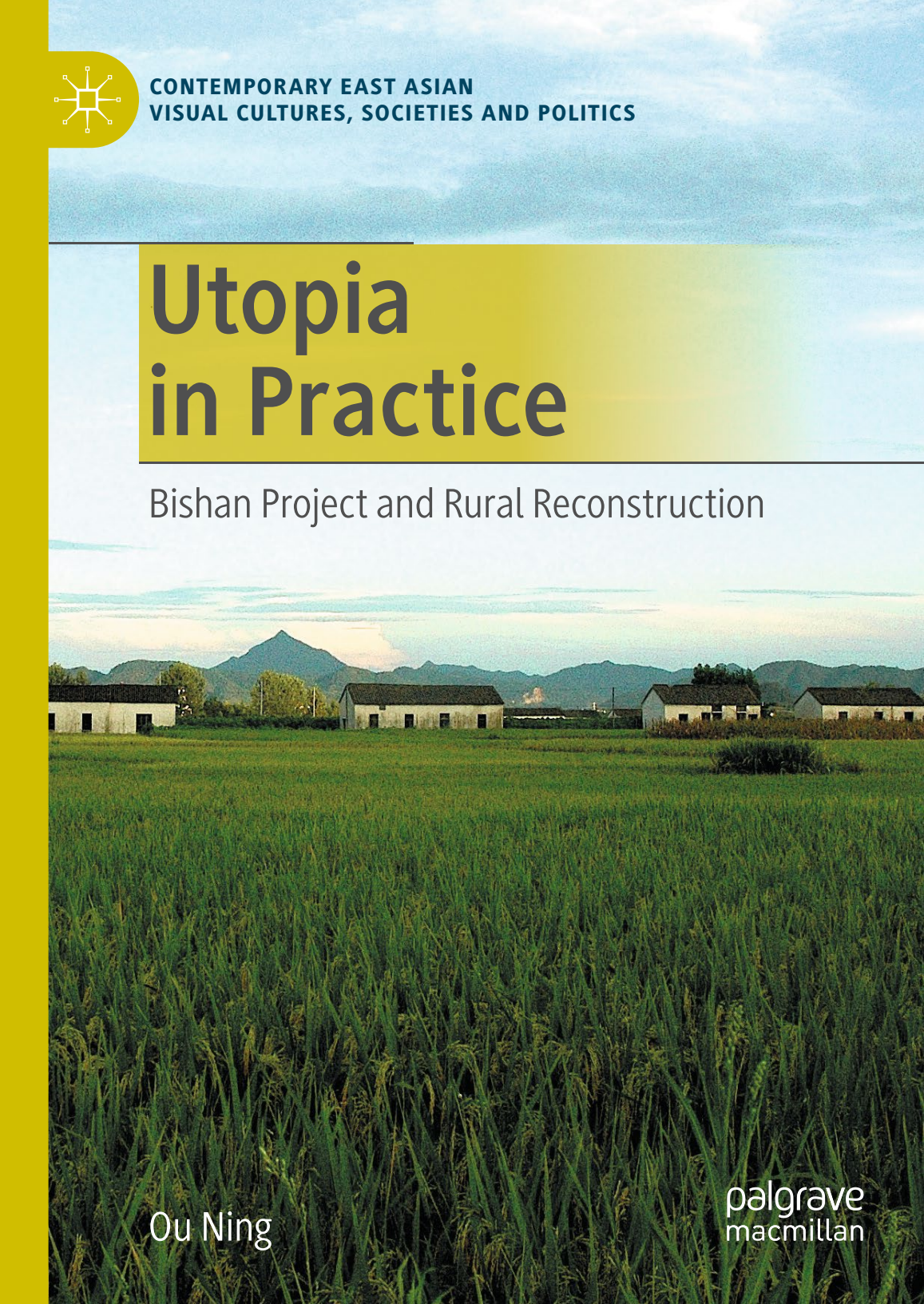
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Utopia
in Practice
Bishan Project and Rural Reconstruction
Ou Ning
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Introduction

Utopia in Practice[1]

The Origins of Bishan Project

Before I filled up a Moleskine notebook[2] with the "blueprint" of Bishan Commune in 2010, I had curated three editions of Get It Louder (2005, 2007, 2010) and the Shenzhen and Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (2009), all of which are large-scale events with over sixty exhibitors in the Chinese metropolises of Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing. Based in Guangzhou and Beijing at that time, I made each of the two cities a documentary as part of my urban research—*San Yuan Li* (2003), portraying a rural village trapped within Guangdong, and *Meishi Street* (2006), delineating a slum in Beijing. I was also invited to various exhibitions at home and abroad as an artist. All the exhibitions took place in cities, as they are where cultural resources concentrate, and so much so that there is already an "excess" of exhibitions. Against this

[1] Completed in Chinese on March 13, 2018, in Yantai. The English version was translated by Stephanie Lu and Li Bing, published as "Bishan Project: Efforts to Build a Utopian Community," in Janet Marstine and Svetlana Mintcheva, eds., *Curating Under Pressure: International Perspectives on Negotiating Conflict and Upholding Integrity* (London: Routledge, 2020).

[2] The notebook was translated into English and Danish by Mai Corlin, published under the title of *Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia* (Aarhus: OVO Press and Antipyrine, 2015).

backdrop, I decided to do something in villages, a vacuum of public cultural life, embracing my role as both a curator and an artist.

My interest in the countryside originates from my family background. I was born into a rural family and brought up in the Leizhou Peninsula, the southern tip of the Chinese mainland. In the first thirty years of my life, my poor and backward hometown had always been a sore point for me. I studied hard to get away from the place and tried my best to get it out of my system. Only after I found my footing in the city and witnessed the drastic changes brought by urbanization did I realize my passionate attachment to the countryside. During research and shooting of the documentaries about urban villages in Guangzhou and slums in Beijing, I came across a multitude of broke farmers who followed the trend and crowded into cities to earn a living, but due to their lack of resources and the household registration system, they are also rejected in cities and confined to the dilapidated urban enclaves, struggling on the margin of society. My brothers and sisters, shut out by the iron gate of *gaokao* (college entrance exam) system, left hometown at young age and devoted their youth to assembly lines in urban factories. Back at home, the farmland is deserted and house is empty. Urbanization not only drains labor force in the countryside but also encroaches its land, degrades its social body, and atomizes the rural population. The status quo keeps me thinking: as a curator and an artist, what can I do?

If a curator is a mere exhibition maker (*Ausstellungsmacher*), and an artist just signs his or her name on artworks, sends them to exhibitions, and puts them on markets, then the influence of artists can reach no further than the boundaries of the art system. If I want to intervene in and respond to China's aggressive urbanization and massive rural decline, I have to expand the scope of my work and even to augment or change my identity, for instance, redefining myself as an activist, a participant in social movements in the broad sense, or as an artivist, a social actor with an artistic approach, or even more radically as an activator, relinquishing my identity and signature as an artist, reducing myself and delegating powers to facilitate social movements or changes. Such thoughts are provoked, on the one hand, by the pressing Chinese urban-rural problems and, on the other hand, the aphasia of Chinese contemporary art on social issues after its inclusion into the global art markets. Global attention on China's contemporary art peaked before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. At that time, curators and artists were occupied in exhibitions of all sorts, intoxicated by soaring prices for artworks and the illusion of golden time for a rising big

power. They turned a blind eye to the enormous social cost of development and simmering conflicts for the nation. Art became a spectacle to be produced and consumed, increasingly irrelevant to social reality.

In 2005, I came across the New Rural Reconstruction Movement led by Wen Tiejun, which led me to the Rural Reconstruction Movement initiated by Y. C. James Yen, Liang Shuming, and others in the Republican Era. After historical research and fieldwork, I came to a better understanding of Chinese intellectuals' practices in the past and at the present, and rural experiments in other areas of Asia[3] also got on my radar. Meanwhile, I began to look for my rural base. In 2007, after visiting many villages in Yunnan, Sichuan, Jiangsu, Hebei, and Henan Provinces, I picked Bishan Village, Yi County, in Anhui Province to materialize my conceptions on rural reconstruction. Bishan Village is located in the area historically called Huizhou, home to famous Huizhou merchants trading across the country in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Reflux of wealth by the merchants funded the construction of a number of grandeur Huizhou-style residences and ancestral halls. With profound Confucius culture heritage, the local residents are genuine and even-tempered; social conflicts are relatively few. Despite tourism is its economic pillar (it is close to Mount Huangshan, a renowned tourist attraction), rural traditions dating back to ancient times are well preserved. All of these make Bishan almost a peach-blossom-paradise-like place in modern times. I didn't choose my hometown Leizhou Peninsula and villages in other provinces because the reality there was even harsher. Besides interest in rural social improvement on the ground, I also harbor a personal "utopia" complex, which prompted me to take a mild place as the launch pad of my experiment.

Although Bishan is not an extremely poor village, it is still an epitome of rural problems in the times of urbanization. Most young people of its nearly 3000 population are working in cities in the Yangtze River Delta region, leaving senior villagers and children behind. A lot of historic residential houses are left in disrepair. After the neighboring Xidi and Hongcun Villages made to the list of United Nations World Intangible Culture Heritage, the villagers in Bishan also benefit from the spillovers of the two villages and Mount Huangshan's tourist economy. Selling tea leaves, local specialties, and antiques; running restaurants; and offering transportation services to tourists have become the main source of income for the locals. Only a few people still farm, and even fewer after the government

[3] See "The Cultivators: Rural Reconstructionists in China," Chap. 5.

expropriated farmland to develop scale farming or to sell to resort hotels as building land. Water facilities built in the People's Commune period are long deserted. Collective consciousness crumbled, with few public activities except for women's square dancing, and getting together to play Mahjong grew rampant. It is not until 2007 that the construction of a road connecting the county town and the village started, but cars still couldn't get into the village. There were no flagstones on the narrow roads, and no road lamps either. In the same year, two of my poet friends Zheng Xiaoguang and Han Yu duplicated their Pig's Inn in Xidi Village in an old residential building in Bishan. Afterwards, they transformed an old rapeseed oil factory into a third one. Also in the same year, I paid our first visit to Bishan, with my friend Zuo Jing, who was born in the Jingde County of Anhui Province, and decided to initiate the Bishan Project.

Art and Rural Reconstruction

From 2007 to 2010, I started to prepare for the Bishan Project while I was busy with two Get It Louder exhibitions and the Shenzhen and Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture. In 2010, the Italian notebook brand Moleskin invited me to its exhibition tour "Detour: The Moleskine Notebook Experience" in Shanghai, and it gave me a notebook to doodle and jot down anything as I liked, which was later to be exhibited. I filled it with my research and thoughts since 2005 about China's rural problems and worldwide utopian practices, as well as specific ideas of the Bishan Commune. When the exhibition kicked off, the Bishan "blueprint" received lots of attention, so I decided to put the Bishan Project on agenda. I bought an old Huizhou-style residence, empty for years, and renovated it into the Buffalo Institute as my base for life and work there. Meanwhile, the preparation for the 2011 Bishan Harvestival also started.

In the early stage of the project, Zuo Jing and I had to resort to our resources as curators and artists. Although I envisioned the project to be a complex and multi-disciplinary (e.g., organic agriculture, deep ecology, rural finance, and progressive education) social collaboration, yet I had to take art as a launching pad due to my limitations. In 2011, the Bishan Harvestival took place in the village for the first time. The three-day event included various activities, including the *chudifang* show—a folk custom to celebrate harvest—by the villagers at the opening ceremony; the main body exhibition "Mutual Aids and Inheritance" featuring the collaboration between local craftsmen and twenty-five artists, designers, architects,

musicians, and writers; "Huizhou History and Culture" exhibition; "Handicraft in Yi County" research exhibition; a craft market; early rural movies screening; contemporary countryside documentaries screening; "Rural China" seminar; "Poetry Classroom" (for children in the village); "New Folk" music concert; Huizhou Opera joint performance; and so on.[4] Such public activities had been absent for a long time after the People's Commune was canceled in 1980 and production was contracted to each household. Farmers from the Yi County and neighboring counties were attracted to the festivities. The Harvestival was the first cultural event solely funded and organized by ourselves, and the local government provided only venue and administrative and security support. My plan was to channel cultural resources at hand to the village, bring the event to public attention, and achieve publicity. Then more diverse social forces and professional teams would be attracted to get on board, so as to achieve the goal of making it a comprehensive social project.

We expected more on-site practices but wouldn't give up opportunities of off-site exhibitions, which popped up from time to time because of our role in the art system. The social influence attained from such exhibitions could magnetize or internalize resources and support we needed in the next step. When preparing for the Bishan Harvestival in 2011, we had our first museum exhibition of the Bishan Project at the invitation of the Times Museum in Guangzhou, showcasing artists' research efforts and preliminary works. In the same year, the Bishan Project got on another relatively large-scale display as I was the curator for the International Design Exhibition, Chengdu Biennale. In the following years, the project was exhibited in Auckland (New Zealand), Vienna (Austria), Shenzhen, Taipei, Shanghai, Beijing, Aarhus (Denmark), Florence (Italy), and recently on the exhibition tour "Theater of the World: Art and China After 1989" launched by the Guggenheim Museum. Because of the mostly art-based activities in the village, exhibitions and publicity within the art system as well as signature aesthetics in visual design (tailor-made by the outstanding designer partners Xiaoma and Chengzi), the Bishan Project was later marked as the trailblazer of the so-called trendy "Artistic Rural Reconstruction." In my opinion, the label itself is a denomination of the limits of such attempts, rather than a compliment of their creativity.

Inspired by the Bishan Project, more and more artists and architects went to the countryside to develop their projects. Nevertheless, "Artistic

[4] See Peng Yanhan, ed., *2011 Bishan Harvestival* (Bishan: self-published, 2011).

Rural Reconstruction" is neither about moving from cities to the countryside to produce market-oriented artwork, nor about implanting out-of-the-place contemporary buildings into rural fields and communities, only to snatch image or literature for urban communication system and to boost artists' profile. Otherwise, it is taking advantage of the countryside instead of helping it. As urban land reserves are diminishing, hot money is diverted to rural development. Besides, modern rural issues have a moral cherry on top, so everybody wants a piece of the cake. Governments want to gloss performance through "building a new socialist countryside," and idle capital wants to pocket both money and moral superiority. As a result, the naturally eye-catching "Artistic Rural Reconstruction" sells like hotcakes, and many artists and architects become sought-after "Artistic Rural Reconstruction" professionals. Rural reconstruction of this kind and the injection of hot money into the Bed & Breakfast industry are leading to the "gentrification" of rural areas, turning the countryside into the vacation backyard of urban middle class. The subjectivity of countryside and farmers is undermined, and they are abandoned again, becoming spectators at their doorstep.

As the "evil initiator," the Bishan Project was very controversial in its later development. In retrospect of the whole project, I still believe in my vision—art is only the beginning of the Bishan Project, but it did not get enough time to mature. When conceptualizing the project, I was inspired by the practices of James Yen, Liang Shuming, and Wen Tiejun. However, I maintained that there is no "orthodox" in rural reconstruction, as each practitioner is faced with different historical and present conditions. So, the key is to proceed in the light of the specific conditions and find the corresponding approaches and methods. Taking art as the beginning of the Bishan Project is the choice after calculating what we had and what we could do. I am fully aware of the limitations of art, but I am still positive that art is conducive to the Chinese countryside. The key is to find the right kind of art. In the time of economic globalization and neoliberalism, besides marketized and spectaclized art, there are still many artists devoted to socially engaged art and community art.[5] Despite most people are pursuing profit, such arts are nurturing people's soul, empowering and

[5] See "The Subject of Public Art," Chap. 12. I was inspired by the two books: Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012), and Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012).

enabling the common. The Bishan Project is only interested in such arts and expecting more non-art forces to join us. Unfortunately, when exploring the synergy between art and countryside, we were frustrated by one after another setback.

"Force Majeure"

Because of the success and influence of the Bishan Harvestival, the local government invited Zuo Jing and me to curate the seventh Yixian Photo Festival that it sponsored. The festival used to be an official event promoting local countryside tourism, with domestic landscape photographers participating in the last six. We proposed to expand it into an international photo festival with global participants and gave it a theme—"The Interactions," which criticized over-urbanization, promoted rural construction, and advocated urban-rural mutual reinforcement. The festival invited forty exhibitors[6] and was scheduled to held in 2012. It was the same year as the 18th National Congress of the People's Republic of China, when Xi Jinping was elected as the new Party secretary. The date of the national congress was not determined when we chose the opening day of the festival, but the two dates turned out to clash in the end. On the day before the festival's opening, the local government canceled all exhibitions and events, including the second Bishan Harvestival, which was solely organized by ourselves and scheduled to concur with the photo festival. An order from Beijing said that large-scale activities were not appropriate during the congress. Only one month later did we learn that another reason for this move was that Orville Schell, the Arthur Ross Director of the Center on US-China Relations at Asia Society, was also invited to the festival. His exhibition Coal + Ice once staged in Beijing was placed in the festival as a sub-exhibition. Beijing national security authorities sent people to keep watch on him and required the local government to make the move.

It was hard to prove whether this was true. Orville had organized and taken part in many public activities in Beijing, and nothing happened. Why did trouble find him in the countryside? Was it due to the special time period? But the focus of the congress' security efforts should be in Beijing instead of other places. During the congress, some television

[6] See Peng Yanhan, ed., *The Interactions: 2012 Yixian International Photo Festival* (Yixian: Yi County People's Government, 2012).

entertainment shows were suspended, and some dissidents were banned to post on Sina Weibo. The day before the festival was aborted, officials from cultural authorities at Anhui Province and Huangshan City went all the way to the site, censoring all works to be exhibited in the absence of curators. After the incident, we scrutinized the photo festival's curatorial statement, works on exhibition, and text description by ourselves and found the problem might lie in the criticism against over-urbanization and some works exposing grave environment pollution and devastated countryside. But we were not sure about that. The local government made no announcement about the cancellation and did not respond to our doubts. As commissioned curators, we could do nothing but accept the decision and explanation of "Force Majeure."

It is not the first time I suffered such an incident. In 1995, I organized a concert tour for US musician John Zorn and Japanese musician Yamatsuka Eye in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Foshan, and Beijing. Afterwards, I was co-censored by Shenzhen national security and culture authorities. They confiscated the *New Masses*, an underground music and culture magazine under my editorship, on the grounds of lacking performance and publishing licenses. Synonymous with a left-wing political magazine in the United States between 1926 and 1948, the *New Masses* mainly introduced independent music and it once published an article about anarchism authored by Lenny Kwok, the creator of Hong Kong band Blackbird. It only had two issues, distributed in various concerts that I organized for free.

In 2004, that was the next year after *San Yuan Li* was shown at the fiftieth Venice Biennale, Guangzhou national security and culture authorities again imposed censorship on my co-author Cao Fei and me. They declared the independent film and video group U-thèque Organization I established in 1999 illegal. *San Yuan Li* was made in the name of U-thèque Organization, and it was categorized as an illegal documentary because it laid bare the darkness of a rural village in Guangdong. The screening of Chinese independent documentaries over the last years along with our free underground film publications was also outlawed. The incident was also related to the suppression of *Southern Metropolis Daily* by Guangdong authorities. The newspaper was subjected to reprisals as it revealed, in 2002, the real situation of SARS that first broke out in Guangdong and, in 2003, the fact that Sun Zhigang was beaten to death after he was taken to a homeless shelter as he didn't have an identity card with him. This led to the arrest of chief editor Cheng Yizhong and general manager Yu

Huafeng. As *Southern Metropolis Daily* had collaborated with U-thèque Organization in screening with financial support, I was asked many times about the details of our partnership during official investigation. Leaving no stones unturned to frame the newspaper, they would not even let go of such a remote clue as U-thèque Organization.

Beijing-related authorities mentioned my "historical track records" on many occasions to the local government when the Bishan Project was halted, and I was evicted from Bishan Village with all my public activities in China under surveillance. The 2012 Yixian International Photo Festival was just the beginning. It cast a shadow over the Bishan Project. The local government began to keep a distance from the project, neither supporting it nor holding it back. Our channels of communication with the government were blocked. All we could do was to speculate on its intentions and make attempts of new activities to test how far things could go. In the spring of 2004, after almost three years' preparation, the Bishan Bookstore opened in the village. It was the first branch store of the Nanjing-based Librairie Avant-Garde in the countryside. In 1997, I gave this French name and designed the logo for the newly founded bookstore, which was honored as the most beautiful bookstore in China by CNN in 2013 and as one of the top ten bookstores in the world by BBC in 2014. The idea of setting up a bookstore struck me during preparation for the Bishan Project. Inspired by the *xiangcun shuju* (Rural Press) that Liang Shuming established in Zouping, Shandong Province, in the 1930s, I hoped the Bishan Bookstore, besides selling books, could function as a rural knowledge production base, with reading services to villagers and visitors as well as publishing capacity. The local government agreed to provide an empty ancestral hall as the venue for the bookstore in 2011. It honored its words in 2014 when the store was open to business, and made no interference.

Many people were pessimistic about the future of the Bishan Bookstore, predicting it would not live long in the countryside. Qian Xiaohua, founder of the Librairie Avant-Garde, was a Christian, and he told us that he worked not for money but for the God. Many villagers frequented the store to read books, and many visitors were very interested in this ancestral-hall-converted space. The books sold well because most of them were about literary, historical, and rural studies, appealing to the taste of visitors. I organized reading parties featuring books in classical Chinese and Danish music group YOYOOYOY's interactional music and art event "Bevægeligt Akkurat" (Movable Accurate). The Bishan Bookstore soon gained popularity. Young people returning to hometown for the Spring

Festival and Qingming Festival came to learn more about this place, and one of them even rented the bookstore to host her wedding ceremony. People from Yi County town, Huangshan City, and other places came afar to visit. The bookstore even received tourist groups arriving on buses. Many county-level governments in neighboring provinces approached Qian Xiaohua and offered free venues for such rural bookstores. Bishan used to be one of the many unknown villages, short of tourist resources and overshadowed by Xidi and Hongcun. Although it got noticed in 2011 with the Bishan Harvestival, yet there were no fixed tourist attractions. Open every day, the Bishan Bookstore was the first place open to the public and many tourists took it as a must-see.

"Night Stars vs. Street Lamps"

It seemed that the local government was pretty happy with the outcome. Nevertheless, the calm water was ruffled again by the visit of a "China studies" expeditionary learning program organized by the Department of Sociology at Nanjing University in the Summer of 2014. They visited the Bishan Bookstore and invited me to introduce the Bishan Project. The next day, Zhou Yun, a student from Harvard University, posted an article online questioning the bookstore and project. She criticized the bookstore with Pierre Bourdieu's theories, arguing that the bookstore's "symbolic boundary" led to the "distinction" between the urban middle class and rural villagers, and the attempts of the Bishan Project were "othering" the local residents. She misinterpreted my words, saying I did not want road lamps because I was on the side of the urban intellectuals who liked watching stars in the countryside. I retorted with an article,[7] and the controversy instantly escalated into an online hot button issue engaging more people. "Night Stars vs. Street Lamps" even became the G-spot of the debate.[8] In fact, I was well aware of the villagers' longing for street lamps from the very beginning. In their eyes, street lamps were a symbol of development

[7] See "Symbolic Boundary, Distinction, and Othering," Chap. 8.

[8] For summary of the dispute, please see Mai Corlin, "Trojan Horses in the Chinese Countryside: Ou Ning and the Bishan Commune in Dialogue and Practice," *Field - a journal of socially engaged art criticism* 9 (Winter, 2018). http://field-journal.com/issue-9/trojan-horses-in-the-chinese-countryside-ou-ning-and-the-bishan-commune-in-dialogue-and-practice. For full research on the Bishan Project, please refer to the author's PhD dissertation: *Trojan Horses in the Chinese Countryside: The Bishan Commune and the Practice of Socially Engaged Art in Rural China* (PhD diss., China Studies, Aarhus University, 2017).

and modernity, and they were ashamed of the darkness at night in Bishan, especially given that Xidi and Hongcun installed lamps a long time ago. During the Chinese lunar new year holidays, that was several months before the Bishan Bookstore opened, the village committee had a mobilization meeting for returning villagers, and I proposed the installation of street lamps on that exact meeting. Even earlier in the same year, when the village decided to build a driveway linking the outside and Bishan, Zuo Jing and I made donations in our own names. The only benefit of the month-long dispute was that Bishan had street lamps only a few months later, but it added to the woes of the Bishan Project, which was already in an awkward situation after the photo festival incident.

The buzz on the Internet drew herds of media to Bishan. In the time of eyeball economy, it was only natural for the media to jump on the bandwagon. News reporting and production is always running against time. When a journalist wants to get his story published before a deadline, an editor would even sacrifice fact-checking in the eleventh hour. The more sensationalized the news title and rhetoric, the more eye-catching the news. As a result, reports on Bishan were ridden with misunderstandings and distortions, pushing the village into the teeth of the storm. The local government did not like such disputes and it refused interviews. As one could imagine, it blamed the hot mess on the project. What was worse, the attention to a civil rural reconstruction movement inevitably entailed interrogation of the government's stance and acts in the issue. The Bishan Project volunteered loud explanations to the media, while the government remained silent. Such contrast did no good to the government. Pitting the Bishan Project against the government was the last thing I wanted to see. Throughout the project, we actively sought government support and partnership, because I knew nobody, be it James Yen and Liang Shuming in the Republican Era or Wen Tiejun at present, could succeed in rural reconstruction without the government. In essence, rural reconstruction can't be separated from politics. Reform practices by grassroots intellectuals constitute only an auxiliary or complimentary plan within the current political regime framework, which has to be under government leadership and supervision. If we stood against the government, our practice would be a revolution rather than a reform, which was quite another story.

Although I am an anarchist, I have never dreamt about revolution and never identified myself as a stiff opponent. In Chinese, anarchism is translated as "non-government-ism," which is easily mistaken as "anti-government." In the Chinese context, I prefer to transliterate it as *annaqi*.

After the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident, many dissidents were exiled. They were much weakened after leaving the country, but the political regime they opposed beefed up its governing power through the choice of free market and globalization as well as the advancement of Internet technologies. For those still living in the country, despite many disappointments, confrontation will only shrink their political and living space, and in the end, they will also be forced to leave, becoming powerless about their home country. Thus, choosing "reconstruction" over "confrontation" is a more rational option. In the post-Cold War period, the "informal life politics" practices mushroomed in the Arab region and northeastern Asia. When faced with extreme political and natural disasters, the public did not seek help from the government, political parties, and charities nor media. Instead, they relied on themselves to rebuild communities and life.[9] In China, however, even if you are committed to "reconstruction," your motives will be questioned and your acts will probably be checked. The two censorships in 1995 and 2004 are in their nature precautionary and defensive. My concerts, film screenings, and independent magazines never advocated political opposition, but authorities still worried that the communities gathered around *New Masses* and U-thèque Organization would become pressure groups. The Bishan Project is a spontaneous non-profit project, but they fret over the anarchism in it.

About "non-profit," the most interesting response came from some villagers. In the 2011 Bishan Harvestival, they thought Zuojing and I were two bosses who came here to develop tourism (that was what they expected). When I told them it was "non-profit," they were very disappointed and would not understand nor believe there was such a thing as "non-profit" in the world. In 2013, my entire family moved from Beijing to Bishan, and I sent my stepson to a local school. As neighbors, the villagers and I had more daily interactions and they came to understand that we were not here for the money. Their fervent hopes for economic development made me reflect on my reservation about commerce entering villages. Although the Bishan Bookstore was criticized by Zhou Yun, yet it was acclaimed by villagers and the government. Benign commerce of this

[9] For the concept of "informal life politics," please see Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), and Tessa Morris-Suzuki and Eun Jeong Soh, eds., *New Worlds from Below: Grassroots Networking and Informal Life Politics in Twenty-First Century East Asia* (Canberra: The Australian National University Press, 2017).

kind was very inspirational for me. Art exhibitions were not well received in the countryside because, on the one hand, art was not something familiar to the local and, on the other hand, the farmers could not see any practical use of art to their daily life. Besides, temporary exhibitions could not grow into routine events for the lack of venues and limited duration. In contrast, the bookstore sold books, and the villagers believed that reading was to learn useful knowledge, which was the only way to change their fortunes. What was more, it opened every day and attracted tourists. They could benefit from the traffic by doing some small businesses. The Bishan Bookstore was an attempt to introduce non-art resources into the village, and its remarkable social effects encouraged me to push forward similar experiments.

The Political Erasure

After the "Bishan Controversy" appeased, I bought another empty ancestral hall near the Buffalo Institute where I lived. The place was long deserted and the village committee tried many times to persuade me to take over it. I accepted the deal only when I came up with the idea to have another site for business. In 2015, the School of Tillers was opened up. It applied to the local government for business license as a coffee shop, but besides selling coffee, it also had an exhibition gallery, a screening hall, a small library offering different collections of non-sale titles in accordance with reading themes, a study center, and a *zakka* selling books, rural cultural and creative products, and villagers' farm produce. Every evening, the School of Tillers showed movies and TV plays of the villagers' choice on its big screen (e.g., 1955 Huangmei Opera movie *Goddess Marriage*; 1987 TV series *Dream of Red Mansions*). It also hosted a series of events, such as a 3D photo exhibition "Timekeepers," featuring the portraits and family spaces of residents of Yi County villages, which were taken by Slovenia photographer Matjaž Tančič; artist Liu Chuanhong's narrative painting exhibition "Memoir in Southern Anhui," a visual fiction based on Huizhou villages; lectures and workshops on community art, plants, dyeing and weaving, and soil enhancement with micro-organism; "Talk & Buy" flea market where villagers presented their second-hand goods in front of a big screen. The School of Tillers helped farmers sell their farm produce at its *zakka* with free packaging and publicity. Villagers' idle houses were collected and listed on Airbnb as part of the SOT Researchers

in Residence Program. The School helped them with management and customer discovery, and all the income went to the villagers.

All these activities were free. The goal was to create solidarity within the School of Tillers, in a bid to build it into a community culture center. However, it was more feasible to register as a commercial entity than operate as a non-profit organization. On the one hand, a license could help the villagers increase economic income, and on the other hand, it would seem less like a social movement, thus reassuring the government. It is very difficult to register an NGO or NPO in China, and that is one of the reasons why the Bishan Commune was neither NGO nor NPO from its inception. Another reason is my faith in anarchism. I am not in favor of any organization or institution, including NGO and NPO, which is increasingly hierarchical, bureaucratic, and corporatized. The commercial registration of the School is an adaptive strategy, with the aim of forming a community instead of a corporate or organization. After running through all the legal procedures, I successfully got the business license. The only trouble was that I was ignored by the local culture authorities when applying for an exhibition permit. It was same with the situation after the photo festival incident. The authorities did not nod, and they did not reject either. My strategy was to sound the government out with action—executing my plans first without approval and then waiting for reactions from the authorities.

Right before the Chinese lunar new year of 2016, I heard it from the grapevine that the Anhui authorities were going to rectify the Bishan Project. Local culture authorities later came to check the books sold at the Bishan Bookstore and School of Tillers, ordering to remove off shelves the *Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia* published in Denmark. Security authorities required the Airbnb listings managed by the School to have guests registered. Market regulation authorities confiscated villagers' produce for lack of production dates and quality certificates, and the goods were only returned later at the protest of villagers. One day after the lunar new year, my new-born baby woke up at midnight because the room was too cold and weirdly there was no electricity. When checking the electricity boxes in the morning, I found the electricity cables in the Buffalo Institute and School of Tillers were cut off, so were the water pipes. On the same day, the "Happiness Pavilion," a bamboo-structured tea cottage built by villager Qian Shi'an and me, were burnt down. The "Bishan Craft Cooperative" that Zuo Jing was renovating was half-demolished, as it was said to have "ruined overall countryside landscape and appearance." As it

was freezing cold at that time, my family had to crash in the Pig's Inn, but the next day local security authorities warned that it was the order from Beijing that we could not stay there anymore and had to leave the village. We were left with no choice but to buy air tickets to Shenzhen, and we stayed in a hotel in Huangshan City for the next-day flight.[10]

At that point, the Bishan Project was clamped down, violently. Later, they removed the statue of Wang Dazhi that we donated. (Wang was born in the Bishan village. He worked with Tao Xingzhi on rural education in the Nanjing Xiaozhuang Normal School at an early age. Later he became one of the initiators of the Xin'an Children Touring Troupe. Zuo Jing and I regarded him as a Rural Sage in rural reconstruction.) The signs of SOT Researchers in Residence Program were taken down from the front of Airbnb houses. The Buffalo Institute and School of Tillers were empty. All traces of the Bishan Project were erased. Zuo Jing's Bishan Craft Cooperative soon reopened after it declared that it had nothing to do with the Bishan Project, but I was forbidden to conduct any public activities in Bishan. I could not believe it was Beijing's order until my public speech about "Well-field System and Utopia" was canceled by a phone call from Beijing. I realized I was on Beijing's blacklist. Later, I got to learn that, before the electricity and water outage, Yi County sent an ad hoc village Party secretary to Bishan. The secretary held several meetings for Party members, persuading and mobilizing them to abolish the Bishan Project. At meetings, the new secretary collected a lot of my public statements on "non-government-ism" and "utopia," and he defined the nature of the problem as "avoiding the leadership of the Party." Shortly after I was forced to leave, the new secretary had all footpaths in the village paved with flagstones.

Anarchism and Utopianism

Anarchism and utopianism only occur in my mind and words, and I have never put them into practice in the Bishan Project. I am fully aware that in China's political reality, they are forbidden and cannot be put into action. Even against the global backdrop, anarchism is dismissed as an innocent

[10] I decided to keep silent about the incident and refused interviews, yet some media still got word and made a report. See Calum Macleod, "Crushed Dreams of Utopia in Rural China," *Times*, May 2, 2016. The report was then quoted by Amy Qin, "Architects See Potential in China's Countryside," *New York Times*, June 17, 2016.

and romantic thought, marginalized even in academia. Worse still, utopia is mocked as a naïve delusion. Although the Occupy Wall Street movement is championed by anarchists, given its considerable impact, their efforts are still not recognized by the mainstream of society. The Invisible Committee is constantly published, but its influence is confined to a small audience. The committee's spiritual mentor is Guy Debord, whose prophecies before the May 1968 events in France were looked up to by only a few radicals (especially in the art community) as legends. The Back-to-the-Land Movement that first broke out in North America last century spawned a large number of hippie communes, but they are nowhere to be found today. Indeed, some of the communes have evolved into the current intentional communities and ECO villages, but they are still peripheral to the mainstream. Even more unfortunate for the nineteenth-century classic anarchist Peter Kropotkin and utopia practitioner Robert Owen, their books are shelved and forgotten. In contrary to the disregard and disdain by the mainstream, I am obsessed with the concepts because of serendipities.

My attachment to anarchism started in 1994. Lenny Kwok sent me an independent magazine he published called *Blackbird Communique*. In the magazine, I read about his life in the countryside of Lantau Island, Hong Kong, where he spent his time practicing guitar, composing songs, writing articles, fixing computers for friends, writing letters for villagers, typesetting for poor students, and producing records financed by a few music fans, among other things. He paid "mutual help in the mortal world" instead of selling himself.[11] In further reading about different schools of anarchism, I selectively rejected violent branches and grew more attached to the warm social ideals it depicted. I believe that the tradition of *huangong* (labor exchange) and gift economy in the Chinese countryside is in consistent with the anarchist mutual-aid spirit. They represent a way of cooperation and life in the childhood of humanity when there was no currency, corporates, political parties, political agents, governments, or nations. Anarchism is unlikely to be realized at a national level, but it may come into shape in small human communities. When turning my attention to villages like Bishan, I did have the aspiration to put anarchism into practice at heart, but I was not optimistic about the outcome. Stemming

[11] About Lenny Kwok and *Blackbird Communique*, please see Ou Ning, "The Revolutionary Imagination and Its Cultural Praxis," in Jessie Chang, Christina Li and Kinwah Jaspar Lau, eds., *CHiE! Culture Sieges Politics* (Hong Kong: Para/Site, 2008).

from my long-term personal interest, anarchism and utopianism have become my devoted field of study, as well as my thinking resources for discourse production. Even after the Bishan Project was called off, my passion did not wane.

About anarchism and utopianism, my most explicit article is "Autonomy: Utopia or Realpolitik,"[12] which was written in 2012 for the publication of an exhibition curated by Hou Hanru in Guangzhou, and was later incorporated into *Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia* published in Denmark. Besides, my discussions on the topic can also be found in my narrative articles and interview scripts.[13] Between 2013 and 2015, in between lectures and exhibitions abroad, I spontaneously conducted field study on "Practical Utopia." I filled up my second Moleskine with the research, and I named it *Bishan Commune: How to Continue Your Own Utopia* (2014–2015). When back in China, I posted long articles in my own magazines and mainstream Internet media on the intentional communities movement in New Zealand, anarchist community Fristaden Christiania in Copenhagen, and the hippie movement in Australia. The writings elaborated on the concepts and methods I learned, including cohousing, consensus decision-making, permaculture, and community currency.[14] Between 2016 and 2017, during my teaching at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, I finished reading Erik Reece's new book *Utopia Drive*,[15] and followed his route, visiting the Oneida Community in the upstate of New York, Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill in Kentucky, and New Harmony in Indiana. After the United States, I took a trip to the site of Robert Owen's New Lanark in Britain.

[12] See "Autonomy: Utopia or Realpolitik," Chap. 15.

[13] See Chaps. 3, 9, 11, and 15.

[14] See Ou Ning, "Looking for Utopia," in Ou Ning, ed., *V-ECO* mook #1: *Go Bush! - Alternative Life in New Zealand* (Beijing: China Youth Publishing Group, 2013); Ou Ning, "Life and Death of Fristaden Christiania," *Paper*, November 5, 2014; Ou Ning, "Legend of a Collective Escape from a Dirty World," *iPress*, October 4, 2015 (Tencent self-censored and closed *iPress* completely during the coronavirus epidemic in 2020). My fieldwork on historical sites and living communities of communitarian experiment and rural reconstruction in different corners of the world from the nineteenth century through today will be resulted as a new book *Utopian Field*. For a brief summary of this research project, please see "Utopian Nostalgia," Chap. 15.

[15] Erik Reece, *Utopia Drive: A Road Trip Through America's Most Radical Idea* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

In 2013, I met with David Graeber, who came up with the slogan "We are the 99%," in London, and in 2014, I met with Prof. James C. Scott of Yale University in New Haven. I have read major monographs the two authored. In *Debt*,[16] David Graeber described China's *nongjia* (School of Tillers) in the pre-Qin period as the first anarchism in the world, and that is where the name of School of Tillers in Bishan came from. I was also inspired to further study utopia in ancient China ("Great Unity" in Confucianism and "Peach Blossom Spring" in Taoism), enriching the discourse of my self-invented "Ruralism" and "Contemporary Agrarianism." Another two books by Graeber—*Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*[17] and *The Democracy Project*[18]—gave me a glimpse of anarchism's contemporary developments in theory and practice. As for James C. Scott, his book *Seeing Like a State*[19] denounced state-making large-scale utopian projects in "High-Modernism." *The Art of Not Being Governed*[20] examined the history of shifting farming tribes in southeastern Asia escaping the centralized state and conducting self-barbarianization. The two books enlightened me on *metis* or on-the-ground knowledge and reassured that the construction of an ideal society on a small scale was harmless. In 2013, I paid a visit to the Community Oriented Mutual Economy Project made by the Hong Kong St. James' Settlement. In the following year, I met with Paul Glover, the inventor of Ithaca Hours, in Philadelphia. Later I designed and printed Bishan Hours. It would be rash to circulate it in Bishan, so I chose to use it as a pay to volunteers for the exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. They could use the Hours to exchange for all the publication in the Bishan Project. I used to believe perhaps "artists" were privileged to break rules, and to be immune from punishment. For example, in the first Moleskine, I excerpted the synopsis of how to build a personal mini country from a thin book called *How to Start Your Own Country*[21] by Erwin S. Strauss. I whimsically designed a flag and passport

[16] David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2012).

[17] David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004).

[18] David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013).

[19] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[20] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[21] Erwin S. Strauss, *How to Start Your Own Country* (Colorado: Paladin Press, 1979).

for the Bishan Commune (influenced by NSK, a new Slovenian art collective I came across a long time ago), and later the "Agritopia Dress." What I did not expect was that once these behaviors were widespread, they were considered out of line and, along with the unpopular statements and articles, constituted evidence to crash the Bishan Project.

In modern China, only Mao Zedong has achieved his "utopia."[22] In his youth, Mao Zedong was influenced by the Atarashiki-mura movement put forward by Japanese Writer Saneatsu Mushanokōji. After coming into power, he combined Atarashiki-mura with Russian Kolkhoz and Zhang Lu's *wudoumidao* (Way of the Five Pecks of Rice) and launched the nationwide People's Commune movement. This twenty-year-long "utopian" movement thrust the Chinese countryside into utter disasters. Many Chinese left-wing intellectuals are now re-studying and re-evaluating the People's Commune. They argue that the large number of water facilities built that time should be protected or reused as agricultural heritage. It is held that in the current context of agricultural capitalism encroaching countryside, the People's Commune can enhance farmers' bargaining power and risk resistance as well as production and marketing capacity. Nevertheless, I still cannot accept the People's Commune with all my heart. In my eyes, the People' Commune is a political movement first and foremost. It forced the concentration of means of production and labor in the countryside and resorted to semi-military management to increase agricultural output. The ultimate goal was to fuel the urgent industrialization and to cope with the delicate relations with Russia. It robbed farmers of agricultural surplus, destroyed rural family and social structures, and caused massive famine, cornering farmers into a situation where they could not even save themselves. The word *gongshe* (commune) in Chinese bears so much negative historical meaning, and this is why I did not use it to describe the Bishan Commune. Instead, I prefer *gongtongti*, which indicated communities and social groups. For its visual symbol, I chose the natural and prosperous green over the revolutionary red.

The Bishan Project often reminds people of "Chinese Educated Urban Youth Going and Working in the Countryside and Mountain Areas" in the Mao era. However, the latter was started by the state, sending urban youth to the countryside to defuse the social crisis of no education or employment for the young in the cities. Whereas the Bishan Project was

[22] For China's utopian practices and imagination in the Mao era and afterwards, please see "The Discourse of Utopia in the Post-Mao Era," Chap. 15.

completely spontaneous, shifting from cities with strong economy and employment to tackle the harsh reality of rural hollowing and decline. Oftentimes, the Bishan Project is also misunderstood as the modern Chinese version of the Back-to-the-land Movement in North America in the 1960s and 1970s. Back then, the western hippies went to the countryside to escape economic crisis and seek a low-cost collective life. In contrast, the Chinese in favor of "anti-urbanization" are predominantly the urban middle class. They give up their stable income in cities as they cannot stand the poisoning air and population overload. When in the countryside, the urbanites without income have to live off their savings. My family did not move to the village for an escape (both urban and rural areas have their own problems), but we were also financially unsustainable. The Bishan Project not only brought no income to my family but also raised my spending. If I could not make ends meet through other means or projects, and the project itself could not raise more funds, sooner or later it would lose steam. From a financial perspective, it is fair enough to say "utopia" is naïve and childish.

A "Facilitator" Approach

In the few months before the Bishan Project was banned, I was secretly preparing a third exhibition in the School of Tillers. Qian Shi'an in his seventies was a very talented villager. He named his house and yard "Hillside Gardens," which was the first Airbnb listing in the Researchers in Residence Program. Living by himself, he designed a bridge with flowing water underneath and a pond in his yard, where various trees and flowers were prosperous (some plants were innovatively grafted by him). He also made potted landscapes and kept dogs and birds. His place was like a well-attended garden of a retired literati. He liked poetry and photography and was good at many handicrafts. On the mountain, there was a piece of barren land where he planted trees and bamboos. He often collected strange-looking roots, branches, and bamboo joints and made them into furniture, articles of daily use, musical instruments, and toys for kids. I was an apprentice to him learning carpentry, and we were very close. I proposed to build a special-shaped all-bamboo tea pavilion with traditional techniques on his mountain land. He could take a rest in the pavilion when working. The School of Tillers would hold an exhibition of documents and pictures, showcasing his gardening, handicrafts, and photography as well as how the pavilion was built. Some student interns

majoring in architecture and I offered some reference about the design and structure of the pavilion, but besides that, all the works to be exhibited were done by Qian himself, a representation of his personal taste. In this exhibition, I was a facilitator, not a curator or artist in charge of the content and aesthetics. After two exhibitions by outsider artists in the School, this time I intended to put two basic principles of socially engaged art into practice: de-authorization and de-aestheticization. To my luck, I raised some money from a friend. Qian together with other four villagers went about the project right away. They started from scratch, blazing a trail to the mountain and leveling the land. Unfortunately, when the pavilion was about to be completed, with only the roof to be installed, it was set on fire by the government. As a result, all our efforts for the exhibition went down the drain.

There are many talented craftsmen in Huizhou villages. At the early stage of the Bishan Project, Zuo Jing executed a research project called "Handicraft of Yi County," which was later compiled to a book.[23] The research got on an exhibition tour to many places and secured financial support from the Yi County government. Bishan Village also had a few educated people (I regarded them as farmer-intellectuals). Villager Wang Shouchang's ink drawings of Bishan's historical and current views were made into postcards for sale at the bookstore, and he was paid royalties. Yao Lilan was a retired primary school teacher and his photography works were exhibited in a small showroom converted from a field-side shack by Pig's Inn volunteer Jin Ming. There was an amateur Huangmei Opera troupe in the village, and Wang Chenglong, a young villager who returned from Beijing to the village because of the Bishan Project, created many performance opportunities to increase its income. Qian Shi'an was a versatile craftsman. It was a shame that his tea pavilion and exhibition fell victim to the cancellation of the Bishan Project. I have to admit that the idea of building the "Happiness Pavilion" has something to do with my utopian complex. I am a fan of the book *Shelter*, which was published in 1973 by Lloyd Kahn, who once was the architecture editor of *The Whole Earth Catalog*. *Shelter* collects vernacular architecture all over the world and interviews many hippie communes and introduces their hand-made houses. On its first page, the first line reads: "In times past, people built their own homes, grew their own food, made their own clothes…" I had tried to produce the "Agritopia Dress" and witnessed college graduate

[23] Zuo Jing, ed., *Handicraft in Yi County* (Beijing: Jingcheng Press, 2014).

village official Zhang Yu grow organic rice. So, I hoped to see how the villagers build their own houses with local materials and without the help of modern tools since there was no electricity on the mountain. I persuaded Qian to take part in the project (or more exactly, to lead the project), and I would learn from him. The pavilion could be taken as socially engaged art or simply as a shed on a farmer's own land, so we did not report it to the government. It was mainly because of me that the pavilion was burnt.

In fact, the Bishan Project was banned not only because its art events, thoughts, and statements touched the nerves of Chinese government cultural censorship but, more importantly, because it overstepped the Party's leadership in the countryside. The Beijing central government is not unaware of the problems relating to agriculture, rural areas, and rural population. In fact, rural reform has always been high on the agenda of the central government, with new policies promoting rural construction coming out every year. It has made great strides forward in infrastructures like roads and telecommunications and poverty relief and social security systems. The vast rural land and huge rural population are cornerstones of Chinese society. No rulers of any generation could afford to ignore rural issues. During Xi Jinping's administration, he famously said that "Lucid Waters and Lush Mountains Are Invaluable Assets," stressing the importance not only of economic development based on natural and agricultural resources but also of environment protection and "ecological civilization." Xi attaches great importance to Confucius traditions, advocating *jiafeng* (family ethos) and *xiangxian* (rural sages), and such cultural heritage is concentrated in the countryside. Nevertheless, his authoritarian thoughts are rising, with increasingly hardline diplomacy and tightening grip on Chinese society. After Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping's administrations, "strongman politics" is back in China again.[24] Despite sharing the same goals with the government, the new rural reconstruction movement initiated by unofficial intellectuals takes dramatically different approaches and methods. It doesn't have the political freedom as the rural reconstruction movement in the Republican Era did. Back in that time of wars and warlordism, Liang Shuming could even get authorization from Shandong warlord Han Fuju to reform the Zouping County. Centralization of state

[24] On March 11, 2018, the National People's Congress adopted the amendment to the Constitution of the Republic of China, abolishing the two-term limits on president and enabling Xi Jinping to rule in longer time and even indefinitely.

power can put a lid on chaos, but gambling the hope of good governance on one person or political party and blocking the efforts of other social channels can also lead to a catastrophic deluge.

On the other hand, the Bishan Project also suffered "censorship" from public opinions. The "Theater of the World: Art and China After 1989" that opened in the Guggenheim Museum was boycotted and protested against by a large number of animal activists. For the same matter, some "public opinions" held up their banner of self-styled "political correctness" and pointed finger at the Bishan Project. Although "public opinions" did not have the power or motive to call off the project, yet the social controversy they stirred up gave the government another reason to stop the project. Surely, the criticism from the likes of Zhou Yun was a far cry from "censorship," but the pressure it brought was the same. The social media give a loud voice to "public opinions" and commercial media augment the voice to stand out in attention marketing. Such social ecology creates a level playing field for two sides of debate where eloquence and stress tolerance are weapons. As a practitioner, I have never wavered in my principles and opinions because of praises and criticism. After the Bishan controversy, I did not go out of my way and put on the clothes of Russian farmers like Leo Tolstoy did. He was bedraggled and hobbled along into the public with the help of a stick, only to hide his intellectuality and nobility and show his "down-to-earth-ness." To me, what Tolstoy did was simply "class transvestitism," a kind of *zhuangbility* (a coined word mixing Chinese and English, which roughly means being pretentious) in disguise, because differences in family background, education, and ability cannot be concealed. On the contrary, the right attitude of intellectuals working in the countryside is to acknowledge that different people have different strengths and weaknesses and not to classify people with labels like the "elite" and "common." Different people should respect and learn from each other. Looking down upon or "segregating" farmers shows nothing but a despicable and ridiculous sense of superiority; however, looking up to or deifying them displays a hypocrite moral thirst.

Aftershock

Although the six eventful years have taught me a lot, yet I lost the chance to do further work in the countryside. I am forbidden to conduct any public events in Bishan, and my urban renewal and historic preservation project Kwan-Yen Project in Yantai, Shandong Province, also went through

interference from Beijing. The one-year teaching at Columbia University allowed me time to review and sort through the Bishan Project. Inspired by the French anthropologist Marc Augé's "Place" and "Non-place" theory,[25] I defined the Bishan Project as a "placemaking" praxis. With artistic and cultural forces, through community connection and social movement, "placemaking" not only creates a new physical space but also creates a common spiritual space, turning a village, a block, and even a city into a "Place" that encapsulates historical memory, identity, and social relations. It is the opposite of "Non-place" brought by James C. Scott's "High Modernism" and Marc Augé's "Supermodernity." I extended the Bishan experience to the urban project in Yantai City. I created a non-profit community library in Suochengli, the oldest historical neighborhood in Yantai. The site used to be an empty compound. Architect Dong Gong renovated the original space at my invitation, and I furnished it with books and magazines related to local history. The library hosts exhibitions and lectures for residents in the neighborhood on a regular basis. Suochengli Neighborhood Library bears some resemblance to the Bishan Bookstore and School of Tillers, but it is more similar to the Working Men's Institute I saw in the New Harmony. The Institute is the prototype of American public libraries, and its primary aim is to spread knowledge among labor workers. My plan is to place more small libraries in different neighborhoods of Yantai, offering services to more people just like 7-Eleven convenience stores. I was asked by Beijing to back out, but luckily they did not say no to the Kwan-Yen Project.[26]

After I was forced to leave Bishan, the young volunteers working with me also left. For some time, tourists decreased, but later villagers' Bed & Breakfast hostels increased to over thirty, and the Pig's Inn and Bishan Bookstore are still in business. The Alila boutique hotel project that bought over 200 *mu* (about 13.3-hectare) farmland is breaking ground. Some young people come to Bishan to set up their art studios and small libraries. Others try small-scale organic agriculture and still others run guesthouses. Ding Mu'er, son of Han Yu, the new manager of Pig's Inn, begins to organize art exhibitions and even brews his own craft beer labeled with "Bishan." Bishan does not transform into a rural utopia as I expected. Instead, it becomes a hot tourist destination on *Lonely Planet*.

[25] See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 1995).

[26] For more about Kwan-Yen Project, please see "Topophilia and Placemaking," Chap. 14.

Just like the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill in Kentucky and New Lanark in Scotland, all used-to-be utopias ended up as tourist attractions. Compared with the real McCoy utopias in the free and radical nineteenth century, the Bishan Commune is merely a fantasy in my head that has never materialized. The Bishan Commune I expected is neither an artist village nor an ivory tower. It is supposed to be a mutual-aid community where the villagers are the majority, and they live together, construct hand in hand, and share the results of their joint efforts. Reality shows that it is not easy to realize such a vision. What is impossible is often called a "utopia," since the word originally means "nowhere."

Jingzhou, China Ou Ning