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The Intellectuals' Utopia: The Prospect and Dilemma of Art Intervention in Chinese Countryside

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Abstract

China's modern village construction shows a distinction between economy-led modernization and humanities-led modernity. Following early cultural rural construction and social movements such as the Village Construction Movement, the New Year Painting Movement, the Farmer Painting Movement and intellectuals going to the countryside, there are also many cases of the independent intervention of artists in the countryside today. Art intervention in the countryside is not the artist's choice to enter the countryside to live and create, but to participate in the cultural construction of the countryside as an intellectual with a sense of social responsibility. Artists protect rural cultural ecology that has been gradually lost, and they conduct interactive artistic exchanges with villagers in order to promote or inspire the modern humanistic construction of the countryside.

Key Words

Contemporary art, socially interventional art, artistic countryside construction, intellectual

The intervention of art in society can be summarized into three categories: the natural space with ecological claims, and the human living space with urban and rural distinctions. There has always been an intersection between the three, but for each aspect there are relatively independent artistic and social claims. The interventional creations by artists in society and the participation of the public in art projects expand the possibilities of art in reality, abolish the integrating effect of specialized exhibition spaces, and bring art back to its sociological meaning again. The biggest characteristic of art intervention in the countryside, compared to ecology and the city, is the difference between the two parties involved in the project. Artists and villagers are two types of groups, and when they start to seek a common ideal, many problems, difficulties, and even conflicts will arise during the implementation of the intervention. There are different forms of this phenomenon in the development of modern and contemporary China, from the salvation-style village construction movement initiated by cultural figures and policy-led cultural and

artistic movements, to the various types of artistic village construction today. There is also a group of freelance artists with a sense of social responsibility who live in the new era of China's continuous development and change who have a keen sense of the human landscape under the flow of society, and they participate in yet another construction of the countryside with artistic intervention. In addition, the artists who go into the countryside are well-intentioned restorers and preachers who try to restore the dying ecology of the countryside and explore another artistic attitude towards life in their interaction with the villagers.

1. Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art Intervenes in the Countryside Phenomenon

As a country with a large rural population, China's modern development has been closely related to the peasantry, from the early peasant uprising and the worker-peasant movement to the agrarian revolution,



Figure 1. Liang Shuming (seated) and colleagues of Zouping Shandong Countryside Construction Research Institute. Photograph. 1930s. Photo credit: *China Social Work*, 2019 (02).

all guided by the regime. During the Republican period, there were also rural construction movements guided by cultural figures: for example, the Association for the Promotion of Civilian Education established by Yan Yangchu (宴陽初, 1890-1990) in Ding County, Hebei Province; Liang Shuming (梁漱溟, 1893-1988) directed the Rural Construction Research Institute (Figure 1) in Zouping County, Shandong Province; and the Jiangsu Institute of Public Education, founded by Yu Qingtang (俞慶棠, 1897-1949) in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province. All of these were important examples of rural construction practices with cultural aspirations during the early modernization period in China. Chinese intellectuals have always carried out social transformation and revolutionary movements in various ways with their sense of national responsibility, and the construction in the countryside in the Republican period was a type of salvation movement that appealed to the transformation of the underclass.

At the same time, art began to have an effect in the people as a form of propaganda. During the period of the Emerging Woodcut Movement, in April 1938, Lu Xun College of Art (魯迅藝術學院) was established in Yan'an, Shaanxi Province, and Lu Xun College of Art Woodcut Working Group (魯藝木刻工作團) was set up in the winter of that year. The woodcutters group represented by Hu Yichuan (胡一川, 1910-2000) began to hold mobile exhibitions for different classes of workers, peasants, and soldiers in the northwest and to organize the "New Year Picture" factory, whose creations were all reflecting the battles and production behind enemy lines. An important turning point was Mao Zedong's "Speech at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" in May 1942, when he stated, "Why the question of people is a fundamental question, a question of principle."¹ The Speech clearly points out the direction of literature and art to serve the people and the workers, farmers, and soldiers. Under



Figure 2. Cheng Wozha. *The Grain is Plentiful and the Animals are Prosperous* (《五穀豐登 六畜興旺》). Woodcut New Year picture. China, circa early 1940s. Image credit: *Art*, 2022 (05).



Figure 3. Hu Wugong. *Shaanxi Hu County Street Scene*. Photograph. China, 1975. Photo credit: He Weiping. *Farmers' Paintings of Hu County*. Xi'an Jiaotong University Press.

the guidance of such instructions, artists in the liberated areas began to work more intensively on works popular with the people, and the masses in this period referenced the workers, farmers, and soldiers, of whom the farmers were the vast majority; woodcut artists also transformed woodcuts based on the villagers' New Year pictures (Figure 2).

In November 1949, the Ministry of Culture issued another "Instruction on the Development of New Year Paintings" to further promote the popularization of literature and art in the form of folk art, and during this period had also begun to gradually mobilize workers, farmers, and soldiers to participate in art creation. During the Great Leap Forward from 1955 to 1958, Changli County, Hebei Province, formulated the cultural popularization action slogan of "Frescoes in the forefront, singing as a pioneer, and small and diverse to follow". Statistics from March 8 to mid-September 1958 show "the county's three hundred and ninety-one administrative villages painted more than 78,000 slogans, fresco, poetry, production vision planning, etc. more than 38,400, of which more than 7,500 were created by the masses themselves, coupled with the depth of the singing campaign, the red-hot situation of 'poems and paintings covering the walls, songs and dances all over the city and countryside, new weather everywhere, classrooms everywhere' has been formed."² At the same time, there were also rural clubs set up in Pi County, Jiangsu Province, Shulu County, Hebei Province, Lingyuan County, Liaoning Province, Kaiyang County, Guizhou Province, Qingyang County, Gansu Province, Liaoyuan County, Liaoning Province, etc. They carried out the farmer mural painting movement and poetry painting movement. Hu County, Shaanxi Province, was also a participant in the rural mural movement during

this period, and farmer paintings of different forms and themes were created in Hu County at various stages of history on the eve of reform and opening up. In 1973, the Farmer Painting Exhibition in Hu County was organized by the Cultural Affairs Group of the State Council and exhibited in major cities throughout China, becoming the highlight of the farmer painting phenomenon. Since then, although there has been a continuous focus on local non-heritage culture or the phenomenon of farmer painting, there has been nothing as extensive as the period of farmer painting in Hu County (Figure 3).

Along with the guidance of the Down to the Countryside Movement policies in the 1970s, painters led the villagers and the public in carrying out a vigorous mural and poetry painting movement in the countryside, and there were exhibitions of farmer paintings that caused national repercussions. These movements were the products of political and cultural movements with the purpose of social transformation, and they were movements of the times in which the participation of the masses was a necessary condition. However, unlike the cultural rural construction guided by Liang Shuming in earlier years, in woodcut and New Year picture movements that developed from the left-wing art movement, and the socially interventional art we are discussing today, the worker-peasant-soldier art movement was not purely a local spontaneous or individual intellectual cultural practice aimed at social transformation—its purpose was mostly a social movement under political guidance. This was a slight deviation in the policy, and the reality may appear to have caused uncontrollable consequences; the campaign to produce excessive targets and other undesirable phenomena are not from the actual problem and led to a loss of control. The most important measure of a cultural or artistic movement's intervention in the countryside is whether it has had a beneficial impact on the general public, and whether it has effectively transformed the material or spiritual life of the general public, rather than competing as a policy project that has the opposite effect on the normal life of the public.

Since the 1990s, along with the phenomenon of spontaneous groups of domestic artists gathered in communities, abandoned factories and villages have gradually emerged, initially providing cheap and spacious spaces for their creations; as the artists moved in, these surroundings were transformed by the artists. Earlier cases of artists stationed in villages include Beijing Yuanmingyuan Painter Village, Beijing East Village Art Group, Shenzhen Dafen Village, Beijing Songzhuang Art District, Jingdezhen Tao Xichuan Cultural and Creative District, etc. Some of the villages

and towns have now developed into well-known cultural industry parks with the cooperation of artists, villagers, and local governments. There are countless cases of this kind of collateral impact from artists gathering and creating all over the world, and there are also a few cases of practices initiated by artists or cultural figures, with farmers as the main group, trying to expand the practice of art on the life of villagers, rural ecology, and rural cultural transformation from the perspective of social functionality using art as a way of direct public participation and social change. Representative cases include the following and are representative of art intervention projects in villages.

- Song Yongping and others *Village Project* 1993 (《鄉村計劃 1993》). Huatuo Temple, Xijucha Village, Liulin County, Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province, 1993.
- Qu Yan *From Xu Village to Qingtian* (《從許村到青田》). Xu Village, Songyan Town, Heshun County, Jinzhong, Shanxi and Qingtian Village, Foshan City, Guangdong Province, 2007-present.
- Mo Ye *Lantian Project* (《藍田計劃》). Lijiao Village and Xichang Village, Guangzhou City, Guangdong Province, 2007-present.
- Jin Le *Shijiezi Art Museum* (《石節子美術館》). Shijiezi Village, Qin'an County, Tianshui City, Gansu Province, 2008-present (Figure 4).
- Chen Jianjun and Cao Minghao's *Kunshan Reinvention* (《昆山再造》). Kunshan New Village, Shuangliu County, Chengdu City, Sichuan Province, 2010-2012.
- Ou Ning and Zuo Jing's *Bishan Project* (《碧山計劃》). Bishan Village, Yixian County, Anhui Province, 2011-present.
- Jiao Xingtao *Yangdeng Art Cooperative* (《羊磴藝術合作社》). Yangdeng Town, Tongzi County, Guizhou Province, 2012-present.
- Kong Delin, Gui Shuzhong and Tang Tao's *Qingming Project* (《清明計劃》). Lai She Village, Ninghua County, Fujian Province, 2013-present.
- Wu Xiaochuan *Guanzhong Art Cooperative* (《關中藝術合作社》). Changyi District, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, 2018-present.
- Wang Tianxiang *Liuyin Project* (《柳蔭計劃》). Liuyin Town, Beibei District, Chongqing, 2018-present.
- Xiang Yong *Daba Mountain Flower Field Arts Festival* (《大巴山花田藝穗節》). Bicheng Village, Baima Town, Xuanhan County, Dazhou City, Sichuan Province, 2019-present.
- Wang Bi and Lou Jin's *Qitang Art Experimental Field: 2019 Village Creation Camp* (《七塘藝術實驗田: 2019 村落創作營》). Chenjiawan, Qitang Town, Bishan District, Chongqing, May 2019.

In these cases, the artists are no longer the subjects of practice but become the organizers and planners. The farmer groups, as the participating subjects, learn from the organizers how to recognize art, change their lives, and broaden the conceptual boundaries through their participation in the practice.

The intervention of art in the countryside is a way of adjustment in the development of social modernity. Artists usually choose more remote and backward villages and try to change the local villagers' way of living with their flexible artistic practices. This is often different from the policy-led modernization of villages, which conceptually brings the avant-garde and fun of modern life or attempts to restore some human heritage that has been forgotten during village development in order to preserve the traditional culture and ecological landscape of villages. However, as a category of uninvited visitors, whether the humanistic appeals of the artist community can receive lasting recognition and effective instigation among the farmer community remains and is a common problem artists encounter in their artistic intervention practice. The pragmatic nature of the farmer community is always at odds with emerging phenomena. Therefore, the question of how to effectively develop the humanism pioneered by the artists becomes an issue that needs to be addressed in every artistic intervention in rural areas.

2. Pioneering Humanism

Artistic interventions in the countryside are taking place simultaneously in the context of today's burgeoning rural construction movement. The proposal of "Building a New Socialist Countryside (社会主义新农村建设)" was promulgated at the 15th Plenary of the 16th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee in October 2005, in which the government advocated to accelerate the improvement of the living environment, improve the health and education of farmers, and make "industry feeding agriculture and cities supporting the countryside" as the policy to coordinate urban and rural economic and social development. With the support and guidance of policies some poor rural areas have indeed received real changes through the "Extending Radio and TV Broadcasting Coverage to Every Village Project (村村通)" system engineering guidance, roads, electricity, domestic drinking water, telephone networks, cable TV networks, internet, and other infrastructure which have been implemented in most villages. Moreover, new rural cooperative medical care, public health service networks, home appliances to the countryside, rural compulsory education and other measures have also improved the



Figure 4. Zhang Binning. *Jin Le at the Opening of the Shijiezi Art Museum*. Photograph. Shijiezi Village, Tianshui City, Gansu Province, China, 2009. Photo credit: Shijiezi Art Museum WeChat Official Account.

lives of villagers.

The most common phenomenon in the transformation of rural modernization is rural urbanization and industrialization, which mainly arises from the phenomenon of urban villages in urban expansion and the construction of factories brought about by investment promotion. Urban villages are swallowed up by the city, villagers then live in buildings, and the original villages disappear completely; factories are being built in the countryside where land prices are lower, where it is very common to occupy arable land and residential bases, and villagers live in the resettlement houses built by factories and become factory workers nearby. This seems to have solved the employment problem of farmers and improved the living environment, but in the long term, it is completely destroying the rural ecology. Another example is the policy of demolishing dangerous rural buildings which have been implemented in recent years. Although the starting point is to reduce rural safety hazards, many rural buildings that are hundreds of years old are often demolished because of the ignorance of grassroots implementers. In 2020, I witnessed the demolition site of my family's ancestral house (Figure 5, 6, 7). This house was then the only building left in town that was over a century old. However, due to age and disrepair, it was demolished by the village as classified as a dangerous house. Original green bricks and tiles have been taken by villagers to enclose pigpens and build fences and have been replaced by uniform red brick buildings. The new countryside, built by means of modern architecture, has become a mere appendage and replica of the city. Under the implementation of the policy the living standard of rural residents has been significantly improved, but the modernization of the new countryside has also destroyed ancient village



Figure 5. Li Yang. *Ancestral House* (built in the late 19th century). Photograph. South Slope Yangjia Village (坡南楊家村), Jiuhu Town, Zouping City, Shandong Province, China, April 18, 2020.



Figure 6. Li Yang. *Ancestral House Being Demolished*. Video clip. South Slope Yangjia Village, Jiuhu Town, Zouping City, Shandong Province, China, April 18, 2020.



Figure 7. Li Yang. *After Ancestral House Demolition*. Video clip. South Slope Yangjia Village, Jiuhu Town, Zouping City, Shandong Province, China, April 18, 2020.

architecture and primitive ecology, achieving material abundance of food and clothing at the cost of losing traditional Chinese rural culture and folkways. Although the principle of development in Marx's philosophy states that "new things must replace old things", the definition of old and new things is not unique, and old things sometimes have irreplaceable advantages, especially historical and humanistic traditions that need to be selectively preserved and protected. Renovating the countryside is not essentially a matter of renovating buildings and the other structures of people's lives. Although some architects and planners take architectural preservation as the primary issue of rural cultural preservation when planning and constructing new rural areas, what really needs to be preserved are rural rituals and beliefs, home values, family systems, and rural

orders.

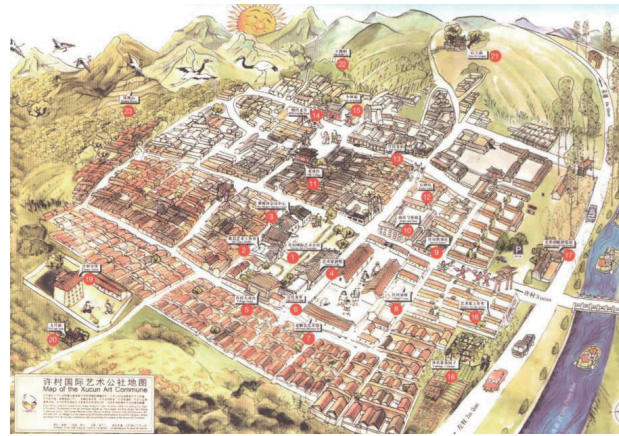
The earliest art intervention in the Chinese countryside was the Shanxi Young Artists Creative Group, composed of Song Yongping, Wang Yazhong, Liu Chun, Wang Chunsheng, Zhou Yi, Shen Guanqun, Han Fei, Chang Qing, Zhang Guotian, Fan Xiaoli, Li Shaoping, Song Yonghong, Yao Chaocheng, Li Chen, Tang Jin, Li Jianwei, Hao Zhidong, and more than 20 others, which initiated the *Village Project 1993* (Figure 8) on February 22, 1993 at the Huatuo Temple in Xijucha Village, Liulin County, Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province. They used it as a venue for their activities and conducted a two-month rural live art practice. During the event, critics such as Li Xianting and German scholar Holst Rölli visited Hua Tuo Temple to study. From August 20 to 26, 1993, the Young Artists Creative Group of Shanxi Province held an art exhibition, *Village Project 1993*, at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. The exhibition included easel painting, installations, performance art, photography, etc. They investigated the environment along the Yellow River in the Lüliang area of Shanxi and made a film and music video on the theme of *Village Project 1993*, as well as written a collection of reportage. In the implementation of the project, they had a clear division of labor, using the local environment and humanities as materials, and their creations are more concerned with the direct connection between contemporary art and the social reality of China at that time, emphasizing realistic cultural practices, trying to turn the originally overly academic and gradually market-oriented contemporary art into a concern for reality. As they state in their chronicle, "through extensive communication and interaction with the society, we dissolve the sense of the temple of art and return art to the public. Through all readable means, we present the artist's feelings and thoughts on the living environment and the state of existence."³ The implementation of *Village Project 1993* did not have many elements of public participation, but its local practice of using villagers as the direct audience group was in stark contrast to the artists who were rushing to the market and international exhibition platforms at that time; exposing villagers to art and culture at their doorstep and filling the gap of culture between artists and villagers was the rural vision of this group of Shanxi artists. As organizer Song Yongping puts it: "The *Village Project* is an event that has the culture to imagine a utopian process of behavior in which each person is realizing his or her dreams."⁴

Art intervention in the countryside is not an amendment to the policy, but an attempt to expand contemporary humanism from the grassroots, to bring into play the realistic value of art in society through



Figure 8. Song Yongping. *Village Project 1993-4*. Photograph. China, 1993. Photo credit: *Contemporary Art & Investment*, 2009 (01).

cultural enlightenment, civic education, and even social intervention. Take the *Xu Village Project* (《許村計劃》) (Figure 9) initiated by Qu Yan as an example. When he went to Heshun County, Shanxi Province in 2006, he found Xu Village and regarded it as a “beautiful village like a peach blossom land”. He saw the ancient temples, stage, and archway preserved in the village, as well as rich festivals and folk celebrations. However, he also found that the shrines of the land gods that the villagers had kept on the walls were gradually replaced with images of Fu Lu Shou (福祿壽) and the Guest-Greeting Pine (迎客松), and the original old village forms and architectural methods were no longer protected but replaced by the demolition of old houses to build new ones. In 2007, Qu Yan launched the *Xu Village Project*, “Art for Village Revival and Art for Rural Restoration”, to salvage historical relics through artistic intervention in the countryside. They first convinced the township and village cadres and villagers to stop destroying the old buildings and worked out a restoration plan and protection measures for the old Ming and Qing Dynasties streets and ancient buildings in Xu Village. Secondly, the old, abandoned film and television base in Xu Village was rehabilitated into the Xu Village International Art Commune, and the “First Xu Village Art Festival and Artist-in-Residence Program” was launched in 2011 to bring social attention and increase the villagers’ income. Finally, through the development of the Xu Village Civilization Manual and a series of civilization activities, the villagers cultivated public awareness (Figure 10, 11).⁵ Rather than simply restoring old buildings, they used emerging technological means to restore and alter them, and on the basis of collecting and organizing traditional handicrafts they brought into play and promoted traditional culture that can still be applied today. In the case of Xu Village, whether it is the experimentation of art or the transformation of the



1. Xu Village International Art Commune; 2. Qu Yan Art Studio; 3. New Media Conference Center; 4. Artist Bar; 5. Xu Village Grand Stage; 6. Commune Canteen; 7. Old Granary Art Museum; 8. Xu Village Clinic; 9. Xu Village Supply and Marketing Cooperative; 10. Shops and Inns; 11. Old Stage; 12. Stone Archway; 13. Xu Village Old Street; 14. Old Well of Ming Dynasty; 15. Temple; 16. Artist Studios; 17. Cultural Revolution Poster Exhibition Hall; 18. Yan Bing's Vegetable Garden; 19. Xu Village Primary School; 20. Wenchang Temple; 21. Temple of the Back Earth; 22. Stone Buddha Cave; 23. Phoenix Mountain

Figure 9. Zhang Dan. *General Plan of Xu Village*. Hand-painted. Image credit: *Architectural Journal*, 2013 (12).

countryside, the artists and the villagers may not share the same ideals in their participation, but as different groups, they are able to achieve the ultimate harmony and progress in the midst of many small conflicts, which is a rare successful case of art intervention in the countryside. In 2015, Qu Yan initiated the *Qingtian Paradigm Project* (《青田範式項目》) in Qingtian Village, Xingtian Town, Foshan City, Guangdong Province, to further promote the impact of art in rural construction. As he says: “The important significance of art intervention in the countryside is not art itself, but the relationship between art and the countryside that is beginning to be established. Art is no longer a creation of the artist’s self, confined only to the aesthetic sensibility of art, but becomes an act of artistic practice, and even a social movement.”⁶

Another special case is the *Yangdeng Art Cooperative* project that Jiao Xingtao led a group of young artists and local residents to initiate in 2012 in Yangdeng Township (Figure 12), Tongzi County, Guizhou Province. Yangdeng Township does not have the same history and culture as Xu Village, but is simply a poor township with no characteristics, as Jiao Xingtao said, “the biggest characteristic of Yangdeng is that it has no characteristics.”⁷ They initiated the art intervention project here with the intention of “trying to find some roots of traditional Chinese culture”⁸, searching for the history and humanity that has been cut off by the modern development of China over the past century. They implemented a series of experiments with local villagers to integrate art and rural society, including “the ‘Village Woodworking Project (鄉村木工計劃)’ in collaboration with local carpenters, the ‘Boundary Tree (界樹)’ project



Figure 10. 2013 2nd Heshun Village International Art Festival. Poster. Xu Village, Heshun County, Shanxi Province, China, July 20, 2013.



Figure 11. *Sacred Homeland*: 2017 4th Heshun Xu Village International Art Festival. Poster. Shanxi Province, China, July 15, 2017. Photo credit: Art Village Construction WeChat Official Account.

by purchasing local rural houses, interactive art activities during the market, the ‘Feng Douhua Art Museum (馮豆花美術館)’ and the ‘West Cake House Art Museum (西餅屋美術館)’ and the ‘Xiaochuntang Culture Museum (小春堂文化館)’ with local business stores, various art activities on the town’s school campus, hillocks, rivers, bridges, as well as the town’s radio station and abandoned offices, and the ‘Twelve Views of Yangdeng (羊磴十二景)’ project with local residents.”⁹ As the project progressed, they became more certain of the significance of the *Yangdeng Art Cooperative*—that art does not fundamentally and directly change the reality of the villagers’ lives, nor does it resist the village’s reliance on novel artistic activities to attract economic benefits such as tourism, but rather that art involvement in Yangdeng is simply an attempt to promote a “formalized life” and, in the process, to establish continuity between art and life in reality: artists gain creative inspiration, life experience and interest in the countryside, villagers learn about art and broaden their conceptual awareness through participation in art and may also gain certain economic benefits. They take what they need in the cooperative project and build public space in the countryside with mutual respect. As critic Wang Lin puts it, “as we acknowledge the importance of individual creativity in artistic activity, we must also acknowledge the difference that emerges in the field of knowledge through education and self-education. This difference is both a dogged social state and a blurred and mixed public space.”¹⁰ In Yangdeng’s art projects, the artists and villagers do not have a realistic goal, but they all have their own direction and ideal without a definite project plan. Everything goes with the flow, and they explore art inspiration through practice.

If all this is not possible, perhaps someone will make



Figure 12. Yangdeng Township. Photograph. 2020. Photo credit: *Sculpture*, 2021 (01).

some artistic tribute to those rural landscapes that cannot be preserved. In May 2020, I did a small commemoration at the site of my ancestral house that was demolished. I titled this event *Burning Incense at South Slope (《坡南香火》)*. I exhibited 16 of my paintings, some self-written nostalgic poems were copied on the remnants of the wall (Figure 13), and a libation ceremony was eventually performed on the spot (Figure 14). The event was semi-public and the local villagers were still suspicious of this individual act. I did not want this to be an open event at the beginning of the project either, because the event gave me a sense of compulsion and passivity from the very beginning. Although the house began to fall into disrepair when I was a child, I often went to play in it and much of the family history took place from here. When the house was knocked down, although many relatives and friends expressed their regret, they felt more like it was just an extraneous matter. Because historical value may seem to more people that if it cannot be associated with utility, then something priceless may be something valueless.

In the practice of artistic interventions in the countryside, artists and villagers are actually two completely different social groups, with distinct cultural differences between them. To the villagers, the artists are the cultural people they rarely see. And for the artists, the villagers are the most common mass group outside their lives. When two groups whose lives do not intersect are bound together through art, the most important things to overcome in the collaboration are cultural differences and cultural prejudices. For the organizers and artists in particular it is necessary to fully understand each other’s cultural situations and demands. The harmony of the participatory project lies in the activity of each group taking what it needs, each using its own independent creativity, collaborating with and helping each other, not the so-called cultural decentralization. Intellectuals

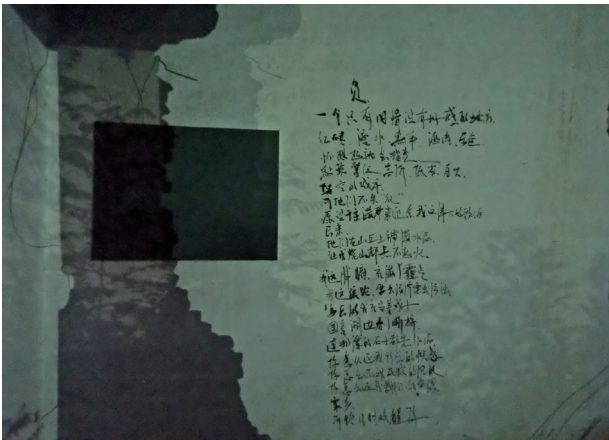


Figure 13. Li Yang. *Burning Incense at South Slope: Poetry & Landscape* (《坡南香火：詩風景》). Video clip. South Slope Yangjia Village, Jiuhu Town, Zouping City, Shandong Province, China, May 7, 2020.

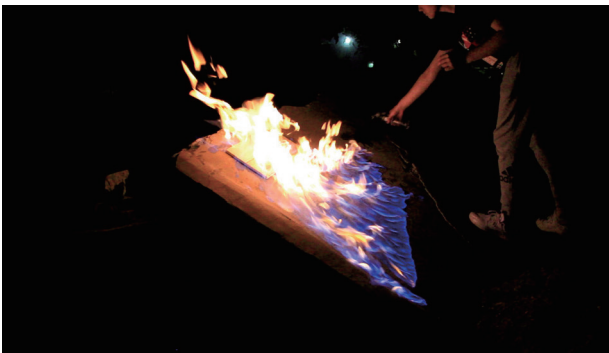


Figure 14. Li Yang. *Burning Incense at South Slope: Spondai* (《坡南香火：酌酒》). Video clip. South Slope Yangjia Village, Jiuhu Town, Zouping City, Shandong Province, China, May 7, 2020.

are also a blank slate in an unfamiliar environment, and villagers have folk wisdom. The combination of art and countryside is a kind of pioneering and inclusive humanism. Both the artists and the villagers will gain another humanistic landscape that they have not been exposed to in the process of participating in the art project.

3. Intellectual: Unexpected Visitors

It may not be appropriate to call artists “intellectuals”, but compared to the rural farmers who are generally not well-educated artists are mostly college-educated “educated” people in their eyes, and “educated” means “promising”, so it may not be too much to call artists with rural cultural and artistic ideals “intellectuals” in this context.

Art intervention in the countryside is a cultural enterprise. Many artists come into the countryside with ideals in mind. Sometimes they try to integrate into the countryside, work and live with the villagers, and use their abilities to make the countryside more desirable.



Figure 15. Matjaž Tančič. *Bishan Library* (碧山書局). Photograph. 2014. Photo credit: *New Architecture*, 2015 (01).

For example, Ou Ning and others implemented the *Bishan Project* (Figure 15) in Bishan Village, Yixian County, Anhui Province in 2011. They came to live in the village with utopian ideals and invested a lot of energy and financial resources to mobilize people to improve the village, but the implementation of the project was always unsatisfactory and they eventually left Bishan Village. The cause of this unsatisfactory situation was perhaps their intellectual identity, which prevented them from living correctly in the village. Intellectuals are always alone in a village environment; an exception is Jin Le who came from Shijiezi village and then returned to Shijiezi village to remain a part of it. Intellectuals are the most difficult to integrate into the masses; they are the least good at reading and listening to the masses, their cultural background determines their incompatibility in the masses, their different perception of things and their innate sensitivity to social life when integrating with the masses creates a gap and even seems deliberate, an independent state that cannot be kept moderate for a long time. Artists were “accidental visitors” to rural society, and as Edward Wadie Said put it, they filled the “public role of the intellectual as outsider, ‘amateur’, and disturber of the status quo”.¹¹ They are naturally the type of people who are dissatisfied with the status quo, and the dissatisfaction is not only with their own status quo, but also with any situation that is beyond their ability and in front of them. Moreover, today’s intellectuals are no longer confined to the grand narratives of the past; artists are no longer satisfied with exploring individuality and aesthetics, they are increasingly concerned with social details and local situations, freedom and truth are still universal beliefs but they value more the ability to change reality, which leads them to constantly align themselves in various uncomfortable situations and a return to solitude. For example, in 1994, artist Yu Zhenli moved into a village in the countryside of Dahei Mountain, Dalian, and began to build his art for nearly thirty years. He gradually turned a few farmhouses in



Figure 16. Qu Zhenwei. Exterior view of Yu Zhenli's Studio. Photograph. Winter 2021.

Dahei Mountain into the present studio (Figure 16), using materials from urban construction waste, as well as discarded car tires, wine bottles, TV monitors and various found objects. His act has also had a wide impact on the surrounding villagers and art lovers, and has attracted the continued attention of the art circles. Although his initial actions and thoughts were out of society, the ultimate effect was indeed to enter society.

It is difficult to achieve a lasting social effect by holding short-lived art activities in the countryside. Art intervention in the countryside requires lasting promotion, but not a lasting residence of artists or intellectuals; they have to cultivate good habits and awareness of the masses through participatory mutual assistance and inspiration in the process of change. Liang Shuming, the pioneer of Chinese rural construction, tried to bring the fire of civilization to the countryside, but he also encountered various practical difficulties in his early work which led him to speak of the helplessness and indignation of “talking about social transformation but clinging to the regime” and “calling the countryside movement but the countryside does not move”.¹² The most pressing problem he encountered in the village building movement was how to stimulate the progressive aspirations of cultural figures in village building into a motivation for change for all villagers. As an intellectual, Liang Shuming's sense of social responsibility also

led him to question: “Can you represent the interests of the countryside and the demands of the peasants or not, so that the countryside will move to follow you and shift the big picture by occurring with great force?”¹³ It is obvious that individual interventions are hardly powerful, and nowadays they no longer face the problem of salvation they did during the Republican period, so Jiao Xingtao and others did not envision that art could fundamentally change the reality of villagers' lives at the beginning of their interventions in Yangdeng, but rather sought and constructed a socially shared space there. From the beginning, they did not define it as rural construction, nor as cultural charity or artistic philanthropy, but they hoped to bring possible revelations there, or try to cultivate a group's self-awareness to improve the human environment of a village, as Qu Yan did in Xu Village and Qingtian.

Drawing on Said's reading of intellectuals, for an artist or intellectual who is interested in intervening in society, there is a complex hybrid relationship between the personal world and the public world; on the one hand, the culture, values, responsibilities, and positions of individuals derive from their self-experience, and on the other hand, how these individuals make their experiences enter the social world. They need to debate with the public, have discussions with villagers, negotiate with local governments. They also need to make

trade-offs between implementing land and art, revenue and ideals, and elimination and culture. As “accidental visitors” in the eyes of the villagers’ community, they need to maintain the independence of their cultural stance while constantly compromising when meeting resistance. Intellectuals are active exiles whose destiny is to move around endlessly. They never return to a stable state of comfort and ease because of their perpetual longing for the ideal, and “sadly, never fully arriving, never becoming one with their new home or situation.”¹⁴

Therefore, although utopia exists only in the ideal, it exists more in the gap between their efforts and practices.

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知識分子的桃源一夢：藝術介入鄉村的前瞻與困局

李洋

摘要：中國的現代鄉村建設具有經濟主導的現代化與人文主導的現代性之分，在鄉村建設運動、新年畫運動、農民畫運動、知識分子上山下鄉等早期的文化鄉建與社會運動之後，今天也出現了諸多藝術家自主介入鄉村的案例。藝術介入鄉村，並不是藝術家選擇進入鄉村生活與創作，而是以有社會責任感的入世者身份參與到鄉村的文藝建設之中，對已逐漸流失的鄉村文化生態進行保護，與村民進行互動式的藝術交流，以促進或啓發鄉村的現代人文建設。

關鍵詞：當代藝術；社會介入性藝術；藝術鄉建；知識分子

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