

# Cultural Evolution: Chinese Perspectives on Land, Art and Ecology

Vitamin Creative Space

Each of the following four dialogues are excerpted from instant messenger conversations that took place in late June or early July 2006. Translation by Fan Zhang, Han Yan and Hu Zhen.

Our narrative begins with a well-known painting, *Chairman Mao Surveys Guangdong Village* (1972) by Chen Yanning. 'The painting was inspired by a historical event on 30 April 1958 when Chairman Mao Tse-Tung came to Guangdong province to make his inspections. In the painting, it is a bright summer's day. The Great Leader – healthy and energetic – is walking speedily and vigorously along a ridge, surrounded by the peasants of the Pearl River Delta, children dashing around with excitement, and an atmosphere that suggests a tremendous surge of joy and happiness.' Following this excerpt from 'The Golden Land Reform – Pearl River Delta: Exaggerated Sociological Imagination', a lecture by Feng Yuan and Yang Xiaoyan given at Vitamin Creative Space in July 2004, the same landscape is described, now some 30 years after the painting was made: 'Nowadays the village of Tangxia has long been surrounded by the continual expansion of towns, and has become a lonely village that's today at the centre of a city. In the Pearl River Delta, the boarder between city and country is no longer clear. If you travel by highway to the areas such as Dongguan, Fushun and Foshan, you'll come across the countryside of yesterday that has faded away into the wild tendency for urbanisation.'

Land has always been an extremely important and sensitive issue for Chinese society, and dramatic transformations have gone on within varied social and historical contexts. Contemporary China is a kaleidoscope of many different kinds of changing landscapes: in both urban, social and personal life. Forces are functioning all at once and conflicting, shaping a creative reality which exceeds a singular artistic imagination. The city is acted on, as if a huge collective art project and urban spaces are temporary film sets for hosting the dramas of everyday life. The real, surreal and unreal are easily confused in today's living environments.

Based on these perspectives, we conceived this 'paper forum' to open up dialogue and explore how historical and social contexts, urban ideology and contemporary art practices construct an ecology of land and art in a Chinese context.

# Land and China's New National Image

Vitamin Creative Space interviews Feng Yuan

In the transition from the ancient times when land only belonged to kings and emperors to an age when the people became 'masters of history', with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the reform of land was actually a reform of society, and the reforming of landscape a reforming of people. Land reform was romanticised at the beginning of modern China, becoming a visual expression of a new nation and remaining at the core of sanctioned literature and artistic endeavours. This dialogue with the critic Feng Yuan explores the contradictory relationship between violence and aesthetics in the attempt to realise a revolutionary utopia.



**HF** Hu Fang

**FY** Feng Yuan

**HF** My impression is that political change in the understanding of land and resources is a vital issue in Chinese society. It's also something that you have studied deeply. What interests me most is how the Chinese artist and intellectual constructs a connection between the political issues of land reform – which we can talk about here – and the establishment of a new national image. Take Chen Yanning's well-known painting, for example.

**FY** That painting was created in the later period of the Cultural Revolution. The event it depicts in 1958 was during the period known as the Great Leap Forward, a movement Mao started for the purpose of materialising a Communist utopia. Immediately after the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949 and the redistribution of land was completed, Mao conducted new reform experiments – Collectivisation and the People's Commune – which ultimately led to the Great Leap Forward's disastrous fate. Land was the core of Mao's revolutionary doctrine: with a profound understanding of China's history, Mao had indeed grasped the crucial axis of China's problem. His famous allegation was that 'China's problem is the peasants' problem, and the peasants' problem is the land problem'. Mao's revolutionary framework, from start to finish, unfolded before this essentialist thinking.

**HF** It's interesting that the creation of this new image of China was synchronised with art and literature representing the land reforms. This is the process of reality being transformed to art, utopia being put into reality not only through force, but aesthetics.

**FY** Through political propaganda and of course artist-workers' 'make-up', land reform obtained a positive image. This is just one case of how powerful the entire revolutionary ideology could become – there are many more other examples, but land reform is paradigmatic.

**HF** Wang Shilong's photographs of that time make a deep impression – the grand spectacle of the construction of terraces. Perhaps we can regard them as Land art in the context of modern China?

**FY** Certainly, the revolution was to some extent indeed 'art' driven by politics. Such art, through its creator's charisma and power, could assemble thousands upon thousands of horses and soldiers with an effect that is incomparable to the scale of Western Land art or Performance art. On the other hand, however, it produced massive societal tragedy. This is a big difference. After all, when a society has become the experiment of the person in power – it's the worst fate.

**HF** What, in your opinion, is the relationship between reforming land, changing landscape and reconstructing people? Somehow, these processes are also occurring in the guise of so-called urbanisation. Has an ideology of 'changing the face of land' (大地换新颜) determined the speed and pattern of Chinese history?

**FY** If we look carefully we can see the difference. The reform by Mao, to 'change heaven and earth' as he said, comprehensively revealed his attitude towards nature and human beings. People were nothing but his bargaining chips used to fulfil his political ideals, with the land of course being these ideals' experimental domain. Today, urbanisation indicates that people are embracing a more advanced market economy despite the relatively old political system – which brings about contradiction. We must discern that everything is dominated by a political framework; China's urbanisation is a totally lopsided grand narrative of space. Nevertheless, I want to clarify a point about China's transformation since Mao's time. Changes have of course taken place in political structure and political strategy, but in essence politics is still the dominant factor. This is the crux of China's problem. Consider that whether we are talking about land in Mao's time or today, does not each context respond to their respective political strategies?



Wang Shilong, *Lin Town, Henan*, 1961, Courtesy: the artist / Guangdong Museum of Art

# (Il)legal Empires

Vitamin Creative Space interviews Zheng Guogu

Zheng Guogu is regarded as something of a legend in contemporary Chinese art. Not only has he created unique objects, he has also initiated a sustainable environment for the development of contemporary art. In 2004, he bought about two hectares of land in the outskirts of the city of Yangjiang in southwest Guangdong province and started Empire Time, a project based on the notion of a conceptual garden, and he is devoting his life to its development.

**HF** Hu Fang  
**ZG** Zheng Guogu

**HF** What's the relationship between the present land ownership situation in China and *Empire Time*? Without owning land you would never be able to create the project...

**ZG** I bought land from a peasant, which as you know is illegal in China. So the *Empire* is illegal at the moment... I will somehow have to make it legal! This is the object of my project – that by making use of public relations it can become legal.

**HF** Public relations with who, the government?

**ZG** *Empire* is a time that will ultimately disappear. Through stamps and signatures it is being transformed into law. It will undoubtedly exist through the communications I have had with various public departments in government, the Bureau of Land Resources and the Department of Urban Planning and Design.

**HF** Doesn't all land have to go through this process to a degree before it is able to be established?

**ZG** Absolutely. Unless you have good connections it's impossible to get a licence to develop land.

**HF** No public relations, no empire.

**ZG** Unless you are going to plant vegetables on a barren mountainside or a trackless plain. Once you make architecture, problems arise. *Empire* is an ideal, but in reality everything depends on good public relations.

**HF** We might see the birth of a new kind of landscape with *Empire Time* – we could call it 'the individual landscape' – that until now there has been very little space for in China's policy. It's very interesting that after breaking all the rules and regulations, you are still going to legalise your *Empire*.



**ZG** I want to become a peasant, or become a new intellectual going 'up to the mountain, down to the village'. [Mao's policy, begun in 1968, of ordering some 17 million privileged students from the cities into the remote countryside to learn from workers and farmers]

**HF** I remember that 'Empire Time' is the name of a computer game.

**ZG** There is no barbecue in the computer game, yet you can find one in my real *Empire*!

# Parasitically Green

Vitamin Creative Space interviews Chu Yun

In the new industrial complex created by the automotive electronics company Siemens VDO in Huizhou, pairs of trees stand side by side throughout the office accommodation and factory areas. The work is simply called *Love* (2005–06) and was created by Chu Yun for the Siemens Arts Program 'What Are They Doing Here?' as a resource that contrasts with the mechanised production line. He collaborated with the garden designer of the complex, making his work function like a parasite within the existing greening of the factory environment. This process of the work's realisation and its final presentation are intentionally inconspicuous – the project grows with and infiltrates people's everyday life and work.



**HF** Hu Fang

**CY** Chu Yun

**HF** A very interesting aspect to your work *Love* is that objectively you created so-called public artwork via a company's commissioning programme, yet the starting point of your work is completely personal.

**CY** Land has belonged in the political field for a long time and my interests are the rules for living on this land, ie the rules of competitiveness and the assumption that enterprise is the only way of living. Planting trees is compensation for humans, and this is pretentious – it cannot truly rebuild the relationship between man and environment.

**HF** So you transform the company's environment in a rather invisible way...

**CY** Possession is ideological, and I didn't want to directly use physical materials such as earth as my material. And supposing the pairs of trees had been planted in an open field, the work would have lost its meaning.

**HF** It could have had another meaning but would have lost the social dimension it is intended to have?

**CY** Maybe, but this is, after all, not what I was looking at.

**HF** We see from this work how a slight concept can intervene with a seemingly huge system, ie the mechanics of a large company.

**CY** We are too trusting of rationality and systems that are inherently tedious and full of problems.

**HF** Today we often see artists working with circumstances that are full of paradox and compromise – the degrees of publicness or ownership in so-called public art is a good example. On what level do you think the artist can intervene in such realities?

**CY** Art still inhabits the problems of globalisation: the issues encountered in other areas also exist in art. In my opinion, the image plays the same role in the domain of art as capital does in the economic and political domain.

# Bird's Eye-deology

Vitamin Creative Space interviews Jiang Jun

Under the banner of urbanisation, the land developments of the mid-1990s in China became the demesne of another ideological conflict, once more romanticised as a radical revolution. Land again become inevitably linked with visual expression, yet now it was an urban ideal that was at stake rather than a rural one. This dialogue with Jiang Yun, editor-in-chief of the Shanghai-based magazine *Urban China*, starts by considering who is driving the vision of land in today's rapidly expanding cities.

**HF** Hu Fang

**JJ** Jiang Jun

**HF** Do you think that city planners in China are acting more like artists – utopian ideas are put into practice, risks taken, visible and invisible forces are encountered...

**JJ** Not really. City planners are just a tool, although the tool is used to draw grand and conspicuous forms and lifeless statistics. But in terms of art, it's the governments and developers who are more fanciful. I am sending you a picture of The World islands which are being constructed off Dubai City in the Persian Gulf. This project and the Window of the World theme park in Shenzhen have similarities – both these phenomena might lead us to suspect that the image of today's city is more direct, more external, and more suited to media expression than ever before. Yet The World islands – being made in the shape of a global map – are an even more romanticised idea than the Window of the World.

**HF** And we also have to be high up, flying, in order to see the panorama of a city's complete architectural plan. In a sense, the city becomes a vast article of consumption that needs to be easily absorbed and comprehended by mobile global capital. So design in order to promote has become a significant strategy, alongside whoever has the power to create a city image, and whoever has the power to create a landscape.

**JJ** Land and economy run parallel to each other in China. The government takes the lead, the developer steps in, the designer serves, and people look on. In a panorama, we can see at least three types of landscape: grand narratives by the government, eg highways, junctions and plazas; local operations by developers, eg masses and masses of thriving buildings or idyllic paradise-like communities; as well as 'inherited' landscape transformed by the people themselves, eg lots occupied by many households, shanty towns or villages in the city.



**HF** From the rural land reform of the past, to the current reformation in the cities, there is a continuous radical re-imagination.

**JJ** Government landscapes are often very recognisable, due to their huge scale, conciseness and symmetrical structure. But such symmetry cannot conceal the chaos of an entire city, especially if you see it from the air. The grid is made futile, as it is overwhelmed by other disorderly textures.

**HF** Disorder within extremely huge structures has always been a characteristic of Chinese society, one that's reflected in cities, spaces and landscapes...

**JJ** To comprehend land, one must have the control of the sky. Those who can see the blueprints, can afford to go up the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai, take a helicopter flight or climb skyscrapers like King Kong, and have the privilege to read the landscape. With Google Earth we have another imaginable perspective. Any internet user is able to download the programme for free and explore satellite imagery of the earth from any point above the globe. So perhaps more and more governments and developers will make grander and grander landscapes to be seen from the air, as in Dubai.

**HF** The bird's-eye view is becoming an ideology? Bird's eyedecology?

**JJ** Yes, and then we are free! :-)