

Something unexpected emerges when things are out of control
Interview4: Na Yingyu / Li Mu



In the middle of November, 2013, after attending the Seminar —“Projects on Social Art Practice by Asian Artists” at RAM (Rockbund Art Museum), Shanghai, Na Yingyu, Li Lisha and Li Mu came back to Qiuzhuang. They reviewed the progress of the Qiuzhuang Project in the past several months and had a discussion about it.

Na Yingyu(NNY): I still want to know what happened to you in the last couple of months. Let's review.

Li Mu(LM): After you left, Zhong Ming and I continued putting up Andy Warhol's portraits of Chairman Mao in the villagers' houses. We managed to bring them into dozens of other houses.

NNY: Did you put them up all by yourselves?

LM: We put them up in about fifty to sixty houses by ourselves.

NNY: How many families came to the library and asked for the portraits?

LM: About thirty to forty. So there are over one hundred sets of Mao portraits given out.

NNY: Were there interesting reactions from the people when you were distributing the portraits?

LM: Some people didn't want them.

NNY: Those who believe in Christianity wouldn't want them, would they? I found that the percentage of Christians in your village is actually high.

LM: Yes, most Christians didn't want them. And some people, though not Christians, clearly responded that they didn't want to put them up in their houses.

NNY: Did you ask them about the reasons why they didn't want to?

LM: It's difficult to ask. Though they didn't refuse me directly, they showed their reluctance on their face when I brought the portraits to them.

NNY: What was the reaction of those who let you put the portraits up?

LM: Many of them were happy with it. Some did it to support my work. I am not sure whether they like it or not? When I went to Lu Daode's house, I was very cautious and carefully asked him whether he wanted them or not. He said: "Yes, of course." Then I asked him: "Will you put them up?" Because I know that he has an opinion about Mao. He told me that he would replace the original portrait of Mao with the new ones.

NNY: Did he take off the original one?

LM: The next time we went to his home, we found that he still kept the original portrait of Mao. He put Warhol's portraits of Mao in his studio. He told me that he didn't understand Warhol's works that well, but he wasn't against them and could accept them.

In fact, I felt a little disappointed and frustrated when turned down by others. But on second thought, the rejection itself has its own meaning, probably the richest part of the project. If all of them accepted the works happily, wouldn't it be too unreal? To me, the rejection itself is real. I want to be true to the facts.

NNY: Is there someone who didn't put up Mao's portraits because of his dislike of Mao?

LM: Yes, for example, the mother-in-law of my second older sister didn't like them. Because her family were landlords and, therefore, were prosecuted by the Communist Party. They have a hatred of Mao. Other people asked me to sign my name on the portraits of Mao. They prefer to treat it as an art piece by me.

NNY: Where did you sign your name?

LM: On the lower right corner. Many villagers asked me to sign my name, such as Shun'er, Lianying, Qianjin and so on. They insisted!

NNY: So they know that with the signature a piece of work becomes an art work.

LM: Right, so they insisted that I sign the portraits. Later I met a very interesting person. His name is Sun Guangfa. He exclusively collects portraits of Mao.

NNY: Is he from your village?

LM: He is from the nearby village. Since the Cultural Revolution, he's been wearing a military uniform and a Mao button. I met him on the street. He was my father's schoolmate in elementary school. I asked him why he wore that Mao button even now. He said that he admired Mao. Then I told him that I could give him some portraits of Mao. I gave him two sets of portraits: one is for his collection; the other will be put up in his home. I visited him later and saw several pots of Mao buttons and lots of posters of Mao, which he put in picture frames.



Three prints of Andy Warhol's portraits of Mao hanging in the villager's home. Photographer: Na Yingyu

NY: Do you have any questions to add, Lisha?

Li Lisha(LLS): Did people have any doubt or any discussion when you put up the portraits of Mao?

LM: The discussion never stops. They also questioned the color. Why this portrait is in red and the other in blue? They can't accept Mao's blue face and white mouth.

LLS: What about the rooms where you installed the portraits? Did they have any opinion about them?

LM: No. I just told them that I wanted to hang three portraits of Mao. They said fine.

NNY: Before we put up the portraits of Mao, there was lots of rubble in front of the wall. The house owner then spent one morning cleaning the space. In front of the house, there was also a pile of dirt. After we put up the portraits, he shoveled that pile of dirt flat and then planted some pumpkins on it.

LLS: How do you explain your works when questioned by others?

LM: I will tell them that this is a recreation of Mao portraits by an American artist. One set is composed of three portraits in three different colors. That American artist, unlike us, doesn't have the same feelings for Mao as we do. It's neither criticism nor compliment. He put another layer of color on it and turned it into a new art work.

LLS: Do you mean that his way of recreation is still loyal to the original work?

LM: Yes.

LLS: Did they accept your interpretation?

LM: They understood a little, but at least I gave them an answer.

LLS: Did they let it go then?

LM: There are still some people questioning me. Later Na Yingyu told them that the red portrait is to protect you from illness, the yellow one is to bring you fortune, while the blue one is to keep the ghosts

and evil spirits away.

NYY: There is another interpretation which I think is better. That is the three periods of Mao's life.

LM: As you said, the first period is the revolution Mao led: it's red; the second period is the new regime that Mao founded, spanning the 50's to 60's: it's yellow; the third period is the Cultural Revolution, the dark period, so it's blue.

NYY: Did you choose certain families to put up the portraits? Or did you ask every family?

LM: Some doors were closed. So I didn't go and give them the portraits myself. In July, my focus was not on the portraits of Mao. Anyone who is interested in them could come to my house and get one set. I didn't visit the houses one by one to give out the portraits.



Li Mu's father opening the curtain of the Light Installation by Dan Flavin. Photographer: Li Mu.

NYY: What did you change your focus to in July?

LM: I attended a conference in Macao, introducing my project. When I returned to the village, I found that the light installation by Dan Flavin had been completed. It was placed temporarily in the library.

NYY: If my memory serves me well, you didn't intend to put this installation on the wall of your house, did you?

LM: At the beginning, I planned to hang this installation on the wall of the grocery. But he didn't like the monochrome after seeing my sketch. He told me that it would be better if it was colorful. So I decided to put the "HI HA" installation on the wall of his house.

NYY: After you put it on the wall of your own house, you also added a curtain to it. Did your father come up with this idea?

LM: Because it's installed outside, we needed to make something that would protect it from the rain. I gave this task to my father and Zhong Ming. Zhong Ming was in charge of buying the materials. My mom made the curtain and my father installed it in the end.

NYY: It's a red curtain. Who chose this color?

LM: Zhong Ming did. I was surprised when I saw the color the first time.

NY: You don't like the red?

LM: No. In my vision, in order to emphasize the lights, the color of the curtain shouldn't be too rich.

NY: What color would you choose?

LM: Grey, I would choose the color which has a lower value. Zhong Ming chose the red. I didn't think it was a good idea, because it's a color symbolizing passion for revolution. I was a little afraid of using it. But since Zhong Ming already chose it, we decided to try it. After hanging the curtain, my father pulled it to the side, like opening a stage curtain. The lights then came into our view. Visually it was very strong. Though the original art work doesn't have a red curtain, the red gives this art piece a special feeling. And it's an auspicious color.

NY: Do you always go for an aesthetic perfection in the process of creation? For example, the first time we printed the portraits of Mao, you thought the definition wasn't high enough and wanted to redo it.

LM: Yes. My pursuit of perfection is very natural. This kind of experience will always be in my consciousness. I feel it's better this way.

LL: Do you think this is a kind of morbid preoccupation with cleanliness? Isn't he faithful to the original work?

NY: As close as he can be.

LM: Right. The original work of Dan Flavin's light installation doesn't include a rain curtain. We wouldn't add a curtain if we didn't need to. So I don't want the curtain to stand out too much.

NY: The color temperatures of the lights are also different.

LM: The color of the first lights we ordered was warm white, but half of them were broken during shipping. The factory later sent another batch of lights, but the color was cold white. What can we do? We have to put up with it.

NY: Besides being more tolerant, I also found you trying to accept things.

LM: At the beginning I always wanted to be in control. But gradually I found that I couldn't control everything. Something unexpected emerges when things are out of control, but they are very interesting things.

NY: You learned to be tolerant, and then to accept things, and now you find it interesting. How did this change come about?

LM: I let other people make the pyramid light installation, because I couldn't make it. We couldn't find the same materials used in the original work. I asked Fan Jingsi for help. He said he could make it. So I let him be in charge of making it. He is a carpenter. He has his own knowledge, which I don't have. He did a good job. Though it turned out to be something that I didn't expect, it was interesting. So gradually I was willing to let other people be in charge of making things. They brought their experience to the work.

NY: I remember in our early discussion that you kept emphasizing the two words "original and copy" that John Kormeling gave you when you visited the Van Abbemuseum. But looking at all the copies in Qiuzhuang, none of them is exactly the same as the original. I think you reduplicated them. This reduplication is a recreation on the basis of the original works. What are the relations among the original work, the copy and the reduplication?

LM: I think it's more interesting. Though I wish to make an exact copy of the original one, in the

process of making them, it's out of my control because of the change of materials and the effect of other people involved in the creation or the works.

NYY: So it's a process of gradually accepting. After all, your original intention is to be one hundred percent loyal to the original works.

LM: This is my basic principle and also a standard. I tried my best to be close to my standard, and I didn't want change it. But I was forced to make all the changes. It happened very naturally.

NYY: You asked Fan Jingsi and also your former classmates to make the installation. What's the relationship between you and them, employment relationship or cooperative relationship?

LM: I think it's a cooperative relationship. Without their participation, my work might be more monotonous and the disconnect between the art works and the village might be stronger. I don't want that disconnect. That's not what I am going for. I want the art pieces to get along and interact with the village in a harmonious way.

LLS: I like the fact that you made efforts to be loyal to the original works. Your "efforts" remind me of the copycat spirit, namely, to get as close as possible to the original version while in the process come up with many creative ideas. I think the "HI HA" is purely a copycat but also very natural. There is a kind of transformation in the reduplication which is due to local people's participation. It leads us to think which is more meaningful, the reduplicated works or the reduplicating process? At the beginning, you pursued a particular goal, but on the way many things changed you.

NYY: My original plan was to get as close as possible to the original, but the closer you get to it the more little divergent paths came your way. These little divergent paths stretch far away in the opposite direction to your original goal. They meet at certain points and then diverge and go back in their own direction with no more further connections.

LM: Actually I tried very hard to be loyal to the original works. But the deviations brought out in the creating process turned out to be very interesting, which wasn't planned in advance. They came out naturally because of the limitations and an inability to change things.

NYY: Do you think these things come from the village?

LM: The participants from the village brought me these unexpected things. Take the "HI HA" for example. It's Yang Gaoju who helped me make this piece. The first piece I wanted to make is the "HI HA". After the library was open, I gave this task to him.



Yang Gaoju, Li Mu's former schoolmate, is installing the HI HA installation. Photographer: Li Mu.

NYY: When was the "HI HA" completed?

LM: It was finished in July. It took him half a year. In that half year, I called him now and then, asking about the progress. But he delayed it for some personal reasons. Since the whole process lasted quite long, he put lots of effort into making it. He did try his best. I feel that he led me by the nose instead of me controlling him. I respect him.

LLS: What's the most valuable thing you've gained from this project?

LM: I never thought about this question. I think I have become more tolerant, maybe this is the biggest gain! At the beginning, I wasn't willing to give tasks to other people, and wanted to control everything. But gradually I found it made me very tired. Since my ability is limited. If I give the tasks to different people, their participation will enrich the project, more than I myself can create. I know this truth already, but only when I am practicing it myself, I totally accepted it and it became part of my personality.

NYY: Besides copying the art works, have you ever thought of building up a connection between you and the village by taking advantage of your identity as an artist?

LM: Now they will ask me to take pictures of them. In the wedding or funeral ceremony, people come to me and ask me if I can film it. There are also people asking me to help print materials. If the kids want to learn drawing, their parents will ask me to tutor them. There are even people asking me to help their kids with their English.

LLS: In fact, you are part of the village already, though you think that there are barriers between you and the village people. On the other hand, the distance between you and them may make it easier for you to cooperate with them. You came to this village as an artist. This kind of distance is very helpful.

NYY: I also want to ask about the relationship between you and your parents. When I first visited you, I found that you and your father were in a tense relationship. When I left, I found he changed a little bit. What are his opinions about your work here now?

LM: He saw enough. Now he seems to have no feelings about this project.

NYY: Just because he saw enough?

LM: Yes. Recently many people came to interview us. When they asked him how he thought of the project, he poured out all his thoughts and theories. But after many interviews, he seemed to have no desire to express himself.

NYY: Have you, father and son, discussed this project?

LM: Of course. When you were here, our relationship just got repaired. After you left, we were getting on especially well with each other. I could feel that we appreciated each other. There was no distance between us. That feeling is really good. I didn't have arguments with him anymore.

NYY: No more arguments anymore?

LM: No. Sometimes he wasn't in a good mood or he wasn't happy with something. I would comfort him and he got better.

NYY: He always got angry with you before.

LM: Not anymore. I respect him very much. For example, the light installation by Dan Flavin consumes lots of electricity. Sometimes he turns it off early or forgets to turn it on purposely. I don't mind. If I notice that he forgets to turn it on, I will turn it on.

NYY: Isn't he the one who turns off the lights every day?

LM: Yes. He forgets to turn it on, but he always remembers to turn it off. So I lied to him and told him

that the actual electricity consumption was very minimal, 50 cents per hour.

NY: I calculated the cost of electricity that day. It costs 80 cents per hour.

LL: Did you pay the electricity?

LM: No, he did.



Sari Braithwaite and Munro Melano are interviewing the kids in the library. Photographer: Li Mu.

NY: Recently many people came to visit you and interview you. It's helpful to promote your project. But do you think that it interrupted the process of doing this project?

LM: My work was interrupted. But I tried to see their visits as part of the project. Because they are from different countries, regions, cultures. When they came here, they had many interactions with the village people. Take the grocery owner Wang Gaoqi as an example. He isn't in a good form physically and mentally sometimes. But during the twenty days when the Australian documentary directors Sari Braithwaite and Munro Melano stayed with us, Wang Gaoqi was in good spirits. Every night he took out the English textbook he used in school and reviewed the words and sentences. The next day he communicated enthusiastically with them. Many villagers were surprised to see him communicating with two foreigners. He felt he was respected and became very happy in those days. I never saw him so happy.

LL: I found that you placed most of your works on the walls or in the houses of the people you are familiar with. Did you do that to avoid trouble?

LM: Yes, if I cooperated with strangers, I would have to spend more time communicating. I wanted to conduct my plan more smoothly. I didn't want too much trouble.

LL: You hoped to do it more smoothly, like the "rain moistening things silently." What kind of people do you think most enjoyed their participation in this project?

LM: People who have a passion for life, such as Fan Jingsi. He is a very mild person. He is interested in many things and open to them. So he showed lots of interest in my project and became a very active participant.

LLS: The owners of houses where the works are placed talked with you about the works?

LM: They seldom talked with me about my works. They just showed that they like them. They are too busy. Most people are busy and have no time to talk about the works with me. Those who talk with me are the idlers in the village.

LLS: They are all busy with something which is useful to them. They probably think the works are not useful to them and would only talk about the works when they are totally free. Do they really not care about the works? They don't care whether the works are there or not?

LM: I didn't ask them about their feelings towards the works. Maybe when the time of the road repair and demolition comes, we will see whether they have feelings towards the works. At that time, it will be self-evident.

NYY: How long do you think the project will last?

LM: I want to complete all the copying work before Spring Festival. It should end after the Spring Festival.

NYY: As it happens, one year. What's your plan after Spring Festival?

LM: I don't know. I can't be too greedy. I can't do too many things. If I was still inspired, I would stay in the village for some more time, see whether I could do more things. Meanwhile, it's time to review all the videos and documents, which will take a lot of time.

NYY: Will you come back to the city and do that work?

LM: I prefer to do the reviewing work in the city. Thus I can keep some distance from the village and be more calm and clear.

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