

Exploration and Analysis of the Contemporary Chinese Art Activism as an Intervention in Urbanization

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Abstract: China's rapid urbanization and market-oriented reforms resulted in localized socio-political issues while redefining the image of world power. The ideological shift during the social transformation creates an experimental era for art interventions and cultural practices. This article maintains that artistic production serves as a means to understand, interact, and critique the transformation of urban spaces, contributing to responding and addressing the challenges suffered by citizens and the nation. Focusing on the perspectives of common people, socio-economic and physical geographies inequality, and nation branding during the urban revolution, this article examines the expressions of artistic activism in China reflect on the issues arising from urban space development. Adopting phenomenological approach and action research methods, it considers artworks as manifestations and mediums for the narratives of residents and social discourse identities, thereby interpreting the potential of cultural strategies as form of deconstructing contemporary urban issues in China amidst social and environmental change.

1 INTRODUCTION

The implementation of reform and opening-up in China coincided with the influx of international capital driven by neo-liberalism and economic globalization in the 1980s, which accelerated the rapidity of urbanization (Tam, 2020). These top-down social transformations reshaped the living environment of citizens and emerged as subject of public political or cultural imagination, reconstructing ethnography within the national context (Wang, 2015).

Nevertheless, national socioeconomic transformation imposes the popular masses to suffer throes and confusion (Mirra, 2020). Urban development has shaped a volatile environment of mobility, where citizens confront anxieties of dislocation and alienation in the shifting time and narratives, which interact with trans-local and social texts, ultimately influencing nation-building (Valjakka & Wang, 2018).

In response, local artists who concern for new urban aesthetics concentrate on socially underprivileged people, disappearing historical land spaces, as well as the marginalization of national image identity resulting from an atomized society, utilizing artistic creative expressions as a means to

perceive, interpret, and address the dilemmas of urbanization (Jiang, 2020).

This article focuses on contemporary Chinese artists who have background shaped by the impacts of urbanization and possess an urban consciousness, exploring how their creation of locality to deconstructs and applies the concept of urbanization through diverse materials, forms, and multimedia installations to construct narrative discourse that supports underprivileged social groups negotiate visibility and address structural issues (Zhang, 2020). Furthermore, the article discusses the significant role of artistic practices in reshaping and promoting Chinese cultural identity and nation branding along an unprecedented path of development.

2 METHODOLOGY

This article adopts phenomenological approach and action research methodology, exploring how Chinese artists are voicing diverse groups and issues while dealing with the juxtaposition relationship between contemporary urbanization and artistic production. The phenomenological approach emphasizes that abandons the preconceived theoretical frameworks, aiming to objectively employs participatory attitude

to describe the phenomena and experiences generated by the research subjects (Cissé & Rasmussen, 2022). Moreover, the action research involves investigating strategies and effectiveness of problem-solving practices within real social situations (Wright, 2015).

Thus, this article is based on cultural activism and combines the quantifiable and intangible contexts within urban revolution, analyzing phenomena generated by aesthetic production as a method of urban intervention and the subjective experiences of social groups. Consequently, this study examines the cultural phenomena and interventions generated through artistic works in individual, land, and national image. It aims to demonstrate the possibility of art as a vehicle for addressing public issues and engaging with utopian dreams, reimagining the symbiotic interdependence between humans and city.

3 THE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION ABOUT MIGRANT WORKER IN THE CHINESE URBANIZATION

The restructuring and expansion of industries during urbanization attracted large-scale flow of rural-urban migration, resulting in the conflicted spatial concentration of population and production (Lu, 2011). Confronting with the unfamiliar exploitative and elitist value systems in cities, migrant workers with limited cultural and economic resources endure discrimination, and marginalizing as 'superfluous people' (Grube, 2020). In response to the polarized laboring environment of this transitional period, local artists employ art interventions, including photography, installation, and performance art, to create spaces for dialogue and resolution, thereby concerning with and revealing the destruction and disruption experienced with the migrant population in their lives of excluded from the right to the city (Qi, 2023).

As the economic focal point of urbanization policies, the growing demand for industrial transformation in the Pearl River Delta facilitates an influx of rural populations into the development zones to serve as cheap labour and rendering them to objectified individual (Tam, 2020). The consumerist environment which detached from individual lived experiences exacerbates tensions between marginalized citizens and the modernized imagery of urban clusters (Yu, 2020).

Liang Juhui, who is a member of the Big Tail Elephant Working Group from Guangzhou, created

the experimental performance artwork *One-Hour Game* (1996) within a moving construction lift at the Sinopec Towers (figure 1), to highlight the exclusion and alienation suffered by migrant laborers as the objects of urbanization (Lin, 2018). In the photographic documentation, Liang dresses the blue uniform and safety helmet, which symbolize worker image, and crouches within the narrow confines of the elevator grille while playing the video game *Battle City* (1985). Over the hour-long performance, the workers' elevator, which represented the prison imprisoning the identity of rural migrant laborers embodied by Liang, moved up and down the expansive urban construction landscape following the predetermined rhythms of the building process (Wu, 2010).

Liang Juhui's artistic practice integrates the artist's body with urbanism materials as medium for expression. This approach appropriates the repetitive work scenes associated with urban construction to reveal and examine the monotony of laborers lived conditions. By employing sharp contrasts, Liang metaphorically represents the impoverished lives of migrant laborers trapped within the urbanized context through his own powerless portrayal in the elevator (Tan, 2015). The video game symbolizes the nipple entertainment culture in lower tier market, which is utilized by marginalized individuals for distraction and escapism from the harsh realities of life.

Furthermore, this work offers a illustration of human alienation in the context of industrial urbanization (Merlin, 2018). The elevator operation is confined to two-dimensional vertical motion, lacking the capacity transport in other directions. The juxtaposition of the wide-angle city skyline with the restrictive and mechanical operations of the elevator emphasizes the sense of powerlessness and absurdity encountered by rural migrants, who find themselves with nowhere to turn under the dominant narrative of urbanization.

The identity issues faced by migrant workers and other margins of the cities and invisible residents linked to the processes of urbanization, which led to the dismantling of neighborhoods and the rural landscape. Thus, Chinese artists who engage with rural predicaments connect their bodies with the land and environment, adopting performance art to articulate the loss of emotion associated with land.



Figure 1: Liang, J. H. One Hour Game.

4 THE GEOGRAPHICAL ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN THE CHINESE URBANIZATION

The crucial topic in urbanization is the appropriation of rural land. The uncontrolled expansion of urban property industries misappropriated the rural lands and traditional buildings, resulting in the deprive of collective memory and the hollowing out of community culture (Wang, 2015). As a result of construction development by real estate companies or local authorities, the dwellings of villagers are squeezed and destroyed (Mirra, 2023). They are compelled to migrate to the cities while living space and collective memories are deprived. The art professionals who concentrate on sacrificed geographical spaces connect the avant-gardism of art with the social issues surrounding encroached rural land, forming a manifestation of social intervention and engagement (Wang, 2018).

The joint exhibition, *Land*, created by Li Binyuan and Zhang Huan, transcends the limitation of single geographical area. The artists adopt physical and performative art form to represent the intrusion of rampant urbanization into rural environments, thereby interpreting the emotional connection between people and land. In Chinese culture, farmland is regarded as the root, representing the foundation of traditional civilization relations and life primal agency (Yu, 2020). Nonetheless, the dichotomy between city and countryside engendered by urbanization resulted in farmland being regarded as a sacrifice to industrialization. This condition dissolves collective memories for root and disintegrates the traditional attachment to the countryside.

In the *Freedom Farming*, Li Binyuan integrates phenomenology and activism, manifesting his own body as a farming tool. This innovative form with the farmland to creates a venue of emotional resonance and connection for the audience. The two-hour film initiates with a shot of the Certificate of Land issued by Dahankou Village in Hunan, symbolizing the encroachment and reshaping of rural land belief under urbanization policies. In the observation of his family and the neighborhoods of the village, Li repetitively jumps up and down on the moist soil on his deceased father's farmland (figure 2). The video end in him collapsing into the muddy water, vomiting from exhaustion and becoming a part of the paddy field (Oredsson, 2019). Li Binyuan's artistic languages, characterized by suffering and stressful, incorporates affective expediences and responds from audiences into the performance, creating an interactive phenomenological expression. His Sisyphean mechanical jumps allegorically represent fragile plight of farmer forced to leave their familiar rural context due to the enduring long-standing implications of urbanization, continuously oscillating within the urban environments (Shi, 2022). However, Li Binyuan's ultimate action of submerging himself in the muddy field metaphor aspiration of villager long for return pastoral textures in traditional Chinese agricultural structure. The *Free Farming* employs sensible representation to visualizes the emotional relationship and identity of farmers marginalized by economic reform, reposing localized feelings of displacement and offering dialogue site for citizens to reconceptualize traditional life in villagescape.



Figure 2: Li, B.Y. Freedom Farming.

Furthermore, Zhang Huan utilizes a dark humor performance to reveal the relationship between the individual needs and the collective narratives in land reform. In the phonographic work *To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond*, Zhang Huan, who carry a child on his shoulders, stands naked with forty temporary migrant workers in a pond located in Beijing Park.

They gaze impassively beyond the viewfinder frame of the camera in the scene of portrayed in a cold and lime green palette (figure 3). Through this orchestrated collective performance in the water, Zhang transforms the pond into a space for experiencing the natural landscape, metaphorically reflecting the pollution and destruction of aquatic environments resulting from urbanization (Lin, 2020).



Figure 3: Zhang, H. To Raise the water Level in a fish pond.

Additionally, Zhang Huan attempts to raise the water level of the pond by one centimeter through the collective effort of strangers. This activism of intervention emphasizes the potential for microscopic individual freedom and power for resistance within the macroscopic ideological transformations and influence. Nevertheless, the tragedy of the ethical concern image stems from the futility of the action, as the water level remains unchanged despite the individual efforts. Instead, the participants, who are depicted as powerless citizens, experience the exploitation of societal transformation's relentless waves within the icy waters of the pond (NASHER, n.d.). With urbanization accelerates, the self-awareness and subjective meaning of individuals appear insignificant. Zhang's performance art critiques and reflects on the inevitable harms of urbanization, aspiring to establish an alternative aesthetic imaginary for migrant workers and general public.

The individual contexts that emerged during China's sociopolitical transformations evolved into structural issues on societal scale, accompanying challenges impact on the construction and recognition of the national overall image. Artists who are aware of the diminish of national imagination within highly industrialized urban spaces seek to incorporate the visual vocabulary of traditional art history into the process of urbanization. They aspire to create channels for cultural dialogue and perception

between citizens and the nation through balancing modernity with a traditional aesthetic narrative.

5 THE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION ABOUT THE NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CHINESE URBANIZATION

Top-down industrial development disrupts urban cultural landscapes and public spiritual space, resulting in the national identity crisis (Marinelli, 2015). In comparison with the Chinese flourishing international stature in framework of public diplomacy, the cultural identity of the citizens presents signs of fatigue (Hu, 2023). The property planning and infrastructure constructing, service to dream of social transformation, led to supersized sprawl to compresses the presence of historical texture with urban spaces, disrupting sentimental geographical connections. A significant number of ancient architectures which embody cultural memory have been leveled and destroyed, conceding to spiritless building binge of modernity. This process deprives citizens of the physical spaces necessary to entrust and experience localized cultural affective (Campanella, 2008).

Moreover, the economic stimulus of urbanization exacerbates competitive life patterns and consumerist ideology. Overcrowded residential environment and intense commuting pressures enforce citizens to devote their limited time to endless involution labor, to exchange for opportunities that sustain life in the city. Meanwhile, urban classes, constrained by stress of capital accumulation, incapable to form habits of life associated with subjectivity. Instead, they have to embrace and obsess logic of capital, serve as a savior for material and spiritual dilemmas within the commercialization of the urban fabric (Lu & Zhang, 2020). Thus, the gentrified society creates a vicious cycle of production and consumption, reinforcing the atomization and fragmentation of the cultural climate (Mirra, 2019). In the context of the prevailing trend of 'de-Europeanisation', the international perspective is increasingly oriented towards China's cultural soft power. The tensions of robust internal cultural pride is a matter of significant concern (Salemink et al., 2023). For this reason, Chinese artists integrated localized narrative structures into the urbanization, creating new local art practice, to address disjunctive and antagonistic situation between the economic reforms and traditional culture.



Figure 4: Ma, Y. S. Chaoyang Park Plaza.

The optimal solution is to search for cultural symbols of subjectivity, integrate them with the current pattern of change, and construct local narratives to reduce the vulnerability of cultural identity. The shanshui city designed by Ma Yansong applies the artistic characteristics of traditional Chinese Shan shui painting to architectural design (figure 4), representing dissatisfaction and resistance with the dehumanizing urban configurations resulted from predatory architecture (Mirra, 2019). Through his imitation of landscapes, the skyscrapers present the soft streamlines, accompanied with luxuriant vegetation, which enrich the weak fabric of urban space. For instance, the Chaoyang Park Plaza conforms to traditional concepts of Chinese landscape painting and classical garden design. The fluid and streamlined forms of the architectural complex emulate the poetic imagery of layered mountain ranges, creating sinuous and organic natural contours. The extensive utilizing of glass curtain walls adopts the classical garden technique of 'scene borrowing', reflecting and showcasing the urban texture and landscapes. This sustainable architectural landscape which imbued with distinctive Chinese aesthetic traditions and identity evokes a sense of cultural belonging and inspires conceptualization of the national future among citizens. It provides residents of impersonal and machine-made cities with

a solution to connect with humanized environment on a spiritual or philosophical level (Yang & Hu, 2017). Moreover, the incorporation of traditional philosophical concept of Chinese art present the architect's affective identification with Chinese cultural discourse and ideology. This approach contributes to capture and shape cultural values and strengths characterized by coherence and continuity during a period of social transformation (De Nigris, 2019).

Confronting the ambiguity of cultural identity, artists experienced the influence of highly urbanized environments are dedicated to translate and refrigerate philosophies of traditional Chinese art into modern narratives, addressing the anxiety of seeking the cultural root and offering a creative expression of national self-identity (Jiang, 2019). They aim to promote Chinese citizens to reengage with their cultural gene and establish enduring emotional connections within a context of high mobility, fostering a sense of national pride. From the perspective of national identity, the past undoubtedly informs the future (Li, 2019).

6 CONCLUSION

This research highlights the three dimensions involved in China's urbanized revolution, including migrant workers, geo-cultural dynamics and national image. It examines the social issues arising from uncertainty while presenting the perspectives and expression from artists. The essence of the dilemma of social transformation in China is that the rush for economic and political achievements has defused the inherent narrative patterns of traditional society. Regardless of the original context, it is essential for individuals to recognize and adapt to the new social structure and to make the changes. In this progress of constant movement, citizen suffer the alienation in daily lives and sense of cultural estrangement.

In the social transformation, artists assume the responsibility to utilize artistic and cultural productions as medium to reflect critically on social problems and articulate the concerns for public and themselves. Art activism, as a form of urban intervention, captures, interprets, and conceives the distinctiveness and critical aspects of contemporary urbanization in China, aiming to create sustainable and inclusive spaces within overcrowded urban environments. This approach offers citizens a localized connection to reimagine and experience ancient traditional values and cultural specificity while cultivating the potential for new forms of civic

engagement. Ultimately, through a narrative structure creates by locational aesthetics and participatory art, China would establish a strong foundation for the people's livelihoods and social harmony, while manifesting a multifaceted and great national branding image.

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