

**THE NEW COMMUNE: THE MAKING OF ARTIST COMMUNITIES IN
CONTEMPORARY CHINA**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how artists in contemporary Beijing have been displaced and migrated from the urban centre to its peripheries, transforming marginal spaces into self-organised communities. It introduces the concept of the artist community (艺术家社群, *yishujia shequn*) to describe collective formations that sustain livelihoods outside the formal art establishment through shared practices, resources, and space. Drawing on secondary research, fieldwork, and visual analysis, the study traces how these communities emerge from and adapt to shifting political and economic pressures. Their communal practices offer material and emotional support while serving as platforms for artistic experimentation that engage with issues such as displacement, censorship, and representation. Though independently formed, these communities recall Mao-era people's communes, emerging from artists' needs rather than state mandate—yet still within the reach of surveillance. Attending to the experiences of women artists, the study interrogates internal hierarchies and conceptualises these spaces as “new communes” at the intersection of art, politics, and social life.

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Introduction

Artist community as the dissertation topic

In the winter of 2017, I was informed by a friend that her art studio in the periphery of Beijing had been torn down. This occurred just a year after she had excitedly shown me her new studio, which was her first studio and home. The studio, a converted storage house, was located at the junction of Heiqiao, Jinzhan, and Dongying villages—an area that attracted many emerging artists due to its affordable rent and ample space. Earlier that same year, artist communities in nearby regions had been subject to a series of forced demolitions by local authorities. Artists were given short notice to evacuate and were harassed by teams of security guards, dressed in black, who monitored their activities. Shortly thereafter, essential services such as water and electricity were cut off. My friend and her neighbours had held onto a tenuous hope that their small, relatively unknown community—which flew under the radar, not attracting the same public attention and government scrutiny as more established art districts—might evade the demolitions artist communities have faced in Beijing since 2010.¹ Their hope was extinguished when they received an evacuation notice, giving them less than a month to pack and leave the premises. Many artists in this community, a majority of whom were recent graduates from art academies or universities, had invested their savings into converting village housing to fit their living and working needs. With no compensation provided, some local artists temporarily sought shelter in their family's houses, while others moved to more distant areas, attempting to establish

¹ In the 2010s, a wave of demolitions targeted more than twenty art districts and artist communities in Beijing. For example, Jiangfu Art District—located near the well-known 798 Art Zone in Chaoyang District—faced forced eviction when local authorities sold the land to developers for a luxury seniors villa project. Despite long-term rental agreements, artists were denied compensation and subjected to coercive eviction tactics, including blocked entrances and cut-off utilities. In response, they organised exhibitions and forums advocating for their rights. While their resistance temporarily delayed the demolition, the site was ultimately redeveloped, marking another instance of artist displacement amid Beijing's urban expansion plans. See “Yizuo ‘Chaoyang xincheng’ mie diao 20 ge yishu yuanqu?”一座“朝阳新城”灭掉 20 个艺术园 区? [Does a "New Chaoyang" destroy 20 art districts?], last modified August 14, 2013, <https://www.163.com/fashion/article/969AP2DE00264MK3.html> (accessed December 2, 2024)

new artist communities on the periphery of Beijing. The rest of those without the means to do so were forced to return to their hometowns in despair.

These events, whose impacts I witnessed first-hand, and the widespread phenomena of demolition and displacement deeply unsettled me. They demonstrated the significant challenges and barriers faced by artist communities in maintaining their physical and cultural presence. The displacement of artists has been a persistent issue in art communities in Beijing, since the first evictions thirty years ago in the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village. In 1989, some non-local artists gathered in Yuanmingyuan, a village located west of the centre of Beijing, forming what became known as the first “artist village” in China. Unlike the earlier art groups such as the Stars Art Group (星星画会, *Xingxing Huahui*), formed in 1979, which consisted of amateur Beijingers artists who, while engaged in artistic endeavours, maintained other full-time occupations within the city, the artists in Yuanmingyuan pursued more professionalized artistic careers and had a greater need for physical community, encompassing both living and working spaces. In pursuing their artistic professionalism, they adapted the utopian idea of an artist community—working and living in a secluded space that offered artistic freedom, distanced from the political constraints imposed by the central government. However, this idealistic enclave was short-lived. The Yuanmingyuan Artist Village was forcibly demolished in 1995.

This dissertation examines how artists have been displaced from one location to another, increasingly distant from the urban centre of Beijing, and how they have transformed the peri-urban areas into their studios and communities—ultimately creating their own communes. I map this migration to show the artists’ struggles under varying political and economic circumstances, as well as their efforts to stay together. I discuss how the art they produced (some of which I analyse throughout this dissertation) can be seen as a result of their migratory assemblage of practices, relationships, and spatial movements.

The term “artist community” (艺术家社群, *yishujia shequn*), which I adopted in the title of my dissertation, refers to a community of artists who come together in an effort to sustain their livelihoods outside the formal structures of the art establishment. The notion of community is defined by shared commonalities that may take diverse conceptual and physical forms. This dissertation examines the practices of artist communities where artists live, work, and exhibit together within a shared physical environment. I deliberately chose the term “community” for its

focus on communality, which can take shape in diverse forms of gatherings. Communities can exist both in physical spaces and conceptual alliances. Physically, they are typically defined by geographic areas, such as neighbourhoods or towns. Conceptually, they form around shared ideas, interests, or beliefs, regardless of physical proximity. Both forms of community foster connection, mutual support, and collaboration among their members. In the case of artist communities, their practices of communality provide shared resources for living and working on the periphery of the urban centre, while simultaneously engaging in artistic experiments that address socio-political and aesthetic issues. They produce both individual and collective works sustained by a collective living and recall aspects of the “people’s commune” during the period of Mao Zedong’s leadership in China (1949–1976, commonly referred to as the Mao era). However, they were independently formed and organised—though not necessarily beyond the state’s purview. The artists who chose to organise in these ways constructed new communes for themselves, yet this formation was still subject to surveillance and repression by state authorities. In this regard, I define them as the “new commune”—a collective space where artistic creation, political engagement, and social organisation intersect, reflecting a reimagined sense of community that is both autonomous and constrained by the broader socio-political landscape. This dissertation analyses the evolution of these artist communities and their stories from historical, empirical, and theoretical perspectives. I pay particular attention to women artists’ experiences to address questions of power hierarchy within these communities.

Research focus and scope

This research investigates how artist communities in peri-urban Beijing, beginning in the 1980s, have constituted themselves in relation to the state and the market, both of which impose order and discipline on their positionality. It is crucial to note that the locality of peri-urban Beijing has been continually changed as the city has undergone extensive urban redevelopment over the past decades. Thus, I use the term “peri-urban” to describe the status of artist communities’ locations at the time of their formation, rather than their current spatial relation to the city. This study focuses on several key artist communities that represent different phases of development, including the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village (1989-95), the Songzhuang Artist Village (1994-present), Dashanzi (also later known as the 798 Art Zone, 1995-present), 1005 (2014-17), and

Luoma Lake (2017-22). It is important to note that the peri-urban sites where artist communities built their habitus —understood here as the embodied dispositions and social practices they developed through daily life in these spaces—were originally inhabited by peasants who had become entrepreneurs by renting out the collectively owned land to artist communities.² In this sense, peasants have played a pivotal role in the initial founding of artist communities. I look at how artist communities built their spaces through collective living and art-making, a process of place-making for a new commune which re-defined their identity as an “artist community.”

Central to my dissertation is how the state and the capital transformed artist communities, some by demolition and displacement (i.e. deterritorialization), and others by containment or reframing (i.e. reterritorialization) in the processes of commercialization and gentrification of “art districts.”³ I pay attention to the dynamics of power relations and the hierarchies within artist communities, with a particular focus on gender aspects, which are crucial to understanding the social structure of their new communes. I challenge the idea of artist communities as utopian collectives, as they are often portrayed by involved artists and media. This dissertation critically examines their internal power relations and presents a dialectical view of their organisation. Finally, this dissertation is guided by what I would call the “gap of cognition” in research, which is often caused by the inconsistency of terms and their meanings between Chinese and English in writing the history of contemporary Chinese art. I seek to elucidate the nuances of translation, cultural transmission, or specific historical contexts that inform my understanding of artist communities in Beijing and beyond.

² Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of *habitus* describes the lasting, socially learned tendencies that shape how individuals or groups think, act, and engage within a specific social context. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

³ The discussion of art districts has long been connected to gentrification ever since Richard Florida’s 2002 book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, gained international attention. Florida suggests that creativity has become the key driver of economic growth, surpassing the importance of raw materials or natural resources. For regions to thrive in this new era of creativity, they need to cultivate, attract, and retain talented and inventive individuals who drive innovation, develop technology-driven industries, and fuel economic expansion. Florida refers to these individuals as the “creative class,” a group he believes is essential for promoting cultural and technological advancement. See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

Literature review and contribution of this dissertation

This dissertation examines the contemporary phenomenon of artist communities organised around the idea of the collective by forming a new commune. It builds upon the scholarly works by Gao Minglu, Li Xianting, Wu Hung, and others, who extensively documented the post-Cultural Revolution generation of Chinese artists. They address the practices of artist groups and individual artists of the post-Mao era (1978-present) whose focus was largely centered on individual expression. I seek to contribute to the existing scholarship by locating my research on artist communities within the history of contemporary Chinese art, framing artist communities historically as new communes each taking different paths, pursuing various experiments, and manifesting diverse energies. Instead of focusing on individuals, I emphasize the collective formation of post-revolutionary artist groups. By doing so, I tease out a new phenomenon: artist communities. My analysis, however, is built on the insights provided by existing studies of post-revolutionary artists, as well as theoretical inputs from feminist scholarship. I organise their influence around five *interrelated* approaches: 1) Socio-political context; 2) everyday life; 3) urbanization; 4) gender relations; 5) the gap of cognition; 6) inter-referencing.

1) Socio-political context



Figure 1. Zhao Wenliang, *Sunset in Qianhai*, 1960, 100×100cm, oil on paper.

Gao Minglu's research on the No-Name Art Group (无名画会, *Wuming Huahui*, active from the 1960s to 1980s)⁴ and the '85 New Wave serves as a foundation for my study on Chinese artist communities. Through his documentation and analysis of these art groups and movements, Gao calls for situating and contextualizing Chinese contemporary art and artists within the parameters of Chinese culture and history, rather than adhering to a Western narrative. For example, in *The No Name: A History of A Self-exiled Avant-garde* (2006), Gao pointed out the No-Name's persistent commitment to depicting natural landscapes and how this is often misinterpreted through a Western Modernist lens, associated with movements such as Impressionism. This Euro-centric interpretation tends to overlook the group's intrinsic connection to their Chinese cultural history. Gao argues that the artists did not use the depiction of nature to hold a mirror against modernity within an urban society. On the contrary, they intended to explore the beauty of nature in depth, particularly its "antisocial factors" (an example of such a position can be seen in Zhao Wenliang's series of oil-on-paper outdoor sketches depicting the scenery of parks in Beijing. See Figure 1). Their gaze upon nature emerges as a reflection of their (self-) exile from society and social movements, rendering both their perspective and subject matter deeply political.⁵ His use of the term "avant-garde" indicates the influence of individuality, and of Western art history's tropes more broadly, but Chinese history recognizes retreat from society as a form of critique of or resistance to state power.

Gao was responsible for introducing the term "avant-garde" to Chinese art history in the late 1980s, in conjunction with an exhibition held in February 1989 to mark the contemporaneity of Chinese art movements.⁶ The notion of "avant-garde" was adopted "for convenience," with full awareness that the Chinese situation might not be compatible with Western context.⁷ The

⁴ Gao even suggested that the activities of the No-Name artists can be traced back to the 1950s and stretched to the 2000s. See Gao Minglu, *Wuming: Yige beiju qianwei de lishi* 无名: 一个悲剧前卫的历史 [The No Name: A History of A Self-exiled Avant-garde] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue shubanshe, 2006), 13-14.

⁵ Ibid, 21.

⁶ For a document on the debates around Chinese "avant-garde movement," see Gao Minglu et al., *Zhongguo dandai meishu shi, 1985-1986* 中国当代美术史, 1985-1986 [A history of contemporary Chinese art] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1991).

⁷ See Julie F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, "The Avant-Garde's Challenge to Official Art," in *Urban Space in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in post-Mao*

Chinese “avant-garde movement” nevertheless was internationally oriented and influenced by Western bourgeois Liberalism, but in China, as Andrews and Gao pointed out, it involved “occasional political dissidence.”⁸ The Chinese avant-garde movement played a role in challenging “the power and aesthetics of a self-perpetuating official establishment,” which has led Andrews and Gao to conclude that it must be understood as a resistance against “the power structure of the Chinese art world.”⁹ It thus was “less an assault on the (Chinese) art world from without, than an effort to change its direction from within.”¹⁰ Andrews and Gao localized the avant-garde movement as the “third style” or the third leg of a Chinese tripod, which developed in the context of “the conflict between the old and new traditions and in a situation of suppression.”¹¹

In this dissertation, I adopt Gao’s approach to artist communities by foregrounding the socio-political contexts of their time. For the avant-garde movement of the 1980s, the individual pursuit of artistic integrity was a central value, epitomized by the No Name artists. In contrast, contemporary artist communities are organising their identities around a sense of collectivity, forming new territories for their practices in peri-urban Beijing—communes that help them survive the challenges of the present day.

2) Everyday life

The second approach I bring to my analysis relates to how everyday life in artist communities shapes the artworks produced in them. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (2010), edited by Wu Hung, collects more than four hundred pages of first-hand, primary documents about contemporary Chinese art, artists, and exhibitions.¹² The volume provides researchers a glimpse into the Chinese art world at present. The articles and writings from this book have

China, ed. Deborah Davis, Richard Krauss, Barry Naughton and Elizabeth Perry (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1995), 222.

⁸ Andrews and Gao, *ibid* 222.

⁹ *Ibid*, 223.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 222.

¹¹ The first leg was the “traditional Chinese painting” developed from ancient literati painting and the second leg was the “realist styles” derived from revolutionary artistic tradition. Andrews and Gao, *ibid.*, 223.

¹² Wu Hung, ed, *Contemporary Chinese art: primary documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

enriched my research with invaluable insights. Wu's other book, *Rong Rong's East Village* (2014), is a careful documentation of Dong Cun Artist Village, also known as Beijing East Village.¹³ Alongside artist Rong Rong's photographs of Dong Cun and its artist residents, the book incorporates Rong Rong's diaries and Wu's collection of essays on the artist village and its artists, documenting the rise and fall of Dong Cun and how the artists' everyday lives are implicated in the village's history. *Rong Rong's East Village* exemplifies how documentation and analysis of an artist community can respond to its unique context: it focuses on how everyday life in the village community shaped the artists' works.



Figure 2. Rong Rong, *East Village 1994 No.1*, 1994, 107×161 cm, photograph.

The depiction of everyday life in Dong Cun in *Rong Rong's East Village* significantly informed my field research on Beijing's artist communities and influenced its trajectory. In particular, Wu's accounts of Ma Liuming and Zhang Huan's performances—*65 Kilogram* and *Fen Ma Liuming's Lunch* in June 1993—along with their aftermaths, complements and expands upon Rong Rong's own recollections. Shortly after Ma's nude drag performance on June 12, Rong Rong, Zhang Huan, and two other Dong Cun artists spontaneously decided to have dinner outside the village. This coincidental outing spared them from being arrested at Ma's place just ten minutes later when the police arrived. In a letter to his sister, written soon after the performances, Rong Rong recounted how he had gone into hiding, entrusting a friend with the

¹³ Wu Hung, *Rong Rong de Dong Cun* 荣荣的东村 [Rong Rong's East Village] (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2013).

film from his camera documenting the events, while the other three artists fled to Inner Mongolia. “I’m thinking about my place in Dong Cun, but I do not dare to return,” he wrote.¹⁴ The book’s narrative is told by two storytellers across time—Wu in 2003 and Rong Rong in 1993—woven together through first-hand accounts of performances, art historical analysis, and everyday moments marked by coincidence, humour, human connection, and emotion.

The storytelling in *Rong Rong’s East Village* deepened my interest in exploring the role of everyday life within artist communities, as it reveals how artistic practices and communality are embedded in social interactions, chance encounters, and shared experiences, rather than existing in isolation. This perspective has shaped my approach to researching Beijing’s artist communities, prompting me to pay closer attention to informal gatherings, personal relationships, and mundane routines that often go unrecorded in conventional art historical narratives. Just as Wu and Rong Rong illustrate the precarious yet vibrant existence of Dong Cun artists, my own fieldwork has sought to capture the lived realities of contemporary artist communities—their struggles, collaborations, and the ways they navigate shifting political and cultural landscapes.

3) Urbanization

The work of Meiqin Wang has led me to understand the forces of urbanization and their associations with demolition, displacement, and reconstruction in shaping Chinese art. Meiqin Wang’s 2015 book, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, investigates the relationship between the ongoing urbanization in China and twenty-first century Chinese art.¹⁵ In the sections titled “Urbanization Deconstructed” and “Conceptualizing Demolition,” Wang looks at artists’ responses to urban construction projects characterized by reckless speed and consumerism, born of the ambitious collaboration between developers and local governments. Wang’s work provides invaluable insight into the intertwined relationship between urban development in contemporary China and the creative practices and struggles of artists. Through her writings on the *Chaile Travel Agency*, Wang contrasts the national rhetoric of urbanization and its impacts on people’s lives.¹⁶ My research on the artist community and its formation and survival draws on

¹⁴ Ibid, 116-117.

¹⁵ Meiqin Wang, *Urbanization and contemporary Chinese art* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁶ Ibid, 76-104.

Wang's perspective on Chinese urbanization and art. Her interdisciplinary and bottom-up perspective on Chinese urbanization and its impacts on Chinese art and artists have helped me develop a way of understanding artist communities' responses to urban change.

The works of Gao, Wu, and Wang have provided a wealth of materials for considering the specificity of contemporary Chinese art (Gao), the diversity of individual artists' practices emanating from their everyday lives (Wu), and the forces of urbanization within which they are embedded (Wang). Drawing on their insights, I seek to study areas that have not been covered—the new artist communities that have emerged in peri-urban Beijing from the 1980s to the present. I ask the following set of questions: How did these communities form? What kind of new communes do their members seek to create? To what socio-political conditions do they respond and what might be the limits of their interventions? How do artists position themselves within the state's promotion of creative industries? How can artist communities maintain a critical stance toward both state and market forces that influence their existence? And how does gender hierarchy shape the structure of the new commune, which is supposedly based on the idea of collectivity and equality? Central to these questions are issues of power relations involving the state and the capital as well as class and gender.

4) Gender relations

Problematizing the assumption “women are not capable of achieving greatness,” liberal feminist art historian Linda Nochlin asked “Why have there been no great women artists?” Her answer to that question has shifted issues of gender inequality from the false assumption that great artists are the matter of individual genius, to a recognition of the constructed nature of social institutions.¹⁷ While I draw on various strands of feminist thought (including Griselda Pollock's Marxist-inflected analysis and Rozsika Parker's psychoanalytic-Marxist critique), the questions I raise in this dissertation are specific to the Chinese context.¹⁸ In China (not unlike in the West),

¹⁷ Linda Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” *The feminism and visual culture reader* (1971): 229-233.

¹⁸ See Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988); Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1986). Both works apply a Marxist-informed critique to gender and artistic labour in Western art institutions, and while foundational, they do not account for the legacies of state-sponsored art education, socialist gender policies, and collective art practices in China.

most of the internationally renowned contemporary artists are men. Chinese women artists are underrepresented compared to their male counterparts. Given the marginalization of women in the Chinese art world, I examine how the collective nature of the commune, which suppresses individualism, might reinforce traditional gender roles. Additionally, I explore how this collectivism may either silence women artists or limit their opportunities for visibility and recognition.

In this dissertation, therefore I seek to recognize the contributions of Chinese women artists and situate their predicaments within the highly male-dominated field of contemporary Chinese art. By exploring their experiences and artistic outputs, I seek to shed light on the complexities of their positions and the systemic barriers they face. To contextualise my study, I also draw on local thinkers including Li Xiaojiang¹⁹ and Zhang Nian,²⁰ who work in feminism in the Chinese context. Their approaches depart from Western liberal and Marxist feminist paradigms by emphasising historically situated, culturally specific analyses of gender, and by critically engaging with the legacy of socialist policies and Confucian patriarchy in shaping Chinese women's lives and cultural production.

I also turn to Dai Jin Hua's feminist film theory, most notably her work *After The Post-Cold War: The Future of Chinese History* (2018). In this book, Dai positions contemporary China within a post-Cold War context, reflecting on how the Cold War era shaped China's identity as a major socialist nation in opposition to the West. Dai analyses Chinese films created in light of the misalignment between the disjointed temporality of China Time and global

¹⁹ Li Xiaojiang (李小江) was a pioneering scholar who established women's studies as a significant field in post-Mao China. Her 1983 work, *In Search of Eve*, spurred a surge of interest in the discipline, leading her to found China's first Women's Studies Research Centre and a museum on women's cultural anthropology. Rooted in Marxist theory, Li developed an independent feminist perspective that diverged from the state's discourse on women's liberation. She distanced herself from Western feminism, arguing that China's political and cultural context required a distinct approach to women's issues.

²⁰ Zhang Nian (张念) is a feminist philosopher and professor at the School of Humanities, Tongji University, known as a leading figure in contemporary gender studies in China. Her research, rooted in psychoanalysis and philosophy, focuses on critical studies of female desire, women's conditions, sexual differences, and ethical-political action. She has published several influential works, including *Gender Politics and the State: On the Liberation of Chinese Women* (2014), *The Wound of Gender and the Pain of Existence: From Hegel to Psychoanalysis* (2018), and *Arendt: The Origins of Politics* (2022).

historical time.²¹ I also draw on Sasha Su-ling Welland's approach to gender issues within contemporary Chinese art history. Welland's book, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art* discusses the 2002 *Long March Project* which triggered my interest in investigating the gap of cognition between languages and cultural contexts. Specifically, I am interested in how the interchangeable use of the term "feminist art" (*nüxing zhuyi yishu*) and "women's art" (*nüxing yishu*) in the project blurred the boundaries of feminist discourse.²² The works of Chinese feminists bring to my attention the "gap of cognition" between feminist art in China and the West.

5) Gap of cognition

I use the term "gap of cognition" to attend to possible gaps and absences in translating Western perspectives to Chinese contexts. Gao Minglu has also pointed out this gap, noting that it often leads to two tendencies in the study of Chinese women's art: first, an attempt to employ general feminist theory to Chinese women's art as a part of the development of international feminist community, and second, an analysis based solely on personal experience, often resulting in a binary understanding of women's art by distinguishing it from men's art. To avoid such tendencies and to address these gaps, it is important to recognize that works produced by Chinese women artists should be understood as complex reactions to their social and cultural contexts, rather than regarded as having a singular pursuit or meaning. Wu Hung's book, *Feminine Space in Chinese Painting* (2018), while focused on traditional ink paintings, offers valuable insights into a way of investigating female subjects and femininity in Chinese art. His book (which focuses on dynastic time) provides a useful approach for analyzing the gender-related themes in a contemporary context.²³

Throughout my study, I am inspired by Western theories of socially engaged art, which can apply to explorations of how artist communities in China foster collaborative, dynamic relationships that amplify grassroots voices, thereby creating connections across artistic, literary, musical, and social movements, and moving beyond art history's conventional disciplinary

²¹ Jinhua Dai, *After the post-cold war: The future of Chinese history* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 3-4.

²² Sasha Su-Ling, Welland. *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 162-163.

²³ Gao, *ibid*, 23.

boundaries. While ideas from Claire Bishop and Grant Kester on collaboration and community offer valuable insights, this dissertation adopts a narrative style that centres on the unique ways Chinese artist communities engage with their own sociopolitical context.²⁴

Furthermore, my narrative departs from the more traditional, often linear structure of Chinese art history, which I find limiting. Likened to a spider web of interconnected stories and individuals, my approach emphasizes the fluid and intersecting relationships within and across artist communities, spanning different locations, times, disciplines, and movements. I consider the artist community as an essential entry point for examining the engagement between people and the intersections of their stories. This reciprocal dynamic between people and stories is central to the narrative of my dissertation.

6) Inter-referencing

This dissertation prioritizes analysis of contemporary Chinese art in the Chinese context. I follow the example set by Arif Dirlik in his account of global anarchism in the context of Chinese history. Dirlik's work on Chinese anarchism locates contemporary Chinese artists' spirits of resistance in the nexus of local and global histories. In his 1989 book, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, Dirlik argues that the discourse of Chinese anarchism was shaped by both external and internal forces. He suggests that Chinese anarchism was a part of the burgeoning revolutionary discourse emerging from China's encounter with the modern world. Dirlik underscores how ideas travel from time to time and from one place to another, not without frictions and adaptations. Studies have also shown that the past entanglements of Chinese socialism and anarchism (as indicated by Dirlik) were shaped by memories of the Paris Commune, which influenced the establishment of communes and revolutionary committees in China, such as the Shanghai Commune in 1967.²⁵ According to Tings Chak, in the first commemoration of the 55th anniversary of the Paris Commune in 1926 in Guangzhou,²⁶ Mao

²⁴ See Claire Bishop, "The social turn: Collaboration and its discontents," *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (2005): 178; Grant Kester, *Conversation pieces: Community and communication in modern art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

²⁵ Hongsheng Jiang, "The Paris Commune in Shanghai: The Masses, the State, and Dynamics of 'Continuous Revolution,'" PhD dissertation, Duke University Press, 2010.

²⁶ Tings Chak, "Guangzhou 1927: The Paris Commune of the East," *The Funambulist* 34, 2021. <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/the-paris-commune-and-the-world/guangzhou-1927-the-paris-commune-of-the-east> (accessed March 9, 2025)

Zedong referred to the Paris Commune as a “bright flower” whereas the October Revolution was the “happy fruit.”²⁷ Chak also noted that in the following year in 1927, a series of uprisings inspired by the Paris Commune took place in Shanghai, then Nanchang and Hunan, and finally Guangzhou, the latest which was remembered as the “Guangzhou Commune” or the “Paris Commune of the East.”²⁸

Here we see the historical inter-referencing of ideas and movements across time and space in the formation of political communities. Duanfang Lu indicates that in the 1950s, “two historical commune experiments were cited by CCP leaders: that is the Paris Commune of 1871 and the peasants commune in the 1930s.”²⁹ But according to Lu, Mao drew upon China’s late Qing reformer, Kang Youwei, who characterized the commune as *da* (大, “grand”) and *gong* (公, “public”). For Mao, it was important that the commune movement become an articulation of a centralized party-state, as he saw the lack of “a revolutionary party” as one the reasons for the Paris Commune’s ultimate defeat.³⁰ While visions of decentralized, autonomous, communalistic democracy which took hold among revolutionaries in Europe inspired Chinese revolutionaries, they also helped produce a distinctive political community for China in the form of a party-state framework.

The inter-referencing approach to Chinese history is inspiring.³¹ Although this dissertation does not directly focus on the discourses of anarchism and the history of revolutionaries in China, it draws on their legacies of resistance, reflecting aspects of the struggle for survival of artist communities in peri-urban Beijing.

²⁷ Chak, *ibid.*

²⁸ Chal, *ibid.*

²⁹ Duanfang Lu, “Third World Modernism: Utopia, Modernity, and the People's Commune in China,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 60, no. 3 (2007): 42.

³⁰ Alain Badiou, “The Paris Commune: Marx, Mao, Tomorrow,” *Monthly Review* 73, no. 1 (2021): 60-68.

³¹ Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* (1989), The Anarchist Library, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/arif-dirlik-anarchism-in-the-chinese-revolution> (accessed October 20, 2024)

Conceptual framework

In this dissertation, I use spatial concepts of territorialization— *detrterritorialization*, *reterritorialization* and *the unterritorialized*—to refer to the production of space and identity, and to examine the formation and transformation of the artist community.

The concepts of detrterritorialization and reterritorialization were first introduced in the 1970s by French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.³² They explored how capitalism, power, and identity are interconnected in a dynamic process of territorialization, detrterritorialization, and reterritorialization of social structures. Their concepts of territoriality have been embraced by various disciplines, including geography, anthropology, international relations, and linguistics.

I am inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of territory and milieu which they saw as always undergoing a dynamic and unstable processes (associated with capitalism). Deleuze and Guattari discussed about how a *terre*, a raw space or expanse of land, ground, earth, could be subjected to coding or appropriation as a "territory" (by some owner) to create a community. Yet such territorialization is profoundly unstable, as it could be uncoded or decoded a process which they called "detrterritorialization." When a space is detrterritorialized, the codes that bind the community are thrown out, but bodies are kept Inside" to be re-governed by a new ordering. The recoding of bodies is what Deleuz and Guattari called "reterritorialization," a re-coding of a community to achieve new stability based on new interests or priorities (set by the state).³³

Following Deleuze and Guattari, I use terms such as detrterritorialization and reterritorialization to coordinate my understanding of a process that leads to an establishment of an order organised around a shared relation to a territory from which a culture is invented and developed. A commune, in my case, is constituted through territoriality to become a distinctive locale, populated by artist communities. It constitutes a habitual relation, and practices that are both imaginary and pragmatic. In the context of China, the state plays a major role in detrterritorialization and reterritorialization which as this dissertation will show is increasingly determined by the flow of capital.

³² Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault, *Anti-Oedipus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

³³ For a discussion on territory, see Deleuze and Guattari (1991): Chapter 11; and their definitions of detrterritorialization: 61, 141-44, 453-56. Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

I show in Chapters One and Two the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, respectively. In chapter three I discuss a community of artists that have been left out by “reterritorialization.” They are deterritorialized by the process of reterritorialization. I call them the “unterritorialized” because they were made “outsiders” by reterritorialization. They are similar to deterritorialized subjects, but the “unterritorialized” are the displaced, the refugees who find no accommodation in the reterritorialized art districts. As far as I know, Deleuze and Guattari did not discuss bodies that could not be re-ordered. I seek to contribute to their discussion on territoriality by considering the “unterritorialized.” I discuss how they constitute a self-governed artist community in and through a struggle to territorialize by inventing a “new commune” through placemaking, among others.

In this dissertation, I use “-territorialization” when discussing artist communities and their capacity to alter physical spaces and cultural horizons. I use “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” when exploring the ways in which the artist communities are subjected to external forces. As indicated above, deterritorialization signifies the undoing of established structures, the removal of control from preexisting spatial or social frameworks, and the subsequent disruption of previously stable connections. Simultaneously, reterritorialization occurs, restoring what has been undone but incorporating new forms of power.³⁴

First, in a narrow sense, deterritorialization in the context of Chinese art communities refers to the displacement of artists resulting from the rapid urbanization of Beijing, which has led to their self-relocation to peri-urban areas of the city that were historically inhabited by rural peasants. The artist community’s self-territorialization thus was enabled by the peasants who accommodated them by repurposing their land and housing. Eventually, both the artists and the peasants were deterritorialized by the forces of urbanization.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid; Barney Warf, ed, *Encyclopedia of Geography* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010).

³⁵ For discussion on the topic, see Alexander Day, “The end of the peasant? New rural reconstruction in China,” *Boundary* 235, no. 2 (2008): 49–73; Ran Liu et al., “Peasants’ counterplots against the state monopoly of the rural urbanization process: urban villages and ‘small property housing’ in Beijing, China,” *Environment and Planning A* 44, no. 5 (2012): 1219–1240.

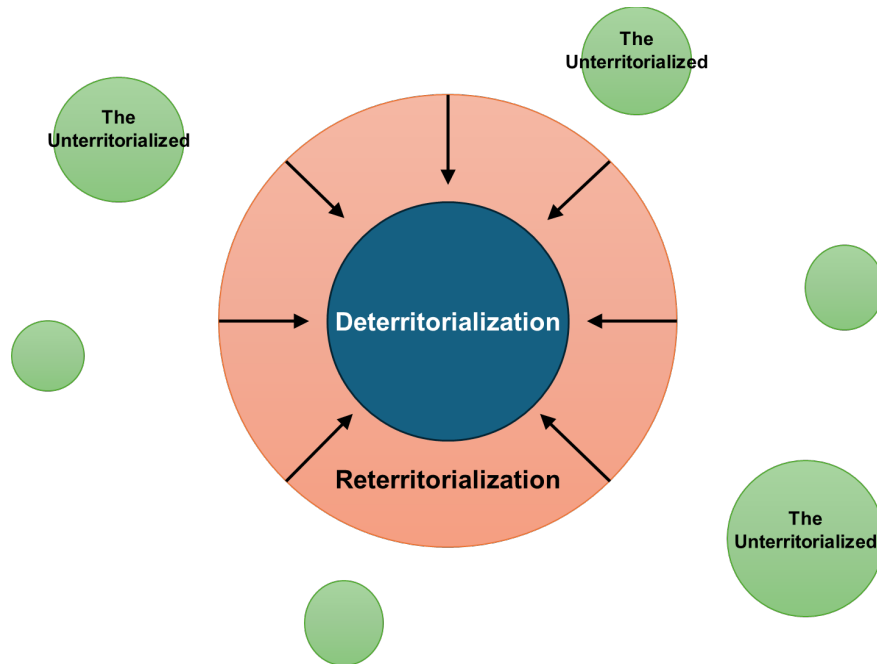


Figure 3. Diagram of conceptual framework.

The Yuanmingyuan Artist Village (1989-95) is a notable example of this type of displacement, with its origin and activities carefully documented by art critic and resident Li Xianting, documentary director Zhao Liang, and photographers Xu Zhiwei and Zhang Xiaojun. The Yuanmingyuan artists relocated to the urban periphery and settled in farmhouses made available by peasant entrepreneurs. It was at this margin that early artist community groups were established, developing into numerous scattered communities of artists around peri-urban Beijing. This dissertation aims to narrate this story through the concept of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, as it offers a coherent framework for understanding artists' experiences of displacement and marginality, as well as the new configurations around which subsequent artist communities organised their identities and practices.

The second concept I engage with, reterritorialization, essentially involves the state's production of space for artists communities to work and live. In the 2000s the state, in collaboration with private developers, constructed or gentrified enclaves for artists as part of a drive to promote the creative industries. In 2006, recognizing the significance of artist communities and the economic gains they produced for local businesses and governments, the central government announced its plan to integrate art and culture into the five-year national plan for development. Through the concept of reterritorialization, I examine how the state and

business groups perceived art from the perspective of marketing the creative industries. Underlying the commercialization of art and artist communities are issues related to control, surveillance, tourism, and gentrification. I analyse the case of the 798 Art Zone and *Warm Winter Initiative* to explore the development of such districts, which involved local governments, informal landowners, and developers.³⁶ There have been some insightful studies on commercialized art districts in Beijing, including one by Elizabeth Brunner and Jennifer Currier from the perspectives of cultural industry and urbanization. This dissertation, however, focuses on artists' reflections on their experiences within these districts, and contrasts them to the narratives surrounding the phenomenon of reterritorialization as represented in mass media.

I use a third concept, the unterritorialized, to address the excluded and the uncontainable (by the definition of the state and capital) and those who resisted the reterritorialization of their bodies and artistic works. Dispersed among the villages of Heiqiao, Jinzhan, and Donying in peri-urban Beijing, these groups of artist communities offer a distinct condition for understanding the contemporary Chinese art scene, raising questions of antagonism, dissensus, and democracy—values that developed particularly among the unterritorialized. This raises important questions: How do unterritorialized communities define themselves in relation to other artist communities? How do they give meaning to their experiences in contrast to the reterritorialized art districts? The investigation of the unterritorialized is primarily based on first-hand materials gathered during my field trip to Beijing in 2022.

These three spatial concepts serve as the framework for this research. However, I acknowledge that there are overlapping and grey areas among them. Artist communities navigate these ideas in a variety of ways and spaces, often occupying multiple spaces simultaneously. Through these spatial concepts, I seek to consider the art created by members of artist communities and their stylistic and relational interconnections. I explore how modes of inhabiting space—such as displacement, precarity, and collective -territorialization—inform aesthetic strategies, including ephemeral, dematerialized, or socially embedded practices. While

³⁶ Since the 2000s, increased censorship over media and publication has significantly limited the availability of first-hand documentation on artist communities. As a result, much of these materials have not been systematically studied by scholars. Instead, these accounts often existed online in the form of blogs and posts across various platforms.

such tendencies have global parallels, my analysis centres on their emergence and meaning within the specific socio-political context of contemporary China.

Place/Beijing: The old centre and the new periphery

The Beijing they loved was the ‘cosmopolitan and modern’ Beijing, and the Beijing they criticized was the backward, crowded, lower-class Beijing.

– Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories*³⁷

Beijing indeed is at the center of China’s rapid economic transformation, but it is also a symbol of political power. Beijing is also a place central to the history of artist communities. This section serves to situate the artist community as a phenomenon and a practice in the city of Beijing, particularly in the ongoing process of urban (re)construction. Over the past century, Beijing has transformed from an imperial capital into a political centre that emphasizes military and industrial power, evolving into an international metropolis that aspires to embody the idea of “soft power.”³⁸

The symbolic function of urban planning, directed by official ideologies, has shaped the development of Chinese cities throughout history. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial capital of Beijing was designed to represent the mandate of heaven, thereby legitimizing the emperors’ rule. In the Qing dynasty, the populace of Beijing was stratified by social status, with “rightful” spaces and neighborhoods allocated to various groups: Manchu and Han, imperial family and servants, officials and commoners. These delineated spaces physically embodied the ideal imperial hierarchy and polity. As a result, the Outer City, inhabited by commoners, was largely neglected—in contrast with the Inner City, which housed the affluent and powerful. With the arrival of the Republic period after the overthrow of the Qing emperor, it became imperative that the spatial order of Beijing reflect modern values of equality and the rights of the people.

³⁷ Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

³⁸ Wanfa Zhang, “Has Beijing Started to Bare Its Teeth? China’s Tapping of Soft Power Revisited,” *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 4 (2012): 615–639.

However, as noted by Madeleine Yue Dong, the city government, under the guise of promoting “the public interest,” often acted as a self-appointed agent of modernization. It claimed that its construction projects served the public good, representing the principles of autonomous administration and resident participation.”³⁹ Throughout the socialist and post-socialist periods, this modality grew unceasingly. The city government’s modernization agenda served both old and new purposes in urban planning, symbolically legitimating state power and formally promoting the state’s economic policies as well as development-driven governance.

In the discussion of urban planning in twentieth-century Beijing, the Xuanwu Gate Project (1929–34) often comes up as one of the best-documented and well-studied cases. During the early Republic, the ideal of “the public interest” was tested against the competing efforts of various forces vying for material space. In the process of negotiating these forces, the state monopolized information and resources, consolidating its control by declaring its authority and promoting a grand vision for the public good.

Residents’ petitions were ignored, and they were forced to vacate their residences and businesses to facilitate the reconstruction of the Xuanwu Gate area. In the 1960s, under Chinese communist rule, the Beijing municipal government made the decision to further dismantle the main gate tower of the Xuanwu Gate to accommodate the construction of an underground railway. Architect and architectural historian Liang Sicheng, along with other professionals and scholars, vocally opposed this demolition, calling for the protection and preservation of historical architecture. However, their efforts were unsuccessful, as the government prioritized rapid development and socialist modernization.⁴⁰

The fate of Xuanwu Gate symbolizes the beginning of the city’s century-long determination to modernize the ancient capital through urban reconstruction. Modernization and urbanization have become part of a unified narrative that ostensibly advocates for the public good. However, the voices of the individuals living in this land have often been marginalized, leaving them unheard and with no place to go, a reality that resonates strongly today.

Artist communities in Beijing began to grow in a similar climate in the 1980s, as artists sought companionship and a sense of communality to survive and make themselves heard in post-Cultural Revolution China. Through their gathering and resistance to the mainstream art

³⁹ Ibid, 55-56.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 65-66.

scene, a new commune was formed. In these artist communities, artists from diverse disciplines—encompassing various artistic forms, genres, and media—collaborated, exhibited and often lived together in the same neighbourhoods while still maintaining their identities as individual artists. The formation of art communities not only provided artists with affordable housing and opportunities for mutual learning from various disciplines but also empowered them to engage in collective actions aimed at self-identification as artists and correcting social injustice.

Artist community: The peri-urban generation

The growth of artist communities, envisioned as utopian spaces of creativity and mutual support, has coincided with urbanization, which entails demolition and displacement. Notably, artist communities in Beijing have been displaced from Yuanmingyuan to Dashanzi and Songzhuang in the 1990s, and from Heiqiao to multiple temporary locations in 2017. While these movements may be described as a form of migration, I understand them more accurately as processes of -territorialization, where artists are uprooted from previous spatial, institutional, and symbolic footholds and must renegotiate their presence at the city's periphery.⁴¹ These relocations have given rise to clusters of art communes in areas that were formerly occupied by farmers' houses or factories in the peripheries of Beijing.⁴²

At the beginning, artist communities suffered from prejudice. They were subjected to strict public security measures enforced by law, which categorized artists in Yuanmingyuan Artist Village (1989-1995) as troublesome *sanwu* ("three-no") people lacking identification papers, valid residence permits, and reliable sources of income. According to art critic Yang Wei, many artists leaving Yuanmingyuan found themselves in a precarious situation, pursued by police and described as "fishes barely escaped the net." This ongoing struggle led to the eventual

⁴¹ For contemporary discussions of art and migration in the global context, see T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁴² In the case of Dashanzi, 798 Art Zone, it was factories rather than village housings.

revival of their community in Songzhuang, a village in Tong Zhou, Beijing around 1994-95.⁴³ Concurrently, another group of artists began relocating to Dashanzi, now known as the 798 Art Zone (1995-present), a former industrial complex where bright, spacious factories were turned into art studios.

However, a change took place in China's economic development policy in the early 2000s. Both central and local governments in China adopted the global trend of promoting the creative industries.⁴⁴ Creative districts, like Shanghai's M50 and Beijing's 798 Art Zone, developed because of both spontaneous artistic initiatives and urban policies aimed at achieving broader goals of economic development, city renewal, and increased attractiveness. Their developments, while initially fostering artistic communities, have increasingly become sites of gentrification, where the tension between artistic, commercial, and tourist elements complicates their evolution. This dynamic demonstrates that China's adoption of creative industries discourse in the early 2000s was not just a response to global trends, but also a strategic effort by the government to reframe urban spaces, leveraging creativity to drive economic growth while reshaping cultural landscapes.⁴⁵

This shift was driven by economic and political imperatives to move away from labour-intensive manufacturing industries while simultaneously projecting a modernized socialist image of China, leveraging creativity to attract capital. Since then, numerous sectors including advertising, architecture, art, crafts, design, fashion, film, music, performing arts, publishing and software have moved to the forefront of economic growth justifying urban development and gentrification.⁴⁶ In response to government-led demolitions—prompted by the disbandment of

⁴³ Yang Wei, “Wo suo jingli de Yuanmingyuan Huajia Cun he Songzhuang” 我所亲历的圆明园画家村和宋庄 [Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and Songzhuang I experienced], *Tian Ya Zazhi* 天涯杂志(2017).

⁴⁴ Also known as the “cultural industries” or “creative economy” in some cases. These terms differentiate or overlap with each other depending on contexts.

⁴⁵ Basile Michel, “Art, creativity, and tourism in creative quarters: trajectory and tensions of the cultural scene of the M50 art district in Shanghai,” *Cybergeog: European Journal of Geography* (2021); Jennifer Currier, “Art and power in the new China: An exploration of Beijing's 798 district and its implications for contemporary urbanism,” *Town Planning Review* 79, no. 2-3 (2008): 237-265.

⁴⁶ UNESCO, “Creative Industries,” accessed March 6, 2021, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/creativity/creative-industries/>.

state-owned enterprises to which these complexes belonged—local governments began to recognize the economic and political potential of the creative industries to redefine the urban landscape of peri-urban Beijing. Local governments in Beijing therefore endorsed art districts, which have become an important part of their promotion of the creative industries. In this new political climate, earlier artist communities such as the 798 Art Zone and Songzhuang Artist Village have become largely commercialized and transformed into tourist destinations.

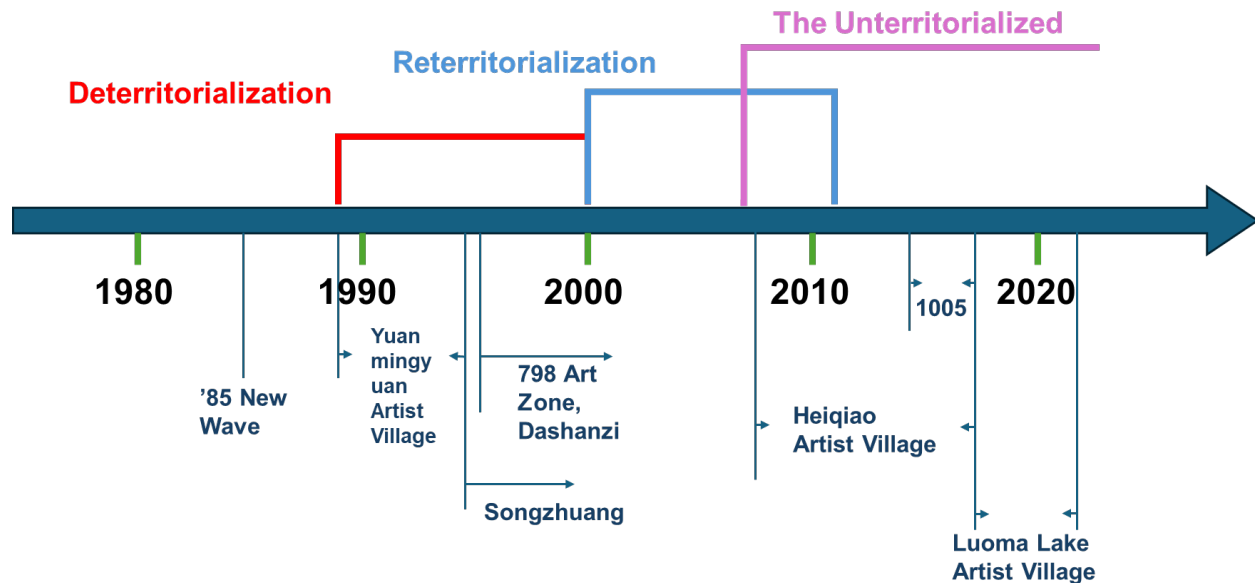


Figure 4. Timeline of selected artist communities in Beijing.

During the early 2000s, foreign investment, international publicity, and the voices of local communities played pivotal roles in the external sustainability of Beijing's art districts. Internally, these art districts underwent significant transformation. I identify this process as reterritorialization, where governments reframed independent artists and their communities as “creative industries” while benefiting from their presence.

While the prosperity of these art districts has provided artists in Beijing with access to affordable housing, studio spaces, collaborative opportunities, and greater visibility, it has also led to gentrification. For example, the significant rent hikes in areas like Dazhanzi (home to the 798 Art Zone) have displaced younger and less established artists—the *unterritorialized*—from their communities. Despite the challenges, artist communities in Beijing continue to survive and thrive. This resilience raises important questions about the factors contributing to their persistence and growth in the face of ongoing commercialization and displacement.

Hua Xiaocheng⁴⁷'s *Light and Scenery* (光景, 2022. Figure 5) reflects on his personal experience within the artist community of Luoma Lake, Beijing, and its demolition during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sculptural installation features a massive metal box, broken in half to reveal an interior adorned with shattered, glowing mirrors. It embodies the precarious existence of contemporary artists, particularly those in rapidly transforming urban environments. The work tells a story of how artist communities often occupy a state of transience, vanishing and reemerging in response to the expanding urban landscape. This cyclical process, in which spaces are persistently lost and reclaimed, is encapsulated in the piece itself. The weathered iron plates, subjected to constant pressure and fragmentation, serve as metaphors for the external forces that shape artists' environments. Despite the palpable tension between the external pressures and the internal resilience, the mirrored surfaces emit a subtle yet persistent light, symbolizing the enduring energy and creative vitality of artists, even when separated from one another. The monumental scale of the piece further amplifies this dynamic, evoking a sense of memorialization and serving as a tribute to the histories and lived experiences of the artist's memories of the valuable time spent with friends and peers at Luoma Lake.⁴⁸

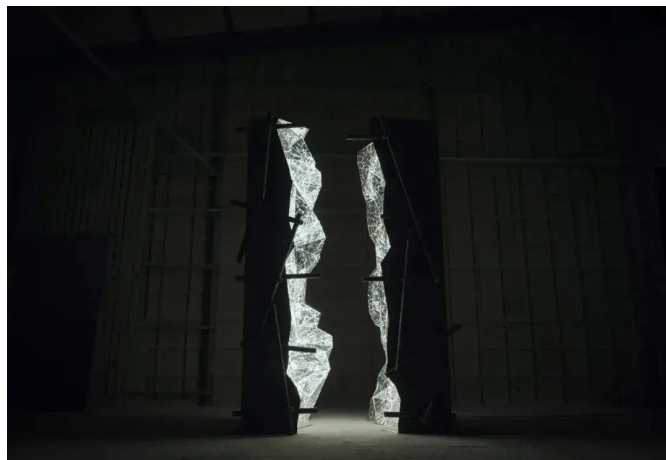


Figure 5. Hua Xiaocheng, *Light and Scenery*, 2022, sculpture. Courtesy of the artist.

The cases of dislocation I discuss throughout this dissertation point to the dilemma faced by urban artist communities. While Chinese contemporary artists in art communities are given

⁴⁷ The artist's first name has been anonymized in this study to protect his identity, as their discussions during the interview on land use involved politically sensitive topics.

⁴⁸ Hua Xiaocheng, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.

greater opportunities for recognition and survival in an increasingly competitive art world, individual artists and the integrity of the community as a whole can also suffer significant setbacks when their work is co-opted as part of an urban renewal effort. For instance, when artists draw their inspiration from social and political issues, their practices may be perceived to challenge state political power. The demolition and eviction caused by gentrification forces artists out of the spaces they have deliberately cultivated and preserved. This paradox underscores the precarious position of artists, who must navigate the tension between increased visibility and opportunity on one hand, and the risk of displacement and political scrutiny on the other. This situation parallels similar cases in the West, notably in lower Manhattan, New York, during the 1980s.⁴⁹ However, the indifference and brutality exhibited by authorities in contemporary China towards marginalized communities in the process of displacement underscores the problematic exercise of power and its structural implications.

The emergence of contemporary artists and the new commune

In this dissertation, I suggest that the artist community of the post-Mao era reenacted some aspects of the people's commune of the socialist era, particularly, their approach to collectivism. An important distinction, however, is that artist communities were formed by academically trained professional artists who were displaced to peri-urban Beijing by the urbanization efforts of the new, market-oriented economy. Displaced in the post-Mao remaking of Beijing, contemporary artist communities sought survival in the peri-urban area by playing out the idea of collectivism. In the peri-urban area, they remade art as a form of grassroots resistance. This process has given rise to a new commune. In the following section, I provide a short history of how marginalized artist communities responded to the socialist state's support for "amateur art."

Under socialist revolution, China underwent massive urban transformation and collectivization of land and labour in the countryside. Both the city and the countryside were arenas for experimenting with radical social and cultural change, but the countryside was the

⁴⁹ In her influential essay "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City" (1988), Rosalyn Deutsche examines how public art projects intersected with the processes of gentrification and urban redevelopment in New York City. She challenges economic determinist views of gentrification, emphasizing its political and cultural dimensions, and connects these processes to a broader "revanchist" reclaiming of urban space by wealthier interests.

primary site for the establishment of “people’s communes.” Introduced in 1958, following the pre-existing programmes of land reform, people’s communes introduced a series of cooperative practices based on mutual support and resource-pooling to achieve collective work relations. One of the main aims was to “free” women from the confinement of work in the domestic sphere. Throughout the socialist era, this initiative to create a new rural community produced uneven economic results, but it profoundly shaped social and cultural life, including art practices. In her work on “amateur art” in the people’s commune, Angie Baeckel indicates that in the Maoist countryside, art practices were transformed from the highly specialized domain to the sphere of everyday life accessible to and practicable by the commoners. During this socialist period, amateur art practices were promoted to challenge the hierarchy and class privilege of male urban artists. The Maoist countryside was seen as both the embodiment of real life and the source of creative force for the future.⁵⁰

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was a socio-political movement launched by Mao Zedong towards the end of his rule, intended to strengthen communist ideology by eliminating capitalist and traditional influences. It aimed to overhaul cultural, educational, and political systems but it resulted in widespread disorder, persecution of perceived adversaries, and major disruptions to daily life. The movement involved the mobilization of youth, particularly the Red Guards, and led to significant turmoil, loss of life, and enduring effects on Chinese society and culture.⁵¹ In the 1960s, a group of artists in Beijing formed the first art group in the history of Chinese contemporary art, later known as the “No-Name Painting Group.” During the Cultural Revolution, this group evolved from a landscape sketching club into an art group that held the first self-organised exhibition in the history of Chinese contemporary art. The No-Name artists became disillusioned with prevailing artistic ideologies that enforced strict political narratives during the Cultural Revolution. Their collective yearning for freedom led them to explore natural landscapes as a form of rebellion against the grandiose themes of revolutionary art. In contrast to the socialist realism and propagandistic imagery of state-sanctioned work, their paintings embraced a muted palette, subtle brushwork, and everyday

⁵⁰ Angie Baeckel, “Reimagining Revolutionary Labor in the People’s Commune: Amateurism and Social Reproduction in the Maoist Countryside,” PhD diss., (University of Michigan, 2020), 84-92.

⁵¹ Yongyi Song, “Chronology of mass killings during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76),” *Online encyclopedia of mass violence* (2011), 315-327.

subject matter—trees, rivers, quiet alleys—rendered in plein-air style. This shift emphasized observation and introspection over political didacticism. Private gatherings and underground exhibitions became spaces where they could share their work without fear of censorship or personal repercussions, fostering a sense of community among those marginalized by the then-mainstream art scene. Their group not only offered refuge from ideological constraints but also paved the way for alternative artistic expressions outside the socialist art canon that celebrated individual experiences, marking a significant shift in the artistic landscape of the time.⁵²

In the post-Cultural Revolution China, after Deng Xiaoping (in office from 1978 to 1989) rose to power as the paramount leader of the country, the Chinese Economic Reform, also known domestically as “Reform and Opening-up” (改革开放, *Gaige Kaifang*), began in 1978. This campaign was characterized by “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” a slogan that has since been widely adopted across various fields and disciplines to contextualize Western ideologies and concepts within China. The Reform and Opening-up policy aimed to transition the country from a centrally planned economy to a more market-driven one. “Reform” (改革, *Gaige*) represented effort to decollectivize agriculture, allowing Chinese peasants to sell excess produce, while “Opening-up” (开放, *Kaifang*) referred to the implementation of the Open Door Policy, to attract foreign investment and trade in Special Economic Zones. Additionally, state-owned enterprises were granted greater autonomy and competition, with some even being privatized. These changes introduced market mechanisms for pricing and resource allocation, resulting in rapid economic growth, the lifting of millions of people out of poverty, and the transformation of China into a global economic leader. However, the reforms also brought challenges, including rising income inequality, massive unemployment in industrial sectors, and environmental destruction—issues that set the stage for *detrterritorialization*.⁵³

During this time, three Beijingers poets and artists, Bei Dao, Huang Rui and Ma Desheng, co-founded the literary magazine *Today* (今天, *Jintian*), which soon led to an assembly of versatile artists and writers later known as the Stars Art Group. The art group’s founding was

⁵² Wu, *Contemporary Chinese art: primary documents*, 5.

⁵³ Alok Ray, “The Chinese economic miracle: Lessons to be learnt,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (2002): 3835-3848.

strongly influenced by the pro-democracy movement in China during the post-Cultural Revolution Era, and unlike the No-Name group during the Cultural Revolution, the Stars were eager to present themselves openly and engage the public in their work. The first *Stars Art Exhibition* was held in September 1979, in the park beside the National Art Museum of China (then the National Art Gallery), without government permission. Many artworks, which could be seen as constituting a moment of dissensus—what Jacques Rancière describes as the disruption of the sensible order that defines what can be seen, said, and thought⁵⁴, and which Claire Bishop interprets as a key strategy of politically engaged contemporary art⁵⁵—reflected artists’ experience with the brutality of the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement during the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁶ The exhibition quickly drew attention from the local authorities. Artworks were seized from the exhibition by police and some of the organisers were arrested, which led to a city-wide parade calling for artistic freedom on National Day, October 1, 1979.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12-13.

⁵⁵ See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), especially Introduction and Chapter One.

⁵⁶ Wang Keping, “Xingxing wangshi ‘星星’ 往事” [Past of ‘the Stars’], last modified March 11, 2010, <http://www.shigebao.com/html/articles/shiliao/3313.html> (accessed March 14, 2022)

The “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement” (1968-1978) was a social and political campaign initiated by the Chinese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution. It aimed to send urban youth, especially students, to rural areas to learn from the peasantry and contribute to the country's agricultural development. This movement was seen as a way to “re-educate” youth, reduce urban unemployment, and promote socialist values. However, it also led to the disruption of many young people's education and lives, with long-lasting effects on the cultural and intellectual landscape of China.

⁵⁷ Xu Wenli and Liu Qing et al., “A letter to the people (1979)”, in *Contemporary Chinese art: Primary Documents*, edited by Wu Hung (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 8-10.



Figure 6. Gao Xiaohua, *Why*, 1978, 108×136 cm, oil on canvas. Courtesy of National Art Museum of China.

Parallel to the Stars Art Group's development in the post-Cultural Revolution era, Scar Art and Native Soil Art emerged from Chinese fine art academies. These artists abandoned Socialist Realism and in turn reinstated humanism and what they called "critical realism," drawing inspiration from early twentieth-century Chinese art and literature. The revival of these movements in the artworld went hand-in-hand with literary trends, in the form of Scar Literature and Native Soil Literature.⁵⁸ Gao Xiaohua's oil painting *Why* (为什么, 1978. Figure 6) is an example of Scar Art. It portrays a group of weary Red Guards taking a break during a struggle session, having perpetrated heavy violence and humiliation, and suffered resistance from their targets, all for a meaningless cause. At the centre of the composition, a Red Guard, his head bandaged, gazes directly at the viewer with a look of confusion. It is as if he is asking not just a personal question, but one shared by the artist's contemporaries and people across the country—"Why?" The tight composition, muted tones, and bold brushstrokes create an overwhelming sense of oppression, powerfully rejecting the aesthetic ideals promoted during the Cultural Revolution, particularly the slogan "red, light, and bright" (红, 光, 亮). Artists from the Scar and Native Soil movements, like Gao, challenged the official narratives by taking the stance of critical realism and humanism. These movements were influential, both within and outside of

⁵⁸ Wu, *ibid*, 19.

institutions, and their perspectives on the Cultural Revolution significantly shaped the post-Cultural Revolution era.

With the professionalization of artists and the establishment of art schools and academies, many art groups arose simultaneously in the mid-1980s. The Chinese Avant-Garde emerged in this period (known as the '85 Art New Wave) and avant-gardism thrived across the arts—visual art, cinema, literature, music and dance. As described earlier, while this movement shared certain characteristics with European avant-gardism—such as its rejection of traditional forms and embrace of innovation—it developed within a distinctly Chinese context, shaped by local socio-political conditions. However, this avant-garde movement in China was, in a sense, “jet-lagged.” The generations of artists preceding the Chinese Avant-Garde had been so entrenched in turbulent historical eras that they had not responded to the avant-garde movements that took shape in the West from the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries. As a result, the Chinese Avant-Garde emerged as a delayed, yet inventive, iteration of Western ideas, simultaneously confronting and reinterpreting them within China's unique historical and cultural landscape.⁵⁹

During this time, academically trained emerging artists took the leading role in avant-garde groups. Educated in art schools following a Beaux-Arts-inspired curriculum, these artists were also influenced by imported books on Western art and history. Texts on Modernist movements like Impressionism, Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism offered a stark contrast to Socialist Realism, introducing new techniques and philosophies of individual expression and autonomy. These Western ideas helped shape the Chinese Avant-Garde, inspiring artists to challenge state-sponsored norms and explore more personal, experimental forms of art.⁶⁰ As I described in the first section, The *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, curated by Gao Minglu, took place in 1989 at the National Art Museum of China (then the National Art Gallery) in Beijing. The exhibition is regarded as a watershed moment in the history of contemporary Chinese art. It was the first time that contemporary Chinese art had been hosted in a national exhibiting institution, but it ended prematurely—shut down by the police after artist Xiao Lu fired shots at her installation as a performance.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 101.

⁶⁰ Wu, *ibid*, 51.

⁶¹ Gao, *ibid*, 161-166.



Figure 7. Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, 1989, installation and performance. Courtesy of the artist.

Two weeks later, in June 1989, the Tiananmen Square protest occurred. The student-led, pro-democracy movement started as a demand for political reforms, freedom of speech, and other democratic rights. The demonstrations culminated in a significant gathering at Tiananmen Square, where protesters called for government accountability. From June 3 to 4, the Chinese government imposed martial law and deployed the military to quell the protests, resulting in a violent crackdown that caused many deaths and injuries.⁶² The incident continues to be a sensitive and censored subject in China to this day.

After the Tiananmen Massacre took place, Xiao's gunshots were seen symbolically as its first gunfire. Given the generally pro-democratic sentiments of contemporary Chinese artists—especially after the Tiananmen Massacre—they were once again locked out of the mainstream.⁶³ This sense of exclusion can be traced back to earlier decades, when Chinese artists in the 1960s–80s experimented with various approaches to challenge or co-exist with the world around them and to define their own identities and Chineseness.

It was at this time, after the '85 New Wave, towards the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, that the first generation of artist communities made its appearance in peri-urban Beijing. Artist communities emerged at this historical point: representing the urgency of socio-political issues that went back further since the 1960s. The art groups and art movements discussed in this Introduction provide a background for the birth of the artist community in contemporary China.

⁶² Chun Lin, *The transformation of Chinese socialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 211.

⁶³ Gao, *ibid.*

They drew their energies from China’s revolutionary memories, its trauma, and from new knowledge and trends originating outside of China. Chapter One will investigate these groups and their influences in detail.

Artist	Title	Year	Medium	Movement/Art Group/Artist Community
Zhao Wenliang	<i>Sunset in Qianhai</i>	1960	Oil on paper.	The No-Name
Hua Xiaocheng	<i>Light and Scenery</i>	2022	Sculpture	The Luoma Lake Artist Community
Gao Xiaohua	<i>Why</i>	1978	Oil on canvas	Scar Art
Xiao Lu	<i>Dialogue</i>	1989	Installation and performance	‘85 New Wave

Table 1. Works discussed in Introduction.

Overview of Chapters

This final section of my introductory chapter offers an overview of the dissertation structure, outlining how each chapter is organised and its specific contributions to the research objectives. Each chapter plays a vital role in exploring the topic of artist community in Beijing, delving into various aspects such as socio-political influences, historical context, and artists and artworks. I argue that the contemporary artist community seeks to define its identity around the idea of collectivism, in critical relation to individualism (the latter of which defines both Western and Chinese artists of the immediate post-Mao era.) Ideals and practices of community and collectivism are rooted in Chinese history and culture (mobilized most visibly during the Mao era). This dissertation shows the artist community seeks to reconfigure the idea of community without leaving individuality behind. The reinvention and reconfiguration of community that I discuss in my dissertation highlights artists’ attempts to “return” to community, emphasizing a rejection of individualism while also underlining the contradictions this poses for artists’ identities.

In Chapter One, “Deterritorialization: Artist communities in the peripheries of Beijing from the late 1980s to 1990s,” I discuss the origin of artist communities in Beijing and track how artist communities met deterritorialization at the end of the 1980s. The emergence of artist communities in Beijing went hand-in-hand with statewide urbanization and (re)construction that disrupted peasants’ land and livelihoods, and this chapter explores the peasants’ struggles and solutions to these socio-political issues. Ultimately, the informal sales and rental market created by the peasants that gave birth to artist communities is, to the core, an exercise of peasants’ “illegal rights” to access their share of the urbanization process. This chapter looks into artist communities that have existed on the peripheries of Beijing since the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village in 1989, and the simultaneous rise of artist communities in Songzhuang and Dashanzi around 1996. Many artists rose to stardom from these communities. For example, Fang Lijun’s signature bald avatar was born in Yuanmingyuan, and so was Yue Minjun’s “laughing man” character. The chapter considers their works and the broader movement of Cynical Realism. This chapter introduces the “prototypes” of Chinese artist communities that emerge during this time, and their roots in socio-political and financial struggles.

Chapter Two, “Reterritorialization: The Rise of Art Districts in the 2000s and 2010s,” examines art districts in China, not limited to Beijing. In recent decades, the establishment of art districts across China became a popular phenomenon, offering opportunities for central and local governments to gain economic success through tourism. Categorized by reterritorialization, formalized artist-communities-turned-art-districts represent the effort from both state and capital to contain organic artist communities, often in the name of supporting the creative industries. The most successful and one of the earliest examples of such an attempt is Dashanzi, also known as the 798 Art Zone, in Beijing. Beginning as an artists-organised living and working space, and ultimately becoming a publicly funded commercial space that aims to boost the tourist economy, the art district (and similar spaces) have had a great impact on Chinese art and artists. Capital-led real estate developments designed for artists and artist communities (which often involve local authorities at different levels), play an important part in creating hierarchies within and among artist communities, which eventually separate the unterritorialized from the rest. I will discuss artists’ anti-demolition campaigns including the *Warm Winter Initiative*, and most notably, Huang Rui’s *Chai-na/China* series. During the

campaign protest, Huang, dressed in Yin-yang, performed *Chai-na/China*, using satire to address the violent evictions and the forces behind the violence. This chapter emphasizes artists' voices and resistance to the exposure and scrutiny placed on their artist communities. I discuss how this exposure is a double-edged sword, which potentially comes with fame and success, but also censorship and gentrification.

Chapter Three, "Formation, Fortune, and Fate of the Unterritorialized: The 1005," focuses on artist communities in the Huantie region of Chaoyang district, Beijing. It is based on a field trip and interviews that I conducted in 2021–22. I documented short-lived artist communities in the Huantie region, raising questions concerning the demolition of these communities and its impact on the fate of young, emerging artists. This chapter is centred around one artist community known as "1005" that once sat at the junction of three villages. Upon its brutal and abrupt demolition in 2017, the former residents of 1005, mostly young and emerging artists and artworkers, became unterritorialized. By tracing their individual experiences in the artist community, (living conditions, the organisation of an exhibition, modes of working, etc.), this chapter considers their struggles with hierarchies within the community.

Chapter Four, "Is Gender Territorialized?: Women artists in the community," explores the work of women artists from the Mao era to present, including works by Xiao Shufang, Xiao Lu, and Yu Hong. I question how their individual and collective choices in themes and styles are related not only to Chinese historical context but also to international feminist movements. To position these questions in context, I refer to writings on the depiction of female images and male gazes in ancient Chinese art, to illuminate my discussion about gender roles within artist communities in contemporary China. Examining gendered dynamics in configuring space and producing artwork is crucial to understanding the artist community through its internal power relations. This chapter seeks to challenge the image of the artist community as a utopian gathering of artists by shedding a light on the struggles of women artists as represented by their lives, and the works they produce in artist communities.

"Conclusion," gives an overview of the dissertation. I include discussion of the challenges artist communities faced during and after the global COVID-19 pandemic. I end with a message that since 2020, many artist communities have been in jeopardy. Some of them, such as Luoma Lake, have been razed to the ground, while others, such as Caochangdi, have become vulnerable as their residents and occupants struggle to make ends meet. I outline the limits of this

dissertation and how I would like to approach future work on this subject. I hope nevertheless that this dissertation is sufficient in conveying the situation of Chinese artists today. I hope for the survival and the preservation of their art communities, and that this dissertation supports their struggles by narrating their histories and stories.

Chapter One – Deterritorialization of Peri-urban Beijing: Artist communities in the peripheries of Beijing from late 1980s to 1990s

Chinese peasants, rural urbanization and deterritorialization

Through the transformation of ‘farmers’ into ‘peasants,’ ‘tradition’ into ‘feudalism,’ and ‘customs’ or ‘religion’ into ‘superstition,’ there was invented not only the ‘old society’ that had to be supplanted, but also the basic negative criteria designating a new status group, one held by definition to be incapable of creative and autonomous participation in China’s reconstruction.

– Myron L. Cohen, “Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese ‘Peasant.’”⁶⁴

During the late 1980s and 1990s, the deterritorialization of peri-urban Beijing was a direct consequence of rapid urbanization driven by economic reforms that began under Deng Xiaoping. These reforms, which started in 1978, marked a pivotal shift in China’s economic structure, transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a more market-oriented one. As urban areas expanded and were rapidly rebuilt to accommodate both domestic migration and foreign investment, lands on the periphery of cities like Beijing also underwent significant transformations. Peri-urban Beijing was reconfigured to meet the needs of the city centre: space for expansion and a labour force to serve the city. In this dissertation, I use the term *deterritorialization* to refer to the displacement of artists by urbanization to the peri-urban areas of the city. Deterritorialization characterizes how artist communities formed in the 1980s and 90s, with artists moving to the urban periphery and settling in farmer’s houses made available by peasant entrepreneurs.

The relationship between the creative class and urban development has been widely debated in discussions on gentrification. For instance, Grodach et al. recognize that artist communities also facilitate gentrification and, in many cases, displace the lower-income residents they once coexisted with. They also indicate that the standard narrative of arts-driven

⁶⁴ Myron L. Cohen, “Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese ‘Peasant,’” *Daedalus* 122, no. 2 (1993): 154.

gentrification is often overly simplistic. They argue that the relationship between the arts, gentrification, and displacement is multifaceted, varying according to different regions, and often depending on the actions of state, public, and private institutions (such as art galleries, educational institutions, markets, and artist-driven organisations) and the types of arts involved.⁶⁵ For example, the artist communities in Beijing I examine in this dissertation were informed not only by artists' desires for community, connection, and market growth, but also by financial pressures and opportunities from owners of vacant farmlands and factories in the urban peripheries. These communities also arose against the backdrop of significant economic reforms transitioning from a planned economy to a market-driven one, which created new opportunities and challenges for both artists and operators of industrial properties and farmlands.

The discussion surrounding the role of artists in this process is further complicated by the many ways artist communities and peri-urban contexts intersect with gentrification. Artists themselves are often motivated by overlapping and sometimes competing factors—some seek affordable spaces to create, some are driven by a desire for artistic expression, some are in pursuit of recognition, and yet others are driven by their engagement with social or political issues. These differing intentions and actions add layers of complexity to the conversation, suggesting that the relationship between artists and gentrification is not one-size-fits-all.

In this chapter, I examine the early artist communities that emerged in Beijing during the 1980s and 1990s, that are the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and the Songzhuang Artist Village.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Carl Grodach, Nicole Foster, and James Murdoch, "Gentrification, displacement and the arts: Untangling the relationship between arts industries and place change," *Urban Studies* 55, no. 4 (2018): 807-825.

⁶⁶ Yuanmingyuan Artist Village was the first, though not the only, artist community of its time. While my current focus is on Yuanmingyuan, it is important to acknowledge that other artist communities also emerged in the 1990s Beijing, each leaving an impact on the history of contemporary Chinese art. Dong Cun, also known as Beijing's East Village, which is often regarded as the birthplace of experimental art in China, is an example. Through Dong Cun photographer Rong Rong's lens, Wu Hung's 2003 book, *Rong Rong's East Village*, carefully documented Dong Cun's history and artists' lives and works. Around 1993, Rong Rong, Zuoxiao Zuzhou, Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Duan Yingmei, and a group of young artists and musicians in their twenties coincidentally came together in Dashan Zhuang, a village at the eastern periphery of Beijing. Taking inspiration from New York's East Village and to echo Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, which is also known as the "West Village," they formed their artist community, the Beijing "East Village," Dong Cun. From 1993 to 1998, this artist community went on to create a series of experimental and performance works, such as *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995) by a group of Dong Cun artists, Zhang Huan and

Focusing on the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, I explore the identity and professionalization of artists, as well as the counterforces from the authorities that led to the disbanding of the community. By examining documentation and analyzing self-organised exhibitions (particularly the *Little Forest Exhibition* in Yuanmingyuan), I highlight the financial and social obstacles faced by the artists, along with their collective efforts to establish their identities and sustain themselves through the art market and international exposure.

The emergence of artist communities in Beijing went hand-in-hand with statewide rural urbanization and (re)construction that challenged peasants' land and livelihood. The informal sales and rental market created by the peasants that gave birth to artist communities is, to the core, an exercise of peasants' "illegal rights" to profit from the urbanization process, as peasants in China are legally restricted from using their farmland for anything other than farming. Many early artist communities, such as Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and Dong Cun Artist Village, were formed and developed into many more scattered communities of artists around peri-urban Beijing, precisely because they were able to access space in the growing informal rental economy led by peasants.

In the rhetoric of modern China, Chinese peasants have been defined as incapable of creativity or autonomy.⁶⁷ However, China is still a largely agrarian country. As of 2021, the number of "agricultural labourers"—in other words, working peasants—was almost 200 million people. The "rural population" was 510 million people, while the number of "registered agrarian *hukou*" stood at 771 million people.⁶⁸ Wen Tiejun, an agricultural economist and a key scholar of the new rural reconstruction movement, initiated a new debate on the rural problems by shifting the focus on economical growth in agricultural production to the conditions of the peasantry. He is known for coining the concept of the "Three Rural Issues", which are peasants, villages and

Rong Rong's *12 square meters* (1994), *Fen Ma Liuming's Lunch* (1994) and many more. Now, the site where Dong Cun once stood is part of Chaoyang Park, and it is bisected by the East 4th Ring City Expressway.

⁶⁷ Cohen, *ibid*.

⁶⁸ "Zhongguo nongmin zhi sheng budao 2 yi? Daduoshu ren dui nongminde sange wujie 中国农民只剩不到 2 亿? 大多数人对农民的三个误解" [There are less than 200 million farmers left in China? Three misunderstandings most people have about farmers,] last modified December 22, 2021, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/GRRU8S1R052100BV.html> (accessed December 2, 2023)

agriculture, opens his article “Centenary Reflections on the Three-Dimensional Problem of Rural China”: “China’s problem is the peasants’ problem; the peasants’ problem is unemployment.”⁶⁹ Wen argues the rural problems lie in surplus labour and peasants’ wellbeing. He argues that rural reconstruction in China will remain linked to the Three Rural Issues, as the country’s largely peasant population bears the burden of radical modernization. This challenge intensifies as traditional society breaks down and cultural values shift. Wen calls for collaboration among peasants, intellectuals, and other social groups to develop alternative development strategies that is while prioritizing equality over economic efficiency. He hopes these efforts will rebuild the peasantry by protecting rural society from incorporation into world capitalist economy.⁷⁰ That is, as Alexander Day points out, “...to reconstruct rural culture and social relationships primarily means to build cooperative and community social relations that transcend the interests of individual household productive units and their mediation by the market.”⁷¹

While Wen and his associates sought to reconstruct the rural to protect peasants against the predatory behaviors of state actors and market forces, in peri-urban Beijing, the shift from agricultural to non-agricultural income has reduced motivation for land conservation. It has also led to a labour outflow and an aging workforce. A recent survey found that 63.8% of those engaged in agricultural labour have an education level below junior high school. Researchers conclude that the agricultural workforce in these areas mainly consists of middle-aged and elderly individuals with lower educational levels. Meanwhile, younger people are leaving to work in manufacturing centres. With the loss of both intellectual and labour resources, many peasants prioritize stability in their farming operations. They tend to rely on experience rather than agricultural technology and are more inclined to follow conventional practices.⁷² Since the mid-1980s, the central government has implemented policies to encourage the market circulation

⁶⁹ Wen Tiejun, “Centenary Reflections on the ‘Three Dimensional Problem’ of Rural China,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 2, no.2 (2001): 287.

⁷⁰ Wen, *ibid*, 287–95.

⁷¹ Alexander Day, “The end of the peasant? New rural reconstruction in China,” *Boundary* 235, no. 2 (2008): 57.

⁷² Zhao Huaifu, Zhang Fengrong, Jiang Guanghui, Xu Yueqin, and Xie Zhidan, “基于农户调查的北京郊区耕地保护困境分析” [Analysis on the predicament of arable land protection in Beijing outskirts based on peasant survey], *Zhongguo Tudi Kexue* 中国土地科学 3 (2008): 32-33.

of land contracting rights. However, research shows that these policies have not achieved the expected results. They were intended to expand agricultural operations, improve labour productivity, and enhance peasants' living standards. Yet, these goals remain largely unmet.⁷³

Since 1998, China's land quota system has restricted peasants from using farmland for non-agricultural purposes. However, scholars argue that informal housing, or "small property housing" (小产权房), provides economic benefits by allowing villagers to manage housing tenure despite legal constraints. This practice is shaped by the dual land system, village autonomy, and shifting market influences, resulting in varying levels of tenure security and housing prices.⁷⁴

In their article, Ran Liu, Tai-Chee Wong, and Shenghe Liu characterize small property housing as "peasants' counterplots against the state monopoly of the rural urbanization process."⁷⁵ Since the late 1980s, modernist reforms have driven rapid urbanization, particularly in peri-urban areas. In Beijing, large amounts of farmland have been seized and converted for urban development to boost economic growth. While market reforms have increased land values, the state, as the primary landowner, has retained most of the resulting surplus value, leaving peasants—who only have user rights—with little benefit.⁷⁶

In response, peasants established an informal market for selling and renting housing, both to compensate for their lost income and to meet the demands of Beijing's residents and low-income migrant workers. This unregulated housing market also inadvertently created

⁷³ He Guojun, and Xu Chong, "城郊农户土地流转意愿分析——基于北京郊区 6 村的实证研究" [Analysis of land transfer willingness of rural peasants' households—An study based on 6 Villages in the outskirts of Beijing], *Jingji Kexue* 经济科学 5 (2007): 124.

⁷⁴ Mengzhu Zhang and Pengjun Zhao, "The determinants of informal housing price in Beijing: Village power, informal institutions, and property security," *Cities* (2018): 128-129.

⁷⁵ Ran Liu, Tai-Chee Wong, and Shenghe Liu, "Peasants' counterplots against the state monopoly of the rural urbanization process: urban villages and 'small property housing' in Beijing, China," *Environment and Planning A* 44, no. 5 (2012): 1219-1240.

⁷⁶ "The People's Republic of China practises socialist public ownership of land, namely, ownership by the whole people and collective ownership by the working people. Ownership by the whole people means that the State Council exercises the right of ownership of State-owned land on behalf of the State. No units or individuals may encroach on or transfer land, through buying, selling or other illegal means." *China's Land Administration Law of 1998 (revised version of 2004)*.

opportunities for artists seeking affordable space, drawing them to the peri-urban areas. Taking advantage of these conditions, artists began settling in these areas, leading to the emergence of China's first artist community, Yuanmingyuan Artist Village.

Yuanmingyuan Artist Village in Beijing

We came to Beijing with hope and dreams, but now I panic at the world I see.

– Wen Quan, *The Yuanmingyuan Song*.

During the period between 1989 and 1995, a group of artists from different provinces settled near the Qing Dynasty royal palace and garden, Yuanmingyuan, also known as the Old Summer Palace, on the western outskirts of Beijing, and formed a grassroots artist community. In Modern Chinese history, Yuanmingyuan Artist Village was the earliest known self-formed artist community. More would follow.

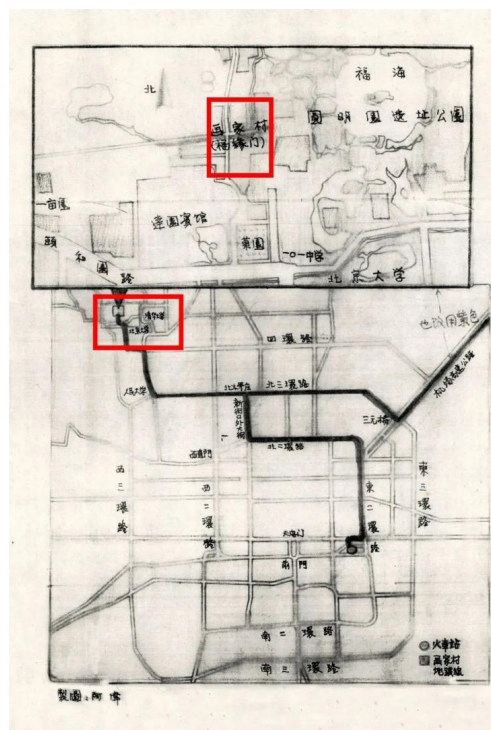


Figure 8. Map of Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, drawn by Xu Zhiwei, date unknown.

Yuanmingyuan is located in the northwest of Beijing, in the Haidian District. Since the mid-1980s, Haidian has evolved from a district on the outskirts of Beijing to becoming one of its thriving urban districts. The district's success is primarily attributed to the electronics industry, which grew as an extension of prestigious institutions such as Peking University, Tsinghua University, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences in the 1980s. This development gave rise to the rapid establishment of Zhongguan Cun, often dubbed as China's Silicon Valley. However, Haidian's transformation also has another dimension.⁷⁷

In the late 1980s, graduates from various art schools in Beijing, including Hua Qing, Zhang Dali, Mou Sen, Gao Bo, Zhang Nian, and Kang Mu, chose to forgo their assigned graduate jobs (毕业生分配). Instead, they settled in the Loudouqiao (娄斗桥) area, forming one of Beijing's earliest groups of "wandering artists (流浪艺术家)". These artists belong to the first generation of university graduates after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Unlike the Stars in the 1970s, who were mostly part-time artists, artists in the 1980s benefited from the (re-)establishment of multiple art academies around the country, professionalizing the arts as a career path. Proximity to Beijing's leading universities in Haidian exposed artists to both domestic and international innovative and progressive ideas, fostering a creative environment that encouraged a dynamic exchange of thoughts. Given the limited access to non-state-sanctioned ideas in China during that era, this closeness to academic institutions played a crucial role in artists' development. The artist residents of Yuanmingyuan proudly referred to their community as "West Village" in China, drawing a comparison to New York's Greenwich Village. Inspired by the art and lifestyle of Western artists, some individuals used their newfound freedom to leave positions in state-owned institutions, opting for freelance work—an unprecedented choice in China during Mao Zedong's era. According to artist Yang Wei, because the Fuyuanmen Village, where they resided, was situated on the ruins of the Qing Court Garden, Yuanmingyuan, and connected seamlessly with Yuanmingyuan Village, people started to call it the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Angela Lin Huang, "Leaving the City: Artist Villages in Beijing," *M/C Journal* 14, no. 4 (2011).

⁷⁸ Huang, *ibid.*



Figure 9. Artists sunbathing in Yuanmingyuan Artist Village. Photograph by Xu Zhiwei, 1992.

The artists used Yuanmingyuan as a base for both artistic creation and daily life, thereby performing place-making for the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village (圆明园画家村). As more “wandering artists” (many of them self-trained) flocked to the area, it attracted media attention, and the name “Yuanmingyuan Artist Village” spread and eventually became a cultural symbol. In an interview with poet and writer He Lu (a former resident of the artist village) he highlighted how the Yuanmingyuan artist village provided artists with a profound sense of belonging that extended beyond mere geographic identification.⁷⁹



Figure 10. A street view of Yuanmingyuan Artist Village. Photograph by Xu Zhiwei, 1995.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

This sense of belonging that the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village provided was crucial for the artists, as it gave them a space where they could communally establish their identities and resist the economic marginalization and social stigmatization they faced as artists in urban society. However, this sense of community also existed within a broader context of isolation—while the artist village provided a crucial sense of community for its residents, the conditions in which these artists operated were far from ideal. They had limited sources of external information in their fields of practice and were largely cut off from institutional support. The lack of an established art market in China further compounded their challenges, forcing them to rely heavily on instinct and resourcefulness—both in their artistic practice and daily lives.

While some of the Yuanmingyuan artists were trained in universities, and many benefitted from proximity to educational institutions, they saw themselves as part of a grassroots community, distinct from more traditional, academy-trained artists. This distinction was not only ideological but also social, as they viewed professors from prestigious institutions such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) and the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University (formerly the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts), with a sense of disdain. In return, these academic figures held a similar attitude towards the Yuanmingyuan artists, dismissing them as individuals gathered for life, not art. This tension reveals a broader generational and institutional clash—one in which younger artists, many of whom were recent graduates or dropouts, rejected the hierarchical, medium-specific values of their art school training in favor of collective experimentation and self-organisation. Their critiques, often embedded in both their practices and their living arrangements, marked an implicit challenge to the authority of their teachers and the institutions they represented, reflecting a desire to redefine what counted as legitimate artistic labor and where it should take place.

During that period, they were stigmatized as *mangliu* (盲流) due to their lack of stable employment, and the absence of household registration (*hukou*) in Beijing. The term, usually derogatory, literally means “blind flow” and can be roughly translated as “vagabonds” in English. In a general sense, it refers to a group of people who migrate or move without clear direction or purpose, often driven by external factors. It can also be used to describe a movement of people that lacks organisation. Originally an usually derogatory expression in Northern China, the term *mangliu* was later adopted by the government in modern China to refer to illegal migration, particularly to major cities, and was used in official documents, demonstrating

underlying prejudice towards people without homes or jobs. In the case of the Yuanmingyuan artists, *mangliu* both described their social and legal status in the eyes of the general public. As China didn't have a formal labour market until the 1980s, and by the early 1990s, university graduates still depended on state allocations, working as freelance artists was unusual and taboo. As full-time freelancers, the Yuanmingyuan artists didn't have solid income, and were unregistered Beijing residents in the hukou system.⁸⁰ Without the Temporary Residence Permits issued by the police, their status was illegal.

Numerous challenges emerged as the Yuanmingyuan artist community expanded. The artists' expressions and behaviors were considered too extreme for acceptance in an area dominated by political institutions and government activity, where conservative values and priorities were often dominant. Local law enforcement regarded them as troublemakers, and their interest in and interactions with the Western world were viewed as a sensitive matter by the government. In 1995, the government issued an abrupt order to close the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, effectively bringing an end to the community. This event remains largely minimized in official narratives. According to local authorities, the closure was primarily attributed to the artists' stigmatized reputation. Residents of the artist community were characterized by their long hair, alcohol consumption, and relationships with female students from nearby universities, behaviors that eventually attracted public security attention and led to government intervention and the village's closure.⁸¹

In the following section, I use the film documentary *Farewell to Yuanmingyuan* (1995), directed by Zhao Liang to provide an insider's perspective on the story of the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village. What is significant about Zhao's documentary is the countering of the often-derogatory tone of official narratives. It starts with a conversation among the director Zhao, artist

⁸⁰ In accordance with China's hukou system, every citizen must register in a single place of permanent residence. The hukou status of an individual determines their entitlements and eligibility for social welfare, as well as various services such as public education and housing, within a designated administrative unit.

⁸¹ These depictions circulated not only through bureaucratic channels but also in local media coverage, which often portrayed the artists as bohemian outsiders or even social threats. The press sensationalized their lifestyles, reinforcing public anxieties about youth, sexuality, and intellectual nonconformity. This atmosphere of moral panic, combined with growing pressure to "clean up" the area near a major historical site, provided justification for the government's intervention and the eventual demolition of the village.

Xu Ruotao, and painter Lao Guo, who adopted “Yi Ling” as his artist’s name, and was also known as the “village mayor.” In Xu’s Yuanmingyuan home and studio, he describes a recent police raid of the village. Xu recalls how shortly before June 4th, 1995, the Anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre, dozens of policemen came into the artist village, arguably trying to deter the artists from gathering and protesting. Unlike the raids that had happened around the same time in the previous years, this year the police asked them to move out. Most of the residents left town in June and returned later. However, a new rule about temporary residence permits (*zanzhu zheng*, 暂住证) went into effect in the next month, giving the police a justification for more raids. On an administrative level, the permit was designed for migrant workers without hukou in the city they work in. According to Xu, the policemen who raided their village were the same people who had sold the artists their original, under-the-table permits. Moreover, during the raids, the police requested to check their permits, and if they showed the documents to the police, they confiscated them.

Xu laughs: “The cops make you pay for your temporary residence permit, then they take it away!” and Guo adds, “more money for them!” Guo also describes regular “hassles” from law enforcement, specifically citing his experience trying to obtain a temporary residence permit as early as 1990, when the officer rejected his request because he “didn’t like Guo’s face.” The documentary highlights the disjunction between official policies and the lived realities of those affected. Through personal anecdotes and the director’s insider perspective, the film underscores the systemic nature of state control, not only through administrative barriers like temporary residence permits but also through blatant exploitation by law enforcement. The sarcastic remarks from the artists about corrupt police practices reveal both the absurdity of the system and the artists’ resilience in navigating these hostile environments.

Artist Liu Hui joins their conversation to share his far worse experience of being taken from the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and placed in a detention centre. Recalling his time in detention with palpable fear, Liu described the dehumanizing conditions and the revolving cycle of arrests and repatriations—a few hundred people who were jailed with him had been repatriated to their hometowns, and others were sent to work camps. As soon as they were gone, a new batch was brought in. “The wardens weren’t happy, either. I heard them complaining, ‘Why the fuck are they sending me these people? What the hell are we supposed to do with them?’ See, they are the ones who had to feed them,” Liu points out, “The only reason they

arrest you is so you will come back and tell the others.”⁸² His account reflects the state's harsh treatment of those deemed undesirable, using imprisonment not only to punish but also to send a message of control. The wardens' complaints about their duties, combined with Liu's insight into the purpose of the arrests, reveal the underlying strategy: to intimidate and deter others, ensuring compliance through fear and coercion.

Poet He Lu also describes in the documentary how he was later arrested and placed in a detention center after police raided his Yuanmingyuan home one night. On his first day, with other Yuanmingyuan artists detained there, he performed for the other prisoners by reciting one of his love poems: “Sapling shivers at the flight of birds / My heart quivers when I think of you / Dainty girl, you are the biggest diamond in the world...” According to He, the first day was in a way “exciting,” as it was a new place filled with new people. It wasn’t until the second morning, when they were woken by the sound of whips, that He realized it was more akin to a “concentration camp.” He witnessed guards and enforcers repeatedly whipping people and stealing belongings, while those serving food deliberately poured soup on the ground and forced detainees to eat it. He explains that the hatchet men and food servers were in fact fellow inmates, trusted by the authorities and given power over their fellow prisoners. “Use a fool to cure a fool, and an inmate to punish inmates,” He remarks. After a few days of hardship, He bribed a guard with thirty yuan (while onboard the train sending him back to his hometown) and managed to escape back to Beijing. Looking back on his experience, He acknowledges the fame that the

⁸² *Farewell to Yuanmingyuan*, directed by Zhao Liang, Beijing: Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, 1995, film. *Farewell to Yuanmingyuan* (告别圆明园, sometimes referred to as *Farewell, Yuanmingyuan*) is a powerful documentary capturing the final days of Beijing’s Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, China’s first spontaneous grassroots artist village. Filmed in 1995 and finished editing in 2006, it reflects on a pivotal moment in China’s contemporary art history. Founded in 1989 near the ruins of the Old Summer Palace, the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village became a sanctuary for painters, poets, and musicians seeking creative freedom outside the constraints of state control. It was a rare space of artistic experimentation and self-expression in Socialist China. However, in the summer of 1995, citing “security concerns,” Beijing authorities launched a crackdown, conducting raids, making arrests, and ultimately dismantling the community. By late autumn, the artists had been forced out, and the dream of the artist village had come to an end. Through intimate footage and firsthand accounts, *Farewell to Yuanmingyuan* preserves the memory of this brief yet extraordinary period. Zhao Liang’s documentary is not only a record of a lost community but also a meditation on artistic resilience, state power, and the fragile nature of creative autonomy in a rapidly changing China. The film is presented by Three Shadows Photography Art Centre (三影堂摄影艺术中心).

Yuanmingyuan Artist Village had gained but emphasizes the constant threat that loomed over the artists. He expresses that despite their growing recognition, the danger of being targeted or suppressed remained ever-present, proving that they were always vulnerable to being taken down without warning.⁸³

He's incident, while harrowing, served as a critical moment in the development of the artist community. The artists' experiences of incarceration were as a reminder of the instability that artists, especially those outside state-sanctioned structures, have faced in China. The statements about the conditions in the detention center—marked by both brutality and survival—underscore the tension between creative freedom and governmental control. The performance of He's poem, for instance, illustrates how these artists, even in dire circumstances, sought to assert their identity and resist through creative expression. As a documentary, the film not only preserves these testimonies but actively contributes to a broader redefinition of the artist's role in Chinese society. By offering a rare visual and narrative platform for artists who challenge state ideologies, it contrasts with both official portrayals of artists as cultural functionaries and with romanticized depictions found in some global art discourse. This dissertation engages with the documentary as both testimony and cultural artifact—one that foregrounds how artists resist erasure by making themselves visible, audible, and collectively remembered. By exploring these conversations and statements, I aim to illuminate the broader implications of their struggle: it was not merely about art but about survival, autonomy, and the right to exist in a rapidly changing society.

It was a witch hunt, and as unfortunate as the Yuanmingyuan artists were, many of them became vocal about their experiences, especially as the artist village gained international recognition. Their stories reached wider audiences, shedding light on the oppressive tactics used

⁸³ Ibid. Compared to Liu Hui, He Lu's story also reflected that detention centres, and perhaps other untitled lockups, were acting upon the issues of overflowing inmates. Because they were extremely short of hands, they started using inmates to share guards' responsibilities, and power—not commonly done in detention centres or lockups other than official prisons, because they would receive no payment and it would not reduce their time there. The turnaround time was shorter, too, arguably because they needed to have new people coming in quickly, due to the rapid *mangliu* "hunting" movement all over town. Police would approach people on the street, and if their accent did not sound local and they did not have proper documentation to stay in Beijing, they could be easily arrested and put in one of these detention centres or lockups. He recalled that one of his inmates lost his identification while on a business trip in Beijing and ended up spending days in the detention centre while his identification was being remade.

by the state. However, many individuals who faced similar stigmatization did not have the same platform to voice their struggles. In this transitional period when China was becoming a free market economy, many workers in new professions (itinerant vendors, temporary workers, and traders who moved between cities) faced significant prejudice. These individuals were often treated as criminals by local authorities and the general public, despite national policies that promoted economic mobility. Like those labelled as *mangliu*, they faced stigma that marked them as dangerous and disrespectable. This situation underscores the general confusion and broader social inequities that persisted during this time of economic and political transition.⁸⁴ It was, and still remains, a privilege to be heard.

In this context, one must also consider the waste of public resources in institutions like detention centers, where the government's use of state apparatus not only inflicted harm on individuals but also squandered taxpayer money. The resources allocated to detain and monitor these so-called "illegal migrants" were disproportionately directed at already-marginalized groups, many of whom had no means of advocacy. The very infrastructure that was supposed to protect citizens was being used to suppress their expression and criminalize those without social or political power. This misuse of public funds in an effort to maintain control speaks to the broader issue of resource allocation in authoritarian systems, where the prioritization of surveillance and punishment over meaningful support or rehabilitation only perpetuates cycles of social injustice.

Towards the end of the documentary, on the eve of their eviction, Lao Guo sits down with the director and reflects on how many artists in the village, including himself, believed the police were simply following orders. To this day, the identity of those who ordered the eviction and the reasons behind the mass arrests remain unknown. Guo also discusses how the structure of the artist village fostered a burgeoning (micro) art market, which not only benefited emerging

⁸⁴ According to scholar Qiao Shan, the policies around *mangliu* were first introduced in the 1950s, which dealt with job and food shortage in big cities when there was an influx of population from villages. In the 1990s, these policies became largely bendable by local law enforcement as a way to clean out migrants and anyone they saw as a threat without proper prosecution. In the 2010s, the movement which claimed to clear "low-end population" in Beijing followed their steps. Qiao Shan, "Cong quanzhi dao zhizhi: 20 shiji 50 niandai de 'mangliu' zhengce" 从劝止到制止:20 世纪 50 年代的“盲流”政策 [From dissuading to retraining: Policy towards blind Inflow in the 1950's], *Lanzhou Xuekan* 兰州学刊, 12 (2017):16-25.

artists but also contributed to the local economy. Through their gatherings, collective exhibitions, and activities, the village attracted both domestic and international attention, bringing visitors and economic vitality to the area.⁸⁵

1) Sample of works: Cynical resistance

Many artists from Yuanmingyuan rose to stardom, Fang Lijun among them. In 1985, when Fang Lijun entered CAFA, it was a time of cultural criticism and the influx of Western modern thoughts. The art world saw the vigorous emergence of the 85 Art New Wave Movement, which was characterized by extensive borrowing from Western modern art. After 1989, Fang Lijun increasingly used his bald-headed appearance as a distinctive symbol of mischievous humor. Through the playful and mundane expressions of characters in his works, whether they be daydreaming, facing away with the back of the head visible, or yawning, Fang conveys a sense of meaninglessness. The combination of the bald head with these meaningless expressions generates a rebellious and mocking undertone that ridicules and dissolves existing systems of meaning. Art historian Li Xianting discusses Fang and his style in his article “Fang Lijun and Cynical Realism.”⁸⁶



Figure 11. Fang Lijun, *Series 2-Number 2*, 1992, 150×300 cm, oil on canvas.

⁸⁵ Zhao, *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Li Xianting, “Fang Lijun yu Wanle Xianshizhuyi 方力钧与玩世写实主义” [Fang Lijun and Cynical Realism], *Yishujie 艺术界* 1 (1997): 50-52.



Figure 12. Fang Lijun in his studio in Yuanmingyuan. Photograph by Xu Zhiwei, 1993.

Li describes how Fang's cynical realism emphasizes a brushstroke-free treatment, maintaining an emotionless and neutral sense in the artwork. Li suggests that boredom and mischief are external expressions, while Fang Lijun's motives lie in the sensations and concerns about the physical and psychological states of human existence. While Fang's style expresses calmness and indifference, highlighting an atmosphere of "absence," Li also points out that this atmosphere of "absence" is Fang Lijun's continuous and critical expression of his own struggle in life—not a view of himself as a third-party observer.⁸⁷ In a similar manner to Chinese philosopher and linguist Lin Yutang's novels, such as *Moment in Peking* (1939), Fang's works not only serve as narratives but also illustrate the impact of the environment on individual lives and artistic creation. Lin believes that artistic creation is not just an expression of personal emotions but also a profound observation and reflection of the external environment.⁸⁸ The environmental description in Lin's novels is not merely a backdrop but also a reflection of the characters' inner worlds and social realities. Likewise, Fang's cynical realist artworks featuring his self-portrait characters are reflections of boredom and mischief, with an underlying sense of "absence," corresponding with realities of his life in Yuanmingyuan.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living: The Noble Art of Leaving Things Undone* (London: Duckworth Books, 2020).



Figure 13. Yue Minjun in his Yuanmingyuan Studio. Photograph by Xu Zhiwei, 1993.

Often discussed side by side with Fang Lijun, and also a former Yuanmingyuan artist, Yue Mingjun started his “laughing man” character in Yuanmingyuan as well. *Execution* is a 1995 painting by Yue, made in the artist village. It is a striking and disconcerting artwork that employs satire to explore themes of violence, conformity, and political oppression. The painting’s mood is simultaneously darkly humorous and profoundly unsettling. On the left, it depicts a line of figures, each with an exaggerated grin, facing execution. Their hands are tied behind them and they face forward, all sporting the same wide, unnerving smile, which starkly contrasts with the seriousness of their fate. On the right side of the painting, another line of figures is depicted as if holding guns directed at the figures on the left, though their hands are empty. The artist explains, “In my painting, they’re pretending to hold guns, as if playing a game.”⁸⁹ A figure on the far right with one hand on his chest and the other at his waist, directly references a similar pose in Manet’s *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico (four fragments)* (1867), where the figure is seen cocking a gun. The arrangement of these figures in a row creates a sense of sameness and repetition, underscoring the concepts of mass conformity and dehumanization. This artwork can be seen as a commentary on political repression and the erosion of individuality, with the forced smiles reflecting a critique of conformist pressures and the absurdity of Chinese communist political ideologies.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Yuan, “‘Execution’ artist rejects Tiananmen label,” last modified October 11, 2007, <https://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/10/11/china.artist/index.html#cnnSTCText> (accessed December 2, 2023)

The painting elicits a feeling of discomfort and irony—the contrast between the figures' cheerful expressions and the grim execution scenario creates a striking and thought-provoking effect, encouraging the audience to grasp the nature of authority and power. The execution scenario, coupled with the smile of the victims, serves as a critique of how authority demands conformity and imposes a false sense of unity through dehumanization. The artist, in turn, plays with these power dynamics by creating a visual contradiction—a smile in the face of death—that mocks the idea of submission to authority. Through satire and irony, Yue challenges the dominance of political power and presents a subtle form of resistance, suggesting that art can both expose and destabilize the way authority manipulates human behavior and thought. The figure with the pose resembling Manet's painting adds a layer of historical irony, implying the cyclical nature of violence and power across time, further complicating the relationship between political repression and the artist's role in critiquing it.

The artwork drew inspiration from the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre of 1989, but the artist clarified that it should not be interpreted as a depiction of the events. Yue stated: "I want the audience not to think of one thing or one place or one event. The whole world is the background. As I said, the viewer should not link this painting to Tiananmen. But Tiananmen is the catalyst for conceiving this painting."⁹⁰



Figure 14. Yue Minjun, *Execution*, 1995, 150 × 300 cm, oil on canvas.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

In a 2007 interview, Yue also explained that through this painting, he was trying to express his confusion over what he saw.⁹¹ While the artist most likely intentionally self-censored here and created ambiguity about the painting's connection to the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the "invisible guns" held by the executioners in the painting also suggest the presence of brutal force and extreme power, elsewhere and everywhere. Though the red wall and yellow tiles in the background suggest the gate of the former imperial palace, the display of raw power upon commoners (with or without actual guns) was also actively experienced and observed by the artist in the place he was living at that moment: Yuanmingyuan.

Since the boom of contemporary Chinese art on the domestic market in the early 2000s, Chinese artists, like Yue, embraced certain levels of ambiguity in their works, leaving ample room for audience interpretation. The self-censorship arguably earned them more personal safety, artistic freedom, and of course, access to the domestic and/or international art market. With contemporary Chinese art gaining prominence but lacking a developed art market in China, an important question arises: How did these emerging artists present their work, especially considering that formal institutions had excluded them following the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition? The Yuanmingyuan artists provide their answers through their self-organised exhibitions, most notably, the *Little Forest Exhibition*.

2) The Little Forest Exhibition (1992)

After a surge of artists arrived and settled in Yuanmingyuan Artist Village in 1990, the question of creating exhibition opportunities soon arose. In response to the *mangliu* stigma and their exclusion from mainstream art institutions, and recognizing the growing interest of the international art market in contemporary Chinese art, the artists created their own exhibition opportunities. Their ultimate goal was to sell their works and secure their livelihood.

The first attempt to market the artworks by the Yuanmingyuan artists happened in December of 1991. According to photographer Zhang Xiaojun, they held an exhibition of their works at Dayuan Hotel near Yuanmingyuan, marking the first collective appearance of the Yuanmingyuan artists.⁹² Later that same month, in Fuyuanmen Village (which later became the

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² It is worth noting that Dayuan Hotel is a government agency unit and belongs to the foreign affairs reception department. The hotel primarily handles the hosting of small meetings

Yuanmingyuan Artist Village), Studio 149 organised an exhibition in their studio space, which consisted of works by Wei Ye, Morgan, Lu Lin, Hong Bo, and Huan Zi. In February 1992, The *Yuanmingyuan Artists Yang Aiguo and Yi Ling Art Exhibition* was held at the Peace Hotel and was the earliest exhibition organised under the name of Yuanmingyuan artists. Unfortunately, because there is limited documentation of these events, few details about the exhibition are available.⁹³

In Spring 1992, Yuanmingyuan Artist Village resident Gao Shan, who was an English language student and drawn to the artists' free-spirited lifestyle and their dedication to art, organised a debut-style art exhibition for the village, entitled *92 New Era Six-Person Art Exhibition*. Gao worked intensively for a week to arrange the exhibition, with funds from friends. From May 19 to 21, 1992, it was held at the Beijing Friendship Hotel, showcasing works from Yuanmingyuan artists Lu Lin, Yi Ling, Wei Lin, Wei Ye, Yue Minjun, and Yang Shaobin. However, none of the paintings sold.⁹⁴

Although this exhibition did not publicly identify with the artist village, another exhibition held a month later at the Beijing Music Hall Gallery was titled *Yuanmingyuan Artists Yi Ling, Hong Bo, Li Yi, and Liang Wei Four-Person Art Exhibition*, funded by Hong Kong director Li Han-Hsiang and others. The gallery manager, moved by the artists and their circumstances, did not charge for the use of frames and glass, and reduced the rental fee for the space by 80 yuan per day, saving the artists 560 yuan for the week-long exhibition. However, they still could not afford the high publicity costs. A TV station offered to broadcast a segment about their exhibition on the evening news but required a 150 yuan service fee. The number of

organised by the State Council and the reception of important guests, while also providing apartment services for both domestic and international guests. This action by the government can be interpreted as an early attempt to contain contemporary Chinese art and artists, directing their image-making towards portraying a more modern and progressive China, primarily for foreign audiences.

⁹³ Zhang Xiaojun, “Yuanmingyuan Huajia Cun yanjiu (yi) –Yi tuxiang wei zheng” 圆明园画家村研究（一）——以图像为证 [Study on Yuanmingyuan Artist Village (1) –Using visual evidence], *Yishu* 艺术 10 (2013),

<http://www.arts2005.com/magazine?op=article&id=178> (accessed December 2, 2023)

⁹⁴ Ibid.

visitors to the exhibition ended up being very small. The week-long exhibition ended with the same outcome as the *Six-Person Art Exhibition*.

It was evident that the artists sought to gain access to the international art market by inviting foreign guests to their exhibitions. Rumors at that time suggested that some foreign residents in Beijing used to receive up to sixty invitations to different exhibitions in a single day.⁹⁵ At the same time, contemporary Chinese art and artists sought not only financial but also political and cultural support from foreigners in Beijing, including diplomats, art dealers, and travelers. One might also question whether the state-owned Dayuan Hotel, which hosted the first exhibition, represented an early effort by the government to leverage contemporary Chinese art and artists to build the country's image. However, the true motivations behind this decision may remain uncertain.



Figure 15. Group photo of the *Little Forest Exhibition* artists. Photograph by Xu Zhiwei, 1992.

On the afternoon of July 12, 1992, the *Professional Artist Open-Air Exhibition*, also more commonly referred to as the *Little Forest Exhibition* (*Xiao Shulin Huazhan*, 小树林画展) was held in Fuyuanmen Village. Nearly all the Yuanmingyuan painters participated, including Yue Minjun and Yang Shaobin. According to Zhang, one of the primary goals of the art exhibition was to sell artworks and relieve economic pressure. The event was self-funded, with each

⁹⁵ Ibid.

participant contributing twenty yuan. Initially, the artist studios were opened to the public, followed by an exhibition in the little forest beside the village. The event drew a significant crowd, including more than twenty foreigners and rock singer Cui Jian, along with several journalists and members of the art community. This was followed by the incident of burning the paintings.⁹⁶ Photographer Xu Zhiwei recalls that the exhibition made no sales, and in frustration, an artist suggested burning the artworks.⁹⁷



Figure 16. Group of artists setting paintings on fire after the *Little Forest Exhibition*. Photograph by Xu Zhiwei, 1992.

The burning of paintings shook Zhang. After witnessing this, he wrote in 1992,

When the twenty or so foreigners arrived, the sun was setting, and it wasn't long before darkness fell. The exhibition had to come to an end, and as people were preparing to transport the paintings back, someone, whether intentionally or not, suggested burning the paintings. A few painters began to agree, and the mood became somewhat agitated. No amount of persuasion from onlookers was effective. It was truly distressing to see several quite impressive works turn to

⁹⁶ Zhang, *ibid.*

⁹⁷ “20 nianqian Beijing zui niu de yipi beipiao, xianzai gege mingzi xiang dang dang” 20 年前北京最牛的一批北漂，现在个个名字响当当 [Twenty years ago, the most influential 'beipiao' (migrants to Beijing) were just starting out; now, each of them has become well-known], last modified January 23, 2021, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_10386892 (accessed July 10, 2023)

ashes. I knew that these were the products of the artists' blood and sweat, and some artists were in tears, visibly upset, as they burned their own works.”⁹⁸

Artist Yi Ling (“Lao Guo” in Zhao’s documentary), who was often referred to as “village mayor” by other artists in the village, described this in a slightly different tone. During an interview, when asked what the most memorable thing about Yuanmingyuan artist village for him was, Yi answered:

The *Forest Art Exhibition*⁹⁹ stands out the most. We invited many people to view the exhibition, which was set up in the Yuanmingyuan forest. We carried the paintings there and set them up. It reached a climax when everyone started burning the paintings. I burned a couple of mine as well. A painter from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts invited Cui Jian to visit his studio. The painter got into an argument with others in the courtyard because Cui Jian was taken away by several other painters. Later, while drinking in the evening, he smashed a bottle against a rock and said that painting was too painful, and he would never paint again. True to his word, he left for Hangzhou with his bag the next day. He and Ye Yong shared a dormitory at Hangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. Now he is very successful in real estate in Zhejiang, while Ye Yong is still in Beijing, working in interior decoration.¹⁰⁰

It became obvious that in 1992, even though the Yuanmingyuan artists were all experiencing prejudice from Chinese society and suffering difficult living conditions, some of them had benefited from the international art market and left their financial struggles behind. Others continued to struggle.

The act of burning the paintings after the *Little Forest Exhibition* symbolizes the deep frustration and disillusionment the Yuanmingyuan artists experienced. Despite their efforts to present their work to both local and international audiences, the failure to make sales led to a

⁹⁸ Zhang Xiaojun, “Guanyu zhiye yishujia lutian huazhan de sikao” 关于职业艺术家露天艺术展的思考 [Thoughts on Professional Artist Open-Air Exhibition], *Meishujia Tonglu* 美术家通讯 10 (1992).

⁹⁹ Yi used the phrase “Sen Lin Huazhan” here, instead of “Xiao Shulin Huazhan” people commonly use, but he was talking about the same exhibition according to the context.

¹⁰⁰ Yi, interview by Anuoabu, “Yi Ling Fangtan: Yuanmingyuan Wangshi 伊灵访谈：圆明园往事” [Yiling Interviews: Memories of the Yuanmingyuan (Part 1)], *Zhongguo Nanfang Yishu* 中国南方艺术, September 30, 2012.

collective sense of despair, culminating in the destruction of their art. This act reflects not only their economic struggles but also the emotional toll of being marginalized by both society and the art market. Furthermore, Yi Ling's recollection highlights a growing divide within the artist community—those who had gained international recognition and financial stability contrasted sharply with those still grappling with poverty and societal rejection. This incident thus encapsulates the internal tensions and the broader challenges the artists faced as they navigated their place in an evolving art world.

In the 2013 documentary *Leading Contemporary Art in China*, Fang Lijun discusses his pathway as an artist and involvement with the Yuanmingyuan artists.¹⁰¹ Fang explained that he was present but did not exhibit in the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village exhibitions, including the *Little Forest Exhibition* and later at Peking University, because he already had substantial income from selling his paintings. Fang jokingly said:

I had basically become a millionaire in our Yuanmingyuan. I feel that it's not right for an artist to be displayed in an open-air (space) like this, because I already had a lot of such experiences (exhibiting experiences) myself, for example, in good art museums and fine exhibition halls. Therefore, (I) cannot even deliver works for (my) formal exhibitions, let alone take works to be exhibited in the wilderness."^{102 103}

This description reflects the growing divide between the Yuanmingyuan artists as their careers developed and their relationship to both the local art scene and the emerging international market changed. Fang's refusal to participate in the more informal exhibitions represents his increasing success and status within the art world. Fang's statement about becoming a "millionaire" demonstrates a shift in his financial and professional standing, distancing him from the struggles of the artist community that had initially been marginalized. This also speaks to the complex tension between grassroots artistic movements and the institutionalization of contemporary Chinese art.

In a 2012 interview, almost two decades after his interview in Zhao Liang's film *Farewell to Yuanmingyuan* (1995), Yi had different thoughts about the marketing of Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and how it related to the fall of the village. He recalled that even

¹⁰¹ *Lingjun Dangdai, Zhongguo Yishu* 领军当代, 艺术中国, produced by ifeng.com, 2013, film.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Fang participated in the Venice Biennale during his time in the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village.

the media reports at the time had been relatively positive and tolerant. In retrospect, Yi reflected on how the extreme approach from the government in taking down the artist village probably had multiple causes. Some of the artists' works were quite radical because modern art inevitably expresses views on society, and "some artists translated these social phenomena into attitudes towards the government,"¹⁰⁴ which Yi has been cautious not to do in his own work. He further argued, from the perspective of purchasing power, that the mainly foreign buyers were drawn to Chinese art for its radical and subversive qualities—they viewed Chinese art through the same lens they viewed art in the Soviet Union, when Soviet artists were in conflict with art associations and literary federations. In a way, Yi saw this portrayal as a push for the artist village and the art canon, furthermore the government authorities, to antagonize each other. Yi also questioned the artistic and ideological expressions of the artists in their artworks:

...some artists also created works with specific messages, and some artists, due to poverty, could not continue their own creations... In reality, they did not understand the situation at the time. Some people had no source of income, did not want to sell their paintings, and did not want to rely on their families, facing more immediate survival issues. They did not have the conditions to pursue and explore art. Many artists at the time were still unable to come together, and when they finally had the opportunity to exhibit at Peking University or at the art academy, the chance was eliminated (by the interfering authorities).¹⁰⁵

Like Fang Lijun, Yi, as an established artist who benefited from the experience of residing in the artist village, came from a position of privilege. However, his statement reflects some truth: the environment of Yuanmingyuan indeed shaped young artists yet did not provide them with sufficient opportunities to deeply understand the significance of the community or its place in a larger movement.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Yi, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Yi, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Xu also commented, "At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Western art frequently came to China for exhibitions. Culturally, the environment was actually more open than it is now[#]. People were in a state of accepting these new ideas, yet had not fully absorbed them." Xu, *ibid.*

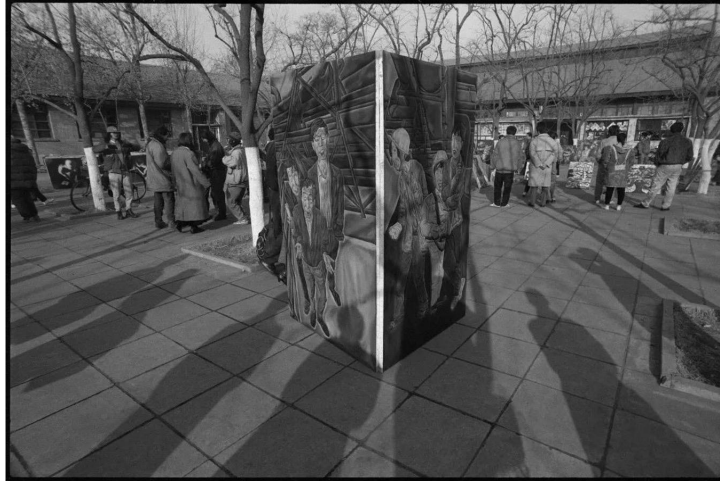


Figure 17. Exhibition at Peking University on December 3, 1992. Photograph by Xu Zhiwei.

Artist	Title	Description	Year	Medium
Xu Zhiwei	<i>Untitled</i>	Artists sunbathing in Yuanmingyuan Artist Village	1992	Photograph
Xu Zhiwei	<i>Untitled</i>	A street view of Yuanmingyuan Artist Village	1995	Photograph
Xu Zhiwei	<i>Untitled</i>	Fang Lijun in his Yuanmingyuan Studio	1993	Photograph
Xu Zhiwei	<i>Untitled</i>	Yue Minjun in his Yuanmingyuan Studio	1993	Photograph
Xu Zhiwei	<i>Untitled</i>	Group photo of the <i>Little Forest Exhibition</i> artists.		Photograph
Xu Zhiwei	<i>Untitled</i>	Group of artists setting paintings on fire after the <i>Little Forest Exhibition</i>	1992	Photograph

Xu Zhiwei	<i>Untitled</i>	Exhibition at Peking University on December 3, 1992	1992	Photograph
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Table 2. Table of selected photographs of Yuanmingyuan Artist Villages and exhibitions by Xu Zhiwei.

Though some saw the *Little Forest Exhibition* as turbulent and financially unwise, without doubt, it attracted a lot of attention to the artist village, and many saw it as a successful starting point. Later that year, some Peking University student organisations brought the *Yuanmingyuan Artist Village 1990s Modern Art Exhibition* to Peking University. Organised and curated by Yuanmingyuan artist Li Xinghui, the exhibition was installed in the central area of the campus, known as the “Peking University triangle area.” The artists planned to tour the exhibition to a series of universities in Beijing, but these plans ended after the exhibition scheduled for Renmin University of China was called off—not by student organisations but by the administrations of participating universities, which implied censorship and political pressure.¹⁰⁷

Some believe the exhibition at Peking University and the cancellation of the planned tour foreshadowed the fall of the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village. Yi observed that because of Yuanmingyuan’s geographical proximity to Peking University, and because students there were “active, naive, passionate, and enthusiastic, the government feared that this enthusiasm would influence the university students.”¹⁰⁸ Given the recent precedent of the government’s violent reaction to student protesters at Tiananmen Square in 1989, it is plausible that government authorities wished to maintain tight control over other activities near campuses.

As more and more people and media came to the artist village, it was also inevitable that foreign reporters would cover the story and discuss the relationship between the artists and the Chinese art and cultural policies. Yi suspects that both domestic and foreign public opinion

¹⁰⁷ “27 nianqian bei yiwang de Yuanmingyuan Huajia Cun” 27 年前被遗忘的圆明园画家村 [Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, Forgotten for 27 Years], last modified May 26, 2021, <https://www.mhymy.com/dasl/ksls/6764.html> (accessed July 10, 2023)

¹⁰⁸ Yi, *ibid.*

accelerated the confrontation between the artists and the government. With increasing media attention, artists who felt aggrieved seized the chance to seek help from outside, and from the government's perspective, Yuanmingyuan became associated with growing political unrest and dissent, as the artists' concerns drew public scrutiny.

The dilemma faced by the artist community can be likened to a seesaw: on one end, there was the community's need for gathering and exposure, while on the other end was the danger of government attention and censorship. If either side became too heavy or too light, the equilibrium would be disrupted, potentially leading to the community's downfall.

Nevertheless, the *Little Forest Exhibition* stands as a powerful testament to the agency of the Yuanmingyuan artists, who, despite societal marginalization and economic hardship, demonstrated remarkable self-organisation in their efforts to create visibility and financial opportunities for their work. In the face of exclusion from mainstream art institutions, the artists showed an earlier example of forming their own exhibition spaces—taking matters into their own hands to engage with both local and international audiences. Ultimately, the Little Forest Exhibition was not only about artistic expression but also a manifestation of the artists' agency to assert their presence in an evolving art market. The exhibition's failure, the emotional outbursts, and the burning of paintings serve as a poignant reminder of the challenges and complexities of being a part of a grassroots artist community. In framing these events within the broader dynamics of artist agency and self-organisation, the *Little Forest Exhibition* reveals both the resilience and vulnerability of the Yuanmingyuan artists as they navigated their way through a complex and often hostile art world. As the first known self-organised, community-wide exhibition taking place within the physical boundaries of an artist community, it has a significant influence on the Beijing artist communities that followed it. It paved the way for community-wide art festivals in Dashanzi and Songzhuang, art activist demonstrations such as the Warm Winter Initiative, and small, self-organised open studio exhibitions in grassroots artist communities, like *1005Ye* at 1005, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

The last of the Yuanmingyuan artists moved out before November 15th, 1995. After Yuanmingyuan Artist Village disbanded, some of the artists left Beijing and stopped making art, but some of them decided to stay. Where could they go? Was there somewhere else they could take deterritorialization to another level? The next subchapter looks into a transformational period where the artists explored different options and worked on achieving different outcomes

through their communing. After all, as Yang Wei said, the true significance of Yuanmingyuan Artist Village is in its transformation of ideas into action: making the emergence of a group of full-time Chinese artists reality.¹⁰⁹ Yi Ling named his son after the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village: Canyuan (残园) – “can” meaning “ruin” and “yuan” as in “Yuanmingyuan.”¹¹⁰

Building on the exploration of deterritorialization in Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, the last section of this chapter delves into the historical trajectory of Songzhuang Artist Village into which some Yuanmingyuan artist communities moved. In Chapter 3, I will discuss in detail, Dashanzi which is another artist community formed after the demise of Yuanmingyuan artist village. Both cases were products of deterritorialization of the Yuanmingyuan group, but each represents a distinct case of *re-territorialization*. Their development reveals critical experiments in navigating economic, political, and social shifts. However, while these communities initially sought to break free from traditional territorial constraints, as I will show they inevitably encountered the forces of *reterritorialization*. Both artist communities took the advantage of the deterritorialization of villages (in the case of Songzhuang) and of factories (in the case of Dashanzi) throughout the 1990s. Then, they consciously or unconsciously knocked on the door of reterritorialization, a process which involved the state and capital in taking advantage of artist communities (see also Chapter Two).

Songzhuang Artist Village: Transition from deterritorialization to reterritorialization, I

This subchapter shifts focus to Songzhuang Artist Village, seen as a successor of artist communities before them (notably Yuanmingyuan and Dong Cun). Songzhuang came out of a collaboration with the township government in villages that experienced economic downturn.

During the Spring months of 1994, artists Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, Yue Minjun, Yang Maoyuan, Wang Yin, Zhang Huiping, critic Li Xianting, and others, seeking to escape the eviction as well as crowdedness, began to leave Yuanmingyuan in search of a new place to settle.

¹⁰⁹ Yang Wei, “Wo suo jingli de Yuanmingyuan Huajia Cun he Songzhuang” 我所亲历的圆明园画家村和宋庄 [Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and Songzhuang I experienced], *Tian Ya Zazhi* 天涯杂志, 2017.

¹¹⁰ Zhao, *ibid*.

This group, along with artists from Dong Cun, went to various places throughout Beijing to find new places to settle, including Dahongmen, Xiangshan, Huajiadi, Liulitun, and Feijia Village, among others. In the end, Zhang Huiping's student, Jin Guowang from Xiaobao Village in Songzhuang Township, Tongzhou, Beijing, brought a large group of them to Xiaobao Village. At the same time, local police stations in the Yuanmingyuan area had informed their residents that they had stopped approving Temporary Residency Permits, which meant evacuation. Some of the artists later opted to move to Dashanzi, which is now recognized as the 798 Art Zone, an area that was formerly an abandoned electric switch factory located on the northeastern outskirts of Beijing, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

Toward the end of 1994, other artists from Yuanmingyuan, including Yang Shaobin, Liu Fenghua, Ma Ziheng, Zhang Jianqiang, Zhang Mingqiang, Yao Junzhong, Wang Qiuren, and Wang Qiang, also moved to Xiaobao Village and purchased properties there. By the fall of 1995, Yuanmingyuan artists were almost completely dispersed,¹¹¹ and Xiaobao Village gradually welcomed artists such as Lu Lin, Si Mao, and Wang Qingsong. Over the next year or two, artists like Yang Wei and Wang Yan also moved to Songzhuang. Along with others who relocated to Songzhuang Township from different places, such as Gao Huijun, Ren Rong, Zhang Guolong, and Zuo Xiao, Songzhuang, with Xiaobao Village as its core, began to take shape as a new gathering place for artists.¹¹²

The artist community in Songzhuang, which was farther away from the city centre than Yuanmingyuan, started off looking like any other remote villages in peri-urban Beijing with no concrete roads and a lot of crop fields but few working peasants. While the Yuanmingyuan area had rental activities prior to the artists' arrival, because of its proximity to the urban core, Songzhuang's peasants did not usually offer their housings for rental. However, they did sell their properties. People could spend a couple thousand yuan and get a *yuanzi*—a house with a courtyard—in Songzhuang, which is much more spacious than Yuanmingyuan. These bigger spaces attracted artists working in large formats, and those with families. Because of the spaciousness, affordability, and the overall setting of the Songzhuang Artist Village, artists'

¹¹¹ According to Xu, the last time he photographed Yuanmingyuan Artist Village was in 1997. At that point, the only one left was artist Qi Zhijie, who had his *hukou* registration in Beijing, hence police had no reason to evacuate him.

¹¹² Jun Zhang, "The geographic political economy of art district formation in China: The case of Songzhuang," *Geoforum* 106 (2019): 340-348.

spaces had more privacy and artists created stronger boundaries between themselves. This contrasts with Yuanmingyuan, where people were constantly spending time with each other. Artists in Songzhuang generally had their individual spaces and rarely shared working and living spaces.¹¹³

Existing research shows that today, well-known Songzhuang artists are frequently invited to international art exhibitions and have their works collected both domestically and internationally. Though most artists in Songzhuang have not gained fame, some artists occasionally sell works and have a certain level of influence but live modestly; many have no stable income and pursue artistic exploration in difficult conditions, with some even struggling to make ends meet. A recent survey of sixty-four Songzhuang artists' income sources revealed that twenty-nine rely primarily on selling artworks, five on art education, and six on both selling artworks and art education. Thus, forty artists, or 63% of the surveyed, have stable income from painting and teaching activities. Seven rely on financial support from family and friends, one lives on a pension, and sixteen have no fixed income source, making up 37% of the surveyed artists.¹¹⁴

The artist community in Songzhuang emerged as part of a broader process of deterritorialization, distinct from the experiences of the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village. The key difference between Songzhuang and other artist communities is that from early on, the township government had been informed of the benefits the artist community would bring and started to work closely with members from the artist community—resident and art critic Li Xianting in particular. Endorsement from the township encouraged the community to grow quickly. Moreover, in 2004, the Songzhuang Township Government proposed the development of “a cultural town, with the goal of creating the world's largest hub for original artists and an art ‘Silicon Valley’ integrating production, education, and research. Through active social mobilization, the local villagers have come to understand and support the development of the

¹¹³ After the artist community gradually took shape, there were three main ways artists settle in Songzhuang: first, by renting houses from local villagers, either through formal lease agreements or verbal arrangements, which has been the most common method; second, by purchasing or leasing land to build suitable studios, with agreements signed with the village committee or villagers, a method used by relatively successful artists, especially since 2000s, after the rent hike; and third, by converting idle industrial buildings into studios, which has gradually become the dominant method.

¹¹⁴ Zhang, *ibid.*

cultural and creative industries and have participated in providing related industry support services.” Reterritorialization began to take shape.¹¹⁵

In Songzhuang, the development process also provided job opportunities to the original dwellers—the villagers—which cemented the partnership with the township on another level. In the process of artists gathering, the supply of materials needed for artistic creation, along with the establishment, introduction, and continuous growth of galleries and agencies, accelerated the development of the industry cluster and attracted more artists to live and create in Songzhuang. Research shows that in Xiaobao Village, there were only four small shops in 1994, while by 2006, there were eight supermarkets and forty-six restaurants. Assuming each artist spends 20,000 yuan annually, 1,000 artists contribute 20 million yuan in cash flow to Songzhuang, creating 1,000 job opportunities. Galleries and other art supplies followed. Public exhibition venues such as the Songzhuang Art Museum, East District Art Center, Shang Shang Art Museum, Double R Art Museum, and others also opened to the public in the 2000s.¹¹⁶ By the early 2010s, Songzhuang had become the largest artist community in Beijing. As the number of artists grew, so did the vibrant artistic environment and local identity. The district government has supported this growth by developing notable exhibition spaces and promoting the arts to attract more tourists, investors, and artists.

The downside of the rapid, ambitious, highly government-involved development in Songzhuang was mass gentrification and stronger control in the 2000s. In addition to rising prices, a 2008 legal dispute between artists and local residents regarding land property rights drove some artists out of Songzhuang because they did not feel the circumstances there were stable anymore. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident. Since the 2010s, the township government has disregarded its agreements, including conducting forced evacuations and demolitions, carrying out violent actions against artists, and soliciting bribes.

In 2020, an evacuation notice was sent to hundreds of artists living and working there. In an interview, Li Xianting expressed his concern about changes in leadership—that new leaders might not share the long-established view of the artists as beneficial to the community. Even if

¹¹⁵ Zhu Zhao, "Artistic Urbanism: Multi-Scalar Spatial Governance of Songzhuang Art District by the Local Government," *China City Planning Review* 30, no. 3 (2021): 19-27.

¹¹⁶ Huang Danhui, "Songzhuang yishu xianxiang fansi" 宋庄艺术现象反思 [Reflections on the Songzhuang Art Phenomenon], *Zhongguo Meishu* 中国美术 4 (2012): 26-27.

all the documentation were complete, a change in officials could lead to everything being dismantled. He observed similar issues elsewhere, noting that the fundamental problem is that land cannot be privately owned in China. With frequent changes in leadership and a lack of long-term planning, leaders may not understand the original intentions and can make arbitrary changes. Additionally, every local and township government has its own agenda. Several Songzhuang artists have stated that the government previously promised land use rights for "fifty years without change," but now it is reneging on that promise. Li pointed out that the relationship between the original fifty-year guarantee and the current proposal to sign a twenty-year agreement is still unclear. When asked if artists have formed an advocacy and support association, Li said, "It is impossible to form an organisation. In China, forming organisations is a sensitive political issue; we cannot organise street protests like in Hong Kong. Otherwise, the repression we face would be much harsher than that from the Hong Kong police."¹¹⁷ At the end of the interview, Li admitted that there were certain developments he did not fully understand, particularly those related to the shifting policies and local governance in Songzhuang. He explained that shortly after he called artists to move to Songzhuang in the 90s, the authorities lost trust in him, which led to his exclusion from official township meetings, leaving him disconnected from key decision-making processes. Li's identity and influence seemed to have become disposable once the artist village had taken shape.

Songzhuang's future as a centre of original art runs up against the aspirations of local officials for more tax revenue and tourist dollars. In the Songzhuang Cultural Creative Industries Cluster Design Plan, which was sponsored by the local government in 2007, Songzhuang is designated as an arts capital incorporated with culture, commerce and tourism. This aspiration is that more museums, galleries, shopping centres, hotels, and recreation infrastructure will inevitably be developed in order to capitalize on Songzhuang's global reputation. In other words, the wellbeing of artists and access to studio spaces is a secondary concern to building the district's profitability.

¹¹⁷ "Beijing Songzhuang yishujia bei xianqi banqian huo gai hetong, wushi nian zuqi bu ren le" 北京宋庄艺术家被限期搬迁或改合同 五十年租期不认了 [Beijing Songzhuang Artists Ordered to Relocate or Amend Contracts: Fifty-Year Lease Agreements No Longer Valid], last modified June 16, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/renquanfazhi/hx1-06162020114825.html> (accessed July 11, 2023)



Figure 18. A street in Songzhuang, 2022. Photograph by the author.

Through the lens of deterritorialization, this chapter has traced the emergence of Chinese artist communities, linking their origins to the rapid urbanization that began in the 1980s, a process set in motion by the 1978 economic reforms. At Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, the formation of an artist community was made possible through a collaboration between artists in need of affordable studio space and peasants-turned-landlords who had lost their livelihoods as a result of urbanization. This mutually beneficial arrangement not only facilitated the physical establishment of the artist community but also fostered a shared experience of displacement and transformation. I highlighted both the artistic explorations and the economic and social challenges undertaken by these artists. By examining the economic, social, and political hardships they faced during this historical period through documentaries and personal testimonies, I have explored how this process shaped their professional identities and communality.

The subsequent disbanding of the Yuanmingyuan artists led to the rise and growth of new artist communities in more peripheral areas of Beijing, marking a further phase in the process of deterritorialization. Among the most notable of these were Dashanzi (the focus of the next chapter) and Songzhuang, which attracted many of the displaced artists. These communities, while taking new paths to deterritorialization, also laid the foundation for future transformations that would eventually give rise to the phase of reterritorialization. Artist communities in this

stage offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between artistic autonomy, state intervention, and economic forces, and set the stage for the continued evolution of the artist communities in Beijing. Categorized by reterritorialization, formalized artist-communities-turned-art-districts in the name of creative industries represent the effort from both state and capital to contain organic artist communities.

Compared to Songzhuang (and Dashanzi), which has been gradually incorporated into state-led cultural and economic planning, Yuanmingyuan was never reterritorialized or absorbed into urban redevelopment. Instead, its dissolution in the mid-1990s was driven primarily by ideological concerns rather than market forces or gentrification. The state sought to eliminate, rather than contain or commercialize the community, effectively erasing it from Beijing's artistic landscape. In contrast, Songzhuang's transformation into a government-designated cultural hub reflects a different trajectory—one where an initially organic artist settlement is reshaped to align with official urban and economic agendas. This contrast underscores the evolving relationship between artist communities and the state, revealing how shifting political and economic priorities dictate the fate of these spaces within Beijing's broader urban transformations.

The process of deterritorialization is intricately tied to urbanization and gentrification dynamics. Urbanization here refers not just to the physical growth of cities, but the transformation of cultural spaces into economically profitable zones, which aligns with the objectives of gentrification. In this process, wealthier individuals and businesses move in, driving up property values and gradually pushing out lower-income residents, including artists. This displacement is not merely a consequence of urban growth but also reflects broader political-economic shifts in China, where state-led initiatives prioritize economic development over the preservation of creative, lower-cost spaces. This chapter contributes to a larger understanding of the intersections between art, urbanization, and the political economy in China. By examining case studies like Yuanmingyuan and Songzhuang, we also gain insights into how art communities are both shaped by and resist these processes. The artist communities, often seen as victims of gentrification, also play an active role in facilitating it. They establish themselves in once-affordable, peripheral urban areas, thereby displacing previous inhabitants such as migrant workers, industrial workers, peasants, and other low-income groups. These communities' participation in urbanization reflects the broader processes of gentrification that affect diverse groups, not just the artists themselves.

As urbanization progresses, state policies and market forces collide, revealing the challenges creative communities face in navigating an urban landscape increasingly dominated by capitalist imperatives. Understanding this dynamic deepens our comprehension of how urban transformation impacts cultural and social spaces and provides a critical lens on China's rapid modernization and its effects on artistic practice. The departure from deterritorialization to reterritorialization reflects the state's changing stance toward cultural production and urban development. In the next chapter, "Reterritorialization: The Rise of Art Districts in the 2000s and 2010s," I continue to examine the progress of artist communities in Beijing through the case of Dashanzi, which developed from the 2000s to the 2010s.

Chapter Two – Reterritorialization: The Rise of Art Districts in the 2000s and 2010s

Key issues and questions of reterritorialization in the 2000s and 2010s

In this dissertation, I use the term “-territorialization” when discussing artist communities, highlighting how the prefixes affect both physical environments and cultural contexts, altering them through varying degrees of territorial transformation. To briefly recap the concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization: originally introduced in the 1970s by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, these terms describe an ongoing, dialectical process in which social structures are continuously reshaped. Deterritorialization involves the breakdown or destabilization of existing systems, while reterritorialization occurs concurrently, rebuilding what has been disrupted, but integrating new forms of power and structure. This chapter specifically employs the concept of reterritorialization to examine how these processes have shaped Chinese artist communities in the 2000s and 2010s.

In my study of artist communities, reterritorialization refers to how the state and capital produce or modify spaces for artist communities—essentially, how they attempt to *contain* artist communities. Having witnessed the significance of artist communities that arose in the 1990s and the subsequent economic gains (in the form of tourism, local business, and international recognition), the central government announced in 2006 its plan to integrate art and culture into the five-year national plan for development. As the commercialization of art and artists’ communities grew, so did several underlying issues: control, surveillance, the tourist gaze¹¹⁸, and gentrification. Michael Keane, a prominent scholar on the creative industries in China, notes that the promotion of creative industries discourse in China—particularly in Beijing—is largely driven by coalitions that seek to secure the support of propaganda officials. These coalitions are often informal alliances with varying interests: some focus on profit-making, while others aim to

¹¹⁸ The “tourist gaze,” a term coined by John Urry, refers to the set of expectations and perceptions tourists apply when interacting with destinations and local cultures, shaped by media, prior knowledge, and the desire for an “authentic” experience. This gaze can commodify local customs, reducing them to spectacles, and may harm local communities by positioning their people and traditions as objects of observation, reinforcing cultural otherness and power imbalances.

align with international trends. Within this network of collaborations, local and district governments determine their paths for the development of artist communities.¹¹⁹

Keane highlights that, by the 2000s, culture had become an important aspect of national sovereignty.¹²⁰ As China sought to position itself as a global cultural powerhouse, the state and capital began to harness art and creativity as key drivers of economic growth, especially through the development of tourism and the commercialization of urban spaces. In this context, the reterritorialization of Beijing's art district, such as the 798 Art Zone, became symbolic of broader national strategies to reconfigure cultural production as both an economic asset and a tool for soft power. As designated spaces for cultural production and consumption, art districts function as sites of containment and commodification, where artistic practice is integrated into market-driven urban development and governance strategies. This chapter investigates the reterritorialization of Beijing's artist communities and art districts by the state and capital during the 2000s and 2010s and how the concept of the creative industries was central to the formation of the art districts. The idea of the creative industries, as advocated by Richard Florida, was adapted and localized in China during this period, particularly in response to the economic and cultural shifts surrounding the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Examining the localization of the

¹¹⁹ For instance, the Beijing Municipal Government opted for a hybrid approach, coining the term “cultural and creative industries” (CCI). In 2006, it launched the International Cultural and Creative Industries Expo (ICCIE), an event aimed primarily at fostering business partnerships, with a focus on contract signings and the awarding of honors for excellence in clustering. This dual approach allowed a broader range of entrepreneurs to participate and helped integrate emerging sectors, such as design, which had gained prominence ahead of Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics. This CCI hybrid, promoted by the Beijing Municipal Government, resulted in much economic success in the 2000s, influencing a wide range of activities in the city, including the establishment of creative industry parks, the formation of art and culture clusters, and the development of design-based startups and innovation hubs, all of which contributed to the commercialization of Beijing's cultural landscape. See Shaun Chang, “Great Expectations: China's Cultural Industry and Case Study of a Government-Sponsored Creative Cluster,” *Creative Industries Journal* 1, no. 3 (2008): 263–73; Michael Keane, *China's New Creative Clusters: Governance, Human Capital, and Investment*. 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011); Niu Weilin and Peng Yi, *Beijing shi wenhua chuangyi chanye jijuqu fazhan yanjiu baogao* 北京市文化创意产业集聚区发展研究报告 [Research report on cultural creative industries clusters development in Beijing] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2009); Michael Keane, “Creative Industries in China: Four Perspectives on Social Transformation,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15, no. 4 (2009): 436.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

“creative industries,” the chapter explores how these processes of reterritorialization reshaped not only the physical spaces of the artist communities but also their identities and activism.

This chapter consists of three parts. The first part discusses debates on the role of culture industries in the reformulation of cultural policies in China. The second part discusses the origin and spread of “art districts,” through the case of the 798 Art Zone. I show how the process of reterritorialization started “from below” through the self-development of artist communities, and how it grew from local grassroots festivals to international events. I explore how the state and business sectors capitalized on the popularity and recognition of these events as manifestations of “creative industries.” The third part examines a range of artistic practices as a critical response to the containment and commodification of art districts.

Localizing creative industries in China: “Culture sets the stage, economy sings the opera”

By the time Songzhuang had been reterritorialized (as discussed in Chapter One) as a platform for the state and the capital to co-produce art, China had entered a new post-economic reform period, best represented by the slogan, “Culture sets the stage, economy sings the opera (文化搭台，经济唱戏).” Although its origin is unclear, this phrase roughly refers to the state attitude about developing economies based on cultural industries. In the 1990s, local governments in Chinese cities and towns started implementing this belief at relatively small scales by hosting cultural events in order to attract tourism.¹²¹ 2001 is often considered a major turning point for cultural and creative industries in China—the year of China’s World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession and Beijing’s winning bid for the 2008 Summer Olympics. The former represents China’s formal connection to the world economy, and the latter signifies its determination to both branch out and reach out culturally.

China’s investment in culture, particularly through the development of the creative industries, was driven not only by economic considerations but also by a strategic effort to

¹²¹ These cultural events mostly celebrated local histories, traditional cultures, and crafts. For example, during the 1990s, Zibo, in Shandong Province, had held “Zibo international Ceramic and Glass Festival,” and the Town of Liuyang, in Hunan Province, had rebranded its agriculture festival and hosted firework parties. However, the long-term economic growth of these strategies had long been doubted.

counter the increasing cultural influence of the Western media, including film, television, and advertising. In the early 2000s, as creative industries discourse gained traction, the Chinese government sought to assert control over cultural production and promote domestic content as a means of resisting the pervasive presence of the Western media. This initiative was framed as essential to safeguarding China's national identity and cultural sovereignty. Consequently, creative industries discourse became a tool for both economic modernization and cultural protectionism, aimed at localizing cultural production within a Chinese context. The localization of creative industries, therefore, can be understood as a dual process: it not only sought to foster economic growth but also served as a mechanism for ensuring that China's rapid economic transformation would not come at the expense of its cultural values. In this way, the development of the creative industries in China was inextricably linked to efforts to resist Western cultural dominance and establish a more self-reliant and culturally distinct creative sector.

In his influential book for urban policymakers, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (2002), Richard Florida defined the creative industries, which include a wide variety of fields including advertising, architecture, arts and culture, design, fashion, film and video, music, publishing, software and so on, as economic sectors that are based on creativity, knowledge, and information. Florida argues that the creative industries play an important role in spurring economic development and creating jobs in the current century. He contends that these industries are an essential component of the "creative economy," which is characterized by high levels of innovation, entrepreneurship, and talent.¹²² According to Keane, the idea of the creative industries officially arrived in China in 2004, a year after the *Creative Industries Baseline Study* had been published by the University of Hong Kong Cultural Policy Unit. The document had a crucial impact in promoting discussions about cultural growth in China, and it helped popularize the term *chuangyi chanye* (创意产业), which came to be widely used as a translation for "creative industries."¹²³

However, during the period when creative industries discourse was gaining traction in China, scholars such as Jing Wang expressed reservations regarding its viability in a centrally planned system, particularly in that the state had already established the "cultural industries" as

¹²² Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006).

¹²³ Keane, 431-432.

an official policy. “The thorniest question triggered by the paradigm of creative industries is ‘creativity,’ the seemingly least problematic notion in the Western context,” Wang writes, going on to ask: “How do we begin to envision a parallel discussion in a country where creative imagination is subjugated to active state surveillance?”¹²⁴

It is important to note that many Chinese scholars investigating the localization of the creative industries in China in the 2000s and 2010s, looked at this issue through a comparison between China and the West. Particularly when discussing the idea of creativity, some scholars adopted a rather rigid binary system that divided “the East” and “the West.” Although this form of binary comparison, which largely reflected China’s eagerness to “catch up” with the world culturally and economically after the economic reform, has been useful, it perpetuates a problematic perspective in constructing and documenting a history of contemporary China. In the context of cultural and creative industries, the West is often portrayed as superior—bigger, better, more creative, more progressive, and trendier—while China, and the East by extension, is often positioned in contrast.

This dichotomy can be understood through historical and cultural dynamics. As Tang Youxia explains, first of all, cultural influence is inherently reciprocal, with no culture remaining completely isolated. Secondly, following the Opium War and into the twentieth century, China’s traditional culture suffered immense damage through various revolutions and upheavals. Despite these challenges, China did not rapidly establish a cultural system aligned with its social development, leading to what was essentially a “dry phase” before the reform and opening-up period. During this time, the neglect of traditional cultural practices and festivals created a spiritual void, which was later filled by the influx of Western ideas after China’s economic doors were opened. As a result, Western cultural ideologies flooded China, resonating with the younger generation in particular, and rapidly expanding in popularity. Thirdly, Tang suggests that this phenomenon was not solely driven by domestic demand but was also reinforced by Western countries’ cultural hegemony in the Global South.¹²⁵ Since the 1980s, many artists have

¹²⁴ Jing Wang, “The Global Reach of a New Discourse: How Far Can ‘Creative Industries’ Travel?” *International journal of cultural studies* 7, no. 1 (2004): 13.

¹²⁵ Tang Youxia, “Lun xifang wenhua zai zhongguo de shentou yu yingdui” 论西方文化在中国的渗透与应对 [On the penetration of western culture in China and its response], *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Engineering* 青年文学家, 2016(35):168-169.

described or branded themselves and their communities using terminology originating from the West. For example, residents of the 798 Art Zone, such as Huang Rui, have often emphasized their “Bauhaus” style architecture, while many members of artist communities have characterized their spaces as “utopian,” referencing the concept of utopia coined by the English social philosopher Thomas More, rather than using the term *shiwaitaoyuan* (世外桃源), a culturally specific equivalent rooted in Chinese history.¹²⁶ By framing their identities through Western ideologies and terminology, they seem to position themselves in opposition to stereotypical representations of Chinese culture in general, reinforcing a binary system that contrasts the “Western” ideal with the “Chinese” other.

Chinese economist Li Wuwei from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences explores the role of creativity in modern Chinese society in his book *How Creativity is Changing China* (2011).¹²⁷ In the chapter “Toward a Creative Society,” Li states that creativity is becoming increasingly important in China as the country undergoes rapid economic and social change. The author begins the chapter by discussing the historical context of creativity in China, noting that creativity was not traditionally valued in Chinese culture.¹²⁸ However, he argues that this is changing as China embraces globalization and seeks to compete in the global economy. Li describes various initiatives that the Chinese government has implemented to foster creativity, such as the “Creative China” campaign and the establishment of creative industry parks. He also

¹²⁶ “798: Yizuo wenhua dibiao de xingqi yu bianqian” 798: 一座文化地标的兴起与变迁 [798: The rise and transformation of a cultural landmark], last modified December 29, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-12/29/c_1123921612.htm (accessed January 8, 2025)

¹²⁷ Li first published the Chinese version in 2009.

¹²⁸ Historically, Chinese artistic and intellectual traditions often framed creativity in ways distinct from modern Western individualism. For example, Confucianism emphasized continuity, moral cultivation, and the reinforcement of social harmony, while Daoist and Buddhist traditions valued spontaneity, non-attachment, and transcendence. Unlike the modern Western ideal of originality as self-expression, Chinese artistic practices frequently prioritized reinterpretation of classical forms and collective knowledge. Art was often seen as a vehicle for promoting ethical values, reinforcing political legitimacy, or cultivating personal virtue rather than as a means of individual innovation. However, this does not mean that individuality was absent—many artists, poets, and scholars navigated these traditions in highly personal and expressive ways, demonstrating a more nuanced relationship between creativity and tradition.

discusses the rise of individualism in China and the emergence of a new generation of creative entrepreneurs.¹²⁹

While this dissertation focuses on the broader discourse of creativity and its cultural implications, it is important to note that Florida's theory is not only about the rise of a creative class, but also about how their spatial preferences have reshaped urban geography. For Florida, post-industrial cities thrive not because of natural resources or industrial capacity, but because they attract mobile creative professionals—engineers, artists, designers—who are drawn to open-minded, culturally vibrant environments. This shift contrasts sharply with the industrial-era model of urban development, where cities like Detroit were defined by corporate headquarters and manufacturing plants.¹³⁰ In the Chinese context, Li Wuwei's discussion of "creative society" and state-sponsored creative industry zones suggests some alignment with Florida's ideas, but with significant qualifications. While Li mentions the development of "creative industry parks" and urban policy support for creativity, he does not deeply explore whether these spaces represent a genuine break from industrial-era geography, or whether they merely repurpose it under new terms. The creative cities Li describes—often top-down initiatives—may reflect a continued state-centric logic of urban planning, contrasting with Florida's more bottom-up, market-driven model of urban transformation. He then turns to the challenges that China faces in its quest to become a more creative society, noting that the country still lags behind the West in terms of creativity, and that there is a need for greater investment in education and research. He also discusses the challenges of balancing creativity with the need for social stability in a rapidly changing society. Finally, Li concludes by arguing that China has the potential to become a truly creative society, but that this will require a concerted effort from both the government and the private sector. He emphasizes the need for greater creativity in all aspects of Chinese life, from business and education to art and culture.¹³¹

Li's analysis of China's growing emphasis on creativity and the government's initiatives to cultivate a creative society underscores both the potential for transformation and the challenges that lie ahead. Yet, this optimistic vision of China's creative future is complicated by

¹²⁹ Wuwei Li, "Towards a Creative Society," in *How Creativity Is Changing China* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 99-126.

¹³⁰ Florida, 216.

¹³¹ Ibid.

the varying interpretations of what “creativity” and “creative industries” truly mean, revealing a deeper conceptual divide that must be addressed in the discourse.

Keane observes that there is a divergence, or what I call a “gap of cognition”, when discussing the concept of the creative industries and its adoption in China. He points out, “The creative industries are fundamentally misunderstood in China and are more appropriately construed as cultural industries.”^{132 133}

At the policymaking level, the choice of terminology and the relationships among cultural development (*wenhua jianshe*, 文化建设), innovation (*chuangxin*, 创新), and creativity (*chuangyi*, 创意) remain areas of ongoing debate and uncertainty, as these terms are generally regarded as interchangeable in present-day China. This kind of obscurity allows local officials and entrepreneurs the freedom to associate themselves with whichever idea seems trendier.

In the development of China’s creative industries, “tolerance” has been used as a strategic tool by the government to balance state control with the demands of a global cultural market. In the years before Beijing’s hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympics, “tolerance” (*baorong* or *rongren*, 包容 or 容忍) was a key term in developing cultural and creative industries in China.

As China sought to position itself as a global cultural and economic powerhouse, the concept of “tolerance” was employed to promote a sense of openness and adaptability within the country’s rapidly evolving cultural and creative industries. In this context, tolerance was not just a moral or social value but also a strategic tool, requiring flexibility in both cultural expression and market dynamics.

In the case of artist communities, tolerance can be a loaded concept: it can be seen as an effort to understand and legitimize artistic practices, and as a compromise from central and local governments aiming to profit from reterritorialization. One of the primary challenges to the model of attracting ideal consumers—typically international tourists and collectors—through the

¹³² Keane, 434.

¹³³ Keane explains: “Differences, as well as the similarities between cultural and creative industries in China are split along national and regional fault lines. A broad perspective locates Ministry of Culture policy-makers in Beijing, who stridently oppose the creative industries concept. . . These municipal and provincial coalitions include local governments, developers and investors, research agencies and entrepreneurs . . . For these agents the creative industries are a development template into which local characteristics are inscribed.” Ibid.

development of art districts and cultural festivals is the cautious and risk-averse approach often adopted by government officials. These officials typically prioritize projects that align with their professional interests or that can advance their career objectives. This tendency was evident in 2007, when the authorities at Songzhuang Artist Village permitted a Queer Film Festival and endorsed the display of visual artworks that conveyed political perspectives diverging from mainstream or official norms.¹³⁴ Such instances of relative openness were permitted within the constraints established by propaganda officials, who, while overseeing the expansion of creative venues, continued to exercise control over the activities within art districts and creative clusters, thereby allowing a form of “freedom” that remained subject to their supervision. While China may not yet be able to cultivate the same forms of creative freedom and expression as in the West, in the 2000s, there was an increasing awareness among local authorities of the potential benefits of fostering “free expression”—or, at least, a version of it.¹³⁵ A notable example of this more “tolerant” approach can be seen in Nanluoguxiang, a traditional hutong area in Dongcheng District, Beijing, where young filmmakers, musicians, artists, and designers freely interacted with international visitors in local cafes and bars (Figure 19). According to Keane, this was an example of how government officials began to loosen restrictions, allowing for a more dynamic exchange of ideas between local and international communities.¹³⁶

However, despite the initial enthusiasm for this openness, government officials remained focused on the economic benefits of tourism. The emphasis on growing the tourist economy led to the commercialization and gentrification of areas like Nanluoguxiang and the 798 Art Zone (which I will examine in more detail in the next section). Although artists expressed concerns about the encroaching commercialization of their spaces, government officials continued to prioritize the growth of the tourist economy over preserving the autonomy and cultural integrity

¹³⁴ M. Ulfstjerne, “Constraining creations: a study of Songzhuang art district” (paper presented at the Asian Creativity in Technology and Culture Conference, University of Trondheim, Norway, 12–16 November 2003).

¹³⁵ In the 2000s, while the phrase “free expression” was not promoted in official discourse, it reflected a growing awareness of more liberalized forms of creativity and self-expression emerging in Chinese society. This shift, though not explicitly framed as “freedom” or “expression” in official rhetoric, was evident in discussions about art and culture, particularly as China sought greater international recognition. It signified a desire for greater creative freedom within the socio-political context, as China’s economy and culture became more globalized.

¹³⁶ Keane, 438.

of Nanluoguxiang. The rapid gentrification of Nanluoguxiang following government engagement illustrates the consequences of government-led commercialization and gentrification, despite earlier efforts to support creativity. This trend of reterritorialization reveals how the promotion of creative industries for economic gain has often taken precedence over safeguarding artist communities' grassroots, artistic character.¹³⁷



Figure 19. Nanluoguxiang. Xinhua News Agency.

Nevertheless, the initial efforts to preserve artist communities—which, in a sense, enabled the process of reterritorialization—did not unfold solely from the top down. While the state and capital were eager to develop cultural and creative industries in the early 2000s and 2010s, this economic drive did not guarantee that artists or their communities would be fully protected from displacement or demolition. In fact, for reterritorialized artist communities, even when they received formal endorsement, being recognized as art districts did not offer a straightforward path to stability or security. During this period, artists themselves often took the lead in advocating for the protection of their communities from destruction, pushing back against government and corporate pressures. Artist communities also faced a central, paradoxical dilemma: while visibility is essential for securing attention and ensuring their survival, it simultaneously exposes them to the risk of exploitation—where their cultural capital, including artistic creativity and local identity, is commodified by external forces for profit, often without fair compensation or respect for their original intentions, contributing to gentrification.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

This paradox, as I will show, is most starkly embodied in the 798 Art Zone. On one hand, the 798 stands as an internationally recognized success story, saved in part through the tireless advocacy of artists themselves. On the other hand, it has also become the most emblematic case of gentrification in China, a process that ultimately commodified the very cultural capital it sought to protect. The example of the 798 also shows how reterritorialization is inextricably tied to the logic of the market, where economic forces must “sing the opera”, but at the end of the day, the survival of artist communities is on the line.

The 798 Art Zone and the Dashanzi Art Festival

The 798 Art Zone is a prominent contemporary art district (艺术区, *yishuqu*) located in Beijing, China. It belongs to the Dashanzi (大山子) area of Jiuxianqiao, Chaoyang District, with a total area of 230,000 square metres. The “Beijing North China Radio United Equipment Factory was originally constructed in the 1950s with help from Germany as a complex of military-industrial factories, also known as the “718 United Factory.” The factory was built in 1952 and put into operation in 1957. The area was part of a larger military base and was later used by state-owned enterprises, such as those in the electronics industry and light manufacturing. In 1964, the North China Radio Joint Equipment Factory was dismantled, with each subsidiary becoming an independent legal entity. The 718 United Factory was revoked and broken down into seven factories. The original division, Third Branch Factory, was renamed the 798 Factory. In the 1980s, a new technological revolution centered on electronic information technology surged forward, while older factories like 798 failed to adapt to market changes. As a result, they gradually entered a semi-abandoned state, with many of their facilities beginning to lie idle.

In 1995, factories in the area encountered a historical opportunity that would change their fates, when the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) relocated from its original site in Wangfujing. Before moving to its new campus in Huajiadi in 2001, the academy spent six years temporarily operating in the nearby Beijing Semiconductor Devices Factory No. 2, more commonly referred to as “Er’Chang,” meaning “Factory No.2.” This period (from 1995–2001) is

known as the Er'Chang Era, which refers to a period of CAFA's occupation of these unproductive factories.¹³⁸

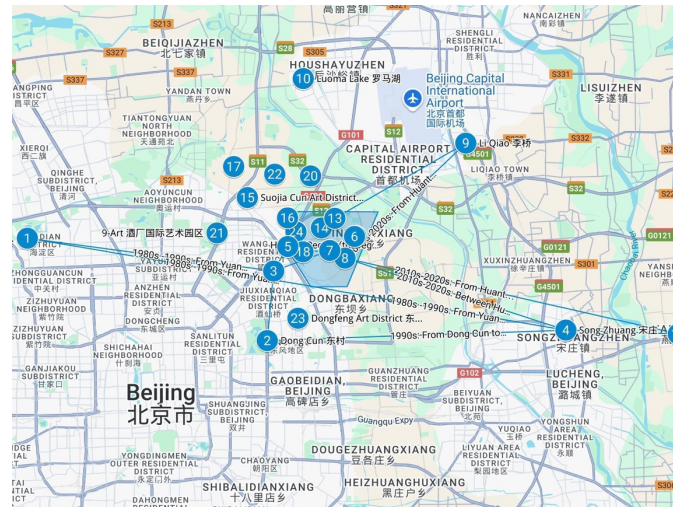


Figure 20. Map of Beijing Artist Communities (See 3 for 798 Art Zone, or Dashanzi).

Also in that year, the Sculpture Department at CAFA was in need of extra workspaces. Sui Jianguo, a sculptor and faculty member from the sculpture department secured a vacant warehouse in the 798 Factory across the road from their campus. Due to the historical transformation of industry and repurposing of state-owned enterprises at the time, many spaces were vacant. From 1995 to 1998, all sculpture faculty and students worked there together. Upon completion of the project, the academy's faculty members chose to stay and later, students of CAFA followed.¹³⁹

What began as a necessary adaptation to city planning pressures on CAFA became a creative solution to artists' space needs. By the early 2000s, artists began moving into the abandoned industrial space, transforming it first into an artist community and then into a thriving cultural hub. Over the years, the 798 has become a key destination for contemporary Chinese art, hosting numerous art exhibitions, international festivals, and cultural events. It has played a significant role in China's rapidly growing contemporary art scene, attracting both domestic and

¹³⁸ Juncheng Dai, Xue Huang, and Huasheng Zhu, "Interpretation of 798: Changes in Power of Representation and Sustainability of Industrial Landscape," *Sustainability* 7, no. 5 (2015): 5282-5303.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

international artists, art workers, curators, and tourists. However, the 798 has also faced the pressures of commercialization, gentrification, and urban redevelopment, which have raised concerns about preserving its community and artistic character. The Dashanzi Art Festival represents the artists' efforts to address these pressures employing publicity and activism.

Back in 1995, when sculptor and former director of CAFA's Department of Sculpture Sui Jianguo brought his colleagues and students with him to Dashanzi, the workshop-turned studio-spaces cost only 0.3 yuan per square metre per day. The department leased approximately 3,000 square metres for their group project. In 2002, when individual artists and art galleries started to move in, and what we now know as the 798 Art Zone began to take shape, their rent was based on 0.6 yuan per square metre per day. In 2012, it became 5.6 to 5.8 yuan per square metre per day, and as high as 11 per square metre per day in the sublease market. This means that a typical, medium-sized gallery in the 798 Art Zone would cost at least 600,000 yuan (approximately 85,700 USD) in annual rent—in that year, the average annual income in Beijing was about 36,000 yuan (approximately 5,100 USD) per person.¹⁴⁰ Within the ten years from 2002 to 2012, the average annual per capita income in Beijing had tripled, while the rent in the 798 Art Zone had increased tenfold, and in some cases even twentyfold.¹⁴¹ What happened?

We need to talk about several stages of the 798 Art Zone in order to put the numbers into perspective: CAFA's Er'chang Era, the artist community, the art venue, and the art district. As we discussed in the previous chapter, unlike other artist communities in Beijing, the 798 is deeply connected to Beijing's industrial past—and to the reform of the state-owned enterprises. Although my research does not focus on the impact of this nationwide reform, which had an influence on tens of millions of Chinese people, it is important to note that the fate of this artist

¹⁴⁰ As of March 2023, still under the impact of the global pandemic, the current rent is around 7 yuan per square metre per day.

¹⁴¹ This exponential growth was not only the result of gentrification alone. According to government statistics in 2022, home prices in Beijing jumped tenfold this century, mostly because after the economic reform, more people choose to invest their life savings in the real estate market. "China's \$1.3 Trillion Housing Crackdown Leaves Few Winners," Bloomberg, last modified December 27, 2022, [\(https://www.bloomberg.com/tosv2.html?vid=&uuid=3a0f051b-ba0b-11ed-980f-426c7079526f&url=L25ld3MvYXJ0aWNsZXNmVmJyAyMi0xMi0yOC8tMS0zLXRyaWxsaW9uLWN0aW5hLWhvdXNpbmctY3JhY2tkb3duLWhhc24tdC1maXhlZC1lbnFmZm9yZGFibGUtchJvcGVydHktbWFya2V0\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/tosv2.html?vid=&uuid=3a0f051b-ba0b-11ed-980f-426c7079526f&url=L25ld3MvYXJ0aWNsZXNmVmJyAyMi0xMi0yOC8tMS0zLXRyaWxsaW9uLWN0aW5hLWhvdXNpbmctY3JhY2tkb3duLWhhc24tdC1maXhlZC1lbnFmZm9yZGFibGUtchJvcGVydHktbWFya2V0).(accessed February 15, 2023)

community, born on the land of the factories in Dashanzi, has been intertwined not only with Beijing's city planning and the state's policymaking, but also with the lives of the factory workers who were laid off during the reform. Revenue generated by the 798 is collected by the property owners, and redistributed not only to cover the art district's operations, infrastructure upgrades, and property services, but also pensions and payouts for retired and laid-off workers. Unfortunately, only a small bit of funding was allocated for former factory workers.¹⁴²

1) CAFA's Er'Chang era (1995–2001): Transition from deterritorialization to reterritorialization, II

After the reform of state-owned enterprises began in the 1980s, a lot of old factories in Beijing, including many in Dashanzi, became vacant. In 1995, city planners asked CAFA to move out of their old campus located in Wangfujing, central Beijing, while their new campus in Huajiadi, Chaoyang District, had not finished construction. Between 1995 and 2001, CAFA rented the idle Beijing Electronic Devices Factory No.2 (Er'chang), which situated at No. 2 Wanhong West Street in Jiuxianqiao, directly west of the 798 area, along the southern road of Jiuxianqiao. During the Er'chang Era, in 1997, when the Department of Sculpture was commissioned a monumental piece commemorating the Lugou Bridge Incident, Sui Jianguo and his colleagues from the department were looking for a place that was spacious to accommodate production of the artwork and living arrangements for the almost-one-hundred people working on it, preferably in proximity to their Er'chang campus. A department staff member managed to track down two vacant workshops in the 798 factory and Sui, born in a working-class family, immediately “felt at home.” During that time, Sui also finished the first large-scale sculpture in his career, the magnified resin dinosaur, titled *Dinosaur—Made in China* (1999). The dinosaur series has become a token of the 798 Art Zone. Sui later reflected that since then he had “more and more

¹⁴² “798 er'shi nian fasheng le shenme 798 艺术区二十年发生了什么?” [What happened to 798 Art Zone in the past twenty years?], last modified June 26, 2021, <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20210626A0A4KD00> (accessed February 15, 2023)

deeply realized the great influence of space on art, especially sculpture,” which prompted him to stay after the monument was finished in 2000.¹⁴³

In 2000, Sui and his colleague at CAFA, sculptor Yu Fan, rented an eighty-square-metre space in Factory 706 in Dashanzi together and converted it into their personal studios. In December of the same year, the economic policies related to the restructuring of state-owned enterprises led to the reorganisation of factories originally coded 700, 706, 707, 718, 797, and 798 into the Beijing Seven Stars (Qixing) Huadian Technology Group Co., Ltd. Countless factory workers lost their jobs while a large number of factory buildings were left vacant. Seven Star Group began leasing out these seemingly outdated spaces and naturally, the management of the corporation and the artist community found each other. At this point, although the spaces rented out were mostly used as studio and living spaces for CAFA-affiliated people, writer Hong Huang and publisher Robert Bernell moved into Dashanzi in 2000, which arguably changed the trajectory of the academy-derived community. Huang Rui, who moved in later in 2002, was quite candid: “The fact that 798 has heating is the main reason it attracted me.” Additionally, “like Hong Huang and Robert Bernell, I was also drawn to the factory’s clean and spacious environment, orderly workers, low rent, and the presence of a factory-operated cafeteria.”¹⁴⁴ In two years, the area known by the code 798 was starting to become a collective term for the artist district in the region and became a new landmark in contemporary Chinese art history.

The 798 as a part of the CAFA’s Er’chang Era only lasted three years, but its impact is profound. It kickstarted the art district that the 798 was going to become. Moreover, it offered a path for generations of the CAFA students to create new artist communities, particularly around their Huajiadi campus. However, at this point, the 798 had not yet transformed into an artist community for several reasons. First, both CAFA and Sui’s time in the 798 were self-contained: they did not make attempts to reach out and build community with other artists, perhaps because their studio was primarily an external working space in addition to their campus. Second, their

¹⁴³ Liu Mingliang, *Beijing 798 Yishuqu—Shichanghua yujing xia de tainye kaocha yu zhuzong* 北京 798 艺术区--市场化语境下的田野考察与追踪 [Beijing 798 Art District – A Field Study and Tracking in the Context of Marketization] (Beijing: Beijing Book Co. Inc., 2014).

¹⁴⁴ “Huang Rui: 798 jiushi wo zui da de zuopin 黄锐: 798 就是我最大的作品” [Huang Rui: the 798 is my biggest artwork], last modified April 14, 2010, <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/news/2010/04-14/2225363.shtml> (accessed April 1, 2023)

gathering in the 798 was not entirely voluntary, but under the requirement of the academy and the department. Lastly, while people from CAFA's Department of Sculpture were occupants there, they were professors and students working as a hierarchical team on the same commissioned project. After the Er'Chang Era, preparations for the 2008 Summer Olympics brought significant change to Dashanzi. During this period, the artist community turned to art activism and global public advocacy in their struggle for survival against Seven Stars Corp and state-led urban reconstruction (to be discussed in next two sections of this part on the 798). Dashanzi has undergone significant changes and has not weathered them as other artist communities have. Songzhuang, for instance (See Chapter One, "Songzhuang Artist Village: Transition from deterritorialization to reterritorialization, I"), is still a top choice for many artists to work and live in, because of its unmatched scale (and a huge amount of resources available, despite rent hikes, controversies and scandals). Dashanzi—nowadays 798 Art Zone—has lost its artist community.

2) The artist community (2001–04)

In 2001, author and media figure Hong Huang and musician Liu Sola moved into the 798. At the end of that year, a founding member of "the Stars," Huang, had returned to China from Japan. Fascinated by the 798's industrial architecture, he immediately decided to sign a lease, even though he had been told he only had thirty-four months in the space, due to an anticipated demolition to construct a mall for electronic products on the land. Huang recalled that, at the time, tenants in the 798 had leases of fewer than three years because, according to the operators' planning, all the factories in the area were to be torn down by 2006 to make way for the construction of the mall, which was set to be completed by 2008, before the Beijing Olympics. This did not stop Huang from drastically renovating his rented space, starting his personal studio in the 798 and bringing the Tokyo Art Gallery with him from Japan in early 2002. The Tokyo Art Gallery became the first foreign gallery to settle in the 798, as part of the "Beijing Tokyo Art Project (BTAP)," run by Tabata Yukihto, and aiming to build bridges among Asian countries' art scenes and introduce them to the world. American Robert Bernell established his publishing agency and bookstore in 798 around the same time, under Sui's recommendation. Bernell, the publisher of the online art magazine *Chinese-art.com* (from 1998 to 2003) and the founder of Timezone 8, an art publisher and bookshop, was excited about the environment and future of the

798. Like Huang, he spread the word about the 798 in his circle, which brought more artists in. Then, photographer Xu Yong (who became another important voice in the 798 at this stage) moved in. He spent half a year renovating the rented workshop: using metal brushes to restore the blurred Cultural Revolution slogans, cleaning the walls with high-pressure water guns, and turning two abandoned ceramic parts workshops into public art spaces— “Shitai Kongjian (798 Space)” and “Bainian Yinxiang (Century Impressions).” More and more artists followed. Among them, were former *China/Avant-Garde* participants, the former couple Xiao Lu and Tang Song, Li Songsong, and Dong Cun Artist Village survivor Cang Xin and his wife Xiang Xiaoli.¹⁴⁵

It was also during this time—because the former Beijing North China Radio United Equipment Factory had been regrouped and the factory complex did not have a sign or even a street number—that people started to refer to the area using the number of one of the factory buildings, the 798.

Because of the common narrative depicting the birth of the 798 Art Zone as a “discovery” by Sui, Huang and/or Bernell, with a focus on its bottom-up assembly, we tend to forget about its owner and operator being an old-brand state-owned enterprise. In 2000, when Sui was seeking to lease his personal studio, under recapitalization from the top, five factories (including the 798 factories in Dashanzi) were restructured again to establish the Qixing (Seven Star) Group. The newborn Qixing Group, still struggling with financial difficulties following state-owned enterprise reforms, desperately needed to obtain liquidity from their vacant factories and workshops. In the early 2000s, their demand for cash flows simultaneously met artists and artworkers’ demand for working (and living) spaces. The only difference was that the Qixing Group’s demand was temporary—because of their plan for constructing the mall—while their tenants’ was not. Former chairman of the board and general manager of the Qixing Group, Wang Yanling, has been often introduced as the founder of the 798. Wang once recalled that in 2002, it was he who led the factory’s decision to rent their spaces only to artists, and 73 art institutions settled in the 798 within the first year of operations. Starting as a manager in one of the factory’s divisions, Wang’s career and reputation grew with the development of the 798.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Liu, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ In 2021, during the pandemic and series of lockdowns around the country, Wang was under investigation by the National Supervisory Commission and the Discipline Inspection Commission with charges of serious violation of laws and disciplines. Wang is likely to be still in custody as of 2023 since no updates can be found.

However, despite the 798's growing spree in 2002, the Qixing Group still planned to transform the buildings into an electronics mall. Huang and Xu, who invested dearly, both financially and emotionally, in their spaces in the 798, decided to start an art festival aiming to gain more recognition and therefore, to keep the 798 from demolition. In an interview from 2010, Huang reminisced:

The 798 was originally just an ideal, and we all knew that this ideal was to be dismantled. I referred to the rise and fall of SoHo in New York City, and I knew that after the 798 had been put on the market, the rest was not my job. Sure enough, it didn't take long for the property management to inform us to shutoff, (because) they had other plans. Rents for workshops kept rising, and artists were asked to leave. It was understandable that only large-scale art institutions could enter due to the increase in the rent threshold. Beijing's land and housing prices had been rising. For an economic institution, it must follow the market. Why should they take care of an art district? But artists are people who really love the 798, and I don't want to see this good ecology broken. So we started to plan the Dashanzi Art Festival to attract the attention of the media and even the international community. If you don't publicize the name of 798, who will come to help you?¹⁴⁷

3) The art venue (2003–2004): Bottom-up assemblage

In Spring 2003, Huang and Xu Yong initiated the “Reconstruction 798” campaign. Xu intended “reconstruction” to refer not only to the physical transformation of the 798 factory space, but also to the potential for the development of the 798 through art—the photographer, who shot *Hutong 101 Portrait* (1989-90, Beijing), had experience in conserving cultural resources through artistic means. Curated by Qiu Zhijie and Zhang Li, this was the first “full-scale” event in the 798, with almost all the artists and galleries in the art district participating by putting on exhibitions and open studios. On its opening day on April 13, 2003, “Reconstruction 798” attracted more than 3,000 visitors. In May 2003, Huang and Xu collaborated with curator Feng Boyi and Shu Yang, and reacted to the SARS outbreak and nation-wide lockdown through their anti-SARS event “Blue Sky Exposure.” It started in the Yizhuang Development Zone and continued in the 798 Space.¹⁴⁸ “Blue Sky Exposure” represented the artist community's

¹⁴⁷ “Huang Rui: 798 jiushi wo zui da de zuopin” [Huang Rui: the 798 is my biggest artwork], *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ “Sars guoqu 17 nian, ‘lantian bu shefang’ xingdong gei dangdai yishu liuxia le naxie yichan? SARS 过去 17 年, ‘蓝天不设防’ 行动给当代艺术界留下了哪些遗产?” [In the past 17 years

aspiration to engage the general public, which they aimed to do through the discussion of the SARs pandemic. These two art events in 2003 became the gateway for the so-far semi-underground artist community to reach out to the public and laid the foundation for the Dashanzi Art Festival (also known as the DIAF, or Dashanzi International Art Festival). “Reconstruction 798” ultimately led to the outbreak of conflict between the owner, Qixing Group, and local artists and art institutions.

In 2004, near the end of their lease periods, artists in the 798 decided to seek justice from a higher authority. The artists entrusted Beijing Municipal People's Congress representative and sculptor Li Xiangqun to submit the “Proposal on the Protection of Buildings and Cultural Industries in the Former 718 United Factory Area” to the Beijing Municipal People's Congress. Huang approached Chen Dongsheng, then a member of the Beijing CPPCC, and proposed the development of the cultural industries at the Beijing CPPCC meeting. Huang admitted that the Dashanzi Art Festival he initiated also had the purpose of expanding the influence of 798 and attracting the attention of the public, and domestic and foreign media. “At first we wanted to call it ‘798 Art Festival,’ but the property management company didn't allow us to use ‘798,’ so we changed it to ‘Dashanzi Art Festival,’” Huang said. Among the different voices within the Qixing Group, former 718 United Factories, and the Beijing Electronic Control Group (which the entire complex belonged to), some people thought that renting factories to artists was “promiscuous.”¹⁴⁹

However, the power of the artist community was undeniable. The DIAF 2004 achieved unprecedented success in the history of contemporary Chinese Art, and creative industries in general. The festival transformed the 798 from an artist community to an art venue. Unlike Yuanmingyuan or Dong Cun Artist Villages in the 1990s, the 798 gradually became “extroverted,” according to Li Xiangqun. Li believed that the 798 had an innate consciousness for display outwardly, with its geographical location being in proximity to the embassy area and up-and-coming neighborhoods. The 798 gradually began to shift from an art creation area to an art trading and exchange area, with new tenants with stronger attachments to the art market

since SARS, what legacy has the “Blue Sky Undefended” operation left for the contemporary art world?], last modified December 12, 2020,

<http://www.artpower100.com/newsitem/278461609> (accessed April 1, 2023)

¹⁴⁹ “Huang Rui: 798 jiushi wo zui da de zuopin” [Huang Rui: the 798 is my biggest artwork], *ibid.*

moving in. The shift from art production to art exhibition and trade was not only social and economic, but architectural. Many of the original Bauhaus-style factory buildings, constructed in the 1950s with East German assistance, featured high ceilings, large north-facing skylights, and a rhythmic structure of sawtooth roofs—ideal for art display. As the site evolved, these spatial features were retained and emphasized, even as layers of its socialist past were partially erased. Artists and curators often whitewashed the walls and scrubbed away faded slogans from the Cultural Revolution, turning spaces once dedicated to industrial labor and ideological education into blank canvases for contemporary art. Yet traces of the past lingered—exposed pipes, industrial beams, and ghost signs sometimes deliberately left visible—creating a layered aesthetic that blurred the boundaries between ruin and revitalization.¹⁵⁰ This architectural palimpsest contributed to 798's emergence as a “display platform” in both a literal and symbolic sense: a site where Chinese contemporary art could be seen, sold, and staged for both local and global audiences.

Themed *Radiance and Resonance/Signals of Time* (光 · 音/光阴), the inaugural DIAF featured approximately thirty events, including three film festivals, nine fixed-location visual art exhibitions (including two photography exhibitions, three painting exhibitions, two multi-media exhibitions, an exhibition related to sound art, and an open-air light installation), three exhibitions related to architecture and/or design, as well as various concerts, sound events, dance performances, and multimedia presentations. Over one hundred works by artists from nine countries, including China, were showcased in the DIAF 2004. Focusing on the use of new media and technologies in art, the art district aimed to become one of the most prominent alternative centres for new media art production. Interestingly, whether because of publicization or documentation, the DIAF 2004 had a strong emphasis on foreign artists and their works, instead of local artists—supposedly internationalizing the event and the conversation.¹⁵¹ This list

¹⁵⁰ Huang Zhuan, “From Factory to Gallery: The 798 Art District,” in *Chinese Contemporary Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 184–187.

¹⁵¹ Huang received an angry backlash from many of his fellow 798 neighbours, as they felt underrepresented during the process even though they were all asked to chip in to make the DIAF 2004 happen. There were accusations that Huang was making this art festival his own and corporatizing it without financial transparency to others. This issue seemed to be resolved in the DIAF 2005 and 2006 after Huang's company officially and legally oversaw the operation. See

included filmmaker Chris Marker, Australian artist Iain Mott, Italian artist Marco Nero Rotelli in collaboration with Filippo Centenari, and French artist Guillaume Paris. Nevertheless, works by Chinese artists, such as Wang Shugang's installation, *The Meaningless Red* (2004), not only stood out, but in many ways defined the terrain. During the run of the art festival from April 24th to May 23rd, Wang directed red spotlights on the factory's tallest 60-metre chimney. Like a red obelisk, the chimney overlooked the precedent scene and crowd with silence and solemnity. Art critic Fu Xiaodong discussed Wang's installation with great passion in her article, "When Art Encounters Economics: A Chronicle of the 'Radiance and Resonance/Signals of Time' Dashanzi Art Festival." Fu wrote:

When night fell, Beijing's deep blue and tranquil sky wrapped around this splash of eerie and profound red hue, with a somewhat surreal touch. The hurried passersby could completely ignore its presence, but as a symbol of spiritual externalization, it compelled people to stop and gaze, leaving them with a sense of wonder. Just as the 798 Art District stood in contrast to the increasingly uniform and materialistic urban life, marked by spiritual alienation and restlessness. For most, art held little practical value in their livelihoods, but the artistic spirit, symbolizing freedom, ideals, and independence, remained detached from worldly matters. Just as Wittgenstein once said, red things would inevitably disappear, but the colour red will endure forever.¹⁵²

Published in *Mei Yuan*, October 2004, Fu's article was one of a handful of scholarly writings on the DIAF published in Chinese journals. It is hard to say how barriers were formed against more careful documentation and discussion of the then-unparalleled art festival on an academic level back in 2004, but from this quote by Fu, we can get a glimpse of the predicament. The art critic metaphorically used the artwork, *The Meaningless Red*, to depict the circumstance of the art district. Fu, like many others, largely romanticized the presence of the 798 as a beacon of freedom, artistic experimentation, and cultural resistance, which in many ways countered the contemporary lifestyles and values of Chinese society. Unsurprisingly, the critic also exercised

"798 zaoyu gengnianqi 798 遭遇更年期" [798 encounters menopause], last modified September 28, 2012, <https://www.zgnfys.com/m/a/nfrw-15765.shtml> (accessed March 10, 2025).

¹⁵² Fu Xiaodong, "Dang yishu zaoyu jingji – Ji Guangyin Guangyin Dashanzi yishujie 当艺术遭遇经济——记‘光·音/光阴’大山子艺术节" [When Art Encounters Economics: A Chronicle of the "Radiance and Resonance/Signals of Time"], *Mei Yuan* 美苑 5 (2004): 47-53.

great care with her word choices. She deliberately chose not to pose either the art festival or the 798 against anything more than “urban life” or “worldly matters.” Intriguingly, even though the colour red in the installation appeared to embody many ideological meanings—especially given the historical past of the site—the Beijinese artist called it “meaningless” in its title, and Fu addressed this only briefly through a quote by Ludwig Wittgenstein and did not go further. However, the colour red has played an important part in Wang Shugang’s art practice. In the later part of the artist’s career, he created multiple series featuring life-sized sculptures of people fully painted in red, including, *Meeting* (2007), which Chinese curator and art critic Feng Boyi commented on, coincidentally helping to make sense of *The Meaningless Red*: “Wang Shugang’s installation transforms the ‘red memory’ into a realistic and somehow vulgar daily life situation. He implicitly reconstructs an everyday life scenario reflecting the transition of the city from red memory to present society.”¹⁵³ Going back to Fu Xiaodong’s analogy between *The Meaningless Red* and the 798, naturally, the question is: by the 2000s, had the 798 reconstructed itself enough to represent this great economic and cultural transition?

4) The art district (2006–present): Commodification and control

Following the great success of the inaugural Dashanzi Art Festival, the second and third DIAF happened in 2005 and 2006. Since 2007, after the official establishment of the 798 Art Zone (endorsed by the municipal government in 2006), the art festival has been taken over by the Beijing 798 Art Zone Development & Management Office, which introduced a bureaucratic system into the 798 and ultimately pushed artists and curators aside. Ironically, the art festival was hence renamed the “798 Art Festival,” as Huang and the artists had initially wanted but faced brutal rejection as the title for the first Dashanzi Art Festival. Nevertheless, Huang’s story in 798 continued, and he remained a key player in the long journey of fighting for the existence of Beijing artist communities.

In 2008, when Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics, the Chinese government claimed to have spent 6.8 billion US Dollars. However, this figure did not include the hundreds of billions of dollars used for building roads, stadiums, subways, and airport terminals. During the

¹⁵³ Exhibition catalogue, “An Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition by Wang Shugang,” <https://wang-shugang.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Flyer.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2023)

preparation period, Beijing designated six key tourist reception areas for the duration of the games. This list included the 798 Art Zone, among other sites with great cultural and historical significance, such as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City. Chen Yongli was the director of the Beijing 798 Art Zone Development & Management Office. This management office was a “working advancement agency,” jointly formed by Qixing Group and the government, responsible for coordinating, guiding, and managing functions for China's most famous contemporary art district. In July 2008, Chen revealed that the government had already invested more than eighty million yuan (approximately 11.7 million US Dollars) in the 798 to improve the environment, install directional systems, and construct four pedestrian streets and ten parking lots. He also estimated that during the Olympics, the daily visitor flow to the 798 would be at least 20,000 to 30,000 people, which turned out to be accurate.¹⁵⁴ Both the economic success and the official government promotion of the 798 were quickly picked up by the capital in the pre-Olympics time. Unlike the grassroots artist communities that were organically formed by groups of artists and artworkers, new art districts in peri-urban Beijing designed by real estate developers for housing artists suddenly emerged. Hence, the reterritorialization of artist communities moved to a different direction, led by opportunist developers with the support from local village governments, or in many cases, specific bureaucrats. It was a new business model for everyone, and it seemed like a new time.

Art Districts in the Post-Olympics Beijing: the *Warm Winter Initiative*

In this section, I consider instances of critical responses by artists to the creative industries as they have grown to threaten the artists' existence and livelihood. Through discussion of the *Warm Winter Initiative* (暖冬计划, *Nuandong Jihua*), this section examines art districts in post-Olympics Beijing and the art activism produced to counter forces of eviction and demolition of

¹⁵⁴ “Chaoguo 50 wei guojia yuanshou aoyun qijian jiang zuoke beijing 798 yishuqu 超过 50 位国家元首奥运期间将作客北京 798 艺术区” [More than 50 heads of state will visit Beijing's 798 Art District during the Olympics], last modified July 3, 2008, <http://news.sohu.com/20080703/n257929253.shtml> (accessed April 18, 2023)

artist communities. The *Warm Winter Initiative* was an activist art campaign and four-part exhibition/performance series initiated in 2009 by artists and cultural workers in response to the impending demolition of art districts in the Chaoyang District of Beijing, where Dashanzi is also located. This project served as a protest against the city's urban redevelopment plans, which threatened the existence of artist communities. The campaign was launched to draw attention to the importance of these communities and to express opposition to the demolitions. The name “Warm Winter” symbolized the artists’ struggle to preserve their spaces during a harsh winter, reflecting their desires to keep the artistic spirit alive despite the threat of displacement. The project included art exhibitions that depicted the impact of the demolitions on both the artists and the broader community. Artists also organised public gatherings and demonstrations to protest the destruction and advocate for the preservation of cultural heritage. The initiative leveraged media outlets and social media platforms to raise awareness, bringing the issue to national and international attention. Although the *Warm Winter Initiative* did not stop the demolitions, it sparked a broader public discourse about the role of art and art districts in urban development. The project became a powerful example of how art can be used as a form of social activism, challenging the forces of commercial development while advocating for the preservation of cultural and creative spaces.

Despite concerns from local communities, on the surface, tourism in Beijing boomed during the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Amid the crowds at tourist attractions and the cheers of the arenas, there was a tendency towards economic and cultural openness and inclusivity, nurtured by policies—as well as a lot of financial expenditure—from the government.

The Olympics represented much more than a sports event. In the 2012 article, “What Did the Olympics Leave China?,” writer and financial commentator Wang Qiang looked back from post-Olympics China and pointed out the harsh truth. Wang indicated that, in 2001 and 2008, there was widespread optimism in China about the potential of hosting the Olympics to achieve major national goals, including unity, economic growth, government reform, and a stronger global image. Many hoped the event would usher in a new era across various sectors. However, in hindsight, these expectations were not realized. Instead of sparking the anticipated changes, China entered a period of stagnation, revealing that the belief in a single sporting event's ability

to transform such a large and complex nation was overly ambitious.¹⁵⁵ According to Wang, from a statistical standpoint, China surpassed Japan in 2010 to become the world's second-largest economy, trailing only the United States. However, in terms of national “soft power,” including economic quality, technological level, per capita income, quality of life, wealth disparity, social welfare, productivity in the global market, and innovation capability, China could not compare to developed countries. Following the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese stock market struggled, and housing prices showed abnormal surges. Increasing inflation and wealth disparity became more and more evident, leading to widespread public complaints.¹⁵⁶

During the Beijing Olympics, there was another aspect that received international attention. To align with international standards, the Chinese government established three designated protest zones to allow the public to express differing opinions during the Olympic period. While authorities received numerous protest applications, no actual protests took place because the official permits were not granted. Then-President Hu Jintao, when meeting with reporters from various countries before the Olympics, also stated that after the Olympics, China would continue comprehensive reforms, including political reforms. Meanwhile, unprecedented attention was focused on whether the Beijing Olympics would impact political reforms in China, both domestically and abroad. Some Western commentators were concerned that the Olympics’ success would reinforce the authoritarian nature of Chinese politics, while many hoped that the Olympics would accelerate political reforms, making the government more open and transparent. Though the Beijing Olympics presented an opportunity for further reforms within China, it's challenging to imagine that a global event like the Olympics could promptly instigate substantial political shifts and the introduction of democracy in a country as vast as China.¹⁵⁷ The reality is that in post-Olympics China, social tensions and the public's dissatisfaction with the government have not decreased; in fact, they have increased and intensified. Various group conflicts resulting from issues such as forced land seizures, natural disasters, and environmental pollution have

¹⁵⁵ Wang Qiang, “Aoyun liugei Zhongguo shenme?” 奥运留给中国什么? [What did the Olympics leave China] *The New York Times China*, August 3, 2012.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Zheng Yongnian, who serves as the Director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore, expressed this perspective shortly after the Beijing Olympics concluded, suggesting that the belief that the Olympics could drive significant change in China was overly optimistic.

become more frequent. The *Warm Winter Initiative* happened against this backdrop in winter 2009.

During the pre-Olympics years, the capital-led art district became a new cultural phenomenon after the official endorsement of the 798 Art Zone. People wanted to participate in the process, including the real estate developers, local township bureaucrats, and artists. In the process, the Chaoyang District evolved into the epicentre of Beijing's art scene. The emergence of the 798 and the thriving contemporary art market around 2005 drew artists and art enthusiasts from across China and around the world. Large and small art districts sprang up rapidly, covering the area between the Airport Expressway and the Fifth Ring Road. Particularly in the Cuigezhuang and Jinzhan Townships, over twenty art districts emerged within just five years, housing more than a thousand artists.

Some of these art districts formed organically when artists sought refuge from the increasingly expensive, commercial, and touristy 798, in search of more remote, peaceful, and conducive environments for their creative work. Subsequently, developers recognized the business potential in these districts. They signed land lease contracts with nearby villages, spanning from twenty to fifty years, and constructed extensive artist studios while actively seeking tenants. In order to attract more artists and businesses, the developers often waived the rent for established artists to boost popularity and attract other tenants to move to their emerging art districts. Well-known artists often entered into agreements with the developers, requiring the artists to plan events in the art districts to assist in attracting investment. According to Huang, this was the usual pattern for constructing art districts in China: developers and local authorities invited renowned artists to serve as consultants, leveraging their fame, appeal, and credibility with the hope of rapidly boosting the development. However, when faced with sudden demolition and relocation, these artists found themselves not only losing their own professional resources but also facing reputation-related dilemmas. Their public involvement in such projects, initially seen as a mark of prestige, could later be viewed negatively—either as a sign of complicity in the destruction or as an inability to protect their own spaces. This left them

grappling with the potential damage to their public image and credibility within the artist community.¹⁵⁸

The developers of art districts comprised a diverse mix of cultural and design companies, as well as local village residents. Initially, their actions received implicit approval or support from local township and village governments. For instance, in Cuigezhuang Township in the Chaoyang District, conspicuous signs were erected near the Caochangdi Art District, bearing the name “Cuigezhuang Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster Zone.” During the opening ceremony of the 008 International Art District in 2008, leaders from Jinzhan Township participated. In October 2009, Li Jiemin, the Deputy Party Secretary of Jinzhan Township, stated in an interview with Beijing Television that the local government would create a more favorable environment to attract more artists in order to develop in the area, particularly the artist-concentrated 008 Art District.

Art districts, typically located in the peri-urban areas, are often the first to face urban land expansion. From an economic perspective, when artists move in, the art market flourishes, leading to an increase in land value. This, in turn, motivates the government and developers to consider further ways to capitalize on the land, such as upscale housing or commercial uses.¹⁵⁹ In July 2009, the Chaoyang district government of Beijing initiated a meeting to promote “urban-rural integration” through land reservation. Essentially, it involved transforming 26.2 square kilometres of land in the urban-rural interface by demolishing housing and relocating people, reserving the land for future uses. In contrast to typical urban eviction incidents, in this case, artists did not own housing in the art districts, they were tenants. Artists had prior long-term agreements with the local government and property developers, allowing them to lease in the art district for three years or more. This resulted in conflict between artists residing in the district

¹⁵⁸ Li Yanhong and Lin Fan, “Wenhua ziben, chuanbo fuquan yu ‘yishujia’ dushi kongjian kangzheng: dui J shi yishuqu chaiquan jiti weiquan xingdong de yanjiu” 文化資本, 傳播賦權與藝術家都市空間抗爭: 對 J 市藝術區拆遷集體維權行動的研究 [Cultural Capital, Media Empowerment, and Artists Urban Space Resistance: A Study of Collective Rights Protection Actions in J City's Art District Demolition], *Communication & Society* 傳播與社會學刊 26 (2013): 33-73.

¹⁵⁹ I will further discuss the term art district (艺术区, *yishu qu*) in the next chapter, especially in relation to the word *qu* (區, district), which denotes urban districts in China's municipal governance system and carries institutional and spatial connotations tied to the urban.

and developers seeking their swift eviction. It is important to note that contemporary Chinese eviction processes are intricate due to the involvement of multiple stakeholders. In this case, the government provided substantial eviction subsidies to developers and residents to ensure smoother eviction procedures. Developers, acting as intermediaries for these subsidies, aimed to remove residents in a cost-effective manner to claim substantial eviction compensation from the government. This led to developers resorting to coercive and sometimes violent tactics, such as cutting off essential utilities, to expel artist tenants. In response, the artist communities in the Chaoyang District joined together to resist eviction and seek fair compensation.¹⁶⁰

Only when the eviction order was issued, did artists discover that the houses they had rented for three, ten, twenty, or even thirty years were actually illegal constructions.¹⁶¹ The agreements they had with the art districts were not legally protected, and the developers claimed they would not provide any compensation. In addition to 008 Art District and Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District, several other art districts were also facing eviction and demolition, including Dongying Art District, Suojia Cun Art District, Jiangu Art District, Feijia Cun, Cao Chang Di, Naizifang, and more than a dozen other art districts. Artists who were unwilling to vacate their spaces quickly faced a harsh winter with no water, electricity, or heating, and forced demolitions. On November 28, 2009, a demolition team entered the Chuangyi Zhengyang for a forced eviction; on December 4, the entire art district experienced power outages, water cuts, and heating shutdowns. On December 9, the 008 was completely without water.

In Naizifang Art District, twenty days after sculptor Chen Wenling received the evacuation notice from the art district, his studio suddenly lost both water and electricity. “The pipes just stopped working—it felt like my blood vessels were frozen,”¹⁶² Chen said. Due to Chen Wenling's financial standing and influence, the landlord did not further pressure him. However, other young artists nearby were not so fortunate. Chen recalled that next door, a young

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ In many Beijing artist communities, rent contracts are often deemed illegal by the government because they operate in a grey area, where non-commercial land is transformed into real estate.

¹⁶² “Beijing chengxiang jiehebu yishuqu jiang chaichu, yishujia bei duanshui duandian” 北京城乡结合部艺术区将拆除, 艺术家被断水断电 [The artist community in the urban-rural fringe of Beijing is set to be demolished, and artists have had their water and electricity cut off], *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan* 中国新闻周刊 6 (2010).

couple's studio was forcibly shut down on New Year's Day, with their iron gate destroyed and utilities cut off. Chen described it as a "catastrophe" for the couple, who had invested all their savings into the studio. The police classified the incident as an economic dispute and declined to intervene.¹⁶³

In 2006, Xiao Lu rented a 300-square-metre space in the Dongying Art District after her renowned artwork *Dialogue* was sold for 2.31 million yuan at the China Guardian Auction. Xiao was assured that the art district management had signed a twenty-year lease with the village, which prompted her to invest over 300,000 yuan in renovations to adapt the space for her studio. However, it lasted only two years. On December 7, 2009, Xiao was forced to pack up and relocate to the Xiedao West Art District. Shortly after settling in, she received an eviction notice for the new space as well. "I moved, and again it was the wrong place," she remarked in the interview.¹⁶⁴



Figure 21. Wu Yuren and artists of the 008 Art District, *Untitled*, performance, 2009.

On December 20, 2009, the first performance art project against the eviction order was enacted. At the entrance of the 008 Art District, over thirty artists stood in a row in the freezing cold of minus five degrees Celsius, each holding a brick they had picked up from the ruins of the demolition and remained motionless for an hour. "We want to remind you that, first and foremost, this is a human being, someone with rights and dignity,"¹⁶⁵ said the initiator of this

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Miandui baoli qiangzhi chaiqian beijing 20 ge yishuqu canjia 'nuan dong' xingdong 面对暴力强制拆迁 北京 20 个艺术区参加'暖冬'行动" [Faced with violent forced demolitions, 20 art

action, artist Wu Yuren. The brick performance garnered widespread media coverage, drawing attention to the plight of the artists.

Zhang Wei and Yu Gao, an artist couple who were determined to hold onto the Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District, sought out Wu Yuren, who expressed his interest in organising similar art rights actions. In fact, Zhang Wei and Yu Gao first arrived at Chuang Yi Zhengyang as prominent artists, and had lived and worked there rent-free, as did Yu Gao's sister and brother-in-law, well-known artists Yu Hong and Liu Xiao Dong. According to Yu Gao, they had received offers of special treatment from the art district, offering them temporary studios for one year if they followed the eviction orders. They rejected the offer and started to talk to artist residents of Chuangyi Zhengyang about an art show that could protect their rights.¹⁶⁶

The *Warm Winter Initiative* gradually took shape, and Xiao Ge, who had participated in curating the Venice Biennale, was invited as the curator. On December 29, 2009, the first stop of the *Warm Winter Initiative* began at Chuangyi Zhengyang, featuring various artworks in various media, including performances, sculptures, installations, and paintings. At the entrance of the art district, Zhang Wei's work *Sheep Totem* (2009) featured two rows of suspended sheep figures against a backdrop of prominent black characters on white banners that read: "Power outage, heating cut, intolerable injustice." Using the sheep to symbolize the defenceless artists and their situation and combining this iconography with an expression of public outrage through the bold black-and-white text, the critical and confrontational nature of the artwork was unmistakable. Also in Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District, artist Hei Yang's performance *Resist Eviction and Demolition to Death* (2009) exhibited a much stronger and more pronounced sense of resistance and cruelty. During the performance, the artist, wearing nothing but his red underwear, lied in front of a bulldozer to prevent it from entering the art district. On Hei Yang's bare chest, in bold letters "*si ke*", meaning "resist till death," was written. It is also important to point out that the act bore a great resemblance to the image of students blocking military tanks during the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident.¹⁶⁷

districts in Beijing participate in the "Warm Winter" operation], last modified December 29, 2009.

<http://www.99ys.com/home/1970/01/01/08/83690.html> (accessed May 5, 2023)

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Li and Lin, *ibid*.



Figure 22. Zhang Wei, *Sheep Totem*, installation, 2009.



Figure 23. Hei Yang, *Resist Eviction and Demolition to Death*, performance, 2009.

At the end of the day, Xiao Lu executed a performance that ignited nine small fires amidst the ruins of the Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District, an act she described as a response to the “bitter cold” atmosphere of the site. This spontaneous performance, created for the Warm Winter Initiative, aimed to protest the sudden and disruptive demolition of Beijing’s Chaoyang district art districts as winter set in. According to Xiao, the works created by artists participating in the *Warm Winter Initiative* shared a raw, impassioned quality, marked by an unrefined, almost primal energy—“rough, natural, filled with the scent of gunpowder and the sound of revolution.” Xiao is no stranger to controversial art; in 1989, during the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, she famously fired two shots at her own installation, *Dialogue* (1989).¹⁶⁸ This act directly

¹⁶⁸ While Xiao’s *Dialogue* (1989) is often regarded as China’s first major performance art work, earlier, less-documented actions anticipated the medium’s emergence. In the mid-1980s, art students and collectives in cities such as Hangzhou and Guangzhou staged ephemeral actions, collaborative drawing events, and environmental installations that blurred the boundaries

contributed to the abrupt closure of the exhibition, which has since been regarded as a defining moment in the history of Chinese contemporary art. Twenty years later, her studio in Beijing's Dongying Art District faced a similar fate, threatened with closure due to “urban planning and land reserve needs.” Based on her participation in the *Warm Winter Initiative*, Xiao reflected on the complexities of the current socio-political landscape, noting that, in some ways, the pressures for Chinese artists—while not as overtly ideological as those of the 1980s—had been complicated by the intertwining of commercial interests and economic forces.¹⁶⁹



Figure 24. Xiao Lu, *Nine Piles of Fire*, performance, 2009.

Prior to her involvement in the *Warm Winter Initiative*, Xiao Lu described herself as “an artist who is distanced from such social activism,” a stance that can be partly attributed to the backlash she faced following her provocative actions at the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. Initially, her participation in the initiative was driven by anger over the developers’ decision to cut off water and electricity to the art district. However, as she became more engaged, Xiao Lu began to realize that her involvement was bringing her closer to broader societal issues.¹⁷⁰

between performance, installation, and protest. By 1988, more explicit body-based gestures appeared in gallery contexts—for example, Zhang Nian’s *The Birth of a New Man*, in which he wrapped himself in gauze and lay motionless in a coffin-like box during a China/Avant-Garde pre-show event. Informal live-action experiments by Tang Song and Xiao Lu in private studios likewise presaged the performative strategies that would crystallize in 1989. For further discussion of these proto-performance practices, see Thomas Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2006).

¹⁶⁹ “Miandui baoli qiangzhi chaiqian, Beijing 20 ge yishuqu canjia ‘nuandong’ xingdong” [Faced with violent forced demolitions, 20 art districts in Beijing participate in the “Warm Winter” operation], *ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Following her participation in the initiative, Xiao has increasingly focused on the theme of violent urban demolition and the control of communities in Beijing, a subject she continues to explore through both her art and activism, as seen in works such as the installation and video *Tear Down This Wall* (2022) and the installation *Razed* (2024).

The *Warm Winter Initiative* made its second stop in the 008 Art District located in the village of Jinzhan. Subtitled *Resolve*, it had reached a stage where the artists were eager to find a resolution, hopefully through an official channel, where the government could step in, like what happened in the 798. More artists and activists from neighbouring art districts in Chaoyang District joined the initiative. In the performance, *The Quilt Project*, artists of the 008, along with art historian and critic Li Xianting who had come from Songzhuang, wrapped in military green quilt, stood in the bitter cold of heavy snow for one hour. They positioned themselves along the perimeter wall of the demolished art district, forming a human wall with their bodies. The military green attire contrasted starkly with the white snow, creating a powerful juxtaposition between the demolished wall and the human wall. The 798 pioneer Sui Jianguo placed a sculpture of a colossal, monumental skull on a pile of bricks in the 008—among the art pieces displayed and performed during the *Warm Winter Initiative*, there seemed to be a common linkage between the demolition and death. Many of the artworks appeared simplistic because of their short preparation period, but they were straight from the artists' hearts, and they showed determination in a harsh and primitive way: the “death” was not the death of their home or art but exemplified their willingness to fight until their last breath.

Another artwork that received a lot of media coverage in the *Warm Winter Initiative* was a performance piece by Huang. The artist dressed in a Yin-Yang robe imprinted with “Chai-na (拆-那)” on the black side and “China” on the white side, holding a Bagua umbrella while standing on a Yin-Yang diagram. “Chai-na,” meaning “demolish that” in Mandarin Chinese, is homophone for China. This alias for China, which teases the brutal reality of the society, gained popularity on Chinese social media around 2010. The performance, titled *Chai-na/China*, was part of a series by Huang that had been ongoing since 2005, all bearing the same name. However, the rest of the series are silkscreen and oil-on-canvas works, featuring depictions of wall surfaces paired with silkscreen prints of photographs with significant Chinese cultural connotations, with “Chai-na” and “China” marked in the centre of the images.



Figure 25. Huang Rui, *Chai-na/China*, performance, 2010.

Drawing inspiration from his activism against the demolition in 798, the *Chai-na/China* series was imbued with the artist's sense of anger and frustration. The performance introduced Yin Yang and Bagua into this series. It was characterized by its simple colour scheme, consisting of only black and white. The black and white here also could represent something more figurative. On January 12th, during the *Warm Winter Initiative* event in the 008, some unidentified individuals in black clothing arrived and tore down the exhibition posters, defaced the paintings on the walls, and engaged in physical conflicts with the artists on the scene.¹⁷¹ The colour black, or *hei* in Chinese, is commonly used when describing criminal and violent personnel and activities, namely *hei she hui* (gang) and *hei er shi li* (criminal forces). *Hei yi ren* (men in black clothing) has also become a key term in many demolition incidents for the often-organised and violent behavior of demolition crews, and their intentional identity-less appearance. Given the high-profile involvement of many hatchet men in the eviction process prior and during the *Warm Winter Initiative*, the artist's decision to place the "Chai-na" character on the black side of his robe was not coincidence, though the colour black could represent more than just the hatchet men, but also what had given them the power. Moreover, the

¹⁷¹ "Yishuqu chaiqian: Yong yishu duikang baoli 艺术区拆迁：用艺术对抗暴力" [Art District Demolition: Using Art to Fight Violence], *Nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报, January 13, 2011.

artist holding an umbrella and standing still in the white dot of the Yin Yang diagram appeared to be playing with the idea of balance but also seclusion—were the artists standing still in their white dot that was their artist communities, surrounded by darkness?

On January 21st, the third part of the *Warm Winter Initiative* occurred, with the theme *Wen Wu Shuang Quan* (“Cultivating Both Culture and Physical Fitness”), and featuring a sports event. The event reached a climax when Ai Weiwei showed up, and later made a generous donation.¹⁷² After coordination between the Jinzhan Village government and the developers, on January 23, 2010, the township government promised to compensate the artists with five million yuan. However, whether the artists could successfully receive the compensation was still uncertain. On February 4th, the fourth part of the Warm Winter Initiative, taking shape in an exhibition titled *I Don't Believe* took place in the Dongying Art District, expressing the artists’ doubts in the deal they had reached with the township. That same night, the Dongying Art District was demolished. Also on the same day, a bulldozer entered the Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District, leading to a confrontation between the artists and the demolition party.

Shortly after Chinese New Year, 2010, on the night of February 22, over a hundred masked assailants, armed with machetes and clubs, launched a nocturnal attack on the Chuangyi Zhengyang’s remaining tenants. Liu Yi, Wu Yuren, and several other artists were assaulted, with some suffering severe injuries. Following the incident, the district mayor of Chaoyang arrived at the scene and demanded increased security and expedited negotiations with the artists for compensation. Soon after, local public security authorities arrested eighteen individuals involved in the attack, as well as those involved in its orchestration behind the scenes. After several rounds of negotiations, on March 22, twenty-eight tenant artists from the 008 reached a compensation agreement of 7.01 million Chinese Yuan with the developers and subsequently relocated from the art district. Artists from the Chuangyi Zhengyang also received compensation from the developers. Tenants in some other art districts in the area, such as Xie Dao Xi and 95 Changdian, gradually reached agreements with their developers. Thus, the four-month-long struggle of artists defending their communities reached an end.¹⁷³

¹⁷² While Ai's participation highlighted his occasional engagement with the rest of artist communities, the focus remained on the artists who were directly impacted by the demolition. It is worth noting that Ai's studios—his Shanghai studio in Malu and his Beijing studios in Caochangdi—would later face similar demolition pressures in 2011 and 2018, respectively.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

In Li Yanhong and Lin Fan's article "Cultural Capital, Media Empowerment, and Artists Urban Space Resistance: A Study of Collective Rights Protection Actions in J City's Art District Demolition," the authors point out that the success of the *Warm Winter Initiative* was due to its deliberate approach to the media, which ultimately directed pressure from public opinion. According to Li and Lin, one reason why protest artworks gain media attention to begin with is because they directly fulfill the media's need for powerful visual content. 2009–2010 was a time when new media was posing increasing challenges to traditional outlets and print media had started to focus more on visual news. Images were playing a growing role in news reporting, and on the Internet, the use of visuals was becoming commonplace. Consequently, the media was showing a preference for covering events or subjects that could be effectively communicated visually. The creative and impactful forms of art presented at exhibitions served as a valuable "visual supplement" for the media. However, it is important to note that the mere existence of artistic forms, even when they possess creativity and generate conflict, does not guarantee media coverage. In this case, the ongoing media interest in the protest art was also connected to the specific protest campaign they had created, known as the *Warm Winter Initiative* or *Warm Winter – Art Districts Exchange Program*. This form of protest aligned perfectly with the media's underlying desire for a media event. As a well-established art exhibition and a series of pre-planned exhibition and exchange activities across four art zones during a set timeframe, the *Warm Winter Initiative* possessed the fundamental attributes required to become a media event. This structured approach provided the media with ample opportunities for preparation and interviews, offering rich sources of news content. Additionally, the timing of the exhibition fit the media's need for freshness in reporting. Furthermore, as a mature event format, exhibitions typically have a stable organisational structure, ensuring a consistent and reliable source of information for the media. This fulfills the media's regular requirement for reliable news sources. The initiative had five core organisers, who became the main subjects of media interviews, regularly offering interpretations of the events and the artistic expressions presented at the exhibitions to the media. In particular, Xiao Ge, responsible for media relations, was highly skilled at providing up-to-date information. She and her team produced "Warm Winter Updates" and routinely supplied news to prominent media outlets, such as The Beijing News,

Looming overhead is a massive mechanical claw operated by red-helmeted bureaucratic figures, who issue commands like “先把这几个搞艺术的抓下去！” (“First take down those art people!”) and “对对，拆迁钉子户！” (“Yes, yes — demolition holdouts!”). Their uniform appearance and elevated position satirize the dehumanizing, industrial nature of urban development forces. Meanwhile, below them, artists respond with varied identities and resistance: one shouts, “我们不是钉子户！” (“We are not holdouts!”), while another corrects, “我们是文化创意产业！” (“We are the cultural and creative industry!”). Others self-identify by their creative roles: “我拍纪录片的！” (“I’m filming a documentary!”) and “我是搞行为艺术的！” (“I do performance art!”). These voices emphasize the diversity and legitimacy of the artistic community, portraying them not as obstacles to progress but as cultural producers whose work has social value.

The cartoon itself becomes a media artifact, reinforcing the idea that the Warm Winter Initiative was not just an act of resistance, but a well-structured media event. It demonstrates how protest art offered the kind of visually compelling, narratively rich material that could fulfill the media’s increasing demand for visual news content during the rise of new media around 2009–2010. The figure of the documentarian and performance artist underscores the protesters’ strategic engagement with media, suggesting that the artists were not only resisting through art, but also consciously shaping their portrayal in public discourse.

Artist	Title	Medium	Date and Location
Wu Yuren and artists of the 008 Art District	<i>Untitled</i>	Performance	December 20, 2009. 008 Art District, Chaoyang District, Beijing.
Zhang Wei	<i>Sheep Totem.</i>	Installation	December 29, 2009. Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District, Chaoyang District, Beijing.
Hei Yang	<i>Resist Eviction and Demolition to Death.</i>	Performance	December 29, 2009.

			Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District, Chaoyang District, Beijing.
Xiao Lu	<i>Nine Piles of Fire</i>	Performance	December 29, 2009. Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District, Chaoyang District, Beijing.
Artists from the 008 Art District and other Chaoyang art districts, and Li Xianting	<i>Quilt Project</i>	Performance	January 12, 2010. 008 Art District, Chaoyang District, Beijing.
Sui Jianguo	<i>Untitled</i>	Sculpture	January 12, 2010. 008 Art District, Chaoyang District, Beijing.
Huang Rui	<i>Chai-na/China</i>	Performance	January 12, 2010. 008 Art District, Chaoyang District, Beijing.

Table 3. Table of selected artworks and performances from the *Warm Winter Initiative* discussed in Chapter Two.

The *Warm Winter Initiative* emerged as both a product of transition and a site of conflict within the broader context of Beijing's evolving creative industries. The project responded to an opportunistic effort by developers and local governments to capitalize on the growing global recognition of contemporary Chinese art and its associated artists—and demonstrated the sense of belonging they felt in spaces created under this model. On the other hand, this commercialization of art and culture clashed with state-led urbanization policies and gentrification, as exemplified by the forced eviction and demolition of artist communities. In this context, the destruction of these artist communities and art districts became more than just a physical displacement—it represented a broader struggle for artists' autonomy, symbolizing the ongoing battle over the independence and communality in a city undergoing rapid transformation.

Through a comparison of the Dashanzi Art Festival and the *Warm Winter Initiative*, it becomes clear that while reterritorialization efforts, driven by both the state and capital, have taken various forms over time, the success of the (physical) preservation of the 798 Art Zone may never be replicated. Although the wave of new media, digital platforms, and a broader audience following the Beijing Olympics provided artists with powerful tools to gain visibility and assert their voices, fostering new forms of activism and alliance among artist communities in Beijing, this increased visibility has not been without consequences. Since 2008, growing censorship, evictions, demolitions, and even physical violence toward artist communities and their members have become widespread and systematic, as China has not gained more political openness, contrary to what many had hoped before the 2008 Summer Olympics. The continued demolition of artist communities underscores a growing divide between the market-driven interests of urban development and the cultural significance of these spaces.

In this climate, the once-promising possibilities for organic gathering and activism within Beijing's art districts have been undermined, as the increasing commercialization of the creative industries continues to overshadow the original spirit of artistic autonomy. The case of the *Warm Winter Initiative* illustrates a fundamental tension between art as a tool for social critique and its growing entanglement with market and centralized political forces, raising important questions about the future of art activism in China. As the state's grip on both urban development and freedom of expression has tightened since Xi Jinping's inauguration in 2013, the struggle for artistic freedom and the preservation of artist communities—often threatened by gentrification and censorship—remains an ongoing challenge. The evolution and migration of Beijing's artist communities thus serves as a critical lens through which we can understand the broader dynamics at play in Chinese art history and beyond, where the intersection of culture, capital, and politics creates both opportunities and obstacles for artists seeking to push the boundaries of the status quo.

At the same time, while more prominent artists, such as Ai, can still leverage their fame through activism, many have become increasingly cautious over the years, aware that speaking out can position them as targets in a political and economic environment that is less tolerant of dissent. For lesser-known artists without fame or financial resources, the struggle to find a platform for their work has become even more difficult, with limited access to institutional support or public spaces to showcase their art. In the following chapter, I will explore the case

study of the unterritorialized artist community 1005, tracing its formation, evolution, and eventual demolition. I will also examine the emerging artists who inhabited the space, focusing on their lives and work. Additionally, this chapter will investigate the unterritorialized as an alternative form of resistance to reterritorialization within the context of artist communities.

Chapter Three – Formation, Fortune and Fate of the Unterritorialized: The 1005

The occurrence of the unterterritorialized

The last chapter, “The Rise of Reterritorialization: State and Capital led development of artist communities and art districts in China in the 2000s and 2010s,” uses Dashanzi as an example to examine art districts in Beijing and the art activism that was born there. It took a close look at reterritorialized artist-communities-turned art districts around the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. I conceptualised these shifts as a practice of reterritorialization, representing efforts from both state and capital to localize the concept of the creative industries in China through possessing and regulating artist communities.

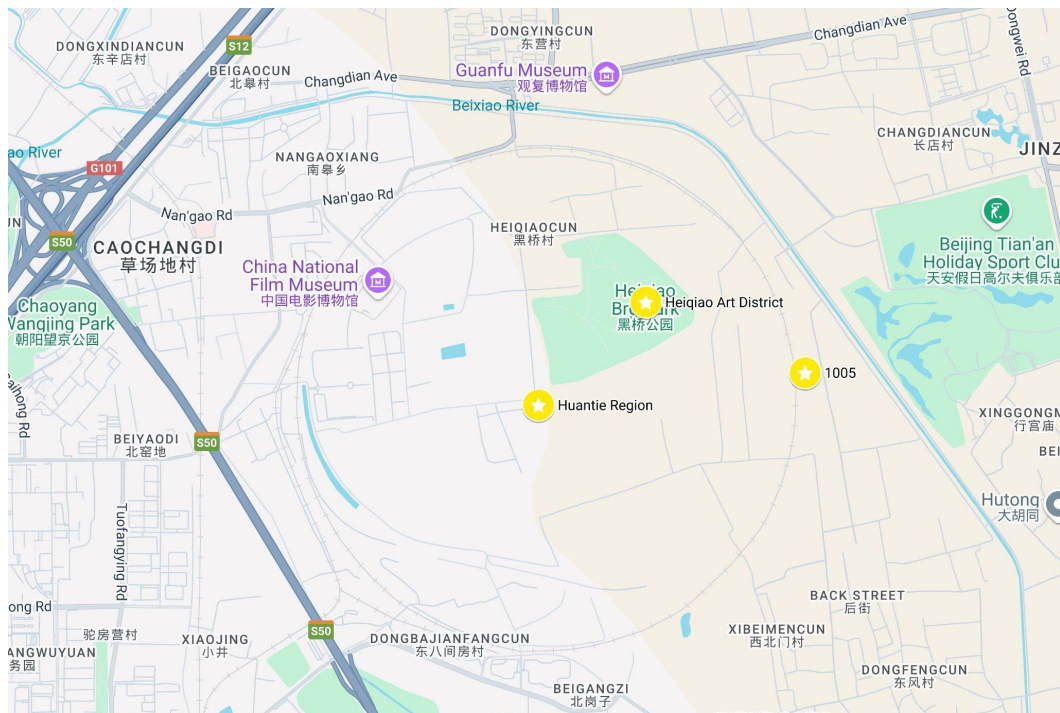


Figure 27. Map of the Huantie (环铁, Circular Railway) region.

While growing gentrification and censorship came with the 798 Art Zone in Dashanzi, which in many ways damaged its artist community, the financial success and its international recognition continued to provide creative nourishment and inspiration to other artist communities around it in Chaoyang District, Beijing. Many artists chose to work and stay in the adjacent Huantie region in the 2000s, most notably in the Cuige Zhuang Township, which once gathered

many capital-led, developer-designed artist communities. However, after the *Warm Winter Initiative* (the 2009–10 art districts protection campaign and exhibition series), most of the more than twenty art districts radiating outward from the 798 Art Zone have long since ceased to exist.¹⁷⁵ The series of demolitions that occurred in the early 2010s epitomize the municipal district's decade-long eastward expansion plan to urbanize the periphery of Beijing, while also holding artist communities on a tighter leash. It was at this threshold that the process of the *unterritorialization* began to affect artist communities—by which I refer to artists who, excluded by the forces of reterritorialization, refuse passive displacement and instead initiate new territorial practices to counter dominant spatial reordering. Building on Deleuze and Guattari's framework of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, I use the term “unterritorialized” to describe those rendered outside formal systems of order yet engaged in their own place-making and communal invention.

In this chapter, I seek to capture the unterritorialized—the excluded, the uncontainable, and those who resisted the reterritorialization of their bodies and works by both the state and capital.¹⁷⁶ Dispersed throughout villages in peri-urban Beijing, these artist communities offer a different condition for understanding the art scene in China today. This chapter, “Formation, Fortune and Fate of the Unterritorialized: The 1005” looks into the unterritorialized artist communities. The case study, based on my field trip and interviews conducted from 2021-2022, will focus on an artist community known as “1005,” which once sat at the junction of the

¹⁷⁵ Such as Suojia Cun Art District, Sunhe Art District, Naizifang Art District, 008 International Art District, Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District, Changdian No. 95 Art District, Xiedao West Art District, Dongying Art District, Huantie Art District, Beigao Art District, and etc.

¹⁷⁶ Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*—a figure who is excluded from the political community yet still subjected to its power—resonates with my use of the term “unterritorialized.” Both describe forms of exclusion that reveal the underlying operations of sovereign power. However, unlike Agamben's ontological and universalized subject, the *unterritorialized* in this dissertation refers to artist communities shaped by and responding to the specific socio-political dynamics of urban redevelopment in contemporary China. Rather than being passively abandoned, these artists actively contest the conditions of their exclusion, seeking new forms of communal belonging and spatial agency. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Heiqiao, Jinzhan, and Dongba villages in the peri-urban Chaoyang district of Beijing.¹⁷⁷ Through the case study, I ask the following questions: How did the artists of 1005 position themselves socially within the broader landscape of artist communities? How did they articulate their artistic vision in response to more “established” artist communities? How did the demolition of 1005 happen and how did it change the paths of young, emerging artists? I also discuss the artist community as a “utopian” space for belonging, creativity, and mutual support, as well as the exchange of knowledge, and the exclusivity and gender hierarchy within the community.

The Huantie region and the Heiqiao Art District in the 2010s

In the northeast corner of Beijing, there is a circular area enclosed by a railway, known as the Huantie, or “Circular Railway” region. It was part of the Circular Testing Ground of the National Railway Testing Centre, used for testing the latest national railway and subway vehicles. Established in 1958, it has a circumference of nine kilometres and is the only comprehensive railway testing base in China—and the only one in Asia. However, as locomotive speeds have increased, the circular testing ground can no longer fully meet the experimental requirements for locomotives. Hence, the railway ring had gradually been abandoned between the 2000s–10s. During this time, many of the buildings in the region—old warehouses used for storing goods for railway transport and newly built studios—became attractive prospects for artists, surrounded by wasteland and ample space for further expansion. After the 798 Art District became saturated and gentrified, the geographical advantage of being adjacent to the 798, along with low rents and abundant space, led to the formation of numerous new artist communities in the northwest Huantie region, particularly around Cuige Zhuang, in the 2000s. Beginning in 2009, alongside the series of demolitions which led to the *Warm Winter Initiative*, the Huantie region saw a migration of artists and artist communities from its northwest (including Cuige Zhuang and Cao Chang Di), to its centre-east inside the circular railway, which is mostly occupied by the Heiqiao Village.

¹⁷⁷ The first names of interviewees from 1005 and Luoma Lake have been anonymized in my case study, in order to protect the artists, whose approaches to land use and space were subversive and rebellious.

My examination of Huantie illustrates the migrations and boundaries between artist communities within this region which give birth to the unterritorialized, including the 1005 artist community. It provides a background to understand the unterritorialized geographically and historically, especially through its connection with the Heiqiao Art District and Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in the 2010s. It also pays attention to the local development of surrounding industries driven by artist communities. These resources have become a key reason for the gathering of artist communities.

The Heiqiao Art District was gradually formed in the mid-to-late-2000s, following other art districts in the Huantie region whose proximity to Dashanzi and CAFA, coincided with a booming domestic art market. In 2007, some CAFA students and artists from other regions came to Heiqiao to rent rooms in houses and warehouses in the village. Local villagers saw this business opportunity, converted warehouses and nursery gardens into studio spaces, and rented them to artists for fifty to sixty cents per square metre per day. The artist community in Heiqiao boomed after the demolitions started in the northwest Huantie from 2009 to the early 2010s, when many artists turned to Heiqiao as an alternative, resulting in its rapid growth. It soon became the “the largest spontaneously formed art district in Beijing.”¹⁷⁸ Despite demolition rumours in Heiqiao, the artist community remained unaffected by the wave of demolition and reconstruction, likely because Heiqiao was located on the opposite side of the area where most artist communities had gathered in the Huantie region.

Artist couple Hu Wendan and Wen Xichao, moved into their Heiqiao studio in the early 2010s. They were some of the first residents of the Route 2 No. 8 Courtyard (二道八号院, *Er dao ba hao yuan*) in Heiqiao, which was later regarded as a prestigious area of the art district. In 2018, recalling their first impression when moved there, Hu described how, “at that time, Heiqiao was somewhat like Silent Hill,¹⁷⁹ it wasn’t as prosperous as it is now, and the studio was

¹⁷⁸ Song Shiting, “Heiqiao yishuqu de ‘xiaoshi’: You yige dangdai yishu ‘yitubang’ jiang chengwei lishi” 黑桥艺术区的“消失”: 又一个当代艺术“异托邦”将成为历史 [The “disappearance” of Heiqiao Art District: Another “heterotopia” of contemporary art becoming history], *Sanlian Lifeweek* 三联生活周刊,

<https://www.lifeweek.com.cn/article/770> (accessed September 10, 2024)

¹⁷⁹ Referencing the hit thriller film, *Silent Hill* (2006), directed by Christophe Gans. The film is famous for its depiction of the little town’s eerie and isolated scenery.

surrounded by a forest . . . (as more and more artists moved in) the forest has been cut down to build new studios.”¹⁸⁰ With the rise in demand for studio and living spaces, the rent had increased to around one yuan per square metre per day, prior to the art district’s demolition in 2016–2018. By then, the art district was composed of as many as eight to nine thousand artists, accounting for about ten percent of the total population in the Heiqiao Village. The main road of the Heiqiao Art District featured several sub-art-districts on either side, including the Route 2 No. 8 Courtyard (also known as the *Miaopu* or “Nursery Garden” Art District, 56 Degrees Art District, Jinfeng Art District, and Areas A to F (Route 6 courtyards). Among these, the Route 2 No. 8 Courtyard had the highest number of artist residents and professional landscaping, including an artificial lake. Artists often jokingly referred to it as the “CBD of Heiqiao.”¹⁸¹

In the article, “‘Nothing here is permanent; we can only adapt to it all.’— On the changes in the Heiqiao Art District,” Jamie Fullerton observed that the Heiqiao Art District was the last concentrated area for artists in the city that offered three major advantages: large spaces with relatively affordable rents, convenient access to the city centre, and a warm, developed community environment as many artists had made Heiqiao their primary place for work and living. A large percentage of the residents were CAFA students and recent graduates. “The rent there allowed them to breathe a little easier, providing a slight reprieve from the pressures of selling their work so they can focus on their creative exploration.”¹⁸²

The artist community in Heiqiao was a source of inspiration for the artists. Artist Yu Ying, who had lived in Heiqiao since her graduation from CAFA, created the art project *Heiqiao Geng* based on her experiences in Heiqiao. She documented her life in Heiqiao through snippets written on her way home and images meticulously collected on her phone to create a song and video titled *Song of Heiqiao*, and she also started the *Heiqiao Hiking* project where she chatted

¹⁸⁰ Xia Feifei, “Heiqiao yishuqu: Manhuang zhi di de yishu shengtai” 黑桥艺术区：荒蛮之地的艺术生态 [Heiqiao Art District: Art ecology in a wild place], *Artron*, August 29, 2018.

<https://m-news.artron.net/20180829/n1019897.html> (accessed April 3, 2024)

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Jamie Fullerton, “Zai zheli meiyou shenme shi hengjiu de, women zhide qu shiying zhe yiqie – Tan Heiqiao yishuqu bianqian 在这里没有什么是恒久的，我们只得去适应这一切”——谈黑桥艺术区变迁” [Nothing here is permanent; we can only adapt to it all.’— On the changes in the Heiqiao Art District], *Yishu Shijie* (2017): 319.

with friends around the neighbourhood. These seemingly absurd and mundane activities used self-deprecation and satire to reflect the artist community's alienation from society. Most young artists in Heiqiao lacked stable financial support, and as freelancers, they first faced the challenges of daily life. Li Xinyu graduated from art school in 2011 and moved to a small studio in Heiqiao. Under financial pressure, Li chose to work on well-sold sculptures that were considered aesthetically pleasing. Fortunately, he secured a contract with Yulan Gallery, which allowed him to establish himself in Beijing, move to a larger studio, and continue pursuing his artistic goals. Li stated: "Doing art and business are not in conflict; I feel my ideals are becoming closer to reality."¹⁸³

While Heiqiao took shape as an art district, some artists took on second careers, directly combining art with business. The Baiye Photography Studio in the Route 2 No. 8 Courtyard was founded by Yang Wēi and Wang Xu, graduates of the Experimental Art Department at the CAFA. Initially, it was an art project focused on researching old photographs and photography studios. In 2013, after graduation, they set up a studio in Heiqiao, combining academic research with a business model, offering vintage photo shoots for one hundred yuan per photo. In just three years, they had provided shooting experiences for over 3,000 customers. Baiye Photography Studio not only validated Yang and Wang's research through interactive experiences, but also served as a successful operational model for artists starting their own businesses in art districts. Although Heiqiao was only a few kilometres from the 798, its initial messy environment had not attracted galleries or art institutions. Instead, artists of Heiqiao rented spaces and created independent art venues. Most of these spaces were non-profit, organising independent art projects and providing venues for artist exchanges. For example, MAMALA Center for Contemporary Art was an art project initiated by artist Dai Chenlian. Officially launched in 2013, it regularly organised exhibitions and public projects in the Heiqiao Art District. The MAMALA Family Theatre project is a branch of his virtual art museum initiative, with each performance held in an artist's private studio, using everyday items from the studio for the performance.¹⁸⁴

The rise of the Heiqiao art district had also spurred the development of surrounding industries in Heiqiao, such as dining, unlicensed taxis, art supply stores, and sculpture processing

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Xia, *ibid.*

factories. For instance, within several years, the “Yama Li Art Supplies Store” in the art district had evolved from a small frame workshop to a well-stocked art supply store with frames and paints. The entire Heiqiao Village had formed a tacit relationship with the artists, growing together. This relationship provided resources, convenience, and supplies to other small, unestablished artist communities in Heiqiao and nearby villages. In proximity to the Heiqiao Art District, many young, emerging artists began to settle in small *yuanzis* or “courtyards” in the centre-east Huantie region, seeking affordability and to exist outside of art districts and reterritorialization. 1005 is one of them.

From *huajia cun* (画家村, artist village) in the 1980s and 1990s, to *yishuqu* (艺术区, art district) in the 2000s, and finally to *yuanzi* (院子, courtyard/compound) in the post-2010s, the shifting terminology used to describe artist communities mirrors broader changes in their socio-spatial organisation and relationship to the state. The term *cun* (村, village) was closely tied to the rural origins of these early enclaves, often located on the outskirts of Beijing and formed through informal agreements with local peasants. These communities emphasized self-sufficiency, artistic experimentation, and a degree of social marginality that paralleled the rural-urban divide. With the rise of the *yishuqu*, the language changed to reflect new forms of urban integration. *Qu* (区, district) is a term embedded in municipal governance—used in administrative units like Chaoyang District or Xicheng District—and its adoption for art district signaled increasing institutionalization and incorporation into official urban planning frameworks.¹⁸⁵ Artist communities in this phase were increasingly subject to government regulation, cultural policy, and market-driven development. By the 2010s, however, the emergence of *yuanzi* in the unterritorialized as a descriptor for smaller, self-organised artist compounds marked a shift back toward informality and spatial retreat. Often used by artists themselves, *yuanzi* invokes a sense of enclosure and intimacy, suggesting a withdrawal from

¹⁸⁵ While it is difficult to determine whether the term *yishuqu* (art district) originated as a direct translation of the English phrase or developed from within China’s own spatial governance discourse, the latter is significant. In the Chinese municipal system, *qu* (district) designates urban administrative districts—underscoring how the term *yishuqu* may carry state-sanctioned connotations of urban zoning and control.

both the urban formalization of *qu* and the rural expansiveness of *cun*. This linguistic trajectory—from *cun* to *qu* to *yuanzi*—encapsulates the evolving strategies of artist communities navigating between visibility and autonomy, between official incorporation and alternative modes of existence.

The birth of 1005

In spring 2015, CAFA student Xia Jia was looking for a studio space in Beijing, preferably spacious and near their Huajiadi campus, because he had recently enrolled the graduate programme in the sculpture department. Through some connections, Xia quickly got in touch with Lao Li, who was a contractor and a so-called “secondary landlord” to a *yuanzi* (院子), a gated courtyard compound, near the Heiqiao Art District. It was listed for seventy cents per square metre per day. The address of this *yuanzi* was 1005 Dongba Back Street, Dongba Village, Chaoyang District, Beijing. Given its name by the street number, the artist community born here was later referred to as “1005.”¹⁸⁶

Artist community members commonly adopt the word *yuanzi*, or *yuan* (院) in northern dialects, to refer to the physical artist community. The idea of a *yuanzi* as a high-population, high-density living and working space can be traced back to *dayuan* (大院), or *yuan*, in the first three decades after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, with the term used particularly in northern China. The construction of *yuan* as compounds of work-and-live units allowed people within them to work, live, and conduct their daily lives in the compound. This represented the most basic form of social management and organisation in urban areas in China at that time. In artist communities, *yuanzi*'s meaning and scale differs: Firstly, in a large artist community or art district, established artists often have their own *yuanzis*, which function similar to a house with a front yard. Secondly, in large artist communities or art districts, some artists and organisations share an enclosed, bigger *yuanzi*, with several individual houses and a shared courtyard. Thirdly, the *yuanzi* for the unterritorialized often occur as a gated compound and space is divided by the artists, with ten to thirty people sharing space.

¹⁸⁶ Sun Xiaofei, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.

Lao Li's role as a "secondary landlord" was intentionally ambiguous. He was essentially a sublessor who doubled as an individual developer, who recognized the need for artist studios in the Huantie region and decided to partner with a landowner. After the series of demolitions of art districts in the Huantie region from 2009–10, village township governments and developers stopped pursuing the art district business model—at least on the surface. Local villagers and individuals like Lao Li sought to provide unofficial complexes for artist communities. This form of partnership was not uncommon, although many landowning villagers preferred to remodel and rent to artists directly. However, in Lao Li's case, the yuanzi he was subleasing was not farmland or owned by an individual, but sat on a lot, which on paper, belonged to the village's fire station. The so-called "primary landlord" who was represented by Li, was in fact the head of the fire station. It was impossible to verify if Li was further using the identity of the primary landlord as a way to show their connection with the local government, which suggested immunity to future demolitions, but the idea of a low-profile, affordable, gated yuanzi that was also close to resources in the Heiqiao Art District was appealing enough for the young artists.

Xia first reached out to his CAFA schoolmate, Sun Xiaofei, from the mural painting department. Like Xia, Sun had graduated from CAFA's undergraduate programme in spring 2014 and enrolled the graduate programme in the fall of 2014. Because of Sun's family background in ceramic art, besides his schoolwork in mural painting, he had started to explore ceramics as his new art form, which eventually required more space and equipment. Sun immediately grew interested and convinced more CAFA students, including Sun Jing and Zhao Bin, to move with them into 1005.¹⁸⁷

According to Sun, in the beginning, there were three rows of vacant factory storage warehouses inside the yuanzi. The structure was made up of large steel and polymer plates, which are commonly used to make temporary non-residential structures in China, usually in construction sites, factories, and warehouses. It worked similar to selling loaf bread by the slice: Artists would ask for a dimension, usually one to two hundred square metres, and Lao Li would do the calculation, decide the length, and then put up a wall to divide their spaces from the rest. This format had become a common approach for structuring these small artist communities in the Huantie area in the 2010s. Though it often created safety hazards and poor heat preservation

¹⁸⁷ Zhao Bin, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.

during winter because of improper insulation (among other issues), the colour-coated steel plates were chosen because they were low-cost and easy to install.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, from the landlords' perspective, it was important for many artist communities to appear as if they were still warehouses, because using lands with non-commercial land statuses for storage purposes is a legal grey area. Essentially, it was not illegal for villagers to personally rent out their farmlands for storage purposes, rather than developing them as real estate. In 1005's case, the land technically belonged to the township while the primary landlord partnered with his facade, Lao Li, for his self-earnings, and by taking advantage of the gray area, they avoided additional scrutiny.¹⁸⁹

Word soon spread in CAFA after the first few people moved into 1005. Wan Yunyun, Liu Chao, and Shen Cheng were in their final year of the undergraduate programme in the sculpture department and struggling with the on-campus studio space which the department provided for students' graduation projects. Their training as sculptors—particularly in negotiating volume, mass, and monumentality—instilled an aesthetic commitment to scale that carried political weight in contexts of spatial contestation. By insisting on works requiring expansive sites, they consciously or unconsciously challenged the constraints imposed by formalized art spaces and institutional pedagogies. According to Wan, the shared studio was not only crowded, but also had a low ceiling, which made it very difficult for working on large scale sculptures or transporting them in and out. Introduced to 1005 by Xia, who was actively trying to gather a group of schoolmates and friends in the space, Wan was also drawn to the live-work space by the fact that it would be a community full of people of her age and background. "It's not like some yuanzi [that] have people from generations above us, you know what I mean? . . . Because he (Xia) just graduated and gathered these people, the people who went there were all just graduated (or going to graduate soon.)" Even though some 1005 residents had felt unsettled and confused when facing an almost empty structure which they had to build from scratch, many

¹⁸⁸ Colour-coated steel plates typically consist of two layers of galvanized steel sheets coated with polymer paint. The material between the layers may vary. The plates used in artist communities in the Huantie region are mostly insulated with PVC foam, which is more cost-effective but prone to fire hazards, or, in some cases, mineral wool, which meets higher specifications for warehouse and storage. Depending on the quality and the environment, these plates usually last up to 10 to 30 years. However, before the series of demolitions in 2017, artist community members generally had no understanding of this issue.

¹⁸⁹ Sun, *ibid.*

of them, such as Wan, were very satisfied with the arrangement and excited for what was to come. Wan illustrated her first impression of 1005:

It was quite nice; the courtyard was very orderly. It was simple and straightforward, with winding paths. Some [artist communities] have particularly narrow spaces between the buildings, where the paths are small. There are many places like that. But our place [1005] was quite spacious with lots of open space, and there were not many cars on the roads outside, so it was really convenient for transporting materials and supplies, which is very important, right? Because in some artist communities, it is particularly difficult to transport things to the studio; I do not know if you've been to any. But in villages like Luoma Lake, the roads are very narrow. You are working with large vehicles, like 4.2-metre trucks, right? So having easy access for vehicles is quite important. It was essential to have a studio because you could not work if you lived in an apartment and could not get materials up there.¹⁹⁰

Out of thirty residents in 1005, Wan and Liu Chao were the only two female residents who moved in without male partners.¹⁹¹ Wan lived and worked in her studio alone, while Liu made the choice to live with her mother who recently had retired in their hometown. Unlike the rest of the residents of 1005, Liu took the time living there as an opportunity to reconcile with her mother. Though they were under a budget and moved into a smaller studio which was basically a section of a roughcast warehouse, the mother and daughter decided to install a skylight and started growing flowers and plants together.

As more CAFA students moved in in the summer of 2015, 1005 started to attract people with no relationship to CAFA. At that time Liu Bangbang had just graduated from university in the United States with a degree in fine arts and returned to his hometown of Beijing. Knowing his then-partner, Wang Yifan, would graduate in a year and also return to Beijing from the US to pursue her career as an artist, Liu was in search of a spacious and affordable working and living space for both of them. He learned about 1005 from a CAFA student through a mutual friend and had a quick tour with Wang. Wang recalled:

¹⁹⁰ Wan Yunyun, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.

¹⁹¹ Nochlin's essay on the "male enablers" of women artists in the nineteenth century highlights a common pattern where female artists depended on male patrons, relatives, or teachers to access training, exhibition opportunities, and critical networks. In contrast to this historical trend—and notably rare within the artist communities I have studied in this dissertation—Wan lived entirely on her own in her studio, while Liu Chao resided with her mother. Their choices reflect a break from traditional gendered dependencies in art-making spaces. See Nochlin, *ibid*, 22–39.

We didn't plan to sign the lease when we first set foot here. Everything was in construction. About 100,200 square metres were drawn, in such an area, a large square (for each studio.) The land was still undulating, had not been paved, and there was no water or electricity. It was in such a very rough state. I had no idea at the time. I just thought, well, you could rent a studio here. I had some vague concerns, like 'how long can I stay here?' Maybe at that time, I didn't have a clear long-term plan for how long I could rent a studio in this place, I didn't know how long this place would last or how long I could stay. I was a little confused. I thought it (the place) was pretty good, so I rented it. Then I didn't think too much about the surrounding infrastructure, because there was nothing around. I didn't think too much about any of these [things], but there was a kind of muddled optimism.¹⁹²

Around the fall of 2015, Liu moved in and Wang followed in 2016 after she graduated. With this shared "muddled optimism" among its residents, the artist community of 1005 rapidly grew and spaces were filled.

A key challenge in the beginning for the residents was the interior renovation. The wall panels were bare and so were the concrete floors. A common design among the studios was adding a half-second floor and a staircase to the studio, so it became a loft, dividing working and living spaces. Lao Li acted as a contractor and often took care of building these kinds of arrangements according to their financial and other considerations, so the interior construction for each studio greatly varied, which directly related to the many challenges artists experienced when living there. Despite the affordable rent, which was approximately two to three thousand yuan per month depending on the studio's size, it was a big investment for most artists to renovate and get appliances while they were students or recent graduates. Sun Xiaofei recalled that some of them had even lived in their bare shell studios without electricity for a while until they saved enough money, usually a few thousands yuan, to do simple renovations. Liu Bangbang and Wang received family support and spent twenty to thirty thousand yuan on the renovation, basic appliances, and furniture, which both of them believed to be very minimal effort. Most of the 1005 residents I interviewed spent within this range. A small percentage of residents, such as Sun Xiaofei and Xiao Ke, received more support from family, or poured their savings into their spaces, eventually spending a large amount of money on their studios.

¹⁹² Wang Yifan, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China; Liu Bangbang, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.



Figure 28. The exterior of a studio unit in 1005, 2015. Photograph by Liu Bangbang.



Figure 29. The interior of Liu Bangbang and Wang Yifan's studio in 1005, 2015. Photograph by Liu Bangbang.

Whatever the amount of money they put into them, it is clear that most of them had perceived their spaces in 1005 as their homes. Based on their ages, for many of them, these were their first adult homes, as non-Beijingese university students often stay in dormitories. In the years from 2015–17, this group of young, emerging artists and art workers were going to make friends, form families, have children, get pets, and live and work in the territory of the artist community 1005. The next section will continue to document and examine their lives there and

the challenges they faced. It will also look at how male and female members of the artist community tended to play different gender roles in their households and the community.

Constructing an artist community

I felt that if we all lived in houses that we made and were surrounded by art, our supplies, our pieces of equipment, our finished and unfinished artworks and people who also worked in art, it was pretty much utopian.

– Wang Yifan, former resident of 1005.

1) Life and art

When reflecting upon 1005, many former residents and members of the artist community used the word “utopia” to describe their experiences. In fact, in the history of contemporary Chinese art, a lot of artist community members and outsiders adopt this Western term referring to their gathering spaces. Utopia represents an envisioned perfect society or location where everything is ideal, encompassing optimal political, social, and economic conditions. The Western concept of "utopia" originates from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), in which he imagines a perfect society free from the corruption and inequalities prevalent in European society. This idea was later developed by philosophers like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who envisioned utopia as a classless society where social harmony prevailed and the oppressive structures of capitalism were dismantled.¹⁹³ Curiously, though in the Chinese language the word “utopia” is frequently and interchangeably used with the Chinese phrase *shiwaitaoyuan* (世外桃源), not many referred to the latter when discussing Chinese artist communities. *Shiwaitaoyuan*, or Peach Blossom Spring, conjures a secluded, ideal place, free from the chaos of the outside world, symbolizing peace and harmony. It comes from a classic Chinese story about a hidden paradise where people live simply and happily while being safely tucked away. In exploring the nuances between the concepts of "utopia" and *shiwaitaoyuan*, it becomes evident that certain individuals with a Chinese cultural background prefer the term "utopia" when describing their artist communities

¹⁹³ Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2003). For the philosophical expansion of the term, see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; repr., New York: International Publishers, 1969).

for a reason. While *shiwaitaoyuan* signifies an idealized realm, isolated from society yet suggesting a possibility for mutual existence, “utopia” leans toward the purely imaginative and theoretical. This preference may indicate that these individuals, consciously or unconsciously, perceive their gatherings as existing somewhat apart from societal norms. They may view their ideal as a higher form of society—one that, while not entirely grounded in reality, represents aspirations that seem almost too good to be true.

This section investigates aspects of the former residents’ lives in 1005, including their daily routines, work, gender roles, and experiences of collectivity and exclusivity within the artist community. It seeks to bring another perspective to the often idealized, utopian gathering of artist communities by inquiring into the everyday challenges and hierarchies that can exist there.



Figure 30. A typical get-together in “1005,” 2016(?). Photograph by Liu Bangbang.

Living together under a shared condition of scarcity comprised a major part of the challenges living in 1005. When the first group of artists moved into the yuanzi, water and electricity had not yet been connected, because it had been a vacant lot not legally designed for living. Lao Li, the secondary landlord, managed to drill a well from a nearby location and supply the yuanzi with its water. He then proceeded to connect power cables between 1005 and Aohai Fishery, an industrial fishery next door, therefore providing electricity to the yuanzi. Issues began to surface as people were settling in, particularly when many of them realized that the

water quality was alarmingly lower than the standards for tap water. Visually yellowish and turbid, the water drew great concerns from the residents but their conversation with Lao Li did not resolve their questions, as the water was free of charge and their location could not access the city's tap water. Upon discussion, the residents decided to purchase bottled water for their cooking and drinking, which they continued to do for the entire duration of their time in 1005. The residents installed water purifiers for their showers and washers, but many of them still experienced itchy and peeling skin after showering or wearing clothes laundered there. Some of them grew used to this and accepted it as part of the deal; others started to shower and do their laundry elsewhere. Beijingers artists, such as Wang Yifan and Liu Bangbang, frequently commuted between their parents' places and 1005, and the latter functioned almost like a transfer station between their works in the 798 Art Zone and Cao Chang Di, and their childhood homes in Beijing.¹⁹⁴ In a way, the water issue demonstrated some of the divisions that existed in 1005, becoming an omen for the future of the artist community.

It was only after their first month in 1005, when members of the artist community received their electricity bill from Lao Li, that most of them realized that the electricity they had was, in fact, industrial-grade, and that they would be charged more than three times the rate of normal household electricity. According to multiple sources, the cost of electricity constituted a significant portion of their living expenses in 1005, despite widespread suspicions that Li had stolen electricity from the fishery in the first place.¹⁹⁵ For example, according to Zhao Bin, each month he spent approximately two thousand yuan on rent, while electricity could end up costing seven hundred to twelve hundred yuan, depending on the season.¹⁹⁶ Additionally, the absence of collective heating¹⁹⁷ became problematic in the winter, as high electricity costs hindered artists' ability to use individual electric heaters for warmth. Because the buildings were not properly insulated or reinforced, the studios struggled to retain heat, and heat loss and leakage due to rain

¹⁹⁴ Wang, *ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Zhao Bin, *ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Collective Heating(集体供暖) in China refers to a centralized heating system that serves multiple households or buildings by distributing hot water or steam generated at a central facility. This method is commonly used in urban areas as a more efficient and cost-effective alternative to individual heating options. Prior to the establishment of collective heating, and in remote regions lacking this infrastructure, people typically relied on coal and firewood for warmth, which can present environmental and health issues.

were consistently observed, which led to more expensive heating. In the late fall of 2015, Xia Jia gathered the residents of the artist community to work on the ongoing heating emergency. After several brainstorming sessions, they pooled their funds, and Xia contacted a private coal mine owner in Shanxi province.¹⁹⁸ The artist community purchased a truck-load of coal from the mine, which was delivered to them from Shanxi. The coal was deposited in the common area of their yuanzi, and everyone shared it during the winter months. This arrangement ultimately cost each household between two and three hundred yuan per month. Coal burning also exposed them to potential safety hazards, exacerbated by the poor quality of the building structures. This problem was not unique to 1005—many artist communities in this era were evicted and demolished under the pretext of fire hazards.¹⁹⁹

For many former residents of 1005, their most vivid memories were of their get-togethers. Usually taking shape as dinner parties and broad-ranging discussions, these routine get-togethers became their platforms to share and discuss their art and lives, broaden their horizons, promote artistic versatility, and initiate projects—which to an extent, truly formed this artistic community. For example, the idea for an on-site group exhibition was facilitated by Xia Jia in one of the get-togethers. Because of space and equipment limitations, with most of the residents relying on single induction cookers, rather than full kitchens, Xia and Sun’s fully renovated studios became hubs for the get-togethers and simultaneously these two took on major roles in the community to host events and tackle different issues in 1005. Xia was commonly referred to as the “village mayor” (*cunzhang*, 村长) of 1005. Zhao Bin noticed that sometimes people would bring their bowls of food and chopsticks to gather around lunch or dinner time, and it could be more than a dozen people having a meal together in his, Xia Jia’s, or Sun Xiaofei’s studio. During the summer, there would be as many as three to four barbeque parties a week, gathering all the members of the community. As the artist community grew and flourished, many realized that it had become too crowded to talk about art. Smaller groups of artist peers started to

¹⁹⁸ In the 2010s, private coal mines in China functioned under a complicated regulatory framework. Generally smaller than state-owned enterprises, these mines were essential for satisfying the country’s increasing energy needs. They often utilized less advanced technology and adhered to lower safety standards, resulting in numerous accidents. Although the government aimed to consolidate the industry and enhance safety regulations, many private mines persisted in operating informally, avoiding stringent oversight.

¹⁹⁹ Zhao, *ibid*.

form. For instance, CAFA graduates including Zhao Bin, Sun Xiaofei, Sun Jing, Liu Chao, and Chen Xiaozuo frequently held discussions over their artworks in their 1005 studios. This group of individuals, all sharing similar educational backgrounds, excelled in their studies and became acquainted during the CAFA exhibition of outstanding graduates.²⁰⁰ As some of them enjoyed the get-togethers and benefited from the collective, others found it distracting and harmful to their personal spaces and creativity. In the first half of 2017, Liu Chao and her mother subleased her studio to another CAFA student because she no longer found the environment favourable for her productivity. Many of them also expressed that even though 1005 had been a utopian, once-in-a-lifetime experience for them, they did not think they would choose to live and work in a similar environment at their current stage of life, if given another chance. Wan Yunyun explained that besides the living conditions and related safety concerns, she thought that 1005 was a great place to collect inspiration, rather than produce work.²⁰¹

2) Gender roles in 1005

Based on the interviews with the former members of 1005, it may not be a coincidence that more female members have found themselves less likely to return to a similar arrangement in the future. In fact, representation, labour, space, and time at 1005 were highly gendered. Starting from the beginnings of the artist community, 1005 had been dominated by its male residents. Most of the female residents had been partners to a male residents. Some of them moved into the artist community as couples, while others moved into their male partners' places at a later time. While the men were more dominant in the space, for a considerable period of time there were roughly the same number of men as women. In retrospect, some recalled the ratio had been around 1:1 or 5:3 men to women. Most of the men living in 1005 had cohabitated with female partners, who seem to have been quite overlooked. In most cases, these women were also artists and art workers themselves, with academic education (usually CAFA graduates). However they did not possess the same level of presence as their male partners and peers in the artist community.

Wang Yifan, who moved into the studio in 1005 a year after her then-partner moved in, observed that male residents held a stronger presence in many aspects. She pointed out that on

²⁰⁰ Zhao, *ibid.*

²⁰¹ Wan, *ibid.*

paper, it was the male residents who signed the lease contracts (except for Wan, who lived by herself, and Liu, who lived with her mother), even though the couples usually shared the expenses; it was also mostly the male residents on the poster for their self-organised exhibition in November 2015. Wang agreed that the male residents in the community resembled the concept of *huzhu* (head of household) in the *hukou* registration system, while women there were usually identified as spouses or dependants to their partners, rather than artists in their own right. Another stronger sense of male presence for Wang was that when discussing certain issues, such as daily matters, people would automatically discuss issues with the male residents, who felt like *huzhu*. Wang also recalled that after the residents had gotten to know each other better, they still tended to refer to a female resident as someone's wife or girlfriend. "There was a strong feeling that they made sense as couples," Wang said.²⁰² Furthermore, although some former residents now identify as queer, none were openly so during their time in 1005, and no same-sex relationships were publicly acknowledged—underscoring the community's prevailing heteronormative norms.

Some artists and former residents of 1005 also reflected upon the gender roles within the artist community (see Chapter Four). Liu Chao acknowledged that many couples residing there adhered to traditional gender roles, where men were expected to earn money and handle repairs around the house, while women were responsible for household chores. Because their living spaces also served as workspaces, this living arrangement often resulted in women occupying much smaller areas within their studios than their partners, even though they had similar backgrounds in the arts. Liu said that it occurred to her that many male artists of her generation, including the ones in 1005, intentionally chose partners with "good wife qualities." Many of them also reflected on gender roles and noted that women were typically responsible for household chores, such as cleaning and caring for children, pets, and even plants. While some men cooked, this often depended on the functionality of the kitchens. The male residents generally took on the responsibility of grocery shopping and obtaining supplies, as they were the ones who owned transportation. In fact, the challenging transit to their yuanzi was a particular concern for female residents, hindering more women artists from living there independently. Although the spacious pathways and streets outside of the yuanzi allowed easy transportation of

²⁰² Wang, *ibid.*

large-sized sculptures via trucks, there was no public transportation anywhere near the community. Most of the artists could not afford cars, and even if they could, Beijing has some of the strictest regulations in China, including a lottery system for purchasing vehicles and obtaining licence plates. One option was using rideshare applications, which had just started to become popular in China around that time, to get to the nearest subway station; however, they were too expensive for everyday commuting. Residents opted to purchase motorcycles for easier transportation within the area, but not many female residents learned to ride, leading the majority to rely on their male partners for transportation.

Not only did female residents tend to occupy smaller working spaces in their households and spend more time on household chores, but their roles as caretakers also affected their available time. Many found that living in the community left them with fragmented periods for work, as the demands of caring for their surroundings and partners often disrupted their schedules. This fractured time made it difficult for them to concentrate on projects, leading to lower productivity. I will continue the discussion on gender within artist communities in the next chapter, “Is Gender Territorialized?: Women Artists in the Community.”

3) Exclusivity and collectivism in 1005

In this section, I wish to draw attention to the often seemingly contradictory, yet coexisting, considerations of exclusivity and collectivism within 1005.

In the early stages of my research on the subject, during a conversation with my main contact, I hypothesized that the artist community of 1005, while emphasizing idealistic communality and collectivity, was also, in many ways, elitist and exclusive to artists and art workers with certain educational and financial backgrounds. This hypothesis has been shown to be partially true.

As documented in the last section about the assembly of the artist community, it is clear that 1005, similar to Dashanzi in the ‘Er Chang era, the beginning of Heiqiao Art District, and many other art districts in the Huantie region, was strongly influenced by CAFA students and sometimes faculty. In particular, the sculpture department often required larger spaces and, as a result, sought out off-campus locations for studio spaces, leading to the formation of clusters that could eventually grow into art communities. Because the formation and development of 1005 began with personal relationships in CAFA, and with core members, such as Xia Jia and Sun

Xiaofei, being CAFA graduates, the artist community placed significant emphasis on art professionalism related to academy training, with elitism and exclusivity stemming from their shared educational background as graduates of the most prestigious art academy in the country. Wang Yifan and Liu Bangbang, who had educational backgrounds from Western art institutions, perceived this elitism and exclusivity as part of a greater divergence between Chinese and Western art education.

Chinese art academies traditionally emphasize a systematic approach to teaching, focusing on the mastery of techniques within specific media and styles. This method often involves rigorous training in classical techniques and an adherence to established forms, aiming to cultivate skilled artisans who can uphold cultural heritage. In contrast, Western art schools tend to prioritize conceptual exploration and students are encouraged to engage with a variety of subjects and ideas. This fundamental divergence reflects broader cultural values, with Chinese art education emphasizing technical proficiency and Western art education promoting personal expression. Wang and Liu, while they felt a strong sense of belonging within the artist community through daily activities and friendships with their neighbours, also felt their artistic experiences and understanding were disjointed. As a result, they did not regard themselves as professionally trained artists within the Chinese context.²⁰³

Some CAFA graduates residing in 1005 also recognized the elitism and exclusivity operating through an East vs. West perspective, but from a different angle. For instance, Liu Chao suggested that 1005 belonged to a generation of CAFA students with “westernized” ideologies, characterized by international liberalism which drew them together. Liu further explained:

I think there is a rather general issue. It's not just a problem specific to this artist community; it reflects a commonality among our generation of artists. I'm not saying it's about being patriotic or not; it's not that black and white. However, I feel that in the circles of art academies or among intellectuals, there is this tendency where one feels the need to express dissatisfaction with the government in order to demonstrate independent thinking and to show resistance. I also believe that our generation of Chinese artists, whether due to thematic constraints or censorship, faces limitations in our ability to think critically or express ourselves. Often, when people create their works, it's more about expressing emotions than engaging in critical reflection.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Wang, *ibid*; Liu Bangbang, *ibid*.

²⁰⁴ Liu Chao, *ibid*.

In contrast to Liu's opinion, Wan Yunyun based her perspective on Beijing's geopolitical advantages for developing artist communities that, in her view, are highly inclusive.

Wan pointed out that Beijing is an immigrant city, home to people from all over the country. Similarly, CAFA has a diverse student body. She believed that this makes the academy—and, consequently, the art scene in Beijing—more inclusive compared to other regional art academies, such as the Guangdong Art Academy, which has a strong emphasis on local Cantonese culture and connections, and is perceived as more exclusive and elitist, particularly the Lingnan School(岭南画派). Wan also argued that the existence of artist communities like 1005 does not indicate an intention from CAFA to create exclusive spaces. Rather, CAFA graduates tend to remain in Beijing, ultimately making them the majority within the city's artistic demographic.²⁰⁵

Wan's observation on inclusiveness revealed important truths about the artists' backgrounds. Contrary to my initial hypothesis, 1005 gathered emerging artists and art workers from diverse social classes and financial and family backgrounds. In fact, many former residents of the artist community who grew up in middle- to upper-middle-class families were often unaware of the financial struggles faced by their peers. For example, when discussing financial support, Wang Yifan, who came from an upper-middle-class family in Beijing, assumed that because every household in 1005 had spent a significant amount on renovations, they all enjoyed substantial financial backing from their families. Wang believed this support extended not only to their studios and art-making but also to purchases like motorcycles and other items. She also thought that their CAFA degrees likely provided many of them decent incomes from part-time teaching.²⁰⁶ However, tutoring high school students for art academy entrance exams was not always a reliable means of sustaining their livelihoods in Beijing. Some artists explained that working in the exam-oriented art education system could hinder their own creativity. While in 1005, these artists were still in the early stages of their careers—only a few had begun to sell their artworks. Although most received some financial support from their families, the extent of that support varied significantly. For instance, Sun Xiaofei came from an artistic background; his parents were renowned Chinese ceramic artists who guided his development in the field.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Wan, *ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Wang, *ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Sun, *ibid.*

In contrast, without financial support from their families, some of the artists in 1005 took on multiple part-time jobs (primarily tutoring) to cover their rent, living expenses, and art supplies. Among these artists, some were providing financial assistance to their families outside of Beijing, occasionally incurring debts of millions of yuan. During times of crisis, they would receive assistance from some other residents of 1005 with their rent and other needs. Painter Zhao Bin noted that his time in 1005 was marked by significant financial stress. Despite receiving state and CAFA support for students in financial need, he worked throughout both his undergraduate and graduate programmes to pay his own bills, as well as his family's. Zhao articulated that "this situation of living together with artists represents a collision between collectivism and individualism. While individualism is more prominent in their work—where each person tends to take the lead—collectivism plays a dominant role in their daily lives. In this communal living environment, individuals rely on one another for support, coming together to face the challenges of reality."²⁰⁸ While daily life in 1005 was deeply shaped by mutual support and shared resources, the artists' works often reflected divergent individual perspectives and aesthetic approaches. Some leaned toward introspective figurative painting, others experimented with conceptual installations or large-scale sculptures—choices shaped not only by personal sensibilities but also by practical constraints and shared dialogues within the space. This coexistence of distinct artistic voices within a collective framework underscores the productive tension Zhao described as a "collision" between collectivism and individualism.

During this period, Zhao expressed this collision between individualism and collectivism in his paintings. He had been working on a series of large-scale paintings portraying the communal living conditions of Chinese pre-university students. In his 2016 acrylic-on-paper painting, *The Giant Bathroom* (Figure 31), Zhao depicted an impossibly large-scale school bathroom. Throughout the 240 x 480 cm painting, viewers overlook a gigantic bathroom that is divided by gender down the middle, with more than nine hundred figures in total, including boys and girls from different grades, and teachers. Some of the characters are water-fighting, some change into costumes for performances, some are reading, some are pulling pranks on their teachers. With vibrant colours and a humorous style, the painting not only depicts the happy and fun aspects of the shared space, but also depicts brutal fights and bullying. The

²⁰⁸ Zhao, *ibid.*

viewer's perspective—overlooking the entire scene and monitoring the overcrowded group of people in a box-like structure, with barred windows—draws our attention to the underlying tension and repression in the space. Many of Zhao's paintings of this period visualize a very centralized approach to collectivism in youth through school settings. In a way, they reflect the artist's own experiences leaving his hometown and family at a young age to study art, and his own struggles around collectivism and individualism in his early adulthood—especially after he opted to continue living in an artist community after graduating.



Figure 31. Zhao Bin, *The Giant Bathroom*, 2016, acrylic on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Despite their differing views on whether and how 1005 (intentionally or unintentionally) excluded outsiders, the interviewed artists mutually acknowledged their sense of collectivity within the community on many levels. Beyond their co-living arrangements, many artists from 1005 believed that their sense of collectivity arose from their sense of living under inadequate social and physical infrastructure support, which required them to put resource-sharing into practice as young, emerging artists. For many, this distinguished their community (which may have been elitist in some aspects), from the more elitist circles of established artists, who often leverage the fame and wealth of their connections to reinforce their social status. The next section further explores the 1005 artists' collectivism through the self-organised exhibition *1005Ye*.

1005Ye

In 2015, after people had settled in 1005, Sun Xiaofei brought up the idea of holding open studios in their newly founded artist community, in an effort to make a statement of their

presence in the artist-filled Huantie region. The proposal was immediately echoed by Xia Jia. During a get-together over dinner, the community members collectively supported the initiative and after some brainstorming, it quickly took shape. At that time, 1005 had one studio space that had not been rented out. After a discussion with their secondary landlord, Lao Li, the artists managed to temporarily rent the vacant space where they decided to put together a group exhibition of select artworks along with the yuanzi-wide open studios. Artists were assigned different tasks, including food and beverage, poster shoot and design, publicity, curation, putting up signs and directions, etc.



Figure 32. A poster of the *1005Ye* exhibition on a food stall cart in 1005, 2015. Photograph by Liu Bangbang (left).

Figure 33. The poster of *1005Ye* of the participating artists in 1005 in front of a pile of coal, 2015. (right).

To promote the event, they needed a name for the exhibition. In a moment of inspiration, someone proposed “1005Ye,” which is homophone of “1005 Nights (夜),” referencing *One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Middle Eastern folktales that is widely known in China. Gathered during the Islamic Golden Age, these tales are framed by the narrative of Scheherazade, an intelligent woman who spins enchanting stories to postpone her execution at the hands of King Shahryar. This collection encompasses a wide variety of narratives, including adventures, romances, and moral teachings, showcasing the rich cultural diversity of the region.

The name drew an analogy to the artists' understanding of their artist community—much like Scheherazade's captivating tales told before her uncertain fate, the artists were unaware of how long 1005 would endure, but they aimed to leave a lasting impact through their works and art. By spelling “ye” with pinyin,²⁰⁹ the title whimsically suggested a sense of playfulness and lightheartedness, in contrast to the seriousness that “ye” (which could mean “yeah” or “yay”) evoked, making “1005Ye” (1005 叶) sound like a celebration.²¹⁰



Figure 34. *1005Ye*'s advertisement on social media, “*1005Ye* first exhibition opening party, 2015/11/15, 4 pm, 1005 Dongba Backstreet, Chaoyang District, Beijing.”

Approximately twenty of the participating artists from 1005 gathered in their underwear for the photoshoot for the exhibition poster in front of a pile of coal they had just purchased for the winter. Their choice of attire and background symbolized not only their determination to combat the cold with their passion and energy, but also their rejection of traditional artistic norms. The playful incongruity of artists in such casual and vulnerable clothing, posed in front of a stark and industrial setting, subverts expectations and turns a mundane scenario into an intentionally absurd, yet profound, artistic statement. The composition is a visual joke that challenges the seriousness often associated with art exhibitions. At the top of the poster, picking out a character from the names of every artist and mimicking Chinese calligraphy, the artists

²⁰⁹ Romanization system for Standard Mandarin Chinese.

²¹⁰ An artist also suggested that “ye” could have implications to marijuana, which in Chinese pop culture commonly referred to as “叶(ye)”, but it remains unclear.

arranged the characters, which were unrelated to each other, into a format like an ancient Chinese poem, which did not verbally make any sense. This manipulation of cultural symbols, just like the name *1005Ye*, is deliberately playful, a creative misuse that disrupts traditional expectations and invites reinterpretation. Through this gesture, the artists assert their freedom from conventions, positioning themselves as creators who can both honour and deconstruct cultural forms.

The mischievous approach of the photograph and poster also contrast with the 2009 performance and demonstration, *The Quilt Project*, which took place in the 008 Art District in the Huantie Region during the *Warm Winter Initiative*, protesting the eviction and demolition of the art district. *The Quilt Project* featured artists wrapped in army green quilts standing as a human wall on the perimeter of the art district in the winter of 2009. In both cases, winter and the cold symbolized the obstacles the artist communities faced, however *The Quilt Project* was grave—a call for help from artists face-to-face with demolition—while in 2015, the 1005 artists were not yet worried about what was to come, but excited for what they were going to be.

In the afternoon of November 15, 2015, *1005Ye* opened. Formed around the group exhibition in the rented space across from Zhao Bin's studio, the event attracted three to four hundred visitors to 1005 that single night. It also featured open studio tours, live performances by 1005 residents Sun Xiaofei and Sun Jing's band, street food stalls they invited to the yuanzi, a roasted whole lamb dinner²¹¹ and more.

Due to time constraints, many of the artists chose to showcase works they had created during their time in school. For example, Xia presented wooden sculptures prepared for this CAFA graduation exhibition. Placed in the centre of the exhibition space, Xia's *Belief* (2015) depicts a long-haired woman raising her head with her eyes closed, clutching her throat with one hand as if she is taking a deep breath. The sculpture highlights the tension in the subject's body, with her arms closely attached to her slightly bow-backed body. It creates a sense of discoordination in the figure, making her appear almost unnatural, as the head is raised when it should be looking down, given the contour of her upper body. This disjunction between the head and body conveys a struggling gesture, suggesting that the character, burdened by many weights, is seeking help from the sky. Reflecting the frustration and confusion over their lives and careers

²¹¹ In northern Chinese and Mongolian culture, roasted whole lamb holds significant cultural and symbolic importance. It is often associated with hospitality, generosity, and celebration.

at a young age, the motif of praying was shared in works by other 1005 artists, such as Wan Yunyun, in her installation and performance, *Pray* (2015), created for *1005Ye*.



Figure 35. *1005Ye* exhibition space, 2015. Photograph by Liu Bangbang.

In the performance captured in the video, Wan repeatedly wrote three lines of text neatly on a scroll of paper for three consecutive hours: “I pray for world peace. I pray for freedom for humanity. I pray for progress for civilizations.” (我祈祷世界和平. 我祈祷人类自由. 我祈祷文明进步.) This initial gesture seems earnest and almost religious, a classic reflection of lofty ideals and the artist’s desire to align her work with grand social and philosophical causes. However, as the performance reached its final moments, the tone abruptly shifted. Wan scrawled in bold, chaotic characters: “Fuck praying. I’m going to drink” (妈的去你妈的祈祷, 我要喝酒去了), followed by an exuberant exclamation mark, seemingly painted with a burst of energy and defiance. This sudden shift in tone highlights the facetious subversion of her earlier, idealistic statements. The transition from tidy, respectful prayer to rebellious, irreverent outburst underscores Wan’s rejection of formal, high-minded concepts, which had dominated her understanding of art during her education. The playful, almost comedic ending of the performance reflects a deeper disillusionment with the seriousness and rigidity of traditional art

forms. The moment embraces a philosophy of *carpe diem*, prioritizing personal freedom and the pleasures of life over abstract ideals.²¹²

Wan herself later dismissed the piece as “silly” and the exhibition as “embarrassing” in a 2022 interview, stating that it felt unrefined and abrupt to her now. Yet, in retrospect, *Pray* encapsulated her mindset during her time at 1005: it was a deliberate rejection of formal art education and the conventional art world. Through this almost nihilistic act, Wan was exploring a new artistic language that was raw, unpolished, and spontaneous—a far cry from the structured ideals she initially pursued.²¹³



Figure 36. Wan Yunyun, *Pray*, 2015, performance and installation. Photograph by Liu Bangbang.

Liu Bangbang’s installation in the group exhibition, *Angry Birds/Take Off* (2015), resonated with Wan’s piece, but displayed more hope and ambition regarding time, life changes, and the artist community. The installation featured a piece of acrylic with a reflective surface in the shape of the “人” (human, or person) character, wrapped in clear protective wrap while standing in dirt. By attaching helium balloons (in the shape of characters from the video game *Angry Birds*) to the wrap, the artist presumed that given time, the balloons would peel it from the acrylic piece, revealing the acrylic’s reflective surface. Then the *Angry Birds* balloons would take off for the ceiling. However, the balloons lost their floating ability sooner than Liu expected

²¹² Wan, *ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*

and started to drop as the wrap was half-peeled. On the closing day, the installation resembled a toppled pot of flower as most of the balloons fell, learning on the floor. The artist believed that this time-based installation hence also exhibited his inquiry into the concept of completion in an artwork, which he struggled with in the art school in the U.S. Even though the installation did not function according to his presumption, Liu did not think it failed or was incomplete. He rather questioned the necessity and value of completeness and refinement in creating art. Referencing the then-hit game *Angry Birds*, Liu aimed to record how anger and frustration in early adulthood could also supply the energy to take off in life. *Angry Birds/Take Off* carried good wishes for the beginning of his career as an artist in Beijing and marked his start in 1005 as an opportunity for him to take off.²¹⁴



Figure 37. Liu Bangbang, *Angry Birds/Take Off*, installation, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

The humor and irreverence that animated *1005Ye* were not incidental—they formed part of the aesthetic and political force of the unterritorialized. Freed from the disciplinary expectations of institutional spaces, the artists operated with a looseness that enabled risk, self-parody, and experimentation. This playfulness was not a retreat from politics, but a mode of resistance: by refusing to take themselves—or the art world’s hierarchies—too seriously, the residents of 1005 forged a space where critique could emerge from vulnerability, intimacy, and

²¹⁴ Liu Bangbang, *ibid.*

laughter. In this sense, the condition of the unterritorialized found its most vital expression not in solemn defiance but in exuberant disobedience.

1005Ye received positive responses from the audience. Through various connections, the artist community was approached by Guomei Electronics and Appliances, a leading Chinese retail chain specializing in electronics and home appliances, which expressed interest in hosting the exhibition in their downtown Beijing space as part of their effort to promote contemporary Chinese art. While the opportunity to present *1005Ye* in Guomei's downtown space could be seen as a commercial compromise, most residents did not interpret it that way at the time. Instead, they embraced the unexpected platform as a means of amplifying their presence as a self-organised artist community in the area, distinguishing them from the Heiqiao Art District, and championing their own equally strong voice in the Beijing art scene. For some, this experience opened up further opportunities to engage with commercial venues and audiences, which they found professionally instructive and, at times, creatively expansive. Others, while flattered to be featured in a central and visible location during their early careers, have since moved away from projects linked to commercial institutions, preferring alternative or critical frameworks. In retrospect, it is difficult to define *1005Ye* as a clear turning point in their artistic paths, but it certainly marked an early encounter with the tensions between visibility, autonomy, and institutional affiliation.

Demolition and aftermath

In April 2016, Cuigezhuang Township announced the planning details for several villages under its jurisdiction, including Heiqiao. Normally, if a project is not initiated after a planning announcement, it means relocation is indefinitely postponed. However, this time, just over six months after the planning was announced, relocation was set to begin, and the administrative force behind it was unprecedented. According to the Heiqiao villagers, individuals holding property certificates were permitted to remain, whereas those lacking such documentation were required to vacate their spaces. Historically, the government would prioritize demolition and provide rental compensation until resettlement was finalized; however, the approach they adopted in 2016–2017 involved withholding water and electricity supplies to residents without property certificates, with the intention of eviction without using violent force or negotiation of

terms. At the end of 2016, the long-rumored demolition of Heiqiao Art District finally had a specific deadline—the end of February 2017—which caused every artist community in the region to fear for its own fate. Former Heiqiao Artist District resident, Huang Jingyuan, commented, “The demolition of Heiqiao is a typical Beijing year-end action: it sweeps away everything, yet is both slow and painful.”²¹⁵

The residents of 1005 were aware of the situation surrounding Heiqiao, but were reassured by Lao Li, who was confident that their artist community was in capable hands. Even though they had known that a structure like 1005 would not stand forever in Beijing, given the history of the previous artist communities in the city, they thought they would have five to eight years (at least). Many of them were clinging to hope—after all, compared to Heiqiao Art District, their artist community was much smaller and less visible. Unfortunately, one morning in June 2017, the residents found a note from the township asking them to vacate within a month. By then, Lao Li was in the middle of collecting their rents for the next six months, and he continued to calm them and promised that the yuanzi would stay intact. Whatever negotiation Lao Li might have tried did not succeed; after about two weeks, he informed the residents that they needed to vacate the premises in five days, as the demolition team from the township was coming in fifteen days.

The artist community was furious over Lao Li’s deception and the overall cruelty of the eviction system. A meeting between the residents and the landlords (both Lao Li and the primary landlord) ended with the primary landlord issuing more threats to the community, and to artists’ property and personal safeties. Though some of them had decided to put up a fight, their hope diminished quickly, replaced by fear of violent actions from the landlords and the township officials. Because Sun Xiaofei and his family had knowledge of the previous demolitions of artist communities, his parents immediately moved his important belongings out of 1005 to their studios in Liqiao, Shunyi District, Beijing, and he abandoned the things that were hard to reuse.²¹⁶ Liu Bangbang and Wang Yifan also moved out quickly as they had not paid rent for the

²¹⁵ He Xun, Huang Jingyuan, and Zeng Hong, “Beijing laixin: Heiqiao—30 fenzhong nei bu shoufei” 北京来信：黑桥——30 分钟内不收费 [Beijing Letter: Heiqiao—No Charge for 30 Minutes], *Artforum*, last modified January 30, 2017, <https://www.artforum.com.cn/slant/10316> (accessed April 3, 2024)

²¹⁶ Sun, *ibid.*

second half of 2017 and wanted to avoid future problems.²¹⁷ Under pressure from the residents, the landlords came to agree to refund their prepaid rents, arguably in exchange for their quick exit. Many residents felt lucky to receive refunds at all.

Non-Beijingese artists were struggling to find new studio spaces, and many of them spent the next few years roaming from studio to studio. Some of them left Beijing eventually. Many former residents had poured all their savings into their studios in 1005. The demolition had critical financial and mental impacts on them. Along with many artists from the nearby Heiqiao Art District, many displaced 1005 artists moved to Liqiao, Songzhuang, and Yanjiao, Hebei Province—farther and farther away from the city centre. Not many of the 1005 artists continued to pursue their careers in art as full-time artists but a lot of them still worked in art organisations or galleries before the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹⁸

In the 2022 interview, looking back on 1005's eviction and demolition, Wan Yunyun, compared their case to the *Warm Winter Initiative*. Wan commented that from 2009–10 when the eviction operation took place in the Chaoyang artist districts, the overall socio-political environment was significantly more comfortable than in 2017. In 2017, though the willingness of officials to negotiate still hinged on artist communities' ability to present greater benefits, officials' actions were largely detached from community interests; if they decided to pursue a course of action—whether to build or to destroy an artist community—they would proceed without hesitation. While negotiation was not entirely impossible, it often revolved around city planning. On one hand, successfully developing, commercializing and containing an artist community might allow for tax collection, and there was potential to transform a development into an artistic hub, similar to the 798 Art District. In that case, support would be granted for successful development, whereas failure to demonstrate financial gains might lead to expulsion. On the other hand, demolition policies also reflected a level of absurdity, as some officials might publicly claim intentions to demolish certain areas while often failing to follow through with any new plans for the area.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Liu Bangbang, *ibid.*

²¹⁸ Zhao, *ibid.*; Liu Chao, *ibid.*

²¹⁹ These policies served primarily as symbolic metrics, with officials establishing specific targets for demolition, or “demolition quotas.” For instance, in a given district or township, a mandate may have required that 30% of structures be demolished, while another area might only necessitate a 10% reduction. The method for achieving these targets could be flexible; it could

The expulsion of the migrant population of Beijing from 2016–18 was closely linked to Cai Qi, who ascended from Acting Mayor to Mayor, and then to Secretary of the Beijing Municipal Committee during that period, when Chaoyang District faced mounting concerns over urban density, housing availability, and infrastructure strain relating to the growth of migrant worker population. Nearly eighty thousand residents lived in Heiqiao Village, of which only about twenty-seven hundred were villagers; the remaining over seventy thousand were migrant workers, including nearly a thousand artists and their families.²²⁰ In 2017, Cai initiated the campaign to “evict the low-end population” (驱除低端人口) in Beijing, which which operated simultaneously with the demolition of artist communities in the city peripheries. “Low-end population” is a term that encompasses individuals with low educational attainment, low income, and employment in low-end industries. These populations typically reside in relatively underdeveloped areas of Beijing's peripheries or in the basements of residential complexes in the city centre, where they are regarded by the government as “urban tumors.” The term “low-end population” has appeared multiple times in documents from the Beijing Municipal Government and is widely used in the media and among scholars; however, it has sparked controversy due to allegations of discrimination.²²¹

The campaign for the expulsion of migrant people reached its climax in November 2017, when a fire broke out in Xihongmen Town, Daxing District, Beijing, directly affecting migrant workers living in low-cost peri-urban housing.²²² The victims of the fire received no assistance from the government and additionally encountered the misfortune of eviction during the severe

involve demolishing a single artist community entirely to meet the 30% requirement, or spreading the demolition across multiple households, each contributing a smaller percentage. However, the overarching requirement of achieving a specific percentage remained a non-negotiable aspect of the policy that members of artist communities could not possibly know. Wan, *ibid.*

²²⁰ He, Huang, and Zeng, *ibid.*

²²¹ Wang Xinxian 王信賢, “Xi Jinping xin shidai de shehui zhili: Beijing quli ‘diduan renkou’ de guancha” 習近平新時代的社會治理: 北京驅離“低端人口”的觀察 [Social Governance in Xi Jinping's New Era: Observations on the Eviction of the 'Low-End Population' in Beijing], *Zhanwang yu tansuo yuekan* 展望與探索月刊 16, no. 1 (2018): 15-21.

²²² For a broader discussion of the relationship between displacement and contemporary visual culture, see TJ Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

winter months. In the immediate aftermath of the incident, Beijing authorities initiated a forty-day "Safety Hazard Major Inspection, Cleanup, and Rectification Special Action," which marked the beginning of a systematic expulsion of migrant workers from the city. Cai, then the Beijing Municipal Party Secretary, played a key role in advancing this cleanup campaign. The expelled migrants were predominantly categorized as "low-end population." This operation involved the closure of factories and rental apartments, with accommodations for migrants being explicitly denied.²²³ Since then, many evictions and demolitions happening in peri-urban Beijing have been categorized under the convenient name of fire prevention corresponding with land status, including the evictions of artist communities.

Five years later, during my field trip to Chaoyang District, Beijing, in 2022, I asked Wang Yifan to lead me through the area around the former Heiqiao Art District, including 1005. Before our meeting, Wang and I did some research on the map and managed to locate the former site of 1005. When looked up on Baidu map, it showed, just like the Heiqiao Artist Village, that 1005 had also been flattened and become part of Heiqiao Park, a community park. While on another map application, Amap (高德地图), the location of 1005 was pinpointed under the name of "Dongba Northwestern 'Shanty Area' Redevelopment Vacating Headquarter" (东坝北西棚改造项目腾退指挥部). This suggests that during the demolition, the workforce responsible for clearing the site had temporarily occupied the 1005 compound as their headquarters while simultaneously referring to it in a derogatory manner as a shanty area. Ironically, what was once an artist community fostering creativity and collaboration was first dismissed as an informal, undesirable settlement, only to be repurposed as an administrative hub for its own erasure.

²²³ Ibid.

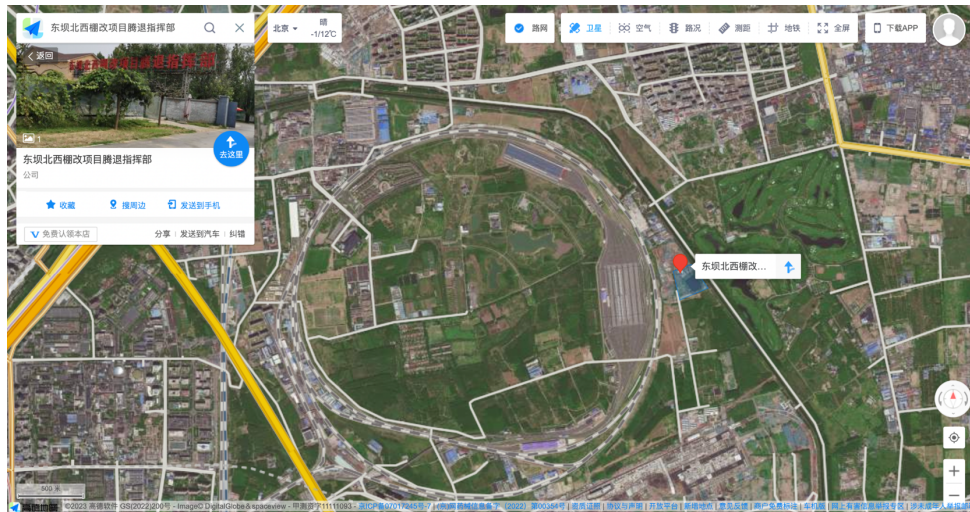


Figure 38. “Dongba Northwestern ‘Shanty Area’ Redevelopment Vacating Headquarter” (东坝北西棚改项目腾退指挥部) on Amap Application, 2022.

The concept of displacing individuals from their homes and livelihoods to construct a neighborhood park in a peri-urban area is not only perplexing but also deeply cruel. What is the purpose of creating a space for relaxation when it comes at the cost of destroying existing communities? Moreover, one must consider the significant expenses associated with landscaping such parks. Inside the park, the only thing that stood out from the surroundings was a carefully fenced, empty lot. A big sign stood outside and wrote “The City of Beijing, Chaoyang District Permanent Basic Cropland Conservation Area” and a list of “Five Not-to-do’s of the Conservation of Basic Cropland.” Land status and the nature of land leasehold were key factors contributing to the lack of legal operating status for Heiqiao Artist Village and many other artist communities in Beijing. In peri-urban Beijing, much of the land is classified as cropland, making it illegal to repurpose it for commercial real estate development. The Cropland Conservation in Heiqiao Park may initially appear to us as merely a performance, yet it also serves as a significant statement on the legality of occupying this space.

Exiting the south gate of the park, the site where 1005 once stood is now best described as a mountain of construction debris—bricks, concrete blocks, tiles, and metal scraps all haphazardly piled together and roughly wrapped in green mesh and plastic boards for protection from collapse. These “mountains” have overtaken the former 1005 site, starkly highlighting that when residents were forced to vacate in 2017, the government treated the situation with such urgency that the space needed to be cleared immediately. However, more than five years later, it

is evident that there was no concrete plan for its use. Consequently, the remnants of the former artist community remain, forgotten and unacknowledged.



Figure 39. The demolished site of 1005, 2022. Photographs by the author.

During my field trip in Luoma Lake, Shunyi District, Beijing, sculptor and installation artist Hua Xiaocheng had a theory about why his studio and yuanzi survived the Luoma Lake Artist Village demolition during the pandemic, which echoed Wan Yunyun's comment regarding the abrupt yet ill-defined demolition of 1005. Hua noted that districts and local governments receive "demolition quotas" from higher levels of government, typically determined by the number of acres of land. As a result, they often target larger areas of illegally occupied land managed by a single landowner or developer, as this approach is simpler and more effective than negotiating with individual households. In these situations, artist communities are particularly vulnerable, as artists have become increasingly cautious regarding issues of censorship and political sensitivity in recent years, and therefore tend to avoid conflict. In Hua's case, because his yuanzi is located on the edge of the former Luoma Lake Artist Village and the property belongs to someone who "has the right connections" according to Hua, the artist had a narrow escape from the village-wide demolition. However, with his being the only yuanzi left, Hua faces a reality without peers, amenities, or art resources.²²⁴

²²⁴ Hua Xiaocheng, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.

Later in the conversation with Zhao Bin, when discussing the total value of his property lost in the demolition, Zhao laughed and commented that an exotic tree inside the Heiqiao Park now may cost half a million yuan, and the value of his property is nothing for those people in charge. Since leaving 1005, Zhao has moved to Liqiao, Yanjiao and now he lives with his wife in Songzhuang, Tongzhou District, Beijing. Zhao is one out of a few 1005 residents who still works as a full-time artist. During the pandemic, Zhao experienced a significant increase in painting sales, which he attributed to the enhanced representation of paintings in online formats compared to other art media. This led to him affording a small yuanzi in Songzhuang in 2022.



Figure 40. Zhao Bin, *My Father and I* (我和父亲), performance and video installation, 2'20'', 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

Back in 2017, after the demolition of 1005, Zhao briefly went back to his hometown in Henan Province and spent some time with his parents. He had been struggling with his relationship with his family financially and emotionally when in Beijing, and Zhao decided to take this opportunity to reconcile with his parents through art, which materialized into the series *Everything Goes Well* (都挺好). The first project of the series, a 2017 performance, was presented as a dual-screen video installation, named *My Father and I*. The artist reflected on the relationship between he and his father through his father's work, describing how his father operated an advertising truck for a living. With his father in the front, the cargo area was transformed into a makeshift studio for the artist, where he painted while his father drove around town. Two cameras documented the father and son during the ride. For Zhao, the works in the vehicle symbolized their family's livelihood, as their income had largely depended on the father's work before Zhao started to support the family.²²⁵

The artist initially struggled to communicate his intentions for his artwork to his father, as their perspectives on success differed. While the father associated a better life with material

²²⁵ Zhao, Ibid.

gains, the artist argued that his creative endeavours could lead to financial success and recognition. This conversation ultimately allowed the father to support the artist's work. The camera also captured the dynamic of their relationship. Although their communication was minimal, it was efficient, highlighting the challenges each faces—his father driving slowly due to road conditions for Zhao's painting, and the artist grappling with the hardship of his father's work while sitting in the back. This seemingly quiet video reveals profound connections and disconnections between the two. *My Father and I* stems from Zhao's personal desire to reconnect with his family in his hometown on both emotional and intellectual levels, following a chaotic and confusing period in Beijing.²²⁶



Figure 41. Zhao Bin, *Everything Goes Well—Mother's Garden* (都挺好-母亲花园), 2022, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Reflecting on earlier times, Zhao revisited the series in 2022 after getting married and feeling as though he had finally settled down in Beijing. *Everything Goes Well—Mother's Garden* is a 150 x 200 cm, acrylic-on-canvas painting, depicting plants in repurposed containers collected by the artist's mother. Unlike his previous effort to connect and communicate through

²²⁶ Ibid.

art in *My Father and I, Mother's Garden* represents the artist's effort to acknowledge and console his mother through making her rustic garden his art subject.

Zhao explained that the plants grown by his mother, despite their unremarkable appearance, possessed a resilience that became evident when arranged together, showcasing a vibrant and natural beauty distinct from artificially cultivated plants. She found broken planters, repairing them with adhesive tape and ropes, repurposing non-functional vessels as flowerpots, and protecting the blooming flowers from being consumed by hens using scavenged trash cans. The garden not only showed her practical needs but also her life choices and values. Through the painting, Zhao expressed his admiration for her aesthetic sensibilities and her attitude to life. The artist hoped that this painting would help his mother recognize her self-worth and take pride in being a practical person. Despite her aspirations, she often felt inadequate due to her inability to provide financial support for the family. Zhao called this painting “a gift for my mother, as well as a gift she gives me.”²²⁷ For Zhao, his mother's garden was anti-elitist, in contrast to the well-nurtured exotic plants on the market. He also acknowledged a sense of in-betweenness; while people praised the visual appeal of *Mother's Garden*, he questioned whether the same individuals would extend similar compliments to the actual garden his mother tended.²²⁸ By acknowledging the garden, Zhao was, in a way, analyzing himself and his identity as an artist in the art scene. On a certain level, *Mother's Garden* signified Zhao's true reconciliation with his struggles as a son, an artist, and a member of an arguably elitist artistic community.

In many ways, Zhao's mother's garden functions as a metaphor for the community at and around 1005. Like the repurposed containers and salvaged objects that supported the plants' quiet resilience, the 1005 community thrived on piecing together limited resources, improvising solutions, and cultivating creative life on the city's margins. The “unremarkable” and makeshift aspects of the garden mirror the provisional infrastructures of 1005—its patchwork studios, informal exhibitions, and reliance on mutual aid. Just as Zhao questioned whether outsiders would appreciate the real garden as much as his painting of it, many 1005 artists confronted the ambivalence of visibility: celebrated for their creativity, yet uncertain whether their lived conditions and personal struggles would ever be equally recognized. *Mother's Garden* thus

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

resonates beyond the familial; it becomes a visual language of survival, dignity, and alternative value—qualities shared by the artistic collective Zhao was part of.

In this chapter, I examined the unterritorialized artist communities that resisted both state and capitalist attempts to confine and profit from their bodies and works, particularly focusing on a case study of the 1005 artist community. By looking into *1005Ye*, I explored how 1005 positioned itself against more established artist communities, articulating a vision of artistic freedom and playfulness through their self-organised exhibition and their self-representation more broadly. The chapter also delved into how the community served as a “utopian” space for belonging, creativity, mutual support, and knowledge exchange, while also grappling with issues of exclusivity and gender hierarchy. The demolition of the 1005 community marked a critical turning point, highlighting the fragility of these alternative art spaces and altering the trajectory of many young, emerging artists. As these communities dissolve, they leave behind a complex legacy of resistance, experimentation, and community-building that raises important questions about the intersection of art, politics, and social dynamics.

As we turn to the next chapter, “Is Gender Territorialized?: Where do female artists and feminisms fit?,” we will continue examining the roles of women in artist communities, considering how gender dynamics both inform and are informed by the artist communities we’ve explored. How do women navigate the power structures within these experimental, often male-dominated spaces, and what unique challenges and opportunities do they face in asserting their voices? Additionally, this chapter will extend the discussion of exclusion and territorialization to feminist critiques of the Chinese art world, investigating the ways in which feminist art, or *nüxing yishu*, challenges both the physical and conceptual boundaries placed on women within artistic communities. It aims to address how female artists and feminist thought further disrupt and reimagine the boundaries of art and community.

Artist	Title	Medium	Year
1005 Artists	<i>Untitled (1005Ye Poster)</i>	Digital display and printing	2015 (1005Ye)
Liu Bangbang	<i>Angry Birds/Take Off</i>	Installation	2015 (1005Ye)
Wan Yunyun	<i>Pray</i>	Sculpture	2015

			(1005Ye)
Xia Jia	<i>Belief</i>	Performance and installation	2015 (1005Ye)
Zhao Bin	<i>The Giant Bathroom</i>	Acrylic on paper	2016
Zhao Bin	<i>Everything Goes Well—My Father and I</i>	Performance and video installation	2017
Zhao Bin	<i>Everything Goes Well—Mother's Garden</i>	Acrylic on canvas	2022

Table 4. Table of selected artworks and performances by the 1005 artists discussed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four – Is Gender Territorialized?: Women Artists in the Community

Women in artist communities: The gender roles of women artists

Chapter Four examines the dynamic relationship between women artists and Chinese artist communities, focusing on how women artists navigate, challenge, and reshape these spaces, while also exploring how these communities, in turn, shape and influence women's artistic practices. By analyzing the works of Yu Hong and Xiao Lu, I explore how their artistic practices engage with the social, gendered, and institutional forces within artist communities. This chapter seeks to localize feminisms and feminist art within the history of modern and contemporary Chinese art, with a particular focus on Beijing artist communities. Rather than centring solely on feminist theories, it situates women artists within the structures of these communities, exploring how their artistic practices engage with and challenge their environments. I ask: How have Beijing's artist communities shaped women's artistic trajectories, and vice versa? What limitations and possibilities do these spaces present? Most importantly, this discussion also serves as a critical reflection on previous chapters, addressing the question of why women artists have been less visible in our discussions of artist communities thus far.

The presence of women in Chinese artist communities has often been shaped by broader social and historical forces. While the state-led women's liberation movement promoted formal gender equality, it did not always translate into lived experiences of artistic or professional parity. This situation was further exacerbated after the launch of the Chinese Economic Reform in 1978, when the population increased and labour shortages were no longer a concern. As Li Xiaojiang explains:

The official reports of achievements always emphasize progress and accomplishments . . . but this does not mean that under laws of equality, women's issues have disappeared, nor does it mean that the attainment of social rights can be equated with women's liberation. If equal rights do not bring happiness and health to women's lives, but instead place heavier burdens on them, this "equality" must be questioned and warrants serious reflection. By delving into the lives of women in different social classes, we find that those issues that have disappeared at the social level may have already transformed into concrete and trivial obstacles, silently and stubbornly reflected in every woman's daily life. These problems stem from an important reason: although our society is immersed in the

ideological atmosphere of “gender equality,” no feminist revolution has taken place at the level of the family and daily life.²²⁹

As Li Xiaojiang reflects in her examination of gender equality in China, despite the ideological commitment to “equality between men and women,” many of the profound inequalities women face in their daily lives remain persistent, often concealed beneath the surface of legal reforms and societal progress. Women are increasingly expected to contribute financially and work outside the home, a role once predominantly reserved for men. However, this outward shift toward equality contrasts with the continued expectation that women shoulder the traditional responsibilities within the household, such as caregiving and housework. When domestic matters arise that demand more time or emotional investment—whether it’s caring for children, elderly relatives, or managing the household—women are often expected to prioritize these duties, sacrificing their professional aspirations in the process. As a result, even when women are encouraged to be financially independent and pursue careers, they still face the weight of unpaid labour within the home, which often limits their career growth and personal development. This paradox places women in a double bind, where they are expected to perform equally to men in the public sphere, yet are constrained by traditional gender roles within the private sphere.

Although the discourse in Chinese around gender largely uses “equality” (平等, *pingdeng*) to cover both equality and equity, in practice, the two concepts diverge sharply. Socialist-era policies tended to foreground equality based on formal rights and sameness, yet paid little attention to the differing needs and burdens that women actually bear. This ideological stance has been reflected in legal frameworks, but practical applications often failed to recognize the lived reality of women’s experiences. A case can be made for a shift from equality to equity in understanding women’s situation, as equity demands a recognition of these differing needs, rather than merely providing identical rights or opportunities to all individuals. Some grassroots measures did anticipate more equitable approaches, however. For example, in the 1950s, people’s communes in Henan and Shandong provinces implemented a “women’s labour-

²²⁹ Li Xiaojiang, *Nüxing Wutopang: Zhongguo Nvxing/xingbie Yanjiu Ershi Jiang* 女性乌托邦：中国女性/性别研究二十讲 [Women’s Utopia: Women and Gender Studies in New China (20 Topics)] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2016), 97-98.

protection name-tag system” (妇女劳动保护挂牌制). Each day, women workers hung a tag on a board indicating whether they were menstruating, pregnant, or breastfeeding, so supervisors could assign them tasks and breaks suited to their physical condition. This system recognized that formal equality must be matched by equity in workload and care—an important corrective to the often overburdening demands placed on women under socialist gender policy.²³⁰ Till this day, the term *lijia* (例假) is commonly used in Chinese to refer to menstrual breaks, reflecting the lasting impact of this system.

This context of systemic inequality and the dual expectations placed upon women is crucial to understanding the challenges women artists face within Chinese artist communities, where their identities are often subjected to the same contradictory forces of progress and traditionalism.

In the post-economic reform era, as market-driven dynamics reshaped the cultural sphere, women artists encountered both new opportunities and persistent structural barriers. Within this landscape, artists like Yu Hong (喻红) and Xiao Lu (肖鲁) developed distinct strategies to assert their artistic voices, sometimes working within established systems and other times radically disrupting them. Their works reflect both personal and collective negotiations with gendered expectations in the art world, offering a lens through which to examine the evolving role of women in Chinese artist communities.

In this chapter, I utilize the concept of “feminine space” to analyse Yu and Xiao’s works. First introduced by Wu Hung in his analysis of portraits of Qing court women, he defines “feminine space” as a distinct spatial framework that goes beyond the portrayal of a female figure or feminine objects. Instead, like a theatrical stage, it is constructed through sensory elements, characters, and their actions. Just as a stage is composed of a complex interplay of props, backdrops, lighting, and sound, “feminine space” embodies a multifaceted environment

²³⁰ While the name-tag system aimed to accommodate women’s physical needs in the workplace, it also raised concerns about privacy, stigma, and safety. The practice was gradually abandoned by the 1960s, especially as political campaigns prioritized ideological conformity over differentiated care. See Henan Provincial Archives, “People’s Commune, 1954–1956,” Reel 12.

that denotes a particular cultural and symbolic context.²³¹ “Feminine space” is a useful concept when investigating works by women artists. Rather than attempting to categorize these artworks as either feminist or non-feminist based on a Western understanding of feminist art, this dissertation seeks to approach the subject from a different perspective—one that emphasizes the exploration and recognition of the feminine spaces embodied within women artists’ projects.

Yu Hong’s work and personal identity are intrinsically connected to the gendered dynamics of her time—beginning in the late 1980s when she graduated from CAFA. While gender equality was then and is still professed as a value and legal achievement in society at large, the lived reality for women artists like Yu still involves navigating traditional gender roles that limit their professional and personal autonomy. For example, the shift in Yu’s artistic focus after motherhood and her return to painting in the *Witness to Growth* (1999–ongoing) series speaks to the broader challenges faced by women in balancing career and familial responsibilities. During this period, her art became a site of both personal expression and social commentary, as she engaged with the complex roles imposed upon women, especially within the context of contemporary Chinese art communities. Yu’s participation in artist communities is first discussed in this dissertation in the section on the *Warm Winter Initiative* in Chapter Three. In the art campaign against demolition during the re-territorialization phase, Yu’s position, along with that of her husband Liu Xiaodong, was no doubt privileged. As discussed in Chapter Three, their prominent status as renowned artists in the Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District not only allowed them to live and work rent-free, but also earned them offers of temporary, alternative studios from the developer when the eviction began. These privileges were tied to their prominence, which had helped attract other tenants and bolster the district’s reputation. Given their established positions and financial security, they were in a position to turn down the art district’s offer of alternative studio space in exchange for their silence. This decision to stand with the artist community was also made possible because of their privileged status, which allowed them to advocate for the rights of other artists without the same risk of displacement faced by less-established members of the community.

²³¹ Wu Hung, “Beyond Stereotypes: The Twelve Beauties in Qing Court Art and the Dream of the Red Chamber,” in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, edited by E. Widmer and K.I.S. Chang, 306-338 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

However, in a sense, the household can be viewed as the smallest unit of an artist community. As a female artist sharing living and working spaces with her male partner and potentially other family members within an artist community, Yu was, in a way, simultaneously experiencing processes of reterritorialization and deterritorialization—reterritorialized by external forces as part of the art district, and deterritorialized by internal forces within the household itself. Within this domestic space, her artistic autonomy may have been shaped by the dynamics of shared space, implicit gendered expectations, or the practical challenges of balancing artistic and domestic responsibilities.

Yu's decades-long series *Witness to Growth* was created from 1999-2008 and includes over forty-five historical photographs from the news and more than fifty-nine paintings documenting her own growth, and the growth of her daughter from infancy. Each work is named by units of years and ages, and through the comparison between the news photographs and the autobiographical paintings, each work reflects events that have taken place in Chinese society, from the birth of the painter in 1966 to the present.²³²



Figure 42. Yu Hong, *1966 six months old in Xi'an*, 1999, acrylic on canvas (100×100cm) and multi-media collage.

Witness to Growth captures the intersection of private and public memories, particularly in the context of Yu's personal experiences amid China's larger historical landscape. One

²³² Yue Meimei, "Xinshengdai huajia Yu Hong yishu de yanjiu" 新生代画家喻红艺术的研究 [Study on the new generation artist Yu Hong], PhD Diss., (Xinjiang Normal University 新疆师范大学, 2012).

example of this collision can be seen in the painting *1966, Six Months Old in Xi'an* (1966 半岁在西安, 1999) (Figure 41). In this work, the iconic image of Mao, depicted in the unassailable format of state propaganda, is juxtaposed with a six-month-old Yu dozing outside her family home. The stark contrast between the political fervor of the time and the quiet, bucolic life of the infant draws attention to the disjunction between the personal and the political. It prompts questions: What did this image of Mao mean for the infant in Xi'an? How long would her family's peace remain undisturbed by the turbulence starting to unfold in Beijing? And perhaps most poignantly, what would she grow up to become? Significantly, the painting's formal language—its combination of photorealistic detail, autobiographical narrative, and layered temporality—signals a movement beyond the collectivist aesthetic of socialist realism. In doing so, it reclaims personal history and emotional depth as legitimate subjects of contemporary Chinese art, especially from a woman's perspective.²³³

Part of the answer is that Yu became an artist—arguably one of the most successful women artists of her generation. After graduating from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1988, Yu's career unfolded in a period marked by political and social upheaval, including the Tiananmen Square protests, which shook intellectual and artistic communities in China. While many young artists fled the country in the wake of these events, Yu remained in China, where she steadily gained recognition through her academic, realistic painting style, in contrast to the radical performances of artists like Xiao Lu, whose 1989 performance at the *China/Avant-Garde* Exhibition famously involved her shooting a gun at her installation—a powerful statement of defiance and a demand for power.

Yu's *1992, 26 Years Old Story* (1992 26岁故事片, 2001) (Figure 43) presents a young woman artist at the intersection of national pride and personal uncertainty. In the context of a rapidly industrializing China asserting its global presence, the work reflects a sense of dislocation as the artist grapples with her newfound success. In this moment, Yu's character seems caught in a state of indecision—her future as an artist uncertain. It is a moment of hesitation in her artistic journey that extended into 1994, when the birth of her daughter, Liu

²³³ Li Weiwei, "Muji Yu Hong" 目击喻红 [Witness Yu Hong]. *Yishu pinglun 艺术评论*, no. 3 (2007).

Wa, marked a significant turning point in her life and career. Yu would not return to painting until five years later.



Figure 43. Yu Hong, *1992 26 years old story*, 2001, acrylic on canvas (100×100cm) and multi-media collage.

The painting *1994/8/12, 28 Years Old, Giving Birth to Daughter Liu Wa* (1994 年 8 月 12 日 28

岁生下女儿刘娃, 2001) (Figure 44) captures this pivotal moment, coinciding with a news headline announcing industrial success in bold, masculine terms. In stark contrast, the intimate portrayal of Yu and her daughter focuses not on the tender affection between mother and child but on the individual presence of each figure. Both look directly at the viewer with a sense of inquiry, even stubbornness, capturing a moment of vulnerability, exhaustion, and resilience. This absence of conventional maternal warmth—a cuddled baby or a smiling mother—suggests Yu's intention to present these figures as two distinct, yet intertwined, individuals. The scene does not shy away from the temporary sense of loss that comes with this moment of personal transformation, prompting the viewer to ask the central question of *Witness to Growth*: What will they, or what will *she* become?²³⁴

In *Witness to Growth*, Yu does not resort to dramatic depictions of blood and tears to express the difficulties of her upbringing. Instead, she positions herself as a witness to the quiet, everyday struggles of life, illustrating the small yet vital lives of individuals set against the vast historical and political backdrop of China. This contrast of scale serves to both diminish the

²³⁴ Ibid.

figures and highlight the resilience of their vitality as they face the uncertainty and challenges of their time. A central emotion in Yu's work is a sense of loss and confusion, which I argue is particularly rooted in the post-Cultural Revolution era. This feeling, distinct in its nature, reflects the profound shifts occurring in society at the time—loss not only of certainty, but of the freedom to question one's existence, past, and future.



Figure 44. Yu Hong, 1994/8/12 28 years old, *the birth of daughter Liu Wa*, 2001, 100×275cm, acrylic on canvas and multi-media collage.

Yu's exploration of personal loss and transformation, however, also resonates deeply with the concept of feminine space. In *Witness to Growth*, feminine space is apparent in how Yu constructs a distinct world for her female subjects. The domestic and intimate scenes in *Witness to Growth*, particularly Yu's portrayal of herself and her daughter, create a space that is at once deeply personal and culturally significant. Through the careful depiction of their physical surroundings—whether the isolation of a sunlit courtyard or the starkness of a hospital room—Yu constructs a feminine space that encompasses both the sensory and emotional worlds of women. These spaces are not simply backdrops; they grow around the characters, interacting with them, influencing their experiences, identities, and roles in ways that reflect the broader social and cultural expectations placed on women. Much like a stage set in a play, Yu's feminine spaces become sites of tension and transformation. They embody the contradictions of female existence in contemporary China, where personal autonomy and public expectations clash. In this series, the feminine space serves as a dynamic arena where questions of identity, freedom, and gender are constantly negotiated, making *Witness to Growth* not only a personal narrative but also a larger cultural commentary on the role of women in a rapidly changing society.

While Yu's *Witness to Growth* explores the complexities of feminine space and identity through a more introspective lens, Xiao Lu's artistic practice takes a much bolder approach in her exploration of autonomy and feminine space. Xiao, as a recurring figure in this dissertation, has appeared in earlier chapters (Introduction and Chapter Two) through her involvement with the 85' New Wave and the *China/Avant-Garde* (1989) exhibition, and the *Warm Winter Initiative* (2009-2010). These moments in her career provide crucial context for understanding her exploration of gender and political themes. Notably, her performance at the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, which garnered significant attention, exemplifies how she mediates feminine space in her art. The act of shooting at her installation, within the exhibition's broader context, offers valuable insights into how her work challenges gender roles and the spatial boundaries imposed on women in contemporary Chinese art.

Xiao's performance at the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, *Dialogue* (1989), is one of the most notorious and politically charged acts by a woman artist in China. The installation features life-sized photograph images of a man and a woman communicating with each other pasted into separate phone booths, with a red telephone dangling off the hook in the centre. The gendered body language of the figures—the woman tilting her upper body and appearing softer, and the man standing upright with confidence—illustrate the ways gender roles are inscribed in everyday actions. Xiao's shooting of the installation two hours after the exhibition opened disrupted these gendered dynamics and the art space itself, leading to her arrest (and her partner's), and also to the immediate closure of the show.

Through this radical act, Xiao challenged the space assigned to women in the art world, where their gender identity is often subsumed by the dominance of male peers. Xiao's shooting of the installation can be interpreted as an assertion of her own agency in a space where women's voices and bodies are rarely afforded visibility. Just as Yu's feminine space is shaped by external and internal forces within her community, Xiao's performance destabilizes the boundaries of feminine space by asserting her autonomy and authorship, particularly in an environment that has not fully recognized women as equal creators.

Xiao's struggle with authorship is deeply connected to gender imbalances in the art world. Initially sharing authorship of *Dialogue* with her then-partner Tang Song, Xiao's subsequent work in the early 2000s, such as *Fifteen Shots ... from 1989-2003* (first performed in 2003), illustrates her reclaiming of her role as sole author of the piece. Xiao returned to China in

the early 2000s from Australia, where she had withdrawn from the art world and lived with Tang for more than a decade. She learned to do house chores there and drew tourist paintings on the street for a living. In 2003, when she and Tang parted, in a letter to a friend, Xiao described her devotion in the relationship: “In the past fifteen years, he wanted neither marriage nor children, and I accepted it. I realized love as an ideal of life, and I value him greatly. Seriously, I have truly achieved a state of selflessness.”²³⁵ After their separation, Xiao began to talk about the details of the *Dialogue* performance and her original motivations for the work, for the first time. She considers herself the sole author of the piece and asserts that she no longer needs a male narrator of her work.

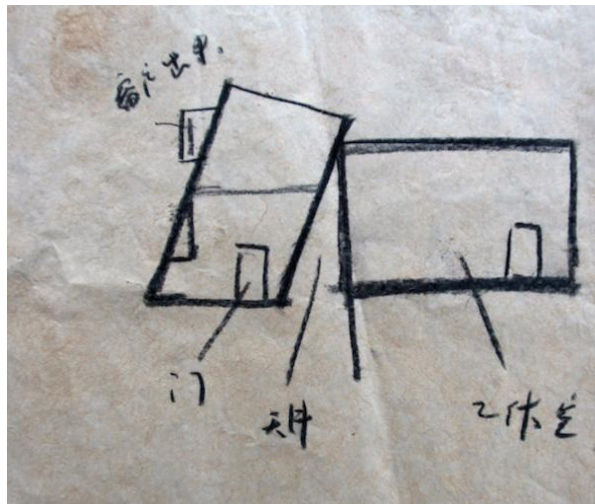


Figure 45. Xiao Lu, sketch of *Skew* house, 2011-2013. Courtesy of the artist.

After the *Warm Winter Initiative* (2009–2010), Xiao eventually settled in Liqiao, Shunyi District, Beijing, an area known for its scattered artist communities. There, she designed and built her studio, which she refers to as an installation, titled *Skew* (2011–2013). The architectural installation consisted of two distinct but interconnected structures: a box-shaped studio space on one side, and a skewed rhomboid living space on the other, leaning toward the former. Xiao describes the design as a reflection of the co-existence of the straight and the skewed, explaining

²³⁵ Zhang Runjuan, “Nuren de cuowu? Nanren de cuowu?—You Xiao Lu Duihua ji shumingquan zhenglun yinfa de sikao” 女人的错误? 男人的错误?——由肖鲁《对话》及署名权争论引发的思考 [Woman’s fault? Man’s fault? Reflection on the Xiao Lu’s *Dialogue* and its controversy over the rights of authorship], *Art Monthly* 画刊 5 (2007): 53-57.

that “when I was young, things were generally tangled up: straight and skew, right and wrong, black and white. They pervade your thinking and creating. When you observe straight being juxtaposed with and suppressed by skew, you suddenly find they are one and the same thing.”²³⁶

This duality echoes the contrasting body language of the male and female figures in her earlier work *Dialogue*, where the female figure tilts and the male figure stands upright, representing a subtle negotiation of feminine and masculine spaces. However, in *Skew*, unlike in *Dialogue*, where the two spaces are conceptually connected through the tangled red telephone wire, the studio and living spaces in *Skew* physically touched, with the dominant, leaning rhomboid structure in *Skew* representing a more fluid, feminine space. In this installation, the telephone wire is symbolically replaced by Xiao herself, as her movements between the two spaces physically embody the blending of traditionally gendered realms, juxtaposing the male-dominated work sphere with her personal, domestic life.

This installation goes beyond mere functionality or practical design. The way Xiao conceptualised the spaces—juxtaposing the traditionally male-dominated workspace with a leaning, feminine space—suggests a deliberate artistic intervention in how space is both inhabited and created. By physically embodying the shifting boundaries between the professional and personal, Xiao’s movements between the two spaces are not just utilitarian transitions, but performative acts that challenge and reshape the spatial dynamics within her life and work. Through this installation, she transforms the domestic and workspaces into a cohesive artistic expression of gendered experience, making a conceptual advancement in spatial thinking that, in some ways, her male counterparts may not have engaged with in the same manner.

Artist	Title	Medium	Year
Yu Hong	<i>Witness to Growth—1966 six months old in Xi'an</i>	Multi-media collage	1999

²³⁶ “Skew House (Installation/Design),” last modified January 3, 2024, <https://xiaolu.com.au/index.php?c=show&id=36> (accessed September 20, 2024)

Yu Hong	<i>Witness to Growth—1992 26 years old story</i>	Multi-media collage	2001
Yu Hong	<i>Witness to Growth—1994/8/12 28 years old, the birth of daughter Liu Wa</i>	Multi-media collage	2001
Xiao Lu	<i>Dialogue</i>	Installation and Performance	1989
Xiao Lu	<i>Fifteen Shots ... from 1989-2003</i>	Performance	2003
Xiao Lu	<i>Skew</i>	Installation and architectural design	2011-13

Table 5. Table of selected works by Yu Hong and Xiao Lu.

This shift marks a critical moment of challenging the deterritorialization of Xiao's personal and professional space, as she reasserts her agency after years of being subsumed by both her male partner and the art world's gendered expectations. By examining Xiao's experience alongside Yu's, we gain a fuller understanding of the ways female artists navigate the complex intersection of gender, space, and autonomy within China's artist communities. While Yu's *Witness to Growth* subtly explores the limitations and transformations of feminine space, Xiao's radical actions directly confront and deconstruct those limitations, offering a powerful statement on the role of the female artist in a male-dominated art world.

Both Yu and Xiao, both of whom had established themselves as professional artists with recognized works at a young age, faced significant challenges related to their identities as both women and artists. In contrast to women in other professions who regularly leave their homes to work, the gendered roles of women artists are further complicated when they share both their living and working spaces—often the same space—with men. In artist communities, where the boundary between work and life is frequently blurred, women artists often find themselves constrained by traditional domestic roles, tasked with caretaking responsibilities around the clock.

For emerging women artists, the situation is often even more challenging, especially under financial constraints and in situations where they are cramped into smaller living and

working spaces with their male partners. This further compromises the personal space and the time available for their own creative work. Without an established career or a body of recognized work, many young women artists naturally find themselves slipping into the role of supporter and caretaker for their male counterparts, even when they are at the beginning of their own artistic journeys. In this context, their ambitions and creative potential are frequently overshadowed by the demands of domestic responsibilities, reinforcing gendered expectations that limit their autonomy and professional development.

My study of the 1005 artist community (Chapter Three), highlights the issue of gendered dynamics within co-living and co-working spaces. Despite many male artists in the community expressing unawareness or outright denial of the obstacles faced by their female counterparts, both interviews and observations revealed that, like many other male-dominated artist communities, 1005 reinforced traditional gender roles. These roles often prioritized the workspaces and time of men at the expense of women. In cases where both male and female artists shared studio spaces for both living and working, male artists tended to occupy more space, often benefiting from better lighting and other favorable conditions. Although it is also important not to rule out the fact that many male artists frequently work on larger-scale objects or appliances, this raises an important question: if female artists had not been historically confined to such spatial limitations, would their artistic practices and perspectives have evolved differently? At the same time, these very constraints—of space, resources, and visibility—can also provoke critical reflection and creative adaptation. In *Skew*, for example, the experience of gendered spatial limitation becomes the very subject of artistic exploration. Rather than simply occupying and using space, Xiao interrogates and reconfigures it, pointing toward a distinctly feminine spatial practice that emerges through and against restriction. In this way, the unequal conditions women face are not passively accepted but also prompts the formation of new aesthetic strategies and feminist engagements with space.

In the 1005 artist community, ceramic artist Sun Xiaofei shared his studio space with his wife, Ye Zi, also a graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). The couple met while at CAFA and later married within 1005. After the birth of their first child, the couple rented an apartment nearby, and Ye and the newborn moved out of the studio. The studio space, once shared, was now reserved exclusively for Sun, while his wife ceased pursuing her artistic

career.²³⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, many female artists in 1005 observed that women in the community were often burdened with more household responsibilities than the men, which resulted in their time for work being fragmented and compromised. Some attributed these imbalances to external factors, such as the geographic location of the community and limited access to transportation. However, almost all of the interviewed female artists who had lived with male partners in artist communities acknowledged that they would not have considered living and working there if their male partners had not made the decision to do so. In these cases, women artists often found themselves attached to their partners' professional trajectories and space allocations. For example, Zhuang Yu, who shared a studio at Luoma Lake in Shunyi District, suburban Beijing, with her partner Hua Xiaocheng, noted that the studio's location was too far from her parents' home or her part-time job in the city, requiring her to rely on Hua's vehicle for transportation. Hua's sculpture and installation works dominated the studio, as his work was the primary reason they had a studio space at all, while Zhuang, whose projects were mostly digitally based, had no designated workspace and instead worked on a computer in the bedroom.²³⁸ I observed a similar dynamic in the studio of former 1005 member Zhao Bin, now based in Songzhuang. Zhao's workspace occupied the largest area of the studio house he and his ex-wife shared, with floor-to-ceiling windows. His ex-wife, who preferred to remain unnamed, on the other hand, worked in a much smaller room, which also served as the family room and was cluttered with furniture such as a sofa, coffee table, and chairs.²³⁹ The expectation that she use this small room (which was also the only pathway to the bathroom) further illustrates how spatial and functional inequalities often shape the domestic and professional lives of women artists in artist communities.

The experiences of women artists in China's artist communities reveal the complex and often contradictory forces that shape their professional and personal identities. Drawing on feminist theorist Li Xiaojiang's analysis of gender inequality, we see that while legal frameworks may promise gender equality, entrenched societal expectations continue to perpetuate the marginalization of women in many areas of life, including the art world. Women artists, even as they engage in professional work, often find themselves navigating a terrain where traditional

²³⁷ Sun Xiaofei, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.

²³⁸ Hua Xiaocheng, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.

²³⁹ Zhao Bin, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.

gender roles—particularly those related to domestic responsibilities—remain deeply ingrained. This section, building upon Chapter Four, reflects on how these gendered expectations complicate the role of women within the artist community, where the demands of both career and domestic life are compounded by limited resources, time, and spatial constraints—pressures that women artists have navigated not by retreat, but through adaptive and often innovative artistic strategies. For some, the lack of physical studio space has catalyzed a turn to digital tools and smaller-scale formats—media that not only accommodate spatial limitations but also offer new conceptual possibilities. While these shifts are responses to systemic inequality, they also demonstrate how resilient women artists actively forge new artistic vocabularies in the face of constraint.

The question of whether the woman artist is a gender role is not easily answered. Artists like Yu Hong, Xiao Lu, and others challenge traditional gender roles through their art and activism, yet they continue to be shaped by societal expectations that limit their professional opportunities. As we have seen, the persistence of gendered spatial and labour divisions underscores the ongoing struggle for gender equality in the art world. The artist community, in many ways, becomes a space where these dual roles—artist and caretaker, creator and supporter—are not only conflated but also reinforced.²⁴⁰

In order to fully understand the position of artists like Yu and Xiao, we must first trace the historical trajectory of feminist thought in China. Section 5.2 of this chapter is going to examine the lineage of gender discourse from the early days of modern China, particularly the founding of the People's Republic of China, which allows us to debunk the assumption that state-led women's liberation achieved true equality, revealing instead the complexities and contradictions that continue to shape women's experiences in the art world.

²⁴⁰ This inequality was further evidenced by a striking comparison in 1005, where a middle-aged male artist, who lived alone in the community, was widely admired by both male and female residents for his freedom to live an unconstrained artist's life. In stark contrast, Liu Chao's middle-aged mother, who lived with her artist daughter, was asked by community members to start a public kitchen to feed the 1005 residents, highlighting the traditional expectation that women—especially those in close proximity to male artists—should take on domestic responsibilities, even at the cost of their own personal time and space.

Feminisms with Chinese characteristics

It seems that the more expansive issue of the “East-West divide” is concretely evidenced (in modern China) by the perceived differences between Chinese women and Western women . . . The hidden woman, once a model of moral ideals, is now distorted into a symbol of backwardness and decay, and history once again re-symbolized women.

- Zhang Nian, *Gender Politics and State: On Women's Liberation in China*²⁴¹

My “resistance” (to feminism) is not actually against feminism, but rather against the cultural hegemony that comes with it and the attempt to impose a monolithic, one-size-fits-all trend worldwide.

- Li Xiaojiang, *Femininity/ism?*²⁴²

This subchapter explores the multi-faceted and plural nature of Chinese feminisms, tracing their historical developments and diverse articulations in modern and contemporary China. The title of this subchapter is borrowed from the 2021 book, *Feminisms with Chinese characteristics*, edited by Ping Zhu and Hui Faye Xiao. The volume's title juxtaposed the plural “feminisms” to “Chinese characteristics” in order to challenge and dismantle the binary structures and patriarchal hierarchies ingrained in history, language, race, culture, and politics. The authors advocate for a broader understanding of “feminisms” to critically engage with and expand the concept of “Chinese characteristics,” which has historically been limited by factors such as racism, traditionalism, nationalism, and the spatial and biopolitical hierarchies of different eras.²⁴³

The term “Chinese characteristics” was invented by Westerners in the nineteenth century as a result of colonial encounters and when Chineseness was racialized. In the 1980s, during the Chinese Economic Reform led by Deng Xiaoping, the term was adopted as the official

²⁴¹ Zhang Nian, *Xingbie zhengzhi yu guojia: Lun Zhongguo funü jiefang* 性别政治与国家：论中国妇女解放 [Gender Politics and State: On Women's Liberation in China] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2014), 50.

²⁴² Li Xiaojiang, *Nüxing? Zhuyi* 女性？主义 [Femininity/ism] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2000), 282-283.

²⁴³ Ping Zhu, and Hui Faye Xiao, eds, *Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2021), 1-3.

translation for *zhongguo tese* (中国特色) as in *zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi* (中国特色社会主义, socialism with Chinese characteristics).²⁴⁴ In both its usage as a racialized, often negative term, and as a state policy, the term assumes a binary framework that contrasts East and West, tradition and modernity, socialism and capitalism, among others, in the effort to localize a Western ideology or perspective in China. The term “feminism” was translated into Chinese as *nüquan zhuyi* (女权主义, women’s right-ism), emphasizing women’s rights, or *nüxing zhuyi* (女性主义, womenism), emphasizing womanhood.²⁴⁵ Dai Jinhua viewed both of them as different forms of feminism, with the latter containing the former, but not the other way around.²⁴⁶ Zhu and Xiao acknowledged the conceptual framework Dai suggested, hence proposed “feminisms” as the general term representing the plurality. Dai also called to broaden the definition of feminism and the search for possibilities other than global capitalism through the documentation of the plurality of historical processes.²⁴⁷ Lisa Rofel also noted that a challenge for Chinese feminists stems from the binary divisions used to create a unified feminism, such as the contrasts between socialism and capitalism, Chinese traditions and Chinese socialism, and Chinese feminism and Western feminism.²⁴⁸ According to the authors, plurality also serves as a powerful approach to challenging systemic oppressions that maintain their power through the creation, reinforcement, and perpetuation of binary structures.²⁴⁹ This dissertation seeks to draw attention to this plurality in the study of women and non-binary artists and their works and lives, while being aware of and problematizing the power of Chinese characteristics.

²⁴⁴ Deng's main contribution was to adapt Marxist principles to China's unique historical, cultural, and social context by introducing more practical economic policies. In 1984, he officially coined the concept of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which advocated for incorporating market mechanisms and encouraging foreign investment, while still ensuring that the state controlled key sectors and the Communist Party maintained political leadership.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Dai Jinhua, *After the Post–Cold War: The Future of Chinese History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 163.

²⁴⁷ Dai Jinhua, “Liangnan Zhijian Huo Tuwei Keneng?” 两难之间或突围可能? [A Dilemma or a Breakout?] in *Funü, Minzu yu Nüxing Zhuyi* [Women, Nation, and Feminism], ed. Chen Shunxin and Dai Jinhua (Beijing: Beijing Bianyi Chubanshe, 2002), 29.

²⁴⁸ Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 51.

²⁴⁹ Zhu and Xiao, *ibid.*

At the macro level, the history of Chinese feminisms is deeply intertwined with the complex and evolving transformations of modern China. These feminisms have emerged at various historical moments and have consistently been central points of tension, conflict, or negotiation, shaping political, social, and cultural changes.²⁵⁰ The plural forms of Chinese feminism—ranging from early nationalist feminism to state feminism, socialist feminism, and the NGO-driven feminist movement—are connected to modernity, national revolutions, nation-building, and the political dynamics of globalization. This includes the rise of New Left thought in reaction to neoliberalism, the flow of transnational capital, and the decolonization of knowledge in a globalized world.²⁵¹

Zooming in on feminist theories by Chinese scholars in modern and contemporary China, a prominent feature of Chinese feminisms is their emphasis on prioritizing the narrative of the state's socialist transformation. For example, Li Xiaojiang, a pioneer in women's and gender studies in China and often regarded as “the Chinese Simone de Beauvoir,” wrote:

Since the modern era, the issue of national liberation has taken precedence over women's issues, and national consciousness has been prioritized over women's consciousness. This is an important distinction between Chinese women and Western women. While the national question has long been absent from the Western feminist movement²⁵², it has been the foremost issue in the path to the

²⁵⁰ The development of feminisms in China differs significantly from the dominant narratives of Western feminism, reflecting localized socio-political conditions, historical trajectories, and cultural contexts. Similar divergences can be observed across the Global South, where feminist movements have evolved in response to specific national and regional struggles. For example, in Latin America, feminist activism has been deeply intertwined with anti-authoritarian resistance, indigenous rights movements, and demands for reproductive justice. The concept of *Ni Una Menos*, originating in Argentina, exemplifies how gender-based violence has become a central concern of Latin American feminisms, often intersecting with broader issues of economic inequality and state violence. Such cases highlight the importance of viewing feminism not as a monolithic, universal movement but as a plurality of struggles shaped by distinct historical and geopolitical realities. See María Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–209; and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

²⁵¹ Yiju Huang, “Review of *Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics*, by P. Zhu & H. F. Xiao,” *Rocky Mountain Review* 76, no. 1 (2022), 158–61.

²⁵² Li's reference to “Western” feminism here appears to primarily indicate Euro-American feminist movements, which have often been critiqued for sidelining questions of national liberation and colonialism. However, feminist movements in the Global South—such as among Arab, South Asian, and Latin American women—have long intertwined women's liberation with struggles for national sovereignty, decolonization, and state-building. See, for example, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale

liberation of Chinese women.²⁵³ The equal rights that Chinese women enjoy today are a result of the collective efforts of society as a whole, which has significantly reinforced the 'national/state/social' consciousness among women.²⁵⁴

Li's assertion resonated with Dai, who considered gender ideology—rather than women's rights—the main issue in Chinese feminism. She explained that Chinese women never fully considered how the women's liberation movement in the PRC had shaped them as women, and simply took it for granted. The problem, however, is that the women's liberation movement wasn't sufficient. When feminism began to be discussed in socialist countries like China, it created a focus on difference, in contrast to socialism's focus on sameness. However, the socialist approach was grounded in the legal and ideological equality of women in China. Dai suggested that this is why she emphasized the role of ideology. Due to legal policies enacted in the early years of the founding of the PRC, this generation of Chinese women were unaware of gender discrimination, and as a result, didn't anticipate the consequences that came with the economic reform. Changes to the constitution, for example, marked a retreat from earlier laws that had upheld women's rights.²⁵⁵

The socialist emphasis on “sameness” that Dai refers to is evident in Chinese socialist realism during this period. In the early decades following the founding of the PRC, as the country was undergoing crucial modernization, the state urgently needed labour. As a result, women were strongly encouraged to work outside the home and delay marriage and childbirth in order to contribute to society as workers. However, in socialist portrayals of heroism, physical differences between men and women were often erased. This led to depictions of figures with idealized, standardized bodies—sometimes with exaggerated features like oversized hands and feet—and faces that, while slightly varied, typically adhered to stereotypical representations.

University Press, 1992); Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Verso, 1986).

²⁵³ Feminism, as *nüquan zhuyi* (女权主义) or *nüxing zhuyi* (女性主义), is not a term that has been adopted by the official Chinese socialist rhetoric. “Women's liberation” and “equality between men and women” are often used.

²⁵⁴ Li, *Nüxing Wutuopang: Zhongguo Nvxing/xingbie Yanjiu Ershi Jiang* [Women's Utopia: Women and Gender Studies in New China (20 Topics)], 16.

²⁵⁵ Dai, *ibid*, 163.



Figure 46. Propaganda poster headlining “Marry late and engage in planned parenthood for the revolution,” 1970. Courtesy of ChinesePosters.net.

Based on women’s liberation activist Qiu Jin’s 1904 feminist manifesto “Respectful Proclamation to China's 200 Million Women Comrades” (which advocated for women's independence, breaking free from the traditional dependent personality, and, on the premise of economic independence, fulfilling “the same duties as men”²⁵⁶), Zhang Nian questioned the mediation between the Western-originated framework of natural law in socialist China and the women’s liberation movement. She asked: Under what conditions do women adopt the shared narrative of “us women,” thereby creating a sense of collective identity? Is this a matter of gender politics or state politics? Moreover, are women’s rights and human rights fundamentally the same, and does the recognition of human rights inherently take precedence over the specific rights of women?²⁵⁷

Zhang pointed out that “conceptual equality” became the foundation for the legitimacy of state power. During the period of proletarian dictatorship, gender equality was understood as the

²⁵⁶ Qiu Jin, “Jinggao Zhongguo er wanwan nütongbao”敬告中国二万万女同胞 [Respectful Proclamation to China's 200 Million Women Comrades], in *Jin dai Zhongguo nü quan yun dong shi liao* 近代中国女权运动史料 [Historical Materials of the Modern Chinese Women's Movement](Taipei: Taipei zhuanji wenxue shubanshe, 1975), 423-424.

²⁵⁷ Zhang, *ibid*, 76-77.

elimination of all differences. The flattening of power structures effectively erased the possibility for consciousness of diverse rights. Political opponents and opposing ideologies were rematerialized into physical representations that marked them as distinct from the unitary proletarian body, reinforcing their exclusion. By emphasizing their embodied difference, the state positioned them as ideological and physical threats, justifying their marginalization and, in some cases, elimination. This also prompted an attempt to transcend the limitations imposed on women by their biological characteristics. In this context, there was nothing beyond a single class and a single body. The transfer of rights in sovereign theory became a quasi-religious devotion of both mind and body, and the image of the state was completely mythologized. However, in this process, the radical measures taken by the state to shape women did not ensure their place as full citizens in the ideal society.²⁵⁸

Feminist writers examined the challenges surrounding “conceptual equality” during and after the state-led women’s liberation movement. Li identified four generations of women in modern China. The first generation consisted of women born and raised before the establishment of the PRC, who were often illiterate and had bound feet, which made individualism rare for them. The second generation included women born in pre-revolutionary China but raised in the new socialist state. They usually entered school late and began working early. Compared to their predecessors, they were more socially engaged but still lacked adequate education, and many suffered from political upheavals and natural disasters. The third generation, born after the PRC’s founding, grew up under the ideal of “equality between men and women” (男女平等), but the Cultural Revolution disrupted their education. While many of their male peers had opportunities to return to school, many women faced pressures to settle into roles as wives and mothers instead. The fourth generation, born during or after the economic reform, typically completed at least nine years of mandatory education. However, as these women entered the workforce, they encountered a difficult dilemma. Li pointed out that “the difficulty young women face in finding employment, along with the heavy household burdens carried by working women, are among the most pressing issues.”. As a result, traditional expectations for women to return to the home resurfaced for this generation.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 20.

²⁵⁹ Li, *ibid*, 17-18.

In Zhang's book, *Toothless Feminism*, she documented her visit to the apartment of a female-friend, Min'er, a scholar and writer. She was surprised to learn that the study had been claimed by Min'er's businessman husband, while she had transformed the balcony into her own "room of one's own"—a reference to Virginia Woolf—dedicated to her books and work. She wrote, "I was thinking, when Min'er exits the room, she becomes a wife and a mother, identities which represent compromise and giving up. Outside of the room, women's everyday lives have not changed much, the hierarchical relationships within the family still persist. What Min'er achieved even falls short of the female writer from more than a hundred years ago, which is an incomplete, converted room."²⁶⁰ The challenges recognized by the scholars were also shared by generations of women artists. Women in artist communities faced similar issues revolving around their gender roles as women—both in and outside of the art world. This thematic resonance between writers' and artists' negotiations of space—especially the gendered implications of securing a room of one's own—will be explored further later in this chapter.

In the next section of the chapter, through viewing the branches of *nüxing yishu* (女性艺术, women's art or feminist art) in parallel with *nüxing zhuyi* (女性主义, womanism), I look further into the feminine space in modern and contemporary Chinese art. As we've seen, the concept of feminine space provides a valuable framework for analyzing how female artists navigate and reshape cultural and symbolic contexts through their works. This concept allows us to move beyond Western feminist categorizations and explore the spatial and sensory dimensions that inform their artistic expressions. In Section 5.3 and 5.4, I will delve further into the idea of feminine space, examining how it functions in the works of other artists. Through this lens, we will explore how these artists engage with gendered structures, negotiate their identities, and create new artistic languages to both challenge and coexist with these frameworks.

²⁶⁰ Zhang Nian, *Buyaoren de nüquanzhuyi* 不咬人的女权主义[Toothless Feminism] (Xi'An: Shaanxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2001), 11-12.

Nüxing yishu and feminine space

This section on *nüxing yishu* and feminine space critiques and explores *nüxing yishu*'s ambiguity and plurality, by using the concept of feminine space to examine how womens' relationships to their internal and external worlds are represented in *nüxing yishu*. Inspired by Sasha Su-Ling Welland's observation during her documentation and discussion of *The Long March* (2002), this study identifies and examines the gap of cognition between *nüxing yishu* and feminist art, which, while initially rooted in Western contexts, has since developed into a transnational and multifaceted movement. To examine *nüxing yishu* and its cognitive gap, I explore its development in Chinese art from the early days of the PRC, a period when Western art, culture, and ideologies had entered China. These influences had begun to interact with local intellectual currents and the nation's aspirations for change, amidst decades of political turmoil. This historical context lays the foundation for my study's primary focus on the contemporary period.

To begin the investigation of *nüxing yishu*, it is essential to first define what the term encompasses. Rather than a fixed genre, *nüxing yishu* marks a shifting site of contestation over gender, authorship, and artistic meaning. Welland discussed how the term blurs the concepts and boundaries of feminist discourse in *The Long March*, a multi-year art project initiated in 2002 by Chinese artist Wang Du, involving a collective of artists and curators, including Welland, who documented its progress. Drawing on the symbolism of the 1930s Red Army campaign, the project thematized endurance and struggle but in the context of contemporary transformations in post-1990s China. While the project involved both male and female artists creating diverse works, performances, and installations, women artists used the platform to challenge traditional gender roles, engaging with feminist ideas, and redefining women's representation in China's evolving art scene.²⁶¹

Site six of *The Long March*, situated at Lugu Lake—located on the border between Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in southwestern China and home to the matrilineal Mosuo people—represented the maternal and feminist emphasis of the project. However, Welland notes that the *Long March* project had little to do with the Maoist concept of “learning from the people,” and was instead more concerned with questions of feminism in contemporary Chinese art. One such question, emerging in transnational contexts, was: “Why have there been no great

²⁶¹ Sasha Su-Ling Welland. *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 135-136.

Chinese feminist artists?", a reference to Linda Nochlin's seminal 1971 question, "Why have there been no great women artists?" This query raises doubts about whether there is anything inherently feminist in the works categorized under the label *nüxing yishu*. At the Lugu Lake site, exhibits were organised around themes that defined works as feminist, feminine, or both, which blurred the boundaries between *nüxing yishu* and feminist art within contemporary Chinese art discourse. In short, *nüxing yishu* can refer to art created by women, but it is also used as a shorthand for *nüxing zhuyi yishu* (女性主义艺术), or feminist art. To further complicate the issue, it can also be used to describe art that portrays female subjects and themes without necessarily being feminist.²⁶²

While Welland's reading is crucial, I argue that the ambiguities she traces also reflect broader struggles in how gendered artistic spaces were imagined and inhabited across different artist communities. Rather than resolving the feminist/feminine binary, my analysis explores how certain artists—particularly those working within or against collective structures—constructed spatial and affective alternatives to dominant gender norms.

Welland simultaneously critiques and problematized the involvement of Judy Chicago in the Lugu Lake site of *The Long March* project, where Chicago took on the role of a pedagogue offering personal evaluations to each of the participating artists' works. For Welland, Chicago's involvement is emblematic of the Western feminist perspective, which draws on the experiences of women from other cultures to argue that patriarchy is a universal, cross-cultural phenomenon, and contributes to what Chandra Mohanty calls "third world difference." Mohanty asserts that this framework oversimplifies and appropriates "the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries."²⁶³ Judy Chicago's project at Lugu Lake illustrated this dynamic, presenting Western feminist art practices as more sophisticated, while seeking out a supposed primordial matriarchy still existing in China's remote regions. In this light, Chicago's role aligned with Tani Barlow's concept of "international U.S. feminism," a discursive formation in which the self-enlightenment of U.S. women is seen as an indicator of their progress, which is

²⁶² Ibid, 162-163.

²⁶³ Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses," *Feminist review* 30, no. 1 (1988): 61-88.

then meant to be imparted to women around the world.²⁶⁴ “Chicago proposed to educate Chinese women on how to be feminist artists by instructing them in the utopian society of the Mosuo within their own nation’s borders,” Welland wrote.²⁶⁵

My research on artist communities as “new communes” builds on this critique by shifting the focus away from transnational feminist misalignment and toward the ways in which Chinese women artists negotiated gender, identity, and collectivity within their specific social and spatial contexts. Rather than functioning as passive recipients of imported feminist frameworks, the artists examined in this dissertation constantly reimagine feminist praxis through grounded engagements with space, labor, and everyday life—often operating outside formal institutions or prescriptive ideological categories.

Welland’s analysis somewhat mirrored the discourse of feminisms with Chinese characteristics. While many Chinese feminist theorists—such as Li Xiaojiang, Dai Jinhua, and Zhang Nian—have been the subject of controversy due to both their political and personal stances on feminist and other issues, as they seek approaches that are distinctly Chinese. These theorists recognize the shortcomings of international feminism in addressing the realities of women in China. For instance, Li Xiaojiang’s work focuses on the generation of women who entered society during and after the economic reform, with particular attention to the widening rural-urban gap. In 1993, after hearing about the factory fires that killed many women workers, Dai Jinhua realized that the Euro-American theories taught in women’s studies programmes were inadequate for analyzing the experiences of these women. As she noted, “that theory (Western feminist theory) was for women benefiting from the reforms, not these women who were exploited.”²⁶⁶ Hence, it is important to acknowledge that in Chinese art history, *nüxing yishu*, although marked by the gap of cognition and weighted with its own sets of biases, assumptions, and blind spots, remains a useful umbrella term. It has defined the feminine space across different historical periods, reflected social changes, and responded to various forces within

²⁶⁴ Tani Barlow, “International feminism of the future,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1099-1105.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁶⁶ Dai, *After the Post-Cold War: The Future of Chinese History*, 164.

Chinese society specifically. This is why this dissertation prioritizes the narrative of *nüxing yishu* over Western feminisms.²⁶⁷

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese art entered a new phase. During the Mao era, women were encouraged to come out of their households and participate in the society—gender equality was written in the first edition of the constitution in 1954. The widely broadcasted slogan “both men and women are the same,” initiated by the mainstream media, advocated a popular social style that weakened the natural differences between sexes in the name of the state. Female characteristics—both psychological and physical—were dimmed and obscured in all aspects and representations of life. It was during this era that individuality and individualism were carelessly disassembled and merged with collective ideology and its language—the so-called “Iron Girl” (*tieguniang* or *tieniangzi*, 铁姑娘 or 铁娘子) became the one and only feminine icon. This was indeed a hypercorrection that aimed to subvert the traditional, feudal gender hierarchy that positioned women as inferior to men. However the pursuit of equal rights for men and women evolved into a well-concealed catering to patriarchy that misrepresented and disregarded women, unsurprisingly creating new forms and expressions for sexism. This unsolvable contradiction reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution—prompting massive shifts both in the art world and in everyday life.

It is interesting to point out that in the early days of modern China, “spaces of femininity” which Griselda Pollock described in her seminal essay, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity (1988),”²⁶⁸ did not occur in art depicting and created by Chinese women. Instead, “Iron Girl” imagery and representations of female labour saturated the Mao era. But Pollock's framework is still a useful comparison: Pollock examines the “spaces” where femininity is positioned in

²⁶⁷ In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains “The political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompany the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form of discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine dominion. The notion of a universal patriarchy has been widely criticized in recent years for its failure to account for the working of gender oppression in the concrete cultural context in which it exists.” And Butler continues, “...the critical point of departure is the historical present, as Marx put it. And the task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize.” See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 5-7.

²⁶⁸ Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

modernist thought—not strictly physical spaces but rather symbolic and social roles that modernist discourse assigns to women. For example, women are often depicted as belonging to the private, domestic realm, their identities, experiences, and expression constrained, while men are placed in the public, creative, and intellectual spheres. This dynamic mirrors larger societal power structures that limit women’s full participation in modernity.

Pollock’s concept underscores how societal power structures restrict women’s creative expression, while the “feminine space” proposed by Wu Hung describes the environment structured in art through feminine presence. The framework of “feminine space” highlights women and their lives through recognition of the artistic representation of their worlds.²⁶⁹ Rather than Pollock’s “space of femininity” which female characters and artists are passively assigned to, Wu’s “feminine space” represents creation of space initiated by women through living and working—in short, the former focuses on the systemic gender hierarchy, while the latter focuses on the occupation and invention of the space imbued with feminine characteristics. In many cases, these two concepts can co-exist simultaneously. Or, neither can be present. For instance, in the Mao Era, Chinese women were portrayed beyond Pollock’s “spaces of femininity”—in outdoor and work spheres—yet, at the same time, the emphasis on gender sameness also erased the distinctly feminine elements of their inner and outer worlds, leaving no space for either Pollock’s “spaces of femininity” or Wu’s “feminine space.” These portrayals neither acknowledged the systemic gender hierarchy nor represented women as creators of space imbued with feminine characteristics.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, many women artists that we know from the Republic era (1912-1949) had disappeared from the scene, such as Guan Zilan, Li Qingping (李青萍), Qiu Di (丘堤), and others. Entering the 50s, the situation worsened—the slogan of “make individualism stink” (*gao chou geren zhuyi*, 搞臭个人主义) pushed individual expression further towards the verge of extinction. Nevertheless, even in such a harsh political environment, even in the era when individuality was abandoned, there were still women artists

²⁶⁹ Wu Hung, *Zhongguo huihua zhong de “nǚxing kongjian”* 中国绘画中的“女性空间” [Feminine Space in Chinese Painting] (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2019), 18-19 .

who were trying to find gaps in the ruthless political system, persistently finding ways to express themselves and creating feminine spaces, even through detours.

These artists can be roughly divided into two categories: the first includes artists who came from the Republic era and continued in their artistic careers, such as Xiao Shufang (萧淑芳), Yu Feng (郁风), Xu Jianbai (徐坚白), and others who emphasized self-expression of emotion and the depiction of inner spirit. The other category includes women artists who bloomed from the art academies of the new China, such as Zhou Sicong (周思聪), Wang Yujue(王玉珏), Zheng Xiaojuan (郑小娟), Zhu Licun (朱理存), and others. These artists portrayed female images and feminine spaces that bore more of the weight of political ideology, which sometimes created an interesting situation where female self-image was separated from the kind of images projected by society. However, no matter which category they fall into, in the words of critic and curator Yao Daimei, “regardless of the theme of their appearance, the artists always depict themselves.”²⁷⁰

Xiao Shufang’s skating series (including oil paintings and Chinese ink and wash paintings) is a good example of the career transitions women artists from the first category experienced. As a skating enthusiast, Xiao S. depicted skating figures repeatedly in her life as a painter. Her first notable piece on this subject is *Beihai Skating* (北海溜冰, 1935) (Figure 47).

She revisited the same subject during 1954-55. *Shichahai Lake in the Beijing Winter* (北京冬天的什刹海, 1954) (Figure 48) diverges from *Beihai Skating* (1935)’s depiction of the correspondence between the flowing natural scenery and skate dancers’ limber bodies. Instead, it focuses on the warm and festive atmosphere symbolized by the vibrant, beautiful, and lively living conditions of socialist new China—a requirement of fine arts which were considered primarily a propaganda tool during that specific historical stage.

²⁷⁰ Yao Daimei, “Self-portrait: A narrative thread that runs through 60 years of female art in the Republic”自我画像: 一条贯穿共和国 60 年女性美术的叙述脉络 [Ziwo huaxiang: Yitiaoguanchuan gongheguo 60 nian nvxing meishu de xushu mailuo] *Meishu* 美术 3 (2011): 87-93.



Figure 47. Xiao Shufang, *Beihai Skating*, 1935, 46×30cm, oil on canvas. Courtesy of CAFA Art Museum.



Figure 48. Xiao Shufang, *Shichahai Lake in the Beijing Winter*, 1954, 53×40cm, oil on wood panel. Courtesy of Wu Zuoren International Foundation of Fine Arts.

The female character in the centre of the later painting can be seen as a self-portrait of the artist, who discovered a method to express her individuality when this form of expression was outcast and demonized. From *Shichahai Lake in the Beijing Winter*, we are able to recognize the influence of the political environment and ideology on art at that time. The appearance of

characters completely conforms to the “red, light, and bright” (红, 光, 亮) image that was promoted by the state. The girl in yellow looks extremely ruddy, with plain clothing, her body and face both awfully stiff like a puppet with an eternal smile. Moreover, the figures’ skating postures bear a resemblance to model opera in that its dancing fluidity is replaced by a marching rhythm. Viewers familiar with Xiao S.’s work in the Republic era may be unable to connect Xiao at this moment with the Chinese woman of the new age that she used to be. The bloated, rustic skirt and her tense posture transform her image into a simple and vigorous working woman—exactly what the state asked her to be. During this time, Chinese women consciously and voluntarily obliterated or concealed their own female characteristics physically and psychologically, conforming with the most literal image of the “Iron Girl” that they could. The era determined the artistic characteristics and metaphorical direction of painting. In order to show their political orientation, artists created works that catered to the aesthetic appeal of the time, which was limited to portraying the glory of the working people and absolutely nothing else. Starting in the 1960s, Xiao S.’s artistic focus shifted to flowers, a theme that would continue throughout the remainder of her career.²⁷¹

The younger generation of women artists, like Wang Yujue, chose not to conform to the state-mandated aesthetic of the time. In her painting *Mountain Village Doctor* (1963) (Figure 49), she creates a calm and gentle atmosphere that contrasts sharply with the harsh political environment of China during the Cultural Revolution. Using traditional *gongbi* (工笔, fine brushwork) techniques, Wang depicts a young female doctor from a mountain village rolling cotton swabs by lamplight. The painting includes various details, such as a medical box and bottles, which emphasize her identity as a doctor. The artist intentionally includes the Young Pioneers badge on the girl’s chest to indicate her status as a progressive young person. The glow of the horse lantern, which gives the impression of late-night work, highlights the doctor’s dedication to her profession. The focused expression and skillful hands of the doctor serve as the focal points, while her simple clothing reflects her professional identity and humble personality.

²⁷¹ Ibid.



Figure 49. Wang Yujue, *Mountain Village Doctor*, 1963, 84.5cm×63cm, ink on paper. Courtesy of Gallery of Guangzhou Painting Academy.

However, beyond these professional details, there are others—the doctor’s graceful posture, her beautiful, twisted braids, and especially the bright red flower inserted in her straw hat in the upper-right corner—that subtly express a pursuit of beauty that was criticized by the state as “petty bourgeois sentiment.”²⁷² This delicate portrayal of beauty and the vibrancy of the camellia flower, reaching out from the doctor’s hat, also alludes to the artist’s own spirit, suggesting a love for life and a quietly rebellious individuality. Some have pointed out the likeness of the woman in the painting to Wang herself, and whether she did this consciously or not, the painting can be seen as a kind of self-portrait. In the context of the political climate at the time, this was a subtle, indirect way of expressing individuality and personal sentiment, a means of preserving one’s inner world amidst external pressures.²⁷³ In *Mountain Village Doctor*, Wang

²⁷² In Maoist China, the term “petty bourgeois sentiment” (小资产阶级情调) functioned as a state-sanctioned pejorative, deployed to denounce behaviors and aesthetic preferences deemed excessively individualistic, sentimental, or preoccupied with personal adornment—qualities regarded as ideologically incompatible with the collectivist and ascetic ideals of proletarian culture.

²⁷³ Xue Yang, “Research on Female Art Images in Painting during the Cultural Revolution” 文革时期美术绘画中的女性艺术形象研究 [Wenge shiqi meishu huihua zhong de nvxing yishu xingxiang yanjiu], last modified March 13, 2015, <http://www.art-woman.com/HongViewDetail.aspx?id=204> (accessed May 1, 2020)

also reinserts the concept of feminine space into the portrayal of working women in socialist China. Unlike typical artistic depictions of women in the work sphere during this historical period, which often blur gender characteristics, Wang not only imbues her character with femininity but also stages an environment—a “feminine space”—shaped by the character herself, her work, and her personal belongings.

Artist	Title	Medium	Year
Unknown	<i>“Marry late and engage in planned parenthood for the revolution”</i>	Print on paper	1970
Xiao Shufang	<i>Beihai Skating</i>	Oil on wood panel	1935
Xiao Shufang	<i>Shichahai Lake in the Beijing Winter</i>	Oil on wood panel	1954
Wang Yujue	<i>Mountain Village Doctor</i>	Ink on paper	1963

Table 6. Table of selected artworks from the Republic era and the Mao Era discussed in Chapter Four.

Since the Chinese Economic Reform beginning in 1978, Chinese women were able to break away from the state-directed representation of women. Artists like Yu Hong reflected on their journey growing up as Chinese women. In her series, *Witness to Growth*, Yu wove together her personal and public memories by collaging the portraits of her younger self with historical materials such as newspaper and posters, colliding a grand narrative and an individualized depiction of the same period. Artist and art critic Wei Qimei argues that during this period, the depiction of daily life in artworks increased and artists were fascinated to closely observe contemporary life and its ongoing changes. The individualized production of artwork distanced

artists from the pressure to reproduce political imagery—creating a loosened relationship between art and politics in the post-Cultural Revolution period.²⁷⁴

In the public sphere, Yu's artistic and personal identities are frequently associated with her husband, Liu Xiaodong, a renowned oil painter—much like how Xiao Shufang's identity has often been linked to her painter husband, Wu Zuoren (though not necessarily vice versa). Yu's *Witness to Growth* series, which she began in 1999, marked her return to art after a five-year hiatus following the birth of her daughter in 1994. Reflecting on this period of absence, Yu described her struggle with the uncertainties of youth and the overwhelming adjustments to marriage and motherhood: “Earlier, much of my work was about the confusion and anxiety of youth. After getting married and having children, I became completely *ma zhua* [麻爪, numb and clueless], as we say in Beijing dialect. It was a gradual process of adapting, slowly accepting my role...”²⁷⁵ In her words, she was initially lost and unsure of her direction, both in her personal life and career. This sense of confusion and adaptation parallels considerations in Xiao S.'s life and career. While Xiao S.'s depictions of still-life flowers have made a lasting impression, one might wonder if there were broader themes or landscapes she could have explored, had she not assumed the roles of wife and mother? For Yu, it was through the process of raising her child that she rediscovered her own growth, leading her to create *Witness to Growth*—a series that emerged from her personal journey of adaptation and self-discovery.

A recent reflection on the 2002 Long March project by Wang Kaimei offers further insight into the long-term trajectories of its participating women artists. Many, though still active in their practice, have increasingly operated within institutional frameworks—as faculty in art academies and as participants in state-sponsored exhibitions. One example is Fu Liya (甫立亚), whose performance *Water Questions* (2002) at Lugu Lake involved shouting the provocative question “What if women ruled the world?” into the sky, while inviting local Mosuo participants

²⁷⁴ Wei Qimei, “Chenzhong de chanshi - du Yu Hong *Muji Chengzhang*”沉重的阐释——读喻红《目击成长》 [A heavy interpretation—Reading Yu Hong's *Witness to Growth*], *Meishu Yanjiu* 美术研究 4 (2002): 22-24.

²⁷⁵ Yu Hong | *Muji Chenzhang* 喻红 | 目击成长, produced by Zhang Yanping 张延平, Tencent, 2009, film.

and Judy Chicago to sit on the ground and join her in the performance. The piece was noted at the time for its emotional intensity and symbolic power. Now a professor at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Fu has taken part in a series of official exhibitions focused on women, and she describes her identity foremost as a wife and mother, stating: “Art is just a notebook or diary that accompanies me for life; I first do well in my roles as wife and mother.”²⁷⁶ This candid self-positioning suggests that the feminist aspirations surrounding *nüxing yishu* may not always translate into a straightforward political stance, but rather are negotiated through the intertwined demands of family, career, and artistic practice.

From modern to contemporary China, women artists have navigated gendered structures in diverse ways—some working within artist communities, others operating independently. While many have directly challenged these constraints, others have adopted strategies of compromise, negotiation, and innovation, developing new artistic languages to engage with and work around these limitations. These varied approaches lay the groundwork for a broader discussion on the evolution of *nüxing yishu*. The next section examines how gender is actively constructed, performed, and bent in contemporary artistic practices, reimagining the possibilities of *nüxing yishu* beyond its conventional frameworks.

Gendering and gender bending: Reimagining *nüxing yishu*

Having examined the lived realities of female artists in artist communities, we now turn to explore how gender is reimagined within Chinese artist communities, drawing on Judith Butler's key questions in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler asks: “Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations? And is not such a reification precisely contrary to feminist aims? To what extent does

²⁷⁶ Wang Kaimei, “Dang Zhudi Zhijiage laidao Lugu Hu—Huigu 2002 nian de yichang yishu yundong” 当朱迪·芝加哥来到泸沽湖——回顾 2002 年的一场艺术运动 [When Judy Chicago came to Lugu Lake—A look back at the 2002 art movement], last modified June 23, 2022, <http://www.longlatifoundation.org/category/programs-zh/longlati-writing-program-zh-hans/?lang=zh-hans> (accessed April 20, 2025); “Manbu chuntian baihuajian, naxie nüxing yishujia de nannan ‘huayu’” 漫步春天百花间 那些女性艺术家的喃喃“花语” [Walking Through spring, among the flowers: The murmured 'flower language' of female artists], *Artron News*, last modified March 7, 2016, https://news.artron.net/20160307/n820299_1.html. (accessed April 20, 2025)

the category of women achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix?”²⁷⁷ These questions invite us to critically examine how femininity is constructed and whether it can be redefined outside of established gender norms. Through the lens of Butler’s inquiries, this section will focus on examples from contemporary Chinese art where gender is not simply accepted as stable and coherent, but is questioned, subverted, and reimagined. In particular, we will examine three artworks that offer alternative visions of gender, including Lei Yan’s work in the *Long March* project and two performance pieces by Ma Liuming, created through his transgender persona. These examples will serve to illustrate how artists actively reshape gender constructs in Chinese art communities through creative practice.

In a site-specific investigation at Lugu Lake, artist Lei Yan (雷燕) focused on the gender history of the Long March. In response to Chicago’s speculative “what if” fantasy, Lei created a pair of digitally altered photographs titled *What If the Long March Had Been a Women’s Rights Movement?* (2002) and *What If They Had Been Women?* (2002). The first image features prominent women activists such as Cai Chang, Deng Yingchao, and Kang Keqing, who joined the Red Army during its 1934 trek. The second image reimagines male party leaders, including Mao Zedong, with female hairstyles typical of the 1930s, thus challenging traditional gender roles and offering a critical re-interpretation of historical figures through a gendered lens.

According to Welland, the artist “shifts the subjunctive mood of Chicago’s verbal construction to the past unreal condition, which roots dreams for future justice in historically, culturally specific conditions.”²⁷⁸ The author also suggests that “*The Long March*’s promotion of cosmopolitan Chinese culture via a return to the socialist past demonstrates the hybrid hallmarks of the reform-era culture industry. Its promoters aimed to integrate with global capitalism but in a way that drew on culturally specific legacies and differentiated them from the West.”²⁷⁹ My analysis of this work by Lei shifts the emphasis from the transnational concerns foregrounded in Welland’s account to the ways it reimagines gender and history through the lens of contemporary Chinese artists’ negotiations of identity and collective memory. Rather than simply echoing

²⁷⁷ Butler defines the “heterosexual matrix” as the cultural and institutional grid through which sex, gender, and desire are naturalized in binary and hierarchical terms. As discussed in Chapter Three, peri-urban artist communities such as 1005 can be seen as sites where such norms are both reinforced and, at times, challenged. Butler, 7.

²⁷⁸ Welland, 156.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 138.

global feminist discourses, Lei's intervention highlights both the malleability of historical narratives and the persistent constraints on feminist and gender-nonconforming representation within state-sanctioned cultural spaces.

This tension becomes evident in curator Lu Jie's decision to obscure the second image of Mao in drag, reflecting an ongoing ambivalence toward gender subversion in China's public discourse. Lu decided to conceal the second photograph by placing it behind the first photograph within the exhibition space. This arrangement metaphorically addresses the question in Lei Yan's title (*What If They Had Been Women?*): While it is socially acceptable to depict women in traditionally male-dominated images, such as those associated with revolutionary history, the reverse—depicting men in women's attire—remains unspeakable.²⁸⁰ Such paradox resonates with broader patterns in representing *nüxing yishu* and its gender-bending reimaginings of history and identity: moments of challenge and ambiguity often coexist with efforts to render feminist and queer politics more palatable within institutional and cultural limits. Lei's digital manipulations of revolutionary iconography, like the concealed image of Mao in drag, thus not only critique patriarchal narratives but also expose the ambivalence that continues to shape feminist expression in contemporary China.

This project was further complicated by its format as a short-term, site-specific intervention. With artworks installed, performances staged, and films screened in under a week, the initiative prompted skepticism about the depth and lasting impact of such engagements. Although Lugu Lake is a community with little prior exposure to large-scale public art, it is home to matrilineal traditions that have long been romanticized and appropriated in both state and artistic discourses. The project's invocation of feminisms, while well-intentioned, risked flattening these locally rooted practices into symbolic gestures that served curatorial aims rather than engaging meaningfully with lived cultural frameworks. While works like Lei's offer moments of critical rupture, the broader structure of the project arguably struggled to sustain the depth of its feminist aspirations, constrained not only by time and logistics but also by a representational politics that veered toward tokenism.²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Bu Sheng, "Cong zaochan dao jueyu—Dui 'Lugu Hu Xiangmu' de chongshen"从“早产”到“绝育”——对“泸沽湖项目”的重审 [From “premature birth” to “sterilization”: A reassessment of the Lugu Lake Project], last modified June 23, 2022,

While Lei's photographic reworkings mine history to unsettle gendered narratives on screen, that same impulse towards embodied gender critique finds its earlier and pioneering expression in the work of Ma Liuming(马六明), a key figure in China's performance art scene since the 1990s and a member of the Dong Cun artist community, which is regarded as the "hometown of performance art in China."²⁸² Ma's performances as his transgender persona, Fen-Ma Liuming (芬·马六明) stand out as an early exploration of transgender identity and the destabilization of gender norms.

His inaugural Fen-Ma Liuming performance in 1994, *Fen-Ma Liu Ming's Lunch*, explored the internal and external transformations. The performance consisted of two acts—one in April and the other in June—embodying the dual nature of change: the internal flow of energy and the external destruction and recreation of the body. This concept was realized through the persona of Feng-Ma Liuming, who transcends the traditional gender binary. In the April performance, Fen-Ma Liuming, a subject with a masculine body and a feminine face, cooked live fish in a pot, attaching a plastic tube to his penis and placing the other end in his mouth, symbolically connecting the masculine and feminine energies. Ma himself explained the significance of these transformations by stating: "Through the connection of the tube, I imagined linking my 'yang'—my male side—with my 'yin'—my female side, creating a cycle."²⁸³ After sharing the fish with the audience, Fen-Ma Liuming placed the remaining fish parts into a fish tank.

The second performance, in June, was described by photographer Rong Rong, who recalled: "Ma Liuming emerged from behind the curtain, instantly transforming into a completely different person. His hair was long and flowing, and he was naked with his face and hands painted in feminine makeup. He became a feminized figure, and in that moment, the audience was no longer able to tell if he was male or female—creating a sense of illusion." Rong Rong further noted that Ma then performed seemingly mundane tasks, such as placing a potato in

<http://www.longlatifoundation.org/%e4%bb%8e%e6%97%a9%e4%ba%a7%e5%88%b0%e7%b%9d%e8%82%b2-%e5%af%b9%e6%b3%b8%e6%b2%bd%e6%b9%96%e9%a1%b9%e7%9b%ae%e7%9a%84%e9%87%8d/?lang=zh-hans> (accessed April 21, 2025)

²⁸² Wu Hung, *Rong Rong de Dong Cun* 荣荣的东村 [Rong Rong's East Village] (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2013), 7-14.

²⁸³ Ibid, 116.

a pot, adding a leaf inscribed with writing, and burying the cooked potato under a tree, before emerging from the house fully dressed again, signaling a process of cyclical transformation. Through these actions, Ma's work challenges fixed gender categories, illustrating the fluidity of gender identity and embodying both destruction and rebirth. By embodying both masculine and feminine traits, Fen-Ma Liuming blurs the lines of identity, demonstrating that gender is not a fixed attribute but a construct enacted through performance. Ten minutes after the performance, the local police department of Chaoyang District arrived at Ma's place in Dong Cun and arrested all the people present.²⁸⁴

This performance, with its exploration of gender fluidity, set the stage for Ma's further examination of Fen-Ma Liuming, where the tension between personal identity and cultural symbols became even more pronounced. The video *Fen-Ma Liu Ming Walks the Great Wall* (1998) documents Ma's transgender persona, Fen-Ma Liuming (芬·马六明), walking barefoot in nude on the Great Wall of China, a historical symbol of strength and national authority. In this work, Fen-Ma Liu Ming's body, marked by vulnerability and resistance, stands in stark contrast to the immovable and symbolic power of the wall, thus complicating the boundaries between gender, identity, and national symbolism.²⁸⁵



²⁸⁴ Ibid, 110-117.

²⁸⁵ Zhijian Qian, "Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (1999): 60–81.

Figure 50. Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liu Ming Walks the Great Wall*, 1998, 34.7×53.6 cm, gelatin silver print.

Artist	Title	Medium	Year
Lei Yan	<i>What If the Long March Had Been a Women's Rights Movement?</i>	Digitally altered photograph	2002
Lei Yan	<i>What If They Had Been Women?</i>	Digitally altered photograph	2002
Ma Liuming	<i>Fen-Ma Liu Ming's Lunch</i>	Performance	1994
Ma Liuming	<i>Fen-Ma Liu Ming Walks the Great Wall</i>	Performance and video	1998

Table 7. Table of selected works discussed in the section of “Gendering and gender bending.”

These gender-bending projects further underscore how *nüxing yishu* and female identity in modern and contemporary Chinese art are not merely shaped by the global currents of feminism, but by the complex intersection of unresolved questions, shifting ideologies, and the changing dynamics within the fabric of Chinese society. In particular, artists like Lei Yan, working through the Long March Project, and Ma Liuming, performing through his transgender persona Fen-Ma Liuming, do more than simply exemplify gender-critical art: they hold up a mirror to the very communities that produced them. Within peri-urban enclaves such as 1005—spaces organised around heteronormative domestic rhythms, spatial hierarchies, and traditional gender roles—these performers enact the contradictions of their milieu. By staging drag-inflected enactments or interstitial interventions in domestic and public areas, as well as in memory, they expose and disrupt the tacit codes that govern who belongs, who leads, and who remains unseen. In this sense, their work can be read as an internal critique: not strangers challenging from the outside, but community members reconfiguring the rules of space, body, and identity from within. This chapter offers only a fraction of the vast, multifaceted discourse on female identity in Chinese art, a topic that has long been at the forefront of social and artistic debates. As seen through the lens of *nüxing yishu* and the lived experiences of women artists in artist communities, as well as the gender-bending works of artists such as Ma Liuming, the issue of

female identity remains far from settled. Both in theory and practice, it is constantly evolving, influenced by and reflecting upon broader cultural and political shifts.

At this moment, we need to point out that the concept and umbrella term of *nüxing yishu* further complicates this terrain, as the category of women's art both reinforces and challenges traditional gender identities in ways that artists continue to negotiate. At the same time, the realities of gendered expectations, such as the disproportionate domestic responsibilities borne by women in artist communities, underscore the persistent inequalities that women must navigate in their artistic practice. However, these same challenges also present opportunities for artists to push boundaries and redefine the spaces they inhabit. The struggles of women artists, both historical and contemporary, remind us of the urgent need to revisit and reassess these transformational moments in art history. By doing so, we can better understand the complexities of gender in art and continue to confront the traditional gender constructs that have long defined both the artist and their work.

Thus, through these examples—whether it is the negotiation of physical and metaphorical space in artist communities, the questioning of female identity in gender-bending practices, or the reimagining of gender history itself—the question remains: Can art, and artist communities in extension, be a space for the dissolution of rigid gender roles? The work of these artists demonstrates the power of creative practice to destabilize and reconfigure the social structures that govern gender. As Butler's earlier assertion suggests, the very categories that we use to define gender—such as the category of “woman”—are fluid and subject to constant reworking. By engaging with these fluidities in art and artist communities, we are not merely witnessing a transformation of identities and communities, but also of the very ways in which we understand and experience gender in the art world.

Conclusion

Mapping artist communities in Beijing

This dissertation examines the evolution of artist communities in Beijing since the 1980s, within the context of China's shifting socio-political landscape. In this chapter, I map the socio-political and geographical landscape of Beijing's artist communities, tracing their migrations and interconnections over time from pre-Beijing Olympics to post-pandemic, and draw examples from Caochangdi and Luoma Lake. I end also address key study limitations, including constraints in scope, time, and comparative analysis. Then, I frame my discussion of Beijing's artist communities. I reflect on the survival strategy of artist communities, the legacy of activism they drew upon, and the futures these communities have envisioned and created.

Figure 51 is a map that pinpoints the locations of artist communities in Beijing. I draw lines between them, indicating the patterns of their over time. The map serves as a spatial visualization of the movements and transformations of these communities, illustrating their shifting relationships with each other and their changing connection with the city and the state. By tracing these patterns, this research gains a deeper understanding of how artist communities in Beijing have navigated an ever-changing physical and political landscape. These movements are not just about geography—they reflect the personal and collective struggles of artists as they adapt to state control, economic shifts, and the quest for creative autonomy. This chapter thus brings together and reflects upon the arguments developed across previous chapters: from the pioneering yet often marginalized formations of artist communities in deterritorialized farmlands (Chapter One), to the ways collective creative practices both responded to and resisted the political-economic forces that reterritorialized urban space and artistic life—ultimately distinguishing the unterritorialized from other communities (Chapters Two and Three), and finally to how feminist and queer interventions navigated questions of visibility and institutional containment within these evolving artist networks (Chapter Four).

- 1 Yuan Ming Yuan Artist Village 圆明园画家村
- 2 Dong Cun 东村
- 3 798 Art Zone/Dashanzi 大山子
- 4 Song Zhuang 宋庄
- 5 Caochangdi 草场地
- 6 008 International Art District 008国际艺术区
- 7 Heiqiao Art District 黑桥艺术区
- 8 1005, Dongba
- 9 Li Qiao 李桥
- 10 Luoma Lake 罗马湖
- 11 Yanjiao 燕郊, Hebei Province
- 12 Chuangyi Zhengyang Art District 创意正阳艺...
- 13 Xiedao West Art District 蟹岛西艺术区
- 14 Dongying Art District 东营艺术区
- 15 Suojia Cun Art District 索家村艺术区
- 16 Feijia Cun Art District 费家村艺术区
- 17 Naizifang Art District 奶子房艺术区
- 18 Huantie Art District 环铁艺术区
- 19 Shangyuan Art District 上苑艺术区
- 20 Sunhe Art District 孙河艺术区
- 21 9-Art 酒厂国际艺术园区
- 22 Yihao Di Art District 一号地艺术区
- 23 Dongfeng Art District 东风艺术区
- 24 Beigao Art District 北皋艺术区



Figure 51. Artist communities in Beijing, from the 1980s to the 2020s.²⁸⁶

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?hl=en&mid=1hNEFKaHRLrQ7e7akwT4gJR661Vdlx1E&ll=40.02967239848907%2C116.5399785578125&z=1>

²⁸⁶ “Yizuo ‘Chaoyang xincheng’ mie diao 20 ge yishu yuanqu? 一座“朝阳新城”灭掉 20 个艺术园区?” [Does a “New Chaoyang” destroy 20 art districts?], last modified August 14, 2013, <https://www.163.com/fashion/article/969AP2DE00264MK3.html> (accessed December 2, 2024); “1990-2019: Beijing yishuqu de qianxi luxian 1990—2019: 北京艺术区的迁徙路线” [1990-2019: Migration path of art district in Beijing], last modified July 25, 2019, <https://www.cafa.com.cn/cn/news/details/2110834> (accessed December 2, 2024); Field Trip to Beijing, October to November 2022, Beijing, China.

The deterritorialization phase is marked by the formation of the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and Dong Cun in the 1980s to the 1990s. This period represented the beginning of a profound transformation in China, as the country emerged from the shadows of the Cultural Revolution and began to grapple with the possibilities of reform. The post-Mao era was a time of great social and economic change, and artists, in search of freedom and expression, found a rare opportunity to experiment outside the confines of state-controlled art. Drawn by the relative freedom and affordability of peri-urban Beijing, they settled in farmhouses made available by peasants whose livelihoods were challenged by rapid urbanization and created an environment that was as much about community as it was about artistic production. Yet, despite this creative flourishing, the mid-1990s saw the winds of change blow through Beijing, as urban development and government pressure led to the dispersal of the Yuanmingyuan (see marker 1 on the map) and Dong Cun (see marker 2) communities. In response, artists scattered across the city. Most notably, some found refuge in Dashanzi (see marker 3), while others sought more affordable or freer spaces in Songzhuang (see marker 4). The disbanding of artist communities during the deterritorialization phase was not just a spatial shift—it represented the beginning of a continuous struggle for artists to assert their place in a city where the lines between state control and creative freedom were constantly redrawn.

By the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, Dashanzi and Songzhuang emerged as critical sites for these dislocated artists. Unlike earlier settlements, they began to formalize in response to both state support and economic forces. Long-term leases, stable studio spaces, and institutionalized structures offered new kinds of security for artists, who could now think long-term about their practices. However, this very reterritorialization, while providing infrastructure and stability, also brought about a sense of tension. Artist communities during this phase began to mirror broader societal shifts in Beijing, where the state and local governments' growing interest in the creative industries introduced both new opportunities and new constraints. Artists who once thrived on the fringes found their creative freedoms increasingly shaped by market interests and government priorities.

The rise of the 798 Art Zone (in Dashanzi, see marker 3 on the map) in the 2000s represented another dramatic shift in the geography of Beijing's art world. What began as a temporary and convenient occupation of industrial space by artists quickly transformed into a

thriving cultural district—one that attracted global attention and investment. The rapid commercialization of 798, however, was not without its conflicts. For some artists, the visibility and professional opportunities the international art market afforded were invaluable, helping to establish their practices within a global art scene. But for others, the transformation of 798 into a polished, corporate art space threatened the very ethos of artistic freedom that had initially drawn them there. At the same time, some artists moved from Dashanzi to other developed art districts nearby in the Huantie region (see shaded area on the map), searching for spaces that were less affected by rent hikes, growing commercialization, and censorship. This search for autonomy in an increasingly commercialized environment is emblematic of a broader struggle and key question within Beijing's artistic communities—how to maintain one's creative independence in a city that is relentlessly evolving? In 2009, some artists in 798 Art Zone staged independently the *Warm Winter Initiative* (2009-10) as a reaction to the threat of demolition and displacement of artists. The initiative was a critique of the opportunist efforts from developers and local government which collided with state-led urban (re-)construction plans in displacing artist communities.

In the 2010s, many artists wary of demolition, gentrification, and state involvement in the 798 left Dashanzi and relocated to areas like Heiqiao, Jinzhan, and Dongying on the other side of the Huantie region. Since then, many small, off-the-grid artist community compounds (such as 1005, see marker 8 on the map) appeared near the Heiqiao Art District (see marker 7). I characterized them as the unterritorialized, operating outside the orbit of state-controlled, market-driven cultural production. The ongoing movement to less commercialized spaces reflected a desire to maintain artistic integrity while negotiating the boundaries of public visibility, state control, market demands, and creative expression. These shifts have not been merely about finding new places to live and work; they represent a constant negotiation with the power invested in the city itself, as emerging artists attempt to carve out spaces that reflect their own visions, free from external pressures.

The state's aggressive push for modernization, alongside the pressures of global capitalism, meant that spaces for artistic production were increasingly scarce. As urban redevelopment policies intensified, many remaining enclaves of artists faced eviction, scattering communities across the periphery of the city. By 2018, after another wave of artist community demolitions near Heiqiao Village hit the Huantie region, the landscape of Beijing's art world has

shifted once again. Artists from the Huantie region moved to areas farther away from the urban centre such as Liqiao (see marker 9 on the map) and Yanjiao (see marker 11). By the time when the pandemic hit China and the world, artists have adopted practices that are transient and geographically uncertain while struggling to find workable locations to generate income. As artist communities' physical spaces are increasingly dismantled, members of (former) artist communities are finding ways to persist, and adapt their identities even in the face of uncertain and precarious conditions.

These migrations tell a larger story—one of resilience, adaptation, and resistance. Throughout Beijing's contemporary history, artists have been forced to navigate shifting landscapes, both physically and metaphorically. These communities have continuously reinvented themselves, carving out spaces of autonomy and creative expression in a city that is constantly evolving. As this dissertation shows, the movements of artists reflect broader tensions between the state, capital, and artists' creative autonomies. Artists' experiences of community and migration are not just about their struggle for space, but also about their ongoing quest for a voice in a rapidly transforming cultural and political environment. In the following section, as a way to recap and end the dissertation, I discuss how artists coped with the larger forces unleashed by the world games and challenges left by the pandemic in and through their resilience, adaption, and resistance.

Artist community: From pre-Beijing Olympics to post-pandemic

I have fought the good fight,
I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith.

— Fang Fang, *Wuhan Diary*.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* chronicles the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic during the city's lockdown in 2020. While capturing the fear and resilience of Wuhan's residents, the diary faced censorship and backlash from both the government and nationalist groups, who accused her of criticizing China's response. This led to Fang Fang's ostracization, yet her work remains a courageous testament to the human experience during the crisis. Fang Fang, *Wuhan Diary* (New York: HaperCollins Publishers, 2020), 354.

In the path of survival of artist communities from pre-Beijing Olympics to post-pandemic, I use the transformation of Caochangdi—once a vital hub for independent artistic production, now increasingly constrained by structural and political shifts—as a central thread in illustrating this trajectory. Two cases anchor this discussion: Ai Weiwei’s involvement in the Bird’s Nest stadium and his subsequent arrest, which encapsulate the post-Olympics era’s fraught relationship between artistic expression and state power; and 1005 member Wang Yifan’s experiences working for a non-profit film organisation in Caochangdi in the 2020s, which reflect on the post-pandemic conditions of precarity and shifting institutional support. Building on this, I turn to artist Hua Xiaocheng’s case in Luoma Lake, an artist community that offers deeper insight into the lived realities of working and creating within artist enclaves during and after the pandemic.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the 2008 Beijing Olympics marked a pivotal moment in China’s contemporary history, presenting an opportunity for the state to craft a narrative of progress, modernization, and global integration. Central to this image-making was the Bird’s Nest stadium, a striking architectural feat co-designed by Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron, with significant input from Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. At the time, Ai’s participation symbolized a moment of convergence between contemporary Chinese art and state ambitions, as his avant-garde reputation lent credibility to the notion of a forward-thinking and internationally engaged China. However, this alignment was short-lived, and Ai’s subsequent disillusionment and political persecution underscore the fragile and conditional nature of the state’s embrace of artists.²⁸⁸

Ai’s involvement in the Bird’s Nest project was initially marked by an interest in pushing architectural and conceptual boundaries. Despite his past critiques of state policies, Ai saw this project as an opportunity to engage in a globally visible cultural endeavour. The stadium’s bold and innovative design reinforced China’s aspiration to be perceived as an emerging superpower, capable of producing cutting-edge art and architecture. However, Ai quickly became critical of how the state was leveraging the Olympics to project an image of progress while simultaneously tightening political control. He publicly distanced himself from the project, denouncing the

²⁸⁸ Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, “A Conversation with Ai Weiwei,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 7, no.4 (2008): 10-19.

government's broader human rights violations and suppression of dissent. In his memoir, Ai wrote:

The design of the Bird's Nest aimed to convey the message that freedom was possible: the integration of its external appearance with its exposed structure encapsulated something essential about democracy, transparency, and equity. In defense of those principles, I now resolved to put a distance between myself and the Olympics, which were simply serving as nationalistic, self-congratulatory propaganda. Freedom is the precondition for fairness, and without freedom, competition is a sham.²⁸⁹

His disavowal of the Bird's Nest shifted Ai from state-endorsed artist to outspoken critic, a transition that culminated in more direct confrontations with Chinese authorities.

In the years following the Olympics, Ai's tensions with the state escalated, leading to his 2011 detention. The very artist who had once been instrumental in shaping China's image abroad was now seen as a political threat. His arrest and subsequent house arrest highlighted the precarious position of artists in China: their visibility and influence could be celebrated when convenient, but swiftly curtailed when their voices challenged the state. Ai's trajectory from national collaborator to dissident artist exemplifies the limits of state-sanctioned artistic participation. The forced demolitions of Ai's studios in Malu, Shanghai (in 2011) and Caochangdi, Beijing (in 2018) further illustrate the Chinese state's determination to extinguish him from the official art canon. Since 2010, Ai had been under constant surveillance by the police outside his yuanzi in Caochangdi, and in 2011 during his arrest, the police raided his studio, confiscated his laptops, and questioned his wife and coworkers.²⁹⁰ In 2018, Ai's Caochangdi studio—once part of a larger hub of artist studio, living, and working spaces in Caochangdi—was demolished, arguably as part of a broader effort to marginalize and silence politically sensitive artists.²⁹¹ The closure of his studio marked not only a physical displacement but also a symbolic erasure of his once-prominent role in China's contemporary art scene.

²⁸⁹ Ai Weiwei, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir* (Canada: Bond Street Books, 2021), 249-250.

²⁹⁰ Ai, *ibid*, 216-219, 295-296.

²⁹¹ “‘Yongbie le, Zuoyou!’ Ai Weiwei gongzuoshi bei chai, shejiao meiti lianxu fasheng” “永别了，左右！”艾未未工作室被拆，社交媒体连续发声[“Farewell forever, Zuoyou!” Ai Weiwei's studio was demolished, and social media continuously voiced out], last modified

The cases of Ai Weiwei and artists like him in the post-Olympics era also offer insights into how contemporary artist communities navigate similar dynamics in the post-pandemic era, where increased censorship, socio-political conservatism, and economic stagnation have further constrained opportunities and artistic freedom. The experiences of younger artists and artworkers, such as Wang Yifan and Hua Xiaocheng, reflect these changing conditions, as they engage with institutions and artist networks under heightened political scrutiny. The interplay between state ambitions and artistic agency remains a critical issue, shaping the possibilities and limitations of creative expression in contemporary China.

By the 2020s, Caochangdi had undergone significant transformations, shaped by state intervention, commercial redevelopment, and the broader precarity of Beijing's artist communities. Following the large-scale demolition of studio spaces in 2018, much of the original Caochangdi arts community was displaced, and the once-vibrant artistic hub was fractured. What remained were scattered artists and cultural organisations, now leasing spaces from a single developer, Zui Ku (最酷), whose operations were sanctioned by the government and negotiated with the village committee. Unlike in the pre-2018 period, when artists had a visible presence in the area, tenants in the 2020s operated more discreetly, surrounded by villagers and migrant workers, yet distinctly separate from them.²⁹²

Wang Yifan's experience as an art worker in Caochangdi illustrates the shifting dynamics of this post-demolition landscape. For five years, she worked for a Beijing-based non-profit organisation dedicated to curating and promoting independent films. The organisation's Caochangdi office was located in a gated courtyard shared with several other entities, all tied to a holding company owned by a renowned director. While this arrangement provided temporary stability, the organisation was heavily reliant on private donors for funding. The pandemic, however, drastically reduced donations, leaving the organisation in financial distress. At the same time, the holding company's owner had become embroiled in controversies related to state censorship, further compounding the precariousness of affiliated cultural projects. By the end of 2022, the film production company affiliated with the non-profit distributor could no longer afford their rent, forcing the organisation to close its Caochangdi office. At that point, Wang was

August 7, 2018, <http://art-ba-ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=190573&forumId=8> (accessed December 29, 2024)

²⁹² Field Trip to Caochangdi, October 2022, Beijing, China.

one of its last two full-time employees, and had gone more than six months without receiving her salary—an all-too-common experience for art workers in an increasingly precarious environment.²⁹³

Caochangdi's legal and administrative ambiguities further complicated matters for its artist and art worker occupants. Many, including Wang and her supervisor, were uncertain about Zui Ku's precise legal status in leasing the village's land. Though the company had circumvented the village committee by securing approval from the local government, its long-term stability remained unclear. Meanwhile, tensions between Zui Ku and the village committee persisted, raising questions about who truly represented the interests of Caochangdi's villagers. These uncertainties underscored the fragility of artistic spaces within the village. Artists and art workers often described their studios and courtyards as separate from the village itself—when venturing out for food or other necessities, they would say they were “going to the village,” reinforcing the idea that their creative enclaves were isolated from the surrounding community.²⁹⁴

Strict pandemic control enforcement in 2022 further complicated access to Caochangdi. The entire village was fenced off and guarded, making it impossible to reach certain areas. These physical barriers mirrored the broader limitations imposed on Beijing's independent art spaces—spaces that, once integral to the city's creative landscape, were now increasingly precarious, enclosed, and subject to forces beyond their control. While Wang Yifan's experience in Caochangdi reflects the challenges faced by art workers navigating shrinking institutional support and financial instability, another artist, Hua Xiaocheng—who continued to work at Luoma Lake after his peers' studio spaces were demolished—offers a different perspective. Hua's experiences highlight how artist communities outside Beijing's central districts adapted to post-pandemic realities, negotiating between self-sufficiency, state oversight, and the evolving role of communal art spaces.

Luoma Lake Art District, named after the body of water it borders, was once home to a small but vibrant artist community. The name “Luoma” (罗马) hybridizes the names of LuoJia Village and Majia Village surrounding the lake. Coincidentally, “Luoma” is also the name for

²⁹³ Wang Yifan, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, October 2022, Beijing, China.

²⁹⁴ Wang, *ibid.*

“Rome” in Chinese, which often amuses residents and visitors, as the contrast between an imagined romanticized Western city and a rural village in Beijing’s Shunyi district could not be starker. Among artists, the district was often described as *tu* (土), meaning “rustic” or “hillbilly,” reflecting both its distance from the city centre and the informal nature of its art spaces. Unlike the more well-known Caochangdi, where art institutions coexisted with state-sanctioned developments, Luoma Lake had remained a relatively low-profile enclave—until the pandemic accelerated its erasure.



Figure 52. Site of demolished Luoma Lake Art District in 2022. Photograph by the author.

By the time I visited Hua in 2022, nearly the entire art district had been demolished during the pandemic. The township had forced most of the non-Beijing residents to vacate and return to their registered hukou locations as part of lockdown measures. This left only remnants of what had once been a vibrant community. Many former residents viewed this as the township’s deliberate opportunity to displace them. Hua’s yuanzi was one of the few structures that survived. Located at the periphery of the former art district, this yuanzi had been spared from demolition largely due to its positioning outside the central cluster of artist spaces, and his landlord’s ambiguous personal relationship with the township bureaucrats. The two-story building contained a dozen units, with Hua and his partner occupying a spacious ground-floor loft. Previously, Hua had lived in a smaller upstairs unit, but when a neighboring tenant vacated during the pandemic, he seized the opportunity to move into the larger, converted space downstairs. In contrast to the makeshift studios and precarious live-work arrangements that typified much of the Beijing art scene, Hua’s space stood out. It was well-furnished, equipped

with floor heating, and had been generously left to him by its previous owner, complete with all the appliances. However, living in this space still presented challenges for Hua and his partner. Located near Luoma Lake, the area was not easily accessible by public transit, so they relied on their private vehicle. The car, registered in Hua's hometown in Hebei Province, was subject to Beijing's strict vehicle registration system, which aims to limit traffic in the capital. As a result, the vehicle could not be legally driven within the city, lest it be caught on camera, incurring a fine and adding to the couple's violation record. This situation deepened Hua's sense of isolation. With the demolition of much of the Luoma Lake Art District during the pandemic, Hua lost many of his friends and peers, who were displaced or forced to leave the city altogether. In addition, the tightening of regulations surrounding non-Beijing vehicles further limited his mobility, making it difficult for him to engage with the broader art community or visit other parts of the city where fellow artists may have relocated. His experience reflects the broader sense of displacement and fragmentation that many artists face in Beijing, as both their physical spaces and their social networks are increasingly dismantled by the city's rapid urbanization and regulatory control.²⁹⁵



Figure 53. Hua Xiaocheng's yuanzi in Luoma Lake, 2022. Photograph by the author.

Hua's case illustrates not only the resilience and persistence of artists in the wake of state-led redevelopment but also the limits of such persistence. While his studio had survived, the larger support network that once sustained the Luoma Lake artist community had vanished. Previously, the district had been home to a network of fabricators, carpenters, and art handlers

²⁹⁵ Hua Xiaocheng, interview by Huiyao (Niuniu) Sun, November 2022, Beijing, China

who facilitated large-scale installations—an essential infrastructure for artists like Hua, known for his monumental sculptural works. During our interview, a carpenter stopped by to take measurements for a shipping crate, now a rare occurrence in the area. The disappearance of these logistical supports mirrored the broader dispersal of artist communities in post-pandemic Beijing. As demolition and relocation fragmented once-thriving creative clusters, individual survival did not necessarily equate to the survival of a community.²⁹⁶



Figure 54. Hua and a carpenter taking measurements of his sculpture and installation, *Regeneration* (迭代, 2022),²⁹⁷ 2022. Photograph by the author.

The trajectory from the pre-Olympics to post-pandemic eras reveals a deep transformation in the spatial and structural conditions of Beijing’s artist communities. In the years before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, artist enclaves like Caochangdi flourished as alternative

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Hua’s 2022 sculpture and installation *Regeneration* (迭代) reflects his experience and observations of urban redevelopment. Each component of the sculpture moves freely along a track, constantly separating and reassembling. This fluid movement symbolizes the people and social elements of a metropolis, which continuously regenerates itself. His 2022 piece, *Time and Scenery* (光景), features a metal box split in half, with each interior adorned with reflective mirror fragments. The piece draws inspiration from his time at Luoma Lake, surrounded by friends and peers, and the subsequent demolition of the artist community during the pandemic, which separated them (discussed in “Introduction.”)

spaces for independent cultural production, with figures like Ai Weiwei shaping Caochangdi's identity as a hub for creative autonomy. However, the post-Olympics tightening of state control saw Ai's studio demolished, signaling a shift in how the government managed artistic spaces—transforming them from loosely governed zones of experimentation into regulated, commercialized, or displaced enclaves. By the post-pandemic period—as seen in Wang's experience working in a non-profit in Caochangdi and Hua's near-isolated existence in Luoma Lake—the impact of these shifts had fully materialized. The remaining spaces were no longer sites of collective artistic energy but scattered pockets of survival, where artists and cultural workers navigated precarious conditions under increasing financial and political constraints. While Ai's case in the post-Olympics moment illustrated a dramatic confrontation between artist autonomy and state control, the post-pandemic landscape reflects a more diffuse, yet equally decisive, reconfiguration of Beijing's artist ecology. This reconfiguration further invites not only observing artist communities as merely spatial entities, but as interdisciplinary formations shaped by intersecting social, political, and economic forces. Tracing the legacy of past activist interventions alongside emerging strategies for survival and expression, the following section considers how these artists and artist communities continue to reimagine their roles, alliances, and futures within an ever-changing landscape.

Reflections and future directions

When they were thrown into the furnace
flesh still soft
nameless corpses transformed into ash
the epoch or endless history
is at most a wisp of black smoke

他们被投入焚尸炉时
身体还很柔软
无名的尸体化为灰烬
一个时代或漫长的历史
也至多是一缕青烟

Throughout this dissertation, I have emphasized the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the formation, evolution, and struggles of artist communities in Beijing. These communities are not merely artistic spaces; they represent complex intersections of politics, economics, social structures, and cultural production. While studied here through the lens of art history, telling the stories of artist communities also requires insights from urban studies, sociology, and political theory. Amidst it all, the changing urban landscape of Beijing—marked by continuous redevelopment and gentrification—has been a crucial force shaping the spaces in which these communities exist.

The evolution of artist communities—from spaces like the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village into formalized hubs like 798 Art Zone—highlights the tension between artistic autonomy and the forces of state control and marketization. This dissertation draws from spatial theory to explore how these communities occupy peripheral areas of the city, often aiming to create spaces for artistic freedom outside the formal structures of state-controlled galleries or institutions. In doing so, they challenge not only the notion of “art” but also the very boundaries of public and private space, as well as the urban fabric of Beijing itself.

Furthermore, the feminist framework that informs my research provides a critical lens to examine how gender and class intersect within these communities. This approach shifts the conversation from aesthetic or cultural critique to a broader inquiry into how art and community-building are tied to larger socio-political conditions. While this study foregrounds questions of social structure and lived experience, it does not dismiss aesthetic innovation; rather, it situates artistic form and practice within the constraints and possibilities shaped by gendered and classed conditions. Thus, artist communities offer a valuable entry point for interdisciplinary study,

²⁹⁸ Liu Xiaobo (1955–2017) was a Chinese writer, literary critic, and human rights activist who played a significant role in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and spent much of his life advocating for democracy in China. He was imprisoned multiple times for his activism and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010 while serving an 11-year sentence for ‘inciting subversion of state power.’ *June Fourth Elegies* (2012) is a collection of poems that Liu wrote annually from 1990 to 2009 in memory of those killed in the Tiananmen crackdown. Deeply personal and politically poignant, the book serves as both a tribute to the victims and a meditation on grief, resilience, and the silencing of historical memory. Liu Xiaobo, *June Fourth Elegies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), 51.

revealing the ways in which art production is shaped by—and, in turn, shapes—societal structures. The formal choices made by artists, including shifts in medium, scale, and mode of engagement, are themselves responses to these conditions and deserve further exploration in future studies.

The history of activism in China has deeply informed and, in many ways, shaped the formation of artist communities in Beijing. Activism in modern and contemporary China has always been a response to shifting political and social landscapes, often seeking to challenge state power and assert individual freedoms. For instance, in the late 1970s and 1980s, the Stars Art Group emerged as a direct reaction to the Cultural Revolution, a period that stifled creative expression. The group's activism was rooted in a desire to break free from the ideological constraints of the state, a theme that would continue to resonate in the following decades.

The '85 New Wave, a movement showcased in the *China/Avant Garde* exhibition, marked another turning point. The artists involved in this movement critiqued both the artistic legacy of the Cultural Revolution and the shifting political atmosphere of the time. This wave of artistic activism in a way set the stage for the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, and the activist artists of the period highlighted the increasing tension between the individual and the state. The artists of Yuanmingyuan Artist Village believed their eviction in 1995 was directly connected to the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre, an event that left an indelible mark on Chinese society. The state's increasing surveillance and control were seen as efforts to limit the spread of liberal ideas, particularly among university students. The crackdown on artists and their intellectual spaces represented not just a physical eviction but also an ideological silencing of dissent. These events underscore the complex relationship between artist communities and activism in China, where the boundaries between art, politics, and state control are often blurred.

Moving into the 21st century, activism within Beijing's artist communities continued to evolve. In recent years, members of artist communities have actively participated in significant social movements, such as the Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement in Hong Kong, a struggle for democratic freedoms for the region. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, the White Paper protests (also known as the A4 Revolution), which symbolized a collective stand against government censorship, also saw the involvement of participants from artist communities discussed in this dissertation. These more recent movements, in both subtle and overt ways, reflect the ongoing legacy of activist traditions within the artistic communities.

Whether knowingly or unknowingly, these waves of activism—before and beyond the artist communities discussed here—have inspired, informed, and shaped the direction of Beijing's artist communities. The experiences of previous generations of artists in responding to political oppression, social unrest, and state surveillance have created a foundational awareness among contemporary artists, who continue to push the boundaries of expression in their work and community-building efforts. These movements, together with their historical predecessors, have maintained a constant dialogue between art and activism, reminding us that artist communities in China are not simply spaces of artistic production but also potent sites for political and social resistance.

As Beijing's urban landscape continues to evolve, the future of artist communities remains uncertain. The commercialization of art districts and the gentrification of former artist spaces pose significant challenges to the sustainability of these communities. However, artist communities are not passive victims of urban development; they are also active participants in shaping its futures. One of the key questions for the future of artist communities is how they will navigate the tension between maintaining artistic autonomy and engaging with the broader market forces that shape the contemporary art world. Future research could benefit from comparative analyses of artist communities in other rapidly transforming Chinese cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen, which exhibit distinct patterns of urban development, state intervention, and grassroots organising. Such comparisons would illuminate how local specificities shape different strategies of survival, resistance, or collaboration across urban China. Likewise, examining artist enclaves in diasporic Chinese communities or other global art hubs could enrich our understanding of how mobility and migration intersect with artistic formation and community-building.

The rise of digital platforms and online communities offers new possibilities for artistic collaboration and resistance. While physical spaces for artistic production continue to be displaced, virtual spaces provide an alternative venue for artists to collaborate, exhibit their work, and maintain a critical stance toward state and market forces. The future of artist communities may therefore lie not just in physical spaces but in hybrid forms that foster artistic engagement across both digital and physical realms. This shift to digital also creates opportunities to study translocal feminist and queer networks that extend across cities and borders. Online platforms such as WeChat groups, podcasts, or grassroots feminist zines allow

artists and activists to share resources, collaborate, and offer mutual support, even in environments of heightened censorship. Future research might explore how these networks complicate traditional understandings of community by generating affective and strategic ties that are not geographically bound, yet remain rooted in shared cultural, gendered, and political concerns.

Furthermore, as Beijing continues to position itself as an emerging global art hub, the future of artist communities will be shaped by their ability to maintain their unique local identity while finding ways to engage with international trends and audiences. In the post-pandemic era, economic recession, growing censorship (and self-censorship), and the decreasing presence of international art institutions in China, present a lot of challenges. In this context, artist communities will need to balance their desire for artistic freedom with the realities of operating within an art world that is often at odds with their grassroots origins and activism.

Ultimately, the future of artist communities in Beijing will hinge on their ability to resist co-optation and preserve spaces that nurture creative autonomy. Given the precarious status of many informal artist communities, future research might also examine the role of urban and cultural policy in either supporting or undermining creative ecosystems. This includes not only examining how zoning laws, artist residency programmes, or redevelopment policies affect artists' mobility, but also considering what policy models might better support the preservation of cultural memory and grassroots artistic heritage. Policymakers, urban planners, and cultural institutions have much to learn from the organic, adaptive practices of artist communities, which often operate outside formal frameworks yet play a critical role in the cultural vitality of the city.

While commercialization and state control will undoubtedly continue to exert pressure on these communities, their resilience—particularly in adapting and evolving without losing sight of their foundational ideals—will determine their enduring relevance in the broader cultural landscape. Throughout the course of this dissertation, I have followed the journeys of many emerging artists who, disheartened by increasing financial instability, have paused their careers indefinitely, particularly during and after the pandemic. I hold hope that they will find success in their lives, both within and beyond artist communities and the art world. After all, communities are made up of people. This dissertation on artist communities prioritizes their personal stories and lived experiences above all else.

Constraints and limitations

Finally, let me end by acknowledging that the scope of this study is not without limitations. Acknowledging these limitations is essential in understanding the scope of the research and the gaps that remain in capturing a meaningful picture of Beijing's artistic landscape.

The scope of this study is shaped by both deliberate methodological choices and external constraints, particularly those imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on Beijing's artist communities, this dissertation foregrounds the capital's significance as a site where artistic practices, state interventions, and shifting institutional conditions intersect. However, such a focus inevitably excludes equally pertinent developments in other major artistic hubs, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and so on. Each of these cities has fostered distinct artistic ecologies influenced by local governance structures, market forces, and international networks. A comparative study across multiple cities would have provided a more comprehensive account of contemporary Chinese artist communities, but given the scope of this dissertation, I prioritized depth over breadth.

Additionally, the case studies selected—the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, the 798 Art Zone, 1005, etc.—are not meant to be exhaustive representations of artist communities in Beijing. Rather, they serve as key sites for examining the changing landscape of artistic production in contemporary China. Other artist communities that I did not have opportunities to discuss in my dissertation, such as Shangyuan Art District or Yanjiao, could have offered alternative perspectives on artistic survival, community organisation, and state interaction. Likewise, a closer analysis of digital artistic platforms and decentralized online collectives, which gained prominence during the pandemic, could have extended the study beyond physical artist communities. While these subjects fall outside the immediate purview of this research, they remain valuable directions for future inquiry.

The pandemic itself introduced significant research challenges. China's strict lockdown measures, shifting quarantine policies, and travel restrictions between 2020 and 2023 affected not only my ability to conduct fieldwork but also the availability of artists and organisers to participate in extended interviews. Inter-city travel was particularly precarious—at times, a visit to an artist community outside Beijing, such as in Yanjiao, which belongs to Hebei Province, could have resulted in being unable to return to Beijing due to sudden quarantine level changes. The financial demands of extended quarantine stays added another layer of difficulty, further

limiting my mobility and the breadth of site visits. These constraints inevitably shaped the research design, reinforcing the focus on communities that were more accessible and on participants who were available for remote or in-person engagement during the study period.

Finally, this study acknowledges its limitations in comparative analysis. While it situates artist communities within broader discussions on territorialization, precarity, spatial politics, state-artist negotiations, and globalization, it does not offer an extensive transnational comparison. Connections to global artistic movements, particularly those in the Global South, could have further contextualized the experiences of Chinese artists, especially women artists, within a wider framework of artistic resistance and community formation under neoliberal and authoritarian pressures. Given the scope of this dissertation, comparative insights are drawn selectively rather than systematically, leaving room for future research to explore these connections more deeply.

Despite these limitations, this study offers an in-depth examination of artist communities navigating political, economic, and spatial transformations in contemporary China. By tracing transformations in the post-Cultural Revolution era, this dissertation highlights the resilience embedded in artistic practices, the evolving relationship between artists and state power, and the spatial reconfigurations of creative enclaves. It is my hope that these insights not only contribute to the study of Chinese contemporary art but also invite further interdisciplinary engagement with urban studies, research on labour precarity, and activist projects and networks.

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