Keep on dreaming  
*Art in a changing Beijing*

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*Published in:*
IIAS Newsletter

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

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President Xi Jinping’s ‘China Dream’, promising prosperity and progress, is by and large mapped onto the city. In the case of Beijing, this dream can primarily be found within the fifth ring road, with its cultural heritage sites and fancy buildings designed by ‘starchitects’. But what about the people, most of whom migrant workers, living beyond this significant demarcation? Are they allowed to take part in the China Dream too?

How does art intervene? Indeed, China’s global rise is epitomized by the changing central cityscape of Beijing. Xi Jinping’s China Dream finds its materialization in shiny skyscrapers, speedy ring roads, fancy buildings designed by starchitects, and green parks. This dream can help to contest naturalness and obviousness. 

Fig. 1 (above): Renaissance-style marble statue of a nude female stood incongruously next to a ‘village’ basement that was inhabited by migrant workers.

We will show how Ma Lijiao is doing something more: he does not render the people silent, nor does he attempt to transcribe concerns in art work. Instead, his artwork consists of an enactment of their concerns in which the artist becomes respectively a migrant worker, a journalist and a student.

Becoming a migrant worker, journalist and student

Ma Lijiao participated in 5+1 in November 2014 for 10 days in the Xiaojiahe East Village (Xiaojiahe dong cun), located in North-West Beijing. In his project, Ma Lijiao morphed into a migrant worker, to give them a face, a life and aspirations, by participating in their social media groups. In Ma’s words in an interview with us: “social media platforms can gather people from different locations of the real society to internet and make their voices heard together. There are anonymous social apps like Youmi which allows users to hide themselves behind their words. I think this (way of expression) is more real.” For example, he joined Wechat groups of the village such as the ‘Xiaojiahe Community Youth Group’ on which Chen Yan, a young lady, said: “I’ve enrolled in a vocational school (. . .) I have some regrets.” Two other members of this Wechat group encouraged her to re-write the college entrance examination the next year in order to get into a college. It turned out that Chen Yan was not a fresh graduate from high school – she had worked for a year already. The screenshot of this conversation was part of the exhibition. It shows the mundane nature of their conversations on social media, it brings to light the aspirations of the migrant workers, their hopes of moving upwards in the social hierarchy – a fresh graduate from high school – she had worked for a year already. The screenshot of this conversation was part of the exhibition. It shows the mundane nature of their conversations on social media, it brings to light the aspirations of the migrant workers, their hopes of moving upwards in the social hierarchy – it creates a convivial online space. For the 5+1 Project exhibition in summer 2015, Ma printed out all the screenshots of chats for the audience to read. In this part of the work, the artist, acting as a migrant worker, saw things and heard voices that would otherwise not be visible or audible to him. Migrant workers emerge as individuals with feelings, and as people with critical voices and ambitions.
The land became ungoverned, and contractors now rented sentence of Chen Xitong, and the lack of proper certification of Beijing mayor Chen Xitong who was later jailed on charges in the creation of zombie buildings and zombie cities. These buildings are symbolic of the frictions of China’s alleged classes (bieshu).

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After his initial visit in November 2014, Ma returned to the village in the early summer of 2015, this time as a “journalist” who filmed interviews with the residents. He encountered land renters who complained about a planned demolition, which was scheduled to happen soon. This demolition would tear down the illegal houses on the site, and the occupants, lacking any proper legal land use documentation, would not be compensated for their loss. In the film, a female land renter who is a cook explained to the contractor: “We have shown already, but the work strikes us as significant in two aspects. First, in the ways the artist enact different roles to allow migrant workers to participate, to take control of their own urban village to perform their own aspirations and frustrations. They are not denied their agency, they are more than just props in the work of an artist. Second, the work is deeply embedded in its specific site; it is a case of what Minna Valjakka calls ‘site-responsive artwork’. The work unfolds itself in a complex intersection between the site, its social relations and the representations of both. But are the villagers really more than just props? While the redaction of this poem may stimulate critical questions about urban progress in China, there are also questions left unanswered. The work is primarily exhibited in art spaces, which are usually sanitized spaces in Beijing, quite removed from the everyday lives of most people. What impact can such a work have? Also, by acting in different roles, and not revealing himself to be the artist, ethical questions are raised: who is using whom in this work? And what do the migrant workers gain in the end? Does not the artist benefit the most from their work?5

While the work challenges an uncritical celebration of urban progress in China, a position that is shared with many artworks in China, these ethical questions about the involvement of migrant workers, and other communities in works of participatory art, remain unanswered. Let us as a way of a more hopeful closure return to MC Hotdog. He sings “Regardless of anything, I just want to drive on the 5th ring”. The artists of the 5+1+6 project may respond with “please, look further than the fifth ring road, drive outside, take a detour, walk around, and experience a Beijing that may shatter the China Dream, but that may also allow for other dreams, other futures”.

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This project has been supported by a consolidator grant from the European Research Council (ERC-2013-CoG 616828-ChinaCreative). We would like to thank Ma Lijiao for sharing his work with us.

References

Fig. 2 (below): Steel bars of the unfinished village. Images courtesy of Ma Lijiao.