the daily lives and business of many young people in China since 2015. They like to watch a variety of live-streamed shows online, send cashable virtual gifts to the streaming stars, or to live-stream their own activities. It has become so popular, in fact, that that live-streaming is now the fastest developing sector on the internet, generating revenues amounting to more than thirty billion yuan (Zhang and Miller 2017). Lehmann contends that "theatre is the site not only of 'heavy' bodies but also of a real gathering, a place where a unique intersection of aesthetically organised and everyday real life takes place" (2006, 17). By using contemporary media (that is, live-streaming),

Home brought outside, extra-dramatic space and time into the theatre space. Conversely, the fictional figures of the aliens brought the play to the outside world. This interrupted the internal time in the theatrical black box by merging with the mundane temporality of everyday society. In this scene, the combination of live-streaming and theatrical performance produced an uncanny meeting of art and daily life. The audience collectively witnessed daily activity through the lens of the alien's live-stream.

As Carol Martin observes, on the documentary stage, media is not secondary, and far from it: media is "evidence" that what is purported to have happened actually did happen. As such, it functions as both a record of events and a form of testimony (Martin, 2009, 74). The aliens were puzzled by the megacity and they used live-streaming to transmit their confusions: just as the real Miaomiao was absent onstage, she was also absent offstage in that the alien could not find her. This presentation of the migrant worker's double absence, in both media (in the live-stream) and medium (on stage), testified to the unsettling dilemma of Home, and was laid bare before the audience. The theatrical re-presentation of encounters with Beijing's young migrant workers in *Home* did not directly concern the workers themselves. Neither did the migrant workers speak about or for themselves onstage, nor did the performance alter their living conditions.

Rogoff argues that "smuggling" can exist alongside to a main event "without being in conflict with it and without producing a direct critical response to it" (Rogoff, 2003). As a theatrical device, the aliens' live-streaming was critical because it smuggled forms of critique into the institutional setting of the CAD. It was a critique not only of urbanisation (which involved the expansion of suburbs with poor infrastructure), but also of the theme of performance itself, for the live-stream highlighted the absence of the migrant workers both on and offstage.

The tense silence and sobbing: The affective performance and audience's response-ability

As I mentioned in the section on dramaturgy, Liu Shanshan acted out the story of Didi, Wang Shaolei's cousin. Toward the end of her performance, Liu gave an emotional rendition of Didi's disillusionment. The script for this passage reads:

> When can I become a successful person? Who doesn't want to become successful? You think I'm not right? How could I be wrong? Anyway, I think that's the truth: successful people are rich. People will look down upon you if you don't have money,

> and if you are not rich, you're definitely not a successful person.
> (Li, Chen, et al., 2016)

Here, the character of Didi is portrayed as an impoverished and frustrated young migrant worker, who has imbibed capitalist "successology" – the so-called science of success. Hunching her back in an oversized T-shirt, the student actor Liu looked angry and hopeless. She walked out of the cold white backlighting and picked up a huge bottle of cola from the stage's front-left corner. Her body was lit up in red from the front.

Accompanied by a jazz soundtrack that symbolized petit bourgeois taste, Wang's voice declared that "successology is one of the prisms through which Didi observes the world. Through this prism, it seems that there are only two types people: winners and losers. As capital exchange accelerates in the market economy, all past glories and dreams melt into air, and the grand narrative of socialist progress is dissolved by the individual's will to success. Success, success, success—is forever only a joke and a daydream" (Li, Chen, et al., 2016). The difference between Wang's and his cousin's discourses was amplified by the lazy jazz music. This soundtrack, which was associated with a kind of chic café in Beijing, was a form of self-mockery with Wang's part as a theatre studies student. What is more, the jazz song was actually a modified version of the Internationale. This added another layer of self-deprecation, poking fun at the idea of a leftist youth who could not change his exploited and disillusioned cousin's situation.

At this particular moment during the play, I, as part of the audience, was confronted with the demarcation between me– an urbanite-researcher who would go to a café where jazz would be played – and rural workers in the city, desperate for unattainable success. Although I myself did not come from Beijing, I was never classified as a "migrant worker" in my interactions with the class system in China. I was confronted by my privilege as someone who could afford a ticket for a seat in this theatre. I felt rather uneasy, as Wang's self-mockery also mocked me. Like Wang, though, I did not know how we could close social and economic gaps in society. This interplay between discourses and aesthetics (such as sound and light) was not simply meant to call attention to the audience's privileges. Rather, it evoked empathy, allowing the audience to respond to the performance – and Didi's and Wang's feelings of helplessness and frustration – in different ways.

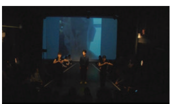

Figure 34
p.351

While I was thinking in response, Liu started to drink cola from a huge bottle in silence. I heard the sound of her throat as she gulped down the liquid – not out of enjoyment, but more of a despairing revenge. As the cola fizzed out of her mouth and streamed down to the floor, the theatre's silence amplified the splashing sound. I could smell the acidic sweetness of cola, the industrial soft drink that reeked of industrialisation, capitalist production, and exploitation. Along with other members of the audience, I was affected by Liu, the cola, and the tense, upsetting atmosphere. We remained silent.

As Massumi argues in his notes on the translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*: "L'affect (Spinoza's affectus) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (1987, xvii). At a certain moment, I even wanted to go onstage and take the huge bottle out of her hands. I wanted to stop the performance, which was becoming unbearably intense. But I did not. I could feel the audience's unrest. The people sitting near me were holding their breath. The affect of uneasiness was transmitted among bodies in the theatre: as Liu almost choked, her fellow performers sat motionless and silent in the darkness. So did the audiences, as the heavy air filled with the smell of cola.

Liu then poured the remaining cola over her head. It showered her, running down her face and body. It was a silent catharsis. In dismay, she said: "some of your questions are too artistic. I feel that I still can't understand what you guys are doing. Asking me about the concept of home? No concept. Thoughts on home? No thoughts. For me, perhaps home is a bedroom and a bed" (Li, Chen, et al., 2016).

To the students and their teacher, these words were deeply ironic: documentary theatre was too artistic and incomprehensible to the migrant worker who had contributed his stories to the play. This artwork was consumed by those who could understand and appreciate it, namely, the theatre goers and practitioners: middle-class people. At the end of the scene, Liu took off her outer t-shirt, threw it furiously on the floor, and walked through the audience passage and out of the theatre, slamming the door behind her. I was left sitting there restraining my tears, for I just witnessed the violence that society has inflicted on a young migrant worker, as embodied by Liu.

Bakhtin argues that any understanding of live speech is inherently responsive. It is either actively responsive, which leads to articulation, or silently responsive, which produce delayed reaction (1986, 68-69). This account has been developed into the conceptualisation of response-ability, which means one's ability to respond. Lehmann writes that "the theatre performance turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a joint text, a 'text' even if there is no spoken dialogue on stage or between actors and audience" (2006, 17). In the joint text that was *Home*, the audience was both responsible and response-able to the performance as witnesses (Jeffers, 2009, 92). This meant that I, along with the other spectators, responded to performance, not least the violent reenactment of the character of Didi. I felt that it was my responsibility to witness this enactment so as to face my complicity in the socio-economic structure that had given rise to the inequalities and violence from which a lot of migrant workers had suffered. This violence was not physical, but ideological. It was wrought by neoliberalism, success-driven capitalism, and the lack of social mobility. As a piece of documentary theatre, *Home* cut open middle-class guilt in hopes of inducing action in the future.

In the last act of the play, an alien read a paragraph from *The Time Machine*, describing how the Morlocks ate the Elois. I heard some members of the audience were sobbing.

Were the tears caused by the horror of cannibalism in Wells's extreme vision of class division? Or were they triggered by the guilt and shame that they felt about the metaphorical cannibalism that powers contemporary capitalist society? Or did they rather result from the accumulated affect of previous scenes, such as those those dialogues between Wang and his cousin Didi?

The play ended with another reading of a poem by a migrant worker poet named Xu Lizhi, who committed suicide in 2014. The poem was about his grandmother's last breath or cough. After a few seconds of silence, a student-actor started singing the song *Who Don't Say My Hometown Is Good* (谁不说俺家乡好) in the traditional operatic way. All of the performers then came onstage, singing, smiling, and waving cushions with Xu's poem printed on them. They danced along to the song *Loving Each Other* (相亲相爱), which began with the lyrics "under the sky we all love each other". Some performers dragged a few members of audience from the front row onstage to join this "joyful" celebratory moment of "love" and "home" (Figure 35). I could see the embarrassment, awkwardness, and uneasiness of those audience members as they were forced to perform this final, ironic act: "loving each other", it seemed, was either a lie or a mockery of the social harmony that typically featured in government propaganda.

Figure 35
p.351

The irony that *Home* directed toward what had happened both during the interviews and onstage was a form of criticality. The play smuggled a critical account of the migrant worker issue into the performance and its associated affects. What is more, the students were critical of their social engagements with migrant workers and both their own and the audiences' complicity. All of these were achieved without spelling out the issues explicitly.

Ah Yuan's bouquet: Migrant worker as an audience member

The only migrant worker who came to the performance was nicknamed Ah Yuan, who had been in contact with Li Liyuan. Li told me that she felt comfortable inviting Ah because her story was not going to be staged. After the performance, Ah gave Li a bouquet of flowers and expressed her thoughts and feelings about *Home*. Li told me that the bouquet and words had both touched and shocked her:

> I think, back then, our discussions were built on the hypothesis that class difference exists between the migrant workers and ourselves. On that basis we asked: were we exploiting them? Were the emotional connections between us and them real? This interpersonal relationship seems very complicated, but actually it can be very simple. The so-called terror between classes … I hadn't contacted Ah Yuan

> for the past two months as my own life had been tiring enough and I didn't want to hear more family problems from someone else. But I'd love to share this performance with her, both its form and content. I invited her to come. I didn't want the play to only be a wishful activity within a small circle. In the theatre, we were all in the same space, even though I was on stage. After telling me her impressions on some details, Ah Yuan said: "I came to see you, not to see the performance". I started to feel ashamed of my indifference and arrogance. Perhaps I haven't treasured enough the interpersonal ties and friendships of everyday life. Ah Yuan has been struggling and surviving in the society for such a long time, she must have suffered more than I have. Yet she still has an unsophisticated simplicity. This seems more real in comparison with us who seem to be smart enough to comment critically on society and to distinguish between left and right while still being protected by academia. (Li, 2016)

Li Liyuan's friendship with Ah Yuan called into question with Professor Li's presumption that an unbridgeable class divide made friendship between the students and the migrant workers impossible. Were such friendships really impossible? Or did this presumption lead the students to treat the interviewees in a differently from their own friends (for instance, by trying too hard to maintain the relationship or becoming too instrumental)? As Rogoff points out, criticality involves recognising that, for all their theoretical knowledge and sophisticated modes of analysis, practitioners and theorists live on the basis of the very conditions that they are trying to analyse and come to terms with (2003). Criticality is a mode of embodiment, an inescapable state on which one cannot establish critical distance, that rather marries our knowledge and experience in ways that are not complimentary (ibid.). In light of this, Li's experience of friendship after the performance, as well as her previous doubts as to whether it was real, embodied criticality. They challenged the theoretical premise that social and cultural segregation is unbridgeable.

Using her embodied experiences as a mirror, Li reflected uneasily on what she had read in books and what has been told by teachers. In a follow-up interview conducted online in October 2017), Li described this critical movement between knowledge and experience: "in crossing the boundary of classes, we found that we were kind of as same as them. At least my interviewee and I had a sense of a connected fate" (Li, 2017). The fate shared by these two young women might be that of falling into the precariat. Although Li was studying traditional opera for her Master's degree, most of her classmates were working outside academia and the theatre. After finishing her degree, there was a good chance that she would join them in working on an ordinary job. In 2017, I also caught up with Wang Shaolei on WeChat. He was then working as a clerk at a television company. He commented, "contemporary art is a luxury for me. Now I don't make art anymore" (Wang, 2017). Like the migrant workers, these students might end up working only to survive the exploitative capitalist machine, instead of pursuing their passions.

CHAPTER FIVE

Quotidian criticality: Acting out the sensible in urban villages

If you think about Beijing, what comes to mind? The Forbidden City and Tian'anmen? The Temple of Heaven? The Central Business District (CBD) and China Central Television Headquarters Building? The 2008 Olympic Games? The 798 Art Zone? The Forbidden City and Tian'anmen are situated in the ancient city of Beijing – the centre of the centre. The Temple of Heaven lies inside the Second Ring Road – it is in the old city of Beijing.[70] The Second Ring Road aligns approximately with the walls of the old imperial capital. The companies in Beijing's CBD are situated east of the Third Ring Road. Olympic Games took place in the National Sport Stadium, nicknamed the Bird's Nest. It sits a few kilometres north of the Fourth Ring Road. The hip 798 Art Zone, in the regenerated factory area, is located between the Fourth and Fifth Ring Road.

The building of ring roads was necessitated by the expansion of this megacity. One might well imagine there is a Sixth Ring Road in Beijing. It does indeed exist – but what lies between the Fifth and Sixth Ring Road? Probably most Beijingers have little knowledge of these areas given the city's rapid expansion over the past three decades.

Introduction

As I explained in introduction to this book, China has experienced extremely rapid urbanisation. The growth of the urban population has been mainly driven by migrant workers coming from rural areas, most of whom live in urban villages. Urban villages are generally characterised by narrow roads and buildings around three-stories tall crowed up against one another. These structures are built not by developers or a village collective, but by individual households. In urban villages there is often only a thin strip of sky to be seen, while the inner streets are packed with shops, grocery stores, and service outlets (Liu and He, 2010).

The official narrative of Beijing's development is presented in such venues as the Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall, which is shown in the image below. According to this narrative, Beijing is a sanitised, well-planned, and sustainable modern megacity with a long history (Beijing Urban Planning Exhibition Hall 2016). Yet, in mass media, Beijing's urban villages are often depicted as "poor, dirty, messy, chaotic, and hard to demolish and relocate" (Zhao and Xiu, 2014). This implies that they are mere stains on an otherwise clean and well-organised Beijing. In 2008, there were 867 urban villages in the Beijing Metropolitan Area, most of them located in suburban districts (Zheng et al., 2009b). In addition to migrant workers, most of Beijing's artists also lived and worked in urban villages such as Caochangdi and Heiqiao in the Chaoyang District – at least before they were evicted in the winter of 2017. Despite living alongside them, the artists had little contact with migrant workers, much like the theatre students. People living in central Beijing imagined urban villages as crowded and unruly places populated by migrant workers. They knew little about daily life in these places.

Figure 36
p.351

Against this backdrop, in September 2014 an independent art publisher based in Beijing named the Second Floor Publishing Institute initiated a new project. It was titled *5+1=6* (六环比五环多一环). In their open call for contributions, the initiators invited people to "choose one of the villages/towns between the fifth ring" (Second Floor Publishing Institute, 2014). The participants were each asked to live in their chosen village or town for at least ten days. Whether individually or in groups, they were asked to spend no less than eight hours per day conducting their project in the area (ibid.). Most of the participants were artists or art students; some were designers, architects, and other creative practitioners. Between September 2014 and August 2015, forty such investigative projects were carried out in forty urban villages and towns between the Fifth and Sixth Ring Road. The creative practitioners explored their chosen places using different and often quite unorthodox means. Artist Xu Zhuoer and tattooist Wang Ge, for instance, investigated the tattoo culture of young migrant workers in Yuxinzhuang village, who usually have

70. Till the end of 2019, there are 6 rings roads in Beijing so far, from the 2nd ring road to the 7th, like ripples from the Forbidden City. The 7th ring road lies mainly in the neighbouring Hebei Province.

their tattoos done by/in typically cheaper tattoo studios. Xu and Wang got themselves tattooed in such a studio as part of their project (Song 2015).

An exhibition of the project's results took place in One-Way Street Bookshop, which is located within the Fifth Ring, in July 2015. It attracted considerable attention from the mass media, including the official newspaper China Youth Daily, portal site 163.com, and the official news website China Xinhua.net. Intrigued by the art project, netizens, common people, and government officials all began discussing Beijing's urbanisation. The conversation focused especially on the city's semi-urbanised fringes.

This chapter analyse two subprojects within the wider *5+1=6* venture. In so doing, I address several questions. How, I ask, did socially engaged art projects critically engage with quotidian life in urban villages without either reinforcing stereotypical views about them or pointing fingers at the authorities for not providing proper support to them? How have these practices created lines of flight that deviate from the official image of Beijing? How did they show the fact that precarious people living in urban villages have agency, that they claim their right to the city in and through their daily lives? I will show that two forms of quotidian criticality were at work in my two selected subprojects. The first is artist Ma Lijiao's Xiaojiahe East Village (2014-2015). By acting out different characters, Ma revealed the daily life and struggles of people living in the village of Xiaojiahe East. He did so in a way that avoided openly criticising the government for the lack of proper infrastructure and illegal land use. The second is named *Changxindian Note* (2014-ongoing), which was devised by the architectural duo Xiao Kong and Li Mo. The project did not directly criticise the government's plan to revitalise the town of Changxindian. Instead, it reactivated everyday local histories through images and a board game in which the local residents performed their agency. After the game, they took the cards home as a way of reclaiming local knowledge.

In looking at these two projects, I would like to use the composite theoretical term "acting out the sensible", which has a double meaning. According to Cambridge dictionary, it is, firstly, "to perform in or as if in a play" and secondly, "to realise in action." The ways in which art becomes political, according to Rancière's theory, hinge upon the delimitation and distribution of the sensible (2006). In other words, it involves transgressing the boundary of what is sensible or allowed to be perceived as sensible. This delimitation and redistribution are important because the top-down structures that classify, discipline, constrain, and police the sensible all aim to maintain norms. Aesthetics, in contrast, challenges divisions between the visible and invisible, and audible and inaudible. Visibility is not physical but social-economical-political—what shows up as seeable to the public and what does not, what falls under the spotlight and what is left in darkness. This goes for audibility too—who can have a say and who cannot, and whose voice makes sense and whose is mere noise.

71. It is a non-profit publishing institute that produces independent publications and organises activist art events. This institute explores the interrelations between art and society.

72. This literally means, "the 6th ring has one more ring than the 5th".

To redistribute the sensible is to unsettle the mechanisms through which dominant intertwined structures govern the sensible so as to maintain the social, economic, and political status quo. "Acting out the sensible" thus means that through forms of performance once invisible and inaudible things emerge as worth looking at or listening to. This creates ruptures in politics, which Rancière sees as defined by not only the sensible but the possible too. Politics, he writes with colleagues, is "a common landscape of the given and the possible, a changing landscape" (Rancière et al., 2007).

Revealing daily life by acting out different roles: The *Xiaojiahe East Village* project

In this section, I emphasise first aspect of "acting out the sensible": namely "to perform in or as if in a play." This mode of redistributing the sensible, I claim, is at work in the art of Ma Lijiao, who performed different characters during his ten-day investigation of the village of Xiaojiahe East in November 2014. In my interview with him, Ma told me that he chose Xiaojiahe East (肖家河东村) after encountering some graduates house-hunting in the vicinity of Zhongguan village (中关村), the IT industry sector in northwest Beijing. He then followed them to Xiaojiahe East (Ma 2016). Xiaojiahe East was one of seven villages in the Xiaojiahe She-qu (an administrative unit that is below the district level). Xiaojiahe was on a list of sixty urban villages in Beijing that the local government wanted to tidy up and reorganise (重点整治) in 2016. The majority of Xiaojiahe East's population was made up of non-local people. It was only twenty to thirty minutes away from the village of Zhongguan by car, which made it a favourable place to live for those who worked in there.

Figure 37
p.351

I will analyse the two main elements of Ma's work, which are as follows: firstly, he used social media to act out the roles of a migrant worker living in the village. The project exhibition featured screenshots of his conversations. Secondly, he acted like a journalist in order to he investigate and film the inhabited ruin. Ma later faced an intense situation in which he was interpellated by the local authority as a journalist and he was about to be arrested by local police, he then gave up this character and retreated back into an "innocent" art student. In enacting different social roles, I claim, Ma redistributed the sensible of Bejing by revealing everyday life and daily struggles over land use in an urban village. At the same time, he did not fall into the usual trap of producing a derogative and negative narrative.

Acting out as a migrant worker and researcher on social media

During the first phase of his investigation, Ma played the characters of a migrant worker and a researcher. He joined different chat groups on social media to find out how people expressed themselves and interacted with each other online. Socially engaged art often uses strategies of role-playing and enactment. Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells*, for example, mentions Jeremy Deller's art project, *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001). In this performance, Deller invited former miners to reenact the 1980 confrontation in which 8,000 riot police clashed with around 5,000 miners on strike, at the Yorkshire village of Orgreave. The ones who played the police were then asked to switch roles with the miners. (Bishop, 2012, 30-32). Replaying a historical incident in this way served to confront social conflicts and trauma, triggering debates about social issues then and now.

Yet in the case of Ma's project, he played different social roles not to re-live certain historical events, but to see, listen and experience through these roles and thus to uncover the invisible and inaudible in certain issues. In this case, through these roles, he sensed and unveiled different facets of an urban village and its residents. Most of these people were migrant workers who have not been depicted in the mainstream media or official narratives. By making their lives sensible, his project may contribute to a new social discussion of Beijing's urbanisation and migrant workers.

In the discourse of economics, sociology, and global journalism, Chinese migrant workers are often represented as a horde of nameless and faceless rural people that have descended on urban areas in search of works. In TV programmes such as the popular dating show *If You Are the One* on Jiangsu Province TV, migrant workers were included as participants only because the government has required the programme to "lift its moral standard" (Sun, 2014, 3). Without such mandate, TV stations would simply continue fetishising wealth and commodifying human relationships.

In *If You Are the One*, migrant workers were used as representatives of the poor and the underprivileged to counterbalance the wealthy candidates onstage. In government reports, migrant workers are only.[73] In media and books that are not owned by the state, they are often depicted as the subaltern. For some scholars and writers, such as Hsiao-Hung Pai, they epitomise the tragedy of Chinese urbanisation and modernisation.[74] But what are the micro-narratives told by migrant workers themselves? How do they express themselves in their daily lives? What do they talk about on social media?

I am well aware of the poetry written by migrant workers (not least by the poet Xu Lizhi, who committed suicide whilst working for Foxconn)[75] and the autobiographical novels written by the migrant babysitter Fan Yusu.[76] Nevertheless, here I have chosen to focus on the more quotidian online conversations among migrant workers, as Ma addressed them in his project.

73. See National Bureau of Statistics 2014.
74. See Pai, 2013.

In the article that he published on the Second Floor Publishing Institute's WeChat account, which was subsequently shown in the exhibition, Ma wrote that: "Baidu Post Bar, QQ group, WeChat group and so on, these social media platforms can gather people from different locations in the real society on the internet and make their voice heard altogether. There are anonymous social apps such as Youmi (友秘) that allows users to hide themselves behind their words. I think this [way of expression] is more real" (Ma, 2014). This is the main reason that Ma started his project by joining social media groups of various kinds and acted out the character of a migrant worker online. Acting as if he was one of the young people living in Xiaojiahe East, Ma tried to observe and participate in their online conversations.

Ma joined WeChat groups run by people in the village, such as the "Xiaojiahe She-qu Youth Group." Most of the participants, he found, were not local to Beijing. Some had begun working at a relatively young age; others were considering getting an education in college or at a vocational school. As the screenshot below shows, a young woman named Chen Yan wrote on the "Xiaojiahe She-qu Youth Group," saying that she had "enroled in a vocational school", but now had "some regrets". Two other members in the WeChat group encouraged her to resit the college entrance examination next year. It turned out that Chen Yan was not a fresh graduate from high school – she had already worked for a year. On the one hand, this conversation did not strike me as something obviously related to migrant workers. It was slightly discrepant with the image of migrants constructed in the media, for it did not feature complaints about underpaid and tiring work, unpaid salaries, or homesickness. On the other hand, one can still guess that they were probably not Beijingers because most urban youths would have continued their education after high school.

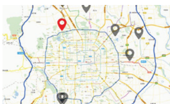

Figure 38
p.352

The screenshot presented in Figure 32. was shown at the exhibition in 2015. At one level, it demonstrates the mundanity of many conversations on social media. At another, though, it also brings into focus migrant workers' aspirations, hopes of upward social mobility, educational ambitions, and mutual encouragement. It attests to a distinctly convivial online space.

Ma also performed the role of a researcher who conducted a social research project. Playing this character online, he asked people whether he could talk to them, either online or face-to-face. He has shown some of these screenshots

75. His poem was used in the last act of the documentary theatre *Home*, as described in chapter 4.

76. See Walsh 2017, and the English translation of Fan Yusu's essay *I am Fan Yusu* by Manya Koetse 2017.

77. Translation of the conversation:
Chen Yan: (I've) applied for vocational school.
Chen Yan: I have regretted a little bit.
SNOW: You can give this up and re-sit (college entrance examination) next year.
Youth Group-Zhao Xing: I agree.
Youth Group-Zhao Xing: Chen Yan, you just graduated from high school this year?
Chen Yan: No. I've worked for one year already.

in an article summarising his ten-day project. The article was posted on the Second Floor Publishing Institute's WeChat platform. Later, for the *5+1=6* Project exhibition, he printed out all of the screenshots of chats and made them into a booklet for the audience to read. These chats were strikingly various, encompassing anything from banal everyday conversations, through complaints about peoples' love lives, to criticisms of the IT corporations such as Baidu.[78] Acting as a migrant worker and a researcher, Ma saw things and heard voices that would otherwise not be visible or audible to him. These screenshots showed migrant workers presenting their daily lives: they emerged as individuals with feelings, critical voices, ambitions, and aspirations.

Both urbanites and rural migrants live together in the same city. The former might live in an apartment built by the latter, buy groceries from the latter, or have food delivered by the latter. Yet despite these moments of contact, how much do the two groups socially interact with one another? This brings to mind Rancière's reading of a poem of Mallarmé's titled "Apart, we are together". "Human beings", Rancière writes, "are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, I would say a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of the 'being together'" (2006, 4).

Many urbanites turn a blind eye to the fact that they share the city with migrant workers; they often see the latter as different, nameless, and certainly not "one-of-us." People born in the city and migrant arrivals live together but apart, secluded from each other. In Ma's work, however, urban audiences discovered a more quotidian dimensions of the migrant workers' lives. These departed from predominant media representations of rural migrants, which foregrounded dramatic incidents such as the strikes occasioned by wages going unpaid or the Foxconn suicides. How would urbanite audiences react upon seeing migrants as individuals? That is, as living through everyday joys and frustrations, being every bit as digital and media savvy as themselves? It may be that they would feel a new sense of unity with the migrant workers, for they would no longer be invisible to them.

It is important to point out that when he publicised these screenshots, the artist did not ask for the consents from the participants in the chat groups and social media platforms. He did not even conceal their names and profile pictures. Ma's outputs, then, might be seen as a form of voyeurism – a violation of his interlocutors' privacy. Ma may have redistributed the visible, but the ethics of his project was debatable. Still, I must admit that I enjoyed reading the very diverse conversations among migrant workers presented by Ma. The project made it possible to peek into their online lives – as an accomplice, perhaps, but also as a compassionate citizen of urbanising China.

78. Baidu is the biggest search engine in China. The Baidu company provides Internet-related services and products, and it also develops artificial intelligence.

Acting out as a journalist and an art student in the village

At the same time as his observation and participation online, Ma conducted investigation offline. He walked around different housing blocks for migrant workers and even climbed over a wall to enter a walled-up construction site. Located near a relatively high-class residential area named Yuanmingyuan Villas (圆明园别墅), the site was made up of unfinished villas. This modern ruin was quite unlike many other unfinished buildings (烂尾楼) left empty when the real estate bubble burst. It occupied an immense 10,000 square-metre area. Temporary buildings had been constructed on the site, providing both homes and workplaces for many migrant workers. Its unfinished buildings were symptomatic of the frictions of China's allegedly smooth process of urbanisation, through which the city has expanding horizontally and vertically at a feverish pace.

According to Ma's article, this inhabited construction site belonged to the Yuanmingyuan Villa Region (圆明园别墅区), which was developed and built by the son of Beijing's former mayor Chen Xitong. "Later, thanks to Chen Xitong's 16-year [prison] sentence [on charges of corruption], and the lack of proper certification of development and construction, this project was suspended" (Ma, 2014). Yet there were different stories about inhabitants of this area. According to an official report on Beijing TV aired when the unfinished structures were demolished, the site had been occupied by construction workers whose salaries had not been paid. Later, more and more migrant workers had moved in (Beijing Television, 2017). During his investigation, Ma discovered another narrative. There had been a major financial dispute among the developer and three contractors. After no resolution was found, the contractors' workers occupied and resided on the land so as to compel the developer to return to the negotiating table and pay the arrears on their salaries (Ma, 2014). In 2008 the developer paid off the salaries. By the end of the year all of the workers had moved out, leaving the three contractors free to build simple houses on the site. They sublet the rest of the land, allowing others to build more houses to be rented out, mainly to migrant workers.

Figure 39
p.352

At first sight, Ma found this ruined site visually intriguing. After many years, the steel bars protruding from the bare concrete walls had been bent by the wind. Rubbish dumps and car parks were interspersed between the low-cost, prefabricated houses. All of this was separated from a luxurious gated community by a wall. He also encountered a renaissance-style marble statue of a nude female figure, which stood incongruously beside an unfinished villa's basement inhabited by migrant workers. The statue connoted a conspicuous sense of luxury, classiness, and Europeanness. Her private parts however were tarnished with yellow paint, which turned her into an odd sexual symbol. In the context of this inhabited urban ruin, the statue held out a teasing image of the urban good life in that she exemplified clean, organised, and glossy upper-middle-class comfort. This was the ideal that informed Beijing's presentation in the Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall.

Figure 40
p.352

Later Ma discovered a fully-fledged migrant worker community living on the site. It contained a kindergarten, recycling station, car parks, stores, and a computer-repair shop. In the winter of 2014, Ma walked around in the area speaking with residents while taking photographs. In the early summer of 2015, he followed up on his primary investigation by filming an interview. It would be screened as part of the *5+1=6* exhibition. To record the interview Ma returned to the site with his girlfriend, who acted as a camerawoman. He met two land tenants, who may have been a couple. They saw him as a journalist and started to complain about the planned demolition of the illegal houses on the construction site. These included the temporary houses that they had built, which were scheduled for demolition in three days' time. Lacking any official documentation indicating legal land use, they would not be compensated for their loss.

In the film, the female land tenant tells Ma that "it's useless to seek help from the government. The government is on their side [referring to the contractors who occupied the construction site]. They all know each other" (2015 6:48). Within the walls of the site, she continues, "there are two-hundred temporary houses ... built by nine groups of land tenants ... not including those stores ... all are from different parts of China" (ibid. 7:10). "When we built these two houses three years ago, we didn't know that the government planned to demolish this site" (ibid. 2:45). We have, she said, built "around forty to fifty houses. By then we didn't know that the contractors hadn't got a land use certificate" (ibid. 3:44). "We are all victims", she concluded (ibid. 7:41). When asked what they were going to do when the contractors came to tear down their houses, the woman said that "we are not going to leave. Staying means that we are going to revolt and stir things up" (she uses the phrase "闹事", which literally means causing disturbance (ibid. 3:15). Showing Ma the demolition notice, they wanted him to cover the forced demolition in hopes that the media would exert some pressure on the government, they might then receive some compensation.

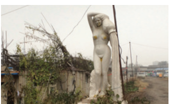

Figure 41
p.352

On camera, in front of a "journalist", the land tenants acted as victims of a coordinated plot between local governmental power and those who have recapitalised the real estate bubble. If Ma had not performed the role of a journalist, who might report sympathetically in media about how they had been unjustly treated, the land tenants might not have performed the role of victims. They might not have told him about the conflict over the demolition, which mirrors wider conflicts over land commercialisation and urbanisation in China. Such clashes concerning demolition are epitomised in stories about the owners of so-called the "nail houses", who refused to move away from their homes. This is depicted in Ou Ning and Cao Fei's documentary Meishi Street (2006). [79] Ma's video, however, does not tell a one-sided story based on what was said by these people, who were

soon to be evicted. It also shows his confrontation with the contractors who occupied the construction sites. In this way, the video reveals the connection between the contractors and local authorities, exposing the underlying mechanism that sustained the existence of this illegal housing area.

Figure 42
p.353

The video's final sequence begins by showing the demolition announcement, which has been pasted onto one of the houses. This is followed by an abrupt jump cut to another scene, in which the contractors (one woman and two men, all in their fifties), approached Ma and his girlfriend in an aggressive manner. They had probably been altered of the filmmakers' presence by security guards patrolling the area.

Figure 43
p.353

“Do you think you can film me?” a woman asks in a menacing way. “Everybody can film in public space”, Ma replies. The woman then pointed at herself and authoritatively declares, “I'm the leader of this construction site!” “Do you have any proof?”, Ma asked. The woman: “Come! Come with us to get the proof! ... Come to my office!” “I can even film in police station,” said Ma, “why can't I here?” "I govern and manage this place... I have the right to interrogate anybody here." the woman replied. Ma went along with it, "You can interrogate me right here!" "Give police captain Liu a call, ask him to come, ask them to come!" the woman ordered the other land contractors. One fo the male contractors made the call. "Now the subdistrict office has also intervened. You are asking for trouble!" The woman said to Ma and his girlfriend. "Very good!", the women shouted. (Ma, 2015, 18:42-21:00)

In this confrontation, it is clear that the artist was acting not as a journalist, but rather as a citizen staking a claim to his right to film in public space (although it is debatable whether this occupied construction site was public space). The contractors took on the role of the de facto owner and governor of this piece of land. They assumed the power to profit from their “territory” and expel “intruders”. The video shows how Ma tried to film what the contractors did and said to him, while the contractors stopped the artist, took him away, and even called the police.

Figure 44
p.353

79. A dingzihu – or 'nail house' – is a home where the owner refuses to accept compensation from a property developer for its demolition (Blason 2014).
Meishi Street [煤市街], directed by Ou Ning and Cao Fei in 2006, is an independent Chinese documentary that portrays a group of Beijing residents protesting against the planned destruction of their home in Meishi street before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The filmmakers gave video cameras to the residents in this group, and they filmed their resistance and the eviction process.

Towards the end of Ma's film, the artist reverted back to his role as an art student. Trying to find a way out of the trouble that they had gotten into, he asks "don't you think this looks beautiful?" As they are forced to leave, his girlfriend started swinging the camera (image above). "I'm not a journalist!" Ma cried out to the contractors. Whereas much of the film is made up of focused shots of the female contractor's fierce body movements, its final minutes gave way to random and swinging movements and alternating shots of the sky and the ground. The final shot shows the interior of a tote bag. Ma told his girlfriend to leave first, but the contractors stopped her, yelling "no, you can't leave!" Ma then became agitated, swearing out loud, "fuck!" The contractors become even more furious: "Who are you swearing at?!" (21:18-22:31).

These scenes recall Ai Weiwei's film *So Sorry* (2009), which recorded his confrontation with the Chengdu police in 2009. He had been investigating how students had died in the Sichuan earthquake due to corruption and poor building construction (Ai, 2009). The film documented how the police beat Ai up so as to put an end to his inquiries.

Unlike Ai, Ma did not act role as an artist, activist, martyr, nor fighter for human rights. Instead, he successively played the role of a journalist, a curious citizen, and an art student. Ma rendered visible a series of clashes among contractors, land tenants, journalists, and citizens. He showed these parties' conflicting interests and revealed also the collaboration between the contractors and local authorities. Unlike Ai, though, Ma neither directly interrogated the authorities, nor levelled accusations against them. During the last few seconds of Ma's film, we can hear the sound of scuffling. The interiority of an unstable and claustrophobic space was contrasted with the exteriority of the sounds and voices in a conflictual situation, and it refused to reveal the confrontation visually, which generated an unsettling affect.

This intense affect mirrored the urbanity in this urban-rural interface: acting out in the marginality of an urban village, Ma did not criticise the lack of proper infrastructural support in urban villages and degrading treatment towards migrant workers. Instead, through the artist's *inappropriate/d* acting as a journalist-citizen-art student, the film created a performative space for complicated situations arose from urbanisation to become visible and audible. What is more, it raised questions about urbanisation. Who could and who could not use the land illegally with impunity? What allowed people the contractors and land tenants to profiteer from the land? Who profited most from the demolition of the buildings? Bringing these problematics to light, Ma smuggled a critique of Chinese urbanisation and the powers that drove and underpinned it into the film. In my interview with Ma, I asked what happened in the police station after the film stopped. When the police captain interrogated him, Ma told me, he presented himself as an art student who found the ruined construction site interesting and beautiful (Ma 2016). Ma said: "the police captain ordered me to delete the video so I could go away. So I did. But afterwards I asked someone to recover the video" (ibid.). To the authorities, it seemed, art was less threatening than journalism.

Acting as a naïve student, practising the "useless" and "harmless" art, was a strategy through which Ma could redistribute without getting into trouble. It played on peoples' presumption that art is an ineffective means of intervening into the social domain – especially student art. For many, art occupies a delimited and innocuous domain as compared with the media. This might be wrong, however, especially in the contemporary era of digital and social media. Indeed, the *5+1=6* exhibition attracted attention not only from the general public but from the mass media too. This amplified the project's impact, making Beijing's urban fringe visible to a wider public.

For some art critics, Ma's sort of work is too "journalistic" in the sense that critical journalists strive to "reveal" or "uncover" social problems. Zhang Wei, for example, criticised some supposedly socially engaged practices on the grounds that they aim to "reveal and expose" society's dark underbelly, from an elevated position, without reflecting on their positionality. What is more, for all their emphasis on revealing hidden truths, such practices merely discover some novelty that could be consumed by the market and the media (2015). However, I would like to argue that not every socially engaged art project that deals with the visibility of certain social issue can be boiled down to Zhang's formula. These projects might not assume in advance that the issue or place it works on is necessarily corrupted or bad, nor do they presuppose the people involved are definitely suffering and miserable. They need not necessarily produce the kind of dramatic stories that the media eagerly spreads. Some projects do not set out to fill a niche in the international art market by addressing a heated social or political issue. Most of *5+1=6*'s subprojects can be seen as examples of this kind. To avoid commercialisation or artistic formalisation, *5+1=6*'s initiators requested that the participants to produce outputs that would differ from the kinds of artworks found in museums. They discouraged creative practitioners from employing the most popular and recognisable forms of artistic expression. It would seem that the contributors heeded their requests: most of the projects did not garner significant commercial interest.

The exhibition attracted considerable attention from the mass media. Still, I would argue that being "consumed" in this way did not render the project uncritical. Subprojects such as Ma's were not peddling sensational stories about the dark underside of society. The criticality of Ma's film derived from the way in which his performance of different social roles allowed for empathetic glimpses of daily life and socio-economic conflicts in an urban village. These glimpses contaminated – in Derridarian sense of the word – the predominant media image of urban villages as undesirable places deserving demolition. This contamination might lead to a more understanding and reflective approach to urban villages and urbanisation in the future.

Reactivating everyday knowledge through actions on the ground: *Changxindian Notes* (2015)

In this section, I discuss Xiao Kong and Li Mo's subproject, *Changxindian Notes* (2015-ongoing), which focused on the historical town Changxindian. In bringing to light and reactivating everyday local knowledge, this work exhibited quotidian criticality. Firstly, I briefly analyse the subproject's first presentation in the *5+1=6* exhibition, emphasising how it rendered visible both significant buildings and scenes of everyday life. Secondly, I demonstrate the criticality implicit in the residents' unexpected attempts to reclaim local memories. To this end, I analyse the board game about Changxindian that the architects invented, emphasising how local people took away the playing cards.

Changxindian Notes: Highlighting everyday architectural devices

Apart from performing, acting out has another meaning, which is taking action. In this section, I analyse Changxindian Notes, to showing how actions on the ground critically reactivated quotidian local histories and memories of a historical old town. In doing so, though, I stress that these actions avoided directly opposing the government's plans to revitalise, or to "disneyficate", the area.

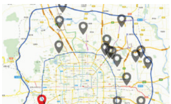

Figure 45
p.353

On 17 January, 2015, Calligraphy Architecture, an architecture studio run by Xiao Kong (小孔) and Li Mo (李墨), took part in *5+1=6*. They conducted their investigative art/architecture project in a town named Changxindian, which I have indicated with a red dot in the map provided in figure 38. The famous Marco Polo Bridge is only two kilometers from this town.[80] Changxindian is Beijing's gateway to the southwest. The Beijing-Kowloon Railway, Beijing-Shijiazhuang Highway, and Beijing-Zhoukoudian Road run through it. Part of its name – "dian" (店) – signifies that it was a resting place, a waypoint for people travelling to and from Beijing in ancient times. Changxindian is home to the state-owned Two Seven Diesel Locomotive Factory, which played a key role in the Great Strike of 7 February 1923 (also known as the Beijing-Hankou Railway Strike. The town also has a mosque, a temple dedicated to the Fire God, and a Catholic church.

Xiao Kong and Li Mo chose to focus on Changxindian for three reasons. Firstly, Li Mo's mother grew up in Changxindian and she still had relatives living in the town (at least at

the time of our interview in 2016). Secondly, as I have indicated, Changxindian is imbued with a variety of histories and cultural legacies. Its golden era was the period of Chinese industrialisation between the 1950s and 1990s. It has been in decline ever since. Thirdly, the town has been included in the Beijing government's revitalisation plan. As urban designers and architects, the duo had their own perspective on this.

Figure 46
p.354

In the first phase of the subproject, the duo surveyed Changxindian's history and architecture. They drew site plans of some of the significant places, such as the locomotive factory and workers' dormitories on the Jianshe and Guangming lanes. They also drew the front elevations of some small stores and food stands, such as a hand-made noodle stand. They showed these architectural drawings in the *5+1=6* exhibition, along with an article presenting their conversations with residents and people working in the village office.

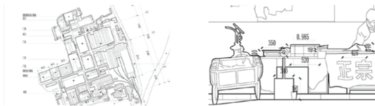

Figure 47,48
p.354

Through abstraction and measurement, the site plans revealed not only the sheer scale of the clusters of buildings that characterise this industrial town, but its diversity of places. Juxtaposing the site plans of giant factories and dormitories with elevations of small food stands produces a sense of discordance – things were "a bit off". Normally in architectural presentations, the ground plans are displayed alongside frontal elevations. Yet in this context the contrast created a sense of equality between places that are vividly infused with quotidian life and massive buildings that symbolise the socialist era, industrialisation, and modernisation. Indeed, the duo presented these two poles as being on an equal footing with one another.

The Beijing government planned to "revitalise" Changxindian, such that it would become something of a theme park. Against this backdrop, the project of using architectural visual language to depict diverse everyday scenes in this bustling town was distinctly critical. It highlighted the importance of the quotidian, for it was everyday practices that kept the town alive.

Changxindian Notes board game: Local residents acting out their claim to local memories

After the completion of *5+1=6*, the duo continued with their subproject. In late September 2015, they designed a board game that bore the same name as their initial subproj-

80. The Marco Polo Bridge Incident was a battle in July 1937 between China's National Revolutionary Army and the Imperial Japanese Army. It is widely considered to have been the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

82. Jianshe (建设) means to construct, to build; Guangming (光明) means brightness. These two were among the typical names of roads and she-qu (社区) in the socialist era.

ect, Changxindian Notes. The game, which investigated places, histories, landscapes, and everyday life in Changxindian, was exhibited in a gallery in the 798 Art Zone, Beijing. The game invited players to conduct a ten-day investigation of Changxindian: one round of the game equals one day. Players were asked to roll the dice, and the six sides of whom corresponded to six heterogeneous places, including Changxindian Railway Station and the Two Seven Factory. When they landed on particular positions on the board, players drew a card displaying five questions. They were then to answer the questions. The correct answers and a short description of the place in question appeared on another card. Players accrued points by answering questions correctly.

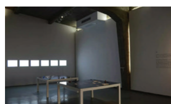

Figure 49
p.354

Although I went to the gallery featuring the game, I did not feel like playing it, for I have been disciplined to avoid touching items displayed in museums and galleries. The sanitised white cube space was rather unwelcoming there were no gallery assistant present to invite me to play. Presented in the context of an art exhibition, the game was to be exhibited, not played. Visitors were not activated as players/actors in the game, but remained spectators. Without the game being played, the local knowledge it contained was subsumed into a conventional art object in a conventional art institution.

On 27 October 2015, after the first show had ended, the same board game was presented at an exhibition named *Remembering the History of Sino-Japanese War: Inheriting the Culture of the Old Town* (2015), which was hosted by Changxindian's Community Culture Centre. Here local residents, including the retired director of the Two Seven Factory (who was in his late 80s), were invited to play the game and provide feedback for the artists/architects who had designed it. Many curious residents attended the exhibition. However, the architects found that the visitors did not actually play the game. Instead, they only took the cards—both of those bearing questions and those providing answers.

Figure 50
p.354

Did the game fail again in its local context? Yes and no. As Gadamer contends, the artwork or the game appears as self-movement that needs the spectators to play along with what it brings forth (Gadamer quoted by Davey 2016). People did play along with what it brought forward, though, namely local knowledge and memories. They did this by taking cards away without permission. They played along the game by ignoring the rules, not following them. In her book the *Gestures of Participation* (2018), Sruti Bala insightfully points out that unsolicited and unexpected forms of participation should not be overlooked or underestimated. Indeed, these unanticipated modes of engagement can be seen as rearranging the terms of participation, often in very sophisticated ways (2018, 91). The unexpected purloining of cards on the part of local residents can be seen as another, disobedient way of participating in the game. Without permission and outside

of the rules, they acted out to reclaim local knowledge and lived memories.
The game's aim of reactivating local histories coincided with that of the Beijing government's revitalisation plan for Changxindian. The government's plan, however, had the intention of digging up and capitalising on local histories by developing tourism in the town. For example, one proposal was to remake the mosque area on Changxindian Street (which is more than one hundred years old) in late Qing Dynasty/early Republican era style. Another was to build a railway museum and themed garden near the Two Seven Diesel Locomotive Factory (Liu, 2015). Although the government claimed that its appointed urban designers and architects consulted local residents, the extent to which their perspectives were taken into consideration remained unclear. This top-down approach to (re)discovering local memories was not only driven by ideology and economics, but detached from local residents' daily lives and lived experiences.

The town itself had been developing organically, and was therefore much less neat and organised than how it was envisioned in the revitalisation plan. According to Xiao and Li Mo, Changxindian Street resembled Foucault's description of the fairground in his well-known essay on heterotopia (1986, 26). The duo appreciated Changxindian's vividness and complexity, especially the dynamic ways in which residents connected with each other and their surroundings. They admired the special temporality that characterised the town's festivals and celebrations. Such events could not be planned from above, and might be disrupted or even dissolved by the government's top-down revitalisation.

On the board of the game, Xiao and Li Mo presented the following text next to Changxindian street: "The 'fairground' usually appears in the form of a festival. In its realisation of the structure of plurality, it establishes a platform for people's daily communication. Its unique charm lies in its triviality, temporality, and uncertainty. And it is full of intermixtures, contradictions, compromises, randomness, and incompleteness" (Calligraphy Architecture Studio 2015). This slightly theoretical and dense passage was juxtaposed with images of the frontal elevations of some of the stores and food stands on Changxindian Street. This area of the board featured cards that contained questions relating to this street. Some questions were: "Blacksmith Liu's Store on Changxindian Street is also called the Workers' Club, which is one of the memorial sites of 7th February Great Strike. Is this correct?" In so doing, the game not only highlighted the street's everyday lives and histories. It also invited local residents to think along with the architects in appreciating Changxindian Street as an organic living fairground, not a "shanty town" awaiting renovation.

The game accorded local residents agency, allowing them to highlight the relevance of the local knowledge and lived memories displayed on the cards. They did so not by playing the game, but by not playing, indeed, even "destroying" it. Their *inappropriate/d* action of "stealing" of the cards reintegrated local memories back into their lives, as lived and living knowledge. The cards could help the residents rediscover their town and relate to local things and locales through the lens of historical memories. When it comes to artefacts, anniversaries, feasts, icons, symbols, and landscapes, the term "memory"

functions not as a metaphor but as a metonym that is based on material contact between a remembering mind and a reminding object (Assmann 2008, 111).

Against the backdrop of shops run by migrants and locals being closed, and mundane objects on the streets being replaced, these cards served as metonyms of local quotidian memories for Changxindian residences. While cultural memories were being remoulded and refashioned, and the town's spaces and places were being repackages as *lieux de mémoire*—ideological mnemo-technical devices that are laden with nationalism (Den Boer, 2008, 21). By taking away cards without permission, the residents (whether local or otherwise) enacted their right to the memories of the town. This was critical in that they deviated from the rules and exercised their *inappropriate/d* agency to reclaim everyday lived memories – and that at a time in which the objects and locations that carried these memories were being altered or erased in the name of "urban regeneration."

83. To know more about Li's death and Chinese people's reactions, see Yuan, 2020.

Conclusion

As I sat down at my home in the Netherlands on 7th February 2022, finishing the revision of this book, I saw poems and posts shared by my friends, in memory of medical doctor Li Wenliang. It was the second anniversary of his death. The start of the COVID-19 pandemic already feels remote. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist in Wuhan, was one of the whistle-blowers to have sounded the alarm about the emergence of a new respiratory virus in December 2019. He died from the disease on 7 February 2020.[83]

At the very beginning of the pandemic, I was following conversations and getting information about it through a WeChat group founded during the *Residents!* project, which was one of my case studies. This group has been banned six times till February 2020. Each time it was "bombed", however, the founder created another group with a slightly different name. This attests to the cat-and-mouse game that censorship so often sets in motion. Having been set up for and by the artists, activists, curators, observers (like myself), the group has expanded to include a wider group of people on political left, beyond those who are orginally involved in *Residents!*. On Valentine's Day 2020, as lovers walked hand in hand on the busy streets of Amsterdam, people in the WeChat group were in their homes in locked-down cities across China, engaged in intense online discussions about the epidemic.

An architect and artist named Li Juchuan, who was one of the initiators of the *Everyone's East Lake* project (as discussed in Chapter 1), sent a post to the WeChat group. It showed an image made by Li's fellow Wuhan artist, Cai Kai. More specifically, it was a vector image created using the answers that had been given to the police as part of doctor Li Wenliang's confession.

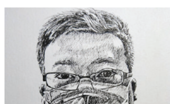

Figure 51
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Li's signed confession (dated 3 January 2020) showed that his interrogators had posed the following question: "The public security bureau hopes that you could cooperate and listen to the police's advice to stop the illegal behaviour [meaning "making and spreading rumour" about COVID-19]. Can you do that?" "[I] can", Li responded. "We hope you can calm down and reflect on yourself", say his questioners. "And we solemnly warn you: if you insist on conducting the illegal behaviour without regret, you will be punished by law! Do you understand?" "[I] understand", Li replied. Both of his answers were covered by his fingerprints.

In a WeChat post titled “There is a Light that Never Goes Out”, Cai Kai created a white-on-black vector image from Dr. Li’s handwritten answers “can” and “understand”. Cai then added the word “no” in front of them, meaning “no, I can’t” and “no, I don’t understand”. Li Juchuan shared it in the sixth interation of the Residents group (named “Residents Road”). “We can download the image to make neon lights, print T-shirts and tote bags, make stickers with it, and so on”, Li Juchuan said. (Li, 2020). In the post, Cai writes “I really wish this disaster will pass soon, and I hope that after everything returns to normal, when we get home and turn on this little neon light in the living room or bedroom, we will remind ourselves that we should never forget” – that is, never forget Li Wenliang and the system that silenced and punished him (Cai ,2020).

Figure 52
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Instead of expressing his anger and sorrow like other netizens, or criticising the local government for silencing him and covering up the epidemic, Cai chose to use his skills in visual art to create this sharable image. This constitutes a form of non-oppositional artivism and commemoration. Through the image, he sought to help fellow citizens stage non-verbal protests by way of everyday objects and to remind future generations that it was those who were in power had severely worsened the epidemic. In China, the authorities treat the history of epidemics as a taboo subject. Cai’s approach also served to avoid censorship; after all, his post did not blatantly state why people should remember Li Wenliang. However, survivors of the epidemic will understand his intentions.

Cai’s post figures an example of how to be critical in times of crisis, in which the state is both necessary and obstructive. In this book, I have sought answers to the question of how socially engaged art can be critical without directly opposing the authorities in urbanising China. In so doing, I have elaborated four forms of non-oppositional criticality: reconfigurative criticality, connective criticality, uneasy criticality, and quotidian criticality.

Seeping in and through each other

In the foregoing chapters, I have elaborated on these forms of non-oppositional criticality of socially engaged art in urbanising China. The importance of reconfigurative criticality lies not in its potential to entirely negate the current system or invoke “revolutionary change”, but rather in its power to reconfigure spaces within the existing system. By means of reconfigurative practices, open urban spaces deviate slightly from dominant structures, allowing for civic, artistic, and social actions. Connective criticality is essential in a context in which rights of assembly and association are drastically curtailed. However, this form of criticality does not entail fighting for these rights directly. Rather, it involves people connecting with, learning from, and nurturing one another across social

differences, geographic locations, and borders. Through these connections, they can become inappropriate/d subjects and imagine otherwise ways of living together, which go beyond the hegemony of the capital-nation-state. Uneasy criticality is also crucial, especially given the sensitivity of issues surrounding migrant workers and inequality. In a context in which speech is censored and unfree, cultural practitioners do not criticise inequality directly or unreflectively consume migrant workers' experiences in the name of art-making. Rather, they embody uneasy criticality in the way that they acknowledge and work with the uneasiness of complicity in social inequality, and that arises from ethics, aesthetics, affect, pedagogy, and dramaturgy, and smuggle social-political critique into art. Against a backdrop in which mainstream narratives stigmatise urban villages and dehumanise their inhabitants, quotidian criticality is crucial. This is because it renders residents' daily lives visible and audible, highlighting their agency and facilitating their ability to reclaim their dignity. In this way, critical practice contaminates representations that stigmatise those living in urban villages with elements of their own agency.

How do these four forms of non-oppositional criticality relate to the urban issues broached in this study? Reconfigurative criticality shows that there are gaps and grey areas in the system of surveillance and control. These gaps allow people to appropriate open urban spaces for civic purposes, in negotiation with the authorities. Connective criticality demonstrates that even though Chinese citizens' freedoms of association and assembly are not protected, people living in cities can still connect with each other by means of fluid assemblages. In this way, they can explore otherwise ways of learning and living. Uneasy criticality indicates that people in cities can address issues around migrant workers ethically and relate to migrant workers themselves more empathetically, however uneasily. Quotidian criticality suggests that urban villages are not undesirable places inhabited by faceless migrant workers. Rather, their inhabitants can reclaim their agency as dignified subjects.

Shaped by different forms of practices, these forms of non-oppositional criticality seep in and through each other. In establishing public spaces, reconfigurative criticality entails connectivity. Inversely, connectivity facilitates the reconfiguration of open spaces through cooperative art, spatial intervention, and urban roaming. What is more, connective criticality involves public space in that its connections enable otherwise possibilities that play out in local public spaces. Connective criticality also overlaps with quotidian criticality, in the sense that socially engaged art nurtures connections among creative practitioners and kai-fongs in everyday life in particular neighbourhoods. Uneasy criticality involves connectivity and the everyday. The documentary theatre *Home* emphasises the criticality embedded in the uneasy possibility (or perhaps rather impossibility) that theatre students might make connections with migrant workers. It also made both the students and audiences aware of the unsettling fact that they were complicit in maintaining social segregation in their daily lives. In the case of quotidian criticality, creative practitioners can feel uneasy upon realising that their actions may not bring about substantial change in urban villages. The four forms of criticality that I have

identified are both entangled and distinct. What unites them is their non-oppositionality. For the sake of clarity, in this book, I decided to zoom in on one aspect of these modes of criticality from each case. As research develops in the future, however, these entanglements I have indicated here should be unpacked.

Little streams

In this book, I have put forward the concept of non-oppositional criticality, which was already implicit in theorisations on the part of Derrida, Haraway, Povinelli and Rogoff. In contributing to this existing discourse, I have theorised criticality from the ground – that is, as it emerges in and through concrete practices. This has led me to enrich the concept by identifying four forms of non-oppositional criticality at work in practices of socially engaged art in China. The theoretical implication of my research is that criticality can go beyond the binary set-up of oppositional critique by deviating slightly from the dominant system, without transcending or turning against it. What is more, one can smuggle something external into that system or something internal out of it. In the process, criticality might become inappropriate/d, embody otherwises, and work towards an exteriority as yet-to-come.

Witnessing the retreat of public spaces in contemporary China, critical socially engaged art can create space for civic practice and otherwise ways of living. Social practices are like little streams that flow in the cracks, gaps and grey areas of this complex and hierarchical system. In turn, these create spaces that are a bit outside of the system, in which then allows further possibilities to emerge. Non-oppositional criticality might be less easy to identify than outright critique, for it does not appear to be rebellious on the surface. In the Chinese context, being critical entails neither openly opposing the regime nor directly criticising social problems such as inequality and corruption. Criticality lies in negotiating with the system, in inconspicuously smuggling thing in and out of the system, in establishing connections across segregation and seclusion, in pushing the system's boundaries, in creating spaces in which the underprivileged can appear with dignity. Critical practices are like little streams that tunnel into rhizomatic water networks, which thread through the subterranean and above the ground. They might prefigure ways of living together that are a bit off the systems.

Becoming Water

It might appear that I seem to be very optimistic about the practices discussed in this book. I should admit that my involvement in these socially engaged art practices has made it difficult to maintain an "objective" distance and produce an unbiased analysis. This is because I care for these practices. Haraway has written that "caring means be-

coming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning" (Haraway, 2007, 36). At the end of this journey of five and a half years, having conducted fieldwork with curiosity and written this book with passion, I now know more than I did. However, I am mindful of the danger of complacency when it comes to non-oppositional critical practices. Such practices can be co-opted or forced out of the public eye, thus allowing the controlling system to proceed unchanged.

When this book first came into shape in the year of 2020, it was the fortieth anniversary of Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. After the pro-democracy student protesters were killed by government soldiers, Gwangju citizens rose up against the military. Among Korean people, this is widely thought to be an important democratisation movement. Although the movement did not bring about democracy immediately, it paved the way for South Korea's eventual democratisation. It may be, then, that antagonism is sometimes necessary to effect radical social and political change, particularly when non-oppositional approaches have been brushed aside.

My positive tone is also partly due to the fact that things have changed a lot since I began this research. As I finished this study in 2020, restrictions have tightened in China. I mourn for the rapidly diminishing spaces available for grassroots civic actions. I commenced this study in 2015. It covers a range of works made or performed between 2015 and 2017. In addition, I have updated my data up until 2019. This period witnessed a number of changes. These include the outrageous forty-day eviction campaign aimed at Beijing's urban villages (December 2017-January 2018). Artists involved in*5+1=6* have investigated how these evictions displaced hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, along with some artists. The exhibition and online materials of *5+1=6* have become an archive of the vanishing urban villages in Beijing. The migrant workers re-presented in Home might have been forced to leave Beijing during this campaign.

In addition, the government's control over freedom of expression has become tighter and tighter. In 2019, discussions among mainland netizens about social unrest in Hong Kong were quickly censored and removed. Online accounts have been blocked as part of this silencing operation. Some people have even been arrested, including some of my artist and activist friends in Guangdong. In this context, the first incarnation of Theatre 44 left traces of momentary freedom; this was still possible in Guangzhou at that time. As for Grandpa Liang, who built and ran the *Sunset Haircut Booth*, has fallen ill in 2018. At his request, Yu Xudong dismantled the booth in 2019. Yu lost contact with Liang later that year. The *Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society* also went through a significant transformation in 2018 that led to the abolishment of hierarchical structure. The members share the rent and the responsibilities of maintaining the space, and they form different groups around their matters of concern and collaborate when organising activities. Chen Yun stopped assuming an active role in DM-AS. In the light of all these changes, it can be said that this book records non-oppositional critical socially engaged art practices that emerged in China in the mid 2010s. Although projects such as these might not reemerge for some

time in the current political climate in China, the attitudes, methods, and strategies that they enrol remain worthy of study by practitioners.

The cultural and political implications of my research, though, are not limited to the context of mainland China. Around the world, governments are becoming ever more controlling and manipulative. The Indian government has passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in 2019, which discriminates against non-Hindus.[87] Concurrently, the Black Life Matters movements take place all around the world, calling for racial justice and equality. Poland imposed a near-total ban on abortion in 2021 despite of the protests.[88] The administration of Hong Kong has ignored people's demands despite the Anti-extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement that has held continual leaderless protests for more than a year (Lee and Fong 2021). The protests evolved into a prolonged campaign involving a wide range of tactics (Lee et al., 2019), some of which can be seen as non-oppositional, including the codified political consumerism—"yellow economic circle" (YEC) (Chan and Pun, 2020). YEC means that citizens buycott yellow (pro-movement) shops and boycott blue (pro-government) shops, which is a form of political consumerism facilitated by digital media (Lee and Fong 2021). It is also a form of identity politics, and a new form of political participation (M. Y. H. Wong, Kwong, and Chan, 2021).

With developments such as these unfolding across a range of geopolitical contexts, it is worth exploring the possibility of non-oppositional critical practices that do not directly fight against powerful regimes. Instead of antagonism, such practices operate according to a different paradigm, which goes beyond notions of friends and enemies. When the surveillance and state control debilitate opposition, or direct activism is answered with police violence and political suppression, non-oppositional criticality presents a viable way forward.

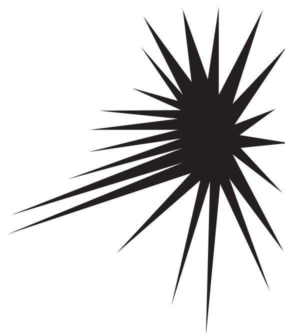
These four forms of non-oppositional criticality also resonate beyond mainland China. Reconfigurative criticality can be found in the actions of citizen platform #LaFiraOLaVida in Barcelona. These actions unite the efforts of grassroots organisations to push forward the proposal of reversing the privatisation of public space of Fira de Barcelona and turning it into affordable non-speculative housing and accessible public space with mixed functions (Bravo and Robles-Durán, 2021). Connective criticality echoes in mujaawarah—a process of neighbouring in Hamada al-Joumah's work in Burj al-Shamali camp, a Palestian refugee camp near Tyre, Lebanon, where he started the project al'and (the land), a food and farming project on a farm that connected Palestinian and Lebanese children across segregation (Al-Joumah et al., 2021, 250). Uneasy criticality resonates in the practices of organising towards social justice and social change such as those of Carole Zou in the U.S.: she needs to figure out an ethical bridge between her position of relative comfort and the positions of the people with whom she is in solidary. "(Deep) listening is that ethical bridge, which asks us to decentre our egos and build understanding through difference" (Zou, 2021,

88. See https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55838210

87. See https://www.dw.com/en/one-year-of-indias-citizenship-amendment-act/a-55909013

160). There are uneasy moments in deep listening. Quotidian criticality is in line with Athena Athanasiou's advocacy on reclaiming ephemerality: "At a capitalist moment, when the conditions of possibility for a different present and future are being destroyed, enacting possibilities for the future in the present involves attending to ephemeral, quotidian, and politically enabling critical forms of collective agonism in the face of despair" (Athanasiou 2021, 272).

Becoming water, acting, thinking-feeling, and connecting like water—this means to embody the agility, tenacity and fluidity of water in our practices. This does not mean that one should become spineless or weak. Rather, the imperative calls on one to persist, to be fluid – that is, seemingly soft but also penetrating and erosive, seeping through the social fabrics. I would like to close with this quotation from the Chinese classic philosopher Xunzi (荀子) (310-235 BC): "the water that bears the boat is the same hat swallows it up" (水能載舟，亦能覆舟。).



Glossary

Hukou (户口)

Since 1951, the population of China has been governed and managed through the hukou or "household registration system". Although this system has undergone a series of reforms since the 1990s, the main structure remains intact. It ties access social welfare and infrastructures to one's residential status. Children of migrant workers from rural China, for example, cannot be admitted to public schools in the cities.

inappropriate/d

"To be an 'inappropriate/d other' means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality," Haraway writes; it is to be "in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality—as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination" (ibid., 299).

Kai-fong (街坊)

On Lee Chun-Fung's definition, the Cantonese term Kai-fong

synthesises, in one conceptual compound, 'community' and 'neighbourhood'. The prefix 'kai' literally refers to the street, whereas 'fong' refers to the place where one lives and works. Thus, 'kai-fong' refer to the web or the dense tangle of relationships that accrete over a territory, a network of mutual aid composed of those in which one depends, places one's trust in. (2016, 22)

Line of flight

In Massumi's notes, Deleuze and Guattari's term "line of flight" in French is "ligne de fuite". "Fuite" covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance (the vanishing point in a painting is a point de fuite) (Massumi 1987: xvi)

Min-jian (民間)

This term roughly describes a folk's, people's, or commoners' society. This approximation of its meaning is not exact, however, because whereas min means people or populace, jian connotes space and in-betweenness.

Zai-di (在地)

Zai-di means on site, on the ground, down to earth, and grounded in the locality. Although it concerns local issues, it does not connote localism.

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Figure 1. The Danish performance ensemble Moveable Accurate performing a piece created together with villagers of Bishan in Bishan Project.
Photo: Mai Corlin, October 2014

Figure 2. Theatre performance *Cold Puddle: Asking Ghosts in Black Pine Forest* (2016) was about north east Asia, and it was based on the novel that bears the same title. It was performed by independent theatre group in Shenyang in July 2016, and its documentation was screened in Harbin later, constituting a major part of the second edition of *On Practice* (2015-). Photo courtesy of On Practice. 2016.

Figure 3. Heiqiao Village in Beijing.
Courtesy of the author. 2016.

Figure 4.1

Figure 4. Li Binyuan's action performance *Reservoir Dogs,* 2014. Digital photographs, dimensions variable.
Photograph courtesy of Action Space and Li Binyuan.

Figure 4.2

Figure 5. Migrant workers and their children who participated in Gaze from the Top Floor. They are posing in Guangdong Times Museum, in front of the garments that they created. 2014.
Courtesy of Chen Jianjun, Cao Minghao.

Figure 6. *30-Metre Memorial Wall,* 2010.
Photograph courtesy of Wu Yun, Zi Jie, and Mai Dia

Figure 7. *The Stars Show,* which was held outdoor in 1979, was well-received with great curiosity. Photograph courtesy of Li Xiaobin. https://cn.doors-agency.com

Figure 8. The Southern Artists Salon's first experimental show, 1986. Photograph courtesy of Asian Art Archive.

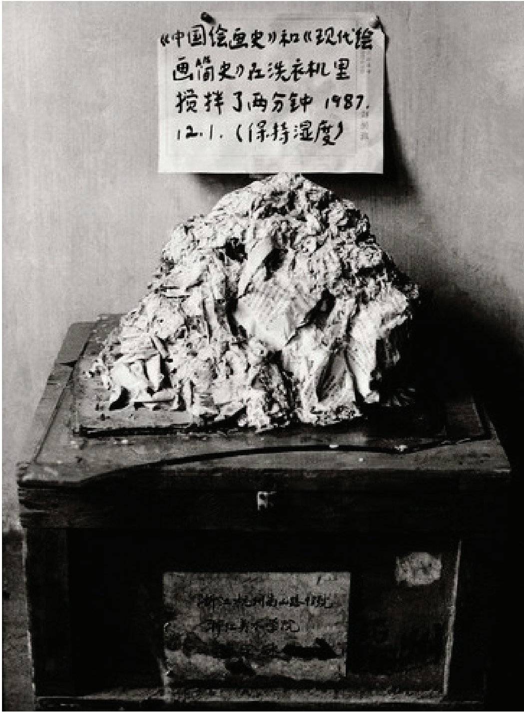


Figure 9. *The History of Chinese Art and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes,* 1st Dec 1987. (Keep the humidity) Courtesy of Huang Yongping and Asian Art Archive.

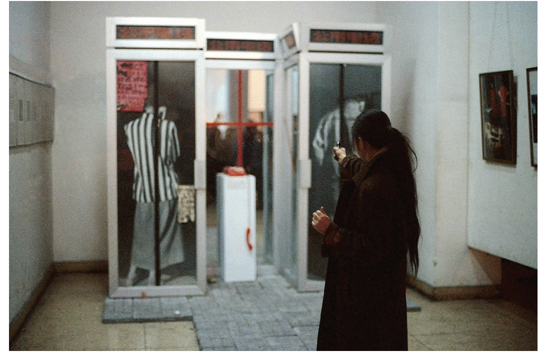


Figure 10. Xiao Lu's installation *Dialogue in the context of the China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, 1989. Photograph courtesy of Xiao Lu.

Figure 11. Lin Yilin's *Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road*, 1995.Photograph courtesy of Lin Yilin and Tang Contemporary.

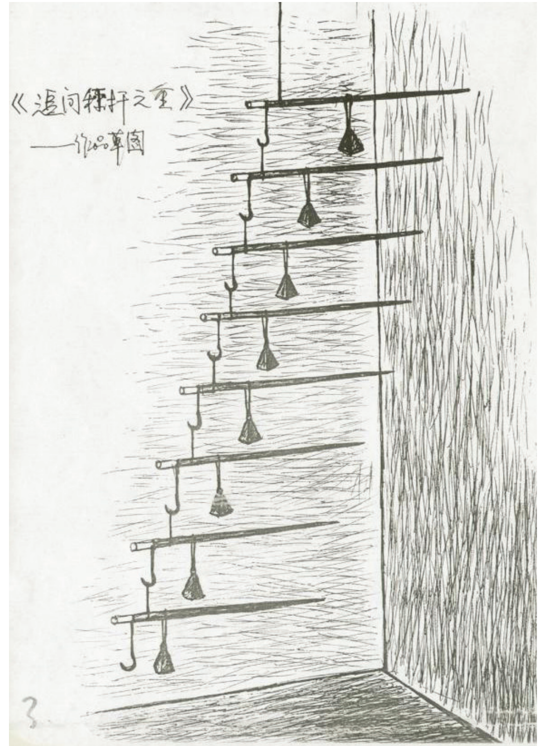


Figure 12. One of Zhang Shengquan's mail art/installation sketches, *Inquire the Weight of the Weighing Rod* (1990s). Courtesy of Zhang Shengquan.

Figure 13. A series of stills from Cao Fei's video Chain, 2000. Photographs courtesy of Cao Fei.

Figure 14. Yin Xiuzhen's *Washing the River*, 1995. Photograph courtesy of Yin Xiuzhen.

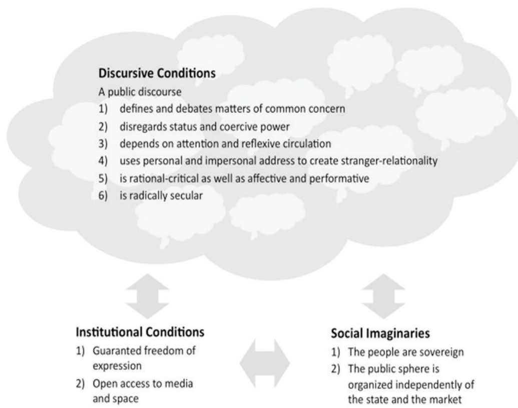


Figure 15. Zheng Bo's diagrammatic representation of the conditions of publicness. (Diagram by Zheng Bo. *The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects* [Rochester: School of Arts and Sciences, University of Rochester, 2012], 13).

Figure 16. *Memory of Memory* (2002)[34], Li Fang. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project.

Figure 17. Karibu Islands III (Game and Discussion Held at Beijing Queer Cultural Center on 11 May 2008) . Still from the video. Courtesy of Zheng Bo and Hong Kong Art Archive. https://arthistory.hku.hk/hkaa/revamp2011/work.php?id=3207

Figure 18. Grandpa Liang (in red jacket) was talking to Yu Xudong (in pink polo shirt) when I visited *Sunset Haircut Booth* in early January 2017. Courtesy of the author.

Figure 19. Flower Photo Studio.
Courtesy of Yu Xudong. 2017.

Figure 20. Residents posing in front of the chicken store-photo booth. 2017. Courtesy of Liu Sheng.

Figure 21. Participants performing on the Liede Central Reservation, courtesy of the author, 2017.

Figure 22. Theatre 44 performing nearby Peasant Movement Training Institute. 2017.
Courtesy of the author.

Figure 23. Theatre 44 was performing along the Donghao Creek in central Guangzhou. 4th Jan 2017.
Courtesy of the author.

Figure 24. The scene from the window of the second floor of DM-AS. 2016.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

Figure 25. Pang, a pupil in the after-school tutoring class, blowing a bubble, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Zheng Limin.

Figure 26. Pang playing the melodica during Dinghai street vending, 4 April 2016. Zheng took this photograph and wrote on it: “God said: Let there be → [arrow pointing to Pang’s shining head]: and there was light”. Photograph courtesy of Zheng Limin.

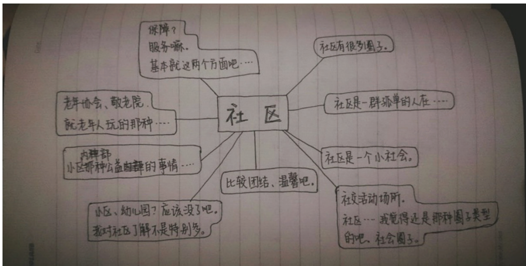


Figure 27. Some students’ mind map of the concept of shequ, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Ma Li.

Figure 28. An art student drew a portrait of an old woman in Dinghaiqiao, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Zhao Yiren.

Figure 29. Map showing where the tours put on by the Banyan Travel Agency were located (indicated by red circles). Alternations made by the author.

Figure 30. Zhao Yiren taking part in a demonstration in the *No Limit Autonomous Zone*, holding a mug bearing DM-AS's name in 2016.She also sold DM-AS's wares in the street. Photograph courtesy of DM-AS.

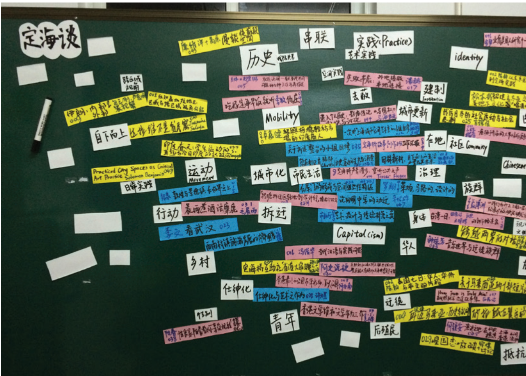


Figure 31. Mapping Dinghai talks, 2016.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

Figure 32. The scene in *Home* in which Yuan Ye narrates the story of Xiao Jie, 2016.
Photograph courtesy of Xiao Jiawei and Liu Shanshan.

Figure 33. The scene in *Home* in which three aliens travel to Earth in search of utopia. Screenshot from a video of the performance at 02:13. Courtesy of the CAD.

Figure 34. A scene in Act 5 of *Home* in which an alien has started live streaming his search for Miaomiao in Caochangdi. Screenshot from a video of the performance at 0: 47:10. Courtesy of the CAD.

Figure 35. Liu playing Didi, who drinks from a big bottle of cola. Screenshot from a video of the performance at 1:09:15. Courtesy of the CAD.

Figure 36. Performers and the audience dance on the stage during the closing scene of *Home*. Photograph courtesy of the CAD.

Figure 37. Scale model of Beijing presented in the *Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall*, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Jeroen de Kloet.

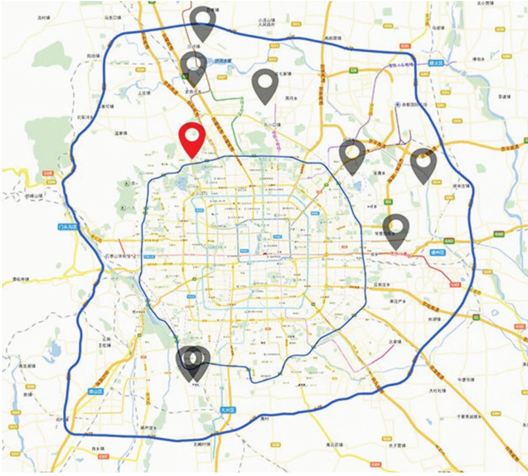


Figure 38. A map of Beijing. The red pin indicates the GPS location of the village of Xiaojiahe East. The inner blue circle is the Fifth Ring Road, the marine-blue outer circle is the sixth. Map courtesy of the Second Floor Publishing Institute.

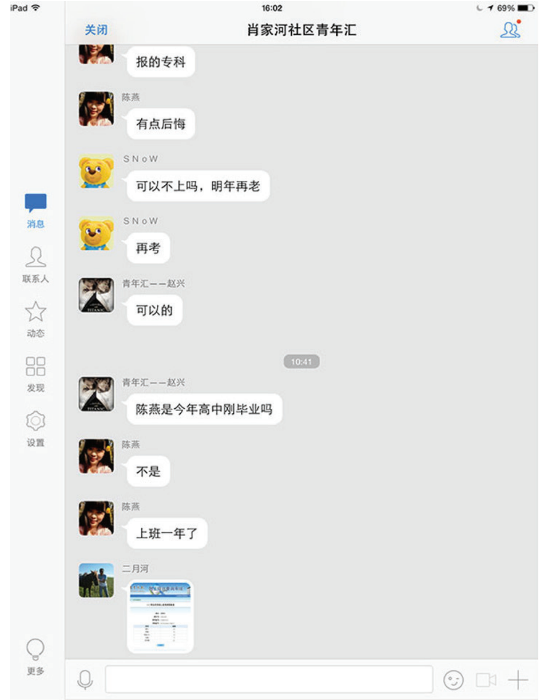


Figure 39. Screenshot of chats in WeChat group “Xiaojiahe Community Youth Group”. Screenshot courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

Figure 40. Steel bars protruding from unfinished villas, 2014. Photograph courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

Figure 41. A marble statue of a nude female, with yellow paint dabbed onto her private parts, amid the ruins of unfinished villas, 2014. Photograph courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

Figure 42. A interviewing the land tenants, 2015. “We often go to the sub-district office to ask for help,” the female land tenant says, “but they don’t care about us.”) Screenshot from Xiaojiahe East Village at 9:21. Courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

Figure 43. The contractors came to take the artist and his then girlfriend away. (The female contractor pictured in the foreground is saying: “I am the leader of this construction site!”). Screenshot from Xiaojiahe East Village at 18:55. Courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

Figure 44. The artist being taken away. (Ma: “Don’t you think this is beautiful?”) Screenshot from Xiaojiahe East Village at 21: 16. Courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

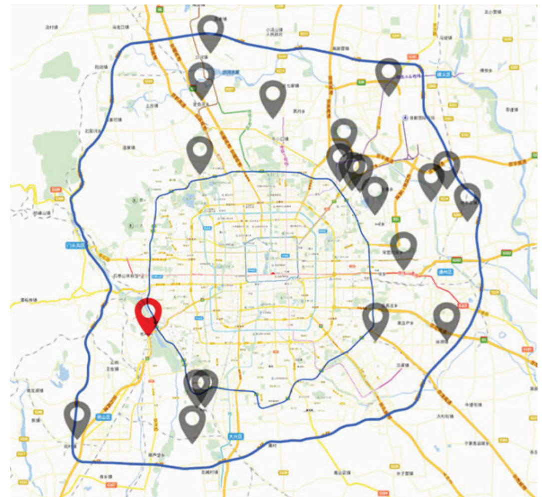


Figure 45. A map of Beijing. The red pin indicates the GPS location of Changxindian. Map courtesy of the Second Floor Publishing Institute.

Figure 46. View of a road in an area of workers' housing, 2016. Photograph courtesy of the author.

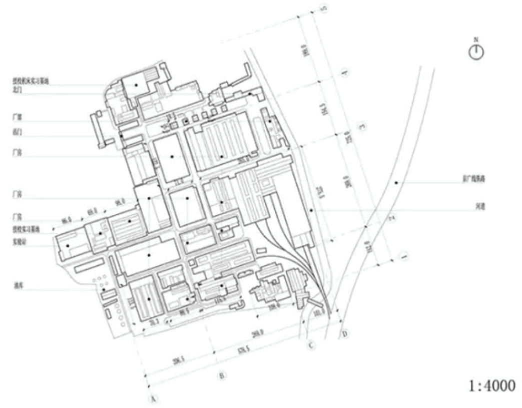


Figure 47. Site ground plan of the Two Seven Factory, 2015. Courtesy of the Calligraphy Architecture Studio.

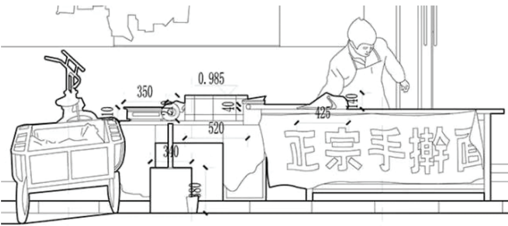


Figure 48. The front elevation of a hand-made noodle stand, 2015. Courtesy of Calligraphy Architecture Studio.

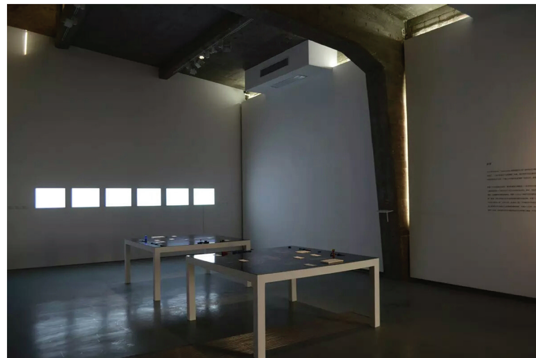
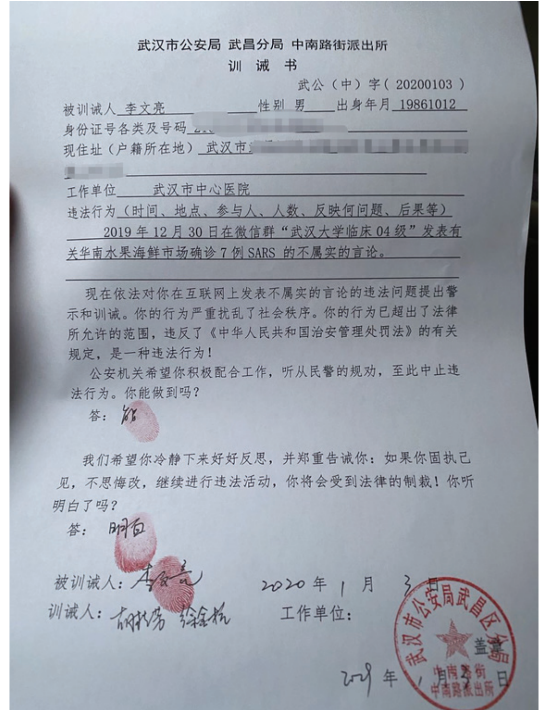


Figure 49. View of the board game in the gallery in the 798 Art Zone, Beijing, 2015. Photograph courtesy of Calligraphy Architecture Studio.

Figure 50. Photograph of the board game being played in Changxindian, 2015. Photograph courtesy of the Calligraphy Architecture Studio.



武汉市公安局 武昌分局 中南路街派出所

训 诫 书

武公（中）字（20200103）

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违法行为（时间、地点、参与人、人数、反映何问题、后果等）

2019 年 12 月 30 日在微信群“武汉大学临床 04 级”发表有关华南水果海鲜市场确诊 7 例 SARS 的不属实的言论。

现在依法对你在互联网上发表不属实的言论的违法问题提出警示和训诫。你的行为严重扰乱了社会秩序。你的行为已超出了法律所允许的范围，违反了《中华人民共和国治安管理处罚法》的有关规定，是一种违法行为！

公安机关希望你积极配合工作，听从民警的规劝，至此中止违法行为。你能做到吗？

答：能

我们希望你冷静下来好好反思，并郑重告诫你：如果你固执己见，不思悔改，继续进行违法活动，你将会受到法律的制裁！你听明白了吗？

答：明白

被训诫人： 2020 年 1 月 3 日

训诫人： 工作单位：

年 1 月 3 日

Figure 51. Left, a portrait of Dr. Li Wenliang made by a citizen as a way of mourning his death. Right, Dr. Li Wenliang’s confession that he had spread the rumour that there were “7 confirmed cases of SARS in Wuhan South China Seafood Wholesale Market.” Images shared online in the WeChat Group “Wuhan University Clinical Medicine 04 (enrolment year 2004)”.

等一切风平浪静之后，我们回到家中，打开客厅或卧室的这盏小小的霓虹灯，提醒我们永远也不要忘记。

也希望更多的设计师同行们能够使用这个文件制作出更有意义的物件。

链接: https://pan.baidu.com/s/18uRhS87970c-PxOrqavYaVg 提取码: r3nn

Figure 52. Left, screenshot of Li Juchuan's post sharing Cai Kai's vector image made using Dr. Li Wenliang's confession. Right, the post itself with a download link. (Names have been covered to protect the privacy of group members.) Accessed February 14, 2020.

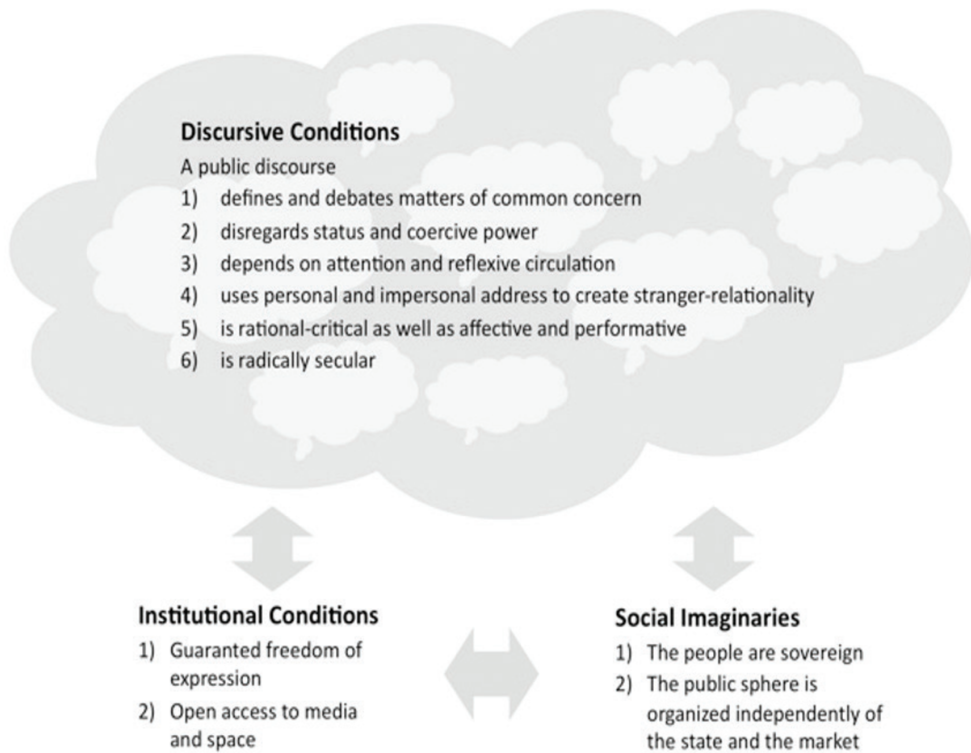

Figure 15. Zheng Bo's diagrammatic representation of the conditions of publicness. (Diagram by Zheng Bo. *The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects* [Rochester: School of Arts and Sciences, University of Rochester, 2012], 13).

volume 2:

Be Water, My Friend:

Non-Oppositional Criticalities of Socially Engaged Art in China

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The cultural practitioners and citizens who have enabled this book (those who I have written about in this book, those who have so generously shared with me their practices, time, thoughts, doubts, and emotions, those who have critical discussions

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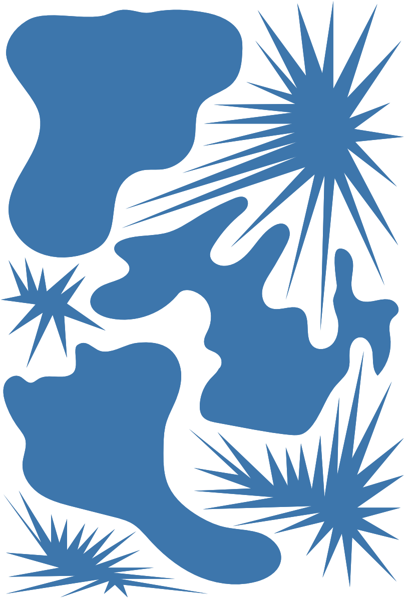
COLOPHON



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