

Urban Imaginaries: Contemporary art and urban transformations in China since 2001

Federica Mirra

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BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Arts, Design and Media
Birmingham City University
School of Art
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Abstract

This interdisciplinary and discursive PhD thesis investigates how urban aesthetics and imaginaries can actively grasp, shape, and foresee urban space-making in Mainland China since 2001. After four decades of rapid urban and economic development, the pace and scale of China's growth have contributed to the emergence of a thriving urban aesthetics. Whereas artists have produced multiple representations and imaginings of urban space and perhaps even encouraged the rise of a more conscious civil society, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has fostered one official narrative, the China Dream. Although this dominant narrative has come to shape urban space and the whole of China, this thesis analyses visual arts and a host of different practices, including real estate billboards, and architectural projects, to identify different urban actors and imaginaries in China. Artists' urban experiences and re-imaginings, juxtaposed to top-down urban planning and architectural practices, can articulate the complexities behind space-making and point towards more inclusive and sustainable urban visions. This research collates together fieldnotes, literary sources, interviews with artists and other experts in the field, as well as online primary and secondary data. This study is situated across China's five major metropolises, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Chongqing. Each chapter is dedicated to one aspect of the China Dream, respectively focussing on an internationally strong, socially fair, ecological, and culturally rich China. Overall, this PhD thesis concludes that there are bilateral interlinkages between visual arts and space-making that are regulated by the everchanging dynamics between artists and state-power.

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Introduction

Returning from the missions on which Kublai sent him [Marco Polo], the ingenious foreigner improvised pantomimes that the sovereign had to interpret [...]. The Great Khan deciphered the signs, but the connection between them and the places visited remained uncertain; he never knew whether Marco wished to enact an adventure that had befallen him on his journey, an exploit of the city's founder, the prophecy of an astrologer, a rebus or a charade to indicate a name. But, obscure or obvious as it might be, everything Marco displayed had the power of emblems, which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confined. In the Khan's mind the empire was reflected in a desert of labile and interchangeable data, like grains of sand, from which there appeared, for each city and province, the figures evoked by the Venetian's logogriphs (Calvino 1974, 21–22).

Several centuries later, the city is still narrated through evocative histories and re-imaginings. However, rather than by a single explorer, it is envisioned by a variety of urban actors, who individually experience the urban rhythms and produce their own understanding of it. This discursive and interdisciplinary research explores and re-imagines today's Chinese cities through contemporary artistic practices and urban visual materials. Like Polo's storytelling, the artistic narration brings forward those 'emblems, which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confined' (Calvino 1974, 22). Indefinite and yet piercing, visual arts and imagination provide the tools to grasp China's transforming urban space. On the one hand, they can provide immersive representations indexed to the real of the city; on the other, they also leave fractures to be filled with individual stories and interpretations.

My research project penetrates and investigates those fissures, which is where imagination and artistic practices can flourish. This practice of navigating the abstruse space through multiple encounters is the essence of 'urban imaginaries', which allows and boosts simultaneity, plurality and diversity (Soja 1996). Lastly, it provides an original framework to investigate and interpret the relationship between art and urbanisation as additive and creative. Rather than detailed and

concrete accounts of the city, my thesis, like the Khan's mind, prefers that in-betweenness and uncertainty which are capable of evoking alternative understandings of the urban space.

This project is led by one main research question, which enquires how urban aesthetics and imaginaries in Mainland China can actively grasp, shape, and foresee the abstruse strategies and processes of urban space-making since 2001. By urban aesthetics I primarily refer to visual arts, however, I also include a host of different practices, which include real estate billboards, architectural projects, as well as grassroots' tags on the wall. The juxtaposition of visual arts and several urban practices allows me to answer three further sub-questions: what have the existing urban imaginaries and aesthetics been in Chinese cities since 2001? What are the artistic strategies that have emerged in response to the creation of several urban imaginaries and how have they developed in the last twenty years? Last, maintaining that the central and local governments promote an ideological vision of urban China (in the form of the 'China Dream'), do artists align with or oppose this official narrative? This interdisciplinary investigation aims to highlight alternative urban imaginaries to the dominant ones, which can contribute to rising the awareness of China's urban society.

0.1 Research Context

The interdisciplinary nature of this research project demands the integration of different fields and encourages a comprehensive survey of several intersecting areas. For this reason, my research context develops through four crosscutting flows, respectively, contemporary art, urban space, imagination, and the China Dream (*Zhongguo meng*). As they are inevitably interdependent and regulated through multiple and complex dynamics, my research context proceeds in a fluid manner to describe their intersections and fractures. In other words, it refuses the linear development of a text whilst trying to capture the complexity of these relationships through a comprehensive structure. From an overview of visual arts in China across the twentieth and

twenty-first centuries, to the current vision of a modern nation under the imperative of the China Dream, this survey brings together the three main threads forming this thesis.

0.1.1 Contemporary art in China

After the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the People's Republic of China (PRC) entered a new phase of its history, which was inaugurated by the Reform and Open Door Policy in 1978.¹ Announced by Deng Xiaoping, the Reform and Open Door Policy was a series of economic reforms that ended China's inwardness. The consequent economic and urban growth of the 1970s-1980s had a significant impact on China's artistic scene. The international influence and freedom of self-expression penetrated China and infused in artists a palpable sense of excitement and novelty. Such a lively atmosphere ignited several debates among Chinese and international scholars in the late 20th century, including one that revolved around the shift from modern to contemporary art in China.

Today, the start date of contemporary art in the Chinese context is associated with either 1979 or 1989.² Both years function as markers for unprecedented economic and political changes, as well as two important artistic exhibitions, namely the *Stars Exhibition* and the *China Avantgarde Exhibition*.³ On the one hand, Gao Minglu argues that 'contemporary' is 'the spirit of a time'

¹ It established a more outward approach that aimed at acquiring knowledge and attracting investment from the west through tax incentives and world trade regulations (Jacques 2009, 186–87; C. Fan 2008, 3–4; Huan 1986; Howell 1991).

² There are some dissenting voices on the exact year of the start of contemporary art in China. Some of the problematics stem from the difficulty of imposing a western term and finding a common understanding of what *contemporary* is in China. There is a variety of categories which have been used to refer to the post 1978 artistic practices, such as 'experimental art' (*shiyān yìshù*), 'avantgarde art' (*qiānwēi* or *xianfang*) and 'contemporary art' (*dāngdài yìshù*). For a rich discussion on the shift from modern to contemporary art in China, see H. Wu (2008), Gao (2011a), and Gladston (2014).

³ The *Stars Exhibition* is a non-official exhibition that took place outside the National Art Gallery on the thirtieth anniversary of the PRC in 1979. Despite the secrecy and lastminute promotion, the outdoor exhibition attracted a large crowd of artists, students, and foreigners. However, due to its non-officiality, it was soon forced to close by the local authorities. The *China Avantgarde Exhibition* in 1989, on the other hand, is one of the most important artistic events of the 1980s. It officially displayed the avantgarde works of 186 artists at the Beijing's National Art Gallery. The selection of artists was decided by a committee formed by art critics and curators, such as Gao Minglu, Li Xianting and Hou Hanru. The show marked a point of no

(2011a, 9), rather than a definite temporality.⁴ On the other, Wu Hung identifies 1989 as the milestone in the shift from modern (*xiandai*) to contemporary (*dangdai*) art (H. Wu 2008). Despite differing opinions, today, scholars agree that the shift to contemporary art in China is characterised by both a total break, and a deep interest in space rather than time (H. Wu 2008, 290-2; Gladston 2014, 8-10; Gao 2008, 134-36, 137-8).

Whereas during the Cultural Revolution and Mao's era, the arts were spatially bound to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and official institutions, the artistic practices of the post 1978 also took place in non-official domains. For instance, in the *Stars Exhibition*, twenty-three young artists displayed their works on the gates outside the National Art Gallery. Rather than one stream of official art, many groups spread publicly across the national territory, one being the '85 Art Movement.⁵ Whereas the 1970s-80s experimental art took place outdoors, in the public scene, the Tiananmen students' protests and the *China Avantgarde Exhibition* in 1989 compelled artists to withdraw indoors. The private nature of artists' production and exhibitions brought forth the terms 'apartment art' and 'underground art' to identify the different locations for the production of art in the 1990s. Whether staged in public or private spaces, these artistic responses all had in

return for contemporary art in China: the exhibition was closed due to an improvised performance by artist Xiao Lu, who shot at her own installation on the ground floor. Moreover, this incident was followed by the Tiananmen students' protests, which signalled a significant change in the political and artistic freedom of the following years. For more information, see H. Wu (2014a).

⁴ Likewise, in the west, Peter Osborne argues that contemporary art 'has no *critically* meaningful referent' and is treated as something external to history (2013, 7, original emphasis).

⁵ Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, the increasing number of oppositional and highly political works has convinced scholars and critics to juxtapose them to western avantgardes. However, Chinese scholars are not so inclined to interpret the specificity of Chinese practices merely as western avantgarde. Andrews and Gao (1993) argue that in China, the social mission and progressive role of the artist were more significant than in the west, where the avantgarde seemed more focused on moving beyond established artistic traditions. H. Wu goes even further by replacing the term 'avantgarde' with 'experimental art'. Drawing on Renato Poggioli, he amplifies one defining aspect of the western avantgarde, experimentalism, and interprets it as the continuous repositioning of artists within China's society and art world (H. Wu 1999). Experimental art becomes a strategy to avoid the heated discussion over avantgarde in China and the dismissal of China's specificity. The '85 Art Movement is part of China's experimental art, which was mostly valued for the high degree of experimentation, diversity and political and social engagement. Between 1985 – 1986, seventy-nine self-organised avantgarde groups arose to organise exhibitions, conferences, events, as well as published materials (Gao 2011b, 101–2). They appeared all over Mainland China, from the Pond Society in Hangzhou and the M Art group in Shanghai, to the Northern Art Group in Harbin and the Zero Art Group in Hunan. For a comprehensive list, see Gao (2011b).

common a non-official spatial dimension and the rebelliousness against the materialistic society and political situation.⁶

Whereas the experimental scene took root in underground and informal places (Gao 2011a, 5–6; X. Li 1993, xix, lxxviii; H. Wu 1999, 13–15), there is another platform where artistic practices emerged, namely the international art market and global art events (i.e., biennales, triennials, and international art fairs). In 1993, for the first time, the Venice Biennale invited contemporary Chinese artists to individually showcase their works in the exhibition *Passage to Orient* and by 2003 a national Chinese pavilion was installed.⁷ On top of this exposure, two very successful artistic styles intensified the opposition between commercial art and experimental art, Cynical Realism and Political Pop. Emerging in China in the 1990s, these two latter artistic trends deployed communist and consumeristic icons and were easily accessible to a global audience. Their success is increasingly associated to the rise of the international art market and the commercialisation of art.⁸

As China entered the international art scene, another heated debate arose on the spatialisation of art in global and local terms. In the post-Mao era, many artists, such as Wang Gongxin, Zhang

⁶ The long-standing opposition between official and non-official art is resumed to interpret the works produced in the late 20th century (H. Wu 1999, 17–20). The traditional opposition refers to the distinction between artists at the imperial court and those outside. Whereas the former were professional artists trained at the imperial academy to serve the Chinese emperor and the court, the literati (*wenren*) were independent scholars, who excelled in the arts and were often praised for their withdrawal from the public sphere and the desire for self-cultivation (X. Li 1993, x–xii).

⁷ M. Wang suggests that the Chinese government had already taken part in the Venice Biennale, in 1980 and 1982 (2009). However, it exhibited traditional embroidery and paper-cuts. Before the widely recognised Venice Biennale, there are other international exhibitions that included or even focussed entirely on the avantgarde practices by Chinese artists. Amongst them, Erickson identifies: *Painting the Chinese Dream: Chinese Art Thirty Years after the Revolution* at the Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, US, in 1982; *Artists from China — New Expressions* at Sarah Lawrence College, New York in 1987; and *Magiciens de la Terre*, at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris in 1989. For a more comprehensive list of exhibitions, see Erickson (2002).

⁸ Cynical Realism was a significant movement that arose in the 1990s, whose major artists were Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun, among others. They were characterised by a ‘collective senselessness and roguish humour in their perception of the world’ (Li, cited in H. Wu 2014, 138). Political Pop was described by H. Wu as a ‘hybrid of double kitsch composed of communist and consumerist icons’ (2014a, 156). For a discussion on the complex evaluation of Cynical Realism and Political Pop, see Kharcehnkova and Velthuis (2015).

Dali, and Lin Tianmiao, left the country to only return in the mid-1990s.⁹ Whereas Wang travelled to the US and has been influenced by the pioneering works by Nam June Paik and Bruce Nauman, Zhang's current practice has been informed by his time in Bologna, Italy, and the encounter with graffiti as a form of resistance. As several artists trained abroad to acquire new knowledge, this phenomenon instigated the reawakening and renovation of traditional arts, folklore, and crafts. For instance, the 'Experimental Ink' illustrates the revival of calligraphy since the end of the 20th century (H. Wu 2014a). Furthermore, *shanshui* paintings, papercutting, embroidery, woodblock printing and ceramics, among other traditional techniques, were integrated into contemporary artistic practices.¹⁰ China's exposure to the outer world moulded the understanding of art in spatial and cultural terms: Chinese artists often came to be judged for either instrumentalising their exoticness or departing from their Chineseness.



Fig. 0.1 Chen Shaoxiang, *Street scene: Haizhu Square*, 1997-9, C- print, 61.7×94.7 cm. Asia Art Archive (AAA), Hong Kong, accessed 27 April 2019.

⁹ Many diaspora artists have quickly gained international success, including Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, Zhang Huan, Huang Yong Ping, Wenda Gu, and Cai Guo-Qiang among others.

¹⁰ *Shanshui*, meaning mountain and water, refers to the traditional Chinese landscape painting. Yao Lu, Xiyadie, Yin Xiuzhen, Lin Tianmiao, Gao Rong, Xu Bing and Liu Jianhua, respectively, are some contemporary artists who deploy traditional techniques and media and give them a new life.

set the ground for the discussion of urban space.¹¹ Through artistic and curatorial practices, the exhibition praised a multiplicity of heterogenous and site-specific urban encounters that defied unilateral and dominant discourses around the city.



Fig. 0.3 Chi Peng, *Sprinting Forward*, 2005, photograph, 116.8x149.2 cm.

At the turn into the new millennium, as the urban transformations accelerated, artistic and creative practices also multiplied. Artists engaged with a variety of themes, ranging from the impossibility to grasp the urban rhythms to catastrophic and imaginary urban visions. For instance, through vivid photographs that instil a sense of velocity, Chi Peng inserts and clones his naked figure multiple times in the middle of an already shifting urban landscape (Fig. 0.3). His photographs exemplify China's sprinting forward and problematise the velocity at which urban planners, officials and developers reassess cities. They reiterate the understanding of a city which exceeds citizens' understanding. Attempting to connect urban dwellers with their urban space, Cao Fei's *RMB City* presents a virtual reality where users can purchase buildings, modify the virtual space, and even socialise online (Fig. 0.4).¹² Cao creates an imaginary platform for visitors to make sense

¹¹ The information has been collected by the author during the archival visit to the Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, 27-30 April 2019.

¹² For a more comprehensive analysis of Cao Fei's work, see Berry (2018).

of their space and play around it, if not physically, digitally. As artists respond to their socio-spatial conditions, the city inevitably becomes one significant protagonist in the production of artworks.



Fig. 0.4 Cao Fei, *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning by China Tracy*, 2007, video with sound, 6 min. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/23251>.

As Meiqin Wang and Minna Valjakka suggest, since the last decade of the 20th century, urbanisation has become the primary condition of art making (2015, 140). Artists have responded to the urban space with a vast array of lenses, media, and results in strenuous attempts to understand, reimagine, and sometimes subvert the top-down process of space-making. Moreover, they have engaged with different sites; beyond the major artistic centres of Beijing and Shanghai, artists' practices have been informed by their site-specific conditions, including localised urban policies and society, in a rich and dynamic way. For instance, in Changchun, Huang Yan's long term project, *Collecting Series* (1993-4) (Fig. 0.5), deployed ruins and ink to suspend mounted paper scrolls with black and white images of fragmented walls (H. Wu 2014). Moreover, in *Gaming for an Hour* (1996) (Fig. 0.6), Liang Juhui went up and down in a skyscraper's lift while playing a computer game. Ironic but perhaps less playful is Chen Shaoxiong's photographic series *Streets* (1997-8) (Fig. 0.1). By inserting a puppet theatre against the urban background of Guangzhou, Chen presented two fragmented realities that point to a rapidly changing physical space, which ultimately outlives urbanites' visual and daily understanding (J. Jiang 2015a, 46). After four decades since the extreme urbanisation of China, the city has emerged as an innovative framework to

decode artistic practices and, hence, it is possible to trace a trajectory of their everchanging relationship.



Fig. 0.5 Huang Yan, *Collecting Series: Demolished Buildings*, 1993-94, ink rubbing.

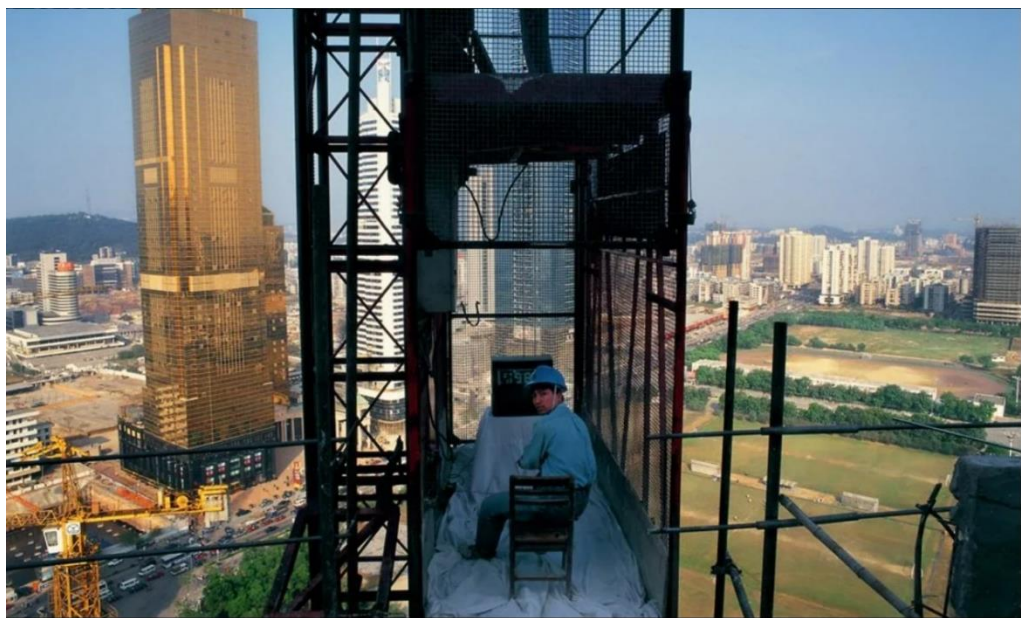


Fig. 0.6 Liang Juhui, *One-hour Game*, 1996, single-channel digital video (colour, sound), 10min 17sec. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong.

Indeed, since the late 2000s, the amount of literary material has grown and become quite extensive; for instance, Robin Visser's *Cities Surround the Countryside* (2010) investigates the socio-historical shift from the countryside to the city through the analysis of artistic and literary practices and a historical materialist lens. Visser identifies the emergence of an 'urban aesthetics', which has the creative potential to 'foster radically new forms of urban vitality in China' (2010, 293). Whereas Visser dedicates an entire volume to the transformation of the countryside, Wu Hung focuses on the theme of ruins in contemporary Chinese cities, which becomes the lens through which artists dialogue with their urban realities (2011). Yomi Braester, on the other hand, investigates film and theatre to advance their active role in the transformation of Chinese cities (2010, 2013). Moreover, Jiang Jiehong extensively examines photography to depict cities, explore their aftermaths, and play with the evocative power of images (2015a, 2018). Another insightful framework to interpret the artistic practices within the city is the notion of spectacle, as theorised by Guy Debord (2005). Maintaining this notion, the collection of essays edited by Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen (2013) deconstructs the spectacular urban representations through visual and sound works.¹³

Last, a crucial literary source for the development and positioning of my research in the field is Wang Meiqin's prolific investigation of China's artistic practices in response to the transformations of urban space and the phenomena associated with the urban. Her book, *Urbanisation and Contemporary Chinese Art* (2016) offers several case studies to discuss the rapid rise of the city through visual arts. Recently, her co-edited volume with Minna Valjakka (2018b) expands the relationship between art and urbanisation, including the analysis of less recognised artistic strategies in China (i.e., illegal advertisements on the walls, graffiti, and commercial billboards). These alternative urban visual materials provide a further means to expose the different forces shaping the urban space and reconfigure the everyday urban experiences. Overall,

¹³ In Chapter 1, I will suggest that whereas the spectacle functions according to binaries which juxtapose visible/invisible, advertised/concealed, skyscraper/alley, the notion of urban imaginaries is rooted in multiplicity and simultaneity.

from my brief literary survey, it emerges that whereas, initially, artists' fascination with the urban space stemmed from the ubiquity of urban demolition and the emotional and psychological trauma these entailed, today, their responses vary in terms of themes, perspectives, media, and spaces.

0.1.2 Urban space

Alongside an overview of China's artistic development, it is necessary to discuss the unprecedented urban transformations in China to better position my investigation of urban aesthetics and space. Specifically, the turning point for the discussion of urban space in China can be associated with the set of economic reforms in 1978 which were aimed at the modernisation and global inclusiveness of the country and resulted into an incessant urban development. Scholars unanimously agree that cities became the economic engines for China's extraordinary growth (F. Wu 2007; Campanella 2008; Marinelli 2015; Greenspan 2012). High-rise buildings and skyscrapers sprouted from rubble sites, and efficient urban infrastructure was set up to tackle traffic congestion. Among the reforms, in 1980 the central government established the first four Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in the coastal cities of Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen.¹⁴ As this strategy turned to be successful, other cities and areas were appointed as SEZs, including Hainan Island and Shanghai Pudong to allow a rapid economic and urban growth. Over a very short period of time, China entered the global scene and embraced neoliberal policies and a capitalist economy to rapidly shift from a 'developing' to globally recognised 'modern' nation counting several global cities.¹⁵

¹⁴ SEZs are representative of the central government's understanding of cities as national economic engines. They are strategically chosen and characterised by free trade, tax incentives, subsidies, and high level of autonomy, which together aim at attracting capital and exponentially increasing the urban and national GDP. Today, China Briefing counts fifteen types of Economic Development Zones (EDZs) in China, including SEZs (Z. Zhang 2020). This variety of strategies suggests the speed at which they have been tested and developed and reinforces the national imperative of economic growth.

¹⁵ As I use the terms 'developing', 'developed' and 'modern', it is necessary to offer a clarification. These words are problematic as they insert nations into fixed categories and long-standing discourses established in the west. The 'global city' is defined as a site of production and highly concentrated hub in the organisation of the world economy (Sassen 1991, 29).

The exceptionality of China's urban development, with its overwhelming scale and pace, has attracted much scholarly attention since the 2000s. The abundant literature that studies urban planning often involves the analysis of economics and policy making, together with a historical approach that highlights the fast shift from Mao's era to today's China (F. Wu 2007; Campanella 2008; Abbas 2008, 2013; Marinelli 2015). Campanella identifies six characteristics of the PRC's extraordinary urbanisation: speed, scale, spectacle, sprawl, segregation, and sustainability (2008: 281). He argues that although these features would not be exceptional if analysed individually, their simultaneity attributes a special character to China's urbanisation. On this topic, F. Wu acknowledges one characteristic that distinguishes China from the west, namely the stark intervention of the state in mediating globalisation (2007: 6). The construction of neighbourhoods, economic zones, and infrastructure projects, on the one hand, and the pervasive demolition and rubble sites, on the other, have been referred to as 'urban revolution' by several urban scholars (F. Wu 2007; Campanella 2008; and Marinelli 2015). The word revolution, which carries a deep historical meaning and critical connotations, has been paired with urbanisation to recognise the cultural, social, emotional, and environmental trauma associated with the extensive scope and scale of Chinese metamorphosis.¹⁶ Despite being framed in this exclusively negative way, 'revolution' can also refer to profound, radical, and yet exciting alterations.¹⁷

The rationale to comprehend why space can have such an extensive impact beyond its geographical aspect can be found in socio-spatial theories, which conceives of space as something active and intimately related to its inhabitants. Whereas in the past, space was treated as something immobile, homogenous, and fixed, since the end of the 19th century, it has become a heterogenous,

¹⁶ Henri Lefebvre has dedicated an entire volume to the *Révolution urbaine*, which he defines as 'the transformations that affect contemporary society, ranging from the period when questions of growth and industrialization predominate [...] to the period when the search for solutions and modalities unique to urban society are foremost. [...] The words "urban revolution" do not in themselves refer to actions that are violent. Nor do they exclude them' (2003, 5).

¹⁷ For instance, during our interview, artist Shi Yong was visibly enthusiastic whilst reminiscing about the early 2000s. He recalls the wave of optimism that pervaded artists and the Chinese population due to China's entrance in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the international art market. 'It felt like we could achieve anything!'. However, he also recognises that this excitement was encouraged by a highly visual urban spectacle, whose fragility casted a shadow over such genuine optimism. Author's in-person interview with Shi Yong, ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, 9 May 2019.

thick and flexible entity. According to Walter Benjamin's analysis of the arcades in 19th century Paris, space is a labyrinth in which urban dwellers explore and get lost. 'The street conducts the flaneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. [...] The city splits for him [the flaneur] into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room' (Benjamin 1999, 416). Benjamin argues for a fragmented and multi-faceted space that can only be fully grasped in the realm of dreams. Fragmented and multifaceted, the urban space slips away from the *flaneur* for its complexity and can only be fully grasped while walking in the night, by stepping into the realm of dreams.

Benjamin's attention to urban dwellers wandering around the city and imagining resonates with Michel de Certeau. De Certeau similarly understands the act of walking as constitutive for the formation of the city. Whereas urban space assumes a variety of meanings, including, respectively, a physical and socio-economic dimension, pedestrian movements constitute another system to produce the city in its entirety. The bodily explorations become one intangible means to give form and depth to space. Rather than a collection of material buildings, infrastructures, and signs, the city takes form in people's mind through a sensual exploration. However, de Certeau argues that these paths are illegible. 'Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body' (Certeau 1984b, 108). Space is produced by pedestrian movements and a host of social practices. In other words, space consists of the intersection and 'ensemble of movements deployed within it' (Certeau 1984b, 117). It is to be understood as the spatialisations of actions. However, because space can only be grasped in the instantaneous moment of its actualisation, as one tries to recall their paths and places, what they see is only the memories of it, the absences of what once was.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand the city, not as a homogenous and uniform cluster, but as a site charged with social, political, cultural, and historical significance, which is always re-adjusting

and moving. Soja understands space as spatiality, which is socially produced and determined by tangible forms and relations between individuals (1989, 120–22). This supports the mutability of space, as something not fixed or stagnant, but receptive and unstable.¹⁸ Hence, the city becomes the platform for this continuous re-assessment: it stages and participates in the struggle between different forces to reshape space. Whereas de Certeau reflects on the legibility of the city through the bodily act of walking, Foucault, and later, Ong identify the power-relations involved in the practice of urban space-making. Borrowing Foucault's notion of 'milieu', Ong asserts that cities are sites of intervention, where diverse agents, such as the state, urban planners, NGOs, artists, and ordinary people, establish what is problematic and form interlinked and everchanging relationships (2011). Each actor envisages their own urban space and future, adding a further layer to the physical space. There is not one single actual reality, but multiple understandings of it. The involvement of several actors in the formation and continuous transformation of the city, and the multiple approaches and mappings to grasp and reimagine the urban space, bring into fore the fragmented and heterogenous nature of this site. At the same time, this diversity opens up possibilities and new understandings of the evolving urbanities.

0.1.3 Imagination

Whereas Benjamin argues that the complexity of urban space can only be grasped in the dreamworld, I argue that imagination and artistic practices have the potential to provide immersive representations and invite individual interpretations of the city. Iain Chambers argues that today the city is also a 'metaphysical reality', a 'myth, a tale, a telling', a 'poignant narrative' that builds on the past, on the real and the imagined to continuously create new possibilities (1990: 112). It cannot be merely conceived of as a reflection of the contemporary social and economic development. Rather, imagination insinuates into those interstices between different spaces to open them up and bring forth a multiplicity of possible realities. Thus, apart from the

¹⁸ Soja builds on Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre, similarly, calls for multiple and socially produced understandings of space (1991).

understanding of cities as sites of production and economic territorialisation, the way we experience and get hold of the surroundings seems to entail imagination.

Kevin Lynch is one of the first to identify the role of imagination in shaping the urban experiences of humankind. To the argument that 'at every instant there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored', he offers a solution through the notion of 'imageability' (Lynch 1960, 1). This concept recognises the potential that material objects own to stimulate a vision into the observer. At the same time, it gives a prominent role to imagination as it becomes the means through which urban dwellers can experience the sets of images that overlap and interrelate in the urbanity (Lynch 1960, 85–86).

Leaving the fields of architecture and urban planning, Walter Benjamin is similarly aware of the power of imagination, especially at night or in the arcades of the French capital. He reflects on the existence of 'a phantasmagorical representation of Paris (and, more generally, of the big city) with such power over the imagination that the question of its accuracy would never be posed in practice' (Benjamin 1999, 439). Soja suggests that:

the boundaries of the city are becoming more porous, confusing our ability to draw neat lines separating what is inside as opposed to what is outside the city; between the city and the countryside, suburbia, the non-city, between one metropolitan city-region and another; between the natural and the artificial. An increasing blurriness intercedes between the real and the imagined city, making the city as much an imaginary or simulated reality as a real place (2000, 150).

The vision of a simultaneously real and imaginary city heavily relies on Lefebvre's theories developed in *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre suggests that today 'there is a diversity or multiplicity of spaces that is distinct from that multiplicity which results from segmenting or cross-sectioning space ad infinitum' (1991, 27). Specifically, he identifies three spaces: firstly, a physical one, which is that of the cosmos. It is the 'perceived space' where space is produced; secondly, a mental space, which includes representations and abstractions. It is also referred to as the 'conceived space' or

‘representations of space’; and last, a social space, which is socially produced and experienced through individual representations of it. This comprises the lived spaces of representation, also called ‘representational spaces’. This latter space bridges the previous two together and is regulated by imagination, which seeks to alter and appropriate its representations (Lefebvre 1991). Lefebvre’s triad of spaces needs to be understood as a fragmented, yet complementary, unit. Whereas the physical space risks of falling into the illusion of opaqueness, which only sees a superficial materiality, the conceived space runs the risk of turning into pure abstraction. Hence, the perceived, conceived and lived spaces should not be investigated or understood separately, on the contrary, they form a unitary triad.

Soja takes up Lefebvre’s triad of space to further support an understanding of urban space that is both emerging from a socio-historical and spatial analysis (1989). He coins the term ‘Thirdspace’ to refer to Lefebvre’s lived space. The Thirdspace is a ‘space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives’ (Soja 1996, 5). It is where the real and imagined commingle. It ‘attempts to capture’ exactly this simultaneity, ‘what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances and meanings’ (Soja 1996, 2). Rather than thinking about space either in material or abstract terms, Soja reasserts the urgency to consider this opposition as ‘both/and’ (1996, 5; 1989, 127).

Moreover, he understands imagination as a significant tool to think about urban space and cities through an alternative lens that treats binaries as generative. Hence, he proposes the notion of ‘urban imaginaries’ to define the ‘mental and cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretative grid through which we think about experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces and communities in which we live’ (Soja 2000, 324). By deploying this term in my title and thesis, I aim to visualise the city’s plurality and unfold the ways in which we experience and shape our surroundings. As a social product, space has the potential to reveal the modes of

production and continuously adapt to material and abstract changes. In this constantly re-adjusting platform, which is the urban space, imagination offers a means to interlink a plurality of spaces that offer multiple and antagonistic understandings.

As social practices produce and mediate different understandings of space, the possibilities for further imaginaries become innumerable and growingly confusing, especially once they are projected towards the future. Koselleck explains that in front of a future that 'has yet to be experienced' (2004, 38), and tends to infinity, the uncertainty and plurality of possibilities induce an antithetical process, that of narrowing down these numerous futures. Whereas the past is experienced as concluded, the future is temporally extended and uncertain, especially when paired with technological and scientific innovation (Koselleck 2004). However, as Nick Dunn suggests, the diversity of futures is exponentially limited as the influential role of specific political and economic agendas grows (2019). Today, urban imaginaries often draw on past models and align with the interests of influential corporations rather than deviating from dominant discourses. Moreover, imagining futures turns into a set of services and commodified visions (Savini 2019, 427). To move beyond these politically and economically sanctioned imaginaries, it is necessary to identify the forces behind the production of various imaginaries and analyse their frictions.

0.1.4 China Dream

The recognition of state-sanctioned urban imaginaries is particularly relevant in the context of China, where the economic and ideological urgency to modernise the nation has physically and metaphorically reshaped the understanding of space. Whereas in the time frame between 1978 and 2011, the central government triggered economic and urban development, since 2012, it has adopted a new strategy and re-channelled its effort to strengthen the party and unify the diverse Chinese population. As the new Chinese president Xi Jinping came into power, a specific

propaganda campaign started spreading around the nation under the slogan of the China Dream (*Zhongguo meng*) (Fig. 0.7).¹⁹



Fig. 0.7 Public Service Advertising Art Committee, *Wo de Zhongguo meng* [My Chinese Dream], 2013, http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf_294/zggvvg/pml/zgmxl/201309/t20130930_1501267.shtml.

¹⁹ William A. Callahan argues that although the *Zhongguo meng* was initially translated as the ‘China Dream’, since 2013, it has been referred to as ‘Chinese Dream’. According to Callahan, there is an important distinction between the two: whereas the Chinese Dream comprises the aspirations of the Chinese people, the China Dream suggests the nation’s dream and has a more threatening connotation (2015). Throughout the thesis, I will use the term China Dream to actively refer to the dreams of Xi Jinping, the party, and the governments.

Despite a clear reference to the American Dream, the China Dream advocates ‘a singular national dream shared by all the Chinese people’ (W. A. Callahan 2014, 156).²⁰ At a time of extreme urban transformations and economic growth, this dream subtends and nurtures the visions for a prosperous future. It stems from the surrounding reality and feeds people’s minds with realistic hopes. By blurring the boundaries between physical and imaginary realities, present and future, the vagueness of the China Dream aims at unifying the Chinese population through its evocative messages and diverse promises. Callahan argues that the China Dream is ‘full of contradictions, but this is not necessarily a weakness. The China Dream is able to encompass both individual dreams of happiness and collective dreams of national strength’ (W. A. Callahan 2017, 256). Despite the contradictions inherent within this vague, yet, embracing dream, Landsberger identifies four crucial aspects of this imaginary: a strong China, a culturally rich China, a harmonious society, and a green China (2018). Overall, the China Dream narrates a tale of a strong and cohesive nation formed by a harmonious society, which is proud of its long-standing culture and values ecological policies.

Over the last ten years, the indefiniteness and pervasiveness of the dream have been instrumentalised to pave the way for China’s unprecedented development and legitimise the CCP. Stefan Landsberger argues that the term dream can be traced back to the ads and posters promoting the Beijing Olympics in 2008, where the ‘Olympic Dream’ was advanced through the slogan ‘One World, One Dream’ (2018). In that occasion, the motto aimed at conveying a powerful sense of being together in achieving something big. The preparations for the Beijing Olympics reflected this goal: several neighbourhoods were destroyed, citizens had to relocate, an entire Olympic citadel was designed, and a cleansing campaign was implemented to free the city from waste, pollution, street vendors and irregular activities. China worked non-stop to achieve

²⁰ Callahan identifies several similarities between the American and China Dream, the main one being the contradictory nature of these two ideologies (2014). However, he concludes that the main difference lies in the fact that the China Dream ultimately coincides with the vision of the party. On the contrary, the American Dream allows for multiple aspirations and diverse voices. Specifically, what is worth flagging is that the high number of books published since 2012 to illustrate Xi’s China Dream all stress the unique character of the China Dream, which is specific to the Chinese nation and people (W. A. Callahan 2014).

its successful comeback into the world stage. Likewise, since its official launch in 2012, the China Dream has invited the Chinese people to contribute to this overarching vision for a global and strong nation.

Overall, the China Dream combines previous political agendas and longstanding traditions with a careful selection of west-centric discourses. This amalgamation of both western and Chinese features echoes the official decision to comply with established international standards to compete globally and increase the national soft power. Chen suggests that this behaviour is ‘a form of redemption’ for the century of humiliation (2010, 12–13). The history of humiliation starts with the internal uproar in the Qing dynasty and the end of the Chinese empire; later, it was exacerbated by the defeats of the First Opium War and the Japanese War in the late 19th century. Since its renewed exposure to the rest of the world, China has strived to redeem itself by opening up to the outside and pursuing economic development. According to Chen such economic growth assumed connotations of a national, if not even a nationalist movement (2010, 12). This argument is supported further by the propaganda campaign of the China Dream, which aims at reclaiming the nation’s global role and success. Rather than nurturing hopes and dreams, this propaganda campaign narrows down the multiplicity of possible imaginaries to a few official visions, which reflect the political and ideological agenda of the CCP.

Today, China could be described as a post-totalitarian regime where economic reforms and neoliberal markets develop alongside the stark presence of the party and central government (Kuan and Lau 2002). Investigating post-totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe, Havel defines post-totalitarianism as a totalitarian system that is, however, different from the traditional understanding of dictatorship.²¹ Despite their differences, at the root of both regimes lies ideology. Whereas the Marxist tradition suggests that ideology interlinks power and the people by weaving

²¹ The major differences can be found in the historical roots, the geographical vastness, the extremely flexible ideology, and the consumerist and industrial society typical of the post-totalitarian system (Havel 1985: 24-7).

an illusion, neo-Marxists, such as Althusser and Jameson, and later, Žižek, argue that ‘ideology has nothing to do with “*illusion*”, with a mistaken, distorted representation of its social content’ (2012, 4, original emphasis). What we experience as reality is deeply ideological, to the point that it becomes impossible to disentangle ideology from reality.²² What is real and appears as such are both constitutive parts of ideology (Eagleton 1997, 184). In China, this reality has been carefully interwoven by the CCP through socialist and Confucian slogans that revive China’s long-standing tradition.²³ From slogans around Scientific Development and Harmonious Society, most recently, ideology has assumed the evocative term of the China Dream.

Although this lack of coherence is thought of by many as transitional in character (Hulme 2014; Xin Wang 2014), it reveals the party’s fragmentation between the benefits of an open and competitive market and a centralised state with a strong sense of nationhood.²⁴ Despite capitalism being the most accepted model of organisation, the CCP is concerned this system might lead to a moral crisis (Hulme 2014). Hence, it has shaped a complex path for China, socialism with Chinese characteristics, which provides the constitutive ground for the China Dream. The socialism with Chinese characteristics ‘is the only path to socialist modernization and a better life for the people’; it guides the Party and the people to the ‘rejuvenation of the nation’ (*zhonghua minzu weida fuxing xihou*) (Xinhua 2017c, 14). During the 19th CCP National Congress, Xi envisioned the socialism with Chinese characteristics as ‘a continuation and development of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of Three Represents, and the Scientific

²² Žižek draws on Jameson’s example of nature and capitalism to clarify the extensiveness of ideology. He argues that whereas climate change is real and happening, there is an incapability to move beyond liberal capitalism and propose a future that is not dependent on a capitalist society (Žižek 2012). In other words, although we are aware of the incumbent ecological catastrophe, we pretend that it is not there or find solutions that do not solve the problem at its roots. Citing Sloterdijk, ‘they know what they are doing, but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so (1987, 5).

²³ Kraus advances that since the extensive economic reforms initiated by Deng, an increasingly significant component of the party’s ideology has been the extraordinary economic growth and the self-identification with material products (2004). In other words, China’s economic rise has legitimised and strengthened the CCP’s rule. As the Chinese population experienced an overall improvement in material wealth and life conditions, the central government was deemed responsible and admired for those economic achievements. Unsurprisingly, the strong economic sector lies at the base of current leader Xi Jinping’s China Dream.

²⁴ I will delve into this matter in Chapter 1.

Outlook on Development’ (Xinhua 2017b).²⁵ This hybrid ideology embraces contradictory strategies, such as socialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism to advance China’s economic and global role, whilst circumscribing potential negative ramifications.

Overall, the analysis of urban aesthetics and imaginaries against the contradictory, yet dominant ideology of the China Dream provides a unique contribution to the existing knowledge. Firstly, there are very few analyses of the contemporary art scene in response to the urban planning and policies in the wake of Xi’s tightening regime. Amongst the exceptions, Landsberger (2018), M. Wang (M. Wang 2018), and Jiang (2015b) have touched upon the China Dream in relation to visual arts. However, as there is no comprehensive work on this topic in the field of contemporary art, my project contributes to fulfilling this research gap. Furthermore, whereas the artistic production of the 1990s and 2000s in Beijing and Shanghai has been analysed through several interpretations and by different scholars (Abbas 2008; Braester 2010; Gladston 2011; Jiang 2015a; de Kloet and Scheen 2013; Visser 2010; M. Wang 2010, 2011, 2016; M. Wang and Valjakka 2015; Valjakka and Wang 2018; H. Wu 2010, 2011, 2014b), the last decade has not been extensively investigated and framed around contemporary discourses due to temporal proximity. The scarcity of diverse and constantly renewed interpretations requires more accounts of the ways in which visual arts and space-making can affect one another. Therefore, this thesis covers the time frame from 2001 to 2021 to interpret artistic practices against the historical, spatial, and political background and identify patterns and frictions.

²⁵ The Theory of the Three Represents (*san ge daibiao*) was introduced by Jiang Zemin at the end of his leadership to reinforce the role and continuity of the party. Specifically, the party would represent ‘(1) the development trend of China’s advanced productive forces (*xianjin shengchanli*), (2) orientation of China’s advanced culture (*xianjin wenhua*), (3) fundamental interests of the over-whelming majority of the Chinese people (*jueda duoshu rende genben liyi*)’ (Mohanty 2003, 1366). The Scientific Outlook on Development, on the other hand, emerged during the leadership by Hu Jintao to address a series of concerns around the increasing socio-economic inequalities, the excessive use of resources and the environmental urgency. Overall, it brought forward a ‘comprehensive, balanced and sustainable development’ that would focus on the people (Hu 2012).

Although the entanglement between visual arts and urbanisation is believed to have proliferated since the 1990s, the year 2001 marks a milestone in the context of my research. In 2001, China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO), which marked the nation's increasingly significant role in the world economy. This economic turning point was further supported by the announcement that Beijing would host the Olympic Games in 2008. As a worldly renowned competition and source of national pride, the Olympics in Beijing, on the one hand, confirmed China's successful achievement and, on the other, instigated even more pervasive urban transformations. Moreover, in the same year, the central government included urbanisation in China's Five-Year-Plan, suggesting the unavoidable interdependence of economics, politics, and urban planning. For these reasons and because the period before 2001 has been widely investigated, my thesis focusses on the post 2001.

Secondly, the existing literature around artistic practices and urban studies needs to go beyond the major metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.²⁶ Whereas Beijing has been celebrated as the capital of China and for its artistic scene and traditional culture, Shanghai and Guangzhou are two cosmopolitan cities that have benefitted from their location on the coast. To address this gap, my research includes Shenzhen and Chongqing. The former is located on the coast and is one of China's first SEZs and fastest growing cities, which hosts many start-ups and tech companies. The latter is situated in the west and only experienced an exponential growth since the central government's decision to directly control the municipality of Chongqing.²⁷ These five cities aim to represent China's diversity in terms of geographies, histories, artistic practices, and urban and economic strategies.

²⁶ These three cities have been thoroughly examined. Firstly, Beijing has been the focus of most scholarly and artistic accounts of the lively art scene in the 1980s and 1990s up until today. Secondly, Shanghai has often become a popular subject of investigation, especially in urban studies; for instance, Anna Greenspan has extensively investigated Shanghai (Greenspan 2012, 2014). Last, Guangzhou has been celebrated as an important trade hub since the Qing dynasty and even throughout the 20th century. Moreover, it is where one of the main avantgarde collectives, the Big Tail Elephant group, emerged in the 1990s (H. Wu 2014a).

²⁷ Chongqing is one of China's four direct municipalities, including Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin. A municipality is an enlarged city comprising its urban area and its more rural peripheries, which often includes other towns, villages and smaller cities. Municipalities are at the highest level of the administrative hierarchy. Managed by the central government, rather than local officials, these municipalities directly implement state-sanctioned policies and, hence, play a key role nationally and internationally.

Thirdly, this research expands the growing literature on China and East Asia. It contributes to the urgent need to decolonise knowledge and make China-based artists part of a broader, more inclusive, and less biased discussion. Since China's entrance into the global art market, works by artists in China have often been measured against their 'Chineseness'.²⁸ Moreover, according to Brenner and Schmid, today 'the urban has become a worldwide condition in which all aspects of social, economic, political and environmental relations are enmeshed, across places, territories and scales, crosscutting any number of long-entrenched geographical divisions' (2015, 173). This planetary urbanisation calls for an inclusive and diverse approach. Overall, despite my specific focus on the China Dream, this research has the potential to contribute to challenging interdisciplinary boundaries and positing the role of Chinese artists as part of an international and overarching system.²⁹

Lastly, it is more meaningful than ever to identify the dynamics and proceedings of the relationship between visual arts and the city. Whereas at first it was necessary to document the multitude of artistic practices due to the speed of urbanisation, today the urgency has shifted towards a more critical analysis. This approach responds to the slowing down of urban transformations since the global financial crisis and the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. Moreover, it possibly resonates with the novelty of the urban process, which has perhaps reached a plateau. Even though the number of artistic practices in response to the city are still high, those produced in the last decade build on previous artistic strategies to reflect on ruins, speed, environmental concerns, migration, and heritage, among others. Although the notion of urban imaginaries has attracted academic attention, it still provides an original cutting point. Imagining allows departing from the dominant urban

²⁸ It is also necessary not to idealise China's uniqueness. As I will touch upon in Chapter 5, the conscious romanticizing of the Far East as an exotic and different 'Other' has been carried out by the Chinese state to assert China's soft power and referred to as 'internal orientalism' (Schein 1997).

²⁹ For more literature on this debate see Appadurai (1990), Chen (2010), Chow (1993), Gao (2011a), and Gladston (2014).

narratives and affirming alternative aesthetics that simultaneously coexist, sometimes align with, and at other times resist the China Dream.

0.2 Methodology

This research has been rigorously conducted by collecting both primary and secondary data through mixed qualitative research methods. My investigation describes the complex socio-spatial dynamics that mediate artworks, urban space, and imagination through the observation of artistic and urban practices. The underlying theories deployed throughout the chapters belong to socio-spatial and historical discourses and conceive of imagination and artistic practices as meaningful tools to decode and shape the urban space. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of my research, artistic practices are discussed against a multi-layered context, including historical, social, cultural, and political aspects. On the one hand, artworks constitute the lens to read the imaginaries evoked by the urban terrains and understand this process. On the other, they actively elaborate on those imagined realities and suggest additive realms running parallel to the physical city. The inequalities, simultaneities and fragmentation of urbanities call for a multiplicity of methods. As a result, my research has developed through diverse approaches: literature review, visual analysis, semi-structured interviews, fieldwork, digital methods and online representations.

Firstly, literature review has been central to outline the interdisciplinary nature of this research. Although my focus lies in urban aesthetics in China, my literary sources encompass a variety of independent and crosscutting disciplines, whose boundaries are sometimes hard to set. They range from visual arts and culture in urban China, to architecture studies, urban studies, history, and social geography, among others. The close reading of the discourse around several intersecting fields has allowed me to gain an extensive and thorough understanding of the historical, political, and economic circumstances in China since 2001. Rather than an overarching literature review, each chapter in this thesis opens with a literature review that is specific to the theme discussed.

Secondly, I have conducted my research by visually interpreting the works in relation to their socio-cultural and political contexts. Visual analysis demands a profound awareness of how one's own experiences and background can inevitably condition the overall perspective. This aligns with Jas Elsner's interpretative description (2010), which is an approach able to determine the external contexts in which the artwork is produced. This interpretation is intuitive, which means that it results from the encounter between the self and outer realities. The rigour of this approach lies in acknowledging the researcher's involvement through self-reflexivity (Attia and Edge 2017). Rather than ignoring this aspect, I recognise how diaries, notes, photographs, and thoughts might shape my understanding of the urban. These personal encounters subtend unexpected and sometimes overly conscious reactions that need to be taken into consideration. Hence, I conceive of my deep knowledge of Chinese culture and foreign gaze as a double-edged sword: whereas, at times, it can be misleading, it also provides a fresh point of view. To overcome this difficulty, I have integrated my findings through the data collected from interviews and literature review.

In terms of artistic selection, I have included those artistic practices that are spatially bound to urban practices and have responded to one of the four aspects of the China Dream. Mostly inhabiting either the urban centre or the edges, artists are part of the urban fabric and contribute to the production of second-hand representations. However, they occupy a privileged position in the urban society as they form China's creative class and, hence, play a key role in reshaping the city (Florida 2012).³⁰ The reshaping of certain urban neighbourhoods is widely referred to as gentrification in the west. However, scholars in China seldom use this term for its negative connotation and potential political implications (Shenjing He 2010).³¹ They prefer to discuss 'urban renewal projects'. As these urban renewal projects are mostly attributed to the interactions between the state and the market (Q. Yang 2017), less attention is paid to the active role of the middle and creative classes. For this reason, it is increasingly necessary to acknowledge artists' role

³⁰ I will discuss Florida's critique in Chapter 5.

³¹ As the processes of demolition and relocation (*chaiqian*) are mediated by the stark intervention of the local and central governments and often explored through the interaction between market and state (Q. Yang 2017), scholars avoid the term 'gentrification' for its negative connotations.

and privileged position in envisioning futures. Contrary to lower social groups, including, low-income workers, migrant population, minorities and ethnic groups, artists have more opportunities to express and push forward their visions.

Alongside artistic works, this thesis also investigates what Wang and Valjakka define as ‘representations and urban interventions’ (2018a, 25). These refer to the mediated urban encounters which emerge ‘in urban public or semi-public space, with or without authorization, by [...] artists, graffiti writers, urbanites, designers, film-makers, organizations and other institutions’ (Valjakka and Wang 2018a, 25). This research considers a variety of urban practices. Whether they align with or resist the dominant urban imaginary and aesthetics, they often complicate and provide alternative visions to the official China Dream. Together, artistic and urban practices become especially significant to articulate the dynamics behind space-making. They allow me to widen the understanding of urban aesthetics, which Visser defines as the ways through which ‘the city is envisioned, experienced and accessed’ (2010, 4). Moreover, through the juxtaposition of urban and artistic practices against the China Dream, it is possible to acknowledge fractures, proximities and intersections and reveal the complex dynamics behind the production of urban futures.

Among my research methods, semi-structured interviews constitute a further major tool to develop my research. My subjects of enquiry include the artistic community in Beijing and Shanghai, as well as architects, curators and other Chinese nationals that have experienced the impact of urbanisation. As the means to know individual stories and make sense of them (Seidman 2006), interviews have allowed me to enter artists’ practices and urban imaginaries. They have been extremely significant to collect general information about artists’ work, artistic process, and the scale of urban transformations. These individual stories are the results of a selection operated by the participant who decides what to highlight and censor, and how to convey the message (Seidman 2006). However, the different accounts have enhanced me to grasp the complexities of

the developing urban space in China. The process for approaching and selecting artists and interviewees has developed fluidly since the beginning of my PhD proposal. The literature review, and regular discussion with experts have helped me shape an organised database of artists and artistic practices that are spatially bound to the city.

The artists examined in the chapters cannot mirror the totality of artistic practices in relation to urbanisation. However, they have been rigorously selected to reflect the diversity of artistic responses to the urban space and China Dream. I conceive of artists as significant contributors to the final development of this thesis. Their stories, works, online exchanges, and informal discussions have allowed me to see urban transformations through their eyes and, have ultimately informed my understanding of space-making in China. Along with the variety of artistic media and strategies, artists of different age, gender, regions, and success contribute to a plurality of equally valid interpretations.

Firstly, I have included artists from different generations: whereas the older generations have experienced the dramatic urban and economic development of the post 1978, the younger artists were born among the pervasive processes of construction and demolition and the culture of consumerism. Secondly, although most artists have long lived in either Beijing or Shanghai, they often come from other parts of China or even outside of it, such as Alessandro Rolandi. Thirdly, despite a traditionally male-dominated art scene, I have included an equal number of female artists, especially born among the 1980s-90s.³² Last, I have opted to only signpost established artists who produced work relevant to the discussion of urban space as there are multiple accounts and interpretations available in the existing literature. However, I could not exclude all of them as they have undoubtedly set the ground for later generations of artists. Hence, the chapters

³² China is still regulated through a strong patriarchal system where it is hard to be a female artist (P. Wang 2012). There have been attempts to recognise women in art through exhibitions and by labelling their works as 'women's art' (*nixing yishu*). However, this categorisation is rejected by most artists as it marginalises them even more. Though the number of women artists who consider themselves feminists is very low due to the government's critical position on feminist movements, there are some artists, such as Liang Yuanwei and Gao Ling, who openly fight for gender equality through their work (Pollack 2018; Merlin 2013).

simultaneously analyse the works by more established figures while giving prominence to young and emerging artists. The selected artists form a diverse group who has produced a multitude of practices that are useful to identify patterns and fractures in the envisioning of urban imaginaries.

My previous professional experience as curatorial assistant for the first Thailand Biennale was crucial to meet artists and approach galleries and curators either via email or through WeChat.³³ Of the forty-seven artists initially approached for in-person interviews in Beijing and Shanghai, I ended up meeting twenty-eight participants in-person. Moreover, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, I have been developing the communication online and even initiated some conversations through WeChat and Zoom. Whereas the latter approach is geographically, timely, and economically more sustainable, it lacks the more human aspect of in-person interviews.

Interviews have been conducted in Mandarin, English, as well as Italian. My advanced skills in the Mandarin language and familiarity with China's culture have greatly enhanced my overall understanding and elaboration of data. At times, the support of experienced gallerists, who regularly play translation and interpretation roles in both Mandarin and English, has been invaluable to conduct and transcribe in-depth interviews in a timely and rigorous manner with artists from an older generation. Although this method can lack spontaneity, my knowledge of their artistic work, the visit in their studios and mutual curiosity have made up for a potential barrier. Furthermore, I have included younger artists who often trained in Europe or the US and could comfortably speak about their practice in English. The linguistic ease, but perhaps, also our similar age, have both contributed to informal and very successful exchanges.

³³ WeChat is a social media platform that is especially popular among Chinese. It is used for messaging, calling, video-calling, broadcasting, as well as sharing images and videos. Since 2016, WeChat has been increasingly, and even almost exclusively used for a variety of services, including online transactions, ordering taxi and food.

Most interviews have been conducted during fieldwork, which, initially, was my main research method. I understand fieldwork as a fluid and informative blend of approaches, including interviews, informal exchanges, visits of art galleries, museums and studios, and participant observation. Moreover, it comprises what goes beyond the traditionally understood and purposefully gathered materials (Kara 2015, 28). Whereas interviews were regulated by the consent form and conducted at artists' studios, galleries and on a few occasions, cafes, with informal exchanges I refer to the variety of spontaneous conversations and encounters that I had with urban dwellers, artists, gallerists, friends, and cities in China. Apart from the scheduled appointments, I immersed myself in what is my research context. Paul Gready suggests that fieldwork is an immersive experience where the boundaries between research and leisure confuse into one another (2014). Indeed, conversations with gallerists, artists and scholars often moved to the dinner table and lead to unexpected discoveries. Through those informal gatherings I got a palpable sense of how the contemporary art scene and urban space in Beijing and Shanghai function.

Throughout my month of fieldwork, I gathered plenty of information through participant observation. Often associated with ethnography and social sciences, participant observation is here understood as a means to acquire knowledge about the urban surroundings. Ingold defines *participant observation* as a practice of correspondence rather than a research method (2014). Whereas *to observe* refers to the act of 'watch what is going on around and about, to listen and to feel'; *to participate* indicates joining 'from within the current of activity in which you carry on a life alongside and together with the persons and things that capture your attention' (Ingold 2014, 387). Hence, participant observation 'consists in the skills of perception and capacities of judgement that develop in the course of direct, practical, sensuous engagements with our surroundings' (Ingold 2014, 387). It is the awareness of the surroundings, which is then documented and elaborated through photographs, diary, taxi drives and walks, among other records. The material collected on site through a conscious self-reflexive approach and analysis have become invaluable and accurate accounts.

Being an immersive, on-site experience, fieldwork has required much planning and preparation. Originally, I had planned two to three research trips to different cities in Mainland China and Hong Kong. The first trip in Spring 2019 would be essential to survey and become deeply involved in my research context. I would access archives, galleries, museums, and ongoing exhibitions, and interview a wide range of artists to collect both primary and secondary data. The second and third field trips would delve deeper into certain topics and aspects of my thesis. After a very successful first fieldwork, I planned to visit Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Chongqing to go beyond the overexamined Beijing and Shanghai. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic I only made one trip. My second fieldwork was cancelled two months before my departure, despite the extensive planning and successful funding application. For both the first and second trip, I had meticulously organised interviews, made a list of exhibitions and art spaces that I needed to attend, arranged my visit to the Asia Art Archive (AAA) in Hong Kong and left a few days to wander around the cities and specific neighbourhoods.

My first experience of fieldwork was very fruitful and rewarding, despite some difficulties: although I had taken into consideration the size of Chinese cities, I had not imagined how long it would take to go from one site to the other. Moreover, artists often moved interviews, making it hard for me to organise meetings according to location and availability. On top of this, ordinary activities like navigating the city required initial planning, on-site testing, and often quick problem-solving. After years without visiting China, I discovered a highly digitalised Beijing and Shanghai, where it was hard for anyone without a Chinese bank account to make their way around the city. As Schön suggests fieldwork can be a swamp if the researcher is not prepared for a chaotic and intricate practice (1991). Despite the initial difficulties, the plurality of data and narratives which have emerged from fieldwork, together with literature review and interviews, have produced meaningful and empirically grounded understandings of space.

Due to Covid-19, I could not visit three cities, namely Chongqing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou. However, due to their crucial role to the development of my thesis chapters, rather than excluding them I decided to keep them by stretching further the concept of urban imaginaries. From a theoretical framework subtending my overall argument, Soja's notion of urban imaginaries has also become a research method. In other words, not only are urban representations the subjects of my study, but they have also turned into the means through which I understand urban space: the city as a mediated encounter. The multiplicity of mediated representations gathered in the last three years has informed my knowledge and understanding of cities, providing me an incomplete, and yet thriving vision on its own.

Despite the impossibility to travel, I have shaped my own interpretation of Chongqing, Shenzhen and Guangzhou by relying on artists' and interviewees' interpretations and integrating them with a series of urban imaginings collected through digital and online methods.³⁴ Among the material gathered, I have included artists' and Chinese residents' accounts, observed contemporary trends and news on WeChat, joined forums, seminars, and workshops as well as researched information on academic, official, mediatic and specialised websites.³⁵ Hence, this research project does not only hold, but also embodies in itself, the concept of the city as a mediated representation. Where the heterogeneity of urban space is spatially produced and best grasped in the dream, imaginary and physical spaces assume the same ontological status. Overall, my account of cities through mediated encounters on the Internet, artists' works, and imaginings adds an additional layer to the complex and constantly shaping urban dynamics.

³⁴ In our increasingly digitalised and online reality, digital methods and research become particularly useful to make sense of the blurred distinction between online and offline (Garcia et al. 2009). However, the use of digital methods has attracted criticism. Rogers lists the reputation and messiness of data on the Internet, the offline grounding of data, and anonymisation, among others (2015).

³⁵ The study of communities through digital medias is often referred to as online ethnography. However, I refrain from using this term following Ingold's critique towards the widespread use of the term 'ethnography' (2014). According to Ingold, the word ethnography has been overused to the point that it is hard to define what it means. He brings forward some instances of what is or is not ethnographic: whereas he argues that a monograph can be referred to as 'ethnographic', fieldwork, encounters, and interviews, cannot be called 'ethnographic'. This has to do with the fact that ethnography is retrospective and documentary and occurs after the encounters with people. On the contrary, the moment of interviewing itself, the doing, can be referred to as participant observation.

Although the variety of methods has the potential to undermine the rigour of my research, I argue that the interdisciplinarity of my investigation asks for mixed research methods. The complexity of the relationship between visual arts, space-making and the impact on society can only be portrayed through a variety of outcomes. On top of this, qualitative methods ask for originality, intuition, and a *chaotic* exploration (Silverman 2010). The rigour can be found in the awareness of the type of data collected and their interpretation.

Overall, the originality of this project lies in the ability to deploy different research methods, as well as synthesise a variety of discourses from different disciplines into an organic and cohesive study. The ways in which the discussion of urban space is woven together with disparate theoretical frameworks and supported by the visual analysis of different, yet complementary, artistic practices constitute my unique writing style. Each chapter focuses on a specific theme and collates together an impressive number of diverse artists without flattening their practices. What brings together the multiplicity of discourses and topics is the China Dream, which constitutes another main element of originality. Although several studies have been conducted on the China Dream, this research is the first comprehensive account where this vision is used as a framework to interpret the artistic responses to the city and to the problems and phenomena associated with the transformations of urban space.

Lastly, the impact of this investigation lies in the contribution to the understanding of the ways in which visual arts and urban culture can shape the urban and social fabric in Mainland China. Through the different perspectives offered by the analysis of mainly artistic projects, as well as other visual elements defining the urban experience, I illustrate the abstruse panorama of several urbanities. Expanding the already existing literature, my research focuses on urban imaginaries as indicators for the changes in the urban space, as well as facilitator for envisioning futures. This is particularly true for overcoming the inequalities and social issues raised by urbanisation in China

and elsewhere. As Robin Visser suggests, ‘the next generation of urban planners working in China will have more experience at solving global issues in urban design than anyone in the world, and their knowledge will shape future worldwide practices (2010, 84).

0.3 Thesis structure

This interdisciplinary and discursive thesis is structured in five chapters, each dedicated to a specific urban imaginary. Maintaining the notion of an urban spatiality where different forces compete and continuously reshape space, I conceive of space not as a single entity, but as multiple and evolving realities that intertwine, layer up, diverge from and run parallel to each other. As several imaginaries could be envisioned, the thesis is structured around the framework of the China Dream. The China Dream mirrors the national agenda since 2012, when Xi Jinping became state and party leader. The rationale to deploy the China Dream as my underlying structure is two-folded: firstly, since Xi’s election, propaganda posters, banners and ads have pervaded China’s urban and online space (Fig. 0.8). Although this is not an unprecedented phenomenon, Landsberger notices that ‘the messages have shifted to moral and normative topics, and their visualisation has become much more sophisticated than in the earlier periods’ (2018, 147).³⁶ Moreover, the party has produced a variety of audio-visual materials, including television programmes, songs, high-resolution desktop images, and propaganda posters on the subways, streets, and squares for the Chinese people to internalise the propaganda campaign (Landsberger 2018). Secondly, the concepts of dream and imaginary belong to the same immersive and elusive sphere. Opposed to the actual, present, and objective reality, they are often associated with the future, uncertain, subjective, and unconscious. Because of both their semantic similarity and pervasiveness, I believe that the concepts of the China Dream and urban imaginaries should be juxtaposed to inform each other and produce creative understandings of how contemporary art and urban transformations in China have been entangled together.

³⁶ Landsberger explains that posters, banners, and digital materials are site-specific and changing accordingly. For instance, in the countryside, the images and slogans seem to be more educational than in the urbanities. However, more could be done in terms of design to meet people’s everyday concerns and urban lives, such as environmental concerns (Landsberger 2018).



Fig. 0.8 Photograph taken in Beijing by the author, 2 May 2019.

As mentioned in my previous section, the China Dream was at first a very ambiguous term, which has come to be understood through a more concrete definition. It envisions four different Chinas: ‘a Strong China (economically, politically, diplomatically, scientifically and militarily), a Civilised China (equity and fairness, rich culture, high morals), a Harmonious Society (amity among social classes), and Beautiful China (healthy environment, low pollution)’ (Landsberger 2018, 162–63). Notwithstanding the temporal divide between the China Dream and the starting point of my research, this campaign’s continuity with the past and stretch to the future justifies my decision to adopt the China Dream to analyse space-making and artistic responses since 2001. Furthermore, the Chinese political agenda provides an original structure to support the development of my investigation and advance urban imaginaries that are relevant to the present. Although there is a risk of reinforcing this power structure, my focus is on the projection of future imaginaries through artistic and creative practices that can reveal various competing dynamics, including less visible ones.

As the China Dream promotes four pervasive and overarching visions of China, the chapters in this thesis are informed by these four official urban imaginaries. Though they do not necessarily

comply with each aspect of the China Dream, I suggest that the imaginaries produced by artistic and urban practices cannot entirely ignore the dominant ideology. Hence, this thesis presents a Dream City, a Worlding City, an Erased City, a Beautiful City, and a Heritage City. Whereas the latter four imaginaries tackle the strong, harmonious, green, and civilised China(s), the chapter on the Dream City tackles the overall narrative of the China Dream. This selection is not entirely a reflection of the China Dream. On the contrary, it results from interviews and exchanges with artists, curators, and other experts, as well as from my fieldwork in Beijing and Shanghai. Although the selected imaginaries cannot be exhaustive, they shed light on the entanglement between urban aesthetics and space-making since 2001 in different urban realities. Lastly, the five urban imaginaries advanced in the thesis provide an initial step towards envisioning future cities that are more conscious of the forces underlying the formation and reshaping of urban space.

Following the Introduction, Chapter 1 amplifies the re-imaginings of the city through real estate billboards on the streets. It builds on the concept of ‘global cities’ (Sassen 1991), which compete against each other by feeding our imagination, hopes and dreams through aestheticized representations. According to the state-sanctioned visions displayed within real estate billboards, memorable skylines, iconic buildings, and ambitious infrastructure showcase the nation’s achievements and pave the ground for even brighter futures. Specifically, this chapter investigates and extends the re-imaginings of China’s urban space through the comparative visual analysis of real estate billboards and contemporary artistic practices. Together, they complement and challenge each other’s visions, offering several competing lenses and means to interpret and untangle the complexity of space-making. By restating the China Dream, this chapter ultimately serves as a further introduction, guiding the reader towards the following four urban imaginaries.

Chapter 2 develops from the national goal of pursuing a Strong China. It examines how China presents itself as a strong nation by analysing a specific urban phenomenon, namely the appropriation and translation of urban and architectural practices from the world. I focus on those

sites where this process is mostly evident: private estates, gated communities, iconic landmarks, as well as theme parks and themed towns. Often designed to satisfy the taste of China's new middle class, they feature western architectural principles, as well as local specifics. I suggest that they are more than bland copies. Specifically, as the artistic practices reveal, they undergo a synthesising process of reproducing and reassembling global and local. Immersive and fluid, these local and global urban milieus merge together to form a hybrid vernacular architecture. On the one hand, this chapter tackles the tight relationship between the state and the housing market, which has boosted China's economy; on the other, it deploys the traditional understanding of creativity in China to suggest that today urban space blurs the line between physical and imaginary, transforming cities into touristic attractions and experiences.

Chapter 3 shifts the attention from the spatialization of China's new middle class in gated communities and themed towns to that of migrant workers. Stemming from the government's ambition to pursue a harmonious society, this chapter resists this pristine and positive vision of a fair and equal society by focusing on the socio-spatial relationships that emerge from migrant workers and their locales. Situated in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, I investigate three interconnected phenomena: the floating population, namely those who flow into the city to work without an official citizenship; the rural-urban fringes; and villages in the city, which are illegal and undesired constructions within the urbanities inhabited by the floating population. Though these ambiguous territories and underrepresented social group are often portrayed by the government as unattractive and disruptive, they have provided the cheap labour and informal economies necessary to sustain the beautified urban centres. The artistic practices conceive of this in-betweenness and friction as generative and creative, pointing to a more inclusive and sustainable urban imaginary that values the tension between rural/urban, visible/invisible, and primary/secondary.

From the socio-spatial analysis of the urban and rural, Chapter 4 analyses the recent aestheticization and commodification of the construct of 'nature'. The China Dream's vision for a 'Beautiful China' reveals today's increasing awareness of ecology across the world. Specifically, environmental concerns have led the design and implementation of sustainable urban futures that are often driven by capital. This chapter examines the case of the direct municipality of Chongqing, which has been transformed into a forest city since 2008 through a top-down policy. Moreover, it problematises the understanding of 'nature' as something externally produced by a capitalist society. Whereas some artists and architects fail to distance themselves from this long-entrenched nostalgia for a lost natural environment, there are artistic instances that bring forward the notion of an organic ecology. These works can criticise the latest environmental policy-making in China in the late 20th and 21st century and the current use of green capitalism and environmental governance in China.

Last, Chapter 5 reinforces the understanding of space-making as driven by a top-down agenda, in this case, heritage. This final urban imaginary develops from the China Dream's imperative to restore the country's cultural and historical heritage and, hence, promote its soft power. Specifically, this chapter suggests that Chinese cities are undergoing an antithetical process where destruction and reconstruction coexist with practices of conservation. It results that the discourse on heritage and culture has been instrumentalised to reshape Chinese metropolises. My examination moves across Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing to highlight how different histories have been carefully selected to revive a specific imaginary of the city. By instrumentalising past narratives to reshape present and future visions, the CCP legitimises its power, fosters national unity, and increases China's international soft power. Overall, through the artistic and urban analysis of these three cities, I advance that the Chinese city oscillates between past and future, sacrificing what Hartog defines an 'immense, invasive' present (2015, 202).

Overall, each chapter presents a different urban imaginary, which respectively draws on certain aspects of the urban experience through representations and interpretations. As I discuss in the Conclusion, these imaginaries expose the different forces operating in the urban space and how they relate to each other. Specifically, I argue that artists are continuously readjusting to the everchanging socio-political landscape and respond to the official imaginaries through varying levels of engagement and diverse approaches. In the Conclusion, I identify three loose and often overriding categories of artistic strategies: a documentary approach which mimics reality; an approach which depicts reality whilst deploying digital manipulation, optical illusion, or playfulness; and, last, participatory and socially engaged practices. I demonstrate that the majority of artistic practices deploys digital manipulation, illusion, humour, and imagination to reproduce the top-down imaginary of the China Dream whilst simultaneously inserting unwanted elements and ultimately oppose the original vision of the party. In other words, I posit that in a post-totalitarian regime like China, the use of established narratives can be the starting point to reweave alternative stories. Last, I conclude that whilst the artistic conversation with the city has expanded since the 1990s, the urban is becoming an inescapable backdrop rather than the focus per se. By investigating the frictions and similarities among different urban imaginaries and aesthetics, this research project aims to grasp, shape, and foresee diverse understandings of space-making.

1. The Dream City

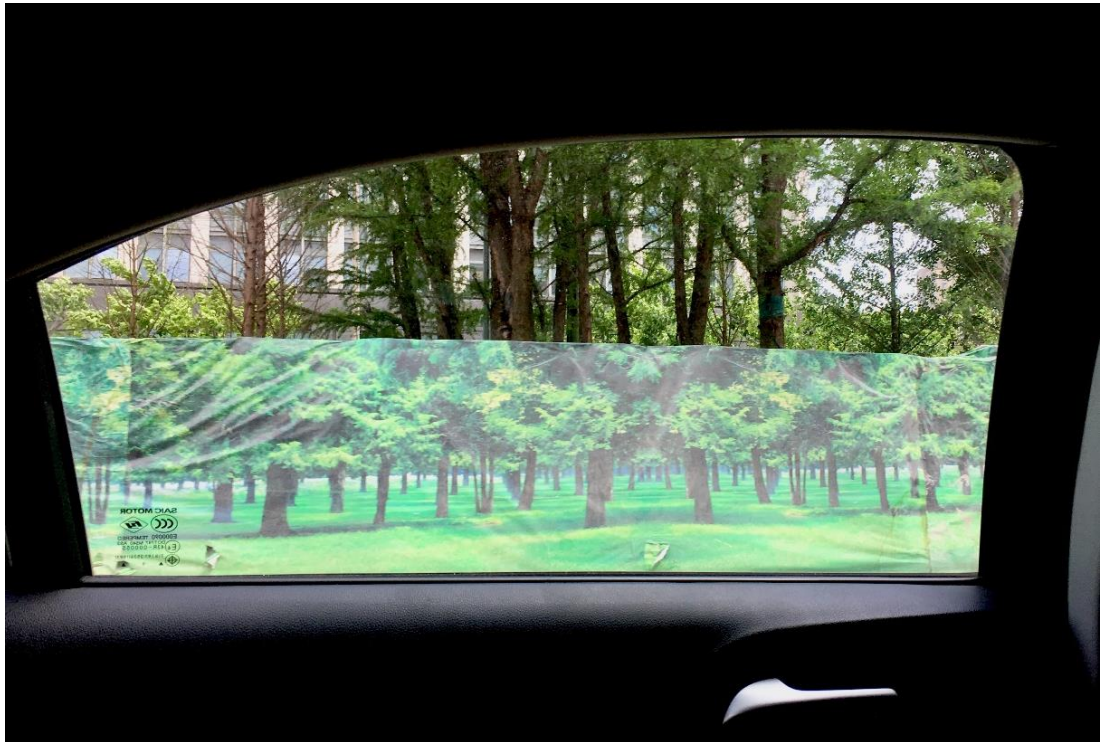


Fig. 1.1 Photograph taken in Shanghai by the author, 20 May 2019.

Among the urban jungle of steel and concrete, the sight of glistening grass and rising tree trunks strikes the everyday urbanites who wander around the city. It is not a glimpse of the urban space, but an advertising image captured from a window. This fictional scenery transports the viewer into an imaginary reality by visually extending the green of the trees into the surroundings (Fig. 1.1). In the era of global consumption, advertising billboards have become a ubiquitous landmark among urbanised and modern metropolises. Dominating the urban space, they appear along the streets, around the corners, on LED screens and in other public areas. Among the variety of commercial visual material, this chapter focuses on the advertising images that surround construction sites in Chinese cities. They visualise flawless and pristine urban futures, display sleek skyscrapers set against sunny skies, or green fields in quiet and empty neighbourhoods. Overall, they reinterpret the urban fabric's transformation through imagination. Specifically, I suggest that

billboards are significant to identify the complex processes behind space making. They integrate with and redefine the visual and spatial experience of urban space. By juxtaposing the systematically positive, promotional, and state sanctioned urban imaginaries against the more varied and critical artistic practices, I disclose the discontinuity and multiple representations of China's urban space.

My rationale for examining the significance of billboards is twofold: firstly, their visual language directly attests to the ways in which urban space is imagined and produced. Billboards reveal the symbolic value of the city, which is not merely a physical entity but a mediated environment (Soja 2000; Huyssen 2008; Cinar and Bender 2007; Prakash 2008). Thoughtfully produced by real estate developers, billboards provide information on planners' agendas and the ongoing urban transformations. Moreover, they are designed with customers' desires in mind and are rooted in prior imaginaries shared across the society. Secondly, these imaginaries, together with the presented artworks, stretch the present and actual reality into future and imaginary representations of urban space. By denying the separation between imagination and the city and affirming their interdependence, billboards can evoke and even self-realise their own future imaginaries. Likewise, the comparative examination of the aesthetic dialogue between billboards and visual arts through the analysis of their traits, tensions, and contradictions can form alternative understandings of space-making which can coexist together.

On top of their social and spatial significance, real estate billboards have received little scholarly attention in Mainland China, especially in relation to artistic practices. This is especially true when compared to other geographical contexts, such as the Middle East (Nastasi and Ponzini 2019; Gillian, Degen, and Melhuish 2016), and other urban visual materials. In Mainland China, Landsberger has researched propaganda posters for years, including the recent omnipresent China

Dream aesthetics (2018).³⁷ To identify the disappearing visual and verbal content on public surfaces Gerda Wielander has advanced, instead, the concept of ‘urban culture wall’ (2019). Moreover, the edited volume by Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang has explored ‘urbanized interfaces’, from graffiti art, and socially engaged practices to public interventions (2018b). Among these relevant accounts of urban visual material, real estate billboards have the potential to provide an original and insightful means to look at urban space-making and the impact of re-imagining.

The rest of the chapter is structured into four sections, respectively looking at billboards and artistic practices through the lens of the China Dream. By addressing the four aspects of the China Dream, this chapter reinstates the structure and focus of the overall thesis. Specifically, this chapter aims to illustrate some of the social groups influencing space-making. Indeed, billboards reveal the feedback loop among real estate industry, local and central governments, and the middle class. On the one hand, billboards advance pristine visions that align with the China Dream due to the shared economic gain of the housing industry and governments. On the other, their design cannot ignore the increasing influence exerted by China’s bourgeoisie. Last, the artistic practices in response to billboards further complicate these dynamics. Artists shed light on underrepresented social groups and visions (i.e., migrant workers, ordinary urban dwellers, and pollution), revealing the complexity and plurality of the city. Together, I argue that billboards and artistic practices represent the city as spatial, but mostly social and mediated entity that is formed by a variety of equally indispensable urban actors.

1.1 China Dreaming

Today, cities around the world have become sites of potentiality. Their attractive and promising appearances have become signifiers for successful competitive cities and offer residents a compelling urban experience. From ‘global city’, to ‘creative’, ‘AI’ or ‘eco’ city, metropolises have

³⁷ Stefan Landsberger has developed one of the largest private collections of Chinese propaganda posters since the 1970s. After researching the Cultural Revolution for several years, he has recently grown interest in the China Dream and published several chapters and articles on this topic.

been branded and designed to become unique and globally recognised landmarks. In China, and elsewhere in Asia, the scope and speed of urbanisation have produced an exceptional number of new and influential urban clusters. For instance, whereas Pudong evokes Shanghai's success and China's urban and economic development, Beijing has become renowned for its numerous imperial palaces and rich past. These cities display their successes and challenge long-established global power-relations through spectacular urban features and ambitious engineering projects. Rather than merely physical and functional spaces, they become experimental platforms and aestheticized façades, which compete against each other through the exertion of visual fascination and desire (Braester 2013). As a result, cities simultaneously function as material and intangible structures that possess symbolic significance and evoke imaginaries embedded in their complex surroundings.

Cities have fed individuals' imagination, hopes and dreams through their aestheticized representations. Since the 1980s, central and local governments have replaced dilapidated districts and rural settlements with distinctive skylines, knocked down alleys to make space for shopping malls and renewed historical and cultural sites. Through successful renewal projects, officials and urban planners have come to determine the way in which China presents itself to the world: one attracting capital, people, and knowledge through the construction of dream cities. These cities signal something more complex than the physical urban space. Architecture and urban practices become indispensable tools for the party and other urban actors 'to create affirmative spaces that prompt memories, discoveries and desires' (Klingmann 2010, 4). On top of a material entity, space can stimulate sensual perceptions and set the standards to measure something as unquantifiable as the quality of the urban experience.³⁸ Therefore, the emergence of aestheticized cities, and along

³⁸ For instance, the tier city ranking aims at evaluating and categorising China's metropolises into four different orders. Rather than a standard official mechanism, it works as an arbitrary tool to measure something as impalpable and nebulous as urban success. Indeed, the criteria to judge the city ranking range from GDP, population, and political administration structure, to commercial and urban residents' activities, urban lifestyle and malleability (Sun 2017).

with them a rich urban aesthetics, can be interpreted as an attempt aimed at increasing the national perceived success.

Recently, the extraordinary urban and economic transformations in China have been associated with the notion of spectacle by Guy Debord, especially in relation to the construction of attractive skylines and the increasing social inequalities (Greenspan 2012; M. Wang 2015a; Abbas 2013). Debord believes that ‘in societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation’ (Debord 2005, 7). Ultimately, he criticizes the spectator for passively consuming images without going beyond the glossy patina or questioning the power relations that constitute them. Greenspan (2012), Wang and Valjakka (2015), and de Kloet and Scheen (2013) have contributed to a rich discussion of the spectacle within visual arts in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. However, in the context of China, this notion can be limiting as it presumes a fully developed capitalist system. Although China has certainly embraced neo-liberalist and capitalist principles, it still operates as a post-totalitarian regime with authoritarian and centralized practices. David Harvey calls it neo-liberalism ‘with Chinese characteristics’, in other words a hybrid economic and social system where neo-liberal elements coexist with the stark presence of the central government (2005). Moreover, as mentioned in the Introduction, the notion of spectacle operates through binaries, rather than allowing multiplicity. Therefore, though the concept of spectacle has produced insightful studies, I suggest an alternative lens to read the city, imagination.

Maintaining that cities are more than material entities, it is possible to affirm that what is understood as urban ‘is made and occurs remade on a daily basis through a complex network of interactions, negotiations, and contestations yielding several competing narratives and images of the city that seek to give it particular presence and identity’ (Cinar and Bender 2007, xxi). There is not one understanding of the city, but several interpretations of it. Alongside its materiality, ‘the

city is produced and sustained in such narratives that proliferate through the daily travels, transactions, interactions, thereby shaping the collective imaginary' (Cinar and Bender 2007, xiv). Urban dwellers' embodied experiences and daily rhythms, alongside urban visual material and practices constitute the different textures of urban space (Lefebvre 2013), which, in turn, is continuously adjusting due to its multiple constitutive forces.

The city becomes an urban 'milieu', namely a site of intervention where individual and collective imaginings clash and feed into one another (Foucault 2007). As Foucault suggests the milieu 'is an element in which a circular link is produced between effects and causes, since an effect from one point of view will be a cause from another' (2007, 36). In this field, individual imaginings can transform into powerful acts when shared collectively. Specifically, Cheng argues that today there are four different social groups: central and local governments, corporate and industrial businesses, vulnerable social groups (i.e., migrant workers), and the middle class (2016). Having different interests and necessities, these three social groups add variables to and affect space-making. Drawing on this understanding, the urban fabric incessantly renovates and pluralizes itself through the collective acts of imagination of these three social groups who often end up informing each other's agendas.

Today, re-imagining Chinese metropolises has been regulated by a pervasive vision, the China Dream, which is the prevailing urban narrative among other imaginaries. Since its adoption in 2012, the China Dream has represented the renewed political agenda of the central government. As illustrated in the Introduction, the notion of a complex and unique path for China, the socialism with Chinese characteristics, sustains this propaganda campaign. This hybrid ideology embraces contradictory strategies that are rooted in both western and Chinese traditions. Hence, imagining cities functions at two levels: on the one hand, local authorities shape their cities by complying with international models and successful practices, whilst simultaneously investing in innovative designs and attractive urban practices. On the other, the central government pushes

forward the vision of a dream city that is uniquely Chinese. If Klingmann suggests that today architecture is merely a style, I argue that the aestheticization of Chinese cities is deeply ideological.³⁹

Whereas memorable skylines have served to testify the high achievements of China and its new global role, billboards and artistic practices have made a similar statement at the street level. Together, real estate developers and artists have engaged in dialogue with the city, observed the urban transformations and further responded to its physical and symbolic significance. Moreover, they have produced mediated representations that are inextricably linked with the practice of space-making. By presenting second-hand representations of the city, billboards and artworks can provide in-depth understandings of urban space through different imaginaries. Hence, there is not one valid imaginary. On the contrary, there are several urban interpretations that, like threads, are interwoven together to create the complex, yet cohesive, urban fabric. Billboards and artistic practices represent some of the threads, patterns and colours that constitute the overall patchwork. As part of this multi-layered space, their analysis provides alternative imaginaries through which the city can be 'envisioned, experienced and accessed' (Visser 2010, 4).

Building on Chinese citizens' pre-existing visions and fears, billboards are up-graded versions of these imaginaries. They have re-imagined urban space and produced 'affective powers of feelings that influence people's corporeal perception and state of mind' (Biehl-Missal and Saren 2012, 176). Blocking the view of urban dwellers and concealing rubble sites, they both release and absorb what they encounter. They have the potential to disclose the ongoing transformations, and less visible aspects of the city. In addition to more traditional artistic practices, billboards have become part of the broad range of urban visual materials. They envision future cities that resonate with the surroundings and bet on uncertain, yet attractive, predictions. To achieve that, they infiltrate in pre-existing socio-spatial interstices and connect present and future, actual and metaphysical.

³⁹ Arguably, the urban aestheticization is not unique to China, but part of a wider global practice.

They produce 'new grounds of imaginative spaces, complicating the visual experience of urban living' (M. Wang 2018, 116).

Despite the uncertain origin of the advertising market, billboards have a long tradition in this industry. The beginning of advertisement in recent history can be traced back to the Nanjing Treaty in 1842 and the arrival of commercial and promotional goods from the west (O'Barr 2007). By the early 20th century, a variety of advertising items, such as posters, banners, newspaper ads and calendars (*yuefenpai*) selling tobacco, alcohol and featuring attractive women, were widely available.⁴⁰ However, with the advent of the communist era in 1949, commercial advertising started being extensively criticised for its frivolous and western connotations and was soon replaced by propaganda posters. Though today, the visual imaginary of propaganda billboards has been replaced by more sophisticated images that align with consumerism, I suggest that the sudden return of commercial ads since the end of the Cultural Revolution has been mitigated by a hybrid strategy that merges capitalist and socialist values together.

Specifically, in today's globalised and consumerist society, the central government and party have had to recognise, on the one hand, the significance of the socialist propaganda tradition, and on the other, the increasing interlinkages with the market. Stross interprets this phenomenon as the party's necessity to 'sell the legitimacy of selling' after years of intolerance towards advertising and capitalism (1990). In this conjoined effort, the central government and advertising market endow socialist signs with renewed significance to transmit a consumerist message that is integral to the China Dream. Indeed, Stuart Hall explains that for the message to 'have an "effect" (however defined) or satisfy a "need" or be put to a "use", it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully de-coded' (1973, 3). In other words, there needs to be a decodable system that is specific to the cultural order of the audience. Otherwise, the message would not have any relevance. Reinforcing both socialist and capitalist values, today real estate billboards aim

⁴⁰ The 1920s-1930s Shanghai best represented the golden age of advertising and the consumerist and cosmopolitan attitude of Chinese society (Puppini 2014, 180).

to bridge the remains of a long-standing socialist tradition with the more recent capitalism and consumerism.

Although there is a dominant code that relies on a localised cultural system to interpret, in this case, real estate billboards, Hall recognises that there will always be alternative and diverse readings (1973). Specifically, he articulates four possible understandings: firstly, the hegemonic code, which reproduces the dominant narrative; secondly, a professional code, which is the message encoded by professionals and, in this case, the housing industry; thirdly, the negotiated code which takes different forms to adapt to localised and specific situations; and fourthly, the oppositional code, which aims to reframe and redetermine the dominant system through alternative readings. Although the dominant code is neither universal nor determined as it depends on everchanging site-specific cultural systems, it becomes institutionalised (Hall 1974).

In today's China, I argue that the hegemonic code is formed by the China Dream, which has been internalised and disseminated by both the advertising and housing industry. Unsurprisingly, Zhao and Belk define the recent history of advertising in China as an 'extension of the party propaganda' (2008, 241). Specifically, I suggest that real estate billboards contribute to the party's ideology, which couples socialist with capitalist values. Indeed, the advertising practices of the housing industry seem to belong to the same immersive and elusive sphere of the China Dream. Moreover, the verbal and visual language of billboards and the China Dream are often associated with the potential, subjective and unconscious future. Because of both their semantic similarity and pervasiveness, I believe that their imaginaries can be understood as informing each other and producing creative understandings of space-making. Together, I suggest that real estate billboards and Xi's ideological campaign interplay in two different ways: firstly, they deploy a similar visual and written language and contribute to the formation of interconnected dreamlike imaginaries; secondly, they visualise the interaction between real estate developers and local officials.



Fig. 1.2 Photographs taken in Beijing CBD by the author, 2 May 2019.



Fig. 1.3 Photograph taken in Beijing CBD by the author, 2 May 2019.

Firstly, I advance that billboards' visual and verbal language reproduces the main characteristics of the China Dream: a modern, green, and culturally vibrant city, inhabited by civilised urban dwellers. Whereas billboards in the Central Business District (CBD) and urban centre celebrate

modernity and support the ideal of a powerful nation (Figs. 1.2-3), the visualisations of the restored Beijing traditional alleys, *hutong*, seem to tackle the central government's intention to revive China's cultural 'uniqueness' (Fig. 1.4). Moreover, the green billboards (Fig. 1.5) visually amplify the greening policies that have been implemented in several Chinese cities (i.e., Chongqing, Dalian, Nanjing) to realise a Beautiful China.⁴¹ Alongside these attractive images lies the text, which anchors billboards into the political ideology of the China Dream. Through big bold Chinese characters, the textual message encourages urban dwellers 'to be civilised' (*wenming*) and 'protect the beautiful environment' (*baohu meihua chengshi huanjing*), among other slogans. Overall, both propaganda and real estate billboards stretch individuals' perceptions of the city, by exploiting fears, triggering expectations, advancing dreams, and responding to uncertainties.



Fig. 1.4 Photograph taken in the Beijing hutong by the author, 2 May 2019.

Secondly, posters offer a springboard to discuss the struggle over space-making and the role of the housing industry. Before delving into this topic, it is necessary to clarify how the Chinese

⁴¹ For readings on green projects in China, see Chang and Sheppard (2013); Chreod Ltd. (2011); and Hoffman (2011).

territory is administered. Specifically, the Chinese administration develops through a pyramidal structure organised around provinces, the four municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing, and autonomous regions, cities, counties, county-level cities, towns, and villages (Ma and Wu 2005b). Whereas this administrative hierarchy has empowered local governments with more responsibility and independence in decision-making, it has escalated the competition for investments among local governments. Especially, since the Open Door Policy in 1978, the already existing differences between the richer coastal and southern areas and the poorer central regions have intensified (Lim and Horesh 2017). Due to the national imperative to achieve modernisation and produce global cities that could compete in the international scene, central and local governments have deliberately overlooked social, economic, and spatial divergencies.

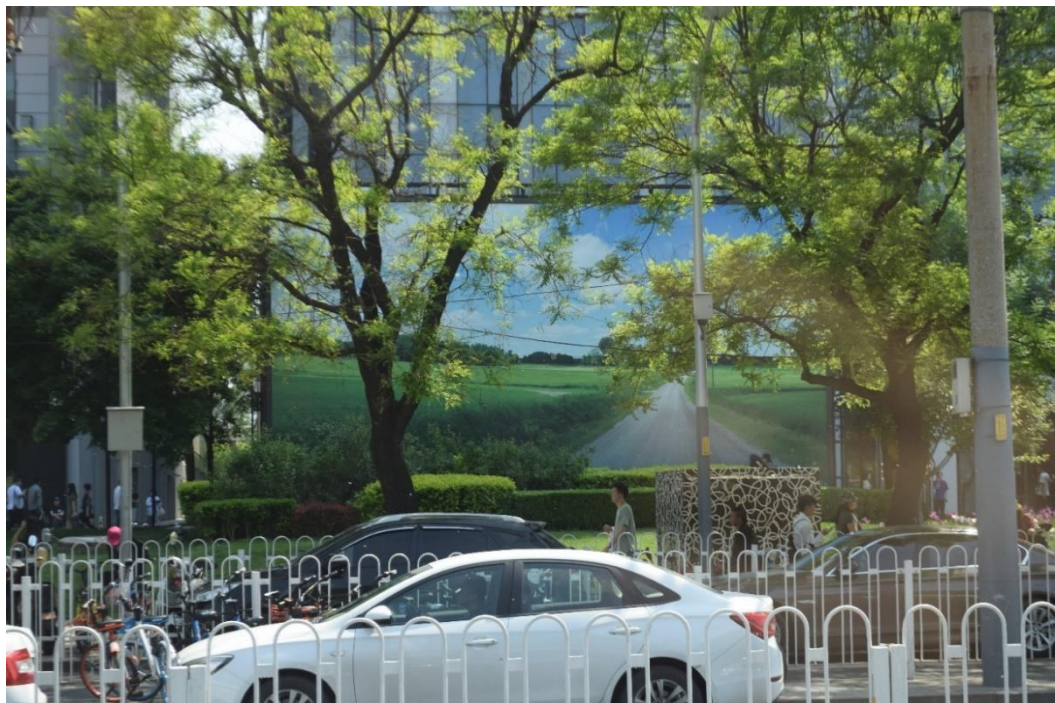


Fig. 1.5 Photograph taken in Beijing by the author, 2 May 2019.

In such a competitive environment, local officials have been securing their political and financial success by collaborating with the housing market and sponsoring developments (Xue, Wang, and Tsai 2013, 228). China's housing market emerged in the 1980s in response to the commodification of land rights and the urgency to transform farmland into real estates (Q. Huang and Li 2014, 26–

27). Through land-leasing, authorities, and developers, who respectively needed capital and land, were able to implement ambitious projects for their cities and gain economic and political validation (Chen and Dai 2014, 26). As Anna Klingmann advances, ‘current architecture must be assessed by its economic potential to raise the perceived value of its beneficiary, be it a single client, a corporation, or a city’ (Klingmann 2010, 7). Hence, the joint interest in land by officials and developers has led those two agents to play a major role in the transformation of the urban landscape, not only physically but also, and perhaps more dominantly, in economic and global terms. Because of their shared interests, the housing industry has fed into and supported the state-sanctioned imaginary of the China Dream.

However, the ongoing urban development and aestheticization, which have been jointly implemented by the housing industry and the party, show the contradictory and hybrid nature of the China Dream. As mentioned before, Xi’s ideology combines a capitalist mode of production with a centralised state. Concerned by the danger of a moral crisis, but aware of the impossibility to escape the overarching capitalist system, the party has been trying to find a compromise between the two. For instance, since the 2010s, the common practice of promoting goods through beautified and inaccurate images has been condemned by the central government for highlighting the increasing social inequalities in China. Puppin reports that in 2011, the Beijing office banned the promotion of luxury goods as they emphasized the stark social and economic gap; moreover, in 2012, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television sanctioned some TV commercials for boosting the practice of exchanging expensive luxury products for favours (Puppin 2014, 192).⁴²

⁴² Several episodes suggest the central government’s increasing awareness and tightening towards advertising. To mention another instance, in 2015, China’s Advertising Law banned the alienating and distorting visual language of ads and pressured the real estate industry, among other sectors, to convey truthful and fair content (De Marco Lawyers n.d.). Obviously, this is not a practice unique to China: the US crowdfunding platform, Kickstarter, announced in 2012 that computer generated images or misleading simulations would not be allowed on the website (Strickler, Chen, and Adler 2012). Later, in 2015, they even shifted from Incorporated Company (Inc.) to Public Benefit Corporation to ‘consider the impact of their decisions on society, not only shareholders’ (Strickler, Chen, and Adler 2015).

Today, billboards often juxtapose commercial against socialist materials to associate consumption and economic growth with longstanding principles of community and nation-building. Through this process, both consumerist and socialist signs are decontextualised. They depart from their original meanings, and the social practices rooted in the sign to attach new meanings and social practices to them (X. Zhao and Belk 2008). The power of this process and, in this case real estate billboards, lies in the fact that the message in the poster implies that consuming will contribute to the realisation of the China Dream and, consequently, that buying a property can even make you a worthy and responsible citizen.

1.2 Billboards in the dream city

Billboards ‘touch, invade and permeate people’s bodies, being able to subtly influence and manipulate their emotions and moods, sensual and mental states’ (Biehl-Missal and Saren 2012, 170–71). To demonstrate their pervasiveness and visual power, I analyse them through three lenses: site-specificity, perspective, and erasure. These three features characterise those real estate billboards that often align with the vision of the China Dream and can offer evocative urban imaginaries. I suggest that, firstly, billboards are able to help make sense of the already abstruse urban fabric and disclose how political and economic desires ultimately influence the social and spatial urban contexts. Secondly, their flat and bidimensional surfaces load the urban fabric by anchoring their imaginaries to the physical space. Thirdly, they have the potential to shape future understandings and makings of spatiality through the promotion of attractive lifestyles and luxurious gated communities. Mostly surrounding the construction sites around the city, these digital visualisations are designed to display the completed project, while blocking the gaze and replacing the sight of rubble and destruction with portrayals of undisturbed neighbourhoods and exclusive communities.

Despite the lack of an established rationale, it is possible to advance the hypothesis that billboards’ visual content is informed by their surroundings and hence, site-specific. These imaginaries range

from illuminated skylines and disciplined neighbourhoods to visions of cultural and historical areas, and immersive green vegetation. In the CBD, where skyscrapers, glassy surfaces and yellow cranes dominate the background, the digital renderings present a similar view of the city. They include high-rise buildings standing out against the clear sky, as well as elevated walkways, wide lanes and intricate urban junctions illuminating the night (Fig. 1.3). This site-specific character is especially evident through the analysis of posters situated in different urban areas. Whereas billboards in the CBD portray innovative architecture projects and illuminated highways, the poster located in Beijing's alleys, the *hutong* (Fig. 1.4), visually exemplifies the spatial shift by conforming to the old and traditional aesthetics of those narrow passages and courtyards. By sensually adapting to this historic area, it convincingly anticipates the future look of Beijing's *hutong*. When surrounded by trees and bush, instead, the panels feature artificial grass walls, lush vegetation, and colourful flowers to camouflage their physical proximities and stretch the urban terrain into a distant and intangible green space. Hence, billboards seem to penetrate urban dwellers and insert themselves in the urban space by extending the physical surroundings and establishing credible future imaginaries.

Furthermore, billboards seem to complement the China Dream campaign by envisioning dreams and giving a materiality to the impalpability and pervasiveness of such ideological propaganda. Both the attractive aesthetics and geographical concentration of posters seem to plaster over the 'heterogeneous and inconsistent' nature of ideology (Eagleton 1991, 45).⁴³ Clustering around neighbourhoods under construction or renovation, such as the CBDs, historical and cultural sites, and cities' peripheries, they replace ruins with evocative imaginaries inherent to the China Dream. Whereas the high-rises in the financial districts point to the vision of a 'strong China', the green billboards (Fig. 1.5) hint at the central government's engagement with ecological concerns. Moreover, the goal of a 'civilised China' is pursued through the display of the restored Beijing

⁴³ Terry Eagleton asserts that it is impossible to establish an adequate definition for ideology as it encompasses multiple meanings. The ideology of the China Dream will be analysed more in depth in the Conclusion.

butong and the rehabilitation of cultural and historical sites. However, the difficulty in identifying China's 'harmonious society', one major aspect of the propaganda campaign, seems to reveal the economic priority of the housing industry and the central government over social concerns. Overall, real estate billboards display site-specific visions that are anchored to the urban terrain whilst simultaneously bending to the fiction of the China Dream.

The choice of perspective is the second feature that characterises real estate billboards and ultimately suggests the potential producer and consumer of those imaginaries. The two common perspectives are either face on or a bird's eye view from above. The frontal view invites visual proximity and inclusion and has the potential to convey the sensation that posters simultaneously participate in and stretch the current urban space into a future and imaginative dimension. However, it is the top-down perspective that is most significant. It allows for a sense of discernment and control over the picture. The bird's eye perspective hints at the gaze of an omniscient eye, which can dominate the everchanging urban space and even flatten the verticality of the city.

The close-up picture of the *butong* (Fig. 1.4) displays the renewed area of Beijing's old urban centre from above and reveals the density and normally unseen geometry of roofs, internal gardens, and green areas. The grouped complexes almost become plastic monopoly houses. Thanks to such totalizing view, the spectator can visually and mentally take part in the game and malleably reconfigure the space to their will. Likewise, in Putuo district, in north-west Shanghai, another billboard advertising the upcoming AI park offers a comprehensive sight of what will be built behind the fences (Fig. 1.6). Through a top-down perspective, the poster displays a strikingly ordered green scene that juxtaposes buildings, trees, and infrastructures in a neat and gracious way. The billboards' aesthetics mirrors that of an online simulation game or other mapping

software, such as Google Earth, Gaode Maps or Baidu Maps, which promises an all-encompassing view and knowledge.⁴⁴



Fig. 1.6 Photograph taken in Putuo district, Shanghai by the author, 8 May 2019.

Not only are maps a means to navigate and explore a territory, but they are also anticipations of spatial reality (Anderson 1983, 173). Benedict Anderson, who theorised nationalism and imagined communities, brings forward the connection between maps and power. Rather than reproducing the model of the earth's surface, maps materialise the vision of the colonizer. In this case, it is the atlas of the housing industry as opposed to everyday urban dwellers. As a collection of logos easily recognisable, the map 'penetrated deep into the popular imagination, forming a powerful emblem [...] (Anderson 1983, 175). This wide and penetrating viewpoint from the top insinuates what de Certeau calls 'the fiction of knowledge'. He argues that despite the sensation of extensive understanding, 'the panorama-city is a "theoretical" (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices' (Certeau 1984b, 93). Therefore, the vision from above fails to capture the depth of the city and the liveliness of

⁴⁴ In a different context, Charles and Ray Eames deployed this perspective expedient to produce the short film, *Powers of Ten* (1977).

the less visible. Its overarching aesthetics is so homogenous and totalising that it offers the superficial sensation of encompassing knowledge and immediate possibilities. Like the map, which is instantly recognisable and secured in popular imagination, billboards become systems of pure signs.

Lastly, there are different processes of erasure at play in the creation of billboards. Despite the plasticity and impalpability of these envisaged futures, billboards have come to be understood as material and immediate realities that are extremely accurate to the final project. However, these leisured neighbourhoods and green liveable spaces are not necessarily truthful to the surroundings. Aiming to attract home buyers and investors, they are instrumental visualisations and, as such, they choose what to highlight and/or conceal. Rose et al. identify this process of erasure in the tension between the time consuming design and the pristine look of billboards (2016). As a labour-intensive and highly selective production, those constructed imaginaries entail a range of specialists, who respectively focus on light, colour, material, and texture. Furthermore, such processes also account for multiple software, periodic reviews, and time (Gillian, Degen, and Melhuish 2016, 3–5). Indeed, most images present sunny and cloudless skies or suffused shafts of light falling into the skylines and develop through a neat structure to create a sensually attractive vision. By stimulating aesthetically pleasing perceptions, the amount of work becomes completely invisible and irrelevant to the final aestheticized image.

On top of the erasure of the designing process, what seems to become secondary against the totalising aesthetics of billboards is the actual house on sale. Billboards display extensive overviews of green and quiet neighbourhoods, dense and illuminated skylines, or close-ups of the stylish interiors that look like exclusive previews. However, they seldom present accurate and complete images of the projects. Although the goal of commercial ads is to sell an apartment, villa, or entire compound, it is often impossible to clearly distinguish the property on sale from the rest of the picture. It results that billboards are more suggestive than informative. As billboards do not

communicate precise data, Wang Xiaoming and Yang Liu suggest that they evoke the flavour of an urban, wealthy, and cosmopolitan lifestyle. ‘Things, such as fortune, position, reputation, leisure life and noble style as well as a beautiful wife from the West, which are remote in real life are within reach in the advertisements’ (Xiaoming Wang and Yang 2010, 27). They promise a shortcut to access a better and superior urban experience. Hence, estates become one symbolic element, among others, to immerse potential buyers in the extensive vision of a new and improved life.

Alongside the processes of erasure operating at the design and content level, there are two other elements mostly absent in the final visualisations of real estate billboards: individuals and social activities. The brand-new complexes seem completely uninhabited and undisturbed. Vivid, clean, and well-structured, these environments own an almost surreal appearance, especially if thought in the actual context of the trafficked and overcrowded Chinese metropolises. The posters conceal undesired and disruptive aspects of the daily life and envisage an urban space that is completely controlled and free of crowds, traffic jams or pollution.

The process of erasure performed within billboards seems to refer to that occurring in the physical cities. The printed imaginaries illustrate the common top-down practice of clearing the city from anything that suggests illegality or deterioration and, hence, could damage the urban image. For instance, since the 1990s, and especially in preparation for mega events, such as the Beijing Olympics in 2008, street managers (*chengguan*) have patrolled the streets to fine and get rid of street vendors.⁴⁵ As an unregulated presence in the city, which often cannot meet established environmental and sanitary standards (Song 2020), these unofficial traders compromise the city’s image and perceived success. Therefore, the aesthetic processes of erasure in billboards can be

⁴⁵ The street stalls range from those selling clothes and printed materials to those preparing food and trading second-hand furniture. Interestingly, Song notices that since Covid-19, the street stall economy has surged again with the support of the government to revitalise the post-pandemic economy and unemployment (2020). The topic of the cleansing campaigns will be touched upon in the following chapters.

considered as a further extension of the official strategy, which conceals certain individuals and objects as required.⁴⁶

Overall, the examination of site-specificity, perspective, and erasure constitute the distinctive visual language of the real estate billboards that can evoke influential urban imaginaries. These three aesthetic features can help demonstrate that posters contribute to an emerging urban aesthetics that can offer ways to reassess the experiences of urban space. By borrowing similar features and aesthetics to the surroundings and adopting diverse points of view, they insert themselves in and extend the urban space. Despite their actual flatness, they sensually load and give further depth to the urban fabric, stretching the physical and present reality into positive and promotional future dimensions. Moreover, billboards have the potential to shape urban space, especially as they seem to align with the pervasive ideology of the China Dream. However, it is important to remember that they provide one among several competing urban imaginaries. The top-down view and the erasure of both the designing process and less desirable aspects of urbanisation hint at the visions of an elite and their economic and political agenda. As a result, real estate billboards unfold and further complicate the already dense urban fabric, disclosing how political and economic interests have an impact on space-making.

To establish further the impact of billboards, I draw on Jens Beckert's concept of 'imagined futures' (2012, 2016). Although Beckert's theory is grounded in finance, it is transferrable to the analysis of real estate billboards in China. Specifically, it has the potential to shed light on the ways in which billboards can shape space-making and future expectations. His theory asserts that economic investments occur in conditions of uncertainty and unpredictability and, thus, rely on the fiction of better futures and economic profit. Moreover, Beckert suggests that economic

⁴⁶ Apart from the aesthetic and social erasure, there is another kind of cleansing that involves ethnicity (Finley 2018; D. O'Brien and Primiano 2020). Specifically, here I refer to the recent wiping out of the Uyghur's community, which has not merely taken place in Xinjiang, but also in other Chinese cities (Ruiz 2021). Several restaurants, shops and other businesses owned by them have been forced to close. Moreover, in Shenzhen, several factories are divided into ethnic groups and regional provenience so that they can be assimilated (Ruiz 2021).

decision-making is dependent on the visions of a few actors. This powerful minority wants to gain capital and bets on their own ‘mental representations of future states’, what he calls ‘fictional expectations’ (Beckert 2012, 3). The impossibility to foresee the future justifies their risky decisions and investments, whilst augmenting economic restlessness and innovation through fiction (Beckert 2016, 84). He argues that decision-making is inherently uncertain and based on speculative expectations. However, when decisions are made by relevant actors and are coherent with the present, hence plausible, they have the potential to shape the future and self-realise their own predictions (Beckert 2012, 15–16, 2016, 11).

Real estate billboards become themselves the visual counterpart of Beckert’s financial investments. Informed by the interests of the housing industry, they express specific economic predictions through homogenous aesthetic forms. Firstly, the housing market is very competitive and hard to predict. In these uncertain conditions, state-owned enterprises, semi-private, private, and foreign-owned firms coexist together and create an uncertain environment, where economic survival depends on successful relationships with the local and central authorities.⁴⁷ The creation and production of billboards support these investments through visually pleasing images. Secondly, the visual content of billboards, like many investments, needs to be revised and approved by officials. Hence, the imaginaries often align with the collective imaginings of the China Dream to be more successful. Thirdly, the investments need to carefully choose their target, which in the case of billboards is the rising middle class. The reason why ads focus on the Chinese new middle class lies in their high-end lifestyle, their stable income, and ultimately, their need to validate their recent social upgrade (Xin Wang 2014). Hence, billboards are simultaneously informed by and shaping bourgeoisie’s taste. Bearing this in mind, real estate billboards operate in a similar way to Beckert’s imagined futures and, hence, are also capable of concretising their own visions.

⁴⁷ Recently, due to the US-China trade war and a tightening regime under Xi Jinping, businesses have had to be particularly careful to the changing dynamics and standards imposed in the business industry by the party. Since the US and Europe hit China’s market in an attempt to criticise China’s human rights, counter-sanctions have been announced by the central government to weaken the influence of western industries, MPs and scholars (Oxford Analytica 2021). Moreover, this year, the multinational tech-company Alibaba has been fined a record \$2.75 billion for anti-monopoly violations (R. Zhong 2021). The current political climate points towards a tightening market that is harder to navigate (Hackenbroich 2022).

However, there is a significant limitation in the application of Beckett's theory to the context of this discussion, which can be identified in the annihilation of urban consumers. In this sense, urban dwellers are treated as passive consumers rather than actively embracing the attractive urban imaginaries and lifestyle available within billboards. In other words, it fails to recognise that urban residents are individuals able to decode the symbolic messages anchored in the ads. Hall explains that although the advertising message is produced by the housing industry, it does not form a closed and determined system; on the contrary, it 'draws topic, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, "definitions of the situation" from the wider socio-cultural and political system (1973, 3). Therefore, urbanites are both the sources and receivers of the message conveyed within real estate billboards. This means that the circulation (encoding) and reception (decoding) of the message 'are incorporated, via a number of skewed and structured "feed-backs", back into the production process itself' (Hall 1973, 3). On the one hand, the real estate industry advances its imaginaries to boost its profits and feed into the aspirations and dreams of the Chinese middle class. On the other, it encodes meaningful signs and discourse that the middle class can decode and make sense of. Overall, the process of communication, and in this case advertising production, becomes a performative act to impose or lean towards one dominant code (Hall 1973, 14) and urban imaginary.

However, as mentioned before, whereas the official vision for a dream city has become institutionalised by the housing and advertising industries, it is constantly renegotiated by the emergent Chinese middle class. As the Chinese middle class got rich overnight due to the economic development of the 1990s, it did not inherit the cultural and social capital that is necessary to produce class identity (Bourdieu 1984).⁴⁸ As a result, buying goods and exhibiting

⁴⁸ Bourdieu defines the cultural capital as the forms of knowledge, skills, and education that give families or individuals a higher status in society, and which is inherited. The social capital combines the actual or potential resources which are linked to a durable network of relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit (Bourdieu 1997: 51).

wealth has become an empowering mechanism to acquire cultural and social capital and validate their status.⁴⁹ Today, the middle class shares economic grounds, but also the taste for western brands and design, and the desire to attend cafes, museums, restaurants, and other public spaces (Xin Wang 2014). On the one hand, they have been actively shaping their lifestyles to validate and even improve their social status; on the other, their desire to acquire cultural and social capital has informed marketing strategies. Overall, the Chinese bourgeoisie's everyday practices become a performative tool to express their social status and struggles, as well as renegotiate the hegemonic code of the central government and Chinese party.

Maintaining that consumption is prescribed by cultural preferences, then 'the construction of the middle class is in continuous production and reproduction through cultural practices' (Xin Wang 2014, 20). The repetition of collective acts is reminiscent of Judith Butler's concept of performativity. In her study of gender, performativity is understood as 'an account of agency' (Butler 2009, i), which is collective, public, and prescribed to historical, social, and political circumstances. It refers to the reproduction of norms, which 'are made and remade and sometimes they enter into crisis in the remaking' (Butler 2009, xi). This enactment suggests that gender is not 'predetermined' (Butler 1988, 521). On the contrary, it results from performative acts and is real only to the extent that it is performed. Hence, 'performativity is a process that implies being acted on in ways we do not always fully understand, and of acting' (Butler 2009, xii). Likewise, consuming becomes the performative acts through which the middle class constructs their identity. This identity, like gender, is not innate but occurs in the 'form of essence fabrication', as 'objects of belief' (Butler 1988, 520, 528). As a result, it is possible to advance that the performative acts of buying goods have two functions: on the one hand, they validate the pre-existing advertising strategies; on the other, they serve as a tool to construct the Chinese bourgeoisie's identity. Whereas billboards can self-realise their own visions, this is certainly possible thanks to the feedback loop between the housing industry and the rising middle class.

⁴⁹ As I will outline further in Chapter 2, one of the most recent means to assert one's status is through purchasing property.

1.3 Art in the dream city

Whereas billboards promote the urban visions of the housing industry and the middle class, through positive, yet, exclusive images, I suggest that the following artistic practices have the potential to multiply the inclusive and personal encounters of the city. Specifically, they form Hall's oppositional codes, which reframe the dominant discourse by advancing alternative interpretations. Amplifying the sensual and perceptual accounts of the urbanity, artistic practices do not merely foresee present and future cityscapes. They imagine them. Imagining, as perceiving, is participating from within through the sensual perception of the surroundings. Moreover, it is also the action of the becoming of things, which presupposes an indispensable fluidity between actual and imaginary (Janowski and Ingold 2012, 4). Such intuitions further authenticate artworks' visions. They provide with 'metaphorics of the city', which reveal 'the real experiences of cities [that] are caught in networks of dense metaphorical meanings' (Highmore 2005, 4–5). It is in the comparative analysis of billboards and artworks and their tension that one can grasp the depths, cracks and overlaps of the urban terrain as a spatial and social platform where different actors intervene and push forward their views and interests.

This section examines the works by Beijing and Shanghai based artists, Wang Wei, Miao Xiaochun, Zhao Yao, Ni Weihua and Xing Danwen. Although their practices do not all necessarily respond to the phenomenon of advertising billboards directly, they have been selected for the following reasons: firstly, their relevance in the discussion of site-specificity, perspective and process of erasure enhances me to further interlink and compare billboards with art and the city. Secondly, their bidimensional and flat character, which resembles billboards, makes their similarities and differences even more evident. Thirdly, the artistic strategies have the potential to encourage viewers to become aware, and perhaps even reappropriate and reimagine space. Fourthly, the chosen artists all belong to that generation, which experienced the extraordinary shift from a socialist to a highly urbanised and globalised nation. In their works, the city is the starting point

for their artistic practices rather than merely constituting the backdrop of socio-political or economic discussions. Lastly, the works selected are exemplary of some of the most common artistic strategies that will be discussed in this thesis: whereas Zhao and Miao have a documentary approach and Wang and Xing use optical illusion and fictional characters, Ni engages with ordinary urban dwellers, even if from the distance. This selection reinstates the variety of artistic practices and overall direction of the following chapters. Together, they provide a cohesive and multi-layered group of works that is insightful to discuss the impact of imagination in understanding space-making and exalts the simultaneity and multiplicity of approaches and actors in the urban fabric.

Whereas billboards could be said to be designed to accentuate the China Dream by branding space through a homogenous and totalising image, the practice of Beijing based artist, Wang Wei, seems to intervene in the urban fabric to wither away this beautified façade. Although his work does not directly respond to billboards, it has extensively explored space and its representations through a multisensorial approach. Wang is interested in restaging quotidian scenes. His site-specific installations are imperfect reproductions made of mosaics which aim to challenge and raise the viewers' awareness towards their surroundings. In *What you see, is not what you see* (2017) (Fig. 1.7), Wang's tiles, ranging from cream to different nuances of grey, mirror the gallery environment to camouflage amongst the white cube and deceive the audience. However, it is only a cheap and flat reproduction. Rather than a seamless and homogenous copy, the mosaics deconstruct and reconstruct the view emphasizing the individuality of each tile. Contrary to billboards, which produce uniform and fluid imaginaries that guide the collective understanding of how the city should look, the tiles reclaim the plurality and distinctiveness of possible urban futures.

Through a contrasting approach, Wang's mosaics invite a critique over the homogenised environment of Chinese cities by emphasising the individuality of each mosaic tile. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, architecture and urban planning seem to bend to economic and

ideological imperatives to empower cities and compete in the global scene. More than clusters where people accumulate, cities become territorialisation of regional, national, and international economies into a global system (Robinson 2002). As such, architecture, urban planning, and infrastructure act as indexical of cities' distinctiveness (Klingmann 2010). They set distinctions, which are necessary to inspire and establish successful models and standards for urban planning and substantiate an idealised narrative for the city. Billboards comply with this vision of cities as branding engines. They tend to privilege one aesthetic expression over the 'heterogeneous social fabric from which people can create their identities' (Klingmann 2010, 44). By resisting this trend of reducing urban imaginaries into one fluid and collective image, Wang's work, *What you see, is not what you see*, praises the diversity and plurality of sensual experiences triggered by architecture and space.



Fig. 1.7 Wang Wei, *What you see is not what you see*, 2017, site-specific installation, mosaic tiles, chairs, curtains, metal pillars, 1650.5x330 cm.

A conceptually similar work which deconstructs the hyper-homogenous and aestheticized urban reality is provided by the same artist through another mosaics work. *Shadow* (2017) (Fig. 1.8) aims to confuse urban dwellers' visual experience as they wander around the public space. Fixed onto the concrete ground, at the base of a tree, the work emulates the shadow of the tall plant. Here, the deception lies in the unnatural coexistence of two different shadows, which, apart from a few moments of correspondence, never coincide. Whereas real estate billboards overcome the discontinuity and diversity of urban space by providing an illusion of fluidity, Wang's work, on

the contrary, exaggerates the artifice. The intentions of the above artistic practices diverge from and challenge the accuracy and exclusivity of the housing industry's visions. Real estates' goal to slip into urban dwellers' imagination and affirm their imaginaries is juxtaposed to Wang's invite to consciously reconnect with space. Overtly deceptive, the artist's work provides viewers the possibility to spot the cracks within the second-hand representation and perhaps recreate their own visions. Wang's works propose an additional way to assess space, one that whilst being rooted in the surroundings, privileges the viewer rather than the creators.



Fig. 1.8 Wang Wei, *Shadow*, 2017, site-specific installation, mosaic tiles, 1350x1020 cm.

I argue that this comprehensive and homogenous view, which is one of the main traits of real estate billboards, can also be achieved through the skilful use of perspective. By providing a top-down view, billboards empower the viewers by letting one believe that they can control what they see thanks to their ability to distinguish roads, paths, corners, and buildings. However, maintaining de Certeau, the roads network and the everyday escape 'the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye' (Certeau 1984a, 93). Likewise, Anderson suggests that the omniscient gaze typical of maps reduces the complexity of vast territories into recognisable signs, such as longitudes and latitudes (1983). Through this process, the designer flattens the diversity of the urban space and, specifically,

brings forth an artificially constructed image that privileges certain features of the city. Whereas billboards seem to function in a similar way to make their imagined futures more recognisable and remarkable, Beijing based artists Miao Xiaochun and Zhao Yao revert this process. Contrary to the fluid and exclusive images of real estate ads, the artistic works by Miao and Zhao present inclusive accounts of the city which minimise manipulation and privilege inclusivity.

Firstly, Miao's *Beijing Index* (2007-9) (Figs. 1.9-10) is a two year long photographic project that attempts to provide multifaceted representations of the city through an overarching perspective. Aware of the subjective role of the photographer, Miao attempts to reduce his presence and intervention by documenting the urban changes in Beijing through a three hundred and sixty degree view. Drawing meridians and parallels onto a map of Beijing, he chooses the topographical intersections as shooting locations and captures the surroundings without privileging any specific sites or objects (Fig. 1.9). To support that, each image is named after its geographical coordinates. His photographs comprise very different realities, from the Forbidden City to shopping malls, industrial areas, and abandoned sites, as well as street vendors and narrow alleys (Fig. 1.10). His images are not after composition, instead, they attest to the urban and social ground in a thorough and 'democratic' way.



Fig. 1.9 Miao Xiaochun, *Beijing Index: D18*, 2007-9, archival print, 25x95 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 1.10 Miao Xiaochun, *Beijing Index: K17*, 2007-9, archival print, 25x95 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Specifically, Miao's representations of the city challenge its symbolic value, which often favours certain urban areas and condemns others as undesired, irregular, or dangerous. As the city becomes an experimental platform to advance and inform new ways of being global, modern, and, hence, competitive (Ong 2011, 23), its representations come to be understood as highly selective processes. On the one hand, the urban centres and waterfronts turn into privileged areas that undergo continuous renovation; on the other, peripheral, and informal neighbourhoods are condemned and cleansed.⁵⁰ Contrary to the official and elitist imaginary of the city as envisioned by the government and housing industry, the round viewpoint of *Beijing Index* embraces the spectator's gaze and captivates a variety of social groups. In Miao's photographs, there are construction workers, street cleaners, children, white collars, urban dwellers, and men in Beijing's

⁵⁰ In Chapter 3, I will discuss the theme of concealed and cleansed urban areas, one being the villages in the city (VICs). They are irregular habitations that are often associated with informal and transient settlements in other parts of the world and, hence, associated with poverty and unhygienic conditions. The local and central governments have cleansed, renovated and even demolished several of them in an attempt to advance an image of economic and technological development, on the one hand, and political control, on the other.

bikini.⁵¹ His series is not only relevant for opposing the ubiquity of the China Dream vision, but also for allowing Chinese citizens to reconnect with their urban spaces through a less imposing and exclusive approach. The three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view allows for an embracing sensation and the preference for the everyday to the spectacular.



Fig. 1.11 Zhao Yao, *I Love Beijing*, 2008-9, single-channel video (colour, silent), 41 min 6 sec.

Produced at a similar time, Zhao Yao's *I love Beijing 999* (2008-9) (Fig. 1.11) is a video of more than 30,000 still images captured through a view from below. Chasing the sun by riding through nine-hundred and ninety-nine bus lines, Zhao documents the changing urbanscape preferring the view of the ordinary urban commuters.⁵² The sun is the main coordinate which makes sense of the changing surroundings. By establishing the sun and the bus as the longitudes and latitudes of his project, Zhao explores the urban terrain through a plurality of continuous flows. The sun is the pole around which buildings, signs, electric cables, flags and even people follow one another. The multiplicity and velocity of these urban encounters become irreproducible and leave the viewer with only a sense of what the city might look like. Like in Miao's photographic work, Zhao

⁵¹ Today, among the strategies to upgrade urban façades, the central government has established a series of good manners and rules for Chinese citizens. Behaviours, such as spitting, littering, wearing pyjamas in public and even, the so called Beijing bikini, have been publicly condemned and addressed as 'uncivilised behaviour' (S. Wang and Hollingworth 2019). The Beijing bikini is the common habit of men to roll up their t-shirts and tops to the chest due to the summer heat.

⁵² Ai Weiwei produced a similar project in 2012, titled *How to Scientifically Remove a Shiny Screw with Chinese Characteristics From A Moving Vehicle in Eighteen Turns*. However, in Ai's video there seems to be a deeper interest in the political symbols of Beijing which the artist passes by.

reinvents the ‘map-as-logo’ (Anderson 1983, 175) through unrepeatable scenes and rhythms of everyday urban life. Rather than an instantaneous and totalizing map, the artists produce a multiplicity of urban fragments that cannot comprehensively converge into one single account. Overall, the artistic practices of Miao and Zhao, rather than presenting a totalizing vision of a dream city, discern spaces and imaginaries by encouraging a variety of inclusive perspectives.



Fig. 1.12 Ni Weihua, *Landscape Wall: South Zhongshan Rd no.1, Shanghai*, 2010, photograph, 150x100 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Whereas Wang offers an alternative use of site-specificity and Miao and Zhao respectively advance a bottom-up sight, whose ambiguous edges represent the spatial multiplicity and social diversity of the city, Ni Weihua’s photographic series, *Landscape Wall* (2008-18) (Figs. 1.12-13) sheds light on the process of erasure that is at play in both the visual language of billboards and cities. Based in Shanghai, Ni has long investigated the extensive urban transformations and documented how they inevitably alter the physical and social landscape. *Landscape Wall* is the outcome of his numerous wanderings around the city and photographs of commercial advertisements. In his images, the pictures of foreigners inhabiting western-style villas with swimming pools or showing off

luxury goods are placed side by side to the actual urban dwellers walking past the panel. These latter individuals are construction workers, street vendors, commuters, and urban residents who have little, if nothing, in common with the picture. As Gu Zheng suggests, ‘the only possible relevance that the passers-by bear to the mansions might be the fact that they are the construction workers’ (Gu 2012, 17). By capturing ordinary citizens against the beautified landscape, Ni emphasises the concealment of the increasing social and spatial fragmentation within cities.

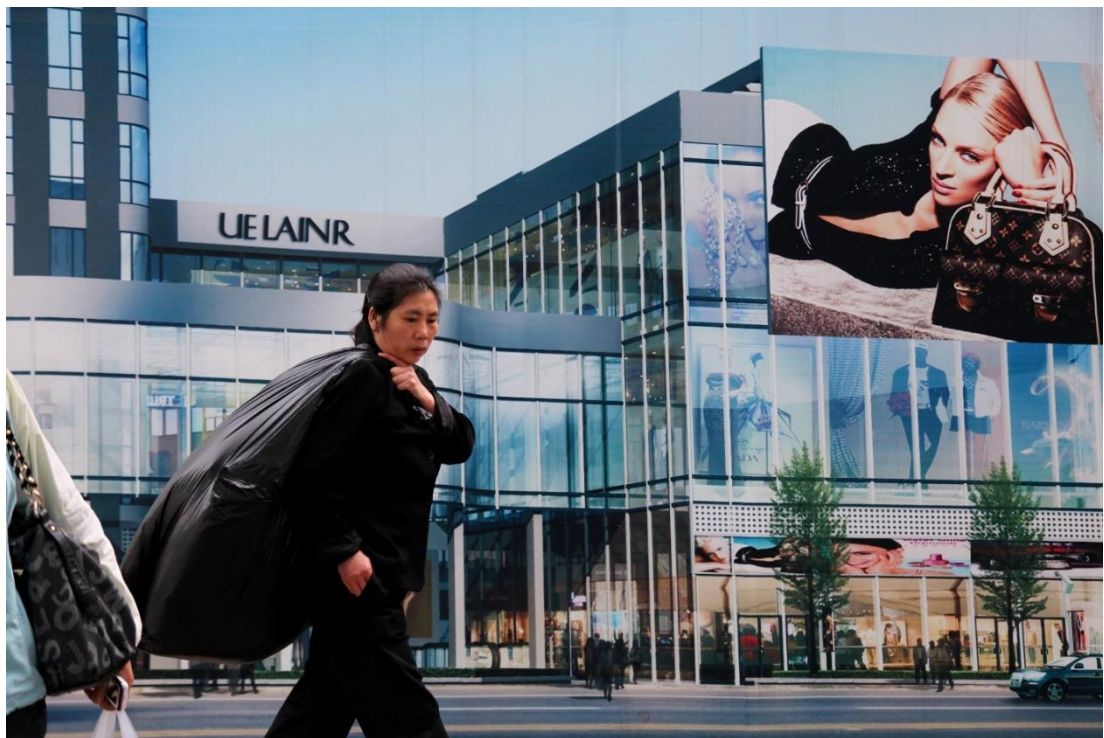


Fig. 1.13 Ni Weihua, *Landscape Wall – Qingyang Temple, Chengdu, Sichuan*, 2011, photograph, 100x150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

His work initiates a deeper reflection on the social toll that has been paid mostly by low-income workers to materialise the pristine urban vision of a powerful minority (M. Wang 2015b). Whereas the references to this powerful, yet minor imaginary are everywhere in the city, as exemplified by billboards, the representations of the workers are erased.⁵³ To advance an alternative vision, Ni’s practice juxtaposes unwanted characters and elements to billboards. Rather than concealing

⁵³ In Chapter 3, I will delve into this problematic issue by exploring the hidden presence of migrant workers in Chinese cities. Although they have provided the critical manual labour to build Chinese metropolises, they have been excluded from them.

unwanted workers and ordinary urban scenes, he brings them to the fore of the picture. In *Landscape Wall – Qingyang Temple, Chengdu, Sichuan* (Fig. 1.13), the woman walking in front of the life-size billboards is not holding a Louis Vuitton's bag as the image of an elegant western model suggests. On the contrary, she carries a big black bin bag on her shoulder. Ni's photographs cynically highlight the hyper-realistic and plastic character of billboards by highlighting what is erased: low-income workers, air pollution in Chinese cities, traffic congestion, and the stark social differences.

To evaluate the impact of real estate billboards and artistic practices on imagining and space-making, I draw on a final case-study, namely the photographic project by Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction* (2005-6) (Figs. 1.14-16). The series stems, firstly, from Xing's long fascination with China's extensive urban transformations and relative social implications; and, secondly, from her previous experience as photojournalist. Specifically, before becoming a renowned artist, she took part in several real estate fairs as a reporter, which convinced her to investigate the complex dynamics between the housing industry and the middle class.⁵⁴ During those fairs, developers would exhibit three-dimensional miniaturised models and digital renderings of the property to promote not only the physical characteristics, but also enhance a sensual and aesthetic experience for the potential buyer. Rather than facilitated by the material qualities of the house, the relationship between the developer and the client becomes regulated by the feelings and promises that the physical and digital modelling can raise. Referring back to Wang and Yang (2010), the housing industry appears to be mostly concerned with evoking sensual perceptions than communicating precise information. Likewise, Xing identifies the developers' preoccupation to stimulate emotions in the carefully designed models, which moulds the dreams and imagination of the Chinese middle class into plastic displays.

⁵⁴ Author's in-person interview with Xing Danwen, Starbucks Café, Beijing, 1 May 2019.

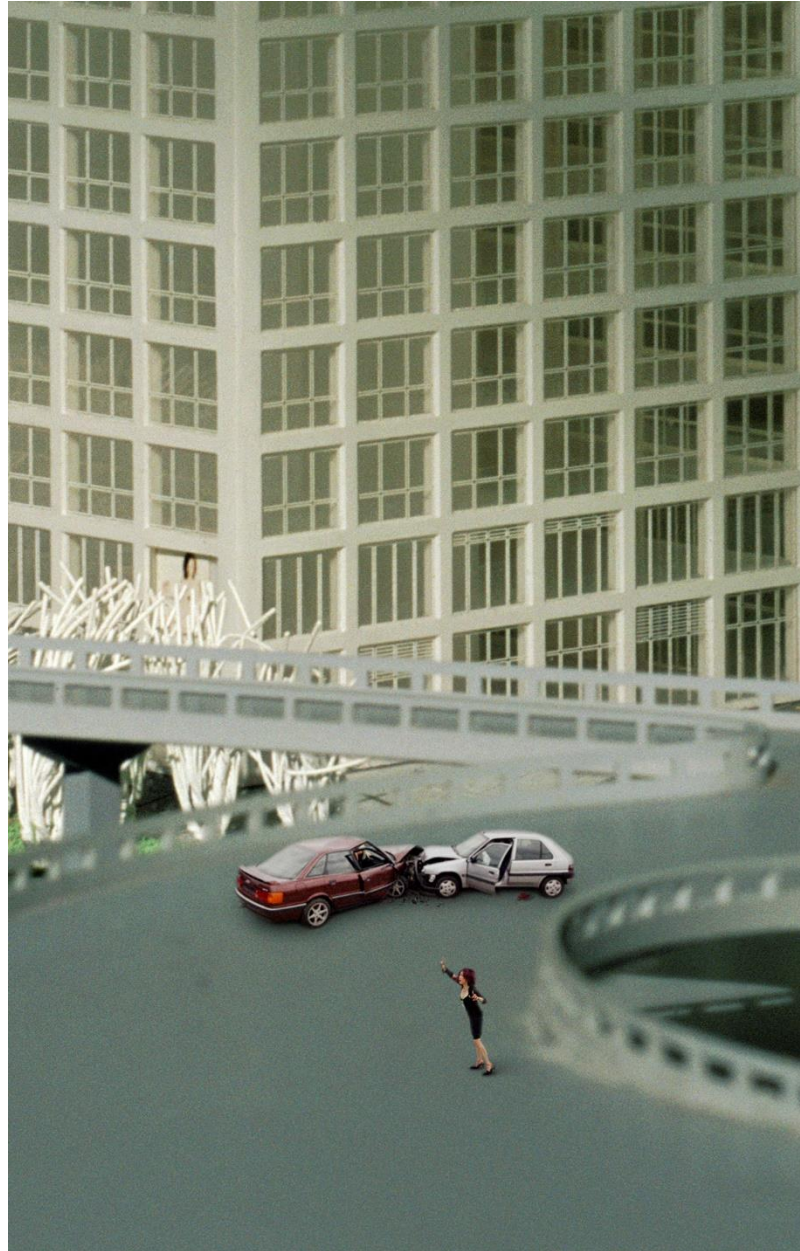


Fig. 1.14 Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction: Image 3: detail*, 2005, photograph, 224.3x170 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Specifically, Xing digitally manipulates real estate three-dimensional models and creates fictional narratives through the addition of fictitious characters in the original photos. At first, her photographs appear as anonymous and uninhabited blocks of flats illuminated by artificial lights. The verticality and seriality of cold buildings occupy the scene. Whether it is a series of white skyscrapers viewed from above or a close-up of a block of residences, the pictures are empty, rigorously neat, and monotonous. However, they have a sinister presence with their unusual and strange desolation, and it is only in the details that one can find some hints of urban everyday life.

This is the case of the car crash imagined by Xing (Fig. 1.14). At the bottom of the scene, the image of two cars, which have crashed on an elevated road, stands against a dense grid of black and grey buildings. Near the car, an elegant woman with dyed hair, wearing high heels and a little black dress asks for help waving her hands in the air. Although at first, the figure of the woman gets unnoticed against the copious and imposing flats, by zooming into the picture, one eventually sees her desperate cry for help. Xing's work features a performative agency that can be identified in the insertion of active characters who simultaneously reproduce and subvert the urban imaginaries of the housing industry.



Fig. 1.15 Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction: Image 1*, 2009, photograph, 233x170 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In her artistic practice, she departs from the three-dimensional renderings of real estate properties to create alternative urban fictions through a warped process of mental wandering. Apart from the car accident, Xing stages a variety of ironic and playful stories in her photographs. Although the figure in her scenes is always her alter ego for reasons of convenience, the background and narrative differ. They range from a luxurious villa with the swimming pool (Fig. 1.15), to gated

communities with lush greenery and high-density residential compounds. Likewise, the woman is captured sunbathing, smoking a cigarette with a bored expression on her face, watering flowers, and caught half-dressed amid committing adultery (Fig. 1.16). Whereas at first her characters seem to endure the transformations of the city as they blend into them, in the end they emerge as active citizens, who have the potential to reproduce and recreate their own urban imaginaries.



Fig. 1.16 Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction: Image 23: detail*, 2005, photograph, 212.5x170 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In conclusion, my comparative analysis suggests that visual arts and billboards provide alternative methods to make sense of the urban transformations and space-making in China. On the one hand, billboards convey a highly positive, exclusive, and state sanctioned message that promotes a homogenous and fluid urban vision devoid of any problematics. On the other, the artworks discussed above approach the city in different ways through inclusive and diverse urban encounters. Firstly, Wang's work deploys optical illusion to confuse the sensual experience of the viewers and encourage a re-discovery of space. Secondly, the works by Miao and Zhao are illustrative in their intent and aim at providing a counternarrative to the top-down view imposed by the governments and the housing industry. Lastly, Ni and Xing both depart from the outer reality and insert a fictive element into it. Whereas Ni's work includes ordinary workers walking

by and is more cynical in its social critique, Xing's photographs feature imaginary characters and stories to weave playful accounts of the city that are mediated through an amusing everyday rather than the spectacular. Despite their individual approaches and effects, they share one similarity: they have the potential to subvert the homogenous and totalising aesthetics of real estate billboards.

The comparative analysis conducted through the three lenses of site-specificity, perspective, and erasure can articulate some of the ways in which space is produced and imagined. Specifically, it has led to the following findings: firstly, the discussion of site-specificity suggests that urban representations are anchored to the physical reality to then take flight and wander around the realms of imagination. Whereas billboards hook and guide the spectator towards the designers' imaginings, Wang's installations invite the audience to actively sense the space, be one with it and, hence, re-imagine it. The visual language includes images that evoke China's development in urban planning and infrastructure, the national effort in ecological practices, the preservation of cultural and historical areas and the pride in building spaces that inspire civilised behaviour. Overall, the content of billboards, which is specific to their location, seems to reinforce the aims of the China Dream.

Secondly, it emerges that the perspective can be informative of the desired audience of both aesthetic practices, billboards, and visual arts. The bird's eye view typical of billboards displays the exclusive visualisations of real estate developers and targets the new middle class through the careful production of pristine images. Miao's and Zhao's photographic series, instead, includes a wider variety of sites and individuals, respectively through three-hundred-and-sixty degree shots and the bus view. The artistic approaches shed light on those parts of the city and social groups that often get erased due to the official promotion of a homogenous urban narrative.

Thirdly, the mechanism of erasure allows to identify the increasing socio-spatial inequalities. Both the design of billboards and Ni's series disclose the common practice of concealing undesired and unwanted aspects of the city through beautified visions and idealised futures.⁵⁵ Moreover, it reveals the marketing approach of the housing industry, where buyers are drawn into purchasing thanks to the evocative sensations and aesthetics associated with the property. The message of real estate billboards suggests that buying can provide a shortcut to acquire cultural and social capital and perhaps even support the China Dream. Lastly, Xing's photographs demonstrate the ambiguous and loose understanding of the dream. Despite the top-down attempts to materialise the China dream into concrete and definite form through urban planning and architecture, Xing exaggerates these plastic and evocative imaginaries and makes fun of state-sanctioned promises through her own imagination and practice. She pictures these fictional futures as hazy puffs of smoke. As much as the official narrative of the dream city can pierce urban dwellers before they can even notice, this smoke can be similarly dissipated by a gust of wind or imagination.

Today, as spectacular architecture and engineering projects validate the nebulous and intangible goal of modernisation, cities become physical displays for nations' economic and political power. In such a competitive and carefully orchestrated urban reality, billboards and artistic practices offer ways to stretch the physical urban terrain into further imaginary dimensions and can provide a more comprehensive understanding of space-making. They are performative acts that constantly adapt to and reimagine a changing urban panorama which is more and more rooted into impressions and sensations. On the one hand, drawing on the notion of performativity, they expose and reproduce current challenges and contradictions as they cannot escape from established norms; on the other, they intervene on the intricate intertwining and interconnectedness of the social urban space. Whereas billboards act on and are simultaneously

⁵⁵ Since the 1990s, the cleansing campaign and urban renewal practices have been implemented by central and local governments to erase migrant workers and entire neighbourhoods. Officially advertised as urban renewal campaigns, they fight the unattractiveness of migrant workers and the relative informal housing and businesses to achieve an aesthetically and, hence, economically attractive city. Nowadays, they are particularly evident in China's major metropolises, Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, among others. For more on this topic, see: He (2010); Lai and Zhang (2016); and Zhang (2005). I will discuss these concepts in Chapter 3.

informed by the middle class's fantasies and taste, artworks' agency can be found in their inclusive and diverse re-imaginings. Both practices reveal today's dominant tendency to deploy architecture and urban planning as signifiers for economic and political achievements and instigators for future changes.

Specifically, real estate developers promote a tightly pre-packed lifestyle through ads, which re-enacts the official vision of the China Dream. Billboards include the state's contradictory values of socialism and capitalism. At the same time, they also push forward their own financial prediction by exploiting and insinuating themselves into the new middle class' feelings and expectations. Although assessing the impact of real estate billboards on space-making is relatively speculative, as mediated representations of the city, they are highly relevant to the understanding and potential reconfiguration of urban futures. Moreover, they are even more insightful when juxtaposed to artistic practices. The works discussed above complicate the already loaded urban aesthetics by providing more inclusive imaginaries where urbanites can have an active agency in re-appropriating and shaping their space. Overall, I advance that these encounters of the city cannot be separated from one another. They are interwoven together, and it is exactly their interconnectedness that is revealing about space-making.

Overall, billboards do not merely comply with the China Dream or exploit the new middle class. Instead, there are more subtle dynamics to consider. As real estate developers consciously deploy the China Dream to pursue their interests, the new middle class is similarly feeding into their collective imaginaries in a conscious way to affirm its status. Together, billboards and artistic practices tackle the allusive and illusive environment, which stems from the 'tangle of physicality and symbolism, the sedimentation of various histories, the mingling of imaginings and experience' (Highmore 2005, 4–5). These future imaginings are always in transition. They visualise the complexity of the city, its simultaneous plurality and singularity. In conclusion, they challenge,

reinforce and advance parallel, yet intertwining, understandings of the city as a territorial, social, and mediated entity that is produced not merely by a powerful minority, but diverse forces.

2. The Worlding City



Fig. 2.1 Xiang Liqing, *Residence no. 1*, 2006, photograph, 60x60 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Enclosed in a circular frame, the sight of a turquoise and pink house with bizarre pinnacles and rounded balconies appears as a flashy vision seen through a crystal ball (Fig. 2.1). Privileging the unusual and one of a kind, the colourful façade blends architectural styles and cultural practices, blurring the distinction between physical and imaginary, foreign and indigenous, beautiful, and ugly. Belonging to the photographic series, *Residence* (2006), by Shanghai-based artist, Xiang Liqing, the house embodies a fantastical imaginary. The image of this extravagant residency instils curiosity and questions over its actual materiality. The bizarre house alludes to a vernacular architectural practice that is not so extraordinary in China today. On the contrary, it is typical of

several Chinese cities, which continuously re-assemble and re-stage themselves against global and local milieus (Ong and Roy 2011). This synthesis between successful urban models and local specificities has become a popular strategy and fed into the practice of integrating foreign icons and western designs with China's urban space. On the one hand, the Chinese reproductions deploy the symbolic meaning of those international landmarks to gain cultural and political momentum. On the other, they equip Chinese cities with an everchanging nature that can potentially lead to a new understanding of cities, which blurs the line between real and unreal, local and global, to create new synergies.

Since 1978, China has strived to compete internationally with its modernising metropolises and, specifically, since 2012, this competition has been driven by Xi's dream to achieve a 'Strong China'. The objective of pursuing a Strong China is understood economically, politically, diplomatically, scientifically, or militarily. Although this term 'power' is hard to define and measure, Nye quotes Robert Dahl's and interprets it as 'the ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not do' (cited in Nye 2008, 177). He continues his argument by making a distinction within this concept of power. On the one hand, there is hard power, which is measured against material resources, such as military and economic strength. On the other, there is soft power, which exerts its attraction through intangible resources, including culture, political orientation, and foreign policies (Nye 2008). Whereas in the past hard power expressed national power, recently, it is soft power that has played an increasingly greater role in the world politics. Likewise, the concept of Strong China has to be understood not only in terms of economic, diplomatic, and military resources, but equally through the nation's soft power.

Today, there is little doubt about China's global role as a strong nation. In terms of tangible power, since the 2000s, the PRC has conformed to established international standards and fostered its national power, especially across Southeast Asia. In 2001, China joined the WTO and, later signed the Paris agreement on climate change in 2015. Moreover, recently it has developed the Asia

Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as built military bases around the South China Sea. Although China's hard power is a crucial part of its national and global success, soft power is just as much critical. Specifically, Callahan argues that soft power in China has a very peculiar nature (2015). Rather than strengthening foreign relations, soft power looks inwards and relies on the national longstanding culture and history to establish a strong sense of identity. Though it is mainly hard power to be examined in relation to the discourse of a 'Strong China', today it is urgent to investigate the less tangible, and yet invaluable soft power of China.⁵⁶

Therefore, I deploy the practice of integrating local and global milieus as a framework to interpret the goal of Strong China. Whereas the academic literature within the field of urbanism has mostly investigated the construction of CBDs and waterfronts, the urban renewal of old neighbourhoods and the urban aestheticization to measure and evoke China's power (Ren 2008; Campanella 2008; Greenspan 2014; O'Connor and Gu 2012), there are other urban practices that provide unique insights into space-making. Since the post-reform period, Eiffel Towers, Venice and reproductions of the Giza pyramids and the Taj Mahal have mushroomed as a quick-fix to the increasing demand for an upgraded urban experience. Unexpected and surreal, yet immersive and fluid, they have become integral parts of the construction of Chinese cities. More than copies, they are localised urban practices and reinterpretations of the goal of 'Strong China'. Although they are processes enacted by local officials and developers and driven by economic profit, they synthesise the dominant class' taste for the west with China's cultural and social specificity. The originality of this process lies in this unusual integration between global and local, which can bring forward a creative and diverse urban practice.

⁵⁶ It must be noted that there are literary sources on China's soft power, however, they are mostly situated in the field of international relations, international development, global power relations and often focussing on major events, such as the Beijing Olympics or the Belt Road Initiative (BRI). See Jacques (2009), Barr (2011), Callahan (2015; 2013), Nye (2012), Goldstein (2020).

This chapter examines four urban spaces that feature in this synthesising process: private estates in Beijing and Shanghai, the iconic reproductions of international landmarks, theme park, and themed towns. These spaces have been chosen for their relevance in space-making and interdependence with the selected artistic practices. Despite critiques, these urban exercises are not mere reproductions. Firstly, this chapter aims to demonstrate that they often are the results of a commercial tactic by real estate developers, who insert western features into their designs to respond to the middle class taste and, hence, increase their popularity. Secondly, rather than duplicating the originals, they tend to adapt to Chinese clients' and urban dwellers' requirements. Thirdly, through accurate reproductions, China affirms its ability to restage entire cityscapes and forge new cities at almost no time. Lastly, these urban exercises are insightful to understand how the city could be envisioned and reproduced in the future.

Specifically, this chapter demonstrates how urban and artistic practices can blur the line between physical and imaginary by concretizing a dreamscape and letting one believe that anything is possible. In an instant you are projected into another realm, where you can act accordingly. This phenomenon transforms cities into entertaining spaces that offer different sights and experiences to their urbanites. Whereas the older generation of artists attests to their surroundings and is fascinated by the increasing ambiguity between real and unreal, global and local which is offered by recent urban practices, more recent works have developed hybrid places and immersive installations. They propose multi-sensorial experiences of a city that allows viewers to travel places without leaving their country. Overall, this chapter argues that Chinese cities can be imagined as worlding cities, which are able to re-assemble global and local milieus into something anew and perhaps constitute an alternative urbanism.

2.1 A window into the west

Today, the city can be understood as a highly concentrated site of production in the organisation of the world economy (Sassen 1991, 29). Globalisation has dramatically altered the world

infrastructure and advanced a global economy that is highly united and interdependent, yet spatially dislocated (Sassen 1991). Among these changes, the city has also transformed to take up new roles. Referred to as ‘global city’ by Saskia Sassen and Manuel Castell, or ‘world city’ by John Friedmann, this urban centre has competed in the global economy, whilst maintaining its spatial and social connotations. In China, by the end of the 20th century, more than forty-three cities declared their commitment to turn into global cities (Ren 2011, 12). This aspiration has been pursued through significant infrastructure projects locally and nationally, thanks to the aid and direction of the central government. Ambitious developments inspired by successful global practices have materialised and internationally renowned architects have been invited to design distinctive waterfronts and skylines to empower and validate China’s global role through its urban imaginary.⁵⁷

Alongside the top-down and centrally-sanctioned projects to materialise the vision for a strong China, hybrid and extravagant architectural and urban designs have emerged to synthesise the taste for the west at the local level. Local authorities and the housing market have allowed the installation of duplicated landmarks and developed villas and neighbourhoods that are reminiscent of American and European lifestyles. Rather than inauthentic, as opposed to original, this practice of assimilation entails complicated dynamics that can be explained by China’s specific context. Firstly, the adoption of western principles can be justified by the neglect of urban planning and design during communist era. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, there was an urgent need to invest in such expertise (Bosker 2013). From an architecture measured against functionality and collective use, the post-reform period brought forward the necessity to deploy architecture and

⁵⁷ In Beijing, the central government planned the development of a thriving CBD juxtaposed to the old town. Situated in Chaoyang, Beijing’s official CBD stands out with its numerous high-rises. However, there are at least two other financial centres, in Xicheng and Haidian, which have been respectively developed to attract more capital and resources to those neighbourhoods (Gaubatz 2005). Cities, and within them districts too, compete to build iconic projects and commission international designs. For instance, SOHO China is a real estate company founded by Zhang Xin and Pan Shiyi, whose projects are associated with internationally renowned architects, such as Zaha Hadid, Kengo Kuma and Riken Yamamoto (Soho China 2012). Among other renowned projects, whereas the Beijing National Stadium was designed by the high-profile Swiss architecture firm, Herzog & de Meuron, in collaboration with artist Ai Weiwei (Herzog & de Meuron, n.d.), the CCTV headquarters have been projected by Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren (‘CCTV - Headquarters’ n.d.; Braester 2013).

design strategies to mark China's success and innovation at national and international level. Hence, the decision to follow western principles and techniques was a natural response to the newly emerged and divided discipline of architecture studies in China (Chen and Dai, Zhikang 2014).

Secondly, the reproduction of successful models was a quick and inexpensive way to acquire the needed engineering, architectural and technological knowledge. Today, Ong refers to this common strategy as 'modelling' and 'inter-referencing' (Ong 2011, 13). They are two interconnected practices particularly deployed in Asia, where cities take inspiration from established prototypes and measure their success against other advanced urban centres. Rather than bound to the west, these strategies rely on emerging Asian megalopolises, such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen, which can offer more localised models and solutions (Ong 2011, 15–18). Modelling and inter-referencing, together with association, are the three common practices that characterise the worlding city in China. Ong and Roy define the 'worlding city' as 'a milieu of intervention, a source of ambitious visions, and of speculative experiments that have different possibilities of success and failure' (2011, xv). They challenge the capitalist and postcolonial approaches and promote the understanding of diverse urban conditions, which do not ultimately refer to the west (Ong 2011, 14). In this context, the practice of integrating urban and local milieus can be understood as an urban exercise, which has the potential to advance new ways of being global.

Thirdly, the recreation of western landmarks and foreign architectural styles seems to respond to the taste of a changing society (Bosker 2013; F. Wu 2003; L. Zhang 2010). In the last thirty years, China lifted a great number of people out of poverty. The rapid improvement of life conditions, as opposed to the previous material deprivation, has fuelled the craze for western capitalism and consumerism (Chua 2000; C. Gu and Shen 2003). Whereas in the pre-reform era, the four most desired durable items were the sewing machine, watch, bicycle, and radio, in the 1980s they were replaced by the television, fridge, electric fan and washing machine (C. S. Fan 2000). Today,

private housing might become the necessity of the 21st century. It allows urban residents to access a modern and cosmopolitan lifestyle and validate not only individuals' social status, but also the nation's economic power (C. S. Fan 2000, 85–87). To achieve that, real estate developers have both exploited and fuelled the middle class's fascination with the west by branding their properties with extravagant and exclusive designs. By borrowing foreign engineering, technological, as well as visual and written language, the housing market has offered the Chinese elite and bourgeoisie a 'private paradise' (L. Zhang 2010, 2).⁵⁸

The common phenomenon of appropriating western architectural style to create private paradises has been thoroughly documented by international media (van Mead 2014; Leng 2017; Street 2018; BBC 2020), as well as elaborated through artists' work. Although today this practice has lost most of its extraordinariness, the unexpected encounters with Californian inspired mansions, Parisian cafés and life-size reproductions of Venice initially took national and international citizens by surprise. Artists in the 2000s were particularly fascinated by and often critical of the bizarre and hybrid architecture that was designed to attract capital. For instance, Xiang Liqing's photographic series *Residence* (2006) functions as an illustrative narration of the architectural extravaganza created to meet the developing taste of the Chinese new middle class. Despite its documentary nature, Xiang's series further confuses the already blurry separation between authentic and fake, urban and artistic practice, real and imaginary. Portrayed frontally from a low point of view, *Residence no. 1* (Fig. 2.1) has a hybrid and eclectic design with turquoise-green windows and pink bricks. The imposing gates deny both the physical and visual access to the property and suggest a sense of exclusivity. Physically close, but visually and perceptually remote, those gated houses are designed to mark and validate the social status of the buyer, the Chinese bourgeoisie.

Maintaining the discussion of billboards in the previous chapter, the taste of the middle class for western architecture and design is similarly instrumentalised by the housing industry to pursue its

⁵⁸ With visual and written language, I refer, respectively, to the western architectural styles and the adoption of foreign and exotic places to name buildings, streets, and gated communities.

economic goals. However, the extravagant and hybrid design is not purely an emulation of the west but undergoes a process of cultural translation. According to Bosker, real estate developers carefully consider traditional customs, such as the Chinese geomantic practice, *fengshui*, and the need for communal areas and guest rooms to host an extended family (Bosker 2013, 51). Rather than copying, the phenomenon of urban palimpsests subtends a complex process of translation, where exotic and appealing features are often melted into the local historical and cultural background to meet Chinese residents' needs.

Alongside economic and practical convenience and an emerging taste for the west, a further reason to adopt foreign symbols and architecture can be found in China's commitment to demonstrate its global power. To understand this point, it is useful to compare the notions of authenticity and creativity in the eastern and western philosophical tradition. Lothar Ledderose advances that whereas in the west, creativity stands for innovation and something anew, in Asia, it is the ultimate product of the reconfiguration and re-elaboration of some pre-existing oppositions (2000). In other words, in the eastern thought, everything is already available around us (A. Cheng 1997, 249–54; Robinet 1991, 14). Hence, multiplicity and creativity stem from re-arranging modules and oppositions.⁵⁹ This philosophical concept has been applied to traditional landscape paintings, where painters were trained and evaluated upon their ability to reproduce earlier masterpieces. By imitating previous masters' landscapes and re-enacting their essence, they demonstrated their knowledge of the past and, ultimately, their success as artists.⁶⁰ Likewise,

⁵⁹ The notion of creativity in the east Asian thought shares similarities with the postmodernist discourse. Postmodernism emerges in the late 20th century in the west as a philosophical movement which breaks with modernism and, thus, is concerned with notions of rupture, ambiguity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. Frederic Jameson suggests that 'postmodern consciousness [...] looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same' (1991, ix). The similarities between the two thoughts lies in the understanding of creativity as a synthesising process rather than absolute and ultimate innovation. Whereas in the Daoist tradition, creativity stands for nature's infinite ways to reinvent and multiply itself in a continuous generative cycle, in postmodernism, it is identified through repetition and the refusal of the 'novum' (Jameson 1991b, 104). Secondly, they both deny the existence of a singular and true reality to affirm several understandings of it, which are simultaneous, self-referential, and multiple.

⁶⁰ Several volumes and scholars have established and defined the essential elements to evaluate and appreciate an excellent landscape painting. Craig Clunas (1999) appoints Chinese painter, Xie He (6th century), as the first to collate together the *liu fa*, namely six criteria of Chinese painting. According to

China's urban palimpsests, by copying and restaging architecture, engineering and technological strategies affirm their mastery over the originals.

Although copying is commonly interpreted as a lack of originality and identity in the west, in China's architectural practice it can be understood as the integration of global and local milieus rather than something fake. On the one hand, this practice attempts to retain the symbolic significance of the landmark and can be even thought, reductively, as a validation of western pre-eminence; on the other, according to the east Asian thought, it demands a kind of boldness and even mastery to integrate global with local, foreign with indigenous. Among the most copied symbols, there is the United States Capitol building, followed by other distinctive sights, such as the Eiffel Tower or Venice. The selected sites have a specific significance embedded within them. One that goes beyond their physical appearance and entails a myriad of intangible principles and ideas. As Klingmann suggests, architecture has the power to inspire a set of mental connections which, for instance, associate the Eiffel Tower with 'Paris and, in the larger context, French culture' (2010, 50). However, once these cultural signs are spatially de-contextualised and inserted into another context, their function and identity change.

In China, this phenomenon of cultural translation has been so pervasive that several international artists have engaged with them. On top of Xiang Liqing, artist Qiu Zhijie photographed the US White House in Fuyang county and titled the work *The Dream* (Fig. 2.2).⁶¹ Visibly similar in terms

Jerome Silbergeld, the 'rhythmic vitality that animates living subjects' (1982, 31) was at the core of Xie's treatise on Chinese landscape, which discarded the visual phenomena to prefer the emotional and intimate experience ignited by the landscape. These six principles have developed and assumed different terminologies thanks to several scholars and essays, such as the *Bi Fa Ji (Notes on the Method for the Brush)* by Chinese artist Jing Hao (ca. 880-940) (West 2000). Here, I report Xie's six principles as paraphrased in Robert Thorp and Richard Vinograd's *Chinese Art and Culture* (Thorp and Vinograd 2001, 177), where the authors list the slightly different understandings and translations by scholars William Acker, James Cahill and Alexander Soper. The six laws included: the vital energy, the materiality of the brush, the thought to fulfil formality, the resonance with the physical image, the composition and placing of elements, and transmission.

⁶¹ The project of the Fuyang White House was completed in 2003 to host the district government offices and amounted to more than three million yuan (Anderlini 2008). Zhang Zhi'an, a former Party secretary of Yingquan district of Fuyang, was nicknamed the 'White House boss' (*bai gong*) after approving the expensive and distinctive construction (Tang et al. 2021, 1344). He was soon investigated for bribery and corruption and sentenced to death (Tian 2010).

of size, colours, and style, the Fuyang reproduction shares a similar governmental function to the original. However, the palm trees and numerous businesses outside the reproduced building hint at the subtropical climate and the high urban density of the Chinese city. Despite the differences, Qiu's photo reiterates the local officials' desire to assert their political authority through architecture and, specifically, through the symbolic significance of such a renowned building. Although this interpretation of the work remains valid, it is extremely ironic if thought against the ideological campaign of the China Dream and the recent worsening of the US-China relationship.



Fig. 2.2 Qiu Zhijie, *The Dream: Yingquan District Government House, Fuyang, Anhui Province*, 2007. Trans-Asia Photography Review Images.

Whereas Qiu's work documents China's reproduction of an American political symbol, the restaging of Venice in Hangzhou by Zhang Peili, shifts the focus to culture and history. Here, I discuss Zhang's photographic project, *Water Town of Venice: Hangzhou* (Fig. 2.3), and his installation, *A Scene in Black and White Unfolded Four Times* (2007) (Fig. 2.4). Produced in the first decade of the 21st century, just before the Beijing Olympics, his work captures one of the many reproductions of Venice around China, specifically in Hangzhou. As unexpected as this sight might be, the emulation evokes a cultural and historical connection between the two cities. Both situated on

canals and waterways, Venice and Hangzhou had a glorious past and rich culture.⁶² Visiting Hangzhou at its peak, the Venetian Marco Polo would describe the capital as ‘the noblest and best city in the world’.⁶³ However, their evident similarities become insignificant against the number of copies around the world. The reproduction of Venice Water Town becomes purely entertaining in today’s consumerist society.



Fig. 2.3 Zhang Peili, *Venice Water Town: Hangzhou*, 2007, photograph, 80x47 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The preference for a spectacular vision rather than its truthful resemblance provides a further lens to interpret Zhang’s work. The disproportions, size and layout of the copied elements all contribute to create a plausible, yet slightly different landscape. In his photograph, the tower, once confronted with the original, appears chunky. The elegant proportions and delicate colours of the Doge’s Palace are also lost in the red-bricked and solid building. Moreover, the three distinctive

⁶² Since the 7th century, the republic of Venice had stood as an important naval and commercial centre in the Mediterranean Sea, reaching its maximum power and expansion across the 13th and 14th centuries (Treccani n.d.). Around the same time, Hangzhou became the capital of the Chinese Empire and a very important centre for commerce (Britannica 2021).

⁶³ Translation of the original text: ‘*la più nobile città del mondo e la migliore*’ in Polo (1975, 123).

features of S. Mark's Square, namely the tower, palace, and columns, are disproportionate to one another and misplaced. Nevertheless, the overall scenery is reminiscent of the Venetian city. The brick Gothic architecture, Moorish influenced trilobate windows, as well as the Venetian lion all feature in Hangzhou to reproduce an embracing sensation of being in the Italian lagoon. The original city view is deconstructed into modules and reassembled through a careful process of selection into a new, yet acquainted form. Rather than the exact reproduction of the scene, it is the familiarity of the visual reproduction that seems fundamental to immerse the urban strollers into such a fantasy.

Whereas Zhang's photograph has a documentary function, it simultaneously challenges such vivid image by alluding to the heterogeneity and fragmentation of the urban space. From showing the cracks of this restaged reality, he goes more conceptual with his video installation *A Scene in Black and White Unfolded Four Times* (2007). Instead of a single image, this time the artist displays seven photographs of Venice Water Town across a row of twenty-eight small screens on the wall (Cacchione et al. 2017). The digital cityscape and the individual images are repeated four times. However, such repetition is hardly visible due to the visual imbalance between the miniscule screens and the exposed intricated cables and devices. If this optical distraction was not enough, sensors connected to each screen blank out the individual image as soon as the audience gets closer, interfering with the visitors' visual experience. The viewers find themselves in a position where they can never fulfil their visual desire. The seemingly comprehensive and fluid landscape continuously fades away despite individuals' attempts and curiosity.

Zhang's installation seems to translate into practice de Certeau's argument that 'the desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it', making the urban space unreadable (Certeau 1984b, 92). The initial sensation of a legible, linear, and perhaps redundantly repetitive landscape is replaced by the realization that the sight will always slip away. As the audience gets closer and more intrigued, the image disappears, leaving them dissatisfied. The impossibility to fulfil the

visual desire can be explained by the ephemerality and intricacy of the city, which can never be wholly grasped by its viewers. Like Lacan's *objet petit a*, the desire to see the picture is intensified by the concomitant disappearance of the image, which oscillates between emanation and loss. 'Desire manifests itself in the dream by the loss expressed in an image at the most cruel point of the object' (Lacan 1973, 59). In other words, the desire for the object emerges as soon as it disappears, becoming a fantasy. As the lucidity and intensity of a vivid dream wither away and cloud the mind, likewise, the understanding of the city, especially in its twisting and bending, is similarly fragmented, and only partially satisfied in its entirety.

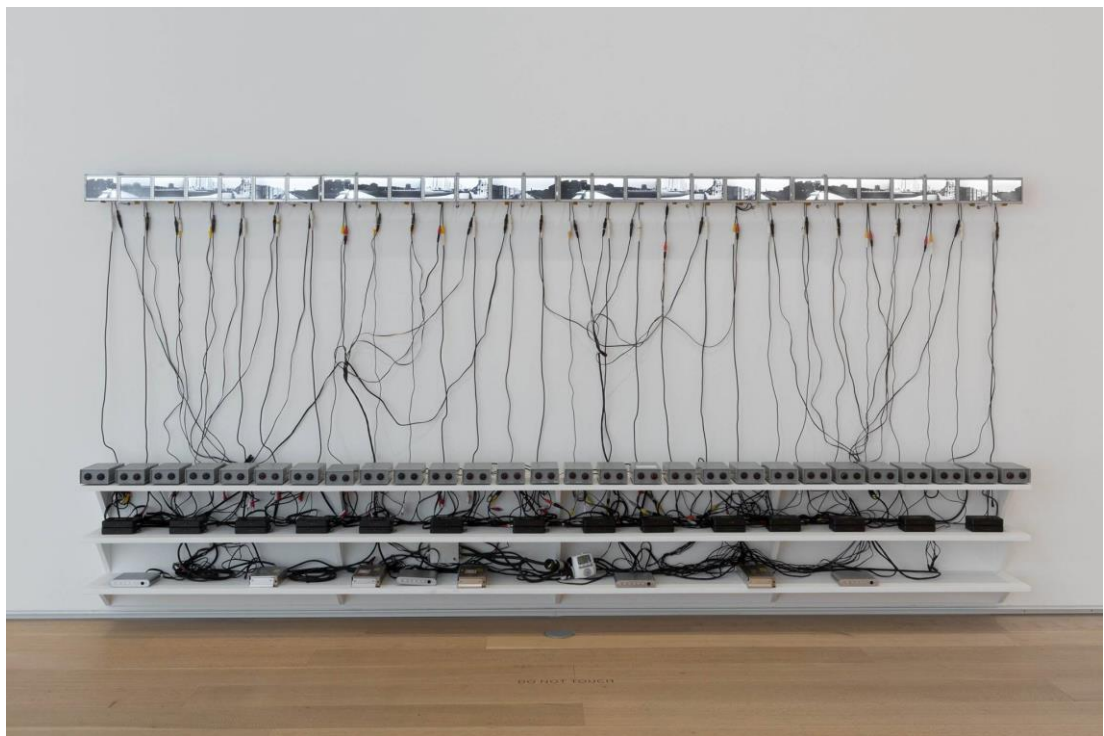


Fig. 2.4 Zhang Peili, *A Scene in Black and White Unfolded Four Times*, 2007, video installation, 28 TV screens, 336 cm wide.

Whereas the theoretical framework provided by de Certeau and Lacan proves central to the discussion of Zhang Peili's work, the deconstruction and reconstruction of Venice Water Town across several screens bring forth another set of ideas, namely modules. The notion of modularity, as oppositions merging and unifying the whole, stems from China's philosophical tradition. Compiled by several thinkers, the *Daodejing* (5th – 3rd century BCE) is the canonical volume that collates together the eastern thought and conceives of the *Dao* as the generating principle. 'Dao

gives birth to one, one to two, two gives birth to three; and three gives birth to the ten-thousand phenomena' (Laozi 1972, 42). *Dao* is the infinite, one of the possibilities within the multiplicity, and it has a dual nature which entails both the existence and the non-existence (A. Cheng 1997, 199–203). Thus, dualities and oppositions are generative rather than destructive. Instead of nullifying one another, these modules, create and ignite an incessant cycle that benefits from differences and provides the planet with the 'ten thousand things' (Ledderose 2000, 2).

The modular production at the base of the cosmos can also be found in other contexts, from painting and calligraphy to gardens and printing. In the urban space, the individual units, such as the trilobate windows in Venice or the red brick buildings, are mixed within the Chinese city to produce a completely new site. As Ledderose argues, individuality and modularity are two sides of the same coin (2000, 213). There is no real or unreal, original, or fake, only an ontological unity that allows for organic, spontaneous, and fluid realities. In this ambiguous and self-referential dimension, even creativity cannot be understood as total innovation, but perhaps as a process of recombination. Jameson suggests that 'paradoxically, the historic originality of postmodernism lies in the renunciation of the new or the novum' (1991b, 104). Rather than unprecedented novelty, repetition becomes the standard to measure creativity. Therefore, what is understood as and often criticized for being a copy, is much more complex than that for the reasons listed below.

Firstly, the insertion of landmarks and the construction of neighbourhoods and gated communities after western and foreign architecture subtend an issue of convenience. This practice partly stems from the lack of creative freedom and expertise in architecture and urban studies throughout the communist era (B. Chen and Dai, Zhikang 2014). Secondly, China's cultural translation builds on the middle-class taste and real estate developers' desire for instant economic gain through a feedback loop between the two. As the Chinese elite validates its status through the purchase of exotic villas and modern flats, it also substantiates the success of the housing industry and, to a wider extent, China's economic growth. Therefore, there is a significant interest

in meeting and feeding the new middle class' expectations. Lastly, the practice of bending and merging international symbols within China's cities proposes an alternative approach to space-making, one that exploits the symbolic value of global landmarks and the successful engineering and architectural innovations. It provides Chinese middle class with the sense of comfort and modernisation that has long been associated with the west, whilst living in China. The wealth and lifestyle that in the late 20th century were still a dream have become today's unchallenged reality for a small minority and a promise for a better future to the working class.

2.2 Choreographed spaces

As well as the relatively confined gated communities and foreign landmarks, there are two other sites to take into examination, namely theme parks and themed towns. Compared to the former two, fun parks and themed towns operate at a wider scale, and both boomed after World War II. Their extensiveness shifts the focus from authenticity to the discussion of theme parks and town as choreographed sensual experiences. Whereas theme parks aim to provide the middle class with entertainment, themed towns bring back to mind the UK new town movement and the strategy of urban renewal in the US (Z. Lin 2012). This section lays the foundation for the end of the chapter and hypothesises that branding has strayed from the theme park to pervade the urban space too. This is particularly significant when suggesting that the theme park is the 'complex result of modernization by demonstrating progress in urbanisation. At the same time, it also serves as a representation of postmodernism by contributing to the confusion between the arts and the everyday life' (W. Zhang and Shan 2016, 1).

From the earliest examples dating back to the late 18th and 19th century, the modern theme park was designed as an entertaining tool targeting the middle class in the post-war period (Clavé 2007, 16). Today, the quintessential prototype is Disneyland (Clavé 2007, 1; Klingmann 2010, 70–75). Since its inception in 1955, Disneyland has thematised and branded space to satisfy its audience's desires and expectations (Young 2002, 1–2). Moreover, it guides and shapes viewers' perceptions

by providing them a sense of security and choreographing their whole experience (Klingmann 2010, 72–75). In other words, architecture is deployed to stimulate visitors' feelings and reactions. The combination of miniature size, soft and circular buildings, as well as the paths and speed at which different environments are experienced, guide the visitors and spark evocative feelings in them.

However, the performativity of the theme park is such that the possibilities for imaginings shrink in front of the staged and artificial environment (Klingmann 2010, 76). Disneyland develops through the 'drama of architecture', it 'embodies the very structure of myth, employing fables and fairy tales' and, hence, 'captures our imagination' (Klingmann 2010, 70, 72). However, despite such evocative and sensual experience, the body is trapped into an accurately designed stage and rehearsed performance that is too manipulative and tightly choreographed. Hence, there is no active imagining. The theme park activates a rehearsed mental wandering that does not encourage the audience's freedom and independence, but, instead, their consumption of entertainment.

In China, one of the earliest theme parks was Splendid China, built in Shenzhen in 1989 (W. Zhang and Shan 2016). In the following decade, China would register a peak in the construction of theme parks, especially concentrated around the developing area of the Pearl River Delta (Clavé 2007). Scholars from different disciplines have conducted extensive research on theme parks, globally but also domestically, ranging from tourism and economy, to urban studies and visual culture.⁶⁴ In terms of their origins, Li and Zhu (2003) claim that there is an essential difference in the intent of theme parks between the US and China: whereas the former provides an escape from everyday life, the latter combines entertainment with nationalism and Mainland China's traditional

⁶⁴ W. Zhang and Shan (2016) acknowledge a lack of data on the relationship between theme parks and the environment, and the way social space is constructed. In the exhibition catalogue *Theme Parks: Shenzhen, China* (2014), photographer Bronck Kozka and scholar Nick Stanley discuss theme parks and national identity in Shenzhen.

culture. However, these magical kingdoms seem to have a common predecessor, namely gardens (Young 2002).

Not only the European, but also the traditional Chinese garden has come to influence the theme park on three main aspects: architectural landscape, timeliness, and artificiality. Firstly, both places are separated from the outside by gates, which simultaneously allow isolation and access to another realm, one that is suspended in time (Young 2002). Secondly, the visitors' sensual experience is choreographed. Paths direct the bodily and visual exploration through embracing viewpoints and artificially staged architectural settings. Chinese writer, Shen Fu, suggests to 'arrange the garden so that when a guest feels he has seen everything he can suddenly take a turn in the path and have a broad vista before him, or open a simple door in a pavilion only to find it leads to an entirely new garden' (Pratt and Chiang 1983, 63).

Thirdly, the Chinese traditional garden and theme park both function in the interstices between real and imagined. In China's tradition, by entering a garden, looking out from the window or passing through a gate, one has the sensation of leaving the physical reality to enter other imaginary worlds. Discussing Ji Cheng's notion of 'borrowed scenery' (*jiejing*), Kuitert suggests that landscape lends itself to the viewer to induce a multisensorial experience, which 'brings forth sensory and imaginative factors' (Kuitert 2015).⁶⁵ This landscape is 'an object of objective perception', but at the same time, it is 'also an artist that creates itself, a *natura naturans*' (Kuitert 2015). Likewise, theme parks allow visitors to momentarily detach from everyday life and access exclusive realms and fantasies through their suggestive landscapes. They spatialise memories, desires and narratives, which are, nevertheless, inextricably interwoven with urban planning and economy (Shien Zhong et al. 2014).

⁶⁵ Although the conceptualisation of the idea of the 'borrowed scenery' dates back to the 1960s, this notion was firstly mentioned by the Chinese garden designer, Ji Cheng (1579-1642). Around 1631, Ji compiled *The Craft of Gardens (Yuanye)*, a manual for garden design, whose final chapter was entitled after and dedicated to the concept of 'borrowed scenery' (*jiejing*).

On top of their ability to immerse visitors into carefully orchestrated fictions, theme parks provide new economic opportunities by cooperating with the real estate industry and urban planners. Unsurprisingly, some of the most popular themed parks are located in Shenzhen, the first SEZ, and one of today's most popular centres for innovation and technologies. Since the 1980s, the city has been associated with *shanzhai* culture, namely the extensive production of cheap counterfeits. As Kloet, Chow and Scheen assert, this copycat culture is not merely copying, but it can be understood as a process of cultural translation, where the reproduction is made available and more accessible to the Chinese public (2019, 28). Such concept can also be valid for theme parks, and more widely, the urban practice of emulation. Among the most studied fun parks in Shenzhen, there are Splendid China, Folk Culture Village, within the former one, and Window of the World. Whereas the former welcomes tourists with celebratory sceneries of China's national territory, the second one promotes national ethnic minorities and the long-standing Chinese culture.⁶⁶ Lastly, Window of the World displays reproductions of landmarks around the globe and, as the title suggests, teleports the audience to other fantastic realms. However, there is no physical transfer, but only an immersive sensual perception of being catapulted somewhere else. All the theme parks objectify and reduce the diversity and symbolic depth of these sites to a rehearsed and consumable experience. Therefore, I suggest that theme parks are means to national and economic ends: they praise the regional and national culture and celebrate the global circulation of places, whilst attracting visitors and capital to the city.

The hyper reality of theme parks is particularly relevant when juxtaposed to those artworks that can similarly deepen and confuse the audience's perceptual experiences. For instance, the photographic series, *Somewhere* (2004) (Figs. 2.5-8), by Shanghai artist, Hu Jieming, responds to this warped understanding of space by composing even more disorientating photographs.

⁶⁶ Both theme parks promote the PRC's nationalism and international soft power by celebrating and reproducing the long-standing history and culture of China. Specifically, the display and objectification of China's culture and ethnic minorities is revealing of the central government's intent to unify and homogenize the Chinese population under its authority (J. Lee 2019).

Although his images appear as ordinary urban sights, at closer inspection, they reveal their hybrid and fictional character. The photographic series, *Somewhere*, is the product of the digital and imaginative manipulation by the artist, who brings together different spatial and temporal entities into one single image.



Fig. 2.5 Hu Jieming, *Somewhere #5*, 2004, photograph, 50x35.29 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Mostly portrayed from above, Hu's pictures perpetuate the sensation of an exclusive scenery that only a privileged viewer could observe and control. In *Somewhere #5* (Fig. 2.5), the vantage point directs the eye towards a wide square crowded with pedestrians, cars, and buses. The view is suddenly interrupted by the sight of the majestic Giza pyramid complex. Like a mirage, the pyramids and sphynx unexpectedly appear in the middle of an urban scene, which is clearly Tiananmen Square in Beijing, viewed from the Forbidden City. Standing above, the observer gazes at the hybrid vision of the two cities of Beijing and Cairo fused into one fluid landscape. Likewise, in *Somewhere #8* (Fig. 2.6), Hu inserts the skyline of Chicago as the background of the reconstructed Ming dynasty Yu garden in Shanghai. With the focal point slightly higher than the

centre of the image, the eye proceeds smoothly and curiously from the bottom to the top of the image. Especially in the latter instance, the zigzagging of the white bridge, a typical strategy to sensually expand the size of the garden, guides the sight until it reaches, with surprise, the first skyscraper and the other blurred high-rises in the distance. Maintaining the concept of *jiejing*, the cityscape is integrated within the vision of the garden through a skilful artifice that fosters a sense of continuity between the two realities.



Fig. 2.6 Hu Jieming, *Somewhere #8*, 2004, photograph, 50x35.15 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

This fluidity is further exacerbated by an exaggerated aerial perspective, which ‘gives the sublime sensation of bewildering height, orderly crowds and endless display of things’ (Ogata 2002, 72–73). As per real estate billboards in Chapter 1, the bird eye perspective justifies the extravagant visions of a certain group and gives the sensation of omniscient and privileged knowledge. Drawing on Anderson’s findings on maps and Said’s study of ‘Orientalism’, this all-knowing view can be metaphorically compared to that of the colonizer, who flattens and uniforms the heterogeneity of the colony into a cohesive whole. As you zoom out to get a complete overview of the territory, the picture loses its definition and becomes more imaginative.

In his theorisation of ‘Orientalism’, Said calls this loss of definition as ‘imaginative geographies’; it ‘is a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetics, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts. [...] it has more to do with the west than the Orient’ (Said 1977, 12, 68). In other words, he suggests that Orientalism is a mental construct. It is a myth that reduces the knowledge of the ‘Other’ to something easily imagined by the colonizers and that reproduces their encompassing views. Extending this concept further to the phenomenon of replicas in China, then it is even possible to suggest that the assembling of global and local milieus into one homogenous landscape could be interpreted through the colonizer’s gaze. Rather than the colonized ‘Other’, today China wants to present itself as a strong global power that merges differences into a new cohesive system.

Apart from the analysis of perspective, a further lens to interpret Hu’s work and, to a wider extent the practice of theme parks, can be found in the primary medium deployed by the artist, postcards. The use of postcards provides an insight on the romanticizing of personal experiences and the temporal and spatial processes occurring in Hu’s photographs.⁶⁷ Firstly, postcards, as souvenirs, can recall a specific experience and validate the past (Stewart 1993, 139). By capturing an entire

⁶⁷ A variety of studies examines postcards from different perspectives, such as tourism and visual culture, highlighting their association with individual memories, the emerging middle class and archives. For more material on postcards, see McNeil (2017), Rogan (2005), Schor (1992), and Woody (1998).

city into one single image, they encapsulate a personal memory, one that is intimate and stands against the wide popularity of the postcard as souvenir. For instance, *Somewhere #2* (Fig. 2.7) offers a glimpse of the glass pyramid in the Louvre Museum in Paris. Standing at the centre of the image, the glass structure is gazed at from a hidden and exclusive spot, which gives the sensation of an intimate and nostalgic memory. As McNeill suggests, postcards ‘bring together different elements from the past into a cohesive, nostalgic and consumable image of contemporary urban space’ (2017, 393). Moreover, postcards becomes a ‘means to identify and possess the totality of the city’ (Prochaska and Mendelson 2010, 2). The sight of the Louvre is commodified into a miniature and branded object that stands for Paris and, more widely, French culture. As the picture demonstrates, this limited vision can be extrapolated from its geographical context and reinserted into another reality to gain renewed meaning.



Fig. 2.7 Hu Jieming, *Somewhere #2*, 2001, photograph, 50x36 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Furthermore, the technique of collage allows discussing how places are associated with meanings and how they assume new significance in the wake of certain events and juxtapositions. One

relevant instance in Hu's work is provided by the combination of the Giza complex and Tiananmen Square. Whereas the Giza pyramids (c. 2575–2465 BCE) were built as tombs to celebrate and extend the power and authority of the living pharaoh to the afterlife, they have come to assume historical significance ('Memphis and Its Necropolis – the Pyramid Fields from Giza to Dahshur' n.d.). Today, they have even been appointed as one of the original Seven Wonders and turned into a popular tourist site. In the photograph, Hu juxtaposes the ancient site to the more recent Tiananmen Square. Built in the 17th century to host gatherings, the square in Beijing has a very strong political significance (Zhu and Kwok 1997, 127), especially internationally since the summer of 1989. The embracing sight of the pyramids and sphinx enjoyed from the high gate of the Forbidden Palace is reminiscent of the colonizer's practice to restage landmarks and/or architectural styles of conquered regions. As a result, by blending Tiananmen square with the Giza pyramids, the resulting hybrid landscape seems to highlight the central government's desire to be eternal.

Recontextualised in the contemporary practice of theme parks, Hu's photos become extremely relevant. His artistic practice shows that the operation of merging different elements into something anew is simultaneously temporal and spatial. As the Tiger Hill pagoda fluidly mutates, twirls, and grows into something unstable (Fig. 2.8), Hu's work collates places from different times and spaces together and recontextualises them in the contemporary urban space. Rather than imaginary and unrealistic processes, his images become possibilities, if not a foreshadowing. They neither criticise, nor do they praise this urban strategy, however, they play with the ambiguity of the developing urban terrain. From the historical site of Giza pyramids to the natural Niagara Waterfalls and the capitalist New York's skyline, visitors of the theme park can bodily experience these sights by walking around. However, today the hyper-reality of the theme park extends beyond its gates and trespasses onto the urban terrain (Baudrillard 2000). Specifically, it stretches and englobes theme towns where the distinction between everyday life and fantasy becomes confused. Whereas the theme park emerged as an entertaining tool and is embedded in a realm of

fantasy, theme towns have stemmed as solutions to urban problems and been anchored to the physical ground.



Fig. 2.8 Hu Jieming, *Somewhere* #7, 2001, photograph, 60x40 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The construction of theme towns in China is part of a long established strategy for decentralization and urban renewal. In this sense, it is reminiscent of the New Town Movement in the UK and the regeneration of old neighbourhoods in the US in the second half of the 20th century (Z. Lin 2012). In the former case, Ebenezer Howard theorized the construction of satellite

towns to form a green belt that could surround and relieve the urban centre from traffic congestion, overpopulation and other issues associated with urbanisation (1902). His garden city represented a prototype to build new towns that could support the main urban cluster. In the US, instead, the idea of replacing underdeveloped neighbourhoods, leading to gentrification, was a major reason to develop additional towns. Starting in New York and then spreading to other geographical contexts, that upscaling practice transformed suburbs and entire cities and fostered alternative narratives to forge a new sense of identity (Zukin 2009). However, rather than reinforcing the existing cultural identity of a community, gentrification often ended up imposing an entirely new one. Likewise, the creation of new towns from nothing is widely problematic as it denies the spontaneity and fluidity of urban transformations. As Jane Jacobs asserts, ‘successful economic development has to be open ended rather than goal oriented’ (1985, 221).

Whereas the US and UK conceived of new towns as further extensions of the city and intensified the opposition between urban and periphery, China understands them as alternative clusters that can attract investments to the wider region (Bonino et al. 2019). Indeed, in China, the creation of new towns is not only a strategy to relieve the city centre or revive underdeveloped areas, but it is foremost an economic and branding engine. Therefore, China’s new towns often become ‘themed’ to provide special and attractive urban clusters. They are part of a national plan adopted at the beginning of the 21st century to build twenty cities each year from 2001 to 2020 and reach a high level of urbanisation (Wakeman 2016, 304–5). Driven by a political strategy, they respond to the need to accommodate the Chinese population and support development (Fang and Yu 2016). To achieve that, they integrate global and local to showcase a hybrid cultural and national identity, comply with residents’ taste, and deploy the latest technological innovations (Z. Lin 2012). In other words, theme towns are economic and branding tools that display China’s successful developments with a strong focus on globalisation.

Among the developments, there are the 2008 Beijing's Olympic Village, Suzhou Industrial Park, Chongming Island in the east of Shanghai, Zhengdong New Area in Zhengzhou and One City, Nine Towns, to cite a limited selection. Exemplary of today's theme towns is the project 'One City, Nine Towns', launched in 2001 by the Shanghai government. With the intention to ring the metropolis with nine satellite towns, it aims to redistribute the highly concentrated Chinese population around the outskirts of Shanghai (S. Zheng 2010, 4). Each community is designed as a replica of a foreign city: whereas the town of Anting is based on the road structure and typology of Weimer in Germany, there is a variety of other landscapes inspired by Italian, Dutch, and American urban styles. In Songjiang, there is even an English town, Thames Town, which has been designed after Shakespeare's hometown and includes pubs, fish & chips, and souvenir shops to offer an authentic foreign experience. As the housing market profits from the evocative and appealing lifestyle it can provide, real estate developers need to both understand and develop the symbolic meaning of that living style to attract the Chinese elite (F. Wu 2004, 231).

However, despite the efforts and early investments, the project One City Nine Towns has failed to meet its original goals and has become an expensive and unliveable town. Rather than residential communities, theme towns often become either ghost cities or touristic attractions. The unaffordable housing and living costs, inefficient infrastructure and lack of public transports often reveal the aesthetic and economic priority over everyday practicalities. Driven by economic profit, most developments target the wealthier social classes, who invest in them without necessarily inhabiting them (Xue, Wang, and Tsai 2013). For instance, Thames Town mostly attracts wedding photoshoots and tourists on a day trip.⁶⁸ Moreover, Xue and Zhou (2007) suggest that the satellite towns around Shanghai could be read as top-down strategies to endow the metropolis with the historical and cultural depth attached to Europe. Despite their

⁶⁸ Designed after Stratford Upon Avon by the British architectural company WS Atkins after winning an international bid, Thames Town was supposed to host around 10,000 residents. However, around the time of its completion in 2006, it was almost deserted and in 2010, den Hartog reports that there were only a few hundreds of people (2009). In 2014, Henriot and Minost (2017) claim that Thames Town included more than 2300 inhabitants. Nevertheless, the project was not nearly as successful as it should have been, especially due to the unaffordable housing and living costs, and the inefficient infrastructure.

problematics and economic intent, theme parks and towns have the potential to bring forth new ways of re-imagining the production of space by synthesising global and local milieus.

2.3 Globalising the local

From miniature Eiffel Towers and small-scale reproductions of Venice in Hangzhou to entire theme parks in Shenzhen and theme towns, the construction of replica and the adoption of western design have proved very popular in China. Not only do they amplify the urban landscape, but they visualise some of the ways in which China has integrated successful and historically rich architectural models and landmarks into its territory. To an extent, it demonstrates how local developers and governments have imagined a Strong China. Whereas the mainstream version of powerful China is identified in the distinctive waterfronts, skylines and infrastructure projects, a more creative and hidden potentiality can be found in the synthesis of local and global milieus. This hybrid style can enrich the diversity of urban transformations and allow Chinese urban dwellers to acquire instant cultural and historical capital. At the same time, the production of urbanities that can mentally travel the world and physically host global architecture can provide new ways of making space. Maintaining the traditional Chinese notions of modules and creativity, these worlding cities continuously reinvent themselves and offer new understandings of urban planning by ways of reassembling.

Beijing based artist Yang Yuanyuan refers to these urban spaces as constructed realities: they are mentally imagined, but often concretely assembled and absorbed within Chinese urbanities. Re-elaborating the numerous architectural mimicries throughout China, Yang's work *Blue Window, Two Roses* (2016) (Figs. 2.9-13) is inspired by the relationship between authentic and fake, real and unreal, physical and imaginary. Since the early 2000s, she has photographed abandoned places, including theme parks, and real estate developments around cities. Collated together in her own archive, these pictures are particularly revealing of the width of urban transformations and strategies. They are loaded with symbolic meanings and, hence, particularly insightful of the social,

cultural, and urban fabric. She anchors her project to the already loaded physical urban spaces and intertwines it with ordinary re-elaborations of these terrains. Her work adds further layers to the dense urban experience by travelling to unexplored imaginaries. ‘The two types of constructed realities [...] are something resplendent yet unreal, shining like gold’.⁶⁹ Her multimedia work departs from the popular experience of photo studios and weaves the photomontage through individuals’ narratives and her own imagination.



Fig. 2.9 Yang Yuanyuan, *Blue Window, Two Roses*: exhibition view, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

The organicity and depth of her project can be found by focussing on three elements: places, format, and green silhouettes. These three lenses provide significant insights on the ways in which her work swings from imaginary to actual. Bringing back the principle of creativity in the *Daodejing* her multimedia installations continuously blur the line between representation and original to create new urban narratives. Firstly, Yang’s project collates a range of places and landscapes that belong to different parts of the world and fantastic realms. Whereas some pictures display distinctive and very recognisable landmarks, such as the Arc de Triomphe in Place Charles de

⁶⁹ Author’s online interview with the artist on Zoom, 27 May 2020.

Gaulle in Paris, or the Leaning Tower of Pisa, other sceneries are familiar, yet ambiguous. Images of castles strike the viewers with their prominence and architectural styles. Some of the mansions are reminiscent of Wes Anderson's 'Grand Budapest Hotel', Dracula or traditional castles from fairy tales set in northern and eastern Europe (Figs. 2.10-11). However, there is something enigmatic about them: the lack of natural features such as mountains, or forests, which we would expect in juxtaposition to the castle; and the surprising and illogical presence of yellow cranes, construction elements and an overall dismissed and unfinished look. The viewer cannot but wonder which one is the physical or digital reproduction.



Fig. 2.10 Yang Yuanyuan, *Living in Trending Ancient Castle, Being Leaders of the City #3*, 2016, archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

With regards to the main element in the photo, this ranges from material buildings to billboards. As investigated in Chapter 1, billboards further complicate the ontological divergence between real and unreal. Deploying real estate imaginaries as actual cityscapes and yearned for destinations means interweaving an imaginary process into another to forge a third and even more layered one. The original place becomes irrelevant compared to its reimagined and relocated imaginary.

According to the artist, such mental and visual wandering reflects customers' dream house in Beijing, from their evocative names to the gated gardens and lush interiors.⁷⁰ Once they arrive in the city, their mental visions of Italian or Parisian looking buildings are satisfied and completely revolutionized by the pervasive physical experience of them. From pictures of the original site to physical reproductions, real estate billboards, as well as completely artificial imaginaries, Yang's collection of backgrounds goes beyond the question of authenticity. Her work affirms the assimilation of global milieu within the Chinese city and, hence, the mixture of fictional and tangible.

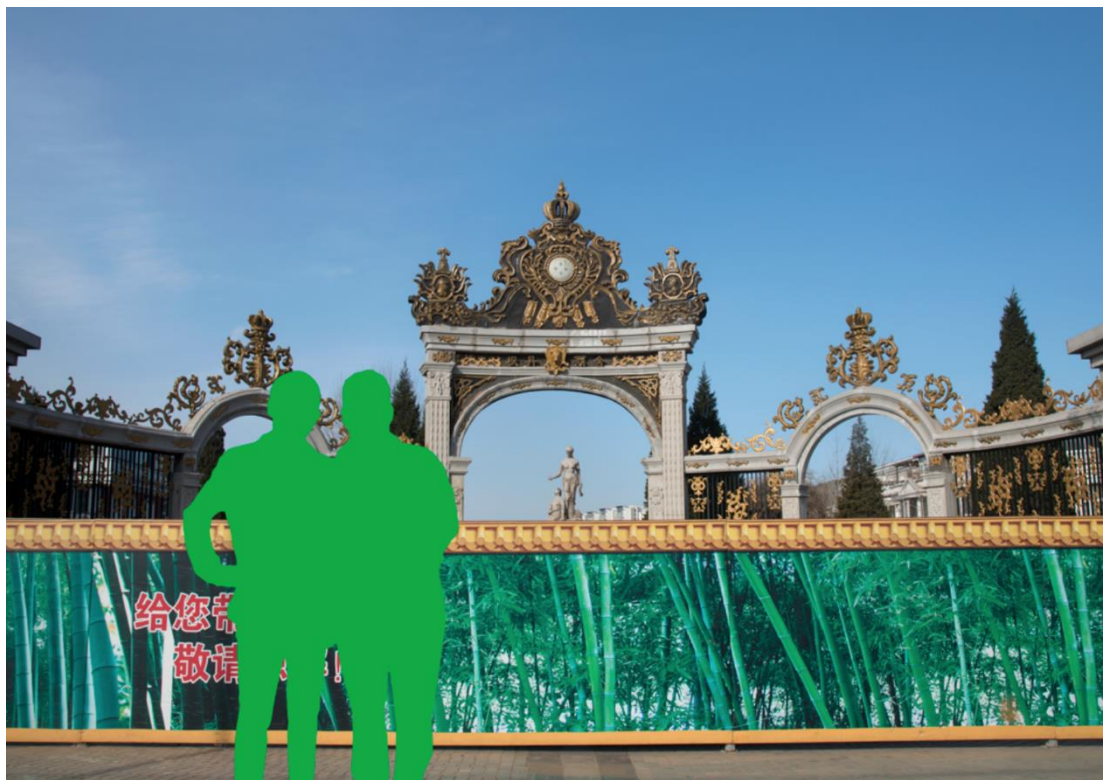


Fig. 2.11 Yang Yuanyuan, *Ideal Life #10*, 2016, archival pigment print (with frame), 61x41cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Secondly, the variety of places is somehow matched by the range of formats and media used. *Blue Window*, *Two Roses* includes photography, installations, participatory works as well as texts. It oscillates from the physical experience to virtual and intangible sensations that are nevertheless

⁷⁰ Author's online interview with the artist on Zoom, 27 May 2020. Among the evocative names often appointed to gated communities and hotels, I include some that I have collected during my fieldwork in Beijing and Shanghai: Oriental Hawaii, Hawaii Estate, Alpen Hotel, or Buckingham Palace.

no less authentic and perceived as real by the audience. The diverse media are interwoven together to produce unexpected encounters and landscapes that are simultaneously embedded in physical and illusory realms. The photographs narrate a journey from real to unreal, pristine to manipulated, temporary to eternal. Whereas this mental wandering physically starts at the green screen studios often inside shopping malls, it suddenly takes off the ground when the subject steps in front of the camera and stands against the green panel. The stage, like a magic cloak, can transport individuals into extemporal dimensions and no-where. The experience of a few minutes is captured instantaneously, yet it becomes an eternal image and fluid memory. Flat, plastic, and momentary representations turn into loaded experiences and emotional perceptions.

The activity of green screen photo studios has become very prominent in China in the last ten years. These businesses attract individuals, friends, couples, and families who can be shot against a variety of backgrounds and have their photographs printed at a cheap cost. They offer clients the possibility to transcend the physical reality and dive into a selection of imaginary scenarios, which subtend their yearnings for a certain lifestyle. The over one thousand backgrounds include tourists' attraction sites, celebrities, cartoon characters, as well as luxurious villas and European scenes. The final photograph, as the physical documentation of such imaginary exploration, whether real or unreal, has a symbolic value. It validates the ephemeral experience and offers immediate gratification despite the spatial or temporal boundaries. Cheaper and faster than buying a high-end property or travelling to Europe, such activity provides a shortcut to acquire cultural and historical capital. Maintaining Bourdieu's theories around class and taste, these photographic experiences at green studios make up for a lifestyle that is not available to everyone and ultimately distinguishes China's elites.

In addition to restaging part of the green screen photo studios, Yang's exhibition space is saturated with a myriad of visual elements (Fig. 2.12). Their seriality suggests a fast, spirals and warped wandering where people are catapulted from one *locale* to the other. Such sensation is conveyed

through the juxtaposition of framed photographs to colourful wallpapers displaying images, landmarks, and other signs through a confused and apparently non-sensical pattern. The audience is confronted with an overflow of visual images and symbols. From castles and ancient vases, to princesses, Botticelli's Venus as well as fountains. As a storyteller, Yang interweaves visual, verbal, and spatial language together to create an immersive sensual experience that mirrors the continuous and fluid oscillation between real and unreal, physical, and digital, original, and fake.



Fig. 2.12 Yang Yuanyuan, *Blue Window, Two Roses: exhibition view*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Thirdly, the extensive presence of green silhouettes provides an insightful lens to discuss the exchanges between human experiences and place. Featuring in the distinctive landscapes around the exhibition space, Yang reverses the idea of a fixed figure against interchangeable backgrounds (Fig. 2.13). The service provided by the green screen studio to forge personal and vivid memories by fabricating authentic and credible visual experiences is replaced by impersonal green silhouettes. There is a loss of individuality. As vacant bodies, the green silhouettes in the photographs are deprived of any recognisable features and seem to invite the viewers to fulfil that emptiness. The figures are homogenous, their bodies fusing into one, and their identities amalgamating into the

collective. 'It could be you and me, he or she, all of us'.⁷¹ Instead of interrupting the transition from image to reality, Yang's work insinuates in such interstice. Her multimedia project plays with that in-betweenness and values the individual's perceptual, emotional, and imaginary experiences of space. With this sensual and symbolic understanding, the city is decoded and readable by its inhabitants.



Fig. 2.13 Yang Yuanyuan, *Ideal Life #16*, 2016, archival pigment print, 50.8x32cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Furthermore, the reversal of the photoshop process leads to a further reflection on the dynamic and fluid circulation of space. Rather than people travelling places, it is the backgrounds that change. Today, the experience of travelling places is concretely happening within the urban space, especially as the urbanscape shifts and adapts to our senses and global market. As Boris Groys argues, 'cities are no longer waiting for the arrival of the tourist – they too are starting to join global circulation, to reproduce themselves on a world scale and to expand in all directions' (2008, 105). In other words, the city itself starts travelling places on its own through the global circulation of urban images. Moreover, as the existing theme towns exemplify, the city starts offering a global

⁷¹ Author's online interview with the artist on Zoom, 27 May 2020.

experience domestically through the synthesis of global and local milieus. This worlding city allows for a total experience of the world, physically, sensually, and culturally. As international landmarks are inserted into the local context, cities expand and are deterritorialised further through their circular reproduction and pervasive presence, fostering alternative imaginings.

However, in the last decade, the pervasive and unchallenged phenomenon of architectural mimicry has gradually lost its initial momentum. Very visible and deployed since the 1980s, it has slowed down, specifically after Xi came into power in 2012. Since then, the central government and local authorities have been more reluctant towards foreign influences and promoted the uniqueness of Chinese culture (Creemers 2014). The China Dream has promoted socialism with Chinese characteristics as a potential path to success, which combines carefully selected principles from the west with China's historical and cultural specificity (Xi 2014, 178–80; Lam 2015).⁷² Moreover, it has condemned those localised urban practices that constitute the postmodern and hyper reality of Chinese cities. For instance, in 2019, the central government banned the use of exotic names for domestic buildings and laid out a list of strange and foreign names to be changed (Z. Fan 2019). Moreover, in 2020, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China (MOHURD) published a decree to stop the construction of architectural copycats and 'super tall buildings' (2020). Overall, the ideological shift consequent to Xi's China Dream has demanded for a transformation in architectural and artistic practices to be deeply rooted in the national and cultural heritage.

Today, there seems to be more than one understanding of strong China. On the one hand, there is the officially appointed meaning of an economically, politically, and militarily strong nation which can exert global influence (Xi 2014). This is the distinctive definition of Xi Jinping, which

⁷² Since the official visit to the exhibition *Road to Rejuvenation*, Xi Jinping and the party have been promoting the slogan of 'inherit the past and usher in the future' (*chengqian qibou, jiwang kai lai*) as the premise to become a modern and powerful nation. The exhibition is part of the permanent display at the National Museum of China and retraces the main stages of China's recent history, from 1840 up until now. For the full speech of Xi Jinping at the exhibition opening, see Creemers (2012).

does not allow for omnipresent references to the west. Rather, it gives prominence to China's heritage, historically, culturally, and politically. On the other hand, there is a broader and more creative understanding of strong China. Alongside spectacular top-down projects and international designs, at the local level, the synthesising process between the popular fascination with the west and site-specific requirements provides an alternative understanding of 'Strong China'.⁷³ Maintaining the notion of modularity and creativity in China, this urban process re-assembles modules and has the potential to advance a new approach to space-making. However, this broader understanding of Strong China has been limited by the more centralising and authoritarian regime of Xi.⁷⁴ As China is transitioning towards a more inward-looking and authoritarian nation, the concept of Strong China is also shifting and enduring continuous transformations.

The temporal situatedness of the previous artistic practices further support the conjecture of an ideological transformation between the 2000s and 2010s. Whereas Xiang Liqing captures the appropriation and hybridization of architectural styles and designs, Zhang Peili documents the craze for western prototypes and iconic views. Together with Hu Jieming, their works offer a starting point to investigate the unneutral and fragmented practice of space-making without direct references. From private flats and gated communities to exponentially more extensive and inclusive urban elements, they attest to and, in the case of Hu and Zhang, also play with a vernacular and postmodernist approach to architecture that relies on assemblage.

Belonging to a younger generation, Yang has observed and exacerbated the shifting landscape of shopping malls, gated communities, and local and global milieus through more regulated space-making strategies. Her photographs capture and unfold the juxtaposition between the dense and

⁷³ This urban practice is not aimed at pursuing the goal of Strong China. However, I argue that it becomes a way for local authorities and real estate developers to prove their capabilities and can reinforce and provide a new understanding of 'Strong China'.

⁷⁴ Since the presidencies of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, and especially with Xi's, China has been re-asserting its power through more pro-active and confident policies (Goldstein 2020).

intricate expectations embedded within those architectures and their vacuous essences. Her work is also participatory, giving agency to urban dwellers and their demands. Her interactive installations complement and amplify the power of visual elements, blurring the distinction between physical and imaginary. Overall, the accumulation of photographs, the use of photoshop and the mixture of visual and verbal language in Yang's work compensate the static nature of images and give it momentum. Yang's narrative sequence seems to refer to a liquid architecture, which privileges 'permeable boundaries, flexible internal relationships, multiple pathways and fluid hierarchies' (Klingmann 2010, 130).

Although the city emerges as a multi-layered and fragmented terrain, its representations and perceptions are fluid and extemporal in people's memory and mind thanks to the elasticity of architecture. F. Wu suggests that 'in the advanced economies, postmodern urbanism provides a greater flexibility in landscape production and allows the artistic expression of lifestyles through the construction of distinctive cityscapes' (2004, 229). Today, the use of architectural designs and technological innovations from the west cannot be simply understood as copying. It is a process that whilst responding to the emerging taste of the Chinese middle class also undergoes cultural translation and can bring innovation. Drawing from the concept of *Dao* and postmodernism, this urban practice can be understood as a tool to reduce the 'Other' to something homogeneous and easily reproduceable. By mastering the original, China exerts its global power and success. Like the phenomenon of *shanzhai*, it could be perceived as a creative re-assembling of pre-existing elements to forge something that responds to the local context and is essentially new. In the urban context, it provides an alternative path to urbanisation and globalisation. Rather than identifying a Strong China in daring architecture and infrastructure projects only, I suggest looking at the more localised urban practice of integrating local and global milieus. As augmented by the artistic responses discussed, such integration promises a worlding city, namely a space which blurs the line between physical and imaginary by concretizing dreamscapes and proposing an understanding of space-production that is originated from China and not merely the west.

3. The Erased City



Fig. 3.1 Wan Yan, *Paper Crane Fly*, 2014, site-specific installation, 1000 paper cranes.

A Japanese legend narrates that if you fold one thousand origami cranes, they will take flight and realise your dreams. Children may believe this story, however for adults it is just fantasy. Inspired by this traditional Japanese tale, architect Wan Yan installs one thousand origami cranes in the art space Handshake 302 in Baishizhou village, Shenzhen (Fig. 3.1) (O'Donnell 2014). Baishizhou is a spontaneous urban village that provides cheap housing, services and working opportunities to a varied group of individuals, ranging from rural migrants, to foreigners, students, and white-collars. Wan's installation, *Paper Crane Tea* (2014), brings forward the dreams and ambitions of these workers who move to the city. Individually folded through repetitious movements, the delicate origami forms a three-dimensional background as Wan initiates conversations among the local community on the potentiality of their urban village and condition. They are fragile paper decorations that hang on the wall and from the ceiling. The one thousand cranes represent villagers' ambitions and attempt to defy and reassess the increasing social and spatial inequalities typical of China's urban space by advancing alternative narratives.

This chapter focuses on the socio-spatial relationships between urban and rural, specifically concentrating on three interconnected phenomena: the floating population (*liudong renkou*), rural-urban fringes (*chengxiang jiehebu*), and villages in the city (*chengzhong cun*). Part of the urban fabric and reminiscent of rural villages, the floating population includes those rural workers who have entered the city to find jobs and opportunities but seldom settle in one definite place. As the term suggests, they float in between cities and countryside.⁷⁵ Likewise, *chengzhong cun*, namely villages in the city (VICs), and *chengxiang jiehe bu*, rural-urban fringes, are places of ambiguity that have emerged during the unprecedented urban transformations of the Chinese territory in the last three decades. As emerging topics of discussion related to social and spatial inequality (Logan 2001; C. Fan 2008; Chung 2013; X. Lin 2013; De Meulder, Lin, and Shannon 2014; Al 2014; Parke 2018; Ma and Wu 2005b; Xiang and Tan 2005), migrant workers and urban villages have been widely concealed or negatively depicted by central and local authorities through invisible barriers and urban practices. Often portrayed by official media and news as negative and disruptive aspects of the urbanised city, they have been erased and excluded from any decision- or space-making. However, what has gone unnoticed is that the floating population and their locales have provided crucial land and cheap labour to realise China's unprecedented urban and economic development.

The understanding of the floating population, rural-urban fringes, and villages in the city as unwanted interruptions in the attractive and wealthy urban fabric aligns with one aspect of the China Dream, namely the principle of 'harmonious society'. The CCP has reiterated Hu Jintao's imperative to reduce the social gap among Chinese citizens, and between cities and countryside. However, it has focussed its attention on the urban centres and ignored urban villages and migrant workers due to their peripheral situatedness and what is conceived of as unattractive aesthetics. It has disregarded villages' ambiguous nature and diverse population, which provide informal economies, housing, and services, and essentially contribute to the urban core's functioning. More than merely a physical concealment, the official narrative enacts a kind of erasure that safeguards

⁷⁵ There is a distinction to make between rural migrants working in factories and assembly lines and those working class families who migrated but are wealthy enough to rent shops, set up their own business and invest in education. In this chapter, I focus on the former group unless specified otherwise.

the vision of a 'harmonious society'. Erasure becomes a political preventative measure. By promoting this representation of migrant workers and their locales, the CCP simplifies and discourages any form of engagement with the rural/urban dynamics.

Through the discussion of contemporary artistic practices, this chapter offers an insight on the official narratives and the socio-spatial inequalities brought upon by urbanisation. Contrary to the established norm, it suggests conceiving of these three happenings as sites of creative possibilities, which inspire artistic engagement and are crucial to the functioning of the city. By exploring the tensions between rural/urban, visible/concealed, and primary/secondary, this chapter investigates the creative dynamics among artists, migrants, and their locales. The discussion of the floating population, rural-urban fringes, and villages in the city (VICs) is interwoven in an organic and fluid manner as they are inseparable and interdependent phenomena. This chapter includes a variety of approaches, viewpoints and multimedia works, whose diversity helps develop multifaceted and innovative dialogues on social and spatial inequalities.

Despite the arching entanglement among the three phenomena of floating population, urban-rural fringes, and villages in the city, the chapter moves from erasure towards an increasing awareness and potentiality. It departs from the concealment of migrant workers and the segregation and liminality of rural-urban fringes to discuss the informal VICs. Specifically, it aims to demonstrate that whereas at first, the issues of migrant workers and urban villages were rarely documented, today, there are several public, social, and participatory activities that attempt to include and value unrecognised social groups and spaces. On the one hand, artists have often engaged with these social concerns by tapping into the official narratives of erasure and urban-rural separation to avoid direct political confrontation. On the other, an increasing number of artistic practices has actively opposed the concealment of these underrepresented social groups and areas through socially engaged and participatory works. These latter practices and projects

provide an instance of integration between rural and urban and point to an inclusive, sustainable, and alternative re-imagining of future cities.

3.1 Erasure

The proliferation of the three phenomena of floating population, villages in the city, and urban-rural fringes seems to be related to several land and social reforms which have altered the way society and space are organised for economic purposes. Although land has consistently belonged to the party-state, since 1979 the central government has leased its land use rights to make profits. By 1982, the Chinese territory was either labelled ‘urban’ and, hence, owned by the state or ‘rural’ and leased to the collective village (Crawford and Wu 2014, 19–20). This differentiation brought along a further distinction in ownership. Whereas, theoretically, both urban and rural land belonged to the state, practically, the rural soil was leased to villagers. These land reforms deliberately coincided with the industrialisation process of the 1970s, which boosted the transformation from a traditionally agricultural country to a secondary and tertiary-led economy (C. Gu and Shen 2003). As the economic and physical development of cities was given priority, the land use rights of villagers were often expropriated, and rural croplands reallocated as urban soil. Ma and Wu refer to this practice as the policy of ‘abolishing counties and establishing cities’ (2005a, 27). Although this strategy was aimed at relieving the increasing spatial and economic gap between urbanities and countryside, it further contributed to the capitalisation of rural land and the escalation of inequalities. Overall, through the creation of a land lease market in the 1980s, local governments re-established city borders and sold extensive parts of farmland for profit (Al 2014; Smart and Tang 2005; Lai and Zhang 2016).

On top of the numerous land and administrative revisions, the *hukou* system, namely household registration system, is another significant reform that has exacerbated spatial and social fragmentation. Accompanying the first land reforms, the *hukou*, has had an impact on shaping the current Chinese society and deepening the gap between rural and urban. Originally heralded as a

census tool, the *hukou* system was established in 1958 by the central government to monitor the Chinese population and migration (Chan 2010, 357–58; De Meulder, Lin, and Wang 2011, 3586). Individuals have since been assigned either a rural or urban citizenship according to the location of their household. Once registered, residents can access the welfare, education, health, and other state-provided services only from their designated area. More than just a census tool, Ma and Wu identify in the *hukou* a continuation of the popular *baojia* system, which was firstly deployed during the Song dynasty (960 – 1279) ‘to maintain local control and mutual surveillance’ (Ma and Wu 2005a, 28).⁷⁶ Likewise, the *hukou* became a social and migration tool. It was introduced as the PRC decided to shift from an agricultural to industrial economy and, hence, needed to contain the expected flow of rural peasants towards industries and cities. The *hukou* system has discriminated between rural and urban populations spatially, but also and, perhaps most dramatically, in political, social, and economic terms.

Today, scholars have recognised that the household registration system has supported the unprecedented scale of China’s urbanisation and development through the invisible cheap labour of rural workers who came to the city to find jobs and opportunities. This social tool anchored the rural population to the countryside, while it physically exploited them in pursuing development and ‘industrialization on the cheap’ (C. Fan 2008, 4). Whereas in the 1970s, only a small number of rural workers were allowed to temporarily access and live in the city to fulfil unwanted work, between the 1980s-90s, the central government deployed the *hukou* system to recruit cheap labour and implement low-cost urbanisation (Chan 2010, 359–60). The political and economic agendas to build metropolises at cheap costs translated in the exploitation of rural workers. Even though migrants mostly contributed to the shiny and ambitious construction of CBDs, gated communities, shopping malls and other essential parts of the city, they are concealed and treated as undesired aspects of the urban fabric. They cannot legally enter the city, neither can

⁷⁶ The *baojia* system (household administration) was a tool to organise society and the territory. Households were grouped according to a tripartite system and had to display on their doors the number, age, and other relevant information of each resident (Ma and Wu 2005a, 28). This system was abandoned with the establishment of the PRC and the introduction of the *hukou* system.

they freely apply for any jobs or claim benefits within the urban delimitations (C. Gu and Shen 2003, 115–17). Overall, the *hukou* system has functioned as an invisible barrier, arbitrarily allowing rural workers into the city but denying them any social and spatial rights.

Today, the knowledge around land reforms is particularly complex and hard to grasp due to the constantly reviewed regulations. This is especially true as they are closely interwoven with other happenings inside and outside of China, including the country's industrialisation, the *hukou* system, and the wider globalisation, among others. Notwithstanding the confusing changes in land administration, according to John Fitzgerald, 'the territorial system is "the most stable element in the historical annals of the Chinese state"' (Fitzgerald 2002, 11). Whereas during the dynastic period, the Chinese empire administered the territory by separating the capital from county level province, today this division can still be identified between urban and rural realities. This hierarchical system has reinforced the binary understanding of cities as centres of wealth and power, and the countryside and peripheries as sites of erasure and backwardness. Rather than a means to bridge the gap between rural and urban, the numerous land reforms initiated by the central government could and should be interpreted as a social and political tool for separation and exclusion (Ma and Wu 2005a).

In the 2000s, the spatial and social dichotomy between rural and urban became so evident that it infiltrated the artistic scene and inspired the internationally acclaimed works by Cao Fei and Weng Fen. Both living in the south of China, respectively Guangzhou and Hainan, they attest to the constant shift of rural and urban through the concept of borders. On the one hand, in the photographic series *Sitting On the Wall* (2002 – 5) (Fig. 3.2), Weng depicts young girls looking at the distant urban centres and sitting on bricked and concrete walls to make this separation clear. On the other, Cao's *COSplayers* (2004) uses composition and colour to highlight the socio-spatial divide. In her photograph *A Mirage* (Fig. 3.3), vibrant green fields, a deer, and other exotic animals, together with two anime characters stand bright against the grey and blurred skyline in the

background. Although these two artistic instances are not the focus of my chapter, they are revealing of how space is represented and aligns with the official narrative of centre and suburbs as divided and contested terrains.⁷⁷ In both instances, the high-rise cityscape turns into a backdrop. Despite the visual attractiveness of the urban centres of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Hainan, it is the edges that catch the artists' attention and change across the photographs.



Fig. 3.2 Weng Fen, *Sitting on the Wall: Guangzhou 3*, 2002, C-print, 50×69.2 cm.



Fig. 3.3 Cao Fei, *A Mirage*, 2004, c-print, 75x100 cm.

⁷⁷ For more information on Cao Fei's works, see Obrist (2006); Berry (2018); and H. Wu (2014a). For more information on Weng Fen's work, see M. Wang (2011, 2015c).

Alongside the spatial separation between urban and rural, artists have increasingly voiced the deepening social concern over rural migrants, especially as they often reside in similar areas. According to Pi Li, Sigg senior curator at M+, Hong Kong, the physical vicinity of artists and floating population constitutes an important and fascinating element in the discussion of their artistic engagement. As artists rent their studios in the city outskirts and peripheries to pay cheaper rent, they move to the only areas that migrant workers can afford.⁷⁸ Living in the same suburbs, they have privileged access to the floating population's life conditions. Amongst the earliest works denouncing the social inequalities between urban and rural is Zhu Fadong's performance *The Person for Sale* (1994) (Fig. 3.4), where the artist wears a blue uniform with red characters on the back reading 'this person is for sale, negotiate price on the spot' (Berghuis 2006, 111-3; Visser 2010, 169).⁷⁹ Later, in his longer term project, *Identity Cards* (1998 – 2015), Zhu brings forward the frustration and sense of powerlessness against the central government's top-down policies by creating his own ID cards.⁸⁰



Fig. 3.4 Zhu Fadong, *The Person for Sale*, 1994, photograph, 60x80 cm.

⁷⁸ Author's in-person interview with Pi Li, M+, Hong Kong, 19 April 2019.

⁷⁹ A very similar performance is Luo Zidan's *Luo Zidan – Half White – collar/ half peasant* (1996), where the artist simultaneously wears a blue uniform and white shirt and tie. The work reflects on a significant contradiction: on the one hand, rural workers and white collars have very different living conditions and social status; on the other, the former has been invaluable for the social upgrade of the latter.

⁸⁰ See Tomkova (2018) for a more in-depth discussion of Zhu Fadong's work.



Fig. 3.5 Liu Bolin, *Suojia Village*, 2005, archival pigment print. © Liu Bolin.

Through a different medium, *The World* (2004) by film director Jia Zhangke documents the everyday lives of rural workers through the viewpoint of a migrant woman. Set in the theme park of Beijing World Park, the film problematises the loss of culture and identity and the proliferation of urban palimpsests and pastiches as consequences of globalising and capitalising practices. However, despite the successful portrayal of the social gap between the conditions of, respectively, migrants and the wealthier visitors, Jia fails to convey an unbiased representation of female workers. The female protagonist is depicted as impotent and objectified by the camera (Gaetano 2009). Whereas the film explores the repetitive and strenuous lives of the floating population, Liu Bolin comments on the invisibility of China's lowest social group in his photographic series *Hiding in the City* (2005) (Fig. 3.5). As a migrant artist himself who moved to Beijing in 2005, he initiates his project to directly engage with the demolition of Suojia Artists' Village. By camouflaging his body amongst the ruins and rubbles, his figure disappears against the background (M. Wang 2015a). His photographs, alongside Jia's and Zhu's works, reveal the presence of migrant workers

as ghosts in the city, who merge with and adapt to the ongoing changes, at times losing their individuality.⁸¹

The illegal, uncertain, and temporary presence of these low-skilled workers in the city has inspired a variety of terms: floating population, migrants, cheap labour, and rural workers. Despite the differences, they all subtend the sense of elusion and transience that this social group is pervaded with. As they move from their hometowns to the city to find job opportunities, they physically and intangibly occupy a liminal space between urban and rural. This instability allows them to keep floating within the urban borders and beyond, from the countryside to the city and vice-versa. As mentioned earlier, the cause of the extensive migration flows can be partly imputed to the *hukou* system and land reforms after 1978. As the secondary and tertiary sectors increasingly grew at the expense of agriculture, and croplands were expropriated by local governments and transformed into prime real estates, the sudden surplus of rural labour rapidly moved into cities. Since then, rural villagers have been floating towards rich metropolises in the Yangtze River Delta, Pearl River Delta and the area of Beijing and Tianjin (Shi and Liu 2019).

Due to the irregularity of these low-skilled urban workers and the ephemerality of their activities, it has been difficult to track and examine the scale of this urban phenomenon. However, in the last twenty years, an increasing number of studies have contributed to the discourse on the floating population as an urgent social concern (Chan 2010; Chung 2013; C. C. Fan 2008; Gaetano 2009; Giroir 2006). What has emerged is that migrant workers mostly secure low-skilled, unstable, and badly paid jobs due to their poor education and rural origins. Nevertheless, these informal occupations still prove to be more profitable and, hence, more attractive than agriculture (C. Fan

⁸¹ Although the artistic instances above have been selected to illustrate how the representations of migrant workers have replicated the strategy of erasure, the list is not exhaustive. Among other performances and installation that either deployed or interacted with underrepresented social groups in their work, there are Wang Jin's photographic work *100%*, Song Dong's *Together with Migrants* (2003) and Zhang Dali's *Offspring* (2005), to name a few. Despite raising awareness towards an increasingly urgent social concern, their works seem to exploit migrant workers' bodies and identities by reinstating an unequal power-relation between artists and migrants. For a critical analysis of those works, see H. Wu (2014a, 406) and Eschenburg (2017).

2008). Studies also acknowledge a significant gender divide: whereas men have been mostly exploited in high-intensity jobs, female workers are often recruited in the clothing, textiles, food processing, as well as sex industries (C. Fan 2008; J. Fan and Taubmann 2001; Gaetano 2009; Tiantian 2008). Despite the growing scholarly findings, the concealment and ephemerality that are associated with the floating population seem to prevail.

Apart from a few exceptions, I argue that the severity of migrant workers' social and spatial segregation has often been underexplored by local artists due to their reputation and unofficial presence within cities. Even those artists who attempt to tackle this social concern tend to reinforce the trope of erasure. This is the case of Beijing-born artist, Wang Wei whose work has commented on migrants but failed to overtly criticise the top-down urban policies. In occasion of his first solo exhibition at Long March Space in 798 Art District, Beijing, *Temporary Space* (2003) (Fig. 3.6), Wang showcased three different elements: an installation, a video projection and twelve photographs. The two week-long installation *25,000 Bricks* was built by ten migrant workers and consisted of a ten by ten metre square with four-metre-high walls. Throughout the fourteen days, workers collected bricks from rubble sites and piled them up into walls, while Wang took pictures of the process (K. Smith n.d.). On the day of the opening, the figures of the workers had already disappeared, and the bricked structure occupied almost the entire gallery, leaving only a one-metre-wide corridor from each side of the built square. Alongside the installation, a series of twelve photos and an eight-minute video marked the absence of the workers. Whereas the former captured the overall process of building the bricked structure, the video focussed on the site of Dongba, where the workers collected the bricks from (Tinari n.d.). To complete the documentary and spatial elements, a performative dimension was added to the overall exhibition. The day after the opening, the bricked structure was suddenly knocked down under Wang's instruction and, as it happened at the beginning of the artistic process, migrants started collecting bricks all over again.



Fig. 3.6 Wang Wei, *Temporary Space*, 2003, installation, brick, sand, and lime 100x100x400 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Curator of *Temporary Space*, Philip Tinari, asserts that the performance was not judgemental or nostalgic of the constant demolitions, nor did it touch upon migrant workers' exploitation (2016). Likewise, the artist himself reinforces that the show was not directly referring to workers' social condition and inequality.⁸² However, I advance that his exhibition and statement are particularly revealing of how the presence of migrant workers has been treated. Despite his open denial, Wang's installation, *25,000 Bricks*, seems to refer to the concealment of China's cheap labour by performing the disappearance of migrants' persona. In the white cube, as workers erect the four bricked walls around themselves, their bodies gradually vanish until they are buried behind the red cold bricks. Likewise, migrants working in the city become invisible against the glossy and shiny facades of CBDs, shopping malls and luxurious gated communities. Moreover, Wang specifically chooses the ten workers from a previous photoshoot, when he was still working for the Beijing Youth Daily and invited them for lunch to learn about their working and living conditions (Tinari 2016). Notwithstanding Wang's rejection of any engagement with this

⁸² Author's in-person interview with Wang Wei, artist's studio, Beijing, 30 April 2019.

underrepresented social group, the exhibition suggests something different. The apparent disengagement with and de-personification of migrants by naming the work *25,000 Bricks* could perhaps constitute a strategy to sensitise the audience and acknowledge this socio-spatial problem whilst navigating China's authoritarian and censored regime. As the CCP normalises the erasure and exploitation of the floating population, artists re-produce this narrative to safeguard their status. However, as Wang's case suggests, the artistic work can also affirm a greater form of erasure, self-censorship.

As mentioned earlier, the trope of erasure and indirect engagement can be highly problematic. Although artists have a privileged access to the real living conditions of China's cheap labour, they often decide not to overtly denounce the increasing social and spatial inequalities. For instance, whereas Liu's initial intent in *Hiding in the City* aimed at critically presenting his personal experience as a migrant, today, his project has turned into remunerative and commercial collaborations with luxury fashion brands, such as Monclér, Missoni and Gaultier. Furthermore, as the artist enters the art market and international scene, his social status as rural migrant is often forgotten. This instance demonstrates the arbitrariness and unfairness of the migration regulations and *hukou* system, which often allows exceptions according to the social status and fame of the individual. Last, by deploying the strategy of erasure, Wang's exhibition illustrates the (non-)existence of migrant workers but fails to actively recognise their physical presence in the gallery and criticise the socio-spatial policies. Whether deliberately or not, Wang's artistic exercise, capturing the illegality, elusion, and transience of the floating population, seems to mirror the way in which this social group has been widely represented and conceived of by the CCP.

3.2 Semi-erasure

Whereas the above artistic practices reduce the narrative of urban and rural to a still, linear, and often concealed socio-spatial divide, the everchanging land regulations and urban transformations of the last thirty years have produced places of liminality and ambiguity, such as VICs, and rural-

urban fringes. Although VICs and rural-urban suburbs are both hybrid products of urban transformations and share similarities, they are distinct phenomena. The major difference lies in the geography: whereas VICs have illegally mushroomed within the city centre, *chengxiang jiehe bu* refers to the edges of the city and those former villages in the countryside which have been encroached by the expanding urbanities and transformed into something anew. Outside downtown, these suburbs stand in stark contrast against the high-rise buildings, luxurious communities, and high-end shopping malls. They are interconnecting zones where gated communities, modest shops and small businesses are juxtaposed to worn-out sites, empty fields, and factories. Together, VICs and rural-urban fringes allow migrants to fluidly float between city and countryside and spatially reflect the socio-economic inequalities between urbanites and peasants.

The rural-urban fringes, as liminal areas, have attracted plenty of artists due to their cheap rents and ambiguity. Looking for big studios at affordable prices, artists move according to the land value, which often means to the city borders where the rent decreases. Moreover, the outskirts have been providing artists and the local community with constant stimuli thanks to their everchanging features and continuous spatial renegotiations between the city and periphery. The tension augmented by socio-economic differences and cultural diversity becomes additive rather than pejorative. On the one hand, the liminalities between rural and urban can be thought of as two grinding surfaces, whose friction releases heat and produces sparkles of energy and potentiality; on the other, the same in-betweenness opens up possibilities and initiates dialogues through a fluid exchange.⁸³ Simultaneously unstable, yet flexible, the rural-urban fringes are porous areas that tend to absorb and release what they encounter. Rapidly transforming from rural villages into informal communities and eventually into urban neighbourhoods, these rural-urban fringes physically mirror the front line of the urbanising process. Although Svetlana Boym asserts that cities (as a whole) are porous beings (2001, 77), I suggest that their capability to absorb,

⁸³ The exchange here refers to the services, economies and labour often floating from the countryside and urban peripheries to the urban centres.

release and mutate is particularly evident in *chengxiang jiehe bu*, which are fluid and temporary zones. They emerge through an experimental and improvisational process of re-adjusting to the everchanging spatial and social conditions.⁸⁴ As a result, rural-urban fringes should not be confined to concealment and periphery, on the contrary, due to their liminal situatedness and inseparability from the urban cores, they should be especially examined as they provide relevant insights on urbanisation.

Hu Weiyi's most recent work, *The Window Blind* (2019), exemplifies artists' fascination with these in-between areas. Born in Shanghai, Hu had always lived in the city centre until moving to Songjiang, a district in the southwest of Shanghai. Known as the 'root of Shanghai', before 1958 Songjiang was a commercial town located in Jiangsu province.⁸⁵ It was only in 1958 that it was re-designated as part of Shanghai municipality. Since then, it has experienced rapid industrial and urban development and become a village in the urban fringes of Shanghai. Today, this area is more than an hour away from the city centre by public transport. However, contrary to the urban core, where transformations are slower and harder to notice, this urban village is considered by many artists as an eclectic and kaleidoscopic space that provides a multisensorial experience. Hu Weiyi's exhibition explores this neighbourhood through video, installation, and photography. His work is concerned with social and spatial inequality by physically displaying the disappearance of individuals and local activities. Fascinated by the lights, smells, sounds and intrinsic energy of Songjiang, Hu describes it as 'a kind of place in between the city and the countryside', where you can quickly spot the changes and encounter 'strange landscapes'.⁸⁶

The magic and mysticity of this neighbourhood are encapsulated in Hu's photograph *Belief* (Fig. 3.7). The dark picture captures the magnetic energy of Songjiang through the portrayal of a power station as an imposing, but, nonetheless, delicate, and light weighted structure framed in the night.

⁸⁴ Despite the ephemeral and liminal nature of the urban fringes, one needs to be aware of the risk of romanticising the precarity and uncertainty typical of these peripheral areas.

⁸⁵ Author's in-person interview with Jin Feng and Bi Rongrong, artist's studio, Shanghai, 17 May 2019.

⁸⁶ Author's in-person interview with Hu Weiyi, HdM Gallery, Beijing, 6 May 2019.

The power plant seems suspended on a cloud. Whereas the industrial scene would mostly come across as ugly, messy, and grey, Hu plays with light and time of exposure to depict the station as an intricate and elegant product of engineering. Standing against the dark and empty sky, the structure seems to be owning and diffusing its own light. This radiant sensation is further triggered by the viewpoint. The slightly low and lateral view, together with the diagonal outline of the station, accentuate the depth of the gaze and portray the station as a rising and imminent installation, whose edges can only be sensed or imagined. The lack of any other elements in the background and the impossibility to grasp the limits of the power station raises questions over its physicality. Stemming from the ground and rising high before the dark void, the power station is vibrating with light and energy, as if being charged. A dull and grey urbanscape along the street becomes the only glowing and pulsating element in the dark. Although Hu captures everyday life scenes, the ordinariness of the industrial landscape which he regularly drives by turns into an aestheticized and powerful object that inspires mental wandering.



Fig. 3.7 Hu Weiyi, *Belief*, 2019, photograph, ultra-giclee print, 97.5×130 cm 3+1AP. Courtesy of the artist.

Hu sheds light on the unwanted and unpleasing city edges not only visually, but also conceptually, inviting a further reflection. This underlying consideration is on power and desire, whose relationship has been extensively explored throughout Hu's artistic practice. This investigation, as a *fil rouge* weaving through his show, does not provide a conclusion nor an answer, however, it raises awareness towards the phenomenon of the urban fringes. In *Belief*, it is possible to read the reference to both migrants and urbanised villages in relation to the urban centres. The long-established dichotomy between rural and urban persists and is mostly evident in the photograph's darkness pointing to the unrecognition and remoteness of those villages. Whereas the city centre becomes an emblem for modernity, globalisation, and the new middle class, the outskirts are unwanted fragments of the urban fabric, despised for their noisy, chaotic, and unhygienic features. Likewise, migrant workers and villagers inhabiting those areas are associated with low education and inferior social status due to their spatial confinement to the countryside (C. Gu and Liu 2001, 202). However, in Hu's photographs, the darkness of the night is not only a signifier for hopelessness and illegality. Pulsing with energy, the glowing station is reminiscent of the potentiality of these areas and the invisible interplay and flows of several forces.

The everyday Chinese term for these suburbs, *chengxiang jiehe bu*, is a constant reminder of what they really are. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, *chengxiang jiehe bu* puts emphasis on the connection and synthesis rather than the separation between urban and rural grounds. This term advances a less biased understanding of urban villages as diverse, merging, and evolving spaces. The segregation and disengagement that they have come to be associated with is merely the consequence of political and economic decision rather than the actual reality. In the west, these interstitial and in-between areas have been discussed in many ways, from suburbs, and non-urban, to Marion Shoard's 'edgelands' (2003). Although their spatial contexts are very different, the concept of 'edgelands', which is embedded in environmental and rewilding practices, can be helpful to unfold how these Chinese urban villages work. Despite the differences and particularities, they all defy control, fixity, and homogeneity to affirm uncertainty, fluidity, and

plurality.⁸⁷ Gallent et al. describe edgelands as ‘raw and rough, [...] often sombre and menacing, hosting activities often not wholly comprehensible’ (2004, 222). They are visually unappealing. However, it is exactly their biodiversity, irregularity and anonymity that attribute invaluable recreational potential to those lands. Likewise, *chenxiang jiehe bu* should be understood as the results of and oppositions to certain political and economic decisions which aim at controlling urban planning and undermining the essential role of these hybrid sites amidst the complex urban ecology.

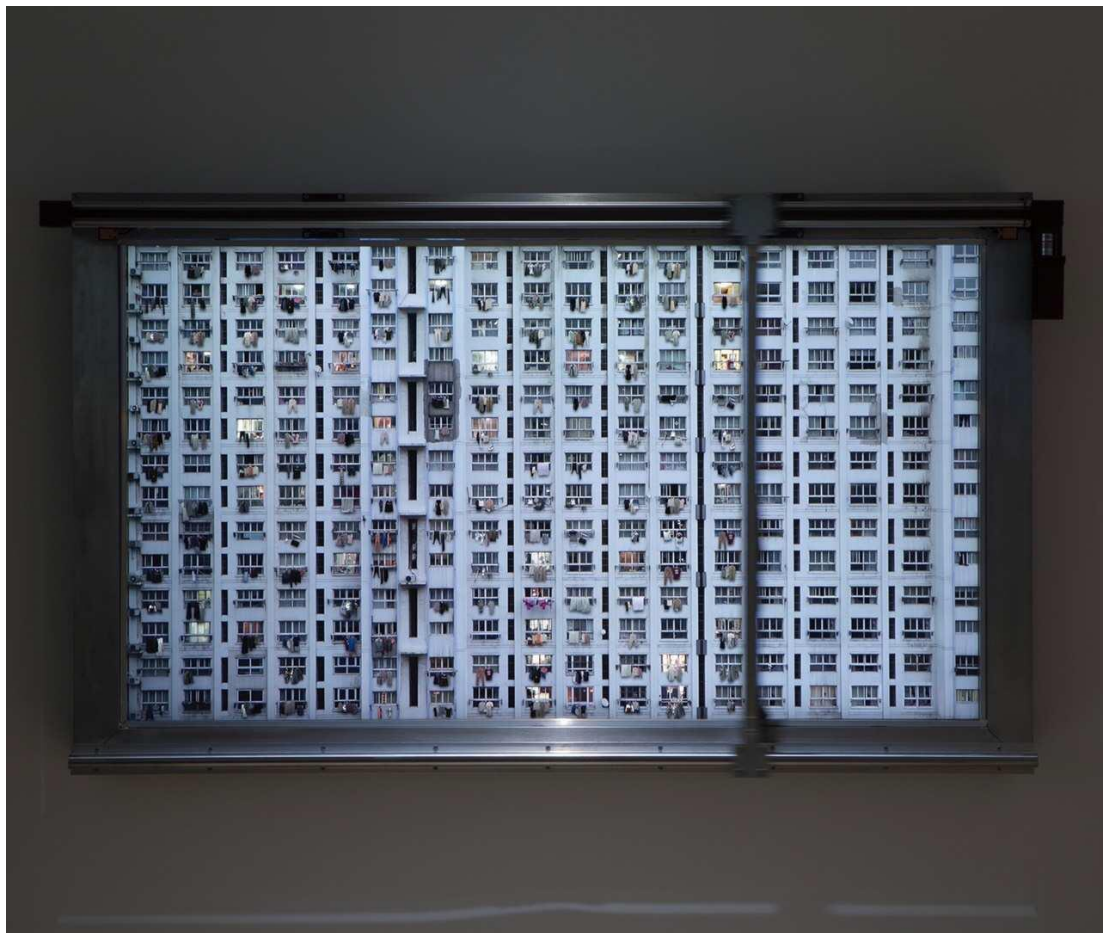


Fig. 3.8 Hu Weiwei, *No Traces*, 2019, video installation, 95x170x20cm 1+1AP. Courtesy of the artist.

⁸⁷ Urban fringes are physically at the edge of urban settlements and control. They often have more leeway to escape the stricter regulations implemented in the city centre and, hence, are more uncertain and informal (J. Fan and Taubmann 2001, 186–94). Moreover, due to the expanding cities and the retreating of the rural land, urban fringes are constantly moving their geographical borders (Gallent et al. 2004, 220). Lastly, as they represent the liminal space between rural and urban settlements, they offer more diverse exchanges, whether cultural, socio-economic, or environmental (L. Zhang 2005, 219–21).

Whereas Hu highlights the hidden potential of migrant workers, he is also aware of the top-down urban policies and their socio-spatial implications. In his video installation, *No Traces* (2019) (Fig. 3.8), Hu depicts the so-called ‘handshake’ buildings, which are high-rise structures so close to each other that they can metaphorically kiss or shake hands together. They are bottom-up solutions to official urban policies. They mirror the creativity and inventiveness of those rural workers who had to find an alternative income to agriculture and, hence, illegally added floors to their compounds to rent them out. However, more often than not, they are treated by the central government as untidy, unhygienic, and unsafe accommodations that need to be renewed or demolished. In Hu’s video, the windows of these densely-populated habitations are either portrayed as empty and dark hollows or with hanging clothes overlooking the apartment. As the sliding bar moves from one end to the other, the picture gets animated; depending on the direction of the brush, the windows liven up or shut down, cleaning the building again and again.⁸⁸

This installation work alludes to the government’s cleansing campaigns, which have been implemented since the 1990s up to erase migrant workers and several neighbourhoods. Officially advertised as urban renewal campaigns, the cleansing aims to achieve an aesthetically and economically attractive city by fighting the irregularity of migrant workers, their housing and businesses (Lai and Zhang 2016). As the inevitable results of ‘cultural and political incarceration’ (De Meulder, Lin, and Shannon 2014, 44), rural-urban fringes and VICs have come to be understood as urban diseases due to biased official media and reports. Specifically, they stand as a signifier for inefficient governmental control, which can consequently undermine the modern and appealing image of global cities and negatively impact foreign investments and the land market (De Meulder, Lin, and Shannon 2014, 43). Indeed, their illegality and poor aesthetics have earned them an association with other irregular settlements in developing countries, such as slums, shantytowns, bidonvilles, and ghettos to name a few (Smart and Tang 2005, 73). Whether fairly or not, this connection has augmented international demands for the central government to regulate land and society. In Guangzhou the city government has promoted the elimination of the

⁸⁸ Author’s in-person interview with Hu Weiyi, HdM Gallery, Beijing, 6 May 2019.

‘three oldies’, namely old villages, old urban districts, and old factories (Shizhengfu bangongting [The Municipal Government Office] 2010). Consequently, food vendors and informal businesses on the streets have also been swept away, and several urban villages have been either demolished or ‘renewed’ to make room for infrastructure and real estates.

However, as Hu’s video displays, it is not only the untidy and displeasing that is concealed or removed, but the overall liveliness and diversity of these sites. The demolition of villages and neighbourhoods alters the overall urban dynamics, flattening the urban fabric and wiping out the heterogeneity, fluidity and potentiality provided by the migrating population and territories. From inhabited and bustling flats, Hu’s brush empties and turns them into ghost buildings. Apart from the brush, he also uses another object to convey the erasure and ambiguity of rural and urban issues, a semi-transparent curtain (Fig. 3.9). The filtered image becomes granular, losing definition and clarity. By cleansing the buildings with the slide bar, brush and curtain, Hu brings attention to the central government’s attempts to impose an overarching narrative that results into the erasure on the floating population and insinuates the homogenising vision of a harmonious China.



Fig. 3.9 Hu Weiyi, *The Window Blind*, exhibition view, 2019, HdM Gallery, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.

The curtain calls for a reference to Havel's veil, which supposedly embodies the pervasiveness of ideology (1985). As discussed in the Introduction, Havel claims that ideology connects the regime to the people by offering them an imaginary construction of reality. Although neo-Marxists, such as Žižek, oppose Havel's understanding of ideology, the use of the curtain in Hu's work seems to point to the limited vision of ordinary urban dwellers who experience the real as deeply ideological. In today's China, it is the China Dream and specifically, the principle of 'harmonious society' that pervades reality. As migrant workers represent an unfair and unequal society, they also reveal the faults of China's harmonious society. Indeed, ideology is characterised by an intrinsic tension that 'designates totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility' (Žižek 2012, 49). Although the China Dream, can be thought of as the connective tissue between individuals and reality, it is fragile and precarious. It is due to this internal instability that the regime condemns even the mildest attempts to resist ideology, including students' demonstrations, workers' strikes, petitioning, as well as the illegal construction of buildings and settlements. Although these are not active attempts to fight against ideology, they are localised points of friction with the authorities that are deemed as expressions of dissent.⁸⁹ Specifically, frictions emerge and even have the potential to raise the attention of the central government when local officials, rural farmers, and migrants cannot negotiate and find a solution at the local level.

Although Hu's use of the white and semi-transparent curtain in the series *The Windows Blind* could point to ideology, it can also indicate the subtle potentialities that are activated as a consequence of the erasure of migrant workers and their locales. In this case, the curtain metaphorically stands for migrants' erasure. The erasure they operate in does not merely obstruct the gaze and the senses, but also provides a concealed space for cooperation and creative energies. Rather than detracting,

⁸⁹ Havel makes a useful distinction between the terms, 'opposition' and 'dissent'. Whereas the former originated in the west to describe a legitimate alternative to the current government in western democracies, dissent was deployed by western journalists to refer to the opposition specific to post-totalitarian regimes. Dissent is the systematic expression of unconventional and critical opinions in public, whose intention has a strong political dimension. However, Havel suggests that those who are called dissidents do not consider themselves as such and do not just decide to become dissidents. Although dissidents and their 'opposition' are driven by human rights, they are interpreted by the system as anti-conformist and, hence, oppositional (Havel 1985).

this blurriness can be additive. Hu's work points to the resilience of migrant workers, who often find ways to survive urban renewals and forced demolition, from relocating somewhere else, to negotiating with local governments. Moreover, Crawford and Jiong argue that urban villagers have refined their strategies as they became increasingly conscious that public exposure and protests could increase their negotiating power (2014, 21). Operating between legal and illegal, urban and rural, in other words, amidst the cracks of the urban terrain, migrant workers fluidly float across them.



Fig. 3.10 Photograph taken in Beijing by the author, April 2019.

Confined to the hidden sphere, the floating population makes the most of this erasure. Havel argues that the 'hidden sphere' is where an initial potential for transformation can emerge within individual's conscience (1985). It is only through this hidden sphere that one can aspire to mature awareness and, perhaps move forward a political or social critique. Today in China, this transformative potential has materialised along the streets, where several illegal ads and tags appear on the walls and are promptly painted over by local authorities (Fig. 3.10). Elizabeth Parke examines *banzhen*, a series of numbers, normally a phone number, which advertises services 'for

obtaining forged certificates and fake ID' (Parke 2018, 262) (Fig. 3.11). They oppose the cleansing campaign imposed by central and local governments. As Parke suggests, they provide tangible instances of the spatial struggle between visible/hidden, and official/non-official (2018). Their apparition and erasure, as performed respectively by the grassroots and the local authorities, can be interpreted as the visualisation of the continuous renegotiation of space and power. This is further suggested by drawing on Jacques Rancière's distribution of the sensible (2011). By theorising a specific aesthetic-political system that defines what is visible and audible, he argues that 'the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community' is determined by certain powerful actors (2011, 12–13). In the Chinese urban context, this aesthetic-political regime is beheld by the central government and locally reinstated by local authorities. Therefore, maintaining Rancière, the continuous shift from concealed to apparent, illegal to legal and readable to unreadable can be thought of as the performative actions of officials who want to impose a certain aesthetics and the grassroots who, in turn, might wish to subvert this distribution of the sensible.



Fig. 3.11 Photograph taken in the hutong area by the author, Beijing, April 2019.

Recently, the spatial awareness of villagers' rights has increased and translated into several urban practices, such as the protests of nail houses, the negotiation of residents' compensation and the urban renewal of certain areas. Matthew Erie reports several instances of nail house protests in

China, from the successful negotiation by Wu Ping in Chongqing in 2007 to the distressing case of three family members burning themselves on their evicted house roof as an act of protest in 2010 near Fuzhou city (2012). Shanghai based artist, Jiang Zhi, reflects on this latter episode in his five-minute video work *Black Sentence* (2010) (Fig. 3.12). Despite being a recurrent phenomenon, the eviction reached the national news due to the upsetting images circulated on the web and the death of one elderly family member, who died from his burning wounds a few days later. Jiang's video responds to the photograph of the man's burns and portrays an unperturbed and featureless face being swollen by red, purple, and yellow flames. The video proceeds slowly and inexorably: whereas the crackle and intensity of the flames mirror the initial despair of the evicted man, the black ashes and fumes at the end reflect his silence. As an extreme act and request for visibility, the incident nevertheless culminates in the dark, bringing the man back to the darkness. On a less dark note, Jiang's photographic series, *Things would turn nails once they happened* (2007) (Fig. 3.13) brings forward the discussion of the stubborn nail house in Chongqing in 2007. Hit by a cone of light, one last house proudly stands in the width of a rubble site as a signifier of Wu Ping's resilience and successful negotiations. Among the ruins, a white banner with Chinese characters reads *guojia zunzhong he baozhang renquan*, meaning 'a nation respects and safeguards people's rights'.

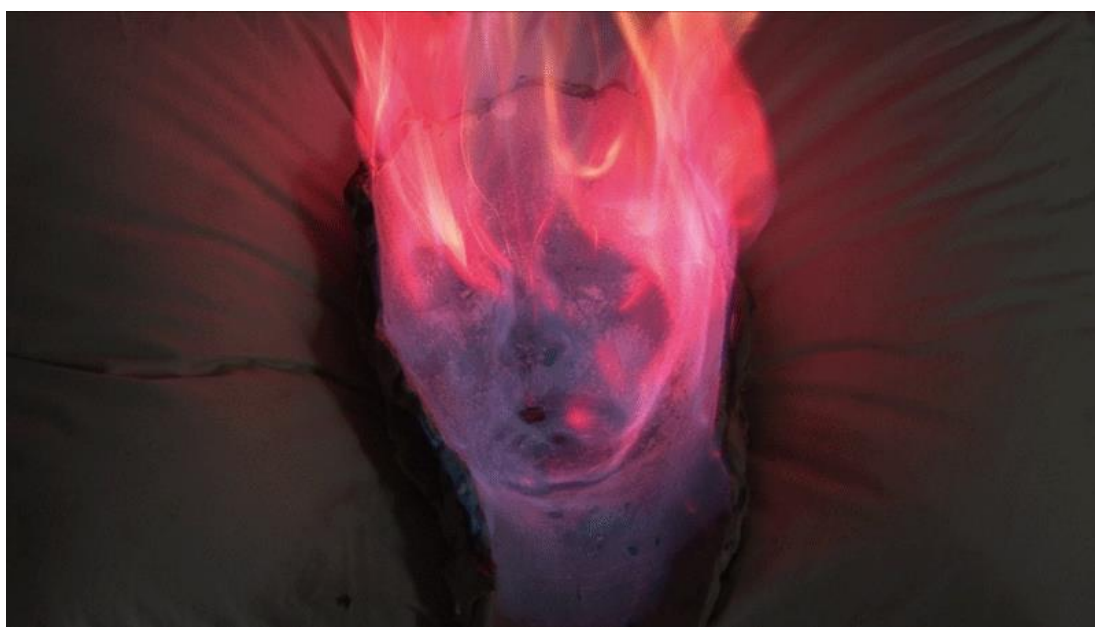


Fig. 3.12 Jiang Zhi, *Black Sentence*, 2010, video, 5 min. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3.13 Jiang Zhi, *Things would turn nails once they happened*, 2007, C-print, 148x200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The spatial inequalities represented through the artistic practices in this section suggest a gradual shift from a total disengagement and sense of impotence towards concrete attempts to comment on the floating population and the city outskirts, specifically through the themes of erasure and liminality. Erasure, instead of denying presence, amplifies the absence and lets potentialities emerge. In Hu Weiyi's photograph *Belief*, the black sky and empty scene free the landscape and seem to open it up to possibilities, especially when juxtaposed to the bright power station. Together, wires and cables energetically glow in the dark as markers for the resounding erasure and potentiality of migrant workers and their peripheries. In this instance, the tools of concealment and liminality take on a different connotation. Erasure turns into a means to shed light on the biased reputation and resourcefulness of the floating population. It is in the hidden sphere where rural migrants reside that processes of multiplicity, simultaneity, and hybridity are initiated.

3.3 Visibility

Although the exclusion of migrants from space-making and society is still predominant, in the last fifteen years, there have been increasing urban and creative solutions to include the floating population. These include VICs, which are ambiguous and in-between areas located within the urban core which offer migrant workers and other lower social strata cheap housing and services. According to de Meulder, Lin and Shannon, the first VIC, Caiwuwei, mushroomed in 1978 in Shenzhen (2014). However, this urban phenomenon has been geographically associated with the wider region of the Pearl River Delta, which has long had commercial exchanges worldwide and required workforce. The explanation for the proliferation of these migrants' enclaves can be found in three concurrent happenings: the unprecedented and rapid urban extension; China's expropriation of rural land from farmers in exchange for compensation and land for housing; and, finally, the migration boom coming into city (Q. Huang and Li 2014). As cities have undergone an overwhelming urbanising process, attracting different inflows of capital, investments, culture, as well as workers, their development has mostly focussed on the modernisation and aestheticization of their centres at the expense of peripheral areas and the low-income population (Ma and Wu 2005b, 5–6). In most cases, the rural borderland has gradually retreated, and the floating population has been excluded from urban welfare and other governmental services, such as health, education, and housing (De Meulder, Lin, and Shannon 2014, 10–11). To make up for these exclusions, VICs have informally attempted to bridge the divide between urban/rural and the new middle class/floating population (De Meulder, Lin, and Shannon 2014, 34). Offering temporary and informal solutions to several urban questions, today VICs have emerged in major Chinese global cities as a symbol of the simultaneous urbanisation and increasing social and spatial inequality.

Due to the informality of these places and their concealed inhabitants, VICs are pervaded with a sense of ambiguity and transience. Their enigmatic nature has drawn scholarly attention, especially in social and urban studies, shedding light on the social implications of these migrants' enclaves and their undesirability against the modern and attractive city centres (Al 2014; De Meulder, Lin,

and Shannon 2014; Liu et al. 2018; Lai and Zhang 2016). Although they are ambiguous and informal dwellings that seem to defy an exact definition, they 'have become urban in their own way. They consist of high-rise buildings so close to each other that they create dark claustrophobic alleys, jammed with dripping air conditioning units, hanging clothes and caged balconies and bundles of buzzing electrical wires' (Al 2014, 1). Their chaotic and noisy features emerge from the lack of inclusive urban regulations and planning, which did not account for migrants and their needs. Despite the insufficient infrastructure and dense handshake buildings, VICs have an underlying structure that subtends the villagers' resourcefulness and innovation. Regulated through an entrance gate and their own police force, VICs often specialise into one industrial or manufacturing sector. Villages host workers who share geographical origin, professional vocation, and dialect. Moreover, they all provide plenty of restaurants, shops and other informal businesses that are accessible twenty-four hours seven days a week to their inhabitants. Notwithstanding their illegality and overcrowding, VICs have creatively channelled and re-organised multiple, asynchronous, and unwanted flows into the city through their own informality.

Cenzatti and N.R. Smith respectively suggest a variation in the label of 'villages in the city' into 'city in the village' to highlight the relevant role and primacy of VICs (2014; 2014). Despite their peripheral and secondary connotations, these decentred clusters are self-sustainable and enable the functioning of informal residents, economies, and services, whilst supporting the overall urban system (Cenzatti 2014, 16). They seem to suggest an alternative mode of urbanism. Whereas in western countries the current urbanising city has gradually encompassed the outskirts and the countryside through a concentric or centre-based approach, the proliferation of Chinese VICs hints at an alternative urban model that juxtaposes downtown to villages (Cenzatti 2014, 8–12). Instead of hierarchical relationships, the urban system is established and spreads through horizontal and multilateral flows, exchanges and renegotiations. Like the ancient Greek urban model of *synoikism*, the Italian *città diffusa* or the 'horizontal city', VICs have the potential to rethink urbanism and introduce alternative urban imaginaries, which are developed through a rhizome

like structure with parallel but interconnected economies, spaces, cultures, people, and services (Cenzatti 2014, 17).

Among the artistic representations of VICs, photographer Michael Wolf, became internationally renowned for his photographic series, *Architecture of Density*, which documents the colourful and crowded ‘kissing’ superstructures in Kowloon Walled City, Hong Kong, across eleven years. His photographs fascinate the gaze through their repetitive patterns, density, and lively colours. However, they do not reveal the creativity and vibrance of these communities, which develop in the ‘hidden sphere’ and often become a threat to the official narrative of ‘harmonious society’. I suggest capturing the energies and potential of these urban sites, through a selection of socially engaged works. Specifically, I focus on the participatory work by Shanghai based artist Ni Weihua, who has investigated the contested sites across Chinese cities in his recent project, *Tracing Outdoors* (2017 – now) (Figs. 3.14-17). Through the voluntary co-participation of the local community, Ni complicates the bilateral narrative between visible/hidden and official/irregular, which has been the central point of my discussion.



Fig. 3.14 Ni Weihua, *Tracing Outdoor: Songjiang, Chenta lu no.1, completed work no.3*, 2018, site-specific drawing. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3.15 Ni Weihua, *Tracing Outdoor: Songjiang, Chenta lu no.1, original marks*, 2018, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Ni belongs to a generation of artists who experienced the Cultural Revolution and China's experimental arts at the end of the 20th century. Born in Shanghai, he firstly dedicated himself to painting to then shift to photography. In his newest series, he combines these two media, painting and photography, with his long-established interest in the changes of Chinese society and urban spatiality. *Tracing Outdoors* is a highly performative project that documents the physical surroundings and, most importantly, the enactment and result of the artistic process. Part of an overarching and long-term project that started in 1985 with ink and acrylics experimentations on canvas, since 2017, Ni has pushed the concept of retrieving traces beyond his studio to public and open spaces. His photographs attest to the meticulous and ephemeral artistic process at different stages, from selecting the site, to retrieving the characters from underneath the paint. Wandering around the suburbs and grey zones of Shanghai, Ni digitally pins his selected location onto the map and uses photography as a documenting tool. He chooses contested sites that are reminiscent of Havel's 'hidden sphere' (i.e., rural-urban fringes, neglected areas and abandoned factories) and significantly grounds his practice onto a geographical and spatial dimension.⁹⁰ By interpreting the

⁹⁰ In the last three years, Ni has been 'tracing' a multitude of signs within the city of Shanghai, covering several industrial and commercial areas, such as Yangpu, Baoshan, Songjiang, and Pudong New District, to name a few.

signs along the streets as spatial and visible demonstrations of power relations between migrant workers and the central government, Ni's outdoors practice intervenes in the pre-existing urban space and alters the ongoing struggle.



Fig. 3.16 Ni Weihua, *Tracing Outdoor: Songjiang, Chenta lu no.1, drawing no.1*, 2018, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Rather than developing a complex composition, his photographs capture the surroundings and the artistic process. In Fig. 3.15, the frontal and narrow viewpoint of the camera highlights the signs on the wall, focussing on the different nuances of grey and tonal interruptions of white paint. The photograph illustrates how the suffused contours of the characters can still be glimpsed at, despite the attempts to conceal them with white paint. The simultaneous concealment and transparency hint at the struggle between hidden/visible and official/illegal. The indefiniteness and ambiguity of both the characters and white paint release a kind of potentiality that resembles that of the bright power station portrayed by Hu in the nightscape of Songjiang. Ni acts on this contested scene by framing and emphasising the visible/concealed interplay as a valuable artefact. He retrieves the black signs by outlining them with dark paint and turns the white paint patches into the background of a wider black and white graffiti-like work (Figs. 3.16-17). Whereas

originally, the white patches stood against the grey walls and concealed some blurred characters, at the end of the process, there is a total inversion. From irregular and illegal signs on the walls, Ni retrieves the bold characters to reinforce the hidden presence and resilience of unrepresented social groups.



Fig. 3.17 Ni Weihua, *Tracing Outdoor: Songjiang, Chenta lu no.1, drawing no.3*, 2018, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

His engagement with the already existing forces at play in these sites not only intervenes in the ongoing negotiations, but also raises individuals' awareness of their own rights. This is especially true since Ni's individual practice has gradually transformed into an inclusive and socially engaged effort that invites artists, the local community, and children to interact with those tags and signs on the walls. The inclusion of other actors adds a further layer to the previous actions of writing and concealing. With different educational and historical backgrounds, social strata and geographical origins, the participants amplify the originally individual performance by the artist. Together, they congregate and initiate dialogues and happenings by tracing signs and cracks on the wall and, hence, altering space and renegotiating power relations. They perform in the space

by consciously, actively, and collectively tracing lines on decaying surfaces. Walking around these in-between areas and applying paint on walls become a political and social performance to re-appropriate participants' 'rights to the city' (Harvey 2012) through a bottom-up approach that stems from the streets and gets to the flesh of the urban core.⁹¹

Years of mediation, multiple attempts, and recurring strategies have facilitated the interplay between migrants, rural villagers, and local authorities. Today, those rural farmers who have unofficially turned into urban landlords are more aware of their spatial rights and have been actively participating in the renewal of their neighbourhoods (Chung 2013; J. Fan and Taubmann 2001). The district of Huanggang in Shenzhen is a successful example of the cooperation between local authorities and the villagers. Chung (2013) and N.R. Smith (2014) claim that villagers and officials conjointly decided on the renovation and transformation of their informal settlements into a hybrid space where several traditional aspects intertwine with a modernising and urbanising process. Although these are more the exception rather than the norm, they attest to the increasing negotiations between urban/rural, official/unofficial, and can perhaps point to the creation of a more aware civil sphere.

Despite the ongoing difficulties to allow underrepresented social groups to take part in decision and space-making, there have been increasing attempts. Alongside the already mentioned urban tags on public surfaces, there are currently two museums entirely dedicated to the labour of migrant workers: a grassroots-run museum just outside Beijing, in Picun village, and a state-sponsored museum in Shenzhen. Whereas the state-owned Migrant Labour Museum romanticises the figure of the rural worker and weaves a 'linear and optimistic narrative' to reassure NGOs and activists, the Migrant Workers' Culture and Arts Museum in Picun reveals more complex dynamics (Qian and Florence 2020, 15). Established in 2008, the space in Picun is a spontaneous

⁹¹ Ni Weihua's socially engaged projects take places in neglected areas and abandoned factories where there is no one supervising the sites. In case they were happening closer to the city centre, Ni would have to request the permission of the person patrolling that specific area to work undisturbed.

joint effort by the New Workers' Art Troupe (NWAT) in dialogue with Chaoyang District Culture and Tourism Bureau and the village committee (Qian and Florence 2020).⁹² By collecting the arts and culture of migrant workers in the form of letters, documents, poems, photographs of their injuries, as well as drawings, the museum brings to light the often erased or forgotten histories of the floating population.⁹³ The museum comprises five exhibition halls, including an historical overview on migrant workers in China and a display dedicated to women, who make up for most of the manual labour at Picun village. Contrary to the official narrative, Picun museum fosters a sense of collective community by giving space to the individual stories of this underrepresented group and recognising its interlinked role within the rest of society.

Alongside the exhibition space, the NWAT runs a series of cultural activities in Picun, such as the New Workers' Art Festival, the Precarious Workers' Spring Festival Gala (Picerni 2020), the free screening of films at the weekend, and the Tongxin experimental school for migrant children in Picun (Shan He and Sexton 2008). Aimed to relieve migrant parents from inaccessible school fees, Tongxing experimental school is part of a wider national attempt to provide free education to migrant children. In Shenzhen, Liu et al. report that since 2008 migrant children hold the right to attend public school and receive free education (2018, 32). However, these bottom-up initiatives often struggle to function and/or survive. Firstly, public schools often cannot cope with the demand and the bureaucratic process tends to be very challenging (Liu et al. 2018); secondly, as in the case of Tongxin experimental school, the local and central governments often undertake cleansing campaigns to get rid of informal and irregular activities. In 2013, as officials shut down four migrant schools in Beijing, Tongxin experimental school was one of the few that managed to stay open thanks to an online campaign (Shiwu Zhong 2013).

⁹² The New Workers' Art Troupe is a group of migrants established in 2002 by migrant workers themselves, Sun Heng, Wang Dezhi, and Xu Duo (Picerni 2020).

⁹³ Shan He and Sexton (2008) report that most of the exhibited objects were donated by migrant workers in the village.

In the art scene, artists, institutions, and several projects have acknowledged the crucial role of rural-urban fringes and VICs and developed a deeper social and spatial engagement with the local communities residing in those areas. For instance, the art space Handshake 302 in Baishizhou VIC, Shenzhen, opened in 2013 with the aim to empower the local community by re-imagining their urban space.⁹⁴ Strategically situated in one of Shenzhen's VICs where plenty of migrants reside and work, the space invites the local community to conceive of the city as a work-in-progress they are part of (M. Wang 2019). Although Baishizhou is certainly one of China's urban villages, it is no longer inhabited by line-factory workers and poor migrants; on the contrary, most Baishizhou local residents are established working class families that have enough capital to invest in their children's education and welcome Handshake 302's art programme.⁹⁵ This has certainly played a significant role in the successful interactions between Handshake 302 and the residents. From walking tours to artists' residency, collaborations with the Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (UABB) and workshops, local families can benefit from and develop artistic and creative encounters.

Throughout the years, Handshake 302 has valued and fostered the interlinkages among locals, individuals' imagination and the city through bodily and collective practices. Site-specific works, such as *Dalang Graffiti Festival* (2015), *Evolution* (2014) and *Urban Fetish: Baishizhou* (2013) are exemplary projects that invite the local community to re-appropriate and reshape the imagined future of Baishizhou through art. Alongside these earlier works, the two-year education

⁹⁴ The project started in October 2013 thanks to several people, including Mary Ann O'Donnell, Zhang Kaiqin, Wu Dan, Liu He, and Lei Sheng (O'Donnell n.d.).

⁹⁵ According to an anonymous interviewee, there is some misunderstandings around urban villages, spatially and historically. Whereas in the 1990s, VICs and urban villages could offer cheap rents and services to factory workers due to unreliable electricity and water, with the rapid urbanisation of the 2000s, villages got connected to the city and, hence, became more popular and expensive. Around the same time in 2005, the city centres were also de-industrialised and, hence, both factories and workers moved to the urban peripheries. In the case of Baishizhou, since 2012, line factory workers have been replaced by working class migrants who have enough capital to own a shop and give their children an education. Although they are both part of the working class, these working class families live in very different conditions to China's cheap labour. What I refer to as cheap labour comprises the line-factory and construction workers who often reside in the accommodation provided by the factory or in the construction sites and have strenuous shifts and living conditions. Furthermore, the same anonymous interviewee argues that due to the official urban and economic agendas, VICs are getting increasingly less diverse. Author's online interview with anonymous interviewee on Zoom, 21 August 2021.

programme *Handshake 302's Art Sprouts* (2016 – 2018) (Fig. 3.18) brought migrant children together to find beauty in the everyday and create artistic responses to their surroundings.⁹⁶ As per the project *Paper Crane Tea* (2014) (Fig. 3.1), this artistic and social project attempts to bring forward the dreams and ambition of the workers, whilst implying their relevance in the overall urban ecology. In the inclusive and hybrid space of Handshake 302, the engagement with Baishizhou inhabitants allows for alternative imaginaries that can perhaps inform future urban practices. However, in August 2019, the space was evicted and forced to shut down due to the local government's plan to redevelop Baishizhou.⁹⁷



Fig. 3.18 Handshake 302, *Handshake 302's Art Sprouts*, 2016 – 2018, educational project.

⁹⁶ Handshake 302 is particularly committed to art education programmes and has three main sub-projects: Handshake Academy, where they work with young children, often focussing on low-impact art; Handshake on campus, where they engage with college students and teach them how to research; and last, Handshake 302 as the art collective interested in site-specific installations and working with the local community. On top of that, they also organise guided tours in Shenzhen for researchers, college students and other visitors. Author's online interview with anonymous interviewee on Zoom, 21 August 2021.

⁹⁷ The first demolitions in Baishizhou date to 2016. Handshake 302 was firstly notified in 2018 of the need to move and in 2019 the space was shut down. The art space is currently exploring off-site and digital possibilities for a 'post-Baishizhou' future (O'Donnell n.d.). For instance, Handshake is in conversation with technological and architectural experts to set up an online project to offer three different online tours of Shenzhen alongside the physical ones.

Another collaborative project worth mentioning for its ongoing impact on the everyday reality of those migrants who often work in factories and assembly lines is the Social Sensibility Research & Development Program (SSR&D). Initiated by Beijing-based artist Alessandro Rolandi in 2011, the Social Sensibility is a department within the French company Bernard Controls in Beijing fifth ring.⁹⁸ It has developed through the collaboration among the factory CEO, international artists, and the spontaneous participation of workers to allow for collectivity, sensibility, and exchanges within the working environment. Twice a week, the factory staff can decide to dedicate some of their paid time to engage with the invited artists. The reactions have been diverse: some find the artistic interventions disrupting and prefer not to engage; some do not seem to mind the presence of the artist and often accept the interactions; last, there are those workers who are very enthusiastic and pro-active.⁹⁹ This is the case of assembly line worker, Li Zhan, who developed the work *I Like Round Things* (2016) (Fig. 3.19). Collating personal objects from her private life together with tools from the factory, such as bolts, screws, and other components, she created a vibrant installation that was exhibited at the Arrow Factory, Beijing. Colourful yarns and threads fell from the ceiling to the floor, where clay balls, cardboard tubes, sectioned vegetables, and fruits were casually arranged. From an intimate reflection on Li's private and working life, her work left the factory and stepped into the space of Arrow Factory as well as Guangdong Times Museum.

Although the intent of SSR&D could be misinterpreted as a top-down strategy to alleviate the workers' strenuous life conditions through artistic engagement, it seems to be genuinely driven by a social mission. SSR&D is an eleven-year-old project that was initiated through a fortuitous conversation between Rolandi and Guillaume Bernard, who shared similar views on art.¹⁰⁰ Departing from the notion of art-object and the idea of authorship, SSR&D values the spontaneous exchanges within the factory, which are aimed at breaking established hierarchies,

⁹⁸ For more information on the project, see the website Social Sensibility R&D Department (n.d.) and Rolandi (2016). For more info on Rolandi's practice, see his website <https://www.alessandrorolandi.org/>.

⁹⁹ Author's online interview with Alessandro Rolandi on Zoom, 26 July 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Rolandi recounts that they both disagreed on the use of the term 'art' and opted for 'social sensibility' as it resonated better with their vision of what artistic practices can do for individuals.

introducing creative thinking, and allowing the participants to deal with art.¹⁰¹ Rather than imposed, they are voluntary. Once the artist is invited to reside in the factory, it is up to the workers and the artist to establish a sense of trust. According to Rolandi, it is in the relations and conversations among factory workers and artists that art and sensibility lie. By preferring the qualitative process of art to its final product, SSR&D believes that art can affect people's sensibility, which is the ultimate 'capacity to respond in an organic way to external situations' (Rolandi 2016a). Art becomes a skill that allows workers to be better equipped for life.¹⁰²

The discussion of the previous artistic practices reveals a constant tension that characterises the relationship between urban and rural. Even though the three interrelated topics of floating population, rural-urban fringes and VICs have often been treated as invisible and displeasing phenomena, they are extremely relevant to the wider urban ecosystem and can provide alternative solutions to the current concerns over spatial and social inequalities in Chinese cities. Together, they have come to be defined as urban problems by the central government mostly because they could pose a threat to the ideal of 'harmonious' Chinese society. However, as this chapter has demonstrated, they are fluid, generative and highly necessary for the sustainability and development of the city. The floating population provides the diversity, flexibility, and irregularity that is necessary to counterbalance the predictable, highly organised, and attractive urban centres.¹⁰³ Flowing from the countryside into the urban centres, migrants have fulfilled the urgency for cheap labour and been highly responsible for the urban development of the last forty years. Last, rural-urban fringes and VICs, as migrants' self-sustainable realities, offer affordable housing, jobs, and services, as well as informal economies and cultural enterprises that are crucial

¹⁰¹ Rolandi argues that before even trying to imagine and change migrants' everyday life, SSR&D aims to make the workers more aware of their space and social interactions by altering power relations that are embedded within the work environment and normally expressed through reverence, gratitude, and intimidation. Author's translation of Rolandi's words '*prima di poter anche formulare un pensiero o una concezione della propria realtà (quella del lavoratore migrante), il nostro contributo agisce sulla percezione degli spazi e delle interazioni alterando quei rapporti di reverenza, gratitudine e intimidazione che sono già iscritti nel design e nelle regole e gerarchie di un luogo*'. Author's email exchange with Alessandro Rolandi, 20 August 2021.

¹⁰² Despite occasional challenges and confrontation from those at the top of the factory hierarchy, Rolandi recognises that there have been several gratifying stories of workers who left the work at the factory to develop their own life projects.

¹⁰³ It is important to acknowledge that is only 'necessary' in the context of an underlying economic system that demands flexibility.

for the city's functioning. Overall, a surplus of creative energy has the potential to arise from within rural-urban fringes, migrants, and VICs to perhaps achieve a more 'harmonious' society and sustainable cities.



Fig. 3.19 Li Zhan, *I Like Round Things*: exhibition view, 2016, mixed materials. Courtesy of SSR&D.

In terms of artistic representations, this chapter presents an array of different approaches, strategies, and themes to tackle or ignore, at times, these three urban phenomena. Artists, as part of the urban fabric, and personally bounded to these peripheral areas and their population, have

certainly had a privileged insight on these issues. However, they have often deployed the official discourse of erasure. This is the case of Wang Wei, who almost touches upon the seclusion and obliteration of migrant workers, but in the end fails to openly denounce the social and spatial inequalities. This choice is certainly interlinked with China's authoritarian regime and the use of censorship by the central government. Artists' disengagement with sensitive concerns allows them to maintain their status and move away from what could be interpreted as oppositional. Moreover, the tactic to adopt the state rhetoric and narratives has long been internalised and proved to be significant in mobilising bottom-up protests (Erie 2012; C. K. Lee 2000; D. Zhao 2001; K. J. O'Brien and Li 2006; Pye 1990). By deploying the same official strategies, artists have more leeway to advance alternative narratives and foster the audience's own interpretation, whilst safeguarding themselves.

Therefore, in representing the floating population, the established trope of erasure has been powerful and widely adopted. It can simultaneously articulate the complex urban dynamics and the reliance on this tension between different and simultaneous forces by migrants, artists, and more powerful urban actors. The concealed in Liu Bolin's photographic performances metaphorically documents the absence of migrants and urban villages. However, whereas at the beginning the framework of erasure was mostly deployed as an illustrative tool, it has become a social and spatial strategy to talk about the proliferation of illegal businesses, informal transactions and services offered to the excluded and continuously floating migrants. In other words, from a negative connotation in Liu's work and neutral significance in Wang's work, erasure has shifted to signify the potentiality of informal and liminal areas. As Havel posits, the concealed is 'where the potential for communication exists' (Havel 1985, 41). The void of the deserted night or the use of the curtain and brush, respectively, in Jiang Zhi's photograph and Hu Weiyi's installations, instead of affirming the exploitation and erasure of migrant workers, amplify this concealment by over-exposing it. The picture's dark background reveals rather than disappears. As Jacques

Rancière suggests, the ‘nothing to see’ asserts and emphasises the presence of that nothing, making the hidden even more apparent (Rancière 2009, 147).¹⁰⁴

Drawing again from Havel, this hidden potentiality constitutes the premise to bring forth something more visible and tangible, which in the case of visual arts can be participatory works. Although the tactic of erasure still seems to be dominant, socially engaged practices that call for the participation of underrepresented social groups have emerged to foster a more concrete social and spatial intervention. In this chapter, the apparition and erasure of urban tags have been treated as an empowering renegotiation with local authorities, which can trigger passers-by’s awareness. Moreover, through Ni Weihua’s work, the same signs are recuperated and reimaged by the artist with volunteers. As temporary and collective efforts, Ni’s traces metaphorically recall the fluidity, ephemerality, and possibilities of VICs and empower the local community by reproducing their own concealed and negative spaces. Lastly, Handshake 302, SSR&D, and the migrants’ museum in Picun village are active attempts to reposition villagers and their community as conscious holders of artistic agency. Throughout their projects, underrepresented social groups flank artists and advance their visions and dreams to shape an inclusive and diverse urbanity. Such collaborations should inspire future discussion over city planning. Although a village-centred urban model might not solve all the concerns relative to the urban question, wider exchanges between different social strata, including VICs, urban planners, officials, and everyday workers, are essential to address problems and reconfigure more sustainable and inclusive cities.

¹⁰⁴ A similar argument, which, however, revolves around the notion of camouflage, is advanced by Michael Taussig. Taussig argues that the camouflage is simultaneously dazzling and concealing, visible and, yet, invisible as you see through it (2008). Likewise, Hu Weiyi’s darkness becomes a triggering distraction, which brings forward what is behind the black sky.

4. The Beautiful City



Fig. 4.1 Yan Wang Preston, *Frank, Chongqing, China*, 2013, c-print, 92x115 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In 2013, a three hundred year old, lush and monumental tree, planted in the small village of Xialiu, Lijiang, was bought for a large sum of money and relocated in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, to embellish the surroundings of a future five-star hotel (Fig. 4.1). Huddersfield-based photographer, Yan Wang Preston, named the tree Frank and retraced its life through documentary pictures and local stories. Deprived of its crown and leaves, the tree died in 2017 leaving real estate developers with nothing but an empty hole on the ground. Another tree was planted afterwards and a few others after that to provide guests a green façade and the sensation of being surrounded by vegetation. However, little attention was paid to the ecological impact of such a decision. By photographing and retracing the footprint of trees, the work by

Preston not only sheds light on the common practice of transplanting trees and vegetation, but also problematise a much wider problem: the commodification and separation of the fictional construct of ‘nature’.

For centuries, society has developed at the expense of other ecological communities through an intensive and pervasive process that has contaminated waters, turned forests into farmland, and erected concrete jungles. A new term has even been coined to define the current geological era and the relative academic discourse, the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is the ‘human-dominated, geological epoch’, characterised by the ‘anthropocentric emissions of carbon dioxide’, which seems to have increased since the late eighteenth century (Crutzen 2002, 23). Along with the Anthropocene, other terms have emerged, including Malm’s ‘capitalocene’, Haraway’s ‘chthulucene’ (2015, 160–61), as well as homogenocene (Mann 2011, 17), plasticene (Demos 2017, 94), and plantationocene (Haraway 2015, 162) among others.¹⁰⁵ These alternatives stem from a critique of the Anthropocene as a concept which reinstates society’s fictional separation from and superiority over the natural world. Among several critiques, T.J. Demos advances that this concept is depoliticising (2017). The Anthropocene ‘distributes responsibility evenly across human history, [...] whereas we know that it’s not human species in general that has caused climate change: it’s particular humans, it’s particular corporations and developed nations within a long history of capitalism, of colonialism, of slavery, of genocide [...]’ (Demos 2017).¹⁰⁶

Acknowledging the uneven distribution of accountability and the worldwide environmental crisis, in the last thirty years, major powers have called for a reconfiguration of sustainable futures (Hodson and Marvin 2010; Lindner and Meissner 2019). Since the 1990s, the world has come

¹⁰⁵ Jason W. Moore attributes the term ‘capitalocene’ to Andreas Malm, who was a PhD student at Lund University at the time. As they were having a conversation in Sweden in 2009, Malm proposed using the term ‘capitalocene’ for the first time (Moore 2016, xi, 5). Moreover, in an article published two years earlier, Malm and Hornberg had already advanced the terms ‘capitalocene’ and ‘technocene’ (2014, 6).

¹⁰⁶ Along with Demos, Haraway argues that the Anthropocene is a marker for discontinuities and destroys places and times for both non-human species, and certain humans, such as refugees (2015). There is a whole field, namely feminist political ecologies, that acknowledges the diverse communities and gender in the ecologies that we are part of (Harcourt and Nelson 2015).

together to tackle environmental concerns on several occasions: in 1992, at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, in 1997 with the Kyoto Protocol, and recently, in 2015, with the Paris agreement, which was signed by two global powers and big polluters, namely China and the US. Despite the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of these global efforts (UNFCCC n.d.), today, manifold conversations have emerged from several disciplines and actors in ecology, politics, social sciences, economics, as well as urban studies and the humanities to tackle the pressing environmental concerns and find solutions.

Indeed, international cities, too, have come to be redefined by the imperative of environmental conservation as experimental platforms to respond to climate change, deforestation, land degradation, over-population, and pollution (Hodson and Marvin 2010). As urban planners set alternative models for urbanities to adapt to habitat loss, ecological cities and other green projects have become increasingly popular. What these blueprints of sustainable metropolises tend to have in common is low-impact constructions, smart technologies to reduce pollution, the implementation of eco-islands as self-governed and sustainable centres, and the intention to promote biodiversity (Hodson and Marvin 2010). However, more often than not, these practices translate into shiny green policies (Economy 2006, 184-86). They become aestheticized visions of eco and high-tech urban centres, which are rooted in political and economic rhetoric, rather than the ecological imperative (Boland and Zhu 2012). Along with addressing environmental concerns, these greening practices reflect the perspectives of officials, developers, and planners, who, in turn, want to satisfy their own visions and interests (Hoffman 2011, 59).

In the local context of China, it is in the last three decades of intensive economic and urban development that the central government has acknowledged some major ecological concerns, including air pollution, water contamination, desertification, the decreasing availability of natural resources, as well as health hazards (Economy 2006). In 2005, Xi Jinping started promoting ecological practices and sustainable development through the slogan *'jinsban yinsban jiusbi liushui*

qingshan' (clear waters and green mountains are as good as mountains of gold and silver) (Geall 2017; R. Huang 2021). Moreover, since his election as Chinese President, the ecological imperative has featured in the China Dream under the slogan 'Beautiful China' (*meili Zhongguo*).¹⁰⁷ As one dominant aspect of Xi's ideology, the engagement with environmental policy reveals the tight interlinkages between ecological conservation and national soft power, rather than a genuine concern over ecology per se. By exploiting established discourses and representations of an external 'nature', environmental policy turns into a political and economic tool. On the one hand, it addresses city dwellers' preoccupation over the hazardous pollution and aims to prevent potential uprisings due to spread malcontent (S. Zhao 2019). On the other, green urban practices become part of an international strategy to increase nations' soft power through visual gratification and instant quick-fixes.

This chapter demonstrates the development of an aesthetics of ecology, which has long embraced meanings, representations, and images that are conveniently constructed to serve current society and its modes of production. Generally, this aesthetics is sensually pleasing and attractive. It depicts 'nature' as something external, pristine, and already extinguished. To situate this discussion in the Chinese context, I will draw on the deeply rooted tradition of the Chinese *literati*'s landscape painting and the Daoist notion of *ziran* (spontaneity). Whereas *literati*'s landscape paintings depict evocative and perfect images of mountains and waterways, the meaning of *ziran* has mutated from spontaneity to 'Nature' and, hence, reflected the shift towards an anthropocentric understanding. The attractive and romanticised features of this aesthetics reinforce a nostalgia for an intact 'nature' that perhaps has never really existed. As the intricate web of relations that is ecology becomes separated into 'natural' and 'artificial', it assumes a multiplicity of meanings and connotations.

¹⁰⁷ Maria Elvira Rios argues that the notion of 'beauty' in relation to environmental protection is reminiscent of the Buddhist ecological narrative (2021). According to Rios 'the ecological interpretation of Chinese Buddhism points, among other things, to the purification of this earth in order to transform it into a "Pure Land"' (Author's email exchange with Maria Elvira Rios, 26 August 2021). Specifically, she argues that it is only under the guidance of the president, Xi Jinping, and the party that China can become a 'pure' and 'beautiful' nation. Recently, the figure of Xi has been juxtaposed to that of the Buddha, reinstating the subordination of the Buddhist ecological narrative to the political discourse of the central government (John Ai 2016).

Specifically, I argue that the production and representation of nature(s) are more revealing of a social and cultural epoch with specific economic and political agendas, rather than the actual environmental conditions. Therefore, through the analysis of recent contemporary art and architectural practices, I retrace the development of an aesthetics of ecology and, consequently, Chinese culture and society. Whereas the architectural projects by Ma Yansong and several artistic practices tend to reinforce the official vision of ecology as set of services, the artistic works by Ye Funa and Na Buqi exaggerate the plasticity of these imagined natures. Likewise, the photographic series by Yan Wang Preston resists the traditional representations of 'nature' by denaturalising trees in Chongqing. Contrary to the beautified visions of a green China, her trees are depicted naked, wrapped up and developing alongside concrete and human-made landscapes. Though the ways in which we reproduce and understand 'nature' seem unmistakable, this chapter attests to the development of a wider variety of imaginaries and encounters with ecology.

4.1 Beautiful Chongqing

The increased awareness of environmental conditions has encouraged the development of a variety of projects and strategies in China and around the globe to reduce the ecological footprint attributed to major polluters. However, more than environmental solutions, these strategies have become synonyms for economic investments. Neil Smith explains that 'in its constant drive to accumulate larger and larger quantities of social wealth under its control, capital transforms the shape of the entire world' (2008, 7). Throughout this process ecology is exploited, objectified, and re-produced to provide more capital. Although this has long occurred, for instance in agriculture, today ecology has turned into an intentional strategy, which has intensified the exploitation of raw materials for its use and exchange-value, leading to the common practices of afforestation, eco-tourism, and green urban planning.

N. Smith refers to this tactic as ‘green capitalism’ or the ‘financialization of nature’. Green capitalism is defined as a tool to soften ‘the environmental impacts of the capitalist exploitation of nature’ and a ‘major strategy for ecological commodification, marketization and financialization’ (N. Smith 2007, 17). This externalised ‘nature’ constructed through modern capitalism is exchanged and produced, turning into a commodity in all effects. For instance, Theo Reeves-Evison with Josh Bowsher argue that this financially produced ‘nature’ ‘that both surrounds and flows through a river, for example, is reductively reframed as a set of provisioning services (water, food.), regulating services (floods, droughts etc.) and so on’ (2020). Likewise, N. Smith brings forward the instance of the restoration and conservation of wetlands through the incentives of financial credits (2007, 19). The restoration of these different natures through ecological incentives provides an alternative way to reframe and re-imagine the fictional separation between ‘nature’ and society (Reeves-Evison and Bowsher 2020). Overall, rather than an untouched and pristine entity, these representations of ‘nature’ not only reflect the capitalist mode of production through landscape reconfiguration but become themselves a final product of the market.¹⁰⁸

As cities around the world respond to the urgency of environmental conservation by exploiting the concepts of ‘green capitalism’ and the ‘financialization of nature’, Asia and the Pacific Area have attempted to stress geographical specificity, as exemplified by the notion of ‘green growth’.¹⁰⁹ Green growth refers to the simultaneous pursuit of economic growth and environmental sustainability. The conceptualisation of this term, which emerged in March 2005 at the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environmental and Development in Asia and the Pacific, was proposed by governments and stakeholders to replace the western rhetoric on sustainable development and emphasize the regional efforts of Asian and Pacific countries (Sustainable Development n.d.).

¹⁰⁸ Though the idea of several ‘representations of nature’ could imply the existence of a real and actual nature, it is important to stress that this essential ‘nature’ has perhaps never existed in the first place (Morton 2007, 140). Quoting Reeves-Evison and Bowsher, ‘the actual nature’ is ‘an already-externalised product of the Nature-Society distinction set in motion by capitalist modernity’ (2020, 41).

¹⁰⁹ Although the strategy of ‘green growth’ is indebted to environmental discourses in the second half of the 20th century and is widely used beyond Asia and the Pacific region, its definition is often associated to the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environmental and Development in Asia and the Pacific in 2005 (Capasso et al. 2019). According to Capasso et al. there are two main features that characterise this term: ‘the different geographies involved in the triggering and diffusing green growth, and the intertwining of economic, social and political challenges which green transformative innovation entails’ (2019, 391).

Under the concept of green growth, several projects have been designed and implemented with the hope to attract investments and become successful international models. In China, these developments include the Chongming Island in Shanghai, the Singapore-Nanjing Eco High-Tech Island, and the National Eco-Industrial Park Demonstration Zone in Dalian, among others. However, despite the desire to shape a site-specific term and strategy, there are several overlaps among green growth, green capitalism and the financialisation of nature.¹¹⁰

Representative of the central government's green growth policy, since the late 2000s Chongqing has been undergoing an intense ecologising transformation to boost its overall reputation and recognition as global city. As one of the biggest metropolises in Mainland China, counting over fifteen million residents, Chongqing is a second-tier city situated in the west of the country. In 1997, it became the fourth municipality under the direct control of the central government and today, it is an emerging hub with one of the highest GDPs in China. Although Chongqing has transformed at a striking speed, it belongs to the traditionally poorer internal regions (Guo and Liu 2012). Historically, the internal areas of China have been less developed than the coastal and southern regions due to fewer commercial and trading opportunities.¹¹¹ However, since becoming a directly controlled municipality, Chongqing has undergone extraordinary changes. The Three Gorges Dam Project in the 1990s marked a turning point for the city's strategic role within the national territory (Lim and Horesh 2017). Thanks to a highly centralised developmental model, which has accounted for the geographical and economic isolation of the city, today Chongqing represents a gate to the west of China and an alternative centre to first tier, coastal cities.

¹¹⁰ It could even be argued that they are synonymous.

¹¹¹ The geographical inequalities have perhaps even worsened since the Reform and Open Door Policy (G. Y. Long 1999, 69; Hui 2006, 387). As Deng Xiaoping encouraged the already wealthy coastal areas to grow further and stimulate development in the western regions, local governments had to readjust to the 'system of reciprocal accountability' which 'generated inter-regional socioeconomic variations' and increasing intra-territorial competition (Lim and Horesh 2017, 8). This strategy focussed on the overall national development rather than the increasing regional disparities.

Since 2008, the Chongqing Municipal Government has tried to establish further the city's role by launching the campaign for a 'Forest Chongqing'. Through the creation of ninety-five ecological forest towns and three thousand green villages, the government is committed to transform Chongqing into a safe, healthy, and happy city (Chreod Ltd and Shanghai Development Research Center 2011).¹¹² Several architects have participated in this extensive programme of green growth by advancing ecological innovations and ambitious developments. For instance, *Chongqing Hortitecture* is a project by the Italian architect Stefano Boeri to merge architecture with the surroundings through a sustainable and low-impact design (Stefano Boeri Architetti n.d.).¹¹³ However, though it claims to promote the current environmental conditions, the development is located in one of the last natural areas in Chongqing's municipality. Moreover, the fame of an established international architect, alongside the carefully designed aesthetics unavoidably increase the value of 'nature' and the city's perceived success. Under the concept of green growth, the environmental efforts satisfy economic and aesthetic goals. Overall, the official campaign to transform Chongqing into a green and beautiful city assumes a double significance: on the one hand, it suggests the urgency to implement an effective environmental policy to reduce the urban footprint; on the other, it unavoidably subtends the desire to boost the city global ranking.

Among the green developments in Chongqing, Ma Yansong's *Urban Forest* (Fig. 4.2) proposes to reconfigure the city into a green community of the future (D. Huang and Ma 2012). Born and based in Beijing, Ma Yansong is a world renowned architect, who has been working to re-enact the immersive feeling of being part of our dynamic ecosystem through his projects.¹¹⁴ In 2014 he

¹¹² Michela Bonato argues that Chongqing is a pilot city for ecological districts, and a model for environmental protection. Specifically, Bonato advances that the Yubei district in Chongqing has been visually dismantled in the name of ecological practices in order to promote the narrative of a beautiful and ecological Chongqing and China (2021).

¹¹³ Stefano Boeri is the author of 'Bosco Verticale' in Milan and the manifesto 'Urban Forestry'. Among his most innovative plans, there is the Liuzhou Forest City, which is an ideal green village with more trees than residents and producing tons of oxygen ('Liuzhou Forest City' n.d.).

¹¹⁴ Ma Yansong completed his undergraduate studies at the Beijing Institute of Civil Engineering and Architecture and his master's in architecture at Yale University, supervised by Zaha Hadid. After years spent abroad, he founded his studio, MAD Architects, in Beijing, China in 2014. Currently, he supervises projects and teaches at the University of Civil Engineering and Architecture. Ma was awarded the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) International Fellowship in 2010 and appointed as 'Young Global Leaders' (YGL) by the World Economic Forum in 2014 ('MA Yansong: Founder & Principal Partner' n.d.).

founded his studio, MAD Architects in Beijing, to pursue his long-term project of developing a ‘*shanshui* city’.¹¹⁵ Ma’s concept is reminiscent of the *shanshui* city proposed in the 1980s by Chinese scientist, Qian Xuesen, who encouraged the construction of an urban centre which could re-establish a supposedly lost connection between humankind and ‘nature’ (Y. Yang and Hu 2016). Although Ma refers to Qian’s *shanshui* city, the theorization of ‘green city’ is not uniquely Chinese. On the contrary, it is also indebted to Ebenezer Howard’s ‘garden city’ and Frank Lloyd Wright’s ‘Broadacre City’, respectively in Europe and northern America.¹¹⁶ Both projects attempt to relieve citizens from urban problems by combining the urban landscape with other ecological communities. However, Hoffman suggests that the term ‘garden city’ in Asia implies a different understanding due to the process of cultural translation that the concept has undergone (2011, 62). Whether the origin of *shanshui* city is linked to China or the west is irrelevant. However, what is significant for my discussion is that Ma’s emphasis on the Chinese tradition could be interpreted as a conscious strategy to promote a distinctive self-orientalist aesthetics. Representative of the green growth’s paradigm, Ma Yansong claims to simultaneously meet the environmental and economic agendas whilst highlighting China’s uniqueness.

Specifically, MAD’s architecture exploits the traditional Chinese concept of *ziran* as a fluid, and non-linear set of relationships which, according to the studio, can stimulate mental wandering and facilitate a spiritual reconnection with space.¹¹⁷ Such understanding emerges from the Daoist philosophical tradition, which advances the ontological continuity of the cosmos and views ecology as an organic, spontaneous, and fluid being (Ledderose 2000). In the Daoist tradition, this concept is best embodied in the principles of *ziran* and *zao Hua*, which respectively refer to

¹¹⁵ The notion of *shanshui* city has been translated as ‘landscape city’ in the interview between Huang and Ma (2012). Ma defines this landscape city as an urban centre where residents and different ecological communities are in harmony. His project perpetuates a long-established tension between ‘nature’ and society which dates to the Enlightenment and has intensified as a consequence of a modern, capitalist culture. From now on, I will refer to Mao’s concept either as ‘*shanshui* city’ or ‘landscape city’.

¹¹⁶ Howard’s project planned for a green belt surrounding the city, the construction of a self-sustainable hub and the monitoring of urban population density, among other features (1902). For more information on Broadacre City, see Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation (2017) and Gray (2018).

¹¹⁷ Author’s in-person interview with MAD Architects, at their office in Beijing, 5 May 2019.

spontaneity and ecosystemic changes.¹¹⁸ On the one hand, as discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to modularity and authenticity, *ziran* represents an infinite source of creativity and continuous renovation which embraces humankind and all other living beings. On the other, *zaohua* stands for the ‘transformative process’ or even the ‘universe in its continual unfolding, differentiation and transformation’ (Komjathy 2007, 487). *Zaohua* refers to natural processes, but also gardens, reproduced landscapes and even human-made buildings, among others (Salamanca Arts Centre 2016). In other words, whereas today *ziran* reproduces the concept of an externalised and separated ‘nature’, *zaohua* refers to the notion of ecology as a dynamic and overarching relational system. Despite MAD’s mission to retrieve the concept of a fluid and organic ecology, in this case, the commitment in reincorporating ‘nature into a high-density urban environment’ (‘Urban Forest’ n.d.) conceives of nature as externally and financially produced. Overall, Ma exploits the notion of *ziran* to forge a uniquely Chinese architecture style that is attractive to both the CCP and the west.

This imaginary rift between the non-human and human species has long been instrumentalised and reinterpreted in different ways. Retracing the origins of this fracture in the west, Davis and Turpin have identified the invention of the steam engine and Kant’s theories as two potential milestones (2015). Since the Enlightenment period and the relative centrality and progress of humanity, the planet started to be depicted as a passive, immutable and mechanical being that could bend to human’s will (Davis and Turpin 2015). Moreover, according to Demos, nature’s submission to humankind could be further linked to the practice of colonialism (2016). Whereas western civilisations would stand outside ‘nature’ and colonise it, the east was and still is largely assumed to retain a spiritual harmony with the environment (Hodson and Marvin 2010). Following this trend, Yin acknowledges a consequent epistemological fracture in China in the 1864’s translation of American jurist Henry Wheaton’s *Elements of International Law* (2017). Since

¹¹⁸ Whereas *ziran* is spontaneity, *zaohua* refers to the principle of ‘creation-transformation’ (Sallis 2020, 72). The concept of *zaohua* goes back to the Daoist canon contained in the *Zhuangzi*: ‘*jin yi yi tiandi wei dahu, yi zaohua wei daye, e hu wang erbu kezai?*’ (Now in this instance I take heaven and earth to be a great furnace and the process of creation and transformation to be a master smith. Where could I go that wouldn’t be acceptable?)’ (Watson 1968, 85).

then, the term *ziran* gained the additional definition of a separate and different ‘nature’, as established in the western tradition.¹¹⁹ This aligns with two possible understandings of natures: on the one hand, ‘nature’ an indigenous, organic, and untouched ecology that is associated with the ‘Other’; and, on the other, a ‘nature’ as an inferior and exploitable entity indebted to the west.



Fig. 4.2 Ma Yansong, *Shanshui City Exhibition: Urban Forest*. Courtesy of MAD Architects.

However, scholars have revealed that East-Asia had a much deeper ecological footprint than is often thought (Elvin 2004). Rather than beholding the view that ecosystems in China and East Asian regions were pristine before the arrival of western influence, Hudson links ecological

¹¹⁹ Interestingly, as *ziran* acquired the meaning of an externally produced ‘nature’, it has increasingly attracted scholarly attention and today there are plenty of literary sources to illustrate this concept. On the contrary, the notion of *zaozhua*, as the broader ecosystemic changes, has been underexamined and is still deeply associated with the philosophical and historical study of the *Zhuangzi*.

damages to the early industrialisation in Asia and the use of coal (2014). Moreover, Mark Elvin and Chang Tan respectively suggest that the untouched representations of landscapes in Chinese paintings and literary works reveal the human desire for a reconnection with ‘nature’ as early as the fourth century (2004; 2016). Specifically, Elvin discovers that by the late imperial period, the ecological footprint of China was already significant enough to suggest that the modernity often associated with the Enlightenment period in Europe had long occurred in China (2004, xxiii, 454).¹²⁰ In other words, even the traditional Chinese notion of *ziran* subtended a fracture within ecological communities that is not unique to the west. Today, this romantic idealisation of Chinese ecology as a transcendent entity to gaze at from the distance is often revived to advertise a unique and distinctive style.

This understanding of ecology is traditionally associated with the role of the Chinese *literati*. They were amateur and non-official painters, who were not admitted in the official academy and would therefore find consolation elsewhere, in the solitude and peace outside society. The *literati* painter, like an eremite, would escape from the urban centre and find inspiration in the non-human. The desire to live in isolation lies in the Daoist tradition of conceiving of our ecosystem and, specifically, mountains and rivers as vehicles to achieve metaphysical liberation and become one with the cosmos (Y. Yang and Hu 2016, 6). To pursue this goal, painters would attempt to capture the ecosystem’s fluidity, spontaneity, and continuous regeneration through observation and representation. By contemplating and inhabiting the surroundings, the *literati* scholar would comprehend, reproduce, and become one with such reality. Chinese landscape painter, Guo Xi, believed that painters’ success was determined by their ability to inspire an immersive experience ‘without leaving one’s room’ (Ortiz 1999, 7). Hence, the rendition of landscape was not supposed to be realistic or accurate, on the contrary, it had to convey the artist’s emotional and psychological status, which would pervade and animate the whole scenery (Clunas 1999). Unsurprisingly,

¹²⁰ Mark Elvin’s volume, *The Retreat of the Elephant*, investigates the history of environment in China.

traditional landscape painting has come to reinstate romantic and modern interpretations of natures that could compensate the faults of the current socio-cultural reality.

Specifically, it is possible to suggest that alongside the notions of *ziran*, also the long-established tradition of landscape painting has fed into Ma's architectural projects to advance a distinctive design which is Chinese and state-sanctioned. It is both a conceptual and aesthetic recovery. By repurposing the tensions between west/east, modern/traditional and external/organic natures, Ma shapes its concept and aesthetics. The proposal *Urban Forest* is particularly revealing of MAD's approach. Designed for the city of Chongqing, this plan has not been implemented yet and perhaps never will be. However, it has already attracted media's attention and been featured in several architecture websites for its attractive aesthetics and potential innovation.¹²¹ *Urban Forest* is a high-rise which revives the mountainous landscape around Chongqing through curvy and sinuous forms, whilst camouflaging with the high-density urbanscape through a glass and modern structure. Ascending to the clouds, the skyscraper grows tall through the juxtaposition of different shapes, floors, and raw and artificial elements, showcasing a singular object that is aesthetically pleasing. Rather than merely responding to the environmental urgency, the project presents a stark aesthetic presence.

To design his *shanshui* cities, Ma brings back established representations of 'nature', which can be identified in landscape paintings, gardens, and poems. He specifically focuses on two contradictory aspects: the romanticised understanding of *ziran* as an impromptu, overarching and fluid entity; and the re-integration between non-human and urban environments. Firstly, Ma suggests that the continuous lines and flowing shapes in his initial sketches exhibit spontaneity and organicity (Fig. 4.3) (D. Huang and Ma 2012). Like a calligraphy work, his drawings appear onto the paper through an impulsive action. Moreover, the sensation of a casual and organic development is given by the floors, stacked one on top of the other, the irregularity of their shapes

¹²¹ See Cilento (2009); Etherington (2009); and Meinhold (2009).

and the seemingly tentative way in which the high-rise grows. Like many painters and poets in the past, Ma adopts the trope of 'nature' both as a source of inspiration and something produced by and, hence, separated from society.



Fig. 4.3 Ma Yansong, *Sketch*, n.d., MAD website, <http://www.i-mad.com/work/urban-forest/?cid=4>.

Ma's second imperative consists in re-uniting what he conceives of as two different and separated ecological communities, namely the human and non-human species. This requirement is pursued through the incorporation of raw materials. For instance, whereas the use of glass surfaces lets light enter and brighten up the inside of the building, the trees, green bushes, and waterways allow for a human-made recreation of a contained ecosystem. Moreover, instead of considering the building in its verticality, Ma conceives of each floor as a horizontal micro-cosmos. Like in traditional gardens, the multi-layered experience of space is simultaneously enhanced through

verticality, and the sensation of depth and expansion.¹²² Ma's *shanshui* city is reminiscent of traditional Chinese gardens and their ability to make your imagination travel places. The sinuous lines, three hundred and sixty degree views, green terraces, elevated walkways, and transparent surfaces aim to recreate a similar imaginative space to travel 'into distant places, into the past, or into myths' (Ortiz 1999, 6).

Overall, MAD's *Urban Forest* and *shanshui* city seem to align with the spread exploitation of 'nature', which focuses more on the vision of an appealing imaginary than its environmental sustainability. Not only is there little evidence of the ecological impact, but the attractive designs seem to reinforce a pristine aesthetics. Preoccupied with their visual appearance, green projects have gradually set new standards for an aesthetics of ecology rather than for a sustainable and green city. As N. Smith argues, 'the development of the material landscape presents itself as a process of the production of nature' (2008, 50), which is regulated by capital. Indeed, Wong recognises that despite successful eco-projects, there are still many real estate developments in China responding to economic agendas and overlooking substantial environmental damage (2011). Moreover, the recent case-study conducted by Jesse Rodenbiker in Tangshan Nanhu Eco-city Central Park identifies a relevant gap between residents' understanding of *shanshui* city and real estate developers' implementation (2017, 81–82). Whereas the introduction of green solutions should ideally respond to ecological distress and anxiety, today the terms 'nature', 'ecology' and 'green' have been instrumentalised. Consequently, green projects and eco-cities shape a variety of landscapes which evoke visions of modernity inherent to the economic and political agendas.

Despite the intent to provide a sustainable and healthy environment to urban residents, Ma's practice is more concerned with the resulting vision and sensations that the building can inspire. His emphasis on landscape paintings and gardens reinforces the idealised and nostalgic

¹²² This multisensorial experience of the garden calls for reference the concept of 'borrowed scenery' (*jiejing*). As illustrated in Chapter 2, the strategy of the borrowed scenery allows to extend the visitor's physical experience of the garden into a mental and sensual wandering.

representations of *ziran* as a passive and subjected entity. Moreover, the commodification of this traditional concept is problematic as China's cultural specificity and exoticness are exaggerated to increase its international popularity. Whereas the vernacular reaffirmation of Chineseness has long fascinated the west, recently, this has been strongly promoted by Xi Jinping to advance a distinctive national identity. Therefore, Ma's developments, including *Urban Forest*, could be conceived of as blueprints to concretize Xi's vision for 'clear waters and green mountains' (R. Huang 2021), where the ecological imperative is integrated with the economic and political agenda of the party.

4.2 New aesthetics of ecology

Whereas MAD's projects illustrate the extensive commodification of 'nature' in today's Chinese cities, this practice does not stand alone. In a similar fashion to the *literati* landscapes, gardens, and poems, there have been several attempts throughout China's history to forge new meanings for 'nature' that are attractive to the west. Specifically, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the Reform and Open Door Policy, a painting trend emerged to rediscover the native landscape. This is the Native Soil Art of the 1980s. Its works expressed a longing for 'a "primitive" land' and criticised 'people polluted by modern culture' (H. Wu 2014a, 52). Along with the intention to document the poverty of the countryside and peasants, Native Soil images were heavily rooted in a romantic understanding of the countryside, soil, and the non-human as opposed to the frenetic and shallow modern life. Artists mourned the decline of a rural society. However, according to Li Xianting this emphasis on the countryside was a conscious attempt to appeal the western art world with what was thought to be Chinese (1993). It reinforced the biased association of China with the 'Other' and, specifically, fed into the narrative of the Chinese population as rural, and longing for a reconnection with a pristine land. From the imperial traditions of paintings, poetry, and gardens to the Native Soil Art in the 20th century, up until today, a specific aesthetics has been developed to represent ecology.

At the root of this aesthetics there is an overarching problem which needs to be thoroughly explored: the imagined fracture between the ‘human’ and ‘natural’ world. Specifically, I align my argument with the work of several scholars to suggest that this separation denies the ecological interlinkages that we are all part of. This blindness towards their interdependence is highly visible in architectural, urban, and artistic exercises, which consciously or not, can significantly reinforce an anthropocentric understanding of the universe as increasingly defined by oppositions.¹²³ Timothy Morton alludes to the fictional character of this construct by arguing that ‘the environment was born at exactly the moment when it became a problem’ (2007, 140). ‘Nature’ becomes an imagined narrative which comes to define humanity by creating distance. However, conceiving of ‘nature’ as a signifier for discontinuities worsened the ecological footprint of cultures in the past (Elvin 2004; Morton 2007; Tan 2016). It has entitled a few big actors to impose their fictitious superiority over non-human species and mark their presence in the world. Furthermore, it has also allowed individuals to deny their responsibility towards the environment. Morton argues that what we call ‘nature’ has been romanticised and confined to a distant podium, from which it is adored by humanity. Yet as soon as you get closer to it, its aura stops existing (Morton 2007, 22). Today, despite the increasing ecological awareness, this fractured vision of the world still constitutes the dominant narrative due to its deep roots and pervasiveness.

Indeed, this artificial divide has been ongoing for centuries and is deeply rooted in artistic practices. Elvin suggests that Chinese traditional landscape paintings and literary works presented an idealised and longed for ecosystem, which had already deteriorated. It provided a façade to make up for the exploitation of land, population pressure and high-levels of agriculture and urbanisation, which were already affecting the Chinese Empire in the fourth century (Elvin 2004). The representations of ecology and the idea of a fluid and harmonious relationship between diverse ecological communities were already mediated through fictional narratives. Tan advances that the early urbanisation and commercialisation during the Song dynasty, with its consequent

¹²³ Our understanding of reality increasingly functions as a signifier for fractures. For a richer discussion of ecology in geopolitics, gender studies, and post-colonialism see Demos (2016); Mirzoeff (2014); Zheng and Lee (2016).

problematics, led artists and intellectuals to nostalgically look back at an uncontaminated ecosystem that had already vanished (2016). ‘Grief at the destruction of nature is... never to be understood only as allegorical, but also in its direct sense’ (Roetz cited in Elvin 2004, 323). Therefore, the ‘sympathetic feeling for nature [...] was simply a reaction against the course being taken in an entirely opposite direction by reality as it developed’ (Roetz cited in Elvin 2004, 324). Moreover, as Clunas argues, the painting had to capture the emotional rather than realistic rendering of the landscape (1999). Among its innumerable narratives, ‘nature’ assumes carefully designed meanings that suit a certain capitalist society. Therefore, the representations of what is referred to as ‘nature’ are more revealing of social and cultural tropes and the market rather than ecological responses.

For this reason, the exploration of contemporary visual arts can be meaningful to trace the development of an aesthetics of ecology and, hence, Chinese culture and society. This aesthetics has significantly contributed to and shaped the discourse around the ways in which ecology is represented and, ultimately, conceived of. Specifically, I suggest that contemporary artistic practices often reinforce a romanticised and socially produced separation between society and ‘nature’. As in the case of MAD, these aesthetic strategies are often reminiscent of the Song dynasty paintings and Ming gardens, which subtend a longing for a degrading ecosystem. For instance, Qiu Anxiong’s animated video trilogy, *New Classics of Mountains and Seas III* (2006 – 2017) combines the aesthetics of landscape paintings with hybrid urban centres to showcase a different future for China. Likewise, the photographic practices by Han Bing, Yao Lu, and Zhao Liang, among others, recreate beautiful landscapes made of mountains of waste, polluted waters, green nets, and other urban elements.¹²⁴ Last, reviving the artificial rocks in traditional gardens, Zhang Wang and Zhang Jianjun respectively produce shiny and silicone rocks to recreate a ‘visual reality’

¹²⁴ Corey Byrnes focuses on one specific art form responding to the Anthropocene, namely the ‘landscape of desolation’ (2019). Although the landscapes either deploy the documentary or *trompe l’oeil* techniques, in both cases, artists rely on established approaches to see the world. Whereas the documentary landscape promises an objective representation, whilst depending on the biased view of a more ecological past, the latter strategy similarly risks reinforcing traditional aesthetics and narratives (Byrnes 2019, 128).

rather than a material one (Tan 2016).¹²⁵ However, rather than inviting a solution, what these works reinstate is a traditional way to view ecology, which relies on and strengthens the aestheticization and externality of nature.



Fig. 4.4 Yin Xiuzhen, *Washing River*, 1995, performance. Asia Art Archive (AAA).

Corey Byrnes wonders whether it is possible for artists to go beyond ‘the memory of a pristine natural world’ and forge new ways of ‘seeing the world’ (2019, 125, 131). Although it is hard to answer this concern, there is an increasing number of artistic responses that seem to reclaim an inclusive and circular understanding of the environment. Yin Xiuzhen’s *Washing River* (1995) (Fig. 4.4) is a public performance in Chengdu, Henan province, where the artist and the local community clean cubes of frozen water coming from the polluted river. The action of washing the dirty water becomes irrelevant as the ice cubes melt, especially when thought in relation to the capacity of the river. However, by including the audience, she invites the locals to actively push forward their ecological concerns. Artist, Zheng Bo, has been extensively invested in imagining

¹²⁵ What is interesting to notice is that these artificial rocks were already human-made attempts to represent mountains. They were often extracted from lakes and selected for their extravagant shapes (Paolillo 2014).

the future through the perspective of plants and other marginalised living beings. His projects range from the work *Plants Living in Shanghai* (2013), which reconverts Shanghai's Cement Factory into a botanical garden, to *Pteridophilia* (2016 – ongoing) (Fig. 4.5), which explores eco-queer potentialities. His work reimagines the circular ecology that humans and nature are both part of through the perspective of plants. Overall, both Zheng's and Yin's practices contribute to an aesthetics which does not passively depict nor deploys the non-human, but actively encourages an understanding of the ecological system as inextricably interlinked.



Fig. 4.5 Zheng Bo, *Pteridophilia 1*, 2016, video (4K, colour, sound), 17 min.

Among the contributors to this more inclusive aesthetics of ecology is Beijing-based artist, Ye Funa, who is interested in kitsch representations of the landscape.¹²⁶ Although she does not directly engage with ecology, she exaggerates the traditional aesthetics to praise the kaleidoscopic narratives that constitute the artificial construct of 'nature'. Born in Kunming, in Yunnan province, where touristic campaigns usually promote the region's cultural and natural heritage as a beautiful escape from the city, she is fascinated by the commodified reproductions of the landscape.¹²⁷ Her

¹²⁶ In 2010, she completed her undergraduate studies in experimental arts at CAFA, which was previously called 'folk art'.

¹²⁷ Author's in-person interview with Ye Funa, artist's studio, Beijing, 3 May 2019.

project *News From Nowhere* (2014) (Figs. 4.6-9) tackles her concern around these fictional narratives and is extremely relevant to discuss the re-imagining of green futures. As a younger generation artist, who has long been exposed to the worsening environmental conditions, she can provide an alternative perspective on ecology. Moreover, her participatory project invites the local community of the rural village of Shiman, Lijiang, in Yunnan province to produce new understandings of ‘nature’.

Since the 12th century, Lijiang has been a strategic hub for trade and transportation between Sichuan, Yunnan, and Tibet, as well as a cultural and commercial point. In 1997, it was appointed by UNESCO as World Heritage Site (UNESCO n.d.). Since then, the village has become a ‘super surreal world where white-collar ladies and hipster aesthetes can divert themselves or even have some romantic adventure’ (W. He et al. 2015, 102). Ye’s work is part of the *Artists Transit Project*, which invited several artists to participate and produce site-specific works to document the traditional Shiman Village and its community before and throughout the construction of the Dali-Lijiang Expressways. Combining her artistic perspective together with that of young villagers, *News From Nowhere* produces a multimedia work that reveals the localised grassroots’ representations of landscape.

Specifically, Ye’s contribution records and plays with popular culture, aesthetics, and imagination. Inspired by William Morris’ eponymous novel, which narrates a utopian socialist society set in England, the artist repurposes the novel’s title and frames her work around play and fiction. Throughout her observation in the village, she collects the stories of twenty-five young people from sixteen to thirty-five years old and re-elaborates the community’s everyday objects. Among them, she gathers diverse representations of the surroundings, ranging from home decorations, to lightboxes, plastic trees with LED lights, as well as ceramic tiles. What she is fascinated with is the range of re-imaginings, which generally advance narratives of an uncontaminated land. Notwithstanding the differences, they all retrieve a kitsch and unrealistic landscape, as showcased

by the omnipresent painted tile around the village (W. He et al. 2015). Framed within a floral pattern, the picture on the top-left corner includes fawns on the vividly green grass and cranes flying or resting on the edges of the water banks (Fig. 4.6). On the right, a big, lush tree directs the gaze towards the shallow waterfalls and the white mountains in the distance. The plasticity of the image portrays a ‘nature’ that is too pristine to be true, obviously imaginative.¹²⁸

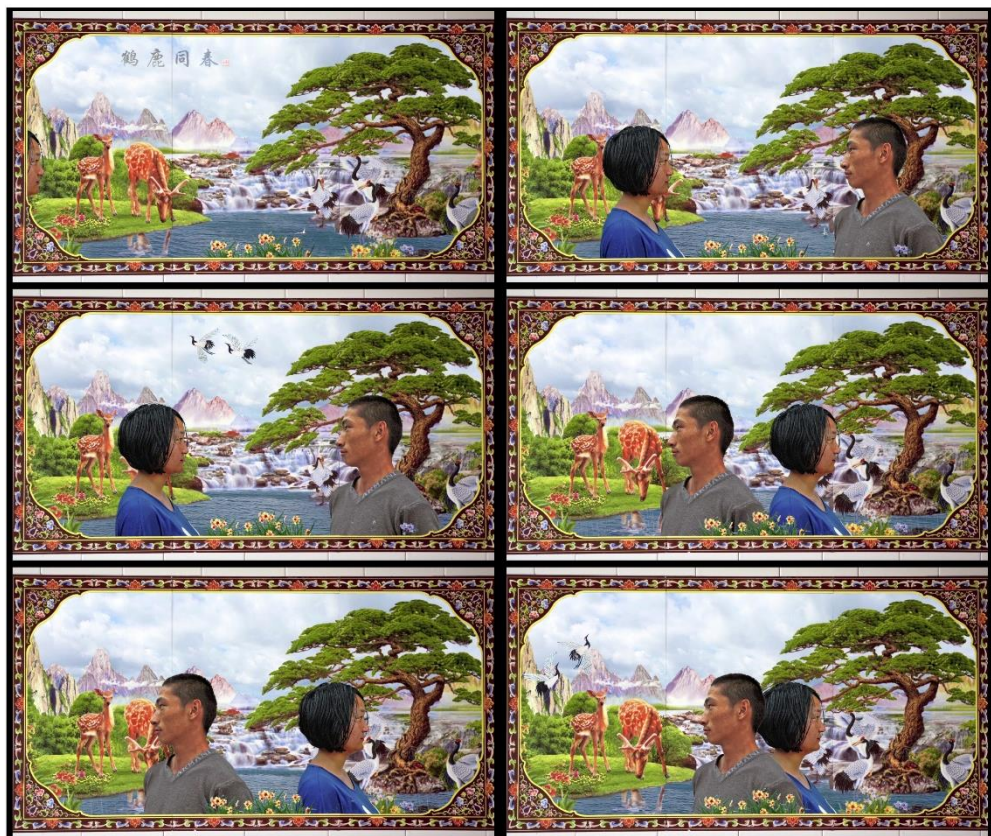


Fig. 4.6 Ye Funa, *Utopia Landscape: He Lu Tong Chun*, 2012, video, 4 min. Courtesy of the artist.

‘Nature’ becomes an empty construct that is brought to life as a dynamic whole by the multiple accounts of its own reflection. Whether it has ever existed before becomes irrelevant as its reproductions replace and multiply the physical environment through carefully designed strategies. Specifically, Shiman village satisfies the sensual expectations of tourists, providing them

¹²⁸ Although the works by Zhan Wang and Zhang Jianjun also provide a ‘nature’ that is too perfect to be true, the main difference lies in their aesthetics. Whereas Zhan and Zhang respectively produce shiny and attractive reproductions of artificial rocks that are elevated to art objects, Ye prefers the kitsch and gaudy, which opposes the aesthetically pleasing and seamless representations of landscape.

representations of an intact rural environment alongside the material comforts of urban lifestyles. This is exemplified by Ye's lightbox (Fig. 4.7), which portrays a moving and bright waterfall immersed in a green environment. Whereas the waterfall and tree dominate in the picture, an orange cocktail with fruit decoration appears on the right and interrupts the peaceful and green atmosphere as a symbol of the urban and cosmopolitan lifestyle. The overall scenery mirrors the villagers' aesthetics, where urban merges with rural, and non-human species with modern society to create a new kind of ecological landscape. Ye's 'imaginary landscapes' offer mediated accounts of 'nature' that satisfy villagers' aesthetic taste (Figs. 4.8-9). What is interesting is that this aesthetic tendency aligns with the touristic and commercial interests of Shiman local authorities. Whereas at first glance, *Utopia Landscape* (Fig. 4.6) seems to bring back the aesthetics of traditional landscape paintings with its mountains, waters, and trees, as the title suggests, it is an idyllic narrative carefully woven by officials. It is a 'nature' that is 'more perfect than reality' and capable of satisfying the bourgeoisie's expectations, who romantically escape the city to 'reconnect with nature'.¹²⁹



Fig. 4.7 Ye Funa, *Utopia Landscape: Waterfall*, 2014, lightbox, 30x30 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

¹²⁹ Author's in-person interview with Ye Funa, artist's studio, Beijing, 3 May 2019.



Fig. 4.9 Ye Funa, *Moving Utopic Light Box: Huangshan Scenery*, 2012, lightbox, 110x60 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4.8 Ye Funa, *News From Nowhere: exhibition view*, 2014, plastic trees and LED lights.

Today, this motivation has partly substantiated the development of tourism, alongside the emergence of the new middle class and the government's establishment of the Three Golden Weeks (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013).¹³⁰ The not yet highly urbanised countryside, together with cultural and historical landmarks, has been objectified and reproduced to boost tourism and, hence, the local economy. As N. Smith advances, among the 'innumerable layers of meaning',

¹³⁰ In 1999, the central government established the Three Golden Weeks, which are three weeks of holiday to celebrate, respectively, Chinese New Year, Labour Day, and the PRC National Day. Rather than one day, the public holiday was extended to seven days to encourage tourism and China's economy.

which ‘nature’ has accumulated throughout history, capitalism has filtered them to develop ‘concepts of nature appropriate for the present era’ (2008, 11). As the natural landscape ends up satisfying a certain agenda, it assumes convenient and even contradictory meanings at time. In the case of China, natural sceneries are treasured by local and central authorities to promote the regional economic development and increase China’s soft power. However, rather than being preserved, they are curated into a touristic and entertaining experience, where different ecological communities are persuasively represented and re-produced through traditional aesthetics to accumulate capital. As a result, the often convenient understanding of ‘nature’ as an external entity, which humanity is not responsible for, runs parallel to the simultaneous desire to experience and be one with it, ‘at least for the weekend’ (N. Smith 2008, 27).



Fig. 4.10 Na Buqi, *Destination: exhibition view*, 2018, UCCA Dune, China.

Set in another touristic spot for China’s bourgeoisie is Na Buqi’s work *Destination* (2018) (Figs. 4.10-12). Like Ye, she moved to Beijing for her undergraduate studies after leaving her hometown in Inner Mongolia. Although their artistic practices are very different, they are both fascinated by the blatant financialisation of nature and the consequent aesthetics of ecology. Specifically, *Destinations* was commissioned and exhibited for the first time at the group show *After Nature: UCCA Dune Opening Exhibition* (2018 – 2019) to explore the ways in which humankind has

‘discovered – and somehow invented – the natural world’ (‘After Nature: UCCA Dune Opening Exhibition’ 2018).¹³¹ Installed by the sea, the work is developed in relation to the UCCA Dune site and the Aranya Gold Coast Community. This gated district is a ‘holiday resort’ aimed at the Chinese new bourgeoisie coming from the nearby Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei economic zone. It is an enclosed dreamland that provides luxurious hotels, expensive restaurants and a high-end lifestyle which clashes with the ordinary port city of Qinhuangdao.¹³² The extensive advertising billboards and newly built architecture makes you feel like Aranya is not just a name or a decoration. On the contrary, it is a community and lifestyle.¹³³ Like in Shiman village, the exclusive Aranya Gold Coast Community offers an escape from a high-speed urban life whilst satisfying the sophisticated needs and taste of the Chinese urban travellers with a carefully designed seashore.

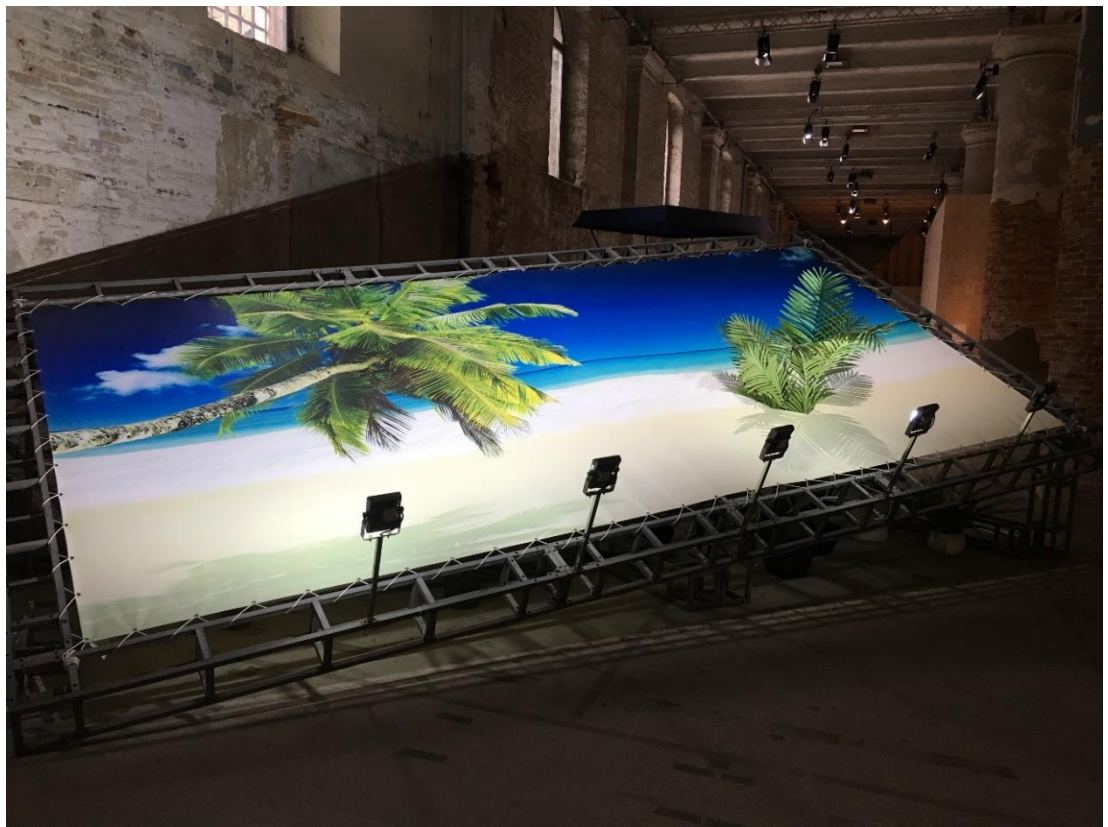


Fig. 4.11 Na Buqi, *Destination: exhibition view*, 2018, installation, steel, frame, image, fake plants, lights, 600x300x180 cm, photograph taken by the author, Venice Biennale, September 2019.

¹³¹ The exhibition included the works by Zheng Bo, Li Shan, Liang Shaoji, and Liu Yujia among others.

¹³² The Aranya Gold Coast Community counts several newly built facilities, such as the Lonely Library and the Community Hall by Vector Architects and the Aranya Art Centre by Neri&Hu, to name a few.

¹³³ Author’s in-person interview with Na Buqi, café in London, 3 June 2019.

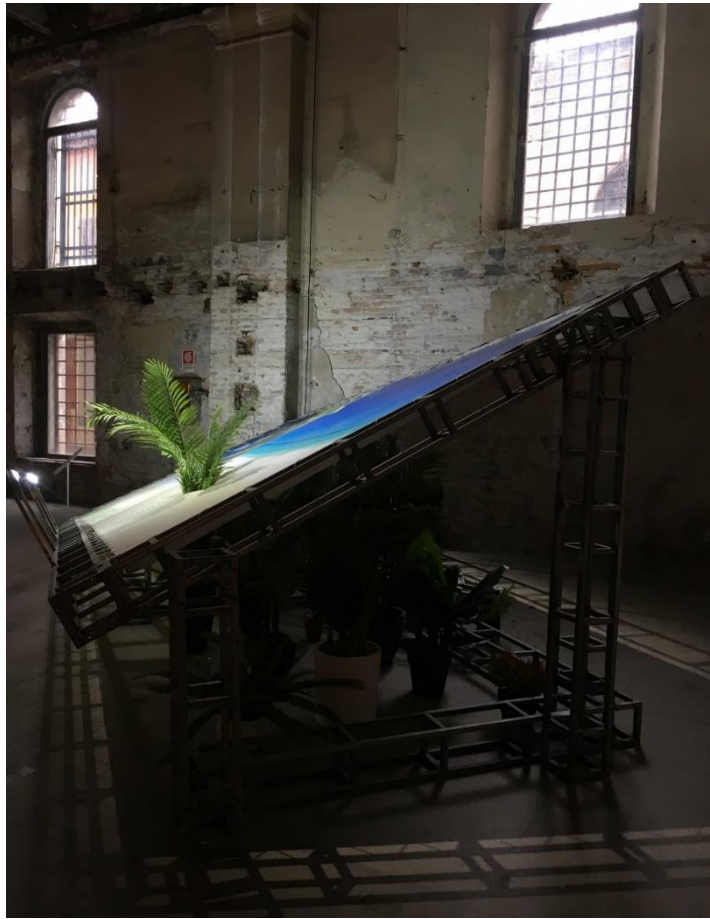


Fig. 4.12 Na Buqi, *Destination: detail*, 2018, installation, steel, frame, image, fake plants, lights, 600x300x180 cm, photograph taken by the author, Venice Biennale, September 2019.

As the sea meets the concrete, Na creates an installation that plays with the denaturalisation of nature. Situated outdoors, near the crowded Beidaihe beach, the artist's work includes a three by six meters billboard and several fake plants (Fig. 4.10). Unlike most large advertising panels installed vertically and relatively high from the ground, hers is supported by a steel structure which is slightly inclined into a semi-vertical position. From this view, the displayed picture reveals an exotic landscape with a white sand beach, tropical palm trees and a line of light blue sea which blurs with the cloudless horizon (Fig. 4.11). The scene almost looks too pristine to be true and, indeed, is downloaded from the Internet. To break this visual illusion, the size and vicinity of the installation allow the viewer to physically explore the work and realise that that two palm trees break through the panel. Whereas the tree on the left emerges from the corner as a flat bidimensional object, the fronds of fake evergreen leaves on the right cuts through the panel, marking the plant's three-dimensionality against the superficial and flat representation of the seaside (Fig. 4.12). In Na's work, the separation between 'nature' and society is reimagined and

further negotiated by merging digital material with plastic reproductions of tropical vegetation. This seemingly ‘natural landscape’, made of fake plants, is veiled, and partly covered by the photoshopped image. *Destination* resists the temptation to draw from traditional representations of a pure and intact ‘nature’ to immerse the viewer into a wholly plastic installation.

Both Na’s and Ye’s works problematise the increasing externalisation of ‘nature’ by exaggerating this trope. Through kitsch, plastic, and extravagant re-arrangements, their works distance themselves from the traditional *shanshui* aesthetics and the nature-society boundary produced by capitalism. Their nature(s) encompasses multiple meanings and representations of itself. ‘It slides over the infinite list of things that evoke it’ (Morton 2007, 14–15). Slipping away from one and absolute definition, it becomes a transcendent entity that oscillates between the material and abstract. ‘Nature’ turns into ‘a kaleidoscope of fragments most of which reflected something of most of the other fragments’ (Elvin 2004, 413). Facing the impossibility to wholly grasp the ecological interlinkages, mediated representations have increasingly developed to visualise this impalpable concept through pleasing and distant encounters. They have roared in ‘to fill the void left as old nature exits’ (McMurry 2014, 493).¹³⁴ Overall, ‘nature’ reveals itself as an empty construct for a multiplicity of narratives, which all subtend the understanding of ecology as conveniently shaped by society.

4.3 Ecological governance

Though what we have come to understand as ‘natural’ seems unmistakable, this fiction has been conveniently interwoven and promoted as a social product with a specific economic and political

¹³⁴ Malm also cites these lines by McMurry and continues his argument by quoting the rapper, Kate Tempest, who sings ‘staring into the screen so / we don’t have to see the planet die’ (Malm 2018, 17). He argues that the virtual realm becomes an escape from the ecological damages inferred to the world and the overwhelming catastrophic futures. However, despite the association of climate change and environmental concerns with despair, Malm advances that the concept of ‘nature’ cannot be eliminated as it is the only way for society to keep inhabiting the planet (2018, 182–83). Reeves-Everson and Bowsher move a critique towards Malm’s determination to keep the nature-society boundary as it denies the possibility to shift beyond an anthropocentric standpoint (2020).

role (N. Smith 2008, 28). As the ultimate product of social labour, 'nature' has become an integral part of society, whilst simultaneously standing outside of it. N. Smith explains that whereas 'the hostility of external nature justified its domination', 'the spiritual morality of universal nature provided a model for social behaviour' (2008, 28). Moreover, by bringing forward the Marxist discourse around capitalist production, this contradictory binary comes to be understood as a reproduction of the dialectical process of separation: as labourers transform raw resources into a finished product, they are increasingly alienated from their ecosystem.¹³⁵ 'Much as the real subsumption of labour strips the labourer of individuality, the real subsumption of nature, through its capitalization and financialization, strips nature of its specificity' (N. Smith 2007, 29).

As a social product, 'nature' reflects the uneven development of capitalism, which is responsible for the over-exploitation of land, flows, and other raw resources and unequal development across countries. Malm suggests that ecological concerns are proportionate to countries' GDPs and their ability to deal with environmental disasters (2018). Whereas those labelled as rich countries rely on their advanced economic and technological skills to respond to environmental catastrophes and comply with international regulations, so called 'developing' and 'underdeveloped' nations often do not have the resources to face calamities. Moreover, the latter frequently capitalise their raw materials in exchange for economic gain. In Southeast Asia, the severe ecological footprint is partly attributed to multinationals, which often move their industrial production to poorer regions for economic and environmental reasons (Y. F. Lee and So 1999). For instance, Mainland China counts informal e-waste collection centres, such as the world-renowned Guiyu in Shantou, Guangdong province.¹³⁶ Despite the central government's attempt to acknowledge and improve the overall ecological footprint, the case of China is very complex.

¹³⁵ The metabolic rift is a term developed by several scholars to describe the Marxist analysis of the labour process between humans and nature (Foster 1999; Schneider 2017).

¹³⁶ The case study of Guiyu town has been thoroughly investigated to measure the scale of the environmental impact and find solutions. In 2008, Greenpeace discovered severe implications to the unregulated e-waste disposal by low-skilled workers: widespread and even severe contamination of natural resources and in humans (Walters and Santillo 2008). However, recently, the government has tried to regulate some of these informal activities by imposing restrictions and bans on the disposal of e-waste and by implementing official centres, such as the Guiyu Circular Economy Industrial Park (Chi et al. 2011; Cao et al. 2016).

Due to the rapid development that the PRC, as well as other countries in Southeast Asia have experienced, measuring the ecological successes and failures of China demands a more layered analysis.¹³⁷ On the one hand, China's recent economic and urban growth has had a deep impact on its ecological footprint and led to regular international critiques;¹³⁸ on the other, becoming one of the main economic powers in the world has enabled China to implement more green initiatives (Economy 2006). This increased awareness towards ecology has encouraged the development of a variety of projects and strategies for China to conform to international standards. Among them, there are the pricing of natural resources, the National Environmental Model City programme, as well as the introduction of the green GDP (Economy 2006). In addition to this, The GreenWatch programme, supported by the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and World Bank, has been very successful in reducing emissions by publicly disclosing firms' environmental performances (H. Wang et al. 2004). A Greenpeace report in 2018 shows that the PRC has made stark improvements in the reduction of fine particle levels and currently owns the 'most numerous and far reaching monitoring network' (IQAir AirVisual 2018). Moreover, the project of Liuzhou Forest City, designed by Stefano Boeri, plans to host 30,000 inhabitants, 40,000 trees, 1,000,000 plants and promises to absorb 10,000 tons of carbon dioxide and 57 tons of micro particles, whilst producing 900 tons of oxygen.¹³⁹ Despite the amount of ambitious urban projects that have mushroomed around China to tackle environmental concerns, the economic and financial gain still seems to play a significantly major role.

¹³⁷ In the late 20th century China was still considered a 'developing' country, preoccupied with political instability and urged by the need to improve the economic and living conditions of its population (Economy 2006, 173).

¹³⁸ Media coverage on the levels of emissions and air pollution has been particularly stark in concomitance with relevant national and international events, suggesting direct linkages between environmental and countries' overall performances. In 2008, before and throughout the preparation for the Beijing Olympic Games, numerous countries raised concerns on air quality and athletes' health conditions ('Beijing's Battle to Clear the Air' 2008; Dube 2008). In 2010, the Shanghai World Expo attracted reports about the good level of air quality throughout the event period (Master 2010; Plafker 2010). Later, in 2019, it was the seventieth anniversary of the PRC that drew the attention of journalists and media (Fifield, Li, and Yang 2019).

¹³⁹ Liuzhou Forest City is an enclosed and clean town that could perhaps boost other green models ('Liuzhou Forest City' n.d.). However, there is not much available information about the progress and completion of the project.

It becomes evident that the discourse of ecology has become highly entrenched in economics, as well as politics. Along with economic gain, politics has also benefitted from environmental policy and more sustainable urban imaginaries. Elizabeth Economy refers to the interlinkages between ecology and policy making as ‘environmental governance’, suggesting the active impact of ecological interlinkages and the re-production of ‘nature’ not only for economic, but also political gain (2006, 12). Specifically, it is possible to identify the instrumentalization of ecological practices both at local and global level. On the macro-level, the central government has taken significant steps in environmental policy to raise the nation’s credibility and power. Not surprisingly, since the US decision to leave the Paris Agreement in 2017, the PRC has been even more committed to achieve environmental goals and provide a leading model (Geall 2017). Therefore, being able to protect and restore a thriving ecology and develop high-end cities by advancing clean technologies and renewable sources becomes a signifier for a modern nation that can look after present and future generations, as well as other ecological communities.

Domestically, local governments have branded and turned regions, cities, and islands into green commodities to attract foreign and domestic investments (Hodson and Marvin 2010), as well as measure local officials’ performances. For instance, the Chongming Island, in front of Shanghai, is a project initiated in 2004 that claims to ‘transform a coastal island into a world class environmental and sustainable district for Shanghai that preserves the environment yet houses 800,000 people’ (Skidmore Owings & Merrill LLP, n.d.). Interestingly, a grassroots’ food movement has recently developed on the island, which Cody refers to as ‘exemplary agriculture’ (2018). Constituted by an independent group of organic farmers, most ‘exemplary agriculturalists’ possess an urban *hukou* and, hence, do not originally come from the countryside (Cody 2018). They are urban dwellers who are concerned with the unsustainable lifestyle and the poor health

and safety in the city.¹⁴⁰ For these disillusioned citizens, the countryside does not only offer a solution to urban problems, but it is once again idealised as the keeper of Chinese culture and tradition.

Today, ‘the whole concept of trying to be green is being abused’ (Warner 2018). These are some of the words by photographer Yan Wang Preston, whose work has been introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Born and raised in China, Preston uses her camera to document how rivers, trees and the land have changed and undergone a denaturalising process.¹⁴¹ Among her works, I analyse *Forest* (2010-2017) (Figs. 4.13-19), which is a long-term project that maps trees’ existence. Based in Chongqing, it documents the sudden metamorphosis of China’s youngest municipality from concrete into a green forest through the presence of trees (Preston 2018). As the city changes and becomes increasingly obsessed with the colour green, she observes magnificent ginkgo trees mushroom around the city to decorate new and ongoing projects as if they had been there for decades. Her photos merge natural, urban, and technological infrastructures together. Artistically responding to the official policy of transforming the municipality into an urban forest, Preston’s work stresses further the extensive trend of ecological façades and puts into question the sustainability of current urban exercises. Her photographs simultaneously unveil the instantaneity, violence, and humanity of transforming Chongqing into a ‘Forest City’ (Preston n.d.).

Although Preston’s series focuses on the practice of transplanting trees in Chongqing, her research has reported similar happenings in Dali in Yunnan, Sanhe in Beijing, and in other parts of Europe (i.e., West Yorkshire, Romania), which demonstrates the popularity of this phenomenon (Preston

¹⁴⁰ Cody reports that food movements can be explained by a ‘disillusion with city life and a flight from urban modernity, a response to food safety concern and/or backlash against industrially produced food, a manifestation of the need for conspicuous consumption and class-based distinction or a response to the erosion of grand narratives of modernity and replacement with alternative modernities’ (2018, 73).

¹⁴¹ Born in China, Preston currently lives and works in England as photographer and lecturer at the University of Huddersfield. In 2005, after working as anaesthetist in Shanghai, she decided to move to the UK and pursue her passion for photography. In 2018, she completed her practice-based PhD, supported by a new photographic work, *Mother River*, which toured around twelve international exhibitions.

2018). Through several years of investigation, she has discovered that most transplanted trees come from rural villages or are illegally taken from the mountains to the city centre and acquired through expensive fees (Fig. 4.1). Like the factory workers who cannot afford the product they produce, villagers are separated from the ecosystem they are part of in exchange for capital. The large sum of money compensates the eradication of the tree from its original site, the emotional loss for the community and the potential death of the plant after transplantation. In return, trees provide green areas, and visually demonstrate real estate developers' mission to conserve and restore the environment (Preston 2018). Overall, the green becomes the means to associate the neighbourhood, city and, to an ever wider extent the nation, with the ecological imperative.¹⁴²



Fig. 4.13 Yan Wang Preston, *Goldie, a fake old tree*, Chongqing, China, 2017, c-print, 92x115 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

¹⁴² Perhaps, it is even possible to argue that it is the colour green that becomes indexical of the ecological mission to the eyes of officials, urban planners, and real estate developers in the urban space. As mentioned in Chapter 1, construction sites are often covered by billboards and panels of fake green grass, which amplify the integration between concrete and vegetation and the sensation of being in a fairly green environment.

Specifically, Preston argues that ‘trees display a political landscape’, where ‘nature’ assumes a set of meanings and services, ranging from ecological, to political and cosmetic (2020, 351). Trees and, to a wider extent ecology, have become a symbol of sustainable development and, as such, they are able to attract capital, especially thanks to an established aesthetics. Urban planners and designers raise attention and capital by promoting the pleasing appearances of their green projects and solutions, often overlooking the environmental impact (Rodenbiker 2017). Although ecology becomes one victim of prioritised economic gain, the death and decay of certain ecological communities are seldom taken into much consideration. The inevitable losses are counterbalanced by the visions of a greener and more sustainable environment, and ultimately justified by financial expectations (Wong 2011). Even when developers’ economic possibilities are limited, creative solutions arise to build visually green projects. ‘Goldie’ is one of those innovative quick-fixes. Although at first glance, it looks like a lush and big oak tree, Goldie is constituted by several smaller oak trees planted very close to each other to resemble an expensive and ancient tree (Fig. 4.13) (Preston 2020). Likewise, *Swimming pool underneath Egongyan Bridge* (Fig. 4.14) illustrates the immediate and seemingly effortless integration between grey and green. Plants, bush, and vegetation seem to have spontaneously grown and supplemented another kind of forest which is made of concrete. However, bringing vegetation into the urban centres through an instantaneous and easy process becomes part of a macro-plan to build ecological cities and relieve urban dwellers’ ecological concerns.

Through the assimilation of different ecological communities, Preston portrays trees as denaturalised objects against concrete infrastructures and skyscrapers. Her work is useful to shed light on the tension between the two concepts of ‘nature’ as a separated non-human, on the one hand, and ecology as a web of interlinked relations, on the other. In *Yangtze Riverside Road* (2011) (Fig. 4.15), two curving rows of trees dominate the view and direct the gaze towards a human-made scene. Juxtaposed to concrete buildings on the left and delimited by a walking path on the process of being paved, living, and breathing trees become additional elements to the urban design.

Void of their natural habitat, they try to adapt to another soil with the only functions to decorate concrete jungles and please the eye of city dwellers. The trees in her pictures seem cold and distant. In *Central Park, University City* (Fig. 4.16), the veiled trees evoke a transcendental and mystical aura. An after-death mysticity is perhaps accentuated, respectively, by a low point of view which invites the spectator to look up, and by the fine and almost transparent material which lets light trespass while covering and blurring the shape of trees and leaves. The landscapes in both images seem still, expressionless, and sterile. With cut branches, supporting structures, and nets wrapping them, trees appear as harmed, unstable, and suffocating beings fighting for survival. The crude and unembellished landscapes portray a still and suspended afterlife for trees. Preston photographs a dystopian and deserted land where humankind has urbanised plants and vegetation but perhaps also endangered its own survival.



Fig. 4.14 Yan Wang Preston, *Swimming Pool Underneath Egongyan Bridge, Chongqing, China*, 2012, c-print, 92x115 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The sense of distance, hopelessness, and the fragile appearances of trees in what sometimes looks like a wasteland invite a further reflection on the biased understanding of ‘nature’ as a separate

entity from humankind. Preston's trees are denaturalised objects which construct another meaning for 'nature' where vegetation turns into decorative and glorious symbols of wealth and modernity for the apparent benefit of an urban elite. Once they are eradicated from their original ecosystems, the complex environmental linkages they were part of alter and gradually compromise the overall ecosystem. The photographs of the Haidong Development Zone in Dali, Yunnan, attest to this human-made practice; in the picture, mountains of red soil and green valleys have been artificially created to host a modern mountain town (Fig. 4.17) (Preston 2018). As the morphology of the territory is modified and even replicated by transporting raw elements from one site to the other, this practice reveals little understanding and consideration of the 'feral ecology' we are all part of.¹⁴³



Fig. 4.15 Yan Wang Preston, *Yangtze Riverside Road, Chongqing, China*, 2011, c-print, 92x115 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

¹⁴³ Tsing defines the 'feral ecology' as the human and non-human landscape transformation, where humankind's exceptionalism has been overcome and replaced by an understanding of the universe as interlinked (2019).



Fig. 4.17 Yan Wang Preston, *Central Park: University City, Chongqing, China*, 2011, c-print, 92x115 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4.16 Yan Wang Preston, *D12-Pubeijing Quarry Ecology Recovery Project, Dali, China*, 2017, c-print, 92x115 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4.18 Yan Wang Preston, *Longan Woodland*, University City, Chongqing, China, 2011, c-print, 92x115 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Alongside their illustrative function, the artist's earlier photographs are loaded with a strong personal and emotional connotation. Her first encounters with transplanted trees and afforesting and rewilding practices reveal a sense of sadness and impotence. They are frontal and close portrayals which seldom leave any space for other elements in the composition. *Longan Woodland* (Fig. 4.18) seems like a battlefield of injured trees, wrapped around by white bandages, and kept standing by supporting structures. The cut and barren branches look like amputated limbs and open wounds.¹⁴⁴ Whereas Preston's earlier photographs reveal a sense of frailty and impotence, throughout the years, she has become more acquainted with these scenes and even witnessed the survival and regrowth of several trees. For instance, the trees in *Longan Woodland*, which looked

¹⁴⁴ Her impotent trees are reminiscent of Liu Jianhua's sculptures, *Transformation of Memories* (2003), which was inspired by the sudden tearing down of trees and buildings in Jingdezhen. Picking trunks, branches and other fragments from the ground, Liu deployed them as moulds to give trees another life. Although denaturalised and converted in ceramic sculptures, trees become fragile, yet eternal sculptures (Author's in-person interview with Liu Jianhua, artist's studio, Shanghai, 8 May 2019). Jingdezhen, in Jiangxi province, has been one of the main production centres for ceramic and porcelain, which flourished around the Ming dynasty.

like a battlefield in 2011, were fully grown and adorned with green leaves six years later. Her later works capture wider views where the green of trees and the grey of concrete merge into one scene, revealing her hope for trees to survive and readjust to new ecosystems (Fig. 4.19). Despite the evident denaturalisation of trees, her practice becomes more optimistic and confident of our ecosystem's ability to adapt, depicting trees as healing and resilient beings. Preston's photographs attest to different ways of denaturalising the natural world, from transplanting trees to afforesting, and creating semi-artificial lakes and mountains. However, apart from these visible processes, her artistic practice reveals a more invisible phenomenon: the appropriation of 'nature' and the constant alteration of our ecological interlinkages for economic advantages.



Fig. 4.19 Yan Wang Preston, *Jinlong Square, Chongqing, China*, 2017, c-print, 92x115 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Overall, the instrumentalization of non-human ecological communities has been fundamental for the development of smart eco-cities and other successful models. Specifically, under the

imperative of the China Dream, environmental conservation has been deeply intertwined with policy making, society and, ultimately, the realisation of an ecologically responsible nation. Whereas locally, the dream for a Beautiful China has aesthetically responded to city dwellers' anxieties and concerns by retrieving idyllic landscapes, globally it has increased the perceived success of China.¹⁴⁵ Internationally, the revival of the eastern philosophical notion of *ziran* has become a signifier of cultural specificity and independence. Geall suggests that China is affirming its leading role and unique path by proposing new terminologies, such as the term *shengtai wenming* (ecological civilisation), which currently features in the communist party constitution (2017). Moreover, Hoffman, and Ong and Roy respectively identify a similar intent in the phenomena of urban modelling and inter-referencing (2011; 2011).¹⁴⁶ Although those practices are not exclusive to the east, Hoffman conceives of China's urban governance as an innovative strategy to advance alternative understandings of place-making that are not necessarily bound to the west (Hoffman 2011). Moreover, those practices highlight the active transformation of urban models into a set of tools that can be mediated and adjusted according to the future visions of cities. As a result, urban and environmental governance becomes a 'political tool for changing the built form and social spirit of another urban environment' (Ong 2011, 15).

Indeed, whereas the ecological benefits are evident in politics, economy, and ideology, those relations seem to be mostly unidirectional and fail to recognise the multilateral linkages. The diverse artistic and creative practices and urban exercises collected in this chapter demonstrate that current re-imaginings of ecology often reinforce long-established narratives that praise a romanticised and nostalgic 'Mother Nature'. In the Chinese context, the reinterpretations and imagined futures of ecological urbanities and practices tend to revive the traditional *literati* art as an example of pristine, indigenous, and untouched 'nature'. However, as already illustrated

¹⁴⁵ The widespread malcontent over pollution and other environmental problems has become a strong trigger for uprisings in Mainland China (S. Zhao 2019).

¹⁴⁶ As mentioned in Chapter 2, urban modelling and inter-referencing are two interconnected practices where cities collect information and expertise from other successful prototypes and measure their success against other advanced urban centres. These strategies look at emerging Asian cities, such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen, which can offer more localised models and solutions than the west.

throughout the chapter, Elvin and Tan respectively suggest that such pure 'nature' was already contaminated (2004; 2016) and no different from its western counterpart. 'Nature' is a mere artificial construct that has relieved society from the responsibility towards ecology. As a whole, the selection of artworks, architectural projects, and urban and ecological strategies are capable of documenting, challenging, and reinforcing the representations of ecology in urbanities and art.

Specifically, MAD's architectural practice reinforces N. Smith's understanding of the 'financialisation of nature', which has become 'a powerful ideological tool for justifying racial, gender, class, sexual and other forms of social difference and inequality as natural' (N. Smith 2007, 23). MAD's projects exploit the Chinese philosophical and aesthetics traditions of *ziran* and *shanshui* to forge a vernacular, yet modern architectural style that is highly valued by the party and the west. Whereas Ma aligns with Xi's political agenda and meets the taste and concerns of the wealthy middle class, the works by Ye and Na offer a reflection on 'nature' as a marker for distinctions. Respectively inspired by Shiman village, and Aranya Gold Coast, they bring forward the active participation of the local community in reinterpreting their relationships with 'nature'. Rather than feeding into the fiction of an externalised 'nature', Ye's and Na's strategies exaggerate and amplify the long established narrative and aesthetics to move towards alternative ecological approaches. Likewise, Preston, by mapping and denaturalising trees and their existence, overcomes the anthropocentric view and gives agency to non-human species. With their diversified media and visual strategies, the selected artistic practices inform each other and mirror the complexities of ecological practices in our globalised and urbanised era. Moreover, they demonstrate that it is impossible to discuss environmental concerns without referring to and considering politics and economy.

Today, recognising the importance of the intricate living webs that sustain the globe is fundamental for an organic and sustainable existence. Lindner and Meissner have called for a reconfiguration of cities and ecology that can prioritise these linkages. Their 'urbanisation of

nature' fosters the integration and synergy of several species, with biodiversity and ecosystems being prioritised in urban planning and design (Lindner and Meissner 2019). Some of Preston's later photos seem to optimistically envision a future where non-human species can be assimilated in, and despite, the concrete and steel skylines. Although the practices of modelling mountains from semi-artificial soil and transplanting trees are highly driven by cosmetic and economic goals and certainly require an ecological shift, they could perhaps lead towards future practices and ecosystems. After all, change is significantly more dominant than balance. Tsing proposes a feral ecology or 'third nature' which develops notwithstanding capitalism or the human presence. She explains that to 'even notice third nature, we must evade assumptions that the future is that singular direction ahead' and imagine multiple and interdependent ways of life (A. L. Tsing 2015, viii). Contrary to the one and only China Dream and the dominant vision for a 'Beautiful China', more speculations about ecology need to emerge if we want to develop adequate environmental solutions.

5. The Heritage City



Fig. 5.1 Gao Rong, *Static Eternity: detail*, 2012, installation, cloth, cotton thread, sponge, steel support and board, 270x516x460 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Marks on the white walls, collaged photos, light blue cushioned chairs, and old cups and thermos with a traditional flower design nostalgically point to a bygone era and the intimacy of a private domestic space now reproduced through stitches and fabric. Demolished several years ago now, the apartment would not exist anymore if it was not for Beijing based artist Gao Rong. Her sculptural work, *Static Eternity* (2013) (Fig. 5.1), carries a deep emotional charge as it remoulds the house that once belonged to the artist's grandmother. Stitches re-weave the thread of her memory and restage her childhood and emotional bond in the present. Rather than in the spectacular façade of Chinese cities, it is in the worn out, disappearing, and often forgotten that different pasts and presents are stored and retrievable. Drawing from Calvino,

the city [...] does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls (1974, 11).

Since the Reform and Open Door Policy in 1978, many Chinese cities have undergone an extensive process of demolition, reconstruction, and development. China's frenetic growth has translated into the razing of entire neighbourhoods, and with them a conspicuous number of cultural and historical sites. In central Beijing, at least eight hundred traditional alleys were demolished in 2005 in preparation for the Olympic Games (Visser 2010, 35-6). Simultaneously, the central government has been busy reviving national heritage. From adhering to the UNESCO and the World Heritage Organization to establishing rehabilitation projects, authorities have celebrated China's cultural tradition. Today, antithetical processes of demolition, reconstruction and preservation coexist and have been exploited by China's one party-state to reshape cities and boost the nation's soft power.

This chapter focuses on how the discourse of cultural heritage has been used to re-imagine Chinese metropolises through the analysis of artistic and urban practices. Specifically, it responds to the China Dream and the goal of pursuing a 'civilised China', which highly values 'rich culture, high morals and equity and fairness' (Landsberger 2018, 162-63). Hence, it investigates how the city has been changing in compliance with the national imperative of becoming a culturally and creatively rich nation through the visual analysis of selected artistic practices. My investigation develops across three direct-controlled municipalities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing.¹⁴⁷ These three major cities are selected not only because of their political and economic significance, but also for their geographical and cultural diversity.

This chapter demonstrates that whereas Beijing, as the long-standing capital and symbol of Chinese culture, has reinstated its traditional role by advancing restoration projects in the old town,

¹⁴⁷ Today, Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Tianjin are the four direct municipalities in the PRC. A municipality is an enlarged city comprising its urban area and more rural peripheries, which often includes other towns, villages, and smaller cities. Municipalities are at the highest level of the administrative hierarchy. Managed by the central government, rather than local officials, they directly implement state-sanctioned policies and, hence, play a key role nationally and internationally.

Shanghai has fuelled dreams of a globalised and thriving China by re-purposing industrial factories into museums, and creative and cultural industries. Moreover, I argue that the recently developed Chongqing reinforces the hypothesis that Chinese metropolises are developing by selectively preserving cultural heritage. By picking certain histories and reshaping them in the light of current events, the CCP legitimises its power, fosters national unity, and increases China's international soft power. Against this linear temporality and bright future ahead, the examined artistic practices reveal multiple and more fragmented narratives. Specifically, I argue that they recuperate the vanishing vitality and decaying places in Chinese cities to display different presents, pasts, and futures, which would otherwise be forgotten. Whereas Gao Rong and Zhang Ruyi rematerialize the past present of Beijing and Shanghai, Yang Yuanyuan merges spaces and times together into a spiral, bringing forth a multi-temporal city. Overall, this chapter aims to demonstrate that today, Chinese cities are caught in between past and future, in a pervasive present.

Before examining the cases of Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing in detail, it is relevant to bring forward the notion of heritage. Since the 1980s and 1990s, heritage has become very popular. According to UNESCO and the World Heritage Organization, heritage 'reflects living culture', and hence it 'is the entire spirit of a people in terms of its values, actions, works, institutions, monuments and sites' (UNESCO 2002). As it recuperates the past to transmit it to future generations, heritage is 'continuously reinterpreted, claimed and counter-claimed and negotiated' (Harrison 2005, 7). This does not mean that history can be made up, however, as the reading of the past is always different from the actual events making history, past events are chosen according to the current socio-political contexts and temporal distance (Koselleck 2004, 111-12, 134-35). It results that heritage is a localised phenomenon that has different meanings and implications. For instance, there is a major difference between the west and Asia: whereas the former values the material and physical authenticity of the object through preservation, in China, the priority is given to the symbolic value and the idea of transmitting tradition, often through reconstruction (Varutti 2014b, 9). Despite site-specific differences, the popularity and prestige of the UNESCO World Heritage List controversially suggest a common and global understanding of heritage. Highly

indebted with the notions of memory and territory, it has become a strategic tool to ‘unearth[ed], piece[d] together or even invent[ed]’ national identity by establishing ‘what one was, without being aware of it or without having been in the position to know it’ (F. Hartog 2015, 167).

This intuition lies in the modern understanding of time as developed in the west. Rather than repeatable and cyclical, time is unpredictable and unrepeatable due to the concepts of progress and acceleration. Around the 17th century, a consciousness of one’s own time as separated from its past and future became established thanks to the notion of progress (Koselleck 2004, 22). As progress insinuated in the understanding of history and time, the future became increasingly close, yet impossible to be fully determined on the premise of previous experiences. ‘History shows the boundaries of the possible otherness of the future, without being able to dispense it with structural conditions’ (Koselleck 2004, 113). As past events could not be repeated in the exact same mode as they happened in the past, they could only be reassessed through the ‘fiction of actuality’. In other words, as we analyse and narrate the past that has gone, we reconstruct it according to our own social and political contexts. Moreover, the narration of past events presumes an increasing temporal distance from the present and even more the future. Whereas the past is temporally delimited and conceived in its totality, future tends to infinity and remains unforeseeable (Koselleck 2004, 260). In front of this temporal aporia and the impossibility to define one future, heritage, and the revival of cultural tradition bridge past, present, and future (F. Hartog 2015, 218-19).

Although Koselleck’s theory is rooted in the west, the longstanding emphasis by the Chinese central government and CCP on progress, modernisation, and development suggest that this understanding of time can be applied to the specific context of China. Since the reform period starting in 1978, the PRC has stressed the urgency to become a global power and worked to pursue this goal. Motivated by the desire to overcome the century of humiliation and bring back China’s glorious past, this need has been achieved by reviving Confucianism, Chinese history, and,

specifically, the peak of China's dynastic time. However, rather than aiming to repeat past events, the party is selectively reconstructing the past to unite society and forge new visions for China's future. Past events become crucial to future-making, even though the traits of this future are unspecific and impossible to predict. The China Dream with its elusive and yet evocative meaning is a relevant example of how nations can justify their political and economic missions through unspecific and ambiguous promises. Today, by developing cultural and heritage policies, nations recreate and revive certain periods of history and build a sense of national identity.

In China, there has been a similar upsurge in heritage and cultural tradition since the end of the Cultural Revolution and Mao's death. In 1982, the List of Precious Chinese Historic Sites was compiled, and the Law of the PRC on Protection of Cultural Relics approved (Whitehand and Gu 2007). Moreover, in 1985 China joined UNESCO and later in 1987, the World Heritage Organization. Since China joined these internationally recognised organizations, more urban rehabilitation projects have shaped today's urban fabric. Imperial palaces, ancient temples, or industrial factories and distinctive architecture that are characteristic of one city's history and identity have been revived to create new narratives that serve the present, and even more, the future. Among them, China's Great Wall has undergone extensive restoration (Y. Wang and Fu 2020). From letting tourists sign their names on the old bricks in exchange for compensation (Y. Jiang 2006), in 2006, for the first time, the central government included the wall in the long list of protected cultural heritage sites and supported renovation. In 2013, China counted forty-three UNESCO cultural, natural, and mixed World Heritage sites, including the Forbidden City's Imperial Palace, the Temple of Heaven and the Summer Palace in Beijing, the Mausoleum of the first Qin emperor and the famous Terracotta Army, as well as Pingyao, the traditional gardens of Suzhou and Dunhuang caves, to name a few (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013, 5). Since the

Thirteenth Five Year Plan (2016 – 2020), the Chinese government and the CCP have appointed culture as one imperative of China’s national development strategy.¹⁴⁸

Today, the enthusiasm for heritage and cultural traditions is clearly part of a wider national strategy to comply with domestic and international agendas (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013; J. Lee 2019; Fiskesjö 2010; Kurlantzck 2008; Jiawen Ai 2011). Domestically, the party’s cultural policy aims at legitimising the one-party rule, establishing political order, and boosting a sense of nationhood and belonging by promoting Confucian principles and portraying itself as the moral authority. Specifically, the government has registered several folkloristic traditions as part of China’s intangible cultural heritage to unify the fifty-five ethnic minorities within the national territory. However, this strategy seems to appropriate and flatten the ethnic minorities’ folklore and diversity.¹⁴⁹ Internationally, instead, the celebration of China’s glorious past aims at increasing its global soft power. As discussed previously, Nye defines soft power as ‘the ability to shape the preferences of others’, which ‘tends to be associated with intangible assets such as attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority’ (2008, 94). Although China’s political and foreign policy is not very attractive to the west, according to Jiawen Ai, China’s ability to establish preferences lies in its rich and longstanding culture (2011, 135–36). Therefore, today China is deploying both tangible and intangible cultural heritage to strengthen the CCP and unify its multi-ethnic population under one nation.

¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, culture was projected to grow into a pillar of national economy by 2020 (Xinhua 2017a). Though most goals have been met, the tertiary sector does not seem to have grown as much as predicted (Kennedy 2020). Noticeably, not all data have been published by the authorities and Covid-19 has certainly posed challenges to China’s growth.

¹⁴⁹ This rhetoric suggests that ethnic group’s traditions are exploited for tourist, economic and geopolitical purposes, rather than genuinely considered valuable. This practice is rooted in the west, specifically, in colonial practices. The appropriation of these measures and the consequent cultural objectification across the Chinese territory have been addressed by scholars as ‘internal orientalism’ (Schein 1997, 92). The romanticizing of the Far East as an exotic and different ‘Other’ is applied domestically. Hence, folkloristic dances, popular songs and oral traditions are not just tolerated, but celebrated as they stand in opposition to the dominant Han’s culture, which is associated with higher forms of cultural heritage, such as calligraphy, crafts, opera music and technical and specific knowledge (J. Lee 2019, 70–71). Overall, the assertion of such narrative by the central government has the potential to strengthen China’s cultural claims to a vast territory populated by ethnic minorities (McCarthy 2009).

5.1 Old Beijing

In the urban context, the revival of heritage has mostly taken the form of restoration and rehabilitation projects to preserve cultural and historical buildings and revitalise certain neighbourhoods. This is particularly significant in Beijing as it has long been the centre of political authority and culture. Several scholars address the capital as the quintessential Chinese city and highlight its historical continuity. Not only was Beijing old town laid out accordingly to Confucian principles (Sit 1995), but its urban fabric has survived and developed across several dynasties, including Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (L. Wu 1986) (Fig. 5.2). Moreover, despite the demolition and alteration that have occurred throughout history, the layout of Beijing's old city can still be identified.¹⁵⁰ In the area around the traditional alleys (*hutong*), several conservation plans have been laid out. L. Wu lists Ju'er Hutong, Xiaohoucang and Chunfeng among successful projects that have incorporated social and historical considerations in the overall urban renovation process (1999). Moreover, in 2002, three historical residential quarters, namely Shichahai, Zhong-Gulou and Nanluogu xiang, were appointed for rehabilitation (Alexander et al. 2004).¹⁵¹ However, alongside the cultural heritage conservation policy, the party-state has also enforced an antithetical process of destruction, where specific neighbourhoods are razed down to create space for new buildings.

In the last few decades of extensive urban transformations, artists have experienced first-hand and, at times, resisted the continuous renovation, relocation, and reconstruction. In 1994, in response to the demolition of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, several artists and students, such as Zhan Wang, Sui Jianguo and Yu Fan occupied the building and installed their works to record the altering and everchanging urban structure (Fig. 5.3).¹⁵² Through what could be thought of as an act of conservation, the artists attempted to resist the speed and

¹⁵⁰ According to Clifton Pannell, Chinese cities can be characterised by several elements: defence walls, a ceremonial and administrative core, specialized locations for markets and fairs, and infrastructure (1977). Specifically, the old city of Beijing stretches from the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square to the traditional alleys and courtyard houses, the Drum and Bell Tower and the Temple of Heaven.

¹⁵¹ However, urban renewal projects are often driven by economic interests rather than cultural and historical preservation.

¹⁵² See H. Wu (2014a) for a more detailed account of the works by Zhan, Sui and Yu.

ephemerality of cities. Likewise, Rong Rong and Inri captured the demolition of their house in Liulitun, Beijing, through black and white photographs (2003) (Fig. 5.4). The grey tones evoke a sense of loss and stillness, a tragedy that has already occurred. Through a much more colourful and playful approach, internationally renowned artist, Song Dong, engages with the theme of destruction in several works. In *Usefulness of Uselessness* and *Same Bed Different Dreams* (2018) (Fig. 5.5), he assembles old doors, windows and other materials collected in the *hutong* and transforms them into new objects; whereas in the *Eating the City* series, he installs skylines made of biscuit for his audience to taste and destroy. Artists' engagement with the city reveals the antithetical coexistence of conservation policies and the destruction that has characterised part of China's urban changes and perhaps the prevalence of the latter.

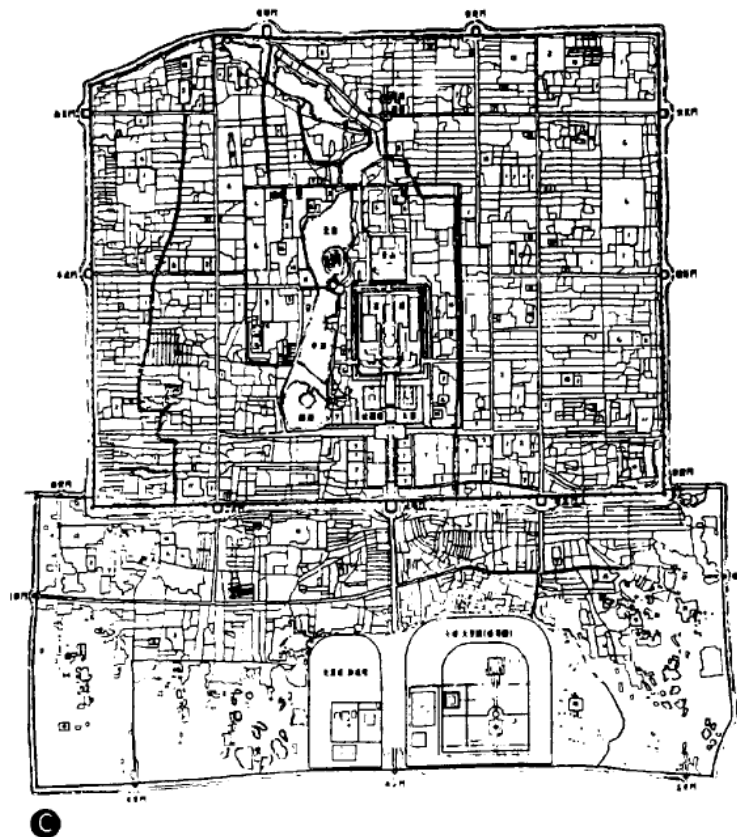


Fig. 5.2 Figure from Hou, Renzhi. 1988. *Beijing Lishi Dituji* [An Historical Atlas of Beijing]. Beijing: Beijing Press, 28.



Fig. 5.3 Zhan Wang, part of the project *Property Development* by the Three Men United Studios, 1994, site-specific installation on the former campus of CAFA, Beijing, mixed media.



Fig. 5.4 Rong Rong and Inri, *Liujiu 2003 No. 1*, 2003, hand-dyed silver gelatin print, 100x127 cm.



Fig. 5.5 Song Dong, *Same Bed Different Dreams No. 3*, 2018, mixed media, 254.5×224.5×361 cm. © Song Dong.

Although urban transformations and economic interests have certainly boosted the demolition and slow decay of Beijing's ancient centre, this process is not unique throughout history. On the contrary, the conditions of Beijing's old town deteriorated so much that in 1950, Liang Sicheng and Chen Zhanxiang proposed a new vision for the capital (L. Wu 1999). The old Beijing would be preserved and become the biggest architectural work in the world, while the newly established administrative centre for the new China would move to west Beijing (Sicheng Liang and Chen 1950). However, the plan was rejected. The central government decided to situate its administrative buildings and offices in the city centre to exploit the symbolic and political role of Beijing. By installing the power into the heart of the capital, while destroying the old, the central

government paved the ground to justify the new and legitimise its authority.¹⁵³ However, the official decision to settle the administrative and political power in ancient Beijing translated into the loss of many cultural and historic sites. Especially, in the decade of the Cultural Revolution, the capital's historic structure was widely altered to accommodate the rising number of workers and urban citizens. It is thought that in the time frame of 1974 – 1986, around seven million square metres, most of which in Beijing's old core, hosted newly built residential areas (L. Wu 1999, 51).

Interestingly, in 2017, the administrative centre was eventually moved from Beijing's city centre to Tongzhou, an eastern district twenty kilometres away from Beijing's core. Whereas in the 1950s the consolidation of political power relied on the refusal of China's past and traditions to support communism, since the death of Mao, the party leaders have increasingly revived Confucian values. Especially since 2012, the current Chinese president has emphasised the role of China's past and culture to create a sense of identity and push forward the vision of the China Dream. This practice of drawing from history to create imagined futures resonates with what F. Hartog defines as the realm of presentism. Presentism is 'the sense that only the present exists' (F. Hartog 2015, 11). The present stretches into the past and future and fabricates its own memories and expectations to become overarching, fluid and dilated. Likewise, the decision to protect the old town in Beijing and advance the dream of a culturally rich China is embedded in this understanding of an immense and pervasive present. Presentism denies the fractures among past, present, and future, to reinforce a narrative of fluidity, which legitimises the CCP as the longstanding keeper of cultural, historical, moral, and political heritage.

¹⁵³The central government chose to settle in the Old Town of Beijing for several reasons. Alongside the ideological aspect, which certainly weighted on the final decision, there is also an element of convenience to consider. Using existing buildings and infrastructure to host officials in the old town was easier and cheaper. Indeed, moving the administrative and political headquarters to the west of Beijing would have required sufficient capital, time, design and urban planning theories, which China could not count on in the 1950s (L. Wu 1999, 17–19).

Today, the difference between the urban demolition of the Maoist era and the post-1978 can be found in the scale of this destructive tendency, which has increased its momentum until very recently. Abramson suggests that the real threat to the ancient urban fabric of Beijing, and specifically the *hutong* and *sibeyuan*, raised as China prioritised its economic growth (2001). Since then, extensive areas comprising mansions, courtyard houses (*sibeyuan*) and narrow alleys have been demolished or entirely reshaped for several reasons. Firstly, as a consequence of urban and economic development, Beijing, like many other cities, has had to face the problem of overpopulation. Secondly, Wu Liangyong suggests that urban design and management have been too flexible and relaxed (1999). Thirdly, the tight relationship between local governments and real estate industry has fostered urban projects driven by economic gain. Although urban land remained state-owned, its use rights became negotiable. Hence, private developers bought urban land from local governments, who in turn benefitted from this transaction economically and politically.¹⁵⁴ Since then, local officials have sponsored ambitious projects to gain capital, increase the city's image and legitimise their role, often at the expense of local residents and the old city centres.

A survey conducted in 1990 brought to light that Beijing's old town comprised around eight million square metres of derelict properties, which hosted an estimated 800,000 residents (L. Wu 1999). Abramson suggests that the degradation of most properties in the *hutong* has to do with their transformation from private housing for one extended wealthy family to work units in the communist period, when they accommodated the increasing urban population (2001). In the Maoist era, many new buildings were added to the existing old city and manifold courtyard houses were structurally altered to welcome more families. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that today the strategic position of the old city and its bad conditions have justified the demolition and reconstruction of some neighbourhoods. For instance, Silverman and Blumenfield point out that the Chinese government has not attempted to inscribe the *hutong* as World Heritage Site, leaving

¹⁵⁴ In Chapter 3 I touched upon the shift in land use rights. For more in-depth discussion, see Ma and Wu (2005b).

UNESCO unable to do anything against the demolition and transformations of many traditional alleys into restaurants, hotels, and tourist destinations (2013). In Xicheng district, hundreds of old houses were knocked down and although some were rebuilt in the same style as part of Xicheng's local government's plan, their historical and cultural significance got lost in the urban rehabilitation process (Mao 2018). Overall, the lack of a cohesive and coherent cultural heritage policy seems to further suggest that the protection and/or demolition of certain areas rely more on their economic value rather than historical and cultural significance.

Despite the increasing erasure of the *hutong*, the risk to lose the cultural and social liveliness of this area has certainly pushed many artists and curators to locate new art spaces and practices in the *hutongs*. For instance, the Arrow Factory is an art space in the Beijing *hutong*, which had long engaged with the local community before it was recently forced to shut down. Established in 2008, the Arrow Factory was a non-profit platform for artists to experiment with the local community and urban diversity. Among the first projects attempting to engage with the surroundings and integrate the new art community with a previously existing one was Wang Gongxin's *It's not about the neighbors* (2009) (Fig. 5.6). Mimicking the façade of the pancake shop just adjacent to the art space, Wang designed the latter as an extension of the pre-existing business. Moreover, he further confused and activated people's imagination by projecting a video of the production of noodles and pancakes at night. More recently in 2017, Yang Zhenzhong replaced the glass entrance door with a fake wall and a rectangular window behind bars (Fig. 5.7). The installation reproduced and criticised officials' practice to cement or brick up doors and windows as a sign of incumbent demolition. Despite the scarcity of focussed and active socially engaged practices with the residents, the space certainly attempted to boost the *hutong's* liveliness and sense of community without exploiting them. Nevertheless, in September 2019, their hope to bring back the *hutong* through visual arts had to face the same fate with many other buildings under the central government's call for 'neighbourhood improvements' and close (Arrow Factory 2019).



Fig. 5.6 Wang Gongxin, *It's not about the neighbors*, 2009, site-specific installation, Arrow Factory, Beijing.



Fig. 5.7 Yang Zhenzhong, *Fences*, 2017, site-specific installation, Arrow Factory, Beijing.

Along with the Arrow Factory, there are other artists and spaces that have tried to resist the destruction of the old town of Beijing and revive the value of the urban, cultural, and social fabric. The project *Instant Hutong* by the architects Marcella Campa and Stefano Avesani has been ongoing for twelve years in the form of performances, installations, and other exchanges with residents. Whereas *Welcome back bricks!* (2009) engages with the local community through performative

actions, the duo's most renowned project maps and reproduces the intricate web of *hutongs* through different media, comprising Chinese stamp, embroidery, and stencils, often involving the local community (Fig. 5.8).¹⁵⁵ Similarly located in the *hutong*, Zaijia Lab was a non-profit space established by sinologist and artist Ambra Cortini and filmmaker Rong Guangrong to encourage art collaborations and organise documentaries screenings before being evicted in 2015. What the just mentioned artistic practices aim to challenge is the recent gentrification of the old town and its gradual loss.



Fig. 5.8 Instant Hutong, *Urban Carpet Pink*, 2008-2010, embroidery on canvas, 200x200 cm.

Despite a few successful conservation projects, today, most *hutong* and *sibeyuan* (courtyard houses) have lost their invaluable cultural and historical meaning (Alexander et al. 2004; Mao 2018; Yu 2017; Abramson 2001, 2020). From private households for wealthy and powerful Chinese families, they became overcrowded socialist units (*dazhuyuan*) for working and co-living during the Mao Era and the Cultural Revolution. Today, the *hutongs* and *sibeyuan* have transformed further into a tourist destination and regained their elitist connotation (Yu 2017). They host restaurants, hotels, souvenir shops and luxury apartments and attract visitors nationally and internationally.¹⁵⁶ Rather than improving the community's living conditions, urban renovations end up increasing the land

¹⁵⁵ See their website <https://instanthutong.com/>.

¹⁵⁶ MAD's proposal to improve the *hutong*'s hygienic conditions and comfort by inserting several 'futuristic bubbles' becomes another attempt to transform the *hutong* into shiny attractions. Moreover, it demonstrates how officials legitimise renewal projects by advocating the urgency to upgrade residents' living conditions.

value and leaving residents with no other option but to move further away. In other words, the vitality and colour of old Beijing are replaced by the ‘gentrification and absenteeism’ brought in by the new wealthy owners (Abramson 2001, 15). In the context of space-making, traditional alleys and courtyard houses have become part of a romanticised narrative where the symbolic value of Old Beijing has become more evocative than its historical significance (Zha 1996).



Fig. 5.9 Gao Rong, *Station*, 2011, cloth, thread, sponge, metal frame, 255x100x28 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The official preference for idealised and selective histories is revealed by the fabric sculptures of Beijing based artist, Gao Rong. One of her earliest projects, *I live in Beijing* (2013) (Figs. 5.9-11), reproduces life-size scenes and objects typical of the everyday urban space, such as bus stops, fences, and motor-tricycles, through the medium of fabric and stitches. One main feature of her work is the accurate and truthful rendering, which is almost impossible to distinguish from its original counterpart. Seen from the distance, the bus stop in the exhibition space, *Station* (2011) (Fig. 5.9), could be easily mistaken for one in the street. The design looks exactly alike: tiny Chinese characters inform the viewer about the bus names, direction and stops. Her works are not elegant and delicate soft sculptures. On the contrary, they display dirt, scribbles, and other marks, blurring

the line between original and copy. Likewise, *Blocked Scenery* (Fig. 5.10) is not a pristine fence. Rather, it is an old looking panel whose colour is fading away and showing marks of wearing out. Her sculptures do not elevate these everyday objects to artworks, nor do they repurpose their function. Devoid of any functionality, her interwoven stitches and fabrics restage the urban landscape with its pollution and traffic and exalt the contrast between the delicate art of stitching and the grey and concrete cityscape.



Fig. 5.10 Gao Rong, *Blocked Scenery No.1*, 2013, cloth, thread, sponge, metal frame, 186.1x76.8x10.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Another relevant disparity lies in the chosen urban objects and views. Precariously on the verge of becoming objects from another era, they still belong to an increasingly old looking present. Her yellow telephone booth, which is almost impossible to find anymore along the streets, is reminiscent of an age that is neither completely gone, nor part of the present. It is a past present

whose temporal distance has not yet allowed us to perceive it like history. Hence, we cannot interpret it and produce meaning from it yet. Gao's sculptures resonate with the pervasive cleansing policy carried out by the local and central governments around the city centres to relieve them from the old, dirty, and unregulated. As the old-fashioned public phones or the polluting tricycles are close to our time and can occasionally still be seen (Fig. 5.11), they are not past enough for the CCP to fully report them as historical objects. However, they break the spell of a city caught in between an ancient and glorious past and an imminent and progressive future. The urban sights that Gao reproduces are those eliminated by the central government because they are not beneficial to the future urban imaginary. They are merely visions of an undesired present. As these urban sights cannot be labelled as heritage and, hence, exploited for ideological and economic agendas, they are often concealed.

Gao's sculptures resist this erasure and make the increasingly disappearing urbanscape visible and even palpable again. By giving similar prominence to both touch and sight, she conceives of the city in spatial and relational terms and uses stitches to translate her daily urban encounters. This medium, with its tactility and materiality, becomes Gao's means to process the continuous urban transformations and her situatedness within the city. Rather than understanding the present as indebted to both the past and future, she concentrates on those elements of the present that would not necessarily survive in the constant re-evaluation of the city image. Gao's artistic practice allows her to pause and reflect. As opposed to the fast-consumed and visually saturated urban space, the labour intensive and time consuming technique of stitching makes it possible to separate and interpret the city into independent lived spaces. Through her sculptures, she halts a present that would otherwise be 'overshadowed by entropy [...], destined to be forgotten, consigned to the immediate, the instantaneous and the ephemeral' (F. Hartog 2015, 219). The slow and tactile experience becomes a means for Gao to access both the present reality and everchanging city. Overall, *I Live in Beijing* could be interpreted as an act of resistance against the enforced, yet inevitable process of amnesia and forging new memories.



Fig. 5.11 Gao Rong, *What Type of Car Can A Motor-Tricycle be Exchanged For?*, 2013, thread, cloth, wood, foam, iron shelf, leather and plastic, 180 x 195 x 95 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Last, Gao's work reveals the mechanism through which the governments have been arbitrarily deciding what to save and erase. Officials and developers have been saving cultural and historical sites in the ancient town with two premises in mind: firstly, the buildings and areas need to belong to the completed and distant past. What looks old but is still viable in the present, like Gao's tricycle or the scribbled bus stop, does not qualify to be remembered yet. Whereas the unadorned urban sights of Gao do not evoke palpable and emotional past experiences, the dilapidated courtyard houses and clothes hanging across the old alleys, which belong to another era, can exert a sense of fascination towards the past. Their neglected look provides a startling contrast to the residences of wealthy families and the thriving community that were once there. Secondly, these areas need to be located outside of strategic areas or special economic zones. Whereas several *hutong* and residential areas have been demolished in the past because of their neglected conditions,

as mentioned before, these properties have perhaps been strategically left to fall derelict. For instance, some of the neighbourhoods connecting the Olympic village or adjacent to the CBD and other commercial areas have been demolished or rehabilitated without much concern over their historical and social value. In other words, on the one hand, the CCP has restored an already gone past and exploited its embedded significance to conceal undesirable elements from the present day. On the other, it has demolished and replaced old areas in strategic locations with high rises and recognisable architecture that can attract international investments and attention.

For alternative memories to be forged, an emotional past with a sense of palpability needs to be in place (F. Hartog 2015). In the specific case of Beijing, the ancient town has been rehabilitated by central and local governments as it embodies Confucian and traditional principles. This way, officials can reinforce the associations of Beijing with political authority, and of the party with morality and tradition. The cultural tradition is not merely preserved but glorified and objectified. Today, Beijing's present condition is indebted to both the past and future. It is caught in between memories and expectations. On the one hand, ancient sites approved by the World Heritage organization stand to remind us of China's ancient and rich tradition; on the other, development projects designed by globally acclaimed architects announce China's future accomplishments. Maintaining F. Hartog's theory of presentism, the present extends into the past and future and becomes pervasive. However, by being so deeply entrenched in past memories and future expectations, this overarching present is sacrificed to evoke China's upcoming future.

5.2 Industrial Shanghai

As part of a wider national strategy for urban development and cultural policies, official authorities' enthusiasm for Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs), art factories, museums and other culture

policies has increased exponentially.¹⁵⁷ Whereas Beijing has capitalised its cultural heritage to promote an image of an historically rich city, Shanghai has advanced for itself the vision of a creative and economic force. Specifically, it brings back its more recent past, the industrial boom of the 1920s – 1930s. Although Shanghai is not located in the north of China, which is traditionally associated with the secondary sector, its industrial development predates Beijing's and other northern cities' due to its free trade port and consequent international exchanges (J. Chen, Judd, and Hawken 2016). Today, by repurposing those old factories and warehouses of the 1920s – 1930s into cultural and creative clusters, museums, and other creative platforms, Shanghai has fuelled its future expectations to become a worldly cultural and creative hub.¹⁵⁸

Today, the years between the 1920s and 1930s are considered Shanghai's 'urban golden age' due to its urban and economic development fostered by rapid industrialisation (Greenspan 2014, 2). Situated in the southeast coast of Mainland China and cut across by the Huangpu and Suzhou rivers, Shanghai has long benefitted from commercial trade and foreign influences. Since the Nanjing Treaty in 1842, the city became a relevant port, and later an industrial centre and cosmopolitan city (X. Gu 2012).¹⁵⁹ At the beginning of the 20th century, the city expanded and

¹⁵⁷ Liang and Wang (2020) and Zennaro (2017) argue that the first mention of CCIs dates back to the Eleventh Five-Year-Plan. However, CCIs were prioritised in the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan and feature in the following one as well. Alongside CCIs, the museum boom across China has raised global attention for its extraordinary speed, which only China's urbanisation and economic development has paralleled. The total number of museums is still inferior to other countries, such as the US and Germany. However, Kiowski suggests that it is still extraordinary as the reports between 2008-2013 suggest an overall increase by 36.5%, and a growth of the private sector by 154.2% (2017, 48). Like several CCIs and art factories, which have repurposed industrial areas, many of today's art galleries and museums are located in concrete and imposing warehouses. Amongst the most spectacular venues for contemporary art museums in Shanghai, the Shanghai Power Station of Art was Nanshi power plant, the Yuz Museum was used as an airplane hangar and the Long Museum was deployed to unload coal cargos.

¹⁵⁸ Although this chapter section concentrates on the revival of industrial buildings, there are other architectural styles that have been spared from demolition and can help conceiving of Shanghai as an eclectic city in temporal and spatial terms. For instance, Greenspan investigates the revival of both gothic and art deco architecture, which can be respectively admired in the twin buildings at the corner of Huqiu and Yuanmingyuan road, the True Light building and the Christian Literature Society Building, as well as the Park Hotel, Peace Hotel, and the Paramount, among others (2014). Even Abbas reads the eclecticism of Shanghai in the variety of styles, including 'Tudor style villas, Spanish style townhouses, Russian style churches, and German style mansions' (2002, 42).

¹⁵⁹ Shanghai's cosmopolitan dimension was certainly established not only through its international port, but also through the presence of international concessions. At the end of the first Opium War, when the Nanjing Treaty was signed, China had to accept France, the UK, and the US's demands to each administer autonomous territories in Shanghai. The creation of international concessions on Shanghai's urban ground allowed for the emergence of different architecture styles, customs, and culture to emerge and produce a cosmopolitan and hybrid society.

numerous industrial buildings, including factories, warehouses, and breweries came to characterise Shanghai's urban core. Connecting the Yangtze Delta region and the banks of the city, the Suzhou river came to play a prominent economic role.¹⁶⁰ Although the cosmopolitanism and globalisation of Shanghai were certainly not well received and even suppressed during Mao's era, since 1978, the city has reclaimed its international role (Lu 2002, 17; Abbas 2002, 44–45). In the 1990s, and especially after Deng Xiaoping's trip to the South in 1992, Shanghai became one of China's SEZs and rapidly shifted from a manufactory into a service based economy.

Shanghai was and still is an 'economic strategy' (Greenspan 2014, 45). One that has given prominence to the tertiary sector, leading to the rapid relocation of industries and factories towards outer towns and peripheries. Since the 1990s, many industrial buildings around the Suzhou river have been abandoned and left standing like old relics, exposed to natural elements and relentless time. However, they have not been ghosted shells for too long. Since the late 1990s, those industrial compounds have attracted artists for their strategic position, cheap rent, and versatility (J. Zheng 2011). Warehouses and factories have provided artists with studios with high ceilings, large open space and sturdy structure that could easily adapt to their different practices, including large installations, paintings, sculptures, and video making. Through this spontaneous and unexpected process fuelled by practical and economic convenience, artists unconsciously repurposed several industrial compounds of the 1920s – 1930s.¹⁶¹

The most renowned artists' clusters in Shanghai are along the Suzhou river and in Tianzifang. Whereas the latter was an abandoned light factory, the former was a disused textile mill factory supervised by socialist officers, which today hosts the artists' village M50. Several scholars

¹⁶⁰ The nation's first textile, flour and woollen factories and warehouses were located in the Suzhou river (X. Gu 2012, 196).

¹⁶¹ This phenomenon is not unique to Shanghai and has taken place in Beijing too. The 798 Art District is perhaps the example *par excellence* of the repurposing of an old electronics factory into a spontaneous artistic village that was later turned into a tourist site by the central government (J. Chen, Judd, and Hawken 2016, 336). However, Shanghai's recent repurposing of industrial heritage is particularly significant as it provides an alternative artistic centre that can compete with Beijing and other international cities.

associate the beginning of repurposing industrial sites with Taiwanese architect, Teng Kun Yan (X. Gu 2012; Greenspan 2014; Sheng Zhong 2016). Settling in Shanghai in 1998, he leased a 2000 square metre warehouse at no. 1305 on the Suzhou river and redesigned the space maintaining some remains of the decrepit industrial building. He advanced the idea of ‘urban rejuvenation through preservation’ (Greenspan 2014, 91).¹⁶² Certainly, his project raised the attention of real estate developers, investors, and the central and local governments, who saw an economic opportunity in the redevelopment of degraded areas and communities. In 1998, the central and municipal government, together with the Asian Development Bank, started to implement the Suzhou Creek Rehabilitation Project, which aimed at improving water quality, environmental management, and residents’ quality of life (Liao et al. 2011).¹⁶³ Moreover, in 2005, the unplanned and bottom-up M50, which originally emerged for artists to pursue artistic freedom, was officially recognised by the municipal government to promote Shanghai’s urban image (Sheng Zhong 2011).

Since realising the economic potential of artists’ spontaneous clusters, the central government has initiated a process of re-appropriation and land-leasing. As the official owners of urban land, they have leased properties and collaborated with privates to develop cultural and creative industries. According to Luciana Lazzeretti, the world-wide enthusiasm for cultural and creative industries (CCIs) is associated to culture’s recent ‘capability to generate wealth and promote economic development’ (2012, 1). Since the turn into the 21st century, a rich discussion has flourished on the rise of culture and creativity as new influential factors in economy and urban planning. Richard Florida has theorised the emergence of a new class defined by their ‘ability to create meaningful new forms’, namely the creative class (2012, 6). Moreover, Allen J. Scott has envisioned a third wave of urbanism, leading to the development of creative cities (2013). According to Scott, the 21st century’s creative class and technological advancement are inevitably reshaping the urban landscape through visible phenomena, such as the aestheticization of CBDs, gentrification, and

¹⁶² Greenspan’s interview with the architect further reports that ‘he gutted the interior, and increased the light by widening windows and adding a skylight. Instead of paint, traditional limewater was used to preserve the brickwork. Teng thus conserved the building’s original form, while creating an open, meditative and ultramodern space. “Suzhou Creek Warehouse” was based on an industrial chic aesthetic’ (2014, 91).

¹⁶³ In 2021, the project is still not completed and has recently entered phase four.

agglomeration economies (2011). However, both their claims present faults in their application to urban policy. For instance, Glaeser argues that although the creative class has a significant role in shaping the city, urban success and economic growth are certainly not dependent on creative workers only (2004).¹⁶⁴ Moreover, rather than allowing for a spontaneous cultural development, Florida envisions the development of creative cities through careful design and urban policies. The resonance with urban planners, policy makers, and officials helps explain the wide acceptance of Florida's theories and the investments in CCIs as vehicles to boost culture and creativity and enhance the city soft power.

In China, the idea of cultural and creative clusters has perhaps found a favourable ground due to the previous experience of collective labour, such as the Town and Village Enterprises (TVEs) in the 1980s. Michael Keane suggests that the socialist communes of the 1950s – 1960s, the TVEs, the science and technological parks and the recent CCIs all share the legacy of collectivism and function according to 'hierarchical management, favourable investment policies, and state supervision' (2009b, 226).¹⁶⁵ Although with some differences from their western counterparts, China's CCIs aim at attracting investments and increasing the national soft power by upgrading cities' urban façade.¹⁶⁶ They initially boomed in Shanghai, and rapidly spread on a national scale. Today, they are situated in strategic locations to revitalise dismissed areas by repurposing old industrial buildings and enhancing a new urban aesthetics (J. Zheng 2011).¹⁶⁷ This aesthetics is

¹⁶⁴ Florida tried to measure the significance of the creative class by developing a Bohemian Index and Creative Class Index, which counted the number and concentration of creative workers in the city. However, these data provide little evidence to his claim that creatives can increase the city's economic growth (Malanga 2004).

¹⁶⁵ TVEs were established in the 1980s as collectively-owned rural enterprises and played a big role in China's industrial and economic development in the 20th century. According to Harvey, 'they became centres of entrepreneurialism, flexible labour practices and open market competition' (2005, 126).

¹⁶⁶ The concept of CCI arrived from the UK, however it underwent a process of cultural translation in China. A significant differentiation was drawn between 'culture' and 'creative' industries on the Chinese territory: whereas culture is associated with the state and socialist ideology, and hence, preferred by the central government as a term, creativity seems to be driven by economic interests and less state-sanctioned (Keane 2009b, 2009a). For more readings on China's CCIs, see Keane (2009b, 2009a, 2016); Zheng (2011); Gu (2012); O'Connor and Gu (2012); Zhong (2011, 2016).

¹⁶⁷ Keane (2009a) lists several CCIs around China's biggest metropolises: in Beijing, the 798 Art District and Caochangdi; in Dalian, Xinghai Creative Island; in Shanghai, the 1933 Old Mill Factory, Tianzifang, M50, among others; in Hangzhou, Loft 49, A8 Art Commune; in Nanjing, Nanjing 1912 and the Creative East no 8 District; in Shenzhen, OCT Loft, F518 Creative Fashion Park; and last, the Tank Loft in Chongqing.

one that romanticizes artists and their bohemian lifestyle. Portrayed as incessantly pursuing artistic freedom and dismissing commercial and political involvement, they prefer ‘indigenous street-level culture – a teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros, where it is hard to draw the line between performers and spectators’ (Florida 2002, 20). The creative class has been exploited by officials and developers to attract young people, talents and, ultimately, capital.¹⁶⁸ Branding the urban image, these diverse and thriving clusters have been working as marketing strategies, however, they have not necessarily improved creativity or culture.¹⁶⁹ Neither spontaneous nor organic, they deny Jacobs’s prescription of openness, flexibility, and diversity (1992). As the results of real estate developers’ and local governments’ efforts, these areas are forced into a top-down developing process that accentuates competition, increases land price, and exploits culture.

A further instance of the municipal government’s plan to transform Shanghai into a cultural and creative destination is the West Bund Cultural Corridor (WBCC). The WBCC plans to transform the Xuhui waterfront into a ‘planning-based, culture-oriented, eco-based and technological-innovation-driven’ district (West Bund n.d.). Along with the construction of West Bund Media Port, Smart Valley and Financial Centre, the project hosts culture and art related institutions, including the Water Theatre, the Yuz Museum, Long Museum, Tank Museum, and Start Museum, to name a few. Among them, the Long Museum has raised media attention since its design and opening in 2014 (Fig. 5.12). Owned by the collectors, Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei, and designed by the Chinese firm, Atelier Deshaus, it was previously used as a coal dock.¹⁷⁰ From the outside, the façade looks rather imposing with a ‘vault-umbrella’ structure. Inside, the interiors are connected through spiral ladders, elevated floors and overlooking bridges which create a structured open

¹⁶⁸ Although it is acknowledged that the creative class participate in reshaping the city centre, Zhong has identified a stark fracture between internationally renowned artists and less recognised artistic figures (2012). From his study, it emerges that whereas the former would benefit from their conscious and active engagement with local authorities and developers, the latter artists would ‘collectively, but unconsciously’ participate in space-making and be excluded from the rehabilitation area due to the increase in rent and living costs.

¹⁶⁹ Even studies on AI and science parks assert that industrial parks are better at attracting investments rather than fostering innovation and creativity per se (Keane 2009a; J. Wang 2007).

¹⁷⁰ Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei are a married couple who became rich during China’s rapid economic development and started collecting artworks since then (Zennaro 2017, 73).

space. Rather than a white cube, the museum is reminiscent of a refined and smart industrial building with grey concrete walls, bolt marks and seams among moulding boards. Overall, the WBCC aims to compete with other waterfronts, such as London Southbank or Paris Rive Gauche and promote Shanghai as a world-class city. The West Bund cultural corridor celebrates the architectural preference for concrete that is common to several CCIs and demonstrates how a post-industrial aesthetics is shaping and advancing the cultural and creative role of Shanghai.



Fig. 5.12 Long Museum, Shanghai, photograph taken by the author, 17 May 2019.

The fascination with industrial aesthetics is not only related to architecture or design. On the contrary, it is experienced by many contemporary artists, such as Yu Ji and Zhang Ruyi. The concrete maimed bodies of Yu hang from steel wires and seem to expose their wounds (Fig. 5.13). Yu's mutilated figures could metaphorically hint at the rubbles and what remains after demolition, incomplete fragments. However, they themselves become subjects of that fascination with the dilapidated, the old, and the brutal. In other words, they denounce and, yet participate in the aestheticization of the industrial and the beatification of the neglected. Likewise, Zhang Ruyi

shares the same interest in concrete and industrial spaces. Born and currently living in Shanghai, she has witnessed the city's transformation. Her practice tackles the physical, but also intangible changes by understanding space as a material, social and emotional entity. She collects stones, fragments, rubble, and bricks from the street and treats them as living sculptures that are capable of retaining emotions, feelings, and heat. She conceives of the innumerable footsteps on the ground, the voices absorbed by the walls, the food cooked in the kitchen and the gatherings occurred in the living room, as shaping, and ultimately constituting space. Through her practice and concrete installations, she attempts to create lived spaces that are sculptures of the past, present, and future society.

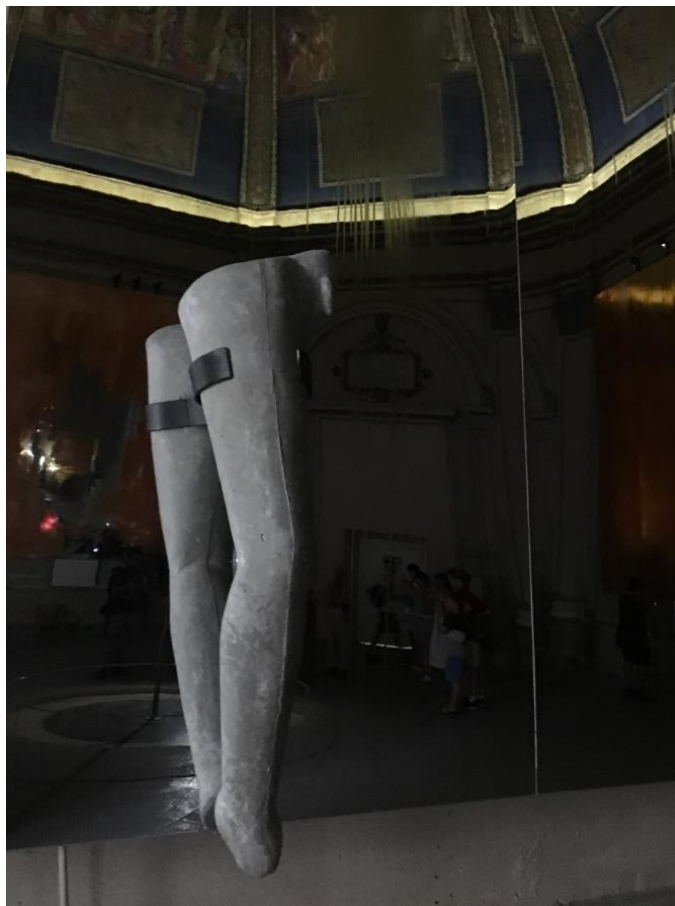


Fig. 5.13 Yu Ji, *Flesh in Stone: Component #1*, 2012-2015, installation, cement, and iron, 40x100x30 cm, photograph taken by the author, Venice Biennale 2019.

As a highly porous substance that from sand transforms into ooze and then hardened matter, concrete can retain touch, sensations and is sensible to external factors. In occasion of the exhibition *The Things That I Don't Understand* (2011), Zhang cements the walls of a traditional Shanghainese house and decorates the interiors with concrete balls and other everyday objects (Fig. 5.14). Through her actions, she halts and captures the domestic environment as she encounters it. The once inhabited rooms, where she could still detect their warmth, are juxtaposed to cold and coarse concrete. The space is simultaneously trapped in between a past that has been literally cemented and a present that still bears the marks of a previous time. In her recent solo exhibition, *Decoration: Building Debris* (2020), her small-sized concrete sculptures become indistinguishable against the dirty barren floors, unadorned columns, interrupted cables, and dark atmosphere of the abandoned open space. The rough and striated look of concrete, chipped bricks, and bent steel wires merge with the contemporary artworks, elevating the state of neglect and concrete to aesthetic objects and penetrating the viewers with a spectrum of sensations, ranging from loneliness to fragility and stillness.



Fig. 5.14 Zhang Ruyi, *Things that I don't understand: detail*, 2011, cement.



Fig. 5.15 Zhang Ruyi, *Spacing*, 2016, installation, concrete cactus, metal, iron wire, 211x75.5x14 cm.

Zhang's fascination for industrial and concrete buildings also lies in their association with the loss of human relationship and communality. Consequent to China's economic development and urbanisation, independent flats and studio apartments have discouraged the sense of community among neighbours, who would have once shared more public spaces. Moreover, globalisation and

technological development have led to high-paced urban rhythms and the alteration of established social patterns. Today, young urbanites consume relationships, images, and information quickly and through digital screens. Zhang addresses concerns over the lack of physical and embodied communication through her concrete replicas of doors, windows, electric plugs, and cacti. From everyday objects that allow people to be connected to the outer world and communicate, they become deactivated objects with no function. In *Building Opposite Building* (2016) (Figs. 5.15-16), she cements window, positions doors opposite to each other and blocks passages and cracks in the walls with cacti and other rubble. She deprives them of their connecting functions. Furthermore, her installations physically constrain the visitors, whose body cannot but bend to navigate the concrete labyrinth she has created. By intensifying the coldness, impersonality, and rawness of industrial and dilapidated spaces, she exposes their defects, whilst contributing to the diffusion of an urban aesthetics that celebrates forgotten pasts.



Fig. 5.16 Zhang Ruyi, *Spacing: detail*, 2016, concrete cactus, metal, iron wire, 211x75.5x14 cm.

Her fascination with materiality, rawness and communication does not only speak to the pervasive aesthetics of the industrial, as exemplified by the West Bund Cultural Corridor and numerous CCIs. Rather, it is reminiscent of Brutalist architectural forms and principles.¹⁷¹ Reyner Banham's manifesto values Brutalist architecture for the memorability of the architecture, the clear structure, and the elevation of raw materials (2010). However, more than a mere architectural style, Brutalism is rooted in a wider political discourse that is critical of capitalism, gentrification, and other neoliberal practices. Contrary to an architecture made of high, fluid, and glossy skyscrapers, Brutalism physically and conceptually opens to society by unveiling buildings' inner structure and valuing materials with their coarse and exposed look. Overall, 'Brutalist architecture was Modernism's angry underside, and was never, much as some would rather it were, a mere aesthetic style. It was a political aesthetic, an attitude, a weapon, dedicated to the precept that nothing was too good for ordinary people' (Hatherley 2010, 93). Rooted in top-down and economic-driven projects, this aesthetics has been reduced to a set of popular and romanticised principles that fail to satisfy their original avant-gardist nature and become showcases for an international and wealthy elite.

If Zhang's work is not sufficient to expose the problematic aestheticization of industrial and concrete architecture, other artists, such as He An and Chen Wei, have been denouncing and perhaps participating themselves into this beautifying process through the use of neon lights. As an alternative material to concrete, neon lights have been widely used by artists to engage with the city and criticise its commercialisation. Whereas He's *Who is Alone Will Stay Alone Forever* (2012) (Fig. 5.17) is an extensive installation in an abandoned factory in Shanghai, Chen's *Future and Modern* (2014) (Fig. 5.18) captures a neon sign in the darkness of a hazy night. Both works illuminate the gloomy surroundings with blue signs. However, they have different temporalities. On the one hand, He nostalgically merges a past modernity associated with neon lights with an industrial past embodied in the metal fences, spilled oil, and concrete blocks within the space. On

¹⁷¹ Brutalism emerged in the aftermath of World War II and became very popular in European countries for its 'functionality, (relative) ease of construction and nod to modern utopian living' (Mould 2017, 704).

the other, Chen escapes the present reality to speculate on the future. Blanketed in fog, the only distinguishable element in his picture is the neon sign reading ‘future, modern, new city’ on top of the dim shape of a building.¹⁷² However, rather than a promising slogan, the commercial ad evokes a sinister reality that seems timeless. It even insinuates the doubt that this reality may have not existed in the first place. Both works reinstate an urban poetics that elevates the loneliness and neglect of industrial spaces and speculates about their temporal and physical existence.

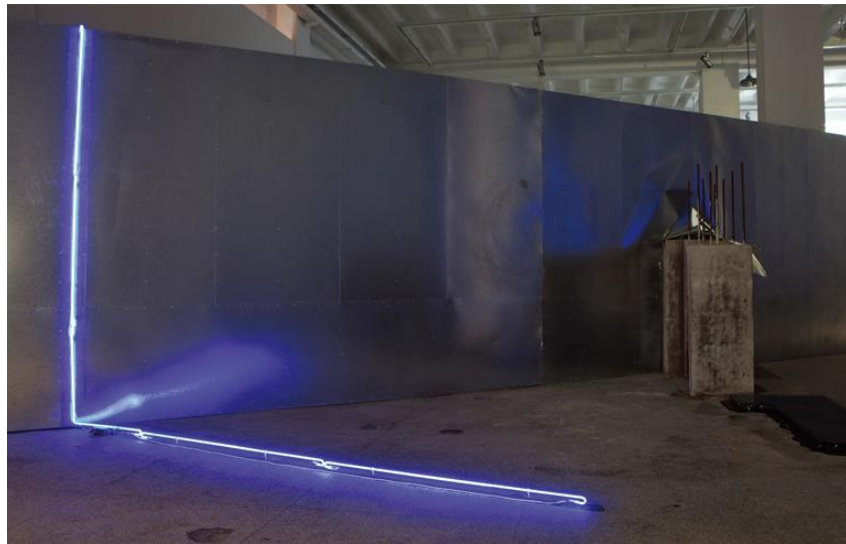


Fig. 5.17 He An, *Who is alone now will stay alone forever: exhibition view*, 2012, installation, mixed materials, TOP Contemporary Art Center, Shanghai.



Fig. 5.18 Chen Wei, *Future and Modern*, 2014, archival inkjet print, 100x125 cm.

¹⁷² Author's translation from the Chinese 'weilai xiandai xin cheng'.

Overall, this sense of melancholia can be explained by the current condition of living in between two epochs. On the one hand, the past is retrieved by the governments through heritage and, on the other, an imagined future is created through the vision of the China Dream. By reviving its golden urban age, today, Shanghai repositions itself as an international city. However, in our self-accelerating time, the gap between past and future widens, and the historical rupture becomes harder to reunite (Koselleck 2004). Whereas the past is temporally limited and circumscribed by its completion, and hence, can never be repeated in the exact same way, the future opens to infinite other possibilities. However, in front of an unplanned future, both Koselleck and Adam agree that the future is planned in the present (2004, 39; 2010, 367).¹⁷³ Likewise, the central government attempts to unify those infinite possibilities through the vision of Shanghai, and to a wider extent China, as a cluster for innovation and creativity. To pursue this goal, abandoned factories have been transformed into creative platforms and an enthusiasm for industrial architecture has been revived. Although this process was spontaneously initiated by the creative class itself, rehabilitation projects have soon been regulated by officials to feed into this trend. They have shaped present cities and by doing so they have developed future expectations that comply with the CCP's political and economic agenda. Even though the Oriental Pearl is far from a manufacturing hub, it still exploits its previous successes to reimagine itself as a world-recognised creative centre.

5.3 Time travel cities

The case studies of Beijing and Shanghai demonstrate the different ways in which officials have pursued the national goal of promoting China as a modern and civilised nation that has rich culture and creativity. Although their methods are specific to cities localised identities and narratives, they go after the same national agenda. In both cases, cultural policies seem to exploit the city's greatest achievements and successes to physically construct an urban space whose multi-temporal architecture can advance its urban future through its past. The disintegrating historical city is

¹⁷³ Both Adam and Dunn respectively explain that envisioning and selecting future imaginaries become a strategy to grasp the incessant innovation and urban complexity (2010; 2019).

replaced and even reimagined through nostalgic memories and romanticised representations. Furthermore, it revives ‘yesterday’s dreams of the metropolis of tomorrow’ (Greenspan 2014, 3). Whereas Beijing values the Ming and Qing dynasties as they represent the peak of Chinese culture, and ultimately, imperial authority, Shanghai celebrates its economic and creative power by reviving its industrial and cosmopolitan past of the 1920-30s.

In Chongqing, cultural heritage policy is still lagging behind the two major metropolises of Beijing and Shanghai, especially as the former city is still mainly preoccupied with its economic growth (J. Chen, Judd, and Hawken 2016). As mentioned in the previous chapter, whereas cities on the coastal and eastern regions have long prospered as trade centres, Chongqing and the inland have only recently benefitted from national subsidies and investments as part of a domestic effort to level regional differences.¹⁷⁴ Since 2006, Chongqing has been associated with the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, which aimed to boost the development of the western regions of China. As the world’s largest hydroelectric dam, it not only had an engineering and practical function, but it came to stand as a symbol of the PRC’s global rise. Several sociologists, environmentalists, cultural heritage experts and rights activists, as well as local officials opposed this monumental project as it would harm the territory, culture, and social life of the residents (Demattè 2012). Despite shared discontent, in the early 1990s the construction of this massive project was approved, exactly around the same time as Chongqing became a direct municipality. Directly controlled by the central government, local officials could not protest the construction of the Three Gorges Dam and prioritised the national economic agenda.

¹⁷⁴ For instance, Chongqing and Shanghai rely on different economies today despite becoming commercial ports around 1842. On the one hand, the Nanjing Treaty in 1842 ‘marked the beginning of the industrialisation’ in Shanghai (X. Gu 2012, 196); on the other, Chen, Judd, and Hawken maintain that ‘the history of Chongqing’s industrial development records China’s whole industrialisation process, spanning the Treaty Port Period (1891-1936), the Wartime Period (1937-1949), the Post-war Period (1950-1962), the “Three Fronts” (sanxian) Period (1963-1977) and the Reform Period (1978-present)’ (2016, 341). However, ‘it was only in the mid 1990s, after the Three Gorges Dam national energy project, that Chongqing was repositioned as a strategically significant city in the national reform agenda’ (Lim and Horesh 2017, 20). Today, Chongqing is still lagging behind Beijing and Shanghai and relies on a secondary industry (J. Chen, Judd, and Hawken 2016, 341).

Demattè suggests that by pushing the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, a sense of ‘inevitability set in’ (2012, 51). This inevitability led to a strategy that encouraged preservation without compromising the dam project. In other words, as the central government approved the Three Gorges Dam, it simultaneously supported historical and archaeological excavations. The narrative of saving the most, despite the circumstances prevailed. For instance, in Fuling district, an underwater museum was built to save the hydrometric station of Baiheliang and, through a similar conservation project, today the Ming dynasty Shibaozhai temple is surrounded by walls to protect it from water (Demattè 2012). Moreover, in Chongqing city the Huguang Huiguan, an ancient merchants’ guild complex dating back to the Qing dynasty, was restored thanks to international collaboration with the World Bank and the Italian Trust Fund for Culture (Ebbe, Licciardi, and Baeumler 2011). Notwithstanding some successful achievements, the contradictions inherent in the Three Gorges Dam and the conservational efforts demonstrate that heritage has been exploited to improve a city’s image and identity whilst boosting economic growth.

Several contemporary Chinese artists have engaged with the physical, social, and cultural disintegration of Chongqing’s urban fabric. Chen Qiulin is perhaps one of the most prolific Chinese artists who has responded to the social and cultural trauma of the Three Gorges Dam.¹⁷⁵ Her photographic and video work shows the changes in both people’s lives and their surroundings: whereas in *Empty City* (2012) (Fig. 5.19), the artist herself wears a uniform and a face mask, in *I am an Angel* (2006), she resembles a graceful ballerina with pure white wings amongst destroyed houses and ruins. Moreover, in both *River River* (2005) and *Rhapsody on Farewell* (2002), the main figures are dressed in traditional clothing as a reminder of the cultural and intangible death that has occurred alongside the physical and material destruction of the territory. Moving away from the Three Gorges Dam, the artistic work by Yang Yuanyuan, *Nearly there, Nearly concrete* (2017) (Figs. 5.20-24), is set in Chongqing city centre. Through archival materials, photographs and present-day urban encounters, she examines and re-imagines the city of Chongqing. Yang’s work

¹⁷⁵ Other worth mentioning projects in response to the Three Gorges Dam are Zhuang Hui’s photographic work, *Longitude* (1995-2008), Ji Yunfei’s painting series *The Empty City* (2003), Liu Xiaodong’s oil paintings *Hotbed* (2005) and Yang Yi’s photographic series *A Sunken Homeland* (2007).

further supports my argument that the preservation of cultural heritage occurs through simultaneous processes of demolition, protection, and construction of old and new.



Fig. 5.19 Chen Qiulin, *The Empty City no.3*, 2012, photograph, giclee print, 117.8×151 cm.



Fig. 5.20 Yang Yuanyuan, *Nearly There, Nearly Concrete*: exhibition view, 2014-5. Courtesy of the artist.

Nearly there, Nearly concrete begins with the discovery of a photo album of the 1960s which belonged to a telecommunication company (Fig. 5.20). The purchase of the album instils in Yang the excitement of unearthing an old artefact that had long gone lost or had never been even accounted for. Rather than big prints, the images are small and grainy and require the viewer to halt to appreciate the details and palpable texture of the old black and white photographs. Shot in the

1960s, the photographs have absorbed the light of those old days, held the fine dust for several decades and retained the imprints of many hands before Yang's touch. A patina covers the photographs. Such invisible, yet palpable layer embodies that place's 'memory and archive[s] the multiple traces left by the touch of weather, people and history' (Diaconu 2011). According to Diaconu, such patina should be understood as skin, an architectural façade that shows the marks of that site's history and people (2011). They attest to the thickness and various forms of the urban fabric. They depict the physical city, as well as the lived urban space through its ordinary activities: wet clothes hanging outside of an alley, a man sitting outside of what looks like a warehouse, and more laundry suspended over the heads of a group of men in the street (Fig. 5.21). Alongside this urban view, portraits of young men and their biographic details give life to the otherwise unanimated collection of still images (Fig. 5.22). With their accounts of everyday lived experiences, the images provide micro-stories that constitute the dense and multi-layered urban fabric.



Fig. 5.21 Yang Yuanyuan, *Nearly There, Nearly Concrete: Mianhua Road #59*, 2015, archival pigment print, 90x60 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

After fifty years since the pictures were originally taken, Yang flies to Chongqing with the intent to retrieve the past of the city and its residents. She retraces the street names, the buildings, and the people in the photo album to often discover they have disappeared. However, rather than documenting the fractures and discontinuities with the past, she retrieves the old in the present and suggests an alternative narrative where memories interweave and develop with an everchanging city. Although some buildings have completely disappeared, others have turned into wrecks, and people have left, she perseveres in photographing the absences, the remains, and the new. She interviews a younger generation of factory workers, takes the same streets again and immortalizes today's views. According to de Certeau, walking is an essential feature to understand and create the urban fabric (1984b, 96-99). By going back to the address of those pictures, Yang retrieves the vitality of the city's urban fabric and finds some of those invisible traces. The gaps of the past are replaced and revitalised by living stories that re-shape the understanding of those spaces.

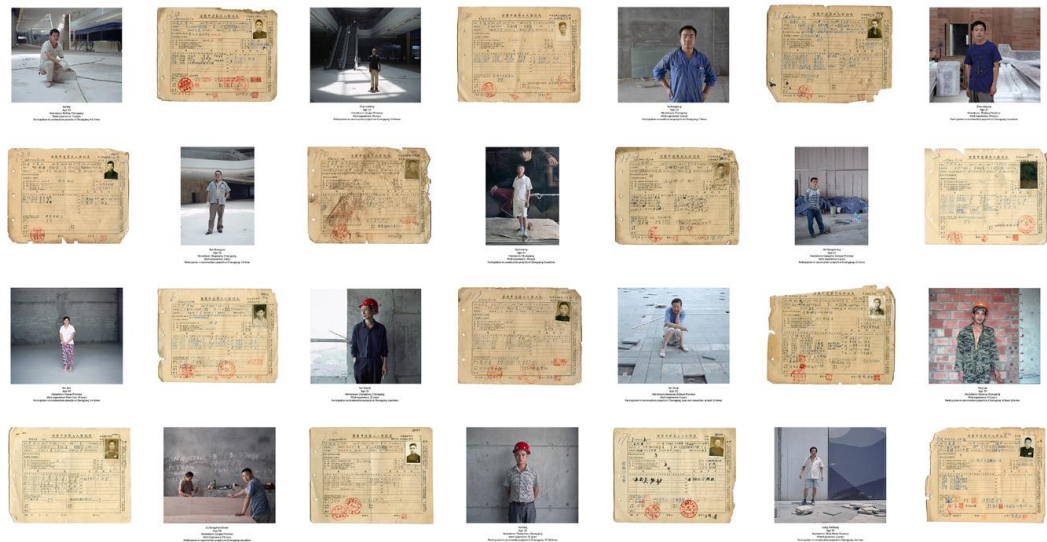


Fig. 5.22 Yang Yuanyuan, *Construction Workers (1950s/2014)*, 2015, archival pigment print (digital photos and archival document), variable size. Courtesy of the artist.

Throughout her artistic process, she merges the past and present of Chongqing by inserting the archival material within the more recent images of the city (Fig. 5.23). Smaller in size, they are sometimes positioned at the centre of the picture or at the sides. However, they cannot be ignored.

They are reminiscent of minor histories that resist the dominant and state-sanctioned narratives. They are fragments of daily life that interrupt the high resolution images of a modern Chongqing which has already undergone selective demolition and reconstruction. Their tiny dimension invites the audience to inspect them and forget about the bigger picture and present day for a moment. Whereas the smaller archive photographs can be isolated, the overall photograph of present day Chongqing cannot be separated from that memory and can only be consumed as a whole. Likewise, today's urban architecture cannot be untangled from the rediscovery and reconstruction of the old. Their regulated and pervasive coexistence alters the urban fabric and produces new understandings and imagined futures. This is further attempted through Yang's intentional layering of photographs and archive material into a three-dimensional installation (Fig. 5.24). In the exhibition space, *Nearly There, Nearly Concrete* seems to hint at a visual and historical depth which merges the images of the 1960s with those of the 2010s. The yellowed and faded certificate and ID photos of the telecommunication company's employees are alternated with the colourful ones of today's builders. They wear their working equipment and stand against scaffoldings, concrete walls, or construction sites. The unfinished developments and the evident ongoing transformations hint at a city of becoming, and a past that oscillates from present to future and, again, 'forward to the past' (Abbas 2002, 38).



Fig. 5.23 Yang Yuanyuan, *Nearly There, Nearly Concrete*, 2015, archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

This mutual and direct interchange in time is especially achieved through Yang's photo installation (Fig. 5.24), which displays see-through prints onto a cubic metal structure. Like semi-transparent veils, the images merge into one another, metaphorically embodying the transcendence of time in

the representations of Chongqing. According to the viewer's situatedness, the view mutates. Incongruous yet, corresponding. Like that past that Koselleck defines irreproducible as in its first occurrence, the images of a long gone Chongqing can only be brought back to life by understanding these photographs as reproductions rooted in specific social and political contexts. As history can never repeat itself, these old pictures are caught in between reality and fiction (Koselleck 2004, 111-12). The temporal realm is instrumentalised. Yang's installations retrieve elements of the past and unite them with the present to perhaps speculate about possible futures. Her images narrate of a multi-temporal city, whose diverse faces cannot be untangled into linear and independent flows. Yang's practice resonates with the assemblage of different locales as discussed in Chapter 2 through the case study of themed towns and Hu Jieming's work. Neither entirely Chinese, nor entirely from the west, these hybrid spaces undergo a process of cultural translation where they merge into one another. Likewise, *Nearly There, Nearly Concrete* combines the 1960s with the daily present without considering or acknowledging the temporal rupture. However, it is exactly this in-between and inevitable amnesia that allows to bind the two temporalities together and create more than one urban imaginary.

In this temporal interstice, the present becomes extensive and easily encroaches the unknown future. Nowotny argues that in such an open-ended present overloaded with possibilities, the future gets determined before it can even be realised (1994). In other words,

the future is calculated on the basis of present and past collective data, projected into an empty future [...] Devoid of any content and meaning, it is a realm destined to be filled with desire, to be formed and occupied according to rational blueprints, holding out the promise that it can be what we want it to be (Adam 2010, 365–66).

The fast changing urban landscape of Chinese cities embodies these official visions and imaginaries. The central and local governments, together with the CCP have loaded urban space by retracing selective memories and, hence, produced a fragmented city. Or one could even say, multiple urban facets, where a collage of simultaneous, yet different pasts coexist in the present space. This postmodernist understanding of space and time as characterised by discontinuities

and ruptures (Jameson 1991a) has been exploited to pursue and envision a multi-faceted city that can embody different epochs within itself.¹⁷⁶



Fig. 5.24 Yang Yuanyuan, *Nearly There, Nearly Concrete: exhibition view*, 2014-5, mixed media, Times Museum, Guangzhou. Courtesy of the artist.

The way Yang's photographs are installed is particularly significant in relation to my argument. What Yang displays is not an exact and fixed representation of Chongqing. Rather than merely juxtaposing past and present, she offers open-ended reflections on how Chongqing's past has leaked into the present and will eventually shape its future. She presents a linear time that becomes fluid and uninterrupted; there is no starting and ending point to view the piece, everything seems to be entering Koselleck's realm of presentism. 'The present is increasingly characterised by a coming together of different but equally present temporalities or times, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times' (Osborne 2013, 17). Likewise, each of Yang's

¹⁷⁶ Since the mid-twentieth century, the enthusiasm for time has shifted to space, which has become 'the primary aesthetic problem' (Harvey 1990, 201). Foucault argues that 'the present epoch will perhaps above all be the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed' (1986: 22). Whereas space has been understood as fragmented, warped and offering opportunities for temporal jumps, likewise, time has been conceived as discontinuous and 'convoluted' (Crang and Travlou 2001).

photographs and stories displays different presents and temporalities that feed one another through their layered transparency. By merging spaces together, past, and present similarly move around and mimic a spiral that simultaneously creates and erases processes, blurring the line between imagination and reality.

Such contradictory, yet fluid processes of creation and erasure are similarly enacted by China's ongoing urbanisation. Through the construction and destruction of previous buildings and the constant presence of ruins, the past is constantly overshadowing and filling the present and future urban space with expectations. In Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing, this has translated into the imperative to build world-class cities while supporting conservation and preservation projects. This continuous going back in time reinforces the present and establishes even rosier and more promising futures by romanticizing and producing narratives over China's rich culture. The rationale for this lies in the central and local governments' economic and political goals. Although the enthusiasm for culture as a new tool to boost economy and soft power has occurred worldwide, China has shifted very rapidly from rural to industrial economy into today's service based system. Globally renowned for its 'made in China', the central government is aiming to be recognised for its culture and creativity (Hulme 2014, 94–95; de Kloet, Fai, and Scheen 2019, 26; Greenspan 2014, 96).¹⁷⁷

Today, cities are shaping their facades and urban terrain in order to arouse several simultaneous imaginaries. On the one hand, protected sites insinuate visions of an ancient and long-standing tradition and, hence, the narrative of a nation with a strong sense of identity. On the other, skyscrapers, cultural institutions, and waterfronts signify China's progress and self-accelerating present, which leaks into the future. As Varutti explains, emphasising the relevance of aesthetics in the understanding of China's cultural heritage allows authorities to meet the increasing local demand for cultural consumption, whilst fostering cultural nationalism (2014a, 159–63). Although

¹⁷⁷ M. Keane has dedicated an entire volume to the idea of created in China, see his volume (2007).

Varutti applies this concept to museums, I suggest that this argument can be extended more widely to cities. The aestheticization of museum objects that represent China's achievements can be paralleled to the architectural landmarks and urban elements, such as the *butong*, the Forbidden Palace, or the industrial style of the 1920s. They are all renovated and given new purpose and life. However, rather than focussing on their cultural, historical, and social contexts, what is stressed is their symbolic value. By accentuating ideals of historical continuity and unity, and portraying the CCP as the guardian of cultural, historical, and political values, China seeks to erase and make up for the discontinuities and ruptures that have certainly marked the nation's recent past.

By re-establishing a historical continuity and retracing the threads with their most successful pasts, both Beijing and Shanghai are promoted as prosperous cities. Especially since the century of humiliation and the communist era, the central government has spatially re-enacted certain historical moments. Cities become epochs (Greenspan 2014, 8). As spatialised epochs, the past Beijing and Shanghai are metaphorically brought forward. The reconstruction and romanticising of certain buildings and their associated symbolic value exploit a stark temporal separation with the past to envision an even brighter and more promising future.

The present has thus extended both into the future and into the past. Into the future, through the notions of precaution and responsibility, through the acknowledgment of the irreparable and the irreversible, and through the notions of heritage and debt, the latter being the concept which cements and gives sense to the whole. And into the past, borne by similar concepts such as responsibility and the duty to remember (F. Hartog 2015, 219).

However, by focussing on past and future, less attention is paid to the present. Whereas this might be true for heritage, the above artistic practices suggest that artists are mostly concerned with a present and recent past that are not entirely bygone yet. For instance, Gao's embroidered sculptures of three wheeled vehicles, phone booths and bus stops display a present that is rapidly turning into past. However, as they are not separated by a temporal rupture yet, they cannot be forgotten nor romanticised. Her works resist the antithetical process of demolition and renewal which actively re-enact certain historical moments to satisfy specific economic and political

expectations. Likewise, Zhang's installations problematise the commercial revival and repurposing of buildings in Shanghai. Where gentrification replaces the warmth of previously inhabited buildings, Zhang attempts to raise one's bodily awareness by constructing warped and labyrinthine spaces made of concrete. Rather than ignoring the industrial setting, the concrete warehouses and their remains become integrating part of the artistic narration. This is a common feature also in He's and Chen's work, which aestheticizes the official renewal of neglected areas and perpetuate a romanticised urban poetics. Lastly, Yang's photographs and installation display a multitemporal city whose present is rooted in past achievements and project forward to the future, almost nullifying its present condition. By visually analysing the selected works and tackling the notions of cultural and historical heritage, a specific sense of time is made visible, which is deployed by the party to promote China's soft power.

Overall, the city falls into a temporal spiral, where 'looking back and looking forward have become indistinguishable and the nostalgia for the past plugs directly into the desire to occupy the future' (Greenspan 2014, 108). What emerges is that in front of a city that renovates itself by bringing back selective memories from a distant past, artists recuperate elements that are currently being endangered or still part of the present urban fabric, perhaps, as acts of preservation and resistance. Although Yang's project seems to mimic official authorities' and real estate developers' approach in reinventing the city, her bodily exploration of Chongqing remembers its places and people. 'Remembering is like constructing and then travelling again through a space. [...] Memories are built as a city is built' (Eco 1986, 89). However, this begs the question: who is this city for? Though it cannot be generalised, both the artistic practices and inconsistencies in cultural policies in Beijing and Shanghai suggest that the interest in cultural and historical preservation is driven by economic and ideological reasons. On the one hand, cultural and creative policies are able to attract capital, young talents and increase China's soft power. On the other, re-enacting the memories of Beijing's and Shanghai's golden ages reinforces the CCP's historical continuity and legitimisation. Overall, whereas F. Hartog asserts that today we live in the era of presentism, where the past and future are decided in the present, I argue that today Chinese cities partake in the process of devaluing

the past and present, respectively by objectifying and concealing it, in the name of a foreseeable future.

Conclusion



Fig. 6.1 Jiang Pengyi, *Luminant: BTV (A)*, Beijing, 2007-8, archival inkjet print, 100x125 cm.

From the darkness of the night, a bright and blinding light radiates from the imposing building of the Beijing TV (BTV) headquarters and illuminates the central business district of Chaoyang, Beijing (Fig. 6.1). As the dark and central railway tracks open the gaze and guide the eye towards an increasingly lighter and higher urbanscape, one has the sensation of being drawn into this urban scene. The artificial brightness of the BTV headquarter hits the viewer unexpectedly. Light emerges through several illuminated windows until it permeates the entire sky. This photograph is part of Jiang Pengyi's series *Luminant* (2007) (Fig. 6.1) where the artist narrates the contradictions and overwhelming pace of China's urban and economic development. Shot in Beijing, Shanghai and Hefei, the darkness and peace of the nights are interrupted by overexposed high rises. These

buildings include the headquarters of economic, technological and media giants, including Siemens, Chaowai SOHO and Xinhua News Agency building (Figs. 6.2-3).¹⁷⁸ Initially read as a response to China's craze for construction, through a deeper analysis, Jiang's photographs become reflections on the power-relations behind urban planning. Owning a significant symbolic value, the imposing presence of these tall buildings against the extensive skyline, reproduces and exaggerates China's political, economic, and media power.



Fig. 6.2 Jiang Pengyi, *Luminant: Xinhua News Agency, Beijing*, 2007-8, archival inkjet print, 100x125 cm.

¹⁷⁸ The Xinhua News Agency is the official press agency of the People's Republic of China and, as a state-sanctioned press agency in a one-party rule state like China, it is a very powerful body that collects and distributes information in line with the CCP (Xin 2012, 2–3). SOHO China, instead, is a real estate company founded by Zhang Xin and Pan Shiyi (Soho China 2012). Their projects are associated with internationally renowned architects, such as Zaha Hadid, who designed Wangjing SOHO, Galaxy SOHO and Leeza SOHO in Beijing, and Kengo Kuma, who developed plans for the Commune by The Great Wall and Sanlitun SOHO ('Soho China' n.d.). Whereas I argue that Xinhua symbolises China's political and media power over knowledge, Siemens and Chaowai SOHO convey China's economic and urban power.



Fig. 6.3 Jiang Pengyi, *Luminant: SIEMENS, Beijing*, 2007-8, archival inkjet print, 100x125 cm.

The collection of high-rises with such brightening aura shot by Jiang has a deep significance in the complex discussion of space-making. The images own an accentuated imaginative power that aims to raise viewers' awareness towards space-making through overexposure and composition. Jiang Jiehong describes such glow as 'a departure from reality – an illusion that is both alluring and frightening at the same time' (2015a, 82–83). That departure from reality could be further understood as Walter Benjamin's 'underworld'. At night, as the urban space becomes more blurred, ambiguous, and prone to be explored within the realm of dreams, an underworld emerges from the surface. Benjamin argues that

our waking existence likewise is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld - a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise. [...] At night, however, under the tenebrous mass of the houses, their denser darkness protrudes like a threat, and the nocturnal pedestrian hurries past (1999, 84).

Likewise, in Chinese cities urban dwellers go past the tall skyscrapers and CBD and blend with the crowds at daytime. However, at night, the glowing presence of these giants suggests a more complex political landscape. As Benjamin's night exploration could lead to an awakening, Jiang Pengyi's overexposed nightscapes intensify the power dynamics embedded in architecture and space-making.

To analyse this complex landscape and discuss the power relations inherent in space-making through visual arts, it is crucial to reassert the aim of this research project to identify how urban aesthetics and imaginaries could actively grasp, mould, and foresee the strategies and processes behind urban space. To achieve that, I have framed the chosen artworks around the current ideological propaganda of the China Dream. In other words, I have selected those works which have consciously or unconsciously internalized and responded to the current political agenda of the central government. Moreover, I have also included a third kind of works which have tapped into a similar undercurrent of socio-political change independently of the regime. My intention is not to assess the China Dream itself, but understand the complex social, political, cultural, and economic changes since 2001 through urban imaginaries and aesthetics. This approach is revealing of the micro-dynamics through which artists navigate the political and ideological landscapes within their everchanging urbanities. From my analysis, it has emerged that Chinese artists often respond to the four aspects of the China Dream, namely strong, beautiful, harmonious, and civilised China with mixed feelings. They comment on their surroundings with 'excited pleasure, sometimes with profound disappointment, and often with a mixture of both' (Kraus 2004, 4). Rather than behaving in a linear and definite way that either praises or criticises top-down policies, the interactions between art and the state are subtle and precarious and often need to be read at different levels.

To clearly articulate my findings, I identify three loose and often overriding categories of artistic practices. This categorisation does not intend to stick labels to artists but attempts to clarify the dynamic artistic landscape, which has simultaneously adapted to and elaborated the rapidly

shifting socio-political environment of China. Across the artworks analysed in my thesis, I encounter three types of strategies: firstly, there is a group of works which mimics reality and aims to represent reality as it is, often through the medium of photography. This category belongs to the longstanding tradition of realism. However, it does not align with the socialist and revolutionary realism that was typical of Chinese literature and visual arts in the 20th century.¹⁷⁹ Specifically, although the tradition of realism was certainly a distinctive feature of, respectively, propaganda art during the Maoist era and the Native Soil Art of the 1980s, today's documentary works diverge from these traditions. They are realistic representations of the urban landscape that documents the social and physical changes within Chinese cities whilst departing from the political sphere, the countryside, and the grassroots.

This fascination with Chinese society and the fast-changing urban environment distinguishes and is greatly emphasized in the second and widest category of works in this thesis. These are highly rooted in the social, spatial, and cultural reality of Chinese cities. However, rather than deploying realism, they often use optical illusions, digital assemblage, and fictive characters to depart from or exaggerate the documentary approach. This category of work is reminiscent of the experimental art of the late 20th century, which aimed at pushing the boundaries of Chinese society and the art world with a diversity of artistic styles and social concerns.¹⁸⁰ Specifically, today's practices seem to revive the post-1989 tradition in the following aspects: artists are not organised in artistic movements or groups but operate individually; the works are depoliticised and tend to avoid direct references to a certain ideology; and, last, artists are capable of distancing themselves from the past of the Cultural Revolution and the Maoist period and focusing on contemporary social

¹⁷⁹ Meserve and Meserve (1992) argue that China initially adopted socialist realism from the Soviet Union to then advance a more hybrid realism, which combined revolutionary socialism with revolutionary romanticism. Mao called for a realism in literature and arts that could serve and educate the masses to satisfy the ultimate goal, namely the realisation of communism through revolution.

¹⁸⁰ As mentioned in the Introduction, there is a complex discussion over the nomenclature for these works: whereas Gao refers to the artistic craze of the 1980s as 'avantgarde' (2011a), Wu departs from this western tradition and emphasises the experimental dimension by labelling these practices in China as 'experimental art' (1999).

concerns. I argue that today there is a further generation of artists who have responded to urban changes and space-making, especially since the 1990s and 2001.

Thirdly, there is a final selection of artistic practices that use socially engaged and participatory strategies to address social and environmental concerns, among others. These works tend to be more conscious of their ‘confrontational’ and socio-critical dimension.¹⁸¹ Contrary to the crude performances of the 1990s, which used to be performed by individual artists in their apartments or in secrecy, today’s works are often organised around non-profit art spaces and collaborative projects.¹⁸² Moreover, the engagement with social and ecological concerns of these recent works comes closer to the social and political performances of the 1979-1986 rather than the quest for identity typical of the 1990s.¹⁸³ Overall, the third group of artworks discussed in my thesis, revives the avantgarde and experimental spirit of the 1980s in its deep engagement with social issues and the surroundings.

Another set of significant findings highlight the media deployed in the artistic responses to the city. Whereas the urban transformations of the 1990s were mostly documented through the media of installation, photography, and performance, the 2000s have witnessed an increase in digital photography and video work as critical tools to attest to, whilst modifying, the present conditions. Later, since the 2010s, despite a decline in public performances, the use of mixed media to represent the city has increased. From archives and video works to installations and participatory practices, the younger generation of artists has been particularly keen to deploy diverse and plural

¹⁸¹ Due to nature of China’s regime, the understanding of ‘confrontational’ is slightly different from the west. In such authoritarian and censored system, the confrontation can be firstly detected in the inclusion of participants and secondly in the topics, which can be easily perceived by officials as direct critiques to the CCP and a sign of moral crisis among the Chinese people, hence as a threat to the nation.

¹⁸² Artists’ tendency to withdraw from the social and political scene and work in their apartments with cheap materials and a small audience is referred to as ‘apartment art’ (*gongyu yishu*) (Gao 2011a).

¹⁸³ H. Wu suggests that this search for the self was a consequence of the lack of self-portraiture during the Cultural Revolution and Maoist era. Until 1976, self-portraiture was looked down as self-indulgent and, hence, not allowed (H. Wu 2014a, 201). Artists’ longing to explore, represent and create their own identity was certainly accentuated by the rapid urban, economic, and social transformations of the 1980s. In the context of performance, Berghuis suggests that this identity quest was pursued by deploying the body both as the medium and subject of the performances of the 1990s.

means to respond to the urban. Nevertheless, today's artistic engagement with the city seems more subtle. As the artistic strategies and conversation with the city have expanded, the focus has also widened and perhaps shifted to understand the city not only as the catalyser for art production, but also as an inescapable backdrop. Whereas this could be explained by the wearing out of the novelty of urbanisation and the exciting development of the 1990s and early 2000s, today, artists also have to be more careful of the increasing surveillance and censorship operated by the party. As the regime of Xi Jinping tightens, the artistic landscape has perhaps started to change its trajectory too.

The main result within the discussion of the dynamics between visual arts and space-making becomes apparent from the second and widest category of works, namely the artistic practices that play with and exaggerate the urban condition. Although their role is not merely illustrative, at a first analysis, they seem to provide a passive, and not so experimental reflection of the current happenings in urbanised China. Rather than actively pointing to the source of the problem or offering solutions, artists reflect and mildly elaborate on urban concerns, such as the increasing social inequalities, environmental pollution, the degradation of the city's cultural and historical fabric and the drive for economic development. However, there is often a contradiction between their visual practices and personal beliefs. Whereas the completed work hardly ever voices out direct critiques to the ideological campaign of the China Dream and the overwhelming urban transformations, during interviews, artists often acknowledge their doubts and concerns. It is through conversation with the artists combined with an in-depth analysis of the artworks against their historical, political, and social contexts that a subtle critique can emerge from the superficial layer.

Maintaining Groys's understanding of art as paradox-object that contains both thesis and antithesis (2008, 2–3), artists do not merely assimilate and reproduce the ideology of the China Dream, but simultaneously draw from a series of unofficial narratives to counterbalance the

political power with alternative visions. According to Groys, this paradoxical dynamic is an intrinsic feature of contemporary art, which tends to counterbalance the dominant power and taste with something that is pluralistic and excessive in nature. In other words, artworks stand for both the thesis and the antithesis, and they simultaneously stabilise and destabilise power (Groys 2008). Indeed, the artistic intention is often mitigated through ironic and playful tones or optical illusion. Moreover, artists tend to deploy the same representations and strategies used by the central government to pursue their own intentions. However, there is a major difference: the artistic practices reproduce the overarching imaginary of the China Dream whilst simultaneously inserting unwanted elements into their aesthetics, and ultimately compromising the original vision of the party. Therefore, although most works analysed throughout the thesis might be interpreted as either conscious or passive reflections of the surroundings, the complex and intertwining dynamics between artists and space-making cannot be merely reduced to that.

Throughout history, art and state have long been interacting through a dynamic and often altering relationship, where their trajectories have often crossed each other's paths and been intertwined to then diverge and/or re-unite. Richard Kraus believes that this relationship has grown into an 'illiberal intimacy' that dates to China's imperial period (2004, 3). Whereas in the dynastic past the exchange between visual arts and political power was evident in the juxtaposition of official and non-official art, in the 20th century, propaganda art reached its peak with numerous posters and slogans celebrating Mao, communism, the countryside and peasants. However, since the 1980s, the interactions between state and art have shifted again. They have become more pluralistic and dynamic due to the emergence of a more stratified and capitalist society and have taken place in Chinese cities where urban dwellers are bombarded with an infinity of images. While the social and political landscape alters, the physical layout and aesthetics of Chinese urbanities have undergone a transition too, further complicating the relationship between art and state.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, along with the central and local governments, there are three other different groups that have political interests and play an increasingly important role in shaping urban space: corporate and industrial businesses; underrepresented social groups; and, last, the middle class (L. Cheng 2016). As politics and society become more pluralistic (and capitalist), the process of decision-making is also complicated by these new societal forces, which have different interests and necessities. The gradual development of urban forces constitutes a major shift in the complex processes behind the production of space. My thesis exposes these altering dynamics through visual arts: whereas the aims of the central and local governments are woven throughout the chapters under the concept of the China Dream, the three other groups are represented through the selected artistic practices and specific urban interventions, including billboards, themed towns, green projects, VICs, and cultural and creative clusters, among others. The aesthetic dimension of both urban and artistic practices becomes crucial to outline and respond to the processes of space-making.

To elaborate a more complex overview, it is crucial to mention the political context in which art operates in China today, an authoritarian one-party regime. As discussed in the Introduction, since establishing the PRC in 1949, the CCP and the central government have jointly ruled over the Chinese population through an exclusive one-party rule and authoritarian system. However, with Mao's death in 1976, the totalitarian regime was softened by the rise of Deng Xiaoping, who allowed for a more liberal economy and looser cultural restrictions. Alongside the diversity of artistic tendencies, such as the experimental art, Cynical Realism, and Political Pop, the art sector expanded beyond the public realm and geographical borders of China. Moreover, as the stark presence of the state gradually eased, between the 1980s and 2008, the economic, cultural, and artistic landscapes became particularly pluralistic and reliant on the global market rather than controlled by the one-party rule. Nevertheless, after years of relative freedom, the Tiananmen students' protests in 1989 marked another turning point. These events and power dynamics stand as a reminder of the ultimate authority of the state, which is ready to intervene as soon as is threatened.

Rapidly in the 1990s, China started opening up again and modernising its cities. However, after a decade of urban and economic growth and relative artistic freedom, the convergence of events in the late 2000s, including the global financial crisis, the Wenchuan earthquake, the milk powder scandal, and the protests in Tibet, have perhaps contributed to a tightening and more authoritarian regime.¹⁸⁴ Since coming into power, Xi has recentralised his authority and introduced information technology, AI and surveillance into the political structure (Strittmatter 2020). Moreover, he has established the National Security Committee and the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms and set himself as the head of the government, the CCP, and military forces (L. Cheng 2016). In the last ten years, China has become more assertive in its diplomatic and military approach (Goldstein 2020).¹⁸⁵ The sudden strengthening of the central government and the creation of the China Dream under Xi have raised comparisons with the Mao's era, even though their ideologies belong to two different times and two different Chinas. For instance, Xi has become the only leader after Mao to discuss the role of the arts at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art, convened in October 2014, on the anniversary date of Mao's Yan'An Forum in 1942. Xi's speech delivered a few key points: the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation; inheriting the past to herald the future; and 'the creation of art can fly with the wings of imagination, but make sure art workers tread on solid earth'.¹⁸⁶ On top of this event, my conversations with artists and curators in China and Hong Kong have confirmed the tightening approach of the CCP on artistic freedom and, more generally, a centralization of power through ideology and repressive actions.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ The Wenchuan earthquake is also referred to as Sichuan earthquake.

¹⁸⁵ The CCP's centenary on the first of July 2021 is exemplary of China's confident and aggressive character. During his talk, Xi advocated that China 'will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people' (Xinhua 2021, 9).

¹⁸⁶ These concepts are translated from Xi's original expressions: *zhonghua minzu weida fuxing; chengqian qihou, jiwang kai lai*; and *yishu keyi fangfei xiangxiang de chibang, dan yiding yao jiao cai jianzhi de dadi* (Creemers 2014).

¹⁸⁷ My conversation with Hong Kong based artist, Leung Chi Woo, in 2019 has sadly been quite prophetic. At the time of our informal chat in a café in April 2019, protests against the earlier handover of Hong Kong to Mainland China were already taking place in the streets. Leung was also very concerned about the future of Hong Kong and mentioned that artists had already sensed changes in their artistic freedom, especially when exhibiting in Mainland China. Sadly, a year later, in the midst of Covid-19, the central government enforced the Hong Kong's security law on 30 June 2020.

Ironically, the strengthening of the party has coincided with the promotion of the loose and ambiguous concept of the China Dream. Supported by the economic growth of China and the desire to regain a central role in the world power-relations, the China Dream legitimates the central government's future plans by merging them with individuals' longings. This tension is specific of ideology, which sets its own total gaze on erasing its own limits (Žižek 2012). In other words, it exploits contradictions for its own benefit. Indeed, although ideology and in China's case, the China Dream, can be thought of as the connective tissue between individuals and reality, they are very fragile and precarious. Eagleton suggests that ideology is like 'a *text*, woven of a whole tissue of different conceptual strands [...] traced through by divergent histories' (1991, 1); in other words, 'internally heterogeneous and inconsistent' (Eagleton 1991, 45). The continuous tension between ideology's inherent contradictions, on the one hand, and its ability to legitimise the party and maintain social order, on the other, requires the central government to have preventative measures to protect the China Dream. Although Žižek argues that in our democratic and late capitalist society, the significance of the word and confrontation have lost their power (2012), I argue that in a non-democratic and hybrid country like China, this is not always accurate. As a post-totalitarian regime combining socialism with liberal capitalism, I advance that there is still a residual belief in the power of words and the fear of losing legitimacy.

Throughout the years, the preventative measures of the central government to validate its power have varied in terms of violence and scale: in the last two years, the world has witnessed the ferocious actions against the protests in Hong Kong and the unlawful introduction of the Hong Kong' security law. Moreover, information and video footage have leaked around 'education camps' and other practices violating human rights in Xinjiang. Due to the overwhelming urban transformations across China, the complaints and struggles against the forced relocation of residents and other urban rights are often avoided by offering compensation or silenced through

negotiations.¹⁸⁸ In the artistic context, it is censorship that mainly intervenes to conceal dissent. As in the case of globally renowned artist, Ai Weiwei, the party's intervention can be more intrusive. Ai's engagement with thorny and sensitive issues, such as the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, and China's surveillance, among others, has earned him the title of dissident. Moreover, it has also led to Ai's arrest, several months in prison, physical assault, the withdrawal of his passport and continuous surveillance. As ideology controls every aspect of people's life, by the same token, every individual action that deviates from the established norm is perceived as a challenge to the regime and, hence, can lead to top-down reactions (Havel 1985, 43).

Moreover, in today's urban space, as ideology needs to compete against an increasing number of visual experiences in the city, the central government exacerbates politics' own aesthetic dimension (Rancière 2011). It exploits the power of images to clearly articulate the present and legitimise the future it needs. For this reason, on the first of July 2021, the party celebrated its centenary through highly choreographed and spectacular performances. In the gala show at Beijing National Stadium, a two hour long cultural performance was live-streamed to showcase China's greatest achievements under the guide of the party. Through dancing, singing, and acting, the references to China's urban and economic development, natural and cultural heritage, ethnic minorities, military, and technological power, as well as the medical response to Covid-19 were unmistakable and highly visual. Likewise, the celebration on the first of July in Tiananmen Square offered another immersive visual and performative experience (Fig. 6.4).¹⁸⁹ The square was decorated with rows of red flags, flowerbeds in the colours of the rainbow, and large-scale installations featuring the number one hundred and the symbol of the CCP. National anthems and military marches were alternated with air formations of helicopters and next-generation J20 stealth fighters, displaying China's strength. Spectacular yet, menacing in its scale and

¹⁸⁸ Michelson argues that social and political conflicts in the countryside tend to be solved through material concessions and procedural reforms and can be more exacerbated than in urban areas (2008).

¹⁸⁹ See the pictures in The Straits Times ('In Pictures: China Holds Cultural Performance Ahead of Centenary on July 1' 2021).

performativity.¹⁹⁰ Today, the Chinese party-state exhibits its power through policies, and even more persuasively through its carefully designed imaginary.



Fig. 6.4 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China at the National Stadium in Beijing, China, June 28, 2021. © Reuters.

Indeed, Groys suggests that the power of ideology ultimately lies in its vision (2008). The aesthetic language becomes one way in which the party-state advances the China Dream and unifies its nation through attractive and persuasive images that, consciously or unconsciously, penetrate the urban dwellers. However, if aesthetics bends to political power, by the same token, it can evaluate and criticise the political performances according to the deployed visual language. Whereas a certain aesthetics can sustain political power, it can also denigrate it, becoming a paradox-object (Groys 2008, 16–17). ‘Every artwork that presents a vision that is guiding a certain religious or political ideology makes this vision profane’ (Groys 2008, 8). Going back to Jiang Pengyi’s

¹⁹⁰ The spectacle lies in the excessive and highly visual character of the show, which is considered bold and problematic by democratic countries perhaps more for the direct glimpse into power at work than anything else. Moreover, in today’s globalised and capitalist society, it is surprising to think that the party can still have such an influential role on its own.

photographic series, this paradox is recognisable in its representation of reality. Although the artist wants to raise a critique towards the totalising power of big giants, such as BTV, Xinhua Agency News, and Siemens, he still deploys the same vision. The photographic scene is almost identical to the outer landscape if it was not for the enhanced luminosity of the protagonist buildings. Jiang's photographs reveal the power dynamics by over-identifying the high-rises with political and economic actors and overshadowing the streets and everyday scenes as unwanted images.

In conclusion, rather than linear and consistent, the interactions between the central government, society, and visual arts are more complicated and nuanced than we often like to think. The western scholarly discourse is 'fascinated by the horror of individual stories of oppression' (Kraus 2004, 233) and, indeed, there have been episodes of violent repressions against Chinese citizens and artists. However, the political and social achievements of the last forty years are often overlooked in the analysis of their dynamics. Despite Xi's increasingly centralised regime, the PRC has transitioned from a non-existing legal system during the Cultural Revolution to a growing emphasis on the necessity of a rule of law.¹⁹¹ It has expanded the channels to protest and express opinions, by reinforcing the legal system and allowing petitioning.¹⁹² Ultimately, society has changed because of an increasingly capitalist system. Whereas the middle class has been identified as one of China's driving economic forces, other urban actors have complicated the political landscape (L. Cheng 2016). Today, alongside the party, there are several other forces that have the potential to influence space- and policy-making.

This socio-political transition has had an impact on the art scene too. Today, contemporary artists can entertain a wider range of exchanges with the central government and society compared to

¹⁹¹ A further consideration on the legal system must be addressed though. Although the rule of law can perhaps provide a further channel to express opinions, Havel suggests that legality serves the post-totalitarian regime in the first place. 'It wraps the base exercise of power in the noble apparel of the letter of law. It creates the illusion that justice is done, society protected, and the exercise of power regulated' (Havel 1985, 73). Therefore, the rule of law not only serves the people, but the system too.

¹⁹² However, the channels to protests are still inadequate or too restrictive and often lead to illegal approaches to reach resolutions (Cai 2008).

the 20th century. In the 2000s, the multiplicity of artistic practices matched the scale of China's urban and economic transformations. Thanks to the reform era and the results of the economic growth, artists enjoyed two decades of relatively loose artistic freedom. They entered the international market, developed new techniques and hybrid styles, and conveyed a plurality of sensations, ranging from excitement to confusion and sometimes frustration with their surroundings. However, since Xi's elections, China has shifted towards a more enclosed regime and artists had to learn how to navigate this oscillating relationship. As mentioned earlier, not only have the arts and state been intimately interlinked throughout history, but this transition from relative openness to closure is a recurring phenomenon. Therefore, Kraus proposes to refuse the view of the Chinese artist as naïve and the central government as malicious (2004, 2). Although his analysis of art-power relations is set against the death of Deng Xiaoping in 1997, I believe that his argument is certainly valid today. 'The charismatic view of the artist as a heroic figure, locked in constant struggle against repressed and repressive authority, is a product of 19th century western romantic ideology' (Kraus 2004, 2). Today, the trajectories of power, art, and society intersect, diverge, and align, creating a complex web of interlinked threads.

It results that in China's post-totalitarian regime, even those artworks that 'passively' reflect on the current economic, socio-political, cultural, and environmental landscape can swiftly assume transformative potential. Unsurprisingly, most artists seem to adopt a low profile to maintain their personal and artistic freedom. At times, visual arts seem disengaged from politics. However, drawing on Havel, this apparent disengagement can perhaps be interpreted as a hidden turmoil and initial resistance. Artists attempt to raise society's awareness of space-making and the phenomena and problems often associated with the city through the reproduction and over-identification of their surroundings. In other words, they do not merely reinforce the official ideology, but like Groy's paradox-object, they simultaneously contain counter-narratives. Indeed, artists consciously reflect the surroundings and conceal their critiques behind optical illusions, fictive characters, and ironic and playful tones to mitigate their messages.

As a result, the three categories of works analysed in my thesis cannot be understood as merely documentary in their approaches. Apart from the first category which reproduces reality, the two other groups of work creatively respond to the socio-political climate with varying levels of engagement. Whereas most works reflect yet slightly alter the surroundings either through optical illusion or exaggeration, the remaining practices are participatory. They both have the potential to reveal the dynamics behind space-making and activate individuals' re-imagining of the city. Firstly, the evocative and playful aesthetic language in the works invites the viewers to re-explore their reality mentally and sensually and amplify their sensorial explorations through exaggeration, fantasy, and imagination. Secondly, by including local communities and viewers in their work, artists invite their audience to take a hands-on approach and grasp their changing urban and social fabric. Although the investigated socially engaged artistic practices often operate in the shadow and across liminalities and would superficially appear to be lacking a political and social potential, they are extremely significant to gradually increase people's conscious presence in the urban space.

By putting distance between reality through beautified, exaggerated, kitsch, and at times, alien and catastrophic visions of Chinese cities, artists have the potential to depart from the official narrative and produce parallel visions. It is by ways of imagining that one can glimpse at and perhaps alter the social relations regulating space-making in China. Therefore, it is not in its political engagement that the work of art becomes more radical and transformative (Marcuse 1978, xii–xiii). On the contrary, paraphrasing Mao's words, Kraus suggests that 'the art of the bourgeoisie becomes more dangerous as it increases in beauty' (2004, 233). It is only by keeping and increasing the distance with the real that the chance to get closer to understanding the extensiveness of ideology can emerge. This tension is extremely important to maintain a critique of ideology. Although more often than not, artists and their works cannot but reproduce the mediated and symbolic reality they are inextricably part of, there is a chance to grasp a residue of unsymbolised reality.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the overexposed high-rises shot by Jiang Pengyi and part of his photographic series *Luminant* are exemplary of how artworks may not be able to extricate themselves from ideology and yet still provide mediated encounters of their historical landscape. Through overexposure and composition, the images are pervaded with an accentuated symbolic and imaginative power that wants to raise viewers' awareness towards space-making. This power lies in the exaggerated glow, which is what Jiang Jiehong calls a 'departure from reality' and is reminiscent of Benjamin's 'underworld'. The glowing presence of skyscrapers doubles the distance between reality and its representations and paradoxically brings closer to an awakening. This seemingly passive urban aesthetics offers a deeper reflection on how space is made and distributed: through the negotiations between dominant actors and increasingly influential social groups in China.

In conclusion, my investigation demonstrates that urban aesthetics are very responsive to the ways in which space is produced. On the one hand, the socio-political transition, and urban transformations of the last two decades have infused and inspired art to produce artworks in relation to the city and the phenomena and concerns associated with it. On the other hand, artists have simultaneously re-elaborated and advanced present and future urban imaginaries that can multiply the understandings of the urban; their practices form an invaluable collection of imagined landscapes that are very significant to initiate dialogues and discussions on more inclusive and sustainable ways in which urban space should be made.¹⁹³ Lastly, urban aesthetics also has the potential to present a variety of less recognised actors and concerns that can surface through artistic practices and, in this case, imagination. These artistic works form some of the ways in which urban space is understood, re-shaped, and subtly pointing towards future changes. Although it might take longer time to have an impact on China's political and social momentum, their potential is certainly accumulating in the evocative and dream-like visions of artists which can ultimately mould future urban imaginaries.

¹⁹³ This is especially clear from the artistic practices and case-studies in Chapter 2 and 5, where multiple spatialities and temporalities merge into a fluid and linear dimension.

To conclude this thesis as I started it, I recall the fictional conversations between the explorer Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Khan. At Khan's court, a journey across memories, places and fantasies unfolds through Polo's narration. The city becomes a complicated tangle of threads that can only be temporarily unwoven through evocative stories and hazy imaginaries.

Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his. [...] Only in Marco Polo's accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing (Calvino 1974, 5–6).

Likewise, artists become the narrators of a mental wandering across China's urban space and society and provide opportunities to provisionally untangle reality and glimpse at, if not imagine, future cities.

Afterword

During a global pandemic a project on contemporary visual arts in response to urban transformations in China feels secondary. However, it belongs to a specific category of works which have been produced during COVID-19; and whether I like it or not, it will become associated with that time. Admittedly though, one must celebrate their achievements during hardships. If Covid-19 encouraged me to think creatively about my investigation, it certainly forced me to rethink my overall plan. My fieldwork in China was supposed to happen in March 2020. At the beginning of 2020, as Covid-19 reached Europe and I started contacting artists and book flights, I started wondering whether my trip would really happen. On the one hand, I thought the media coverage was exaggerated; on the other, more and more countries shut their borders and certain words became part of our everyday life: lockdown, self-isolation, SARS, Covid-19, pandemic, face masks, PCR tests, antigen tests, etc. In the same month, Italy went into lockdown and the conversations with my parents began to sound surreal. ‘Wear face masks and please be careful!’ I remember them saying when life was going on as usual in London. Then, two weeks later cases started rising in the UK and a sense of panic spread – toilet paper, pasta, canned foods, and other essentials were hard to find. The week before the national lockdown was surreal and almost dystopian. On a Thursday at lunchtime, my partner decided it was time to leave London. I was upset and thought it was unnecessary. We packed thinking it would be a matter of two-three weeks, a month in the worst scenario. At his parents’ house in Barford, a tiny village near Warwick, we played games, had dinner together and enjoyed this unexpected family time. It felt like being drawn into Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Set outside Florence, the collection of tales by the Italian poet narrates a group of ten friends fleeing the plague in the city. However, whereas the friends in the book would return to Florence after ten days, the global pandemic seemed more enduring. On top of postponing my trip to China, I had to rethink my professional and personal routine. From working, to Skyping with family and friends in Italy, to watching Netflix, everything happened on a screen. Likewise, reality flattened and time diluted. Although the lockdown seemed endless, what has happened in the last year or so has not really stuck into my memory. I distinguish the before and after lockdown. But the in-between is blurry, ambiguous, compressed. I need to

look at pictures and go back to my records to remember how much I have done. Contrary to many who felt discouraged about the overall situation or could not possibly work, for me writing became one way to make sense of these isolated days. As I felt powerless and like I had no control over the present and future, the only way to give myself some sense of direction was by working. Most of my PhD has been written in lockdowns across Barford, London, and Forlì, at the seaside, in the countryside and city. Unfortunately, not in China. Until the very last, I thought I could jump on a plane and conduct a quick fieldtrip. It is not only Chinese artists and cities that I was longing to meet, but also the Chinese food, the excitement and exhaustion of travelling, taking notes, and feeling a place. However, the isolation and disconnection imposed by Covid-19 have encouraged me to produce something unique, which has developed through artists' representations, encounters, and visual narratives. Moreover, due to the impossibility to visit the cities of Chongqing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou I really had to construct my own urban imaginary of these realities and be creative about my data collection. Despite the difficulties, my thesis might have even benefitted from this further mental wandering. Indeed, it is not necessarily my PhD, but the personal dimension that has suffered the most throughout the numerous lockdowns: the feeling of a hug, a meal shared with family and friends, an unexpected encounter, and even the freedom of going for a walk. Although it is easy to romanticise and exploit moments of hardships, such as a pandemic, it is important to acknowledge how the works produced in these circumstances could have been different. If the PhD already blurred the fine line between professional and personal life, Covid-19 certainly exacerbated the overlaps and even contributed to the creation of a unique category of works that will be able to reflect this significant socio-historical moment.

Glossary

Chinese Names

Ai Weiwei	艾未未 (b. 1957)
Anting	安亭
Baishizhou	白石洲
Baoshan	宝山区
Beidaihe	北戴河区
Beijing	北京
Bi Rongrong	毕蓉蓉 (b. 1982)
Cai Guoqiang	蔡国强 (b. 1957)
Caiwuwei	蔡屋围
Cao Fei	曹斐 (b. 1978)
Caochangdi	草场地
Changchun	长春
Changsha Wenheyong	长沙文和友
Chaowai SOHO	朝外 SOHO
Chaoyang	朝阳区
Chen Qiulin	陈秋林 (b. 1975)
Chen Shaoxiong	陈劭雄 (b. 1962)
Chen Wei	陈维 (b. 1980)
Chen Zhanxiang	陈占祥 (b. 1916-2001)
Chi Peng	迟鹏 (b. 1981)
Chongming Island	崇明岛
Chongqing	重庆
Chunfeng hutong	春风胡同
Dali	大理市
Dalian	大连
Dao	道
Daodejing	道德经
Deng Xiaoping	邓小平 (1904-1997)
Dongba	东坝地区
Fang Lijun	方力钧 (b. 1963)
<i>fengshui</i>	风水
Fuling	涪陵区
Fuyang	阜阳
Fuzhou	福州市
Galaxy SOHO	银河 SOHO
Gao Ling	高灵 (b. 1980)
Gao Minglu	高名潞 (b. 1949)
Gao Rong	高蓉 (b. 1986)
Guangzhou	广州
Guo Xi	郭熙 (1020-90)
Haidian	海淀区
Han	汉族
Han Bing	韩冰 (b. 1974)

Hangzhou	杭州
Harbin	哈尔滨
He An	何岸 (b. 1970)
Hefei	合肥市
Hou Hanru	侯瀚如 (b. 1963)
Hu Jieming	胡介鸣 (b. 1957)
Hu Jintao	胡锦涛 (b. 1942)
Hu Weiyi	胡为一 (b. 1990)
Huang Yan	黄岩 (b. 1966)
Huang Yongping	黄永砅 (1954 - 2019)
Huanggang	皇岗
Hunan	湖南
Inri	映里 (b. 1973)
Ji Cheng	计成 (1582-1642)
Ji Yunfei	季云飞 (b. 1963)
Jia Zhangke	贾樟柯 (b. 1970)
Jiang Pengyi	蒋鹏奕 (b. 1977)
Jiang Zemin	江泽民 (b. 1925)
Jiang Zhi	蒋志 (b. 1971)
Jiangsu province	江苏
Jing Hao	荆浩 (ca. 880-940)
Jingdezhen	景德镇
Ju'er hutong	菊儿胡同
Leeza SOHO	丽泽 SOHO
Lei Sheng	雷胜
Li Xianting	栗宪庭 (b. 1949)
Li Zhan	李占 (b. 1986)
Liang Juhui	梁钜辉 (1959-2006)
Liang Sicheng	梁思成 (1901-1972)
Liang Yuanwei	梁远苇 (b. 1977)
Liang Yue	梁玥 (b. 1979)
Lijiang	丽江
Lin Tianmiao	林天苗 (b. 1961)
Lin Yilin	林一林 (b. 1964)
Liu Bolin	刘勃麟 (b. 1973)
Liu He	刘赫
Liu Jianhua	刘建华 (b. 1962)
Liu Xiaodong	刘小东 (b. 1963)
Liu Yiqian	刘益谦 (b. 1963)
Liulitun	六里屯
Luo Zidan	罗子丹 (b. 1971)
Ma Yansong	马岩松 (b. 1975)
Mao Zedong	毛泽东 (1893-1976)
Miao Xiaochun	缪晓春 (b. 1964)
Na Buqi	娜布其 (b. 1984)
Nanjing	南京
Nanluogu xiang	南锣鼓巷
Ni Weihua	倪卫华 (b. 1962)
Pan Shiyi	潘石屹 (b. 1963)

Pi Li	皮力 (b. 1974)
Picun Village	皮村
Pingyao	平遥
Pudong	浦东
Pudong New District	浦东新区
Putuo district	普陀区
<i>qi</i>	气
Qian Xuesen	钱学森 (1911-2009)
Qing dynasty	清朝 (1644 - 1911)
Qinghuadao	秦皇岛市
Qiu Anxiong	杨泳梁 (b. 1972)
Qiu Zhijie	邱志杰 (b. 1969)
Rong Guangrong	荣光荣 (b. 1984)
Rong Rong	荣荣 (b. 1968)
Sanlitun SOHO	三里屯 SOHO
Shanghai	上海
Shantou	汕头
Shenzhen	深圳
Shi Yong	施勇 (b. 1963)
Shibaozhai temple	石宝寨
Shichahai	什刹海区
Shiman Village, Lijiang, Yunnan	士满, 丽江市, 云南省
Sichuan	四川
Song Dong	宋冬 (b. 1966)
Song dynasty	宋朝 (960 - 1279)
Songjiang	松江区
Sui Jianguo	隋建国 (b. 1956)
Sun Heng	孙恒
Suzhou	苏州
Taiwan	台湾
Teng Kun Yan	登琨豔 (b. 1951)
Tianjin	天津
Tianzifang	田子坊
Tongzhou	通州区
Wan Yan	万妍
Wang Dezhi	王德志
Wang Gongxin	王功新 (b. 1960)
Wang Jin	王晋 (b. 1962)
Wang Wei	王卫 (b. 1972)
Wang Wei	王薇 (b. 1963)
Wangfujing	王府井
Wangjing	望京街道
Wangjing SOHO	望京 SOHO
Weng Fen	翁奋 (b. 1961)
Wu Dan	吴丹
Wu Ping	吴萍
Xi Jinping	习近平 (b. 1953)
Xiamen	厦门
Xi'An	西安市

Xiang Liqing	向利庆 (b. 1973)
Xiao Lu	肖鲁 (b. 1962)
Xiaohoucang hutong	小后仓胡同
Xicheng	西城区
Xie He	谢赫 (6th century)
Xing Danwen	邢丹文 (b. 1967)
Xinjiang	新疆
Xiyadie	西亚蝶 (b. 1963)
Xu Bing	徐冰 (b. 1955)
Xu Duo	许多
Yang Yi	杨怡 (b. 1971)
Yang Yuanyuan	杨圆圆 (b. 1989)
Yang Zhenzhong	杨振中 (b. 1978)
Yangpu	杨浦区
Yangtze River Delta	长江三角洲
Yao Lu	姚璐 (b. 1967)
Ye Funa	叶甫纳 (b. 1986)
Yin Xiuzhen	尹秀珍 (b. 1963)
Yingquan	颍泉区
Yu Fan	于凡 (b. 1966)
Yu Ji	于吉 (b. 1985)
Yuan dynasty	元朝 (1279 - 1368)
Yue Minjun	岳敏君 (b. 1962)
Yumen	玉门县
Zhan Wang	展望 (b. 1962)
Zhang Dali	张大力 (b. 1963)
Zhang Huan	张洵 (b. 1965)
Zhang Kechun	张克纯 (b. 1980)
Zhang Peili	张培力 (b. 1957)
Zhang Ruyi	张如怡 (b. 1985)
Zhang Xin	张欣 (b. 1965)
Zhang Zhi'An	张治安 (b. 1962)
Zhao Liang	赵亮 (b. 1971)
Zhao Yao	赵要 (b. 1981)
Zhengzhou	郑州
Zhu Fadong	朱发东 (b. 1960)
Zhuang Hui	庄辉 (b. 1963)
Zhuhai	珠海

Chinese Terms

1933 Old Mill Factory	1933 <i>lao changfang</i>	1933 老场坊
798 Art District	798 <i>yishu diqu</i>	798 艺术地区
85 Art Movement	85 <i>xinchao</i>	85 新潮
A8 Art Commune	A8 <i>yishu gongshe</i>	A8 艺术公社
illegal tags to obtain fake ID	<i>banzheng</i>	办证
Advertising Law	<i>guanggao fa</i>	广告法
alleys	<i>hutong</i>	胡同
apartment art	<i>gongyu yishu</i>	公寓艺术
Aranya, Gold Coast Community	<i>Anaya, Huangjin Hai'an shequ</i>	阿那亚·黄金海岸社区
Arrow Factory	<i>jianguang kongjian</i>	箭广空间
Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank	<i>yazhou jichu sheshi zi yinhang</i>	亚洲基础设施投资银行
Atelier Deshaus	<i>Dashe Jianzhu</i>	大舍建筑
avant-garde	<i>qianwei/xianfeng</i>	前卫/先锋
Baidu Maps	<i>baidu ditu</i>	百度地图
Baiheliang underwater museum	<i>Baiheliang shuixia bowoguan</i>	白鹤梁水下博物馆
baojia system	<i>baojia zhi</i>	保甲制
Beautiful China	<i>meili Zhongguo</i>	美丽的中国
Beijing Forum on Literature and Art	<i>Beijing wenyi zuotanhui</i>	北京文艺座谈会
Beijing National Stadium	<i>Beijing guojia tiyuchang</i>	北京国家体育场
Beijing TV (BTV)	<i>Beijing guangbo dianshitai</i>	北京广播电视台
Beijing World Park	<i>Beijing shijie gongyuan</i>	北京世界公园
Beijing Youth Daily	<i>Beijing qingnianbao</i>	北京青年报
Belt and Road Initiative	<i>yi dai yi lu</i>	一带一路
Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (UABB)	<i>Shengan chengshi\jianzhu shuangnianzhan</i>	深港城市 \ 建筑双城双年展
Big Tail Elephant Group	<i>Daveixiang</i>	大尾象
borrowed scenery	<i>jiejing</i>	借景
calendars	<i>yuefenpai</i>	月份牌
calligraphy	<i>shufa</i>	书法
Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA)	<i>zhongyang meishu xueyuan</i>	中央美术学院
Central Business District (CBD)	<i>shangwu zhongxinqu</i>	商务中心区
Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms	<i>Zhongyang quanmian shenhua gaige weiyuanhui</i>	中央全面深化改革委员会
Chaoyang District Culture and Tourism Bureau	<i>Chaoyangshi chaoyangqu wenhua he luyouju</i>	北京市朝阳区文化和旅游局
China Dream	<i>Zhongguo meng</i>	中国梦
China's Avantgarde Exhibition	<i>Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhuan</i>	中国现代艺术转
Chinese Communist Party (CCP)	<i>Zhongguo gongchandang</i>	中国共产党
Chongqing Forest City	<i>Chongqing senlin gongcheng</i>	重庆森林工程

Christian Literature Society Building	<i>guangxue dalou</i>	光学大楼
Cities on the Move	<i>yidongzhong de chengshi</i>	移动中的城市 (1997-9)
Civilised China	<i>wenming de Zhongguo</i>	文明的中国
clear waters and green mountains are as good as mountains of gold and silver	<i>jinsan yinsan jiushi liushui qingshan</i>	金山银山就是绿水青山
Commune by The Great Wall	<i>changcheng jiaoxia de gongshe</i>	长城脚下的公社
Confucianism	<i>Rujia</i>	儒家
contemporary art	<i>dangdai yishu</i>	当代艺术
copycat	<i>shanzhai</i>	山寨
courtyard houses	<i>sibeyuan</i>	四合院
courtyard houses	<i>sibeyuan</i>	四合院
crafts	<i>gongyi</i>	工艺
Creative East no 8 District	<i>chuangyi dongbaqu</i>	创意东八区
cultural and creative industries (CCIs)	<i>wenhua yu chuangyi chanye</i>	文化与创意产业
Cultural Revolution	<i>wenhua dageming</i>	文化大革命 (1966-76)
Cynical realism	<i>wanshi xianshi zhuixi</i>	完世现实主义
Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture	<i>Dali Baizu zizhizhou</i>	大理白族自治州
Dalian Xinghai Creative Island	<i>Dalian Xinghai chuangyidao</i>	大连星海创意岛
Dali-Lijiang Expressways	<i>Dali-Lijiang gaosu gonglu</i>	大理—丽江高速公路
Daoism	<i>Daojiao</i>	道教
demolish a building and relocate the inhabitants	<i>chaiqian</i>	拆迁
direct municipalities	<i>zhixiashi</i>	直辖市
dream	<i>meng</i>	梦
Drum and Bell Tower	<i>Beijing gulou he zhonglou</i>	北京鼓楼和钟楼
Dunhuang Caves	<i>Dunhuang shiku</i>	敦煌石窟
ecological civilisation	<i>shengtai wenming</i>	生态文明
Economic Development Zones (EDZs)	<i>jingji kaifaqu</i>	经济开发区
experimental art	<i>shiyanyishu</i>	实验艺术
F518 Creative Fashion Park	<i>F518 shichang chuangyi yuan</i>	F518 时尚创意园
family units	<i>dazayuan</i>	大杂院
First Opium War	<i>diyici yapian zhanzheng</i>	第一次鸦片战争
Five Year Plan	<i>wunian jibua</i>	五年计划
floating population	<i>liudong renkou</i>	流动人口
Folk Culture Villages	<i>minsu cun</i>	民俗村
Forbidden City	<i>gugong</i>	故宫
Gaode Maps	<i>gaode ditu</i>	搞得地图
gated community	<i>fengbi shi zhuzhai xiaoqu</i>	封闭式住宅小区
gentleman/man of virtue	<i>junzi</i>	君子
Great Wall	<i>changcheng</i>	长城
green screen photo studio	<i>limu zhaoxiangguan</i>	绿幕照相馆
Guangdong Times Museum	<i>Guangdong shidai meishuguan</i>	广东时代美术馆
Haidong Development Zone	<i>Haidong kaifaqu</i>	海东开发区
Hainan		海南

Handshake 302	<i>woshou</i> 302	握手 302
handshake building	<i>woshou lou</i>	握手楼
Harmonious Society	<i>hexie shehui</i>	和谐社会
Heiqiao village	<i>Heiqiao cun</i>	黑桥村
household registration system	<i>hukou zhi</i>	户口制
Huangpu river	<i>huangpu jiang</i>	黄浦江
Huguang Guildhall	<i>Huguang huiguan</i>	湖广会馆
Huqiu road	<i>Huqiu lu</i>	虎丘路
inherit the past and usher in the future	<i>chengqian qibou, jiwang kailai</i>	承前启后, 继往开来
international concessions	<i>Shanghai guoji zujie</i>	上海国际租界
Japanese war	<i>jiawu zhanzheng</i>	甲午战争 (1894-5)
Jingdezhen porcelain	<i>Jingdezhen ciqi</i>	景德镇瓷器
landscape paintings	<i>shanshui hua</i>	山水画
Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics	<i>wenwu baohu fa</i>	文物保护法 (1982)
List of Precious Chinese Historic Sites	<i>lishi wenhua mingcheng</i>	历史文化名城
<i>literati</i>	<i>wenren</i>	文人
Loft 49	Loft 49 <i>chuangyi chanye yuangu</i>	Loft 49 创意产业园区
Long March Space	<i>changzheng kongjian</i>	长征空间
Long Museum	long meishuguan	龙美术馆
M Art group	M <i>qunti</i>	M 群体
M50	M50 <i>chuangyiyuan</i>	M50 创意园
Mausoleum of the first Qin emperor	<i>Qin shi huangdiling</i>	秦始皇帝陵
Migrant Labour Museum	<i>Shenzhen laonugong bowuguan</i>	深圳劳工博物馆
migrant workers	<i>mingong/ dagong ren</i>	民工/打工人
Migrant Workers' Culture and Arts Museum	<i>dagong wenhua yishu bowuguan</i>	打工文化艺术博物馆
milk powder scandal	<i>2008 nian Zhongguo naifen wuran shigu</i>	2008 年中国奶粉污染事故
Ming dynasty	<i>Ming chao</i>	明朝 (1368 - 1644)
Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China	<i>zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhufang he chengxiang jianshebu</i>	中华人民共和国住房和城乡建设部
modern art	<i>xiandai yishu</i>	现代艺术
mountain and water	<i>shanshui</i>	山水
nail house	<i>dingzihu</i>	钉子户
Nanjing 1912	<i>Nanjing 1912 jiequ</i>	南京 1912 街区
Nanjing Treaty	<i>Nanjing tiaoyue</i>	南京条约 (1842)
Nanshi power plant	<i>Nanshi fadianchang</i>	南市发电厂
National Security Committee (NSC)	<i>zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui</i>	中央国家安全委员会
Native Soil Art	<i>xiangtu meisu</i>	乡土美术
Nature	<i>ziran</i>	自然
new middle class	<i>xin zhongchan jiecheng</i>	新中产阶级
New Workers' Art Troupe	<i>xin gongren yishutuan</i>	新工人艺术团
Northern Art Group	<i>beifang qunti</i>	北方群体

<i>Notes on the Method for the Brush</i>	Bi Fa Ji	笔法记
Now in this instance I take heaven and earth to be a great furnace and the process of creation and transformation to be a master smith. Where could I go that wouldn't be acceptable?	<i>jin yi yi tiandi wei dalu, yi zaozhua wei daye, e hu wang erbu kezai?</i>	今一以天地为大炉，以造化为大冶，恶乎往而不可哉？
OCT Loft	<i>huaqiao cheng chuangyi wenhua yuan</i>	华侨城创意文化园
Olympic citadel	<i>Beijing aoyuncun</i>	北京奥运村
Olympic Games	<i>Aolinpike yundonghui</i>	奥林匹克运动会
One City, Nine Towns	<i>yi cheng jiu zhen</i>	一城九镇
One World, One Dream	<i>tong yi ge shijie, tong yi ge mengxiang</i>	同一个世界，同一个梦想
Open Door Policy	<i>menhu kaifang zhengce</i>	门户开放政策 (1978)
opera	<i>geju</i>	歌剧
Oriental Pearl	<i>dongfang mingzhu</i>	东方明珠
Paramount	<i>Shanghai bailemen</i>	上海百乐门
Park Hotel	<i>Shanghai guoji fandian</i>	上海国际饭店
Peace Hotel	<i>Shanghai heping fandian</i>	上海和平饭馆
Pearl River Delta	<i>zhujiang sanjiaozhou</i>	珠江三角洲
People's Republic of China	<i>zhonghua renmin gongheguo</i>	中华人民共和国
Political Pop	<i>zhengzhi bopu</i>	政治波普
Pond Society	<i>chishe</i>	池社
protect the beautiful environment	<i>baohu meihua chengshi huanjing</i>	保护美化城市环境
realism	<i>xianshi zhuyi</i>	现实主义
Reform and Open Door Policy	<i>gaige kaifang</i>	改革开放 (1978)
Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation	<i>zhonghua minzu weida fuxing zhilu</i>	中华民族伟大复兴之路
revolutionary realism	<i>geming xianshi zhuyi</i>	革命现实主义
revolutionary romanticism	<i>geming xianshi zhuyi he langman zhuyi xiangjiehe</i>	革命现实主义和革命浪漫主义相结合
Road to Rejuvenation	<i>fuxing zhilu</i>	复兴之路
rural-urban fringes	<i>chengxiang jiehe bu</i>	城乡结合部
Scientific Development	<i>kexue fazhanguan</i>	科学发展观
Shanghai Power Station of Art	<i>Shanghai dangdai yishu bowuguan</i>	上海当代艺术博物馆
Shanghai World Expo	<i>Zhongguo 2010 nian Shanghai shijie bolanhui</i>	中国 2010 年上海世界博览会
Siemens	<i>ximenzi zhongguo youxian gongsi</i>	西门子中国有限公司
Silk Road	<i>sichouzhilu</i>	丝绸之路
Singapore-Nanjing Eco High-Tech Island	<i>Xinjiapo-Nanjing shengtai keji dao</i>	新加坡-南京生态科技岛
six laws	<i>liu fa</i>	六法
Social Sensibility Research & Development Program	<i>shehui minganxing yanjiu yu fazhan jibua</i>	社会敏感性研究与发展计划

Socialism with Chinese characteristics	<i>Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi</i>	中国特色社会主义
Socialist realism	shehui xianshi zhuyi	社会主义现实主义
Special Economic Zone (SEZ)	<i>jingji tequ</i>	经济特区
Splendid China	<i>Jinxin zhonghua</i>	锦绣中华
Stars Art Exhibition	<i>xingxing meizhan</i>	星星美展
Start Museum	<i>xingmei shuguan</i>	星美术馆
State Administration of Radio, Film and Television	<i>guojia guangbo dianying shi zongju</i>	国家广播电视总局
street managers	<i>chengguan</i>	城管
Strong China	<i>qiangda de Zhongguo</i>	强大的中国
Summer Palace	<i>Yibeyuan</i>	颐和园
Suojia Artists' Village	<i>suojia cun</i>	索家村
Suzhou Creek Rehabilitation Project	<i>Suzhou he huanjing zonghe zhengzhi</i>	苏州河环境综合整治
Suzhou Industrial Park	<i>Suzhou gongye yuanqu</i>	苏州工业园区
Suzhou river	<i>Suzhou he</i>	苏州河
Tangshan Nanhu Eco-city Central Park	<i>Tangshan Nanhu shengtai cheng zhongyang gongyuan</i>	唐山南湖生态城中央公园
Tank Loft Chongqing	<i>tanke ku Chongqing dangdai yishu zhongxin</i>	坦克库重庆当代艺术中心
Tank Museum	<i>youguan yishu zhongxin</i>	油罐艺术中心
Temple of Heaven	<i>tiantan</i>	天坛
Terracotta Army	<i>bingmayong</i>	兵马俑
Thames Town	<i>Tainvushi xiaozhen</i>	泰晤士小镇
The 19th CCP National Congress	<i>Zhongguo gongchandang di shijiu ci quanguo daibiao dabui</i>	中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会
The Craft of Gardens	<i>Yuanzhi</i>	园冶 (1631)
The creation of art can fly with the wings of imagination, but make sure art workers tread on solid earth	<i>yishu keyi fangfei xiangxiang de chibang, dan yiding yao jiao cai jianzhi de dadi</i>	艺术可以放飞想象的翅膀但一定要脚踩坚实的大地
Three Gorges Dam Project	<i>sanxia daba</i>	三峡大坝
Three Represents	<i>san ge daibiao</i>	三个代表
Tiananmen Square	<i>Tian'anmen guangchang</i>	天安门广场
Tier city ranking	<i>Zhongguo chengshi fenji</i>	中国城市分级
Tiger Hill pagoda	<i>bulou ta</i>	虎丘塔
to be civilised	<i>wenming</i>	文明
Tongxin experimental school	<i>Tongxin shixianxue Xiao</i>	同心实验学校
town and village enterprises (TVEs)	<i>xiangzhen qiye</i>	乡镇企业
transformative process	<i>zaohua</i>	造化
True Light Building	<i>zhenguang dalou</i>	真光大楼
underground art	<i>dixia yishu</i>	地下艺术
UNESCO	<i>jiao ke wen zuzhi</i>	教科文组织
Urban renewal	<i>chengshi gaisao</i>	城市改造
villages in the city (VIC)	<i>chengzhongcun</i>	城中村
Water Theatre	<i>shuishang juchang</i>	水上剧场
WeChat	<i>weixin</i>	微信

Wenchuan earthquake	<i>Wenchuan dadizhen</i>	汶川大地震
West Bund Financial Centre	<i>xi an jinrong cheng</i>	西岸金融城
West Bund Cultural Corridor (WBCC)	<i>xi an wenhua zoulang</i>	西岸文化走廊
West Bund Media Port	<i>xi an zhuan mei gang</i>	西岸传媒港
West Bund Smart Valley	<i>xi an zhibui gu</i>	西岸智慧谷
White House Boss	<i>bai gong</i>	白宫
Window of the World	<i>Shijie zhi lu</i>	世界之窗
women's art	<i>nuxing yishu</i>	女性艺术
World Heritage Site	<i>shijie wenhua yichandi</i>	世界文化遗产地
World Trade Organization (WTO)	<i>shijie maoyi zhongxin</i>	世界贸易中心
Xialiu village	<i>Xialiu cun</i>	下六村
Xinhua News Agency	<i>xinhua tongxunshe</i>	新华通讯社
Xuhui waterfront	<i>xihui binjiang</i>	徐汇滨江
Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art	<i>Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui</i>	延安文艺座谈会 (1942)
Yu garden	<i>Yu yuan</i>	豫园
Yuanmingyuan road	<i>yuanmingyuan lu</i>	圆明园路
Yuz Museum Shanghai	<i>Yudeyao meishuguan</i>	余德耀美术馆
Zajia Lab	<i>zajia</i>	杂家
Zero Art Group	<i>ling yishu jituan</i>	零艺术集团
Zhengdong New Area	<i>zhengzhou zhengdong xinqu</i>	郑州郑东新区

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Appendix

Related publications

(submitted for publication) Mirra, Federica, 'Erasure: the hidden potential of China's migrant workers in visual arts', *Third Text*.

(submitted for publication) Mirra, Federica, 'Stitching space: tactile explorations of China's urban and social fabric through visual arts', *Positions: asia critique*.

Mirra, Federica (2020), 'The art of billboards in urbanized China', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 7:2-3, pp. 275-300.

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Mirra, Federica (2019), 'Visual arts, representations and interventions in contemporary China: urbanized interface', *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 18:3, pp. 282-284.