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Water Pollution and Spectatorship in Contemporary Chinese Art

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INTRODUCTION

When Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics in 2008, Zhang Hongtu painted a picture, *Re-make of Ma Yuan's Water Album A (780 Years Later)*, which depicted the dire state of water quality in China (Fig. 1). The painting reminds the viewer of the elegance of traditional Chinese literati painting in order to expose water pollution; in doing so it reflects the absurdity of the state's propaganda about ecological civilisation (生态文明) including its ubiquitous environmental campaign to present a positive image of China to an international audience, when in reality water quality is declining. Ecological civilisation, as it has been described by the Chinese government, is the goal of transitioning Chinese society into a model of sustainable, green development.¹ Meanwhile, the Chinese government's promotion of the idea of ecological civilisation is intended to increase public environmental awareness, and therefore offers possibilities for environmental activism that does not impact social stability.² This potential is exemplified by *Everyone's East Lake* (每个人的东湖), a socially engaged art project that aims to raise public awareness of a local development project and voice objections to the plan.

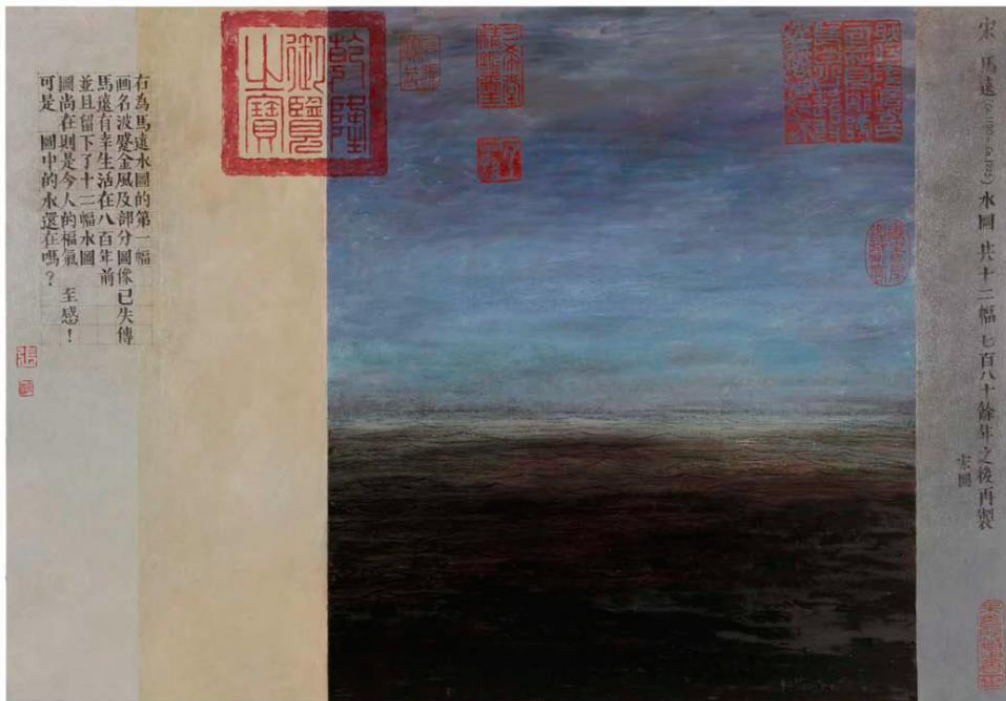


Figure 1. Zhang Hongtu, *Re-make of Ma Yuan's Water Album A (780 Years Later)*, 2008 Oil on canvas, 127cm x 182.9cm. Courtesy of Cheryl McGinnis Gallery/Private Collection.

The concept of socially engaged art can be traced back to the late 1960s in the United States, and includes the works of the American artist Suzanne Lacy who coined the term “new genre public art” to describe art that addresses social and political issues.³ The Mexican artist Pablo Helguera points out that socially engaged art is characterised by “its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence”.⁴ Scholars of the field include the British art historian and critic Claire Bishop, academics Grant Kester and Shannon Jackson, and curator Nato Thompson. In the Chinese context, Meiqin Wang analyses socially informed art focused on participatory and collaborative forms of civically engaged art from the 1980s to present-day within China in *Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China: Voices from Below*.⁵ In this work she discusses Wang Wang’s 2007 *Water of Taihu*. Wang is a pioneer of socially engaged art and exhibitions in China, and has covered topics such as algae blooms in a lake in Wuxi with a solo performance using the algae-contaminated water.⁶ Nanming’s work facilitates public debate about the water crisis and reveals desires for a bottom-up approach to the problem of pollution in civil society.

This article furthers existing research on socially engaged art practices as a response to China’s water pollution and examines the extent to which active audience participation—in contrast to silent observation and appreciation—is an important artistic practice. This topic has so far been neglected by existing literature. This article focusses on two works, *Re-make of Ma Yuan’s Water Album A (780 Years Later)* and *Everyone’s East Lake*, which have not previously been subject to such close attention, and that exemplify the increasing bottom-up activism in the form of participatory art. By analysing these case studies, this article argues that whether water degradation is depicted statically, or is engaged with through active participatory art projects, these approaches all attempt to create didactic and engaging artworks that call upon the audience not to passively accept the current reality of ecological destruction in China. Although artworks do not often directly lead to social change, artists set a scene—whether a painting, photograph, or socially engaged art—that for example, fosters wider public awareness of water pollution and also reveal possibilities for finding collaborative solutions to such problems. The division between static spectatorship and active participation is discussed in relation to Claire Bishop’s and Jacques Rancière’s analysis of spectatorship as well as Roland Barthes’s notion of authorship.

I will trace the various forms of artistic practice that are used by artists in China when focussing on ecological issues. These include traditional and static artistic practices, which may nonetheless serve as captured moments from otherwise actively engaged participatory experiences. I will also consider the difficulties artists have experienced when attempting to facilitate public participation in protests as a form of socially engaged art. While art can enable public engagement with contentious topics that

might otherwise have been prevented from being discussed openly both online and offline, it can still face obstacles.

ECOLOGICAL MARXISM AND CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM

As the concept of ecological Marxism underpins both the Chinese notion of “ecological civilisation” as well as the artistic responses discussed within this article, an analysis of the theoretical structure is necessary. The term “ecological Marxism” was first introduced to China in the 1980s and has provided theoretical guidance for the country’s concept of “ecological civilisation”.⁷ Ecological Marxism criticises the capitalist system for embodying an antagonistic relationship between capitalist accumulation and the environment, and for an anthropocentric dominance over nature that has alienated and isolated humanity from nature.⁸ This concept has faced criticism in China. As a socialist country, China should be free of the environmental issues associated with capitalism. However, that China exhibits the same environmental problems as capitalist systems feeds criticisms of China as only a nominally socialist state.⁹

In addition to ecological Marxism, constructive postmodernism can help to guide the development of an ecological civilisation. Zhihe Wang, a director of the Institute for Postmodern Development of China, advocates the notion of constructive postmodernism as a way of leading China towards ecological civilisation.¹⁰ Constructive postmodernism, developed by John Boswell Cobb and David Ray Griffin, is based on English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy, and integrates modernity and traditional Chinese thinking to construct new pluralistic ways of thinking.¹¹ Constructive postmodernism aims to move China to a sustainable and economically developed state to exist within a socially harmonious society.¹² Within this system, harmony means more than the maintenance of peace and order.¹³ It means a society that embodies integral sustainability, participation, ecological responsibility and spiritual satisfaction.¹⁴ Constructive postmodernists are concerned about the future of human existence and are conscious of our collective social responsibility in the continuation of our species.¹⁵ To achieve their aims, they suggest practical approaches that could help China overcome its present environmental problems.¹⁶ The practical realities of building the types of communities constructive postmodernists argue for, which are sustainable, equitable, ecologically responsible and participatory, is analysed in the following case study. This considers the centrality of public engagement and grassroots movements to ecological civilisations, and the role of art in fostering these vital elements.

IRONY AS A FORM OF CRITICISM

In the first volume of *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1867), Karl Marx compared the capitalists' treatment of workers with their attitudes to the environment, which were marked by exploitation and pollution. He argued that capitalists treated the Earth's resources "as a free gift of nature to capital", appropriating these resources without incurring any costs, and he criticised capitalist wastage, deforestation and the destruction of "the natural vitality of the soil".¹⁷ Although Marx considered natural disasters to be profoundly tied to the history of capitalism, a critique of capitalism alone is insufficient for addressing the current ecological crisis, as this crisis is occurring on a global scale.¹⁸ As a socialist state, China has attempted to avoid the drawbacks of capitalism, yet it still faces the environmental consequences arising from its rapid economic development.¹⁹ These in turn are now beginning to threaten China's economic development, as well as public health and social stability.²⁰

Ecologically unsustainable economic development and accelerated population growth have boosted demand for housing, industry and infrastructure, which has often resulted in increased environmental problems such as water pollution. This section considers how contemporary landscape painting confronts ideals of beauty with the present realities of ecological damage by employing traditional Chinese landscape depictions as a rhetorical device to reveal the environmental crisis and the present paradox of the term "ecological civilisation". It specifically explores Zhang Hongtu's *Re-make of Ma Yuan's Water Album A (780 Years Later)* to expose the absurdity and futility of state propaganda, which promotes a top-down utopia of the green economy.

Zhang graduated from Beijing's Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in 1969 before moving to New York in 1982, where he has lived ever since.²¹ He also trained at the Art Students League of New York in the 1980s.²² In its composition and techniques, Zhang's *Re-make of Ma Yuan's Water Album A (780 Years Later)* refers to an earlier painting by Ma Yuan, a Chinese painter in the Song dynasty (960-1279), but this is integrated with Western artistic styles and media. The original work by Ma ([Fig. 2, 1127–1279](#))²³ was painted in ink and pale colours on silk, whereas Zhang's work is oil on canvas. Zhang also remade some of the seals affixed to the original painting, which were written in seal script. Ma rendered water in thin, smooth and rippling lines. In contrast, Zhang's brushwork is rapid, broken and blurry. The clean water under golden winds and clear skies in the original has been depicted as polluted beyond recognition. Zhang's painting presents flowing water in dark and murky tones and the sky in purplish-blue hues to highlight its contaminated state. The inscription on the left-hand side reads:

the painting on the right is the first painting of Ma Yuan's *Water Album* entitled *Waves Weave Winds of Gold* [波蹙金风] and part of it has been lost. It was fortunate that he was born eight hundred years ago and left his *Water Album*,

of which twelve paintings are still remaining and which we deeply appreciate. However, is the water depicted in the album still there? (Author's translation)

On the right of the work is the title: *Water Album by Ma Yuan of the Song dynasty, twelve paintings in total, remade 780 years later*. Zhang signed his name to the left of the commentary.

According to the curator and art historian Luchia Meihua Lee, Zhang distanced himself from contemporary socio-political issues by referring to Chinese pictorial traditions in order to indirectly address environmental destruction.²⁴ However, the work represents the artist's direct response to a devastating ecological catastrophe. He does not camouflage pollution but instead reveals it in his direct depiction of the contaminated water. This painting was created while the concept of ecological civilisation was gaining traction—it had been proposed by the agricultural economist Qianji Ye in the late 1980s—and became prominent in political discourse following former President Hu Jintao's report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2007.²⁵ "Ecological civilisation" involves comprehensive, scientific and sustainable development.²⁶ In the Xi Jinping era, its significance was embraced by the CPC as a principle of environmental governance and was constitutionalised by the National People's Congress in 2018.²⁷ Instead of solving the fundamental problems of the environmental crisis, this notion takes an optimistic attitude towards future sustainability.²⁸ According to Xin Zhou, the construction of an ecological civilisation could be achieved through proactive ecological awareness which would lead to sufficient public motivation for participating in environmental protection.²⁹ Therefore, the concept of ecological civilisation necessarily involves the development of bottom-up and grassroots environmental movements. The following section explores how such movements use art in order to encourage action and participation from the wider public.

EVERYONE'S EAST LAKE: SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Art as a vehicle which provides social functions is not a new phenomenon in China. However, in the past decade, following criticisms that art largely caters to top-down audiences, intellectuals and art communities are increasingly transforming this practice and have created art movements that instead focus on community participation, in the form of activism that addresses social, political, and environmental problems brought about by commercialism and urban expansion.³⁰ Since the launch of nationwide urbanisation in the Fourth Session of the Ninth National People's Congress, held in March 2001, China's state-led and profit-driven socioeconomic development has contributed to the alleviation of poverty and generated high levels of employment, but it has simultaneously caused environmental degradation.³¹ The negative consequences of China's development are exemplified by

the reclamation project in the East Lake. The bottom-up desire to stimulate wider civic awareness of this social issue has shaped the socially engaged artistic practices of the environmental activists who initiated *Everyone's East Lake*, which protested against the government's plan to exploit natural resources.

Everyone's East Lake was held in the city of Wuhan in response to a reclamation project in March 2010.³² At that time, Shenzhen Overseas Chinese Town Company (OCT), a Chinese state-owned enterprise, intended to reclaim land from the lake and transform seventy-four acres of natural land on the north shore of East Lake into a Happy Valley theme park, with private apartments exclusively designed for wealthy people, and luxury hotels.³³ The public were banned from openly expressing their opinions about this development.³⁴ Therefore, in 2010, the architect Li Juchuan and the artist Li Yu, both of whom were based in Wuhan, initiated an art project to indirectly intervene in the urban transformation and protest against it. They launched a website that invited members of the public to participate in performances in the East Lake area on the condition that their works did not cause damage to the environment.³⁵ The art project was promoted on the Chinese social media website Douban and the microblogging website Weibo, in an attempt to encourage the widest possible public participation in the project.³⁶ Within two months, approximately sixty performance-based works had been submitted by a hundred people, ranging from students to professionals and artists.

Everyone's East Lake demonstrates a shift from the audience as passive recipients to an audience that is encouraged to be co-producers of the art project. Claire Bishop discusses the unhelpful binary of active and passive spectatorship that creates a one-directional and top-down mode of thinking.³⁷ Bishop refers to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*, in which Rancière points out that the polarity of an active contributor and a static witness shows inequality because it divides people into those with the capacity to know and act, and those who cannot.³⁸ He argues that instead of being passive spectators when at the theatre, audiences should be emancipated and become active participants in a collective audience performance, thereby creating equality and blurring the division between passivity and activity.³⁹ Similarly, the French literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes asserts that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" in his essay *The Death of the Author*.⁴⁰ Barthes stresses the importance of readers for the creation of meaning within a text and argues against imposing a single authorship on the text.⁴¹ As a socially engaged art project, *Everyone's East Lake* exemplifies how artists can create a social environment in which the audience actively produce works based on their own interpretations, recalling Barthes's rejection of singular authorship in favour of an empowered audience with its own voice.

The participants of *Everyone's East Lake* were required to provide relevant information about their works on the art project's website, before they were completed or with

updates of their progress during their implementation. This information consisted of the title of the work, the description of the implementation of the work, and the date and place that the work was staged. The locations of the works are marked with small red or blue balloons on Google Maps (Fig. 3, 2010, 2012 and 2014). When viewers click on a balloon, they are directed to a new webpage where further details of the work, such as its title, date, a brief description and participants' names, are displayed. The initiators chose to use Google Maps to display the project because it offers a labelling function. However, access to Google Maps was restricted in China after 2011, and it has been completely blocked since 2014, so the participants had to use virtual private networks in order to view and use the map.⁴² Under Xi's leadership, the state has reinforced authoritarian rule and intensified online censorship to deal with the growing use of the Internet and social media platforms by various grassroots communities to engage in environmental politics.⁴³ While constructive postmodernists assert the ecological rights of individuals and pursue an ecologically equal and just civilisation, Xi's tightening of socio-political control has created tension in China, between state rulership and individual ecological rights, as represented in *Everyone's East Lake*.⁴⁴

Wang Jingping, a photographer who lives in Guangzhou, photographed the scene at East Lake after the new development had been constructed, and created *Untitled* (Fig. 4, 2014). The first picture depicts a construction crane that is taller than the trees in the background, itself a pervasive scene across China due to expansive urbanisation. The second photo shows water contaminated with green algae due to the disturbed ecosystems in East Lake and the discharge of untreated construction waste into the Lake. The message written in red above the blocks of apartments in the distance reads "Would you be happy to live there?" This ironic criticism draws the viewer's attention to the consequences of uncontrolled human exploitation of nature and suggests the paradoxical results of modernisation and urbanisation. In the third image, Wang had picked up a small tile and thrown it into the Lake, but it quickly sank to the bottom of the Lake in the distance. He was concerned that attempts to protect the East Lake were equivalent to the small tile, a small action dwarfed by the scale of the problem. His photographic work straightforwardly exposes the reality of environmental destruction as a result of capitalistic growth which forms a dark shadow of the high-end skyscrapers. Despite the work being a static documentation of the polluted water, it is still a form of activism. As the documentary photographer and author Michelle Bogre points out, images produced by photographers who are driven to enact change, and who put themselves in dangerous situations to record problems are undertaking activist photography.⁴⁵ Wang uses the camera as a vehicle for social intervention. Rather than impose a single viewpoint, his photographs draw the attention of a broader audience to the severity of the pollution caused by commercial development and facilitates a groundswell of opinion which is needed in order for collaborative action to tackle the crisis to be undertaken.

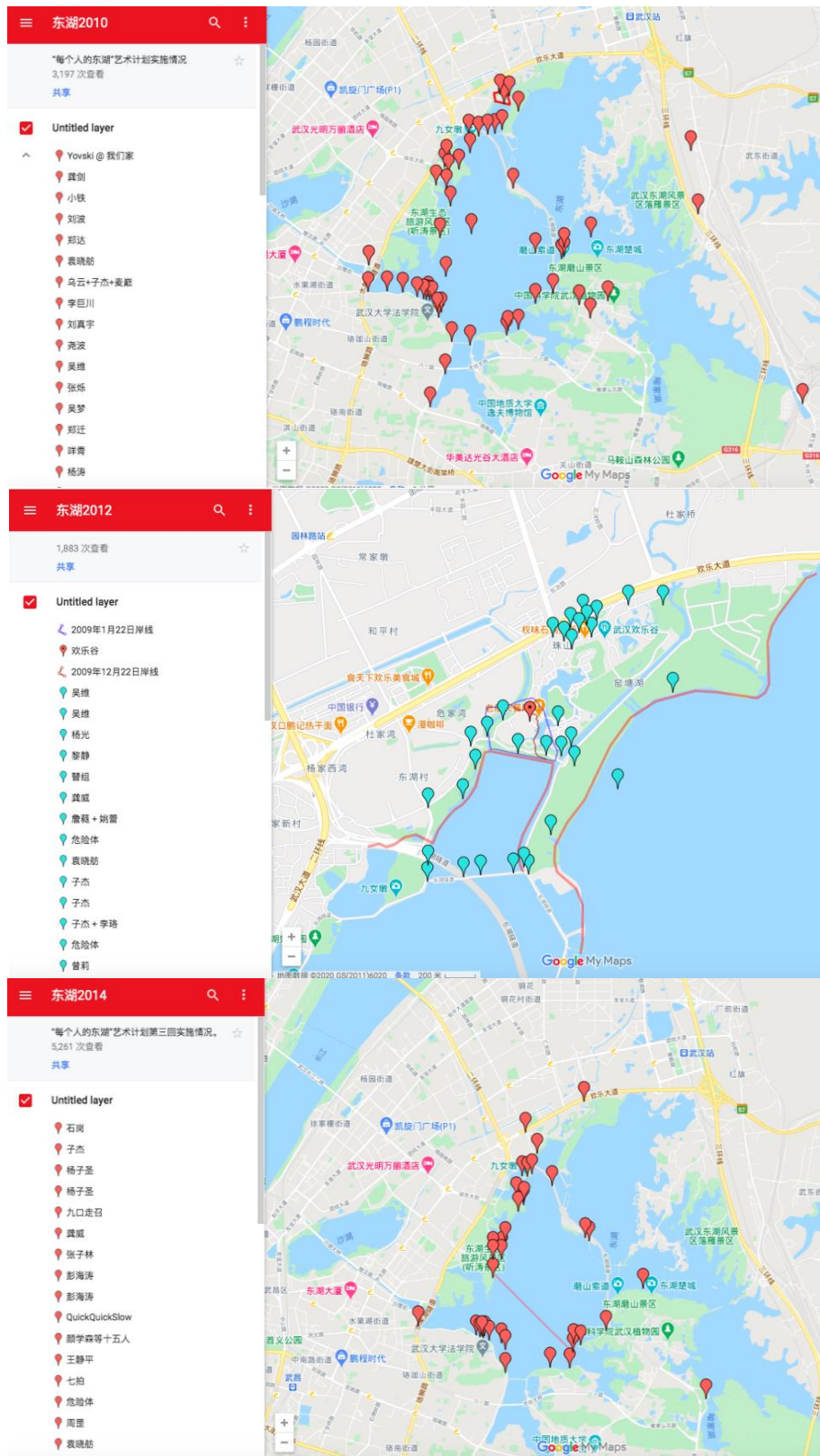


Figure 3. *Everyone's East Lake* (每个人的东湖), 2010, 2012 and 2014. Maps, Wuhan. *Everyone's East Lake*, <http://www.donghu2010.org/2012/>

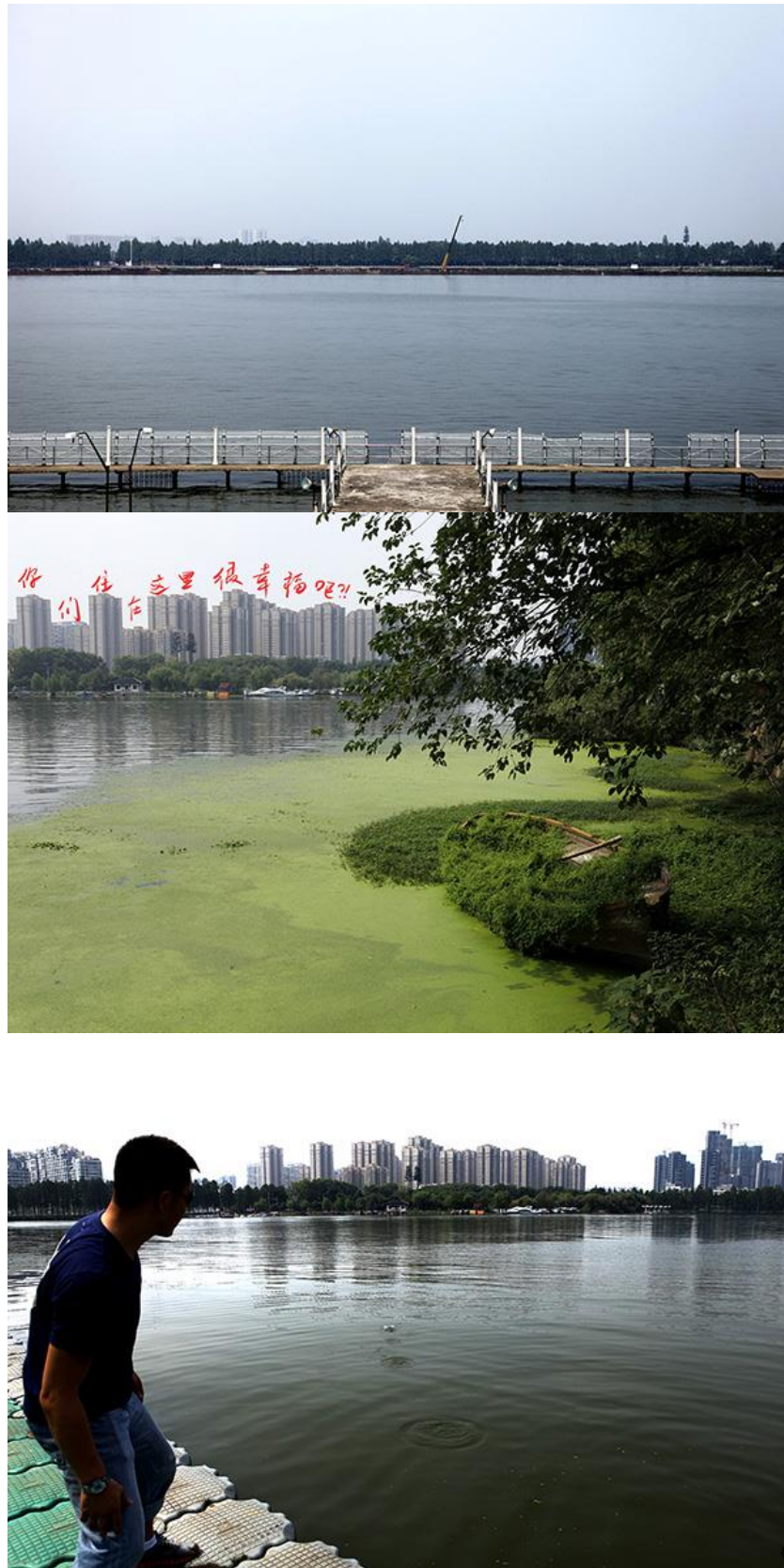


Figure 4. Wang Jingping, *Untitled*, 15 August 2014. Near Wuhan East Lake Ocean World. Courtesy of Wang Jingping

Although Wang's work is not a direct criticism of relentless urban expansion, he deployed sarcasm as a strategy to problematise the Chinese government's response to environmental problems. Before 2013, governmental policy measures for environmental protection were not comprehensive, but there was also an absence of strict implementation, and ineffective accountability mechanisms to tackle common environmental issues such as water pollution.⁴⁶ Local officials fabricated emissions data that artificially aligned with the state's policy goals for pollution control, but there was little improvement in water quality and pollution became even more severe.⁴⁷

Since Xi became president of China in 2013, the central state has made a commitment to environmental protection, and it has enacted policy targets and action plans for local regulators that are more specific and transparent than in previous eras.⁴⁸ Although this has led to temporary improvements in water quality, it remains unsustainable and regionally uneven.⁴⁹ For example, during the period of China's twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011–2015), the water quality of lakes and reservoirs improved significantly.⁵⁰ The proportion of major lakes and reservoirs with water "unfit for human contact" (Grade IV or worse) had dropped by nearly half from almost sixty per cent in 2011 to nearly thirty-one per cent by 2015.⁵¹ Although environmental protection has been a top priority for the government since 2015, progress has not been maintained and the percentage of lakes and reservoirs with significantly poor water quality rose to thirty-four per cent in 2016; the Songhua River in particular saw water quality worsen between 2015 and 2016.⁵² The action plan to control water pollution (水十条), announced in April 2015, proposed that the nation's water quality would be improved by 2020 to the extent that over seventy per cent of the water in seven major river basins (the Yangtze, Yellow, Pearl, Songhua, Huaihe, Haihe, and Liaohe rivers) would be safe for drinking, fishing, and swimming.⁵³ It also aimed to make sure that city rivers were no longer black and odorous by 2030 and to ensure that approximately ninety-five per cent of the centralised drinking water sources in cities would be safe for human consumption.⁵⁴ Whether these goals are achievable is now in doubt, as the number of black and odorous rivers identified by the action plan increased between 2016 and 2017, and the government's plan to tackle water pollution is behind schedule.⁵⁵

The environmental activists involved in *Everyone's East Lake* wanted to invite the wider public to participate in the protection of the water quality of East Lake. *Unable to Send a Blessing*, was a participatory artwork that was organised outside the entrance of the Happy Valley park on the Square (Fig. 5) on 19 May 2012 by Zeng Li, a student living in Wuhan. Zeng aimed to freely distribute sixty wish bottles to visitors to the theme park and she invited them to be photographed while holding the "Love East Lake" vision board she had made and a bottle. Zeng was allowed to distribute the bottles after three security guards agreed that it was a voluntary charitable act that appealed for environmental protection, with the condition that one of the security

guards was to watch the process.⁵⁶ While only hands holding the vision board and wish bottles were photographed, security guards kept interrupting and trying to take all bottles. After Zeng requested that the security guards take a picture, they left. When a female security manager was informed that the bottles were being distributed to help protect the water, she said, "I do not support selling things, but I support environmental protection".⁵⁷ However, the event was disrupted when Zeng was required to get approval from the marketing department to conduct public welfare activities.⁵⁸ After waiting for nearly half an hour, Zeng was asked to go to the security department instead. Eventually, the security department decided that although her event was not a business activity, it was not allowed. Zeng was told to contact Happy Valley by email to ask for permission to conduct a public welfare event.⁵⁹ When the event ended in the late afternoon, only ten wishing bottles had been distributed. The blessings that could not be given out and the remaining wishing papers were crushed together and placed in a tomb.⁶⁰

Zeng's experiences mirror those of other art activists at the site. The organisers and participants occasionally received threats from the real-estate developer and the local authorities. The developer had concealed their initial attempt to reclaim the land to build luxury hotels and later denied the consequences of the development on the environment, only advertising positive messages about their plans.⁶¹ Although the activists could not prevent the developer from constructing the Happy Valley park, they were still able to voice their concerns and objections to a certain extent. However, the authorities' disapproval and threats undermined their efficacy. In China's authoritarian political context, Zeng was powerless to resist the government-endorsed project. Nonetheless, her work demonstrates the potential art has to engage with social realities and issues in China.

The commercial transformation of East Lake did not lead the local villagers to resist the new development; instead, they focused on seeking compensation by negotiating with the local authorities and developers.⁶² Although some were persuaded to participate in the East Lake art project, they were hesitant about directly opposing the development and joining the artistic attempt to protect their land.⁶³ Once the area had been privatised by the project, the land no longer belonged to the local low-income community. Despite being deprived of their rights to use the lake, the villagers cared more about their economic interests such as compensation for the demolishing of their homes, with the result that they acquiesced to the local authority.⁶⁴ They did not seem to be as concerned about the damaging environmental consequences of the construction on East Lake. The reactions of villagers in this case were not unusual. Bryan Tilt, an environmental anthropologist, reveals that although they are aware of the impact of pollution on their health, rural communities in China, as exemplified in his research by the Futian township in southern Sichuan, accept the health risks because they are so financially dependent on local polluting factories for their livelihoods.⁶⁵

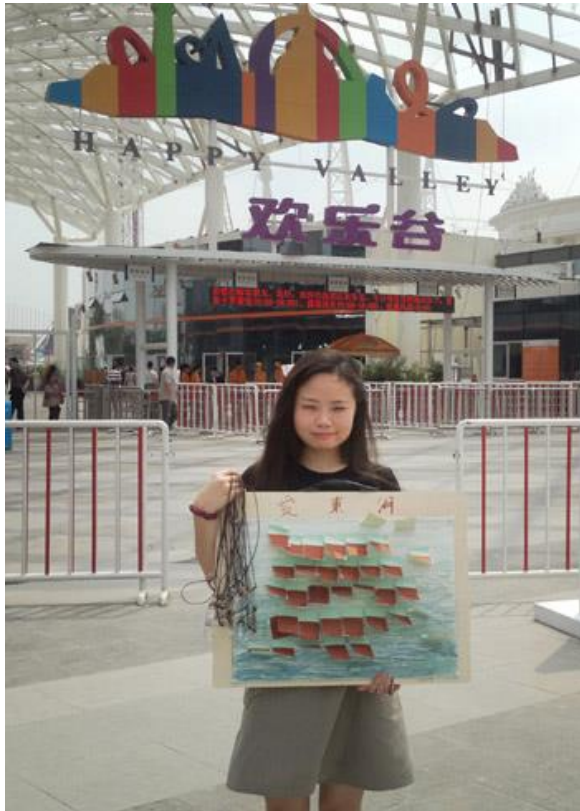


Figure 5. Zeng Li, *Unable to Send a Blessing* (送不出的祝福), 19 May 2012 Performance. Happy Valley Square, Wuhan. Courtesy of Zeng Li.

One reason that the Chinese government has had only limited success in dealing with water pollution is the social passivity of Chinese citizens. Some citizens, such as the East Lake villagers, do not prioritise environmental and sustainability issues as they do not perceive any immediate and direct impact on themselves. Those in wealthy urban environments are even more removed from the consequences of their own inaction upon the environment. As a result, the implementation of environmental regulations faces many obstacles including resistance from an unwilling public.

The multimedia artist Tan Tan, who currently lives and works in China and Belgium, has addressed the problem of awakening citizens to environmental issues in her art. This is most evident in a work entitled *Mirage* in which she created a poster depicting the last luxury apartments by East Lake and placed it at a bus stop in Wuhan to observe how local residents reacted to it (Fig. 6, 2010). Tan took photos of two plastic models of residential complexes around East Lake between July and August 2010 and designed a poster to advertise an imaginary real-estate project entitled *The Last Big House by East Lake* that would be completed in August 2100. By then, there would be no water in East Lake. Her poster explained that a developer would spend ten years demolishing the original East Lake site, transforming it into an artificial lake and constructing the only residential building with a lake view exclusively for the upper classes. After posting the advertisement at a bus station (Fig. 7, 2010), Tan filmed the reactions of local people who passed it; most residents ignored the poster or did not pay much attention to it, appearing unaware of the pollution being caused at East Lake by the reclamation project.



Figure 6. The poster of a fictitious estate development project, *The Last Big House by East Lake*. Tan Tan, *Mirage* (东湖豪宅), 2010, Wuhan. Courtesy of Tan Tan.

Tan's work has a social interventionist quality that exposes the severity of environmental problems that are not otherwise made visible to Chinese citizens. Such artworks recall the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud's relational invention of models of sociability. In his *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud discusses how artistic practice since the early 1990s has shifted from relations between human beings and invisible forces represented by a deity, to relations between humans and objects, and finally to the sphere of inter-human relations.⁶⁶ According to Bourriaud, "art is the place that produces a specific sociability".⁶⁷ Artworks in the 1990s set out to establish intersubjective encounters within the realm of human interactions and the contemporary social context.⁶⁸ These artworks address spectators as a collective social entity, with artists becoming facilitators of social change.⁶⁹ As the British conceptual and installation artist Jeremy Deller has put it, "I went from being an artist who makes things, to being an artist who makes things happen".⁷⁰ However, Tan's work also reveals the obstacles she faces when facilitating public interaction and participation. This in turn reflects the lack of interest for increased water protection measures among the wider public.

In another response to the lack of concern amongst local residents about the pollution in the East Lake, Sha Lina and Sun Jiangshu, both of whom were postgraduates and lived in Wuhan, installed ten lights and switched them on at the Meiyuan site by East Lake on the evening of 30 August 2014 (Fig. 8).⁷¹ By this time, the Happy Valley theme park and residential apartments had been built. Over the four years since construction had begun in 2010, residents had generally acquiesced to the development, or had forgotten about the land reclamation; all they saw was that a large-scale modern theme park had now opened. The aim of *Switching on the Lights Show* was to reinforce the resistance of environmental activists and reignite public attention to the water pollution caused by the construction project, despite the fact that the development could no longer be stopped.

Chen Jining, who has a doctorate in civil and environmental engineering and served as Minister for Environmental Protection from 2015 to 2017, has emphasised the importance of public motivation and engagement both in policy formulation, implementation processes and in investigations into water contamination.⁷² Although some local governments do disclose environmental information and allow the public to express their opinions on environmental regulations, there is generally an ineffective and unsatisfactory degree of public participation in public hearings on environmental plans.⁷³ It is notable that, in the case of *Everyone's East Lake*, the local government did not take the environmental activists' concerns seriously and focused primarily on economic development at the expense of the environment. Instead of promoting communication between the government and Chinese citizens, Xi has increasingly tightened socio-political control, which sometimes has led to conflicts between public opinion and government decision-making.⁷⁴ Such non-participatory policy processes have undermined the potential effectiveness of China's efforts to



Figure 7. The poster was hung at a bus station by the East Lake. Tan Tan, *Mirage* (最后的东湖豪庭), 2010. Courtesy of Tan Tan.



Figure 8. Sha Lina and Sun Jiangshu, *Switching on the Lights Show* (点灯), 30 August 2014 Performance, East Lake Meiyuan, Wuhan. Courtesy of Sha Lina and Sun Jiangshu.

tackle pollution, which in turn suggests weaknesses in China's authoritarian system.⁷⁵ As Benjamin Liebman and Curtis Milhaupt argue, China lacks "the institutional capacity to confront such challenges" as the global climate crisis and pollution-related health concerns.⁷⁶ The East Lake art project problematised Xi's authoritarian leadership and its tight state control over public participation, and it deployed public engagement as a means for individual expression.

Although it did not ultimately halt the urban transformation, *Everyone's East Lake* demonstrates how Chinese activists use art both for resistance and to facilitate public discourse about socio-political realities in China, a country where the monopoly of political power is difficult to challenge and where ordinary citizens are usually prohibited from expressing critical opinions. Rather than using direct confrontation, as is often seen in democratic Euro-American states, activists in China mainly use non-confrontational means to expose social and environmental problems to the wider community, especially in the years following the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.⁷⁷ Alternative expressions of indirect resistance have empowered individuals to cultivate environmental consciousness and social conscience among Chinese citizens.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

Both static works and socially engaged participatory art demonstrate the potential that grassroots responses have as oppositional tools to oppressive state power. They have an ability to adopt different approaches which lie outside traditional forms of protest, and from this position they have the scope to expose problems to wide social groups. Instead of passively accepting an issue, the activists considered here have transferred their social conscience into their artworks, to raise public awareness, stimulate debates and create the conditions for change. In order to avoid direct confrontation with the government, environmental activists employ alternative means such as the sarcasm that underlies the work of Wang Jingping. Although artists initiate bottom-up activism, the reality is that the public lacks sufficient interest, and the dominant powers can intervene in art activism, which creates further obstacles to the implementation of activist goals. The centralised Chinese regime which heavily constrains public participation in environmental governance processes, coupled with low incentivised public interest has led to a conflict of interest and concern, as exemplified by *Everyone's East Lake*, which further weakens China's prioritisation of environmental protections. The gap between the state's environmental targets and its actual outcomes in improving water quality in China today raises important issues with China's ecological civilisation approach. It further questions China's current ability to achieve the vision of an ecologically wise and participatory future, as proposed by constructive postmodernists, or whether there will be environmental

campaigns for public dissemination which might provide mass social awareness at the level needed for participatory change to become a reality.

¹ Berthold Kuhn, “Ecological Civilisation in China”, DOC Research Institute, 2019, accessed 20 September 2021,

<https://doc-research.org/2019/08/ecological-civilisation-china-berthold/>.

² Mette Halskov Hansen and Zhaohui Liu, “Air Pollution and Grassroots Echoes of “Ecological Civilization” in Rural China”, *The China Quarterly* 234 (2018): 324.

³ Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), ixx.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ Meiqin Wang, *Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China: Voices from Below* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 11–12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷ Shakeel Ahmad Ramay, *Eco-Civilization: The Chinese Vision of Prosperity* (Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2020), 8.

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