

## Metamorphosis of a Butterfly:

### Neoliberal Subjectivation and Queer Autonomy in Xiyadie's Papercutting Art

Hongwei Bao

Celebrated as 'China's Tom of Finland' (Fan 2018), Xiyadie (Figure 1) is probably one of the best-known queer artists living in China today.<sup>1</sup> He uses the traditional Chinese handcraft of papercutting to express homoerotic themes and personal feelings. His works often depart from a metropolitan gay experience to explore gay people's lives in rural China (Rofel in Zonkel 2012). His identity as a gay man from rural China and his method of using the Chinese folk art of papercutting for queer artistic expression make him a unique figure in contemporary Chinese art. As the first academic article on the artist and his artworks, this article examines Xiyadie's transformation of identity in life and the representation of gay identity in his papercutting art. In doing so, I wish to delineate modes of subjectivation under transnational market forces and explore possible ways of desubjectivation and artist autonomy in neoliberal capitalism.

Figure 1: Xiyadie at the NOME Gallery which hosts his exhibition *Cut Sleeve, Split Peach*, Berlin, 2018, photo courtesy of the artist.

Xiyadie, literally 'Siberian butterfly', is the pseudonym that the artist chooses for himself. He was born in 1963 in Heyang County in Northwest China's Shaanxi Province, which has a long history of and rich tradition in folk art. He attended the local Special Arts and Crafts School, and, with his skills, worked for the crafts department of the Xi'an Film Studio for a number of years. He married a woman in an arranged marriage and later had two children, a son and a daughter. The son was born with cerebral palsy and could not speak or walk. Against all odds and with great tenacity, Xiyadie brought the child up to the age of 26 when the son eventually died. At the moment, Xiyadie lives in Beijing as a migrant worker, doing odd jobs here and there. He has made a living as a security guard, a cook, a handy man and a

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this article was inspired by an exhibition featuring Xiyadie's artworks, titled *Metamorphosis of a Butterfly: A Kaleidoscope Vision of Life by a Gay Chinese Artist* and held at the Flazh!Alley Art Studio in San Pedro, California, from 29 April to 14 July, 2012.

garbage collector, among others. In his spare time, he cuts patterns out of paper with a pair of scissors, employing the traditional Chinese handcraft of papercutting. But the homoerotic themes that Xiyadie depicts is far from conventional. He is known as the first queer papercutting artist in China (Guo 2016).

Despite his long-term obscurity, Xiyadie's papercutting works have attracted some domestic and international attention in recent years. In China, he is primarily known within urban queer communities. His works were first exhibited at *Difference-Gender*, China's first queer art exhibition organized by the Beijing LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) Centre in 2009. His papercutting-style stamp design, *Harmony*, won the first prize in China's first LGBT-themed stamp design competition hosted by the Dutch Embassy in Beijing on the IDAHOT Day (International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia & Biphobia) in 2016 (Figure 2). Outside China, his name is primarily known within a small circle of international queer art communities.

Figure 2: Xiyadie, *Harmony*, a set of gender and sexuality themed stamps designed by Xiyadie. Courtesy of the artist.

In many ways Xiyadie is an atypical gay man and artist, both of which often carry strong urban and cosmopolitan connotations. What is remarkable about Xiyadie's life is his transformation from an ordinary Chinese farmer and folk artist whose name was little known inside China, to a contemporary queer artist who has recently launched an international career. This article focuses on Xiyadie's life story and artworks. Using a critical biographical approach, in tandem with analysis of his representative artworks, I examine the transformation of Xiyadie's identity from a folk artist to a queer artist, and ask what types of power relations have made the transformation possible. I suggest that the transformation of Xiyadie's identity from a folk artist to a queer artist, and his papercutting artworks from folk art to queer art, has been facilitated by the articulation of his gay identity and his homoerotic-themed papercutting to transnational LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) movement and an international art market. His experience speaks to a postsocialist context where class politics gives way to identity politics in cultural production, and it calls

for a reinvigoration of Marxist and socialist perspectives for a better understanding of contemporary art production and social movements. This article also considers the role of art as possible modes of desubjectivation under neoliberal capitalism. By studying the transformation and reification of human subjectivity and creativity under transnational capitalism, I seek possible ways of desubjectivation and human agency. After all, as we are shaped by discourses and power relations, there are also 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1972) through which human autonomy is manifested.

### **Becoming Siberian Butterfly: Processes of Transformation**

One is not born a queer artist; one becomes both queer and an artist. This is particularly true in Xiyadie's case. Xiyadie could have been called a 'farmer' or 'migrant worker' in China's work classification system; he is now labelled as an artist in the international art market. The works that Xiyadie creates could have been called 'folk art' or 'craft' by Chinese officials or art historians; they have now been elevated to the status of 'art' and, furthermore 'queer art'. It is worth noting that the category 'folk art' or 'craft' is often situated at the lower rank of the artistic hierarchy, with popular associations of reproducibility, lowbrowness, lack of artistry and creativity, limited potential of marketability, as well as merely speaking to an often geographically and culturally bound audience. In contrast, 'queer art' is seen as a different category: to call an artwork 'queer art' would often give it a contemporary, modern and postmodern feel, an international and cosmopolitan outlook, and an appeal that is both universal and particular, both mainstream and niche. Where does craft end and art start? Where does the fine line between 'folk art' and 'contemporary art' lie? When is papercutting a form of art, and when does a papercutter become an artist? And furthermore, what does the signifier 'gay' or 'queer' add to art? How does sexuality mediate human subjectivity and artworks? We can understand 'queer' as a verb to mean: (1) to add sex and sexuality to something that is normally not directly linked to sex and sexuality; (2) to defamiliarize, to make things strange, to subvert and challenge the certain social and institutional norms. If Xiyadie 'queers' papercutting as an art form with his sexual identity, is his identity also 'cut' or 'crafted' like a piece of paper? Can one think about both sexuality and art as innovative forms of artistic engagement? This article takes up the challenge of thinking human subjectivities as artworks, 'cut', 'crafted' and shaped by a myriad of social forces and power relations, and art as a metaphor for human subjectivity and a 'technology of the self'

(Foucault 1988). I ask what forms and possibilities of subjectivation and de-subjectivation are possible in contemporary society in the context of neoliberalism, a global art market, and a transnational LGBTQ Movement. I also query how Xiyadie deals with all these social forces beyond his control.

Looking at Xiyadie's life story and career trajectory, one cannot help but notice several key moments when his life took dramatic twists and turns: (1) the moment when his artistic talent was recognized by a folklore expert and Xiyadie subsequently became a folk artist; (2) the moment when he was encouraged by Sha Qing and Ji Dan, two independent documentary filmmakers, to use papercutting as a form of self-expression; (3) the moment he was recognized as a 'queer artist' at the Beijing LGBT Centre, thus signalling the start of his career as an international queer artist. All these moments signalled dramatic transformations of Xiyadie's identity; they also testified the making and remaking of subjectivities in a postsocialist, neoliberal and transnational context, in which human life ceases to be *zoe* (Agamben 1998), or natural life, and creativity becomes increasingly reified and commodified in identity politics and an international art market.

When Xiyadie was working for an art and craft shop in Shaanxi, he was introduced to Professor Shi, a Chinese folklore expert, who discovered Xiyadie's talent. According to Professor Shi, Xiyadie did not merely follow the tradition by making copies of traditional patterns, but created new themes and contents using papercutting as a medium, and this quality distinguished a creative artist from an ordinary craftsperson (SexybeijingTV 2012). In a *Sexy Beijing* video interview, Professor Shi made no mention of Xiyadie's homoerotic artworks, partly because this was considered an embarrassing topic, and partly because Xiyadie was too reluctant to show the teacher his homoerotic artworks. With Professor Shi's help, Xiyadie gained recognition from the local government as a folk artist producing artworks worthy of state preservation and subsequently received a modest amount of artist subsidy every month. He also became a member of the China Society for the Study of Folk Literature and Art, as well as the Shaanxi Society for the Study of Folk Literature and Art. In this way, he turned from an ordinary farmer possessing an unusual skill to a folk artist; he also became a subject of the nation state and its history by producing artworks of national and historical value. Creativity and skills ceased to be individual properties; they became

properties of the state. In Giorgio Agamben's (1998) words, his life turned from natural life, or *zoe*, to a form of politicized life, *bios*.

While Xiyadie was taking care of his disabled son, he met two documentary filmmakers, Sha Qing and Ji Dan, two pioneer figures in China's New Documentary Movement. The couple lived with Xiyadie and his disabled son for several months, during which they documented father and son's lives with a digital video camera. The result was an award-winning documentary of Xiyadie's life titled *Wellspring (Zai yiqi de shiguang)*, dir. Sha Qing, 2012). The filmmaker couple encouraged Xiyadie to continue with his artistic creation and to pursue artistic freedom. After seeing Xiyadie's queer-themed artworks and realising Xiyadie's sexual identity, they even encouraged Xiyadie to make more of such works and with a stronger sense of individual style. After seeing some of his works, 'Sha Qing was very excited and kept on saying "wonderful". He pointed at the big penis in an artwork and said: "this is great! Make it bigger".' (Guo 2016).

Despite the official recognition of his papercutting works as 'folk art' and the gaining of artistic agency and autonomy inspired by the two filmmakers, Xiyadie artworks would not have become 'queer art' and gained an international reputation without the recognition of his gay identity by the transnational LGBTQ Movement. The Beijing LGBT Centre, a Beijing-based LGBTQ non-governmental organization played a crucial role in the process. In 2005, Xiyadie went to Beijing and became one of China's hundreds of millions of migrant workers. Living in China's capital city and working on odd jobs did not make Xiyadie financially better off, but it offered him unprecedented freedom as a gay man. He soon found himself in Dongdan Park, one of China's biggest public cruising venues, where he met his current boyfriend. During a visit to the Beijing LGBT Centre for a voluntary HIV/AIDS screening test, he showed a community centre volunteer some pictures of his papercutting. 'Guang [the community centre social worker] repeated three times: my God. We have finally had the opportunity to see a living Chinese queer artist in our own times!' (Guo 2016). This dramatic moment marked the formal recognition of Xiyadie as a 'living Chinese queer artist', and his life took a dramatic turn from then on. The Beijing LGBT Centre not only included his works in *Difference-Gender*, China's first queer art exhibition. They also introduced him to art curators from all over the world, including Jan Montoya, creative director of the Long Beach

LGBT Centre, who subsequently introduced Xiyadie's work to the art gallery Flazh!Alley Studio in New York (Sebag-Montefiore 2012). Xiyadie's life has begun as a 'Chinese queer artist' in the international art market and has continued ever since.

Faced with his newly acquired fame as a Chinese queer artist, Xiyadie was extremely modest: 'I never thought about becoming an artist. Some people saw my work and then called me one. I'm only a farmer, belonging to my yellow soil land.' (Xiyadie in Harrity 2012). This modesty seemed to have increased his charm as an authentic and unpretentious artistic genius. American gay magazine *Advocate* described his artwork as carrying a sense of 'sweet innocence' (Harrity 2012). The Beijing-based magazine *Gayspot* described Xiyadie's entry into the international art scene in an exaggerated and even slightly patronising tone: 'What is remarkable about him is that he does not know, nor does he ever need to know, that his papercutting works can be exhibited and even sold for money' (Guo 2016). The image of an unsophisticated indigenous Chinese queer artist with childlike innocence and whose works are untainted by consumerism and capitalist modernity have emerged in these journalistic accounts.

Xiyadie learned to be gay by learning to use the popular jargons from national and transnational LGBTQ activist discourses. In an interview, he described his past experience as a homosexual in a small town: 'I had never heard of it [homosexuality] in my hometown. Sometimes I thought I was a *liumang*/hoodlum. Only after coming to Beijing did I see that there are so many of us.' (Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012).<sup>2</sup> In this narrative, homosexuality either did not have a name (through the use of euphemisms such as 'it' or 'so many of us') or carried a criminalized and pathologized connotation ('*liumang*/hoodlum'). After he was accepted by the queer communities in Beijing, Xiyadie changed his choice of words: '*Tongxinglian*/Homosexual is a term used to describe a pathology. You should have used the term *tongzhi*/comrade. It expresses equality.' and 'If I had known I was gay, I wouldn't have got married' (Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012).<sup>3</sup> He also learned to use English terms such as

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<sup>2</sup> Before the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997, homosexuality was punishable under the legal code of *liumang zui* (hooliganism or hoodlum).

<sup>3</sup> *Tongzhi*, literally 'comrade', is a popular term used in the Chinese speaking world to refer to sexual minorities such as LGBTQ people. For a brief genealogy of the term, see Bao 2018: 65-91.

LGBT and gay, expressing the wish that he would like to visit the ‘gay *qu*’ (gay district) in Los Angeles.

*Liumang*/hoodlum, *tongxinglian*/homosexual, *tongzhi*/comrade and gay: these are not simply different words to refer to sexual minorities; they are different types of sexual subjectivities constructed in multiple discourses and under various governing regimes (Bao 2018: 61). The rejection of stigmatized identity labels such as *liumang*/hoodlum and *tongxinglian*/homosexual and the embrace of the *tongzhi*/comrade and gay identities signals Xiyadie’s changing understandings of sexual and social identities: from an illegitimate sexual subject without a proper name to a nationally and transnationally recognized sexual citizenship. This transformation also has class connotations: the transition from *liumang*/hoodlum and *tongxinglian*/homosexual to *tongzhi*/comrade and gay is characterized by upward social mobility, as the latter terms are usually used by middle-class citizens in China’s increasingly commercialized and homonormative LGBTQ movement to refer to themselves.

The ‘discovery’ of a Chinese queer artist was situated at a critical historical juncture, when China’s LGBTQ Movement was in full bloom after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997 and its depathologization in 2011 (Bao 2018: 73). This coincided with a relatively relaxed political atmosphere since China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the flooding of HIV/AIDS-related international funding into China, which lent support to mushrooming LGBTQ grassroots organizations and social movements. The fast developing LGBTQ Movement in China increasingly called for more indigenous queer representations and intersectional modes of queer politics. Papercutting as a traditional Chinese art form gave the queer communities a sense of indigeneity; and a gay artist from a rural and migrant working-class background also offered the community a much-needed example of intersectional queer diversity. Xiyadie could thus be introduced as an ‘indigenous Chinese queer artist’ to the outside world and to showcase that queer, art and queer art can be rural, working-class, and Chinese too.

In an international context, Xiyadie has increasingly been labelled a Chinese queer artist representing China's 'suffering' queer communities. His name 'Siberian Butterfly' has often been invoked in journalist writings to connote an individual's desire for freedom under a repressive political regime. During his exhibition in United States, an American journalist reported: 'in China, Xiyadie is a closeted artist. So he came to America to be "out"' (Zonkel 2012). BBC even commented on Xiyadie's works as 'revealing the troubled psyche of China's homosexual community' (Sui 2017). Willingly or unwillingly, Xiyadie and his artworks have been endowed with a specific meaning of 'Chineseness'; they participate in shaping a post-Cold War popular narrative of freedom and repression. Sexuality and gay identity stand at the centre of such a narrative.

### **Documenting Queer Lives on Paper and with Scissors**

When Xiyadie's works were first exhibited at *Difference-Gender*, China's first queer art exhibition organized by the Beijing LGBT Center in 2009, the exhibition was shut down by the authorities on the charge of obscenity and lack of official approval. All but Xiyadie's works were confiscated by the police. Without noticing the homoerotic themes in Xiyadie's works, a policeman even encouraged the use of papercutting as a means of artistic expression (Guo 2016). This anecdote manifested Chinese authorities' conservative attitude toward homosexuality and art; it also opened up discussions about the use of traditional art forms to explore transgressive themes and topics.

On a quick glance, many of Xiyadie's papercutting works may not differ much from traditional papercutting practiced in rural China. He often cuts patterns out of red banner paper, using traditional motifs such as flowers and animals that symbolize happiness and prosperity (Figure 3). On a closer look, one can see more details emerging from the abstract lines and shapes; one could even be shocked at the audacity of these works: they are often highly graphic images that portray explicit sex and same-sex intimacies between men. In Figure 3, a man is sitting on a chair performing fellatio to himself in the centre of the frame. But this detail can easily escape from a viewer's attention, as the man is surrounded by traditional papercutting motifs such as flowers, a bird and even a cat. The traditional motifs, as well as the colour scheme, all contribute to the obscuring of the central message. Xiyadie does not deliberately do so to confuse the viewers. The implicit appearance of his queer



representation is often attributed to the abstract nature of the papercutting as an artistic language, which relies solely on abstract lines and shapes and do not usually offer a realistic rendition of people and objects being represented. It often takes a trained eye to interpret these abstract visual codes. The fact that these homoerotic images survived the police raid of the *Difference-Gender* exhibition served as a good example of the specificity of the artistic language. Because of this, together with the legitimacy of papercutting as an officially recognized and widely accepted folk art form in China, the police only noticed the form but missed the content of Xiyadie's works. Indeed, while the form of papercutting is important, and people often take it for granted that the content should be in line with the form and thus be conventional, one needs to pay close attention to the content of Xiyadie's works. Form and content constitute a dynamic unity in Xiyadie's papercutting.

Figure 3: Xiyadie, *Joy*, paper-cut on banner paper, 28x28cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Most of Xiyadie's recent work is cut out of the soft, thin and fine-textured Xuan paper (or rice paper) instead of the thick and hard-textured type of banner paper. This gives him an opportunity to dye the images and their backgrounds. Xiyadie uses water colour made of Chinese pigments, often used for decorating steam buns in rural Shaanxi, to dye the pictures. He frequently uses blue or black as the background colour, together with a combination of red, yellow, blue and green as primary colours of his works. He described the cutting and dying process as follows:

The paper is a form of traditional rice paper, Xuan paper, which feels a bit like cloth. It's very absorbent and easy to flatten, but because it's so thin, you have to cut several papers at the same time, so they are done in editions. I ink them all at once, from the top, but sometimes the colour is not as vibrant at the bottom, so I have to remove the layers and add more colour, which can take a lot of time. The large ones take about a month or more just to cut. Though I cut all of the works free form, I often make a composition first as a small paper-cut and use it as a model for making a larger one. (Xiyadie in Cordray 2018)

This procedure bears striking resemblances to the 'print and dye' (*yinran*) technique used in the traditional cottage textile industry in rural China, something that Xiyadie may be familiar with through his life experiences in Northwest China's countryside. It also draws our

attention to the materiality of paper and dye: both materials are highly indigenous and locally available in rural Shaanxi. Despite the hard work and the long time it takes to complete a piece of work, Xiyadie's account shows the care he takes and the passion he cherishes for the creative process. Through these materialized and embodied artistic practices, Xiyadie situates himself in the long genealogy of artisans and craftsmen in rural China and places his works in dialogues with traditional forms of papercutting in history. His artworks thus carry with themselves a sense of 'aura' (Benjamin 1968), often associated with an unproducibile process of creative practice and an un-reified form of human labour.

Xiyadie draws on a multiplicity of traditional themes from Chinese painting and papercutting, including flowers and birds, double happiness, lanterns and flower vases (Fig 4). They all display various degrees of symmetry, as papercutting artists usually work with folded paper. But Xiyadie often break the symmetry by giving each side some variations. The butterfly is a common theme in Xiyadie's traditional papercutting (Figure 5). Given Xiyadie's artist name is 'Siberian Butterfly' and his wish to pursue freedom like a butterfly, this is hardly surprising. What is common to these traditional themes and motifs is that Xiyadie invariably 'queers' them: that is, placing homoerotic experience at the centre of the images. Men kiss and have sex with each other unabashedly in the midst of flowers, animals and utensils. This seems to suggest that homoeroticism can be compatible with Chinese tradition, in contrary to the common perception that homosexuality in China is a Western import. As Xiyadie 'queers' the Chinese tradition, he also indigenizes homoeroticism.

Figure 4: Xiyadie, *Flying*, paper-cut on banner paper, 28x28cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5: Xiyadie, *Butterfly*, paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 28x28cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Xiyadie's works often seem obsessed with the motif of life and vitality. Flowers, animals and humans are all vital beings, and they all testify to the vitality of life. Sex is not used for erotic titillation; it serves as the ultimate manifestation of life and life forces. In *Disco* (Figure 6),

the two naked men are juxtaposed with chirping birds and blooming flowers circled around them. This manifests the unity between human and nature and conveys the belief that same-sex desire is also part of nature and is therefore perfectly normal. In *Flowerpot* (Figure 7), penetrating and penetrated human bodies grow out of a flowerpot. Drawing on Daoism, a folk religion deeply rooted in Chinese society and belief systems, Xiyadie interprets sex and sexuality not as individualistic desires and identities that can reveal the truth about a person, but as ubiquitous vital forces which fill the entire cosmos. In doing so, he does not privilege human beings over animals or plants. In his universe, everything consists of vital energy, and they exchange energies with one another, thus making the world a vital one. The life force that Xiyadie depicts thus resembles *qi* in the Daoist philosophy or *élan vital* in Henri Bergson's (1911) vitalism. They share and inspire an anti-identitarian and anti-anthropocentric way of thinking.

Figure 6: Xiyadie, *Disco*, n.d. paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 28x28cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 7: Xiyadie, *Flowerpot*, 1991, paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176x176cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Xiyadie often weaves his own life story into artworks. Papercutting functions as a form of visual diary for Xiyadie to tell his life story, to express his love for his son and boyfriend, and to articulate his frustration as a closeted gay man living in a loveless heterosexual marriage. *Fish* (Figure 8) portrays his relationship with his wife at the beginning of their married life: despite the allusion to sex through the imaginary of the fish, a meat cleaver and a chopping board before the pillow, together with a snake under the bed, seem to foretell the misfortune of the couple's marriage. In *Gate* (Figure 9), Xiyadie reveals what lies behind the façade of a heterosexual marriage: while his wife is feeding the baby at home, Xiyadie is having oral sex with a man. A gate divides up the picture, symbolising the double life that he lives: one as a married man living a closeted family life, and the other as a gay man seeking pleasure outdoors. The animated moon and the kitchen god depicted in a picture hung in the house look on quietly, with their eyes wide open, as if they were seeing through and laughing at the comedy of the human world.

Figure 8: Xiyadie, n.d. *Fish*, paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 28x28cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 9: Xiyadie, *Gate*, 1992, paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176x176cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Xiyadie lived such a double life for a long time before he came out to his wife. The couple did not get a divorce, but Xiyadie felt a deep sense of guilt towards his family, and in many of his artworks there was a tortured soul. In *Wall* (Figure 10), a brick wall separates himself from another man as he is trapped indoors. A rambling vine connects his penis and tongue with the mouth of another person sitting on the other side of the door. In *Sewn* (Figure 11), he tries to sew up his penis with a needle and thread, as if this would provide the ultimate solution to curb his homoerotic desire. In the same picture, he is looking at the picture of a man in uniform. The man in the picture is his first boyfriend.

Figure 10: Xiyadie, *Wall*, 2016, paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176x176cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 11: Xiyadie, *Sewn*, 1999, paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper. 176x176cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Xiyadie met his first boyfriend, a train attendant, on a train to Xi'an (Li 2018). This romantic encounter is documented in his work *Train* (Figure 12). We know the location of their encounter because of the locomotive, the driver, the carriages, the wheels, the railway tracks, and even a train company logo dotted around the picture. We can also learn about the time of their encounter: the two men probably met between the Year of the Tiger (top left) and the Year of the Rabbit (bottom right). Xiyadie uses a large number of symbols in his works, many of which only make sense when one is familiar with his life story, as many of these works are highly autobiographical.

Figure 12: Xiyadie, *Train*, 1985, paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 140x140cm. Courtesy of the artist.

After their encounter on the train, Xiyadie and his boyfriend led a few years of happy life together. Their idyllic country life is documented in his work *Gardening* (Figure 13), with childlike innocence. Many of Xiyadie's works feature happy lives with his boyfriend, and they were mostly made after the two men broke up with each other. But happiness was always too short: Xiyadie was already a married man and the boyfriend had to marry a woman because of increasing pressures from his family and the society. Papercutting became a way for Xiyadie to articulate his deep feelings, emotions and desires.

Figure 13: Xiyadie, *Gardening*, n.d. paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 28x28 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Xiyadie not only kept a visual diary of his life through papercutting; he also documented a burgeoning gay scene in China at the turn of the century and in the new millennium. In *Gate* (Figure 14), he depicted a cruising gay scene in urban China. Two men on the right-hand side are tattooed, one of whom is a skinhead figure. The man in the middle acts flamboyantly, and another man on the left-hand side is trying to hush him, while pointing to a door behind. In *Tian'anmen* (Figure 15), Xiyadie portrayed two men kissing each other in front of the Tian'anmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace) in central Beijing. The image of two naked gay men having sex in front of the symbol of China's state power embodies a sense of political subversion and queer transgressive pleasure.

Figure 14: Xiyadie, *Gate*, 1999, paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176x176cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 15: Xiyadie, *Tian'anmen*, 2016, paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176x176cm. Courtesy of the artist.

With paper and a pair of scissors, Xiyadie has documented an important stage of gay life in China, with a vibrant outdoor community life centring on public cruising grounds. This forms a sharp contrast with the middle-class gay life in Chinese cities, which mostly take place in commercial venues and private homes. The gay men cruising in parks, toilets and other public spaces may not be what gay activists in China wish to publicize and advocate; nor are these men seen as proper subjects of identification for middle-class gay men living a cosmopolitan life and frequenting gay commercial venues. They however remind people of the hierarchies of desires and desiring subjectivities in a neoliberal China, where demarcating legitimate from illegitimate desires becomes ways for people to construct their classed identities (Rofel 2007: 103-106). As mentioned earlier, the homosexual subjects cruising in public spaces are in fact different sexual subjects from the middle-class ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ identified people. Xiyadie’s artworks can be seen as social critiques, addressing directly the brutal inequalities and injustices in a society that puts ‘harmony’ at the centre of its political ideology.

### **Sexuality and Class: A Postsocialist Allegory of Modernity**

While the gay community and the international art market mostly see Xiyadie as a queer artist representing gay identities and queer desires in contemporary China, his other works are often neglected, largely because they do not carry homoerotic themes. Some of these works deploy a socialist realistic approach. They reveal the inequalities and injustices in contemporary Chinese society, as well as harsh realities of everyday life in China for poor and socially marginalized people. Indeed, a lot of his homoerotic-themed artworks also carry with them a distinct ‘class’ sensibility; they portray the lives of the rural, migrant and urban poor, or ‘homosexuals’ (*tongxinglian*), living on the fringes of Chinese society. Most of them struggle for a living and have to use public cruising grounds to find sex partners. These queer representations distinguish themselves from the ‘queer mainstream’ in urban China, which often feature well-educated and cosmopolitan gay and lesbian subjects who can afford the luxury of queer commercial public spaces (such as gay bars and clubs) and private spaces (such as a city flat with a great degree of freedom and privacy). Sexuality in a neoliberalising China thus should be examined in conjunction with class, as gay or queer is often used to denote identities and desires with class distinctions, demarcate social classes and define legitimate and illegitimate desires (Bao 2018: 61).

While Xiyadie worked for the Li Xianting Film Archive in Beijing, he made a large work (Figure 16). This work was created around the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, so there are a lot of references to the Olympics, such as the Olympic mascots and torch. The picture primarily features happy households, blooming flowers and flying birds. This can look like a piece of government propaganda until one looks closely: the bottom of the picture shows an underground coal mine, with people toiling inside and some skeletons lying around. Xiyadie explained the meaning of the picture in an interview:

In China, there are a lot of mine workers. At the age of seventeen or eighteen, they can't go to school because they have to work in mines to make a living. They don't get paid much for their hard work; a lot of them even die in these mines. The bosses of these coal mines get rich because of the workers' sweat and blood. They drive private cars and enjoy a happy life. I think this is unfair. (Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012)

This was Marxian capitalist exploitation and class theory narrated from the perspective of a Chinese queer artist. Despite having only had a high school education, Xiyadie understood the central tenets of Marxism through his life experiences at the bottom of the Chinese society. Having struggled through life himself and having witnessed the sufferings of many poor people, Xiyadie was able to translate his understanding of the world into the language of papercutting. By juxtaposing the happy lives of the rich above ground and the miserable working-class lives underground, Xiyadie's work launched a Marxian critique of capitalism in China: whilst capitalism benefits certain social classes and a few people by making them economically better off, a lot of people coming from rural, urban poor and migrant backgrounds are in fact worse off in China's economic reform of privatization. Explaining the etymology of the word *tongzhi* (literally 'comrade', now meaning 'gay' or 'queer') in an interview, Xiyadie reminisced:

During the time of Chairman Mao, everyone used to call each other 'comrade'. At that time, *tongzhi* means 'revolutionary comrade'. Comrades are people who work in the same enterprise and who share the same ideals and aspirations. (Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012)

In the same interview, Xiyadie even sang a folk song from the Mao era. His socialist nostalgia should be seen as an unconscious and a spontaneous critique to contemporary China where the socialist revolutionary ideals are forgotten and egalitarian promises fall short. Along with his social critique, Xiyadie explained the cosmopolitan motif in his works and expresses hope for international solidarity from the perspective of ‘harmony’ (*hexie*):

Although I am a farmer, I also want to make art. So I use a farmer’s perspective and method to express myself on the theme of harmony. I feel that there is a lot of discord in this world, and people from all nations should hold hands and stop fighting. (Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012)

Figure 16: Xiyadie standing in front of his artwork *A Harmonious World*, Songzhuang, Beijing, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

Unfortunately, Xiyadie’s works of social critique have not received much critical attention to date: the queer communities and the international art market seem more interested in celebrating the emergence of a Chinese queer artist, whose creative energies and potentials are believed to have been unleashed by his gay identity and a capitalistic art market. After all, words such as class, exploitation and capitalism hold little appeal in a highly commercialized art market and a global ‘pink economy’ in a post-Cold War world that has recently witnessed the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama 1992) and the ultimate triumph of neoliberal values.

It is necessary to recognize the connection between sexuality and class in transnational neoliberal capitalism in order to understand the rise of a Chinese queer artist and his works. While people celebrate Xiyadie’s creativity, let us not forget the fact that papercutting has a long history, and is deeply rooted in folk and socialist traditions in China’s history. Let us also remember the fact that Xiyadie has been doing papercutting for the last few decades, and it is only until very recently that he was labelled as a ‘Chinese queer artist’ and his artworks began to receive international attention. The cruising ‘homosexual’ subjects in Xiyadie’s papercutting works are often seen by some as orientalized and sexualized spectacles and by others as documents of a bygone community history. For Xiyadie and many other queer people from underprivileged backgrounds, they are realistic depictions of their ordinary lives,



as they have to struggle between their family responsibilities and personal desires, as they have to cruise in public spaces because they do not have access to queer private and commercial spaces, and as they continue to be faced with different forms of discrimination: as sexual minorities, migrant workers, and people coming from rural, migrant and urban poor backgrounds. In this sense, Xiyadie's papercutting works should be seen as an allegory for a neoliberal China, when class is eclipsed by sexuality, when working-class history is replaced by middle-class identity narratives, and when different forms of social inequality and injustice are concealed by an obsession with identity politics and individual desires. In this sense, we should look at Xiyadie's homoerotic images from the perspectives of socialist realism and social expose, with the aim of rethinking and unsettling the neoliberal status quo.

### **Becoming Butterfly: Locating Artist Agency and Autonomy**

Although increasingly recognized as an artist, Xiyadie often rejects such a label himself: 'I never thought about becoming an artist. Some people saw my work and then called me one. I'm only a farmer, belonging to my yellow soil land.' (Xiyadie in Harrity 2012) He also rejects political and commercial interpretations of his works. He often claims that he does not produce artworks to help gay activism; nor does he do it to make money. He cuts paper simply as individual expression (Jao 2012; Sebag-Montefiore 2012). The following interview is a good example to show his apolitical stance:

I don't care about whether it is private or public ... I do these things for myself ... I lived in Beijing for eight years, I don't have a television or a radio. I don't know what's going on outside with the politicians. I just do my artwork ... I never complain about the government because I don't have experience with the government." (Ávila 2012)

While it is possible that he made the above statements to avoid politicising his artworks and getting himself into unnecessary trouble, his words can also be read as an implicit critique that 'doing politics' is often a middle-class privilege and that poor people struggling for livelihood often do not have the luxury of engaging with political debates in a public sphere. It would, however, be naïve to think of Xiyadie's works as completely apolitical: desires and their public expression are always politically sensitive issues and often subject to state control and intervention. In a country where explicit expression of homoeroticism and gay rights is

limited, making queer-themed artworks has significant political implications. At the international art market, Xiyadie is framed as a ‘Chinese queer artist’, and his life has been irrevocably entangled in global geopolitics in a post-Cold War world order. In this sense, even though Xiyadie may be unaware of these political implications, his life and artworks have been unequivocally politicized, and are intrinsically political.

Still, in his signature style of unpretentious simplicity, Xiyadie attributed his creative energy to autonomous expression of personal feelings and emotions: ‘I suffered a lot by living in the closet, but my art allowed me to show my feelings. My art is an expression of my emotion. It is about the desire for freedom: freedom of expression and freedom to live honestly.’ (Xiyadie in Zonkell 2012) In his self-account, there was a strong sense of individual autonomy brought about by artistic expression: ‘Papercutting is my own spiritual world. It is my world. In that world there are no worries and sorrows, only peace and free imagination.’ (Xiyadie in Jao 2012)

Perhaps we should not dismiss Xiyadie’s lack of political consciousness as ‘false consciousness’ (Marx and Engels 1974). After all, his life and feelings are no less real than those of others, such as Ai Weiwei, whose life and artworks cannot help but be overtly political. After all, they are two different types of artists living in their respective worlds. And furthermore, art does not always have to be over-political or politicized; there can be contingent moments of revealing and concealing in terms of politics. An artist can probably locate a certain degree of agency and autonomy in the process of artistic engagement. In such a process, they may temporarily lose themselves and their lives may escape domesticity, mundanity, drudgery and ideological control. Xiyadie emphasized the role of imagination in his artistic creation processes: ‘To do papercutting, I need to have a lot of imagination. Through my imagination, I am the creator; I’m the king.’ (Ávila 2012)

The analogy between a creator and a king shows a great deal of self-confidence and autonomous freedom. It also bespeaks the potential of artist agency and autonomy. In a world where individuals often have little control over their own lives, let alone over national and international politics, agency and autonomy, however limited, is what ordinary people need

for survival. Through imagination, Xiyadie conjures up a 'queer autonomous space' (Brown 2007) and a longing for utopia. Oscar Wilde's (1891) famous quote on utopia is relevant here: 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at'. Refuting the 'anti-social' turn and the 'no future' (e.g. Edelman 2004) rhetoric in Western queer theory, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) points out the limitations of contemporary queer theory: 'The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belongings, normative tastes, and "rational" expectations' (27). Drawing on Ernst Bloch (1984), Muñoz further argues for the importance of utopia for queers of colour who have often been excluded from the Western, metropolitan gay life: 'Queerness is utopian; there is something queer about the utopian' (26) and 'queerness is not yet there; and thus we must always be future bound in our desires and designs' (185). In many ways, Xiyadie is articulating his longing for a utopia where he can express his queer desire freely and where he can create his own queer utopia. This process of articulation is manifested in the process of papercutting and in his artworks.

Xiyadie described the process of papercutting as such: 'When I cut paper, I forget about everything around me. With my scissors, I can reach everything out of my reach, and I can get hold of all these things' (Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012). He also expressed that he does not think of the audience or critics when he creates artworks by conjuring up the butterfly metaphor: 'When I cut paper, I don't think about what other people want to see. I don't care about how people think of my works. I just focus on how I feel and what I want. I am like a butterfly, fly everywhere I want to go. (Xiyadie in Ávila 2012)

Like the ease with which a master chef carves an ox described in ancient Chinese philosophy (Chuang Tzu n.d.), Xiyadie has also gained remarkable dexterity with paper and scissors.<sup>4</sup> The process of papercutting becomes an access to personal autonomy and emancipation from worldly constraints. Probably we should think of the papercutting process not as how Xiyadie the human subject engages with the objects of scissors and paper, but as how Xiyadie the human subject interacts with other agents such as materials (including scissors, paper and dying colours) and technologies (which include designing, cutting and dyeing colours). This

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<sup>4</sup> This is a reference to a classic tale from the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu (Zhang Zi), which is about the exemplary skills acquired by a master chef in carving an ox through years of practice. See Chuang Tzu n.d.

process does not necessarily privilege the human subject; rather, scissors and paper have a life and mind of their own and they shape the human subject in specific ways. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1972)'s notion of 'assemblage', we can think of the papercutting process as a hands-scissors-paper assemblage, shaped in and interacting with specific social and cultural contexts. This assemblage is never static; nor it is predictable and structurally deterministic, thus possessing the potential of disrupting power relations of domination and subordination in global capitalism. It is through this contingent and forever changing assemblage that Xiyadie's autonomy and agency is best located.

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