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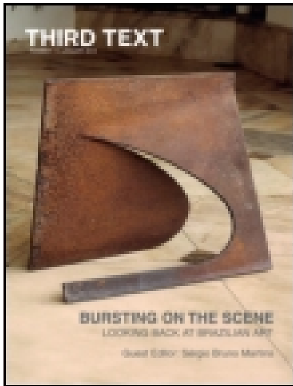

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Art for/of the Masses

Revisiting the Communist Legacy in Chinese Art

Chang Tan

The legacy of the avant-garde is intrinsically linked to that of early Communism in its condemnation of the bourgeoisie and its lifestyle, revulsion against the commodity fetish, radical iconoclasm and, perhaps less obviously, in its desire to negate the privileged autonomy of art and to reconnect artistic creativity with the praxis of everyday life.[1] The linkage never broke. In a world dominated by globalised capitalism, the Communist vision continues to motivate the avant-garde that now securely possesses a demarcated zone where signs of transgression paradoxically mark legitimacy. As John Roberts has pointed out in this journal, Nicolas Bourriaud's influential theory of relational art comes from the heritage of the French New Left whose theories investigate 'what *kind* of communism is appropriate to its defeated legacy'.[2] Socially engaged art practices, which first became prominent in the 1960s and resurfaced during the 1980s, are even more explicitly connected to the Marxist-Communist heritage. In theory, they continue the Situationist International's relentless criticism of consumerist society; in practice, they frequently adopt pseudo-revolutionary formats such as guerrilla warfare, street protests or community-based activism among disenfranchised populations.[3]

The avant-gardism described above, however, largely takes place in a part of the world where Communism never materialised into political reality. To commemorate the legacy of Communism in what was once the Eastern Bloc demands a different mental and strategic approach. Not surprisingly, most post-Socialist art takes a more harshly critical attitude towards the utopian vision proposed by Communism. Yet instead of embracing the modernist discourse that was previously condemned by Socialist regimes, post-Socialist art tends to reject both as hegemonic accounts of history: linear, monolithic, overtly confident in its own inevitability. What emerged in the ruins of the USSR and its protégés was the deconstructive glee of postmodernism, which is 'essentially a reaction to utopianism, the intellectual disease of obsession with the future that

1. Peter Bürger, 'The Negation of the Autonomy of Art by the Avant-Garde', in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp 47–54

2. John Roberts, 'Introduction: Art, "Enclave Theory" and the Communist Imaginary', in *Third Text* 99, vol 23, no 4, July 2009, pp 353–367

3. While blatantly protest-based art seemed to run out of steam after the 1970s, it has made a comeback through new media, especially the Internet. On the other hand, socially engaged art with a more modest yet constructive nature persisted in the 1980s and drew critical attention in the 1990s. See Brian Holmes, 'Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World', in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds, *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and*

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Communication in Modern Art, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004.

infected the latter half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries'.[4] Techniques such as appropriation and collage are widely employed to create a sense of grotesque irony. The past is invoked as an awkward juxtaposition of icons and clichés, so that it may be revealed as incoherent, deceptive and fragmentary. Such a strategy challenges the Cold War ideology that exaggerated the division between the two geopolitical camps, but it may also lead to the trivialisation and partial erasure of history. It not only overlooks the irreducible differences between Modernist and Communist discourses, but also fails to reach a fair assessment of the Communist legacy – as both a theoretical speculation and a political entity. At a more prosaic level, such a strategy simply enables the post-Socialist artists to transit smoothly into the post-Cold-War global artworld, readily equipped with a similar visual vocabulary and critical stance.

This article examines how contemporary Chinese artists deal with their own Communist legacy. Many, like their East European counterparts, appropriate from the visual inventory they inherit from the revolutionary era with postmodern nonchalance; others attempt critically to assess this legacy and the role it still plays in personal lives, society and culture. In recent years, some artists and curators, in a vein similar to the Euro-American avant-garde, have also been using this legacy to question and modify prevailing art practices. While the appropriation of the revolutionary legacy in contemporary Chinese art has been studied, little attention has hitherto been paid to these latter groups. The artists are more usually described as mere receptors both of the historical legacy which stamps them with a Chinese identity irrespective of their own will and of postmodern techniques that enable them to process this legacy.[5] Such descriptions, I argue, not only underestimate the agency of Chinese artists in deciphering and digesting their (in many ways still taboo) history, but also undermine their ability to respond critically to the theoretical discourse initiated by the Western avant-garde. The activities of these Chinese artists are particularly important in assessing the utopian vision of contemporary art. Their experiments lead toward a 'communal aesthetics' that, though bearing apparent affiliation to relational and dialogue-based art, remains markedly different from both. It aims at a wide-ranging and mass-oriented outreach, a mutually stimulating relationship between the artists and the audience, a collective working mode that reduces the role of individual authorship, and above all an approach grounded firmly in social reality that nevertheless refrains from turning itself into political activism. This peculiar communal spirit, I argue, only comes into being through the artists' direct confrontation with the geographic and historical specificity of modern China, where the legacy of Communism remains at once alive and nebulous.

To map out the trajectory of this 'communal aesthetics', I will first introduce how the Communist legacy is constructed and (partially) deconstructed in contemporary China at large, especially in the field of visual culture. I will then take a close look at a number of artists who consciously explore the communal aspect of revolutionary art – as an antidote to the rampant personality fetish and commercialism in the artworld today. The main section of this article will be given to a description and analysis of the *Long March Project – A Walking Visual Display* (2002, hereafter *LMWVD*), a group art project that enables the artists

4. Mikhail N Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Anesa Miller-Pogacar, trans and introduction, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1995, p 330

5. Jiang Jiehong's *Burden or Legacy: From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art*, Hong Kong University Press, 2007, is the most substantial scholarly work on the subject to date. Followed by the exhibition 'The Revolution Continues: New Art from China', Saatchi Gallery, London, October 2008–January 2009, Jiang's book provides a thorough survey of contemporary artists' treatment of topics related to the Cultural Revolution, including the icon of Mao, writing as propaganda, and the expression of 'hysteria' brought on by traumatic experiences. The book and the exhibition, however, still focus entirely on the artists' appropriation of the revolutionary imagery and psyche.

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and the audience alike to re-experience and re-imagine the most celebrated episode in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. During its journey, the *LMWVD* artists investigate the repressive as well as the liberating aspects of the Communist legacy, conjuring a communal utopia that is radically innovative yet, predictably, 'inoperative' and short-lived.

THE RED LEGACY IN ART AND SOCIETY

To call contemporary China 'post-Socialist' is technically a misnomer, but there is little doubt that the country has drifted away from its Marxist-Leninist-Maoist path since the late 1970s. Since then a significant number of Chinese artists have also departed from Socialist Realism and turned enthusiastically to the modernist inspired avant-garde (*xianfeng*).[6] Unlike Eastern Europe, China never became fully involved in the first wave of modernist movements; the modernisation of Chinese art, which also took place at the turn of the twentieth century, largely consisted of the repudiation, as well as revision, of traditional ink-wash painting and a gradual assimilation, as well as re-contextualisation, of the European tradition of academic realism.[7] The Chinese Communist Party endorsed a Socialist Realism that takes in and transforms both the traditional and the realist for propaganda purposes. Modernism, in contrast, was condemned as decadent, impractical and elitist, and practically banned from the art curriculum and from the public sphere after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). After the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), however, a great number of works of modern art were reintroduced into China and received enthusiastically by young artists. In less than a decade, they experimented with a wide range of modern styles, absorbing influences from Renoir to Rauschenberg, while paying little attention to the 'chronology or inner logic' of modernism in the Western context.[8] Their undifferentiated embrace of Western avant-gardism quickly led them to challenge the authoritative tone of the Greenbergian modernism with Duchampian irreverence. Their playfulness is best exemplified by the Xiamen Dada group, who publicly burned all the works they had hitherto created, and its leading artist Huang Yongping, who blended textbooks on the history of Western art and of Chinese art into paper pulp in a washing machine and sold shrimps at the 'First Exhibition of Avant-garde Art' in China in 1989.

Avant-garde art in China also exhibits features that are common to post-Socialist art: the use of 'techniques and procedures' that resemble those of postmodernism, and the 'profuse employment of Socialist and Communist imagery'.[9] Li Shan (born 1942) and Wang Guangyi (born 1957) started appropriating the standard portraits of Mao in the mid-1980s, depicting the chairman as ludicrously feminine or putting his face behind grids. Wu Shanzhuan (born 1960), a calligrapher and installation artist, turned the propagandist 'Big Character Posters' from the Cultural Revolution into visually striking collages of trivia and nonsense. However, such practices did not become widespread until the early 1990s. First came the rapid ascent of Political Pop (*Zhengzhi bopu*) whose visual scheme mainly consisted of combining the icons and styles

6. In retrospect, many art historians and critics dispute whether Chinese art in the 1980s qualifies as 'avant-garde', since it clearly drew from a number of Western art movements that had long since become passé. Wu Hung prefers 'experimental' to 'avant-garde', and his terminology has been adopted by many artists since the late 1990s, exemplified by the first 'experimental art department' established at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2005. Gao Minglu, an equally influential critic, nevertheless argues that the term 'avant-garde' still serves the Chinese context better, 'because it implied breaking free of constraints... [while] the temporal logic of "modern", "postmodern" and "contemporary" were lost on Chinese art, for which these delineations did not exist'. Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, Albright Knox Gallery, New York, 2005, p 45. Also, there is little doubt that the artists in the 1980s considered themselves avant-gardist and, for these reasons, I will adopt this term in the present article.

7. The influence of European modernism was visible among Chinese artists before the PRC era, and a number of modern art groups emerged in Shanghai during the 1930s. However, these artists seldom communicated with their Western counterparts; and the modernist movements were short-lived and much less influential than the realism-orientated modernisers. See Ralph Croizier, 'When Was Modern Chinese Art? A Short History of Chinese Modernism', in Josh Yiu, ed, *Writing Modern Chinese Art: Historiographic Explorations*, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, 2009.

8. Wu Hung, 'Introduction: A Decade of Chinese

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of Socialist Realism with those of commercial culture. Numerous works followed, turning every icon of the revolutionary legacy – from rigidly posed photographs of families and social groups to political landmarks such as the Tiananmen Square and soldiers' memorials, but above all the images of Mao – into something awkward, laughable or meaningless. Despite censorship, criticism and ridicule, those themes remain prominent among Chinese avant-garde art today.[10]

As its detractors point out, Chinese artists' sudden and sustained obsession with the 'red legacy' is largely a response to the global art market. Being at once the only (albeit nominally) major Socialist country in the post-Cold-War era and a rapidly rising economic power, China remains an oddity and a curiosity for outsiders. The Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 reinforced the perception of China as a totalitarian country where Communism still rules with Stalinist brutality. In fact, Tiananmen marks the beginning of an 'export-oriented' trend in contemporary Chinese art, as the artists, fleeing a restrictive domestic environment, became recognised and embraced by foreign media as dissenters and exiles.[11] Irreverent appropriation of revolutionary icons, sometimes combined with Pop Art inspired garishness or a provocative display of (usually female) sexuality, successfully turns an exotic 'Chinese identity' into an easily appealing camp for Western collectors.

The expectations of an international market alone, however, cannot fully explain why numerous artists suddenly became fixated with revolutionary icons. Hou Hanru argues that 'Kynicism' – a plebeian attitude that trivialises official ideology by holding it up to everyday banality – has permeated both art and literature in China since the early 1990s, as a result of both the disillusion felt after 1989 and the opportunism ushered in by the new era of popular culture.[12] But more importantly, the artists' obsession coincided with the revival of the Mao cult – and, consequently, a populist craze for cultural products and memorabilia from the revolutionary era. Emerging in the late 1980s and peaking in the early 1990s, this revival elevated Mao as both a national hero and a demigod, reincarnated in tens of millions of Mao portraits, millions of laminated pictures dangling as talismans from the rear mirrors of taxis and buses, and even in Mao temples built in his home province. Although encouraged by official ideology and fed by rampant commercialism, this Mao craze was largely spontaneous, originating from a nostalgia for the egalitarian past in a society where newly created wealth is distributed with glaring inequality, from a persisting and growing personality cult that identifies Mao with the Chinese nation, and from a highly selective national memory of what actually happened under Mao's reign.[13] The fad subsided in the late 1990s, but even today restaging and reprinting of 'red classics' remain popular, memorabilia from Mao's era are highly marketable, and Mao's hometown receives more visitors per year than during the Cultural Revolution.

Apparently, the avant-garde artists described earlier appear to react critically to this revival of China's 'red legacy'. But their criticism often conveys more complex emotions and can be subjected to multifaceted interpretations. Francesca Dal Lago points out that the ubiquitous presence of Mao portraits in both art and everyday life means they become 'emptied of its strictly ideological connotations', and instead acquire 'an aura of daily familiarity', analogous to popular religious images

Experimental Art (1990–2000)', in Wu Hung et al, eds, *The First Guangzhou Triennial: Reinterpretation*, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China, 2002, p 13

9. Aleš Erjavec, ed, *Postmodernism and the PostSocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003, p 4

10. While censorship has become increasingly lax since 2000, overtly blunt works, such as the Gao Brothers' *Miss Mao* (2008) and *Mao's Guilt* (2009), are still banned from public exhibitions. More importantly, such works have always been criticised as kitschy, imitative of SOTS art and Pop Art as well as of each other, and as market-orientated and ideological.

11. A flurry of exhibitions abroad after 1989, with titles like 'Exceptional Passage: Chinese Avant-Garde Artists Exhibition' at Fukuoka, Japan, 1991, 'Silent Energy', Oxford, England, 1993, 'Chinese New Art: Post-1989', Hong Kong and Sydney, Australia, 1993 and 'Fragmented Memories: Chinese Avant-garde Artists in Exile', Ohio, USA, 1993, testifies to such a twist of perception.

12. Hou Hanru, 'Towards an "Un-Unofficial Art": De-ideologicalisation of China's Contemporary Art in the 1990s', *Third Text* 34, spring 1996, pp 37–52

13. See Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*, M E Sharpe, Armonk, 1996

unto which the artists may project any sentiments they want to express, including their own personal memories and identities. Li Shan's feminine portrayal of Mao, for example, not only satirises the standard portraits and photographs of the Chairman, which were routinely airbrushed and 'rouged', but also reflects a homoerotic desire that harks back to the artist's experiences of sexual liberation during the Cultural Revolution.[14] Jiang Jiehong also argues that many artists approach the Cultural Revolution with a mixture of critique and nostalgia, because the formative experiences of their youth cannot be simply negated and their education taught them to see the Maoist utopia as 'romantic and heroic'.[15] However, the artists Jiang describes as 'nostalgic' seldom yield to their nostalgia without irony and self-reflection. Liu Ye (born 1964) portrays 'red children', for example, in a fairytale atmosphere often tinted with disorienting details such as a cigarette between a little girl's fingers; even without such details, the paintings look at once dreamy and nightmarish, with their aggressive and consuming redness, the overtly theatrical composition, and the absurdity of having children play adult roles.

Notably, in recent years, some artists started taking a more analytical approach toward this red legacy: they set out to investigate how history is manipulated and rewritten through images. The 'Second History' series by Zhang Dali (born 1963) juxtaposes the widely published and often retouched photographs of revolutionary leaders and heroes with non-manipulated originals that he rescues from archives through 'special relations': figures are cut out or added; the background is cleared up or filled in to emphasise the leader's lone status or his proximity to the common people; props are swapped or changed as symbols; even details like hand gestures and facial expressions are subtly manipulated.[16] The result is not only a streamlined 'official' narrative of history but also a distinctive aesthetic that defines the proper representation of heroism, leadership and virtue. Li Songyun (born 1968) offers mock 'Socialist realist' paintings in which he redraws the scenes frequently portrayed in the revolutionary era – factory labourers and farmers at work, soldiers during training, party cadres in meetings, teenagers studying or exercising – with a sincere attempt at realism. Unlike the heroes in Political Pop, none of the figures is caricatured or distorted; they are merely painted as average citizens, some poorly dressed, gaunt or flabby, some looking bored, amused or confused. The revelation, however, is striking, when one compares Li's paintings with the standard propaganda portraits in which everyone appears dignified, energetic and admirable. Even the least impartial viewer has to admit that Li's paintings appear more truthful. Clearly, parody and nostalgia are not the only ways an artist may reckon China's red legacy, since this legacy – or, more precisely, its representation and commemoration – is complex, nebulous and still in the making.

RED LEGACY AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Among those artists who take an analytical approach toward the red legacy, some are also re-evaluating and, to a degree, revitalising what has kept this legacy alive in the first place, namely its alleged ability to engage a wide variety of 'common people' as audience and participants,

14. Francesca Dal Lago, 'Personal Mao: Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art', *Art Journal*, summer 1999, pp 47–59
15. Jiehong, op cit, pp 7–10
16. For information related to the production of *Second History*, see 'Zhang Dali: Di er lishi gezhan jiekai bei zhanbi de lishi' ('Zhang Dali: Second History Uncovers Veiled History'), *Nanfang dushibao* (*Southern Metropolitan News*), 30 March 2010; Ilaria Marie Sala, 'Chinese Propaganda Uncensored', *Wall Street Journal*, 22 January 2010.

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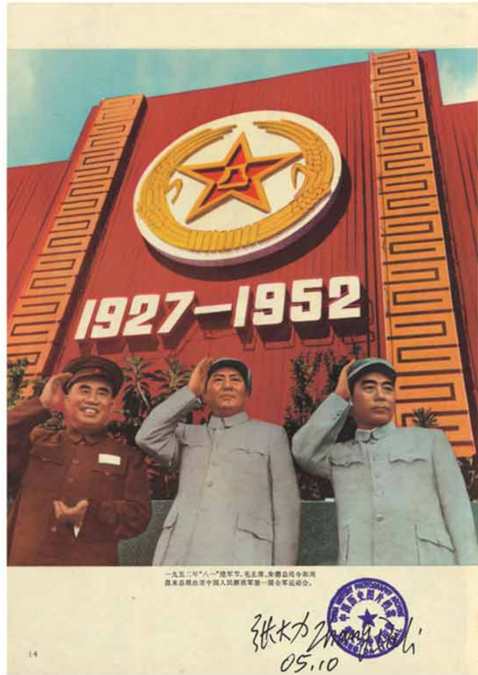

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中国人民解放军摄影作品选集
(Photographs Selection of the Chinese People's Liberation Army)

Zhang Dali, *Second History: The First Military Sports Game, 1952*, 2006, digital C-print, digital image, reprinted courtesy the artist

to build communities where collective creativity triumphs over the narrow confines of subjectivity and individual authorship. Both of which, the artists observe, are missing from the avant-garde art practised today.

Xu Bing (born 1955), a renowned artist who lived in New York for years before returning to China to take up a senior post at the Central Art Academy, has always been keen on discovering and recycling 'what is useful' in Maoist culture. He speaks of the years he spent in some of the country's poorest rural areas as an age of enlightenment,[17] and describes the Maoist 'spirit of avant-gardism' as superior to that of most artists today.[18] When he was invited to create a piece for the Museum of Modern Art at New York in 1999, he submitted an eleven-metre by three-metre banner displaying the words 'Chairman Mao Said: Art for the People', written in his New English Calligraphy that, despite its resemblance to Chinese characters, is actually readable in English only. He believes 'the idea that art should serve the people is correct in any place and at any age',[19] and remarks that he hopes his work 'will reach the broadest spectrum of people possible, everybody from the art expert to the average person'.[20] His later project *A Consideration of Golden Apples* (*Jinse pingguo song wenqing*, 2002) consists of giving away three tons of apples to 'the working people of Beijing' – a simple act of kindness that 'appropriates the concept of "Socialist consideration" or "compassion" embedded in the collective memory of a whole generation of Chinese'.[21] Zhao Bandi (born 1966), an artist known for staged photographs featuring himself with a stuffed panda, admits that he grew up with propaganda art, and that the artists of his generation are 'taught about the type of works we should create as being suitable for the public arena'; but instead of breaking away from this training, he decided to play along and take on 'the role of an educator'.[22] In his photographs, he conducts a dialogue with the panda through speech bubbles, conveying 'public service' advice such as to wear a seat belt or stop smoking. Since official public service announcements in China tend to be serious and heavily didactic, Zhao's light-hearted, humorous way of sending those messages had such an appeal that the Chinese government actually used some of his works in the 'public arena' that he desired to enter, creating a popularity for Zhao that few avant-garde artists can match.[23] Zhao has also staged a series of 'greeting and consolation' (*weiwen*) campaigns that echoed Xu Bing's *Golden Apple* project. From 2007 to 2008, he visited factories, hospitals, schools, army units and rural villages with a panda-costumed entourage, delivering variety-show-style entertainment or distributing (often panda-themed) gifts. Such visits were deliberately modelled on the 'art propaganda teams' (*wenyi xuanchuan dui*) the Communist Party used to send to such venues, though apparently with a gently mocking twist.

Xu Bing and Zhao Bandi are drastically different as artists, yet they both attempt to reach the 'masses' with concepts and models established during the Mao era. The quotation on Xu Bing's MoMA piece came from the all-important 1942 Yenan Forum on Literature and Art in which Mao, appropriating the phrase from Lenin, declared that art and literature should 'serve the millions upon millions of working people'.[24] The slogan 'art serves the people' (*wenyi wei dazhong fuwu*) henceforth became the guiding principle of Chinese intellectuals, and remained so

17. Xu Bing, 'Yumei zuowei yizhong yangliao' ('Stupidity Taken as a Nutrient'), in Bei Dao and Li Tuo, eds, *Qishi Niandai* (*The 1970s*), Sanlian shudian, Beijing, 2009
18. Melissa Chiu, 'Xu Bing: Artist Notes', in Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian, eds, *Art and China's Revolution*, Asia Society, New York, 2009, p 116
19. See the introduction on Xu Bing's official website, http://www.xubing.com/index.php/chinese/projects/year/1999/art_for_the_people_chinese, accessed 25 August 2010
20. Alexa Olesen, 'Xu Bing: Twixt East and West', *Virtual China*, 6 October 1999, p 27
21. Xu Bing, self-description of the project on his official website, http://www.xubing.com/index.php/chinese/projects/year/2002/a_consideration_of_golden_apples, accessed 25 August 2010
22. Karen Smith, 'Interview with Zhao Bandi,' January 2004, available at http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/500, accessed 30 June 2010. The interview is also published in the catalogue *Uh-Oh! Pandaman*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2004.
23. Some works from his *Panda Series*, mounted as light boxes, are put up side by side with real commercials in the subways of Beijing. The Beijing branch of the official Labour Union invited him to meet laid-off workers, while the Family Planning Commission worked with him to make posters promoting the use of condoms. During the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in 2003, Zhao's poster 'Stop SARS, Defend Homeland', which featured himself and the panda wearing facemasks and posing as guerrilla fighters, was reprinted in the *Beijing*

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Evening News (*Beijing wanbao*). Zhao reacted with a mock lawsuit for copyright infringement that earned him even more publicity.

24. *Mao Tse-Tung on Art and Literature*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1960, p 85

for the next four decades. Stylistically speaking, this 'Art for/by the Masses' (*dazhong wenyi*) appropriates colour schemes, composition and iconography from a variety of folk arts, including paper-cuts, woodblock prints and New Year posters. At the same time, it relies heavily on techniques developed by European-Soviet realism. Its main goal is to build a formulaic visual vocabulary that renders the subject matter immediately comprehensible and relatable to the 'working people'. The exceptional popularity of Maoist art since the 1950s, however, was not a natural result of its mass appeal. On the contrary, its success is largely due to the relentless propaganda machine that consolidates its own products with Realpolitik, while effectively eliminating any other form of artistic expression.[25] Xu Bing and Zhao Bandi both avoid the didactic tone in their emulation of Mao-era Socialist art, and they obviously can no longer rely on the monopoly of official art to promote their works. But they still exploit official venues (though not without irony) and, more importantly, their art projects still (perhaps deliberately) retain the vestige of Maoist populism – anticipating what images the masses desire, producing them en masse, and distributing them free of charge.

It is not difficult to see the similarity between the Maoist strategy and that of commercial visual culture today, especially works that involve the branding of commodities. Xu and Zhao, of course, do not aim to trick the public into buying particular products, and their advertising of Socialist ideals is no more than perfunctory; what they try to promote instead are their own 'brands' as artists, which in the case of Zhao Bandi is often hilariously blatant. Their strategy has long become standard practice in contemporary art practices: the radical elimination of the 'personal touch' in artworks, first showcased by Andy Warhol, only further enhances the conceptual ingenuity of individual artists, which translates into real capital more swiftly than ever. The 'mass art' mandatory during China's revolutionary era, on the other hand, was always hostile to the commodification of individual talents. As early as the 1920s, Chinese leftist intellectuals argued that truly revolutionary literature and art demanded a negation of the artist's individuality and the bourgeois concept of 'originality'.[26] But not until the Mao era did this negation become a practical reality. The Communist Party required artists to 'immerse themselves in life' (*shenru shenghuo*), to work with and learn from peasants, factory workers and soldiers; it also encouraged the common labourers to produce art in their free time. The aim was to bestow on physical labour the same – or even higher – status than intellectual labour, and to unite both at the societal and the personal level. Most artworks produced in the decade of the Cultural Revolution were thus either unsigned or co-signed by groups, and many indeed were collaborative efforts by professional artists, art students and amateur 'working class painters'.[27] Individual art practices were subdued and replaced by communal art productions.

Maoist art scored some successes – the sheer quantity of paintings, often reprinted as posters, soared in the 1960s and 1970s; a large number of technically accomplished and highly popular works were produced by young artists receiving their 're-education' in the countryside in the 1970s; members of the 'masses' became prolific artists, among whom the peasant painters in the small town of Hu Xian are the most prominent

25. For detailed accounts of the interplay between art and politics during the Mao era, see Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, and Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994.

26. Tang Xiaobing, *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008, pp 54–62

27. Julia Andrews, 'Art during the Cultural Revolution', in Richard King, ed, *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966–76*, UBC, Vancouver, 2010, pp 27–57

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examples.[28] The overall impact of these policies, however, was schematic and resulted in the often brutal repression of both the individual and the communal. Curiously, in the post-Mao era, when individualism once again flourished in art, vestiges of communal art still persist, though on a more intimate scale. Informal art communities initially took shape among art academy schoolmates and 're-educated youth' in the 1970s and 1980s. These artists held exhibitions in private apartments or studios, relied on participating artists and friends for funding, and disposed of the works casually after a brief display.[29] The artists also tended to form close-knit communities of collaboration and mutual support, and these communities continued to flourish into the early 1990s. East Village, a slum-ridden neighbourhood on the fringe of Beijing, was, in retrospect, the most prominent artist community emerging at the time. Dozens of young artists, many from other provinces and without institutional affiliation or stable income, moved there for the cheap rent, the close vicinity to the art academy and distance from the city centre, and, as the site became a bohemian hub, for the opportunity to meet and work with like-minded artists. They lived a communal life, worked, cooked and slept together, and documented the gritty surroundings, their own lifestyle and artistic performances with photographs. When those photographs became prized items in the art market a decade later, there were repeated disputes on the proper authorship of individual works.[30]

Some of the post-Mao 'communal art' grew from communities formed during the Mao era, but this communal spirit persisted by performing new functions: it helped the young artists to survive at a time when avant-garde art in China suffered from sporadic political censorship, an almost complete lack of institutional sponsorship, and the absence of a meaningful market. As political censorship loosened and a market – mostly international at the beginning – expanded in the 1990s, the earlier art communities gradually dissolved. Collaborative art projects and semi-institutionalised communities, nevertheless, continue to exist. Interestingly, while the early art communities modelled themselves after the SoHo-bohemian prototype, quite a few of the more recent ones eschew the private, semi-exclusive nature of such communities and call for more public engagement – in a spirit that intentionally echoes the Communist heritage. Beijing Commune, a gallery established by the art critic Leng Lin in 2004, is one of those modern 'communes'. In a manifesto published for one of its earliest exhibitions, Leng openly calls for a 'new socialism' – a 'space for the imagination', a space that 'keeps distance from social practices that have developed by means of capitalist forces'.[31] In a way similar to Xu Bing and Zhao Bandi, Leng Lin also declares that Chinese artists, trained by the Socialist curriculum, know how to 'move art into the public space' and to 'communicate with normal people'.[32] The new socialism of the Beijing Commune, however, seems more like an abstract principle than a practical strategy. The gallery has held a number of exhibitions that re-examine Socialist Realism and Utopian Communism with a refreshing nuance, but it has done little in promoting its art in 'public space' or among 'the normal people'. Leng Lin gave a 'lecture on China Contemporary Art' in 2005 to an almost exclusively foreign audience, and no other public programmes were issued in the following years. Also, despite its passionate

28. Promoted as a model of 'people's art' during the Cultural Revolution, Hu Xian painters continue to draw collectors and tourists today. See Ralph Croizier, 'Hu Xian Peasant Painting: From Revolutionary Icon to Market Commodity', in King, ed, op cit, pp 136–66.

29. See Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, Chicago, 2000.

30. Rong Rong's photograph series best captures the atmosphere and creative activities at the East Village. For detailed accounts of the East Village, see Wu Hung, *Rong Rong's East Village*, Art Media Resources, Beijing 2003; Thomas J Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, Timezone 8, Hong Kong, 2006.

31. Hong Hao, Xiao Yu, Song Dong, Liu Jianhua and Leng Lin, manifesto for *Only One Wall*, 2005. See the official site of Beijing Commune at http://www.beijingcommune.com/, accessed 26 July 2010.

32. Barbara Pollack, *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China*, Timezone 8, Hong Kong 2010, p 85

call for 'a kind of collective form that transcends the individual,' with the single exception of the Polit-Sheer-Form Office (PSFO) – a group made up of five artists including Leng Lin himself – the Commune has not hosted any collaborative projects.[33]

The failure of the Beijing Commune to translate its aspirations into reality reflects more of a common dilemma than hypocrisy: the institutional structure of producing and exhibiting experimental art in China remains inadequate and restrictive, with few museums or galleries running educational programmes or community outreach.[34] The recent market boom has prompted the growth of numerous private galleries and 'art districts' in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu, yet the overt commercialism of most galleries resulted more in plagiarism than experimentation. The market potential and competition also fractured the once fraternal community of artists, many of whom now join and drop art dealers in a flash, or even sell directly to collectors, thus skipping a wider audience altogether. In this context, the call for a communal art sounds more like a nostalgic fantasy than a real strategy. The experiment of the *Long March: A Walking Visual Display*, therefore, seems all the more remarkable.

THE EXPERIMENTAL SCOPE OF THE LONG MARCH

Long March: A Walking Visual Display, co-curated by Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie and involving over one hundred artists from China and overseas, aims to bring the avant-garde spirit back into poor rural communities. For four months in 2002, the *LMWVD* group walked the trek of the historical Long March – an iconic event in the history of the Communist Party, during which Mao Zedong led the floundering Red Army through nearly six thousand miles of impoverished and precarious geographical terrain in one year (1934–1935), while being pursued by the vastly better staffed Nationalist army, passing through the Southern Chinese provinces of Jiangxi, Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan, producing and displaying artworks on the road. According to the curators, their action not only followed the route of the historical Long March, but also adopted its method, in spirit and ethics, which was truly avant-garde at the time:

> Its romantic ideals of turning failure to success, of taking to the road in search of utopia, of founding an alternative democratic society through engagement with the masses, leaders and soldiers, of representing the intellectuals to the people, of holding imported theories and tactics up to the lens of reality in the local context, of generating the new and powerful praxis that led ultimately to the founding of the current Chinese state.[35]

Clearly, *LMWVD* aims to revisit the most idealistic aspects of the Chinese Communist legacy, but not to pay homage to the historical Long March; it was, as the curator Lu Jie repeatedly points out, an attempt to re-experience and reconstruct the memories left by the revolutionary era in its original context,[36] among the people who grew up with its historical legacy, and through active exploration of the historical, cultural and demographic peculiarities of the sites they visited.[37] At Site 6, Lugu Lake on the border of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, where the matriarchal

33. Hao et al, manifesto for *Only One Wall*, op cit

34. Most museums in China still do not feature modern art, and those that do are mostly (semi-)private or academic institutions, concentrated in a handful of large cities, with poor attendance, unreliable funding and often corrupt management (artists paying to have their works featured in exhibitions is common practice). Although censorship has grown much less stringent in recent years, the government still intervenes in the public display of art, resulting in self-censorship and occasionally the removal of individual artworks from exhibitions in China.

35. Preface to Lu Jie et al, eds, *Changzheng: yige xingzouzhong de shijue zhanshi* (*The Long March: A Walking Visual Display*), 25000 Cultural Transmission Center, Beijing, 2004

36. Lu Jie mentioned 'revisiting revolutionary memory' as one of the goals of *LMWVD* in his article 'Long March on the Road of Revolution', in Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian, eds, *Art and China's Revolution*, Asia Society, New York, 2008, pp 201–213. He elaborated on his theory of 'reconstructing spatial memories' in the interview I conducted with him at the Long March Space café on 8 July 2009, and again in a symposium at his house the next day.

37. The following descriptions of the *Long March*, unless otherwise noted, come from the account on its official website, http://www.longmarchspace.com and my conversations with the individuals involved.

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Mosuo minority lives, the artworks focused on the 'the gender discourse, both Chinese and Western, and its relationship to art practice' as well as 'the utopian elements of a matriarchal society viewed by two generations of personal experiences'. 'The function of art and technology' was the main theme at Site 10, where the Xichang Satellite Station is located. More often, the integration of the art projects and their particular locality works in a more subtle and well-rounded manner. At Jinggangshan Mountain – another legendary site for the CCP, where Mao set up his first peasant soviet base – for example, the artists stayed four days, producing works that included:

1. Li Fang's installation/performance *Memory of Memory* (*Jiyi de jiyi*), in which he wrote random revolutionary slogans and advertising phrases on a string of straw mats, spread on the lawns outside the Octagonal Pavilion Revolutionary Museum, where Mao used to live and where the First Soviet Congress was held;
2. Public screening of Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary *Chung Ku, Cina* (1972) and contemporary artist Jiang Zhi's video *A Few Minutes of a Person* (*Ren de ji fenzhong* 2002) at the Chinese Red Army Hospital; both films portray ordinary Chinese with similar cinematography but lead to radically different insights;
3. Sui Jianguo's 'walking sculpture' *Marx in China* (*Makesi zai Zhongguo*), for which he had a human-sized statue of Marx, wearing a Mao suit, carried on a bamboo raft down the river; and *Jesus in China* (*Yesu zai Zhongguo*), for which he distributed small statues of the crucifixion, with Jesus dressed in a Mao suit, to the crowd in a local Catholic church that was once used as a Red Army base camp;
4. Qu Guangci's performance '*Who is the Third Party?' Shei shi disanzhe*, for which he carried a stuffed figure of himself on his back, and asked the villagers he met to elect the 'Model Long Marcher' from the works they saw;
5. A retrospective exhibition of the Chinese experimental art of the 1990s, mostly in reproductions, held at the tourist stores and outdoor vendors in the same museum, displayed and 'sold' side by side with regular merchandise.

Most of the activities engaged with the local population, as well as with the indigenous cultures and customs, to a degree that reached beyond the conventional territory of art. During the retrospective exhibition, for example, Qu Guangci, with the effigy on his back, first drew the attention of a crowd at the Octagonal Pavilion Revolutionary Museum; Qiu Zhijie then gave cold beverages to the crowd and started playing with the local children, having them help him to put up the exhibition in the museum store. When the audience expressed interest in an item on display, the curators let them take it home. In many cases, the audiences were drawn into the actual creation of art, producing works that were both exhilarating and ironic. At Site 4, Site 8 and Site 9, the local residents were asked collectively to draw an ink-brush painting, to paint a large portrait of a pop TV star on the floor, or to make Jackson Pollock-style abstract paintings after being offered abundant alcohol. The artists also interacted with the locals through both visual and verbal means. On the train from Kunming to Zunyi, the Long Marchers staged a series of

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Long March Event: *Collective Creation of Pollock Style Abstract Paintings*, Maotai, Guizhou, photographed 14 August 2002; digital image, reprinted courtesy the Long March Foundation, Beijing

performances that centred on the theme 'necessity and chance', offering the passengers an unmediated encounter with art. They hung landscape paintings side by side with advertisement-style photographs on the windows, put up fliers that made false announcements (Zhu Fadong), gave away souvenirs and 'Long March T-shirts', lent the passengers books without charge and encouraged them to tear them up after reading (Ma Han), and asked them to select and read random passages from the Chinese Constitution (Wang Chuyu). Throughout the journey, Wang Jingsong broadcast the self-composed Long March Artistic Manifesto (*Changzheng xuanyan shu*) in the local dialects of the region they passed, and Xiao Xiong used his self-made porcelain statuette of Mao to exchange for other 'merchandise' with local residents.

During their interaction with the locals, the *Long March* artists deliberately emulated the populist agenda of the historical Long March in which the soldiers of the Red Army attracted the local audiences' attention – often with singing, dancing and storytelling – solicited their involvement and distributed propaganda fliers as well as jointly producing artefacts among them. This pattern was reputedly effective, making the Long March 'a manifesto, a propaganda force, a seeding-machine',[38] broadcasting an ideology that appeared progressive and visionary in its historical context. Also like the historical Long March, the *Long March* artists brought the avant-garde to a population that had been habitually overlooked by the state and its cultural institutions. Such practices, the curators argue, are genuinely avant-garde in contrast to the 'so-called Chinese avant-garde' which 'not only severs itself from tradition but also decorates itself with borrowed "labels", turning itself into a pan-politicized conceptual art'.[39] Lu Jie also argues that contemporary Chinese artists, while busy studying postcolonial theory and identity politics, are confusing the social, aesthetic and historical avant-gardes, and end up becoming 'a footnote of (capitalist/imperialist) ideology'.[40] The *Long March* curators, however, had no intention of rejecting the 'capitalist/imperialist' discourse outright; Lu and Qiu are both exceptionally well versed in contemporary art theories, and they seek to '[hold] imported theories and tactics up to the lens of reality in the local context' in a manner similar to Mao's irreverent yet fruitful Sinicisation of Marxist theories.[41] *LMWVD* managed to hold a number of 'imported theories' up to 'the lens of reality', but, above all, it has appropriated and re-examined relational aesthetics – against the communist heritage that informed it.

Unlike the audience of many relational art performances, the participants of *LMWVD* are neither members of the 'artworld' nor regular museum visitors; in fact, most of them had no prior exposure to modern art whatsoever. But contrary to what one might expect, those uncultivated participants were often remarkably open-minded towards the artists' experiments. For his project *Sending Off the Red Army: In Commemoration of the Mothers on the Long March*, Jiang Jie invited local residents to 'adopt' hyper-realistic sculptures of new-born babies and document their 'growth' by taking pictures of the adopting parents together with their 'babies' on the same day every year and sending them to the artist. The rural couple they solicited had no problems with this apparently bizarre proposal and accepted the 'babies' with pleasure. During the *Collective Creation of Pollock Style Abstract Paintings*, the

38. Mao Zedong, 'On Tactics Against Japanese Imperialism', report given at a party conference on 27 December 1935. The actual impact of the Long March propaganda is disputable, but it is commonly seen as a 'missionary feat' that delivered the revolutionary messages to a vast population. See Ross Terrill, *Mao: a Biography*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999, p 165.

39. Preface to Lu Jie et al, eds, *The Long March*, op cit

40. Lu Jie, 'Long March on the Road of Revolution', in Chiu and Shengtian eds, op cit, pp 201–213

41. Lu Jie has an MA in Creative Curating from the University of London, and speaks eloquently on all the latest 'isms'. Qiu Zhijie is a practising artist but also a prolific critic, having published at least seven books on conceptualism, postmodernism, photography, multimedia and performance art, as well as on art with a 'nativist' identity (*bentu yishu*).

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participants created works that did bear a surface resemblance to those of Pollock, although most of them had never seen a Pollock painting before. At Lugu Lake where the matriarchal Mosuo reside, Judy Chicago, who joined the *LMWVD* at this particular site, had a 'visual dialogue' with the sixty-year-old, self-taught folk artist Guo Fengyi on the theme 'What If Women Ruled the World', during which Chicago discovered with delight that Guo, like many women artists in the rest of the world, started her painting from the centre of the canvas and worked from the 'centripetal force'.

At the same time, such unmediated encounters were firmly grounded in the specificity of the local communities – their shared customs, lifestyles, landmarks or (often evasive) memories, all of which were brought forth by the artists and re-investigated in altered contexts. At every stop of the *LVWVD*, the artists started with an investigation of 'local cultural zoology' through field trips, interviews, symposiums and archival research as well as informal interactions with locals. Many projects emerged, sometimes spontaneously, from such investigations. The art project *If Women Ruled the World*, for instance, was itself such an investigation in which a great number of (mostly female) artists recorded and re-imagined local customs through painting, film, installation and performance. The *Jackson Pollock* project was hosted in Maotai, a town that is so well known for its brand of alcohol that its name has long become synonymous with 'fine liquor' in Chinese. Together with the group painting, *Long March* asked the participants to complete a survey describing their personality, tolerance of alcohol and how intoxication influenced their feelings. Jiang Jie's 'adoption' project stems from the true story of female Red Army soldiers who gave birth on the Long March and had to give up their babies for adoption to the locals. These babies were handed over to local residents under circumstances far more horrifying and painful than Jiang's re-enactment suggested, and while Jiang may receive yearly reports of her 'babies' from their adopted parents, many of the female soldiers were never again able to trace the whereabouts of their newborns. This tragedy, inflicted on the small number of women in the Red Army, was largely left untold in the history of the Long March, which has been depicted as a masculine triumph of self-abnegating heroism.[42] Similar stories were unearthed and became materials for artworks. During the *LMWVD*, the artists noticed that the Red Army tended to use local Catholic churches as temporary headquarters – another curiosity that has been largely overlooked in the Long March historiography. They redecorated such a church in Moxi (Sichuan province) with statues, murals and stained-glass windows that explore the commonality between religious and revolutionary fervour: triptychs with Party heroes in the place of saints and angels; crucifixes with Jesus wearing Mao suits. Since the church had long been turned into a Tibetan temple, as well as a community theatre for local opera and dance, the artists also invited local residents to carry on their regular performances in the redecorated settings.

The *LMWVD* artists' methods of engagement were inspired by Mao's 'field research' strategy: to analyse the local social structure, formulate policies that would meet the needs of peasants, and continue to learn from them while guiding them towards common goals. Mao's strategy, though seldom carried out in practice, was effective in strengthening and transforming communities. On the other hand, *LMWVD* as a

42. Female soldiers accounted for around one per cent of the Red Army at the beginning of the Long March; many were teenagers and some as young as twelve, and few survived the March. The members of one Women's Independent Regiment, with 1300 solders, were either killed or captured and sold into slavery during one battle with the Ma Calvary. Such stories are mentioned in numerous works on the Long March, and are told in great detail in Ng Khee Jin and Dora Cheok's *Feet Unbound*, a documentary released in 2007.

Sui Jianguo's *Jesus in China*, Wim Delvoye's *Chapel Series* and Liu Dahong's *The Altar Series* exhibited on the stage of Jinhua Temple, Moxi, Sichuan, photographed 27 August 2002; digital image, reprinted courtesy the Long March Foundation, Beijing

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whole managed to avoid becoming another 'propaganda force' by keeping its agendas intentionally incoherent, ambiguous and ironic. None of the artworks seems to deliver a clear message; put together, they share little of a common agenda. To further diversify the agenda and emphasise the project's bottom-up approach, the *LMWVD* team also collected, exhibited and promoted local and 'indigenous' artworks, many of which were produced by untrained and hitherto unknown artists. Several of these 'folk' artists, like the aforementioned Guo Fengyi, went on to earn international acclaim.

The *LMWVD*, with no government or commercial sponsorship, was realised through communal cooperation. According to Lu Jie, the project was initially funded by his own savings, as well as by small contributions from sympathisers; most of the artists contributed their works free and lived on a shoestring budget throughout the journey. The *Long March* team also encountered numerous practical difficulties: poor road conditions, lack of supplies, resistance and suspicion from the local authorities, personal conflicts, and the poor execution and unexpected outcomes of many experiments; the process was, in a word, full of 'clashes between idealism and pragmatism'.[43] Partly due to these difficulties, the *Project* was called off before its official completion – the curators originally planned for twenty sites, with the north-western town of Yan'an as final stop, but had to halt the project after visiting only twelve sites. A second attempt was planned at the time, but nine years

43. 'An Interview with Lu Jie', Chongqing, 18 August 2002, at http://www.longmarchspace.com/english/e-discourse1.htm, accessed 10 August 2010

have passed and the artists have not returned to their trek. Nevertheless the *Long March* continued and prospered in a much-altered form. The Long March Foundation, with its permanent base at the Beijing 798 Art District since 2005, regularly hosts exhibitions, lectures and symposiums. It has also launched a series of projects, including *A General Survey of Paper-Cut Art in Yanchuan County* (30 June–30 July 2004), *The Long March Yan'an Project* (2 May–30 September 2006), the ongoing *Yanchuan Primary School Papercutting Art Curriculum* (September 2006) and the *Survey of Tibetan Subject Matter in Painting* (18 August–16 September 2007), all of which were rural-based and public-orientated, with a strongly anthropological and educational approach. Most recently, the Foundation launched a sequel to the *Long March* – the *Ho Chi Minh Trail* (2008–2011). This project started with 'field research' and 'educational residency' in Beijing, during which artists, curators and critics from Southeast Asia, Europe and America gathered in Beijing for theoretical discussions, studio experiments and public symposiums. The 'physical journey' in Vietnam and Cambodia started in 2010 and lasted for two months, followed by an exhibition, an imaginary 'rehearsal', and a theatre performance in China.

The 'rehearsal' and 'theatre' of *Ho Chi Minh Trail* were staged as the opening of the 8th Shanghai Biennale, which has become a routine platform for the Long March Foundation. Since its first exposure at the Ethan Cohen Gallery in New York City (November 2002), the *Long March* project has been featured in over seventy exhibitions in Japan, Korea, North and Latin America, Europe, Australia and Africa, in addition to many renowned biennials, triennials and art fairs, including the 2008 Sydney Biennale 'Revolution: Forms that Turn', and the 2009 Frieze and Basel art fairs. In accordance with its growing reputation, the Long March Foundation has also changed from a non-profit foundation into a commercial gallery, selling works by all affiliated artists and turning a decent profit. In 2008 and 2009, the Long March Space was elected one of the artworld's 'Power 100' by *Art Review* magazine and has become the largest and most profitable independent art organisation in China.[44] The irony of achieving such success within the system that it ostensibly criticises does not escape the curators. Qiu Zhijie, who dismisses mainstream exhibition channels such as biennales and art fairs as eurocentric and unsuitable for China, has long withdrawn from curatorship, although he remains a featured artist in the gallery.[45] Lu Jie, who is solely in charge of operations, confronts the question with a nice dose of nonchalance and cynicism: he takes pride in the foundation's financial success and claims to be a 'CEO'. On the other hand, he insists that the experimental nature of the project – its ability to reconstruct 'spatial memory' within a local context – will not be harmed by its commercialisation. On the contrary, financial success enables the Long March Space to achieve its artistic ambitions in a country where philanthropy and non-politicised state sponsorship for the arts remain tenuous and unreliable. When asked whether the project might continue to have an impact among the 'mass audience' as its operations moved towards the international and institutionalised arena, Lu Jie responded that the concept of a 'mass audience' might be inherently elitist: anyone, including the artists themselves, could count as part of that 'mass', and the *Long March* attempts to reformulate the historical and visual discourse for

44. The 'Power 100 list' professes to be 'a guide to the general trends and forces that shape the art world'. In 2009, Long March Space is listed at ninety-five, one of only two Chinese artists/art organisations that made the list (the other is Ai Weiwei, listed as number forty-three). It is also worth noting that the Long March Space is the only group project listed in 2009 – all others are individual artists. See the list at http://www.artreview100.com/2009-artreview-power-100/, accessed 27 September 2010 (taken down at the time of publishing).

45. Qiu Zhijie, 'Women zhende xuyao yige shuangnianzhan ma?' ('Do We Really Need a Biennale?'), in *Geiwo yige mianju* (*Give Me a Mask*), Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, Beijing, 2003, pp 204–209

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both a small and the broader audience – an idea that, after all, had already been proposed by Mao.

CONCLUSION

The Communist heritage has many layers. Its utopian vision has invariably turned into totalitarian nightmares, but its initial momentum was undeniably transformative, and its ideals, as both guerrilla radicalism and the milder version of liberal Socialism, continue to provide ideological support for those facing the (real or imagined) threat of imperialism and predatory capitalism. Contemporary art's investigation of its own historicity inevitably coincides with social history at large; in China, where art has been serving nominally Communist politics for decades, such an investigation is a most urgent task.

Avant-garde art in China never evades its Communist heritage; on the contrary, it has drawn profusely from this 'burden or legacy'. Some of these appropriations are meant to commemorate and re-examine personal or collective experiences; some are intended to meet the expectations of the (mostly foreign) market that forever seeks the correct balance between exoticism and familiarity. Some artists, however, search this heritage for an alternative methodology – an alternative to the institutionalised artworld of today, in production as well as in display. This methodology focuses on exploring the communal aspect of art – to connect art with citizens who are normally excluded from the consumption of luxury cultural goods, to experiment with a collective mode of production that eschews the cult of individual authorship, and to create, no matter how fleetingly, an aesthetic utopia where the joy of discovery, expression and creativity is integrated with everyday life. This 'community-building' apparently shares the agenda of relational art, but the Communist legacy it draws from is distinctly Chinese, with the Maoist slogan 'art for the masses' as its ostensible goal. The only way to reach a critical assessment of this highly problematic and mythologised 'people's art' is to re-examine and re-experience it in its original context – or, more accurately, in the modern approximation of such a context, where fragments of material, linguistic and visual memories of the historical moments still survive within the communities. Such shared memories do not endow the residents of the communities with a uniform identity, nor do they give the participating artists an original perspective on history; they only provide loosely grouped raw materials that can be used for a variety of purposes: to investigate the myths and misconceptions of history, to rediscover and revitalise local customs and creative practices, to measure imported as well as 'native' theories against each other and, above all, to enable each participant to step out of his or her habitual mode of existence and productivity. In Jean-Luc Nancy's words, instead of dividing up 'a preexisting generality' – in that case, the supposed totality of the historical Long March – the projects in *Long March* are meant to 'open singularities in their articulations', to expose and trace the limit of each singularity.[46]

The community *LMWVD* has helped to create is far from utopian. Unable to complete their journey as planned, the curators came to deem their experiment a failure.[47] The quality of individual works created on the route also varied greatly. Many works are derivative,

46. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Peter Connor, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, pp 75–76

47. Immediately after the physical journey in 2002, the *LMWVD* curators organised a panel entitled 'Why the *Long March* Plans Failed' in which a number of prominent artists, critics and intellectuals discussed the conceptual as well as executive flaws of the project. A full transcript of the discussion was published on its official website.

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obvious or sloppily conceived (which, given the time frame and physical restrictions, is hardly surprising); many were never fully realised; and among those that attracted more favourable attention in the following years, ownership issues – whether they belong to individual artists or the foundation – have sometimes become points of significant tension. Their communal outreach also became problematic once the artists started collaborating with local governments to facilitate changes in local customs or institutions, such as their attempt to turn paper-cutting into part of the school curriculum in Yan'an. Powerful as such mechanisms are, they employ a top-down approach that deviates from the earlier models of the *LMWVD*. Governmental support can become onerous in the Chinese context, and the artists may end up overwriting the locals' true wishes to serve their own artistic agenda.

Despite all its shortcomings and flaws, *LMWVD* seems to have invented a new model: a truly communal art that – as Roberts has envisioned – focuses on:

> . . . the examination of community, reflection on community, extension of community across various forms and practices, as an engagement with notions of collectivity and democracy *outside* their inherited (capitalist and Socialist) state forms.[48]

Unlike most relational art, communal art can never sever itself from its point of origin without losing its visual and experiential impact, and therefore cannot be reproduced and re-performed when being 'exhibited' in institutional settings. The experiences created are often too interactive and personal to be captured even on video. Unlike performance art, they also lack a strong focal point that can be photographed in a way that conveys visual or sensual power. Even 'being there' does not guarantee participation – one has to come with a set of shared knowledge, memories and experiences that are peculiar to the community. In other words, the existing system of exhibiting, evaluating and distributing art is fundamentally unsuitable for a truly communal art, and the *Long March*'s investigation into the radical heritage of Chinese Communism calls for more ambitious experimentations.

48. Roberts, op cit, p 362

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