

# Urban revolution and Chinese contemporary art: A total revolution of the senses

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China Information  
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DOI: 10.1177/0920203X15588168

cin.sagepub.com



## Abstract

Urban transformation in China has been hailed as a revolution. The pace and scale of change as well as the grand narrative of transformation have been characterized in terms of superlatives – the tallest skyscrapers, the largest shopping malls, the longest bridges and highways, the fastest trains – testifying to the teleology and progress of China's dream of prosperity. However, behind the sleek and glittering façade lies a story of exclusion, violence, dispossession, and destruction – the ruins of a civilization. This article engages with this side of the story by exploring the dialectic between urban transformation and the parallel development of the visual arts, which has created new regimes of visibility and new hierarchies of representation. In new and large cities alike, the visual arts have been manifesting affections that permeate the contemporary world, creating new possibilities for 'distributing the sensible'. This article focuses on the artworks produced by Zhang Dali, Dai Guangyu and Jin Feng, whose subject matter involves common people, and it engages with three crucial discursive formations: violence, socio-economic inequality, and utopian dreams. These artists are producing a 'history from below' (to borrow E. P. Thompson's expression): rescuing the common people from 'the enormous condescension of posterity'. They are making ordinary people assume the importance of the extraordinary. From the point of view of aesthetics, they are enacting a total revolution of the senses and, in Rancière's words, making 'heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals'.

## Keywords

urban transformation, urban revolution, urban aesthetics, Zhang Dali, Dai Guangyu, Jin Feng

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Urban transformation in China constitutes both a domestic revolution and a world-historical event because it represents the largest construction project in the planet's history.<sup>1</sup> In his book *China in Ten Words*,<sup>2</sup> the renowned Chinese writer Yu Hua dedicates the sixth chapter to his analysis of 'revolution' in the past and in the present. He argues that 'The revolutionary violence of the Cultural Revolution has continued to rear its head in the course of China's economic success story of the past thirty years.'<sup>3</sup> To demonstrate this, he focuses on the official wooden seals, which are the emblem of authority and a metonym of the absolute political and economic power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From 1949 onwards, these 'insubstantial-looking accessories' became mandatory on all official documents: 'In China official seals are needed everywhere all the time.'<sup>4</sup> Yu remembers when the rebel faction in Shanghai assaulted the municipal government in January 1967 and that they announced the successful seizure of power only after they had taken the official seal: 'Whoever seized the official seal would be the possessor of true power, they could issue orders right and left and allocate funds with supreme confidence, destroy the lives of people they disliked, and use public money to bankroll their expenses.'<sup>5</sup> The act of stamping a piece of paper with the official seal legitimizes its content. Therefore, the seal – often taken by violence – has become an emblem of righteousness, a sacred object signifying the accomplishment of the revolution's original aim.

Yu argues that even though Chinese society has changed from the time of the Cultural Revolution, the symbolic importance of the seals has not diminished, 'so seizure of official seals continues to take place in China today'.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of whether the seals are real or fake, they are used in lawsuits and in cases of land grabs, large-scale demolitions and forced relocations. Their use is still associated 'with violence reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution'.<sup>7</sup>

Various scholars have described China's radical transformation over the last two decades as an 'urban revolution',<sup>8</sup> often with praise for having achieved 'more success than failure' in the 'thirty years of urbanization'.<sup>9</sup> However, Yu describes the transformation of the urban landscape as a story of violence, and concludes, 'Behind the situation is a developmental model saturated with revolutionary violence of the Cultural Revolution type.'<sup>10</sup> This violence conceals what Yu calls 'complex emotions':<sup>11</sup> on the one hand, fear and uncertainty, and on the other a search for solidarity, accompanied by suspicion and even possible betrayal:

To suppress popular discontent and resistance, some local governments send in large numbers of police to haul away any residents who refuse to budge. Then a dozen or more giant bulldozers will advance in formation, knocking down a block of old houses in no time at all. When the residents are finally released, they find only rubble where their homes once stood. Vagrants now, they have no option but to bow to reality and accept the housing offered.<sup>12</sup>

Violent eviction has become the norm in China's urban revolution.<sup>13</sup> Yu uses the allegory of warfare to tell the tragic story of forced eviction, and concludes, 'Even in a war, you give your enemy some time to surrender.' Yu concludes that Mao-style revolutionary spirit is still alive. He explains how China's 'economic miracle' is so interconnected with the 'absolute authority of local governments' that lack of political transparency, and ultimately corruption and nepotism, are the norm.

## A history of China's modernization: Violence, ruins, and warfare

Top-down regulatory urban development, often associated with deterministic policies of economic growth, property development, and planning control, has caused physical destruction and disruption of lifestyles and neighbourly ties, consequently resulting in dislocation, loss and precarity.<sup>14</sup> The urban revolution,<sup>15</sup> the persistent thread of violence, and, ultimately, the mechanisms of exclusion-inclusion derive from a reconfiguration of the meaning of living in a cityscape characterized by the juxtaposition of ruins, rubble, and warfare amid glittering and sleek high-rise buildings, echoing a master narrative of modernity, newness, forwardness, and progress. This reconfiguration of meaning has created new regimes of visibility and new hierarchies of representation. The search for meaning and for ways to rescue the common people from 'the enormous condescension of posterity'<sup>16</sup> is the fundamental conceptual and psycho-emotive core of Zhang Dali's art. This article will focus, in particular, on his artistic production in relation to the urban.<sup>17</sup> It will also engage with the related works of fellow artists Dai Guangyu and Jin Feng, who show complementary visual modes towards the urban. As Henri Lefebvre poignantly argues, 'The future of art is not artistic, it is urban':<sup>18</sup> in his conceptualization of 'the urban', the urban holds together the contexts of embodied experiences of individuals living in the city, and allows us to explore both individual creativity and social relations.

I argue that the selected artists' orientation towards the cityscape where they live involves first and foremost a search for and progressive evolution of an aesthetic language, since these artists have lived through the ruin of their city, and have experienced the violent transformation of their city in pursuit of their art.<sup>19</sup> They bring attention to the common people and their everyday life, turning the ordinary into the extraordinary. The metamorphosis of cityscape and art reifies the interrelation between art and politics; art renders 'visible what had not been'<sup>20</sup> and can unveil the ruins of a civilization *before* they actually become ruins.<sup>21</sup> In the last three decades, the claimed reality of a common social world has withered away, and an aesthetic and political revolution has taken place, producing not only a redistribution of the sensible,<sup>22</sup> but also a redistribution of the visible, the audible, the sayable, the tactile and the olfactory. This is a total revolution of the senses, which is still unravelling and reconfiguring the meaning of the urban in China today.

I would like to begin with an analysis of *A History of China's Modernization* (中国现代史) (Figure 1), by the Shanghai artist Jin Feng (born 1962), who is particularly interested in the impact that historical change has on ordinary people. The traditional seals, emphasized by Yu Hua as a metonym of power, have been appropriated and reinvented by Jin Feng in his aesthetic synthesis of the 'extremely cruel' story of China, from the foundation of the Republic, which followed the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 and put an end to the Qing Empire (1644–1911), to its 100th anniversary in 2011. Jin used a total of 2000 seals to visually rewrite this story: 1000 with images ranging from kitsch statues of Mao Zedong and nationalist generals to Li Hongzhi, the founder of the Falun Gong cult; 850 seals with characters from Treasury bonds and state-owned enterprises to the Korean War and Yankees; while 150 were left blank,



**Figure 1.** Jin Feng, *A History of China's Modernization, Volumes 1 and 2* (中国现代化史[上卷下卷]), 2011 | rubber, marble, rice paper installation. Courtesy of the artist.

conveying a sense of pervasive hesitation and anxiety about the future, or maybe the present. The same seals have been used to stamp seemingly random sentences and images on 7000 rice paper slips which cover the walls and lie alongside piles of rubber and marble seals; in reality, they condense key moments of modern Chinese history. This artwork was incredibly labour intensive, and its materiality also has a significant symbolic capital since the seals are carved either from a marble statue of Chairman Mao or from the tires of a Soviet-style T-34 tank. The choice of the materials echoes the efforts made by the Chinese people in building the 'new' China.

Violence and cruelty associated with historical change are a constant element of Jin's artworks. He became famous after his 2006 solo exhibition at Creative Garden 2577 in Shanghai for his 15-metre-long panoramic photograph *Appeals without Words* or *Wordless Petitions* (无字坊) (Figure 2).

This powerful artwork depicts 89 rural villagers, in half-life size, queuing outside the provincial cadres' offices to present to the government authorities their petitions (上访) regarding corruption and land seizures.<sup>23</sup> Some of the villagers are standing, others are crouching against a brick wall, all are covered in a mix of black and gold paint; their posture, clothes and colours convey their status, their ties to the land, and their extreme poverty. The staged nature of the photograph and their position against the wall make the villagers static, immobile, statuesque, as if their long and probably hopeless Godotesque experience of waiting had frozen them forever in that precise moment and space. The petitioners seem to have lost the possibility of becoming human again: they have also lost their language along with their land, and the petition letters of cardboard and paper that they carry are, in reality, empty. *Wordless Petitions* echoes socialist realism, and falls



**Figure 2.** Jin Feng, *Wordless Petitions* (无字坊), 2006, photograph, 1500 cm x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

within a long tradition – one of the major works is the famous 1965 work commissioned by the CCP provincial officials, *Rent Collection Courtyard* (收租院), a socialist realist tableau of 114 life-size clay sculptures made by sculptors from the Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts, depicting the ways in which a cruel landlord exploited his peasants in the pre-Liberation days.<sup>24</sup> This grounds Jin's artworks both historically and aesthetically, and endows the petitioners with a sense of dignity and resilience as semi-heroic characters in an unending war (indeed, the semi-golden colour makes their clothes appear like soldiers' uniforms), making the private petition even more intensely political. On the one hand, Jin denounces their plight and sympathizes with their plea for justice, but on the other he seems to infer that their patience is meaningless, since the authorities are not willing to listen, especially to petitioners who have lost everything, including their own words.

Jin Feng's artworks share a few common traits with the other two artists considered here, Zhang Dali and Dai Guangyu. They all use modularity and repetition to convey their message, and they have all progressed from attention to the space in which they live to the living beings who occupy that space. This shift can be interpreted as a combination of self-awareness with an empathic mode: it reveals an ethical concern, especially towards the plight of a social group which has experienced dislocation, alienation, abandonment and loss. The lives of these common people are often obscured by the government-led narrative, which promotes the Chinese dream of ever-growing prosperity allegedly embodied by the ultra-modern global built environment of Chinese cities. Jin, Dai and Zhang are visual artists who contrast the official mechanisms of inclusion with those of exclusion. Thus, they contribute to an aesthetic revolution in the making, which can be defined as the redistribution of the visible, the audible, the sayable, and also the

tactile and the olfactory. The wordless appeals of Jin are evidence of this: he recruited the models for the figures from the ‘petitioners’ village’ (上访村) in Beijing – an informal residential area for persons presenting petitions to the central government – which was pulled down in 2006.

David Harvey argues that displacement and dispossession are crucial elements of capital accumulation through urbanization, and denounces such predatory urban practices in the United States as well as in China. In his analysis of the ‘urban roots of capitalist crises’, Harvey emphasizes how ‘rising social inequality is accepted as a necessary cost of sustained economic growth and competitiveness’ in China.<sup>25</sup> Harvey concludes that the future of the ‘Chinese model’ is grim due to burgeoning social inequalities, environmental degradation and innumerable ‘signs of overextension and overvaluation of assets in the built environment’.<sup>26</sup>

The three artists discussed in this article are highly critical of the economic cost and the lack of social sustainability of urban transformation in China. In his analysis of the social construct of the urban, Zhang emphasized that his primary artistic interest was in those he calls the ‘half-citizens’ (半城市人): ‘This social group is so vast; it is the bulk of China’s population. Their problems are indeed China’s problems of today and tomorrow.’ These half-citizens represent the dichotomy between city and countryside, between the image of the rural as ‘dirty, chaotic, and backward’ (脏, 乱, 差), as embodied by the migrants and the projected civilized image of the urbanized citizens.<sup>27</sup>

According to Zhang, the migrants are considered half-citizens, and they are the victims of social injustice:

They work extremely hard but they are ignored and pushed aside. They are the craftsmen of the urban dream, but the city does not accept them. They manually build the city and its fundamental infrastructure, but there is no way for them to enjoy these advantages. I believe that for the future direction of Chinese reforms, it is necessary to put an end to the binary *hukou* system (户口制度), which distinguishes between urban and rural areas, so that the rural land enters the market and rural residents obtain equality in education and healthcare.<sup>28</sup>

The internationally known artist Ai Weiwei also shares this concern for those he calls ‘Beijing slaves’: the millions who ‘come to Beijing to build bridges, roads, and houses’. ‘Each year they build a Beijing equal to the size of the city in 1949’, but they are like slaves, since they are excluded from the ‘Beijing of power and money’. They have no rights, they work but do not reside there as they can only ‘squat in illegal structures, which Beijing destroys as it keeps expanding’.<sup>29</sup> This is the reason why Ai calls Beijing ‘a nightmare’:

This city [Beijing] is not about other people or buildings or streets, but about your mental structure. If we remember what Kafka writes about his Castle, we get a sense of it. Cities really are mental conditions. Beijing is a nightmare. A constant nightmare.<sup>30</sup>

But Zhang’s redefinition of the urban and his appeal for social justice go one step further, and seem to echo Henri Lefebvre’s hypothesis that the current process of complete urbanization forces us to address the urban, looking beyond the ‘city’ per se and viewing

the totality of society: ‘an entire way of being, thinking and acting ... a “global” phenomenon, shaping and influencing all of society’.<sup>31</sup>

## The artist and the city: The impact of urban transformation

Zhang argues that all his artworks are closely connected with his life experience: ‘My artwork originates from my life.’<sup>32</sup> When he was asked which three words could best express art, Zhang immediately ranked life at the top, followed by imagination and dreams.<sup>33</sup> When Dai was asked the same question, he listed freedom, truth, and imagination.<sup>34</sup> Dai believes that art is the expression of one’s thoughts, and therefore art should represent the artist’s inner truth.

For Zhang, ‘life is a dynamic force’, and his life is closely connected to the urban: ‘Obviously this has a lot to do with the city where I reside because the stories that inspire my artworks happen in this city.’<sup>35</sup> The city where Zhang has lived for the longest time is Beijing, having moved there from Harbin in 1983. With one break of six years in Bologna, Italy, Zhang has lived for more than 20 years in Beijing, and he has witnessed the transformation of the city and the increase in population from four million to more than 20 million people. The Chinese capital’s appearance has changed dramatically: ‘From the long queues of hundreds of bicycles during rush hour [of the past] to today’s Great Steel Wall of cars holding up traffic; from the [city of] blue skies to the capital of pollution; from the slow-paced life of leisure and carefreeness to the Beijing of today where people die in their own cars because of excess speed and anxiety.’<sup>36</sup> Zhang ponders the temporalities of urban imagery: the striking disconnection between psychological perception and experiential data leads him to compare living in Beijing today, in its complexity, to ‘living in a state of trance, since it [feels] more like one thousand years have gone by’.<sup>37</sup>

One constant theme which emerged in my ethnographic work was an awareness of the dystopian scenarios of the urban environment. We may ask how the artists being studied here have dealt, and in many ways are still dealing, with the speed, size and scale of urban transformation. This relates both to their subject positioning and to how they deal with what Rancière describes as ‘the distribution of the sensible’:<sup>38</sup> the urban revolution has created the historical conditions for making a subjective reconfiguration of meaning possible, and it has challenged the claim made by politics that it is acting according to the principle ‘we are all equal’. The violent urban transformation has demystified the demise of the previous regime of representation, and determined the consequent transition to a regime of aesthetics which has opened new possibilities for negotiating and articulating the relationship between the visual artists, the cityscape, and the excluded.

Zhang’s insights on the artist’s subjectivity are particularly poignant in this respect: ‘Most of the time, it is like we are defying death and chasing transformation (*bianhua* 变化). There is no time to stop and think about the reason why this is happening. Because for all of us, each single individual, regardless whether one is really willing to stop and think about it, there is no way one can stop this tremendous change (*jubian* 巨变).’<sup>39</sup> Zhang uses the term *jubian*, which is different from *bianhua*. Both terms indicate change, but the adjective–noun compound *jubian* emphasizes the massive scale of the change, and carries a social connotation: it highlights what the Chinese people have gone through,

and this is what these artists express in their work. It is not a search for a system of representation, but more, as Rancière points out, the search for an aesthetic of life, which is inevitably intertwined with the politics of aesthetics and, I would suggest, a new history of aesthetics such as artists like Zhang Dali are proposing.

The massive transformation, which surpasses anything imaginable, is summarized by Zhang with evocative imagery: 'Beijing, this ancient capital, has all been transformed, from the sky to the geomorphological features; there are times when the sky is clear, when you are on the top of the hill and looking down you can see the Forbidden City, that vast imperial palace, and the surrounding cement architecture looks like a miniature landscape.'<sup>40</sup> Zhang rejects any Manichean tendency to label this transformation good or bad. There is no space for nostalgic emotions, although he acknowledges a profound sense of loss, since 'after all the ancient capital of the old days has already vanished completely'.<sup>41</sup> The aesthetics of disappearance is evoked by Zhang with the Chinese proverb *yanxiao yunsan* (烟消云散), which literally means 'vanish like smoke and disperse like clouds'. But disappearance makes nostalgia a helpless emotion. Life, imagination and dreams are instruments of both survival and resistance for Zhang, who immediately adds: 'We still have to go on living, and to do this we have to continue to run fast ahead, following this violently fast stream of water.'<sup>42</sup> There is no alternative, because otherwise one would be 'elbowed off' and excluded by the city, without any possibility of existing or settling down. An awareness of the power mechanism underlying inclusion and exclusion is one of the key motivations for Zhang's work on those that he calls half-citizens.

## The influence of urban transformation on artistic creation

An artist's creative production has a profound relationship to the place where he lives. The urban context has always influenced Zhang's creativity: independent of the actual exterior form, the content of his work has always been inspired by 'the actual contradictions which emerge in my life'.<sup>43</sup> Zhang explains that this has to do with his way of thinking and his intuition. Zhang's artistic pathway reveals an intrinsic coherence and a consistent message, from his earliest works, such as *Dialogue* (对话) and *Pork Skin Jelly Migrants* (肉皮冻民工), to *AK-47, Chinese Offspring* (种族), *Us* (我们), and even *A Second History* (第二历史), which was based on archival research. In his own words: 'I don't identify with this idea of progress and modernity which is embodied by the wide roads, the high number of cars, and the accumulation of money. This is an illusion, a misconception.'<sup>44</sup> The grand narrative of urbanization seems to have promoted and progressively institutionalized a commoditized imagery of 'happiness' based on material affluence. Against this image, Zhang juxtaposes the growing sense of anxiety, precarity,<sup>45</sup> spiritual impoverishment and destitution, because 'money cannot buy spiritual serenity and moral perfection'.<sup>46</sup> He refers to a disconnection resulting from the transformation of the urban as the convex hull, the shell-like wrapping of something much more complex, hinting at the subjectivity of the individual, a sort of internal 'revolution' which, to paraphrase Michael Hardt, resides in the possibility of transforming human nature.<sup>47</sup> However, Zhang also draws upon traditional ethical interpretive parameters: he seems to echo Confucianism when he condemns greed and the search for material





**Figure 3.** Zhang Dali, *Demolition* (拆), 1999, no. 65B. Courtesy of the artist.

success: '[Money] cannot transform the common person into a gentleman' ([金钱]不能把人变成君子).<sup>48</sup>

From the very beginning, Zhang's artworks carried both this ethical concern and an iconoclastic undertone, while striving to dialogue with the violence of urban destruction. In the 1990s, in *Dialogue*, he used a war signifier for the first time, spraying the AK-47 tag on walls in Beijing marked for demolition (Figure 3). He used spray paint and a hammer instead of a real rifle, the AK-47, to represent the violence of a community being ripped apart: 'If I use this name [AK-47], I make people think about the Third World, the violence of the cities, and the wild hooligan culture. That's not what people want to think about in Beijing today!'<sup>49</sup> *AK-47* was a powerful way to draw attention to the destructive violence assaulting the city of Beijing and its inhabitants: thousands of old buildings in Beijing have been erased more rapidly than in wartime Berlin and London; hundreds of thousands of people have been relocated, while millions of migrant workers have entered the city. Zhang also exposed a dialectic war involving signifiers (the sound-image AK-47) and signifieds (the violence of the city and in the city), a war of style (the repeated slogans) and content. *Dialogue* was the first series of artworks which revealed the artist's intention to actively engage in a critique of the urban environment where he lived. *Dialogue* was a painstaking, 10-year intellectual reflection on the demolition of old buildings with the consequent forced relocation of their inhabitants.

In the year 2000, Zhang began the first of the *AK-47* painting series, covering human faces with the tag of the Soviet assault weapon AK-47. In 2007, this work developed into *The Slogan* (口号), in which he uses Chinese characters, derived from civic-political slogans,<sup>50</sup> to cover the same human faces. Zhang's intention is to show that violence is

embodied in the Chinese characters themselves, in a language that is omnipresent and charged with political authority, associated with a claimed reality and the construction of a specific 'ritual of truth'.

Similarly, Dai has emphasized how he is 'particularly disgusted with the endless demolition of ancient architecture': 'Looking back at China at the beginning of the 20th century, one might wonder where the traditional culture is! It has been so damaged at the hands of this mob of hooligans who govern the country. In today's China, there is nothing left: the historical relics are all completely obliterated by barbaric demolition.'<sup>51</sup> Dai seems to make a connection between *domicide* and *memoricide* when he states that 'people do not have a sense of home and do not have a sense of history'.<sup>52</sup>

From the point of view of artistic creation, this destruction of ancient architecture has had a profound impact on the 'spiritual direction' of Dai's visual language. His keen and critical awareness of place and setting is particularly evident in his 2004–5 *mise-en-scène* entitled *Geomancy, Ink, Ice* (风水, 墨水, 冰水) (Figure 4), where he painted the two characters 风水 (*fengshui* literally meaning wind and water) in ink on the frozen surface of Beijing's Houhai lake. The choice of the characters was inspired both by their traditional inscription in ancient places and, more broadly, by the artist's interest in the effect of the four seasons on a landscape. Viewers are invited to read, decipher and understand the deeper meaning of *fengshui*; meanwhile the 'reality' of the scene changes when the ice on the surface of the lake begins to melt. Ultimately, the artist is interested in the subtle relationship between expectations arising from contemplating the artwork (and the two characters referring to geomancy) and the irregular but inevitable fluctuations of the landscape. In that relationship one could detect a sense of harmony, a feeling in tune with the landscape, but also apathy, and ultimately a sense of helplessness, since the two characters painted on ice will inevitably vanish. This reflects Dai's interest in the visual production of a 'reality' whose appearance is intrinsically connected to its disappearance. Geomancy (*fengshui*) can be considered an allegory of the construction–destruction logic which dominates the urban context today. The artist also offers a warning: the ancient features of the city and the physiognomy of the city were constructed in harmony with the natural surroundings (*fengshui*) in such an ingenious way that the city should not be destroyed indiscriminately.

Dai also emphasizes that the city where he was born and the city where he lives do not make much difference, 'even though the emotional colouring which one feels toward the hometown might be even stronger'. Dai stresses that 'urban transformation and artistic creation have a very direct relationship'<sup>53</sup> (Figure 5).

This view is also shared by Zhang. With the *Dialogue* series Zhang was responding to the artistic necessity to explore and question the underlying logic of the vicious cycle of destruction, construction, remodelling, and reinventing, which ultimately annihilates the macro-history of the city, the history of the neighbourhood, and the micro-history of one's life. *Dialogue* was a subjective response to the emotional urban geography of destruction: 'I felt so much anger and uneasiness, and I knew that I couldn't change anything.'<sup>54</sup> Once again the sense of loss becomes predominant, and the subject positioning of the artist heightens the awareness that even his artwork is subject to the same fate: the artwork is inscribed in a landscape of destruction, the graffiti on buildings which are doomed to be torn down makes his artwork vanish likewise. Once the doomed building



**Figure 4.** Dai Guangyu, *Geomancy, Ink, Ice* (风水, 墨水, 冰水), Beijing, 2004–5. Courtesy of the artist.

is torn down, Zhang's graffiti will disappear together with it, leaving no material trace except for the photographs and light-boxes created by the artist in his studio.

Beyond the action–reaction mechanism of what is gone and what is left behind, by acknowledging the ruins of urban and historical memory, the artist emphasizes the emotions of sorrow and sadness that *Dialogue* inspires in viewers. *Dialogue* is an aesthetic statement on Beijing's transformation, which also assumes a sociopolitical role. The walls doomed to be torn down and used as canvases (Figure 6) become public places of



**Figure 5.** Dai Guangyu, *The Kidnapped* (人质), 2011, ink acrylic on xuan paper. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 6.** Zhang Dali, *Demolition* (拆), 1981, no. 25. Courtesy of the artist.

resistance and reveal personal structures of affect: the wounded walls are chosen by the artist as a visible stage to show the structural conditions of the metropolis as well as the affective reactions of its citizens. In this sense, Zhang's artwork raises critical questions

about the city's regime of visibility, which increases the spatial sensitivity of urban citizens, externalizes their psycho-emotive manifestations, and creates possibilities for sharing the sensible.<sup>55</sup>

At the subjective level, the *Dialogue* series poses crucial questions which hark back to the 'right to the city': 'What is a city? Whose city is this? Who is it built for? Who are the city-masters? As citizens in this era of tremendous change, are we stripped both of our property and our individual rights because of the city's expansion and construction, or can we obtain some form of protection?'<sup>56</sup> Zhang is aware that he is posing rhetorical questions, since those rights of ownership and other individual rights were not protected even before the massive urban transformation of the post-Mao era began: 'From 1949 onwards, urban construction has been the creation of government officials. Urbanization has been the work of the government, ... the work of some kind of mentally incapacitated cadre obsessed with ideological principles and GDP growth.'<sup>57</sup> This echoes the argument put forward by Harvey, who re-interprets Lefebvre's right to the city as a call for 'a transformed and renewed access to urban life',<sup>58</sup> adding, 'The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.'<sup>59</sup> Harvey's argument for the right to the city as a new and fundamental type of human right is based on his recognition of the fallacy of the political economic imperatives of global capitalism and, in the Chinese case, of 'the hegemonic command of capital and the state'.<sup>60</sup>

Zhang gives the example of the mayor of Taiyuan, Geng Yanbo,<sup>61</sup> who is well known for his radical infrastructure projects, which earned him the nickname Demolition Geng (耿拆拆). He was appointed as mayor because of his role in the urban regeneration of the city of Datong; 'but then he left an awful mess ... There are many officials who created ghost cities, like Changzhou in southern Jiangsu, or Ordos in the southern side of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.'<sup>62</sup>

Zhang is concerned with the aesthetics of urban politics and denounces the 'ugliness of the black, oppressive, spiritless and lifeless constructions, the nauseating and dark tall residential buildings, many of which are empty because nobody wants to reside there'.<sup>63</sup> Zhang asks who gave the officials the right to spend public money, earned with blood and sweat, to build a city that is so ugly. Opening a 'dialogue' with the city on the effects of urban transformation was essentially a 'polite' way for Zhang to protest.

A turning point in Zhang's artistic development occurred in the year 2000. From then onwards he became more and more concerned with the way 'non-citizens' live in the city. His artworks *Pork Skin Jelly Migrants* and *Chinese Offspring* engage with the life of these citizen non-citizens. His concern stems from his attempt to explore the apparently rhetorical question: 'Who is this city built for?' In 1960 Kevin Lynch, in his groundbreaking work *The Image of the City*, argued: 'We must consider not just the city as a thing in itself but the city as being perceived by its inhabitants.'<sup>64</sup> Lynch brought the attention of urban planners to a social approach to the use of urban space. He emphasized a fundamentally important *difference*, which is also useful for social scientists: the city

should be studied not only in its physical form but also by examining individual psychological perceptions and the subjective sociospatial reactions of those who live in it. Coining words such as ‘imageability’ and ‘wayfinding’, Lynch described the mental maps that we form by living, walking and consuming the city. Since every city breathes through its individual and collective memories, the added value of Lynch’s perspective is evident when we understand the interconnected history of the city as ‘home’. Applying this perspective to Zhang’s work, one might conclude that after migrants have left their hometown and moved to the metropolis, they become settlers; they struggle to develop a sense of belonging and to be assimilated into the foreign urban environment. It is significant that Zhang articulates this question in terms of ‘Who are the city-masters?’. He argues that the increase in Beijing’s population from four million to 20 million residents ‘hides many secrets’. These secrets refer to the complexities of the subjectivity of 16 million human beings who struggle to become ‘real Beijing citizens’ (北京正式市民), or who remain ‘illegal residents’ or ‘ghost citizens’ (鬼民).

Zhang thinks that the legal constraints imposed on migrants by the *hukou* system add to the psycho-emotive complexities of articulating one’s identity. His artworks *100 Human Beings* (100个人) and *Us* engage with the complex condition of migrants, but the latter is also a conceptual expansion which ‘involves the existential value of humanity itself’. In *Us*, Zhang questions ‘the meaning of human existence in relation to reality’, but this is not necessarily a solipsistic and pessimistic negation of life with death as the only possible way out.

There is another important element here. In post-Mao China, certain segments of the population have succeeded in the new sociopolitical and ultimately economic game, which has brought their entrepreneurial drive to the fore, seeking profit in legitimate or illegitimate ways. Other groups, however, have experienced marginalization and poverty. The gap between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ has widened and the ‘successful’ members of the middle and higher classes proudly display their newly acquired riches and their social status. A new brand of celebrities has emerged in advertisements in public spaces<sup>65</sup> while the media tend to hide images which embody anxieties regarding the ethics of the economic transformation. In this sense the artworks discussed in this article are morally charged and they raise critical questions about the centrality of the regime of visibility and the distorted lens that proposes alternative images.

I argue that Zhang’s artworks render ‘visible that which had no reason to be seen’:<sup>66</sup> the common people, who are often obscured by the government-led narrative which promotes China’s dream of prosperity, emerge here as something more than ‘noisy animals’. Zhang’s artworks both aestheticize and politicize these non-citizens, helping to construct and offer a counter-narrative to spectators – a counter-narrative in reaction to a hegemonic discourse that excludes and makes invisible, and one which counters the reduction, by the sovereign power, of the ‘invisible’ to ‘bare life’,<sup>67</sup> and turns them into ‘wilful’ agents of urban resistance.<sup>68</sup>

### ‘Urban revolution’: A story of success?

Zhang does not agree with the scholars and observers who have hailed the success of the urban revolution:

My generation is probably the last one to know the real meaning of revolution. Revolution is violence, it is destruction, it is the military thinking which involves pain and suffering. There is nothing romantic about it as one might imagine. The corrupt practices of revolution are greater than the slow process of reform (变革). Revolution has often given opportunities to individuals with ulterior motives. Only by living in the vortex of the revolution can one realize the intense cruelty and tragedy of the revolution. When the revolution is dressed in the outer clothing of idealism, an aureole is put on the heads of certain revolutionaries, and these individuals stand in an elevated moral plane, claiming that they act in the name of the well-being of the multitude.<sup>69</sup>

Zhang discusses the example of Ji Jianye, who was originally promoted to the position of mayor of Nanjing (2010–13) because he had rebuilt the ancient city of Yangzhou. However, after rebuilding the city of Nanjing, Ji ‘had to give up his position since he had violated the interests of too many individuals’.<sup>70</sup> In October 2013 he was arrested and investigated for corruption by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Chinese Communist Party and, in January 2014, he was expelled from the CCP. Before this debacle, Ji explained himself in the self-celebratory report ‘Yangzhou in Eight Years’:

During these eight years in Yangzhou, myself and all the others have walked side by side along the same path, jointly promoting the construction of the city of Yangzhou, the scale of the city, and the flavour of the city, so that the whole appearance of the city was completely transformed. In accordance with Jiang Zemin’s [who is originally from Yangzhou] demand to ‘Build Yangzhou to make it become a famous city, where ancient culture and modern civilization enhance each other’s beauty, each shining upon the other’, and his appeal to support the ‘Creation of the new Yangzhou with even more wealth, civilization and elegance’, we extended the comprehensive regulation for large-scale construction of the city and the surrounding areas according to ‘three years one cycle, one year three nodal points’.<sup>71</sup>

Zhang concludes that therefore ‘The “flavour” of the city coincided with the “taste” of its leaders, and the other people are deaf, blind and mute.’<sup>72</sup>

Coming back to Beijing’s urban revolution, both Zhang Dali and Dai Guangyu argue that this tremendous change has filled many people with deep hatred and resentment. Dai uses the example of the Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi, who in his work *Remembering the South* described his return to visit Hangzhou and remembered with heartfelt emotion ‘how he noticed that things had remained the same even though people had changed’ since ‘for a whole life or a short stay, he was forever intertwined with this place with a vague emotional entanglement, it was that “familiar scenery”. Reading it [*Remembering the South*] is deeply moving.’<sup>73</sup> However, Dai observes that, today, when one resides in a city or travels for pleasure to a specific city and ‘stands where one once felt moved by a certain urban scenery, which might have also influenced one’s artistic creation, it is very hard to find the historical miracle that had once given a sense of spiritual comfort’.<sup>74</sup> Dai contends that the historical miracles have been demolished, one by one, and this ‘makes everybody feel depressed and outraged’:

Today, China is deeply trapped in the emotional and rational appeals of ‘modernization’ and cannot extricate itself. For this reason, China denies its own tradition and shows a very serious

spiritual anxiety. It has transformed into a destructive force, which recalls what Mao Zedong once emphasized, the thought that ‘without destruction there is no construction’. This destruction seems to have become the conceptual foundation of contemporary China’s way of managing state affairs, and its guiding principle for action.<sup>75</sup>

Jin also remembers Mao Zedong’s syllogism of the necessity to destroy the ‘old’ in order to build the ‘new’. Jin describes Mao’s idea as ‘very Chinese, very realist’, but then he laments that the promised ‘new world’ did not materialize so that Chinese people today are left with ‘development and destruction, construction and demolition, revolution and martyrdom, life and death’, and all the collateral damage of ‘post-developmentalism’ ‘which permeates every aspect of [our] life’.<sup>76</sup> Jin emphasizes how ‘development occurs under a particular institutionalized order’, and in the same way destruction and the creation of ruins occur under a particular institutionalized order, but here the temporalities are as important as the spatialities: ‘What lies ahead has not arrived yet. What has happened before is already history. As artists, we have to think about today, we are immersed in these ruins and we have to grasp the proof, find a way to express it. This is what art does.’<sup>77</sup>

Zhang Dali adds:

If we had listened from the very beginning to Liang Sicheng’s proposal,<sup>78</sup> perhaps we would have a much better Beijing today: the ancient capital, the harbour of the soul, in a similar way to Rome, which is the cradle of European civilisation. However, revolution has destroyed everything, and from a cultural perspective the people in China today are like people without a homeland. We are all ... looking everywhere for a homeland that we cannot find.<sup>79</sup>

Between 1950 and 1956, the urban planning experts who were sent from the Soviet Union to China favoured the introduction of Soviet-style urban planning theory into China, and in particular the remodelling of the ancient city and establishment of an administrative centre. ‘Liang Sicheng and Cheng Zhanxiang put forward a proposal to protect the original appearance (原貌) of the ancient city, to move the administrative centre to the western periphery of Beijing, and to build another new district.’<sup>80</sup>

They strongly believed that this proposal would have allowed the preservation of the ancient capital’s historical features (历史风貌), while at the same time it would have had the benefit of dividing the population of the metropolitan area and rationalizing the urban planning of the functional district. However, the Soviet experts made a different proposal, with Tiananmen Square as the centre, which implied remodelling the old city and establishing the capital’s administrative centre here. They thought that this proposal would allow a full use of the land resources of the city area, while providing space for the establishment of government bureaus and the beautification of urban space. At the Congress on Urban Planning held in February 1949, the Soviet experts criticized Liang’s proposal, arguing that preserving the ancient city of Beijing like a museum was a ‘small capitalist illusion not in accordance with reality.’<sup>81</sup>

This shows clearly that urban planning is ideological, and that the Soviet ideology had a grip on the ideas of the Chinese planners. In his *AK-47* series, Zhang denounced the fact that urban planning is ideological:



This was the case when the Soviet-style political ideology encroached on the minds of the Chinese people and made inroads into the urban planning of the Chinese capital. The next urbanization wave will destroy the small and medium cities even more, and villages in the countryside will not be lucky enough to escape. The rapid large-scale duplication of the same template is turning out rough and slipshod work without any originality. Chinese people now live in ‘Roman gardens’, or in ‘Little Berlin’, or ‘Dutch towns’, or ‘Soho village’ ... This is the real outcome of the ‘urban revolution’.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

This article is the fruit of an intellectual conversation, mostly with Zhang Dali, but also with fellow artists Jin Feng and Dai Guangyu. From the beginning, I conceived my endeavour as an attempt to revive and develop the art of sustained intellectual conversation implicit in the traditional notion of ‘pure conversation’ (清谈).<sup>83</sup> Such conversations took place between interlocutors with a common interest – in this case, a profound interest in exploring the possibilities and complexities of China’s urban transformation, and in what Zhang calls a ‘history of aesthetics’.

The traditional pure conversations concentrated on metaphysical and philosophical questions; they advocated freedom of individual expression and ultimately an escape from the intricacies of court politics. Like the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (竹林七贤),<sup>84</sup> the most prominent practitioners of pure conversation, the conversations with the three artists highlighted their engagement with ‘the urban’ through three crucial discursive formations: violence, socio-economic inequality, and utopian dreams. Their artworks demystify the demise of the claimed reality that the previous regime of representation had created and progressively overemphasized. The ‘commons of a community’, based on a ‘common social world’, has withered away. However, the state continues to dominate and mould urban planning, using the same obsolete rhetoric while implementing top-down regulatory and technocratic solutions to eradicate the ‘dirty, chaotic, and backward’ of the rural, in the name of a ‘civilized’ regime of urbanized sociospatial configurations promoted as a model of progress.

Through their work, Jin Feng, Dai Guangyu and Zhang Dali contrast the official mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. They open new possibilities for negotiating and articulating the relationship between the visual arts and the urban, with an emphasis on the excluded. In this sense, their artworks are progressively producing a ‘history from below’, saving the common people from ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’,<sup>85</sup> and making their alleged inconspicuousness and ordinariness become extraordinary. To conclude, I contend that these artists contribute to an aesthetic revolution in the making, which can be defined as the redistribution of the visible, the audible, the sayable, and also the tactile and the olfactory. These artists are enacting a total revolution of the senses, rendering ‘visible what had not been, and [making] heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals’.<sup>86</sup>

## Notes

This article would have not been possible without the artists’ collaboration, and the valuable assistance of Patrizia Galli, to whom I would like to express my sincere gratitude. I would also like to

express my grateful thanks to Meiqin Wang and Minna Valjakka for all their hard work in putting together this special issue. This article has also benefited from insightful suggestions from anonymous peer reviewers, as well as from thought-provoking comments from my colleague Francesco Ventrella, to whom I am very grateful.

1. John Friedmann, *China's Urban Transition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005; Fulong Wu (ed.), *China's Emerging Cities: The Making of New Urbanism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007; and John R. Logan (ed.), *The New Chinese City: Globalization and Market Reform*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
2. Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*, trans. Allan H. Barr, New York: Pantheon Books, 2011, 136.
3. *Ibid.*, 120.
4. *Ibid.*, 121.
5. *Ibid.*, 122.
6. *Ibid.*, 123.
7. *Ibid.*, 123.
8. Thomas J. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What It Means for the World*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008. I will use both this concept and Lefebvre's idea of 'the urban' and 'urban revolution' for the conceptual framework of this article; cf. Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
9. Xu Nan, Pan Jiahua on three decades of urbanisation in China, 15 October 2013, <https://www.chinadialogue.net/blog/6417-Pan-Jiahua-on-three-decades-of-urbanisation-in-China/en>, accessed 10 January 2014. Pan Jiahua is the Director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute for Urban and Environmental Studies.
10. Yu, *China in Ten Words*, 127.
11. *Ibid.*, 135.
12. *Ibid.*, 127.
13. You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*, London: Oxford University Press, 2010.
14. Judith Butler conceptualizes 'precarity' as a politically induced condition, which is different from precariousness, and described as a 'feature of life'. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, London: Verso, 2009, 25.
15. In the Lefebvrian sense.
16. E. P. Thompson, History from below, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966: 279–80; Jim Sharpe, History from below, in Peter Burke (ed.) *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, 25–42.
17. I am particularly interested in the implications of the historical rewriting and resignifying of what Lefebvre, in his pioneering work *La Révolution Urbaine* (The urban revolution), Paris: Gallimard, refers to as the urban, which includes the built environment, urban phenomena, urban spaces and landscapes, urban practices, and ultimately urban ideology. I will use the urban in this sense, both to indicate 'more than the city' and the complexity of a field of inquiry.
18. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
19. Hung Wu, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture*, London: Reaktion Books, 2012; Maurizio Marinelli, Civilising the citizens: Political slogans and the right to the city, *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 9(3), 2012, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/2540>, accessed 25 March 2014.
20. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, 25.

21. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 214–18, in the chapter ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’.
22. What Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible is summarized by Gabriel Rockhill as ‘the system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetic-political regime’; see Gabriel Rockhill (trans.), Jacques Rancière’s politics of perceptions, in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, London: Continuum, 2009, 1.
23. Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, The politics of lodging complaints in rural China, *The China Quarterly* 143, 1995: 756–83; Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, Suing the local state: Administrative litigation in rural China, *The China Journal*, no. 51, 2004: 75–96; and Pamela N. Phan, Enriching the land or the political elite?: Lessons from China on democratization of the urban renewal process, *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 14(3), 2005: 607–57.
24. The work symbolized the epitome of the class struggle. During the Cultural Revolution, many fibreglass replicas were produced, revised (with the insertion of five more figures, and placards from Mao Zedong’s writings in the final section of the six-part display called *Revolt*) and toured in China and other communist countries. *Rent Collection Courtyard – Sculptures of Oppression and Revolt*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1968; Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People’s Republic of China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 62. Cf. Cai Guoqiang’s 1999 reinterpretation in Erik Eckholm, Cultural Revolution, chapter 2; Expatriate artist updates Maoist icon and angers old guard, *The New York Times*, 17 August 2000, 5.
25. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, London: Verso, 2012, 65.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Cf. Elizabeth Parke, Migrant workers and the imaging of human infrastructure in Chinese contemporary art, *China Information* 29(2), 2015: xx–xx.
28. Interview with Zhang Dali. Interviews with Zhang took place in the period 5–30 January 2014.
29. Ai Weiwei, Ai Weiwei on Beijing’s nightmare city, *Newsweek*, 28 August 2011, <http://www.newsweek.com/ai-weiwei-beijings-nightmare-city-67179>, accessed 8 July 2014.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, 46.
32. Interview with Zhang Dali.
33. IFA Gallery, Zhang Dali’s interview about censorship, 23 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP7bqXBMApE>, accessed 14 July 2014.
34. IFA Gallery, Dai Guangyu’s interview about censorship, 24 April 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojN\\_5xCMppI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojN_5xCMppI), accessed 14 July 2014.
35. Interview with Zhang Dali.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*.
39. Interview with Zhang Dali.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. Butler, *Frames of War*.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Michael Hardt, Revolution, in Astra Taylor (ed.) *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*, New York: The New Press, 2009, 133–54.

48. Ibid.
49. Maurizio Marinelli, Walls of dialogue in the Chinese space, *China Information* 18(3), 2004: 436.
50. Marinelli, Civilising the citizens.
51. Interview with Dai Guangyu. Interviews with Dai took place in the period 10–30 March 2014.
52. Ibid. Domicide is the ‘deliberate murder of home with physical and psychological implications’; cf. J. Douglas Porteous and Sandra E. Smith, *Domicide: The Global Destruction of Home*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001, 10–23.
53. Interview with Dai Guangyu.
54. Interview with Zhang Dali.
55. Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*.
56. Interview with Zhang Dali.
57. Ibid.
58. Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, 158.
59. Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 23.
60. Ibid., 7.
61. He was also harshly criticized by the famous scholar Yuan Yisan, an expert in the preservation of old cities. For more on Geng Yanbo, see Geng Yanbo: Guiliu shizhang beihoude minyi anliu (Geng Yanbo: The public opinion undercurrent stays behind the mayor), 2013, <http://news.sohu.com/s2013/newsmaker157/>, accessed 10 August 2014; Yuanshizhang Geng Yanbo wei Datong zaocheng bianjie: Dou shi liugei weilaide caifu (Former mayor Geng Yanbo justifies city-building in Datong: All this is wealth set aside for the future), 23 September 2013, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/20130923/124916823363.shtml>, accessed 10 August 2014.
62. Interview with Zhang Dali.
63. Ibid.
64. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960, 3.
65. Cf. Meiqin Wang, Advertising the Chinese dream: Urban billboards and Ni Weihua’s documentary photography, *China Information* 29(2), 2015: xx–xx.
66. Jacques Rancière, Ten theses on politics, trans. Davide Panagia and Rachel Bowlby, *Theory and Event* 5(3), 2001: 4, Thesis 8.
67. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.
68. Cf. Minna Valjakka, Negotiating spatial politics: Site-responsive urban art images in mainland China, *China Information* 29(2), 2015: xx–xx.
69. Interview with Zhang Dali.
70. Ibid.
71. Ji Jianye, Yangzhou banian (Yangzhou in eight years), *Yangzhou ribao* (Yangzhou daily), 22 August 2009, A02.
72. Interview with Zhang Dali.
73. Interview with Dai Guangyu. In his ‘interactive painting’ *A Scenery I Once Knew So Well* (*Fengjing jiu ceng an*), Dai Guangyu used a famous verse by Bai Juyi and asked the audience to repaint a ‘familiar scenery’. Then he reconstructed *Ink Games* (*Moxi*) in random fashion to demonstrate the impossibility of preserving the original.
74. Interview with Dai Guangyu.
75. Ibid.
76. Interview with Jin Feng. Interviews with Jin took place in the period 2–20 February 2014.
77. Ibid.
78. Jun Wang, *Beijing Record: A Physical and Political History of Planning Modern Beijing*, Singapore: World Scientific, 2011, 91–172.

79. Interview with Zhang Dali.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. The tradition of 'pure conversations' harks back to the period of the Three Kingdoms (AD 220–65), and it continued through the Southern and Northern dynasties, especially among the educated elite.
84. This refers to the famous group of Chinese scholars and poets who found an alternative to the corrupt political world of government officialdom, retiring to the countryside to write poetry and drink.
85. Thompson, *History from below*.
86. Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 25; cf. Chris Berry, Images of urban China in Cao Fei's 'magical metropolises', *China Information* 29(2), 2015: xx–xx.

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