

My Dream Was to Live A Life outside the Rural Village

A Conversation between Li Mu and His Older Sister



Li Mu's older sister and her husband got a reproduction of Sol LeWitt's work for free.

Li Mu: Sister, do you still remember what the village looked like when we were kids?

Older sister: Back then there was little garbage in the village. There were no garbage bags in the river at all. Thick willow trees were planted in front of the village. There were fields everywhere. At the west end of the village there was a tarred road. The house we lived in was extremely shabby. There were stalks of millet piled up in front of every house. We would nudge ourselves into the piles when we played seek-and-hide. At that time each family had several kids and we would play together. There were seldom any cars. It was very quiet.

LM: Now that you look back, do you feel happy or unhappy?

Sister: There was nothing to be happy or unhappy about. It's all gone. There is nothing happy in particular, and nothing unhappy in particular.

LM: You always had high scores at school when you were young.

Sister: I was hardly ever the second student, I was always no.1 in class.

LM: What was your dream when you were a kid?

Sister: My dream was to live a life outside the rural village. I had such a dream since I was a kid. I didn't want to live in a rural village. I wanted to go out and to live a life like an urban dweller. I thought I was capable of anything. I didn't like to be a doctor or a teacher.

LM: You didn't think it good to live a life like a farmer in the rural village?

Sister: As long as I can remember I knew cities were better. If you had relatives living in city, you'd always wear what they had worn. Urban dwellers wouldn't donate good clothes to their rural relatives. They always gave you what they had previously worn. At that time, I would rather wear my own shabby clothes than wear the used clothes patronized by city dwellers.

LM: What was your impression of our dad?

Sister: He was a severe father. Once I got up late and dared not to go to school. He slapped me with his shoes. I told him I just didn't want to go. I was always quite rebellious. The more you pushed me, the more I'd resist. Father was a severe man and had quite a temper.

LM: You were enrolled in the Feng County Middle School, weren't you? That's the top middle school in our county. Did your dislike of the family become your motivation?

Sister: No. The examination was just too easy for me.

LM: Did you feel father favored you as you were enrolled in the Feng County Middle School?

Sister: No. And he never said a thing.

LM: You dropped out of school after middle school. And after rounds of examinations I finally managed to study at the Fine Arts and Crafts College in Suzhou. Do you still remember what you thought at that time?

Sister: I thought finally you could leave, leave the family. I felt relieved. My brother entered college, finally.

LM: You felt happy?

Sister: Yes, happy. I wanted to tell everyone I met that my brother was enrolled in college.

LM: Did you feel a bit of pity that you dropped out?

Sister: Back then I was just happy for you and didn't think of myself.

LM: After four-years of study at the college I entered Central Institute of Arts and Crafts. You know that father didn't want me to continue my study and said if I did he'd hang himself. When you got the news that I made it, what did you think?

Sister: I was proud of you. You shouldn't listen to father at all. He could do whatever he liked, even if he liked to hang himself. You still needed to continue your study.

LM: You were thrilled?

Sister: Yes. Back then few people could enter college. There were probably only one or two college students in a village. I was proud that you could make it.

LM: I resigned from a teaching position at college at the end of 2006 and started to live as a professional artist in Shanghai. I told you the news earlier than other family members, because I thought you could understand my choice. Honestly speaking, did you truly understand my decision to quit my job and become an artist?

Sister: Not really, I'm afraid. But I believed you knew much more than me and your choice would be the right one.

LM: Didn't you feel life could be hard for me if I lost my job?

Sister: I didn't think of the difficulties with making art. But I worried how you could support yourself without your job. I worried.

LM: Are you still worried?

Sister: Yes, as long as I think of it.

LM: Don't I call you constantly? I always tell you my art is getting better and better.

Sister: I believe so. It's just that I don't understand how good your art is.

LM: Do you feel any changes in me since I become an artist?

Sister: Yes, significantly. You're a different person now compared to when you were a teacher. Years ago I read *A Biographical Novel of Michelangelo*. Back then I didn't quite understand what Michelangelo did. How on earth could there be such a person? It was only years later that I realized there were indeed this kind of people in the world. And you are one of them. You are obsessed with art and don't care of anything else. Michelangelo was also like this. He did what he did even if others didn't understand him. In this regard, you are like him.

LM: Michelangelo is a master of art. When you thought I was as obsessed as him, were you happy or worried?

Sister: From a bigger perspective, it's a good thing that someone in our family could be this devoted to art. But personally speaking, I was worried for you. I feared you'd have to live a life in people's misunderstanding. I think if everyone could understand and support you, your life would become much easier.



Sister and Ellen Zweig were making preparation for the picnic.

LM: I told you about this Qiuzhuang Project, saying that I would work with Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands and bring some reproduced artworks to our village. Previously you always hoped that I could leave the village and go as far as possible. When I suddenly told you I wanted to come back to carry on my work, how did you think of it?

Sister: I didn't think much about it. If you wanted to come back, then just come back. It would be good to show villagers some foreign artworks. In our village, other than you, no one else could do it. Since you have the ability, you should just do it. Though father doesn't understand your work, if you do need something, he would still help you. Our parents miss you very much. It's a good thing that you could spend more time at home.

LM: Could you understand the idea that I was not promoting foreign art. The act that I brought their works to the village is in fact my artwork.

Sister: Originally I didn't get that idea. But after you explained it to me, I understood.

LM: The whole event is my artwork, and the world-famous pieces become part of my work. I'm not saying my work is not good and I have to show others' works instead.

Sister: Your work is a huge one. If you want people to understand it, it's better that you make a movie about it. I would prefer if you make a physical work. I know this is also your work. But in the eyes of rural villagers', it's better to see something physical and concrete. I can understand that they don't understand your work.

LM: Do you think that the project would mean something to the village?

Sister: Certainly. Anyone with a brain would not doubt it.

LM: But the reality in our village is that peasants don't read.

Sister: Now the situation is better. Moreover, while you're here working on the project, mother also has something to do, which is good. Eighty percent of the people here won't understand the art you make. You need to be prepared for that. You need to relax.

LM: During the process of the project, the relation between father and I improved. We had some conflicts. I told him my dissatisfaction about him and later I apologized. I felt relieved that I had the courage to apologize to him. Once Ellen Zweig asked him "what do you think of your son". He said "I'm proud of him". Hearing him saying that I felt deeply touched.

Sister: On the surface, father scolds you from time to time. But at the bottom of his heart he is very proud of you. He just doesn't want you to know his pride in you.

LM: He wants to conceal his feelings and emotions toward me?

Sister: He does the same to me. Since he became sick, he cares more about me. I can feel that. But still he wants to hide his care of me. Why doesn't he just show us his care about us? It is because he is used to being the severe father and isn't used to such a change.

LM: I should say that this project has played a significant role in alleviating the conflicts between him and me. It helps us to understand each other better. I think something has been changed through my art. Do you believe that?

Sister: It's not your art that has changed him. Father doesn't understand your art. I don't believe so. It is because he's now getting older. As long as you come back, even if you don't come back to work on your art, the relation between you two would improve anyway. I don't think it has much to do with your art.

LM: Do you think it has anything to do with the efforts I've made to communicate with him?

Sister: Yes, I assume so.

LM: Back to the project. You took the *Zigzag Ladder* (Sol LeWitt's *Wall Structure*) home and hung it on your wall. You did so because of your affection for me and believed it was a good piece or because you accepted it for the aesthetical perspective?

Sister: What do you think?

LM: I think your affection for me was involved.

Sister: That's just one reason. I do like the "ladder".

LM: It's white without any nice-looking patterns. There's no "content" to read. Why you like it?

Sister: After hanging this work on the wall of my living room, I just wanted to take down the traditional hanging scroll I hung previously. I didn't know why. I just felt that painting was so bad looking all of a sudden, and the "ladder" made me feel comfortable.

LM: The *Zigzag Ladder* changed your aesthetic perspective.

Sister: Yes. I bought that hanging scroll because back then I thought that it was beautiful.

LM: With or without the "ladder", does it make a big difference?

Sister: Certainly. Many coming to my home would say the "ladder" was not bad.



Andy Warhol's *Portraits of Mao Zedong* at sister's home.

LM: How about the three portraits of Chairman Mao (Andy Warhol's portraits of Mao Zedong)?

Sister: I am scared by the blue portrait.

LM: Why don't you tear that one down?

Sister: The three make a set and I didn't want to tear them apart. But you actually gave me a piece of good advice. I should tear it down. The blue one looks horrifying and I don't dare to look at it. The more you're scared of it, the more often you see it. It's disturbing.

LM: Now that there're many artworks in the village, do you feel it is different from before?

Sister: As soon as you step into the village you couldn't help looking at the works on the walls. People from other villages would ask me what those things were on the walls of Qiuzhuang and if they were made my younger brother.

LM: Anything you like or dislike in particular?

Sister: Other than the blue portrait, I'm fine with the others. The one featuring lines (Sol LeWitte's *Wall Drawing No.256*) is beautiful. If the background could be changed into azure, it would look even better with the white lines. I was very much touched at the first sight of this piece. Black background plus white lines, what a comfortable treat to the eyes! Gradually I got a bit tired of it and now if I look at it, I'm accustomed to it and no longer have the feelings I had before.

LM: The color has faded due to the weather.

Sister: Right, and it's not as visually powerful as before. It's also probably because I've accepted them as an integral part of the village.



Sister and her son Haoran.

LM: You once said that the library could be closed after I left. Why was that?

Sister: If you are at home, the library can continue to operate. When you are not, no one could guide the kids to read and draw. They just do their homework and play some games in the library. It doesn't take a library to play that role. The library doesn't bring its function into full play. It's a waste of resources.

LM: Haoran often goes to the library during weekend, but he doesn't always read books. What attracts him to go there?

Sister: He loves to watch movies there. And there're computers there. He can play some PC games.

LM: The library has been open for over half a year. Have you spotted any changes in Haoran?

Sister: So many foreigners have come to visit. So now Haoran really likes to speak English. One day he told me: "Mom, I want to go to America, to Australia, in the future." He also said

that once he dreamed that he was in America.

LM: You mean the library is quite beneficial to Haoran?

Sister: Absolutely. When we were kids, we never dreamed that one day we could have such a library.

LM: When Haoran grows up, do you want him to follow my path and be as obsessed as I am?

Sister: If that's what he likes, I have no objection. But that kid is not a scholar type. I'm not wrong about him. You are a scholar type. But that kid will let me down. Subconsciously, I hope he can be like you.

LM: Basically all of my questions have been asked. Do you have any questions for me?

Sister: Not really. I think when the project comes to an end you can still carry on. You can come back to the village again and draw on the walls what you believe is good art. By then it won't be your art project but your contribution to the village. For instance, during the Chinese New Year probably you can spend two days drawing something in the village. And then you can leave.

LM: If the houses are to be demolished after the Chinese New Year due to the road construction project, I will move the installations to the place of those interested in them.

Sister: It's hard to tell what villagers are thinking about. We won't know for sure if they will continue to display your work. Probably they would dismantle them for other purposes or sell them. People now are quite selfish.

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* Li Baoying, my second elderly sister, was born in Qiuzhuang in 1971. She graduated from Feng County Middle School in 1987 and now she farms at home.

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