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Non-oppositional criticalities of socially engaged art in urbanising China
Deng, L.

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Be Water, My Friend

Non-Oppositional Criticalities of Socially Engaged Art in Urbanising China

Loenie Liwen Deng
“Be Water, My Friend”: Non-Oppositional Criticalities of Socially engaged art in Urbanising China

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Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

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Introduction

In May 2018 I returned to Guangzhou, my home city, to visit my family and friends. Some local creatives invited me to join them in celebrating the first anniversary of an autonomous youth space named Seong Jeong Toi (hereafter SJT) on 13 May. At SJT young people of different backgrounds can organise their own practices. It is located on the ground floor of a residential building not far from the Guangzhou Fine Art Academy’s old campus. I sat under a banyan tree on the street outside SJT in downtown Guangzhou. Having ordered a drink and bowl of seafood porridge from Boring Store, I chatted with friends. I had missed a walking tour led by Folded Room in a nearby urban village as well as the “Sweet Enough” workshop that concerned Labour Day and Mother’s Day. Afterwards I went through the half-closed shutter door and watched a few short videos made by emerging artists in Guangzhou.

Before I left, I bought a copy of Kojin Karatani’s *New Associationist Movement Theory* (NAM) in Chinese translation. Published by Fuben Books, an independent publishing institute that focuses on contemporary Chinese language, literature, and the arts, the book introduces and translates relevant social theories in the form of a playful yet practical anarchist guidebook.

SJT is run by “shareholders”: young people with diverse backgrounds who experiment with ways of organising their creative projects. They are engaged in a variety of activities, including publishing, selling beer, tattooing, and making

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1 The NAM is an association of individuals who have taken up the task of organising effective non-violent actions against capitalism and the state. Founded in Japan by Kojin Karatani in 2000, the NAM puts forward a simple theoretical schema for critiquing capitalism, nationalism, and the state, as well as a practical approach to activism in several fields. Currently, the NAM has about six hundred members. Members belong to variety of different age groups and come from all over Japan and beyond. The NAM has twelve regional sections, including one for members overseas. Each member belongs to at least three sections, which are allotted to their social category, region, and main interest. These latter include agriculture, architecture, art, computer, cooperative, education, environment, gender and sexuality, labor, law, LETS, minority, third-world, theory, welfare, among others. For an introduction to NAM, see Ohji (2020).
accessible art. Together, the stakeholders’ aim is to coexist and collaborate with others in a democratic and decentralised way. To that end, they have linked up with a broad network of creative practitioners and activists in Asia, all of whom are interested in alternative ways of living and practising.

The kinds of creative practice undertaken at SJT differ markedly from art that one would expect to find in a conventional museum. Nevertheless, its work forms part of a burgeoning body of socially engaged art that responds to the concerns that have arisen in the course of China’s ongoing urbanisation. This dissertation focuses on this emerging field of arts practice. The non-oppositional approach adopted in this field departs from the art made by figures such as Ai Weiwei, who made his name criticising the Chinese authorities and calling out their violations of human rights. (I am thinking here especially of the corruption that led to school children dying in the Sichuan Earthquake, but other instances of misconduct too). Ai’s work does not enlist art in the service of protest. Instead, as Osnos has argued, it functions by “enlisting the apparatus of authoritarianism into his art” (2010, 54). By this, Osnos means that Ai engaged with the authoritarian regime, drawing its repressive practices into his artworks in different ways, such as filming his interrogation at the hands of police officers. The oppositional critique mounted in Ai’s works was presented to the global art world as the hallmark of

2 These “shareholders” include a punk tattooist; a young man calling himself 37 (because his preferred authors all died at that age) who sells draft beer at SJT; a fashion designer who, having tired of the fashion industry, opened a “clothes clinic” at SJT to “diagnose and cure” unwanted clothes; Bến Guăng Dâ Hùa Lâng, who runs a web shop and online gallery that rebels against the established commercial art system by selling artworks at affordable prices; and a group called the “Materials and Engineering Group”, which is comprised largely of artists. This group designed and renovated SJT’s space. What is more, they work as chefs at dinner events. The SJT was opened on their initiative, as was the TST Diving Platform, which supports anyone who has not received a professional art education in making contemporary art. The group also set up Moonshine Screening, which shows independent and art films, and Folding Room/Flight Club, a collaborative group that meet to undertake a variety of activities, including reading texts on the Deleuzian concepts of the rhizome and lines of flight in this time-based Folding Room, Boring Store that sells interesting small toys, snacks, and drinks that look appealing to young people and attract them to enter the space.

3 For Ai’s website, see Ai 2020.
criticality in Chinese socially engaged art (Sorace 2014; Miller 2016). But does criticality equate with opposition? This dissertation explores this question.

SJT is composed of diverse participants, who engage with people and spaces in the surrounding area by turning open spaces into public spaces for gathering and deliberation. Its artistic practices are process-based and autodidactic. The group organises itself according to democratic principles and it does not rely solely on art institutions. Although it was initiated by Huangbian Station (also known as Huangbian Station Contemporary Art Research Centre), an auxiliary educational institute of the Guangdong Times Museum this has not stopped SJT being critical to these institutions. As Sruti Bala has argued, “participatory practices, particularly in poorer countries and in precarious socio-political environments, do not articulate institutional critiques in terms of anti-institutionality” (2018, 36). SJT is one of the initiatives to have emerged in China in recent years in which creative practitioners organise themselves collaboratively so as to explore possibilities for cultural and political practice that transcend the paradigm of institutionalism. These practitioners work strategically with institutions to realise their projects’ potential.

Between 2015 and 2017 I undertook fieldwork in China, which I have since updated to account for developments up until 2019. In investigating socially engaged art practices that respond to urban issues, I found that they were often involved in strategic collaborations with institutions. Although most of the practitioners I have studied have exhibited in art institutions, the criticality of their work does not reside in a form of anti-institutionalism or even antagonism taken more broadly. However, at artist talks held at exhibitions and the question and answer sessions held after film screenings, I have heard some western audience members ask variations on the following question: “why your work isn’t critical?” In consuming contemporary Chinese art and film, they could see no easily identifiable oppositional critique of either China’s authoritarian regime or the social problems that afflict the country.
Some academic discussions of criticality in Chinese contemporary art either hint at or eschew oppositional criticism of the oppressive regime or injustice more generally. According to Zheng Bo,

in an authoritarian society, criticism of the state does not need to be explicit. Any statement different from the official version, any focus of attention beyond the official domain, is understood as an expression of criticism of the state, by both the state and anyone familiar with the operation of authoritarianism. (2012, 127)

This passage suggests that in authoritarian contexts criticality is often implicit. That said, in a close reading of selected artworks, Robin Peckham claims that Chinese contemporary art puts forward a discourse of criticality that is not political. For Peckham, politics concerns particular social and political mechanisms enacted by a particular government, although he admits that differentiating criticality and politics in this way is questionable (2012, 255-254). Does this discourse of criticality in Chinese contemporary art turn away from critiquing power, as Peckham suggests? I explain this debate in detail in chapter 1.

What is the relationship between criticality in Chinese contemporary art (especially socially engaged art) and oppressive powers? If the practices that embody criticality do not oppose the authorities directly, is it the case that they have retreated entirely from an oppositional stance? These questions suggest a need to interrogate notions of artistic criticality. In this study, I undertake that task by way of an investigation of socially engaged art practices that go beyond the paradigm of opposition. In the next subsection I put forward my research question and explain why this academic inquiry into the criticality embodied in Chinese art today is so urgent.
Research question

I chose to engage with the concept of criticality in 2015, when I had only recently begun this research. In part this was because my project is part of a bigger research project named ChinaCreative.\textsuperscript{4} Led by Jeroen de Kloet, ChinaCreative investigates the forms of creativity, governmentality, and criticality on shown in contemporary creative practices in China. In the project proposal, de Kloet writes that “criticality can be directed to national governmental structures, but also to the globalised notion of creativity or creative industries. It can even be directed against the demand to be political and critical, a demand that is often imposed upon Chinese artists” (2014, 2). In chapter 1, I discuss the growing body of scholarship that addresses socially engaged art in China, and art and urbanity in China.\textsuperscript{5} Despite this burgeoning literature, there is as-yet insufficient work on socially engaged art concerned with urbanisation in China.\textsuperscript{6}

Therefore, this research explores some recent socially engaged art practices that respond to such issues of urbanisation. I encountered these practices during my fieldwork in multiple locations in China. Through my analyses, I mean to shed light on discussions at the intersection of critical Chinese contemporary art, criticality in/and art, art and urbanisation, and socially engaged art. To this end I address the following research question:

What are the non-oppositional forms of criticality adopted and embodied by socially engaged art practices in urban China? How do these practices respond to urban issues in China?

\textsuperscript{4} For the project’s website, see ChinaCreative
One might come away from some discussions of Chinese contemporary art with the impression that the field brims with confrontational, indeed defiant practices that challenge the Chinese authorities. This spirit of confrontation is exemplified by Ai Weiwei’s work. Think, for example, of Ai’s series of works that concern his secret detention by the Chinese police.\(^7\) Or of He Yunchang’s One-meter Democracy (2010), a shocking and painful performance that mocked Chinese democracy. In this work, he conducted a pseudo-democratic vote. He invited twenty-five friends to cast ballots on whether his body should be cut open. That was to be one meter long and have a depth of between half a centimetre and a full centimetre. He navigated the voting process so as to yield an affirmative result. After the poll, he was cut open without anaesthesia (Wang 2014, 23).

These two examples are both oppositional in that they criticise the oppressive regime by either dramatising and aesthetically transforming political suppression or embodying the pain of living in the absence of democracy. As de Kloet has observed, though, the global art world’s demand that artists be critical can function as a straight jacket for Chinese art (2010). In the main, the global media and international art world still focus on the oppositional voices, gestures, and interventions in Chinese art, on the ways in which artists oppose the authoritarian regime. This neglect critical practices that cannot be easily identifiable as opposition.

This study departs from this dominant grasp of Chinese art. Art in China, I argue, can be critical without being oppositional. Critical art needs neither take a stance that is openly against the authorities, nor performs or embodies dissensus. What strategies do socially engaged art practices employ in urbanising China? What forms of non-oppositional criticality do these practices embody? My study reviews and situates a wide range of Chinese-language sources about criticality and socially engaged art in China, which I put in conversation with the English-language

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\(^7\) Ai is widely seen as an outspoken critic of the government. He was detained in 2011 amid what human rights campaigners have described as the harshest crackdown on activists and dissidents in over a decade (Branigan and Watts 2011).
scholarship on critical Chinese art. In emphasising the intersection between criticality and social engagement, I enrich the discourse on artistic criticality both in and beyond China.

As for terminology, the provisional definition of socially engaged art adopted in this research is as follows. Socially engaged art names artistic practices that are called upon to act upon certain matters of concern through art and other forms of practice. They engage with people in their social contexts in which various social, political, and economic forces are at play. These practices do not necessarily resemble the art objects that are widely displayed in museums. Still, they employ various methodologies derived from contemporary art, popular culture, theatre, happenings, social research, and social and political activism. What is more, they draw on media strategies and tactics, guerrilla practices, collaborative and cooperative approaches, long-term space making, and community cultivation. This echoes what Nato Thompson describes as contemporary art’s strategic turn towards relational art in the 1990s. Through this turn, socially engaged art became more local, durational, and community-based (2012, 31). Relational aesthetics is a theory and a form of art that stresses human relationships and their social contexts. A famous example is Rirkrit Tiravanija cooking pad thai in museums and galleries (Bourriaud 1998). However, unlike the in West, socially engaged art practices enjoy little institutional and infrastructural support in China.8

Admittedly there are a few curators who try to use institutional resources to facilitate this kind of projects. However, their affiliation with institutions tend to be short-lived. Art organisations tend to avoid projects that are socially or politically sensitive, for they might endanger a whole exhibition or prompt the authorities to put the institution’s name down on a list for close inspection. Consider a socially and politically provocative work by the artist Liu Weiwei, who invited people in Wukan

8 As Tania Bruguera’s commission from the Tate Modern indicates, socially engaged art is gaining institutional support in the West (see Tate Modern 2019).
Village, Guangdong, to bet on horse racing in Hong Kong. This caused the exhibition in Guangdong Times Museum to be shut down (UnitedMotion 2016). A member of staff told me that every new show underwent tougher censorship for more than a year afterwards.

Socially engaged art practices often have to avoid censorship and surveillance. Their durations are heavily influenced by the political system under which they operate. Projects might be shut down, for instance, if an intolerant governor comes to power in a sub-district office or village government, or the central government orders controls over the arts and culture to be tightened so as to maintain “stability”. As a case in point, consider Bishan Project (2011-2016). This anarchist rural reconstruction project, which took place in the village of Bishan (Anhui Province), was initiated by an editor, artist, and filmmaker named Ou Ning and a curator named Zuo Jing. In 2012 the second Bishan Harvestival was to be held in the village. It was to be a festival celebrating the agricultural harvest, with (socially engaged) art, music, poetry, and discussion. Before the celebrations could go ahead, however, the event “was mysteriously cancelled by government officials with 12 hours’ notice” (Wainwright 2014). Bishan Project discontinued the harvest festival, and started to focus on dialogue and collaboration with the villagers. Henceforth, it would organise reading groups, small exhibitions, researcher-in-residence programmes, concerts, magazines, local handicrafts traditions, a community supported agriculture project, and many other kinds of activities (Corlin 2020). In this way, the basis of the Bishan Commune shifted “from an idea of an anarchist utopian endeavour focused on art and cultural issues to an incorporation of

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9 In the coastal village of Wukan in Guangdong, which has a population of around 10,000, people revolted against the government’s confiscation of farmland and communal land without proper compensation in September 2011. Despite being suppressed by riot police, the movement lasted until December of that year. The authorities laid siege to Wukan. Still, the villagers persisted until they secured promises that they would receive fair and just treatment (see Patience 2011). In 2016, Wukan’s elected chief Lin Zuluan was arrested having written a letter complaining about the corruption underlying the land seizures. He later confessed to taking bribes on state television. Again this sparked protest in Wukan, where it was seen as a forced confession (BBC News 2016).
economic concerns into the Bishan Project scheme” (ibid.). Despite this concession, it was forced to close in February 2016. Corlin suggests that the local authorities might have deemed the project unprofitable, insufficiently able to redistribute tourist revenues among the village at large, or crossed a political line by introducing anarchism and consensus democracy (ibid.). The actual reasons behind the project’s closure are still unknown; officials have never been transparent about the line or lines that the project had crossed. Socially engaged art projects, then, are often rather precarious in that they need to navigate local political landscapes and negotiate unclear red lines. These conditions necessitate non-oppositional forms of criticality.

In terms of discipline, this research is situated in cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field that features a broad repertoire of tools for critical analysis. Often these tools derive other fields, such as philosophy, sociology, semiotics, political theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, literary theory, affect theory, and media studies. On Stuart Hall’s presentation, cultural studies focuses on the conjuncture between myriad cultural meanings and values on the one hand, and historical contexts, social classes, and lived traditions and practices on the other (1980, 55-56). For Hall, cultural studies operates in the tension between theory and politics. As he himself puts it:

I come back to theory and politics, the politics of theory. Not theory as the will to truth, but theory as a set of contested, localised, conjunctural knowledges, which have to be debated in a dialogical way. But also as a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect. Finally, a practice which understands the need for intellectual modesty. (1992, 86).

My thinking in conducting this research has been influenced by this vision of cultural studies as a practice employing “contested, localised, conjunctural” theories to
make a difference in the world. My study is a modest effort to mobilise such theories to shed some light on how socially engaged art can be critical in the context of authoritarian regimes such as China’s. I hope that my research would be useful for thinkers and cultural practitioners who want to think and act beyond the oppositional paradigm, as well as those who face restrictions on their practice, as in China.

Lawrence Grossberg envisions cultural studies as entailing conjunctural analysis: a radically contingent and contextual study of the articulations of lived, discursive, and material contexts (2010). “Conjuncturalism”, he writes, “is a description of change, articulation, and contradiction; it describes a mobile multiplicity, the unity of which is always temporary and fractured” (2010, 41). Following Hall and Grossberg, I consider that it is important to analyse artworks – especially socially engaged art practice – conjuncturally. Accordingly, I attend to the ways in which they are embedded and enmeshed in particular contexts, and the mobile multiplicities that they both generation and emerge from.

There are precedent academic works that have explored contemporary art in China through the lens of cultural studies. These include writings by Zheng Bo, such as his PhD dissertation The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects (2012), and Wang Meiqin, including his book Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China (2019). Like Zheng in his dissertation, I also enrol various analytical tools from cultural studies as a means of elaborating on the different aspects of my concepts and investigating selected artistic practices. I also follow Zheng and Wang in theorising diverse socially engaged art practices and Wang’s focus on fieldwork-based research. Accordingly, my research extrapolates concepts from socially engaged art practices that I have observed in my fieldwork. Yet my study takes an even more embedded and embodied approach than Wang’s. Indeed, I have adopted a method often used in cultural anthropology named participatory action research, which involves taking an active role in realising socially engaged art projects. In using this method, I have taken on the perspective of an
entangled practitioner/researcher who wants to make a little difference through action as well as academic study.

In the following sections of this introduction, I first explain why urbanisation in China has come up an urgent social issue among artists. I explain two major problematics arising from urbanisation. First is the issue of migrant workers from rural areas, who work in cities but are not treated equally. Second is the way in which urban villages have been engulfed as cities have expanded. They now provide cheap housing for the growing population, which consists mainly of migrant workers. Against this backdrop, socio-economic-cultural inequalities between urbanites and migrant workers have come to the fore. I then introduce the ways in which socially engaged art projects are tackling urban issues by describing a few projects that preceded my fieldwork and have received little academic attention (but see Zheng 2012 and Wang 2019). Next I introduce my conceptualisation of non-oppositional criticality. To that end, I present four different aspects of the term, alongside a brief introduction of the chapters and methodologies that correspond to it.

During my research and fieldwork, I have observed that in China socially engaged art practices exhibit various modes of criticality. At times they seek to reconfigure open urban spaces such that they become public civic spaces. I term this reconfigurative criticality. At others they try to connect people (at local and translocal levels) in finding alternative ways of living and learning in cities. I term this connective criticality. In some cases, these practice trigger uneasy reflections, interactions, and responses among different actors involved, especially when it comes to the issue of migration. I term this uneasy criticality. In others, they allow people to reclaim local knowledge as part of everyday life in urban villages. I term this quotidian criticality. The four modes, which I explained in detail later in this introduction, are neither comprehensive (there may be other modes) nor definitive (this is not an exercise in definition). Instead, I seek to articulate what these interconnected modes reveal about the potential of socially engaged art in China.
and the concept of non-oppositional criticality in thinking and working with these practices.

The four modes of criticality outlined here are drawn from five cases that I have observed during my fieldwork between September 2015 and August 2016. They have been selected according to four: genre, locality, form, and thematic focus. These criteria are important, for different genres of socially engaged art use different methods to engage people on the ground and address social issues. What is more, they have various themes and forms and address diverse localities, each of which involve different restrictions and conditions. In terms of genre, I have chosen to attend to instances of art and theatre. Although they sometimes overlap, practices in these two fields enrol different tools in broaching and processing social problems. As for forms and practices, I have selected cooperative art, spatial intervention, urban roaming performance, documentary theatre, and socially engaged cultural practices. These respond to the themes of the diminishment of civic space and civil society in urban China, urban villages that are deemed as undesirable, and forms of inequality suffered by migrant workers in cities. Drawing on the different forms and practices outlined above, the practices approach the problematics from a variety of angles and with a variety of effects.

The project proposal of ChinaCreative had already designated Beijing as the primary location of my fieldwork. Accordingly, I conducted my fieldwork there for nine months so as to gather data about 5+1=6 (2014-2015), an investigative socially engaged art project about urban villages, and Home (2016), a piece of documentary theatre about migrant workers. During my research in Beijing, I realised that practices related to my topic were also going on in other parts of China and that I should investigate further projects in order to present the rich landscape of socially engaged practices that address the conundra of urbanisation.

In January 2016 I attended a roundtable discussion in Xi’an Art Museum as part of the art project On Practice (2015-ongoing). During the proceedings I encountered Chen Yun from the Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society (henceforth the
DMAS), a space in which young creative practitioners developed mutually nurturing social practices. I also met two old friends from Guangzhou: an artist named Zhu Jianlin and a writer and independent publisher named Feng Junhua. Later the pair and others would start the roaming Theatre 44 in Guangzhou, a fluid group of practitioners who explore collaborative ways of addressing social issues through art. These interconnections among practitioners and practices across different locations led me to expand my fieldwork to Shanghai and Guangzhou. As I go on to explain later in this introduction, my own personal connections and involvement influenced my selection of case studies and the appropriate methodology that I used in researching each.

These three cities are each distinct from one another. Compared to other big cities in China, Beijing has the most urban villages situated on its fringes. In 2015 there were more than 300 (Wong, Qiao, and Zheng 2018, 603). Migrant workers from rural China and artists used to live in these urban villages, at least till 2017 (as I explain later). Some artists have responded to the environments of urban villages and interact with migrant workers there in their happenings, performances, and interventions (I discuss examples of this in the next subsection). This prompted me to investigate the tensions and possibilities of socially engaged art projects (such as 5+1=6 and Home) situated in Beijing’s urban villages and involved migrant workers.

Shanghai has multiple layers of history. It was occupied by the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War, for instance, and became home to leftist writers, artists, and intellectuals in the 1930s. Its architecture and cityscape markedly eclectic in terms of its style and historical significance. Some artists in Shanghai have formed collectives and opened spaces (such as the Radical Space) to explore the city’s politics and histories. This led me to wonder whether the connectivity exhibited by socially engaged cultural practices (such as the

10 Artists including Shi Qing and Huang Songhao have gathered to work collaboratively on extracting and activating forms “radicalness” in everyday life. This involved the Shanghai Redux: Film Geography Program (2016) and fieldwork-based project DIFANG Work — Henan Province (2016) (see Radical Space 2020).
Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society’s) played a role in responding to social and political issues in Shanghai and beyond. Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, has an anarchist and revolutionary legacy derived from the early twentieth century.\(^{11}\) Indeed, during the Republican Era (1911-1949), it enjoyed relative autonomy from the central Chinese government (Snow 2004, 135). The influence of this political freedom has lingered on, even as the authorities in the south have tightened their control over the city in recent years.\(^{12}\) Being from Guangzhou myself, I have several cultural practitioner friends working there who like to roam and appropriate open spaces in the city as part of their arts practice. This incited me to wonder whether socially engaged art projects in Guangzhou (such as Theatre 44) also engaged with open spaces, transforming them in the process.

**Urban issues in China and socially engaged art**

China has urbanised rapidly since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Urbanisation accelerated at a staggering pace after 1979, which saw the country’s opening up to the global market and introduction of reformist policies that encouraged privatisation, marketisation, and opening up for foreign investments. Together, these developments have led to an economic boom in China. In 1949 only

\(^{11}\) In *Anarchism in early twentieth century China*, Arif Dirlik offers the following passage:

A new generation of anarchists appeared in South China around the figure of an assassin turned anarchist, Liu Shifu (1884–1915), better known by his adopted name of Shifu. The Cock-Crow Society (Huiming xueshe) that Shifu established in 1912 and its journal, The People’s Voice (Minsheng), served in the mid 1910s as the most important organs of anarchism in China. Despite some apparent affinity to Buddhism in the group’s activities, these affinities do not seem to have had any significant influence on the anarchism they espoused. Shifu promoted the social anarchism of Kropotkin, and while not a particularly original thinker, played an important part in his polemics with the socialist Jiang Kanghu (1883–1954) in clarifying differences between anarchism (pure socialism) and other currents in socialism (2012, 135.)

\(^{12}\) For a good example of this legacy, consider the change undergone by the Southern Media Group, which is based in Guangzhou. Founded in the early 1990s, its newspapers and magazines were beacons of liberalism. They featured opinion pieces by public intellectuals who promoted values such as freedom and democracy, and dared to reveal injustice and criticise the government. However, censorship of these publications has tightened increasingly since 2011. Then, in 2013, one year after Xi assumed power, the authorities clamped down on the Southern Media Group.
7.3% of China was urbanised. By the end of 1991, however, it had grown to 26.94% (Chen 2016). The rate has risen steadily over the last three decades, reaching 59.58% (Liu and Chen 2019). The rapidity of Chinese urbanisation in this short span of decades is stunning as compared to more developed countries. In China, urbanisation has gathered pace in tandem with the development of commercialisation and the market economy.

Urbanisation is considered a driving force of industrialisation and modernisation in that it can boost economic growth. The main five city clusters cover 11% of China’s surface, accommodate 40% of the whole population, and generate 55% of the country’s GDP (Industrial Information 2017). The speed and scale of China’s urbanisation are unprecedented in world history. On the one hand, the party-state proclaims that top-down urbanisation policies aim to make people wealthier. It emphasises this so as to shore up its legitimacy in the eyes of a growing population, which is rapidly stratifying into different classes. Indeed, through urbanisation the Chinese state has lifted a considerable portion of the population out of poverty. On the other hand, though, rapid urbanisation has been fuelled by land expropriation, real estate development, and global capital investment and speculation (Wang 2017, 45). This, in turn, has led to an increasingly unequal and divided society.

A large body of scholarship addresses urbanisation in China. It foregrounds a number of key problematics, including migration from the countryside to the cities; the rapid development of urban real estate; the causes underlying the speed of Chinese urbanisation; and the inequalities endemic to this process.\(^{13}\) Although it draws on this research, this study is concerned with culture in that it focuses on how socially engaged art projects address issues arising from urbanisation in China. I attend particularly to the place of migrant workers in urban villages, socio-economic

inequality, and civil society. These three issues are intertwined with artists’ lives and works. A lot of artists have themselves migrated to big cities such as Beijing from other parts of the country. They live and have their studios in urban villages, where space is most affordable. As such, they have witnessed the inequalities attendant on urban life. Indeed, some of these artists broach issues regarding urban public space and civic rights in their practice.

Disparities in the urban population, migrant workers, and urban villages

According to the IMF, the past two decades have seen a sharp reduction of poverty in China, but also a significant increase in inequality (Jain-Chandra et al. 2018). It is widely held that China’s current high income-inequality is largely driven by structural factors to do with the Chinese political system. These structural determinants include the rural/urban divide and regional variations in economic well-being (Xie and Zhou 2014). A new economic elite has arisen in urban China, which has benefited from the policies of reform, opening up, and marketisation. Still, the same process has conditioned the emergence of newly impoverished classes. Migrant workers constitute a major group of the new poor.

By “migrant workers”, I mean rural Chinese people that have migrated to cities, where they now work and live. China’s internal migration first became a prominent in the early 1990s on account of two major developments. First, national reforms implemented under Deng Xiaoping. In response to global economic and political shifts (not least a new international division of labour), these reforms released agricultural workers from being tethered to their localities. In this way, they could meet a rising demand for labour in Chinese cities boosted by their entrance into the globalised market economy (Bork, Kraas, Xue, and Li 2011, 17). As China’s

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major source of cheap labour, migrant workers have propelled rapid economic growth in the country’s big cities from the early 1990s.

The commodification of land – rather than human capital or advanced technology – has proven instrumental in the growth and transformation of Chinese cities (Lin 2014, 1814). Since 1951 China’s population has been governed and managed through a household registration system (hukou or 户口) system. Although this system has undergone a series of reforms since the 1990s, the main structure remains intact. It ties access social welfare and infrastructures to one’s residential status (Wong, Li, and Song 2007). Although many rural people have migrated to bigger cities to work in factories, construction sites, and the service industries, the household registration system makes it very difficult for them to settle down in cities. Accordingly, most migrant workers are forced to join the ranks of a precarious and exploitable urban labour force.\(^{15}\) In cities, migrant workers have become the de facto working poor (Wu 2016, 341). Institutionally excluded from the regular labour market and urban public services, they are subject to informal employment; low and unstable income; extra living costs; and lack of welfare security. All of this causes many migrant workers to fall into poverty (Liu, He, and Wu 2008, 33).

In addition to socio-economic inequality, migrant workers also face cultural discrimination. A migrant worker is set apart on the grounds that they are seen as a non-local resident (外地人), peasant (农民), or rural person (乡下人) (Zhan 2011). This identity-based discrimination also entails cultural exclusion: in dominant cultural narratives in China, the urban symbolises abundance, modernity, progress, civilisation, bourgeois lifestyles, and cosmopolitanism. The rural, in contrast, is represented as backward, poor, lagged behind, agricultural, and even vulgar (Lei 2003). Migrant workers are always portrayed as insufficiently urban. Everyday interactions among migrant workers and urbanites have led not to a dissolution of

the rural-urban divide, but rather to its reconstitution in the form of distinct economic and cultural formations within city limits (Lei 2003, 638).

Most migrant workers live in urban villages in the expanded cities. Urban villages, known as “villages in the city”, are produced by China’s unique land development process, in which urban and rural land ownership and management treated separately (Wang 2015). Urban villages are literally villages that have been engulfed by the expansion of urban areas. Although they were once physically located inside the city, they are now de facto urban areas. And yet, the land on which they stand is managed by farmers or their collectives (ibid.). Although city governments may have acquired farmland that previously stood on the fringes of cities, land for housing is still owned by village collectives and is allocated to village residents (S. Zheng, Long, Fan, and Gu 2009, 426). Many urban villagers have given up farming. Instead, they build or extended houses to rent to migrant workers. Rent has become their main source of income (ibid.).

On the one hand, urban villages are crucial in that they provide migrant workers (and other groups of the growing urban population) with socially accessible and affordable housing (Zhang et al. 2003). These villages feature living places, small markets, and even small workshops (e.g. the clothing market in Kangle village in Guangzhou). These play a role in the production and global circulation of goods (Wu 2016, 342). Given the lack of government resources and assistance, urban villages have been seen as a form of autonomous housing, an innovative and positive agent of urbanisation in contemporary China (Zhang et al. 2003). Urban villages were eulogised in the 2017 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (held in Shenzhen and Hong Kong), which addressed the theme of “Cities, Grow in Difference”. Here, urban villages were presented as an alternative and convivial urban housing model. However, low-cost housing complexes in urban villages are far from ideal.

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16 This edition of the biennale claimed to learn from, intervene into, and reform urban villages, especially those in Shenzhen. However, it was also criticised as a complicit art event that paved the way for gentrification from the city government and commercial powers.
Examples of chaotic land use, substandard housing construction, infrastructure deficiency, and a lack of open spaces are common. These factors are believed to be associated with social problems, safety risks, and health hazard (Hao 2012, 6).

On 18 Nov 2017, a fire in an apartment in the village of Xinjian (Daxing District, Beijing) killed nineteen people and injured eight, most of whom were migrant workers. This occurred right after officials in Beijing had investigated the city, identifying 25,395 buildings as a fire hazard to be demolished within forty days (anonymous activists 2018). In just forty days, this notorious “low-end population eviction campaign” displaced tens of thousands of migrant workers during the winter. This enraged creative practitioners, including some data activists who anonymously spread information on the evictions online and mobilised people to help the migrant workers. These artists employed their skills in visual communication to support demonstrations or migrant workers who now had to move. These practices of direct action were critical in that they facilitated aid on the part of civil society in the context of a crisis for migrant workers.

With respect to the issue of migrant workers, in chapter 4 I ask: what form of non-oppositional criticality is demonstrated by socially engaged art practices that address the increasingly sensitive topic of inequality with regard to migrant workers? As for urban villages, in chapter 5 I ask: what form of non-oppositional criticality is manifested in socially engaged art practices that deal with everyday life in urban villages that are deemed undesirable?

_Civil society in the urbanising areas_

The example laid out above, in which artists challenged the 2017 campaign to evict migrant workers, can be seen as constituting a civil society in urban China. The spaces available for creative practitioners and other social actors to take such actions, however, are restricted. In a large number of countries, including China, it
seems that civic space – the gap among state, business, and family in which citizens organise, debate, and act – is being structurally and purposefully squeezed (Buyse 2018, 967).

Civil society is commonly defined as “the area outside the family, market and state”. A such, it includes a wide range of both organised and organic groups, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, social movements, grassroots organisations, online networks and communities, and faith groups (World Economic Forum 2013, 8). Although social organisations that fall under “public welfare” or “charitable institutions” have been allowed to continue their operations, since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 there has been a sustained and brutal repression of activists and lawyers engaged in rights protection and advocacy. There have been smear campaigns, forced confessions, and strong ideological controls over universities, media, and the internet. National security laws have been passed, such as the National Security Law, Law of the People’s Republic of China on Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organisations in the Mainland of China (hereafter the Foreign NGO Law), and Cybersecurity Law (Shieh 2018). Living and working in squeezed civic spaces and shrinking civil societies in Chinese cities, artists and other creative practitioners have felt called upon as citizens to create non-oppositional spaces for civic gathering, initiations, and actions.

Regarding the issue of civic space in the city, in chapter 2 I ask: what form of non-oppositional criticality is demonstrated in socially engaged art practices concerned to make public civic spaces in contexts of surveillance and control? In terms of civil society in the city, in chapter 3 I ask: what form of non-oppositional criticality is exhibited by socially engaged art practices that connect people so as to explore alternative forms of living and learning in the absence of freedom of assembly and association? This study argues that in urbanising China civic public space is not a given, but always contingent and in the making.
Socially engaged art responding to urbanisation

In this section, I introduce three art projects to demonstrate the different non-confrontational modes of practice employed by socially engaged art practices responding to urbanisation in China. These projects preceded my fieldwork. Given that my research focuses on another period and set of locations, I do not analyse these three projects in depth analysis. Rather, they serve to paint a broader picture of this strand of socially engaged art in urbanising China. What is more, they underline the need to systematically theorise these artistic practices.\(^\text{17}\)

Some artists’ artworks arise from and are intertwined with urban villages. In 2014, the artist Li Binyuan put on an action performance titled *Reservoir Dogs* (2014). He borrowed the English title borrowed from Quentin Tarantino’s 1992 film. The Chinese title of this performance (何弃疗), however, literally translates as: “why do you give up your medical treatment?”\(^\text{18}\) In an interview about the performance, he recounted the significance he attached to the urban village of Heiqiao, which lies to the east of Beijing, outside of the Fifth Ring Road. Before their eviction, both artists and migrant workers had lived and worked in Heiqiao. It was a very magical place, he said, because it constituted “an urban-rural interface (城乡结合部), and it’s a place where anything can happen, like something unexpected. It’s like a big lab” (Wallpost 2014).

\(^\text{17}\) In this part, although these socially engaged art projects that are not the cases of my research, the visuality of them is essential for the readers to grasp a sense of the cityscape and the art’s interventions in the city. Therefore, photos of these projects will be used as illustrations rather than materials for visual analysis.

\(^\text{18}\) In Chinese, “何弃疗” is a derogatory internet slang, which is to call someone insane. The undertone is: the person is so insane that he/she must be mentally ill, but he/she gives up on the treatment. Most of the time, it is used half-jokingly.
The main part of his action consisted of dancing and interacting with different people and places in the village. He wore a pink wig and sunglasses, and carried around a loud speaker blasting out dance music (see fig. 1). He chose tracks that were especially popular among young people in urban villages. In this delirious and exciting dance, he both embodied and danced in accompaniment to Heiqiao’s various dynamics and rhythms. On the busy main street, he jumped onto the cars as they waited in front of a tollbooth (where there had been protests against extortionate parking fees). He cradled a small child (whose parents may well have been migrant workers) in his arms while sitting on his loudspeaker. He hopped onto a tricycle and travelled along beside a migrant worker for a while. Took up a broom...
to sweep the ground outside the Community Service Centre (社区服务中心), while dancing continually.

Li’s audience was made up of fellow artists living in the village, other art professionals coming from other urban villages, and migrant workers who happened to encounter him in Heiqiao. The action held back from criticising the terrible living and working conditions in Heiqiao (such as a reeking contaminated creek running through the village) and lack of organised management. Instead, through his affective and visceral performance (he danced himself to exhaustion four times), Li explored the vivid unpredictability and conviviality of life in the urban village.

Figure 2. Migrant workers and their children who participated in Gaze from the Top Floor. They are posing in Guangdong Times Museum, in front of the garments that they created. 2014. Courtesy of Chen Jianjun, Cao Minghao.

Another project, Gaze from the Top Floor (2014) by artists Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, collaborated with migrant worker families in the village of Kangle in
Guangzhou. With the help from the Qi Chuang Social Work Development Association, an NGO that is dedicated to supporting the children of migrant workers, they conducted fieldwork in Kangle, organising two workshops on storytelling through art. They asked children to design clothes as a way of telling stories. They were to realise these ideas with the help of their parents, who worked in different sectors of the garment processing industry in the village (Cao and Chen 2014). In the project, the task of collaboratively developing stories and clothes prompted the parents to talk with their children more than they usually would. What is more, the parents had to collaborate with one another: given that the parents each worked on a specialised part of the manufacturing process, they had to consult colleagues’ advice if they were to fabricate a whole garment (ibid.).

These are just two instances of a growing body of artistic practices in urban China that respond to urgent social, political, or economic issues. Often, such practices do not directly critique or contest political conditions. Rather, they immerse themselves in urban village life as a means of interacting, affecting, and connecting. Ultimately, such practices challenge industrial alienation and social segregation. In this study I am interested in unpacking the forms of criticality presented in socially engaged art practices that, although they respond to issues afflicting migrant workers and urban villages, do not directly critique or acting against the powers that be.

Looking beyond urban villages and migrant workers, some art projects also address how open spaces in the city are being commercialised and privatised. A good example is Everyone’s East Lake (2010-2014) in the city of Wuhan, which famous for its East Lake (Donghu). The project sought to reclaim open spaces for the public by inviting citizens to use creative means of occupations. Hence, Everyone’s East Lake protested against capitalist encroachment on public space. Wuhan’s

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19 Kangle Village is an urban village adjacent to Sun Yat-sen University, one of the best universities in China. The village does not only house migrant workers but also serves as cloth and fabric wholesale markets and a hub for garment processing.
government had signed an illegal lease with a state-owned real estate development company named Overseas Chinese Town (OCT). The agreement allowed the latter to encroach upon the protected the East Lake Scenic Area without a proper appraisal of the possible ecological or social consequences. The revelation of this opaque, corrupt, and lucrative deal triggered fierce criticism online, which focused on the development plan’s environmental impacts on public safety, as well as on gentrification and privatisation (Hu 2010).\(^2\)

Still, the local authorities thwarted citizens’ attempts to mount protests.\(^2\) With online discussions dying down due to a combination of fear of reprisals and the state’s control over the media, creative practitioners felt the urge to act (Hu 2010). They were to do so through artworks that might have been made by any citizen in Wuhan. In June 2010, two artists named Li Juchuan and Li Yu began *Everyone’s East Lake*. They posted a call for creative practitioners online. These might be locals and whoever else wished to participate by creating artworks by or in East Lake so as to reclaim it as a freely accessible public space. The artworks were to be publicised on the website donghu2010.org. The project went through three rounds: the first took place in 2010, the second in 2012, and the third in 2014. The first round included more than forty projects that addressed the privatisation of East Lake from different angles. They included the *T-Junctions of East Lake: Social Architecture Naming Series*

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\(^2\) In December 2009, OCT (Overseas Chinese Town) Co., Ltd, a state-owned real estate development company signed a long-term lease with the local government for 4.3 billion yuan (630 million US dollars) – the most lucrative lease of the year for rapidly-expanding Wuhan. This transaction was illegal since 14.2% (30 hectares out of 211 hectares) of the leased area fell within the nationally-protected East Lake Scenic Area, and the local government had not obtained permission to develop the land from the central government. Hired thugs thwarted the petition of the evicted villagers and fishing workers for proper compensations. The aforementioned information was disclosed by the Guangzhou-based newspaper Time Weekly (时代周报) in a report called *An Investigation into OCT’s Development of East Lake in Wuhan* (武汉华侨城开发东湖调查), which received this information leaked by government officials disgruntled with corruption in the development proceedings. OCT’s plan included an amusement park (Happy Valley) and upscale shopping areas, hotels and condominiums. See Hu 2010.

\(^2\) QQ was the most popular social media application in the 2000s in China. QQ groups were formed as citizens were trying to organise camouflaged protest — “going for a stroll”: staging a protest march without banners and, when questioned, claiming everyone was “just going for a stroll”. However, this was thwarted by the authorities: local police sneaked into the groups in order to sabotage the protest; student counsellors in universities warned the students not to join the protest to avoid getting into trouble. See Hu 2010.
Zheng Bo argues that *Everyone’s East Lake* was not only an attempt to resist privatisation, gentrification, and the government’s ban on public discussion of the development. More importantly, it evoked a sense of common ownership and public life (Zheng 2014). I would like to add to this that instead of confronting the local government and real estate company, Li and Li called on their fellow citizens to

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22 In *Everyone’s East Lake: Social Architecture Naming Series* (2010), Social Architect Group named eight T-Junctures around the East Lake and wrote them on the rubbles gathered from the demolished villages, the construction site of this OCT development plan, and neighbourhoods nearby. They invited the public to read out the poems, proses, investigation report, notification from the government, and advertisement and so on about East Lake in one of the T-juncture.

According to the legislation on the management and development of lakes and wetlands, area within 30 metre from the shoreline of the lake is not allowed to be developed. However, the East Lake Fish Pond, which was within the shoreline, was filled by OCT, and the dormitories of fishers were demolished. Wu Yun, Zi Jie, and Mai Dian marked the remaining wall of the dormitories with 30 Metre Memorial Wall and asked others to write and draw whatever they wanted on this wall.

In *Selling East Lake Water Project*, the creative practitioner who named him/herself Dangerous Object, bottled East Lake water and sold it outside of the Lingbo Gate of Wuhan University and at the ticket office of East Lake’s Moshan Park.
express their discontent in the name of art. By occupying open spaces, citizens were to transform them into public spaces in which citizens could voice their discontent in embodied and creative ways. This project is one of a number of cases in China that address issues at the intersection of urbanisation and the development of civil society not through open activism or contestation, but by way of decentralised civic and artistic action. This prompts me to investigate the modes of criticality at stake in the arts projects that open up civic spaces without opposing the authorities upfront.

A common feature stands out across these examples of socially engaged art projects addressing urban issues in China: that they adopt a non-oppositional approach. This does not mean that the practitioners are afraid of suppression and thus censor themselves, nor that they have given up on criticising the system of authority in China. On the contrary, in the given circumstances and contexts in which they must operate, non-oppositionality allows practitioners to be critical in a different way. Avoiding direct confrontation means that it need not express the kind of negative criticism that the global art world expects from “critical Chinese art.” The projects mentioned here, along with SJT, which I described at the beginning of this introduction, have led me to inquire into the ways in which can socially engaged art be critical without being oppositional in urbanising China.

**Non-oppositional criticality**

This study is not a philosophical investigation of criticality\(^{23}\), but a cultural studies research of criticality as it emerges from socially engaged art practices in China. It is a conjunctural study that focus on modes of everyday practice and cultural articulations of criticality as evidenced in interactions and interventions in civic spaces.

\(^{23}\) For example, *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (2011) edited by Karin de Boer and Ruth Sonderegger.
In this section, I first explain what I mean by criticality and non-oppositional criticality. I then unfold the four forms of non-oppositional criticality that are explored in this study, before introducing the cases from which I have derived these criticalities.

*From critique to non-oppositional criticality*

In Chinese, critique is expressed “批判” (pi pan). In classical Chinese, this compound word has two main meanings. First, is it to distinguish and judge. Second, it means to comment and judge (Wu, Zhang, and Wu 2015, 12). The convergence of meanings between pi pan and Western notions of critique has led some translators to substitute the two terms for one another. In 1935, Hu Renyuan used this term批判 or pi pan to render Kritik in the title of Immanuel Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Critique of Pure Reason). In modern Chinese, “批” (pi) means to slap (as in, to slap someone in the face), annotate, write an instruction, analyse, and comment.24 “判” (pan) means to distinguish, decide, judge, or pass verdict.25 When put together, these two characters connote the power exorcised through analysis and judgement.

In the context of mainland China, however, notions of pi pan are tainted with negativity and even horror. During Cultural Revolution, many people were condemned as “counter-revolutionaries”. The activity of accusing and attacking them was called “great criticism” (大批判) (Wu, Zhang, and Wu 2015, 14). Decades have passed and the fear has faded. Now the term “critical” (as in “critical theory”) is translated into Chinese as “批判 [性] 的.” Here, the character “性” connotes innate quality; “的” is the adjectival form of the word.

In the canon of critical theory, critique contains a promise of emancipation. As Max Horkheimer writes:

24 https://www.zdic.net/hans/批
25 https://www.zdic.net/hans/判
however extensive the interaction between the critical theory and the special sciences whose progress the theory must respect and on which it has for decades exercised a liberating and stimulating influence, the theory never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man’s emancipation from slavery. (1972, 246)

The implication here is that critical theory is not a form of navel-gazing, restrained within the field of theory itself. Rather, it aims to trigger radical changes in the social and political realm. Since 1930s, many interdisciplinary critical theories “have emerged in connection with the many social movements that identify varied dimensions of the domination of human beings in modern societies” (Bohman et al. 2019). Critique, then, is a dialectical practice that interlaces theory and practice in a way that contributes towards overthrowing forms of domination.

In cultural studies, critique largely conveys negativity in that it is sets out to unveil problematic assumptions that are taken-for-granted in a given society. As Foucault puts it: “a critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest” (1988, 154). Work in cultural studies often analyses and critiques concrete contemporary cultural discourses and distinctions that reproduce economic and political inequities (Surber 1998, 7). The ultimate goal, in doing this, is to pursue more just forms of society in the future. As Foucault has argued:

Critique exists only in relation to something other than itself: it is an instrument, the means to a future, or a truth that critique will neither know nor be, it is a perspective onto a domain where it would like to act as police and where it is incapable of making the law. (2015, 36)
Often, scholars in cultural studies direct their critiques at crises catalysed by inequalities. They do so by revealing the underlying conditions and processes at work in the practical realm of everyday life.

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the words “critique” and “crisis” have a common etymology. They derive from the Greek krínein, which means “to separate, choose, decide, judge”. Quoting Aristotle, Koselleck notes that “crisis’ also meant ‘decision’ in the sense of reaching a verdict or judgment, what today is meant by criticism (Kritik) (2006, 359). The Chinese word that is often used to translate crisis is “危機” (wei ji). The first character connotes danger; the second opportunity. The double meaning layered into this Chinese word implies that there are positive possibilities latent in crises, critique, and the critique of crisis. Resonating with this semantic complexity, this study demonstrates how critical socially engaged art practices responding to urban issues – often crises – do not simply criticise the system or directly oppose the authorities. Instead, they generate different possibilities for living and relating to one another in the city.

How are these debates addressed in the cultural and artistic domains? To what extent can artworks be appreciated in terms of their “criticality”? How does criticality appear, or rather, what shape does it take in artistic performance and expression? These questions bring to mind Irit Rogoff’s call to turn away from critique in favour of criticality. She argues that we must move from criticism which is a form of finding fault and of exercising judgement according to a consensus of values, to critique which is examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to criticality which is operating from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness. (Rogoff 2003)

The ground upon which criticality operates is uncertain because it is not based on binaries, above all that of for or against. Instead, criticality is articulated in and
through contextually embedded practices that explore otherwise forms of life. As Rogoff puts it:

> We have opted for a ‘looking away’ or a ‘looking aside’ or a spatial appropriation, which lets us get on with what we need to do or to imagine without reiterating that which we oppose ...‘Smuggling’ exists in precisely such an illegitimate relation to a main event or a dominant economy without being in conflict with it and without producing a direct critical response to it. (2003)

Following Rogoff, it can be said that criticality is embodied in the act of looking away from actors and processes in the centre stage of cultural and social discourse (be they an institutional art event, deeply rooted social problem, or exploding political crisis). Instead, criticality means attending to practices that are offstage or backstage. These practices might be less eye-catching, but they are more embodied. In this, criticality figures a means of imagining and exploring alternatives to the status quo and of smuggling these possibilities from the outside into the inside.

Similarly, Rita Felski critiques the negativity of critique. “Both aesthetic and social worth,” she writes, “can only be cashed out in terms of a rhetoric of againstness” (2015, 17). Unlike Rogoff, though, Felski holds that criticality emerges when works of art engage in oppositional critique (2015, 16). She proposes “postcritical reading” in which the reader-critic would place herself before the text, “reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (2015, 12). Instead of looking behind or beneath the text so as to uncover something to critique, Felski’s approach is to come face-to-face with the artwork and let it speak. It entails critically channeling what the work brings forth and, in this way, transforming received perceptions and presumptions. Like Felski, I immersed myself in process-based socially engaged art projects and let them speak for themselves. That said, I still engage with the notion of criticality, as Rogoff presents the term. As Rogoff
indicates, criticality involves relinquishing opposition. To highlight this potent aspect of the concept, I speak of “non-oppositional criticality” instead of just “criticality” alone.

Non-oppositionality can be found in Derrida. “What must occur then”, he writes:

is not merely a suppression of all hierarchy, of anarchy only consolidates just as surely the established order of a metaphysical hierarchy; nor is it a simple change or reversal in the terms of any given hierarchy. Rather the Umdrehung must be a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself. (1978, 81)

This point of view is useful in thinking about non-oppositional modes of criticality. Critical practices might not aim at instigating a sort of revolution, this passage suggests, or replacing current hierarchies with others. Instead, they might venture slightly off the grid of a given hierarchical structure, pass slightly under the system’s radar, without being crushed by reigning authorities. This does not mean that non-oppositional critical practices can eventually dissolve authoritarian structures. Indeed, some systems can evolve by extending their grid of control and expanding their censorship regimes.

Derrida gives up on the term dialectic. Instead he holds onto the “fatal necessity of contamination” (what he terms “unperceived entailment or dissimulated contamination”) between the two poles of any given opposition (1990, xv). Any system, this premise suggests, is always contaminated by what it tries to exclude. The flip-side of this, though, is that what resists a system also implicitly keeps it in place. As a philosophical discourse, deconstruction “must proceed through a strategy of displacement—what Derrida calls a ‘double writing’, which is a form of critique neither strictly inside, nor strictly outside philosophy” (2001, 11). Similarly, non-oppositional criticality operates through displacing an oppositional logic, according to which something must be either inside or outside of a system, either
working with or working against the authorities. Non-oppositional critical practices also displace themselves in relation to a given system. As I have phrased it above, they are “slightly off” with respect to mainstream society and structures of power. Although they sometimes differ from practices mandated by the system, the authorities might still struggle to identify and condemn them, at least immediately. In the same line, Povenelli argues that “every arrangement installs its own possible derangements and rearrangements. The otherwise is these immanent derangements and rearrangements” (Povinelli 2014). Becoming otherwise is critical in that it affirms potentials derangements and rearrangements that constantly reconfigure a given arrangement’s boundaries as they struggle to define inside and outside. This echoes Donna Haraway’s approach, which simultaneously affirms both “radical constructivism” and “feminist critical empiricism” (1988, 580). “To be an ‘inappropriate/d other’ means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality,” Haraway writes; it is to be “in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality—as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination” (ibid., 299). To become “slightly off” and critical with respect to established ways of life is not to become the wholly other. Rather, it entails becoming an “inappropriate/d other”. This otherness does not invert or subvert domination, but rather establishes connections with others so as to explore possibilities that go beyond dominant imaginations and structures of power. Non-oppositional criticality does not rely on a dialectical logic. Instead, it explores, experiments with, and embodies possibilities for living, relating, and learning otherwise that are not offered by existing systems (whether they be capitalist authoritarian or capitalist democratic). In my research, the point of reference is China’s political system. This system may be authoritarian, but the restrictions that it imposes are not entirely clear, which means that there are some spaces in which different voices and practices can arise (Repnikova 2017; Han 2018).

The fact that criticality avoids negativity and opposition does not mean that it affirms the legitimacy of dominant structures. On the contrary, it disputes such
legitimacy, not by opposing it, but by making space for otherwise practices that slightly deviate from prevailing norms. These practices are not entirely different: that would mean radical exteriority and otherness. This brings me back to Derrida. Biesta and Stams write that

deconstruction is an affirmation of what is wholly other (tout autre), of what is unforeseeable from the present ... It is from this concern for what is totally other, a concern to which Derrida sometimes refers as justice, that deconstruction derives its right to be critical, its right to deconstruct. (2001, 68)

In quoting this passage, I do not mean to equate non-oppositional criticality with radical exteriority; attempts to move outside a system are critical, although it is impossible to totally leave a system behind.

Derrida makes the insightful point that “justice remains, is yet, to come, à venir, the very dimension of events is irreducibly to come. It will always have it, this à-venir, and always has. Perhaps it is for this reason that justice, insofar as it is not only a juridical or political concept, opens up for l’avenir the transformation, the recasting or refounding of law and politics. (Derrida 1992, 27)

This does not mean that criticality has no hope of achieving change. This form of justice is critical because it is not set in opposition to certain form of injustice. Rather, it goes hand-in-hand with radical exteriority. We can approach this radically exterior justice, which is always still to come, by venturing slightly off the prevailing system.

At the theoretical level, my research aims to explore and articulate the different modes of non-oppositional criticality manifested in socially engaged art
practices. This task has become only more urgent as the Chinese authorities’ grip on civic space and civil society has tightened under the current president, rendering confrontational approaches increasingly dangerous. I present four forms of non-oppositional criticality: reconfigurative criticality, connective criticality, uneasy criticality, and quotidian criticality. Although I elaborate on each of these modes in their respective chapters, in what follows I briefly introduce each concept, the case through which I explore it, and the methods that I use to do so.

Reconfigurative criticality

Reconfigurative criticality means appropriating spaces that are under the authorities’ control by means of a spatial “double writing”. Examples include negotiating with the authorities so as to make rigid spaces fluid and reconfiguring open spaces so that they become slightly off. Such spaces would be neither entirely outside the system nor inside it; poised between the dominant system and alternative possibilities, they would provide a forum for civic gatherings, deliberation, and political and poetic presentations. In my research on reconfigurative criticality, I am primarily concerned with open spaces in the city.

By and large, urban planning provides open spaces for functional reasons, such as transport, commerce, and recreation. They are not intended for gatherings, demonstrations, or cultural activities (with the exception of those that the authorities initiate or encourage). What is more, in big cities such as Guangzhou, surveillance cameras are installed along streets and around major buildings. Not only that, but urban management officers and guards patrol the city, keeping citizens under surveillance and control. How to embody criticality when responding to the lack of urban public space, beyond expressing discontent with surveillance and control? In chapter 2 I analyse two art projects: Sunset Haircut Booth (2016-ongoing) and a series of events put on by Theatre 44 (2016-2017). These projects reconfigure open spaces in Guangzhou, such that they become public spaces. A
such, they demonstrate what I term reconfigurative criticality. This form of criticality is embodied in both *Sunset Haircut Booth*’s long-term transformation of urban space into public space and Theatre 44’s ephemeral transformation of public places into performative, aesthetic, affective, and interactive public spaces.

*Sunset Haircut Booth* was put on in the urban village of Xisan, a suburb of Guangzhou. It was performed by an artist named Yu Xudong and his team, working in cooperation with a senior local resident named Liang Guangnian. In 2012 Liang appropriated a space under a highway, where he built and ran a booth offering free haircuts: the Sunset Haircut Booth. Since 2016, Yu and his team have joined Liang in maintaining the booth and diversifying its offers to locals. By reconfigurative artistic means, they have made the booth a public space in negotiation with different parties. The first series of performances conducted by Theatre 44 addressed the theme of urban nomadism. In these activities, creative practitioners from different backgrounds explored peripatetic ways of occupying the nocturnal city. Transforming open spaces (such as green verges and pedestrian walkways) into public spaces, they established ephemeral sites in which non-confrontational political and poetic art could take place.

Whereas *Sunset Haircut Booth* is rooted in its locality and has unfolded over a long period. Theatre 44’s nocturnal appropriations, in contrast, were mobile and ephemeral. In analysing these two projects, I stress how they perform reconfigurative criticality in an urban context characterised by shrinking civic spaces and expanding forms of surveillance and control. In fostering public space, the practitioners in question negotiated with different actors (including the authorities) and learnt from, and collaborated with, various others. In his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, the translator and philosopher Brian Massumi notes that in French the phrase “line of flight” is “ligne de fuite”. *Fuite* covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding something. It also means flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance (a *point de fuite* denotes a painting’s vanishing point) (1987, xvi). In circumventing regimes of urban control, the
practitioners created “lines of flight” by means of non-oppositional political and poetic art. In this way they turned open spaces into what, following Haraway, we might term inappropriate/d public spaces.

The notion of public space that I adopt in this study differs from that famously put forward by Jürgen Habermas. On Habermas’s account, the bourgeois public sphere is formed by private individuals coming together to hold rational debates and form public opinions. In this way, he articulate the society’s needs to the state (Habermas 1992). The bourgeois public sphere, for Habermas, was premised on the separation of state and society: any blurring of that distinction, he held, would diminished if not destroy its basis (ibid., 142). For Habermas, then, the forms of advertising and interest groups that have grown up in late capitalism manipulate public opinion and undermine the public sphere. In turn, this leads to the triumph of irrationality in contemporary democracies and the loss of the moral force of the ideal of publicness, as it emerged in modern Britain and France (Huang 1993, 219).

In the Chinese context, however, public space is what Philip Huang terms a “third space” in that it is positioned between state and society.26 For Huang, public space does not require a clear separation between state and society to exist and function. Rather, both state and society participate in it (1993, 216). As Huang indicates here, this differs from Habermas’ binary formulation of the bourgeois public sphere:

contrary to the vision of the public sphere/civil society models, actual socio-political change in China has really never come from any lasting

26I am well aware of the Lefebvre inspired conceptualisation of thirdspace by Edward Soja, which stresses on the trialetics of spatiality. While Soja stresses on the interlaced social and historical dimensions of thirdspace, Philip Huang’s concept highlights the dynamics between the authority and people in the making of the public space. Therefore, Huang’s definition is more helpful in analysing the negotiation and interaction among different actors in public space in China.
assertion of societal autonomy against the state, but rather from the workings out of state-society relations in the third realm. (1993, 238).

Following Huang, I approach urban public space in terms of third space. Creative practitioners can appropriate and reconfigure third spaces in and through socially engaged practices. In the process, they negotiate surveillant and controlling authorities without opposing them.

To gather research data, I employed individual interviews on site in the case of *Sunset Haircut Booth* and participant observation when it came to Theatre 44. Individual interviews allowed me to listen to the voices of both the artist and senior citizen involved in *Sunset Haircut Booth*. Participant observation has been defined as “the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting” (Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte 1999, 91). I used this method so as to gain access to the embodied forms of knowledge and experience at stake in Theatre 44’s performances. What is more, it allowed me to acquire a “deeper understating of the actors, interaction, scene, and events that take place at the research site” (Allen 2017, 33).

Criticisms of this method focus on the fact that, although researchers attempt to learn what life an “insider’s” life is like by immersing themselves in their community, inevitably they will remain an “outsider” (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey 2005, 13). In the case of Theatre 44, however, the research field was Guangzhou, my home city. Furthermore, I had been friends with members of the group even before starting this research. I was, in short, an insider already. The challenge for me during the fieldwork, it followed, was to maintain a critical perspective on the activities in which I participated and avoid romanticising them. The method of participant observation allowed me to join in Theatre 44’s nomadic activities, encounter citizens who were interested in their performances, and an urban patrol officer. During the group’s nocturnal performances, public space was
shared with other citizens and its boundaries were tested; this method allowed me to immerse myself in this critical process of reconfiguring urban spaces.

**Connective criticality**

Connective criticality emerges from non-hierarchical relations. Earlier I quoted Derrida earlier (1978, 81) to indicate how systems of domination can be transcended by exploring alternative ways of living, learning, and connecting. Haraway suggests this too (1992, 299). In this study, connective criticality is exemplified by practices that established relationship against the backdrop of diminished rights of assembly and association in China.

Since 2016, restrictions on NGOs and social associations have become stricter.\(^{27}\) How is criticality practiced in autonomous organising and education in the city, beyond mere disagreement with these restrictions? One answer to this question would be to point to the connective criticality that emerged from the practices of the Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society (DMAS) in Shanghai. The DMAS is a self-organised non-institutional platform that grew from a research-based exhibition held in 2014. It was about Dinghaiqiao, an area on Shanghai’s northeastern outskirts that has been marked by various layers of history. After the exhibition, the curator Chen Yun continued renting the house in which part of the exhibition had taken place. Using this space, he and others started the DMAS, which aimed to take up art’s responsibilities to this area and its histories. For the most part, it is run by young creative practitioners based in Shanghai, who devote their free time to the space. It practice has three main strands: the provision of mutually educating and nurturing services to people in the neighbourhood; the production of alternative forms of knowledge; and the maintenance of spaces in which young

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\(^{27}\) See Civic Freedom Monitor (2020).
practitioners and activists can realise socially engaged projects and connect with one another.

Connective criticality takes the form of what I call “zai-di connectivity” and “rhizomatic connectivity”. The case of the DMAS involves three assemblages of actors. First, its creative practitioners connect with other creatives in and around Shanghai. Second, they have established relationship with people in the neighbourhood. Third, they connect rhizomatically with scholars, practitioners, and activists in Asia so as to produce inappropriate forms of knowledge and alternative ways of life. These three assemblages, overlap with one another, go slightly beyond accepted forms of citizen organisation. Indeed, the DMAS’s connections have grown without too much interference on the part of the authorities. This measure of autonomy was achieved not by going underground, but rather through careful measures such as registering attendees for events and maintaining good relationships with someone working in the local authority.

The term zai-di (在地) has been used by scholars, activists, artists, and other practitioners over the past ten years. It is often presented in contrast with ben-tu (本土). In this term, “ben” (本) means original, rudimental, and essential, and “tu” (土) refers to soil and land (2016, 126). Ben-tu is often associated with a community’s consciousness, of its identity, characteristics, and values (ibid.). Both ben-tu and zai-di are usually translated into English as “local”. In Chinese language contexts, however, they have a rather different resonance. In Chinese “zai” (在) connotes “in” or “at” and “di” (地) signifies ground, place, or land. Zai-di then means on site, on the ground, down to earth, grounded in locality, or concerning local issues. This term allows me to analyse how the DMAS grounds itself in the neighbourhood of Dinghaiqiao at a grassroots level and how it weaves its practices into the daily lives of those living there.

In addition to the notion of the “line of flight” which I use in connection with reconfigurative criticality, I draw another concept from Deleuze and Guattari in articulateing connective criticality: that of the assemblage. “An assemblage”,

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Deleuze and Guattari write, “is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections” (1987, 8). “An assemblage,” they expand, “in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously (independently of any recapitulation that may be made of it in a scientific or theoretical corpus)” (1987, 22-23). This concept helps me analyse multiple flows of connectedness in the DMAS’s practices, in which actors from different backgrounds come together to connect with each other, learn from each other, and produce knowledge at a variety of scales.

My term rhizomatic connectivity draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome. They introduce this concept by way of six principles. Of these, the first two are most relevant when it comes to thinking about connective criticality. These principles are connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other – indeed must be connected to every other (1987, 7). Unlike the model of a tree, which posits a fixed central point and hierarchical structure, a rhizome operates by making connections among heterogeneous elements, orders, and kinds (Thornton 2018, 186). Connective criticality implies that creative practitioners and other citizens connect in a decentralised and non-hierarchical ways. As such, they go slightly outside systems of control that operate according to the model of a tree. Together, they take action as an assemblage to explore inappropriate/d skills and strategies for living differently, while simultaneously sustaining and nurturing each other.

To gather embodied research data at the DMAS, I have used the method of participatory action research (PAR). On Maggie Walter’s summary, the basis of PAR is participation and action:

1. Action Research should be more than just finding out; research should also involve an action component that seeks to engender positive change.
2. Participation: Research is a participatory process that requires the equal and collaborative involvement of the ‘community of research interest’. (2009, 1)

This method is often used in research that has an activist dimension. Critical PAR scholars are drawn to a research praxis that responds to injustice. As such, it is informed by a wide set of theoretical and political perspectives and is always critically contesting entanglements of privilege and oppression. PAR often connects historic and contemporary struggles, and foregrounds the obligation to move from research to action (Torre et al. 2017, 860).

Still, I do not think that my involvement in the DMAS constitutes a form of action aiming to solve social problems. Rather, I acted to created situations in line with the DMAS’s concerns with mutual help and nurturing. Together with other practitioners, I explored the possibility of grounded cultural practices that prompted people to imagine alternative ways of living together. At the same time, PAR allowed me to recognise the social, economic, and political foundation of my practices as a researcher, scrutinise my limits, and modestly and openly learn from other people whom I encountered in the course of my fieldwork. Indeed, when I co-organised activities in at the DMAS I leaned on others for collaboration and support. My research and research object, in this instance, were interdependent. Scholars such as Matthew David, however, warns that participatory action researchers can be caught at the nexus between different and even competing interests (David 2002). Conscious of this risk, I tried to be as impartial as possible during my fieldwork at the DMAS.

*Uneasy criticality*

Uneasy criticality inheres in practices within a given system that try to exceed institutional limits by becoming inappropriate/d. This form of criticality is uneasy on
account of the tension involved in working between the inside and outside of a particular institutional context. Often it entails both smuggling in something external – as Rogoff advocates – while being careful not to overstep certain key red lines.

How do practitioners embody criticality in addressing the issue of migration (beyond criticising the conditions of social-economic inequality and social segregation) in which migrant workers suffer? During my fieldwork I followed a devising process that produced a piece of documentary theatre title Home (2016). This collective work, which thematised migrant workers, suggested that the answer to my question lay in uneasiness. This uneasy form of criticality sometimes compels creative practitioners (the majority of whom belong to the urban elite) to recognise their privilege and complicity.

In chapter 4, I explore the preparation, production, and staging of Home, as well as three aspects of uneasy criticality that correspond to these three phases. Home was produced and performed by third-year students studying theatre and literature at Beijing’s Central Academy of Drama. The play was devised under the guidance and direction of their teacher, Li Yinan, who is Professor in Dramaturgy and Applied Theatre. It was staged as the result of their course in dramaturgy, which lasted a year (2015-2016). Home was based on documentary materials generated by interviews between the students and young migrant workers, in addition to the students’ reflections on these encounters.

My analysis indicates three ways in which uneasy criticality was smuggled into this academic context. First, socially engaged pedagogy put the students in an unsettling situation. Some of their interviewees refused to speak and to connect with them. This led the students to acknowledge their status as members of the urban elite status, and complicity in social segregation, in an uneasy form of reflexive critique. Second, during the devising process, the class underwent a transition which I phrase in terms of a shift from representation to “re-presentation”. This change involved the students voicing doubts not only concerning their teacher/director’s
attitude, not also about theatre as a space for social engagement more generally. Hence, the process of making Home raised uneasy questions about hierarchies in theatre and academia. Third, the performance affected what I term the audience’s “response-ability” for what they experienced. In a distinctly uneasy and critical way, Home smugled a critique of urbanisation and social segregation into the theatre.

During the process of making Home, some of the migrant workers/interviewees refused to speak. Indeed, they cut their connection with the student interviewers and disappeared. In this way, they performed what was expected from them – that is, a form of subalternity. Here, Spivak’s concept of the subaltern sheds light on the uneasy class politics implicit in the students’ encounters with the young migrant workers. Subalternity implies not only an inferior social, economic, and cultural standing. More importantly, it signals an inability to make one’s grievances to be recognised and recognisable. This is primarily because the subaltern has little access to structures and institutions through which grievance can be articulated (Spivak 2010, 228).

The subaltern can speak as a subject, though with difficulty. Insofar as they are not reducible to a homogeneous “other” posited by prevailing discourses in West, subaltern subjects do not speak in the language of the coloniser (Spivak 2010). In this case that I address, the Chinese subaltern can refuse to allow others to speak on their behalf. This led the theatre students reflect uneasily on social segregation and class. Although they did not want to affiliate themselves with these issues, the students were forced to acknowledge their complicity in them. They began to realise that, as urban theatre students, they enjoyed a privileged status. One and the same structures allowed them to make art and enjoy their lifestyles while also exploiting migrant workers and keeping them at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

This students’ critique of their own privilege is critical in that it is “inappropriate” in the eyes of the authorities. Such reflexivity is anathema to the government, which is concerned to perpetuate social segregation and class difference. Then the students, guided by their teacher, made an unsettling transition
from representing the migrant workers’ sad lives to “re-presenting” their encounters with the migrant workers. Moreover, they critically reflected on the hierarchical relationship between them and their director/teacher. Deleuze’s account of non-representational performance helps in explaining this layer of uneasy criticality. Deleuze defines the term as follows: “an operation on the form of theatre as much as its contents, which is not only a subtraction of representations of power (kings and rulers) but the subtraction of representation as power” (quoted in Cull 2009, 5). The theatre students reconsidered and eventually denounced representation on that grounds that it threatened to impose a form of power on the migrant workers. Continuing in this vein, they questioned the hierarchies at work in the theatre, in which they had to represent their teacher-director’s perspective.

In analysing the final performance, I attend to how the audiences responded to the play. I show how they were held responsible for and affected by the performance. To explain the concept of affect, I would like to refer to Massumi:

the Spinozist problematic of affect offers a way of weaving together concepts of movement, tendency, and intensity in a way that takes us right back to the beginning: in what sense the body coincides with its own transitions and its transitioning with its potential (2002, 15).

In chapter 4, I use the term affect to analyse intensities transmitted from the bodies of the performers to those in the audience. In this way, I mean to grasp the potential latent in the bodies of members of the audience.

In terms of methodology, I have employed methods of participant observation, group interviews, and individual interviews in my field research on Home. For three months in 2016, I attended the course in Applied Theatre and Dramaturgy at Central Academy of Drama. I participated in the students’ informal discussions as they prepared the play. I also watched the final performance. Having secured the consent
of those involved, I recorded some of the in-class discussions between the teacher and students on video.

As a method, participant observation made it possible for me to investigate uneasy criticality in a way that differs from how one might look at an artwork as a consumer or critic. I had first-hand experience of learning and exploring topics alongside with the students and teacher during the classes, discussions, and ultimate production. This held true even when things became unsettling. My position as a participant-researcher-observer, who was some years older than the students, allowed me to chat with them like a peer. Some students felt safe talking to me about their uneasiness and doubt regarding the performance and their teacher.

I also adopt the methods critical discourse analysis (CDA) and visual analysis in studying research materials such as Home’s script and interview transcriptions. According to Norman Fairclough, CDA sees both concrete social events and abstract social structures as part of social reality (2010, 74). He proposes three central emphases of CDA: social structures: semiotic systems (languages), social practices: orders of discourse, and social events: texts (including talk “utterances”) (Fairclough 2010, 74). When CDA is used to analyse political, media, institutional, and pedagogical discourse, a number of issues arise, not least those relating to power asymmetries, exploitation, manipulation, and structural inequalities (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000, 450-451). Using this method, I analyse the texts relating to other projects beyond Home featured in this dissertation. These include the social media posts, statements, and texts used by practitioners; interviews with participants; and the sociocultural contexts in which relevant instances of socially engaged art play out – that is, situations of urbanisation in contemporary China.
Quotidian criticality

Quotidian criticality is embodied in everyday life. Above all, it unfolds in the lives of those suffering inequality, be it social, economic, or political. Quotidian criticality makes some aspects of the everyday visible to others and also allows people to present their own daily lives – sometimes in ways that partially deviate from reigning norms.

How do socially engaged art projects concerned with urban villages embody criticality? It should be said, here, that I do not mean to focus on projects that merely point out or lament the lack of infrastructural support for these villages and the poor conditions in which their inhabitants often live. On such project is 5+1=6 (2014-2015), which exhibited what I call quotidian criticality. In 5+1=6, creative practitioners were invited creative practitioners to choose one of the urban villages or towns between Beijing’s Fifth and Sixth Ring Road and conduct an artistic investigation for at least ten days between September 2014 and August 2015. The practitioners involved included artists, architects, and designers.

In chapter 5 I analyse two subprojects undertaken as part of 5+1=6: Xiaojiahe East Village (2014-2015) and Changxindian Note (2014-ongoing). In exploring the village of Xiaojiahe East, Ma Lijiao played different characters. These included a young migrant conversing with people online and an “inappropriate” journalist investigating a modern ruin that had been occupied by migrant workers. Later, when he was taken away by the contractors in charge of the ruin, Ma reverted to the role of an innocent art student. I show how Ma’s film and photographs made it possible for people to show their quotidian lives and air the dilemmas that they faced in urban villages. Without directly judging the people with which he engaged in Xiaojiahe East Village, Ma’s project smuggled in a critique of the middle-class suburban lifestyle, the illegality of much real estate development, and the violence inherent in the privatisation of land.
Having discussed Ma’s project, I turn to that of two architects, Xiao Kong and Li Mo. Together, they critically rediscovered and mapped local everyday knowledge in the town of Changxindian. In addition to images of everyday architectural structures, they Xiao and Mo produced a board game about local knowledge. Having been invited to play the game, local residents participated in an unexpected and inappropriate/d way. By stealing the cards used in the game, players reclaimed knowledge about their local area. This stood in contrast with the local government’s attempts to capitalise on narratives of local history in gentrifying the town and developing tourism. I examine the risks that attend quotidian criticality: in revealing the conditions in urban villages without further engaging with the problems thus exposed, the projects ran the risk of becoming little more than new sources of information for consumption among urbanites. The risk of romanticising everyday life in the face of urban regeneration and privatisation was also pressing.

The first of the subprojects introduced here rendered the quotidian aspects of the urban village life visible by adopting different characters. The second made newly relevant everyday knowledge in, and the history of, a suburban town by prompting actions on the part of local residents. Both projects hold out ways of redistributing the sensible on the urban fringe. I am referring, here, to Jacques Rancière’s approach to aesthetics and politics, which centres on the “redistribution of the sensible”, which he describes as “a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (2006, 13).

Oliver Marchant has criticised how Rancière’s theory of “the redistribution of the sensible” has become a spontaneous ideology that legitimises unpolitical art as political by pronouncing the dictum (2015, 109-110). This “trope of art being political by being un-political”, he argues, “serves as a cover-up for the anti-political ideology of the proponents of the art field who have come under pressure to defend “business as usual” against political factions within their own field” (2015, 110,
emphasis mine). These latter factions, in contrast to artists concerned to redistribute the sensible, immerse themselves in social struggle, and engage in political practices of organisation, agitation, and propaganda. At most, much complacent “critical art” is only critical within the discursively field of art. Accordingly, it is deemed “critical but safe” or “acceptably critical”. Marchant alerted me to the danger that, in applying Rancière’s theory, I might merely circulate a discourse of criticality (and perhaps even the “club” of political art) without rigorous reflection and scrutiny. Nonetheless, I use Rancière’s concept not to present an apolitical project as if it were political. Rather, I mean to explore how, in the context of an authoritarian regime, political criticality differs from direct political opposition and how it is embodied in socially engaged art practices. To be specific, I investigate how quotidian criticality redistributes what can be seen and heard about urban villages in Beijing. These projects, I claim, challenge negative stereotypes about these urban fringes and those who live there. In this way, they underline the agency exercised by local residents in reclaiming their quotidian knowledge.

To obtain research data pertaining to these two cases, I conducted individual interviews with the relevant artists as well as a walking ethnography. In this way, I had embodied, affective, and spatial experiences of the two urban villages in question. Cheng Yi’En argues that walking ethnography enables researchers to attune their bodies to “a host of affects and mundane vignettes of the city” (2014, 211). In the process, it also sensitises them to “the networks of rhythms weaving urban life into form” (ibid.). Walking, Cheng expands, is an “embodied practice, performative act, as well as relational movement” (2014, 212). In Xiaojiahe East, I acted as if I were a new graduate looking for cheap housing. In this guise, I could walk around the village (including the occupied construction site in which Ma’s project took place) without the guards suspecting me of anything untoward.

My conduct here might have been slightly questionable when it comes to research ethics, for I did not inform people in the village about my research. That
said, in an urban village in which residents and visitors were monitored on CCTV and disputes over land use went unresolved, revealing my identity and intentions might have put me into a tricky situation. I might have been stopped and interrogated by the authorities.\textsuperscript{28} Given that urban villages have become a sensitive issue, I had to strategically conceal my research if I was to walk around freely. To try to be as ethical as possible, I did not record any of the conversations that I had with people in the village, nor take any photographs of them in which their faces were visible. The method of walking ethnography allowed me to obtain embodied and affective experiences of everyday life in the urban villages in which the creative practitioners conducted their subprojects. This meant that I did not have to rely solely on second-hand materials produced by the artists.

I also employ visual analysis in attending to Ma Lijiao’s film and visual materials relating to other projects. Irit Rogoff points out that, in contemporary culture, the visual is intertwined with the auditory, spatiality, and the psychic dynamics of spectatorship. Accordingly,

visual culture opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another, lending ever-accruing layers of meanings and of subjective responses to each encounter we might have with film, TV, advertising, art works, buildings or urban environments. (1998, 14)

In approaching visual analysis in this study, I have borne three emphases in mind. First, I have no intention of making truth claims. Instead, I have tried to remain open in interpreting images. Second, I have sought to apprehend the messages and meanings that images produce and grasp the structures underlying such semiosis

\[\text{28 When I was taking a photo of the street in the village with my smart phone, a man paused and looked at me suspiciously, and he focused his phone camera on me. I was scared since he might call the local authority, so I shouted: “why are you taking pictures of me? I’m just hunting for a room!”}\]
(such as aesthetic value, social connotations, and power relationships both within and beyond the image). Third, I have not isolated images, but rather explored their intertextuality. By this, I mean that I have situate them in relation to sound and space (especially when looking at moving images). Far from excluding one another, these critical emphases are entangled and overlap. Still, each serves as a way of unpacking the concept of non-oppositional criticality.

**Dissertation overview**

I begin chapter 1 by providing background on critical Chinese contemporary art since late 1970s, emphasising four key turning points. I then review scholarship on art and visual culture that addresses urbanising China. After that, I introduce socially engaged art in China and theorise criticality as it is manifested in Chinese art. Finally, I broaden the scope of the chapter to include global discourses of socially engaged art. In particular, I identify three main positions on this field of practice. For the first position, socially engaged art is as a catalyst for social change. For the second, it is a nightmare for the democratic system. For the third, it proffers a means of imagining sustainable social institutions. Having charting the main contours of this discourse, I stress that my research is distinct in that it focuses on non-oppositional criticality. The subsequent four chapters analyse a series of case studies, in the course of which I described the four forms of non-oppositional criticality that I have identified. First, I elaborate upon reconfigurative criticality in the case of *Sunset Haircut Booth* and Theatre 44. Second, I described the connective criticality that emerges from the DMAS. Third, I reflect upon the uneasy criticality manifest in *Home*. And fourth, I explore quotidian criticality (and its attendant risks) in the case of two subprojects mounted as part of 5+1=6.

In this study, I argue that paying attention to various facets of non-oppositional criticality in socially engaged art practices allows us to look beyond received perspectives on critical art in China. For many, this art is critical simply “because it
criticises the authoritarian regime” or “opposes social and political injustice”. In thinking my way beyond these positions, I mean to recognise the different forms of criticality embodied in socially engaged art projects that do not simply oppose and critique dominant forms of power. Instead, they address certain issues in the urbanising society with care and daring, as well as test the boundaries of the censorship/surveillance/control machine.

In my conclusion, I show how my research contributes to discourses of critical art in China and global urban artistic practices more generally. In terms of the narrative of critical art in China, Wang has written, “although there has been a tenacious adherence to critical discourse, when specific art is concerned, most instances of critique are carefully disguised, while only a few are straightforward; some are totally evasive” (2010, 71). My research cuts against this view. I show that the criticality of socially engaged art not need not necessarily be discursive and disguised, for it does not set up the regime or certain social issues as targets of critique. Where they are critical in a non-oppositional way, socially engaged art practices do not hide their critique of the authorities or bury critical messages in artworks. Instead, they realise criticality by addressing social issues in the urbanising areas in ways that deviate slightly from established forms and practices. They work through inappropriate/d practices that, though neither expected nor welcomed by those in power, are not especially threatening to the regime. In addition, my study contributes to a global discussion on socially engaged art in that it brings to light practices that do not observe prevailing dichotomies between autonomous art and art that takes up social responsibilities, and state and society. The practices to which I attend in this study act outside of these binaries. They make space for connections, nurturing practices, alternative forms of education, experimentation, reflection, and civil action (sometimes with an anarchist undertone).

In the conclusion I also discuss the implications of this research in 2020. The situation regarding urbanisation in China has changed markedly since I commenced this research in 2015. For one thing, a number of urban villages in Beijing saw
widespread evictions in the winter 2017. What is more, state controls on freedom of expression have tightened significantly. What does it mean to talk about non-oppositional criticality in socially engaged art practices now? Finally, I reflect on the limitations of my research. Given the scope of the study, I was able to conduct fieldwork in just three cities. This meant that I had to leave out places such as Chengdu, where a pair of artists named Chen Jianjun and Cao Minghao have been making socially engaged art projects there for more than a decade. Moreover, the limited duration of my fieldwork meant that I could not witness some of the latest development in my case studies. It would have been intriguing, for example, had I been able to analyse the reformation in DMAS since 2018, which has flattened the power structure to form a collaborative autonomous group. That said, this study attends to a period in which civil society was suppressed but artists still had enjoyed some liberties in addressing social issues through non-oppositional art. This vocation has become more difficult and dangerous in 2020.

All of this only underlines the urgency of entering into searching discussions about socially engaged art. Such practices might be impossible in China for the moment, but they demonstrate an important yet neglected aspect of the place of contemporary art in Chinese society, which is currently characterised by suppression and control. In the conclusion I reflect on what the challenges faced by socially engaged art reveal about criticality, China, and how different forms of non-oppositional criticality clash and connect with one another.
Chapter 1. Positioning: Critical art, urban art, and socially engaged art in contemporary China, and beyond

This chapter sets the scene for the wider study by reviewing relevant literature on critical Chinese art (especially that which addresses urbanisation in China) and major global discourses on socially engaged art. In so doing, I answer the following series of questions. How do the socially engaged art projects at stake in this study stand in relation to Chinese critical art more widely since 1970s? How is my research situated in relation to the broader scholarship on the arts in urbanising China? How does my concept of non-oppositional criticality differ from what has been called “spectral criticality” in Chinese contemporary art? What is its relationship to forms of publicness in China? What characterises the landscape of socially engaged art in China? What are the main global narratives of socially engaged art and how is my research positioned in relation to these?

In begin by introducing four critical art movements in contemporary China and showing how my study relates to them. I then situate my work in relation to relevant literature on the art and visual culture of urbanising China. After that, I review scholarship on socially engaged art and criticality in China. In so doing, I indicate how existing concepts relate to the term that I am putting forward in this study, namely non-oppositional criticality. Finally, I position my research with regard to global discourses of socially engaged art.

Four turning points of critical art in China

In this section I discuss four turning points in the history of critical contemporary art in China. Since the central problematic running through this study is that of criticality, as embodied in socially engaged art in China, my concern here is to describe events and movements that have shaped the landscape of critical art in China. Four are especially relevant to my topic.
The first is the Stars Group’s exhibitions and protests, which are considered to have been significant in catalysing contemporary art in China.29 In mounting a critique of conservative art institutions and politics, the work of the Stars Group was bound up with waves of cultural liberalisation and democracy movements in China. The second is the 1985 New Wave, which produced a 1989 exhibition named China Avant-Garde. The mid to late 1980s were seen as an exciting period, in which artists broke free from restrictions and experimented with Western, modern, and contemporary arts practice. They also addressed Chinese political contexts and drew on traditional Chinese thought and practice.30 The third is the emergence of what is termed action art or performance art in the 1990s. Some of these practices engaged with social issues and spaces. As such, action art can be seen as the precursor of socially engaged art in China. As part of this broad movement, mail art was radically marginal and anti-institutional in adopting a directly oppositional form of critique. The fourth is an exhibition titled Fuck-off, which was held in Shanghai in 2000. In the global art scene, the show was revered as a critical and shocking showcase of Chinese contemporary art. Indeed, in breaking taboos and challenging moral limits, the exhibited artworks demonstrated another form of oppositional critique.

At least to some extent, these four events stand as critiques of official art institutions, the dominant political system, and prevailing discourses and approaches in the art world. In this section, I show these critiques were, in large part, oppositional in characters, although they sometimes compromised with the authorities. This emphasis on opposition has influenced how people think of critical art in China. Thanks to these precedents, the predominant view today is that critical art opposes, that it rebels against the powers that be or dominant orders. This is the perspective from which this study deviates. Visuality was a central part of these events and movements and is key to understanding them. Hence, I use images to

illustrate these turning points, rather than taking them as objects of close reading or visual analysis.

**The Stars Group**

The Stars Group’s actions in 1979 can be seen not only as breaking away from the kinds of practice that were allowed by the state, but as a means of fighting for freedom of expression in art and democracy. In 1978, just after the end of Cultural Revolution, a period of reform and opening up began. That same year, “a small democratic movement reopened the old question of how a powerful government might be reconciled with the exercise of influence from below” (Nathan 2012, xiii). Students and factory workers launched poster campaigns and underground journals to push forward an anti-authoritarian and anti-bureaucratic movement (Brodsgaard 1981, 774). Among these underground journals was the influential *Today* (Brodsgaard 1981b), which counted some members of the Stars Group among its editors.

Cultural practitioners in China were inspired by both modern Western writers and artists (such as Coleridge and Picasso) and traditional Chinese literature that had been banned during Cultural Revolution (such as the *Classics of Mountains and Seas* [山海經] and *Verses of Chu* [楚辭]).

31 Although they were inspired by these sources, they also aspired to find their own ways of expressing thought and feeling through art (Zang 2014). Zhang Xudong argues that although these developments appear to take the form of a dialogue between East and West, this belies an more significant internal narrative: namely, that of China’s continuous efforts to grapple with its own broken traditions, unfinished utopia, and ongoing crises and dilemmas.

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31 The *Classic of Mountains* is a Chinese classic text, and a compilation of mythic geography, (mythic) fauna and flora, witchcrafts, shamanism, mythologies and so on. *Verses of Chu or Chu Ci* is an anthology of Chinese poetry traditionally attributed mainly to Qu Yuan and Song Yu from the Warring States period (ended 221 BC). However, about half of the poems seem to have been composed several centuries later, during the Han dynasty.
Despite these efforts, which go back to the turbulent beginning of the twentieth century, official art institutions remained as rigid and authoritative as ever (Lv 2013, 1044).

Without much institutional support, some writers and painters, most of whom also worked in factories, sought to organise an exhibition themselves at the gallery of the Beijing Art Association in 1979. Although their proposal was accepted, the gallery’s full schedule dictated that the exhibition be postponed by a year. The artists, however, wanted to display their works as soon as possible. Accordingly, they decided to put an open-air exhibition on 27 September 1979. Works were hung on the iron fence surrounding a small garden adjoining the National Art Gallery (Lv 2013, 1046). More than 150 oil paintings, ink and wash paintings, pen drawings, woodcut prints, and carved wooden statues were exhibited, attracting considerable attention, including from full-time artists (ibid.). From 1980, the group began calling themselves the Stars Group (星星画会). In so doing, they may have been critically opposing themselves to the Red Sun (红太阳), a term used to refer to Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution.

The group included Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Yan Li, Wang Keping, Zhong Aecheng, Li Shuang, and Ai Weiwei. Figure 4 shows that people looked at these artworks with great curiosity. The works deviated from socialist realism, which was authorised by the state (Zheng 2012, 1). Indeed, the artworks exhibit a variety of styles (including expressionism, abstraction, and absurdism, to name but a few) and feature motifs concerned individual feelings, love, and sex, alongside political symbolism.
On the second day of the exhibition, the local police requested that the artworks be taken down. Still, the artists persisted with the exhibition. On the third day, the police accused them of “disturbing the mass’s normal life and social order” and shut the exhibition down (Shigebao 2010). On 1 October 1979, the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the PRC the artists (in coordinated with people working for an unofficial publication) sued Dongcheng District Police. What is more, they staged what they called a “Demonstration to Uphold the Constitution”, which they marched from Xidan Democracy Wall to Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China. This protest demanded freedom of expression (including in the arts) and democratic rights. After negotiations, which were mediated by the semi-official Artists Association, the Starts show was permitted to continue in Huafang Pavilion in Beihai Park (Zheng 2012, 3).

A second Stars exhibition took place in the National Art Gallery in August 1980, attracting more than 80,000 visitors (ibid.). For Zheng Bo, these shows were put on in the pursuit of publicness. Artists and their allies, Zheng suggests, strove to
establish free expression in public for both individual citizens and collectives, so that issues of common concern could be defined and addressed (2012, 6).

By experimenting in modernist art, the Stars Group liberated themselves from established approaches to the arts, which served official politics. Furthermore, their direct protest calling for democracy and freedom accounted to an oppositional critique. That said, the Stars exhibition was also critical in a less oppositional way. The self-taught artists acted as an unauthorised collectivity in public space, outside of art institutions. This was the first time that this had happened since 1949. Arguably the exhibition was preceded by independent literature magazines, which had already reached out to not only the literati, but the general public too. Nonetheless, the Stars exhibition was the first such initiative to have been undertaken in public space and attract passersby as well as professional artists. Without intending to mount a campaign of political mobilisation or public denunciation (such as the Cultural Revolution), the Stars activated public space as a forum for exhibition, expression, and discussion. This form of collective action can also be discerned in some of the projects studied in this research, most obviously in the case of the DMAS. Still, there are differences. Today collectives tend to be more fluid and heterogeneous. Moreover, they create public space for self organisation and negotiation – this was the case, for instance, with Sunset Haircut Booth and Theatre 44.

1985 New Wave and China/Avant-Garde in 1989

In the 1980s, artists continued along the path forged in the late 1970s and strove for freedom in the artistic domain. As I have mentioned, the decade between 1979 and 1989 was marked by reform and modernisation. Translated Western philosophy and literature garnered the attention of many young people in China, including poets and artists. Sartre, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Freud, and Bergson were among
artists’ favourite thinkers. Different schools of literature (including expressionism, futurism, existentialism, absurdism, and magical realism) inspired new forms of artistic creation.

In 1985, art critics coined the term “New Wave” to describe burgeoning avant-garde movements in various regions of China at the time. These movements spanned various artistic fields, from literature (both prose and poetry), film, and music. Artists grouped together to experiment with different strands of modern art, including abstraction, dadaism, surrealism, and pop art (Kong 2009, 34). This theory-inspired approach to artistic creation, which characterised Chinese art in the 1980s, is also evident in the contemporary work of Theatre 44. This group’s practices, however, are inspired not by modernist thought by rather by the situationists, as well as Deleuze and Guattari.

![Figure 5. The Southern Artists Salon’s first experimental show, 1986. Photograph courtesy of Asian Art Archive.](image)

From 1986, however, official institutions made an effort to organise these disparate independent activities into a cohesive “movement” (Grube 2013). Wu Hung argues that the ’85 New Wave movement’s “modern” identity and agenda
appears to be a theoretical construct articulated by its leading academics; the actual movement was much more complex and diverse (2011, 7). Although many avant-garde artists worked within the painterly repertoire of Euro-American modernisms (Grube 2013) others deviated from this. Notable in this regard in the Southern Artists Salon, which was established in Guangzhou in March 1986. Instead of pursuing modernist art experimentation, this group focused on making contemporary art that connected to its surrounding social and cultural environment (Wang and Yung 2008, 4).32

Although it only lasted for one year (1986-1987), the Southern Artists Salon gathered together young people from a wide range of different disciplines, including philosophy, social science, film studies, science, and dance (Wang and Yung 2008). The Salon did not have a fixed location. Still, the group met to read philosophy, discuss radical scientific research, exchange ideas across disciplinary divisions, and break the boundaries of different art forms. They produced what was called the “New Plastic Art”, which mixed painting, sculpture, dance, music, and performance art.

Their first exhibition, which presented collectively created experiments, was held in 1986 (Lin and Wu 2013) (see fig. 5). The interdisciplinary, multimedia, and experimental work of Southern Artists Salon demonstrated a critical turn towards the contemporary in Chinese art during in 1980s. This non-oppositional form of criticality resonates with the work of Theatre 44, which would also emerge in Guangzhou, though thirty years later. In my analysis of Theatre 44, though, I try to

32 The key figure in the Southern Artists Salon, artist Wang Du, attended the Zhuhai Meeting (85 New Wave Large Scale Slide Show and Conference) in which the representatives of the artist groups presented their artworks in slides. Interestingly, Wang stated: “in my opinion, modern art is the type of art at the beginning of the (20th) century, and it’s not what we should talk about now. If there’s someone who doesn’t know about modern art, he can go home and make up the missed lessons by himself. If we take modern art as the main topic of our discussion today and mislead so many exciting young artists, that would be too ridiculous!”. He later pointed out that artists were contemporary beings and thus should make contemporary art, which should relate to the society and cultural environment (D. Wang & Yung, 2008).
highlight the reconfigurative aspect of their critical practice, rather than emphasising how their work fits into the development of contemporary art in China.

In 1986, a meeting on the New Wave took place in Zhuhai in southern China, at which artists and critics discussed the artworks presented in slides sent from all around China. The participants wanted to deepen their exploration of emerging art movements. To that end, they resolved to organise a national exhibition of modern art (Lv 2013, 1182). The exhibition, which was hosted by the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, opened on 5 February 1989. It displayed 297 artworks by 186 officially selected artists (this count does not include a few happenings and performance pieces by unselected artists that took place during the opening (Ma 2007).

The exhibition was a deliberate effort to legitimise avant-garde art in the 1980s by presenting it to the public in an official national institution. Although it was not entirely inclusive, it tried to showcase different trends that had set in in Chinese art since the emergence of New Wave. The show featured some provocative works that reacted critically to prominent issues in Chinese culture and society. With biting humour, Huang Yongping’s installation *The History of Chinese Art and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987) commented on the struggles and possibilities thrown up by merging Eastern and Western artistic traditions. This had been a topic of experiment and debate since late 1970s.

There were also unannounced performance art pieces, such as Wu Shanzhuan’s *Big Business* (1989), in which the artist sold prawns in the museum. In mimicking the commercialisation of society, this work would prove prescient given the two decades of market expansion to come. Another intervention was made by Xiao Lu in front of her installation *Dialogue* (1989) (see fig. 6). The installation was made up of two telephone booths, one of which contained the image of a woman

33 However, the contemporary art practices in the south were not sufficiently presented in the exhibition.
with her back to the viewer, the other featuring the image of a man. A telephone’s earpiece dangled before a mirror standing between the booths. Taking up a pistol, Xiao shot her own reflection in the mirror twice. This work, she explained, was about her personal emotions and relationship (Hu, 2011). As such, it had nothing to do with politics, although others interpreted it as an artistic reflection of political unrest in the time. It was seen as “the closing ceremony of avant-garde art”, which “pushed avant-garde art towards the critical point: the limit of the new concepts and new forms that avant-garde artists imposed on society” (Li 2000, 254).

The exhibition was shut down for two days due to Xiao’s performance. After a second closure, it reopened for a few more days. The performances that

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34 After the first gunshot, the artist she liked back then, Tang Song, who had known about her plan and who was on the scene, yelled “another shot!”. He was arrested; later, she surrendered herself to the police and claimed that this was her artwork. Yet art critics considered the work as authored by both of them. (Hu 2011)

35 The second closure was caused by the anonymous bomb that sent to the museum, the municipal government, and Beijing Public Security Bureau.
accompanied it drew attention from the media both at home and abroad, triggering heated debates about avant-garde art in China. Gao Minglu, one of the exhibition’s organisers, commented that:

compared to the works in 1985 New Wave, the art works in the show were less serious, and performances were rather absurd, and more Dadaist ... the roughness is due to the mental state [of the artists] ... This exhibition, facing the society and the fine art world, it creates a tragic atmosphere, and it presents a rogue mentality [流氓意识]. It plummets from heroism and a sense of tragedy to a condition of life that resembles the Chinese Dionysian spirit in Red Sorghum. (Quoted in Lv 2013, 1188)

According to Wu Hung:

First, although it included many works that were radical and even shocking, the notion of a comprehensive, ‘national’, exhibition was traditional and, ironically, found its immediate origin in the official National Art Exhibitions. Second, although its organisers gave much thought to the location of this exhibition, there was little discussion about how to change the system of art exhibition in China. (2008a, 158)

These passages indicate that, on the one hand, the exhibition epitomised the liberal, individualist spirit of experimental artistic practices in 1980s. In this, the works reflected the tragedy of contemporaneous democratic movements. On the other hand, though, it did not refresh the art system. Instead, it betrayed a wish to enter official art institutions and for recognised by the authorities.

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36 Red Sorghum is a 1988 Chinese film about a young woman's life working on a distillery for sorghum liquor. It is based on the novel Red Sorghum Clan by Nobel laureate Mo Yan.
Some of the works in the exhibition responded to social and political issues of the time, such as commercialisation and China’s political relationship with the United States. This aspect of the show can be compared with current socially engaged art projects, which tackle sensitive social issues. These resonances are brought into focus by the following passage by Paul Gladston:

Avant-garde art produced within the PRC since the 1980s can thus be understood to occupy a highly indeterminate position in relation to the prevailing socio-political/economic mainstream within the PRC; one in which it has shuttled continually. ... The relationship between public political discourse and artistic practice in the PRC may then be described as a fundamentally entangled and highly context dependent one, in which the latter is (in much the same way as the scholar-gentry art that preceded it) simultaneously complicit with and a recognised site of largely oblique moral-critical resistance to established political authority (2016a, 113).

For Gladston, arts practices that antagonise and critique official art institutions are simultaneously complicit with and resistant to the authorities. The socially engaged art practices explored in this study, however, have neither striven to attain official recognition nor explicitly targeted the political establishment. This research focuses the strategies and tactics through which contemporary practitioners approach social and political issues.

*Experimental art and mail art in the 1990s*

The reforms of the 1990s brought about unprecedented changes in China’s economy, politics, and culture. Chinese society was transformed: having been in thrall to communist ideology, it now embraced consumerism. Art’s responsibilities, and the social problems that it faced, were shifting (Liang 2007, 4). Performance art
in China emerged in late 1980s. As I have mentioned, some happenings took place in the avant-garde exhibition in 1989; in the 1990s the genre flourished. “Performance art”, Hentyle Yapp proposes, “is a site that involves locating the body at a particular historical moment, physical space, and aesthetic experience. As such, this art form provides the opportunity to not simply reflect on politics, but also to shape its contours” (2013). With this in mind, I now introduce some performance artworks and one mail art project that critically reflected on and reacted to society and politics.

According to an artist named Zhuang Hui, the environment for art deteriorated in the wake of the suppression of democratic movements in 1989. Having been initiated by the Communist Party in 1986, the anti-capitalist liberalisation program had culminated in bloodshed in 1989. All artworks made after 1985 that were perceived as modernist were now deemed to be the cultural artefacts of Western capitalist liberalisation and thus suppressed. The art world was silent (Xu and Zhuang 2014). Zhuang Hui recounts how he and other artists “organised a performance art project [named] Serving People (1992), in which we went to the rural area to screen films for farmers, and put up a huge slogan ‘Serving People’ in the square of the village” (ibid.). Dressing themselves in the same, they were immediately arrested and their homes searched. They were released the following day (ibid.). Zhuang’s reaction to the suffocating cultural environment in Chinese society drew on the official socialist narrative of the Mao era. This was a non-oppositional strategy, designed to make space for art to tackle cultural and social issues. This strategy was also employed in one of my case studies, Sunset Haircut Booth, in which a senior citizen appropriated government slogans. In this way, he could express himself without endangering the public space that he had constructed.

According to the art historian Wu Hung:
in the mid- to late 1990s, as the marketisation of Chinese avant-garde art became possible, artists began to stop regarding official recognition as the ultimate objective of their endeavours. Instead, the ‘inner circle’ came into being and took its place. As art dealers, galleries, curators, and art critics constituted every sector of the new ecology, designating ‘artists’ as such was the result of a ‘collaborative’ process (2010, 309).

The inner circle and art market were not necessarily inclusive, though. Indeed, the market did not encompass artists working outside the main centres of art, such as Beijing.

![Figure 7. Lin Yilin’s Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road, 1995. Photograph courtesy of Lin Yilin and Tang Contemporary.](image)

Another critical performance was Lin Yilin’s *Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road* (1995). In this action, Lin built a wall out of bricks across Lin He Road in Guangzhou, a busy main road leading to train station. One by one, he stacked the bricks on top of one another until the wall blacked the width of the road. This took
him ninety minutes (see fig. 7). Reflecting on the performance, the curator Hou Hanru writes:

hours of labour rendered the commonplace brick into a moving wall, but this moving wall itself was like a surprising monster that interrupted and intercepted the busy traffic ... this unexpected interruption created a void in the busy and dense city. If the rapid changes to the cityscape and people’s busier lives are due to the demands of economic growth, the temporary ‘hollowness’ created by Lin is the moment when people in the metropolis contemplate what has changed inside them (Hou 2016).

Lin’s performance/intervention reacted to the transformation of the city by interrupting the urban flow by building a brick wall – the very symbol of construction and development. In this way he temporally changed a space usually dedicated to traffic into a site of performance and reflection. Theatre 44 similarly intervened in urban spaces, turning them into momentary public spaces for performance and political, poetic, and aesthetic encounters. In so doing, they allowed urban dwellers to reimagine the possibilities of public space in the city.

In the 1990s Lin was the member of a group of four Guangzhou-based artists named the Big Tail Elephants. Three members (Lin included) had been part of the Southern Artists Salon in mid 1980s. Unlike other artists groups of the time, which had a centralised structure, the Big Tail Elephants consciously opted for a dispersed and non-hierarchical approach. As such, the group “had a strong anarchistic inclination” (Philip Tarini quoted in Fu 2017). As one of its members, Chen Shaoxiong (1962-2016), put it:

we must guarantee each member’s independence and rights. When we chatted with each other, we knew that in artists’ groups such as the Southern Artists Salon, there were some leaders who had great energy, whose art was
great, but this would lead to the loss of some other members’ individuality, which was the thing that we Big Tail Elephants wanted to secure. We had the one vote veto rule because of that (Chen Shaoxiong quoted in Fu 2017).

This structure constituted a form of criticality in that the group cut against the contemporaneous trend towards centralisation. Instead, in organising themselves they adopted Derridean anarchy.

In both some critical experimental art practices and works of mail art, an artist named Zhang Shengquan mounted a strong critique of institutionalism. Coming from Datong (Shanxi Province), Zhang was among those who felt rejected by the “inner circle” in contemporary in Beijing. In 1993 he began making his mail art. First, he edited and printed ideas and sketches for art installations and performances, along with his poems, notes of art and proposals for other projects in the form of a thirteen-page periodical. He then produced fifty copies of the periodical, and mailed them to important artists and critics in major cities (Zhu 2016). In 1997, he wrote the Confession Manifesto, in which he states: “from 1 July 1997, anybody can realise any of my sketches and ideas or alter them as they will (of course myself included); the authorship belongs to whoever realises it first” (Zhang quoted in Zhu 2016). He radically denounced the exclusivity and enclosure of artistic circles, in addition to the conception of the artist as author of art and artworks. He also rejected that art is simply a commercial product authored and produced by the artist.

Although they are less radical and specific than Zhang’s mail art, the projects featured in this study do not try to enter the main arenas of contemporary art in China. They neither attempt to ingratiate themselves with museum directors, curators, collectors, and artists in Beijing and Shanghai nor totally reject the art system. Instead of performing an avant-garde gesture of self-marginalisation in the manner of Zhang’s mail art, the practitioners on whom I focus operate in social spaces outside of art institutions. (It should be acknowledged, though, that they
have sometimes strategically exhibited inside institutions so as to reach more people and attract potential participants in the socially engaged art practices.)

**Fuck off (2000)**

On 4 November 2000, an exhibition titled *Fuck Off* in English and *Uncooperative Approach* (不合作方式) in Chinese took place in a warehouse near Suzhou Creek in the suburbs of Shanghai. It coincided with the first official contemporary art biennale in China, Shanghai Biennale in 2000. In this exhibition, which was curated by Ai Weiwei and the art critic and curator Feng Boyi, artists presented all kinds of visceral work under the pretext of art (Berghuis 2004, 712). In comparison with the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, *Fuck Off* broke taboos in more daring ways. A censored piece by Xu Tan named *Reconstruction Project for NO.14 Sanyu Road* (1995) presented photographs that suggested a man and woman having sexual intercourse alongside with photos of the building of NO.14 Sanyu Road, and a sketch of the reconstruction plan for this building. He An’s work *Fifteen Reasons for Fashion No. 2: Hurt* (2000) featured a half-naked woman displaying a wound on her thigh. A description to one side stated: “the parts chosen to bear the wounds: abdomen and leg; the types of the wounds chosen: burn and knife wound; favourite entertainment: Ecstasy and Meth; profession: Ms. PR” (He 2000, 47). Yang Zhichao’s *Planting Grass* (2000) involved two young nurses planting three stalks of young grass in the artist’s back. The performance took place without anaesthetic (Berghuis 2004, 711-712).

The most controversial work of the exhibition was performance named *Eating People* (2000) by Zhu Yu, who was often referred to as “Eating Baby”. According to theatre maker Zhao Chuan, who was present at the exhibition’s opening, *Eating People* was not actually displayed, although it was included in the

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37 In the Chinese context, the term “public relationship ladies” (公关小姐) is associated with prostitution.
catalogue (Zhao 2010). Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s installation *Killing Soul* (2000) featured a fierce dog that had been embalmed under the intense light of a spotlight. Smoke emanated from its head due to the temperature generated by the light.

There were some unsettling works by female artists. Cao Fei’s video *Chain* (2000), which drew upon the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and subcultures, focused on fleshliness and organs (see fig. 8). Chen Lingyang’s work *Hanging Scroll* (1999) was comprised of a long scroll of toilet paper stained with her menstrual blood. Gladston characterises these two works as “neo avant-garde attempts both to transgress and to question the legitimacy of established moral boundaries” (2016b, 129). Much the same could be said of other works in the show, not least Zhu Yu’s.

![Figure 8. A series of stills from Cao Fei’s video Chain, 2000. Photographs courtesy of Cao Fei.](image)

These provocative and daring works expressed the organisers’ critical and resistant attitude. In the curatorial statement, they claimed that:

in today’s art, the ‘alternative’ is playing the role of revising and criticising the discourse of power and mass convention. In an uncooperative and uncompromisable way, it self-consciously resists the threat of assimilation and
vulgarisation. ... Such a cultural attitude is obviously exclusive and alienated. It aims at dealing with such themes as cultural power, art institutions, artistic trends, communication between the East and West, exoticism, post-modernism and post-colonialism, etc. (Ai and Feng 2000, 9).

Feng Boyi further clarified their position in an interview: “Do not cooperate with contemporary mainstream trends in China,” he said, “do not cooperate with the established structure of today’s art world, do not cooperate with the Western standard” (Ai et al. 2001). By presenting this uncooperative stance to the authorities and trendy discourses circulating in the art world, Fuck Off positioned itself as a transgressive alternative form of exhibition. It was considered a piece of “iconoclastic posturing [that] not only stole the limelight from the official Biennial, but also significantly contributed to the counter-exhibition’s legacy as a provocative albeit conflicted phenomenon, both posited against and symptomatic of this new age of internationalism” (Teo 2012, 176).

Interestingly, for all their radical and critical posturing, the organisers including the curators Ai and Feng; the Chinese/Australian director of the Eastlink Gallery Li Liang; and participating artists. This confirmed that the organisers had actually conducted censored themselves (自我监控) in advance of the exhibition opening (Berghuis 2004, 718). This compromise can be seen as a strategy to save the exhibition from being shut down, at least before it had even opened. Still, complaints from some visitors and reports about the live performance Planting Grass (2000) led the Shanghai police to crack down on the show (ibid.).

Reflecting on the criticality at stake in this exhibition, Wu Hung questions what “alternative” it put forward, beyond their organisers’ self-positioning, attitude, and verbal assertions (2008a, 183). Indeed, there was no real confrontation between the Biennale and Fuck Off was found in artworks they showed – both did not pursue stylistic and ideological solidarity (Wu 2008a, 183). For Zhao Chuan, Fuck
Off (2000) was the last breath of the “radical” art movement that began in the late 1970s:

The distinctive features of this kind of exhibition in the 1990s included refusing to be involved in a conventional exhibiting system, risking being cut short or closed down for their radical approaches, proclaiming their status as the avant-garde with radical actions and gestures, and having difficulties with spaces and funding (Zhao 2010).

Fuck Off put forward critiques in an oppositional manner. Resisting mainstream approaches and established centres of authority in the art system, it focused instead on the alternative and provocative. As such, it continued the legacy of the avant-garde. Some of the artworks were visually or viscerally shocking, while others challenged social taboos and moral boundaries. On a practical level, however, the exhibition played by the rules.

This study shows how avant-garde attitudes and critical discourses have been abandoned by socially engaged practitioners. This is because shocking, anti-establishment gestures might stand in the way of engaging with social groups – indeed, it might even put people off. One of my cases, the DMAS has adopted a different strategy. It connects with people in the neighbourhood and other practitioners by finding common ground and inventing collaborative and creative ways of addressing mutual needs.

**Brief review**

In this section on critical art in China, I have shown that Stars Group stood against conservative art institutions and limitations on democratic rights. The 1985 New Wave movement was an effort to break free of the restrictions on artistic expression imposed by the authorities. The 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition reflected on
socio-political unrest and commercialisation. The Southern Artists Salon (1986-1987) responded to contemporary social trends and practiced outside the avant-garde paradigm. In the 1990s, performance art, such as that practiced by Zhuang Hui, became less confrontational. Zhuang adopted the narrative and visual language of mainstream ideology so as to conduct socially engaged art. Zhang Shengquan’s mail art presented a radical critique of the art system’s exclusivity and capitalisation of authorship. The *Fuck Off* exhibition of 2000 transgressed and rebelled against social norms, taboos, and moral boundaries.

In these examples of critical art in China, we can see different oppositional attitudes critiques towards, and criticisms of, the establishment and political authorities, art institutions, and social norms. In the Southern Artists’ Salon’s exhibition and Zhuang Hui and his collaborators’ action art project *Serving People* (1992), we also find less confrontational but nonetheless critical ways of making art. These non-oppositional forms of artistic criticality are continued, enriched, and expanded in the projects that I go on to examine in this study.

**Art and criticality in China**

This section discusses particularly relevant literature on critical art and socially engaged art in China. Further, it shows how my research relates to these previous practices and studies. By way of this review, I underline the necessity of looking into Chinese socially engaged art that is critical in non-oppositional way. To this end, I survey discussions of a range of issues: of art’s sociological turn, critical art, socially engaged art, oppositional criticism, non-oppositional experimental art, criticality and publicness, and the communist legacy, and non-oppositional criticism. I elaborate on key debates concerning these topics in the following subsections.
Art’s sociological turn and critical art

In the early to mid 2000s, some art critics called for a sociological turn in Chinese art in China, by which they meant that contemporary art should delve into social issues and take social responsibility. It should be said that there were precursors for this turn towards the social. One was Yin Xiuzhen, whose art addressed issues such as water pollution in the 1990s (see fig. 9). Nonetheless, by the 2000s critics were calling for a new round of art oriented towards society. One of the key figures in this was Li Gongming, who argued that contemporary art should reflect upon and critique affairs in the public sphere. Artists, he proposed, should exercise the function of the intellectual and shoulder their share of responsibility in addressing social issues (Li 2003). As intellectuals, artists were to take ethical stances, intervene publicly in issues affecting the lower rungs of society, and fight for justice and equality. Li called on artists to deploy sociological methods, frameworks and theories in their practices to examine power structure, social mechanism, class
interests, equal rights, procedural justice, and moral system in the society (Li 2005, 149).

This is reinforced by Sun Zhenhua and Lu Hong, who write that:

In terms of art’s function, contemporary art’s sociological turn emphasises art’s intervention and interference in society and that contemporary art should care for social reality and have the courage to confront it and tackle social issues. (Sun and Lu 2006, 7).

The sociological turn is a call for art and artists to use art to engage with society in the public sphere. It is a call to regard art as a form of political and moral action that intervenes in society. Although these theorists do not use the term “socially engaged art”, these calls can be seen as advocating the kinds of practice that go under that rubric.

The power of socially engaged art lies in its capacity to critique social problems, inequality, and injustice. This resonates with my major concern in this study, namely criticality. All of this brings to mind the conceptual starting point of the piece of documentary theatre Home, in which students set out to confront inequality, injustice, and class, as embodied by migrant workers. However, this point of view presupposes that artists as intellectuals are better able to comprehend social issues than ordinary people, and that they, therefore, should intervene in ordinary people’s lives through their art. This does not always apply to my case studies, some of which show that art practitioners do not assume a superior or higher position with respect to other people. This comes across particularly clearly in the case of Sunset Haircut Booth, in which an artist and his team were on an equal footing with local people. Furthermore, those who might be poorer and less privileged than creative practitioners (such as the migrant workers) still have
agency. Indeed, their responses to artists can sometimes prompt the latter to reflect on themselves uneasily, as I show in my analysis of *Home*.

Alongside calls for a “sociological turn”, another concept is often used to promote art that tackles social issues. This is “critical art”, which has been put forward by the curator, artist, and theorist Wang Nanming. Wang stress how critical art triggers public discussion. Critical art, he suggests, is a form of civic politics:

> Artistic participation constitutes one of the many forms of participation and seeks to enrich multiple dimensions of social democracy. Participation as such also rejects grand narratives and pays attention to the daily experience and practice of ordinary people, and to issues of their concern and problems related to their civic rights. (2011, 251)

“The practice and theory of artists as social workers”, he expands elsewhere, “lifts art to a boundless field, in which art could penetrate into every aspect of society” (Wang 2013, 3). In writing that artists might be seen as social workers, Wang means that artists should take up the responsibility of penetrating into social problems. Drawing on the repertoire of their training, artists might invent grounded strategies for bringing about social change (ibid., 1-2). Similarly, my research looks into artistic practices that shoulder some social responsibilities and experiment with different forms of civic politics through art. As my study of the DMAS will show, however, its creative practitioners do not consider themselves as to be social workers/artists, for they also learn from the people to whom they render services. On this model, both artists and members of the public nurture and inspire one another.

Wang makes the insightful point that, as a form of civic politics, critical art opposed a “politics of centralism” – which involves rapid top-down change – “by emphasising the diversity and triviality of politics” (2011, 251-252). This argument resonates with my analysis of quotidian criticality. In this strand of the study, I look at art practices that, rather than aiming to alter the direction and grand narratives
of urban development, focus on everyday life and politics in urban villages. Another two more of my case studies – the DMAS and Sunset Haircut Booth – work with different actors in specific localities on a daily basis, instead of trying to bring about change in the short term. Although critical art is closely intertwined with non-confrontational practices, Wang does not theorise the criticality at stake in critical art. This study takes that next step of conceptualising the different forms of criticality implicit in critical art.

**Socially engaged art and oppositional criticality**

Socially engaged art in China addresses various issues, including environmental protection (as in Yin Xiuzhen’s *Washing the River* [1995]; see fig. 9) social problems following earthquakes (as in Ai Weiwei’s *Nian* [2008]), the human rights of Foxconn workers (as in Li Liao’s *Consumption* [2013]), and urbanisation (as in the collective project *Everyone’s East Lake* [2010]). 38 Although these practices are not antagonistic, they are still critical with respect to issues of concern. In global art discourse, however, Ai Weiwei is often heroised as the Chinese critical artist, fearlessly confronting the authoritarian state in his antagonistic works. The oppositional criticality that characterises some of his works, however, is not the only form of criticality on offer in socially engaged art in China. What is more, Ai’s strategies are not always confrontational.

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38 *Washing the River*: in August 1995, on Fu and Nan Rivers (Jin River), Yin Xiuzhen made ten cubic meters of river water into ice and placed it on the street. She invited passersby to wash the ice. When the ice blocks finally melted away, sludge remained on the ground, which reminded people of water pollution (A Wall Project 2020).

*Nian*: On April 24, 2010 at 00:51, Ai Weiwei (@aiww) started a Twitter campaign to commemorate students who perished in the earthquake in Sichuan on May 12, 2008. 3,444 friends from the Internet delivered voice recordings, the names of 5,205 perished were recited 12,140 times (Ai 2010).

*Consumption*: Li Liao worked in an assembly-line, making iPads, and forty-five days later, he used his wages to buy one. As an exhibit, he put the iPad on a pedestal, tacked up his uniform and badges, and framed his contract (Osnos 2013).
William A. Callahan sheds light on Ai Weiwei’s seemingly confrontational and critical practices by identifying the artist’s four narrative personas. First is “Ai the Heroic Warrior”, who criticises the Chinese government. Second is “Ai the Court Jester”, who plays with the Chinese state and Western media. Third is “Ai the Middleman”, who acts as a broker between China and the West, young and old people, and civil society and the state. Fourth is “Ai the Citizen Intellectual”, who variously works with and against the state, but always for the good of China (Callahan 2014). As Callahan shows, Ai is only critical in an oppositional sense when in assumes the role of the heroic warrior. Yet to a large extent this guide has come to define the predominant impression of critical Chinese art. This makes exploring non-oppositional critical practices by less-knower artists and collectives only more crucial.

**Non-oppositional critical art, critical art, and publicness**

This subsection reviews some scholarly works that broach the criticality at stake in Chinese contemporary art. Paul Gladston writes that in contemporary China

is simply not possible, as recent events surrounding the detention and effective silencing of Ai Weiwei amply demonstrate, to sustain any sort of public anti-authoritarian artistic practice, or to avoid the recuperation of such practices by the State. As a consequence, the vast majority of artists working either eschew any form of critical art or pursue forms of artistic criticality that are in plain sight of and do not take up definitively oppositional/seditionary positions in relation to governmental authority. (2016a, 113)

Art practices that directly confront and critique the authoritarian regime, Gladston suggests, are risky and unviable. It should be said, though, that Gladston’s definition of artistic criticality is based on the opposition of right and wrong. This is based on
the idea that critique, as I noted in the introduction, is what Foucault calls: “a police and where it is incapable of making the law” (2015, 36). This study deviates from this understanding of criticality. Instead, I investigate forms of criticality that are not oppositional or seditious.

Given that Gladston thinks that oppositional criticality in art cannot present itself directly, he focuses on how some works and practices manifest what he terms “spectral criticality”. Artworks that exhibit this form of criticality find knowing ways of making critical propositions, rather than assuming an oppositional stance outright. They affirm the possibility of difference within Chinese society, without making obvious reference to the country’s crisis-laden recent past (Gladston 2016a, 114). In making this point, Gladston analyses photographs by a pair of artists who name themselves Birdhead. These images, he argues, display spectral criticality, which is, by turns, present and absent. In this way, he “affirms the possibility of a ‘radically critical’ play intersecting immanently/intermittently with rather than in conspicuous opposition to prevailing discursive conditions within the PRC” (ibid.). Spectral criticality, he expands, occupies “a position of problematic discursive entanglement with established political authority” (2016a, 115). This type of artwork is elite, market friendly, relational, related to sub- and supra-national identities, and non-antagonistic (ibid.). In these non-oppositional approaches, Gladston sees “the potential to channel long-term effects of saprophytic socio-political decomposition and displacement in contrast to the all too easily recuperable antagonism espoused by Ai Weiwei” (2016a, 115). By this he means that this form of non-oppositional criticality, in the long run, might shift discursive conditions in China. In this shift, ideologies that promote a homogenous national identity and patriotism might be overtaken by discourses of local identity and place boundedness. Eventually, the solidity of such ideas might dissolve altogether.

Spectral criticality, however, does not ground and involve people. As its name suggests, it rather haunts and hovers. It avoids not only opposition to dominant powers, but also concrete engagement with social issues on the ground. The non-
oppositional critical practices explored in this study, by contrast, do not engage in a critical play with dominant discourses and the political authorities. Nor do they present themselves to the art market. In adopting non-oppositional modes of criticality, these socially engaged practices do not decompose and displace, but reconfigure, nurture, and connect.

Quoting Sean Cubitt, Robin Peckham sees politics as “a site that determines the boundaries of a system and the exclusion of other objects from the same rather than a question of the status of objects within this system” (2012, 252). He argues that an understanding of criticality – not, it should be noted, the activity of critique but rather the qualities of the category of the critical – might emerge to differentiate between the political and the critical, proposing criticality as a core aspect of contemporary cultural practice that focuses on the hyperreal, a lived reshuffling of what might have once, in pre-Althusserian times, been called the superstructure. (ibid.)

For Peckham, the criticality of some Chinese contemporary artworks lies in the difference between politics and critique. This difference is manifest in the creation of a potently ambiguous hyperreal, which deviates from dominant systems. Peckham’s articulation of criticality moves away from oppositionality in political critique, institutional critique, and the art world’s critique of political and social power structures. He sees criticality as simultaneously political and apolitical (2012, 261). Peckham’s approach, however, focuses largely on artistic languages and object-oriented ontologies in relation to artworks that do not directly engage with social issues and sometimes even exclude human relationships. My research, in contrast, does not see art’s engagement with society as a form of politics. My articulation of criticality emphasises art’s non-oppositional mode of addressing social problems and the relationships that this facilitates both among people and between people and places.
Bright Hopfener reflects on the understanding of critique in European philosophies such as Kant’s and Foucault’s, and she departs from this notion of criticality as “confrontational and oppositional questioning of authority in order to reach autonomy” (2012, 204). In analysing moving-image installations by two Chinese artists (Zhang Peili and Wang Gongxin), Hopfener contends that both artists “seem to critically negotiate criticality between a European genealogy of dualistic critique as outlined by Foucault and an involved or embodied criticality that implies critique not outside but inside, as criticality of ‘reality’ as lived” (2012, 205). For her, criticality is about “confusing and dis-harmonising certain cosmic structures or societal hierarchies” (2012, 204).

In a similar vein, in setting out my conception of non-oppositional criticality I have referred to Irit Rogoff’s notion of “embodied criticality”. Hopfener reflects on criticality by way of an analysis of the relations among reality, lived experience, and video installations. She how how Zhang’s and Wang’s works “implicitly propose the concept of the artist and the viewer as embodied participants and constituents of the artwork” (2012, 194). Moving from video art to socially engaged art, I have chosen to mobilise the term “embodied criticality” in investigating embodied actions in this field confuse and trouble the harmony of certain power structures.

Thomas Berghuis contends that experimental art in China in the 1990s and early 2000s, and above all performance art, sought to both demystify and politicise art. In positioning itself as a means of initiating direct public action, art became a vehicle for social recognition. What is more, artists were motivated by a desire to bring about a new social consciousness of the challenges to be faced by Chinese society in the context of rapid and far-reading social and economic change (Berghuis 2012, 150-151). According to Berghuis, the criticality of experimental art is bound up with publicness. Quoting Adorno, Berghuis argues that “publicness is central to the ‘reconstituting [of] political democracy’” (2012, 143). Hence, art becomes critical when it “reclaims public space and organs of public opinion” (2012, 148). For Berghuis, criticality entails
not only an overcoming of the established dominance of ideological consciousness over art within China, but also the deliberate provoking of a social consciousness to address ongoing problems within Chinese politics and society, as well as a blind reliance on humanist principles and their didactic positioning in relation to social and political change in China (2012, 150).

Although it is closely related to publicness, Berghuis’s definition of criticality in Chinese experimental art is still caught up in the dialectical logic of critique. Here, art sets out to critique and overcome dominant ideologies in the art world. In seeking to instigate social change, critical art assumes a higher vantage point with respect to what it critiques. I argue that the reconfigurative criticality of socially engaged art is closely connected with public spaces. The publicness on show in Sunset Haircut Booth (2016-) and Theatre 44, however, does not consist in the project’s ability to spark public discussions about a certain social issue. Rather, it resides in the act of appropriating an open space and turning it into a public space dedicated to communal deliberation, conviviality, and embodied and affective encounters. Furthermore, the forms of criticality that I discuss in my research do not try to break away from preeminent values and approaches in the art world; these are not their point of departure.

Zheng Bo also urges the importance of publicness to art. His argumentation differs from Berghuis’s, however. On Zheng’s view, the pursuit of publicness has been a driver behind the development of Chinese contemporary art from the avant-garde art movements in the 1970s onwards (2012, 6-7). Behind the marketisation of art that set in during the 1990s, an undercurrent of practices have been increasingly concerned with publicness and public issues (2012, 8). A number of artists (including Zheng himself) have positioned their work in China’s fledging civil society and integrated art and activism (ibid.). Zheng suggests that socially engaged art “may nudge Chinese contemporary art towards a future that is not shaped exclusively by
the market and the state but also takes root in a dynamic civil society” (ibid.). The notion of publicness, he proposes, connects the various major concerns that characterise socially engaged art. As the diagram presented as figure 10 indicates, socially engaged art requires three sets of conditions (2012, 9).

![Diagram showing conditions of publicness](image)

**Figure 10. Zheng Bo’s diagrammatic representation of the conditions of publicness. (Diagram by Zheng Bo. The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects [Rochester: School of Arts and Sciences, University of Rochester, 2012], 13).**

For Zheng, in China all public pursuits are both public and counterpublic and Chinese public art features both public and counterpublic strategies (2012, 46). According to Zheng, this is caused by the lack of both guaranteed freedom of expression and a non-state social imaginary around which people can organise (ibid.). I agree that the institutional and legislative conditions that safeguard freedom of expression are lacking in China. In my analysis of reconfigurative
criticality in art focused on public space, however, I do not draw on Zheng’s framework. This is because I have reservations about his premise that in China there is no social imaginary around which people might organise autonomously. As my analysis of Sunset Haircut Booth shows, people are capable of organising themselves and deliberating matters of concern in their neighbourhood. Socially engaged art, I claim, can help invigorate and sustain grassroots civic initiatives. It is in this space that criticality emerges.

Whereas Zheng sees the public sphere as an independent space outside of the market and state, in this study I employ Philip Huang’s conceptualisation. For Huang, public space (which he terms “third space”) is a domain in which state and society negotiate and coexist with one another (1993, 216). The concept of third space allows me to investigate the non-oppositional criticality at work in how creative practitioners react to surveillance and intervention from above. Specifically, it allows me to recognise the presence of the authorities without then claiming that public spaces are not truly public or reaching for the public/counterpublic dichotomy.

*Socially engaged art: the communist legacy and non-oppositionality*

One strand of non-oppositional socially engaged art in China can be related to the communist legacy. Art critic, theorist, and curator Wang Chunchen argues that China has solid theoretical and practical traditions of socially interventionist art. In the 1920s, left-wing cultural groups called for “proletarian arts” (Wang 2010, 15-16). In 1930, the writer Lu Xun put forward the slogan “art for society’s sake”, urging that “artists must take close heed of the affairs of society” and “spread our ideas” through painting (quoted in Wang 2010,16). In Mao Zedong’s speeches on art and literature in Yan’an in 1942, he asserted that the life of the people is the only source for literature and art (Mao 1942).

Like Wang, Tan Chang argues that socially engaged art practices, which first
become prominent in China in the 1960s, are explicitly connected to the Marxist-Communist heritage (2012, 177). Chinese artists did not passively receive the legacy of Marxism and Western theories of art, Tan claims; rather, they deciphered and digested their history, responding critically to theoretical discourse set in motion by avant-gardists in the West (ibid.). A utopian vision of communism is still alive in Chinese contemporary art. Tan has analysed John Roberts’s Long March Project—A Walking Visual Display (2002), a communal art project that examines the concept of community, which it extends across various forms and practices. Tan argues that this project invents a new model of community, which pushes notions of collectivity and democracy beyond the ways in which they have been formulated by (socialist and capitalist) states (2012, 194). 39 The DMAS, one of my case studies, also involves the communal. However, its practices neither draw directly on the communist heritage nor adopt a vision of communal art. Instead, it focuses on a series of assemblages, which create connections of different kinds. As I argue later, this is critical at the time in which the authorities severely restrict grassroots organisations.

Wang Chunchen’s book not only relates contemporary socially engaged practices to the communist past, but offers variously stories of artistic interventions in contemporary Chinese society. “As freedom of speech is not fully secured and affirmed in this country,” Wang argues, “intervening in society in an artistic way becomes an indirect yet effective way of speaking and communicating” (2010, 26). Wang argues that these artistic social interventions play a role in the construction

39 Taking its title from the Chinese Red Army’s historical Long March from 1934 to 1936, “Long March—A Walking Visual Display” set out to recreate twenty sites along the 6000-mile historical trek, eventually realising twelve over four months, each composed of site-specific displays and discussions (Long March Project 2002).

Works include traditional Chinese ink painting, oil painting and sculpture, conceptual art, performance, video, sound, and site-specific installations, non-art, and so-called “folk” and amateur art. Many of the projects realised on-site during the journey also include workshops, symposiums, and the authorless or non-art happenings called Long March installations and Long March events. Participants work together, turning local resources into the international language of contemporary art, and conversely imbuing international art with a local context and meaning-making, as the Maoist dictum goes, “art for the people” (Asia Art Archive 2020).
of Chinese civil society and democratisation processes, in much the same way as the discourse of the sociological turn of contemporary art and critical art in the 2000s (ibid.). This argument resonates with Zheng’s idea that socially engaged art pursues publicness. It also echoes two chapters in this study, both of which treat arts projects that contribute to the development of civil society. Chapter 2 addresses the issue of the lack of public space for civic initiatives in China; chapter 3 looks at the restricted rights of assembly and association.

Also relevant is Wang’s view of critique and criticality. Art’s uniqueness, he claims, lies not in its didactic function, but its criticality (2010, 71). The term “intervention”, he suggests, is the mildest among “intervention, interference, critique”. Although “critique” the strongest, it is taboo in China (ibid.). If critique turns into outright opposition in the Chinese context, he warns, it can bring about the brutal destruction of both the critique and those who articulate it: “Any slip in diction could result in making it [critique] the critique of weapons rather than the weapon of critique” (ibid.). The possibility of a crackdown, Wang argues, artistic critique is often carefully disguised and seldom direct (ibid.), despite the fact that the word “criticality” is used frequently in discourses around art. This helps explain why artists turn to non-oppositional strategies: it is a means of avoiding directly criticising the authorities and social problems. Although Wang’s case studies are non-oppositional, this is not reflected in his theory. This study, in contrast, is dedicated to shedding some light on non-oppositional criticality.

**Brief Review**

Promoted by commentators such as the art historian and theorist Li Gongming, I began this section by discussing the sociological turn in art. In this “turn”, artists in China were called upon to take up social responsibilities (Li 2003). Art critic Wang Nanming put forward the idea that critical art is a form of civic politics. Furthermore, he calls for artists to act as social workers who use their artistic skills to invent
grounded strategies for bringing about social change (Wang 2011). I have argued that the sociological turn can be seen as the predecessor of socially engaged art in China. Indeed, the main issue at stake in this turn is art’s ability to tackle social issues such as inequality and injustice. These are also the concerns to which I attend in chapter 4, which deals with uneasy criticality. In this chapter, I show how urban cultural elites respond uneasily to the issues surrounding migrant workers, above all class segregation and inequality. What is more, I have described how they conducted an unsettling process of critique of both their own social standing and institutionalised socially engaged art. Wang Nanming emphasises that critical art should invent diverse strategies and quotidian civic politics so as to trigger bottom-up social change. This comes across in chapter 5, in which I explore quotidian criticality. What is more, in chapters 2 and 3 I emphasise the diversity of artistic strategies at work in both reconfigurative and connective criticality. For Wang, the criticality of art is closely intertwined with the formation of civil society, which resonates with this study.

Next, I pointed out that Ai Weiwei has become the key spokesperson in a global narrative of Chinese critical socially engaged art. This is primarily because he has used his art to fight the authoritarian regime. According to Callahan, however, only one of Ai’s four personas – namely the “heroic warrior” – fits into this antagonistic narrative. Besides, many other socially engaged art practices that do not accord with this emphasis on antagonism have been overlooked. This makes it all the more necessary for me to write about this broad array of practices in this study.

I then discussed Paul Gladston’s concept of spectral criticality (2016). Although it closely resembles my notion of non-oppositional criticality, spectral criticality still gestures towards oppositional critique, I have pointed out that non-oppositional criticality, unlike spectral criticality, does not involve antagonistic critique. I have also reviewed different perspectives on the correlation between critical art and publicness, and socially engaged art and publicness. With respect to
the former relationship, Thomas Berghuis argues that critical performance art generates publicness by reclaiming public space and opinion. In this way, stimulates the emerge of social consciousness as a means of addressing socio-political problems. Regarding the latter relationship, Zheng Bo contends that the pursuit of publicness has been the impetus of avant-garde and socially engaged art in China. Arts practice has also contributed to the development of a form of civil society that is outside of both the state and the market. In chapter 2, I adopt not Zheng’s but rather Philip Huang’s definition of public space, which Huang presents as a “third space” in which state and society negotiate and influence each other (1993, 216). I suggest that the correlation between criticality and publicness lies not in provoking public discussion and shaping public opinion, as Berghuis claims, but rather in transforming open spaces into public spaces.

Finally, I have discussed how the legacy of communism has shaped socially engaged art in China, as well as the communal aspect of the practices under consideration in this study. I have related this to chapter 3 in this study, which explores a case study in which the communal is embedded in different assemblages. Wang Chunchen has argued that social intervention on the part of artists serves as an indirect way of furtering democratisation and constructing a civil society (2010, 26). This echoes my argument in chapter 2 and 3, which relate to civil society in urban China.

**Art, visual culture, and urbanising China**

A sizeable scholarship addresses the relationship between art and visual culture on the one hand and urbanisation in China in the other. Yomi Braester’s book *Painting the City Red* (2010) analyses how film and theatre both shapes and records urban spaces in China and Taiwan since the 1940s. In one of my case studies, Theatre 44, artistic practice influences how people experience not only urban public spaces, but also the possibility of using public space to interact with others.
Wu Hung’s *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (2013), examines the changing significance of ruins as vehicles for cultural remembrance in Chinese art and visual culture from ancient times up to the present. It attends to an array of traditional and contemporary visual materials, including painting, architecture, photography, prints, and cinema, and looks at urban ruins in the works of the contemporary artists Yin Xiuzhen, Rong Rong, and Zhang Dali. Although *Xiaojiahe East Village Project* (which I discuss in chapter 5 of this study) also explored a modern ruin in one of Beijing’s urban villages, it was less concerned with cultural memory than urban conflicts – specifically over land use – on the city’s fringe.

Wang Meiqin’s book *Urbanisation and Contemporary Chinese Art* (2015) attends to eight case studies in exploring artists’ provocative responses to different urbanisation processes. Still, it does not foreground socially engaged art. In her new book, *Socially engaged art in China—Voices from Below* (2019), Wang investigates socially engaged art’s critical responses to and interventions in China’s socioeconomic transformation. Analysing the practices of eight professionals and three interrelated themes (social criticism, place construction, and personal development), Wang suggests that socially engaged art manifests a desire for a civil and just society among Chinese intellectuals. This desire, in turn, shapes socially engaged art. In Part II of the book, Wang investigates the connections among art, urban renewal, and grassroots community building in relation to lifestyle activism. She analyses the practice of Zheng Dazhen, a Quanzhou-based artist and curator turned cultural entrepreneur who, from 2011 onwards, has endeavoured to revitalise an old urban neighbourhood. Specifically, Zheng has tapped into the city government’s cultural heritage conservation discourse and promotion of cultural and creative industries (2019, 11).

In chapter 5 of this study I also address the issue of urban renewal by looking at a project named *Changxindian Note*. The two architects behind this project became interested in the old town of Changxindian (a Beijing suburb), which was
facing of an unstoppable top-down urban renewal plan. By creating a board game that drew on quotidian knowledge of Changxindian, the architects hoped to help keep the town’s memory alive. Unlike that imposed on the old neighbourhood in which Zheng practiced lifestyle activism, the regeneration plan foisted on Changxindian stated that its inhabitants would be relocated and land taken over by real estate developers. By 2019, most local people and migrants had been relocated or displaced.\textsuperscript{40} On Wang’s analysis the criticality of lifestyle activism lies in the cooperation among local people in tapping into official policy. The quotidian criticality of \textit{Changxindian Note}, in contrast, is manifested in how peoples’ unexpected and inappropriate actions reactivate local memories.

In an article of 2015, Elizabeth Parke compares scrawled telephone numbers advertising a variety of services to migrant workers in Beijing with contemporary Chinese artworks. Whereas the telephone numbers amount, she claims, to an “unsigned public calligraphic practice”, the artworks depict, exploit, and represent migrant workers in order to shed new light on their (in)visibility as the “human infrastructure” of Chinese cities (2015, 226). As one of my cases studies, I attend to a piece of documentary theatre named named \textit{Home}. In it, theatre studies students had to face up to the fact that migrant workers are not only a largely invisible human infrastructure, but also individuals with the agency to refuse to be represented by the students in their art.

The three common global discourses on socially engaged art

Western scholars and artists have theorised and experimented with relational art, participatory art, socially engaged art, and socially engaged art for decades, building upon earlier urban interventions on the part of the Situationist International in the 1960s. I do not intend to summarise the abundant literature on socially engaged art.

\textsuperscript{40} This is according to the update of 5+1=6. See Second Floor Publishing Institute 2019.
Rather, to situate my research in relation to global discussions, this section introduces three strands of discourse. In the first, socially engaged art is presented as a catalyst for social transformation. In the second, participatory or socially collaborative art is seen as a nightmare for democratic systems. In the first, socially engaged art is grasped as a way of imagining sustainable social institutions.

**Socially engaged art as a catalyst for social transformation**

In 1991 the American artist, writer and educator Suzanne Lacy coined the term “new genre public art” to define instances of public art that were not sculptures in public space, but works of art made in the public interest. The spaces in which such works are situated, Lacy suggests, are “filled with the relationship between artist and audience” (1994, 35). New genre public art has the urge to involve the marginalised social groups and bring people together to deal with key issues of the day (ibid.).

In a similar vein, Grant Kester emphasises how some contemporary artists and art collectives have defined their practice around facilitating dialogue among diverse communities. Kester calls this “dialogical art.” Dialogical art, he shows, adopts performative and process-based approaches so as to contrive creative and collaborative encounters and conversations that go well beyond the confines of art institutions (2004, 1). These exchanges can precipitate powerful changes in their participants’ consciousness, potentially leading to substantial change in policy or society at large (ibid.). “It’s the promise of collaborative aesthetic experience”, writes Kester, “to prefigure another set of possibilities, to enact change and not simply represent a priori positions” (2005, 32). Kester also argues that collaborative practices have proliferated since the mid-2000s, as part of a cyclical paradigm shift within the field of art, even as the nature of this shift involves an increasing permeability between “art” and other zones of symbolic production (urbanism, environmental activism, social work, etc.)
While they may be implicated in forms of collective action that take up an oppositional or antagonistic relationship to particular sites of power, they differentiate this antagonism from the modes of self-reflexive sociality necessary to create solidarity within a given organisational structure. (2011, 65).

Despite the fact that some of his works directly oppose the authorities, Ai Weiwei’s practice can be seen as motivated by a similar impulse – namely, to pursue social justice, provoke political reaction, and trigger social change.

In his analysis of performance art, Thomas Berghuis also presumes that socially engaged art has progressive potential and is ethically responsibility. This also applies to some of Wang Chunchen’s examples. I am thinking particularly of Guan Shi’s project on the former mining town of Baiyin, which sought to trigger reflection and even change (Wang 2010, 63).

My research partly resonates with this discourse. This goes especially for the case studies that manifest reconfigurative criticality, which reconfigure open spaces such that they become civic public spaces. It also applies to the practices presented in chapter 5 on quotidian criticality. These socially engaged art practices made it possible for people to reclaim quotidian knowledge and effect how it is presented. Yet the practitioners behind these projects never explicitly promised to bring about social change through their projects. What is more, they have deliberately foregone antagonistic critique so as to help garner support among others. Given that in China infrastructural support for socially engaged art is lacking and the political situation unfavourable to civic initiatives, socially engaged art practitioners often find themselves having to negotiate with the authorities. This is necessary if they are to create spaces and social institutions in which civic initiatives can take place.  

41 Direct activism has been suppressed in mainland China. See Cohen 2017, Fu 2017.
Socially engaged art as a way of imagining sustainable social institutions

Drawing on the daily lessons learned by any theatre ensemble, Shannon Jackson suggests that as an art form theatrical performance has always been cross-disciplinary, duration, and collective, requiring systemic coordination (2011, 14). Accordingly, she explores how art practices contribute to interdependent forms of social imagining. “Whether cast in aesthetic or social terms,” she writes, “freedom and expression are not opposed to obligation and care, but in fact depend upon each other” (ibid.). She points out that debates between Claire Bishop and others (such as Grant Kester and Liam Gillick) have stymied critical discussions that span boundaries art and politics, as well as the visual and the theatrical. These debates, Jackson claims, have only reified these distinct realms and present artists as being either properly critical and antagonistic or else complicit (Cayer 2012).

Jackson suggests moving on from disputes over whether aesthetics or social engagement should be at the centre of discussion of socially engaged art, or whether socially engaged artists are critical or complicit with the system. Instead, she suggests that socially engaged art imagines a third way or rather third ways. As a “supported and supporting apparatus”, socially engaged art searches for “third ways” between art’s autonomy and heteronomous demands placed upon it (2011, 27).42 A “variety of third ways practices” Jackson writes, “mobilise autonomous and heteronomous zones to respond adequately to the mixed economies, mixed ambitions, and mixed appreciations of both art and social repair” (2011, 224). On this basis, she calls for art that “help us to imagine sustainable social institutions” (2011, 14).

In his study of socially engaged art and publicness in China, Zheng Bo analyses two case studies that can be read as imagining an alternative social structure. In 2008 Zheng worked with the Beijing LGBT Cultural Center to organise a

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42 Similar to “third space” of Philip Huang quoted in the introduction, “third way” also stresses on the non-binary way of thinking and doing in complex contexts.
series of conversations (2012a, 47). In these exchanges, Zheng used videos from his *Karibu Island* project (2004-ongoing), which is about an imaginary place in which time travels backwards, as a catalyst for discussion. “Participants, queer and straight, imagined their lives in this hypothetical place and debated issues of sexuality and progress” (ibid.), he has written. Through inviting people to discuss *Karibu Island*, Zheng has encouraged people to imagine a place in which people with different sexualities might live together without fear – a more progressive social structure. This project can be compared to one of my cases, the DMAS, which also imagines alternative forms of social connection. It does so by exploring mutually nurturing practices among people from different places and social backgrounds. These include providing alternative after-school care for children in the neighbourhood, in which members of the DMAS draw inspiration from their experience in the arts. That said, my analysis does not focus on the specific visions of social practices that the DMAS imagines and intimates. Rather, I foreground the connectivity involved in working together on matters of concern, which does without opposition or the onset of institutionalisation.

**Participatory or socially collaborative art as a nightmare for democratic systems**

Claire Bishop criticises the automatic assumption that relational art is politically emancipatory. Bishop argues that an antagonistic approach, aiming at “exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of [social] harmony”, would “provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other” (2004, 79). She expresses her discontent with the fact that theorists such as Nicolas Bourriaud and Grant Kester evaluate socially engaged art not by aesthetics, but rather according to notions of efficacy or ethics, or (worse still) Platonic ideas about art’s truthfulness and educational function (Bishop 2012).

Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), Bishop argues that the politics of participatory
art lies in the dynamics of antagonism, in which relations of conflict are sustained rather than erased (2004, 66). Yet antagonism, on Bishop’s view, should be articulated aesthetically, or at least in tandem with aesthetics. She refers to Rancière’s reworking of aesthetics as a regime dictating what is visible and audible and what is not. In this light, she suggests that an aesthetic judgment is simultaneously a political judgment. She disapproves of both the descriptors “socially engaged” or “participatory” being unquestioningly equated with “good” and artistic criteria being left out of the analysis. The “aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change,” Bishop writes, “because it always already contains this ameliorative promise” (2012, 29). Participatory art projects that avoid confronting aesthetics, she maintains, preserve the very status quo that they profess to challenge (2012, 38).

In his book The Nightmare of Participation (2010), Markus Miessen points out that now, under pressure from politicians, it is almost obligatory for art to be participatory. Quoted by Miessen, Jeremy Till remarks: “participation too often becomes an expedient method of placation rather than a real process of transformation” (Till 2006). This leads to participatory practices that are often uncritical, “participation has become a radical chic, one that is en vogue with politicians who want to make sure that, rather than producing critical content, the tool itself becomes what is supposed to be read as criticality” (Miessen 2010, 44). Against this backdrop, Miessen promotes “conflictual participation”, in which

43 Laclau and Mouffe are better known for their later conceptualisation of agonism, which differentiates from the friend or enemy logic of antagonism.

“With the distinction between antagonism (friend/enemy relation) and agonism (relation between adversaries) in place, we are better able to understand why the agonistic confrontation, far from representing a danger for democracy, is, in reality, the very condition of its existence” (Mouffe 2006).

She further puts forward “agonistic pluralism”.

“Envisaged from the point of view of ‘agonistic pluralism’, the aim of democratic politics is to construct the “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an “adversary”, i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question” (Mouffe 1999, 755).
adversaries, rather than friends and enemies, leaving their own fields to create space for new form of knowledge (Miessen 2010, 92-98). This is to become a “crossbench practitioner”, who is not limited by existing protocols and disciplines, and thus instigates critical change that “breaks the consensus machine” (Obrist quoted by Miessen 2010, 21).

Likewise, Sruti Bala, in her book *The Gestures of Participatory Art* (2018), poignantly indicates the dilemma that participation poses for art and politics in democratic systems. “The insistence on the participatory, or the involvement of marginalised sections of the population,” she writes,

has been critiqued as concealing inequalities or differences through an apparently inclusive false gesture, an ideal turned into the tyranny of an imperative and absorbed into the mechanisms of neoliberal governance, a form of placation and coercion rather than a means of democratic citizenship, where the responsibility of the artist is outsourced to the audience or to others invited to participate. (Bala 2018, 43).

For Bala, unsolicited participation and refusal of participation amount to critical gestures that reconfigure civic practice in public spaces and resist co-optation in unexpected ways (Bala 2018, 19). Miessen’s and Bala’s “unexpected participants” appear in my case study *Changxindian Notes*, which underlines the agency that residents of an urban village wield in reclaiming everyday local knowledge.
Positioning my research

In terms of the history of critical art in China, my research moves away from the oppositional critique that characterised the *China Avant-Garde* exhibition, mail art, and *Fuck-off* exhibition. In the 1990s, the Big Tail Elephants group took urban daily life as the focus and stage of their practices. This interest is sustained in my focus on reconfigurative criticality and quotidian criticality.

The way in which the Stars group’s exhibition appropriated open spaces in the city resonates with my discussion of reconfigurative criticality. The socio-political contexts in which such appropriations take place, however, have changed. Direct protest is much riskier today than in the late 1970s. *Sunset Haircut Booth* and Theatre 44 do beyond simply using open spaces in the city as an exhibition space. They reconfigure public spaces such that it becomes possible for civic, political, and aesthetic initiatives to take place in them.

The projects featured in this study indicate the variety of paths that artists have taken following art’s sociological turn in the 2000s. Nonetheless, they all depart from the notions of critical art that I have discussed here. These include Ai Weiwei’s confrontational and oppositional art, which explicitly criticises the regime; Gladston’s spectral criticality, which stresses the importance of changing the conditions of discourse, yet does not engage with social issues in a grounded way; and Berghuis’s account, for which criticality generates public opinion and reaction.

Unlike these existing accounts, my concept of non-oppositional criticality goes beyond critique. Instead, the kinds of practice that I have in mind explore new possibilities. Rather than criticise reigning systems, they partially deviate from them. What is more, such non-oppositional practices do not remain at the level of spectral discourse: rather, they engage with matters of concern in ways that are actually embedded in society (on this, see my discussion of Rogoff in the introduction). The creative practitioners behind the works of socially engaged art at stake in this study assume a variety of roles. In addition to the role of instigator, they might work as
collaborators (as in Sunset Haircut Booth), nomads (as in the work of Theatre 44), carers and colleagues (as in the DMAS’s services), students and cast members (as in Home), and facilitators (as in subprojects of 5+1=6).

In incorporating these roles, these projects all endeavour to deviate from the system, if only partially. They strive to become inappropriate/d and explore the possibilities latent in the tension between inside and outside, all without directly opposing the authorities and thus provoking oppression. To some extent, these practices echo China’s socialist legacy of collectivity and communalism. Yet in my case studies collectivity and connectivity assume a more fluid and networked form; they are not organised according to a top-down socialist model.

In relation to global discourses, socially engaged art in China generally remains rather marginal. Art institutions are not very interested in supporting it. Miessen’s book mainly features Western locations that are markedly different from China in terms of society, economics, and politics. Given the specific circumstances in China, socially engaged or participatory practices are unable even to demand obligatory participation or perform outsourced social services (as has become common under neoliberalism). Socially engaged art in China is not limited to the binary of aesthetics versus social change, on which Bishop places so much emphasis.

As a number of artists have attested, under the current Chinese regime the label of “art” provides cover for projects that address social issues. These might include the exploitation and living conditions of migrant workers. Journalists and social workers have had difficulties approaching problems around migrant workers, especially after China’s crackdown on human rights lawyers on 9 July 2015. Under these circumstances, aesthetics can help socially engaged art practices to survive and spread behind a veneer of seeming harmlessness. This is demonstrated by the two subprojects of 5+1=6 that I discuss in chapter 5.

44 See H. Fu 2018.
In contemporary China, some socially engaged art practices work in grounded, gentle ways to nurture gradual change at the grassroots level. This is evident in the Sunset Haircut Booth and the DMAS’s work. As such, they resonate with Kester’s account of how participatory practices stimulate social change and Jackson’s plea for socially engaged art that imagines supportive social institutions. Indeed, in the case of the DMAS, creative practitioners connect with various people so as to explore alternative ways of learning and living, without solidifying into an institution (which would imply structure and hierarchy). In the case of Sunset Haircut Booth, public space takes up certain functions of a social institution.

In short, this study does not get bogged down in the issue of the extent to which socially engaged art is autonomous, heteronomous, and entangled with neoliberalism. I am more concerned with how creative practitioners deal with social situations and channel the imperative to intervene in society. I am interested in how these practices play out in particular contexts in China, in which possibilities for direct action (such as demonstration) are severely restricted, local leadership and government policy are unpredictable, state infrastructural and institutional support is lacking, and the scope for bottom up policy change is limited. My study sets out to answer these key questions. What strategies have artists employed to engage with society and politics without explicitly opposing the authorities? In the context of contemporary China, how are these projects critical without being oppositional?
Chapter 2. Reconfigurable criticality: reconfiguring open spaces into public spaces in Guangzhou

A sculpture sited in an open square in a city may have been commissioned by the municipal government as “public art”, but this does not mean that it has “publicness” inherent within it. Rather, it is only through being used, approached, and animated by local citizens that a space that has not been dedicated to socio-aesthetic purposes can become public. How, then, are art and public space entangled? What is the relationship between socially engaged art relate and public spaces in a Chinese megacity like Guangzhou?

In providing insights into how socially engaged art critically reconfigures urban public space, this chapter addresses both these questions and the overarching problematic at stake this dissertation: how can socially engaged art be critical without resorting to confrontational languages and means? Looking at the case of Guangzhou, I argue that the criticality of much socially engaged art practice and performance lies in how it appropriates and activates open spaces and reconfiguring them into public spaces. In making that argument, I analyse two art projects that I encountered during my fieldwork: Sunset Haircut Booth (2016-ongoing) and the first iteration of Theatre 44 with the theme of becoming urban nomads from late 2016 to early 2017. For the most part, I gathered the data relating these two cases as part of the participatory observation that I conducted in December 2016 and January 2017.

My first case study, Sunset Haircut Booth, was conceived and executed by an artist named Yu Xudong and his team, in collaboration with Liang Guangnian, a senior citizen. The project’s title derives from that name a booth that Liang built under the highway that flies over the village of Xisan in Guangzhou. He has offered free haircuts from this booth since 2012. Setting out to learn from Liang’s practice of civic public space-making, Yu’s project amplifies the publicness and sociality of the Sunset Haircut Booth by cooperative and aesthetic means.
My second case study, first iteration of Theater 44, tested the limits of what is possible in Guangzhou’s open spaces through workshops and roaming performances held in the city at night in December 2016 and January 2017. During these nocturnal walks, participants read out a dramatic poem and performed improvisations. In this way, the project momentarily turned open spaces into public spaces. In these ephemeral spaces of encounter, poetic-political discourse, art, and affect interacted unpredictably.

**Introduction**

There are various definitions of the concept of public space. Many commentators equate public space with the physical space in which public, political life, and democratic deliberation takes place. Hénaff and Strong argue that public space is 1) open as one can locate her/himself; 2) a human construct; 3) theatrical, in that it is a place in which one is seen and displays oneself before others (Hénaff & Strong 2001, 5-6). What makes a space public, Don Mitchelle argues, is not some preordained “publicness”. Rather a space becomes public when a particular group actively takes it up and makes it public so as to fulfil a pressing need (Mitchell 2003, 35). These two accounts each resonate to certain degree with recent reworkings of the Habermasian notion of the bourgeois public sphere, which aim to make the concept more inclusive to include more social groups apart from the Western bourgeois. According to these revisions, the public sphere includes a variety of social groups beyond the bourgeoisie. What is more, it entails not just discursive, but also aesthetic-affective modes of communication (Dahlberg 2005). Following Mitchelle and Dahlberg, I do not conceive publicness in socially engaged art in urban spaces as in any way preordained or innate. It is not a quality that inheres in space; rather, it is always under construction, always performed in and through aesthetic and affective practices.

means in between. As a whole, the word connotes commonly owned spaces that exist between private domains. According to urban geographer Piper Gaubatz, China’s post-reform modernisation and hyper-urbanisation have given rise to new types of urban public space. She identifies five: unwalled landscapes, squares, commercial spaces (such as shopping malls), “green” spaces, and transitional spaces (such as vacant lots destined for destruction). For Gaubatz, these spaces are public because they are open and freely accessible to urban citizens. Despite the fact that they are highly regulated and surveilled, people use them for socialisation and recreation (Gaubatz 2008).

Whereas urbanists and geographers such as Gaubatz tend to identify public spaces in China based on how they function with respect to urban planning, other scholars relate them to civil society. Some critically engage with Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the “bourgeois public sphere”. This space, which is distinct from the state, provides the conditions for the development of a public-minded rational consensus (Habermas, 1992). Consider this salient remark made by Nancy Fraser: “any conception of the public sphere that requires a sharp separation between (associational) civil society and the state will be unable to imagine the forms of self-management, interpublic coordination, and political accountability that are essential to a democratic and egalitarian society” (1997, 92).

Philip Huang argues that the dichotomy between state and society at stake in the concept of “bourgeois public sphere” and “civil society” does not apply to China (1993, 216). He puts forward the term “third space” or “third realm” that is influenced by both state and society but can be reduced to neither (Huang, 1993, 225). Another perspective is offered by artist, curator, and educator Qiu Zhijie, who has been deeply influenced by Joseph Beuys’s Total Art and employs socially engaged methods in both his practices and teaching. Qiu puts forward the following account of public space in China: “both Greek agora and clan temple and well in rural China are public spaces. It is not because they are open spaces, but because in
these spaces people can exchange views, live together, and become communities … public space is a space in which the occupants have a say” (2011).

Following Huang, I approach public space as third space. In this domain, the government controls, disciplines, polices, surveils, and negotiates with citizens. And the citizens, for their part, undertake individual and/or collective initiatives in response to matters of concern. As Huang suggests, this third space is not dichotomous and its dynamics are not necessarily confrontational. Echoing Qiu, in this chapter I aim to analyse how artists and other citizens use art to critically appropriate open spaces and reconfigure them as public spaces. I pay particular attention to how these practices of public space-making are performed in negotiation with governmental forces, and the ways in which they enrol aesthetics and affect.

If an artwork or artistic practice is physically located so as to be open and accessible to the public, does it automatically become public art? In the 1990s, Suzanne Lacy among others began to practice and theorise a new genre of public art. Moving beyond the traditional definition of public art (which centred on sculpture sited in parks and plazas), this new mode of practice seeks to bring artists into direct engagement with audiences around pressing social issues. What is more, it brings political activism to the fore (Lacy, 1994). Termed “new genre public art”, this new conception places great stress on the activist and social dimensions of public art. It emphasises the importance of being socially engaged and interactive, and foregrounds collaborations between artists and communities (Lacy, 1994). It privileges process over product and celebrates values the unpredictable relationships that arise among artists and audiences (Lacy, 1994).

Scholars and artists have approached the publicness at stake in public art in China in different ways. Some argue that publicness is closely related to visibility: if an artwork is visually legible to the general public, then audiences can grasp and make use of it. As such, they make the work public (Zou 2015, 41). Another argument about publicness concerns the extent to which an artwork is a product of civil
society. Some commentators hold that artworks must be democratic, open, subject to public opinion, participatory, communicative, and discursive if they are to be considered “public” (Sun 2002, 32). A work of public art, therefore, is not merely a work of art in public space; if it is to become public art, it must interact with the public, environment, and society (Li 2017, 70).

One body of scholarship situates the publicness of public art within social power structures, emphasising the role of public participation in public art (Wang 2004; Sun 2003; Yin 2004; Weng 2002). In 2011 Qiu Zhijie called on artists and scholars to refresh the concept of public art:

public art should extend from visual art: community theatre, education, assembly, festival, ritual etc., all forms of work that enable social organising and public association can be public art. We should include more temporal, dynamic, and functional artist activities into this genre. Community reformation, living environment and activity design, when these kinds of practical activities not only fulfil functional needs, but also actively and imaginatively refresh our symbolic system, they are a new public art ... the symbolic ability of public art is to facilitate social organising and social mobilisation (for progressive purposes) in public space. (Qiu 2011)

Qiu’s discussion here focuses on how the received view that public art amounts to urban sculptures accounts for neither the aesthetic and practical needs of people in the neighbourhood nor the spatial connections that art can engender. On Qiu’s definition, then, the publicness of public art is a political and aesthetic quality that forges social bonds among (temporary) communities and facilitates collective deliberation. It creates new forms of symbolism and significance that inspire people to relate to each other, space, society, and the state in the new ways.

In analysing socially engaged art and public space in this chapter, I have adopted this notion of publicness, which emphasises what Qiu (in the quotation
above) calls “the temporal, dynamic, and functional”. The chapter investigates how socially engaged art practices appropriate, (re)activate, and publicise different open spaces. It shows how socially engaged art can diversify the functions of open spaces, either temporarily or over the long-term, and explores the dynamics through which this can be achieved. I begin by probing the aesthetic and functional aspects of Sunset Haircut Booth, emphasising how the project employed non-confrontational artistic practices to ease tensions among different occupants of a particular public space and, in this way, helped secure its ongoing existence. I then travel with the nomadic Theatre 44 so as to shed light on how peripatetic art activates urban open spaces. Through a flowing, poetic, political, and affective performance, the first iteration of Theatre 44 refreshes city inhabitants’ sensorial experience of the city and inspires new ways of imagining how public space can be employed. In sum, then, this chapter explores how these projects display what I term a “reconfigurative criticality”, which opens public spaces up to civic deliberation and expression.

Sunset Haircut Booth: reconfigurations of public space in an urban village

In this case study, I analyse how the collaborative project Sunset Haircut Booth (夕陽為民剪髮點, 2016-ongoing) reconfigured a suburban open space such that it became a public third space (to use Huang’s term). As a third space, this newly reconfigured urban site allowed people to gather and socialise, undergo aesthetic experience, and debate matters of concern. Sunset Haircut Booth forms part of a self-organised socially engaged art practice project titled Residents! that began in August 2016 in the Pearl River Delta. According to the project’s website, Residents! focuses on “the on-site observation and intervention of the micro politics of the rights of residents and their living space” (2016). Artists, writers, designers, social workers, architects, psychologists, and people with other occupations were invited to initiate their own projects. Sunset Haircut Booth was the project began by Yu
Xudong’s team (which consisted of Yu Xudong himself, Li Yanming, Wu Huansong, and He Yuliang) in collaboration with a senior citizen named Liang Guangnian. The project was performed in a booth under a highway in Xisan in Guangzhou, where Yu and his team lived and worked. It was named after a booth offering frees that was already located under a raised highway that flies over this urban village.

Urban villages are remnants: pockets of space leftover from the past. They consist of low-rise buildings (that are constructed by their occupants), which are often inhabited by villagers and migrant workers. The urban village of Xisan is sited beside a high-rise gated community named Jinxiu Peninsula. What is more, the Nanpu Highway cutting across the sky. The space now occupied by the highway served as a passage connecting the village with the gated community. Before the highway was constructed, this patch of land belonged to the village; now it belongs to the highway company.

Liang Guangnian constructed and runs the booth at the centre of Sunset Haircut Booth. Affectionately called Grandpa Liang, he lived in a high-rise near Xisan. After retiring from the navy in 2012, Grandpa Liang wanted to do something to both occupy himself and contribute to people in the neighbourhood. Having discovered that the space under the highway has been left unused, he began to build structures with abandoned planks. Foremost among these makeshift structures was the Sunset Haircut Booth, in which Liang cut local residents’ hair for free. He liked calligraphy and he practiced it on the planks of wood that he collected. He also invited some other residents to write on them. Some inscriptions sang the praises of Liang’s haircutting skills and good deeds; others conveyed positive messages such as “giving love is happiness” (付出愛是福); still others quoted traditional Chinese literary texts.

Liang went to the booth almost every day, maintaining a convivial space amid the hectic city of Guangzhou. He cut locals’ hair for free, chatting with them about daily affairs. He and a few acquaintences would practice calligraphy and he sometimes adjusted the structures that made up this space. He even attached a
small Chinese national flag to the roof of the booth – this exhibition of patriotism meant that the booth would not be demolished easily. Liang told Yu that some urban management officers had intended to demolish the booth in 2014. The structure, they reasoned, was a temporary construction built on illegally occupied land. In the end, however, they turned a blind eye to the booth on the grounds that the all planks of which it was comprised conveyed positive messages. As Yu put it, this was Grandpa Liang’s “wisdom of spatial struggle” at work: his calligraphy and show of patriotism were effective strategies in protecting both himself and the space that he had made (Yu 2016).

In participating in Residents!, Yu and three then-art students decided to learn from and work with Grandpa Liang by taking part in the space-making practice that was Sunset Haircut Booth (Yu 2016). In this way, Yu and his team hoped to enrich the public space in and around Sunset Haircut Booth. Along with Liang and other local residents, they sought to reconfigure it as a public square that would facilitate quotidian political engagement.

Reconfigurative action I: maintaining and amplifying the publicness of public space

When I first visited Sunset Haircut Booth on 25 December 2016, Grandpa Liang was watching another elderly man writing calligraphy on one of the planks. I was struck by how spectacular the booth and surrounding structures were. Comprised of planks of various materials and shapes, which were covered by calligraphies in different styles, the booth was aesthetically impressive (see fig. 11).

Having taken in this startling aesthetic affect, I began reading the texts. I discerned varied inscriptions, including a propagandistic slogan put out by the Communist Party “the child’s heart is facing towards the Party; it forever follows the Party”; idiomatic phrases such as “when walking with two others you must be able to learn from them”; and praise for Grandpa Liang such as “the joy of contributing, the kung fu of the top” (this phrase puns on the art of haircutting, which both
attends to the hair on top of one’s head and is presented as a “top” craft. I saw security warnings such as “safety first”; advice concerning public behaviour such as “travel in a civilised manner and let the elderly, women, and children pass first”; blessings such as “may all go well with you”; and a poem mourning the way in which love wanes. Some inscriptions were fading, having been worn down by the weather. Other were freshly written and smelt of paint. I could tell that they had been written by different people in the course of their encounters with Grandpa Liang.

Figure 11. Grandpa Liang (in the red jacket) talking to Yu Xudong (in the pink polo shirt) during my visit to the Sunset Haircut Booth in early January 2017. Photograph by the author.

An enthusiast about calligraphy, Grandpa Liang took charge of this liminal space between Xisan and Jinxiu Peninsula and offered it to people as a place to practice calligraphy, no matter which side they resided. There was no communal space shared by people from both Jinxiu Peninsula and Xisan. The role of calligraphy in this space is crucial. As Yuehping Yen has argued, in instances social calligraphic
practice, calligraphy escapes the intellectual domain and becomes embedded in everyday life. Transgressing the confines of elite or academic culture in this way, social calligraphy has the capacity to affect peoples’ social lives (2005, 3-4). As Laura Vermeeren, a calligraphy researcher and my teammate on ChinaCreative, has observed, water calligraphy or writing on the ground in public parks has become a part of everyday life in Beijing and some other Chinese cities. This goes especially for the elderly in China for recreation. Despite these novel formats, the content of these writings often adheres to “normal” calligraphers’ subjects of choice: Maoist poetry, Tang poetry, and Chinese proverbs (Vermeeren 2017). During Cultural Revolution, “large-character posters” (大字报) were encouraged as a classless form of expression through which information and criticisms of the political status quo could be disseminated in public space. This practice was banned in 1979 however. Thereafter, calligraphy has become less common as a cultural means of expressing opinions in public space.

Calligraphy is a common cultural practice in contemporary China, both as a way of exerting symbolic power and as for recreation. What is unusual in contemporary China, however, is the use of calligraphy to express ideas in open space. That is why the public space created by Grandpa Liang, which embraced such a rich variety of different messages, is so intriguing.

Then Yu and I started chatting with Grandpa Liang. He told me that before he set up the booth, he had been doing something else. He broke his leg, however, and became less active as a result. “I don’t resign myself to declining years [不认老]”, he said. It was for this reason that he established the Sunset Haircut Booth. Five years ago, he discovered that it was very inconvenient for people in his neighbourhood to visit the barber’s shop. Not only did they have to take the ferry across the river; they also had to pay 20 RMB per haircut. To alleviate this situation, he began building his small booth in an abandoned area where he could cut hair for free.
Once the booth was constructed, Yu told me, so many people came to see Grandpa Liang that the path to the booth became muddy. People came to have their hair cut, passed by, or stop to chat with Grandpa Liang. Liang then moved the booth to a better spot and gradually enlarged it, building “walls” using discarded planks. People could then use these planks to practise calligraphy if they felt like it. When I asked him whether the local authority interfered, Liang replied by telling me that:

when the three-story building here was pulled down by the comprehensive law enforcement team, (they saw me and my booth), the residents told them that I am an old man who is providing convenience to the people and the mass [人民群众] and doing a good deed. Later the Nanpu Subdistrict Office sent a patrol here twice a day, and the patrollers said: ‘Grandpa, you can just do it. We will protect you and no one would dare to disturb you.’ [With their endorsement] I began to improve it. (personal communication, 3 January 2017)

For Foucault, space is intimately related to power: “space”, he writes, “is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (1986, 252). In the light of this, we can see how Liang has invented techniques for making and maintaining his booth as a form of third space. The booth stands at the nexus between different forms of power and various actors. These latter include local authorities, such as Jinxiu Peninsula’s residents’ committee; Xisan’s residents’ committee; and Nanpu Subdistrict Office. They also include agents of urban policing and disciplinary power: urban management officers (chengguan, 城管), for example, or people in the neighbourhood with different interests.

As Sally Engle Merry points out, new urban social orders are increasingly based on the governance of space rather than on disciplining offenders or punishing offences (2001). From my interviews I could not tell whether Liang adhered to mainstream, pro-government ideology. In Sunset Haircut Booth, however, he employed a discursive technique to protect the site from official intervention:
namely, adopting the rhetoric of the authorities so as to justify his spatial practices. Indeed, among the planks one could read the phrase “harmonious society” and most of the texts exuded “positive energy” – a popular term that is used to describe things that meet with officials’ approval. This can be seen as a practice of making third space or third spacing in that the booth figures an instance of the government and citizen negotiating and influencing one another. In this way, Liang found a way of creating a public space that encouraged residents to connect with each other whether they were from the gated community or the village, and enjoy the conviviality of the space.

In practice, Liang’s discursive strategy involved continuous day-to-day acts of creating and maintaining a space of encounter and conviviality. He was not an artist venturing outside of the art institution to engage with people beyond art’s traditional audiences, as is common in Western socially engaged art projects (Rasmussen 2017). Rather, Liang is a local resident keen to enrich his retirement. As for Yu Xudong, he did not approach the project as an elite outsider descending on a neighbourhood in order to realise a preconceived project. Rather, he was inspired by Liang’s local civic initiative, which he had previously encountered as part of his daily life. Accordingly, he assumed the humble role of learning from a senior citizen. By attending to Liang’s practice, he hoped to further this project of third spacing by helping to amplify the publicness of this public space and sustain its conviviality. Yet neither the booth nor the social connections to which it gave rise depended on an artist’s vision. To the contrary, Sunset Haircut Booth was sustained by the spatial practice of numerous people who used this space as public space on a quotidian basis. The artist and his team played a part, to be sure, but only alongside Liang and people living in the neighbourhood.

In my interview with him, Yu was doubtful as to whether similar practices could be attempted in the China. “It’s not like entering a community with an art proposal and artistic imagination”, he said (personal communication, 3 January 2017). Yu did not take with top-down approach. Rather, he was a resident who
passed by the booth almost every day on the way to his studio. As such, he saw how the space was created and witnessed changes that took place in and around the booth. Like many others, he took part in constructing this space by bringing Grandpa Liang a plank; writing calligraphy for him; lending a helping hand when it came to building the structure; making conversation; or asking him to cut his hair.

The artistic collaboration between Yu and Liang came about naturally when Yu was invited to participate in Residents! in August 2016. It grew out of their friendship and daily interactions with one another. In an article published on WeChat on 1 December 2016, Yu announced that he and his team would work on four small projects under the umbrella of Sunset Haircut Booth. These consisted of, first, a neighbours’ forum to discuss and act on issues that affected the neighbourhood and local residents; second, a newspaper clipping board that Liang would curate and update every ten days; third a “Flower Photo Studio”, in which people could have their photograph taken and printed for free in front of the booth, with the flowers of their choice (the artist funded this himself); and fourth, an exchange of abandoned planks exchange and calligraphy writing activity, which was to be organised at a suitable time (Yu 2016).

At one level, these four sections were designed to fit seamlessly into existing interactions at the site. At another, they aimed to activate, amplify, and diversify its political potential. The neighbours’ forum was meant to encourage people in the neighbourhood to use the space of Sunset Haircut Booth as a place for deliberating on their matters of concern. This built on the chats that Grandpa Liang already initiated every day. The news board aimed to circulate information in the space more effectively (previously its was largely communicated orally). The Flower Photo Studio (see fig. 12) sought to make aesthetic experience accessible to people in the neighbourhood, supplementing the aesthetic impression made by the planks adorned with calligraphy. The activity of exchanging planks and calligraphy writing was intentionally meant to strengthen the space’s appeal as a small civic centre for convivial gatherings.
In engaging with the Sunset Haircut Booth, Yu and his team expected to amplify and reconfigure the space’s existing structures and possibilities, not to invent completely new practices. The cooperation between Liang and Yu’s team, therefore, constituted form of a Derridarian double writing and third spacing. Indeed, in heightening civic practice at the Sunset Haircut Booth, they reconfigured a space inside the system of the village such that it partially stood outside that system. What is more, in doing so they negotiated with controlling and surveilling powers (such as the urban management officers).

Reconfigurative action II: integrating a heterogenous space into public space

When I visited Sunset Haircut Booth on 3 January 2017, I saw the recently constructed Flower Photo Studio (fig. 12). It had been constructed in the same style as the haircutting booth. There was nobody around taking and printing photographs, however: the photo booth’s roof had a leak, according to Liang, and Yu and so his team had decided to mend it before taking any photographs.
When Yu returned after a business trip on 16 January, he found that the photo studio has been pulled down. The perpetrator, Liang told him, was Old Zheng, a middle-aged villager who thought that the site would make a good spot to sell live chicken. Indeed, Zheng had immediately begun building a store on the very same site where the photo booth had once stood. Yu told me that when he and Liu Sheng, another artist, had went inside the half-built store, at first Zheng had blushed with embarrassment. He soon became hostile, though, and sought to defend his “new turf”. Yu and Liu immediately reassured Zheng, telling him that they wanted to know when construction would be finished so that they could buy his chicken. With this, the atmosphere became less tense. Yu later proposed that his team could paint colourful and pleasant roosters on the front door and façade of Zheng’s chicken store. On the one hand, this would advertise Zheng’s goods. On the other, it would allow them to continue the photo booth project by making use of the store’s new photogenic aesthetic (see fig. 13). Zheng happily agreed to this proposal. With the painting project, the once tense, even confrontational relationship between Old Zheng and Grandpa Liang started to improve. people in the neighbourhood liked to pose for photographs in front of the booth. So did urbanites who came to the village’s restaurants (Xisan is famous for its food). Liang was glad to see this, and accordingly Zheng and Liang began talking to each other.

This intervention – which had both aesthetic and social dimensions – served two functions. First, the Flower Photo Studio project could move forward thanks to the painted façade. Second, the sociality of the space was not only maintained but enriched as Grandpa Liang’s gradually warmed to Old Zheng. Before long, he no longer considered Zheng an invader, but rather as co-custodian of the public space that he had established. Zheng’s presence altered the spatiality of the site in that it now included the commercial-private chicken store. As a convivial space, the store only contributed to the publicness of this public space. This unexpected change underlines how spatial projects such as this always remain subject to change and
the influence of different actors over time. This echoes a passage of Rogoff’s that I quoted in the introduction, which suggests that criticality operates on uncertain ground, for it is embedded in the contingencies of actuality (Rogoff 2003). Seen in this light, the relational and aesthetic cooperation among artists and other citizens in and around the Sunset Haircut Booth presents a form of reconfigurative criticality. Indeed, it maintains and amplifies a third space, which is embedded in the contingencies of everyday life and therefore remains open to uncertainty.

Later, in July 2017, I asked Yu about the progress of the other small projects that he and his colleagues had planned, such as the newspaper clipping board project and neighbours’ forum. He told me that although he and Liang had tried to set up the clipping board a few times, they had struggled to find an appropriate format. Regarding the forum, Yu suggested that it was already in use. Unlike a formal forum in an art, educational, or other public institution, the forum took the form of casual discussions in the space surrounding the booth. Through these conversations, Old Zheng, Grandpa Liang, and a few other residents broached public issues such as how rubbish was managed in the village.
Having previously simply torn down the Flower Photo Booth to serve his own personal interests, Old Zheng now also partook in these discussions concerning communal problems. Without this incident, there would be no chicken store and Zheng would not have participated in the public conversations. What first seemed like a setback, then, served to embed the project more fully in the life of the village. What is more, it forced the project to develop in tandem with the village. *Sunset Haircut Booth*, then, was no autonomous art project acting according to a fixed script or preset proposal. Yu did not record or lay claim to the conversations that took place at the site, so as to present them later as an artistic project. Instead, he recognised that these discussions belonged to the public life of residents in the neighbourhood. His art project may or may not have facilitated or triggered these conversations.

Figure 13. Residents posing in front of the chicken store turned photo booth, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Liu Sheng.
Sunset Haircut Booth was a cooperative art project. As such it sought to “reintegrate art into society as [a form of] cultural expression rather than as strictly personal gesture” (Finkelpearl 2013, 98). Cooperative art has “anti-spectatorial character” in that it “is created through shared action, not by active artists for inactive spectators” (Finkelpearl 2013, 343). The Sunset Haircut Booth project, then, was shaped by the people involved. These were no passive spectators. Rather, they included people living in the neighbourhood such as Liang, Yu, members of Yu’s team, and Zheng. They also include employees of the local authority – the urban management officers, for example. Some people became involved in the project knew about Yu’s role as an artist; others did not.

Overall, Sunset Haircut Booth served to maintain, diversify, and facilitate cultural expression. Developing along with the Sunset Haircut Booth itself, the project was reconfigured so as to embrace the heterogeneity of the site, which came to include the private commercial space of the chicken store. Indeed, Yu, Laing, and Zheng integrated the store into the public space without depriving it of its initial public functions. Indeed, it enriched the space in that the store owner became engaged in public deliberation. Public space, Qiu Zhijie has claimed, “is a space in which the occupants have a say” (2011).

To borrow Rogoff’s formulation, Yu “opted for a ‘looking away’ or a ‘looking aside’ or a spatial appropriation” (2003). By this, I mean that he neither saw Sunset Haircut Booth as a space on which an art project could be imposed nor approached it through the lens of “art making”. Instead, he looked beyond the received system of art. In collaboration with different actors, he performed a form of reconfigurative criticality that was the relational, cooperative, spatial, aesthetic, quotidian, humble, and contingent.

Sunset Haircut Booth performed two reconfigurative actions – namely, maintaining and diversifying public space. These can be seen as critical on the grounds that civic and civil initiatives occupy a precarious position under prevailing political circumstances in China. Chinese authorities have cracked down on
grassroots democratic movements. The government keeps close control over registered NGOs. Smaller groups (such as those focusing on workers’ rights) are either forced to underground or must keep a low profile. The police surveil and control small spaces organised by young cultural practitioners.

Although Sunset Haircut Booth did not explicitly claim to reinforce civic and civil society, it performed critical functions. Indeed, the project turned away from systemic forms of art making, focusing instead on maintaining such a public space that was partially outside reigning systems of control. This was achieved not by avoiding any dealings with the authorities, but rather by negotiating with them in this third space. The project amplified the booth’s civic functions by introducing new socially engaged art practices that became embedded in the site. This third space can be understood as “a necessary sphere ... where interdependence is not imagined in compromised terms or where a recognition of heteronomous personhood comes only after grudging acceptance ... It is to make a self from, not despite, contingency” (Jackson 2011, 36). The interdependence discussed here lies in the heart of the publicness of third space. Publicness does not inhere in the nature of a given space. Rather, it is conjured in and through various configurations and reconfigurations of relations among bodies, images, words, spaces, and times. Together, these relations allow people to live together as interdependent subjects. At a time when both civic and civil societies are shrinking, this third space provided a fulcrum around with

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45 An article on Reuters says “but now, Wukan, once famous in China as the ‘democracy village’, has succumbed to China’s tightening grip over civil society and individual rights, said Zhuang Liehong, a former Wukan protest leader who helped lead an uprising against local authorities in 2011. “What is happening in Wukan is what is happening in China,” said Zhuang. “It’s a dark reflection of China, with no freedom of expression. No individual rights” (Pomfret 2017).

46 An article on the website Transparency and Accountability in 2018 points out: “arrests of activists and actors within the civic space have been on the rise – or at least covered more prominently by the media” (Chen 2018).

47 Mr. M, who prefers to remain anonymous, works in a workers’ organisation in Jiangsu Province, and he informed me that the organisation has to remain low-key so that they could still act.

48 This happened to a self-organised youth space in Guangzhou, and one could tell that by checking their WeChat platform and finding no new public activity since February 2019, while before that they hosted activities every week.
different actors (including representatives of the local authority and citizens) collectively negotiated with one another at the grassroots level.

**Theatre 44: creating nomadic and performative public space**

Theatre 44 grew out of an on-going art project named *On Practice* (2015-ongoing). *On Practice* aims to explore different ways of collaborating across disciplines and domains in ways that manifest a “prefigurative ethics of practice” *(On Practice 2015).* The “prefigurative” at stake in this statement resonates closely with Luke Yate’s reflection on prefigurative politics: “prefigurative politics”, he writes, “combines five processes: collective experimentation, the imagining, production and circulation of political meanings, the creating of new and future-oriented social norms or ‘conduct’, their consolidation in movement infrastructure, and the diffusion and contamination of ideas, messages and goals to wider networks and constituencies” *(Yates 2015, 1).* Here, I would like to pose Yates’ analysis alongside a passage explaining *On Practice* put out by its organisers. “*On Practice* entails being concerned and observing things, not only intervening in society, being an activist. ‘Art practice’ is the overflow of the conjoining of various themes and sites (现场) in our times.*" The purpose of *On Practice* is to help art creators to locate themselves and new sites for artistic creation outside of the studio. The site of practice is the core of practice” *(Zheng and Feng quoted in Liu 2016).*

As this explanation indicates, the project seeks to locate art making in social space, such that it bears upon pressing issues. Three iterations of the project took place in art spaces before late 2016. By and large, these versions of *On Practice* entailed collaborative performances based on literary texts by the poet and writer

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49 The concept of "site"/xianchang was interpreted differently by the two initiators of the first edition of On Practice in 2015: Zheng Hongbin considered "site" as the social site, and the site of exhibition and performance; Feng Junhua thought that "site ‘could be seen as local/grounded site, and the site where practitioners could put their talents to use, and these two might not be set apart when the practitioner is at work (Zheng and Feng quoted by Liu 2016)."
Wang Wei. Having put on these indoor performances, the practitioners determined that they would venture out into social, public space. Through these transitions, On Practice became Theatre 44, a fluid collective of artists, writers, and other creative practitioners who conduct their socially engaged art practices in a relatively flexible and inclusive framework. “Rather than having a unified voice and rigid labor division, Theatre 44 seeks to bring together individual creativities by designing conceptual frameworks that is open to all” (Theatre 44 2016).

This transition was accelerated by the incarceration of Ou Feihong, a practitioner of institutional art who was a member of the preparatory group that became Theatre 44. Ou’s rebellious project, Night Watch (夜巡) lasted from September to November 2016. Through graffiti, it tested the limits of public space at night: “in order to satisfy the masses’ increasingly large consumptive needs, I catch the pulse of the time and sincerely accept all kinds of commissions for brutal graffiti. The charge is fxxxing cheap: 1 RMB for 1 character” (Ou 2016). He finished the project in November 2016. Due to one commission that the authorities deemed offensive, however, Ou was arrested later that same month.50 This enraged and shocked his friends among Guangzhou’s creative practitioners. Following Ou’s imprisonment, they continued his practice of testing the boundaries of public spaces by roaming around and performing by night.

The initiators of Theatre 44 chose to work with Wang Wei’s poetic drama Roman von Ungern-Sternberg (2015). In March 2015 they had already read the piece aloud in the Observatory Society (an independent non-profit art space in Guangzhou) as part of On Practice. They rehearsed and performed this new incarnation of the work in public spaces in Guangzhou in 2017. The piece uses poetry to narrate, interrupt, and clarify things in inland Asia by way of figures including Roman von Ungern-Sternberg, a Mongolian guide, a Japanese soldier, French, French,

50 Someone commissioned him to write “I wanna be on top of Mama Peng” (Mama Peng is the nickname of the wife of the Chinese leader), and he sprayed it on the wall in Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Centre, the cluster of universities in the suburb of Guangzhou.
German, English, Manchu, Uighur, Tibetan, Tubo people. Using polyphonic voices, it creates a world of poetry and dynamic geopolitics that is relevant to the contemporary world (Wang 2015).

According to Feng Junhua, who worked in both On Practice and Theatre 44, in 2015 the group debated among themselves as to whether they should perform in the streets, as opposed to art spaces (Feng et al., personal communication, January 2017). He was against both going out into the streets and making their performances into radical gestures meant to test control mechanisms in the city. Reorienting the group’s practice in this way, he held, would be harmful if performances were not prepared with this new modus operandi in mind (ibid.).

Following Ou Feihong’s arrest in 2016, it became more urgent to reclaim the city and test public spaces. For more than a year, Theatre 44 worked both individually and collectively in Guangzhou, exploring and testing the relations among bodies, public space, and spatial production. Eventually, they felt ready to go and work in the streets as a fluid and ephemeral collective of nomads. The transition was accelerated and facilitated by a work titled Banyan Travel Agent (2016). Initiated by three artists based in Guangzhou (Shi Zhenhao, Li Zhiyong, and Zhu Jianlin), the project was supported by the Guangdong Times Museum. The piece consisted of a series of trips to various locales in East Asia. Aimed at artists, zai-di practitioners, and interested citizens, the trips were organised so as to allow people to learn from various activists’ and practitioners’ experiences and tactics. What is more, it sought to forge connections and thus generate new forms of spatial production in the city.

The organisational structure of Theatre 44 is decentralised. There is no curator or director with overarching power over the project. This resonates not only with Derrida’s advocacy non-hierarchical structures, but the working practices of the group of artists named Big Tail Elephants, which I mentioned in Chapter 1. Some members of the group volunteer to fulfil coordinating functions. In these roles, they take care of administrative and financial work, and manage the relationships both among the practitioners and between Theatre 44 and art institutions.
Feng Junhua and Pan He, the founder of a non-profit library-bookstore served as coordinators of the first edition of Theatre 44. Feng is a Guangzhou-based publisher and writer; Pan He used to run Roaming Bookshop in Shenyang. Participants in the project included Zhang Hanlu, a curator based in Shanghai; Zhu Jianlin, Shi Zhenhao, Li Zhiyong, and Liu Jiawen, artists working in Guangzhou; Elaine W. Ho, an artist and activist based in Hong Kong; Zi Jie, an anarchist and comic artist who usually works in Wuhan; Tong Mo, an anthropologist and children’s book writer based in Beijing; and Wang Wei, an author of poetic dramas. Some of these people had participated in On Practice (2015-ongoing), these “old participants” invited the others to take part in Theatre 44. The participants came to Guangzhou at their own expense. They gathered at Fong Fo Publishing House, the project’s “headquarters” where independent magazine Fong Fo had been founded, as well as at the artist couple Zhu and Liu Jiawen’s home and a guest house for visiting creative practitioners.

Next, the members of Theatre 44 collectively planned routes for four nocturnal walking performances in January 2017. To do so, they adopted a working method common among Guangzhou artists, by which one wanders around sensing and perceiving urban contexts before assembling records of observations and artistic practices. These walks were not revealed to the public in advance. Indeed, the group was concerned that releasing detailed plans for people to roam around in Guangzhou at night might attract the authorities’ attention. Accordingly, letting the plans be known would risk the walks being intercepted before they even got underway. In addition to these nocturnal wanderings, Theatre 44 also staged public activities, including talks, textual study sessions, image and moving image study session, and performances.

Although I saw one iteration of On Practice, I had not been very involved in the group’s previous work. Nevertheless, as the main portion of my action research on this project, I took part in Theatre 44’s first two nocturnal walks, which took place on 2 and 4 January 2017. Despite the fact that I did not attend preparatory
meetings ahead of the walking performances, I am friends with most of the participants, who trusted me and welcomed me into the project. The first walk started from the Second Worker Movement Palace, and led through Binjiang Road and Yuejiang Road, then entered Modiesha Park, and ended at Liede Highway central reservation.

Reconfiguring spaces as a temporary playground

The first nighttime walk was not a walk at all. Instead, we rented bikes using bike-sharing systems and cycled the planned route. The group of sixteen people included some who had traveled from far afield. Accordingly, the walk was guided by those who were familiar with the routes, whether because they travelled along them as part of their quotidian urban walking practice or because they had scouted them out prior to the walk. With specially made bags, loud speakers, and placards on our backs, we cycled in a line. Sometimes we rang our bicycle bells in unison, creating an improvised sound performance. Excited, we underwent a variety of feelings and affects. There was a sense of freedom that came with using the city as a transient playground. Moving freely by night, we had the sensation that we were reclaiming the right to the city. Alongside this, though, we felt that we were fleeing urban surveillance and control (as we acted when the guards were less active). Lastly, there was the bodily tension and enjoyment that came with moving fast as a group in the darkness. The affect of being together as a collective flowed among us. We were energised and empowered by the trip. What is more, our capacity for action increased, for we felt that that city’s open spaces had been reconfigured as public spaces.

In his notes on Deleuze and Guattari’s Thousand Plateaus, Brian Massumi observes that in the original French the term “line of flight” is “ligne de fuite.”

51 Having said that, arguably, one could not hide from the surveillance power if they carry their mobile phone with them on which WeChat and GPS are tracking.
covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding something, but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance (tellingly, a painting’s vanishing point is a *point de fuite*) (1987, xvi). Cycling through the city, we experienced lines of flight that transcended normative ways of using urban spaces. They lay outside of daily urban routines, outside of disciplined urban practices. Our flowing movements embodied lines of flights. Fleeing from daytime regimes of urban surveillance and control, the project represented a leak in urban normality and officially approved ways of using public spaces in the city.

Eventually we arrived at the central reservation of Liede Highway, a triangular space that had been discovered by Zhu Jianlin, an artist and one of the founders of Theatre 44, and Liu Jiawen, who was then his girlfriend (they have since got married). The space is captured in their 26-minute film *Garden* (2015). *Garden* depicts their daily interventions in the city (making a flower bed in front of their apartment using a stolen cement roll, for example); the mundane yet extraordinary moments of their shared lives (Liu trimming Zhu’s beard with scissors); and intimate appropriations of public space (kissing on the edge of a fly-over highway’s central reservation). Although this film was not screened by Theatre 44, the group of nocturnal wanders visited the triangular enclave where Zhu and Liu had kissed for the camera. Through this romantic act, they had they personalised was was otherwise a piece of public infrastructure. This “island” – the space between several roads – was well-lit by highway lamps and surrounded by bushes (some of which contained probably a few homeless people). Vehicles passed by on the road below us (see fig. 14). When we arrived, we set up a screen and a projector powered by a generator. We asked the Malaysian artist Ray Chan to give a presentation about underground comics in Malaysia. In addition, we rehearsed a performance by reading out the script of a poetic drama.
Deleuze and Guattari contend that the difference between “a smooth (vectorial, projective, or topological) space and a striated (metric) space” resides in how smooth space is “occupied without being counted” and striated space is “counted in order to be occupied” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 361-362). Whereas striated space is visual, smooth space “is a space of contact, of small tactile or manual actions of contact”, as opposed to a “visual space like Euclid’s striated space” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 371). This is not to say, however, that Deleuze and Guattari simply oppose two senses: instead they emphasise how all of the senses can engage space differently – a perceptual semiotics (Adkins 2015, 241).

A central reservation is designed to separate roads on a highway. Planned and calculated, they are striated spaces. In our performative and artistic appropriation of a central reservation, we transformed a striated space into a stage for artistic presentations, poetic drama rehearsals, and musical improvisation – not
to mention relaxation and joking. In the temporary smooth space that resulted, different sets of perceptual relations permeated the space. Participants voices flew on the wind; the projector became warmer as it beamed light onto the screen; the smell of petrol fuel emanated from the generator; the rhythms of the literary readings; and sonic improvisations echoed in the yellow light. White placards displayed phrases such as “I love Canton Wong” (this was the name of a public WeChat account run by Ou Feihong). The improvised loudspeaker was attached to the mouth of a participant like a big green beak; bycles lay in the grass like resting antelopes. For that night at least, the space was not divided and calculated as territory to be occupied and put to use. Rather, it was filled by flows of haptic encounters between bodies (both organic and otherwise), sounds, smells, lights, temperatures, and affects.

In roaming around on the bicycles, Theatre 44 momentarily reconfigured roads. Whereas roads are usually striated spaces that have been planned for traffic, during the nocturnal performance they became a floating playground. As a smooth space, the roads became lines of flight along which we rode. In this way, Theatre 44 laid claim to urban space, transforming it into public space for aesthetic improvisation and nomadic roving. What is more, in occupying the central reservation we reconfigured another striated space as a smooth space. During the performance it became a public space in which young people gathered at midnight without being harassed by police, whether to rehearse a politically charged poetic drama or just temporarily enjoy the right to the city. For the duration of an evening, these reconfigurative acts shifted planned spaces such that they fell outside of the purposes imposed by the authorities. Instead, they became a stage for performance and civic congregations.
Reconfiguring open spaces as flowing aesthetic and affective spaces

In the second nighttime walk, we began near the Peasant Movement Institute, went through Zhongshan Fourth Road, then walked along Donghao Creek, and finally reached Xiaobei Road, the area where the black population lives and works. The PMTI is politically and symbolically significant. It operated between 1923 and 1926 – that is, in the period of the First United Front: an alliance between the nationalists and communists. Together, the KMT and CCP sought to put an end to warlordism by training young idealists from all over China, who then went out to educate the masses in rural provinces (Berkley 1975). Having once served as a training centre in this project, the PMTI now serves as a museum dedicated to Guangzhou’s revolutionary past. It is a deeply ideological space in that the museum legitimises the CCP, calling for patriotism and reverence for the government. A store that stands in the vicinity of the PMTI had a rolling shutter door, on which we projected a dramatic script using the projector. At the same time, we read the text out using the loudspeakers. One passage of poetic drama reads as follows:

Tibetan soldier:
The captives don’t need to know the place
You only need to wait for the lighting from the one who falls behind
In this reeking massive graveyard
In your myopic eyes will also flows, the hygienic clouds of the party

Very soon you will have that random eyesight
Om Mani Padme Hum
(Shoots dead the Northeast Soldier)
(Wang 2016, 68)
This passage concerns the counterrevolutionary practice of Roman von Ungern-Sternberg, who served as a White Army general during the Russian Civil War and briefly occupied parts of Mongolia. Employing poetry and symbolism rather than directly narrating historical facts, this segment casts doubt on the certitudes of progress and empire at stake in Ungern-Sternberg’s bloody project. What is more, it subverts any radical project that tries to impose a certain ideal on the world – including the communist revolutions that Ungern-Sternberg was concerned to forestall or roll back.

Although the poetic drama is rather metaphorical and coded, performing it at night engendered a poetic space that was imbued with political symbolism. This charged political space deviated markedly from the PMTI’s symbolism. Dieel Guik, a musician of Miao ethnicity, improvised music using a bell attached to his knee and traditional Miao hand drum. Meanwhile, Jin Te, a writer of Manchu ethnicity, played the tanpura, beside a foam board declaring “I Love Canton Wong”. Together they constructed a musical soundscape that was unfamiliar and incongruous with hum of traffic on the busy Third Zhongshan Road. Furthermore, it differed from the music that street artists usually make. Alongside the music, a comic book artist and anarchist named Zijie read the text out through a loudspeaker. Another artist synchronised the projection of the text with Zijie’s reading. As fig. 15 indicates, we attracted curiosity from passers-by, who paused, listened, and watched what we were doing.

The loudspeakers and placards that we used might have reminded people of protest movements or other forms of political mobilisation. Indeed, at one level the piece’s aesthetic aspects and equipment drew upon elements associated with civil disobedience. At another, though, we tried to create the atmosphere of a performance. To this end, we made improvised music with unusual instruments; used a portable projector; carried white canvas bags that had been made especially for these night walks; set up small foldable stools for spectators to sit on; and recorded the performance with a video camera. These techniques allowed us to
remain agile and set up a “stage” quickly. In this way, would could swiftly establish a porous space of alternative discourses and aesthetics in the vicinity of PMTI – a politically charged space.

Figure 15. Theatre 44 performing near the Peasant Movement Training Institute, 2017. Photograph by the author.

The presence of a cameraman not only served to document our practice. He also provided a good excuse should we have been challenged by the police. “We are from Academy of Art and are making a film”, we could have answered. Back in the 1990s, when Lin Yilin had moved a wall of bricks across the busy Linhe Road in Guangzhou (see Chapter 1), it may not have been necessary to think up such an exit strategy, for there were still relatively few CCTV cameras in the city. Still, Theatre 44’s nocturnal performances echo Lin’s action. They both occupied the spaces intended for traffic. They both sought to smuggle something a bit off – a bit odd, a
bit unusual – into urban space. They both made passers-by pause, inciting them to feel and think about what public space could become.

Taking “smuggling” as a model allows us to “rethink the relations between that which is in plain sight, that which is in partial sight and that which is invisible” (Rogoff 2003). By smuggling this multi-media poetic political performance into an open space, which was saturated with the dominant ideology of the party-state, Theatre 44 invited people to rethink what see and hear. Why it was so rare, we wanted people to wonder, for something like this to happen in urban space? What is the relationship between this inappropriate appropriation of open space and the power that designed it and decided how it should be used.

Not long after we had set up the performance, a security guard who was patrolling the area asked what we were doing. “We’re just playing”, Liu Jiawen replied. For a moment I wondered whether the guard would halt the performance and disperse us. Instead, he stood watching for a while, before leaving. He did not call urban management officers or the police. Perhaps he thought that our performance might not significantly influence the public – that we would not disturb public order since we were just “playing”. Perhaps he thought that what we were performing was interesting and that we should be allowed to play.

As Deleuze and Guattari point out, every assemblage has both molar lines and molecular lines. Molar lines constitute a form of rigid segmentation. They organise segments of social space in a binary way, often as part of a state apparatus. Molecular lines, in contrast, are more supple, allowing social space to be constituted by territorial and lineal segmentations (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 222). The ratio of the molar to the molecular in a particular thing or space determines the extent to which it is open to change. The more molecular something is, the greater the possibility that some of its lines will become lines of flight (Adkins 2015, 131).

When we appropriated the pedestrian space beside the PMTI, we were unsure how long we could perform there, for this space was riven by molar lines of surveillance and control. Yet the police did not stop us from performing. Theatre
44’s action tested the space and reconfigured its molar lines into molecular lines. Or rather, it showed that the molar lines that pervade open urban spaces are not as solid as they often seem. Molar lines, we established, could become porous and supple given the presence of lines of flight. The performance poked some holes and prised open some cracks in a seemingly rigid space of control. Through its poetic and political discourse on geopolitics and revolution, and experimental musical improvisation, this guerrilla performance turned an open space and into a stage.

One middle-aged woman who observed us for a while asked Liu Jiawen “Where did you guys graduate from?” “Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts”, he replied. “You guys are really the fairies of art!” Although I was unsure what she meant by “fairies of art”, it seemed that she appreciated this unconventional performance in public space. I got the sense that she perceived it as a line of flight, a way of escaping from prevailing forms of cultural consumption. Indeed, Theatre 44’s intervention certainly deviated from standard cultural products such as television and films, which are not only made according to the dominant regime of the sensible but censored by (and filtered through) the CCP’s dominant ideology. In the moment, the group has distributed a marginal form of knowledge art, and music. The fairies of art might signify those who, as if by magic, make the invisible visible and inaudible audible. As such, they enact what Rancière calls “a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms”, even if only momentarily (2006, 63).

After the performance near the PMTI, we made our way along Donghao Creek, one of the most ancient tributaries in Guangzhou. It has been cleaned and beautified in preparation for the 2010 Asian Games, which were hosted in the city. Some people were taking a nighttime stroll, walking their dogs, or jogging along the creek. Others sat chatting while still others gave us curious looks as they passed by. This is a partially public, though still intimate space in which people can relax. It is carved by molecular lines, which are less rigid than their molar counterparts.

Unlike the performance beside the PMTI, in which participants gathered on one spot, now practitioners moved along the water. Acting and reacting to one
another, we read the poetic drama and improvised a musical accompaniment. Fluctuating perpetual relations arose in this flowing space. Bonds thickened among participants, many of whom were not yet familiar with each other. Qiu observes that people can exchange views, live together, and build communities in public spaces (Qiu 2011). Responding to one another in a public space, the participants became a community.

![Figure 16. Theatre 44 performing alongside Donghao Creek in central Guangzhou, 4 January 2017.](image)

Photograph by the author.

What is more, we also reacted to the environment. The elements that make up this space can be seen in figure 16. There were the rocks, water streaming by, sounds emanating from the highway above, echoes from the surfaces of the concrete structures that prop up the highway, plants, dim and dispersed light, and humid air. These elements were neither part of an urban planner’s design plan nor a stage set that provided the backdrop to our performance. Rather, they became
actors in the piece. They were dynamic performers at that, for they connected to one another rhizomatically in creating a nomadic performance. Sounds from our instruments mixed with those of the traffic and the water sound as they echoed in the space below the highway. The humid air along the creek carried these sounds, which meandered down the path. The yellow lights bathed the performance in a sense of uncertainty. The plants murmured in the breeze, merging into the music. After some of us released our placards into the water, stones in the creek determined the direction which they floated.

Through this confluence of actors, the performance reconfigured a space of molecular lines. Lines of flight temporarily prevailed in a space of supple segments, which had been planned for recreation. For the duration of the piece the space allowed for the creation of fluid sensitivities. Through affective and aesthetic performances, enacted by human and non-human actors, we explored the multiple forms that a public space can take. Things and people acted together to produce a fluid and destabilised public space, which was off-kilter in relation to anthropocentric and utilitarian spatial planning.

After 1989, open spaces in China have been depoliticised. Nevertheless, public political statements that do not follow party ideology are often silenced in the name of stability. Rancière contends that political and literary locutions provide models for speech and action more generally. What is more, he holds that they establish regimes of sensible intensity. “They draft maps of the visible”, he writes, “trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making” (Rancière 2006, 52).

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52 Wang Hui, an important public intellectual in China, remarks: “in contemporary China, although this apparatus still strives to perform an ideological function, it faces insurmountable obstacles. It has therefore largely turned into a repressive one; its control of media and other spheres is not primarily ideological, but rather is based on the need to preserve stability. Yet because all state apparatuses penetrate deeply into the institutions of daily life, the fundamental existential character of the state itself assumes a kind of depoliticized political form. Increasingly, this is now supplemented by the ideological hegemony of the market” (Wang 2006, 40-41).
39). Roman von Ungern-Sternberg, for example, was articulated nomadically in the city. In this way, it drafted the trajectories of urban topography as well as those between the visible and the sayable. These varied trajectories concerned the histories that gave rise to contemporary China and how open urban spaces in Guangzhou might be used.

The rehearsals and performances of Theatre 44 can therefore be seen as critical. Through poetic and political locutions, the group reconfigured different open urban spaces such that they temporarily became public spaces. These happenings loosened up both rigidly and more lightly segmented spaces. They presented urban citizens with forms of art that were “a bit off”, that is, outside of dominant cultural forms. Some observers, we hoped, became curious about how art might repoliticise public space. These performances echoed what, for Zheng Bo, is one of the key discursive conditions of publicness (see fig. 10 in Chapter 1), namely that a space or practice be “rational-critical as well as affective and performative” (2012, 13). I argue, however, that this socially engaged art practice is critical and public because it is reconfigurative as well as affective, and performative.

On 8 January 2017 in the Cultural Park in Guangzhou, Theatre 44 undertook another activity: a midnight emoji competition. A group of young people sat by the park’s gate tapping on their smart phones. Simultaneously, the chat group on which the competition was taking place was projected onto a wall. Unlike the other performances, the police interrupted this event. This calls into question Piper Gaubatz’s definition of public space in China (which I quoted in the introduction to this chapter), to wit, that newly open spaces are public spaces by default (2008). It can be said that in China public space is never a given – at least if public space is understood as entailing the workings of civil and civic society. Gathering in public space is highly restricted, unless it is for the purposes of recreation or match-making (People’s Park in Shanghai, for example, has a corner for parents who want to find

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53 A competition of emojis and sticker-like images with short texts that engenders brisk and fast visual-textual conversations in a chat group.
a partner for their children). The act of reconfiguring open spaces as public spaces is critical, therefore, for it provides a context for civic gatherings, civic engagement, and unconventional public art. If only ephemerally, it exercises a public right to the city.

**Conclusion**

Whereas *Sunset Haircut Booth* was long-term and durational, the performances put on by Theatre 44 were transitory. Despite this difference, they both demonstrate the criticality implicit in reconfiguring open urban spaces as public spaces. These public spaces make many things possible. In them, people can connect to each other, actively use the space, debate matters of concern, perform poetic or political locutions that deviate from political norms, and develop their curiosity regarding art and the possibilities of public space.

My first case study, *Sunset Haircut Booth*, exhibited criticality in that it is crucial to maintain and diversify public space under the restrictive conditions of Chinese society. Reconfiguring an open space, this cooperative project created a third space in which different parties negotiated one another’s interests. In making convivial gatherings and collective deliberation possible, this public space was partially outside of the established system of society.

The criticality manifested in my second case study, a series of performances put on by Theatre 44, comes to the fore in relation to the fact that open spaces in cities such as Guangzhou are closely surveilled and controlled. These nomadic performances tested dominant modes of governing open urban spaces, picking at seams in the city. They momentarily reconfigured these spaces such that they became not only less restricted but fluid. Indeed, during the performances, things were “a bit off”. Members of Theatre 44 read out a geopolitical narrative that

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contradicted dominant discourses. What is more, they presented marginal cultural forms and put on performances in which different elements of the urban environment became actors. Through their actions, space became a fluid public playground.

In these two cases, public space was not confined by the authorities’ designs, but creatively and critically reconfigured by artists and citizens. In short, these two instances of reconfigurative criticality show that criticality can emerge in socially engaged art practices that negotiate with the prevailing system of political governance. Further, it can reconfigure open spaces within systems of planning and control, producing public spaces that partially escape that system. Civic and aesthetic activities can occur in these ephemeral public spaces.
Chapter 3. Connective criticality: The Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society

While I was conducting my fieldwork in Beijing in late 2015, Man Yu informed me that one of the initiators of 5 1=6 (2014-2015) was going to organise a workshop and exhibition. It was to explore art and literature as a socially engaged art practice, as part of the first incarnation of the project On Practice (2015-ongoing) in Xi’an Art Museum. Given that the prospective project related closely to my topic, I booked a ticket on a bullet train to Xi’an and went to participate. Although I cannot recall much of the roundtable discussion in which participated as a researcher, I remember that there were five male presenters and just two female speakers. Huang Jingyuan, a socially engaged artist, and Chen Yun, who initiated the Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society (DMAS, 定海桥互助社).

At the end of the day, I was a bit tired of the discussion, which was dominated by men. Some of the men involved in the discussion said that they were impressed by Chen’s less logocentric and more embodied approach, which foregrounded care. Realising that DMAS could be one of my case studies, I asked Chen whether I could interview her. “Of course”, she replied, “but I think it will be way more productive for both you and DMAS if you can come to work with us for a period of time, not as an observer, but as a practitioner”. This proved correct: through working with the DMAS, I recognised that embodiment is key to their practice. This could not be observed from a distance; instead I had to go to the society and participate in their activities so as to conduct my research.

55 Although I do not want to stray from my focus, I have to mention the gender and power imbalance in socially engaged art in China. Awareness and discussions of gender imbalance from previous projects partially lead to the micro-politics of Theater 44, which sees gender equality as the basis of the ethics of prefigurative politics. The issue of indoor smoking triggered the reflection on gender equality and power relation within the group in the second round of On Practice: some practitioners, mainly male, smoked inside while others preferred smoke-free, yet the need of the non-smokers was not respected. In Theatre 44, this issue was finally addressed when female curators Zhang Hanlu and Li Xiaotian, among others, raised it and pushed through the house rule that bans smoking inside.
Introduction

Before I went to the DMAS I looked up its WeChat account, where I found this:

It is a self-organised venue for study, communication, reflection, and social services. We seek a union that can construct community culture/value, produce art/knowledge, and more broadly undertake interaction, assistance, and cooperation with the local people and our comrades according to the principle of reciprocity.

By stressing on reciprocity and cooperation in this way, the DMAS tries to adopt a non-hierarchical approach. I also read a publication about the art project that brought the DMAS about in the first place: *Dinghaiqiao: An Art Practice into History* (2014), which introduces Dinghaiqiao’s historical, cultural, and spatial complexities. The project in question was one of three proposals featured in the first annual Emerging Curators Project, which was held in the Power Station of Art (PSA) in Shanghai in 2014. It lasted for more than a year. During this time, nine artworks in the gallery of PSA were chosen to stimulate four workshops, which took place in Dinghaiqiao. These workshops were then mirrored in an exhibition, after which researchers (including artists, writers, and curators) continued working based on on-site observations, community activities, interviews, and archival research (Chen 2015, 5). Consider the following précis:

The Dinghaiqiao Project does not work as a community art project that aims at social change. Instead, it expects practice that is based on self-reflection and critique...The purpose is to rethink the responsibility of art to a very recent but disclosed history that intertwines with present and future, to open up the avenues and to find methods to take on this responsibility. (ibid)
To me, it seems that from the very outset the DMAS orientated itself towards something different from community art. It tries to deviate slightly from mainstream forms of knowledge and adopt a critical approach to growing their practices. Its work is anchored by mutual-aid. This model of relating has long existed in Chinese grassroots society, having “developed through the long-term needs for each other and co-living of people in the neighbourhood” (Chen 2015, 13). The DMAS has evolved in trying to root its practice in Dinghaiqiao, which is a working class neighbourhood in Shanghai. Having begun as an art project, it is now a self-organised space concerned with “practising into” histories of the area. Dinghaiqiao is a nexus at which multiple layers of histories meet, including those of the Japanese occupation, state owned factories, the Cultural Revolution, domestic migration, and urban regeneration.

According to my observations, the DMAS’s practices are threefold. First, it explores and collects local memories and cultures, documenting changes in the neighbourhood and engaging with the community. In this role, it provides nurturing services for local people. These include a storytelling and writing workshop, which aims to preserve histories of Dinghaiqiao, and an after-school care service, which puts on creative activities for primary school children. Second, it creates trans-local connections and produces knowledge that goes beyond that reproduced in official institutions. Third, it explores alternative ways of living. These include the “dumbass underground culture” advocated by Matsumoto Hajime, a Japanese leftist activist and anarchist. Here, “dumbass” means that this is not an idea-driven movement that has a threshold, but very grassroots. Everyone can join in the activities, including drinking and eating together, protesting while having fun together. In this counterculture, people “take the liberty to create their own lives” in ways that deviate from capitalism and consumerism (Matsumoto 2013).

This chapter addresses the following question: how does DMAS connect with people, not just in the neighbourhood but elsewhere in Asia too? To what
extent can the different forms of connectivity at stake in the DMAS’s practice be critical, given the restrictions imposed on freedom of assembly and association in China? To answer these questions, I analysed the DMAS’s practices by both studying their archive and conducting seven weeks of field work in DMAS from July to September 2016. In terms of methodology, my fieldwork entailed conducting interviews and participatory action research (PAR). This active, engaged, and engaging method allowed me not only to observe what members of the society did. Indeed, it meant that I could also participate in their activities and initiate actions with them. In addition to being a researcher, then, I was a co-practitioner in the DMAS.

Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey contend that the practices of thinking are not separated from the realm of the body. Indeed, they are implicated in the passion, emotions, and materiality associated with lived embodiment and socially engaged art practices (Stacey and Ahmed 2001, 3), With this in mind, my discussion in this chapter tries to think through my embodied experience of working with different people at the DMAS. At the same time, though, I have been careful not to neglect or dismiss the narratives from the members of the DMAS that differed from those from the initiator and the coordinator.

During the seven weeks of my fieldwork, I lived on the DMAS’s second floor, sharing with the DMAS coordinator Zhao Yiren. When I looked out from the window, I saw the low houses built by the inhabitants snuggled together, further way, the abandoned red-brick former Japanese cotton mill, and right next to it, a high-rise residential building (see fig. 17). I participated in five Dinghai talks (I explain these below), one meal in the People’s cuisine dining room, and three guided tours. (The latter were organised for a Swiss geographer, Indian urbanist, and art professor from Guangzhou, who has a background in visual anthropology and teaches socially engaged art practice). I co-organised street vending (Dinghai street vending) on two occasions, curated one cooking session (in which a cook leads a conversation inspired by the food), and two small exhibitions (one inside the DMAS, another in
the Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou). In the following sections I analyse two forms of critical connectivity at work in the DMAS’s socially engaged art practices of DMAS: *zai-di* connectivity and rhizomatic connectivity. In so doing, I draw mainly on my first-hand experiences and previous practices in which I was not involved.

![Figure 17.](image)

*Figure 17. the scene from the window of the second floor of DMAS. 2016. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

**Zai-di connectivity: making grounded and local connections**

This section introduces two vernacular concepts in Chinese-speaking contexts: *zai-di* and *kai-fong*. It then goes on to analyse two examples of connectivity in the DMAS’s local and grounded practices: its after-school care service, which ran in 2015
and 2016, and Dinghai street vending in 2016. Throughout, I am concerned to explain how these practices are critical.

In his essay “Zai-Di is a Mirror: A Reflection on Hong Kong’s Localism Movement” (2016), Taiwanese artist and writer Kao Jun-honn compares the concepts of ben-tu (本土) and zai-di (在地). Quoting E. Probyn, he contends that ben-tu is related to “location” in that it involves a certain order or arrangement. Ben-tu, he explains, conceals forms of ideological domination. Zai-di in contrast is related to local places and incidents. It is associated with the underprivileged, grassroots, and subaltern (Kao 2016, 124).

Whereas zai-di relates to daily life, he explains, ben-tu is closely related to identity. As such, ben-tu might become a political tool (ibid). In an editor’s note, Lee Chun-Fung complements Kao’s argument: zai-di is usually set in contrast with the “global” (as in the phrase “think globally, act locally”, for example) (2016a). For Kao, however, the global and zai-di do not form a dichotomy. Indeed, they are interrelated and chiasmic. As we shall see in the following sections, the DMAS’s practices are inspired and informed by global practices. Indeed, its rhizomatic form of connectivity especially take place in a zai-di way.

Chen Yun and other members of the DMAS often refer to Kai-fong (街坊). The DMAS has close connection with the non-profit art organisation Wooferten (2009-2015) in Hong Kong. One of Wooferten’s managers, Lee Chun-Fung, uses Kai-fong in both his writing and conversations. Wooferten aimed to introduce a lively conception of contemporary art that would engage the community. In Lee’s Imagine “If it Weren’t All for Nothing—A Few Musings on Communities, Art and Activism” (2016), he defines kai-fong in the following way:

In Cantonese, we commonly use the term ‘kai-fong’ to speak of our neighbours. This term is incredibly useful because it synthesises, in one conceptual compound, ‘community’ and ‘neighbourhood’. The prefix ‘kai’ literally refers to the street, whereas ‘fong’ refers to the place where one lives and works.
Thus, ‘kai-fong’ refer to the web or the dense tangle of relationships that accrete over a territory, a network of mutual aid composed of those in which one depends, places one’s trust in. (Lee 2016, 22)

Although it is important to stress that Shanghai is rather different to Hong Kong, this passage indicates that the term can refer to the people who live in a neighbourhood. In the context of the DMAS, kai-fong can be used to designate those who consciously take part in its activities. Lee perceptively points out that every kai-fong is singular (ibid.). Kai-fongs are specific assemblages of practice with specific capacities and needs. These assemblages are fluid and temporal. Connecting with kai-fongs is an important component of the DMAS’s zai-di practices. This goes especially for the after-school care service and Dinghai street vending, which I analyse in this section.

**The after-school care service: connecting via alternative education**

I asked Chen Yun, who founded the DMAS and was then the curator of an art project, “what does DMAS mean to you?” She pondered the question in silence for a moment, before answering: “it is a necessity” (Chen 2016). Indeed, in the epilogue of the publication accompanying an exhibition held in 2014, she wrote that “art is also a field of struggle, and this field does not only present itself in the exhibition hall or the art world, but more importantly in a specific place among a specific group of people” (Chen et al. 2015, 169). It was urgently important, Chen felt, that the DMAS practise and act on the ground of this specific place, Dinghaiqiao, and engage with kai-fongs from the neighbourhood.

When members of the DMAS discussed how to ground their practice in Dinghaiqiao, they looked into the needs of people living there. They wanted to see whether they could provide services that would both meet the community’s needs and nurture their own cultural practices. Most of the children in the neighbourhood, the DMAS found, attended after-school classes. They had a great deal of homework
to do and their parents lacked the time to pick them up from school and provide home tuition. Businesses saw this as a commercial opportunity; numerous after-school care services and tutoring classes are on offer. The DMAS did not mean to compete with these professional service providers or profit from providing after-school care. Its members rather saw it as a way of sustaining themselves and connecting with local people.

The DMAS set out to attract pupils living on Dinghaigang Road and Dinghai Road. The idea was that the children could have dinner at home and enjoy time with their families. This differed markedly from the all-in-one service offered by professional after-school care. Alongside tutoring and disciplining, professional services provide dinner and send children home at eight o’clock. In forcing children to spend so much time away from the household, it would seem that the education system and its extension in after-school care services estrange children from their homes and strip them of playtime.

In early January 2016, during schools’ winter vacation, the DMAS started its after-school class, providing tutoring on homework and art workshops. They tried to “heed the formation of children’s habits and their mental states” (DMAS 2016). At first, they attracted no more than four children. The “tutors” (members of the DMAS, most of whom studied or worked in the arts) took turns to teach and care for them. They also tried to give children more diverse and creative educational experiences, which did not focus on exam preparation or skills training.

“As cities historically have been rough and tumble places”, AbdouMaliq Simone writes, “where some people can acquire a great deal of money and live in increasingly spectacular conditions while others barely scrape by, the diversity of the city can easily foster highly competitive relationships” (2010, 6). In megacities such as Shanghai, children are taught to compete with their peers from an early age. They have to learn to be competitive, their parents suppose, if they are to survive in the city. This is why it is common for school children to be sent to after-school classes to finish their homework. What is more, they often take extra classes such as art and
Olympic mathematics. Parents hope that this might give them an edge over their peers when they come to compete for a place in a good secondary school, for example. In short, there is a sense in which children become urban by learning to be competitive.

Tutoring children was not so easy as the DMAS had imagined. As the project went on, its members even felt that they, pupils, and parents were all being consumed by the education system. This come to the fore in a discussion between Chen Yun and one of the tutors, Wang Xin, a young writer and university student in civil engineering. They agreed that after-school care at the DMAS should neither oppress children unduly by extending approach adopted in the school system nor extend the space of the family (Wang 2016). Zhao Yiren, the coordinator of the DMAS, held that its after-school classes and workshops be independent from school and family (Zhao et al. 2016). Accordingly, members of the DMAS tried to provide something that would deviate from both institutional education and parental discipline. This presented considerably difficulties. The tutors’ major responsibility was to help children with their homework so as to guarantee that they would finish it. Inevitably, this reaffirmed the school system’s disciplinary power and helped further its goal of preparing children for competitions such as exams.

Although they remained vigilant against the risk of becoming accomplices of the school’s power structure, the tutors inevitably had to situate their practice within it. Ultimately, their aim became that of making after-school care less estranging. Rather than deny the necessity of finishing homework, then, they made the process less stressful and more interesting by providing more personal and humane tutoring. Through artistic activities and games, they endeavoured to create a space that was a bit off, in which children could learn, play, and enjoy themselves without the pressure of having to excel or compete. Growing up in the city and becoming urban subjects can be very stressful, especially if children are constantly disciplined to be competitive and rivalrous.
Providing alternative forms of education can be positive for the development children’s identities as urban subjects. The DMAS’s tutors did not use coercive means to school them. Instead they encouraged the children’s curiosity, imagination, and creativity, whether in playing Cajon drum, drawing and painting, or blowing bubbles. Children could spend some time with their parents during dinner before going to the after-school class to finish their homework and play. They certainly enjoyed the latter.

“At the heart of city life”, AbdouMaliq Simone proposes, “is the capacity for its different people, spaces, activities, and things in the city interact in ways that exceed any attempt to regulate them” (2010, 3). Playing may come naturally to children, but it is often deemed inappropriate or squeezed out in favour of extra classes. “The overthrow of these micro-powers”, Foucault points out, “does not obey the law of all or nothing” (Foucault 1979, 126). In the case of the Dinghai afterschool care service, the tutors consciously decided not to help mould competitive urban subject. This suggests that there is an alternative way of becoming urban, including play and the use of cultural resources. In this way, the DMAS sought to deviate from norms in the existing education system, and thereby allow the children to become children again. Figure 18 shows a boy named Pang concentrating on blowing a bubble. It has become bigger than his head. This photograph draws the viewers into his fascination. The bubble is on the brink of popping: this liminality serves as a metaphor for the role of play, which essentially entails openness towards otherness (Vilhauer 2013). In playing, children and adults open themselves up to possibilities of becoming. They might become children or alternative urban subjects, for instance. The latter is critical in the competitive, success-oriented city of Shanghai.
The tutors/cultural practitioners learned from the children. In the minutes of their third meeting, the tutors discuss the possibility of translating their experiences tutoring and playing with the children into art. Taking the ¥1 monthly independent art magazine Fong Fo (冯火) as an example, they wanted to create works that would be “interesting, positive, and ironic” (Zhao et al. 2016). These works, they emphasised, should be grounded in their experiences, rather than being didactic and unreflective (ibid). Consider an article by Zheng Limin, a young man who works in a state-owned water purification plant and wants to become an artist. Written in a humorous and self-reflective manner, it includes a few photos with some witty and funny words written on them (see fig. 19). Wang Xin (one of DMAS’s tutors) was writing a non-fiction work titled “the Spring of After-school Care”. To Chinese

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56 Fong Fo is an art zine founded in March 2013 by young artist Feng Weijing, Zhu Jianlin, Shi Zhenhao, who by then still studied in Guangzhou Fine Art Academy. It publishes artistic creations in various forms: novel, comics, some experimental combinations of words and images, poems, and so on. There is a sarcastic comic column that mimicks the art world, which was developed in July 2014 called “I’m Ah Shi” by artist Zhu Jianlin. It is an independent hand-made zine funded by low-price “advertisements” of art institutes or art practitioners. Zhu Jianlin, in his casual chat with me, said: “Fong Fo is a rather anarchistic zine: no censorship, no editing, no proofreading. It can’t be collected as an artwork because it’s forever very cheap — only 1RMB” (2017).
readers, this recalls the Chinese title of the film “Les Choristes” — “The Spring of the Class for Falling-behind Pupils” (放牛班的春天). Although as of yet the DMAS has not produced the planned publication, individual texts and images (such as these by Zheng and Wang) have been completed. They were created by drawing on their experiences conducting the after-school class: most of them have established close personal relationships with the children.

Figure 19 shows Pang playing the melodica. Against the background of a blue movable shelf, the boy’s head flash shines like the Sun. The wider scene is dim: it is dusk on the street during Dinghai street vending activity, and the light is fading. With respect to this image, Zheng writes: “God said: Let there be → [this typographic arrow points to Pang’s shining head]: and there was light”. This humorous reference to religion echoes something that Zheng writes in his article: “Kids, untainted kids, have some sort of divinity...” (Zheng 2016). This divinity indicated here is not religious. Rather, it is a rhetorical device that evokes children’s sensibility, perceptions, and creativity. What is more, it signals their capacity to deviate creatively from prevailing norms. It is this that adults at the CMAS such as Zheng admired and wanted to share.

Through the after-school classes, the network among these children, their parents, and the DMAS began growing. In the late summer of 2016, we sold donated second-hand items on the street. In this way, we hoped, we could spread the word about the DMAS and its services. The parents allowed their children to accompany us without a companion. This was a sign of deep trust. Having children beside us during our street vending activities made it easier for us to blend into the neighbourhood. With the children as our side, we became a friendly group of people, which garnered the curiosity of passers-by.
For Deleuze and Parnet, an assemblage is “a multiplicity constituted by heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them” (2007, 52). The network of trust and mutual aid established by the DMAS turned some local residents and members of project into kai-fongs. As such, they connected with one another in Dinghaiqiao, forming an assemblage of people from different backgrounds and pursuing different goals. “An assemblage is a ratio of its tendencies toward both stability and change”, writes Brent Adkins (2015, 13). In forming an assemblage with kai-fongs, the DMAS put down roots in the neighbourhood. What is more, their practices became more zai-di – that is, more grounded in the local area without being localist. Through this process, the kai-fongs’ needs, thoughts, actions and interactions with the DMAS would lead to changes in its practices. As the DMAS wove itself into the neighbourhood’s social fabric, it became a heterogenous assemblage of people.

The after-school care service can be considered as a form of zai-di slow activism in that it helped the DMAS grow in the locality in a sustainable way. In his
discussion of the slow activism enacted through conversational art, Wallace Heim argues that “slowness refers not only to the duration of the event and the drift which can be momentary or extend over years, but to its temper. There is a resistance in slowness which responds to the reductive aspects of haste and frenzy” (2003, 187). Chinese cities are characterised by speed. Shanghai’s central business district in Pudong took shape in approximately fifteenth years.57 What is more, 100 museums were built in the city between 2000 and 2005 (Allsop 2011). Whereas art projects are usually fast, or at least short-term, slowness in cultural practices and education can counterbalance frenetic urban development. It can also further notions of sustainability.

According to artist, educator, and activist Zheng Bo, education is a form of slow activism. Indeed, educational practices occupy space tactically and strive for sustainability within the Chinese political environment (Zheng 2015, 330). Following Zheng’s claim, I would suggest that DMAS’s after-school care was a form of critical slow activism. Although admittedly it only lasted for a little over six months, the initiative explored alternative ways of developing children into urban subjects. These methods stressed not speed and efficiency, but art, play, and creativity. This practice was critical in that it built trust and connections among kai-fongs in a zai-di assemblage. Being part of such an assemblage helped the DMAS in its mission to explore alternative lifestyles in the city with local people.

The DMAS’s after-school care service assumed responsibility not only for caring for children, but for providing a different form of education. Its members took the liberty of drawing on their experience in creating artworks. “Whether cast in aesthetic or social terms,” Shannon Jackson writes, “freedom and expression are not opposed to obligation and care, but in fact depend upon each other” (2011, 14). Indeed, through two-way practices of nurturing and eduction, social art practice can “contribute to inter-dependent social imagining” (Jackson 2011, 14). When they

57 Pudong’s CBD construction is extremely fast when compared to Lower Manhattan in New York, which took a few decades in the early 1900s to build.
began this educational experiment, however, it was unclear whether the DMAS had thought through either the ethical dimensions or their pedagogical approach.

*Dinghai street vending: expanding connectivity via aesthetic experiences*

In this section, I examine how DMAS tested the social and spatial configuration of the street as a public space by means of Dinghai street vending. Through this practice, they created bridges among people in the neighbourhood, bringing *kai-fongs* onboard with DMAS. In sum, Dinghai street vending used aesthetic experiences to produce an assemblage that cut against the street’s policed spatial order.

The practice of Dinghai street vending was initiated by a Shanghai-based architect named Cao Feile. As a form of small and quotidian form of business, street vending offered the DMAS an opportunity to connect with people in the neighbourhood and thus become more embedded in the area, form greater assemblages, and establish other means of alternative learning. Through street vending, the DMAS could experiment with a new format, a new way of exhibiting, performing, selling, and connecting. Alongside *kai-fongs*, members of the DMAS could express their creativity and exercise the right to the city.

Interested in the gadgets, machines, tools, and practices that go into street vending, Cao Feile started observing street vendors. He sought to learn from their vernacular creativities and design a new cart for street vending. It would allow sellers to display and put away their wares swiftly. In this way, they could flee urban management officers (*chenguang*, 城管) more easily and thus avoid punishment.

In his *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau convincingly argues that one can analyse the almost microbiotic that the urban system is concern to administer and suppressed. These street-level, often illegitimate practices may be surveilled and disciplined, they are never eliminated. Instead they proliferate by way of surreptitious creativities, infiltrating surveilled urban systems (de Certeau 1984, 96).
Quotidian practices (such as building informal settlements and street vending) are more tenacious than one might think. They find loopholes and leeway by which they persist in an otherwise disciplined and controlled system. Indeed, they “proliferate illegitimacy” and resist by persisting (de Certeau 1984, 96). Drawing on de Certeau, we can grasp street vending as political and critical on the grounds that urban authorities often see it as undermining their efforts to establish a clean and organised city. Illegitimate street vending proliferates by finding blind spots and loopholes in systems of surveillance and control. It negotiates with those in charge of spatial order in a given urban space (sometimes through small briberies, such as a packet of cigarettes).

In the city of Shanghai, street vending is policed and controlled by urban management officers. Nevertheless, as Cao Feile has shown, street vendors infiltrate the city, developing their tactics to get around efforts at suppressing them. Indeed, they must persist amid urban management officers and urban infrastructures configured to repel or punish them, such as the spikes erected under highways also prevent the homeless people resting and street vendors selling their goods there. Although I do not know the extent to which street vendors have seeped into the fabric of Shanghai, Cap writes that they see street vending is a long-term, stable livelihood. In persisting with their work, they have formed “certain familiarity and stickiness with the urban spaces and social resources” (Cao 2017). Street vending interrupts forms of urban control, creating pockets of heterogeneous space that urban planners and authorities neither designed nor welcome. Still, these spaces make the city livelier and more liveable.

By adopting the practice of street vending, the DMAS learned from ordinary people about how they survive in the city. Its members immersed themselves in the creative ways in which people deal with policing powers in the city. In this way, they connected with more kai-fongs and other street vendors in Dinghaiqiao, with the intention of working together to explore alternative possibilities for living in the city.
In collaboration with Cao Feile and Zhao Yiren, I co-curated a second street vending outing, during which we exhibited materials recording the DMAS’s practices; played music with some children who had previously attended the after-school class; introduced mutually nurturing services for local people, such as a summer art workshop; and sold second-hand wares that members had donated. We encountered some interested kai-fongs, who scanned the DMAS’s QR code so as to receive information about its activities and services. However, we were dispersed by urban management officers. At that point, we realised that we were the only street vendors on the street that day. This reminded us to pay attention to the ecosystem of street vendors in Dinghaiqiao.

In a third round of Dinghai street vending, the DMAS took a step forward and challenged the spatial order imposed on the street. On 12 October 2016 Mr Li Yong (who lectures in art education at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou) led around 20 second year students to a field trip – commonly called “going to the countryside”. He chose the DMAS as an appropriate site for his students to observe, experience, and perhaps participate. Zhao suggested that his students take part in the DMAS’s street vending practice. Zhao asked the students to provide a text promoting their street vending that she could post on the DMAS’s WeChat platform. What is more, the class monitor (a student who assists the teacher) presented Zhao with a mind map of their ideas of “community” (shequ, 社区). It mentions “elders’ associations, elderly home, and places where old people entertain themselves” and other comments: “community has many circles”, “gated community, kindergarten? Don’t know much about community”, and “community is a small society” (see fig. 20).

After roaming around in Dinghaiqiao with information provided by Zhao, the students gathered at the DMAS, where Zhao briefly presented their practices. As Zhao put it, “the students were indifferent” to what they had seen and heard. It seems that bringing a group of people without much interest in informal and creative practice into Dinghaiqiao, even for just one day, runs the risk of turning the
“community” (shequ) into a superficial, even touristic spectacle. That said, the students joined us in Dinghai street vending in Dinghaiqiao, which became a field of practice for both the students and the DMAS.

Figure 20. Some students’ mind map of the concept of shequ, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Ma Li.

At six o’clock in the afternoon, the students joined Cao Feile and Zhao Yiren in front of a bank where the first and second street vending activities had taken place. Students from the art academy chose to participate in the activity by drawing portrait for people in the neighbourhood. The students chatted with their sitters, not only as a way of keeping them engaged but also help grasp their characters. In this way, the students engaged personally with migrant workers living in Dinghaiqiao, elderly people who have lived in this place for decades, as well as other residents. A good many people stood around the portraitists as they worked, watching with interest. This round of street vending, Zhao said, had attracted most people.
Figure 21 An art student drew a portrait of an old woman in Dinghaiqiao, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Zhao Yiren.

Figure 21 shows a student and an old woman, who holds her portrait. The student has made skilful use of her training to produce a realistic sketch of her subject. The old woman smiles happily, probably because she finds that the drawing bears a strong resemblance to herself. Perhaps she feels respected. In China, the most accepted form of art among the general public has been realism. Realism has been taught in art schools and popularised in various ways since the 1910s. Accordingly, residents without much knowledge of art could relate to realistic portraits. This, perhaps, was one of the reasons why this version of Dinghai street vending attracted a large number of people.

Around 8 o’clock, an auxiliary neighbourhood patrol guard named Songjun arrived and tried to dispel the students and the crowd. For the first time, the sitters and some other residents spoke up for the students and the DMAS. They argued with Songjun, probably because they liked the activity and wanted it to continue.

58 See Wang 2013.
Zhao considered this as the most rewarding street vending activity that the DMAS had conducted, for it aligned Dinghaiqiao’s as *kai-fongs* with the DMAS and the students against the urban authorities.

For Deleuze and Parnet, “the only unity of assemblage is that of ‘co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contingencies, epidemics, the wind” (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 52). It can be said that the students, *kai-fongs*, and the DMAS formed an alliance to defy an order imposed on urban space. Together, they not only formed but guarded a temporary assemblage comprised of aesthetic experiences, artistic practice, interpersonal exchanges, and being together. This resonates with Zheng Bo’s call for practices that encourage people to imagine a social infrastructure in which people from different backgrounds can live together (2012, 47). Although this assemblage soon dispersed after the street vending activity was over, the *kai-fongs* had their portraits. These served to remind them of how they were portrayed as dignified subjects, each with a distinct character and story. The students, for their part, went away with new ideas about what *shequ* or community could be.

In this activity, the process of imaging and making was also a process of sense making and space making. The portraits were not drawn in a studio in their academy. Rather, they were the result of the students engaging with *kai-fongs* in their social context. The students had to adapt their artistic practice to a public space. What is more, they had to interact with *kai-fongs* in their neighbourhood in attentive and affective ways. While the portraits were being drawn, a space was also being made in which those marginalised by dominant cultural representations (such as migrant workers and local elders) were made visible in their singularities.  

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59 This version of Dinghai Street Vending could be compared to another art project with activist characteristics in the city: Flyingpig’s [*飛天豬*] 100 free portraits project for *kai-fongs* in Kai Fong Pai Dong, Yau Ma Tei, Hong Kong. On their website, Kai Fong Pai Dong describes itself as “a self-organised neighbourhood market stall in Yau Ma Tei, which opened in November 2015 to build something with
The process of making portraits built a three-way bridge among different people. First, by taking part in this way, the art academy students could better understand the DMAS’s practice. Second, by drawing and getting to know local people in Dinghaiqiao, students had affective interpersonal experiences in the neighbourhood. Third, the kai-fongs became more interested and involved in the DMAS’s activity.

In some ways, this mode of occupying open space resembles the practices of reconfigurative criticality that I addressed in the previous chapter. In others, though, it is distinct: Dinghai street vending is concerned less with the issue of public space, than the social connections that appropriating such space can bring about. The nurturing activity of portraiture, for example, led the students and kai-fongs to get to know each other and promised to draw more people into the DMAS. It extended the DMAS’s geographical reach beyond the vicinity of its own physical space to the neighbourhood at large. It connected the DMAS’s members with more kai-fongs, forging new, if temporary alliances and assemblages. It gave rise to zai-di practices, without jettisoning previous means of connecting with the community, principally the after-school care service. It presented itself as neither a commercial community service provider nor a social work organisation. Rather, it is a group of creative young people who are interested in the neighbourhood and wanted to connect with kai-fongs. Through mutually nurturing practices, the DMAS sought to develop relationships that eschewed that between service provider and customer, which prevails in the commercial world.

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The neighbourhood from the bottom-up” (Kai Fong Pai Dong 2016). Horizontally-run by 11 people: artists, farmers, a hairdresser, a barista/social worker, a tarot card reader, teachers and community workers, the market stall offers an expansive range of products and services, from locally grown organic bananas to neighbourhood portraits, from fruit tree seedlings to communal jam-making, and from irregular film screenings to monthly storytelling events (ibid.). Flyingpig started her project Neighbour Faces in YMT in Kai Fong Pai Dong on 8th November 2015. She spent one hour during weekdays and two hours on weekends to slowly portray kai-fongs and listen to their stories until she accomplished 100 portraits (Flyingpig 2015).
This form of *zai-di* connectivity is critical. Consider how at a moment of crisis – when a patrol guards came to break up the activity – *kai-fongs* defended the students and the DMAS. As the Chinese word for “crisis” implies (as I explained in the introduction), this incident became an opportunity. In repelling the guard’s efforts, all three groups of actors (students, the DMAS, and the *kai-fongs*) were able to connect to one another, forming an assemblage that dared to deviated slightly from the grid of control imposed from above.

**Rhizomatic connectivity: Dinghai Chuan and Dinghai talk**

In this section, I analyse how the DMAS connected rhizomatically with artists, activists, anarchists, and creative practitioners in different parts of Asia. These actors learned from each other about alternative ways of living and working through Dinghai Chuan (定海串, which I explain momentarily). For its part, the DMAS shared its strategies for producing unofficial forms of knowledge, knowledge that engendered inter-Asian connectivity and solidarity through what it called Dinghai talks (定海谈, which I also explain below).

*Dinghai Chuan: Asia connecting to live differently*

The “*chuan*” in Dingahi chaun is *chuanlian* (串联), which means to establish ties with others. Dinghai *chuan* is the practice of making trans-local connections, bridging different groups and collectives that share the DMAS’s values and objectives. This practice was inspired by Matsumoto Hajime, who visited DMAS in mid-September 2015. In the late 2000s Matsumoto initiated the *Shirōto no Ran* (素人之乱) or Amateur Riot movement (Kindstrand, Nishimura, and Slater 2017, 152). He organised the anti-nuclear demonstration in Koejin, Tokyo, at which 15,000 people voiced their discontent. He also runs a second hand shop that shares the same name as the movement. “Amateur Riot provides an interesting insight”, he writes: “if we
are never to really achieve true equality, then at least we can attempt to provide more opportunities for development under the current framework, that will allow those who have time but not money to be happy and free, and live life with dignity” (Yang 2013). This is important because possibilities for happiness today turn on the capacity to move beyond an “all or nothing” approach that subsumes everything under the dualism of capitalism and the revolutionary alternative to capitalism. One cannot simply go on living in the capitalist system being a happy “dumbass” as Matsumoto demonstrates. Rather, non-binary resistance requires deconditioning oneself from what Mark Fisher has termed “depressive hedonia” – an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure (Fisher 2009, 21-22). Being happy is a way of life, not a goal that capitalism disseminates and promises to fulfil. Being happy is a practice of de-alienation and rehumanisation.

Amateur Riot employs various strategies: repurposing abandoned spaces as sites for alternative ways of life; opening second-hand shops to confront the wastefulness of consumerist culture; organising playful political protests: and inventing daily practices of resistance that can be performed by everyone, anywhere. For Matsumoto connections and collaborations among activists and practitioners in Asia are very important. Not only do they challenge nationalism (which has become rampant in countries such as China and Japan). Further, they allow artists and activists to draw on and learn from each other’s experiences.

This necessity and urgency of making connections with other practitioners inspired the DMAS to start the practice of Dinghai chuan. It entailed embarking on trips to establish connections with, and practise alongside, other people and groups.

In this section I analyse how DMAS participated in Banyan Travel Agency, which was initiated by Huangbian Station (a research centre focused on contemporary art), and made connections in the Guangdong Times Museum in the autumn of 2016. In so doing, I mean to answer these questions: how did DMAS connect to zai-di cultural practitioners in other localities? What assemblage of
collaborative practise did they form? Did the strategies of cultivating zai-di and forcing distant contradict each other in practice?

Figure 22. Map showing where the tours put on by the Banyan Travel Agency were located (indicated by red circles). Alternations made by the author.

The Banyan Travel Agency was an art project that promoted and facilitated trans-local connections among zai-di practitioners such as members of the DMAS and citizens who were curious about this form of cultural practice (for the locations, see fig. 22 above). It subsidised transport and accommodation to those admitted to the project following a round of interviews. It featured a number of travel guides in various destinations. Artist Feng Weijing would show people the third Dice King Competition (骰盅王) in Shunde. The DMAS would present Dinghaiqiao, Fuxing Island, and ask participants to curate cooking sessions and do street vending together. Pan He, the shopkeeper and owner of Roaming Bookshop in Shenyang, would talk about the Collage of Cultures in Shenyang and offer studio visits to young local artists. Matsumoto Hajime would welcome people to the Tokyo No Limit
Autonomous Zone, in which they could participate in a demonstration advocating peace. Zijie, an anarchist and comic artist, would lead people around the youth anarchist utopia in Wuhan. Elaine W. Ho and Lailai Lo of Display Distribute (a shop, exhibition space, distribution service, and research centre) would receive people in Kowloon, Hong Kong. There, they would work with cultural practitioners who involved in the urban farming movement and independent initiatives.

The Banyan Travel Agency was initiated and organised by young artists based in Guangzhou: Zhu Jianlin, Shi Zhenhao, and Li Zhiyong. The three were both researchers at Huangbian Station and later participated in Theatre 44. They felt the urge to connect with other zai-di practitioners in China and other parts of Asia. They were also familiar with Matsumoto Hajime. The travel guides were asked to showcase their practices and activities on the ground floor of Times Museum so as to attract people to sign up to the Banyan Travel Agency.

I acted as the DMAS’s “special envoy” to Guangzhou. As such, I set up our stall for the Banyan Travel Agency. Zhao Yiren, Cao Feile, and myself had decided to “street vend” in the lobby or on the terrace of the museum; street vending, we reasoned, is a form of exhibiting. I curated this special performance of Dinghai street vending. In so doing, I tried to display all the facets of the DMAS’s practice in the hope of attracting practitioners and kai-fong in Guangzhou to get involved. The vending, then, served to inform people about Dinghai talks, storytelling workshops, Dinghai street vending, and cooking sessions.

Between 11 and 17 September 2016, all of the hosts and organisers gathered in the No Limit Tokyo Autonomous Zone in Tokyo. On 23 September 2016, a group from Guangzhou arrived. That same afternoon they began a Dinghai working meeting focused on “community economy and Cantonese dessert tasting,” which was arranged by Zhao Yiren from the DMAS. During the meeting they shared observations and experiences of Tokyo and the groups from Guangzhou and

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60 For the schedule and different components of this gathering, see the website http://nolimit.tokyonantoka.xyz/events/
Shanghai presented their practices. They participated in a demonstration named “Permanent Peace in Asia” and saw live music performances and talks by activists concerned to foster forms of resistance. They saw book launches and exhibitions, and attended a meeting named “dumbass insurrection/revolt/riot”, which was organised by Matsumoto and other “dumbasses” from East Asia. During the demonstration, during which people marched with the black flag of anarchism, Zhao Yiren conducted street vending. In selling the DMAS’s publications and other merchandise, she connected with a broader range of people than those participating in the *Banyang Travel Agency* (see fig. 23).

Figure 23 Zhao Yiren taking part in a demonstration in the No Limit Autonomous Zone, holding a mug bearing the DMAS’s name in 2016. She also sold the DMAS’s wares in the street. Photograph courtesy of the DMAS.

Zhao also gave a presentation on the DMAS and her observations about community/shequ (社区) and economics. For Zhao, self-funding was a key issue for the DMAS, which for the most part had been financially supported by its founder,
Chen Yun. This seemed unsustainable. Some other members of the DMAS, such as Wang Xin, had tried to find other means of supporting the organisation economically, such as offering paid online courses. In her contributions to the Banyang Travel Agency in the No Limit zone, then, Zhao raised the financial problems faced by the DMAS and learned about other practitioners’ approaches to self-funding. For instance, she found out how Matsumoto’s guesthouse was run, and why Nantoka Bar (an alternative public space that Matsumoto had set up in the neighbourhood) had a funding deficit (Zhao 2016). She was surprised when an underground musician from Korea told her that they had applied for funding from the government to organise anti-capitalist activities. Following a discussion with Feng Junhua, who coordinates Huangbian Station and participates in Theatre 44, Zhao realised that one should not be too quick to judge this form of resistance, for the context in Korea might be very different from China (ibid.).

By participating in the Banyang Travel Agency, the DMAS wove itself into a rhizomatic network of zai-di artists, activists, anarchists, and other cultural practitioners. All of these actors were concerned to explore alternative ways of working and living with cultural practices. “The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple”, write Deleuze and Guattari. “It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added (n + 1). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills” 1987, 21). With this in mind, we can observe that the Banyang Travel Agency’s network of zai-di practitioners did not expand outwards like a tree from one centre (a megacity such as Beijing, for example). Nor did it have a main point of focus that dominated other nodes in the network. As the map presented above indicates (fig. 22), the localities in which the participants congregated were dispersed. What is more, the range of activities offered to visiting practitioners suggests that these were independent and distinctive zai-di practices, which emerged in and through local conditions. Through
the Banyang Travel Agency, these practices overspilled their initial locales to connect up with others.

According to the Huangbian Station, these trips aimed to “stimulate new situations of being together with people, with localities, and with communities/shequn [社群], to reconsider the visibilities of cities that are assigned by capitalisation” (2016). “Through the nomadisation of our bodies and the flow of overbrimming geographical experiences,” the text continues, “we can investigate the different dimensions of “locality/di-fang [地方]”, “zai-di [在地]”, “local/native/ben-di [本地]”, “in the locality/dang-di [当地]” in the present, and we can disentangle the threads of the relationships between these and our work/(artistic) creation, in order to find the possibilities of co-practising ... for new spatial production” (ibid.). Connecting, here, does not mean developing art projects with a relational aesthetic. Rather, it entails entering a connective rhizome of zai-di practitioners and localities in which the various dimensions of practices they create can be reached and explored by others in the network. By leaving one’s own locality, focusing on zai-di experiences and problematics, and becoming nomads in the rhizome, practitioners can learn from each other. They can exchange ideas about how to live differently under conditions of rampant neoliberal capitalism and rising nationalism. What is more, it enables them to collaborate around pertinent issues.

Zhao’s bewilderment at how activism is funded in South Korea underlines the fact that zai-di practices and tactics are always grounded in specific places. Still, this does rule out the possibility of interconnections: indeed, strategies can be analyzed and carefully deployed in other contexts. Chen Yun expresses this point in the form of a question: “How can we work on a ‘place’ that is difficult to disappear? If we try to combine ‘zai-di work’ with ‘connections with different places and sites’, and with ‘the imagination of association’, we can reimagine and reconstruct the practice of ‘connecting and associating’” (Chen 2016). Practitioners working in a given place are never isolated from other zai-di practitioners – they always share some commonalities with artists and activists elsewhere. As Chen points out,
bringing together perspectives that grew up in very different places serves to prevent zai-di practitioners from falling into parochialism. What is more, it allows them to think about their problems through the lens of others’ practice. Forming fluid an assemblage or rhizomatic network is critical in that it allows practitioners to foster a sense of solidarity, borrow each other’s strategies for use in another locale, and collaborate. It allows them to discern lines of flight through which they might escape from the hegemony of capitalism, the nation-state, and the global system.

The DMAS was inspired by anarchist groups in Hong Kong, Japan, and other places involved in the Dinghai chuan. Eventually, they themselves adopted a horizontal (that is, non-hierarchal) structure, in which the members share rents and responsibilities and all have the same right to initiate activities.

_Dinghai talk: rhizomatic knowledge production_

In this section I discuss Dinghai talks – a major feature in the DMAS’s practice. It addresses two questions: how was rhizomatically connected knowledge produced through this practice? How did it facilitate rhizomatic connectivity among different people with different histories and from different locales? I answer these questions through two analyses. First, I look at connectivity in relation to the sit and format of the Dinghai talks. I claim that the socio-spatial environment in which the talks took place allowed for a less-hierarchical and more equal connections among the speakers, participants, and host. Second, I attend to the connectivity at stake in the talks’ topics. The keywords and assemblages of knowledge production that emerged from the talks largely related to inter-Asia studies, urban everyday life, and spatial struggles.

After establishing the DMAS, Chen Yun and Liang Jie initiated the practice of Dinghai talk. It involved inviting scholars, artists, architects, directors, writers and other cultural practitioners and professionals to give presentations or screen films. Chen Yun had worked in contemporary art institutions in Shanghai and Beijing since
2007. In March 2010 she joined West Heavens as a researcher and project manager. West Heavens is an “integrated cross-cultural exchange programme”, which aims to use social reflection and contemporary art to promote interaction and mutual interconnections between India and China (West Heavens 2012). Liang Jie teaches in the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics. He holds a PhD in economics and has a strong interest in the history of economic thought, developmental economics, political philosophy, and South Asia studies.

The first Dinghai talk took place on 30 July 2015. Given by Ren Chao, it was titled “Sensing Bangladesh: Area and Trans-area Perspectives”. The seventy-fourth and most recent talk (at the time of writing) was held on May 2017. It was named “Contemporary Jogja Art in the Context of Current Political Circumstances” and delivered by Antonius Wiriadjaja. Chen Yun summarises the initiative in the following way:

[The] Dinghai talk series gradually formed three major directions of concern: (1) ‘Another Asia’ [如此亚洲]: To understand histories surrounding China, with a particular focus on South East Asian societies, politics and culture (especially left-winged movements and the Chinese diaspora and historical Chinese migrants in other countries). (2) ‘In the Town’ [城中有事]: Understanding the history and reality of cities in China and surrounding countries; discussing and analysing the historical and recent urban renewal projects in Shanghai; constructing a vision of city life and urban transformation; understanding the rights to the city. (3) ‘Working through Art’ [艺术做功]: How individual and collective artists, researchers and activists work in specific urban and rural context to push forward social and intellectual issues via art creation, knowledge production and strategies of social organisation. (Chen 2018, 489-490)
Retrospectively, we can say that first talk belonged to the “Another Asia” strand and the most recent to “Working through art”. These examples indicate the variety of topics covered in the series. The placement of the venue for the Dinghai talks meant that people coming to see a presentation would leave a metro station and walk past Aiguo Road. On one side was a high-rise gated community; the other is an old compound whose residents were protesting everyday to demand relocation. They then walked along a busy street market on Dinghai Road, before finally turning into the small lane in which the DMAS was located. It was in one of old resident-constructed low-rise houses in this small lane called Dinghaigang Road.

Those who attended a Dinghai talk, then, entered a place with a distinct urban fabric and history. This gave them an impression of the immediate context in which the DMAS worked. When they entered the DMAS, visitors would sit around the table in a room that was quite unlike a lecture hall or formal meeting room. In a corner by the door, independent publications were on side; in another corner were shelves of books, from children’s stories to histories of Southeast Asia. There was a blue notice board displaying information concerning collectives and self-organised groups in other places, as well as a student’s desk that had been turned into a table for cooking utensils and a rice cooker. These last objects made the space seem almost domestic. This was a semi-public space in which knowledge could be shared in a friendly, relaxed, and intimate way. The ground floor, which was used for screening, could only accommodate around sixteen people.

The fact that everyone sat around the same table as the speaker served to level the hierarchy between the speaker, host, and participants. The way in which the DMAS publicised the talks also served to create a safe space in which different topics could be broached. Here people could avoid being intercepted by the authorities, for talks were only advertised two or three days in advance. Participants were asked to send a message to the DMAS’s WeChat account to register their attendance. Besides, the DMAS maintained a good relationship with Dinghaiqiao’s
residents’ committee. Mr. Kong, an open-minded young clerk who had been invited to the talks, said that he did not find the DMAS’s activities problematic enough to report them to higher authorities. Before the speaker was presented, people were asked to briefly introduce themselves. Furthermore, it was considered acceptable for them to interrupt the speaker to pose questions, even before the question and answer session had begun. Afterwards, they could hang out with the speaker and others in the DMAS.

Through these Dinghai talks, people connected with each other and the DMAS, forming a variety of shifting assemblages. These were in a state of continual flux: people gathered temporarily to discuss certain issues, before dispersing. Sometimes people revisited these issues by attending further Dinghai talks that addressed similar topics; sometimes people who had met at the talks got together independently to probe the issue further and discuss what kinds of practice might be generated from the knowledge they had gleaned from the speaker. Others attended one talk and never returned.

In the DMAS’s ground floor, people could connect to knowledge and each other in a way that was impossible in a lecture hall or auditorium. These talks did not feature serried rows of faceless listeners staring at the speaker on the podium. Rather, knowledge became more accessible in the safe space of the DMAS. This not only allowed the speaker to dig deeply into the problematics without fearing censorship; it also made it possible for anyone to contest the speaker’s and each other’s perspectives. This rhizomatic connectivity among people and different forms of knowledge the DMAS was critical in that people could momentarily duck under the authorities’ radar. Evading censorship in this way, the DMAS facilitated non-hierarchical form of debate and learning, outside of official institutions.

In late August 2016, Zhao Yiren and I mapped out the forty-nine talks that had taken place thus far (fig. 24). We extrapolated keywords from the talks and

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61 The residents’ committee (居委会) is the administrative institute on the grassroots level in Chinese cities.
wrote these down on white cards. They include history, mobility, movement, action, *zai-di*, everyday practice, community, urbanisation, gentrification, demolition and relocation, the rural, citizen’s life, connecting, youth, postcolonial, institution, body, resistance, humour, migration, bottom-up, citizen’s life, capital(ism), and leftist.

![Figure 24. Mapping Dinghai talks, 2016. Photograph courtesy of the author.](image)

The pink strips of paper visible in this map of the talks relate to the topic of “working through art” (艺术做功), the blue strips to that of “in the town” (城中有事), and the yellow strips to that of “another Asia” (如此亚洲). The heading “working through art” was intended to capture the rhizomatic ways in which artists presented their *zai-di* practices, many of which were socially engaged, and issues that they were working on. The rubric of “in the town” indicates the rhizomatic dialogue through which scholars, urban planners, urbanists, artists, and other practitioners shared research on urban issues, often in relation to Shanghai and other Chinese cities. With the title of “another Asia” we presented rhizomatic conversations concerning *zai-di* works, made by a range of cultural practitioners, there were rooted in politically significant places across Asia. The white cards were the keywords that we derived from the talks. In the map, they function as the nodes
connecting different parts of the rhizomes. The white cards of the map’s top-left corner, for instance, read “history” and “trans-regional perspective”. The connect yellow strips of text, which read “(009) Iran: inside and outside”, “(043) Meandering in post-USSR spaces”.

The rhizome, write Deleuze and Guattari, “is a map, not a tracing” (1987, 12). “It [the map] is itself a part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (ibid.). True to Deleuze and Guattari’s conception, our map of the Dinghai talks was open to change. Some white cards were left blank on purpose so that both members of the DMAS and visitors could write new keywords on them. What is more, the existing cards could be moved around and new cards could be added. This map would always be provisional, allowing new relations among different forms of knowledge to arise and new nodes to be established. Mapping the talks out in this way helped me analyse the talks from a bird’s eye view. Attending to connections between the substance of the talks, however, requires adopting an ant’s perspective, able to meander through the rhizomes.

The rhizome of inter-Asia knowledge production comprised a fair number of talks on Southeast Asia and South Asia. Most of these were curated by Liang Jie and Chen Yun. The talks included “A Brief History of Leftist Movements in Sarawak” by Tian Yingcheng, “Returning to Malaya: History and Identification” by Liang Jie, and “Seven Days in Thailand: Ethnic Chinese, Overseas Chinese, and Chinese Language fragments” by Chen Yun. In these talks, cultural imaginations of China, and how China relates to other parts of Asia, were re-articulated and rethought by way of Southeast Asia. Seeing China through the lens of Southeast Asia countered the nationalist understanding of China and Chinese that prevails in mainland China. For Chen Kuan-Hsing, nationalism, nativism and civilisationalism are three dominant forms assumed by identity politics under conditions of decolonisation (2005, 7). Unlike Southeast Asian countries, China has never been fully colonised. Still, the effort to change China’s cultural imaginary and points of reference can be seen as a
form decolonisation. In this context, the question arises of how to de-centre the imaginary of modernity expressed in Mao’s injunction that China must “surpass Britain and catch up with America”\textsuperscript{62}

This inter-Asian perspective and methodology become more and more pertinent with the upsurge of Chinese nationalism over the last decade.\textsuperscript{63} Frantz Fanon insightfully points out that “if it [nationalism] is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley” (1963, 204). In the case of China, it would seem, this blind alley leads to a refusal to recognise its Asian neighbours outside the terms set by the mainstream narratives. (Increasingly people alternate between state-engineered hatred towards some Asian countries and consumerist/touristic fetishism towards others).

In producing non-institutional inter-Asian knowledge, these talks utilised a method informed by the concept of min-jian. Min-jian (民間) describes a folk, people’s, or common society. These translations, though, are not exact: whereas min means people or populace, jian connotes “space” and “in-betweenness” (Chen 2010, 237). To use the concept of min-jian as a means of getting to know other Asian people and places is to deviate from official ways of approaching the continent. Knowing more about ethnic Chinese and overseas Chinese in South-East Asia, for example, can help people from mainland China reflect on communication and connection between (southern) China and South-East Asia beyond the scope of

\textsuperscript{62} This is a slogan put forward by Mao Zedong in the Great Leap Forward, which was a disaster “characterised by a collapse in grain production and a widespread famine in China between 1959 and 1961, is found attributable to a systemic failure in central planning. Wishfully expecting a great leap in agricultural productivity from collectivisation, the Chinese government accelerated its aggressive industrialisation timetable. Grain output fell sharply as the government diverted agricultural resources to industry and imposed an excessive grain procurement burden on peasants, leaving them with insufficient calories to sustain labour productivity” (Li and Yang 2005, 840).

This led to a great famine, which caused at least 30 million, making the Great Leap Forward the deadliest famine in the history of China and in the history of the world (Ashton et al. 1992).

\textsuperscript{63} This includes the looting and vandalism in Japanese shops and cars in 2012 in Shenzhen, and the boycott of Korean goods and shops, stopping tourism in Korea in 2017.
nation-state. Mr. Tian’s talk on leftist movements shed light on how people in Sarawak and other Southeast Asian nations fought against colonialism. What is more, he highlighted how the Chinese diaspora has been involved in local communist parties and autonomous movements.

Such perspectives entail thinking beyond the myopic framework of the nation-state, and above all a narcissistic obsession with “Chineseness”, so as to recognise how Asian cultures share interconnected histories. The rhizome conjured around the notion of *min-jian*, which emphasises the shared knowledge that exists in between Asian people and places, was critical in several respects. It prompted people to consider about Asia (and China’s place Asia) from an alternative perspective, which transcended narratives of nationalism and the nation-state. Moreover, it connected those who participated in the talks to a larger rhizome consisting of interconnected histories and political discourses in Asia.

Another set of connections linked the different perspectives put forward on everyday urban life and struggle. The talks named “Tianlin New Village: the Power and Future of bottom-up Life” and “Group Learning about the Government’s Action of Demolishing ‘Illegal Constructions’” in Shanghai, for example, were connected. These two talks both addressed grassroots *zai-di* daily practices in Shanghai. The first presented a case study of a workers’ village in Shanghai, which was built in the 1970s for those employed in a state-owned factory. The talk focused on how they organised to fought for residents’ rights. The latter talk, which was given by members of the DMAS and others, was concerned urban transformation. It invited participants to exchange ideas about how to slow down the demolition of urban spaces that, though full of livelihood and vigour, the authorities deemed illegal and messy. These two presentations underline how the Dinghai talks served to educate citizens and help them organise themselves. At the Dinghai talks, people exchanged

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64 People in the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian started to emigrate to South-East Asia centuries ago for trading or a better life, way before the founding of PRC. See Skeldon 1996.
practical knowledge concerning how to preserve diverse urban ways of life through everyday grassroots struggles.

Not everyone in the DMAS could organise Dinghai Talks. Indeed, the power dynamics at work within the organisation warrant scrutiny. After a talk named “On the Demolition and Relocation of Xiangming Middle School” in July 2016, I held a private conversation with its initiator, Zheng Limin. He voiced his opinion of the hierarchical power relationship and hierarchy within the DMAS. Neither Chen Yun nor Zhao Yiren encouraged his proposal for the talk, he told me. They thought that the talk might not be accessible to those who were not graduates. The invited speaker Zhu Tianhua said that he hoped to publicly interrogate personal memory so as to establish whether nostalgia among young people bears upon problematics concerning memory and history (Zhu 2016).

As it turned out, Chen Yun and Zhao Yiren were right to be concerned: the talk became little more than a gathering of graduates. It was attended by only the speaker, four discussants, the initiators and two of their friends, and myself. Most of this group had graduated from Xiangming Middle School. Nevertheless, questions around the DMAS’s hierarchical structure should not be neglected. Who could make the final decision concerning a proposal for a Dinghai talk? Who had more intellectual resources and could thus initiate more talks? In addition, the DMAS promoted the talks primarily on their WeChat platform. Accordingly, the information could only reach a particular audience: those who followed its account or came across it in posts by their WeChat friends. The limited circulation of promotional information on the talks begs a larger question concerning knowledge production: who had access to the knowledge generated at the Dinghai talks and who did not?

There were limitations, then, to the connectivity of the rhizomatic network of knowledge and people that grew up around the Dinghai talks. Still, knowledge production flourished at the DMAS, this gap in the grid of power. The Dinghai talks were critical given that they made space for non-compliant knowledge production,
public debate on socio-political issues, and dissidence. They allowed artists and researchers to share uncensored information, which has been more and more stifled since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2013.\textsuperscript{65} Public intellectuals whose work was deemed politically incorrect or sensitive have been expelled by institutions. Some have even been detained by the authorities – this has become increasingly frequent in recent years (Goldman 2009).

In this worsening political environment, the Dinghai talks preserved a form of criticality. Evading censorship and control, they created a space that was partially “off the grid”. This allowed for the production of connective knowledge about everyday struggles, inter-Asia histories, critical art, and politically sensitive issues. What is more, it encouraged people to learn, connect to each other, become friends, and put their new knowledge into practice.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed zai-di connectivity and rhizomatic connectivity, both of which can be seen as critical. In my analyses of the after-school care service and Dinghai street vending, I have argued that both demonstrate zai-di connectivity, which is local and grounded. Through the after-school care service the DMAS formed an assemblage with kai-fongs. By providing an alternative form of education, this practice sought to avoid contributing to the production of efficient and competitive urban subjects. Through street vending, the DMAS connected to a larger group of people in the neighbourhood and formed a temporary alliance with kai-fongs in the face of the city authorities.

I then emphasise the rhizomatic connectivity of Dinghai Chuan and Dinghai Talks. Dinghai Chuan allowed zai-di practitioners from different places to forge connections with others in a rhizomatic network and borrow the strategies for living

\textsuperscript{65} See Creemers 2015.
and working otherwise. In circumventing censorship, the Dinghai Talks were able to produced critical and connective rhizomes of knowledge that fell outside of official institutions, mainstream narratives of history and geopolitics. Under conditions in which education institutions are under the control of the party-state, freedom of speech, assembly, and association are very restricted and information is censored or withheld. Connectivity constitutes a form of criticality in this context, for it enables people to link up with each other to find otherwise ways of learning and living, build a supportive and sustainable network to resist the hegemony of capital-nation-state. Indeed, this form of criticality resists, not by fighting back, but by reinventing ways for connecting and nurturing.

Furthermore, the DMAS indicates an alternative path that artivism might take in the context of urban China. The best-known form of Chinese artivism (at least in the global art scene) is project-based, relatively short-term, and oriented towards current affairs. It usually culminates with exhibitions held in art institutions, as emblematized in the work of Ai Weiwei. The DMAS’ work, in contrast, is low key, relatively long-term, and inspired by the concept of min-jian. Far from ending in an international show, its practice is continuous and grounded in (but not constrained by) locality. In providing mutually beneficial services to the neighbourhood, the DMAS remains vigilant against the danger of ossifying into an institution. It pursues collaboration not as a source of artworks, but rather as a means of nurturing the neighbourhood and different assemblages. Though it mobilises artistic means, it does not aim to produce work to put on show in art institutions. Indeed, members of the DMAS do not even claim to be making art. Their practice is best summarised by Joseph Beuys’ remark that “a social organism as a work of art” (1974, 48).
Chapter 4. Uneasy criticality in socially engaged art with migrant workers: *Home, a piece of documentary theatre (2016)*

The one-year rehearsal [and production] of *Home* for me was purgatory ... For me, class is a very profound subject, but it also touched too much on issues that the students wanted to avoid, and the whole process was very very painful.

Li Yinan, 2016 (teacher and theatre director)

Then we can only do it [the documentary theatre piece] and perhaps we can change the world. But we still have doubts: can theatre change the world? So there’s this layer of meaning [in *Home*] for us — it’s a self-irony.

Wang Shaolei, 2016 (student, scriptwriter, and production assistant)

Therefore, this theatre piece was about the relationship between us and them [the migrant workers], a satire of ourselves. It’s as if we were doing something for them, but we were not: we were consuming their stories, and that’s it.

Liu Shanshan, 2016 (student/scriptwriter/performer)

These quotations stem from interviews that I conducted with a teacher and students involved in a year-long dramaturgy course that led to a piece of documentary theatre named *Home* (2016). It focused on the issue of migrant workers in Beijing. It was readily apparent that the process of developing *Home* had been painful. My interviewees were riven by doubts and introspection. How did this happen? Why was the process of staging *Home* so uneasy?
Introduction

*Home* was produced and performed by third-year students of theatre and literature, as the result of a one-year course in dramaturgy. Their teacher was Li Yinan, a professor in Theatre Studies at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing and dramaturg, theatre director, and theatre theorist. Li studied theatre at Columbia University in New York before going on to study and work in dramaturgy in Germany between 1998 and 2007 (the Central Academy of Drama 2013). Since 2009, her work has been dedicated to bringing the ideas and methodologies of German *dramaturgie* to China (ibid.). She leads the programme in Dramaturgy and Applied Theatre at the Central Academy of Drama.

Li’s practice and teaching is concerned with social issues such as those surrounding migrant workers. Although migrant workers have been indispensable to urban development in China, they are seldom recognised by either the authorities or mainstream narratives. Through her pedagogy, Li employs sociological methods such as interviews and participatory observation so as to gather documentary materials for performances.

During the process of devising *Home*, each student was asked to find and interview a migrant worker in Beijing. The worker was to be of the same sex, around the same age, and from the same province as the student interviewer. The students not only had to interview the same young migrants several times over six months; if possible, they were also to follow their interviewees back to their original homes in the provinces during winter vocation. The students conducted semi-structured interviews with the migrants. The questions they asked are as follows:

1. How are your living conditions in Beijing?
2. Are you satisfied with this “home”?
3. Where or in what kind of environment did you grow up?
4. Are you satisfied with this “old home”?
5. Why did you leave your hometown and stay in Beijing?
6. What is home to you?
7. If you don’t have your own apartment or house, where do you want to buy or build your own house?

In the mid-1980s, the government began to loosen the household registration system (hukou, which I explained in the introduction) This allowed rural citizens to seek economic opportunities in cities (Hu 2012). At the same time, China’s “Reform and Open” economic policy led to huge foreign investment in the manufacturing industry in Eastern urban areas. Whereas the cities prospered from this, income growth was much slower in rural areas (ibid.). “The increased demand for cheap labour in China’s new manufacturing sector, and booming development that encroached on rural lands”, Xiaochu Hu explains, pushed a large amount of rural surplus labour to the cities” (ibid.). Although both urban and rural people now enjoy greater mobility, migrant workers are still subjected to prejudice and discrimination. This is due to institutionalised inequality in urban China, which permeates the household registration system, social administration, and government policy (Cui and Cui 2009).

Some of Beijing’s migrant workers are employed in the service sector. Although students at the Central Academy of Drama frequented restaurants, cafés, hair salons, and manicure salons in which these migrants worked, the two groups seldom connected with each other. This might be one of the reasons that Prof. Li wanted to use documentary theatre to prompt the students to engage with migrant workers.

Starting in September 2015, Li instructed the third-year Theatre Studies students to read books on critical theory and the political economy of Chinese villages. In this way, she hoped to lay down the theoretical and contextual
foundation of their subsequent investigation.\textsuperscript{66} In late October, the students began investigating and documenting young migrant workers’ experiences of living and working in both Beijing and their hometowns. This work focused particularly on their shifting ideas and experiences of “home”. During the fieldwork, the students found that the relationship between the migrant workers and themselves, though friendly on the surface, was awkward and could even break all of a sudden. They began questioning the barriers that separated one group from the other.

These rather painful reflections on the stilted interviews led to the emergence of a key theme in the subsequent play: class and class difference. A German dramaturg and theatre director named Kai Tuchmann, who worked closely with Li, suggested this manifestation of class difference could be represented by incorporating aliens from the future into the play, drawing on H. G. Wells’ \textit{Time Machine} (1895). This science fiction novel dramatised the unbridgeable class difference and inevitable conflicts between members of an upper class (Wells named them the “Elois”) and those belonging to a working class (the “Morlocks”).

The students performed \textit{Home} in July 2016. It was put on in the independent theatre Penghao Theatre (蓬蒿剧场), which is situated near the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. For the three nights on which \textit{Home} was shown, the theatre’s main hall was packed. During certain scenes, some members of the audience were moved to tears. \textit{Home} could, therefore, be hailed as a success. Yet during the six months of devising and rehearsal, the script was modified numerous times. Arguments and doubts arose, with both the teacher and students struggling with an uneasy process of thinking, questioning, reflecting, and creating.

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They chose to work in the genre of documentary theatre, which is often enrolled to tackle social and political issues. “The core of documentary theatre”, Li explains,

is the understanding and reenactment of histories (things that took place) by the people living in the present time. Kai Tuchmann, a German dramaturg, considers documentary theatre as “an alternative way of writing history”, compared to the mainstream historical narratives (eg. history textbooks, historical documentary produced and broadcasted in mainstream media) that closely intertwined with the structure of social powers. It is mostly played by non-professional actors in public or semi-public social spaces, and it presents historical events, processes, figures and so on via theatrical means (eg. costumes, role-play, rehearsal etc.) ... Documentary theatre does not intend to tell a story, but to stage social discussion and discourse. It aims at exposing contemporary and current social and political situations, rather than constructing theatrical events through historical stories and real figures. (Li 2017a)

As this passage makes clear, documentary theatre engages with contemporary society in three ways. First, it draws on (and documents) quotidian realities and histories. Second, it probes a specific social political issue that is pertinent to people in society at large. Third, it seeks to stage performances in public spaces so as to provoke discursive and affective interaction and reflection. Documentary theatre, then, tends to be socially engaged at the levels both thematic substance and creative methods.

In my fieldwork I employed the methodology of participatory observation. Between December 2015 and July 2016, I audited the course’s classes, followed its rehearsals, participated in in-class practices and discussions, joined two students for dinner so as to have an informal discussion, and saw the final performance of Home.
In this chapter, I intend to explore three different layers of uneasy criticality in the process of devising and final performance of *Home*: the uneasy class politics at play during the fieldwork and preparation of the performance; the uneasy and self-critical production process and dramaturgy; and the uneasy staging, reception, and what I shall term “response-ability” to the audience.

“Can we be friends?”: Uneasy relations between students and migrant workers

On the day that *Home* was to performed for the public for the first time, the students held a dress rehearsal. Afterwards, they gathered for a group interview with me. Wang Shaolei, one of the students involved, gave the following account of his classmate Sun’s interaction with a migrant worker. “Sun’s interviewee”, he said, “was a manicurist who’s a bit older than her. Prof Li said that she [Sun] might have realised, but she couldn’t convince herself that the relationship between her and the manicurist was instrumental and consumptive. That’s to say, you know that you two are different from each other, but you can’t accept this reality, and you still say that ‘we are friends; we are still the same’” (Spoken as part of Shanshan Liu et al. 2016). This passage raises a number of questions, which I address in this section. Was it impossible for the theatre students and young migrant workers to be friends? Could they understand and connect with each other? What were the differences that lay between these two groups? Was the relationship between them only instrumental? What form criticality arises from discussing uneasy class politics with the students?

During a group discussion among the students and Professor Li, a student named Yang Le said that “at the beginning” of the devising process “we hadn’t discovered this thing” – that is, the issue of class (阶级性):

> Sometimes we feel that maybe the issue of class exists, does exist, as always. But sometimes I feel that [the interviewees] are quite similar to us and the
money that they earn and their living environment are quite good. Yet later I asked myself: ‘if you can live such a life as theirs, will you be willing to do so?’ I give myself an answer: I will not do that because that kind of life doesn’t suit me. And I’ve been studying for such a long time, and I am now here, in such a place [the CAD], I won’t live that sort of life. So suddenly I have a feeling that as if I am superior to them. But when I need to work with people in the outside world (outside of the Academy), for example with (TV) producers, I have to hide this kind of thoughts and doubts about class, about my study, about this thing [Home], about the Academy, and to show that I am a student of theatre and literature at the CAD and I’m very good at playwriting. I need to perform the fact that I am definitely capable of [doing this job and] earning this money.” (Class discussion 2016).

Yang described how the class difference between him and his interviewee, a young migrant worker, surfaced during the interviews. He sometimes struggled to face up to this difference. He struggled to admit that he wanted to maintain a certain lifestyle, which he considered superior to that of his interviewee. In his position as a theatre student, he sometimes tried to overlook issues relating to class and migrant workers. Putting this source of tension out of sight and out of mind allowed him to continue doing what he was supposed (or even programmed) to do. He found interacting with his interviewee unsettling, then, for it confronted him with the sense of superiority that his lifestyle inspired in him.

One of the books that the students were required to read for the course was Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu contends that the different lifestyles and tastes associated with people from different classes are constituted by unequal distributions of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Most of the students admitted that they found it difficult to keep in touch with the migrant workers because “we don’t have many
common interests to talk about” (Class discussion 2015). This situation is reflected in Bourdieu’s argument:

the low interest which working-class people show in the works of legitimate culture to which they could have access—especially through television—is not solely the effect of a lack of competence and familiarity: just as supposedly vulgar subjects, such as television, are banished from bourgeois conversation, so the favourite subjects of bourgeois conversation, exhibitions, theatre, concerts or even cinema, are excluded, de facto and de jure, from working class conversation, in which they could only express the pretension to distinguish oneself (1984, 381).

It might be the case that whereas migrant workers like pop and internet culture (encompassing, for example, television series and celebrities’ live streams), the theatre students enjoy drama and exhibitions (in addition to TV series). It seems that the teacher Li Yinan included Bourdieu on the course’s reading list in a deliberate effort to make the students conscious of the issue of class in preparation of their fieldwork. Yet did the differences between these two groups of young people really stem from class and class-based tastes? Did this interpretation risk overlooking the connections and nuances at work between them? Is it possible to address these issues from a perspective that does not assume a superior position?

Chen Ting, another student, interviewed a young woman named Liu Yiting, who worked in a shop selling Guilin rice noodles. After the first interview, Chen discovered that Liu had unfriended her on WeChat, their only means of communication. Rather than asking Liu why she had done this, Chen make many polite comments in the hope that Liu would friend her again. Although this succeeded, when Chen tried to organise a second interview, she realised that Liu had unfriended her again. This time she asked Liu why she had done this. “I don’t like that when it’s always the same people in my social circle”, Liu replied (Li, Chen,
et al. 2016). Once Chen had managed to squeeze back into Liu’s social circle, she decided to make an effort in maintaining the relationship between them. She messaged Liu every now and then, and invited her to see theatre performances at the CAD. Nevertheless, Liu did not take up these invitations – “maybe she’s too busy”, Chen wondered (Li, Chen, et al. 2016).

In inviting Liu to see theatre, Chen endeavoured to bring their two worlds closer together. This could be seen as an effort at redistributing cultural capital by making certain art form (in this case, theatre) available to a migrant worker. Availability is not equivalent to accessibility, however. Perhaps Liu found theatre inaccessible or felt that she would not understand or enjoy “high art”. Having tried to connect to Liu in this way, Chen was refused. Liu deleted her from WeChat for the third time and stopped working at the rice noodle store, disappearing into the megacity. Had Liu admitted Chen into circle, if only momentarily? Maybe not. By literally disappearing, this migrant worker refused to speak. She severed her connection with a member of the cultural elite, who wanted to understand and represent her life story in an inaccessible (and to Liu perhaps irrelevant) cultural form.

Chen’s fraught interaction with Liu brings to mind Spivak’s famous query: can the subaltern speak? The term “subaltern” here is not reproduction Gramsci’s monolithic grasp of the subaltern as the oppressed proletariat, who assert their autonomy in the face of hegemonic power to which they have no access (Gramsci 2005). Spivak does neither homogenise nor romanticise the oppressed (indeed, she criticises the Subaltern Studies Group on these very grounds) (1993, 66-111). I use the term subaltern here less in relation to postcolonial studies and more in line with subaltern studies in China.

During the Maoist era, rural people internalised their denigrated status, despite constituting the majority of China’s population. Accordingly, many saw migration to the city as their only means of upward social mobility (Lu interviewed by Zhao 2010). As a result of the social polarisation that has taken hold since the
market-oriented reforms of the 1990s, these migrants have become the subaltern (Zhao 2010). Under conditions of China’s rapid urbanisation, modernisation, and economic development migrant workers and their families have benefited from the economic opportunities. Nevertheless, they have suffered from inequitable distributions of wealth, citizens’ rights, investment in social infrastructure, and cultural capital. What is more, they are discriminated against for not being urban enough. In this context, Spivak’s concept of subalternity is strikingly pertinent. For Spivak, subalternity does not only imply being inferiority to social, economic, and cultural elites. Rather, it describes the condition in which a group has little or no access to structures and institutions that would allow its grievances to be recognised or indeed recognisable (2010, 228). This is rings true in contemporary Chinese cities. The news contains reports about migrant workers not being paid for months or advocates for labour rights for migrant workers being obstructed or even arrested.

There is a considerable body of subaltern studies scholarship in China. Pun Ngai’s early work on young female migrant workers (dagongmei, 工妹) emphasises how their subalternity has been conditioned by a matrix of different forms of domination. Rural-urban disparities, state policing, gender difference, family and kinship, production relations, and consumerism all come together to brand female migrant worker subaltern. No single oppositional logic (such as class) predominates (Pun 2005, 196). “Can the subalterns speak?”, Pun asks. “Or do they have to scream?” (2005, 165). Screams, bodily pain, and other embodied forms of resistance on the part of dagongmei, Pun argues, should be considered political (2005, 193). Dong Haijun analyses the Chinese peasantry’s strategy of employing the identity of the weak as weapon in fighting for their rights. This, he suggests, is a subaltern politics (Dong 2008). Yan Hairong’s research on female domestic workers from rural China establishes that, given their subalternity, cannot speak discursively.

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Instead, in their determination to go on living in the city, they manifest a “conscious tactic” of the subaltern (Yan 2008).

Sun Wanning’s book juxtaposes mainstream representations of migrant workers with the ways in which they represent themselves. In this way, she shows how rural migrant workers negotiate a politics of voice, visibility, and agency through media and cultural practices. Against the backdrop of deepening social inequality, they reconstitute their subject positions in reciprocal relation to the state, cultural elites, and urbanites (Sun 2014a). As I have mentioned in discussing the difficult encounter between Chen and Liu, I follow Sun in recognising how, as subaltern subjects, migrant workers can refuse to speak rather than subjugate themselves to cultural elites (in this case theatre students). The subaltern can refuse to be expressed in elite terms or fabricate stories rather than speaking the truth.

Some students grew suspicious of what they gathered in their encounters with young migrant workers. Some stories were inconsistent: the interviewee would say something in the first interview only to contradict themselves in the second. Other stories sounded too miserable or slick. The migrant workers, it seemed, were performing their subalternity by telling the students what they expected to hear. In these a sad life stories, a rural youth is mistreated by their family and disappointed by the village, in which work is scarce. They then struggle to survive and fit in in the big city, constantly failing in one way or another. Telling this hackneyed story may have been a tactic through which the migrants protected themselves. Perhaps it allowed them to avoid revealing their lives and being vulnerable in front of a stranger, thus rejecting an unequal power relationship imposed by their elite urban interviewers.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, waiters working in cafés realise their condition. They play the game of being a waiter: “their condition is wholly one of ceremony. The public demands of them that they realise it as a ceremony; there is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavor to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor.
A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer because he is not wholly a grocer” (1956, 59-60). This applies not only to professional roles, but social identities too. When the students approached their young interviewees as migrant workers, some played up to this role. In this way, the migrant workers demonstrated their subalternity. Economically strained, these people belong to neither the country nor the city, and are exploited and mistreated to boot. By dramatising their life stories according to a recognised narrative arch, the interviewees met the students’ expectations.

In an interview with the students after the dress rehearsal, one student told me that one of the interviewees had apologised to her after she found out that her story had not been selected for elaboration in the play. Had it been passed over, the interviewee had asked, because she had not spoken about certain things (Li 2016)? This prompts the question as to whether she was apologising for not being subaltern enough. Can the subaltern speak in a way that transcends their subaltern position?

The students were also doubtful as to whether they could speak on behalf of the migrant workers. In April 2016, the class was invited to perform in the Phoenix Media Centre, where they decided to stage the story of Xiao Jie, Yuan Ye’s interviewee. At the age of fifteen, Xiao Jie had left his hometown in Anhui Province to work in the big cities. By 2016, when Yuan conducted the interviews, he was a twenty-nine-year-old hairdresser. One of his leg was disabled and he had only visited his hometown three times in fourteen years. According to Yuan, “he always has a slick and slightly wretched look on his face” (Dramaturgy in Central Academy of Drama 2016). Xiao told Yuan that he wanted to move away from the heavy smog in Beijing. “I might be a person without home”, he said (ibid.). In the performance, some students made a cutting motion using pruning shears. This gesture, which was repeated in time with a monotonous rhythm, could be read as the director’s and students’ interpretation of Xiao Jie’s hairdressing job – repetitive, mechanical, boring, even soulless. Xiao Jie’s photograph was projected on the screen at the back of the stage, as can be seen in figure 25.
Despite all of this, Xiao Jie was not invited to the performance. After the show, Yuan Ye felt ashamed to see Xiao again, for he had depicted Xiao Jie as a miserable and alienated figure. Xiao Jie himself would not see himself in the same way. “Can I speak for Xiao Jie?” (Yuan in class discussion 2016). His doubts were aggravated after the performance. Some students in the class felt unsettled when their teacher confronted them with the question: “are you exploiting your interviewees by getting their sad life stories?” Unexpectedly, the exploitative relationship was also raised by the subaltern themselves: sometime after the show, when Yuan Ye went to the hair salon where Xiao Jie worked to interview him once more, Xiao Jie and the salon’ female owner asked him for remuneration. They probably saw Yuan’s interviews as exploitative. In this case, the subaltern did not want to be represented by the cultural elite if they were to be denied access to the resulting representation. Indeed, the performance exhibited the teacher’s and the students’ judgements, not Xiao Jie’s voice and perspective. Can the subalterns speak through a cultural elite when they do not know what the elite is saying and how they are being spoken about?
Preparing for Home was an unsettling process, during which the students’ social consciousness changed. Having begun by assuming that they were the same as the migrant workers, they realised during the six-month interview process that they were separated from the migrant workers by class. When they tried to bridge that distance and to speak for the subaltern, however, they came up against various forms of resistance and rejection. In the wake of this, they were left to ponder the unease ethical issues surrounding the exercise.

This unsettling acknowledgement of class dynamics is a form of critical reflection. It is especially illuminating because it emerged not as a theoretical observation or presumption put forward by the teacher, but from the students’ experiences and reflections of talking with migrant workers. Having initially dominated socialist revolutionary discourse, notions of “class” and “class inequality” have been abandoned and are now avoided in contemporary China. Class difference may be repressed, but the students came to the uneasy realisation that it determined the relationships between them and the migrant workers. Beijing is adorned with propaganda slogans extolling patriotism and prosperity and shiny billboards advertising goods. In this context, as young members of the urban elite, the students exhibited critical imagination in recognising the problem of class inequality. Through critical reflection they were able to become aware of their complicity in the structures that have produced the migrant working class and urban inequality. In this way, they deviated somewhat from the consumerist, docile, and apolitical mentality preferred by the authorities.

On the other side of the ledger, the subaltern’s refusal to speak also manifested a form of criticality. Through this refusal, migrant workers could reject an unequal power relationship and refuse to be represented and consumed by cultural elites. Faced with this rejection, the students became self-critical about how they approached the interviewees. They came to reflect on the utilitarian motivation behind the interviews – namely to obtain information with which to devise a play. This gave rise to a criticality, then, in that the students entered in to what Haraway
has termed “deconstructive relationality”: “a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality” with the migrant workers (1992, 299). The migrant workers deconstructed their inequality with respect to the students. Rather than letting the students project what they wanted on them, the interviewees compelled the students to recognise their agency and diffract and change how the students treated them.

Given that the students came to realise that they neither could nor should speak for the subaltern, how could they continue to produce the performance about migrant workers? This question leads in to the next section on the production process and dramaturgy. How, I ask, did the class construct a theatrical performance out of their encounters with migrant workers? What struggles, questions, and doubts did they wrestle with along the way?

The uneasy production and dramaturgy of Home

During the process of making Home, some students voices questions not only about how the play should be made, but also concerning the point of staging such a piece. They each submitted a piece of non-fiction writing based on the interviews they had conducted. Professor Li selected some of these stories and asked the students to work in groups to produce a short stand-alone piece of work based one of them. The students decided their roles themselves: someone would be the dramaturg, another would serve as the scriptwriter, others would be the actors, and so on. The collective deliberations of these seven groups, like the dramas that they devised, varied in terms of the stories they chose, their approach to the issue of class, their dramaturgical choices, and their performative renditions of the stories. Not all of the chosen stories made it to the final performance. Some groups found it difficult to translates the stories into theatre, and the director Professor Li took out some stories for various reasons.
Arguments, doubt, questions, confusion, and frustration featured throughout production process. This section analyses three aspects of the uneasy process of composing the performance. First, I look at the uneasy transition by which the students went from attempting to stage a conventional piece of theatre that represented the migrant workers’ lives to self-reflective and critical representation their encounters with the interviewees. As part of this shift, the students took the decision to adopt ideas from the science fiction novel *The Time Machine* as their dramaturgical framework. Second, I explore the unsettling collision between two different perspectives on how to write a script based on the story of a manicurist. Whereas the teacher insisted that the relationship between the student and her interviewee (the manicurist) based solely on class difference, with the student exploiting her subject, the student held that they were friends. Third, I attend to one group of students’ unsettling critical interrogation of art’s engagement with society, which led to a lack of productivity in their theatrical process.

**Uneasy re-presentation and a fictional dramaturgical framework**

The students already had doubts about speaking for migrant workers on stage following their performance at the Phoenix Media Centre. This issue was exacerbated by the play’s dramaturgy. In the second half of the process of collectively creating *Home*, the dramaturg Kai Tuchmann questioned the legitimacy of the representational acting in the context of this piece (Li 2017b). If the students followed conventional modes of theatre making, Tuchmann contended, then they would superimpose use their own points of views over of those of the interviewees (ibid.). This echoes the issue of whether the subaltern can speak. Now that the students had realised that they were unable to speak for their interviewees, could they still rely on theatrical representation, through which they would stand in for the absent migrant workers? In struggling with this issue alongside Professor Li, the students tried theatrically “re-presenting” their encounters with the interviewees
rather than the migrant workers’ stories. “Re-presentation” (or *darstellen*), as Spivak understands it, is a constitutive act, which means to “make present again” (1993, 66-111). How could the students make their uneasy experiences with migrant workers and their unsettling critical reflections present again onstage?

A student named Wang Shaolei reenacted a conversation that he had had with his younger male cousin, whom he called Didi (弟弟, meaning younger brother). The piece stressed both his frustration with the exchange and subsequent reflection. Wang was presented as a pre-recorded voice and his cousin was played by Liu Shanshan, a female student.

A young man from a small town in Shandong Province, Didi worked in a kitchenware factory in Shunyi, a suburb of Beijing. He gave the following account of his experience of the city:

Beijing—people here are just richer, and a lot of them drive luxurious cars. When we go for a walk, we always see the second generation of rich people racing their sport cars. Well, we are both humans, but why do we live such different lives? ... living in such an environment as Beijing, the only thing is money, money; [working under] huge pressure, but earning just a little. You won’t have a sense of security, (Li, Chen, et al. 2016)

In the recording, Wang expressed his puzzlement and powerlessness: “I don’t know how to answer this question. Should I act like a liberal and tell him that he doesn’t work hard enough? Or should I act as a fatalist and tell him that fate is obscure? Or should I act as a socialist and tell him that labour is honourable, but that reality is full of cruel exploitation and suppression? I can’t answer my didi [younger cousin]; I can’t answer myself either.” (ibid.)

Wang neither conjectured as to what his cousin thought nor placed any judgement on him in order to represent him. Instead, he made his conundrum present again on the stage. Although Wang felt indignant about social and economic
inequality, and disagreed with his cousin’s belief in meritocracy and material wealth, he did not propose solutions to these issues, despite being familiar with different social theories. Nevertheless, an overarching structure was needed in order to thread together the different re-presentations such as Wang’s. Inspired by *The Time Machine* (1895), a science fiction narrative that portrays extreme class division, Professor Li created a series of scenes. Three aliens embarked on a journey to the Earth in search of an egalitarian utopia. Upon their arrival they encountered students from the CAD.

The first of these scenes, which depicted the three aliens’ journey, a video was projected on a screen (see fig. 26). It featured a montage that alternated hectically between footage of speeches being given by Lenin, Hitler, Churchill, and other leaders. Figure 26 presents a screenshot of video sequence. It shows the moment when “Little Boy” (the first atomic bomb used in warfare) was dropped on Hiroshima. As such, it depicts one of the final catastrophes of the Second World War, which developed from the fascist “ideal” of a “pure” society. All of which indicates a paradoxical yet dangerous affinity between utopia and dystopia that runs through modern history. This added a historical dimension to the play’s exploration of the theme of class and its role in the promise of communism.
Figure 26. The scene in Home in which three aliens travel to Earth in search of utopia. Screenshot from a video of the performance at 02:13. Courtesy of the CAD.

After they have landed, the three aliens arrive at a café in which the students are discussing the process of producing Home. Curious about human civilisation, the aliens ask about a book that one of the students were holding: The Time Machine (1895). In response, the students explain the dystopia described in the book:

He [H. G. Wells] writes about a time traveller who arrives in the far future. To his surprise, although the necessities of life become very abundant and money can generate itself in banks and stock markets, human beings do not attain utopia. On the contrary, they degenerate into two species ... one species is called Eloi ... they spend all their time playing gently ... They don’t work or labour, and they’re interested in nothing. Yet the other species, Morocks, live underground ...they work all day long in a mechanical factory to support the livelihood of Eloi. When the night falls, they come above the ground and capture Eloi to eat ... Cannibalism doesn’t only happen in times of famine; it might also occur in the materially rich future. (Li, Chen, et al. 2016)
Although the term “class” was not pronounced once during the whole performance to avoid censorship, *Home* drew on this dramatised class division in its most extreme form. In this way, the play foregrounded the issue of class, which served to connect different stories in the performance.

The device was intriguing but tricky – can documentary theatre be framed by fiction? Although the genre promises to foreground factuality in its main content, documentary theatre does not enact historical events. Nor does it make drama using historical elements and figures (Li 2017b). Rather, reenacts an event that took place so as to stage social discourse (ibid.). This definition of documentary theatre guided Professor Li in producing *Home*. According to this conception of documentary theatre, the class issue was put forward by using a fictional structure from *The Time Machine* to elicit and elucidate the discursive themes as part of *Home*. It is important, however, to ensure that the fictional framing did not distort the facts. This was avoided in *Home*, which respected the factuality of the interviews.

Ms. Li held that plays such as *Home* should be staged publicly, not as an insider gathering. It was therefore necessary to apply for permission to put on the performance, which entailed clearance from the censors at the Municipal Culture Bureau. In China’s censorship system, using a fictional framework might be seen as a strategy through which an artwork might subtly hint at political issues that are deemed sensitive. Familiar with the bureaucracy and censorship surrounding the performance arts in China, Professor Li and her students knew that it might be safer to present reality in the guise of fiction. In the case of *Home* (2016), this meant presenting social and economic inequality and class division behind a fictional veneer.

Liu Shanshan, a student who played different roles in the final performance, said: “I told Ms. Li back then: ‘if we dig deeper, we will face all those problems: urban-rural disparity, left-behind children etc. and the performance would become rather acute. Ms. Li said that we should forsake all those and stay on this layer’” (Shanshan Liu et al. 2016). For the team of *Home* (2016), using *The Time Machine* as
a framing device was a practical strategy by which they could address social issues while avoiding censorship. On the one hand, it allowed the play to pass through the censorship procedure without neutering its content. On the other, they could still suggest forms of critical reflection on the issue of class by means of fiction and irony.

The criticality manifest in the choice of *The Time Machine* (1895) as a metaphorical and structural framework lies in how *Home* painstakingly combined factuality and fictionality. In adopting a fictional facade, the play struck an uneasy balance between critically raising social issues and navigating censorship. It presented a partial means of transgressing the boundaries of official institutions.

*Unsettling the production of social discourse*

Professor Li decided that class would be the main theme of *Home*. Accordingly, some stories that did not reflect on this topic were not selected for inclusion in the final performance. One was even removed from the script a mere week or two before the opening performance. This story was that of Sun Jianan’s encounter with her manicurist Han Bing:

> Is it really like what our teacher Ms Li has said: in the relationship between me and Han Bing, I am only a consumer? Am I consuming my manicurist Han Bing, including her miseries in life? (Li, Sun, et al. 2016)

These were the closing lines of part of the script. Although they were voiced by Sun Jianan, Professor Li added them herself. This question posed in this passage was not merely rhetorical; the audience were meant to ponder it. Sun seemed unconvinced by the teacher’s suggestion that her manicurist Han Bing was not her friend. She had got to know Han Bing through regulars visit to manicure salon.
Every time I do my nails in the manicure salon where Han Bing works, she always talks to me and tells me about all the suffering she has endured in her life. She has such a hard life! She was abused by her mother since she was a child. When she came to Beijing, she met a boyfriend who swindled money from her. I really sympathise with her, and I always call her ‘elder sister’. When Prof. Li asked us to find a migrant worker, she was the first person that came to mind. So, I went to the salon to interview her, and I recorded all she said, in total more than two hours (Sun 2016).

After hearing Han Bing lay bare her wounds and sadness, Sun felt that they had become close friends. Nevertheless, it was uncertain whether Han’s stories were true. In my interview with Professor Li, in contrast, she expressed her dismay at being unable to make Sun to recognise the unequal relationship between her and Han:

she uttered the words from the script on stage that I had edited, but I felt that she was very reluctant to pronounce them. I reveal the truth but for the students that’s hard to accept. She told me that Han Bing might come to see the performance, and she didn’t know what to do. She thought that it would be very cruel to say these words to Han. This was the cruel reality of life, but I can’t even make the students, who were creating this piece with me, to face it (Li 2016).

Sun and Professor Li had two conflicting perceptions of the relationship between the two young women. Although Sun felt that her friendship with Han Bing was not yet intimate enough for her to feel able to open up about unhappy moments in her life, she felt that her sympathy for and affinity with Han was real. For Professor Li, this “friendship” was a make-belief on Sun’s part. Whether or not Sun acknowledge the fact, Li held, and the relationship was exploitative.
Still, it is important to remember that the relationship between manicurists/beauticians and their customers run in two directions, as Penn Ip points out. Customers can become affective labourers for the manicurists if they feel very empathetic and close to them. This means that customers can be affected by the manicurists and work in their interest, not least by becoming regular customers and thus paying them regularly. Ip describes how in one case a customer even helped her beautician buy stocks in Shanghai (2017). Seen in this light, the fact that Han voluntarily told Sun of her misery could be interpreted as a strategy for retaining a customer by triggering her sympathy. Yet this could not cancel out the fact that Sun was affected by Han’s stories and felt sympathetic towards her.

Although both Li’s and Sun’s perspectives were based on the same documents (Sun’s interviews with Han), they gave rise to very different stories. As Janelle Reinelt points out, in the context of documentary theatre, a document’s value is predicated on a realist epistemology (2009). This means that documentary theatre is based on the facts of what has happened, rather than fiction. Yet plays in this genre do not merely corroborate historical documentation; rather, they employ documents to (re)compose a certain reality. “The inability of the documents to tell their stories without narrative intervention”, Reinelt writes, “becomes in film and theatre the inability of the documents to appear without the creative treatment of film and theatre makers” (2009, 9). Hence, theatremakers’ judgements are predicated on how documents select and interpret dimensions of the real. Based on the documentary evidence about Sun’s encounters with Han, Professor Li judged that this relation was exploitative. This became the main narrative of the story, excluding Sun’s own opinion.

During an interview conducted a few months after the completion of Home, Professor Li told me that she had selected five out of the thirty-five stories so as to present the theme of class, which had emerged during the production process (2016). As the director she had applied this criterion to the stories from all of the individual students. In retrospect, though, she thought that this was improper. In
October 2017 she created another piece of documentary theatre, *Black Temple* (2017), in collaboration with the dramaturg Kai Tuchmann, musician Yuan Ye, and three students. It was based on the investigation of an urban village named Bai Miao (White Temple), which is situated near the CAD’s Changping Campus. In a discussion of this performance, which had been initiated by Xu Wanru (a student involved in creating *Home*), Professor Li stressed the importance of preserving and presenting multiple views. Having gradually come to appreciate this during the year-long project of collectively creating *Home*, Professor Li had made sure to incorporate various perspectives in *Black Temple* (Xu and Li 2017). Through this learning process, she realised that the differences between people had to be respected and that she was very different from her students (ibid.). The nuanced views of each individual must be recognised and discussed before a performance, “otherwise it will cause a lot of confusion and frustration” (ibid.).

Both Professor Li and her students felt confused and frustrated during the process of devising *Home*, especially when their interpretations of reality clashed. When an overarching point of view was imposed onto the performance, the way in which the documentary evidence was narrated had to be adjusted in accordance with it. Sun’s claim that her unequal relationship with Han as friendship may have been unconvincing. Still, forcing Sun to recite an interpretation of the reality in which she did not believe undermined *Home*’s veracity. In any case, Sun’s story was removed from the piece just three or four days before the final presentation out of consideration for “the length of the overall performance and the fact that this story did not reflect on the theme deeply enough”, as a student named Li Liyuan recalled (2016).

The moments of criticality that arose during the collective creation of *Home* may not have made it into the final performance. Still, they were critical nonetheless. They included situations such as Sun’s story being deemed less pertinent and cut from the project, despite their laborious process. Multiple interpretations of the reality were not allowed to play out onstage: instead, they
were subsumed into a single overarching social discourse. This process of investigating, deliberating, and contesting interpretations of the real is crucial in the pedagogy of documentary theatre. The process of making *Home* not only pushed the students to reflect on how they grasped reality, but also critically questioned the teacher/director’s perspective. The power dynamics between the teacher and students structured the whole process of collective creation.

Deleuze has written on non-representational performance, which is defined as much by its form as its contents. Non-representational performance negates not only representations *of* power (such as the images projected by kings and rulers) but representation *as* power to (Deleuze quoted by Cull 2009, 5). In creating *Home*, students such as Wang Shaolei moved uneasily away from the paradigm of representation, which implied an imbalanced of power with their interviewees. Despite this, their polyvocal renditions of *Home* were subsumed under and filtered through the director’s lens. In consequence, the performance represented the director’s reading of reality. Professor Li’s strong discursive voice insisted that people should open their eyes to class segregation, inequality, and their complicity in these issues. Those voices that did not strengthen this narrative were filtered out. To some extent, this turned what had been a representation of the students’ experiences into a representation of the director’s critique.

This process of producing a social discourse about class was critical in that the students started to question the hierarchies of representation at work in theatre. These hierarchies structured not only the relationship between themselves and their interviewees, but the relations among those involved in the creative process. “The *Umdrehung*” or revolution, writes Derrida, “must be a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself” (1978, 81). Critically reflecting on hierarchies made the students uneasy, however, for the equal power structures embedded in academic and arts institutions are not easily transformed.
“Unproductive” critical doubts and reflections on Home

Back then it seemed that we were screwing this thing [Home] up. Alas, that was the scope of our discussions. For example, we even doubted the meaning of the teacher’s decision to make this piece [together]. (Li 2017)

More than a year after the production, when I was confirming some details regarding Home with Li Liyuan in October 2017, she took the chance to reflect back on the process. She was studying Chinese traditional operas as a master’s student. She told me that she only realised a year later that the process of query had had a deconstructive effect in the whole class, which she regretted at some level (Li 2017). The discussions that “went out of hand” concerned what art could do to change the students themselves and social problems. “We attempted to search for some ‘truth’ that could change ourselves and others in the making of theatre performance,” Le said, “or maybe that’s the meaning of doing theatre? I’m not quite sure” (Li 2017).

On the one hand, the production confronted the students with social inequality and class disparity, as revealed in their encounters with migrant workers. On the other, they had to find creative ways of addressing these encounters and the social problems that underlay them.

Li Liyuan’s group did not restrain themselves in thinking either about theatre as an institution or art’s agency in social engagement and change. They became frustrated when they realised that a theatre performance like Home, which was produced by people within institution and bound to be staged within an institution, could only reach a rather small audience, most of whom would be either theatre professionals or people art world: well-educated middle-class people. Although the students employed social science methods in interviewing migrant workers and even accompanying them to their home towns, they did not think that these could be justified as forms of social engagement.
Professor Li considers the works of documentary theatre that she makes to be a form of art, not activism (Y. Li 2017). Although Li Liyuan and her group were disillusioned by institutional art, they had no means of approaching these issues in a different way because they had to operate within Home’s collective framework. Their critique of institutional art might coincide with a form of arts practice known as institutional critique, which criticises art institutions on the grounds that they exclude less privileged social groups. In addition, Bojana Kunst remarks that in a post-political situation, in which capitalism has permeated the artistic domain, art practitioners feel uneasy when discussing the relationship between art and politics (2015, 7-8). On the one hand, activist art seems insufficiently engaged and it is rather powerless to effect wider social change. On the other, it is topical, provocative, fosters participation, ceaselessly critical, and reflexive. Yet its activism is only skin deep, for its criticality is absorbed by the market.

This uneasiness, which presents in Western contemporary art, resonates what Li Liyuan and her group experienced. They felt powerless that their socially engaged art practice was not socially engaged enough, at least in a way that might lead to substantial social change. The uneasiness here differs from that observed by Kunst, however, in that critical theatre is discouraged in China. Indeed, it can be politically sensitive and is subject to censorship (Zhang 2014). This was why Home was staged exclusively in the independent, non-profit Penghao Theatre, which can only host eighty-six people. In this context, Home’s critical dimensions were not easily subsumed by the commercial theatre. Nor was the play produced to quench the theatre world’s for “criticality”. The uneasiness that characterised Home, therefore, was not a pseudo-activist form of criticality. Rather, it was bound up with a critical educational process in which the students doubted the criticality ascribed to art and reflected on how art could matter in a broader sense.

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68 An example in case will be the Ai Weiwei: his works sold quite well outside of China, yet his works were removed from exhibitions in China since 2014. See Larry Lsit 2015, and Steinhauer 2014.
Rogoff maintains that criticality operates “from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness” (2003). The uncertainty surrounding how the students were actually embedded in social engagement through art meant that their deliberations were often unproductive: they could not convince themselves to make a piece of “socially engaged theatre”. But these “unproductive” doubts were actually unsettlingly productive in the context of education. Indeed, in making Home the students performed the kind of critical thinking that art education is supposed to inculcate. The students questioned about what they had been taught, what art they were making, and what kind of art that would matter in society. In this way, they challenged the stricter and stricter control on educational institutions in China – one example being that Chinese universities have stripped “freedom of thought” from their charters.69

The unsettling performance and the audience’s response-ability to the audience

This section analyses the affectivity generated by the performance of Home and the audience’s response to it. Indeed, I stress what I shall term “response-ability” – the ability to respond and to take responsibility. In so doing, I mean to articulate the uneasy relationship between the act of art making on the one hand and that of reception on the other, to use Lehmann’s parlance (2006, 17).

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted three students, one of whom referred to irony, other to satire. How did the student actors perform in a way that expressed irony concerning their own experiences? How did the audiences relate and react to the performance? I will answer these questions by analysing live-streaming in the theatre space, two performances, and a personal conversation between a student and her interviewee (who had watched Home) after the play.

69 See Reuters 2019.
Alien live streaming: the double absence of migrant workers

Besides serving as a means of avoiding censorship, Home’s fictional framework created another layer of reality. Using media, the group merged a plot based The Time Machine (in which aliens visit Earth) with documentary. In the first scene of the play, the students told the aliens about the forms of technology and social media used in China, such as WeChat. One alien was awestruck by a student’s mobile phone, asking: “has the technologically highly-developed utopia that we’ve discussed been realised on Earth?” (Li, Chen, et al. 2016). In Home, mobile phones served as a tool for maintaining the fragile relationships between the students and interviewees. Ironically, this also rendered the differences between them more visible – Earth, it seemed, was far from the aliens’ ideal of an egalitarian and rich utopia. The students invited the aliens to acquaint themselves with Beijing by helping them find the young migrant workers that had featured in their performance. In live streaming the process, the aliens could participate in the performance too. While three students re-presented their stories, the three aliens wandered the enormous city searching for the three workers that the students had interviewed.

Figure 27 shows Xu Wanru (the student in the middle of the image), who interviewed her high school classmate and childhood friend Miaomiao. Miaomiao worked in her uncle’s company, which sold construction materials, and lived in the urban village of Caochangdi, an eastern suburb of Beijing, outside of the Fifth Ring Road. Two other students flank Xu: one plays Xu, the other Miaomiao. Accompanied a conversation about Miaomiao between Xu and Li Liyuan, these two actors made a heart shape with their hands. At first “Miaomiao” had tried to imitate and catch up with “Xu’s” elegant dancing movements, but failed awkwardly.

A live streamed video was projected onto the screen behind them. It was being filmed by the alien looking for Miaomiao. Although he was already in the suburb, he had not yet gone far enough. The alien was waiting to transfer to another
bus. The surrounding cityscape that looked unlike downtown areas: it featured dusty and grey surroundings and low-rise buildings. It resembled the urban fringe or smaller cities and towns in northern China. The alien was bewildered and frustrated, for the bus had been travelling away from the city centre for some time but was yet to reach Miaomiao: “My Chinese friends gave me the route to Miaomiao. Now I am waiting to change to Bus 909. Caochangdi is seventeen stops from here ... it’s really far ... Beijing is really gigantic. Does it [Caochangdi] still count as Beijing?” (Li, Chen, et al. 2016).

Live streaming has been a part of the daily life and business of many young people in China since 2015. They like to watch a variety of live-streamed shows online, send cashable virtual gifts to the streaming stars, or live stream their own activities. It has become so popular, in fact, that live streaming is now the fastest-developing sector of the internet, generating revenues amounting to more than thirty billion yuan (Zhang and Miller 2017). Lehmann contends that “theatre is the site not only of ‘heavy’ bodies but also of a real gathering, a place where a unique
intersection of aesthetically organised and everyday real life takes place” (2006, 17). By using contemporary media (that is, live streaming), *Home* brought outside, extra-dramatic space and time into the theatre space. Conversely, the fictional figures of the aliens brought the play to the outside world. This interrupted the internal time in the theatrical black box, merging it with the mundane temporality of everyday society. In this scene, the combination of live streaming and theatrical performance produced an uncanny meeting of art and daily life. The audience collectively witnessed daily activity through the lens of the alien’s live stream.

As Carol Martin observes, on the documentary stage media is not secondary. Far from it: media is “evidence” that what is purported to have happened actually did happen. As such, it functions as both a record of events and a form of testimony (Martin 2009, 74). The alien was puzzled by the megacity and use live streaming to transmit his confusions: just as the real Miaomiao was absent onstage, she was also absent offstage in that the alien could not find her. This media presentation of the migrant worker’s double absence testified to the unsettling dilemma of *Home*, which was laid bare before the audience. The theatrical representation of encounters with Beijing’s young migrant workers in *Home* did not directly concern the workers themselves. Neither did the interviewees speak about or for themselves onstage, nor did the performance change their situations.

Rogoff argues that “smuggling” can exist alongside to a main event “without being in conflict with it and without producing a direct critical response to it” (Rogoff 2003). The aliens’ live streaming was critical because it smuggled forms of critique into the institutional setting of the CAD. It was a critique not only of urbanisation (which involved the expansion of suburbs with poor infrastructure), but also of the theme of performance itself, for the live stream highlighted the absence of the migrant workers both on and offstage.
The tense silence and sobbing: the affective performance and audience’s response-ability

As I mentioned in the section on dramaturgy, Liu Shanshan acted out the story of Wang Shaolei’s cousin. Toward the end of her performance, Liu gave an emotional rendition of Didi’s disillusionment. The script for this passage reads:

When can I become a successful person? Who doesn’t want to become successful? You think I’m not right? How could I be wrong? Anyway, I think that’s the truth: successful people are rich. People will look down upon you if you don’t have money, and if you are not rich, you’re definitely not a successful person. (Li, Chen, et al. 2016)

Here Didi is portrayed as an impoverished and frustrated young migrant worker, who has imbibed capitalist “successology” – the so-called science of success. Hunching her back in an oversized T-shirt, Liu looked angry and hopeless. She walked out of the cold white backlighting and picked up a huge bottle of cola from the stage’s front-left corner. Her body was lit up in red from the front.

To a jazz soundtrack symbolising petit bourgeois taste, Wang’s voice declared that “successology is one of the prisms through which Didi observes the world. Through this prism, it seems that there are only two types people: winners and losers. As capital exchange accelerates in the market economy, all past glories and dreams melt into air, and the grand narrative of socialist progress is dissolved by the individual’s will to success. Success, success, success—is forever only a joke and a daydream” (Li, Chen, et al. 2016). The difference between between Wang’s and his cousin’s discourses was amplified in the lazy jazz music. This soundtrack, which was associated with a kind of chic café in Beijing, was a form of self-mockery Wang’s part. What is more, the jazz song was actually a modified version of the Internationale. This added another layer of self-deprecation, poking fun at the idea
of a leftist youth who could not change his exploited and disillusioned cousin’s situation.

Although I myself did not come from Beijing, I was never classified as a “migrant worker” in my interactions with the class. At this moment in the play, I was confronted with this demarcation between me – an urbanite-researcher who would go to a café where jazz would be played – and rural workers in the city, desperate for a success that they inevitably would not attain. I was confronted by my privilege as someone who could afford a ticket allowing me to sit in this theatre. I felt rather uneasy, for Wang’s self-mockery also mocked me. It was as if I were more intellectual than Didi, for I could comprehend Wang’s theoretical discourse. Like Wang, though, I did not know how we could close social and economic gaps in society. This interplay between discourses and aesthetics (such as sound and light) was not simply meant to call attention to the audience’s privileges. Rather, it evoked empathy, allowing the audience to respond to the performance – and Didi’s and Wang’s feelings of helplessness and frustration – in different ways.

Figure 28. Liu playing Didi, who drinks from a big bottle of cola. Screenshot from a video of the performance at 1:09:15. Courtesy of the CAD.
While I was thinking in response, Liu started to drink cola from the huge bottle in silence (see fig. 28). I heard the sound of her throat as she gulped the liquid down – not out of enjoyment, but more in despairing revenge. As the cola fizzed out of her mouth and streamed down to the floor, the theatre’s silence amplified the splashing sound. I also smelt the acidic sweetness of cola, the industrial soft drink that reeked of industrialisation, capitalist production, and exploitation. Along with other members of the audience, I was affected by Liu, the cola, and the tense, upsetting atmosphere. We remained silent.

As Massumi argues in his notes on the translation of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*: “L’affect (Spinoza’s affectus) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (1987, xvii). At a certain moment, I even wanted to get onstage and take the huge bottle out of her hands. I wanted to stop the performance, which was becoming unbearably intense. But I did not. I could feel the audience’s unrest. The people sitting near me were holding their breath. The affect of uneasiness was transmitted among bodies in the theatre: as Liu almost choked on the cola, her fellow performers sat motionless and silent in the darkness. So did the audiences, as the heavy air filled with the smell of cola.

Liu then poured the remainder of cola over her head. It showered her, running down her face and body. It was a silent catharsis. In dismay, she said: “some of your questions are too artistic. I feel that I still can’t understand what you guys are doing. Asking me about the concept of home? No concept. Thoughts on home? No thoughts. For me, perhaps home is a bedroom and a bed” (Li, Chen, et al. 2016).

To the students and the teacher, these words were deeply ironic: documentary theatre was too artistic and incomprehensible to the very migrant worker who had contributed his stories to the play. This artwork was consumed by those who could understand and appreciate it, namely, the theatre goers and practitioners: middle-class people. She then took off her outer T-shirt, threw it
furiously on the floor, and walked through the audience passage and out of the theatre, slamming the door behind her. I was left sitting there restraining my tears, for I just witnessed the violence that society has inflicted on a young migrant worker, as embodied by Liu.

Bakhtin argues that any understanding of live speech is inherently responsive. It is either actively responsive, which leads to articulation, or silently responsive, which produce delayed reaction (1986, 68-69). This account has been developed into the concept of response-ability, which means one’s ability to respond. Lehmann writes that “the theatre performance turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a joint text, a ‘text’ even if there is no spoken dialogue on stage or between actors and audience” (2006, 17).

In the joint text that was Home, the audience was both responsible and response-able to the performance as witnesses of it (Jeffers 2009, 92). This meant that I, along with the other spectators, responded to performance, not least the violent reenactment of Didi. I felt that it was my responsibility to witness this enactment so as to face my complicity in the socio-economic structure that had given rise to the inequalities and violence from which Didi had suffered. This violence was not physical, but ideological. It was wrought by neoliberalism, success-driven capitalism, and the lack of social mobility. As a piece of documentary theatre, Home exposed middle-class guilt so as to induce action in the future.

In the last act of the play, an alien read a paragraph from The Time Machine, which describes how the Morlocks eat the Elois. I heard some members of the audience sobbing. Were the tears caused by a horror of cannibalism in Wells’s extreme vision of class division? Or were they triggered by the guilt and shame that they felt about metaphorical cannibalism that powers contemporary capitalist society? Or did they rather result from the accumulated affect of previous scenes, such as those staging conversations between Wang and his cousin Didi?

Then we heard the reading of a poem by a migrant worker poet named Xu Lizhi, who committed suicide in 2014. The poem was about his grandmother’s last
breath or cough. After a few seconds of silence, a student sang the song *Who Don’t Say My Hometown Is Good* (谁不说俺家乡好) in the traditional operatic way. All of the performers then came onstage, singing, smiling, and waving the cushions on which the poem was printed. They danced along to the song *Loving Each Other* (相亲相爱), which began with the lyrics “under the sky we all love each other”. Some performers dragged a few members of audience sitting on the front row onstage to join this “joyful” celebratory moment of “love” and “home” (fig. 29). I could see the embarrassment, awkwardness, and uneasiness of those audience members as they were forced to perform this final, ironic scene: “loving each other”, it seemed, was either a lie or a mockery of the social harmony that typically featured in government propaganda.

![Figure 29. Performers and the audience dance on the stage during the closing scene of Home.](image)

Photograph courtesy of the CAD.

The irony that *Home* directed toward what had happened both during the interviews and onstage was a form of criticality. The play smuggled a critical account of the migrant worker issue into the performance and its associated affects. What is
more, the students were critical of their social engagements with migrant workers and both their own and the audiences’ complicity in inequality. All of this was achieved without spelling the issues out.

*Ah Yuan’s bouquet: the interviewee as an audience member*

The only interviewee who came to the performance was nicknamed Ah Yuan, who had been in contact with Li Liyuan. Li told me that she felt comfortable inviting Ah because her story was not going to be staged. After the performance, Ah gave Li a bouquet of flowers and expressed her thoughts and feelings about *Home*. Li told me that the bouquet and words had touched and shocked her:

I think back then our discussions were built on the hypothesis: between our interviewees and us the class difference exists. On that basis we asked: were we exploiting them? Were the emotional connections between us and them real? This interpersonal relationship seems very complicated, but actually it can be very simple. The so-called terror between classes ... I hadn’t contacted Ah Yuan for the past two months as my own life had been tiring enough and I didn’t want to hear more family problems from someone else. But I’d love to share this performance with her, both the form and content. I expected her to come. I didn’t want it to be a wishful activity within a small circle. In the theatre my interviewee and I were in the same space, even though I was on stage. After telling me her impressions on some details, she said: “I came to see you, not to see the performance”. I started to feel ashamed of my indifference and arrogance. Perhaps I haven’t treasured enough the interpersonal ties and friendships of everyday life. Ah Yuan has been struggling and surviving in the society for such a long time, she must have suffered more than I have. Yet she still has an unsophisticated simplicity. This seems more real in comparison with us who seem to be smart enough to
comment critically on society and to distinguish between left and right while still being protected by academia. (Li 2016)

Li Liyuan’s friendship with Ah Yuan called into question Professor Li’s presumption that an unbridgeable class divide made friendship between the students and their interviewees impossible. Were such friendships really impossible? Or did this presumption lead the students to treat the interviewees in a different way to their own friends (for instance, by trying too hard to maintain the relationship and becoming too instrumental)? As Rogoff points out, criticality involves recognising that, for all their theoretical knowledge and sophisticated modes of analysis, practitioners and theorists live on the basis of the very conditions that they are trying to analyse and come to terms with (2003). Criticality is a mode of embodiment, an inescapable state on which one cannot establish critical distance, that rather marries our knowledge and experience in ways that are not complimentary (ibid.). In the light of this, Li’s experience of friendship after the performance, as well as her previous doubts as to whether it was real, embodied criticality. Indeed, they challenged the theoretical premise that social and cultural segregation is unbridgeable.

Using her embodied experiences as a mirror, Li reflected uneasily on what she had read in books and been told by teachers. In a follow-up interview conducted online in October 2017), Li described this critical movement between knowledge and experience: “in crossing the boundary of classes, we found that we were as same as them. At least my interviewee and I had a sense of having a connected fate” (Li 2017). The fate shared by these two young women might be that of falling into the precariat. Although Li was studying traditional opera for her master’s degree, most of her classmates were working outside academia and the theatre in ordinary jobs. After finishing her degree, there was a good chance that she would join them. In 2017 talked to Wang Shaolei on WeChat. He now worked as a clerk in a television company, saying: “modern art is a luxury for me. Now I don’t make art anymore”
Like the migrant workers, these students might end up working to survive the exploitative capitalist machine, not to further their passions.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have analysed the uneasy criticalities at stake in the preparation, production, dramaturgy, performance, and reception of *Home*, a piece of documentary theatre. In devising the production, the students became aware of class difference. This coloured their attempts to contact with migrant workers. The students were unsettled to realise that some migrant workers – the urban subaltern – refused to speak. This led the students to think about the ethics of documentary theatre-making. In devising the piece, the students, Professor Li, and Kai Tuchmann consciously chose a fictional framework adapted from *The Time Machine*. In this way, they sought to highlight the theme of class difference without being too direct and confrontational. They also shifted the focus of their practice, such that they set out less to re-present the migrant workers’ stories about home than to re-present the students’ encounters with them.

In order to ensure that the theme of class inequality stood out strongly, the director filtered out voices that doubted the predominance of class. Through this uncomfortable process, the re-presentation of the students’ experiences were brought into line with – indeed made to represent – the director’s political perspective. The performance showed aliens live streaming their futile search for some of the interviewees. This revealed the central dilemma of *Home*: the absence of the migrant workers. Some scenes were profoundly affective in ways that compelled the audience to not only respond to the performance, but take responsibility for witnessing social inequality both on and offstage. The only interviewee in the audience was Ah Yuan. The friendship between her and her interviewer, the student Li Liyuan, unsettled the teacher’s presupposed or rather
imposed narrative of unbridgeable class division. In sum, as a work of documentary theatre *Home* exhibited an uneasy criticality at stake in pedagogy and performance. *Home* serves three critical pedagogical functions. First, the students and teacher learnt about the ethics of documentary theatre-making. Through this uneasy process, they interpreted the real by way of theatrical devices. Second, *Home* urged students to recognise and reflect on issues such as class, socio-economic inequality, and the relations among art, (re-)presentation, and social issues. Third, the uneasy pedagogical and dramaturgical process incited the students to change from representation to re-presentation. The former entailed depicting the migrant workers’ stories; the later involved to making their uneasy encounters with migrant workers present again. This transition was critical in that it took courage on the part of the students to not hide behind the mask of another’s life story, but critically stage their own uneasiness and struggles. As a form of pedagogy, *Home* was also uneasily critical in that the students dealt with migrant workers, a number of whom refused to speak. In engaging with the urban subaltern in this way, they were treated not as innocent students but members of a privileged class, complicit in social inequality. Although students “were reluctant to touch” these problematics, confronting them was crucial for the formation of a critical social consciousness in education (Li 2016).

It was important that the group critically discussed migrant workers, class segregation, and inequalities in the academic context of the CAD. With forums for politically debate have been dramatically diminished in China, the university is one of the few remaining social institutions in which critical voices on socio-political issues are not totally muted. The process of producing *Home* involved criticality in that the students and Professor Li has to negotiate with censorship. The theatrical reflection on the issue of migrant workers that resulted struck and uneasy balance between criticality and censorship, in that it almost crossed the institution’s boundaries. Besides, *Home* also inspired critical reflection in some students, including Li Liyuan. Although Li’s story about Ah Yuan was not theatrically staged,
she admitted that *Home* profoundly influenced her. After *Home* she joined a left-leaning learning camp for young people, having she became more politically aware (Li 2017). Although Professor Li did not see her work in documentary theatre as activist, in this sense *Home* could still be seen as a form of educational activism.

Another reason that *Home* was critical is that it disturbed the audience’s comfortable sense of distant spectatorship. Indeed, watching *Home* made its audience feel that they were complicit in social inequality, just like the students onstage. The performance connected members of the audience with migrant workers at an affective level such that they did not see the latter as totally other to themselves. Critical reflection is required if one is to avoid seeing people from different class backgrounds through the lens of one’s own privilege. Criticality helped the audience look beyond their immersion in this success-driven capitalist society, in which wealth is encouraged and admired, and poverty is despised. Indeed, according to prevailing opinion, cities are desirable and prosperous, whereas rural areas are poor in wealth and opportunities.

The performance induced a crisis among its audience, forcing them to recognise that they were implicated in inequality. Unsurprisingly, this made them uneasy. The twofold meaning of crisis in Chinese as both danger and opportunity, however, indicates that *Home* gave spectators the chance to reflect on their position this unequal society. A certain uneasy criticality was also evident in the affect induced by the performance. The intensity of *Home* agitated the audience, moving them to act. Although members of the audience would probably not to become activists fighting for migrant workers’ rights, they would at least to treat the migrant workers they encountered in their daily lives with respect and empathy.

The issue of migrant workers has become sensitive in China – so much so that the authorities have suppressed it by censoring investigative journalism. Against this backdrop, *Home* manifested a form of non-oppositional criticality that did not directly expose and criticise problems around migrant workers, such as urban-rural divide, socio-economic inequality, the wealth gap, rural depopulation,
and migrant workers’ rights. Over the course of a year, the students and teacher went through the uneasy processes of stepping outside of their comfort zones. Getting to know migrant workers, their problems, and their perspectives on life in Beijing, the students built these experiences into a theatre performance that affected the audience and held viewers response-able. As pedagogy, performance, and art, *Home* critically engaged the students in encounters with migrant workers, which were imbued with complex emotions, thoughts, affects, and reflections. This complexity could not be boiled down to the issue of class alone, just as *Home* cannot be reduced to some preconceived idea of art’s social engagement.
Chapter 5. Quotidian criticality: acting out the sensible in urban villages

If you think about Beijing, what comes to mind? The Forbidden City and Tian’anmen? The Temple of Heaven? The Central Business District (CBD) and China Central Television Headquarters Building? The 2008 Olympic Games? The 798 Art Zone? The Forbidden City and Tian’anmen are situated in the ancient city of Beijing – the centre of the centre. The Temple of Heaven lies inside the Second Ring Road – it is in the old city of Beijing.\textsuperscript{70} The Second Ring Road aligns approximately with the walls of the old imperial capital. The companies in Beijing’s CBD are situated east of the Third Ring Road. Olympic Games took place in the National Sport Stadium, nicknamed the Bird’s Nest). It sits a few kilometres north of the Fourth Ring Road. The hip 798 Art Zone, in the regenerated factory area, is located between the Fourth and Fifth Ring Road.

The building of ring roads was necessitated by the expansion of this megacity. One might well imagine there is a Sixth Ring Road in Beijing. It does indeed exist – but what lies between the Fifth and Sixth Ring Road? Probably most Beijingers have little knowledge of these areas given the city’s expansion over the past three decades.

Introduction

As I explained in introduction to this dissertation, China has experienced extremely rapid urbanisation. The growth of the urban population has been mainly driven by migrant workers coming from rural areas, most of whom live in urban villages. Urban villages are generally characterised by narrow roads and buildings around three-stories tall crowded up against one another. These structures are built not by developers or a village collective, but by individual households. In urban villages

\textsuperscript{70} Till the end of 2019, there are 6 rings roads in Beijing so far, from the 2\textsuperscript{nd} ring road to the 7\textsuperscript{th}, like ripples from the Forbidden City. The 7\textsuperscript{th} ring road lies mainly in the neighbouring Hebei Province.
there is often only a thin strip of sky to be seen, while the inner streets are packed with shops, grocery stores, and service outlets (Liu and He 2010).

The official narrative of Beijing’s development is presented in such venues as the Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall, which is shown in fig. 30. According to this narrative, Beijing is a sanitised, well-planned, and sustainable modern megacity with a long history (Beijing Urban Planning Exhibition Hall 2016). Yet in the mass media Beijing’s urban villages are often depicted as “poor, dirty, messy, chaotic, and hard to demolish and relocate” (Zhao and Xiu 2014). This implies that they are mere stains on an otherwise clean and well-organised Beijing. In 2008, there were 867 urban villages in the Beijing Metropolitan Area, most of them located in suburban districts (Zheng et al. 2009b). In addition to migrant workers, most of Beijing’s artists also lived and worked in urban villages such as Caochangdi and Heiqiao in the Chaoyang District – at least before they were evicted in the winter of 2017. Despite living alongside them, the artists had little contact with migrant workers, much like the theatre students. People living in central Beijing imagined urban villages as crowded, unruly, unclean, and chaotic places populated by migrants. They knew little about daily life in these places.
Against this backdrop, in September 2014 an independent art publisher based in Beijing name the Second Floor Publishing Institute initiated a new project.\textsuperscript{71} It was titled \textit{5+1=6 (六环比五环多一环)}.\textsuperscript{72} In their open call for contributions, the initiators invited people to “choose one of the villages/towns between the fifth ring” (Second Floor Publishing Institute 2014). The participants were each asked to live in their chosen village or town for at least ten days. Whether individually or in a group they were to, spend no less than eight hours per day conducting their project in the area (ibid.). Most of the participants were artists or art students; some were designers, architects, and other creative practitioners. Between September 2014 and August 2015, forty such investigative projects were carried out in forty urban villages and towns between the Fifth and Sixth Ring Road. The creative practitioners explored their chosen places using different and often quite unorthodox means. Artist Xu Zhuoer and tattooist Wang Ge, for instance, investigated the tattoo culture

\textsuperscript{71} It is a non-profit publishing institute that produces independent publications and organises activist art events. This institute explores the interrelations between art and society.

\textsuperscript{72} This literally means, “the 6\textsuperscript{th} ring has one more ring than the 5\textsuperscript{th}”. 
of young migrant workers in Yuxinzhuang village. To this end, they got themselves tattooed in a typical cheap tattoo studio (Song 2015).

An exhibition of the project’s results took place in One-Way Street Bookshop, within the Fifth Ring, in July 2015. It attracted considerable attention from the mass media, including the official newspaper China Youth Daily, portal site 163.com, and official news website China Xinhua.net. Intrigued by the art project, netizens, common people, and government officials all began discussing Beijing’s urbanisation. The conversation focused especially on the city’s semi-urbanised fringes.

This chapter analyse two subprojects within the wider $5+1=6$ venture. In so doing, I address several questions. How, I ask, did socially engaged art projects critically engage with quotidian life in urban villages without either reinforcing stereotypical views about them or pointing fingers at the authorities for not providing proper support to them? How have these practices created lines of flight that deviate from the official image of Beijing? How did they show the fact that precarious people living in urban villages have agency, that they claim their right to the city in and through their daily lives? I will show that two forms of quotidian criticality were at work in my two selected subproject. The first is artist Ma Lijiao’s Xiaojiahe East Village (2014-2015). By acting out different characters, Ma revealed the daily life and struggles of people living in the village of Xiaojiahe East. He did so in a way that avoided openly criticising the government for the lack of proper infrastructure and illegal land use. The second is named Changxindian Note (2014-ongoing), which was devised by the architectural duo Xiao Kong and Li Mo. The project did not directly criticise the government’s plan to revitalise the town of Changxindian. Instead, it reactivated everyday local histories through images and a board game in which the local residents acted out their agency. They could take the cards home with them as a way of reclaiming local knowledge.

In looking at these two projects, I would like to use the composite theoretical term “acting out the sensible, which has a double meaning. According to
Cambridge dictionary, first, it is “to perform in or as if in a play.” Second, it is “to realise in action”. The ways in which art becomes political, according to Rancière’s theory, hinge upon the delimitation and distribution of the sensible (2006). In other words, it involves transgressing the boundary of what is sensible or allowed to be perceived as sensible. This delimitation and redistribution are important because the top-down structures that classify, discipline, constrain, and police the sensible all aim to maintain norms. Aesthetics, in contrast, challenges divisions between the visible and invisible, and audible and inaudible. Visibility is not physical but social. Social phenomena determine what shows up as seeable to the public and what does not, what falls under the spotlight and what is left in darkness. This goes for audibility too, which means that social structures dictate who can have a say and who cannot, and whose voice makes sense and whose is mere noise.

To redistribute the sensible is to unsettle the mechanisms through which dominant social structures govern the sensible so as to maintain their the social, economic, and political proper. The act of redistributing the sensible is therefore political. Acting out the sensible means that through forms of performance once invisible and inaudible things emerge as worth looking at or listening to. This creates ruptures in politics, which Rancière sees as defined by not only the sensible but the possible too. Politics, he writes with colleagues, is “a common landscape of the given and the possible, a changing landscape” (Rancière et al. 2007).

**Revealing daily life by acting out different roles: the Xiaojiahe East Village project**

In this section, I emphasise first aspect of acting out the sensible: namely “to perform in or as if in a play.” This mode of redistributing the sensible, I claim, is at work in the art of Ma Lijiao, who performed different characters during his ten-day investigation of the village of Xiaojiahe East in November 2014. In my interview with him, Ma told me that he chose Xiaojiahe East (肖家河东村) having encountered some graduates hunting for houses in the vicinity of Zhongguan village (中关村), the
IT industry sector in northwest Beijing. He then followed them to Xiaojiha East (Ma 2016). Xiaojiha East was one of seven villages in the Xiaojiha Shequ (an administrative unit that is below the district level). Xiaojiha features on a list of sixty urban villages in Beijing that the local government wanted to tidy up and reorganise (重点整治) in 2016. The majority of Xiaojiha East’s population is make up of non-local people. It is only twenty to thirty minutes away from the village of Zhongguan by car, which makes it a favourable place to live for those who work in there.

![Figure 31. A map of Beijing. The red pin indicates the GPS location of the village of Xiaojiha East. The inner blue circle is the Fifth Ring Road, the marine-blue outer circle is the sixth. Map courtesy of the Second Floor Publishing Institute.](image)

I will analyse the two main elements of Ma’s work, which are as follows. First, he used social media to act like a migrant worker living in the village. The project exhibition featured screenshots of his conversations. Second, he acted like a journalist in order to he investigate and film the inhabited ruin. Ma later faced an intense situation in which he was interpellated as a journalist, in response to which
he gave up his role and turned back into an innocent art student. In enacting different social roles, I claim, Ma redistributed the sensible of Beijing by revealing everyday life and daily struggles over land use in an urban village. At the same time, he did not fall into the usual trap of producing a derogative and negative narrative.

*Acting as a migrant worker and researcher on social media*

During the first phase of his investigation, Ma played the role of a migrant worker and a researcher. He joined different chat groups on social media to find out how people expressed themselves and interacted with each other online. Socially engaged art often uses strategies of role-playing and enactment. Claire Bishop’s *Artificial Hells*, for example, mentions Jeremy Deller’s art project, *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001). In this performance, Deller asked former miners relive the traumatic events of the 1980s. Specifically, they reenacted a confrontation in which 8,000 riot police clashed with around 5,000 striking miners in the Yorkshire village of Orgreave. Deller then invited some of them to switch roles and play the police (Bishop 2012, 30-32). Replaying a historical incident in this way served to reenact a social conflict and trauma, triggering debates about social issues then and now.

In his project, Ma played different social roles so as to avoid reliving a specific historical event. His goal was rather to see, listen, and experience things through the eyes of his characters. In this way, he sought to uncover the invisible and inaudible with respect to certain issues. He saw different facets of an urban village and its residents. Most of these people were migrant workers who have not been depicted in the mainstream media or official narratives. By making their lives sensible, he hoped to contribute towards a new social discussion of Beijing’s urbanisation.

In the discourse of economics, sociology, and global journalism, Chinese migrant workers are often represented as a horde of nameless and faceless rural people that have descended on urban areas in search of works. In TV programmes
such as the popular dating show *If You Are the One* on Jiangsu Province TV, migrant workers are included as participants only because the government has required the programme to “lift its moral standard” (Sun 2014, 3). Left to themselves, TV stations would simply continue fetishising wealth and commodifying human relationships.

In *If You Are the One*, counterbalances the poverty and misfortune of migrant workers against the wealthy candidates onstage. In government reports, such workers are only statistics. In media and books that are not owned by the state, they are depicted as the subaltern. For some scholars and writers, such as Hsiao-Hung Pai, they epitomise the tragedy of Chinese urbanisation and modernisation. But what are the micro-narratives tell by migrant workers themselves? How do they express themselves in their daily lives? What do they talk about on social media?

I am well aware of the poetry written by migrant workers (not least by the poet Xu Lizhi, who committed suicide whilst working for Foxconn) and the autobiographical novels written by the migrant babysitter Fan Yusu. Nevertheless, here I have chosen to focus on the more quotidian online conversations among migrant workers, as Ma addressed them in his project.

In the article that he posted on the Second Floor Publishing Institute’s WeChat account, and was subsequently showed in the exhibition, Ma wrote that: “Baidu Post Bar, QQ group, WeChat group and so on, these social media platforms can gather people from different locations in the real society on the internet and make their voice heard together. There are anonymous social apps such as Youmi [友秘] that allows users to hide themselves behind their words. I think this [way of expression] is more real” (Ma 2014). This is the main reason that Ma started his project by joining social media groups of various kinds and became a migrant worker.

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74 See Pai 2013.
online. Acting as if he was one of the young people living in Xiaojiahe East, Ma tried to observe and participate in their online conversations.

Ma joined WeChat groups run by people in the village, such as the “Xiaojiahe Shequ Youth Group.” Most of the participants, he found, were not local to Beijing. Some had begun working at a relatively early age; others were considering getting an education in college or a vocational school. As figure 32 shows, a young woman named Chen Yan wrote on the “Xiaojiahe Shequ Youth Group,” saying that she had “enrolled in a vocational school”, but now had “some regrets”.  

Two other members in the WeChat group encouraged her to resit the college entrance examination next year. It turned out that Chen Yan was not a fresh graduate from high school – she had already worked for a year. On the one hand, this conversation did not strike me as something obviously related to migrant workers. It was slightly discrepant with the image of migrants constructed in the media, for it did not feature complaints about underpaid and tiring work, unpaid salaries, or homesickness. On the other hand, one can still guess that they were probably not Beijingers because most urban youths would continue their education after high school.

Translation of the conversation:
Chen Yan: (I’ve) applied for vocational school.
Chen Yan: I regret a bit.
SNOW: You can give this up and take the (college entrance examination) next year.
Youth Group-Zhao Xing: I agree.
Youth Group-Zhao Xing: Chen Yan, you just graduated from high school this year?
Chen Yan: No. I’ve worked for one year already.
February River: (Screenshot of something)
Figure 32. Screenshot of chats in WeChat group “Xiaojiahe Community Youth Group”. Screenshot courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

The screenshot presented in figure 32. was shown in the exhibition in 2015. At one level, it demonstrates the mundanity of many conversations on social media. At another, though, it also brings into focus migrant workers’ aspirations, hopes of upward social mobility, educational ambitions, and mutual encouragement. It attests to a distinctly convivial online space.

Ma also performed the role of a researcher conducting a social research project. Playing this character online, he asked people whether he could talk to them, either online or face-to-face. He has shown some of these screenshots in an article summarising his ten-day project. The article was posted on the Second Floor Publishing Institute’s WeChat platform. Later, for the 5+1=6 Project exhibition, he printed out all of the screenshots of chats and made them into a booklet for the
audience to read. These chats were strikingly various, encompassing anything from banal everyday conversations, through complaints about peoples’ love lives, to criticisms of the IT corporations such as Baidu.\(^\text{77}\) Acting as a migrant worker and a researcher, Ma saw things and heard voices that would otherwise not be visible or audible to him. These screenshots showed migrant workers presenting their daily lives: they emerged as individuals with feelings, critical voices, ambitions, and aspirations.

Both born urbanites and rural migrants live together in the same city. The former might live in an apartment built by the latter, buy groceries from the latter, or have food delivered by the latter. Yet despite these moments of contact, how much do the two groups socially interact with one another? This brings to mind Rancière’s reading of a poem of Mallarmé’s titled “Apart, we are together”.

“Human beings”, Rancière writes, “are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, I would say a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of the ‘being together’” (2006, 4).

Many urbanites turn a blind eye to the fact that they share the city with migrant workers; they often see the latter as different, nameless, and certainly not “one-of-us.” People born in the city and migrant arrivals live together but apart, secluded from each other. In Ma’s work, however, urban audiences discovered the more quotidian dimensions of the migrant workers’ lives. These depart from predominant media representations of rural migrants, which foreground dramatic incidents such as the strikes occasioned by wages going unpaid or the Foxconn suicides. How would urbanite audiences react upon seeing migrants as individuals? That is, as living through everyday joys and frustrations, being every bit as digital and media savvy as themselves? It may be that they would feel a new sense of unity with the migrant workers, for they would no longer be invisible to them.

\(^{77}\) Baidu is the biggest search engine in China. The Baidu company provides Internet-related services and products, and it also develops artificial intelligence.
It is important to point out that when he publicised these screenshots, the artist did not ask for the consent of those featured in the chat groups and social media platforms. He didn’t even blur their names and profile pictures. Ma’s outputs, then, might be seen as a form voyeurism – a violation of his interlocutors’ privacy. Ma may have redistributed the visible, but ethical his project was debatatable. Still, I must admit that I enjoyed reading the very diverse conversations among migrant workers that he presented. The project made it possible to peek into their online lives – as an accomplice, perhaps, but also as a compassionate citizen of urbanising China.

*Acting as a journalist and an art student in the village*

At the same time as his observation and participation online, Ma conducted investigation offline. He walked around different housing blocks for migrant workers and even climbed over a wall to enter a walled-up construction site. Located near a relatively high-class residential area named Yuanmingyuan Villas (圆明园别墅), the site was made up of unfinished villas. This modern ruin was quite unlike many other unfinished buildings (烂尾楼) left empty when the real estate bubble burst. Indeed, it occupied an immense 10,000 square-metre area. Temporary buildings had been constructed on the site, providing both homes and workplaces for many migrant workers. Its unfinished buildings were symptomatic of the frictions of China’s allegedly smooth process of urbanisation, through which the city has expanding horizontally and vertically at a feverish pace.

According to Ma’s article, this inhabited construction site belonged to the Yuanmingyuan Villa Region (圆明园别墅区), which was developed and built by the son of Beijing’s former mayor Chen Xitong. “Later, thanks to Chen Xitong’s 16-year [prison] sentence [on charges of corruption], and the lack of proper certification of development and construction, this project was suspended” (Ma 2014). Yet there were different stories about inhabitants of this area. According to an official report
on Beijing TV aired when the unfinished structures were demolished, the site had been occupied by construction workers whose salaries had not been paid. Later, more and more migrant workers had moved in (Beijing Television 2017). During his investigation, Ma discovered another narrative. There had been a major financial dispute among the developer and three contractors. After no resolution was found, the contractors’ workers occupied and resided on the land so as to compel the developer to return to the negotiating table and pay the arrears on their salaries (Ma 2014). In 2008 the developer paid off the salaries. By the end of the year all of the workers had moved out, leaving the three contractors free to build simple houses on the site. They sublet the rest of the land, allowing others to build more houses to be rented out, mainly to migrant workers.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 33. Steel bars protruding from unfinished villas, 2014. Photograph courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

At first sight, Ma found this ruined site visually intriguing. After many years, the steel bars protruding from the bare concrete walls had been bent by the wind. Rubbish dumps and car parks were interspersed between the low-cost prefabricated
houses. All of this was separated from a luxurious gated community by a wall (see fig. 33). He also encountered a renaissance-style marble statue of a nude female figure, which stood incongruously beside an unfinished villa’s basement inhabited by migrant workers (see fig. 34). The statue connoted a conspicuous sense of luxury, classiness, and Europeanness. Her private parts however were tarnished with yellow paint, which turned her into an odd sexual symbol. In the context of this inhabited urban ruin, the statue held out a teasing image of the urban good life in that she exemplified that of clean, organised, and glossy upper-middle-class comfort. This was the ideal that informed Beijing’s presentation in Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall (fig. 30).

Figure 34. A marble statue of a nude female, with yellow paint dabbed onto her private parts, amid the ruins of unfinished villas, 2014. Photograph courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

Later Ma discovered a fully-fledged migrant worker community living on the site. It contained a kindergarten, recycling station, car parks, stores, and a computer-repair shop. In the winter of 2014, Ma walked around in the area speaking with residents while taking photographs. In the early summer of 2015, he followed up on
his primary investigation by filming an interview. It would be screened as part of the 5+1=6 exhibition. To record the interview Ma returned to the site with his girlfriend, who acted as a camerawoman. He met two land tenants, who may have been a couple. They saw him as a journalist and started to complain about the planned demolition of the illegal houses on the construction site. These included the temporary houses that they had built, which were scheduled for demolition in three days’ time. Lacking any official documentation indicating legal land use, they would not be compensated for their loss.

In the film, the female land tenant tells Ma that “it’s useless to seek help from the government. The government is on their side [referring to the contractors who occupied the construction site]. They all know each other” (2015 6:48). Within the walls of the site, she continues, “there are two-hundred temporary houses ... built by nine groups of land tenants ... not including those stores ... all are from different parts of China” (ibid. 7:10). “When we built these two houses three years ago, we didn’t know that the government planned to demolish this site” (ibid. 2:45). We have, she said, built “around forty to fifty houses. By then we didn’t know that the contractors hadn’t got a land use certificate” (ibid. 3:44). “We are all victims”, she concluded (ibid. 7:41). When asked what they were going to do when the contractors came to tear down their houses, the woman said that “we are not going to leave. Staying means that we are going to revolt and stir things up” (she uses the phrase “闹事”, which literally means causing disturbance (ibid. 3:15). Showing Ma the demolition notice, they wanted him to cover the forced demolition in the hope that if the media exerted some pressure on the government, then they might receive some compensation.
On camera, in front of a “journalist”, the land tenants acted as victims of a coordinated plot between local governmental power and those who have recapitalised the real estate bubble (see fig. 35). If Ma had not performed the role of a journalist, who might report sympathetically in media about how they had been unjustly treated, the land tenants might not have performed the role of victims. They might not have told him about the conflict over the demolition, which mirrors wider conflicts over land commercialisation and urbanisation in China. Such clashes concerning demolition are epitomised in stories about the owners of so-called the “nail houses”, who refuse to move away from their homes. This is depicted in Ou Ning and Cao Fei’s documentary *Meishi Street* (2006). Ma’s video, however, does not tell a one-sided story based on what was said by these people, who were soon

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78 A *dingzihu* – or ’nail house’ – is a home where the owner refuses to accept compensation from a property developer for its demolition (Blason 2014).

*Meishi Street* [煤市街], directed by Ou Ning and Cao Fei in 2006, is an independent Chinese documentary that portrays a group of Beijing residents protesting against the planned destruction of their home in Meishi street before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The filmmakers gave video cameras to the residents in this group, and they filmed their resistance and the eviction process.
to be evicted. It also shows his confrontation with the contractors who occupied the construction sites. In this way, the video reveals the connection between the contractors and local authorities, exposing the underlying mechanism that sustained the existence of this illegal housing area.

The video’s final sequence begins by showing the demolition announcement, which has been pasted onto one of the houses’ walls. This is followed by an abrupt jump to another scene, in which the contractors (one woman and two men, all in their fifties), approached Ma and his then girlfriend in an aggressive manner (see fig. 36). They had probably been altered of the filmmakers’ presence by security guards patrolling the area.

“Do you think you can film me?” a woman asks in a menacing way. “Everybody can film in public space“, Ma replies. She pointed at herself and authoritatively declares: “I’m the leader of this construction site!” “Do you have the proof?” Ma asks. The woman: “Come! Come with us to get the proof! ... Come to my office!” “I can even film in police station,” Ma says, “why can’t I here?” “I govern and manage this place [这里归我管]”, the woman replies. “I have the right to
interrogate anybody here.” Ma goes along with this: “You can interrogate me right here.” “Call Police Captain Liu”, the woman orders her companions, “ask him to come; ask them to come.” Accordingly, a male contractor makes a phone call. “The subdistrict office has also intervened”, the man says.79 “You are asking for trouble!” The woman says to Ma and his girlfriend. “Very good!” (Ma 2015, 18:42-21:00)

Figure 37 The artist being taken away. (Ma: “Don’t you think this is beautiful?”) Screenshot from Xiaojiahe East Village at 21:16. Courtesy of Ma Lijiao.

In this conversation, it is clear that the artist was acting not as a journalist, but rather as a citizen staking a claim to his right to film in public space (although it is debatable whether this occupied construction site was public space). The contractors took on the role of the de facto owner and governor of this piece of land. They assumed the power to profit from their “territory” and expel “intruders”. The video shows how Ma tried to film what the contractors did and said to him, while the contractors stopped the artist, took him away, and even called the police.

Towards the end of Ma’s film, the artist reverts to the role of the innocent art student. Trying to find a way out of the trouble that they had got into, he asks “don’t you think this looks beautiful?” As they are forced to leave, his girlfriend starts swinging the camera (fig. 37). “I’m not a journalist!” Ma cries out to the contractors.

79 Subdistrict office is an administrative institution under the district government.
Whereas much of the film is made up of focused shots of the female contractor’s fierce body movements, its final minutes gave way to random and swinging movements and alternating shots of the sky and ground. The final shot shows the interior of a tote bag. Ma tells his girlfriend to leave first, but the contractors stop her, yelling “no, you can’t leave!” Ma then becomes agitated, swearing “Fxxk!” The contractors become even more furious: “Who are you swearing at?!” (21:18-22:31).

These scenes recall Ai Weiwei’s film So Sorry (2009), which records his confrontation with the Chengdu police in 2009. He had been investigating how students had died in the Sichuan earthquake due to corruption and poor building construction (Ai 2009). The film documents how the police beat Ai up so as to put an end to his inquiries.

Unlike Ai, though, Ma did not act role as an artist, activist, martyr, and fighter for human rights. Instead, he successively assumed the guise of a journalist, curious citizen, and innocent art student. Ma rendered visible a series of clashes among contractors, land tenants, journalists, and citizens. He showed these parties’ conflicting interests and revealed also collaboration between the contractors and local authorities. Unlike Ai, though, Ma neither directly interrogated the authorities, nor levelled accusations against them. During the last few seconds of Ma’s film, we hear the sound of scuffling. The images of the bag’s claustrophobic interior contrast with sound of the confrontation going on outside the bag, as recorded by the microphone. The film did not depict the confrontation visually, generating an unsettling affect.

In this film, Ma did not criticise the lack of proper infrastructural support for marginal urban villages and degrading treatment of migrant workers. Instead, by showing him acting as a journalist, citizen, and art student, the film creates a performative space in which complicated situations arising form urbanisation could become visible and audible. What is more, it raises questions about urbanisation. Who could and who could not use the land illegally with impunity? What allowed people the contractors and land tenants to profit from the land? Who profited
most from the demolition of the buildings? The bringing these problematics to light, Ma smuggled a critique of Chinese urbanisation and the interests behind it into the film.

In my interview with Ma, I asked what happened in the police station after the film stopped. When the police captain interrogated him, Ma told me, he presented himself as an art student who found the ruined construction site interesting and beautiful (Ma 2016). Ma described how the police captain “ordered me to delete the video so that I could go away. So I did. But afterwards I asked someone to recover the video” (ibid.). To the authorities, it seemed, art was less powerful than journalism.

Acting as a naïve student, practicing the “useless” and “harmless” art of film, was a strategy through which Ma could redistribute without getting into trouble. It played on peoples’ presumption that art is an ineffective means of intervening into the social domain – not to mention student art. For many, art occupies a delimited and innocuous domain as compared with the media. This might be wrong, however, especially in the contemporary era of digital and social media. Indeed, the 5+1=6 exhibition attracted attention not only from the general public but from the mass media too. This amplified the project’s impact, making Beijing’s urban fringe visible to a wider public.

For some art critics, Ma’s sort of work is too “journalistic” in the sense that critical journalists strive to “reveal” or “uncover” social problems. Zhang Wei, for example, criticised some supposedly socially engaged practices on the grounds that they aim to “reveal and expose” society’s dark underbelly from an elevated position without reflecting on their positionality. What is more, for all their emphasis on revealing hidden truths, such practices merely discover some novelty for media consumption (2015). Not every socially engaged art project that makes a certain social issue visible, however, can be criticised in this way. Such art projects might not assume in advance that institutions and people are corrupt or dysfunctional. They need not necessarily produce the kind of dramatic stories that the media
eagerly spreads. Some projects do not set out to fill a niche in the international art market by addressing a heated social or political issue. This is borne out by the fact that most of 5+1=6’s subprojects put forward examples. To avoid commercialisation or artistic formalisation, its initiators requested that the participants not produce outputs that would differ from the kinds of artworks found in museums. They discouraged creative practitioners from employing the most popular and recognisable forms of artistic expression. It would seem that the contributors heeded their request: most of the projects did not garner significant commercial interest.

The exhibition attracted considerable attention from the mass media. Still, I would argue that being “consumed” in this way did not render the project uncritical. Subprojects such as Ma’s were not peddling sensational stories about the dark underside of society. The criticality of Ma’s film derived from the way in which his performance of different social roles allowed for empathetic glimpses of daily life and socio-economic conflicts in an urban village. These glimpses contaminated – in Derridarian sense of the word – the predominant media image of urban villages as undesirable places deserving demolition. This contamination might lead to a more understanding and reflective approach to urban villages and urbanisation in the future.

**Reactivating everyday knowledge through actions on the ground: Changxindian Notes (2015)**

In this section, I discuss Xiao Kong and Li Mo’s subproject, *Changxindian Notes* (2015-ongoing), which focused on the historical town Changxindian. In bringing to light and reactivating everyday local knowledge, this work exhibited quotidian criticality. First, I briefly analyse the subproject’s first presentation in the 5+1=6, emphasising how it rendered visible both significant buildings and scenes of everyday life. Second, I demonstrate the criticality implicit residents’ unexpected
attempts to reclaim local memories. To this end, I analyse the board game about Changxindian that The duo invented, emphasising how local people took away the playing cards.

*Changxindian Notes: highlighting everyday architectural devices*

The notion of acting has multiple meanings. While it is often taken to signify pretending or performing, it also means taking action. In this section, I analyse *Changxindian Notes*, to showing how actions on the ground critically reactivated quotidian local histories and memories of a historical old town. In doing so, though, I stress that these actions avoided directly opposing the government’s plans for the revitalisation – call it the Disneyfication – of the area.

![Figure 38. A map of Beijing. The red pin indicates the GPS location of Changxindian. Map courtesy of the Second Floor Publishing Institute.](image)

On 17 January, 2015, Calligraphy Architecture, an architecture studio run by Xiao Kong (小孔) and Li Mo (李墨), took part in 5+1=6. They conducted their investigative art/architecture project in a town named Changxindian, which I have indicated with a red dot in the map provided in figure 38. The famous Marco Polo
Bridge is only two km from the town.\(^8^0\) Changxindian is Beijing’s gateway to the southwest. The Beijing-Kowloon Railway, Beijing-Shijiazhuang Highway, and Beijing-Zhoukoudian Road run through it. Part of its name – “dian” (点) – signifies that it was a resting place, a waypoint for people travelling to and from Beijing in ancient times. Changxindian is home to the state-owned Two Seven Diesel Locomotive Factory, which played a key role in the Great Strike of 7 February 1923 (also known as the Beijing-Hankou Railway Strike.\(^8^1\) The town also has a mosque, a temple dedicated to the Fire God, and a Catholic church.

Xiao Kong and Li Mo chose to focus on Changxindian for three reasons. First, Li Mo’s mother grew up in Changxindian and she still had relatives living in the town (at least when I interviewed her in 2016). Second, as I have indicated, Changxindian is imbued with a variety of histories and cultural legacies. Its golden era was the period of Chinese industrialisation between the 1950s and 1990s. It has been in decline ever since (see fig. 39). Third, the town has been included in the Beijing government’s revitalisation plan. As urban designers and architects, The duo have their own perspective on this.

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\(^{8^0}\) The Marco Polo Bridge Incident was a battle in July 1937 between China’s National Revolutionary Army and the Imperial Japanese Army. It is widely considered to have been the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

\(^{8^1}\) On February 7th, 1923, workers of the Beijing-Hankou Railway started the big “February 7 Strike” after military police sent by warlord Wu Peifu sabotaged a workers’ unions federation inauguration ceremony. The strike, participated by Chinese Communist Party, paralysed entire 1,200-kilometer railroad endured for three days before Wu dispatched his troops to put an end to the strike, killing all those who resisted. After this incident the Chinese Communist Party gained the popularity needed to start its revolution.
In the first phase of the subproject, the duo surveyed Changxindian’s history and architecture. They drew up site ground plans of some significant places, such as the locomotive factory (fig. 40) and workers’ dormitories on the Jianshe and Guangming lanes. They also drew the front elevations of some small stores and food stands, such as a hand-made noodle stand (fig. 41). They showed these architectural drawings in the 5+1=6 exhibition, along with an article presenting their conversations with residents and people working in the village office.

82 Jianshe (建设) means to construct, to build; Guangming (光明) means brightness. These three were among the typical names of roads and shequ (社区) in the socialist era.
Through abstraction and measurement, the site ground plans revealed not only the sheer scale of the clusters of buildings that characterise this industrial town, but its diversity of places. Juxtaposing the ground plans of giant factories and dormitories with elevations of small food stands produces a sense of discordance – things were “a bit off”. Normally in architectural presentations, the ground plans are displayed alongside frontal elevations. Yet in this context the contrast created a sense of equality between places that are vividly infused with quotidian life and
massive architectures that symbolise the socialist era, industrialisation, and modernisation. Indeed, The duo presented these two poles as being on an equal footing with one another.

The Beijing government planned to “revitalise” Changxindian, such that it becomes something of a theme park. Against this backdrop, the project of using architectural visual language to depict diverse everyday scenes in this bustling town was distinctly critical. It highlighted the importance of the quotidian, for it was everyday practices that kept the town alive.

*Changxindian Notes board game: local residents acting out their claim to local memories*

After the completion of 5+1=6, The duo continued with their subproject. In late September 2015, they designed a board game that bore the same name as their initial subproject, Changxindian Notes. The game, which investigated places, histories, landscapes, and everyday life in Changxindian, was exhibited in a gallery in the 798 Art Zone, Beijing. The game invited players to conduct a ten-day investigation of Changxindian: one round of the game equals one day. Players were asked to roll the dice, and the six sides of whom corresponded to six heterogeneous places, including Changxindian Railway Station and the Two Seven Factory. When they landed on particular positions on the board, players drew a card displaying five questions. They were then to answer the questions. The correct answers and a short description the place in question appeared on another card. Players accrued points by answering questions correctly.
Although I went to the gallery featuring the game, I did not feel like playing it, for I have been disciplined to avoid touching items displayed in museums and galleries. The sanitised white cube space was rather unwelcoming and there was no gallery assistant on hand to invite me to play (fig. 42). Presented in the context of an art exhibition, the game was to be exhibited, not played. Visitors were not activated as players/actors in the game, but remained spectators. Without the game being played, the local knowledge it contained was subsumed into a conventional art object in a conventional art institution.

On 27 October 2015, after the first show had ended, the same board game was presented at an exhibition named *Remembering the History of Sino-Japanese War: Inheriting the Culture of the Old Town* (2015), which was hosted by Changxindian’s Community Culture Centre. Here local residents, including the retired director of the Two Seven Factory (who was in his late 80s), were invited to play the game and provide feedback for the artists/architects who had designed it. Many curious residents attended the exhibition. However, the architects found that
the visitors did not play the game. Instead, they took away the cards describing local knowledge – both those bearing questions and those providing answers (see fig. 43).

![Figure 43. Photograph of the board game being played in Changxindian, 2015. Photograph courtesy of the Calligraphy Architecture Studio.](image)

Did the game fail again in its local context? Yes and no. As Gadamer contends, the artwork or the game appears as self-movement that needs the spectators to play along with what it brings forth (Gadamer quoted by Davey 2016). People did play along with what it brought forward, though, namely local knowledge and memories. They did this by taking cards away without permission. They played along the game by ignoring the rules, not following them. In her book the Gestures of Participation (2018), Sruti Bala insightfully points out that unsolicited and unexpected forms of participation should not be overlooked or underestimated. Indeed, these unanticipated modes of engagement can be seen as rearranging the terms of participation, often in very sophisticated ways (2018, 91). The unexpected purloining of cards on the part of local residents can be seen as another, disobedient way of participating in the game. Without permission and outside the rule, these actions served to reclaim local knowledge and lived memories.
The game’s aim of reactivating local histories coincided with that of the Beijing government’s revitalisation plan for Changxindian. The government’s plan, though, has the intention of digging up and capitalising on local histories by developing tourism in the town. For example, one proposal was to remake the mosque area on Changxindian Street (which is one hundred years old) in late Qing Dynasty/early Republican era style. Another was to build a railway museum and themed garden near the Two Seven Diesel Locomotive Factory (Liu 2015). Although the government claimed that its appointed urban designers and architects consulted local residents, the extent to which their perspectives were taken into consideration remained unclear. What is more, this top-down approach to (re)discovering local memories was not only driven by ideology and economics, but detached from local residents’ daily lives and lived experiences.

The actually existing town had developed organically, and was therefore much less neat and organised than the town envisioned in the revitalisation plan. According to Xiao and Mo, Changxindian Street resembled Foucault’s description of the fairground in his well-known essay on heterotopia (1986, 26). The duo appreciated Changxindian’s vividness and complexity, especially the dynamic ways in which residents connected with each other and their surroundings. They admired the special temporality that characterised the town’s festivals and celebrations. Such events could not be planned from above, and might be disrupted or even dissolved by the government’s top-down revitalisation.

On the board of the game, Xiao and Mo presented the following text next to Changxindian street: “The ‘fairground’ usually appears in the form of festival. In its realisation of the structure of plurality, it establishes a platform for people’s daily communication. Its unique charm lies in its triviality, temporality, and uncertainty. And it is full of intermixtures, contradictions, compromises, randomness, and incompleteness” (Calligraphy Architecture Studio 2015). This slightly theoretical and dense passage was juxtaposed with images of the frontal elevations of some of the stores and food stands on Changxindian Street. This area of the board feature
questioned cards relating this street. They bore questions such as this: “Blacksmith Liu’s Store on Changxindian Street is also called the Workers’ Club, which is one of the memorial sites of 7 February Great Strike. Is this correct?” In so doing, the game not only highlighted the street’s everyday lives and histories. It also invited local residents to think along with the architects in appreciating Changxindian Street as an organic living fairground, not a “shanty town” awaiting renovation.

The game accorded local residents’ agency, allowing them to highlight the relevance of the local knowledge and lived memories displayed on the cards. They did so not by playing the game, but by not playing, indeed, even “destroying” it. Their inappropriate/d action of “stealing” of the cards reintegrated local memories back into their lives, as lived and living knowledge. The cards could help the residents rediscover their town and relate to local things and locales through the lens of historical memories. When it comes to artefacts, anniversaries, feasts, icons, symbols, and landscapes, the term “memory” functions not as a metaphor but as a metonym in that it is based on material contact between remembrance and object than prompts it (Assmann 2008, 111).

Against the backdrop of shops run by migrants and locals being closed, and mundane objects on the streets being replaced, these cards served as metonyms for local quotidian memories in the town. While cultural memories were being remoulded and refashioned, and the town’s spaces and places were being repackages as lieux de mémoire in Pierre Nora’s sense (that is, as ideological mnemo-technical devices that are laden with nationalism), the cards recovered local knowledge (Den Boer 2008, 21). By taking away cards without permission, the residents (whether local or otherwise) enacted their right to the memories of the town. This was critical in that they deviated from the rules and exercised their inappropriate/d agency to reclaim everyday lived memories – and that at a time in which the objects and locations that carried these memories were being altered or erased in the name of “urban regeneration.”
Conclusion: the risk of quotidian criticality

In this chapter, I have illustrated two forms of quotidian criticality against the background of the stigmatisation or neglect of urban villages. I have done so through analyses of *Xiaojahe East Village* and *Changxindian Note*. The first form of criticality lies in Ma’s acting out of different social roles. This created the stage upon which people in an urban village could exhibit their daily lives and struggles in a way that was relatable to urbanites. Ma’s artistic project also smuggled in a critique of the ideal of “urban good life” and the powerful interests at stake in land use and urbanisation. The second form of criticality resides in Xiao and Mo’s errant architectural representations of daily life in a suburb town. Their project, which brought the town’s quotidian life into focus, facilitated an unexpected and inappropriate/d action on the part of residents: they enacted their right to local memories by stealing cards describing Changxindian’s local knowledge from the board game.

In the case of these two projects, being critical does mean the practice of criticising things. Neither does it entail being antagonistic. As such, these variants of criticality differ markedly from provocative artworks shown in the exhibition *Fuck Off* (2000). As these two projects show, criticality can be enacted by both artists and those living in urban villages. Indeed, artists and residents were co-actors in these projects. They stood on an equal footing in a way that recalls Derrida’s notion of the non-hierarchical relationships (1978, 81). These criticalities did not require artists and intellectuals teaching others what to think and how to act. Local residents (including migrant workers) were not passive and ignorant; in fact, they performed and took action. These works were critical in that they revealed everyday life and struggles imbricated in urbanising processes. In stimulating and displaying residents’ agency on the fringes of the city, two projects created lines of flight from the dominance imagination of urbanising Beijing. On the prevailing view, Beijing should be organised around a centre-periphery structure, in which the margins are seldom
deemed as important for given voice. These practices critically questioned entanglements of capital and political power as well as allegedly legitimate trajectories of urbanisation and revitalisation in Beijing.

Quotidian criticality contains the risk of complacency, however. With regard to *Xiaojiahe East Village*, it is clear that projects that reveal problems without further engaging with them might become little more than a new source of information for urbanite consumption. With respect to *Changxindian Note*, it may be that highlighting quotidian memories without persuading the government to modify its revitalisation plan amounts to a form of nostalgia. Indeed, in romanticising a fading form of everyday life, such projects could be co-opted by tourism.
Conclusion

As I sit down again in a university building in central Amsterdam to revise the conclusion to this study, the Netherlands and other European countries are exiting the three-month-lockdown due to the pandemic of COVID-19, a novel coronavirus that first appeared in Wuhan, China. I have been following conversations and getting information about the pandemic through a WeChat group founded during the Residents! project, one of my case studies. This group has been banned six times now. Each time it was “bombed”, however, the founder created another group with a slightly different name. This attests to the cat-and-mouse game that censorship so often sets in motion. Having been set up for and by the artists, activists, curators, observers (like me) involved in Residents!, this online group has expanded to include a wider group of people on the political left. On Valentine’s Day 2020, as lovers walked hand in hand on the busy streets of Amsterdam, people in the WeChat group were in their homes in locked-down cities across China, engaged in intense online discussions about the epidemic.

An architect and artist named Li Juchuan, who was one of the initiators of the Everyone’s East Lake project (discussed in Chapter 1), sent a post on the WeChat group. It showed an image made by Li’s fellow Wuhan artist, Cai Kai. More specifically, it was a vector image created using the answers that had been given to the police as part of a confession. The confession was that of a thirty-four-year-old medical doctor named Li Wenliang, and was one of the whistle-blowers to have sounded the alarm about the emergence of a new respiratory virus in December 2019, before he died from the disease on 7 February 2020.83

83 To know more about Li’s death and Chinese people’s reactions, see Yuan 2020.
Figure 44. *Left*, a portrait of Dr. Li Wenliang made by a citizen as a way of mourning his death. *Right*, Dr. Li Wenliang’s confession that he had spread the rumour that there were “7 confirmed cases of SARS in Wuhan South China Seafood Wholesale Market.” Images shared online in the WeChat Group “Wuhan University Clinical Medicine 04 (enrolment year 2004).”

Li’s signed confession (dated 3 January 2020, see fig. 44) records that his interrogators posed the following question. “The public security bureau hopes that you can cooperate and listen to the police’s advice to stop the illegal behaviour [meaning “making and spreading rumour” about COVID-19]. Can you do that?” [I] “[I] can”, he responded. “We hope you can calm down and reflect on yourself”, say his questioners. “And we solemnly warn you: if you insist on conducting the illegal behaviour without regret, you will be punished by law! Do you understand?” “[I] understand”, he replied. Both of his answers were covered by his fingerprints.

In a WeChat post titled “There is a Light that Never Goes Out”, Cai Kai created a white-on-black vector image from Dr. Li’s handwritten words “can” and “understand”. Cai then added “no” in front of them, meaning “no, I can’t” and “no, I don’t understand” (see fig. 45). Li Juchuan shared it in the sixth version of the Residents group (named “Residents Road”). “We can download it to make neon
lights, print it on T-shirts and tote bags, make stickers with it, and so on”, Li said. (Li 2020). In the post, Cai writes that “I really wish this disaster will pass soon, and I hope that after everything returns to normal, when we get home and turn on this little neon light in the living room or bedroom, we will remind ourselves that we should never forget” – that is, never forget Li Wenliang and the system that silenced and punished him (Cai 2020). The date when he died from COVID-19 was 7 February 2020.

Figure 45. *Left*, screenshot of Li Juchuan’s post sharing Cai Kai’s vector image made using Dr. Li Wenliang’s confession. *Right*, the post itself with a download link. (Names have been covered to protect the privacy of group members.) Accessed February 14 2020.

Instead of expressing his anger and sorrow like other netizens, or criticising the local government for silencing him and covering up the epidemic, Cai chose to use his skills in visual art to create this sharable image. This constitutes a form of non-oppositional artivism and commemoration. Through the image, he sought to
help fellow citizens stage non-verbal protests by way of everyday objects and remind future generations that those power severely worsened the epidemic. In China, the authorities treat the history of epidemics as a taboo subject. Cai’s approach also served to avoid censorship; after all, his post did not blatantly state why people should remember Li Wenliang. Despite that, survivors of the epidemic will understand his intentions.

Cai’s post figures an example of how to be critical in a time of crisis, in which the state is both necessary and obstructive. In this study, I have sought answers to the question of how socially engaged art can be critical without directly opposing the authorities – above all the state – in urbanising China. In so doing, I have elaborated four forms of non-oppositional criticality: reconfigurative criticality, connective criticality, uneasy criticality, and quotidian criticality.

The entangled forms of non-oppositional criticality

In the foregoing chapters, I have elaborated on these forms of non-oppositional criticality of socially engaged art in urbanising China. The importance of reconfigurative criticality lies not in its potential to entirely negate the current system or invoke “revolutionary change”, but rather in its power to reconfigure spaces within the existing system. By means of reconfigurative practice, urban spaces deviate slightly from dominant structures, allowing for civic, artistic, and social actions. Connective criticality is essential in a context in which rights of assembly and association are drastically curtailed. Crucially, though, this form of criticality does not entail fighting for these rights directly. Rather, it involves people connecting with, learning from, and nurturing one another across social differences, geographic locations, and borders. Through these connections, they can become inappropriate/d subjects and imagine alternative ways of live, which go beyond the

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84 To know more, find Dr. Liu, Shao-Hua’s books such as Passage to Manhood: Youth Migration, Heroin, and AIDS in Southwest China (2011).
hegemony of the capital-nation-state (and, in the case of China, authoritarianism). *Uneasy criticality* is also crucial, especially given the sensitivity of issues surrounding migrant workers and inequality. In a context in which speech is censored and unfree, it offers an alternative to criticising inequality directly or unreflectively consuming migrant workers’ experiences to make artworks. More specifically, it allows creative practitioners to acknowledge and work with the uneasiness of complicity in social inequality and smuggle social criticism into art. Against a backdrop in which mainstream narratives stigmatise urban villages and dehumanise their inhabitants, *quotidian criticality* is crucial. This is because it renders residents’ daily lives visible and audible, highlighting their agency and facilitating their ability to reclaim their dignity. In this way, critical practice contaminates representations that stigmatise those living in urban villages with elements of their own agency.

How do these four forms of non-oppositional criticality relate to the urban issues broached in this study? Reconfigurative criticality shows that there are gaps and grey areas in the system of surveillance and control. These gaps allow people to appropriate open urban spaces for civic purposes, in negotiation with the authorities. Connective criticality demonstrates that even though Chinese citizens’ freedoms of association and assembly are not protected, people living in cities can still connect with each other by means of fluid assemblages. In this way, they can explore alternative ways of learning and living. Uneasy criticality indicates that people in cities can address issues around migrant workers ethically and relate to migrant workers themselves more empathetically, however uneasily. Quotidian criticality suggests that urban villages are not undesirable places inhabited by faceless migrant workers. Rather, their inhabitants can reclaim their agency as dignified subjects.

These forms of non-oppositional criticality both overlap with each other, and are shaped by forms of practice. In establishing public spaces, reconfigurative criticality entails connectivity. Inversely, connectivity facilitates the reconfiguration of open spaces through cooperative art, spatial intervention, and urban roaming.
What is more, connective criticality involves public space in that its connections enable alternative possibilities that play out in local public spaces. Connective criticality also overlaps with quotidian criticality, in the sense that socially engaged art nurtures connections among creative practitioners and kai-fongs in everyday life in particular neighbourhoods. Uneasy criticality involves connectivity and the everyday. Indeed, the piece of documentary theatre Home emphasises the criticality embedded in the uneasy possibility (or perhaps rather impossibility) that theatre students might make connections with migrant workers. It also made both the students and audiences aware of the unsettling fact that they were complicit in maintaining social segregation in their daily lives. In the case of quotidian criticality, creative practitioners can feel uneasy upon realising that their actions may not bring about substantial change in urban villages. The four forms of criticality that I have identified are both entangled and distinct. What unites them is their non-oppositionality. For the sake of clarity, in this study I decided to zoom in on this single aspect of these modes of criticality that seems most apparent in my specific cases. As research develops in the future, however, these entanglements I have indicated here should be unpacked.

**Criticality, China, and being critical in China**

What does my study say about criticality, China, and being critical in China? In this research, I have put forward the concept of non-oppositional criticality, which was already implicit in theorisations on the part of Derrida, Haraway, Povinelli, and Rogoff. In contributing to this existing discourse, I have theorised criticality from the ground – that is, as it emerges in and through concrete practices. This has led me to enrich the concept by identifying four forms of non-oppositional criticality at work in practices of socially engaged art in China. The theoretical implication of my research is that criticality can go beyond the binary set-up of oppositional critique by deviating slightly from the dominant system, without transcending or turning
against it. What is more, one can smuggle something external into that system or something internal out of it. In the process, criticality might become inappropriate/d, embody alternatives, and work towards an exteriority as-yet to come.

Against the backdrop of the retreat of public space in contemporary China, critical socially engaged art can create space for civic practice and alternative ways of life. This means that China is not a prison without a window, but a complex and hierarchical system riven with cracks, gaps, and grey areas. These blind spots make critical socially engaged art practices possible. In turn, these create spaces that are a bit outside of the system, in which then allows further possibilities to emerge. Non-oppositional criticality might be less easy to identify than outright critique, for it does not appear to be rebellious on the surface. In the Chinese context, being critical entails neither openly opposing the authoritarian regime nor directly criticising social problems such as inequality and corruption. Criticality lies in negotiating with the system, in inconspicuously smuggling thing in and out of the system, in establishing connections across segregation and seclusion, in pushing the system’s boundaries, in creating spaces in which the underprivileged can appear with dignity. Critical practices are like ants digging subterranean rhizomatic tunnels. Tunnelling away within the system without opposing it, they might prefigure ways of living together that slightly deviate from that system.

Reflections and future visions

It may be that I seem very positive about the practices examined in this study. I should to admit that my involvement in these socially engaged art practices has made it difficult to maintain dispassionate and produce an unbiased analysis. This is because I care for these practices. Haraway has written that “caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning” (Haraway 2007, 36). At the end
of this journey of five and a half years, having conducted fieldwork with curiosity and written this dissertation with passion, I now know more than I did. However, I am mindful of the danger of complacency when it comes to non-oppositional critical practices. Such practices can be co-opted or forced out of the public eye, thus allowing the authoritarian system to proceed unchanged.

This year, 2020, is the fortieth anniversary of Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. After government soldiers put down pro-democracy protests, killing students, Gwangju citizens rose up against the military. Among Korean people, this is widely thought to be an important democratisation movement. Although the movement did not bring about democracy immediately, it paved the way for South Korea’s eventual democratisation. It may be, then, that antagonism is sometimes necessary to effect radical social and political change, particularly when non-oppositional approaches have been brushed aside.

My positive tone is also partly due to the fact that things have changed a lot since I began this research. As I finish this study in 2020, restrictions have tightened in China. I mourn for the rapidly diminishing spaces available for grassroots civic actions. I commenced this study in 2015. It covers a range of works made or performed between 2015 and 2017. In addition, I have updated my data up until 2019. This period witnessed a number of changes. These include the outrageous forty-day eviction campaign aimed at Beijing’s urban villages (December 2017-January 2018). Artists involved in 5+1=6 have investigated how these evictions displaced hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, along with some artists. Against this backdrop, 5+1=6 has become an archive of the vanishing urban villages in Beijing. The migrant workers re-presented in Home might have been forced to leave Beijing during this campaign.

In addition, the government’s control over freedom of expression has

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become tighter and tighter. In 2019, discussions among mainland netizens about social unrest in Hong Kong were quickly censored and removed. Online accounts have been blocked as part of this silencing operation. Some people have even been arrested, including some of my artist and activist friends in Guangdong. In this context, the first incarnation of Theatre 44 left traces of momentary freedom; this was still possible in Guangzhou at that time. Grandpa Liang, who built and ran the Sunset Haircut Booth, fell ill in 2018. At his request, Yu Xudong dismantled the booth in 2019. Yu lost contact with Liang later that year. The Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society went through a significant transformation in 2018 that led to the abolishment of hierarchical structure. The members share the rent and the responsibilities of maintaining the space, and they form different groups around their matters of concern and collaborate when organising activities. The initiator Chen Yun left DMAS in the same year. In the light of these changes, it can be said that this study records non-oppositional critical socially engaged art practices that emerged in China in the mid 2010s. Although projects such as these might not reemerge for some time in the current political climate in China, the attitudes, methods, and strategies that they enrol remain worthy of study by practitioners.

The cultural and political implications of my research, though, are not limited to the Chinese context. Around the world, governments are becoming ever more controlling, manipulative, and authoritarian. The administration of Hong Kong, for example, has ignored people’s demands despite the emergence of a democratic movement that has held continual protests for more than a year. What is more, the Indian government has passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which discriminates against Muslims. The Black Life Matters movements take place all around the world, calling for racial justice and equality. With developments such as these unfolding across a range of national contexts, it is worth entertaining the possibility that non-oppositional critical practice is an ineffective means of challenging powerful regimes. Still, such practice operates according to a different paradigm, which goes beyond notions of friend and enemy. When the surveillance
and control debilitate opposition, or direct activism is answered with police violence and political suppression, non-oppositional criticality represents a viable way forward.

Although I chose the title of this study before Hong Kong’s current democratic movement broke out on 9 June 2019, it coincides with one of the protestors’ slogans of the movement: “be water”. Be water; act like water – this does not mean that one should become spineless or weak. Rather, the imperative calls on one to persist, to be fluid – that is, seemingly soft but also penetrating and erosive, seeping through the social fabrics. I would like to close with this quotation from the Chinese classic philosopher Xunzi (荀子) (310-235 BC): “the water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up” (水能载舟，亦能覆舟)
Glossary

Hukou (户口)

Since 1951, the population of China has been governed and managed through the *hukou* or “household registration system”. Although this system has undergone a series of reforms since the 1990s, the main structure remains intact. It ties access to social welfare and infrastructures to one’s residential status. Children of migrant workers from rural China, for example, cannot be admitted to public schools in the cities.

Zai-di (在地)

*Zai-di* means on site, on the ground, down to earth, and grounded in the locality. Although it concerns local issues, it does not connote localism.

Kai-fong (街坊)

On Lee Chun-Fung’s definition, the Cantonese term *Kai-fong* synthesises, in one conceptual compound, ‘community’ and ‘neighbourhood’. The prefix ‘kai’ literally refers to the street, whereas ‘fong’ refers to the place where one lives and works. Thus, ‘kai-fong’ refer to the web or the dense tangle of relationships that accrete over a territory, a network of mutual aid composed of those in which one depends, places one’s trust in. (2016, 22)

Min-jian (民間)

This term roughly describes a folk’s, people’s, or commoners’ society. This approximation of its meaning is not exact, however, because whereas *min* means people or populace, *jian* connotes space and in-betweenness.
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Summary:

*Be Water, My Friend*: Non-Oppositional Criticalities of Socially engaged art in Urbanising China

This study attends to different forms of socially engaged artistic and cultural practices in China. These practices address a range of social issues in Chinese cities, including the progressive diminishment of spaces available for civil engagement, unequal treatment of migrant workers, and denigration of urban villages. Through anthropological fieldwork and critical analysis, I explore how socially engaged art offers critical approaches to these problematics in the context of the contemporary Chinese regime. In particular, I stress how arts practices in China have developed forms of criticality that avoid explicitly opposing the political authorities.

I start from two basic premises. First, discourses of critique (including forms of critique articulated in art) overemphasise oppositionality. Instead, we need to pay more attention to contextualised forms of artistic criticality, which demonstrate different potentialities latent in China’s authoritarian capitalist state. That is not to deny the necessity of confrontation and opposition in activist art. Still, I mean to move beyond “againstness” as a paradigm through which to assess criticality in art, along with the dichotomy of autonomy versus heteronomy, and aesthetic versus social impact (Felski 2015, 17). Second, I disagree with the general view that if it is to be critical, Chinese art must stand against the state and other sites of authority. This easily identifiable oppositional form of critique, which is certainly present in Chinese art and activism, should not overshadow other, less conspicuous critical practices. These practices create spaces for civic action and engagement, as well as alternative ways of life that are not provided by the regime.

In conceptualising criticality, I draw on a range of critical and cultural theories: Derrida’s non-hierarchical deconstructive recasting of critique (1978, 81); Rogoff’s argument that criticality operates from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness (2003); Haraway’s adaptation of Trinh’s (1989) concept of the
“inappropriate/d other” (1992, 299); and Povinelli’s notion of “otherwise” (2014). Drawing on fieldwork that I conducted in China in 2015 and 2016, which I updated in 2018, I analyse six very different projects. I show how four forms of non-oppositional criticality emerge from these projects, explaining how they are entangled with both one another and socially engaged art practices. My terms for these four forms of criticality (and the corresponding artistic practices) are these: one, “reconfigurable criticality” in cooperative art, spatial interventions, and urban roaming regarding civic public spaces in Guangzhou; two, “connective criticality” in cultural engagements with people locally in Shanghai and translocally in Asia; three, “uneasy criticality” in documentary theatre about rural workers in Beijing who suffer from inequalities; and four, “quotidian criticality” in artistic interventions in “undesirable” urban villages in Beijing.

I argue that critical art can go beyond oppositional critique by being “a bit off”. By this, I mean that it can partially eschew the system—but not by entirely escaping or turning against it. Rather, these forms of criticality work by smuggling something external into the system (or something internal out of it); becoming “inappropriate/d”, embodying an alternative way of life; or working towards the otherwise in the future. Although oppositional and confrontational actions may be necessary in pursuing radical social and political change, non-oppositional critical art can make space for civic engagement and alternative social relations at a time when the Chinese authorities are tightening their control over civic space and civil society.

Chapter 2 focuses on reconfigurable criticality in socially engaged art projects that were concerned to turn open urban spaces into public spaces. Against the backdrop of an increasingly surveilled and controlled city, these projects founded spaces that lay partially outside of the system. These projects are Sunset Haircut Booth (2016-ongoing) and the first edition of Theatre 44 (2016-2017) in Guangzhou. In discussing Sunset Haircut Booth, I show how the artist cooperated with citizens on the ground so as to turn an open space in an urban village into a free haircut booth. This booth served as what I term a “third space/public space”, in
which people in the neighbourhood could negotiate with the authorities, connect with each other, and develop initiatives meant to address their collective concerns. This was made possible by the fact that the artist learned from local people. Through both artistic and social means, he maintained and diversified the functions of this public space. In my analysis of performances by Theatre 44, I explore how nocturnal roaming, spatial interventions, and poetry recitals created what I, following Deleuze and Guattari, call “lines of flight” in the city. Travelling through the city at night, a group of performers reconfigured spaces that were planned for traffic such that they became fluid temporary playgrounds. The practitioners enjoyed the momentary freedom of fleeing from control, using the spaces as a stage for performances and civic congregations. By performing a politically significant poetic drama in a pedestrian space near the Peasant Movement Training Institute, the group created an affective public space. In this way, they made it possible for members of the public not only to encounter alternative political narratives and forms of art, but to join in as co-creators of the public space too.

Chapter 3 attends to connective criticality in socially engaged cultural practices. The Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society (DMAS), a space organised by young creative practitioners in a suburb of Shanghai, that connected people at both local and international levels. In this way, the DMAS explored alternative ways of learning and living together that were either not provided or encouraged by existing social systems. Under circumstances of diminished freedom of assembly and association in China, the DMAS undertook three key initiatives. One, in providing a mutually nurturing after-school care service for children in the neighbourhood, it displayed what I term “zai-di connectivity”—a way of connection, that is, that is grounded and local, but not localist. Two, through street vending that it provided aesthetic experiences to local kai-fongs (residents of the neighbourhood and the supportive network among them). In this way, the DMAS created a temporary alliance among kai-fongs and art students in facing down attempts to break up its activities. Three, through its practices of Dinghai Chuan (chuan means connecting or associating) and
public talks, articulated a rhizomatic connectivity. Indeed, these practices connected artists, activists, and citizens across Asia so as to find alternative ways of living and learning that exceed the hegemony of capital-nation-state, if only partially.

Chapter 4 explores uneasy criticality in documentary theatre. Specifically, it attends to *Home* (2016), the final performance put on by students as part of a course at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. The play addressed the issue of migrant workers, which has become more and more sensitive in China. The students and teacher found the process of devising *Home*, which took a year, uneasy. It also gave rise to forms of criticality. In the preparing this piece of theatre, the students interviewed migrant workers. They came to the uneasy realisation that they were separated from their interviewees by class difference. Indeed, the migrant workers can be read as subalterns, many of whom refused to speak and to be represented onstage. This led the students to change their approach to the production. Whereas initially they set out to represent migrant workers’ stories, ultimately they represented their encounters with the migrant workers. What is more, they adopted a narrative framework based on H.G. Wells’ science fiction novel *The Time Machine* (1895). This served to emphasise the class segregation without stepping on the red line of censorship. As the devising process went on, the students and teacher/director became increasingly unsettled by social and economic inequality at stake in the performance. A group of students expressed “unproductive” critical doubts concerning the project, questioning not just their teacher’s theoretical perspective, but art’s capacity for criticality in an institutional context. The final performance profoundly affected the audience, triggering uneasy responses. Seeing the exploitation of migrant workers and the violence of class struggle, some held their breath and others sobbed. The audience became uneasy witnesses of migrant workers’ absence both on and off stage. Still more unsettlingly, they were held responsible for their complicity in social segregation as members of the urban elite. Perhaps they would be moved to reflect on inequality or even take action, such as treating migrant workers with greater respect and empathy.
Chapter 5 focuses on quotidian criticality in artistic interventions that responded to the issue of urban village. I attend to an art project named 5+1=6 (2014-2015), which investigated urban villages in Beijing. Whereas urban villages are often deemed dirty and chaotic, and therefore slated for redevelopment, this project redistributed what can be seen and heard about urban villages. I look particularly at two subprojects, which manifested two forms of quotidian criticality. In *Xiaojahe East Village* (2014-2015), Ma Lijiao played different characters on social media platforms and an abandoned construction site inhabited by migrant workers. In this way, he revealed the everyday precarity and struggles face by people living in urban villages. In *Changxindian Notes* (2015-ongoing), which focuses on the historical suburb of Beijing—Changxindian, the architectural duo Xiao Kong and Li Mo juxtaposed the site plans of historical buildings with images of the front elevations of small stores and food stands. In this way, they emphasised how quotidian spaces and practices have kept the old town alive. The two architects also designed a board game based on local histories and everyday knowledge in Changxindian. It was made available to the public in the Community Culture Centre in the suburb. People in the town participated in an unexpected way: rather than playing the game, they took away the cards bearing local knowledge. This can be seen as way of reclaiming quotidian knowledge, which cut against the grand narratives that the government has imposed in trying to redevelop Changxindian into a town orientated towards tourism, devoid of everyday vitality.
Samenvatting:

“Wees Water, Mijn Vriend”: Non-Antagonistische Vormen van Kritiek in Sociaal Geëngageerde Kunst in het Verstedelijkende China

Dit onderzoek richt zich op verschillende vormen van sociaal geëngageerde artistieke en culturele praktijken in China. Deze praktijken focussen zich op sociale kwesties in Chinese steden, zoals de gestage afname van ruimtes die beschikbaar zijn voor burgerlijk engagement, de ongelijke behandeling van arbeidsmigranten en de denigrerende houding jegens stadsdorpen. Door middel van antropologisch veldwerk en kritische analyse onderzoek ik hoe sociaal geëngageerde kunst onder het hedendaagse Chinese regime kritische perspectieven biedt op deze kwesties. Ik benadruk in het bijzonder hoe kunstpraktijken in China verschillende vormen van kritiek hebben ontwikkeld waarbij men zich niet expliciet verzet tegen de politieke autoriteiten.

Ik ga uit van twee premisses. Ten eerste leggen discoursen omtrent kritiek (inclusief de vormen van kritiek die in kunst worden geuit) te veel nadruk op antagonistisme. We zouden meer aandacht moeten besteden aan gecontextualiseerde vormen van artistieke kritiek. Die tonen de verscheidenheid aan latente mogelijkheden in China’s autoritaire, kapitalistische staat. Daarmee ontken ik niet de noodzakelijkheid van confrontatie en oppositie in activistische kunst. Mijn intentie is echter om de kritische waarde van kunst niet te beoordelen middels een paradigma van “tegen-zijn” of een tegenstelling van autonomie versus heteronomie of van esthetische versus sociale impact (Felski 2015, 17). Ten tweede ben ik het oneens met het veelvoorkomende idee dat om kritisch te kunnen zijn, Chinese kunst zich tegen de staat en andere gezag dragende instituten moet keren. Deze gemakkelijk te herkennen antagonistische vorm van kritiek, die zeker aanwezig is in Chinese kunst en activisme, mag niet andere, minder opvallende kritische praktijken overschaduwen. Die praktijken creëren ruimte voor burgerlijk engagement en voor levenswijzen die afwijken van wat het regime aanbiedt.

Ik betoog dat kritische kunst door “niet zoals het hoort” (‘a bit off’) te zijn meer kan doen dan antagonistische kritiek leveren. Hiermee bedoel ik dat zulke kunst het systeem deels kan mijden—maar niet door er compleet aan te ontsnappen of zich ertegen te keren. In plaats daarvan functioneren deze vormen van kritiek door dingen die extern zijn aan het systeem naar binnen te smokkelen (of dat wat intern is naar buiten); door “ongepast/niet- toegeëigend” te worden en een andere manier van leven te belichamen; of door naar het andere in de toekomst toe te werken. Hoewel antagonistische en confronterende acties wellicht noodzakelijk zijn in het nastreven van radicale sociale en politieke verandering, kan non-
antagonistische kritische kunst ruimte maken voor burgerlijk engagement en alternatieve sociale relaties in een tijd waarin de Chinese autoriteiten hun controle over de openbare ruimte en de burgermaatschappij aanscherpen.

Hoofdstuk 2 focust zich op herconfiguratieve kritiek in sociaal geëngageerde kunstprojecten die zich erop richtten om van open stedelijke ruimtes publieke ruimtes te maken. In de context van een in toenemende mate gesurveilleerde en gecontroleerde stad stichtten deze projecten ruimtes die deels buiten het systeem functioneerden. Deze projecten zijn Sunset Haircut Booth (2016-heden) en de eerste editie van Theatre 44 (2016-2017) in Guangzhou. In mijn bespreking van Sunset Haircut Booth toon ik hoe de kunstenaars samenwerkten met lokale burgers om van een open ruimte in een stadsdorp een gratis haarsalon te maken. De kraam functioneerde als wat ik een “derde ruimte/publieke ruimte” (“third space/public space”) noem, waarin mensen uit de wijk kunnen onderhandelen met de autoriteiten, met elkaar in contact kunnen komen en initiatieven kunnen ontwikkelen om collectieve belangen te behartigen. Dit was mogelijk doordat de kunstenaar leerde van de lokale mensen. Door middel van zowel artistieke als sociale middelen onderhield en diversifieerde hij de functies van de publieke ruimte. In mijn analyse van de performances van Theatre 44 onderzoek ik hoe nachtelijk dwalen, ruimtelijke interventies en poëzievoordrachten creëerden wat ik, in navolging van Deleuze en Guattari, “vluchtlijnen” (“lines of flight”) in de stad noem. ’s Nachts door de stad reizend, herconfigureerde een groep artiesten ruimtes die bedoeld waren voor verkeer en maakten daarvan rondzwervende, tijdelijke speelplaatsen. De deelnemers genoten van de kortstondige vrijheid die het ontvluchten van gezag hen bracht en gebruikten de ruimtes als een podium voor performances en burgerbijeenkomsten. Door een politiek relevant, poëtisch drama op te voeren in een voetgangersgebied in de buurt van het Trainingsinstituut van de Boerenbeweging (‘Peasant Movement Training Institute’), creëerde de groep een affectieve publieke ruimte. Op die manier maakten ze het voor burgers mogelijk om niet alleen in aanraking te komen met alternatieve politieke boodschappen en
alternatieve kunstvormen, maar om ook deel te nemen aan het ontwerpen van de publieke ruimte.

Hoofdstuk 3 richt zich op verbindende kritiek in sociaal geëngageerde kunstpraktijken. De Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society (DMAS), een ruimte in een buitenwijk van Shanghai die wordt beheerd door jonge kunstenaars, auteurs, ontwerpers enzovoort, verbond mensen op zowel lokaal als internationaal niveau. Op die manier verkende de DMAS alternatieve manieren van leren en samenleven die door de bestaande sociale systemen niet werden aangeboden of aangemoedigd. Toen er sprake was van verminderde vrijheid van vergadering en vereniging, nam de DMAS drie belangrijke initiatieven. Ten eerste toonde het, door een wederzijds bevorderende naschoolse opvang te bieden voor kinderen uit de wijk, wat ik “zai-di verbondenheid” noem—een vorm van verbinding die plaatsgebonden en lokaal is, maar niet lokalistisch. Ten tweede bood het via straathandel esthetische ervaringen aan aan lokale kai-fongs (bewoners van de buurt en het ondersteunende netwerk dat zij vormen). Op die manier vormde de DMAS een tijdelijk verbond tussen kai-fongs en kunstacademiestudenten in hun verzet tegen de pogingen die gedaan werden om hun activiteiten te beëindigen. Ten derde articuleerde DMAS door hun toepassing van Dinghai Chuan (‘chuan’ betekent verbinden of verenigen) en hun openbare lezingen een rhizomatische verbondenheid. Deze activiteiten verbonden kunstenaars, activisten en burgers in heel Azië in hun zoektocht naar alternatieve manieren van leven en leren die voorbijgaan aan de hegemonie van kapitaal–natie–staat, ook al is het maar gedeeltelijk.

kwamen tot de ongemakkelijke bewustwording dat er een klassenverschil was tussen henzelf en de geïnterviewden. Veel van de arbeidsmigranten, die als *subalterns* begrepen kunnen worden, weigerden om te spreken of om op het podium gepresenteerd te worden. Dit bewoog de studenten ertoe om hun productieaanpak te wijzigen. In eerste instantie waren ze van plan de verhalen van gastarbeiders te representeren, maar uiteindelijk re-presenteerden zij hun ontmoetingen met de arbeidsmigranten. Bovendien gebruikten ze een narratieve structuur gebaseerd op de sciencefictionroman *The Time Machine* (1895) van H.G. Wells. Dit had ten doel om de nadruk te leggen op sociale segregatie zonder de limieten van censuur te overschrijden. Naarmate het productieproces vorderde, raakten de studenten en de docent/regisseur steeds meer van streek door de sociale en economische ongelijkheid die in de voorstelling naar voren kwam. Een groep studenten uitte “onproductieve” kritische twijfels over het project door niet alleen het theoretische perspectief van de docent te bevragen, maar ook het vermogen van kunst om kritisch te zijn in een institutionele context. De uiteindelijke voorstelling raakte het publiek diep en bracht een reactie van ongemak teweeg. Bij het zien van de uitbuiting van arbeidsmigranten en het geweld van klassenstrijd hielden sommigen hun adem in en anderen snikten. De mensen in het publiek werden ongemakkelijke getuigen van de afwezigheid van arbeidsmigranten zowel op het podium als ernaast. Nog ongemakkelijker was dat zij als leden van de stedelijke elite verantwoordelijk werden gehouden voor hun medeplichtigheid aan sociale segregatie. Wellicht zou dit hen ertoe bewegen om te reflecteren op ongelijkheid, of zelfs om actie te ondernemen door bijvoorbeeld arbeidsmigranten met meer respect en empathie te behandelen.

Hoofdstuk 5 focust zich op alledaagse kritiek in artistieke interventies die zich bezighouden met vraagstukken rondom het stadsdorp. Ik richt mij op een kunstproject genaamd 5+1=6 (2014-2015), dat onderzoek deed naar stadsdorpen in Beijing. Stadsdorpen worden vaak als vies en chaotisch beschouwd en daarom voor herontwikkeling bestemd, maar dit project herdistributeerde wat er gezien en
Colophon

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