

## Isn't Art A Broken Net?—Drafty All Around And Can Never Be Mended

INTERVIEW: Na Yingyu/Li Mu



Na Yingyu at the entrance to the village

On Feb 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Na Yingyu left Beijing for Qiuzhuang with the intention to shoot Li Mu's coming "Qiuzhuang Project". That night, he and Li Mu chatted over a bottle. Their topic ranged from their understanding of art to the coming "Qiuzhuang Project".

Li Mu(LM): I used to ask myself why I insisted on making art. I thought maybe it was because I had the fear that I couldn't feel my existence. That fear haunts me all the time.

Na Yingyu(NYY): I kind of agree. I don't want to have too much free time either. But I won't have that fear. I would say "I want to kill the free time". However, I can't stand being at a loose end for too long.

LM: What will happen to you if you are not occupied for too long.

NYY: There are two life forces in my body fighting with each other. It's a nightmare.

LM: What are the two forces that are fighting against each other?

NYY: One is the secular me. I probably want all that the secular people want to have; the other me wants to surpass the secular world. But it's not the spiritual me. Do I have a spiritual me?—No! Greed, hatred, ignorance, as the Buddhism called them, will all be found in me. I thought they were evil spirits and wanted to suppress them.

LM: Will they come out of you if you don't make any work for a period of time?

NYY: I don't work particularly hard. I'm not that type of artists who think about making art everyday throughout the whole year. Every year there are about eight months I creates nothing, about two months I spend on my work, and another two months for making money. During the eight months, I have the struggling in my mind for the most of the time.

LM: If you find me keep creating art all the time and do a lot, will you feel the pressure?

NYY: The pressure doesn't come from others, but me. On one hand, I appreciate laziness; on the other hand, I feel deeply anxious. But without the leisurely eight months, I probably can't make any work either. My inspirations all came to me when I was idling around—I really have nothing to do. When I'm in Beijing I can sometimes just watch TV series for half a month.

LM: Zhangfang asked me today why I brought the books to the village. I said I only had books, nothing else. But I feel the need to remind myself that the books are just a tool, no different from the hoe, the candies given to the villagers. I can make good use of the books only when I treat them the same. If I treat the books as something sacred or spiritual, I probably can't make good use of them. One day an idea came to my mind: if the villagers showed no interest in the books and resisted them, I would present them to the villagers in the end. Will they want the books? My father immediately said that they would grab the books for sure. Then I said to him "Maybe I will give them all out".

NYY: So, how will you turn it into a sustainable project? Otherwise, no one will visit it a month later when they get used to it. This library is a carrier. Actually, it's more like a public communication space. Before, the supply and marketing cooperative in the village played the role of public communication space. The villagers gathered there, talking and warming themselves by the fire. Someone even brought wine with them and had a little drink.

LM: Yes, it can be a public communication space, also a library, an art museum, a screening room, a restaurant, a theatre and so on. A LIBRARY is just a name. Never let the two words confine my mind. Well, LaoNa, are you clear of your purpose of coming here?

NYY: I came here to visit people. It's you, Li Mu. Haha! I want to see you. I even want to see you fail to accomplish this project. Though technically it's possible to do this project, I don't think you can finish it. So I came here and shot whatever I saw.

LM: Do you want to make a documentary about it?

NYY: Not a documentary on the traditional definition.

LM: It's seen from your perspective.

NYY: It's not a traditionally narrative thing. Not a story, it's something visual.

LM: For me, your coming gave us the chance to be together for a period of time. I don't have any particular purpose either.

NYY: Maybe there will come the surprise.

LM: At the beginning I was very clear of this project, but now I feel a little confused.

NYY: Did my coming disturb your work?

LM: It's not your problem. It's mine. Something I expected to happen didn't turn out as I wished after back to the village.

NYY: Excuse me for my interruption. I encourage you to be an artist who can't justify his works. If you have everything perfectly done, then something must be wrong. It's too perfect! Is it still art? Isn't art a broken net, drafty all around. We try to mend it, but can never finish the mending. That's the great thing about art.

LM: In fact, we can find out many things that are originally embedded in us through this method.

NYY: Yes, I want to see more of me, that stubborn me.

LM: Yes, we can see ourselves: for example, to see how we are restricted or kidnapped by another kind of value and dream. Generally speaking, the idea of using the knowledge to change the village by returning to the village and building a library is something already kidnapped by some kind of value and cultural dream.

NYY: I think it's the ambition, not the dream.

LM: If you have to say it's the ambition, then this ambition is waning gradually. I got this feeling because I saw one man seemed to be coated with gray color pass by the library. The way he walked and the temperament he exuded are partly due to the environment. I want to make the whole project imbued with mud, just like him. That's what I want.

NYY: When I'm doing a project in a village, I flow with the local people and things. Though I set a work frame at the beginning, it will be broken now and then by the locals. In the end, the frame does not exist and I have to follow what happen to them. But they won't walk till the end of the project. They withdraw halfway. As they stop participating in my project, it means my project comes to its end.

LM: Will they withdraw halfway?

NYY: That's for sure. Anyway there's the interaction between you and them. It's not because he refuses to interact with you. He has no interest in your work. "Good, good, ok, ok, ok, well, bye, bye, I have things to do"—"Well, I will leave you with your things." Then my project is over.

LM: Oh, that's how your project comes to its end?

NYY: Yes, I form this working way last time when I was shooting *"All Gone, My Masters"*.

LM: Maybe what interests us is it's changing, which is completely not in your previous plan. The more perfect the plan is, the less practical it is.

NYY: This time I came to visit you. I am just an observant, no more role I play. I just watch you, carrying no views and no frames.

LM: I set up a direction in advance. I assume myself an intervener. I want to break the balance in the village. Eventually anything that's off balance will return to its balance, no matter how big it is. For example, a girl from other place is married to a man in the village. Ten years later, no matter how beautiful she is, she will be treated as a member of this village. Eventually she will become an old woman and set her roots in this village firmly. That strangeness she felt when she first arrived was all gone.

When an art project kicks off, no matter how much sensation it arouses, it's like a stone thrown into water, making a sound and producing some ripples. But soon the water will return to its peacefulness again. This law, you can never change it.



Qiuzhuang Project—the outlook of A LIBRARY

LM: Sometimes what are familiar to you turn to be very strange when you have a close observation of them.

NYY: Yes. The most familiar things are sometimes the strangest things. If we are not busy in the following days we shall go to town. I want to visit the museum. I always like to try something which is unrelated to the work.

LM: Let me see whether I can find you a *County Annals*, but where to find it?

NYY: Usually there are those very special old book stores in the counties. You have to ask about it. There are often some interesting books to find there.

LM: Those who collect antiques and old things must know it. But this place is weird. Maybe not just my county but almost all the counties in China have the same problem: it's barely possible to find old things.

NYY: Whenever I come to work in a place, I like reading two kinds of books. One is the *County Annals*; the other is—take Feng County for example, I want to read the *Historical Accounts of Feng County*. All the counties in China have its local edition, because it's a mandatory policy. I have so much fun reading it. Usually a county has 50 to 60 issues, the least number will be 10 to 20. In the 90's, every year the county published several issues. After the 90's, fewer issues were published. It's just so fun reading them.

LM: Is it a formal publication?

NYY: The government published it. There is this organizational system in the counties — the Office of Literature and History, which is in charge of the publication. It probably has nothing to do with the project. I will take my time and see. But I don't think it will take me a long time to get used to

your work. It's not like in Lijiang where it took me one month to get into gear. I have the feeling that I will soon get into the work here.

LM: Because you know what I'm doing already.

NYY: Yes, but also because I know you.

LM: If you don't know me, there will less chance of you coming here.

NYY: In that case I really need one month to get into gear.

LM: You didn't start any new work. Do you feel anxious?

NYY: No.

LM: I do. Since coming back from NY, I feel my art is not as good as before.

NYY: Why do you have such feeling?

LM: It feels like I'm not good at it anymore. To tell you the truth, my minds are much simpler than before.

NYY: Why did you feel you were not good at creating art?

LM: I don't know how to create art. On one hand, I don't want to repeat the previous works; on the other hand, I have no new ideas and don't know where to start.

NYY: You don't have any new idea for the last half year since coming back from NY?

LM: No. Many people asked me, "Do you have any new idea?" I said "no". It's the "No idea" state that made me feel I was no longer good at it. Though "Qiuzhuang Project" is undergoing now, the idea actually dates back to two years ago. That's why I feel a little anxious in my heart. I have much reflection upon life, but it still remains a kind of feeling and never inspires me to create an art work. When I put my heart into this project, I was so busy that I didn't feel the anxiety. However, I'm very alert, for the state of being busy can cover something up.

NYY: I can feel that.

LM: Sometimes I feel pleased, while sometimes I feel anxious. Being pleased is because I feel that I'm turning a new leaf. But if there's no new work coming out, I will feel very anxious.

NYY: So the Qiuzhuang Project is like a full period. You've drawn a full stop of your previous works.

LM: You mentioned period. Does it mean I turn a new leaf?

NYY: Congratulations, you are making a change. You are now in the middle of your life, and you need to change at this age. You'd better overthrow all the past.

LM: Besides, when I am talking with people, I am not as confident with what I talk about as before. On one hand, I find nothing to talk; on the other hand, I have nothing to talk. I am kind of empty.

NYY: Good for you. You've used it up.

LM: Exactly, that's the feeling. I feel like a funnel and all the things ran away through it.

NYY: It's all gone? Everyone will experience that period, whether he is doing art or not. Those who live a normal life will also have that period. No one can help you go through that trial.

LM: Normally speaking, I should feel just like a fish to water after visiting so many art museums, meeting so many artists and watching so many art works in NY. Like a sponge soaked with water, it's time to squeeze the water. I thought I was more fulfilled. But when I wanted to go a step further in my creation, I found it was totally a different thing. I feel like I am hollowed out after coming back from NY. I feel nothing.

NYY: Remember we went to the Bacon town (in the northern part of NY) to see Dia Bacon. We were so excited but also so disappointed. Before, we could only see it the book. We never thought we would see the original work. But after we saw it with our own eyes, we didn't feel right. Maybe we shouldn't come. That was my feeling at that time.

LM: It reminds me of Sun Wukong. You think you are almighty. Your somersault can take you to a height of one hundred and eight thousand. Despite so fast and fierce the somersault is, you find you are still in the Buddha's palm when you land.

NYY: Yes.

LM: So when you find you are still in that palm, you suddenly feel very hopeless.

NYY: And a little perturbed.

LM: Speaking of art, it will sometimes kill your passion for creation. You lose all your motivation, cause you know you won't be able to fly out of the palm. However, we see so many western artist, whether be young or old, still enjoy creating art, though none of them ever transcend the art history.

NYY: Do you remember that Mexican artist(Hilario Ortega)? He was ceaselessly shoveling sands and filling the grinding wheel. It left me with a deep impression. In fact, it's a piece of work within the palm. I was very excited about it at that time and went over to watch it again and again. I like that kind of artist who knows clearly that he is in the palm but never let this fact bother him.



## Qiuzhuang Project—interior of A LIBRARY

LM: Usually the definition of a journey is go to somewhere one never went before. Do you think my returning to home is a journey?

NYY: I actually agreed that it's a journey.

LM: You mentioned the word journey. This made me feel I was creating art through a journey despite the fact that my destination was home.

NYY: You've already cut yourself off from this place. You've been away for about 20 years.

LM: 23 years. I left here at the age of 17.

NYY: Right, You left here long time ago. Nostalgia won't be the theme. You've cut the contact with the people here except your parents. This time you came back. You waved to the villagers on the road but had no idea what kind of life they led. Though you don't know what happened to them in the past years, you still want to intervene as much as possible—you can only do this as a traveler, not someone who goes home. Only when you come back at the retired age of 60, it can be called returning home.

LM: It's not about nostalgia. It has nothing to do with nostalgia, neither does it have something to do with humanity or public welfare.

NYY: It isn't a communication, either.

LM: What do you think it is?

NYY: I don't know how to define it. I will know several months later. But now I think it's a personal ambitious journey—How far you can walk? If you does walk that far can you still find the way to go back?

LM: In face, I don't want to learn about others but myself.

NYY: It's a very personal project. Since this place are most familiar to you , you chose this place to carry out your project. But this familiar place also brings conflicts and balance. It must feel different to do this project here than other place.

LM: That's why I think it's totally different from other undergoing projects in the name of bringing art to villages and building up the village cultural. They are totally different though they look similar on the surface.

NYY: Yesterday I saw the chilblains on your hand. If I'm right it's my first shot. I don't think the chilblains were caused by your hard working . I always feel there is a kind of mysticism about it—Why only you got the chilblains? Well, I first felt the mysticism from the chilblain. I like this kind of mysticism. Take us for example, we weren't friends in our teenage. When we knew each other, we were already young adults.

LM: Yes, young adults. Around the age of 30.

NYY: If not meet each other at the middle age, we must miss each other.

LM: Many things are completely out of my plan and control. But the difficult thing of doing the project is that it still depends much on the sponsorship. Mentally, I still depend on their money, for it's very difficult to implement my plan without that money.

NYY: It's not enough, isn't it?

LM: The most important thing is that with that money I can start my project. It means my ship has departed from shore

NYY: Yes, you've kicked it off. Normally speaking, 5000 euros for a piece of work is enough. But it's not enough to do your project.

LM: Yes. But if I didn't start it, I'm not sure when I am gonna start it.

NYY: I will interview you, exclusively talking about the finance issues. How much you spent on chairs, for example. Let me take my time to interview you. I'm not in a haste to turn on the camera.

LM: You can make a video of me doing the project. And Zhongming can use my camera to record the process and make a documentary too. He will shoot the story in his way. When the videos are finished we can compare them. It must be very interesting.

NYY: It sounds fun. If more people shoot it from their angles, it will be more interesting.

LM: Agreed. That Australian girl and her friend told me they really wanted to make this documentary. But they didn't have the time to come here, neither did they get any sponsorship to do it. I am thinking of giving the materials to them and let them edit it and make a documentary about it. I think the materials should be shared. I can use your materials, and you can use mine. Meanwhile, our materials can be used by the Australian girls in their way.

NYY: I support resources sharing.

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Na Yingyu was born in Yichun City, Heilongjiang province in 1973. He moved to Shijiazhuang, Hebei province in 1985 and started his creations in 1999.