THE EDGES OF THE CITY: THE GENERATIVE FRONTIER IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE FICTION AND ART

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Table of Contents

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………………......3
List of Figures…………………………………………………………………………........6

Introduction………………………………………………………………………………..13
I. Defining the frontier…………………………………………………………...19
II. From the soil to the city – urbanisation in postsocialist China……………………29
III. Postsocialist urban aesthetics…………………………………………………..38
IV. The urban psyche……………………………………………………………...42
V. The generative frontier: space, place, and liminality……………………………..46
VI. Zhang Xiaotao and Zhong Biao………………………………………………..48
VII. Chapter outline………………………………………………………………...59

Chapter One. Blurring the rural-urban binary: liminal space, selfhood, and Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone*…………………………………………………………………………65
I. Outside the city walls: Guo's pre-Anglophone alienation………………………..68
II. Reframing Guo as a Private Writer……………………………………………75
III. Spatialised healing in *Village of Stone*
i. Overview and plot summary…………………………………………82
ii. Rural and urban space………………………………………………...87
iii. Shanhong's trauma and psychological healing…………………………93
IV. Imagined landscapes in *How is Your Fish Today?*……………………………..101

Chapter Two. Skyscrapers in the mist: urban *shanshui* and generative ambiguity…………..111
I. Landscaping the mind: *shanshui* and *woyou*……………………………………116
II. The post-*shanshui* image……………………………………………………..122
III. Ambiguous spatialities: Yang Yongliang's *Artificial Wonderland I*…………......136
IV. *Shanshui* and metafiction in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*…………………………......148
V. Shi Weili: generating new models of the city through *Shan Shui in the World*......161

Chapter Three. The yellow leaves of a building: urban exploration in China and the *Cooling Plan* photography project……………………………………………………………....166
I. Invisible frontiers: an overview of urban exploration…………………………...176
II. The city as virgin territory: ruin porn and the Othering gaze…………………....185
III. Urban exploration in China…………………………………………………...190
IV. Spaces of solitude: the *Cooling Plan* photography project………………………203

Chapter Four. One's back to the city: frontier villages and narratives of healing in Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues*………………………………………………………………………………..220
I. Liminal luminescence in Kaili city……………………………………………...229
II. *Kaili Blues* as healing narrative………………………………………………….237
III. Wild men and the Zone…………………………………………………………247

Conclusion………………………………………………………………………………..255
Bibliography……………………………………………………………………………...270

Acknowledgements………………………………………………………………………292

Abstract

This thesis sets out to map the experiential intersections of frontiers and urban imaginaries in twenty-first-century Chinese cultural production, from the realms of contemporary literature and art through to subcultural and online communities. In doing so, I delineate a creatively potent view of the frontier that I term the "generative frontier", a liminal zone between the edges of known and unknown space, which constitutes a healing encounter for the adventurers who traverse it. Throughout, I seek to advance a cultural turn in contemporary frontier studies, a burgeoning sub-field which is now reframing frontiers as sites of encounter. In conceptualising the "generative frontier" as a site that hovers between the urban and the rural, between human civilisation and the wilderness, I examine how it emerges as both a deterritorialised hybrid space in which urban and natural elements interact to create a defamiliarised and wild environment, as well as a psychological process – a transformative interior journey.

This thesis situates the generative frontier as a curative turn in urban aesthetics that has arisen in response to mainland China's post-90s urbanisation programme, as well as the country's "psy-boom" (*xinli re* 心里热) psychotherapeutic turn in the early 2000s, in order to offer a new vision of spatial edges shaped by urban modernity. Chinese cultural producers are engaging with the generative frontier to move away from narratives of urban dystopias (riven with violence), and its binary, rural utopias (the countryside as both antithesis and antidote to the city). Instead, the examples I relate reveal a new way of conceptualising the individual psyche's relation to environments in the throes of rapid change, experimenting with the generative frontier to facilitate highly psychological depictions of space-making and becoming.

The first chapter examines this new urban imaginary by outlining the relationship between spatial liminality and selfhood in Guo Xiaolu's 郭小橹 2003 novel *Village of Stone*

(*Wo xinzhong de shitou zhen* 我心中的石头镇).[1] It demonstrates how the generative frontier aesthetic in the novel emerges in the shifting ways that the protagonist's inner self relates to familiar and unfamiliar space, eventually giving rise to her narrative of psychological healing. The chapter positions Guo in the field of Anglophone literature today as well as in the context of 1990s mainland Chinese literary aesthetics, particularly that of Private Writing (*siren xiezuo* 私人写作). While Guo has mostly been studied in terms of national identity, global mobility, and transculturalism, this chapter reveals that a localised sense of spatial liminality is present in her pre-Anglophone work.

An extended discussion of *Village of Stone* interprets Shitou 石头 fishing village as a wild frontier space and the site of protagonist Jiang Shanhong's 蒋珊红 original trauma, while Beijing emerges as a space of physical and mental retreat. The chapter advances a Winnicottian framework to understand this healing arc, examining the ways in which spatial liminality and the eventual dilution of the rural-urban binary enable Shanhong to move past her childhood trauma. I also discuss Guo's 2006 film *How Is Your Fish Today?* (*Jintian de yu zenmeyang?* 今天的鱼怎么样?), which deploys a metanarrative to explore the relationships between imaginary landscapes and healing. I suggest that the film and the novel should be viewed as companion pieces to each other, as they draw on much of the same source material to advance interlocking variations on the generative frontier.

The second chapter takes as its main subjects the work of digital photomontage artist Yang Yongliang 杨永梁, and filmmaker Jia Zhangke's 贾樟柯 celebrated 2006 *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人), to explore the "post-*shanshui* [山水] image" in China today. Both Yang and Jia have fused elements of *shanshui* art, the traditional genre of Chinese "mountain-

[1] The Chinese title translates to "The Stone Village in my Heart". Note also that this thesis follows the Modern Language Association (MLA) citation and format style, which recommends including Chinese characters, *pinyin*, and the English translation in the text.

water" landscape painting which rose to prominence under the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), with scenes of the accelerated tempo of China's contemporary built environment. But what happens when the *shanshui* tradition (and its renditions of unadulterated rural idylls) is appropriated for twenty-first century Chinese urban landscapes – often, bleak scenes of extensive demolition – by artists today?

The chapter demonstrates that Yang's photomontages and Jia's *Still Life* explore the theme of urban anxiety by embracing a *shanshui*-inspired visual schema that, in turn, gives rise to a soothing ambient aesthetic. In particular, it examines how *woyou* 卧游, a concept of mind-travel associated with the aesthetics of classical *shanshui* painting, has been reinvented in the process. It has instead become a therapeutic philosophy of the generative frontier that seeks to heal the ruptures of China's urban-rural divide within the frame.

The third chapter turns towards a more amateur dimension of Chinese ruin representation, encompassing a study of visual material produced by practitioners of the "urban exploration" subculture, who advance a vision of the urban ruin as a site of pleasure and a space for ego formation. A thriving global subculture, urban exploration is a practice of recreational trespass into temporary, obsolete, abandoned, and derelict areas within built environments. In China, groups such as the Scouts Urban Exploration Team (*Beijing chihou chengtan zhanshu xiaodui* 北京斥候城探战术小队) pursue it as an authentic yet playful means of alleviating urban alienation and everyday boredom.

The chapter's primary focus of study here is the *Cooling Plan* (*Lengque jihua* 冷却计划) online photography project, set up in 2006 by the Beijing-based artist and urban explorer Zhao Yang 赵阳. The chapter demonstrates how using ruined space as a site for adventure enables the practitioner to craft and project an explorer alter-ego via the ludic act of image-making, concentrating on the playful apocalyptic aesthetics of Zhao's images of sites such as the abandoned Shougang 首钢 Steel Plant, the Chaonei 朝内 81 mansion, and the

Xiaotangshan 小汤山 SARS hospital sites in Beijing. Zhao's blend of photography and simulative play presents the ruin as a creative refuge which helps the explorer build a restorative sense of individual autonomy and mitigate the negative mental impact of the "seen" city.

The final chapter discusses the work of filmmaker Bi Gan 毕赣 in the context of the generative frontier, examining how he treats narratives of sickness and journeying towards health. Turning inwards, away from the gritty realism of the directors associated with China's Sixth Generation, Bi's cinema is more interested in innovative ways of foregrounding the psychology of the individual. The chapter invokes sociologist Arthur Frank's classic templates of sickness narratives to examine the generative frontier as a space in which such stories might unfold.

The chapter largely attends to Bi's intensely lyrical 2015 film *Kaili Blues* (*Lu bian ye can* 路边野餐): its protagonist leaves Kaili , a county-level city in Guizhou province, and finds himself in an otherworldly riverside village named Dangmai 荡麦.[2] But If *Kaili Blues* can be read as a quest narrative – in search of healing – then it is one contingent on latent elements of Othering and exoticism that gently trouble the smooth dreamlike consistency of the quest narrative itself (the chapter explores such primitivist tropes, chiefly through the figure of the minoritized "wild man").

Taken as a whole, the thesis frames the generative frontier – advanced by a mode of cultural production which portrays urban space in flux, shifting between states of degradation and renewal, and thrillingly unfamiliar to its explorers – as a zone of healing. Its treatment of narratives of the frontier and encounters with the Other gestures towards a new curative approach to the themes of Chinese urban modernity and psychological distress.

[2] The Chinese title of the film translates to "Roadside Picnic".

List of Figures

Figure 1: Zheng Bo 鄭波. *Weed Party* (*Tipai* 稊派). 2015 – ongoing. Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai, leoxuprojects.com/?p=3545

Figure 2: Xu Zhen 徐震. *8848-1.86*. 2005. Tate, London, tate.org.uk/art/artworks/xu-8848-1-86-t12853

Figure 3: Lily and Honglei. *Shadow Play: Tales of Urbanization in China*. 2014 – ongoing. New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc., turbulence.org/Works/shadowplay/vr-shadowplay.html

Figures 4-5: Zhang Xiaotao 张小涛. *Mist* (*Miwu* 迷雾). 2008. Pékin Fine Arts Gallery, Beijing, vimeo.com/244968178

Figures 6-9: Zhang Xiaotao 张小涛. *Sakya* (*Sajia* 萨迦). 2011. Pékin Fine Arts Gallery, Beijing, vimeo.com/206016916

Figure 10: Zhong Biao 钟飙. *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西游记). 2015. Artist's website, artbiao.com/newsshow.php?id=2161&pid=511

Figure 11: Zhou Hongbin 周宏斌. *Mystical Garden – 6* (*Shenmi yuan liu* 神秘园 6). 2007. Artist's website, zhouhongbin1.zxart.cn/Acdsee/13730

Figures 12-15: *How Is Your Fish Today?* (*Jintian de yu zenmeyang?* 今天的鱼怎么样?). Directed by Guo Xiaolu 郭小橹. Les Films Des Paradoxe, 2006

Figure 16: Yan Wengui 燕文貴. *Pavilions and Mansions by Mountains and Rivers* (*Jiangshan lou guan tu* 江山楼观图). ca. 967-1044. Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts, Osaka, chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-yan-wengui-mountains-and-rivers.php

Figure 17: Ni Youyu 倪有魚. *Landscape Case* (*Ban shan xiang* 半山箱). 2009. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong, mplus.org.hk/tc/collection/objects/landscape-case-2012757

Figure 18: Liu Wei 刘韡. *Looks Like a Landscape* (*Fengjing* 风景). 2004. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong, mplus.org.hk/en/collection/objects/landscape-2012636

Figure 19: Huang Yan 黃岩. *Chinese Landscape Tattoo No. 2* (*Zhongguo shanshui wenshen zhi er* 中國山水紋身之二). 1999. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/77588

Figure 20: Zhang Xiaotao 张小涛. *The Decay of Landscape* (*Kuilan de shanshui* 潰爛的山水). 2004. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong, mplus.org.hk/en/collection/objects/the-decay-of-landscape-20121380

Figure 21: Wang Tiande 王天德. *Gu Mountain 1* (*Gu shan 1* 孤山 1). 2006. Chambers Fine Art, New York, chambersfineart.com/exhibitions/made-by-tiande-ii/selected-works

Figure 22: Yao Lu 姚璐. *Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock* (*Xing chun gudu tu* 行春古渡图). 2006. Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing, i.cafa.edu.cn/sub_artist/fac/show/?ai=110728&c=211&x=4&n=1396#

Figure 23: Michael Cherney 秋麦. *Night Rain on the Xiao Xiang* (*Xiaoxiang ye yu* 瀟湘夜雨). 2008. Artist’s website, qiumai.net/xxbj/xxbj08detail.html

Figure 24: Jennifer Wen Ma 马文. *Hanging Garden in Ink* (*Kongzhong mo huayuan* 空中墨花园). 2012. Artist’s website, littlemeat.net/hanging-garden-in-ink

Figure 25: MAD Architects. Design model of *Chaoyang Park Plaza*. 2017. Artist’s website, www.i-mad.com/press/mad-completes-chaoyang-park-plaza-beijing

Figure 26: Joseph Michael Gandy. *A Bird’s-eye view of the Bank of England*. 1830. Sir John Soane’s Museum, London, collections.soane.org/object-p267

Figure 27: Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁. *Greece 1* (*Xila zhi yi* 希腊之一). 2010. Artist’s website, www.yangyongliang.com/greece

Figures 28-30: Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁. *Artificial Wonderland I* (*Renzao xianjing yi* 人造仙境一). 2010. Artist's website, www.yangyongliang.com/new-gallery-97

Figures 31-35: *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人). Directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯. British Film Institute, 2006.

Figure 36: *Memoria*. Apichatpong Weerasethakul. 2021. Still from *Taylorholmes.com*, taylorholmes.com/2022/01/30/the-inscrutable-movie-memoria-dissected-and-meaning-guessed-at/, accessed 6 October 2022.

Figures 37-39: Shi Weili 石伟力. *Shan Shui in the World* (*Shijian shanshui* 世间山水). 2016 – ongoing. Artist's website, shi-weili.com/shan-shui-in-the-world

Figure 40: Huang Rui 黄锐. *Chai-na/ China – 5* (拆那-CHINA NO.5). 2005. 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong, 10chancerylanegallery.com/artists/main/huang-rui/artworks-en

Figure 41: Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁. *Outside no. 3* (*Waimian zhi san* 外面之三). 2005. www.yangyongliang.com/outside

Figure 42: Troy Paiva. *The Staircase*. 2005-7. Artist's website, lostamerica.com/photo-items/byron-hot-springs-resort

Figure 43: Promotional shot for NikeLAB ACG 2014 A/W campaign. Image from dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/22943/1/first-look-nike-reworks-all-conditions-gear

Figure 44: Bradley L. Garrett. *Firth on Forth*. *Flickr*, 21 December 2017, www.flickr.com/photos/30218751@N05/27408531109/in/photostream/lightbox, accessed 6 October 2022.

Figure 45: Caspar David Friedrich. *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. 1817. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog.jpg

Figure 46: Screenshot of the UERChina.com homepage, accessed 6 October 2022.

Figure 47: Screenshot from "Originating from the catacombs of Paris, and popular in Europe for many years, domestic urban exploration is now on the rise" (Qiyuan bali rengu dong, fengmi Ouzhou duonian, guonei chengshi tanxian yundong zhengzai jueqi 起源巴黎人骨洞，风靡欧洲多年，国内城市探险运动正在崛起). *Tencent Video*, uploaded by Nixingzhe 逆行者, 9 June 2017, v.qq.com/x/page/w0512tyxt2z.html. Accessed on 11 November 2011; link inactive on 6 October 2022.

Figure 48: Screenshot from "HK Urbex: Inside a Creepy Chinese Psychiatric Hospital". *YouTube*, uploaded by HK URBEX 城市探險, 11 July 2014, youtube.com/watch?v=qvn9gaScP-8&ab_channel=HK URBEX 城市探險. Accessed 6 October 2022.

Figure 49: Screenshot of Zhao Yang's 赵阳 coolingplan.com (*Lengque jihua* 冷却计划) homepage. Accessed 6 October 2022.

Figure 50: Screenshot of the "About *Cooling Plan*" (*Guanyu Lengque Jihua* 关于冷却计划) page from coolingplan.com. Accessed 6 October 2022.

Figure 51: Zhao Yang 赵阳. Image 1 from *Military Hospital* (*Jun yiyuan* 军医院). 2014. Artist's website, www.coolingplan.com/军医院

Figure 52: Zhao Yang 赵阳. Image 1 from *Shangyi Normal School* (*Shangyi shifan xuexiao* 上义师范学校). 2012. Artist's website, www.coolingplan.com/上义师范学校

Figures 53-54: Zhao Yang 赵阳. Images 1 and 19 from *Chaonei 81* (*Chaonei 81 Hao* 朝内 81 号). 2006-13. Artist's website, www.coolingplan.com/朝内 81 号

Figure 55: Zhao Yang 赵阳. Image 3 from *A Fantastical Walk Through a Theatre* (*Juchang huan zou* 剧场幻走). 2015. Artist's website, www.coolingplan.com/剧场幻走

Figures 56-59: *Kaili Blues* (*Lu bian ye can* 路边野餐). Directed by Bi Gan 毕赣. Grasshopper Film, 2015.

Figure 60: Initial poster for Bi Gan's second film *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Image from *Cineaste.com*, www.cineaste.com/summer2019/poetics-and-periphery-journey-of-kaili-blues. Accessed 6 October 2022.

Figure 61: Cheng Ran 程然. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Shaonian Weite de Fannao* 少年维特的烦恼). 2009. Artist's website, http://chengranstudio.cn/archives/35

Figure 62: Chen Wei 陈维. *The Stars in the Night Sky Are Innumerable* (*Yekong Xingxing Wushu* 夜空星星无数. 2010. Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai, leoxuprojects.com/?page_id=97

Figures 63-68: *Kaili Blues* (*Lu bian ye can* 路边野餐). Directed by Bi Gan 毕赣. Grasshopper Film, 2015.

Figure 69: *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人). Directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯. British Film Institute, 2006.

Across the street there is a house under construction,
abandoned to the rain. Secretly, I shall go to work on it.
— Frank O'Hara, "Cambridge" (lines 16-17)

In the middle of the night, when Hushan and Niansi were in bed, the skylight above suddenly flung open, and they could hear the calls of the wild geese flying overhead. Empty and lonely feelings welled up in them both. Niansi whispered, "The frontier is so beautiful."[3]
— Can Xue, *Frontier* (52)

[3] *Dangtian banye li, Hushan he Niansi shui zai chuang shang, shangmian yijing guanbi de tianchuang turan zidong de chengkai le, tamen liang ren dou tingdao le feiguo de dayan de jiaocheng, liangren dou cong xinli yongchu kongkuang er huangliang de ganjue. Niansi xiaosheng shuo: "bianjiang zhen mei."* 当天半夜里，胡闪和年思睡在床上，上面已经关闭的天窗突然自动地撑开了，他们两人都听到了飞过的大雁的叫声，两人都从心里涌出空旷而荒凉的感觉。年思小声说："边疆真美。" All translations my own unless stated otherwise in the bibliography.

Introduction

In Can Xue's 残雪 2008 novel *Frontier* (*Bianjiang* 边疆), the married couple Niansi 年思 and Hushan 胡闪 leave their hometown Smoke City (*Dayan Cheng* 大烟城) to strike out and begin new lives in Pebble Town (*Xiaoshi Cheng* 小石城), a remote settlement at the base of a snow-capped mountain and located in the hinterlands of northwest China. Described as a "small frontier town" (*bianjiang xiaocheng* 边疆小城; 2), Pebble Town turns out to be a dreamlike and disjointed threshold place, full of illusory elements that make little ontological sense to its residents or the reader. In this strange geography, snow leopards and Mongolian wolves sporadically roam the streets; a tropical garden disappears and reappears; and odd sounds and voices are emitted from the ground. It is implied that Pebble Town's topological position gives rise to these magical qualities; at one point, Niansi comments, "Everything here feels so unclear and mixed together. Even so, there's a kind of magnetic force to this place. Look at that eagle, it's flying and stopping… Everything's unresolved" (57).[4] And yet, as the narrative progresses and places beyond Pebble Town start to assert their own affective pull over the characters, we see that frontiers here are not necessarily bound to national borders or even specific geographic locations. Even populous Smoke City, which is initially written in contrast to Pebble Town as the urbanised, known world, is eventually reframed as *terra incognita*: "The longer [Niansi] was away, the more unfamiliar [Smoke City] became, and the more she felt attracted to it" (233).[5] It transpires that, for Can, the frontier is ultimately a state of mind – a moveable and experiential quality that can imbue even a teeming metropolis.

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[4] *Wo gandao zheli a, hen duo shiqing fen bu qing, guan jiaza zai yikuai. Zenme shuo ne, zheli haishi hen you xiyinli de, ni kan na zhi ying, fei fei ting ting de...... suoyou de shi dou xuan'erweijue a.* 我感到这里啊，很多事情分不清，全夹杂在一块。怎么说呢，这里还是很有吸引力的，你看那只鹰，飞飞停停的……所有的事都悬而未决啊。

[5] *Yue likai de jiu, naga chengshi jiu yue mosheng, dui ta de xiyinli jiu yue da.* 越离开得久，那个城市就越陌生，对她的吸引力就越大。

Elsewhere, right in the heart of China's largest city, an equally mobile vision of the frontier emerges in a piece from artist Zheng Bo's 鄭波 ongoing *Weed Party* (*Tipai* 稊派) series:

Figure 1: Zheng Bo, *Weed Party*, 2015 – ongoing

Here, we see a living installation made up of soil, stones, and different plant varieties, all transplanted into a small room at the top of an abandoned factory in central Shanghai (figure 1). Within this dilapidated building, and surrounded by harsh strip-lighting and clinical white walls (which fittingly evoke Marc Augé's ideas of non-places), Zheng has cultivated an alien expanse of vegetation, made even vaster with the help of large mirrors which stretch the scene into infinity.[6] The viewer is cast in the role of explorer and, by way of a crude path, invited to hike through the weeds, which seem to have grown against the odds and stand as transcendent

[6] First theorised by anthropologist Marc Augé in his 1995 book *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, the term "non-place" refers to the homogenous and identikit spaces of transitory flow which have come to characterise late modernity. Augé writes: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (77-78). Examples include airports, railway stations, office blocks, business hotels, and shopping malls. As with the presentation of the frontier here, Augé makes it clear that the perception of a non-place (or indeed, a place) is subjective and shifting (78). For example, an airport would not be a non-place for a person who works there every day and has formed a relationship with the site.

harbingers of a new world. Zheng's own comments about the work beckon us towards this alternate reality when he speculates: "Homo sapiens may finally come to respect the vanguardism of weeds, which have always tried to pull us into a rewilded future" ("Zheng Bo: Weed Party"). The unexpected urban placement of the installation suggests the omnipresence of wildness in human lives – it's simply a matter of knowing how to *look* at the city, the installation seems to say.

This thesis explores the individualistic and experiential nature of frontiers in relation to twenty-first century Chinese urbanism, as displayed in these two examples by Can and Zheng. In her influential 2005 study of resource frontiers in Indonesia, the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing defines the frontier as not "a place or even a process", but instead, as an "imaginative project." She goes on to write, "It is a space of desire: it calls; it appears to create its own demands; once glimpsed, one cannot but explore and exploit it" (32). I investigate this creatively charged view of the frontier from a Chinese cultural perspective, exploring artistic representations of how frontier imaginaries intersect with the individual urban psyche in contemporary literature and visual culture. I demonstrate how the frontier manifests as a "space of desire" in a selection of urban-themed cultural works, and within this, I argue for the recognition of what I term the "generative frontier", a liminal zone which constitutes a healing psychological encounter at the very edges of human settlement for the adventurers who traverse it. The majority of the texts and artworks I place in this category emerged after the early 2000s, and the generative turn in urban aesthetics I identify here also coincides with the rise of the "psy-boom" (*xinli re* 心里热). This term refers to the heightened demand for psychological services and associated culture (e.g. self-help books and confessional talk shows), which have now become "an indispensable dimension of individual and interpersonal experience in urban China" (Hsuan-Ying Huang 183).

As the following chapters demonstrate, the generative frontier functions in these texts as a liminal zone that hovers between human civilisation and the wilderness. It is portrayed both as a psychological process – the people who pass through typically undergo some kind of transformative interior journey – and as a deterritorialised hybrid space in which urban and natural elements interact to create a defamiliarised and wild environment. These natural elements often contain exoticising motifs which serve to distinguish the explorer-self from the Other, and these are often couched in racial, bodily, and gendered terms. In Can's *Frontier*, the essentialising portrayal of the character Ying 樱 (a man who works at the local Design Institute and who Niansi meets soon after arriving in Pebble Town) is an obvious example of this tendency. Can writes:

> It was a black person speaking. He smiled, showing bright shiny teeth. Niansi had been a little frightened the first time she ran into him because she hadn't ever imagined there would be black Africans at the Design Institute - and one speaking her own language at that. The black person's name was Ying. He was slim and handsome, and about thirty years old.
>
> [...]
>
> Ying also said that night was the hardest time of the day for him. He felt then that his black body had completely disappeared, yet he could still hear the ceaseless African drumbeat of ancient mother earth. He would often go out into the open fields and, facing the moon, bay four or five times like a wild beast. (111-112)[7]

Throughout the novel, Ying is written in this type of bestial and folksy language, and almost always with reference to his blackness. Niansi is initially wary of his appearance – on their first

[7] *Shi heiren zai shuohua, ta hai xiao le yi xiao, luchu shanshan faliang de yachi. Niansi gang lai shi bei ta xia le yi tiao, yinwei ta wanwan meixiangdao sheji yuan li hui you Feizhou de heiren, erqie shuo zhe ta ziyi de yuyan. Heiren de mingzi jiao Ying, qingshou de shencai, yingjun de mianmao, dayue sanshi sui zuoyou.* […] *Ying hai shuo, meitian yeli shi ta zui nan'ao de shiguang. Ta juede ziji na hei hei de shenti wanquan le, ran'er hai keyi tingdao Feizhou gulao dadi shang de gusheng buduan chuanlai. Shichang, ta chumen laidao kuangye li, xiang yeshou yiyang mian chao yueliang diao name si wu sheng.* 是黑人在说话，他还笑了一笑，露出闪闪发亮的牙齿。年思刚来时被他吓了一跳，因为她万万没想到设计院里会有非洲的黑人，而且说着她自己的语言。黑人的名字叫樱，清瘦的身材，英俊的面貌，大约三十岁左右。...... 樱还说，每天夜里是他最难熬的时光。他觉得自己那黑黑的身体完全消失了，然而还可以听到非洲古老大地上的鼓声不断传来。时常，他出门来到旷野里，像野兽一样面朝月亮叫那么四五声。

meeting, we are told that "his face looked a little fierce, like a black panther" (*ta de mianxiang youdian xiong, xiang yi zhi hei bao* 他的面相有点凶，像一只黑豹; 112) – and his presence serves to accentuate the strangeness of the frontier zone, adding another wild and mystical dimension to this already disjointed space. At the same time, Ying also imparts his folk wisdom and spiritual gifts (for instance, he is shown as having a unique evolutionary connection with nature) to the novel's protagonists in a way that is analogous to the "Magical Negro" trope of Hollywood cinema.[8] Niansi quickly learns that Ying is no threat – although she is "a little frightened", he "smiled, kindly and amiably" (*jiu xiao kai le, heshan er qinqie* 就笑开了，和善而亲切; 112) upon seeing her – and her adult daughter Liujin 六瑾 eventually falls in love with him. Ying fulfils the saintly stock role of "the noble, good-hearted black man or woman" (Appiah 80), and thereby facilitates the growth of the Han Chinese protagonists as they negotiate the exhilarating and strange terrain of the frontier.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that the generative frontier has emerged as an aesthetic response to mainland China's post-1990s urbanisation programme, offering a new vision of spatial edges shaped by urban modernity. The examples I lay out here all reveal a deep preoccupation with how the individual psyche relates to urban environments in the throes of rapid development and demolition. As I discuss later in this opening chapter, most of the scholarly work carried out here has concentrated on evaluating the ways in which urban fiction

[8] The term "Magical Negro" became widespread after a 2001 lecture by film director Spike Lee, in which he criticised the phenomenon for "recycling the noble savage and the happy slave" racial stereotypes (Gonzalez). Theorised as "the Saint" by scholars like Kwame Anthony Appiah in 1993, the Magical Negro stock character is a black person (usually patient and wise, sometimes elderly) whose narrative purpose is to facilitate character development in a white protagonist (or in the case of Can Xue's *Frontier* and other texts/artworks in this category, in a Han Chinese protagonist). While the portrayal is often intended as positive (as in Can's novel), the Magical Negro character serves no serious purpose beyond this supporting role. Accordingly, Ying helps Niansi's daughter Liujin (who is fascinated by his blackness) on her developmental journey. A sample sentence: "Liujin took a closer look at the kind expression on Ying's face. She vaguely felt something, and the anger in her heart vanished at once. She recalled the bottomless spirals of his hair." *(Liujin zixi kan le kan Ying lian shang cixiang de biaoqing, momohuhu de gandao le shenme, xinli de qi yixiazi xiao le. Ta jiqi le Ying toufa li naxie wu di de xuanwo.* 六瑾仔细看了看樱脸上慈祥的表情，模模糊糊地感到了什么，心里的气一下子消了。她记起了樱头发里那些无底的旋涡。; 316).

and artworks engage with broad social and ecological themes. An especially rich topic has been the discourse surrounding contemporary Chinese urban ruins, and how artists have typically approached these as "scars in spatial form left by traumatic events" (Braester 155). It is undeniable that most Chinese urban-themed art and literature operates in an overwhelmingly dystopian mood. Yet I argue that, despite (or even because of) this, some artists and writers are using frontier tropes to move narratives of twenty-first century Chinese urbanism beyond the prevailing preoccupation with dislocation and violence. The works I explore here experiment with generative urban frontiers to facilitate highly psychological depictions of space-making and becoming. Throughout, I seek to advance a cultural turn in contemporary frontier studies, a burgeoning sub-field which is now reframing frontiers as sites of encounter and "zones of unpredictability" (Tsing 279), and expanding our understandings of the term beyond the established issues of territorial boundaries and geopolitical conflict. In this respect, I develop the recent work of heritage scholars Hayley Saul and Emma Waterton, who have called for frontiers to be re-examined as "powerful and extraordinary social *encounters* that are imaginative, affective and transformative" (5).

In this introductory chapter, I begin by establishing how this thesis understands the concept of the frontier. While some see the frontier as a combative space or a geopolitical boundary, I view it as an experiential, mobile zone which facilitates encounters between the self and the Other. I then give an overview of China's postsocialist urban transformation and how this process has been interpreted by scholars and creative producers. As I have already noted, the tendency has been to focus on a dystopian view of the urban and to reinforce the existing city-countryside dichotomy. My thesis makes an original intervention within the field by foregrounding how the generative frontier destabilises this binary model of the rural and the urban, and creates a defamiliarising hybrid zone between the two. I then link the generative frontier to "the presence of all things psychological – ideas, views, attitudes, practices, and

styles – in popular media and everyday life in today's urban China" (Hsuan-Ying Huang 183), citing recent literature on China's psy-boom. Following this, I suggest that frontier artworks and texts are interested in depicting how known urban *place* is defamiliarised to the point that it becomes wild, liminal *space*, and moreover, that this process is a cipher for therapeutic transformation. As a prelude to the case studies and close readings that follow in this thesis, I bring the introduction to a close by discussing artworks by Zhang Xiaotao 张小涛 and Zhong Biao 钟飙 to differentiate themes of Chinese urbanity – namely, the utopian-dystopian binary and the generative frontier, and to provide further clarity on how the latter emerges in the texts I have selected.

Finally, I provide a detailed outline of the four subsequent chapters which will give evidence for my argument: the city as a space of healing in early Chinese-language work by the Anglophone writer Guo Xiaolu 郭小橹; urban-inflected *shanshui* 山水 (mountain-water) landscapes, which include digital artist Yang Yongliang's 杨泳梁 photo composites, director Jia Zhangke's 贾樟柯 2006 film *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人), and a computer-generated painting project by New York-based digital media artist Shi Weili 石伟力; the ludic aesthetics of the urban exploration subculture in China; and how illness narratives and manifestations of Otherness shape director Bi Gan's 毕赣 2015 film *Kaili Blues* (*Lu bian ye can* 路边野餐).

I. Defining the frontier

Defining the frontier is no straightforward task, as noted by Henk van Houtum and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy when they write that the frontier is "anarchic, liberating, unstable, fertile, and because of this bewildering ambiguity, also one of the most contested concepts in geography"

(1).[9] Frontier studies in the Chinese context have so far largely been the preserve of historians, geographers and social scientists, and much of this work has been to do with the sensitive subject of People's Republic of China (PRC) territory and its borderlands (e.g. Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang).[10] Within China, and led by influential figures such as the historian and state policy advisor Ma Dazheng 马达正, the field (known as *bianjiangxue* 边疆学) has adopted a nationalist agenda and is most interested in territorial differentiation. Discussions of the frontier are usually focussed on geopolitical issues of governance and security, and often with an applied purpose and state ethnic policy in mind.[11]

It is therefore unsurprising that Ma advances a definition of the frontier which seeks to justify the Chinese Community Party's (CCP) view of China's boundaries, stating in a 2012 interview printed in *The Chinese Historical Review* that: "There are two preconditions that make a region into a frontier. The first is that the region must be on the national boundary. […] The second precondition is that a region possesses unique historical, ethnic, and cultural features differentiating it from China Proper. The organic combination of these two preconditions determines a status of land frontier". He goes on to add: "The frontier is indivisible from territorial sovereignty and is crucial to promoting patriotism" (Ma and Shan 67-68). For Ma, the frontier is used to draw conceptual distinctions between Han Chinese civilisation ("China Proper") and China's ethnic minorities. As Xinjiang specialist Gardner Bovingdon has noted, many of these domestic scholars of the frontier "have mounted a

[9] As my focus here is on artistic representations of an urban-inflected frontier, it is beyond the purview of this thesis to delve deeply into all the definitional debates surrounding the term, which many disciplines have refined to serve their purposes (especially geography, history, and international relations). For an overview of these discussions, see van Houtoum and Bueno Lacy's helpful summary (1-8).

[10] Scholarship on China's frontiers includes David Tobin's 2020 book *Securing China's Northwest Frontier: Identity and Insecurity in Xinjiang*; Kyle J. Gardner's 2021 *The Frontier Complex: Geopolitics and the Making of the India-China Border, 1846-1962*; and James A. Milward's *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*. Much of this research acknowledges the highly constructed nature of the frontier and discusses frontier theory in the Chinese context from a historical or political perspective.

[11] See Patrick Fuliang Shan's 2012 interview with Ma Dazheng for Ma's candid summary of the history and the state of frontier studies within China.

multifaceted effort to ward off the threat of self-determination in China's peripheral regions" (164).[12]

Given China's abiding focus on its borderlands, it is unsurprising that the frontier was primarily seen through a territorial lens in a large group exhibition which ran at OCAT Shanghai and Beijing in late 2017, titled *Frontier: Re-Assessment of Post-Globalisational Politics* (*Jiangyu: diyuan de tapu* 疆域—地缘的拓扑).[13] In his curatorial notes, Lu Mingjun 鲁明军 frames frontiers as premodern products of empire and "buffer zones for [now-existing] nation states" (2), and writes that his selected artists hold this view of the frontier up to critical scrutiny. While many of the pieces cultivate an ironicising and knowing tone, the exhibition does not unyoke itself from the limiting definition of the frontier as a combative and contested space to be tamed. The works Lu brought together included He Xiangyu's 2017 何翔宇 documentary film *The Swim* (*Youyong* 游泳), in which the artist records himself attempting to swim across the Yalu River into North Korea; and video footage of Cai Guo-Qiang's 蔡国强 *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extra-terrestrials No. 10* (*Jiang Wanli Changcheng yanchang yi wan mi* 将万里长城延长一万米), showing Cai's famous 1993 pyrotechnic display along six miles of the Great Wall.

[12] See Bovingdon on Ma's internally-circulated document from 2003, titled *National Interest Above All Else: Observations and Reflections on the Xinjiang Stability Issue* (*Guojia liyi gaoyu yiqie Xinjiang wending wenti de guancha yu sikao* 国家利益高于一切新疆稳定问题的观察与思考). In this text, Ma argues that "Hans are the most reliable force for stability in Xinjiang" (Bovingdon 54).
[13] Note that the Chinese title "Jiangyu" is more accurately translated as "Territory".

Figure 2: Still from Xu Zhen, *8848-1.86*, 2005

A particularly clear example of the frontier as national construct and foci for political point scoring could be seen in Xu Zhen's 徐震 8-minute film *8848-1.86*, which depicts his provocative Mount Everest ascent in 2005. In this performance, Xu's team successfully reach the summit and proceed to saw off 186 centimetres of ice off the mountain (this trophy was subsequently displayed alongside visual documentation of the climb at the Yokohama International Triennial in 2005). Xu thereby scuppered the original Mount Everest measurements of 8848 meters, which a team of British cartographers took in 1856. In this still from the film (figure 2), we see Xu and his friends posing defiantly in front of the mountain with a Chinese national flag and decked out in full high-altitude gear (the figure on the left, in particular, is glowering at the camera). Xu's act (and his macho pose) can be read as a spirited

challenge to the entitlement of nineteenth-century British colonialists, but it is also an act of modern-day environmental degradation. Furthermore, his criticism of the British explorers is undermined by how he himself shows scant regard for the sacred status the mountain still holds in Tibetan Buddhist culture (Harris 237). *8848-1.86* encapsulates the Janus-faced nature of the frontier myth: the explorer's experience takes priority over any others who might also have a stake in the space.

Given the tenor of domestic and international commentary on China's sovereignty (e.g. the status of Xinjiang), it is unsurprising that, in the public imagination, it is the geopolitical view of the frontier-as-boundary which has prevailed. In contrast to Ma Dazheng's territorial definition or the OCAT artists' performative acts of national one-upmanship or their playful probing of legal borders, the generative frontier I identify here is in a markedly different register (although there is naturally some thematic overlap – for instance, in self-defining encounters with the Other). In this respect, this thesis advances a new cultural approach to frontier studies in the Chinese context. The works I explore here are more invested in the frontier as a site of pregnant, affective ambiguity – the idea, as Can Xue's Niansi put it, that everything feels unresolved and "mixed together" (*quan jiaza zai yikuai* 全夹杂在一块; 57). Instead of the macho scrum of geopolitical tussle, this thesis is more concerned with affective depictions of the frontier as "the extreme limit of settled land beyond which lies wilderness" ("Frontier").[14] Here, I follow the aforementioned heritage scholars Hayley Saul and Emma Waterton who have called for "a re-examination of frontiers" to enable "a more complex and subtle emotional geography [to be] charted" (3). Indeed, Saul and Waterton have gone so far as to suggest that the "curious dearth of academic engagement on the nature and meaning of 'frontier'" has itself

[14] This is the second basic definition of the frontier given by the Oxford English Dictionary. The first is that a frontier is "a line or border separating two countries", which is more akin to Ma Dazheng's view.

perpetuated "a mythology that remains inherently uneven, racist, exploitative and chauvinistic" (2).

Accordingly, in the texts and artworks I explore here, the protagonists evoke this "extreme limit" in their personal journeys through life, gravitating towards marginal spaces and states while seeking out encounters with the unknown. In chapter five of Can's *Frontier*, the character Xiaogui 小贵 reflects on how, "Originally, she and [her husband Xiaoli 小里] had lived in a southern city. Later, every few years, they moved a little further to the north and settled in a city there. They went on like this for over ten years before they finally resolved to take the train to Pebble Town, the most northern place possible" (121).[15] Throughout this process, Xiaogui had felt the alluring draw of "a silent glacial zone" (*jijing de bingchuan didai* 寂静的冰川地带) – presumably the Arctic – but "in the end they couldn't get to the polar region, and so they settled in this frontier town" (121).[16] With each move, Xiaogui and Xiaoli inched further away from the moorings of human society and towards a fantasy landscape imagined as an otherworldly void. For Xiaogui, the northern imaginary embodies a psychological antidote, and I discuss the frontier in these therapeutic terms and as a genre directly linked to twenty-first century urban anxiety later in this chapter. For now, I will concentrate on the defining features of the frontier itself – as a liminal space on the very edge of human habitation.

Firstly, frontiers are zonal thresholds rather than precise delineating lines, e.g. a boundary. Geographers typically begin their English language definitions of the frontier by

[15] *Yuanxian ta he Xiaoli zhu zai nanbian de chengshi li, houlai mei de ji nian tamen jiu wang beibian zou yi duan lu, dingju dao yi ge chengshi. Zheme zouzoutingting de, jingguo le shi ji nian, cai xia ding juexin zuo huoche laidao le zui beibian de Xiaoshi Cheng.* 原先她和小里住在南边的城市里，后来每隔几年，他们就往北边走一段路，定居到一个城市。这么走走停停的，经过了十几年，才下定决心坐火车来到了最北边的小石城。

[16] *Ran'er, tamen zhong jiu dao buliao jidi, tamen zai zhege bianjiang chengshi dingju le.* 然而，他们终究到不了极地，他们在这个边疆城市定居了。

drawing this dimensional distinction and establishing the distinguishing affects and aspects.[17] In his classic 1959 comparative study of the two terms, political geographer Ladis K. D. Kristof defines a boundary as "inward-oriented" (270) and a fixed demarcation which separates different political entities, stressing that a frontier was not originally a legal construct in the same way. Instead, the frontier emerged as a result of the "spontaneous tendency for growth of the ecumene" (270), and is "outward-oriented" (271) and a shifting "zone of transition" (273), contained only by "the limits of the world" (270). Within the Chinese lexical context, the conceptual distinction between the two terms is less distinct.[18] As Franck Billé has noted in a comparative study of borders, there are a number of overlapping terms for "frontier" and "boundary" (e.g. *biangjiang* 边疆 and *bianjing* 边境), and he writes that "Chinese perceptions [of the border] are significantly more zonal and frontier-like [than Russian]" (21). The expansive, generative register of the frontier is borne out by the texts and artworks I study in this thesis, which all frame the frontier as an otherworldly area that has the capacity to transform both the psychological and spatial worldviews of the characters who pass through.

Secondly, the frontier is experiential, mobile, and highly subjective. We have already seen this mobility manifest in Can's *Frontier*, in the examples of Niansi and how her hometown Smoke City begins to feel faraway and unfamiliar to her, and Xiaogui, whose sense of what constitutes the frontier is linked to her proximity to the polar region. This mobile characteristic was established early on in frontier studies, in the context of imperial history and particularly that of nineteenth-century America. The field has been shaped by the work of the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who put forward his famous "Frontier Thesis" in 1893, which argued

[17] Owen Lattimore, for instance, writes that the frontier "always proves, when studied on the ground, to be a zone rather than a line" (469-70).

[18] See historian Gudula Linck for more on the etymology of *sai* 赛, *bian* 边, and *jiang* 疆, particularly in the context of classical frontier poetry. See also Franck Billé for a comprehensive table of Chinese semantic terms for "border", which includes terms for "frontier" (24-25). Finally, the historian Mark Elliott has written about how while "the etymology of the word *jiang* points to an original meaning of a boundary, by the late imperial period it is frequently employed to mean a frontier region" and how *bianjiang* eventually came to mean a "peripheral zone, an unexplored area or region" (339).

that American democracy and its national character directly grew out of the country's successive westward expansion. Turner described the term "frontier" as "elastic", adding that "for our purposes it does not need sharp definition" and that "the most significant thing about [it is] that it lies at the hither edge of free land." This is because, as he saw it, the frontier was fundamentally an imaginative project and contributed to the goal of nation-building. He described the frontier as "the outer edge of the wave – a meeting point between savagery and civilisation" (200). Turner has since been criticised by historians for the all-encompassing blurriness of his definition of "frontier" and for his anachronistic vision of the US national project. For many, his Frontier Thesis became "a shibboleth, denoting a triumphalist and Anglocentric narrative of continental conquest" (Adelman and Aron 814). Scholars like Patricia Limerick and Annette Kolodny have instead argued for reconceptualising the frontier as "a multiplicity of ongoing first encounters over time and land, rather than as a linear chronology of successive discoveries and discrete settlements" (Kolodny 21). For my purposes here, I too understand the frontier as an encounter, but I also retain Turner's conception of its mobility and elasticity. The framework of visual and textual analysis I advance here foregrounds the subjectivity of the individual (in particular, the realm of the urban psyche).

The nature of such encounters brings me to my third point. More often than not, these meetings take place between the self and the Other, between "savagery and civilisation". Many imperial fantasies have been associated with the frontier, most famously the American west.[19] In the cultural imagination, and as scholars like Richard Slotkin have demonstrated, the story of the frontier is typically used to reinforce the abiding myth of "America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top" (5). From cowboys in the Wild Wild West to tales of rugged male heroes like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett striding out into the unknown and taming the wilderness, the

[19] Other examples include the Brazilian *sertão* and the Australian outback.

American frontier has often been invoked to glorify the country's colonial past. As van Houtum and Bueno Lacy note, "the frontier's inherent vagueness has dark drawbacks" (2).

I should note here that liminal geographies like frontiers are typically associated with pre-modern cultures, whereas legal demarcations (e.g. a boundary line) are associated with modern states and governments. As Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities*, "in the older imagining, where states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another" (19). Accordingly, tropes of primitivism and exoticism often emerge in frontier texts, presented in racial, bodily, or gendered terms (e.g. the idea of "virgin territory").[20] One reason I use the term "frontier" in this thesis (rather than other terms which have similar evocations, e.g. "peri-urban" or "edgeland") is because it acknowledges the particular relational dynamic that operates within these texts and artworks, which can feel colonising or even violent. It is unsurprising that the frontier has provided such rich material for artists, writers, and filmmakers whose compelling narratives often emerge from this friction between limits. As Michel de Certeau writes, "Stories are actuated by a contradiction between the frontier and the bridge, that is, between a (legitimate) space and its (alien) exteriority" (126).

Two examples of the frontier as encounter between the self and the exotic Other are especially apparent in Can's *Frontier*. I have already discussed the character of Ying, who we are often told comes from "Africa" (a specific country is never mentioned), which in turn is associated in the text with an ancient spiritualism. A second example can be seen in how China's ethnic minority figures are written. Although exact locations are never specified in the story, the Chinese title (*Bianjiang* 边疆) of Can's novel recalls the province of Xinjiang 新疆,

[20] The English metaphysical poet John Donne provides a famous literary example of the frontier as virgin territory in his 1654 poem "To His Mistress Going to Bed", which uses geographic discovery as an extended metaphor for sexual discovery of the female body: "Licence my roving hands, and let them go / Before, behind, between, above, below. / O my America! my new-found-land, / My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd, / My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie, / How blest am I in this discovering thee!" (lines 25-30).

the characters of which translate literally to "new frontier". Can Xue herself has said in a 2017 *Words Without Borders* interview: "The setting of the story seems to be the Xin Jiang province in the northwest of China, although I have never been there" ("Performance"). The term *bianjiang* is still used to refer to Xinjiang today in official and general usage, along with other parts of China (e.g. Mongolia and Tibet) that hold frontier status in the popular imagination (Tobin 33). In this sense, the title of the novel is a nod to the catch-all use of the term. Can's minority characters are also uniquely mobile when moving between the frontier and the wilderness proper. An example can be seen in the "Uighur beauty" (*Weizu meinu* 维族美女; *Frontier* 53) with whom the Pebble Town resident Qiming 启明 is infatuated. We are told that she lives "on the mountain" (*zhu zai shan li* 住在山里; 33) and occasionally descends into Pebble Town to dance evocatively in the streets and to sell her wares in the local market. Qiming, who lives only on the frontier, is unable to follow the object of his desire into the true wilderness and waits impatiently for the rare moments when she crosses over into the limit of his world. As far as I could find, no reviewer in English or Chinese has commented on the uncritical racial stereotypes which abound in the novel, which is perhaps testament to the prevalence of the classical conceptions of the frontier.

Finally, the frontier constitutes a psychological experience and typically facilitates a story of individual growth for the explorer-subject. Related to this is the idea of the journey, which always accompanies the narrative triggered by the generative frontier. In the texts I study in this thesis, the structures that we often see in narratives of the frontier as a geopolitical or Othering encounter are instead played out on the plane of the individual psyche. The self-actualisation of the explorer is typically given priority within the frontier space (as opposed to meaningful interaction with the Other or recognition of their needs and desires). A couple of decades after Turner published his work on frontiers, Sigmund Freud described the ego as "a frontier-creature" that "tries to mediate between the world and the id, to make the id pliable to

the world and, by means of its muscular activity, to make the world fall in with the wishes of the id" (58). In other words, the frontier is a space in which the ego reigns.

Before discussing the generative frontier and its psychological implications, I first address the process of urbanisation in China and how its creative producers have traditionally diagnosed it.

II. From the soil to the city – urbanisation in postsocialist China

Chinese urban imaginaries naturally reflect and refract the rhythms of China's real-world cities, both past and present. I take a moment here to position this thesis within its relevant sociohistorical context before discussing the emergence of what I call the generative frontier in greater detail. By "urban imaginary", I refer to what political geographer Edward Soja defined as "the mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces and communities in which we live" (324) – in short, the palimpsestic whole that emerges from how we both perceive the "real" city and choose to represent our urban spaces.[21] As shown by Soja's use of plural pronouns and reference to "community", the construction of an urban imaginary is a collective endeavour, created by multiple actors and artifacts across a shared environment. For example, the view of Detroit in recent decades as a city of evocative urban ruins has been produced through a collective imagination, the imprints of which can be located in photography, film, websites, and popular media.[22] The particular imaginary I argue for here – that of a restorative urban frontier – is also a collective product. In this thesis, I bring into dialogue a

[21] A well-known example of an urban imaginary is described by Andreas Huyssen, in his introduction to his 2008 collected volume *Other Cities, Other Worlds*. Here, he cites Orhan Pamuk's 2003 *Istanbul* as "an urban imaginary that is determined in the minds of Istanbul's residents both by Turkish history and by the literary imagination of Western visitors from Gerard de Nerval and Gustave Flaubert" (21).
[22] See Dora Apel's 2015 book *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* for more on how this image of Detroit has been collectively constructed by popular culture.

corpus of representative texts: all seek out liminal spaces on the edges of the built environment, which enable imaginative flights of adventure and function as sites of psychological relief from the perceived negative forces of everyday urban modernity. Recall how Zheng Bo's *Weed Party* installation creates a liberatory space in the heart of Shanghai, embedded in the bleak shell of a former factory. In all these artworks and texts, it is the unfulfilling and often stagnant nature of everyday life in the city – perhaps the most abiding urban imaginary in Chinese aesthetics today – which prompts these fantasies of the frontier.

The fact that China's story of urban transformation is entirely unprecedented on the world stage feels like received wisdom at this point. In this vein, the urban scholar Thomas Campanella identifies six key Chinese urban characteristics: speed, scale, spectacle, sprawl, segregation, and sustainability. While none of these are special in and of themselves, Campanella argues that China's urban journey has been extraordinary because all six characteristics occurred at the same time (281). The process of urbanisation on the Chinese mainland took off in the 1980s, heralding a profound spatial and emotional upheaval for many citizens, along with dramatic levels of economic growth. Historically a country with a national identity shaped by agrarian values, and with a large peasant population engaged in traditional methods of farm work for centuries, around 89% of the mainland population was still classified as rural in 1950 (Poston et al. 141).[23] Within the cultural imagination, the natural world was also a long-established and important subject: the aesthetic appreciation of rural landscapes and eremitic idylls had become particularly popular with the Eastern Jin literati (317-420 CE), and continued to flourish during the Tang and Song dynasties (618-1279 CE) and beyond.[24]

[23] As Li Zhang, Richard T LeGates et al. have noted, much of the research into Chinese urbanisation has overlooked how increases in China's urban population have been also influenced by administrative changes and inconsistent use of terminology. For instance, the definition of an "urban population" has shifted from census to census (113). While urbanists might dispute the exact parameters of China's rural-to-urban shift, however, the significance of its psychological and cultural impact on the populace cannot be denied.

[24] For more on the early development of "agricultural aesthetics" (*nongye meixue* 农业美学), see Chen Wangheng's 2018 book *Chinese Environmental Aesthetics* (93).

One reason why the agricultural way of life held such sway was because imperial China never developed a primate city system, with one urban loci dominating and defining the rest of the country. Instead, cities and towns were suspended within the wider "net" of the countryside, uniformly dispersed and working in symbiosis with the rural way of life (Mote 105). This is not to say that Chinese cities never developed unique urban characteristics, but rather, that they largely functioned as administrative hubs for much of the imperial period, ensuring that ordinary life outside the city walls could go on.[25] As geographer Rhoads Murphy has noted, "[imperial] cities were designed to control and tax the countryside, but more importantly, to serve it, as the basic reason and sustenance of their existence" (190). The ideals of the countryside shaped everyday life for the average person, and scholars have used the framework of a hybridised urban-rural continuum to describe the imperial human landscape, with citizens exercising high levels of free movement between the city and the countryside until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1912 (Mote 104).

This long-standing view of the countryside as the essence of Chinese civilisation led the social scientist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 to open his seminal 1947 book of essays *From The Soil* (*Xiangtu zhongguo* 乡土中国) with the statement: "Chinese society is fundamentally rural" (37). He sought to convince his urban audience that studying the basic social patterns of the countryside could lead to a deeper understanding of Chinese society as a whole. By the time Fei was writing, the cultural gap between the city and the countryside had already expanded, although there were still few formal boundaries between the city and the countryside even during the Republican period (Ren 17). It was during the 1950s that the urban-rural binary we

[25] Urban scholar Xuefei Ren summarises the main types of pre-1949 Chinese cities: administrative cities were predominant until the Song dynasty, with commerce-driven cities, canal cities, treaty ports, and railway cities also emerging after bouts of population growth, new treaties and trade opportunities, and technological advancements. All city types, however, were heavily influenced by the culture of the countryside (21-22).

see today became truly entrenched, after the CCP brought in a series of institutional changes which restricted individual mobility.

The Party regime began as a rural movement and maintained this preference throughout. In the process, they upended the hybrid nature of the former urban-rural continuum and sharpened the social divide between the two categories. As a result of the 1958 household registration system (*hukou* 户口), citizens were labelled as either rural or urban, creating a two-tiered social structure throughout the country and reducing previous levels of free movement. Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 famous military strategy of "surrounding the cities with the countryside" (*nongcun baowei chengshi* 农村包围城市) reflected his intrinsic belief in the revolutionary potential of the countryside and his attachment to his own rural roots. Although the CCP had committed themselves to eradicating the "Three Great Differences" (*san da chabie* 三大差别) between the rural and the urban, their policies and rhetoric were ideologically slanted towards the rural and often appeared to contradict this levelling goal. Historians like Jeremy Brown have noted the "puzzling and ironic" nature of the urban-rural divide during the Mao years, describing it as an "unintended consequence" of the CCP revolutionary modernisation project (1-3). During this period, city-dwellers were often painted as morally inferior and in need of correction. For example, the official rationale for the 1968-72 "Down To The Countryside" programme (s*hangshan xiaxiang yundong* 上山下乡运动) was that bourgeois urban youths needed to be re-educated by the virtuous working-class peasantry. The rural bias of the Mao regime took on a more adversarial and divisive tone than the relatively temperate pre-Republican expressions of rural bias. Cities were nominally intended to serve as sites of industrial production rather than as spaces of leisure or personal aspiration (Kirkby 14), and the urban population only grew annually by 2.3 percent over the 1960s and 1970s (Ren 23). However, despite the regime's clear preference of the rural category, urban citizens often

enjoyed higher standards of living during this period. They received certain welfare benefits through their work units and found themselves relatively sheltered from disasters such as the 1958-62 Great Famine (*sannian da jihuang* 三年大饥荒).

After Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 reform policies following the death of Mao in 1978, and ushered in by the Township and Village Enterprises programme (*xiangzhen qiye* 乡镇企业) in the 1980s and the founding of the first Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in the early 1990s, the rural bias of the socialist years began to quickly evaporate. The process of urbanisation, which paralleled China's shift to a market economy, began to truly accelerate in the 1990s (Ren 29). This was partially due to the highly active role that local states took in shaping urban construction and land accumulation, as You-tien Hsing argues in her 2010 monograph *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China.* Between the years 1982 to 2018, China's urban population increased from 21% to 59% (World Bank). The story of Shenzhen is the classic example used to illustrate the extraordinary speed of China's urban boom: a mere fishing village of around 27,000 people in 1978, it was granted SEZ status in 1980 and saw its population surpass the 1 million mark seven years later (Campanella 34-36).[26] While China's urban growth may be partially explained by Deng's reforms coinciding with the worldwide neoliberal turn in the 1970s, as David Harvey has argued, the sheer scale and pace of its postsocialist rural-to-urban transition makes China an exception in the global arena.[27]

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[26] As architect Juan Du argues in her 2020 book, *The Shenzhen Experiment: The Story of China's Instant City,* the "fishing village into metropolis" narrative is something of "a powerful modern-day fairy tale", and there were in fact a variety of (overlooked) pre-existing factors that led to Shenzhen's rapid growth before it was given SEZ status (15). Nonetheless, the rags-to-riches transformation of Shenzhen is still a powerful founding myth within the Chinese urban imaginary.

[27] In the chapter titled "Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics" in his 2005 book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey observes that Deng's reforms "just happened to coincide […] with the turn to neoliberal solutions in Britain and the United States". He then writes that "the outcome in China has been the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control" (120).

All this goes to show that, over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Chinese rural-urban policy has fluctuated, pendulum-like, in favour of either the city or the countryside. In a reversal of the rural-urban dichotomy of the Mao years, when the rural way of life was promoted as aspirational, cities have increasingly held privileged status in the eyes of the state, served by a "floating population" (*liudong renkou* 流动人口) of undocumented migrant workers who stream in from the countryside as a "by-product of economic reform" (Li Zhang, *Strangers* 1). While this could be viewed as an unofficial variation on the former urban-rural continuum, the people who exist in this space have little protection from the state and few individual rights. Furthermore, although many artists and writers have in recent decades sought to depict the city as a dystopian environment, it is important to acknowledge that, as a result of a propaganda blitz from the government, the city is often hailed by the state as a place of self-actualisation.[28] Miriam Driessen has memorably written about how "rural voids" have emerged all across the Chinese countryside, with rural areas recognised as "backwards" and non-viable, and cities seen as modern and aspirational. She writes: "As the rural condition is denigrated in people's minds as being empty of significance and meaning, "rural voids" signify the contempt for, and neglect of, rurality in an urban-centered world" (64).

Needless to say, the dominant urban imaginary among cultural producers is often at odds with the state ideal of the city. As works such as Wang Bing's 王兵 2002 film *West of the Tracks* (*Tie xi qu* 铁西区), Jiang Rong's 姜戎 2004 novel *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng* 狼图腾), or Brother Nut's 坚果兄弟 2015 performance piece *Project Dust* (*Chenai jihua* 尘埃计划) have sought to highlight, tangible social and environmental harm has been inflicted over the

[28] See anthropologist Ann Anagnost on *suzhi* 素质 ("human quality") discourse in postsocialist China, which in its value coding, typically ascribes low *suzhi* "to the body of the rural migrant" and high *suzhi* to "the body of the urban, middle-class only child" (190). See also Jonathan Bach on urban villages in Shenzhen, where he discusses how Shenzhen stands for "speed, progress and civilization" and the former villages "represent the past, the (closed) East, the feudal, the mythic, the collective, the particular" (422).

past few decades of urbanisation in China. Indeed, water levels have been irrevocably altered; air has become heavily polluted; endangered species have gone extinct; and entire communities have been razed and replaced by new neighbourhoods, with many citizens evicted from their homes in a process of involuntary migration. The build-up to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics drew global attention to the phenomenon of *chaiqian* (拆迁), meaning "to tear down and relocate", which had been ongoing since the 1990s as part of China's urban renewal process (Li Zhang, *Paradise* 139). Sensational stories of "nail houses" (*dingzi hu* 钉子户) became ubiquitous in both domestic and international reporting.[29] It is unsurprising that artists have been so drawn to these violent scenes of demolition and construction, given that urban imaginaries are characterised by a profound interest in place-making and states of liminality.

A tableau of the environmental and social ills typically associated with contemporary urban China can be seen in the multimedia project *Shadow Play: Tales of Urbanization in China*, an ambitious ongoing piece launched in 2014 by the New York-based artist collective Lily and Honglei (Lily Xiying Yang 杨熙瑛; Honglei Li 李宏磊), who began making experimental digital pieces in the early 2000s.[30] This piece explores the dark side of urbanisation across an extended narrative, including instances of imposed demolition, corrupt officials, child abduction, and the struggles of the migrant worker underclass. Mingling traditional shadow puppetry motifs with emergent digital technology to reimagine urban space, *Shadow Play* sets out with a social agenda, in the artists' words, to "present stories of everyday [Chinese people] to the conscience of a worldwide audience" ("Project Overview"). Throughout its various manifestations and across four chapters, *Shadow Play* tells the story of

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[29] A "nail house" is a household which refuses to give way to a demolition team. See, for example, the story of Yang Wu 阳物 and Wu Ping 吴蘋 in Chongqing, a particularly high profile case of a *dingzhi hu* which captivated audiences across China (Li Datong).

[30] The *Shadow Play* project has so far been divided into three parts: a physical gallery installation, including some oil paintings and a slideshow; a virtual reality (VR) installation, once hosted on the online multi-player platform *Second Life*; and a site-specific augmented reality (AR) installation, accessed through the Layar phone app.

a rural family who experience a long sequence of misfortunes while traversing the badlands of urban China. The head of a small village is killed by a violent demolition team in the pay of local government and real estate developers. The village is then reduced to rubble and the child of the murdered village head is drugged and abducted by a malevolent stranger. Next, the child's mother leaves the village in search of the missing child, ending up in a city full of struggling migrant workers who live in underground tunnels and are exploited by multinational electronics manufacturers (figure 3). The mother continues to travel across China, through the environmental degradation that has spread across the countryside. Finally, she discovers the bodies of five small children, suffocated inside a large rubbish bin, and the story ends on this uncertain note. As I go on to show, this bleak, sensationalist tale is typical of how the urban process has been represented by many Chinese artists.

Figure 3: Still from Lily and Honglei, *Shadow Play: Tales of Urbanization in China*, 2014 – ongoing

The Chinese government continues to navigate the social and environmental stresses brought about by rampant urban development. Commentators have noted the increasing levels

of "mass incidents" (*quntixing shijian* 群体性事件) and social unrest over recent years, directly connecting these outbursts to the problems caused by land disputes (Buckley). In its recent rhetoric, the government notably references plans for more sustainable urban development, *hukou* reform, and new urban clusters. New terms reflecting China's environmentally-friendly ambitions have emerged in official policy documents, including President Xi Jinping's 习近平 favoured phrase "clear waters and green mountains are just as valuable as gold and silver" (*Lushui qingshan jiushi jinshan yinshan* 绿水青山就是金山银山; Geall 4). The state has also shown great interest in Eco-city projects which are presented "as entrepreneurial, technological 'fixes' to environmental crisis", like the Tianjin Eco-city – a flagship venture supported by the governments of China and Singapore (Caprotti 11). Artistic centres have also been cultivated in these new urban projects (e.g. a branch of the Juilliard music academy in the planned Tianjin Eco-city), indicating that the state is trying to foster a new cultural image of Chinese urbanity.

It is still too early to tell whether all these goals will be met, but it appears that the government intends to continue its process of urbanisation while acknowledging some of the social and environmental harm caused along the way. The turn towards green urban policy also reflects the urbane desire for more ecologically harmonious built spaces, as expressed by many Chinese architects today. Examples include Ma Yansong's 马岩松 manifesto for a "*shanshui* city" (*shanshui chengshi* 山水城市), as I discuss in chapter two, and Wei Architects' "Xiaoxi Jia" (小溪家) project in Fujian country (Han). The imperial urban-rural continuum may be irrevocably upended, but as I show in this thesis, a contemporary longing for a more hybrid form of urban space has emerged within the Chinese urban imaginary.

III. Postsocialist urban aesthetics

As I have explained, China's rural-urban relationship is a dynamic prone to shifting between extremes. This state of environmental schizophrenia has long defined how artists and writers talk about the rural-urban divide. Throughout the recent history of Chinese cultural production (as well documented by scholars like Robin Visser), the city and the countryside have typically been portrayed as diametric opposites and the rural-urban binary perpetuated. The city has often been represented in negative terms. The trope of the nightmarish city is not exclusive to the postsocialist era (the idea of the city as a place of sin was a frequent motif in Republican-era literature, for instance).[31] But the monumental spatial shift that has occurred in China over recent decades has led many creative producers to overwhelmingly cultivate a vision of China as an unforgiving, all-encompassing urban dystopia which grinds its citizens down – as I have shown through the earlier example of Lily and Honglei's *Shadow Play* project. Another representative example can be found in the poetry of the Foxconn migrant worker Xu Lizhi 许立志 whose anguished literary work rails against the idea that the city is an aspirational destination or a place for rural citizens to fulfil their dreams. "This city is slowly rising from the ruins, / tearing apart the ancestral bones of the motherland. / This city stuffs the stomachs of migrant workers with factories," he wrote in his 2013 poem "This City…" (*Zhe chengshi…* 这城市……; lines 1-3) (Xu committed suicide in 2014).[32] Meanwhile, the urban phenomenon of *chaiqian* (mentioned previously) has been the subject of many highly critical artworks and films, from Huang Rui's 黄锐 2004-9 *Chai-na/China* (拆那-CHINA) series; Wang Jingsong's

[31] For example, in Shi Zhecun's 施蛰存 1931 short story "Witchcraft" (*Modao* 魔道), and Mu Shiying's 1932 short story "Shanghai Foxtrot" (*Shanghai de hubuwu* 上海的狐步舞).

[32] *Zhe chengshi zai feixu zhong ranran chengqi / chai diao zuguo de chuantong zuxian de gutou / ba gongye feishui zhushe jin tamen yizai duanliu de xueguan* 这城市在废墟中冉冉升起 / 拆掉祖国的传统祖先的骨头 / 把工业废水注射进他们一再断流的血管

王劲松 1999 *One Hundred Works of Demolition (Chai)* (*Bai chai tu* 百拆图); and Ou Ning's 2006 independent documentary *Meishi Street* (*Meishi jie* 煤市街).

As I discuss later in this thesis, such themes of destruction and dystopia also incorporate a bodily dimension, frequently deploying the language of disease and defect to castigate urban modernity. For example, in Qiu Huadong's 邱华栋 1997 novel City Tank (*Chengshi zhanche* 城市战车), Beijing is visualised as a "huge cancerous stomach tumour" (*wei bu shengzhang de juda zhongliu* 胃部生长的巨大肿瘤; 1), and the writer Yu Hua 余华 has been reported as describing society today as "so sick that a writer can't pretend to be a doctor. Instead, the best one can do is admit that one is ill and try to describe the symptoms" (Johnson). Or consider the genre of Private Writing (*siren xiezuo* 私人写作) novels centred around "sick urban women" (1), as literature scholar Xin Yang has identified in an essay on Chen Ran's 陈染 1996 novel *A Private Life* (*Siren shenghuo* 私人生活) and Anni Baobei's 安妮宝 2006 novel *Padma* (*Lianhua* 莲花). In *Padma*, the protagonists leave the unhealthy confines of the city and embark on a long spiritual journey into the heart of Tibet, reflecting how the countryside has often been framed as a place of pastoral innocence and positioned as both the city's antithesis and antidote.

Anthropologist Sacha Cody has explored the perception of ruralism in Chinese cultural discourse, which he defines as "the idea that the 'real' China is located in the countryside" (102), and has expounded on the ways in which intellectuals try to foster rural sentiment in urban citizens. An example of finding authenticity through a return to rural life can be seen in Huo Jianqi's 霍建起 1999 film *Postmen in the Mountains* (*Nashan naren nagou* 那山那人那狗), which offers a bucolic view of the Hunan countryside. Winning two Golden Rooster awards upon release, it tells the story of a young man who follows in his aging father's footsteps, choosing to become a rural postman instead of chasing modern city life. More contemporary

examples can be drawn from viral videos on social media which have advanced a Chinese cottagecore aesthetic (a globally-popular genre which peaked during the COVID-19 period).[33] Internet video influencer Li Ziqi 李子柒 – whose depictions of idyllic rural life (in which she plays a starring role, from using plant-based dyes to cooking traditional rural meals) has proven particularly popular among urban millennials – has been one widely commented-upon phenomenon.[34] In this particular incarnation of the pastoral idyll, we see rural authenticity being enacted for a specific technology (the algorithms which drive online video and social media platforms), and mostly consumed by an urban audience (who are presented with a fantasy of delinking and detoxing).

The prevalence of the city in the Chinese cultural imagination has been well established by the existing scholarship. Notable examples which have informed this thesis include Robin Visser's 2010 monograph *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*, which demonstrates how, by the 1990s, "the city had become a subject in its own right" (9) – indeed, a subject no longer to be examined solely through rural or national rubrics. She seeks to answer the key question, "what happens culturally when those in a historically agricultural civilisation start to identify primarily with the city?" (1). The city, Visser finds, "now functions in China as a site of individual and collective identity" (2). One can also consider Meiqin Wang's 2016 book *Urban Aesthetics in Contemporary China*, which argues for urbanisation to be recognised as "the primary condition of art making" (17) in twenty-first century China via its examination of the Chinese art scene through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "right to the city". Wang identifies a "predominantly critical attitude" in urban-themed artworks, which often take the form of artists identifying "with disenfranchised social

[33] The cottagecore social media aesthetic gained traction on the Internet in the 2010s. It "romanticises the return to traditional bucolic attributes", such as "rural self-sufficiency and delicate décor, with a heavy dose of nostalgia" (Kashi).
[34] See Xin Yang's 2022 article on the rise of rural vloggers across the Sinophone Internet.

groups" (18-19). Such observations have even earlier antecedents. Take, for example, on-the-ground art world figures such as the curator Wang Lin 王林, who noted "the shift from native soil to the metropolis" early on in a 1997 discussion of Chinese oil paintings (Meiqin Wang 8). This relationship between the city and art about the city is not a one-way affair, but arguably a symbiotic dynamic. For instance, Yomi Braester's seminal 2010 study *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*, which spans the years between 1949-2008, shows how visual practices in film and theatre have shaped transformations within the material city itself.

Echoing Fredric Jameson's statement that "The postmodern city seems to be in permanent crisis and is to be thought of, if at all, as a catastrophe rather than an opportunity" (10), the tendency in the scholarship on Chinese urban imaginaries has been to expound on the dystopian affect that emerges from many representative texts and artworks (see, for example, Erin Huang's 2020 monograph *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility* on post-90s visual culture). Within the realm of urban aesthetics across both the realms of cultural production and academic scholarship, the starting point is often that of China as urban dystopia. In contrast, the texts I bring together here attempt to soothe the negative feelings associated with urban modernity by reframing or defamiliarising the space (e.g. the photographic aesthetics of urban explorers, who seek wildness within China's built environment) or strike out anew (e.g. Pebble Town, the pioneering outpost in Can Xue's *Frontier*). While some of the works in this thesis firmly situate themselves in environments defined by urban destruction and ruin (for example, the town of Fengjie 奉节 in Jia Zhangke's 2006 film *Still Life*), and indeed, take full advantage of the latent potential of these defamiliarised landscapes, it is the possibility of building new worlds and selfhoods that carries the most weight in these narratives.

Rather than continue to count the ways in which Chinese cities are depicted as dystopian, this thesis is a sustained original effort to identify an urban aesthetic that is principally concerned with the role that the inner psyche can play in the act of place-making in a country in which *chai-na*/China has become a commonplace joke. The urban writer Xu Zechen 徐则臣, in an essay titled "A Pen, Pointing Towards the City" (*Yi zhi bi, xiangzhe chengshi qu* 一支笔，向着城市去), describes the city as a kind of filter for the world, how he regards it as "a grand transport hub" (*zhe ge weida de zhongzhuanzhan* 这个伟大的中转站) – a metaphor which evokes a similar sense of expectation and promise to that of the frontier. He then goes on to describe Beijing as "a strange foreign land" (*mosheng de yixiang* 陌生的异乡). When known space becomes unknown space, things suddenly become ripe with all manner of transformative possibilities: it is this process which is at work within the generative frontier.

IV. The urban psyche

The curative turn in urban aesthetics which I describe here reflects the heightened levels of public interest in the mental health of the city-dweller, or alternatively, in what has come to be known as the "psy-boom", the popular psychotherapy movement which emerged in China during the early 2000s. In contemporary Chinese literary texts and artworks, the postsocialist city has often been associated with psychological crisis as well as the social and economic ills I discussed earlier. Robin Visser devotes a large section of her 2010 study to the representation of urban subjectivity and "the city as internalised in the consciousness of the individual" (225). She identifies texts which typically show the subject in crisis and how "attempts to define self and safeguard autonomy [in the city] result in ill effects" (227). Published in the decade after China's "culture fever" (*wenhua re* 文化热) of the 1980s (hence its heavy Freudian symbolism and overtones), Chen Ran's acclaimed 1996 novel *A Private Life* is a noteworthy example of

this struggle.[35] I discuss this text further in chapter one of this thesis, as a comparative complement to my analysis of Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone*. Suffice to say, its protagonist Ni Niuniu 倪拗拗 portrays the city through her inner monologue as an emotional pressure cooker, and we witness Niuniu constantly seeking out psychological refuge from the aggressive urban environment that surrounds her. In the opening chapter, Niuniu tells us: "Now I am entirely alone. This is good. I don't need to talk anymore. I'm fed up with the noisy clamour of the city, the constant drone of invisible flies that swarm around my mind." (2).[36] While a novel like *A Private Life* is certainly interested in how the urban subject constructs an internal reality to protect herself from the violence of the city, it is more preoccupied with Niuniu's desperate attempts to shield her fragmented sense of self than it is with true personal growth. In addition, the reader sees Niuniu yearning for a feminised ruralism as an antidote to her urban life: "The countryside scenery passed before my eyes. The golden haystacks, the ragged and bare trees, the empty farmhouses, and the swaying fields of winter wheat all held a unique charm that was completely different to the urban landscape." (190).[37] In contrast to this, the frontier texts I explore in the later chapters of this thesis are less interested in nature as a restorative refuge, and are instead more interested in how urban and wild elements interact to create a generative space in which the self can regain a robust sense of autonomy.

The increased demand for psychological services across urban middle-class China has drawn a great deal of scholarly attention over the past decade or so.[38] Medical anthropologist

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[35] For a detailed discussion of how a "Freud fad" grew among young Chinese intellectuals during the 1980s, see Ning Wang (16-19).

[36] *Xianzai, wo jieranyishen. Zhe hen hao, wo yijing buzai xuyao jiaotan, wo yi yanjuan dadushi de xuanhua caoza, naxie wengweng shengxiang yi qun kan bujian de cangying, pan xuan zai wo de siwei sizhou* [...] 现在，我孑然一身。这很好，我已经不再需要交谈，我已厌倦大都市的喧哗嘈杂，那些嗡嗡声像一群看不见的苍蝇，盘旋在我的思维四周 ......

[37] *Xiancun de fengguang cong wo de yanqian lueguo, jinhuang de gancao dui, diaobi de tu shu, kongkuang zhong de nongshe yiji yi pian pian haoye de dong mai, dou juyou yi gu yu chengshi jingguan jiongran xiangyi de dute de yunwei.* 乡村的风光从我的眼前掠过，金黄的干草堆，凋敝的秃树，空旷中的农舍以及一片片摇曳的冬麦，都具有一股与城市景观迥然相异的独特的韵味。

[38] In addition to Huang, whom I discuss here, see Li Zhang's 2020 ethnographic monograph *Anxious China* which demonstrates how "the breathless pace of economic reform in China has brought about profound ruptures not only

Huang Hsuan-Ying has published extensively on the subject, and in a 2014 article, he deems the "presence of all things psychological" as "an indispensable dimension of individual and interpersonal experience in urban China" (183). Huang traces the psy-boom as a popular movement which emerged in China during the early 2000s, following state reforms in mental health policy and the subsequent availability of short-term training programmes for "psychological counsellors" (*xinli zixun shi* 心里咨询师; 185). Psychotherapeutic discourse subsequently seeped into other areas of life, including popular and creative culture. For instance, *Psychological Discussions* (*Xinli fangtan* 心理访谈), the CCTV psychotherapy television programme, ran daily broadcasts in 2005 which the anthropologist Li Zhang deems "played a critical role in popularizing counselling and reducing the stigmas attached to psychological disorders" (*Anxious* 31).

Urban psychology is, of course, not a subject exclusive to China: there is a long history of research on the relationship between the city and mental health. One early seminal text is Georg Simmel's 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life", in which he argues that city dwellers are forced to adopt a "blasé attitude" in order to desensitise themselves and prevent themselves from being overwhelmed by urban stimuli (51). He writes: "The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life" (47). Nevertheless, we can see that conceptions of the self have acquired and incorporated new meanings under China's reform era (without drawing essentialising conclusions about how China has transitioned from

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in its socioeconomic structures but also in its people's inner landscapes" (2-3). See also anthropologist Jie Yang's 2017 study, *Mental Health in China*. Here, Yang argues for the disturbing prevalence of what she terms "therapeutic governance" and explores how dislocations brought about by rapid transformation in society have resulted in a "mental health crisis" for the Chinese population society (e.g. urbanisation has led to the new category of illness named "smog depression" (*wumai yiyuzheng* 雾霾抑郁症)).

collectivism to a modernity shaped by individualism).[39] It is important to note that both Huang Hsuan-Ying and Li Zhang draw attention to how the psy-boom is a preoccupation of the urbane, educated middle-classes. In this sense, we might conclude that educated urbanites are better resourced and equipped to articulate their daily lives through a psychological prism than people who live in the countryside. The phenomenon recalls environmental historian William Cronon's (whose work I explore in greater detail in chapter three) discussion of the frontier, who wryly observes: "The curious result was that frontier nostalgia [in twentieth century America] became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of antimodernism. The very men who most benefited from urban-industrial capitalism were among those who believed they must escape its debilitating effects" (78).

This is, of course, not in any way to suggest that mental health might be in better shape in the Chinese countryside (in spite of what video bloggers like Li Ziqi suggest). I have already discussed the hollowing-out of the countryside, "rural voids", and migrant decampment to the cities. Suicide rates are in fact higher in rural areas (Li Meizhi and Katikireddi 1), and in their recent book on what they term the "urban brain", sociologists Nikolas Rose and Des Fitzgerald find that, "intriguingly, the levels of worry and negative emotions were actually higher in rural China than in the cities" (102). However, a common perception – particularly among middle-class, educated urbanites in China – is that urban living leads to mental distress.[40] This is not necessarily directly linked to the physical environment – Rose and Fitzgerald cite work stress

[39] As anthropologist Andrew Kipnis reminds us, "To relate terms like individuation or individualism to any sort of modernity is thus misleading in that it implies that tension between individuals and their social environment is in itself something that only recently came about." He goes on to write: "What changes are the particular social relationships, discourses, and tensions that constitute the social environment and, consequently, the structures of the individual psyche that are immersed therein" (8).

[40] An everyday example of this sentiment can be seen in an essay which went viral on the Chinese Internet in 2021. Titled "Why have I chosen to live a low-desire life in a mountain village? This is my silent struggle against modern slavery", the author (writing under the name Xia Bingbao 夏冰雹) explains why she chose to leave her urban life in Zhejiang city and build a more laid-back lifestyle for herself in the countryside. She describes the subway in the following terms: "everyone with expressionless, exhausted faces; caught in the roar of crossing over from one side of the city to the other" (*Meigeren lian shangdu mian wu biaoqing, pibeibukan, zai hongming sheng zhong cong chengshi de yibian dao ling yibian.* 每个人脸上都面无表情、疲惫不堪，在轰鸣声中从城市的一边到另一边。)

as a main cause – but the city has nonetheless become a cipher for the daily stresses and anxieties of Chinese modernity within the cultural realm.

V. The generative frontier: space, place, and liminality

In a 2011 essay titled "Remember Our City" (*Jiyi women de chengshi* 记忆我们的城市), the artist Wang Fenghua 王風華 writes: "Every corner that I grew up with has now changed beyond recognition. The ideal, brand-new city for contemporary Chinese people has really appeared, and the tendency towards internationalisation and globalisation seems to be destroying the original personality of each place."[41] A consequence of the rampant processes of urbanisation I have described in earlier sections – and their psychological implications – is that individual conceptions of "place" within China are continually being disrupted and unmade.

In order to become "place", political geographer John Agnew famously argues, space needs a combination of three key elements: location, locale, and a sense of place. Location is the physical position (e.g. longitude and latitude); locale is defined by the material and social context (e.g. the buildings that make up a school); and "sense of place" refers to our emotional attachments to said location and locale (5-6). Both locale and sense of place within China have been profoundly affected by national urbanisation policies. Even some locations have been irrevocably changed: in a 2014 comment piece for *Nature* journal, three environmental scientists describe the act of land creation and mountaintop moving in areas like Lanzhou and Yan'an as akin to "performing major surgery on [the] Earth's crust" (Li Peiyue et al.). These disruptions to long-established senses of place form a theme that we see expressed in so much

[41] *Jintian bansui wo chengzhang de mei ge jiaoluo yi mianmuquanfei, sihu zhen de chuxian le dangdai Zhongguoren lixiang zhong de zhanxin chengshi, er guojihua, quanqiuhua de qushi fangfu ye zai xiaomie mei de difang de yuanben gexing* [...] 今天伴随我成长的每个角落已面目全非，似乎真的出现了当代中国人理想中的崭新城市，而国际化、全球化的趋势仿佛也在消灭每个地方的原本个性 ......

of Chinese creative culture since 1990 (consider, for example, the razed village and the resultant broken social fabric depicted in Lily and Honglei's *Shadowplay*).

Geographers typically draw a distinction between "space" and "place", while also recognising that the two are highly interlinked. In his seminal 1977 monograph *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan frames the difference in terms of mobility, writing: "if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (6). Elsewhere, he states that "place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to one and long for the other" (3). Tuan has also written about the place-making process: "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (6). What is distinctive about Tuan's work is that it is highly centred on the subjectivity of the individual. In this thesis, I am also interested in how the space-place dynamic responds to the desires of the individual explorer. Across the frontier artworks and texts which I discuss in my subsequent chapters, we witness the process of urban place being unmade into frontier space (and at times, even back again) through the workings of the human imagination. This liminal transformation, brought about by a process of construction and deconstruction, carries a generative potential. The journey through the amorphous frontier becomes both a compelling metaphor and a trigger for transformative inner change.

Frontier texts constantly foreground this shifting relationship between space and place. We have already seen how, in Can Xue's *Frontier*, Pebble Town, Smoke City, and countless other locations are framed as both the known and the unknown world. I argue that the artistic technique of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or defamiliarization, is crucial to this space-making process – in rendering the city unrecognisable and strange, a frontier is then able to take shape. The

quality of wildness often creeps in here, and I discuss this in greater detail in chapters three and four.[42]

Marginalised spaces are often celebrated for their liminality (a quality of the frontier which I have referenced previously in this introduction). Psychologist Paul Stenner chooses to define a liminal experience as involving "a temporary suspension of limits that permits a transition to a new set of limits. For this reason, liminality concerns the emergence of novelty just at the moment in which 'something' is in the process of becoming" (3). However, Stenner argues, "There is nothing inherently liminal about thresholds, borders, frontiers, and margins and so forth. What may or may not be described as liminal must include the experience of passage or movement across such a threshold, and its management" (22-23). By this definition (and one that is certainly visible across the texts and artworks under consideration within this thesis), a generative frontier must by necessity incorporate a journey narrative, whether physical or mental.

VI. Zhang Xiaotao and Zhong Biao

By way of clarification, I now draw this introduction to a close by bringing together examples of the "generative frontier" in contemporary Chinese artmaking, and contrast this theme with the dominant narrative of urban dystopia (which can even be seen in the works of the same artist). Zhang Xiaotao is a Beijing-based artist who often links the mental health crisis in China with themes of urbanity. Born in 1960, Zhang first established a reputation for his oil paintings of decaying everyday consumables, but has since turned his focus towards large-scale

[42] In her 2005 study of resource frontiers in Indonesia, the anthropologist Anna Tsing describes the frontier as "an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet – not yet mapped, not yet regulated." She goes on to write that, "Frontiers make wildness, entangling visions and vines and violence; their wildness is both material and imaginative. This wildness reaches backward as well as forward in time, bringing old forms of savagery to life in the contemporary landscape. Frontiers energize old fantasies, even as they embody their impossibilities" (28-29).

experiments with new media.[43] The two views of Chinese urbanity that I have discussed so far – the bleak dystopian city and the generative urban frontier – are clearly articulated in a pair of his 3D digital animation films. Zhang's 2008 film *Mist* (*Miwu* 迷雾) is a frenzied portrait of the urbanisation process, ending with scenes of apocalypse and ruin, whereas his 2011 film *Sakya* (*Sajia* 萨迦) constructs a narrative of transcendence to show a modern city merging with an ancient Tibetan monastery.

Mist was noted by art historian Wu Hung as highly representative of a distinct type of contemporary Chinese ruin image: pessimistic, bleak, and unpeopled, placing deliberate distance between the viewer and the ruins through its monumental narrative and scale (*Ruins*; 239-41). In contrast, *Sakya* is altogether more optimistic, embracing the liminal qualities of the urban frontier and making use of kaleidoscopic visuals to depict a harmonious union between the cosmos and mankind. However, the seeds for *Sakya*, Zhang's abiding interest in healing China's urban malaise, and the function of the frontier trope can be glimpsed in the earlier piece.

A thirty-minute tableau of urban development and destruction, *Mist* opens in a rainforest teeming with reptiles and insects. These creatures reappear throughout the film (ants crawling up a tree trunk, for example, are later spotted crawling up a skyscraper), providing narrative consistency as the surrounding environment morphs with disorientating speed. This rainforest is quickly felled and supplanted by a city, which then takes on two successive and increasingly frantic facades (based on the Chongqing Iron and Steel industrial complex and the "Window of the World" theme park in Shenzhen), rising and crumbling in equal measures. The film ends with dark, ruinous scenes of a fallen civilisation (figure 4), followed by a wide shot

[43] Zhang Xiaotao has taken a leading role in this area, co-founding the New Media Art Department at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2010 and championing many of China's emerging new media artists. For more on this scene, see Zhang's 2014 essay: "From painting to animation: reflections on narrative, language, imagery, and space in independent animation" (*Cong huihua dao donghua: Guanyu duli donghua de xushi, yuyan, tuxiang, chang yu de sikao* 从绘画到动画: 关于独立动画的叙事、语言、图像、场域的思考).

of a snow-capped mountain peak in the distance (figure 5) before the screen finally fades to black. With these last two images, Zhang bluntly underscores his anti-urban sentiment by rhetorically contrasting scenes of futile human consumption against the reassuring solidity of a pristine mountain landscape.

Figure 4: Still from Zhang Xiaotao, *Mist*, 2008 (31:07)

Figure 5: Still from Zhang Xiaotao, *Mist*, 2008 (32:26)

In his artist's notes to *Mist*, Zhang discusses the "individual torment" (*geti de jian'ao* 个体的的煎熬) that lies in the hearts of Chinese people, brought on by the country's relentless course of economic development in its post-socialist era. He also cites the "astonishing ability to self-heal" (*jingren de ziwo xiufu nengli* 惊人的自我修复能力) he sees as inherent within Chinese culture, a faith reflected in *Mist* by some of the religious and rural motifs that briefly emerge between the otherwise overwhelming scenes of urban dystopia: floating portraits of the Buddha, accompanied by sounds of monastic chanting; mountain ranges and snowy peaks; a large Tibetan *thangka* ཐང་ཀ། painting draped across a rocky slope. Here, Zhang is attempting to give visual form to the chronic feelings of alienation and unhappiness that have been associated with the spatial and societal changes brought on by China's rapid urbanisation and endeavours to seek refuge through other means (in this case, spiritual and mystical paths). Over the course of the film, *Mist* accelerates China's urban process to an apocalyptic conclusion, using grand narrative and scale to prompt the viewer into grimly recognising what has been lost because of China's economic growth.

In *Sakya*, Zhang develops some of the restorative strategies he toyed with in *Mist*, presenting spiritual travel and Tibetan Buddhist traditions as effective methods of mitigating the negative psychological effects of urban modernity.[44] The narrative of this fifteen-minute film is comparatively open-ended and non-linear. Taking the ancient Sakya Monastery ས་སྐྱ་དགོན་པ། in Tibet as its source of inspiration, *Sakya* presents the viewer with virtual cities and spaces charged with a numinous cosmic energy (figure 6). With an electronic soundtrack punctuated by sutra chanting and the ringing of bells, it opens with a silhouette of two hands making mudra gestures in the foreground and the outline of a mandala in the background (figure 7), before

[44] *Sakya* was exhibited in the China Pavilion at the 2013 55th Venice Biennale, curated by Wang Chunchen 王春辰, under the theme of "Transfiguration". The piece stands out for its earnest utopianism alongside the pavilion's other artists like Miao Xiaochun 缪晓春 and Wang Qingsong 王庆松, who presented typically dystopian depictions of life in contemporary China.

embarking on a kaleidoscopic journey through a cosmos infused with vivid colours, symmetrical patterns (e.g. urban grids and mandalas), astronomical objects (e.g. planets and nebulae), and nods to our digital age (e.g. long strings of binary code). The overall aesthetic is one of psychedelic kitsch, recalling the visual language that emerged from 1960s Euro-American counterculture and its interest in altered states of consciousness. Occasionally, we are shown snatches of film footage from our recognisable everyday world: crowds of people in a temple forecourt, for example, or shots of urbanites sitting in a glass-panelled waiting room. However, *Sakya* seeks to evoke a transcendental experience and to expand the borders of the mind, and the majority of the film is computer-generated fantasy, reflecting the psychological journeys taken by the characters.

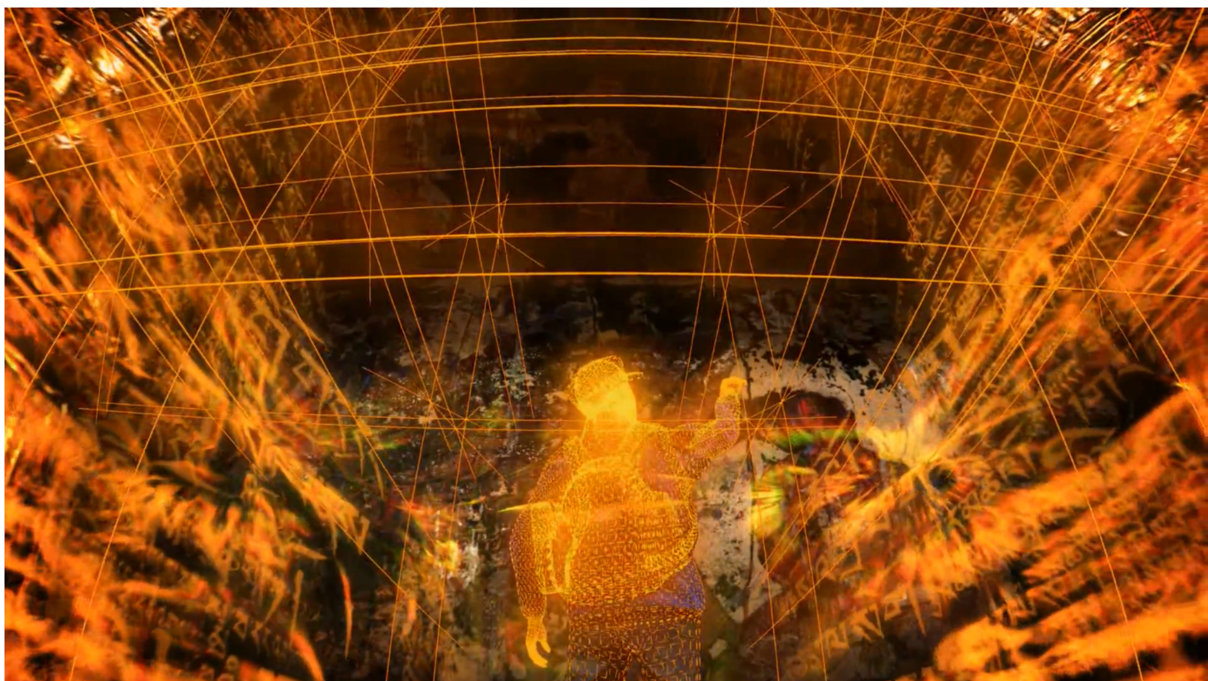

Figure 6: Still from Zhang Xiaotao, *Sakya*, 2011 (04:06)

***Figure** 7*: Still from Zhang Xiaotao, *Sakya*, 2011 (00:33)

Three reoccurring motifs can be drawn out of *Sakya* to illustrate my broader thesis of a generative frontier. The first concerns its reparative impulses and interest in healing the inner psyche. While *Mist* and *Sakya* explore similar subject matter, *Sakya* is more optimistic in its narrative, showing us characters who have escaped urban unhappiness and successfully reached a state of transcendence. In media interactions and in his personal essays, Zhang frequently states that one of his artistic goals is to heal societal malaise. In a 2011 interview with curator Cecilia Freschini, Zhang expresses his belief that "the reason Chinese people are unhappy today is connected to the collapse of traditional values and faith" ("Illuminating").[45] He revisits the theme of collective unhappiness in his 2013 musings on Chinese art history ("Reorganising the Fragments of History"), when he notes that the story of China's modernisation has, for the vast majority of people, been "a long journey of heartache and healing" (*manchang de xinling zhi tong he liaoshang zhi lü* 漫长的心灵之痛和疗伤之旅). In *Sakya*, Zhang envisions what this process of healing might look like, taking a somewhat softer

[45] *Weishenme jintian Zhongguoren gandao hen bu xingfu, shi he chuantong de jiazhiguan he xinyang de bengkui hen you guanxi.* 为什么今天中国人感到很不幸福，是和传统的价值观和信仰的崩溃很有关系。

stance than he does in *Mist.* The urban-rural paradigm is still maintained in *Sakya*, but the forms of the city and temple now merge and overlap with one another. We see columns of binary code which directly recall earlier shots of prayer wheels covered with Tibetan script, and architectural renderings of a temple on a seemingly inhospitable mountain slope (figure 8). The emphasis on the digital medium and imagined future landscapes (hence the renderings of temples and cities rather than the finished products) position the viewer in a potent state of multiple possibilities and futures.

Figure 8: Still from Zhang Xiaotao, *Sakya*, 2011 (07:15)

My second key point lies in how Zhang depicts cultural traditions, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, as the source of this healing power. The use of these elements can be read as part of the "Tibet Fever" (*Xizang re* 西藏热) cultural phenomenon that has swept across China over the past few decades, painting Tibet as a spiritually pure and unpolluted land.[46]

[46] See Ivan Constantino's 2012 essay titled "Spinning Lhasa: Ritual Circumambulation Routes as Liminal Urbanscapes in China's 'Western Treasure House'" for a detailed discussion on the "Tibet Fever" phenomenon and how the region has been successfully marketed across China by the media and tourism industries as an alluring frontier zone.

Zhang states accordingly in interviews that Tibet "may be the last outpost of human faith" on the planet, but also laments that commercial forces are sullying the purity of the region ("Transcending"). Many of the artists in this study reach for the allure of an imagined historical past or stereotypes of ethnic minorities as a way of resisting urban modernity. A colonial gaze can be gleaned from this act of Othering, and an exoticised, simplified vision of rural minority culture emerges as a soothing alternative to contemporary urban life. The psychedelic, Tibet-inflected aesthetic of *Sakya* perpetuates the trope of achieving deeper psychological awareness through channelling certain ethnic cultures. While some critics have praised *Sakya* for "its exploration on the limitations on freedom of religion" (Perlez), it is difficult to see how the film engages with this topic at all. Its portrayal of Tibetan culture is consistent with the state sanitisation of minority cultures (e.g. depicting China's minorities as a pure-hearted people in touch with fundamental human truths) and makes no meaningful reference to how the real-life Sakya monastery in Tibet was ransacked by Red Guards during the Mao years. The film ends with its pilgrims circumnavigating a large globe in mobile harmony with each other (figure 9), suspended in the cosmos. *Sakya*, like many other works that engage with the generative frontier, is far more concerned with individual journeys of personal development and transcendence than politicising states of human unhappiness. Here, Tibetan Buddhism is reduced to a set of abstract symbols and presented as a way of relieving the psychological discomfort of urban modernity (as we have seen, the generative frontier can be as much of a blind spot as a liberating force).

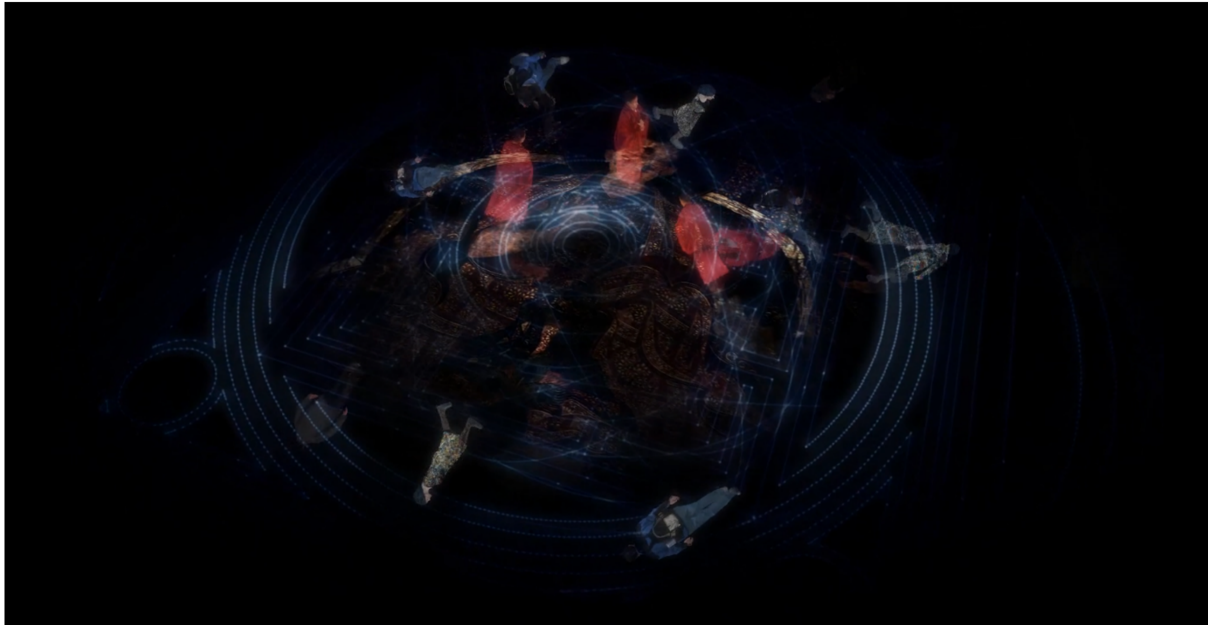

Figure 9: Still from Zhang Xiaotao, *Sakya*, 2011 (14:28)

Finally, we have the figure of the lone explorer stepping out into *terra incognita*. Three main characters emerge as pilgrims throughout this film: a male urbanite, a Buddhist monk in orange robes, and a woman in minority dress. The male pilgrim in particular is depicted in the self-reliant, heroic terms of the explorer: a backpack strapped to his shoulders, striding away from the city and out into unfamiliar space (figure 6). Zhang is quoted in his interview with Freschini as saying: "[Chinese people] really live in a mirage of the material, a beautiful illusion, and our spirits are in the wilderness" ("Illuminating").[47] His rendition of the frontier generates a narrative of striking out into the wilderness to reconnect with one's spirit.

Not all the examples presented here treat this generative and transformative encounter with the frontier so earnestly. A 2015 oil painting by the artist Zhong Biao, titled *Journey To The West* (*Xiyouji* 西游记), is a more humorous exposition of the discourse that emerges from this mixture of urban and wild elements (figure 10). Born in Chongqing in 1968, Zhong Biao is one of Zhang Xiaotao's contemporaries from the Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts. Often listed

[47] *Women zen de chuzai yi ge wuzhi de haishishenlou, meili de huanjue, er women de jingshen que zai yi pian huangyuan shang.* 我们真的处在一个物质的海市蜃楼，美丽的幻觉，而我们的精神却在一片荒原上。

in the same generation of Sichuanese artists, they both approach themes of modernity with macrocosmic vision and microcosmic detail.[48] Meiqin Wang has pinpointed Zhong as a leading figure in China's artworld who "pioneered the urban theme" (8) in 1990s painting. Like many of Zhong's other works, *Journey to the* West is a large-scale piece, 2.8 metres high and 2 metres in width, and executed through his signature collage technique. Recalling the eponymous Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE) work of fiction, the figure of a monk (presumably Tang Sanzang 唐三藏) is placed in the foreground, simply dressed with a sleeping mat slung over one shoulder and with an arch expression of intent on his face. He is suspended over a bird's eye view of a city and is turning towards the wilderness in the background, represented by a mountainscape and a lithe Guanyin figure rising from the peaks. The city becomes abstract at its edges and melts into the blank space of the canvas. The Guanyin figure, however, is painted in photorealistic detail. As in Zhang Xiaotao's *Sakya*, this work blends photorealism and abstraction to enable a wandering mode of spectatorship: our eye is drawn to the key figures in the work, but soon drifts across the nonrepresentational strokes of paint. There is also a sly knowingness to the work, not only in the kitschy title and gaudily erotic depiction of Guanyin, but also in how the artist has deliberately reproduced a photoshopped collage effect via the medium of oil paint (the overall effect is very much that of an advertisement for a blockbuster movie).

[48] For more on the recent generations of Sichuan artists, see Sun Dongdong's 孙冬冬 2010 article "Sichuan: behind the peace, at the region's extremity" (*Sichuan: xianghe de beihou, diyu de jintou* 四川：祥和的背后，地域的尽头) in *Leap* magazine.

Figure 10: Zhong Biao, *Journey to the West*, 2015

Ultimately, a moment of emotional transcendence is also depicted here: the monk is poised to step across the threshold, leaving the manmade realm to move through the wilderness, towards the higher plane of understanding symbolised by Guanyin. *Journey to the West* was included in a 2016 exhibition titled *The Other Shore* at the Klein Sun Gallery in New York. Chinese arts specialist Paul Manfredi, in his exhibition essay for *The Other Shore*, notes the overarching theme of flight across the paintings, and Zhong's inclination to "transcend boundaries, and constraining forces of any sort" ("Zhong Biao"). As in many of Zhong's works,

emblems of modernity ultimately melt away to be replaced by signifiers of spirituality. Both Zhang and Zhong reach for states of transcendence. And while, like some of the other works I examine in this thesis, such signifiers of transcendence might not be especially sophisticated in their form (as discussed, many rely on crude strategies of Othering), all use the generative frontier to achieve this flight away from various states of unhappiness without completely losing sight of the city.

VII. Chapter outline

In their 2013 edited collection *The Spectacle and the City*, editors Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen frame the Chinese city as a "'haptic machine', in Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of the machine as 'a system of interruptions or breaks' where connections and (subsequently) subjectivities are produced" (15). While my focus is not on Debordian visual feasts and tactile cityscapes as theirs is, this thesis continues work on Chinese urbanism in this spirit by exploring how generative spaces of refuge for the urban psyche are expressed in literature and visual culture. In this vein, the artists I work on typically experiment with spatial liminality to facilitate highly psychological depictions of place-making and becoming. They show urban space in transformation, often shifting between states of degradation and renewal, and thrillingly unfamiliar to those who journey through. The generative frontier emerges from derelict buildings in the hearts of top-tier cities; villages deep in the countryside that abide by their own mysterious and often surreal rules; and *trompe-l'oeil* views of cityscapes that recall traditional *shanshui* paintings. These environments are framed as strange new worlds that have a healing effect on the psyche of their explorer-subjects. Furthermore, and as I go on to show, these works typically deploy formal techniques that encourage a relatively undirected and wandering form of audience engagement. Ultimately, they all adopt a curative approach to the theme of the city, using narratives of the frontier and encounters with the Other to soothe the

psychological distress so commonly associated with Chinese urban modernity. I also show here that the rural-urban dichotomy in the Chinese cultural imagination is always shifting within this aesthetic moment. In these texts, the two binary spatialities are always collapsing into each other to create new terrain. I have taken a wide-ranging multimedia approach, and given the broad scope of this project, each chapter acts as a snapshot into one key defining aspect of the generative frontier.

It is also worth noting that many of the artists and writers I work on do not limit themselves to one creative medium: Guo Xiaolu, for instance, produces arthouse film and writes non-fiction, poetry, and fiction. Bi Gan writes poetry as well as directing films. Many of the artists and writers I work on make a number of intermedial references (Jia Zhangke, for example, references the *shanshui* painting genre in his film *Still Life*). No one medium has dominated when it comes to representing China's new urbanism, although different views of the city have naturally emerged from different cultural moments. Examples include Mian Mian and Zhou Weihui's hedonistic vision of 1990s Shanghai in their novels, the gritty urban realism of the New Documentary Movement, and utopian architectural visions which draw on organic forms like Ma Yansong's *shanshui* city. Furthermore, many of the texts I work on are in digital formats, meaning they are highly malleable forms of information (easily modifiable, copied, etc), and lend themselves easily to slipping over into other art mediums (e.g. Yang Yongliang's digital photographs form the basis of his large-scale analogue prints, his films, and his VR art). And while the idiosyncratic aesthetic of rooftoppers and urban explorers may not be influenced by Can Xue's experimental literary fiction, they emerge from the same trajectory of impulses (a patterning akin to Raymond Williams' 1970 concept of "structures of feeling"). All reject mainstream urban modernity and seek to cultivate their own internal worlds. All are interested in psychological interiorities and experiment aesthetically with ways of managing mood.

Chapter one (titled "Blurring the rural-urban binary: liminal space, selfhood, and Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone*") explores the relationship between spatial liminality and individual growth in Sinophone writer Guo Xiaolu's 2003 Bildungsroman *Wo xinzhong de shitou zhen* (我心中的石头镇), best known in English as *Village of Stone*. It demonstrates how the generative frontier aesthetic in the novel emerges in the shifting ways that the protagonist's inner self relates to familiar and unfamiliar space, eventually giving rise to her narrative of psychological healing. The chapter begins by positioning Guo in the field of Anglophone literature today. It then situates her in the context of mainland Chinese literary aesthetics in the 1990s and early 2000s, arguing that she should also be understood through the lens of the Private Writing literary trend. While Guo has mostly been studied in terms of national identity, global mobility, and transculturalism, this chapter also considers how a highly localised sense of spatial liminality can be found in her pre-Anglophone work.

It then turns to an extended discussion of *Village of Stone*, interpreting Shitou 石头 fishing village as a wild frontier space and the site of protagonist Jiang Shanhong's 蒋珊红 original trauma, while Beijing emerges as a generative space of physical and mental retreat. I advance a Winnicottian framework to understand this healing arc, examining the ways in which spatial liminality and the eventual dilution of the rural-urban binary enable Shanhong to move past her childhood and form a more robust sense of selfhood. Finally, the chapter discusses how Guo's representation of the urban as a psychological holding space for her protagonists can also be traced in her 2006 film *How Is Your Fish Today?* (*Jintian de yu zenmeyang?* 今天的鱼怎么样?), which deploys a metanarrative to explore the relationship between imaginary landscapes and healing. I suggest that the film and the novel should be viewed as companion pieces to each other, as they draw on much of the same source material to advance interlocking variations on the generative frontier.

Chapter two (titled "Skyscrapers in the mist: urban *shanshui* and generative ambiguity") draws mainly upon the work of digital photomontage artist Yang Yongliang and Jia Zhangke's celebrated 2006 film *Still Life* to explore what art historian Yin Jinan has described as the "post-*shanshui* image" (45) in China today. It also discusses digital media artist Shi Weili's painting project *Shan Shui in the World* (*Shijian shanshui* 世间山水; 2016 – ongoing). Both Yang and Jia have ambiguously fused elements of *shanshui* art, the traditional genre of Chinese "mountain-water" landscape painting which rose to prominence under the Song dynasty, with scenes of the accelerated tempo of China's contemporary built environment. I demonstrate that Yang's photomontages and Jia's *Still Life* explore the theme of urban anxiety by embracing a *shanshui*-inspired visual schema that, in turn, gives rise to a soothing ambient aesthetic. In particular, it examines how *woyou*, a concept of mind-travel associated with the aesthetics of classical *shanshui* painting, has been reinvented in the process. It has instead become a therapeutic philosophy of the generative frontier that seeks to heal the ruptures of China's urban-rural divide within the frame.

Chapter three (titled "The yellow leaves of a building: urban exploration in China and the *Cooling Plan* photography project") explores the urban ruin as a site of pleasure and a space for ego formation. It concentrates on the aesthetics of visual material produced by China-based practitioners of the "urban exploration" (*chengshi tanxian* 城市探险) subculture. A thriving global subculture since the 1990s, urban exploration is a practice of recreational trespass into temporary, obsolete, abandoned, and derelict areas within built environments. Explorers are often drawn towards an aesthetics of decay, and many share digital documentation of their adventures by uploading written reports, photographs, and video footage to public online venues, generating a vast archive of intriguing secret sites. Within China, urban exploration has been enthusiastically pitched as an authentic means of alleviating urban alienation and everyday boredom. My primary focus of study here is the *Cooling Plan* (*Lengque jihua* 冷却

计划) online photography project, set up in 2006 by the Beijing-based artist and urban explorer Zhao Yang 赵阳. I demonstrate how using ruined space as a site for adventure enables the practitioner to craft and project an explorer alter-ego via the ludic act of image-making, concentrating on the playful apocalyptic aesthetics of Zhao's images of sites such as the abandoned Shougang 首钢 Steel Plant, the Chaonei 朝内 81 mansion, and the Xiaotangshan 小汤山 SARS hospital sites in Beijing. Zhao's blend of photography and simulative play presents the ruin as a creative refuge which helps the explorer build a restorative sense of individual autonomy and mitigate the negative mental impact of the "seen" city.

Chapter four (titled "One's back to the city: frontier villages and narratives of healing in Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues*") discusses the work of filmmaker Bi Gan in the context of the generative frontier, by examining how he treats narratives of sickness and journeying towards health. Turning inwards, away from the gritty realism of the directors associated with China's Sixth Generation, Bi's cinema is more interested in innovative ways of foregrounding the psychology of the individual. The chapter invokes sociologist Arthur Frank's classic templates of sickness narratives to examine the generative frontier as a space in which such stories might unfold. The chapter largely attends to Bi's intensely lyrical 2015 film *Kaili Blues*: its protagonist leaves Kaili, a county-level city in Guizhou province, and finds himself in an otherworldly riverside village named Dangmai 荡麦. But if *Kaili Blues* can be read as a quest narrative – in search of healing – then it is one contingent on latent elements of Othering and exoticism that gently trouble the smooth dreamlike consistency of the quest narrative itself (the chapter explores such primitivist tropes, chiefly through the figure of the minoritized "wild man").

Taken as a whole, the thesis aims to frame the generative frontier – advanced by a mode of cultural production which portrays urban space in flux, shifting between states of

degradation and renewal, and thrillingly unfamiliar to its explorers – as a zone of healing. Its treatment of narratives of the frontier and encounters with the Other gestures towards a new curative approach to the themes of Chinese urban modernity and psychological distress.

Chapter one. Blurring the rural-urban binary: liminal space, selfhood, and Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone*

> I see myself on a boat, sailing towards Shitou village, across the depths of the ocean. As the stormy waves grow clearer in my memory, I gradually move away from the enormous city that surrounds me - away from the enormous buildings, the enormous crowds. Scattering torpedoes as I go, I capture the secret fortresses of my heart, one by one […][49]
>
> — Guo Xiaolu, *Village of Stone* ("About Village of Stone" *Guanyu Shitou Zhen* 关于石头镇)

This first chapter explores the spatialised relationship between transcending trauma and generating a new sense of self in Guo Xiaolu's novel *Wo xinzhong de Shitou Zhen*, published in China in 2003 and best known in English as *Village of Stone*.[50] Through their negotiation of the generative frontier, all the texts and artworks I discuss in this thesis seek to reframe the entrenched rural-urban binary in the Chinese cultural imagination, and this novel's narrative of healing is a particularly clear example of this effort.

Guo's international reputation to date has naturally been forged by her Anglophone corpus, in which she frequently engages with the motifs of global frontiers and border-crossing. These works are characterised by her interest in cultural inbetweenness, nationality and migration, and the challenges of navigating a new country (Guo left China for Britain in 2002). In particular, her stories address her status as a diasporic Chinese Anglophone author who has crossed geographical boundaries herself. The scholarship so far has concentrated on these

[49] *Wo kan zhe wo de chuan yuelaiyue yuan de shixiang Shitou Zhen haiyang de shenchu, fenglang zai wo de jiyi li yuelaiyue zhenshi, wo jianjian de yuanli le wo shenbian zhege pangda de chengshi, pangda de jianzhu wu, pangda de renqun, wo sa xia yulei, wo gongke zhe wo neixin yinmi de diaobao, yi ge jie yi ge* [...] 我看着我的船越来越远地驶向石头镇海洋的深处， 风浪在我的记忆里越来越真实， 我渐渐地远离了我身边这个庞大的城市， 庞大的建筑物， 庞大的人群， 我撒下鱼雷， 我攻克着我内心隐秘的碉堡， 一个接一个 ......

[50] The Chinese title translates literally to "The Stone Village in my Heart", but I will continue to use the English title "Village of Stone" here, which has already been established by Cindy Carter's 2004 translation.

topics in her Anglophone output, analysing her novels such as the 2007 *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers* (henceforth *Dictionary*) in terms of translational experimentation, intercultural communication, international mobility, gender issues, and so on.

Far less critical attention, however, has been paid to Guo's early Chinese-language work, before the diasporic and globalised turn in her writing. This chapter seeks to address this gap in the scholarship, arguing that the generative frontier (as a response to rural-urban tension) emerges most clearly on a local and national level in her Sinophone texts. *Village of Stone* constitutes an overlooked example of how an enmeshed sense of spatial and emotional displacement permeates Guo's work even before she began writing in English. In this chapter, I take literary scholar Gabriela S. Lemos' claim as my starting point. Lemos observed in a 2019 essay that Guo's autobiographical writing indicates that her "feelings of otherness go beyond her ostensible immigrant status" and that they act as "the determinative concept tying together all of Guo's formative experiences for her novels and films" (9).[51] Guo's fictional works draw heavily on her own life experiences and are clearly written in the autofictional mode.[52] *Village of Stone* is no exception in this regard, and it explores her signature sense of fundamental loneliness through a narrative of childhood trauma and rural-urban interplay set in mainland China. The novel's protagonist Jiang Shanhong is a social outsider whose eventual character growth is tied to her journeys through both the real and imagined space of her childhood village. Ultimately, this chapter sets out to demonstrate how a generative frontier in *Village of Stone* emerges in the changing ways that Shanhong's inner self relates to space and place, giving rise

[51] Drawing on the work of literary scholar Natasha Lvovich, Lemos uses the term "pre-existing internal exile" to argue that "Guo's displacement is not bound by geopolitical borders but instead has far reaching roots in internal and temporal realms" (9).

[52] Autofiction can be understood as a literary text which features the "inclusion of a characterized version of the author, usually as the protagonist" (Worthington 2). An example of Guo combining autobiography with fiction can be seen in the recurring figures of the voiceless father and his daughter, who are described in similar terms throughout several of Guo's texts. These characters are obviously based on Guo herself and her own father (who suffered from throat cancer), with versions appearing in *Village of Stone*, her 2008 documentary film *We Went to Wonderland* (*Lengku xianjing* 冷酷仙境), her 2014 novel *I am China*, and her 2019 memoir *Once Upon a Time in the East*.

to her narrative of psychological healing. This hopeful view of the young urban female protagonist and her capacity for change makes Guo relatively unusual in 1990-2000s Chinese literature, as some domestic commentators noted at the time.[53]

This chapter begins by evaluating Guo's position within Anglophone and Sinophone literature. As I have already stated, while most scholars have overwhelmingly focussed on Guo's English-language texts and her transnational themes, our understanding of how she writes about states of inbetweenness should also extend to her depictions of the Chinese urban-rural relationship. This chapter will examine how a localised sense of spatial liminality is especially apparent in her pre-Anglophone work, particularly in *Village of Stone* and her 2006 film *How Is Your Fish Today?* In my view, Guo's uniquely generative depiction of the city in these texts warrants greater scholarly attention, particularly when considered alongside other popular Chinese writers who were also publishing psychological urban fiction from the perspective of individualistic young women during the 1990s and 2000s, like Zhou Weihui 周卫慧, Mian Mian 棉棉, and Chen Ran. I argue that *Village of Stone* resonates strongly with this literary moment, but that in its depiction of a successful attempt at healing, it constitutes a uniquely optimistic portrait of the urban psyche at the time. I also briefly discuss how this femininised desire for privacy within the urban realm manifests in visual culture today, drawing on the photography of artist Zhou Hongbin 周宏斌 to do so.

I then move on to a detailed discussion of *Village of Stone*. A psychological *Bildungsroman* which draws heavily on Guo's own experiences of growing up in a Zhejiang fishing village, the story is told from the perspective of Shanhong, a twenty-eight-year-old woman who grew up in the coastal village of Shitou. In an attempt to distance herself from the

[53] For instance, see Rong Xing's 荣欣 2004 review of the novel in the *China Business Times* (*Zhonghua gongshang shibao* 中华工商时) and Wei Xinhong's 魏心宏 2003 interview with Guo.

trauma of her childhood, Shanhong has sought refuge as an adult in Beijing, yet is haunted by past events. Throughout the novel, depictions of countryside and city are heavily intertwined with Shanhong's emotional state. As she recalls her childhood memories, Shitou village is depicted in harsh terms of imprisonment, as "my fortress without windows" (*shi wo meiyou dongyan de diaobao* 是我没有洞眼的碉堡; 8). In contrast, Beijing is a space of retreat which has enabled her to "escape the chaos and emotional confusion of [her] childhood" (*taoli le younian kaishi di naxie cuoluan er fuza de qinggan* 逃离了幼年开始的那些错乱而复杂的情感; 4). The city may not always be a wholly positive space for Shanhong (her life there is, after all, financially precarious and, at times, dull and emotionally unfulfilling), but nonetheless, it constitutes an adequate holding environment for her process of psychological growth. With reference to recent trauma theory, I examine this healing arc, examining the ways in which spatial liminality enables Shanhong to move past her childhood and form a more robust sense of self.

I end the chapter by looking at how a similar structure plays out in her film *How Is Your Fish Today?*, which deploys a metanarrative to explore the relationships between imaginary landscapes, healing, and art-making. I also suggest that the film and the novel should be viewed as companion pieces to each other, as they draw from much of the same source material and speak to the same themes.

I. Outside the city walls: Guo's pre-Anglophone alienation

Guo Xiaolu has, by now, firmly established herself as one of the UK's most prominent cultural producers on the subjects of China, Chineseness, and the migrant experience, with frequent appearances on the BBC services, articles in the *Guardian* and *Independent* newspapers, and

even a 2019 cinema retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery (titled *She, A Chinese*, after one of her films). She typically writes about transnational selfhoods, and her fictional protagonists often undergo a process of personal growth as a result of their encounters with an unfamiliar culture. Literary scholar Rachael Gilmour's assessment of how Guo's work "celebrates the creative possibilities of linguistic disorder, and explores how a new subjectivity can be forged in the space between languages" ("Living" 222) reflects the position Guo now occupies in contemporary English literature, and how she has become most well-known for her young, adventurous female protagonists who explore new cultural realms.

While Guo's authorial image has come to be defined by her reckoning with racial and cultural liminality, I contend that her spatialised depiction of human loneliness should not solely be understood through the lens of immigrant experience alone. Her autobiographical writing reveals a longstanding preoccupation with loneliness, a cluster of emotions which cultural historian Fay Bound Alberti defines as "a conscious, cognitive feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others; an emotional lack that concerns a person's place in the world" (5). In Guo's 2017 memoir *Once Upon a Time in the East* (henceforth *Once Upon a Time*), she self-presents as someone who has always felt like a social outsider.[54] For Guo, a permanent state of estrangement is reflected even in her family name, the meaning of which relegates her to the very edges of society. Seeking to make sense of what drove her grandfather to suicide, she recounts her father's explanation that the character of their family name (郭) means "outside the city wall", that "in the old days, people built two layers of wall around their cities and Guo is the space between them. An in-between zone" (97). Her father's anecdote

[54] Guo's memoir is full of the following types of sentences: "I stared at that lifeless pond with the dead leaves floating on its surface, and even the keys around my neck seemed to whimper with loneliness" (119); "We continued our affair in secret. He understood my loneliness" (154); and "I was six years old and consumed by an ineffable loneliness" (314).

carries with it the fatalistic implication that her lifelong sense of social alienation is hereditary, and her fictional characters often express a similar fundamental sense of loneliness.[55]

As we learn from *Once Upon a Time*, Guo was born in 1973 in Zhejiang province, where she spent most of her childhood years in the fishing village of Shitang 石塘 and Wenling city. She moved to the UK in 2002, having secured a British Council Chevening scholarship after completing her studies at Beijing Film Academy. By this point, she had already published several works for the Chinese domestic market, including her first novel *Fenfang's 37.2 Degrees* (*Fenfang de sanshiqi du er* 芬芳的 37°2) in 2000, several essay collections on film, and various short stories. She had also accumulated a number of screenwriting credits, including on Jin Chen's 金琛 1998 film *Love in the Internet Age* (*Wangluo shidai de aiqing* 网络时代的爱情).[56] However, it was when Guo began producing work in English that her career truly took off: in 2007, her novel *Dictionary* was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction; in 2013, she was placed on Granta's prestigious "Best of Young British Novelists" list, alongside Zadie Smith and Helen Oyeyemi; and over the years, her films have been shown at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) New York and the Sundance, Locarno, and Venice film festivals. She has since continued to work across a wide range of forms and mediums, producing film, fiction, autobiography, and poetry. She has also personally translated and adapted some of her own work: *Fenfang's 37.2 Degrees* was translated and re-written into her 2008 English novel *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, and in turn, reworked into a new 2010

[55] For instance, in *Village of Stone*, Shanhong describes herself as "so lonely" (*wo jiu hen gudu* 我就很孤独) as a seven-year-old in Shitou, because unlike the other children, she didn't have a family to greet on the seashore when the fishing boats came in at the end of the working day (16). In *Dictionary*, Z might insist that, "In China I not have loneliness concept. Always we with family or crowd" (31), but elsewhere, she alludes to lifelong social estrangement when she writes that her mother told her she was an "ugly peasant girl" for "all twenty-three years" and wonders if this is the reason "why I not never having boyfriend like other Chinese girls my age" (60).

[56] Guo's abiding interest in the generative potential of liminal space can be observed in this very early work. See Yomi Braester's 2004 interpretation of the film, where he discusses how "cyberspace has become the arena for an alternative existence free of the limitations of time and space" (89). Similarly, Shanhong and Zhuzi in *Village of Stone* cultivate an alternative existence through their unconventional slacker lifestyle, building their lives in the social margins of the city, and eventually on their own terms.

Chinese edition under the same title (*Taotie qingchun de 20 ge shunjian* 饕餮青春的 20 个瞬间).

Scholars have typically approached Guo's corpus from three main perspectives, which I discuss here before moving on to how the understudied *Village of Stone* sheds new light on how spatial liminality functions in her work. The vast majority of the criticism has been on Guo's use of linguistic experimentation and transcultural themes in her 2007 breakthrough novel. *Dictionary* is told from the perspective of a young Chinese student called Zhuang (or "Z", as she calls herself), who uses her imperfect English to write diary entries about her life as a language student in London (e.g. "And how I living in strange country West alone? I never been to West" [5]). Her English language capabilities gradually improve over the course of the novel, although she occasionally resorts to her native Chinese when she feels particularly frustrated by her linguistic limitations.

Dictionary divided audiences on its release: some reviewers, like Carole Cadwalladr in the *Observer*, found Guo's attempt at "bad" English disingenuous and unconvincing, whereas others felt the novel successfully guided them into considering "deep questions about the real differences between Chinese and British culture and language" (Thomas). *Dictionary* has arguably been most appreciated as a scholarly object of study: Flair Donglai Shi praises how it "achieves a heightened translational aesthetic through a clever combination of formalistic and thematic features" ("Translating" 3), and Belinda Kong acknowledges Guo as "an important voice that redefines the relation of English to Chinese" (277). Its bilingual features lend *Dictionary* particularly well to questions of linguistic analysis, translation, transculturism and cultural difference, and so on.[57] However, these globalised themes are less pertinent to my

[57] For scholarship on Guo's experimental use of language in *Dictionary*, see: Rachael Gilmour (2012) on the novel as an example of translational writing; Eunju Hwang (2012) on the role of transcultural communication and its failure; Angelia Poon (2013) on the relationship between language and the body, and the global subjectivity that emerges from this; Belinda Kong (2016) for a biopolitical and geopolitical reading of the novel; Fiona Doloughan

discussion of *Village of Stone*, which was originally published for the domestic Chinese reader before Guo began establishing her career in the UK, and is far more localised in its imaginative scope.

Secondly, Guo has been studied as an example of an Anglophone Chinese writer who has had professional success in the English-language book publishing market, and critics have debated how her work both subverts and perpetuates reductive tropes in Chinese diasporic writing. Guo arguably tries to mitigate the issue of self-Orientalism by pre-empting her audience's racial prejudices and cultivating an ironicising stance throughout her Anglophone work. She deliberately invites her reader to view her through a limiting national lens, publishing books and films under pointedly reductive titles such as *I Am China* (2014), *Once Upon a Time in the East*, and *She, A Chinese* (2009), while then striving to educate her audience and subvert their assumptions by complicating these labels in the text itself. For example, as a child in her memoir *Once Upon a Time*, Guo learns that she is in fact of Hui Muslim descent and suddenly realises there is "no such clean-cut thing as *the Chinese*" (97). However, as some scholars have noted, Guo's efforts to blur and resist these Chinese stereotypes can feel inconsistent and have arguably been limited in their success.[58] Belinda Kong, for example, shrewdly observes that while "Guo strategically invokes the category of Hui […] to ironize her identification with Chineseness within the PRC, when facing the Western media she does not

(2016) on how translation shapes Guo's narrative construction; Astrid Møller-Olsen (2017) on Z's identity transformation through the novel's diary-dictionary format; and Flair Donglai Shi (2021) for a comparative discussion of the British, Taiwanese, and mainland Chinese versions of the novel ("Translating").

[58] Critics are split on this issue. Adele Lee, for example, feels these attempts to overturn potential reader prejudices are gestural. She concludes in a 2016 essay that Guo ultimately neither "manages nor desires to transcend national boundaries or inherited gender constructs" (368). Similarly, in a 2012 essay about the "new woman" in Chinese diasporic fiction, Zhang Kaiyi 张凯乙 uses the idiom "old wine in a new bottle" (*xin ping zhuang jiu jiu* 新瓶装旧酒) to describe how Guo's work still replicates outdated, "self-orientalising" (*zhiwo dongfang hua* 自我东方化) stereotypes of East Asian women (57). However, Flair Donglai Shi argues that true subversive potential can be found in Guo's work, noting that the limitations of the book industry mean that Guo has little choice but to be self-Orientalising, but that "it is exactly against such involuntary involvement in these self-Orientalist market forces that [Guo] can deploy certain anti-hegemonic preemptive tactics in the fictional worlds she creates" ("Reborn" 187).

insist on her Hui difference but readily assumes the label of Chinese in order to speak out against prevailing clichés about China" (475).

Guo's own story of how she broke into the British publishing industry illustrates how she has selectively drawn on the "writing Red China" (Grice 103) and Chinese "misery memoir" (Kneissl 205) publishing models over the course of her Anglophone career. Often used interchangeably, these terms refer to the brutal accounts of life in Communist China which became particularly popular with Euro-American reading audiences in the 1990s, exemplified by the writer Jung Chang and her 1991 bestseller *Wild Swans*.[59] Comparisons between Chang and Guo are often made in the British press, and in *Once Upon a Time*, Guo makes this link herself.[60] The translation scholar Pei Meng sheds more light onto Guo's strategy in his article about the "writing Red China" genre during the 1990s. Citing his interviews with Guo's literary agent, Pei reveals that Guo cannily chose *Village of Stone* from her six books already published in China because it was semi-autobiographical and inspired by her harsh childhood, thereby resonating with the appetites of the British reading public at the time (216).

Accordingly, the English language translation of *Village of Stone* has adapted the Chinese original to signpost the references to the Cultural Revolution and add additional harrowing sociopolitical detail. For example, when Shanhong is discussing her father in the

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[59] Many of these works were written by young diasporic women. While reviewing Anchee Min's novel *Wild Ginger* in 2002 for *Time* magazine, the Singaporean writer Hwee Hwee Tan sarcastically observed that "ever since Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* became a global publishing sensation, booksellers have decided that the Beautiful Chinese Literary Heroine is a golden goose". Tan went on to write that readers would find a "basic formula" in these books, namely: "a feisty, exotically gorgeous woman suffers hell. Hell comes in the form of an oppressive regime (usually the Cultural Revolution) or through abuse inflicted by male power figures (heartless fathers or cruel husbands)" ("Ginger Tale").

[60] See book reviews with headlines such as the 2017 review "Abandoned, starved, and raped: how Xiaolu Guo fled China to write the ultimate misery memoir" (Helen Brown) in the *Telegraph* newspaper, and *The Spectator* magazine's 2017 "Cinderella in China", with a subheading deeming the book "one of the most miserable misery memoirs of all time" (George). In the latter, the reviewer writes that "This stunning memoir picks up where Jung Chang's 1991 bestseller *Wild Swans* left off" (George). In *Once Upon a Time*, Guo herself reveals that she studied the success of *Wild* Swans and purposefully sought to replicate Chang's path to becoming a professional writer: "While pacing up and down in Waterstones one day and wondering how the hell all these books had been published, I happened upon the book *Wild Swans*. I leafed through it. In the acknowledgements, the author Jung Chang thanked her agent. […] I sent my book to Jung Chang's agent that very day" (264).

opening pages of the novel, the Chinese edition reads: "As for my father, he wasn't around for [my birth]. I've heard rumours that he was some kind of Rightist. He left Shitang before I was born and went to the "outside", to some place beyond our province. Apparently, only my mother knew exactly where he had gone. But she died so suddenly, and then no one knew where my father was" (8).[61] However, in Cindy Carter's English translation, Shanhong's father "fled the village before my birth to escape the fisherman's life. While he was gone the villagers branded him a 'Capitalist Roader' for his bourgeois views. This was during the Cultural Revolution, and had he returned to the village, he would have been imprisoned" (8). In being translated for an Anglophone audience, we can see that the ambiguous original text was altered to include more concrete plot detail about political persecution during the Cultural Revolution. These edits may well have been in line with Guo's own wishes (in interviews, Guo has said that her early fiction was censored in China [Jaggi]), but it could also be interpreted as a version that has been produced to meet the appetite of the western reading market.

This discussion of how Guo strategically adopted the "writing Red China" model is not to diminish the serious points that she has made about the immigrant experience over the course of her career, but to highlight the ways in which her Anglophone work has naturally been crafted for a western audience. Although mainland Chinese and Taiwanese editions of her English language novels have since been translated and published, Guo has made relatively little impact on the Chinese literary landscape, and domestic media coverage generally positions her as an example of an overseas Chinese writer who has built a successful career in

[61] *Er fuqin, cong wo chusheng dao yongyou "Shanhong" zhe ge mingzi, dou meiyou zaichang, tingshuo ta shi shenme youpai, hen zao jiu likai le jiaxiang, ta yuan zai "waidi", sihu zhiyou muqin zhidao fuqin zai "waidi" na yi ge jiaoluo, keshi muqin huran si le, yushi zai ye meiyou ren zhidao fuqin zai zhenmedifang.* 而父亲， 从我出生到拥有 "珊红" 这个名字， 都没有在场， 听说他是什么右派， 很早就离开了家乡， 他远在" 外地"， 似乎只有母亲知道父亲在 "外地" 哪一个角落， 可是母亲忽然死了， 于是再也没有人知道父亲在什么地方。

the west.[62] In media interviews, Guo often frames herself as a cultural educator and guide: "I have to invite western readers into a familiar world, with a point of reference they can understand. And then they slowly enter this other world, this unfamiliarity, this strangeness" (Liu). In short, after settling in the UK, Guo evolved into an author who became predominantly associated with explorations of Chineseness and transnationality, and her writerly exploration of human loneliness became increasingly bound up with these topics.

II. Reframing Guo as a Private Writer

All this said, Guo's novels have contributed to a new trope of the Chinese woman in the western cultural sphere. While Guo may knowingly "write Red China" in her Anglophone work, she has sought to update the model in her choice of protagonist: instead of Jung Chang's filial heroines who chronicle their suffering and fashion themselves in collective terms as "daughters of China" (Adele Lee 356), Guo's characters are individualistic young women who are on journeys of self-discovery and who strive to free themselves from social and familial obligation. *Dictionary*'s Z, for instance, moves in with a bisexual English man twice her age, expresses unfilial levels of hatred towards her mother, consumes pornography, attends adult peepshows, and has an abortion. And Guo ends *Once Upon a Time* presenting as a self-actualised individual who has successfully liberated herself from the obligations of her genetic ties: "My childhood was gone. Finally I felt free from the burden of my family. I no longer needed to find them. I was my own home now. And at last, I could breathe fully, taking fresh new air into my own lungs" (314).

[62] See, for example, a 2013 news article with the headline: "English magazine publishes list of best novelists – female Chinese writer Guo Xiaolu selected" (*Ying zazhi gongbu zui jia xiaoshuo jia mingdan Zhongguo nu zuojia Guo Xiaolu ruxuan* 英杂志公布最佳小说家名单 中国女作家郭小橹入选) (*Xinmin Evening News*; *Xinmin wangbao* 新民晚报).

Scholars have discussed this image of the Chinese millennial woman only in Guo's Anglophone work.[63] However, as I have established, Guo's abiding interest in states of alienation has been overshadowed by the focus on transculturalism and racial Otherness in her mid-career work. Profound feelings of social otherness also shape Shanhong's narrative in *Village of Stone*, which is set in mainland China only, and I am therefore more interested here in situating this particular novel within the context of mainland Chinese literary aesthetics in the 1990s and early 2000s. During this period, prominent female authors were publishing novels about the personal lives of individualistic, urban women. Subsequently labelled "Private Writing" (*siren xiezuo* 私人写作), these works were often autofictional, sexually explicit, and tackled socially provocative themes, like drug use and same-sex relationships.[64] They came to impact the way individual privacy was debated in public discourse, and Bonnie MacDougall has written on how, "within a very short period of time, the concept of 'private' took on a new definition" in China as a result of this literary phenomenon (112). Loosely grouped together, the Private Writers included Chen Ran and Lin Bai 林白, and younger and more commercial names such as Zhou Weihui and Mian Mian. These authors differed enormously in their career ambitions and literary style: for instance, Chen's work is typically regarded as avant-garde or experimental, and has been lauded by the likes of feminist critic Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, whereas Zhou's hedonistic *Shanghai Baby* (*Shanghai baobei* 上海宝贝) is often dismissed as pulpy and middle-brow.[65] As a result, a number of different yet overlapping media terms have been used

[63] See Wenche Ommundsen and Adele Lee, who have discussed *Dictionary* in the context of Chinese "chick-lit" and China's wave of so-called "bad girl" writers. See also Yifan Jin, who argues that Guo should be read as a "nomad feminist" in *Once Upon a Time* (1).
[64] Guo is not typically grouped with the Private Writers, presumably because she developed a different personal literary style after her Anglophone turn. However, she has approvingly referred to the genre in her own writing on female film directors. An example can be seen in her 1999 essay, "Cinema and Adam's Rib": "In the early and mid-nineties, the literary scene in my country saw the emergence of a new and iconoclastic group of avant-garde female authors. Their extremely personal and colorful accounts of their own life experience, and the emotionally evocative language with which they painted this experience, drew unfair criticism from some male mainland Chinese critics."
[65] See Dai Jinhua's 1996 essay, "Chen Ran: Individualistic and Female Writing" (*Chen Ran: Geren he nüxing de shuxie* 陈染: 个人和女性的书写)

to categorise the Private Writers into various subgroups, e.g. the "New New Generation" (*xinxin renlei wenxue* 新新人类文学), the "Beauty Writers" (*meinü zuojia* 美女作家), and "Body Writing" (*shenti xiezuo* 身体写作).

Guo's *Village of Stone* both resonates with and stands apart from the Private Writing genre. Like many of the Private Writers and Post-70s Generation (*qi ling hou* 七零后), Guo is especially drawn to the subject of self-formulation, and this theme has remained consistent throughout her career so far. She has even, on occasion, been called a "Beauty Writer" in the Chinese press, although the label has never seemed to gain real traction.[66] *Village of Stone* shares many of the features common to Private Writing (particularly Chen Ran's 1996 novel *A Private Life*), and in my view, could certainly be included within the category: it features a semi-autobiographical narrative; a young female protagonist who struggles with a range of mental health issues; individualistic characters who reject the demands of mainstream urban modernity and seek alternate ways of living; inadequate or absent parent figures; disturbing accounts of child sexual abuse; and frank descriptions of female sexuality and eroticism. Guo recently made these links herself in a 2011 essay titled "Exceedingly Loud and Incredibly Quiet". Here, she names Chen Ran as one of the "most direct writing influences" (8) on her early writing style, admiring her "beautiful quietness and interiority which [she] could [previously] only encounter in the works of Duras or Calvino" (10), and aligns herself with the movement in saying that her early novels also received similar criticism.[67]

[66] See a 2008 *Guangzhou Daily* (*Guangzhou ribao* 广州日报) article under the headline "English novels by UK-based Beauty Writer Guo Xiaolu published in Britain and America" (*Lu Ying meinu zuojia Guo Xiaolu Yingwen xiaoshuo zai Ying Mei chuban* 旅英美女作家郭小橹英文小说在英美出; Kang Kai 康慨).

[67] Guo writes: "By the time my own novels were published in the late 1990s, I confronted similar critiques to those that Chen Ran and Liu Suola had faced. The mainstream critics, especially the male academics, accused me of narcissism (*zilian*) and anti-socialness (*zibi*). These negative views were also directed towards writers such as Mian Mian and Wei Hui, two women writers based in Shanghai who had caused a sensation with their narratives about drugs and sex. I wondered, if we were considered narcissistic and anti-social, what would they make of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Woolf and indeed, Plath?" (11).

At the same time, *Village of Stone* distinguishes itself from other prominent Private Writing texts, as some readers observed upon its publication. The author of a short review of the novel, printed in a 2004 issue of the *China Business Times*, writes that Guo was their neighbour for a period and that they subsequently read early drafts of the novel (Rong). The reviewer describes *Village of Stone* as Guo's "autobiographical coming-of-age novel" (*zizhuanti chengzhang xiaoshuo* 自传体成长小说; 54), yet praises it for its distanced and restrained literary style, which they differentiate from other contemporaneous writers, who are more inclined to write highly confessional "individualistic" (*si xiaoshuo* 私小说) or "erotic novels" (*haose wenxue* 好色文学; 54). In contrast to this narrative of positive internal growth, and as noted by Hua Li in her monograph on Chinese *Bildungsroman*, "readers can hardly detect any intellectual concern for the process of change in the self" (70) in texts like Zhou Weihui's *Shanghai Baby* or Mian Mian's *Candy*. Even Chen Ran's *A Private Life* (a novel highly preoccupied with the theme of selfhood) is more concerned with protagonist Ni Niuniu's desperate need to protect a fragmented sense of self from the threat of the outside world than it is with genuine personal growth. In the final chapter of the novel, Niuniu has completely withdrawn from the public world, and instead, favours the sanctuary of her bathroom: "The pale blue-green light falls in my quiet and simple little bathroom. Whenever I go inside (perhaps at noon, when the sun is shining and the noise outside is especially loud), it makes me feel the silence of night-time, when everyone is asleep and the world is at rest, and I feel completely secure" (269-270).[68]

[68] *Bai zhong fan qing de guanxian she zai anjing jianyue de buda de yushi kongjian zhong, shenmeshihou zoujin qu, biru shi yangguang gao zhao, feiteng xuanhua de zhongwu, duhui shi wo juede yijing dao le wanwu chenji de yewan, suoyou de ren dou yi an shui, shijie yijing anxi le, wo gandao gewai de anquan.* 白中泛青的光线射在安静简约的不大的浴室空间中，什么时候走进去，比如是阳光高照、沸腾喧哗的中午，都会使我觉得已经到了万物沉寂的夜晚，所有的人都已安睡，世界已经安息了，我感到格外地安全。

After many days go by in this tranquil manner, Niuniu sees that her houseplants have outgrown their balcony space. She recognises this as a metaphor which also applies to her own impossible position:

> I suddenly wondered if I should move [my plants] to the flowerbeds outside. I could see from the way they were peering down from the balcony window that they too had been hesitating over this choice. If they were to move outside, they could draw nourishment from the deep, broad beds of soil, but cruelly, they would then have to constantly compete with all the other flowers and plants out there. And they would be exposed to the wind and sun. On the other hand, although they could escape the ravages of a harsh environment on my balcony, they would have no way of accessing deeper reserves of soil to feed themselves.
>
> They are thinking about this. So am I. (270-271)[69]

Unlike *Village of Stone* and other narratives of the generative frontier, Niuniu is shown as incapable of undertaking journeys, either physical or mental. Instead, she finds comfort in acts of place-making (especially in the meaning she ascribes to her bathroom) and sticking to familiar territory. Niuniu denies her reader the satisfaction of closure: we never see her move past her inner conflict and make a final choice between public or private life. In reinforcing

[69] *Wo huran xiang, shibushi yinggai ba tamen yizhi dao louxia de hua chi li qu. Wo cong tamen buduan tantou cong yangtai de chuangkou xiangxia tiaowang de zishi kan, tamen he wo yiwang, ye zai sikao zhege wenti, youyi budong. Ruguo yi dao louxia de hua chi li qu, tamen suiran nengguo jiqi geng kuan geng shen de turang libian de yingyang, danshi, tamen bixu meishimeike yu zhongduo de huacao zhiwu jinxing canku de ni zheng wo duo, erqie bixu chengshou daziran de fengchuirishai: er zai wo de yangtai shang, tamen suiran keyi kaituo yan liang lengnuan deng elie ziran huanjing de cuican, dan tamen you wufa huode geng shenhou de turang lai weiyang ziji. Tamen zai xiang, wo ye zai xiang.* 我忽然想，是不是应该把它们移植到楼下的花池里去。我从它们不断探头从阳台的窗口向下眺望的姿势看，它们和我一样，也在思考这个问题，犹疑不定。如果移到楼下的花池里去，它们虽然能够汲取更宽更深的土壤里边的营养，但是，它们必须每时每刻与众多的花草植物进行残酷的你争我夺，而且必须承受大自然的风吹日晒；而在我的阳台上，它们虽然可以摆脱炎凉冷暖等恶劣自然环境的摧残，但它们又无法获得更深厚的土壤来喂养自己。 它们在想，我也在想。

Niuniu’s lack of agency and the unsustainability of her position, Chen ultimately places the blame for her character’s mental breakdown on trauma caused by the repressive nature of the Chinese state and society. In the end, Niuniu deliberately ostracises herself from an aggressive city and social system, reaching instead for what Kay Schaffer and Xianlin Song have called “a radical stance of non-compliance” (166).

Figure 11: Zhou Hongbin, *Mystical Garden – 6*, 2007

At this point, it is also useful to dwell on how the relationship between private space (e.g. retreating from the outside world into a safe, sanitised utopia) and notions of womanhood

are also prevalent in Chinese visual culture. Although less concerned with radical politics, the artist Zhou Hongbin works with similar themes of imprisonment, enclosure, and a gendered desire for a safe space from a hostile city. Born in 1978, Zhou trained at Beijing's prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) and has become known for her digitally altered images, which often involve placing animal subjects in unexpected urban settings. In an artist's statement, Zhou says: "I travel in a digital-made world, an imaginary collage, where I appear adorable and lovely in a safe, quiet, soft and clean environment. I use public spaces such as swimming pool [sic], fountain [sic], parks and restaurants, and I choose to be represented by familiar pets like my own bunny to create a habitat, similar to a personal garden, utopian and self-centered, where different moments of my own life are fixed and combined in the same picture" (2). The work above, taken from her 2007 *Mystical Garden* (*Shenmi yuan* 神秘园) series, depicts the interior of an enormous building (presumably an empty shopping mall or indoor skating rink), capped with a glass ceiling and arranged to evoke a sparse arctic landscape (figure 11). The smooth visual effect of the gleaming ice floor is intermittently broken up with large chunks of ice and, among these, six brown rabbits, adding an extra touch of surrealism to this already strange scene. Zhou has explicitly connected such scenes with ideas of femininity and retreats from the urban: "I want to transform the public space into one with a strange ambience again, to rebuild a mirror to reflect women and their inner world." She has described her strange landscapes as such: "The unreal hill, the dry fountain, the snow-covered park, and the rabbits in between seek to construct a utopian fairytale, a last habitat for women in the complicated city, sensitive and fragile" (14).

At first glance, one might conclude that *Mystical Garden – 6* shares features with works that fall into the category of the generative frontier. For instance, agents of the natural world (e.g. the rabbits) are interspersed within urban infrastructure, as we also saw in the "personal garden" cultivated in Zheng Bo's *Weed Party*. And yet, unlike Zheng's infinite scenes which

invite the viewer into a new and expansive brave new world, Zhou's work resists narratives of journeys and transformative inner growth, and instead, mirror the final impossible predicament of Chen Ran's Niuniu. The circular frame has an ambiguity to it which acts as a barrier between us and the space she shows: are we looking into this world, porthole-like, or is it instead recalling some kind of convex mirrored orb (a gazing ball, or the lens of a camera, perhaps), and therefore, does the work imply that the viewer also exists in this world (yet is not shown in the reflection)? Zhou plays with ideas of surveillance and entrapment throughout the image, reinforced by the bulging fish-eye effect, the curvature of the glass ceiling, and the oval edges of the rink. Elsewhere in her catalogue notes, Zhou says she is seeking to "to allow the existence of a city space where the imagination gradually fades and dies" (7). As in *A Private Life*, the overall effect is distancing and heterotopic, ultimately alienating for the viewer. Her scenes represent an emotional impasse, keeping us at arm's length from the private imaginary world of its creator.

III. Spatialised healing in *Village of Stone*

i. Overview and plot summary

The public and scholarly reception of *Village of Stone* (in both the original Chinese and English translation) was relatively muted in contrast to the attention that *Dictionary* would receive, although *Village of Stone* clearly paved the way for the launch of Guo's Anglophone career. Cindy Carter's 2004 translation did, however, receive a jacket endorsement from the novelist Doris Lessing ("Reading it is rather like finding yourself in a dream"), and it was also nominated for *The Independent*'s "Best Foreign Fiction Prize" in 2005 and the Dublin International Literature Award (IMPAC) in 2006. While critics like Julia Lovell have described

Village of Stone as “more literary” (207) than *Dictionary*, there is surprisingly little scholarship in either English or Chinese that offers an in-depth discussion of the novel.[70]

As I mentioned earlier, *Village of Stone* is less concerned with Guo’s Anglophone themes (e.g. national identity and Chineseness), although as Fiona Doloughan notes, it prefigures her abiding interest in issues of relocation and constitutes “an early version of one of [Guo’s] many stories about a young Chinese woman who has moved from rural China to the city” (33). While part of the novel’s narrative is set during the Cultural Revolution, the major historical events of the era scarcely feature, besides the occasional offhand reference to “Rightists” (*youpai* 右派; 8) or “Mao badges” (*Mao Zhuxi xiangzhang* 毛主席像章; 63).

Village of Stone is not unlike other examples of Private Writing in this regard, but representative novels of that era chose instead to adopt a rebellious stance in their deliberate disregard of sociopolitical issues (as in Zhou Weihui’s *Shanghai Baby*) or gesture towards a national trauma so profound that it cannot be fully articulated (as in Chen Ran’s *A Private Life*).[71] In contrast, *Village of Stone* is far more concerned with its identity as a coming-of-age story about a lonely individual’s successful attempt at self-formulation than it is with the state of the nation, although it does not disregard the latter issue entirely. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Guo’s psychological vision locates the “problem” within the individual rather than with wider Chinese society: once the protagonist Shanhong manages to overcome her trauma and come to terms with her past, her life renews itself with a fanciful, fairy-tale-like

[70] Fiona Doloughan has mentioned the English edition in a 2019 book chapter on self-translation, discussing it as an early example of Guo’s “continual refashioning/rewriting of self” (25) and “as another link in [her] translational chain” (33). Elsewhere, Zhuyun Song has argued that the novel should be viewed as a text that “challenges the Orientalist and biased Chinese images in the West” (g13), as it presents China’s post-reform economic development in relatively positive terms.

[71] For examples of how these particular Private Writing novels engaged with the political climate of the time, see: Sabina Knight on *Shanghai Baby* as a “telling account of how a group of Chinese urban residents reinvest in personal projects and intimate, particularistic relations in response to economic and social transitions which compromise earlier expectations of collective solidarity” (640); and see Kay Schaffer and Xianlin Song on *A Private Life* and “the protagonist’s experience of trauma with reference to the body as a carrier of Chinese history, geography, culture and internalised, private pain resulting from the (obliquely referred to) politics of the late 1980s” (162).

ease. She thus ends her narrative with a secure sense of adult autonomy in the new China. It is also worth noting that Shanhong's version of a good life (e.g. marriage, children, gainful employment) is both more attainable and socially conventional than the radical or utopian visions expressed by the protagonists in the other Private Writing texts mentioned here, and even in Guo's later works. Chen Ran's Ni Niuniu, for instance, ends her story on an impasse, uncertain as to whether she should venture into the outside world or stay in the safe confines of her apartment.

In addition to all this, *Village of Stone* constructs a distinctively optimistic vision of the Chinese rural-urban relationship – as a hybrid space in which people can flourish. Guo discusses this at length in an author interview that accompanies the 2003 Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House edition of the text. She is asked a question about why she opts to not write about "cities and current fads" (*chengshi he shishang de neirong* 城市和时尚的内容; 196) in the trendy manner of her contemporaries (presumably a reference to Beauty Writers like Zhou Weihui). In response, Guo discusses her view of the contemporary Chinese city as an ideal synthesis of rural and urban qualities: "Chinese cities are a Great-Leap-Forward-type of city, especially Beijing. I lived in Beijing for 10 years. What I saw was a wonderful landscape of modern rural cooperatives. In my view, this is what Chinese cities are, and this is what I want to write about" (196).[72] With her unironic reference to the Great Leap Forward (*yi zhong Dayuejin de chengshi* 一种大跃进的城市) and the harmonious hybridised landscape (*juemiao de xiandai nongcun hezuoshe de yi zhong jingguan* 绝妙的现代农村合作社的一种景观) she describes, Guo's urban vision expressed here is in stark contrast to her depictions of

[72] *Zhongguo de chengshi shi yizhong Dayuejin de chengshi, tebie shi Beijing, wo zhu zai Beijing shi nian, wo kandao le juemiao de xiandai nongcun hezuoshe de yishong jingguan. Zhege shi wo yanzhong de Zhongguo chengshi, wo yao xie jiu xie zhege.* 中国的城市是一种大跃进的城市，特别是北京，我住在北京十年，我看到了绝妙的现代农村合作社的一种景观。这个是我眼中的中国城市，我要写就写这个。

the Chinese city in some of her other films and novels (her 2003 documentary *The Concrete Revolution*, which follows the lives of exploited migrant workers, takes a much more critical view of postsocialist urbanism). However, this optimism reflects the narrative arc of *Village of Stone*: by the end of the novel, the formerly entrenched rural-urban binary dissolves into irrelevance, and Shanhong is able to build a new life for herself in the type of nurturing hyrbid environment described here.

Before delving deeper into this reading, it's worth providing a brief precis of the novel's plot. *Village of Stone* is told from the first-person perspective of the protagonist Shanhong, a twenty-eight-year-old woman who grew up in the coastal village of Shitou and now shares a Beijing flat with her unemployed boyfriend Zhuzi 朱子. Living like "two hermit crabs" (*xiang liang zhi jijuxie* 像两只寄居蟹; 2) on the undesirable ground floor of a claustrophobic high-rise, Shanhong works part-time in a video rental shop while the unemployed Zhuzi loafs around and dreams of becoming a professional frisbee player. They somehow manage to make ends meet, but we see Shanhong worrying about the precarity of their lives. In the opening pages of the novel, Shanhong flatly notes that they have both fallen short of societal expectations: "I'm twenty-eight and Zhuzi is twenty-nine. He'll be turning thirty in a few days. Confucius said thirty is the age at which a person should be fully independent, but we've never been able to feel properly settled in this city" (1).[73] She often expresses an abstract feeling of dread: "Maybe I couldn't be considered completely "well", for I often live in fear, but I don't quite know what it is I'm fearful of" (1).[74] Part of her anxiety comes from their financial insecurity, which is framed as (at least) partly self-imposed: while Shanhong is just about able to make a living with her part-time job in a video rental store, Zhuzi repeatedly quits his every job he gets,

[73] *Wo ershiba sui, Zhuzi ershijiu sui, li sanshi'erli meiyou jitian, er women zai zhege chengshi que congwei gangjue dao lizu.* 我二十八岁，朱子二十九岁, 离三十而立没有几天, 而我们在这个城市却从未感觉到立足。

[74] [...] *yexu suan bu shang wanquan "haohao de", wo shichang huozhe kongju, que buzhi kongju shenme*. ...... 也许算不上完全 "好好地"， 我时常活着心怀恐惧， 却不知恐惧什么。

deeming employment “stupid” (*yu* 愚; 2). Shanhong frames this situation in developmental terms throughout her narrative, portraying both herself and Zhuzi as two slackers hindered by their own immaturity, and who have therefore been unable to achieve the traditional linear hallmarks of adulthood (e.g. entering the job market; getting married; having children).

As the reader learns over the course of the novel, Shanhong’s childhood in Shitou village was shaped by several traumatic incidents. This childhood trauma operates as a psychological wound which prevents Shanhong from reaching a state of true adulthood. After her father abandoned the family and her mother died in labour, she was taken into the care of her deeply unhappy grandparents. Later on, at the age of seven, she was abducted and raped by an adult villager with mutism (she calls this man “the mute” [*yaba* 哑巴; 24]). Finally, her sexual relationship with her chemistry teacher Mr Mo (*Mo Laoshi* 莫老师) at the age of fifteen results in her being expelled from school and socially excluded from the village community. From her refuge in Beijing, the adult Shanhong tells us that these painful events have long been buried at the bottom of her “Mariana Trench” (*Maliyana Haigou* 马里亚纳海沟; 125), a metaphor she deploys several times to refer to the uncharted depths of her memory. However, in the opening pages of the novel, these waters are stirred by the delivery of an enormous dried eel from an anonymous sender. This mysterious object, which Shanhong immediately recognises as a traditional Shitou food item, invokes a deluge of involuntary childhood recollections: “All at once, memories begin to connect and start flooding in. […] Had it not been for that dried eel sent from far away, I would never have revisited my memories of that place named Shitou village” (2).[75]

[75] *Jiyi bei jietong le, jiyi zhi shui, yixiazi* [...] *Ruguo meiyou na tiao yuan dao er lai de manyu ao, wo buhui zai qu huiyi, nage difang, nage jiao Shitou Zhen de difang.* 记忆被接通了, 记忆之水, 一下子 ...... 如果没有那条远道而来的鳗鱼鳌, 我不会再去回忆, 那个地方, 那个叫石头镇的地方.

The arrival of the dried eel gives rise to Shanhong's process of psychological healing, as she is forced to contend with its impractical and unwieldy body. She deliberates over what to do with the unwelcome object before deciding to eat it. As she slowly makes her way through the eel (while discovering the pleasure of trying new recipes), her inner monologue shifts between the parallel narratives of her past and present. The culmination of these components – the eel, her everyday adult life in Beijing (involving the surprise reappearance of her father), and her memories of Shitou – finally enables Shanhong to move past her crisis and into a more transformative sense of selfhood. In his 2021 study on narratives of personal growth, developmental psychologist Jack J. Bauer identifies the transformative self as a "growth-oriented personal identity" which, in turn, facilitates the cultivation of "a good life" (7) – whatever that might mean for the individual. Guo confirms this progression to herself by physically making the journey back to Shitou, where she discovers that the village no longer has the same psychological hold over her. She ends her narrative on the cusp of a new stage in life, expressing optimism about her future with Zhuzi and their unborn child.

ii. Rural and urban space

The nature of the frontier as Shanhong sees it shifts throughout this novel; ultimately, the idea of a known or settled place is shown to be a wholly relational and contingent concept. The child Shanhong is initially positioned in an inaccessible village which has little interaction with the rest of China, and in these sections, Beijing is framed as a remote, distant point on the horizon. And while living in Beijing itself, the adult Shanhong cannot shake off her memories of her childhood home, and yet feels both an emotional and geographical gulf between the capital and the village.

In Shanhong's memories, the village is written and remembered as an unpredictable wild place of entrapment, encapsulated by her terrifying recollections of her abduction by a mute paedophile. Shitou is described in stultifying, unforgiving language as "my entire world, my fortress without windows" (8).[76] It is also written in elemental and topographic terms, shown as an insignificant human settlement on the very edge of the country (it is described at one point as a "dark-blue water stain" (*shenlan yipian shuizi* 深蓝一片水渍) on the map of China [4]), and surrounded by impenetrable mountains and ringfenced by a "cruel, mud-yellow sea" (*canku de hun huang de hai* 残酷的浑黄的海; 9). As a child, Shanhong takes a provincial and concentric view of the world, with Shitou placed at the centre (despite its national unimportance). Beyond Shitou is the county, which people in Shitou have occasional dealings with (e.g. "One day, two men came from within the county" [*You yi tian, xian li lai le liang ge ren* 有一天，县里来了两个人; 122]), and finally, the term "outside" (*waidi* 外地) is used to refer to the vast, unimaginable world beyond the county borders.

In one sense, Guo's descriptions of the village as a "closed stone house" (*fengbi de shiwu* 封闭的石屋; 117) or a windowless fortress harks back to a much-travelled trope in Chinese literature: the idea of the oppressive, tradition-bound village, famously evoked in Lu Xun's 鲁迅 allegory of the iron house.[77] And yet it is in this seemingly repressive, claustrophobic space that magic can happen, as fantastical, surreal elements seep into the narrative. The more Shanhong allows the village to creep into her thoughts – taking over her imagination – while living in Beijing, the more surreal her urban existence becomes.

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[76] *Er shitou zhen, shi wo de yiqie, shi wo meiyou dongyan de diaobao* […] 而石头镇, 是我的一切, 是我没有洞眼的碉堡 ……

[77] In his 1922 preface to *Call To Arms* (*Nahan zixu* 呐喊自序) , Lu Xun uses the metaphor of a indestructible, windowless iron house – in which all the residents are sleeping and unknowingly about to die of suffocation – to critique traditional Chinese culture.

In this sense, Shanhong's developing sense of self is directly linked to the Shitou and Beijing landscapes, both real and imagined. As I discuss later on in this chapter with *How Is Your Fish Today*?, Guo's early work is particularly interested in affective geographies and the way the individual relates to the environment. *Village of Stone* also offers an inverted view of how the rural was represented by 1990s women writers and by many creative intellectuals today. For instance, in Chen Ran's *A Private Life*, the countryside is portrayed as a space of spiritual purity in contrast to the city, whereas in *Village of Stone*, Shanhong foregrounds hybrid liminal spaces, which offer Shanhong the freedom of psychological mobility as she learns to navigate her environment.

The novel's opening dedication and author's note ("About Village of Stone") establishes the (initially) entrenched rural-urban binary and the idea of Beijing and Shitou as polar opposites. The novel is dedicated to Shitang village (Guo's real-life childhood home): "The shadow and the light, that's where it all began," (*Yinying yu guangmang yiqie dou cong na'er kaishi* 阴影与光芒 一切都从那儿开始) – a nod perhaps to Guo's cinematic interests and also reflecting the depiction of the village as a place of extremes (and also as a formative environment). The following author's note (quoted at the start of this chapter) immediately sets up an adversarial and dichotomous relationship between the rural and the urban spheres, as well as a metafictional sensibility. Titled "About Shitou Village", and bearing the signature "Author" (*Zuozhe* 作者) dated to autumn 2000, the lines between fiction and reality are consciously blurred in this short paragraph as Guo appears to merge her real-life authorial persona with her character Shanhong, drawing allegorical parallels between their inner world and the landscape of Shitou (which she describes as "the secret [fortress] of my heart" [*wo neixin yinmi de diaobao* 我内心隐秘的碉堡]). In this martial vision, Guo/Shanhong positions herself "on a boat, sailing towards the seas of Shitou village" (*wo de chuan yuelaiyue yuan de*

shixiang Shitou Zhen haiyang de shenchu 我的船越来越远地驶向石头镇海洋的深处) and "away from the enormous city that surrounds me" (*yuanli le wo shenbian zhege pangda de chengshi* 远离了我身边这个庞大的城市). The narrator approaches Shitou with the aggression of a conquering army or vengeful goddess, firing exploding torpedoes towards the village. This attack turns out to be an act of self-harm: in killing shoals of fish, Guo writes that "the sea turns red, and I feel pain" (*hai biancheng hongse, wo gandao tengtong* 海变成红色，我感到疼痛). The final image in the note is of the narrator's tears falling into the Shitou sea, which she deems "this place where I bury my fish, my memories, my childhood, and the secrets of my past incarnations."[78] This short vignette implies that Guo has made several attempts to psychologically conquer her past, framed as violent assaults which end in self-harm. However, in the story that unfolds through the book via Shanhong's account, we see a more benign approach to dispelling past trauma: in a metonymic process, the arrival of the eel allows Shitou village to gently infiltrate the city – Shanhong's refuge – and to access her inner self. This juxtaposition of the short traumatic vignette and longer therapeutic narrative reflects Guo's sustained faith in the cathartic power of storytelling (and the importance in the process of having a willing audience, or, being "heard" in the therapeutic sense – I discuss this process of healing in greater depth later in this chapter).

As suggested earlier, a particular kind of Chinese rurality is depicted in the novel: Shitou village is portrayed as a hermetic, superstitious village with petty customs and hostile to outsiders. Surrounding the village is an unpredictable natural environment, depicted with a sensuous intensity and in starkly ambiguous terms, which reflects Shanhong's confused feelings about her childhood. On the one hand, she regards the sea as "my eternal friend, the

[78] [...] *nar maizang zhe wo de yu, wo de jiyi, wo de tongnian, wo de qianshi de mimi.* ...... 那儿埋葬着我的鱼，我的记忆， 我的童年， 我的前世的秘密。

most beautiful and mysterious part of my childhood” (*wo yongyuan de pengyou, wo tongnian zui meihao de zui shenmi de shiwu* 我永远的朋友， 我童年最美好的最神秘的事物; 9). On the other, the sea is “cruel” (*canku* 残酷; 9) and “more terrifying than death” (*ta bi siwang geng kepa* 它比死亡更可怕; 15). The place is written in sensually overwhelming terms, with frequent references to the typhoons which nearly swept the child Shanhong away; the scent of the jasmine flowers which smother the local schoolchildren, setting off allergies; and menacing sea gods who lurk beneath the waves. The overall effect is of an overwhelmingly schizophrenic environment. But in many ways, *Village of Stone* also constitutes a fantasy of escape from the Lu Xun-esque villages of Chinese literary tradition.

Shanhong’s account takes on a more hopeful tone as she moves quickly through her adolescent years. She notes how, after a childhood peer leaves Shitou village to join a provincial opera troupe, she realises that leaving the village could be a possibility for herself. She had grown up seeing the places beyond Shitou village as so distant they are an impossibility: “I raised my head and looked in the direction old, lame Hai Sheng was pointing toward. There [they were], in the dark, dense expanse of peaks and valleys” (89).[79] However, using a spatial metaphor, she learns to perceive the village in a new light: “I realise Shitou village has gaps. For example, the Shitou bus station operated by old, lame Hai Sheng – that’s a gap, and people can leave through this gap” (117).[80] A new spatial dynamic, and hence a new way of existing in the world, has opened up for Shanhong.

In Guo’s novel, China’s modernity is a force that can dismantle the cloying, claustrophobic structures of the village, which kept people in their place. As a child, Shanhong

[79] *Wo taitou kan xiang lao que Hai Sheng shouzhi de fangxiang, nar, heiyaya de yi pian shan ao.* 我抬头看向老瘸海生手指的方向，那儿,，黑压压的一片山坳。

[80] *Wo xiang Shitou Zhen shi you quekou de, biru shuo lao que Hai Sheng guan de Shitou Zhen qichezhan jiushi yi ge quekou, ren shi keyi zouchu zhege quekou de.* 我想石头镇是有缺口的，比如说老瘸海生管的石头镇汽车站就是一个缺口，人是可以走出这个缺口的。

learns she can leave the village via bus; as an adult, she is able to return in three days by train. She eventually chooses to make the physical journey to Shitou, having spent much of the novel psychologically there. Confronting the village in person diminishes the power it holds over her psyche: it is no longer the dangerous terrain it once was. For example, she sees that the local fishing boats do not have to brave perilous weather conditions to bring their catch ashore anymore; instead, they go straight to a convenient food processing factory. Much of Guo's other work – particularly that which has been more conspicuously pitched at a western market – is about the negative impact of Chinese urban modernity. However, *Village of Stone* offers a more unusual view of China's postsocialist development: that it can be a liberating, healing, and ultimately generative force.

After Shanhong is expelled from her high school, she moves to Beijing, venturing into that mysterious horizon beyond the mountains. In contrast to Shitou and its claustrophobic fishing community, Beijing is described as a "parched, immense" city (*ganzao, juda* 干燥, 巨大; 1), an arid place populated by uninterested strangers and "completely different" (*wanquan jiongyi* 完全迥异; 2) to Shitou village. But her present-day life in Beijing ends up modulating the intense emotional memories of the village. Although Shanhong and Zhuzi often feel socially and economically alienated from the city, the floating anonymity it enables also allows Shanhong to escape the mental terrors of her past. After the arrival of the eel, however, elements of Shitou begin to work their way into the urban fabric. By the end of the novel, Shanhong has forged an entirely different relationship to both places: both are depicted in comparatively placid, measured tones, and Shitou has lost the stultifying suffocation of her inner life.

The resilience that Shanhong cultivates across her narrative ultimately neutralises the spatial threats posed by Shitou village and Beijing, enabling her to find her golden mean and

engage with society on her own terms. The spatial and psychological liminality she inhabits in Beijing is crucial to this journey: although she is physically in the city, Shitou village dominates her mental space, and Shanhong subsequently spends much of the novel existing within a psychological frontier zone.

iii. Shanhong's trauma and psychological healing

In a 2004 interview with the *South China Morning Post*, Guo says:

> "It took me three years to write this book […] First, it was a love story, between [Shanhong] and [Zhuzi]. But no one in China would publish that. So, I set it in the fishing village. But that was just too dark. I needed to grow up and recall the past from the present. That is why I used the eel. It was something organic. Eating the dried eel brought the past back.
>
> The eel also signified a past you cannot escape, as it is too difficult to digest. […] A lot of people are ****ed up because of their bad childhoods. And I thought by getting through this massive eel, eating it every day, people could digest that past, and become strong and healthy" (Bryan).[81]

Here, Guo frames the writing of *Village of Stone* as a therapeutic experience for herself, although much of what she says is applicable to Shanhong's own situation. Psychological healing is one of the main thematic concerns of the novel, and Shanhong's story of becoming "strong and healthy" is supported by the bifurcated structure of her narrative, which was in turn inspired by twentieth-century European cinematic montage. In her 2017 memoir, Guo recalls her experience of writing the novel as a film student in the late 1990s: "I was working on my second book, *Village of Stone*, a novel based on my Shitang and Beijing life. Inspired by the

[81] There are clear autofictional elements to *Village of Stone*, and in publicity for the book, Guo often discusses Shanhong and herself as if they are interchangeable (e.g. the phrase "I needed to grow up" is also applicable to Shanhong's situation). Elsewhere in this interview, Guo says that Shanhong is "my double in real life." The autobiographical aspects of the novel are especially obvious when compared to the rest of Guo's corpus, particularly the Shitang village sections in her memoir *Once Upon a Time.* For example, the same story about Shanhong/Guo's grandmother failing to eat fish according to local Shitou/Shitang customs is recounted in both texts.

idea of applying the montage method from European cinema to novel writing, I began to use a structure of parallel narratives" (*Once Upon a Time*, 212). While Guo does not specify what school of montage she is referring to (e.g. Russian or French), its underlying principle is that "an idea [arises] from a collision of independent shots" (Eisenstein 49). Accordingly, while Shanhong might insist that her Shitou life is entirely separate from her Beijing life and frames the two as diametrically opposed, she gradually learns to build a more integrated view of her past and present. The way her story is structured echoes the fundamental basis of montage itself, as "a building action, working up from the raw material" and "a process of synthesis: a film is seen being constructed rather than edited" (Monaco 239). A generative sense of inner change emerges within Shanhong as the narrative shifts between Shitou and Beijing before temporally and spatially converging into a linear account. Crucially, it is after the story is told in its entirety that Shanhong can progress towards her future.

Shanhong's narrative bears the hallmarks of an individual trauma that stems from a series of painful interpersonal losses and violations. There are three major traumatic situations which Shanhong recounts over the course of her narrative. The first is linked to her early parental abandonment and subsequent sense of social isolation within the village. We learn that her mother died during childbirth and her father left the village before she was born. And as a result, she was raised by her paternal grandparents, whose visceral hatred for each other made a deep impression on her. For much of the novel, Shanhong presents Shitou as a claustrophobic and narrow-minded community from which she felt excluded. In chapter four, she recalls how her grandmother (who came from another village to marry her grandfather) deeply offended her new in-laws by displaying ignorance of their local fishing customs. Portraying her grandmother in sympathetic and affinitive terms throughout, Shanhong concludes that her grandmother's "greatest mistake was that she wasn't from Shitou village" (*zui zhuyao de*

guocuo shi ta bu shi Shitou Zhen de ren 最主要的过错是她不是石头镇的人; 30), and often implies that her own loneliness was hereditary. Her grandfather eventually commits suicide.

Shanhong's second traumatic incident is recounted from chapter five onwards. At the age of seven, and shortly after the sudden death of her grandfather, Shanhong describes how she was targeted by a local paedophile, whom she calls "the mute". He begins by sexually assaulting her in various locations around the village, most significantly in the local cinema and the storeroom of the village opera troupe. After Shanhong's grandfather commits suicide by drinking agricultural pesticide, the mute manages to kidnap her and bring her inside his house. She is subjected to a nightmarish cycle of violent imprisonment and rape, eventually managing to escape one day when the mute is in a drunk stupor. She returns to her frantic grandmother, but is unable to articulate what has happened to her ("I became a mute myself and would say nothing" [*Wo biancheng de ge yaba, wo shenme dou mei shuo* 我变成了个哑巴, 我什么都没说; 78]), and the man is killed in a typhoon later that year.

The third trauma stems from when, at the age of 15, Shanhong enrols in the local junior high school and meets a 23-year-old chemistry teacher, Mr Mo. They begin a sexual relationship, which Shanhong portrays as loving and equal, although she eventually rejects it.[82] Shanhong soon realises she's pregnant with Mr Mo's child, and eventually agrees to an abortion after he tells her both their places at the school will be at risk if she refuses to go ahead. Despite this, the secret leaks out of the school and the village community subsequently ostracises Shanhong. Soon after, she is expelled and leaves the town for good. At this point,

[82] It's worth noting here that, despite repeated calls by lawmakers, China's age of consent (currently set at 14) and student-teacher sexual relationships are only now in the process of being revised and legislated (Yang Wanli). Shanhong and Mr Mo's relationship is framed as a transgressive love story which is stifled by the narrow-minded community they live in. While Shanhong eventually detaches herself from Mr Mo after receiving his letter of farewell, neither she or the narrator ever seriously dwell upon the ethics of the relationship itself or on the gendered inequality of the community response. Throughout, Shanhong is portrayed as the sexually experienced partner in contrast to Mr Mo. Their relationship recalls Chen Ran's *Private Life*, in which Ni Niuniu has a sexual relationship with her neighbour the Widow Ho and her teacher Mr Ti when she is just a teenager.

Shanhong's parallel narratives converge into one and she then situates her story in the present-day.

The representation of Shanhong's trauma resonates with common understandings of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These are described by Cathy Caruth in her landmark 1995 edited volume on trauma: "The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or fully experienced at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (4-5).[83] This pattern of repeated possession is reflected by the novel's dual narratives, and accordingly, we regularly see Shanhong in the grip of memories of Shitou, which violently intrude upon her mind as flashbacks, and like a rising sea, threaten to submerge her sense of adult reality. As Guo notes in her 2004 interview, the eel functions as a metaphorical manifestation of this accumulated trauma ("the eel signifies a past you cannot escape"). It is an unwieldy, unsolicited inconvenience, an "immense" (*juda* 巨大; 96) object which takes up valuable space in her flat and is so pungent it is impossible to ignore. The appearance of the eel also marks the moment when Shanhong's rural past begins to gently bleed into the urban fabric of her adult life, giving her little choice but to confront it.

The psychologists Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart's definition of traumatic memories in Caruth's volume recalls Guo's own explanation of Shanhong's past and her metaphorical need to "digest" the eel: "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it" (176). Like

[83] Contemporary trauma studies in the humanities emerged in the 1980s, after PTSD was formally recognised by the American Psychiatric Association.

Shanhong, Guo's characters constantly grapple with a compulsive desire to tell their story and thereby construct new narratives to live by. The underlying progressive thrust of *Dictionary*, for instance, is Z's need to make herself fully understood by others. In a chapter archly titled "Nonsense", Z rants in Chinese (followed by an English translation): "I am sick of speaking English like this. […] Why do we have to study languages? Why do we have to force ourselves to communicate with people?" (180).

Throughout the novel, Guo explores the subject of trauma by shaping Shanhong's narrative according to some of its typical manifestations. For example, Shanhong exhibits signs of repressing her past. She repeatedly tells us that she had tried not to think about her years in Shitou village, until the object of the dried eel was forced upon her. For much of the novel, Shanhong is a passive protagonist who rarely takes action. Instead, she makes a series of distanced observations about her life; she reacts to external events as they occur; and she is unable to exert control over her inner world, often becoming overwhelmed by intense rushes of memory. She occupies a position of victimhood, often expressed in the images she reaches for: "In truth, I'm not at all like a cluster of coral growing on the ocean floor. I'm more like one of those little cyan pebbles which always pile up in the seaside alleyways in Shitou, cast up by the waves and then getting caught between the paving stone cracks" (9).[84] Through this self-deprecating simile, she expresses her lack of agency and her abiding feelings of insignificance.

Furthermore, in *Village of Stone*, the reader does not simply read. Instead, they are placed in the crucial position of bearing witness to Shanhong's testimony. This particular relationship between reader and writer (in which it becomes apparent that the narrator's

[84] *Shiji shang, wo bingbu xiang shi zai haidi shengzhang de yi cong hongse shanhu, wo shi Shitou Zhen haibian xiaoxiang de yi kuai shitou. Haibian de xiaoxiang, dui man le qingse de shikuai, wo jiushi naxie da shikuai feng li jia zhe de yikuai xiao shitou.* 实际上，我并不像是在海底生长的一丛红色珊瑚，我是石头镇海边小巷的一块石头。 海边的小巷，堆满了青色的石块，我就是那些大石块缝里夹着的一块小石头。
Here, Shanhong is discussing her given name, the characters of which means "red coral" (珊红).

successful formulation of self is dependent on being heard by a willing audience) emerges in varying degrees throughout Guo's work, including in her own autobiographical writing and press interactions. In a 2015 interview, she says: "If I cannot publish my work in China, or if I cannot speak my voice in China, what can I do? I must gain control, I must learn to master my new language which is now English. And I must also be able to write novels because to write my novels is my only identity as a writer. Otherwise I will be a nobody in the West, just one of many refugees" (Peschel). Furthermore, the role of the reader as witness to testimony is crucial to the healing process in *Village of Stone*. In his writing on a very different manifestation of trauma (that inflicted by the Holocaust), Dori Laub concludes that, "The survivors [of the Holocaust] did not only need to survive so they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story to survive" (78).

Guo's authorial persona and corpus subscribe to the healing potential of narrative in the psychoanalytic sense. The literary critic Françoise Meltzer has written that "the very process of psychoanalysis entails the construction of a linear, cogent narrative" because the "goal of analysis is to have the patient reconstruct a 'better,' more cohesive story as the analysis progresses" (155). *Village of Stone*, and the Shitou chapters in particular, constitute Shanhong's recovery narrative. In a style and structure that evokes the sessional nature of talking therapy, she consciously acknowledges that she is speaking to an audience. Early on the novel, she signposts to her reader: "I'll briefly close the door on my memories, while I explain what my life is like in the present" (1), and towards the end, she says: "Finally, I'd like to relate one final incident from our last day in Shitou village" (191).[85]

[85] *Haishi zanqie ba jiyi de men guanbi ji miaozhong wo mian lai, jieshao wo de xianzai.* […] *Zuihou, wo hai xiang tidao guanyu women zai Shitou Zhen zuihou yi tian fasheng de yi jian shi.* 还是暂且把记忆的门关闭几秒钟 我先来，介绍我的现在 …… 最后，我还想提到关于我们在石头镇最后一天发生的一件事。

As I demonstrate here, the psychological state of spatial liminality is crucial to Shanhong's curative arc. Caught between two worlds, she spends much of the novel physically in Beijing but mentally preoccupied with Shitou: after she receives the package containing the dried eel, she likens the village to "a dream which reoccurs each midnight" (*jiu xiang shi mei ge ziye shifen chongfu zuo de yi ge meng* 就像是每个子夜时分重复做的一个梦) and "an inescapable homesickness" (*nanyi taodun de yizhong xiangchou* 难以逃遁的一种乡愁). She continues: "Ever since these memories tore out of that enigmatic dried eel, I've been thinking of Shitou village as I've gone about this city. I think of it as I hear the night buses slowly coming to a halt outside empty stands, or after work, when I enter my kitchen, strike a match, and begin preparing my evening meal" (4).[86] Psychotherapeutic studies have theorised the state of liminality in the context of individual transformative change. For example, in a 2010 article on liminal space and gestalt therapy, the psychotherapist Sally Denham-Vaughan identifies the liminal as the "elements of place, person and time where we are transiting from one 'stage' to another; literally in 'the between' of a transformation" (35-6).

This novel, then, is about the process of becoming, in a psychological sense. At the start of *Village of Stone*, Shanhong (like Chen's Ni Niuniu) is psychologically trapped, her life stagnant. Denham-Vaughan goes on to discuss how the liminal is often societally confused with being in limbo and the liminoid – which are closely related yet "near enemies" of the generative state of the liminal. Her notion of limbo as a "state of stuckness" (36) is useful here in considering Shanhong's position prior to the arrival of the eel. Fittingly for a novel about psychological processes, liminality manifests in the novel in a variety of different ways: in the

[86] *Zhexie jiyi, bei na tiao moming er lai de gan manyu san che zhulai, cong natian yihou, dang wo zou zai zhege chengshi, tingdao yewan de gonggongqiche manman de ting zai wu ren de chezhan shi, huozhe, dang wo xiaban huilai jin chufang dianran huochai zhunbei zuofan de shihou* [...] 这些记忆, 被那条莫名而来的干鳗鱼叁扯出来, 从那天以后, 当我走在这个城市, 听到夜晚的公共汽车慢慢地停在无人的车站时, 或者, 当我下班回来进厨房点燃火柴准备做饭的时候 ......

threshold metaphor of a door used as a framing device for Shanhong's narrative; and in the way her mind oscillates between Shitou and Beijing.

Within this framework, occupying a liminal space can open the subject stuck in limbo up to positive internal growth. Returning to Shitou first in her memory and eventually in reality, while also undergoing significant experiences in present-day Beijing (e.g. eating the dried eel and meeting her long-lost father), enables Shanhong to formulate a more robust sense of selfhood. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's 1950 concept of potential space is especially relevant in this assessment of Shanhong's internal change. In his studies of infant development, Winnicott framed potential space as "the third part of the life of a human being [alongside their inner psychic reality and external reality], a part that we cannot ignore", going on to describe it as "an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute". Winnicott then explains that that potential space functions as "a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated" (3).

The psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden succinctly sums the Winnicottian concept of potential space up as "as a state of mind based upon a series of dialectical relationships between fantasy and reality, me and not-me, symbol and symbolized, etc., each pole of the dialectic creating, informing, and negating the other" (1). Within this transitional realm of potential space, the realms of "me" and "not-me" (as Winnicott terms them) modify each other; furthermore, it is in this area that human play happens and from which creative culture emerges.

In the hands of a different writer, Shanhong and Zhuzi's slacker lifestyle could have been framed in the context of global youth precarity – akin to what Zygmunt Bauman calls the "zero generation", who are "cast in a condition of liminal drift, with no way of knowing whether it is transitory or permanent" (76). But Guo positions Shanhong's trauma as the core

reason why they are developmentally and emotionally "stuck". By the end of the novel, once Shanhong has eaten the eel and physically travelled to Shitou, she finds she is able to successfully engage with wider society. The "happy ending" comes with a romantic, fairy-tale ease as it transpires that their financial precarity is largely self-imposed and their life milestones fall into place. As soon as Shanhong discovers she is pregnant, Zhuzi suddenly chooses to become a "grown-up boy" (*zhangda de nanhai* 长大的男孩; 165), shelves his frisbee, and miraculously lands a job as an editor on a sports magazine. Shortly after this, they are able to buy property in the pleasant western suburbs of Beijing and prepare for the arrival of their baby ("Just before autumn ends, we use all our savings to buy a bungalow in the hills west of Beijing, far out of town. We are delighted to now have a house in the countryside, where we will have more early morning sunshine."[87] [181]). However, Shanhong is only able to truly transition into adulthood (e.g. an engaged, pregnant homeowner with a gainfully employed romantic partner and a secure sense of self) after she has fully articulated the events of her traumatic past.

IV. Imagined landscapes in *How is Your Fish Today?*

I now turn our attention to Guo Xiaolu's 2006 film *How Is Your Fish Today?* (henceforth *Fish*), a Chinese-language docufiction which was funded by the British Documentary Foundation and released the year before *Dictionary* was published. I suggest here that *Fish* constitutes a unique portrayal of the generative frontier, which functions both as a site of healing (as in *Village of Stone*), and moreover, as a transformative space for art itself. I also suggest that this film should be read, at least in part, as a companion piece to *Village of Stone*: it employs a similarly

[87] *Qiutian kuaiyao guoqu de shihou, women yong liang ren de jixu, zai li zhege chengshi hen yuan de difang, nage difang she chengshi xibian de yi pian shanye, women mai le ge pingfang. Women hen gaoxing fangzi zai shan shang, zheyang women meitian bi chengshi dedao geng zao geng duo ge yangguang.* 秋天快要过去的时候，我们用两人的积蓄，在离这个城市很远的地方，那个地方是城市西边的一片山野，我们买了个平房。我们很高兴房子在山上，这样我们每天比城市得到更早更多的阳光。

metafictional and autofictional premise, and it obviously draws on much of the same source material. In the "Acknowledgements" section of the English translation of *Village of Stone*, Guo heavily implies that Rao Hui 饶晖 (who, as we will soon see, plays a starring role in *Fish*) was the direct inspiration for Shanhong's boyfriend Zhuzi: "He lived on the ground floor of a twenty-five-storey building in Beijing. Thanks to Rao Hui for showing me the basement experience, and love" (183).

Fish belongs to the period before Guo's major career breakthrough as an Anglophone writer, and this is perhaps reflected in its low-budget production values and aesthetics. While it was shown at the Sundance and Rotterdam International Film Festivals (it also won the Grand Prix prize at the Creteil International Women's Film Festival), it garnered little attention from critics on its release, although the reviews it did receive were generally positive.[88] Like *Village of Stone*, China's social and political landscape takes a backseat throughout. In Guo's own comments on the film, she acknowledges this herself: "There are lots of 'underground' [Chinese] films about poverty and China's problems. We respect that, but think maybe we can do something different" (McCoy 99).

An experimental docufiction with a multi-layered narrative structure, *Fish* is ostensibly centred on Rao Hui, a Beijing-based scriptwriter in his thirties who is struggling with his current screenplay about a fugitive character named Lin Hao 林浩. Underlying all this is Rao's own *ennui* and frustration that he is unable to have the writing career he desires (all his own film scripts have been banned or rejected, so he makes a living writing soap operas).

The film leans heavily on a deliberately evasive, metafictional premise. For instance, we learn from the credits that Rao was Guo's co-writer on the *Fish* script and that he plays

[88] *Yishu* magazine described it as an "intelligent, literary collage" (McCoy) and *Variety* praised its "beguiling poetry" (Chang).

himself in the film (the real-life Rao Hui was Guo's contemporary at the Beijing Film Academy and is now a film professor in Beijing). But the line between the real-life Rao Hui, and the Rao Hui of the film *Fish*, is hazy. In her own director's statement, Guo discusses her "scriptwriter friend Rao Hui". "He is a writer who really writes, a writer who has an uneventful writer's life, because he only writes but doesn't live. He has been stuck in his flat since the day he came to Beijing, and he has spent his days and nights creating stories set in remote places he has never been to. Following his imagination, the narrative of the film will twist and turn and reshape itself constantly, as the scriptwriter changes his ideas about the places and problems of his characters" ("Director's Notes"). This description might easily apply to both the real Rao Hui and his fictional alter-ego.

Such states of reality and unreality form a constant presence throughout the work. The film shows us Rao's life as a writer in Beijing (figure 12); the palette is then bled out to signal that we have entered the realm of Rao's imagination, as we watch Lin's life play out (figure 13). The latter scenes are typically accompanied by Rao's voiceover ("Is he going to save his life? Or is he going to end his life? I'll let him decide his own fate"). As the narrative progresses and switches between these two parallel stories, we see the character and narrative of Lin in the process of being written.

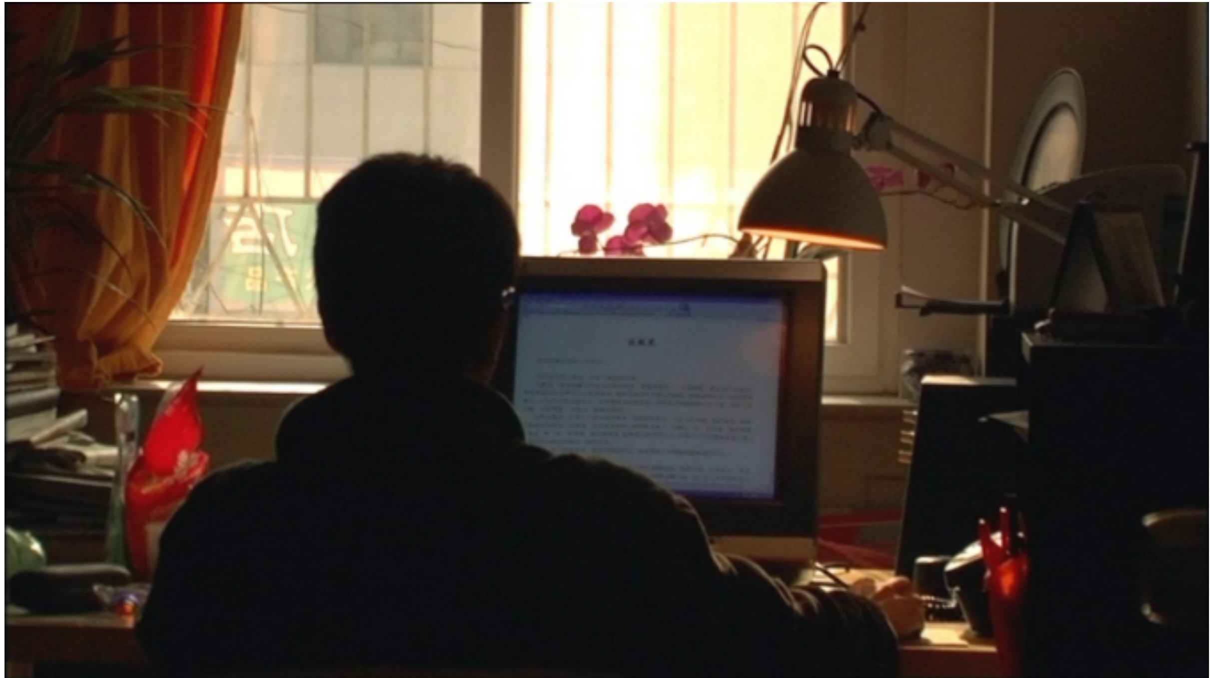

Figure 12: Still from Guo Xiaolu, *How Is Your Fish Today?*, 2006 (06:12)

Figure 13: Still from Guo Xiaolu, *How Is Your Fish Today?*, 2006 (11:02)

As we watch Rao draft the script of Lin's life-story, we learn that Lin is a 27-year-old man from southern China (somewhere in Guangxi province, which Rao describes as "a place

which is always hot and damp"). Rao has Lin kill his girlfriend during an argument and then flee for the northern town of Mohe 漠河. He travels across China by bus and train, eventually meeting a woman called Mimi 咪咪 (acted by Guo herself). They begin a sexual relationship and Mimi brings Lin to Beijing, where they live together for a while.

In contrast to this thrilling fugitive tale that he has authored, Rao lives a mundane existence in Beijing ("my life is more like that of a plant, waiting for seasons to change me") – we see sequences of him at the gym, shopping for clothes, socialising with friends, typing at his computer, and so on. But Rao starts to see himself in his own creation: "I think Lin Hao is like me, from a small town in the south". In the film, the parallel stories of Rao in Beijing and Lin's journey across China eventually converge. (This parallel structure is just one of the many ways *Fish* mirrors *Village of Stone*.) When Rao eventually meets his character in Mohe, he finds Lin lying dead on the ice.

Meanwhile, Guo cuts into these two intertwined fictions with unscripted documentary footage that she shot on a train bound for Mohe, in which we see passengers in a carriage being questioned by an offscreen interviewer (sample dialogue: "How does Mohe look in your imagination?" "It must be a nice place"; figure 14). This blend of fiction and nonfiction was in fact the result of a happy accident. *Fish* was originally conceived as a straightforward documentary, but cold weather conditions meant that Guo and her team could not shoot the film as planned on arrival (Mehaffey). She then reconceived it as a docufiction, combining documentary footage with a fictional script and focussing instead on the mythic qualities of a frontier settlement.

Figure 14: Still from Guo Xiaolu, *How Is Your Fish Today?*, 2006 (39:16)

The film's title is a reference to a scene towards its end, where Rao imagines the river in Mohe and a convivial scenario in which Chinese and Russian fisherman "hail each other from opposite sides of the border" and call "Hello, how are your fish today?". In real life, the town of Mohe (situated in Heilongjiang province) has a special significance – it is a place many schoolchildren learn of in their geography classes and which holds mythic status in the Chinese cultural imagination as a result.[89] And in the film, Mohe as both a real and imagined (even desired) place takes centre stage. As Guo explains in her director's statement:

> An imaginary landscape as the main character – that's what I want to present in this film. And then I need a man, or a man's voice rather than my own voice, to take us into this imaginary landscape, where the audience can paint their own imaginary reality. […] I want to set this imaginary landscape in a village on the border between China and

[89] For instance, a *Sohu Travel* article opens: "You must have heard of Mohe from our geography textbooks, that northernmost place at 53 degrees latitude" (*Ni yiding tingshuo guo Mohe, nage dili keben shang beiwei 53°* 你一定听说过漠河，那个地理课本上北纬 53°) It continues: "City people had no childhood, but Mohe will give one back to you" (*Chengli ren meiyou tongnian, Mohe hai ni yige* 城里人没有童年，漠河还你一个). Similarly, from a 2011 *China Daily* article: "China's northern frontier has a raw beauty that is matched by hardy people and simple joys. All Chinese learn about Mohe in their elementary geography classes, but only a handful ever set foot on it" (Tan).

> Russia, a place Chinese schoolchildren know of, called Mohe. Mohe is the mythical northernmost point of China, where one can see beautiful northern lights – that's what is written in our school textbooks. ("Director's Notes")

The frontier spaces in many of the artworks I engage with in this thesis are fictional (for instance, Can Xue's Pebble Town). The frontier town of Mohe in *Fish* might at first glance seem like a real-life place (even if somewhat romanticised). But what is so striking about this film is that Mohe barely appears onscreen. Indeed, for much of the film, Mohe remains an unseen landscape that exerts an affective, magnetic pull on the film's characters (and real-life producers). After it eventually enters the frame towards the end of the film, Rao feels able to conclude: "In Mohe, this place I've invented so many times, all that remains is this naked icy landscape. But I needed to come here to see that there's nothing to be seen. Now I feel peaceful. Today is the 2nd of February. In five days, it's Chinese New Year. My mother called to ask when I'm going back… I haven't been back to my southern hometown for five years. Suddenly, I miss that place."

In a manner reminiscent of Can Xue's characters in *Frontier* and how they find themselves instinctually drawn to Pebble Town, Rao Hui spends much of the film's narrative visualising Mohe as a place of sanctuary and salvation. But in the end, it turns out that it was the journey, rather than the destination, that held transformative powers and facilitated the return to reality (Rao's return to his hometown). In this sense, and as we will see across the body of this thesis, *Fish* is exemplary of how the generative frontier – often an amorphous and vaguely conceived space, appealing to frustrated urbanites – derives so much of its affective potential by triggering such journeys (whether they are travelling across China or journeying across the mind). As Rao realises by the film's close, the actual place as it exists is comparatively unimportant. And while this might represent a potential deflation of narrative

expectation, it in fact becomes a moment of spiritual growth. Here, the frontier is a state of mind where dreams and desires can coalesce to create momentum.

While noticeably more postmodern in tone, there is much subject and thematic overlap with *Village of Stone* – a dried eel appears in both the film and book (figure 15), and there is even a similarity between how the protagonists of both works describe the plants in their Beijing apartments.

Figure 15: Still from Guo Xiaolu, *How Is Your Fish Today?*, 2006 (10:25)

As with *Village of Stone*, *Fish* takes the rural-urban binary as its starting point (along with other fixed binaries, like documentary and fiction, or the geographies of north and south), and is gradually drawn to the small, individual transformations that happen in the blurred space inbetween. And it continues Guo's interest in the powerful presence a place can hold within the mind, even if it turns out to have little bearing in reality. Indeed, unlike *Village of Stone*'s

Shitou village, and the memories Shanhong nursed over the years, Rao's relationship to Mohe is largely imaginary.

Guo even seems to suggest that the film is not only generative for its own protagonist, but could be generative for the audience too. In her notes on the work, she gestures towards the idea that she requires Rao Hui to act as a guide – indeed requires his "male" presence, which hints at the authoritative, pioneering style this might entail – serving as a conduit to this elevated state of mind ("And then I need a man, or a man's voice rather than my own voice, to take us into this imaginary landscape, where the audience can paint their own imaginary reality" "[Director's Notes"]). What is foregrounded within *Fish* is Guo's interest in the writer's ability to create other worlds, to trigger places into existence through words (which also foreshadows Guo's distinct turn to ideas of linguistic capability which can be seen in works such as *Dictionary*). The film's own metafictional nature expands this self-reflexivity around writerly processes and craft. Its treatment of the characters' parallel journeys can be seen as a kind of discursive statement about the writing of narrative itself. The generative frontier can thus be a transformative space for art.

Conclusion

In her later work, Guo has arguably moved away from urban and psychic frontiers towards a greater interest in linguistic frontiers and the act of speech (and as noted, this turn to the global and diasporic themes mirrors both her *émigré* status and sensitivities to the demands of the literary market). Speech and expression – their frustrating and liberating qualities – attain greater importance in her Anglophone work. And yet we can quite clearly see how the seeds for such sensibilities were sown in her earlier Chinese-language corpus. In *Village*, speech plays a vital role in Shanhong's ability to transcend her traumas, so that she feels able to directly

address the reader and disclose her life story in full. Meanwhile, her long-lost father (who suffers from throat cancer) and the mute paedophile are unable to speak, and by the end of the novel, Shanhong feels pity for them both. A unifying theme across both *Village* and the rest of Guo's corpus is the need within her characters for external recognition and to be able to articulate themselves, contrasted with the feeling of being an outsider, or overlooked. The generative frontier – as a journey, and psychological state that emerges from the interplay of the rural and the urban – provides the stage for this self-articulation to happen. In both her work and her public persona, Guo returns to the idea of the frontier both as a destination for her frustrated characters, as well as a potent allegory for the act of creativity.

Chapter two. Skyscrapers in the mist: urban shanshui and generative ambiguity

In the wake of China's urban transformation, numerous contemporary artists have fused elements of *shanshui hua* 山水画, the traditional genre of Chinese "mountain-water" landscape painting, with the accelerated tempo of China's contemporary built environment. Established over 1,500 years ago, the *shanshui* genre has long been understood as a reflection of the artist's own mental landscape and a conceptual expression of how they psychologically negotiate the world, as opposed to a "real" landscape.[90] While the notion that a painting advances an argument or idea about how to look at the world could pertain to any school of art across history, the philosophy of *shanshui* painting is particularly concerned with the relationship between the artist's abstract vision of the world and personal enlightenment. Embedded within this artistic practice is the idea of *woyou* 卧游 (which I translate as "mind-travel" here), first articulated by Southern Song painter Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443 CE) in his essay "Preface on Landscape Painting" (*Hua shanshui xu* 画山水序). Looking at a traditional landscape painting, Zong Bing famously argues, can send the mind on an imaginary journey through a monumental and infinite natural world, unlocking a higher plane of transcendental understanding and a Daoist oneness with nature. This is particularly interesting as it suggests a premodern antecedent to my notion of the generative frontier, introducing the figure of the hermit or exiled scholar-official who has escaped to the edges of human existence (and in this journey, is moving further away across the peripheries of the known world and away from the political world of the city).

[90] See Sophia Suk-mun Law's 2016 article for a detailed account of how the Daoist "principle of generalisation in depicting nature became a guide for most ancient *shanshui* painters [and] directed their attention from verisimilitude to conceptual expression" (376). Also see Michael Sullivan's *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (1962) on the origin and development of *shanshui* painting (17-24).

Here, looking outwards onto a natural world of mountains and water, they are able to lay claim to a higher plane of understanding.

But when the *shanshui* painting tradition is appropriated for twenty-first century Chinese urban landscapes – often, bleak scenes of extensive demolition – by artists today, what then happens to this ancient concept of mind-travel? In postsocialist China, the tearing down and rebuilding of condemned neighbourhoods has given rise to new urban environments, and alongside this, new creative perceptions of the city. What does *woyou* become when the *shanshui* rendition of the unadulterated rural idyll, once regarded as a pleasurable psychological refuge for the Song literati, is complicated by conflicting ideologies, the unavoidable presence of mankind, and urban sprawl? In this chapter, I argue that *woyou* has undergone a transformation in the strand of contemporary cultural production that evokes the aesthetics of *shanshui* painting: it has, in some parts, become a therapeutic philosophy of the generative frontier that seeks to heal the violence of China's urban-rural divide within the frame (rather than remaining a Daoist-inflected ideology of refuge, sanctuary, and strategic resistance).

To explore these questions, I draw upon the work of three contemporary artists who experiment with both *shanshui* and urban elements in this manner: *Artificial Wonderland I* (*Renzao xianjing yi* 人造仙境一), a widely reproduced and representative 2010 *shanshui* digital photomontage by the artist Yang Yongliang; the 2006 film *Still Life* by filmmaker Jia Zhangke, the leading light of the so-called Sixth Generation; and the *Shan Shui in the World* painting project (2016 – ongoing) created by New York-based digital media artist Shi Weili. All three draw upon the formal conventions of traditional *shanshui* and make selective use of its motifs, while working with new digital media and painterly techniques of illusionary deception, to explore the psychological impact of new Chinese urban space. I suggest that *Artificial Wonderland I*, *Still Life*, and *Shan Shui in the World* all respond to China's urban

transformation by representing and evoking the *process* of building, both in the literal depiction of construction sites or city-mapping, and through the active mode of spectatorship enabled by the structural ambiguity in the visual schema of these works. This process of construction – both in its material and psychological manifestations – precisely evokes the expansive, creative, and healing qualities of the generative frontier I argue for across the chapters of this thesis.

Yang, Jia, and Shi have all emerged from a context in which urbanisation, as art historian Meiqin Wang has argued in her recent monograph, is now "the primary condition of [Chinese] art making in the first decade of the twenty-first century" (17). From street artist Zhang Dali's 张大力 silhouetted heads on ruined walls to Liu Bolin's 刘勃麟 signature photography which playfully camouflages the human body against the urban landscape, a new strain of Chinese art has emerged since the early 1990s, with its philosophy and aesthetics firmly rooted in the city and not in the historically dominant realm of the rural.

Here, however, I am interested in the ways in which artists like Jia, Yang, and Shi deploy elements of *shanshui*, glitched and filtered through their innovative use of new media, in a distinctive journey across China's twenty-first century urban-environmental shift. Many of the artists who have taken urbanisation as their primary subject have either mourned what has been demolished or have wildly speculated about a new world order; and indeed, urban aesthetics scholar Robin Visser has drawn attention to how very few modern-day Chinese artists revel in the sensory thrills of the present-day city and unabashedly celebrate the process of urbanisation as, for instance, the early twentieth-century Italian futurists did (38). However, the artists I explore here innovate the *shanshui* form by complicating and moving beyond simplistic, binary conceptions of power relations (often comparing the violence and detritus of urban development with an innocent pastoralism) – inherent in much contemporary utopian-dystopian art that deals with the urban and the rural – through a multi-layered practice which

brings the viewer's attention to the act of construction itself. Moreover, this is often performed by guiding the viewer's mind towards the processes of narrative formation and artmaking.

I argue here that the idea of *woyou* re-emerges in urban *shanshui* as an ambivalent, exploratory quality, as exemplified in my chosen examples. In the modern-day urban context, *woyou* no longer holds its classical connotations of cosmic transcendence. Instead, the stimulus to mind-wander takes on a self-soothing character in the shadow of China's postsocialist economic drive and large-scale urban development. The urban *shanshui* artists actively seek to move beyond the common utopia-dystopia binary in their responses to urbanisation, which tends to see dominant power structures (meaning the state or commercial forces behind China's urban drive) as tightly woven into the fabric of the landscape itself. Against this, they use the *shanshui* mode to make these power structures visible and to create a narratively ambiguous space in which the imagination is pushed into moving beyond a prescriptively dystopian or apocalyptic framework. At the same time, it is difficult to pass over the inherent utilitarianism that lies within works of art which deliberately cultivate an internal mood of ambient calm, which, for all intents and purposes, appears to be a means of mediating the pressures of the external world. For instance, is this calming ambience merely a distraction from the horrors of contemporary living, a coping strategy of sorts that makes life in the neoliberal city bearable? With such caveats in mind, I instead argue that certain works produced in the urban *shanshui* mode ultimately encourage a generative mode of seeing whose constructive and therapeutic qualities seek to foster mental journeys that recognize the hidden potentialities of contemporary urban China. These works suggest not only paths of survival and spaces of respite, but that there are also ways to live meaningfully within the rampant maelstrom that has defined so much of the changes across the face of urban China.

To understand the conditions that have given rise to this form of urban *shanshui*, the first part of this chapter outlines the classical and contemporary traditions of the *shanshui*

painting genre. I then take Yang Yongliang's digital landscape paintings (with a primary focus on *Artificial Wonderland I*), Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, and Shi Weili's *Shan Shui in the World* in turn, concentrating on how these works privilege individual subjectivity and perceptions of the city, resulting in a multi-layered set of stances that creates a mood of unsettling ambiguity (or in the case of Shi, spiritual optimism).

Each of these works have evolved the theory of *woyou* beyond its classical connotations as a means of escape from human society and connection with a numinous natural world. Instead, in taking the post-industrial man-made world as its subject, human presence (including its political relations) is unavoidable in contemporary urban *shanshui*. Indeed, the genre no longer seeks to cut the built, known, human environment out of its frame (in the melancholia or wistful yearning of its ancient counterpart), but actively finds a way of bringing this space into dialogue with conceptions of the rural or pastoral idyll. As Shi puts it: "The notion that shan shui can exist right here (though in a generative parallel world) not only underscores the contrast between the artificial world and nature, but also reminds the audience of an alternative approach to spiritual strength: instead of resorting to the shan shui of elsewhere, we may be able to obtain inner peace from the 'shan shui' of our present location by looking inward" (41). I end by considering how, within the framework opened up by the contemporary engagement with *woyou*, the ambiguous traits of this sub-genre encourage a wandering eye and mind. Ultimately, these works experiment with a new therapeutic hybridity – an important characteristic of the generative frontier – which reframes the present-day Chinese city, while simultaneously submitting to and critiquing the perceived power structures that shape the landscape of contemporary urban China.

I. Landscaping the mind: *shanshui* and *woyou*

The tenets of landscape painting known as *shanshui hua* (literally, "mountain-water painting") first emerged as a set of Daoist ideals and aesthetics observed by the Southern Song literati (1127–1279 CE).[91] The aesthetics of *shanshui* have proven a subject of great interest to artists in China today, who have drawn from the age-old tradition, and variously used it as a point of bridging history, critiquing the present and reimagining both the past and the contemporary. In his 2011 essay "The Evolution of Contemporary Shanshui", art historian Yin Jinan argues for an expansive definition of the genre. He explains how, throughout the ages, Chinese images of natural scenery have fallen into four main categories: the *shanshui* painting of the imperial literati; *shanshui* landscapes executed in the tradition of Western classical realism; the ideological and politically-infused *shanshui* of the Mao era; and the "post-*shanshui* image" of the contemporary age (45). By closely tracing the evolution of the *shanshui* image, and by arguing that it appears and reappears constantly across Chinese art history, Yin concludes that *shanshui* iconography is now "a new kind of image cache", namely a repository of easily-recognisable archetypes that serve as "elements interacting with contemporary art" (49). Even the *shanshui* art of today that incorporates the imagery of contemporary urban China is deeply self-conscious of its tradition (sometimes to the point of parody, as we see later in this chapter); but in calling upon these long-established motifs and stylistic techniques (and the ideologies embedded and suggested within), they also draw out new ways of being and seeing in the postsocialist urban age.

[91] Buddhism scholar Miranda Shaw has written in detail on how the Daoist appreciation of nature became increasingly preoccupied with the abstract concept of naturalness and one's spontaneous state of existence (see her 1988 article "Buddhist and Taoist Influences on Chinese Landscape Painting"). Unlike the Confucian tradition of refinement, ritualisation, and lifelong learning, spiritual cultivation in the Daoist sense came to involve discarding societal values and embarking on a process of unlearning (184-185). See also Craig Clunas' 2010 monograph for more on *shanshui* painting and cultures of direction and movement (including roaming) during the Ming dynasty (53-83).

To understand how the state of *woyou* was first theorised, and in turn, how the concept of mind-wandering has re-emerged as a form of mediation which counters the visual shock of urban development in contemporary images of *shanshui*, this chapter first deals with the origins of the *shanshui* tradition itself. By the tenth century, Chinese artists had shifted their focus from painting the human figure towards painting landscapes that expressed their emotional responses to real-world or imagined natural scenery, largely composed of sky, trees, mountains, lakes, streams and waterfalls.[92] The archetypal *shanshui* painting contains a sense of monumentality, and in particular, the relative insignificance of humans within the ordered sublimity of the cosmos. Humans, buildings, vehicles (e.g. boats), and animals, if they are shown at all, are tiny in contrast to the majestic scenery. For example, in *Pavilions and Mansions by Mountains and Rivers* (*Jiangshan lou guan tu* 江山楼观图; figure 16), a landmark painting by Northern Song painter Yan Wengui 燕文貴 (ca. 967-1044 CE), the buildings scattered throughout Yan's monochromatic panorama of seemingly endless mountains and rivers are diminutive and scarcely visible. The suggestion in classical Chinese painting that the landscape extends beyond the bounds of its frame and into infinity is a recurring theme that art historians Sherman Lee and Wen Fong termed "mountains and rivers without end" (1). Within this sense of monumentality, too, is the idea that this type of landscape is eternal and unchanging.[93] (Incidentally, it is this very painting by Yan that Yang Yongliang's *Artificial Wonderland I* is directly based upon).

[92] See James Cahill's discussion of Gu Kaizhi's 顧愷之 famous *Nymph of the Luo River* (*Luoshen fu tu* 洛神賦圖; ca. 344-406), where the landscape elements are arranged around disproportionately large human figures as "ready-made stage props, without much concern for size relationships or placement in space" (26).

[93] This idea of the *shanshui* landscape as timeless was famously expressed by Tang dynasty poet Du Fu 杜甫 in his frequently-cited 757 poem "Spring Gaze" (*Chun wang* 春望) when he wrote: "The country shattered, mountains and rivers remain" (line 1). He wrote this poem in urban surroundings, while detained in Chang'an, the capital city of the Tang dynasty. (This poem is quoted with appropriate irony in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*).

Figure 16: Yan Wengui, *Pavilions and Mansions by Mountains and Rivers*, ca. 967-1044

Yet, despite the turn away from figure painting, the typical Chinese landscape painting is nonetheless profoundly suffused with the self and authorial intentionality. The Daoist philosophy embedded within the *shanshui* genre can be seen to form an argument in which landscapes – and indeed ways of seeing – are less about verisimilitude, and owe more to classical concepts of cosmology and the connection of the human spirit with the natural world. Or in other words, and as visual studies scholar Sophia Suk-mun Law concludes in her essay about Chinese landscape painting and Heidegger's philosophy of being, "The theme of *shanshui* is thus more about being rather than seeing" (369).

The state of mind-travel is also evoked in *shanshui*, in part through painterly techniques that create shifting and multiple perspectives, expanding the imaginative potential of the painting even further. Prioritising the importance of the subjective gaze over mimetic representation, these techniques include: leaving certain spaces empty, or literally, to "leave whiteness behind" (*liubai* 留白); using ink washes (*shuimo* 水墨) to create atmospheric perspective; the "three-distance perspective" (*sanyuan* 三遠) as developed by the landscape master Guo Xi 郭熙 (ca. 1020-1090); and usually, a longitudinal composition which is both panoramic and monumental in its scope.[94] In the *shanshui* theory of the image, these landscapes

[94] Northern Song painter and theorist Guo Xi distinguished between three kinds of depth when developing his theory of space: "Mountains have three types of distance. Looking up to the mountain's peak from its foot is called the high distance. From in front of the mountain looking past it to beyond is called deep distance. Looking from a nearby mountain at those more distant is called the level distance. High distance appears clear and bright; deep distance becomes steadily more obscure; level distance combines both qualities. The appearance of high distance

present space with the intention to "take us out of ourselves" (Sullivan 158), sending the mind on a journey through a monumental and infinite world. Thus, the power of the painting is first bound up in the immersive act of looking, and then, in the viewer's transcendental imagined journey through the cosmos.

The Southern Song Daoist painter Zong Bing – widely acknowledged as China's first *shanshui* artist, although none of his works have survived – provides us with insight into these tenets of early landscape painting in his "Preface on Landscape Painting". Zong Bing was the first practitioner to elucidate the state of *woyou* (a contraction of *woyi youzhi* 卧以遊之): non-purposeful imaginary journeying, indulged in while lying down ("mind-travel"); or as Craig Clunas calls it, "recumbent roaming" (61). There is no evidence for paintings holding a meditative function before Zong Bing (Shaw 194), and his treatise had enormous impact on how the *shanshui* aesthetic tradition was to develop later.

Throughout his life, Zong Bing travelled to numerous mountains, but when he became too old and unwell to undertake such long journeys, he painted representations of natural mountain scenery on his walls, claiming this enabled him to mentally roam the landscape while reclining: "Unrolling paintings in solitude, I sit pondering the ends of the earth. Without resisting the multitude of natural promptings, alone I respond to uninhabited wilderness when grottoed peaks tower on high and cloudy forest masses in depth" (38). Here, we can note the emphasis placed on the self ("in solitude, I sit […] alone I respond") and the meditational practice of the individual rather than a collective act of seeing and aesthetic appreciation. The contemporary urban *shanshui* works I turn to later, however, are responding to the environmental impact that human civilisation has had upon the world and display anxieties

is of lofty grandness. The idea of deep distance is of repeated layering. The idea of level distance is of spreading forth to merge into mistiness and indistinctness" (168-169).

over the diminished power of the individual in postsocialist China. It is within this potentially ruinous urban world, in which the individual is also decentred and yet now apparently unable to seek refuge in a pastoral reverie, that the concept of *woyou* is transposed and reimagined anew, amidst the landscape's contemporary tensions and dislocations.

Although Zong Bing's body could no longer go where he wanted, so the story goes, his imagination was under no such constraints. When he stopped physically traveling, his mind found ways to undertake new journeys. His anecdote shows us that, in the model laid out by traditional *shanshui* painting, contemplative visuality results in an imaginative spirituality, and this transcendental sense of being is located in one's self unifying with the environment.[95] Zong Bing himself writes, "As for landscape, it has physical existence, yet tends toward the spiritual" (36). Through the practice of *woyou*, landscape painting therefore acts as "a vehicle for experiencing the being in/with nature", or as Law goes on to explain, it is intended to facilitate a particular state of mind – that of swimming harmoniously in "the broad current of the cosmos" (380). For the imperial literati and through the vehicle of *woyou*, landscape painting therefore served as a key which could unlock a higher plane of transcendental understanding, "a kind of harmonious *being* between man and nature that goes beyond time and space" (381).

Although Yin Jinan goes on to argue that the individualistic or nationalist values in contemporary *shanshui* have now replaced the ideals that the scholarly elite sought in their work (45), I suggest that, nonetheless, we cannot overlook the longstanding tension between

[95] It is, of course, debatable as to what extent traditional Chinese landscape paintings actually induce a state of mind-travel in their viewers, although this cognitive effect is certainly part of their painterly blueprint. This is an area which is starting to come under some scientific scrutiny, and a 2015 neuroscience article details a behavioural study which confirms that, "as predicted, traditional Chinese landscape paintings induce greater levels of relaxation and mind wandering and lower levels of object-oriented absorption and recognition, compared to realistic oil landscape paintings" (1). In a second experiment, neural data then goes on to suggest that "switching from traditional Chinese landscape paintings placed greater demands on the brain's attention and working memory networks during the flanker task than did switching from realistic oil landscape paintings" (Tingting Wang et al. 1).

the individual and worldly desires of the painter (archetypally, a scholar-official forced to withdraw from human civilisation) and their search for this spiritual oneness with an idyllic notion of nature. Although the landscape depicted in a *shanshui* painting might be of a harmonious natural idyll, the literati bureaucrats who typically painted in this style were often dealing with political disillusionment and challenging real-world situations. As political scientist Xuezhi Guo explains: “Most scholar-officials in Chinese history did not destroy themselves after experiencing severe political adversity and failure. Rather, they went into seclusion to protect themselves and continued to pursue self-cultivation for eventual political return” (111). This often meant studying Daoist thought, and indeed, in occupying oneself with related gentlemanly activities such as *shanshui* painting. It is this individualistic sense of cautious political inaction and leisurely retreat (particularly as expressed by Zhuangzi 莊子) that Lu Xun would go on to furiously lampoon in writings such as “Resurrecting the Dead” (*Qisi* 起死).[96]

The individual (and often political) impulse to turn away from and reject the manmade world is therefore bound up within the perceived cosmological unity of the *shanshui* image. One might argue that creating works of art put a refined positive spin on the negative connotations that retreating into the wilderness held for the classical literati (namely, being forcibly ejected from the realm of governance and politics). Xuezhi Guo reminds us that Tang poet Li Bai’s 李白 “embrace of Daoism, of course, was compelled by circumstances: ‘I did not originally give up the world; but the people of the world themselves abandoned me’” (111). But what emerges in the urban *shanshui* image of today, as I show through the examples in this chapter, is a refusal to deny and temper the sprawl of mankind within the natural landscape. In this sense, *shanshui*’s contemporary manifestations – at least in the urban-themed works of the

[96] See Liu Jianmei for a detailed discussion of Lu Xun’s critique of Zhuangzi and the Daoist philosophy of roaming.

generative frontier that I identify in this chapter – function less as an ideal of retreat to a pastoral paradise (or even a fantasy of a post/prehuman world), and more as a reckoning with and working-through of the disruptions and clashes within modern-day China.

II. The post-*shanshui* image

After the political turmoil of the Mao Zedong years (during which the *shanshui* paintings of the ancient literati became associated with the landowning class and fell out of favour, in accordance with Mao's famous principle of "destroy the old and establish the new" [*po sijiu li sixin* 破四旧立四新]), and after the tumultuous search for identity that mainland Chinese art went through in the 1980s, traditional *shanshui* is now in the process of being revisited and dismantled by present-day artists working in a variety of different mediums. Indeed, for art historian Hu Mingyuan, talking about "traditions" is an entirely modern phenomenon, claiming that, "The ancients did not talk about 'tradition'. The moderns do. '*Shanshui* tradition' as a concept was invented to address contemporary tensions" (26). While Hu may be overstating this somewhat (after all, classical *shanshui* painters would often paint "in the style of" – surely displaying awareness of a particular tradition), it is true that signifiers of classical *shanshui* are now used critically as a lens through which to view postsocialist China.[97] Citing a range of factors, notably the state-led revival of traditional culture and the internationalisation of contemporary Chinese art, and the accompanying drive to appeal to overseas audiences' tastes, Yin Jinan locates the mid-nineties as the point when "a kind of contemporary *shanshui* divergent from both political landscapes and literati *shanshui* emerged" (49). (Following on from Yin's points, it should also be noted that, in their foregrounding of traditional culture,

[97] See, by way of example, early Qing painter Wang Hui's 王翚 1713 *shanshui* piece *Landscape in the Style of Juran and Yan Wengui* (*Fang Juran Yan Wengui shanshui tu* 仿巨然燕文贵山水图).

many contemporary *shanshui* artworks purposefully seek to evoke a sense of "Chineseness" – a characteristic which has proven commercially strategic, as far as the international art market is concerned).[98]

Over the past two decades, the art world has witnessed the surge of a fresh *shanshui* moment in contemporary Chinese aesthetics – to the extent that, in 2011 and along with curator Peter Fischer and collector Uli Sigg, the international artist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 curated the *Shanshui – Poetry Without Sound? Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art* exhibition at the Museum of Art Lucerne, showcasing 70 works produced by Chinese artists between 1994 and 2011. Comparing contemporary *shanshui* to a "cracked mirror [reflecting] tens of thousands of shadows of the cosmos", Ai writes in his catalogue essay that an "external world projected through the inner values of Tao and Ch'an has long been impossible" (41). No longer seen as a means of facilitating psychological escape from the human realm, the cracks in the *shanshui* whole are now made visible as an artistic method of subversion.

Featured artist Ni Youyu 倪有魚 speaks to this shift in his 2009 sculpture *Landscape Case* (*Ban shan xiang* 半山箱), which features a traditional lacquer *shanshui hua* scroll case. Inside, Ni has created a three-dimensional *shanshui* landscape from a sparse arrangement of twigs, rocks, and miniature models of ruined pavilions and bridges (figure 17). Annotating this scene is calligraphy which locates existing and imagined place names from classical Chinese poetry into his speculative landscape (Nick Yu). At first glance, the sculpture might seem like nothing more than a roughly arranged mound of dirt and detritus, or even skeletal remains encased in an antiqued, weathered container, but upon peering in on the tiny vessel, the suggestive forms of mountains, trees, and pathways begin to emerge. What is especially

[98] See Anita Archer's 2022 book about Chinese contemporary art in the global art market for a broader discussion of this tendency, especially the section titled "'Chineseness' as a strategic methodology" (128-131).

striking about this piece is how the viewer must rely on their imagination and recollections about *shanshui* paintings to parse the work and fill in the gaps (for instance, ragged twigs have to be remembered and recognised as trees). All this highlights the importance that artists today place on the roots of *shanshui* as, in part, a study of perspective and the use of abstracted forms and blank space to trigger the viewer's imagination, to allow their mind to wander, and ultimately, to complete the picture within. Speaking to themes of regeneration, in a 2011 email to Uli Sigg, Ni wrote: "The openness of the art form may make it possible for the decaying traditional *shanshui* spirit to be reincarnated in contemporary China" (Fischer 147).

Figure 17: Ni Youyu, *Landscape Case*, 2009

From Liu Wei's 刘韡 2004 black-and-white photograph titled *Looks Like a Landscape* (*Fengjing* 风景; figure 18), which turns out to be a sly composition of bent-over naked bodies – wispy pubic hair and all (the backstory: Liu submitted this sarcastic spin on the *shanshui* image after receiving a series of rejections from that year's Shanghai Biennale; to his surprise,

it was accepted [“Liu Wei: On ‘It Looks Like a Landscape’”]); to the mountains and rivers painted directly onto human skin in Huang Yan’s 黃岩 *Chinese Landscape Tattoo No. 2* (*Zhongguo shanshui wenshen zhi er* 中國山水紋身之二; figure 19) 1994-1999 series; through to Yang Yongliang’s own fantastical cityscapes, the grouping of artists gathered together in this exhibition demonstrates that, despite the new layers of irony and subversion that inevitably complicate the post-*shanshui* image, a fascination with multiple modes of perception remains a key component of the *shanshui* moment today (recalling Guo Xi and various other *shanshui* thinkers’ theories of space). In keeping with the original tenets of classical *shanshui*, but with a turn away from the transcendental and with the focus on a landscape now clearly marked by human presence (or indeed, as with Liu and Huang, the human literally becoming the subject matter or canvas), contemporary *shanshui* still seeks to draw its viewer towards new and enlightened planes of phenomenological awareness.

Figure 18: Liu Wei, *Looks Like a Landscape*, 2004

Figure 19: Huang Yan, *Chinese Landscape Tattoo No. 2*, 1999

Without wishing to essentialise or simplify readings of such artworks, it is undeniable that many of these artists who draw on the cache of *shanshui* elements seek to foreground mournful or dystopian narratives, making full use of the obvious jarring contrast between classical rural idylls and China's postsocialist modernity. For instance, in his 2004 oil painting series *The Decay of Landscape* (*Kuilan de shanshui* 潰爛的山水; figure 20), Zhang Xiaotao (whom I also discussed in my Introduction) uses rotting strawberries to create the bird's-eye illusion of mist-covered mountain peaks and valleys; the viewer's eye moves across the wispy strands of mould floating between the blackening, pock-marked fruit in a (disgust-inducing) mimicry of the experience of casting across a landscape. In Zhang's blunt metaphor, a harvest that should be bountiful, abundant, and fresh is fast decomposing, writhing, and shrivelling. Another example can be seen in a work from 2006: the year in which Wang Tiande 王天德 began his *Gu Mountain* (*Gu shan* 孤山) digital photo-series, depicting charred and desolate mountain ranges crafted from ash and burnt *xuan* 宣 paper (figure 21). The ethereal signature

works of Yao Lu 姚璐, which playfully tussle with and manipulate the audience's lines of sight, offer another instance. The act of moving closer and closer towards Yao's images reveals that what was thought to be a richly painted, gem-like *shanshui* landscape is actually composed of green netting, construction waste, and rubble (figure 22). Such works which are premised on this play around distance and illusion typically lean towards a bleaker view of postsocialist China, their internal dramas facilitated by oscillating between the viewer's enchantment and disenchantment. For the most part, the landscapes remain as barren as they are apocalyptic. (Though in Yao's landscapes, the occasional construction worker is inserted as another visual quip.)

Figure 20: Zhang Xiaotao, *The Decay of Landscape*, 2004

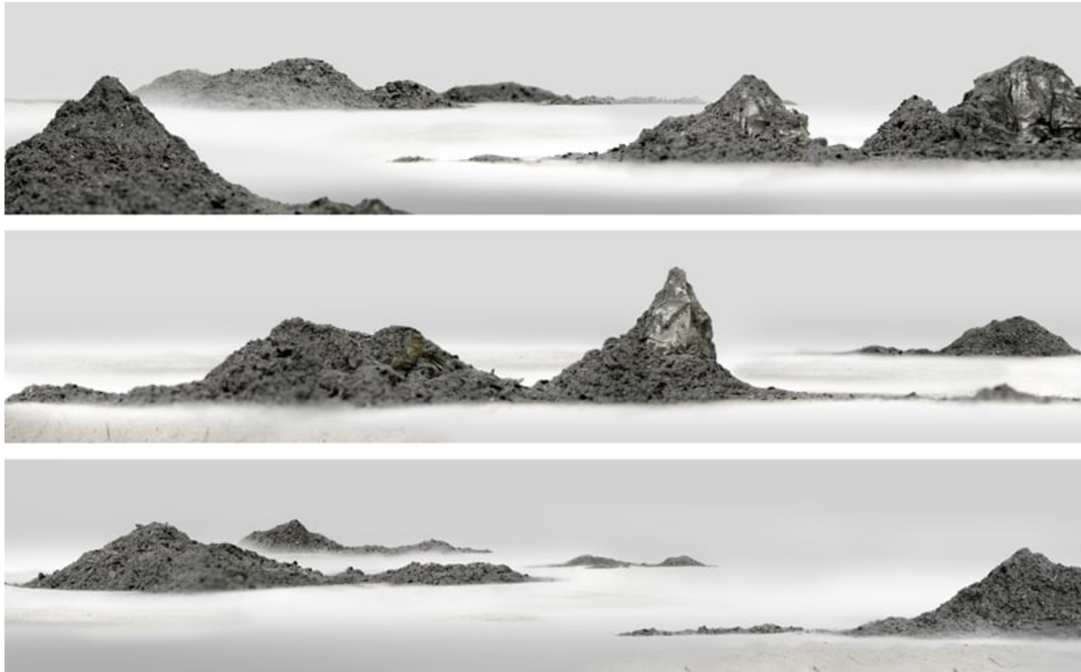

Figure 21: Wang Tiande, *Gu Shan 1*, 2006

Figure 22: Yao Lu, *Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock*, 2006

The genre does not solely exist within the realm of the speculative, but is perfectly capable of advancing narratives of mourning through a more documentarian lens, splicing elements of *shanshui* with various forms of realism and abstraction drawn from traditional photography. See, for instance, the works of the Jewish-American photographer (and long-term Beijing resident) Michael Cherney 秋麦, who is a chronicler of China's disappearing natural environment. His 2008 project *Eight Views of the Xiaoxiang* (*Xiaoxiang bajing* 潇湘八景) takes a key subject of Song dynasty cultural production – the Xiaoxiang river region – as the initial impetus for Cherney to embark on a photographic expedition across modern-day Hunan province, attempting to rediscover the locations of the original eight views through which to create a contemporary document of a historically important cultural theme. The result – quietly beautiful black-and-white photography with a noticeably granular finish achieved by a process of enlarging the film, its softened textures nodding towards the gestural brushstrokes of painting – is unmistakably marked by the excesses of urbanisation and industry. Panning across one scene, the viewer can spot thick columns of smoke rising up into the sky and drifting towards the silhouetted outcrop of trees.

Figure 23: Michael Cherney, *Night Rain on the Xiaoxiang,* 2008

As Cherney's work suggests, contemporary *shanshui* can often address contemporary China's ecological conditions. This topic is also what the majority of scholarship on the genre's

contemporary manifestations has focused on.[99] But within this wider *shanshui* turn towards a contemporary real-world environmental awareness, we can also identify a strand of artists who deliberately use the *shanshui* repertoire to intervene within these laments for our unsalvageable future, by incorporating the themes of desire, hope, healing, growth, and regeneration into their frame. One example of these artists working on *shanshui* with a more therapeutic agenda of resilience while speaking to ecological and environmental themes is the New York-based artist Jennifer Wen Ma 马文. Her 2012 *Hanging Garden in Ink* (*Kongzhong mo huayuan* 空中墨花园), a twenty-metre-long suspended landscape tableau containing over 1,500 live plants painted with charcoal-based ink, symbolically changed from black to green as it continued to sprout fresh shoots throughout its exhibition period at the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing. The piece constitutes a vision of renewal charged both by the artist's materials and the vegetal subject matter of traditional landscape painting.

Figure 24: Jennifer Wen Ma, *Hanging Garden in Ink*, 2012

[99] See, for instance, Elena Macrì's 2019 article "Unsettled Territories: Ruins and Cities in Chinese Contemporary Landscape Representation", which takes a typically ecocritical view of contemporary *shanshui* art production.

The soothing potential of the contemporary *shanshui* worldview has also reached the realm of architectural manifestos, designs, and even realized buildings: namely, MAD Architects' Ma Yansong attempts to articulate a *shanshui* philosophy within the material world in his 2014 publication *Shanshui City* (*Shanshui chengshi* 山水城市). Here, he describes his concept of a "shanshui city" as a direct response to the "soulless, modern city" (21) which "does not provide emotional refuge for its residents and pays no heed to the feeling and experience of living within it" (22). Ma takes issue with China's current model of urbanisation, which he feels has been "copied from the West" (29) and expresses his desire to "create a floating city of the future, somewhat detached from reality, which would provide a kind of regenerative power" (35). There is even a precedent to Ma's dreams of a *shanshui*-infused turn within the architectural world. Ma reveals he took inspiration from scientist Qian Xuesen's 钱学森 original 1980s vision of a Shanshui City, which Qian had proposed in response to the looming spectre of large-scale urbanisation on the national horizon (49). Unapologetically utopian in its vision, Ma's *Shanshui City* is nonetheless a real-world agenda to fuse natural and man-made environments through a vernacular that is both rooted in the Chinese landscape tradition and which envisions a sustainable urban future – and it has been realised in MAD building projects such as the 2017 Chaoyang Park Plaza in Beijing (figure 25).

Figure 25: MAD Architects, design model of *Chaoyang Park Plaza*, 2017

As stated, however, my focus here is on visual artists who specifically appropriate *shanshui* elements and engage with the theory of *woyou* by drawing attention to the subjective and constructive process of seeing, establishing a new narrative that seeks to acknowledge and rebuild the psychological dislocation of Chinese postsocialist urbanisation by invoking the space of the generative frontier. The first two of the artists I discuss –Yang Yongliang and Jia Zhangke – make a complementary pairing; their works are representative of the wider cultural turn towards the reinterpretation of traditional landscape painting, and they both gravitate towards narratively ambiguous environments. The ambiguity within their works emerges from the multiple and contradictory viewpoints of characters, vantage points, temporalities, and ideologies; surreal interjections (both introduce unexplained UFOs into their *shanshui* environments); and gap-ridden narratives. Instead of presenting the viewer with an obvious utopia-dystopia binary, Yang and Jia's landscapes aim to sharpen the viewer's awareness of

multiple modes of perception through the ambivalent states of construction and deconstruction they present.

On the base level, in Jia and Yang's work, the rural landscape of mountain-water painting has now become an urbanised landscape which deploys selected motifs of traditional *shanshui* (for instance, craggy rocks, fishing boats, or tiny human figures). Classical *shanshui* iconography has, I argue, become an image repository for a subset of post-millennial Chinese art, and its elements are selectively deployed in a way that wistfully departs from the ideals of the ancient imperial literati. In the cases of Jia and Yang, fusing certain *shanshui* elements with the modern-day city results in new imaginary landscapes that deconstruct, and at times, parody, traditional *shanshui* paintings, contemporary art forms, and Chinese postsocialist urban policy.

Alongside this contemporary reclamation of *shanshui* elements, Jia and Yang's detailed urban *shanshui* compositions have been achieved through painstaking technical precision afforded by the malleability of the digital medium and its tools (for instance, Jia's high-definition digital video [HDV] camera and Yang's innovative use of Photoshop software). In contrast, the suggestive formal techniques of *shanshui* painting (for example, the varying gradations of ink wash) traditionally created a space which favoured inference and the artist's subjective gaze over verisimilitude. Despite the undeniable photorealism of their fantastical digital images, however, I argue here that Yang and Jia's works produce an affect of ambiguity designed to prompt flights of the viewer's imagination in a phenomenological manner not dissimilar to the state of *woyou*.

Using artistic techniques that create landscapes which emanate a soporific, even soothing aesthetic, yet underlined with a pervading air of menace, Jia Zhangke and Yang Yongliang have produced works that are reminiscent of what media scholar Paul Roquet calls (in his reading of post-1960s Japanese culture) a mood of "*ambivalent calm*" (18). The

vacillation that emerges from this spatial ambiguity and which both pacifies and allows the individual to mediate a landscape of neoliberal capitalism is one of the defining traits of ambient media.

Crucially, Yang and Jia both depict cities deep within the throes of development. Experimenting with the malleability of new digital media, they engage with *shanshui* through a variety of twenty-first century tools and formats, including digital cameras, Photoshop, computer-generated imagery, and most recently, Virtual Reality (VR). Like many of China's current generation of city-dwelling artists, both Jia and Yang have a deep and tumultuous connection with their urban present, taking the construction and deconstruction that has been extended into large swathes of the Chinese countryside as their subjects, and as the driving force behind their fragmented and uneasy aesthetic. In *Artificial Wonderland I* and *Still Life*, we see photo-elements of present-day Shanghai and the (now-submerged) town of Fengjie refracted through the lens of classical *shanshui* and their digital tools, which allow for the surreal interludes that punctuate their landscapes.

In interviews, Jia and Yang have discussed the dislocation that arises from the clash of temporalities that they sense in the present-day Chinese landscape and which is reflected through their mixing of *shanshui* motifs with the twenty-first century city. In his 2007 artist's statement for *Phantom Landscape* (*Shen shi shanshui* 蜃市山水) series, Yang describes his ambivalent relationship with the city and the traditions which make up his cultural heritage: "The city and the *shanshui* landscape – I simultaneously love and hate both. I love the familiarity of the city, but I hate the unpredictable speed of its growth and how it swallows its surroundings. And I love the profundity of traditional Chinese culture, but I hate its stagnant and regressive nature"[100] ("Phantom Landscape"). With their perplexing mix of *shanshui*

[100] *Chengshi he shanshui, wo ji ai tamen, tongshi you hen tamen. Wo ai chengshi de shuxi he qinqie, geng hen chengshi bian de tai kuai yi yi zhong wufa guliang de sudu zai tunshi zhoubian de yiqie, wo ai Zhongguo chuantong*

scenes and teeming cityscapes, his photomontages reflect this Janus-faced attitude towards the environment. On a similar note, Jia has remarked, "When you approach the town of Fengjie by boat, it's like taking a trip back to ancient China. The landscapes have been written about and painted so much that they really do seem to have come out of a Tang dynasty poem. As soon as the boat docks, though, you're thrust back into the modern world" ("Jia Zhangke on *Still Life*" 7). Yet crucially, neither Jia nor Yang express nostalgia for the out-of-body release traditionally facilitated by *shanshui*. Rather, by concentrating on man-made landscapes in the process of being unassembled and reassembled, they turn their gazes towards the gaps found within the uneasy co-existence of the rural idyll and new urban present, and the imaginary worlds that can emerge from this new soil.

Within the wider urban *shanshui* turn found in contemporary Chinese visual culture, I have identified artworks which complicate and unsettle utopian-dystopian binaries and which concentrate on the act of building itself, mirroring the very real construction and deconstruction process of China's urban transformation today. At their core, Yang and Jia's works resist wholeness through their structural ambiguity: the lack of order and the inconsistent gaps contained within these pieces push the viewer into creating their own meaning, whatever this may be. In doing so, the generative frontiers evoked by these works instil a therapeutic process of imaginative construction in the viewer as they are invited into these spaces to link gaps and fragments; as I go on to show, Yang and Jia primarily do this by respectively experimenting with the viewer's notions of spatiality and temporality.

Finally, I bring in a fresh perspective through the work of digital design artist Shi Weili, who channels an optimism (not unlike Ma Yansong's) through his computer-generated urban

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wenhua de bodajingshen, danshi geng hen ta tingzhi bu qian, gubuzifeng. 城市和山水，我既爱它们，同时又恨它们。我爱城市的熟悉和亲切，更恨城市变得太快，以一种无法估量的速度在吞噬周边的一切。我爱中国传统文化的博大精深，但是更恨其停滞不前、固步自封。

shanshui landscapes, to briefly elucidate the intersections of *shanshui* worldbuilding, its generative sensibilities and potentials, and algorithmic modes of artmaking. As Shi puts it in his typically data-driven vision of how *shanshui* can re-empower the urbanite:

> For an audience living in an urban area, a traditional shanshui painting provides them with spiritual support through the depiction of the natural scene of elsewhere. With generative technology, however, *Shan Shui in the World* has the ability to represent any place in the world – including the city where the audience is – in the form of a shanshui painting based on geography-related information of the place. (41)

It is within the shifting of interpretive responsibility onto the viewer and in the phenomenological act of construction that ensues, drawing on *shanshui* painting's philosophies and techniques, that the therapeutic potential of the generative frontier, and a new means of navigating the contemporary urban-rural order, is put forward.

III. Ambiguous spatialities: Yang Yongliang's *Artificial Wonderland I*

Yang Yongliang can be understood as part of a digitally native, hybrid generation which has become fluent in the art of shifting between new media formats and artistic categories. Yang was born in 1980, in what was once the historical country of Jiading and which has now become Jiading District, Shanghai. He has developed an international reputation for creating digital landscapes in the *shanshui* mode, replicating well-known paintings primarily from the Song dynasty.[101] He began making his photomontages in earnest from 2006 onwards, starting with *Phantom Landscape I* (*Shen shi shanshui yi* 蜃市山水一). In this early series, the buildings that make up the cityscapes appear well-maintained, clean, and intact. However, in 2007, Yang

[101] Art scholar Wu Hung has traced the photomontage trend in *shanshui* digital photography back to 2003, instigated by artist Hong Lei 洪磊, who unveiled his piece *After Zhao Mengfu's (1254-1322) Autumn Colors on the Que and Hua Mountains* (*Fang Zhao Mengfu que hua qiuse tu* 仿趙孟頫鵲華秋色圖) that year (348).

quickly shifted into a more critical stance of depicting incomplete buildings in ambiguous states of construction or demolition, and these half-built structures have remained part of his signature style ever since.

Besides photography, Yang's oeuvre encompasses video, film, installations, painting, and virtual reality; he is an interdisciplinary artist who moves fluidly between various mediums of digital technology, stating: "I think digital technology is only a method. It continues to change and develop, which is also one of its distinguishing features. I do not limit myself to using the same technology to complete my work, but rather, I explore the most state-of-the-art technology to realise my work" (Caruso). In his hybridity, Yang can be regarded as a child of the new visual epoch that media philosopher Vilém Flusser argues we now exist in (we have moved past the first age of human culture – defined by the invention of linear writing – and become, Flusser says, "inhabitants of the photographic universe" [65], our lives and modes of representation now dominated by the image).

Here, I explore how Yang's artworks appropriate the idea of *woyou* in his manipulation of multiple spatialities and temporalities. Yang's collages can be parsed on a variety of contradictory levels; these landscapes never reveal one "true" face, and (unlike the mental realm of *woyou* and traditional *shanshui*, which can be accessed while in a state of recumbence) their appearances change depending on where the viewer is standing. Meiqin Wang chooses to situate Yang's work in the context of Henri Levebre's formulation of the "right to the city", and the "real world" social and environmental effects of nonstop urbanisation in China. For Wang, Yang's work "bears the atmosphere of an apocalyptic prediction" (123), and she is not unusual in her tendency to read these images in a purely dystopian light.

However, to my mind, the multiple perspectives contained within Yang's work result in a sense of ambivalence that, to quote the art historian Dario Gamboni on

phenomenologically-demanding “potential images”, “make[s] the beholder aware – either painfully or enjoyably – of the active, subjective nature of seeing” (18) and which seeks to inspire an actively creative mode of spectatorship as the viewer builds their relationship with these images. There is also an art historical dimension to what Yang seeks to accomplish here: this can be seen, for instance, in English artist Joseph Michael Gandy’s 1830 pen and watercolour work *A Bird’s-eye View of the Bank of England* (figure 26). Created to showcase John Soane’s 45-year-long reconstruction of the Bank of England in London (widely hailed at the time as an architectural masterpiece), Gandy’s piece blends the cool and technical visual vocabulary of a cutaway axonometric with the romantic ruination of classical antiquity (recalling for example, the remains of the Forum of Rome). As with Yang’s works, Gandy leaves it ambiguous as to whether the bank is in a state of construction or deconstruction. Yang himself has played with ideas of ruination and western classical architecture in his 2010 *Greece* (*Xila* 希腊) series, which he created as part of his artist’s residency in conjunction with the 2nd Thessaloniki Biennale. As exemplified by *Greece 1* (*Xila zhi yi* 希腊之一; figure 27), the first print in the series, Yang combines an instantly recognisable symbol of ancient Greece (the base of a damaged Ionic column) with a representation of modern-day Athens (his signature mass of city architecture and construction cranes, which seemingly grows from the top of said column).

Figure 26: Joseph Michael Gandy, *A Bird's-eye View of the Bank of England*, 1830

Figure 27: Yang Yongliang, *Greece 1*, 2010

To be fully appreciated, Yang's works require a mobile participant. From a distance, his signature pieces resemble archetypal Song dynasty *shanshui* paintings. However, when the viewer moves closer, what appears natural turns out to be man-made, and we see that Yang's mountains and rivers are actually composed of skyscrapers and houses in a gnomic state of construction or deconstruction; ruins and rubble; construction cranes; electric pylons; ghostly citizens; and dilapidated funfairs. In addition, whereas traditional *shanshui* works on suggestive and often indistinct visual detail, Yang's works depend upon their photo-real clarity. On a micro level, they slowly become more coherent, yet more fantastical, in their detail. There is, of course, a layer of parody that operates here: the mist (traditionally used in *shanshui* painting to create a sense of atmospheric perspective) is revealed as clouds of smog; the sublime mountain peaks turn out to be carefully composed mounds of skyscrapers; water that appears fresh and clear on first glance is actually badly contaminated muck. Spatial representations both contradict and co-exist here, and a viewer has no choice but to wrestle with and marvel over the two competing images when viewing this piece: the idyllic *shanshui* composition of the painting from afar, and the illogical reality of the urban photographic fragments when one gets up close.

Figure 28: Yang Yongliang, *Artificial Wonderland I*, 2010

Reminding ourselves of the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty enables us to see how Yang asks his audience to abandon their "natural attitude" and instead consciously consider

"the world of perception" (*le monde perçu*). Both urban and rural space are unveiled as intellectual constructs here, made up of fragments which stimulate cognitive links in the viewer's mind and echo Merleau-Ponty's famous meditations upon the elusiveness of a piece of wax and its changing state: "I cannot see the wax as it really is with my own eyes; the reality of the wax can only be conceived in the intellect" (*The World of Perception*, 42). For Merleau-Ponty, art that operates in the phenomenological mode "slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, xiii); accordingly, in Yang's work, the viewer is presented with the challenge of balancing two opposing realities and, instead of concerning themselves with the surface of things, they are prompted into taking a sideways look at how both worlds have been artificially composed.

Yang offers up this "world of perception" principally through the deployment of digital photomontage. He creates his signature landscapes by using Photoshop to slice up and piece together the thousands of digital photographs he takes while walking through the streets of Shanghai. In 2010, Yang completed *Artificial Wonderland I* (figure 28), an enormous greyscale piece that preserves the composition of Northern Song painter Yan Wengui's *Pavilions and Mansions by Mountains and Rivers* (figure 16). More than eight metres long and one and a half metres high, Yang's huge panorama presents a vista of seemingly unending mountains and rivers, seemingly ripe for the invocation of *woyou*. Inlets split up the land, which recedes into the distance, and sky, water, and empty space blend into one colourless expanse.

The background and middle distance of *Artificial Wonderland I* are composed of monumental mountain ranges, shrouded in mist that enables the effect of atmospheric perspective. The foreground is a tranquil mix of forests, villages, boats, rivers, and the occasional island. Starting from the right and moving to the left, and if one stands at a distance (and as with *Pavilions and Mansions by Mountains and Rivers*), the viewer can experience the gradual accumulation of nature in all its sublimity.

Figure 29: Yang Yongliang, *Artificial Wonderland I* (detail), 2010

However, when the viewer moves closer (figure 29), it transpires that this vision of environmental serenity hinges on a *trompe-l'oeil*-style deception. What appears to be a lush natural vista from a distance is actually an urban photomontage – an artificial landscape, or as Yang's title wryly puts it, an "artificial wonderland" (*renzao xianjing* 人造仙境). The mountains are conglomerations of towering skyscrapers, and we see that the tonal gradations of the "brushwork" have actually been achieved by adjusting the opacity of the original photographs.

The foreground of the piece contains mounds of rubble and debris, houses and buildings in various states of construction, electric pylons and cranes, pipes, the occasional human figure, and dirty water. And at the centre of the composition (figure 30), we see a derelict ferris wheel, a roller-coaster, and a Disney-style European castle – the ruins, presumably, of some abandoned amusement park (playfully alluding to the idea of a ruined wonderland within the

larger ruined wonderland). Given that the forces of urbanisation have reached our so-called "wonderlands", it is difficult not to take these images solely as direct critique of the environmental and human cost of China's urban policy (as Meiqin Wang does, for instance, when she writes of *Artificial Wonderland I*: "In this striking digital composition, the nightmare has come true" [123]). But on another level, Yang's photomontages insist upon the perceived and mediated nature of all landscapes – even that of the classical *shanshui* rural idyll. The use of photographic manipulation is an apt method of probing perceptions of reality because the base material – the photograph – always begins with the real. As Roland Barthes famously writes, "in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" (76). Regardless of how "artificial" the finished wonderlands may ultimately be, they were nonetheless constructed from real objects placed in front of a camera lens. And in turn, the heavy digital processing that these images have undergone direct our attention to the filtration of the real.

Figure 30: Yang Yongliang, *Artificial Wonderland I* (detail), 2010

Like all of Yang's photomontages, *Artificial Wonderland I* ultimately contains a dual journey. The basic building blocks of the images contain the imprint of Yang's first journey, the one taken as the photographer strolled through Shanghai (evoking, perhaps, the legendary

roaming of the Daoist *shanshui* masters). Curator David Rosenberg reminds us that Yang is, "above all a walker, a surveyor", working in the tradition of famous flaneurs like Walter Benjamin and photographer Eugene Atget (5). The second journey is, of course, the psychological roaming state of *woyou*, the idea of which is conjured up by the iteration of the traditional *shanshui* form.

This dual journey, created through the artistic reconstruction of Yang's corpus of images via the method of digital collage, also means that his photographs function as both a visual archive of the artist's walk and his own mental rendering of the city. In the case of Yang's urban *shanshui*, the artificial, imagined landscape has actually been founded upon a set of photo-real experiences and encounters. By tapping into the new spatial potentialities released by the process of urbanization, and by shifting between the genres of painting and photography, Yang's cities gently oscillate between multiple incarnations, in both real and unreal states.

The sense that unseen forces may have shaped these landscapes gives Yang's photomontages a distinct air of ominous ambiguity. Within the diegesis of this work, it is ambiguous as to whether the *shanshui* urban form is a result of careful urban planning by invisible city governors; whether the city has taken on a life of its own, cannibalising the countryside and craftily assuming its features; or whether the city has organically developed into the shape of mountains and rivers over the course of time. *Shanshui*, in other words, moves beyond its traditional function as a meditative device, designed to link the viewer up with the transcendence of the *dao* 道. Yang's work displaces the theory of *woyou* from its traditionally pure realm of nature and cosmic order, and transposes it into a world which assumes the guise of both urbanity and rurality, and which is consequently laced with human intent and artificiality. Beneath the inescapable tranquillity of the mountain-water form, there is an underlying air of human menace.

This uneasy sense of pre-mediation may in fact derive from the artist's mimicry of the formal spontaneity of a traditional landscape painting through a highly precise digital constructive process. Yang himself has stated: "First I sketch on paper. Then, I take lots of pictures from the city. I download the pictures onto my computer and use software to create landscapes […] It's difficult for me to calculate the time it takes to produce a piece because the photos are collected at different times and places. It's a very easy technique, but it takes a long time" (Caruso). This level of pre-calculation, executed over a long period of time, goes against the spontaneous Daoist essence of a Song dynasty *shanshui* painting. Yang's digital landscapes and their multiple perspective points mobilise the eye and mind, as per the traditional landscape tradition, but rather than instigating a viewing process based entirely on cosmic play and spiritual transcendence, they provoke attempts to recognize the artificiality of both the rural and urban landscape. Instead of presenting an audience with a fully-fledged world of coherent characters and individuated objects, this work makes extensive use of blank space and soft edges to invite the viewer in (like much of traditional landscape painting). Yang's works, then, require autonomous as opposed to passive spectatorship, and audience engagement and imagination is required to fully appreciate them. The sheer physical enormity of his pieces adds to their immersive effect; depending on their distance from the painting, it is ultimately up to the viewer whether the world they explore is a rural or urban one, or a hybrid of the two.

So, if Yang provides a space for the mind to wander, but without the cosmic transcendentalism facilitated by the original theory of *woyou*, what exactly is he offering to the viewer, beyond a heightened awareness of their own subjectivity? In his study of a body of post-1960s Japanese media that stresses how human perception filters and narrates the surrounding world, Paul Roquet describes the effects of what he terms "ambient media": "the ultimate mood to emerge with ambient media is one of *ambivalent calm*, a form of provisional comfort that nonetheless registers the presence of external threats" (18). Ambience can be

understood as a particular environmental mood which infuses a space, which humans within said space can then attune to. For city-dwellers in dense and somatically-taxing urban environments (such as those real-life cities which Yang represents in his exaggerated, post-apocalyptic form), the ambivalent calm that ambient media facilitates can act as an important individual resource. (Roquet uses the Japanese lifestyle brand "Muji" [*Mujirushi ryōhin* 無印良品] as an example of this, reading its diminutive, stripped-down designs as a strategic response to the increased attentional fatigue felt by the Japanese urban subject [138]). However, the form of mood-regulation enabled by ambience is a double-edged sword: as Roquet goes on to explain, "by smoothing over the rougher edges of everyday life, ambient media often help sustain the same social stressors they set out to soothe" (21). While Chinese *shanshui* and ambient media emerge from different cultural traditions and philosophies, an interpretive link may nonetheless be drawn here between the two: Yang appropriates *shanshui* painting to create a space that allows a viewer's thoughts to wander (recalling the practice of *woyou*) and which thereby fosters an ambient mood. This technique is particularly apparent in his video installations, which seamlessly run on loop and deploy a textured, atmospheric soundtrack that evokes a tone of contemplation and calm. By way of example, see his 2012 work *The Day of Perpetual Night* (*Ji ye zhi zhou* 極夜之晝; "Yang Yongliang, The Day of Perpetual Night, Galerie Paris-Beijing").

In contrast to a brand like Muji, however, the "external threats" which signify China's postsocialist urbanisation are made visible in Yang's work (in the form of menacing city environments and polluted nature – and even the occasional UFO, as we see around six minutes into *The Day of Perpetual Night*) but crucially, only if the spectator makes an active choice to bring them into view. In his landmark 2007 monograph *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, ecological philosopher Timothy Morton argues for a theoretical

framework he terms "dark ecology": a way of constructively moving beyond our human tendency to venerate nature as transcendental – an act which Morton regards as fetishising and commodifying. He writes, "Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman" (5). Morton identifies ambience as a powerful aesthetic strategy for making "strange the idea of environment, which all too often is associated with a particular view of nature" (36). He goes on to write: "Dark ecology undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature. It preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe. Instead of whistling in the dark, insisting that we're part of Gaia, why not stay with the darkness?" (187). Yang's work could be said to operate within this realm of dark ecology, through works that question the reality of classical pastoralism, in a way that mirrors Morton's warning of the pitfalls of fetishizing nature. The result of this mode of artmaking is ultimately to "make strange" and destabilise the audience's familiar understandings of the urban and the rural, and instead, invite them to acknowledge the gap between this binary and open up an ambiguous middle-space where they are encouraged to reckon with "the darkness".

With its multiple and oppositional layering of spatialities, *Artificial Wonderland I* is laced with a menace that invokes the incorrigible forces of postsocialist Chinese urban planning, but tempers this threat with a transcendental mood produced by its appropriation of *shanshui* elements and its indeterminable content. In its soothing ambiguity, Yang's signature style offers its viewer an unpredictable experience of reflective drift through a multi-spatial city made strange. Aided by his digital tools and through his modern-day synthesis of urban and traditional *shanshui* elements, Yang's generative ambience – derived from its original photograph – foregrounds the "real" city and suggests how an urban citizen can imaginatively mediate their surrounding space, while also bringing our ways of construing nature and the urban into focus. The traditional preoccupation of *shanshui* with themes of perception and

imaginary renderings of an environment has remerged, in contemporary times, via the computer-based manipulations which fuse photo-real source material (Yang's original photographs of Shanghai that he takes on his mobile digital camera) with classical rural idylls. Here, the generative frontier (as it so often is) can be understood as the outcome of a mental and physical journey, which ultimately enables the artist and viewer to recognize and reconcile the fissures within the contemporary landscape – while, at the same time, affording the viewer control and greater agency via the distance of their body to the work.

IV. *Shanshui* and metafiction in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*

> "The river, the mountains and the fog are taken from the fundamental elements in Chinese painting. That is why I use those panning shots, recalling the gesture of unrolling a classical scroll painting, opening it out in space." ("Jia Zhangke on Still Life" 15)

If Yang Yongliang's work purposefully guides the viewer-explorer through his multi-perspectival *shanshui* paintings to call the categories of the rural and urban into question, then filmmaker Jia Zhangke takes this generative aesthetic strategy one step further through his narrative cinema in his 2006 film *Still Life*. As we see in the above quote, Jia has explicitly drawn links between his *Still Life* and *shanshui* painting.[102] An example of this cinematic "gesture of unrolling" can immediately be witnessed in the film's opening credit sequence, a sensuous tableaux of human life set to Lim Giong's 林強 melodic electronic soundtrack. Here, we see an uncut longitudinal pan shot which slowly moves from left to right across the interior

[102] Art historian Jerome Silbergeld has cautioned against the Orientalising pitfalls of automatically equating ordinary cinematic techniques used by a Chinese director (the tracking shot, for example) with the viewing traditions of Chinese scroll painting (401). However, Jia has made his intent quite clear in his writings and interviews.

of a riverboat (with the mountains and river occasionally glimpsed in the background), showing the passengers playing cards, smoking, eating, laughing, and so on. The camera moves, gently meandering (almost in imitation of the human eye slowly and curiously roaming over a painting), until it eventually comes to rest on the figure of male protagonist Han Sanming 韩三明, who sits by himself and gazes out across the Chang Jiang river. In a step away from the tenets of classical *shanshui*, and unlike Yang's darker view of the human footprint, Jia foregrounds his human characters, the everyday object, and humble interpersonal connections against his omnipresent mountain-water backdrop.

Film scholar Cecilia Mello has written about the relationship between intermediality and realism in *Still Life*, stating that this unique combination "is ultimately moved by [Jia's] political impulse, fruit of the interaction between History and Poetry" (274). Mello goes on to discuss four ways in which Jia invokes *shanshui* painting techniques within the film: through the use of perspective; the alternating points of view; the prolific scroll-shots; and the use of empty space (*liubai*). She concludes that the characters are therefore shown "contemplating a space, traversing a space, as well as being themselves 'traversed' by the camera gaze" (285). Here, I am interested in developing Mello's valuable work by demonstrating how the generative frontier emerges in *Still Life* as a result of Jia bringing together elements of *shanshui* and urban ruination to facilitate the parallel healing narratives which make up the story. However, I am also interested in the metafictional elements of Jia's films set in the Three Gorges region, which I think speak to the ways in which Jia grapples with his status as an artist in relation to his labourer-subjects (evoking, in turn, the Othering gaze of the explorer within the generative frontier framework). With this tension in mind, I therefore also discuss *Dong* 东, Jia's 2006 documentary centered around the neo-realist painter Liu Xiaodong 刘小东.

Still Life follows the parallel storylines of coal miner Sanming and the nurse Shen Hong 沈红, as they trace the footsteps of their spouses who have disappeared from their lives (in Sanming's case, his wife Ma Yaomei 馬幺妹 – whom he had previously "bought" – ran away from him sixteen years ago, whereas Shen Hong has not heard from her husband for two years since he came to the area for work). In their preoccupation with their pasts, they exist in a different psychological time-zone from the machinery of the Chinese state and its relentless push for economic progress (alluded to by the young small-time gangster Xiao Mage 小马哥, who quotes a line from the 1986 Hong Kong action film *A Better Tomorrow* (*Ying xiong ben se* 英雄本色) to Sanming: "Present-day society doesn't suit us because we're too nostalgic"). Nonetheless, as Sanming and Shen Hong traverse the Fengjie landscape on their personal quests, they each come a little closer to working through their own profound sadness. Their endings could hardly be described as "happy", but Sanming moves onto the next stage of his quest with fresh determination and a pack of comrades, and Shen Hong has been able to finalise her divorce and begin the process of moving out of her state of emotional limbo.

Key elements of *shanshui* painting have been inscribed onto the present-day Three Gorges landscape in *Still Life*, creating an evocative space (which could even be described as ambient at times) that again recollects the notion of *woyou*. As Mello has observed, this can immediately be seen in Jia's striking use of alternating camera angles, which shift frequently between elevated vantage points and the street-level, creating a visual space reminiscent of the multiple perspective points (*sanyuan*) found in traditional *shanshui* painting (283). In addition, the recurring scroll-shot also recalls the spatial organisation of *shanshui* and complements the director's use of multiple perspectives.

A rich example can be observed in the shots following the scene in which Sanming and his colleagues compare images of their home provinces on their national banknotes. We first

see a medium shot of Sanming from his chest up, gazing over the mist-covered Qutang gorge far below him and comparing the present-day view to the *shanshui* image on the ten yuan note (figure 31). For Sanming and the viewer, this moment constitutes a brief moment of mental respite: the rolling mist is visually soothing (mirroring the function of *liubai*), birdsong can be made out, and although the omnipresent sounds of demolition can still be heard, they are very faint by this point. These quiet, contemplative shots, combined with the perspectives granted by the aforementioned high and low vantage points, carve out time for the viewer to sift through the various temporal, spatial, and historical layers that make up these landscapes and slowly attune themselves to the distinct atmospheric mood of *Still Life*. But all too soon, the abrasive sound of a large boat's horn slices through this pensive scene, and we cut to a slow, mournful, ground-level scroll-shot across the ruined Fengjie townscape, with the mountain and water elements of *shanshui* still in the background, yet visibly scarred by signs of urbanisation (figure 32). The loud, incessant pounding of demolition starts up, clearly much closer to us by this point.

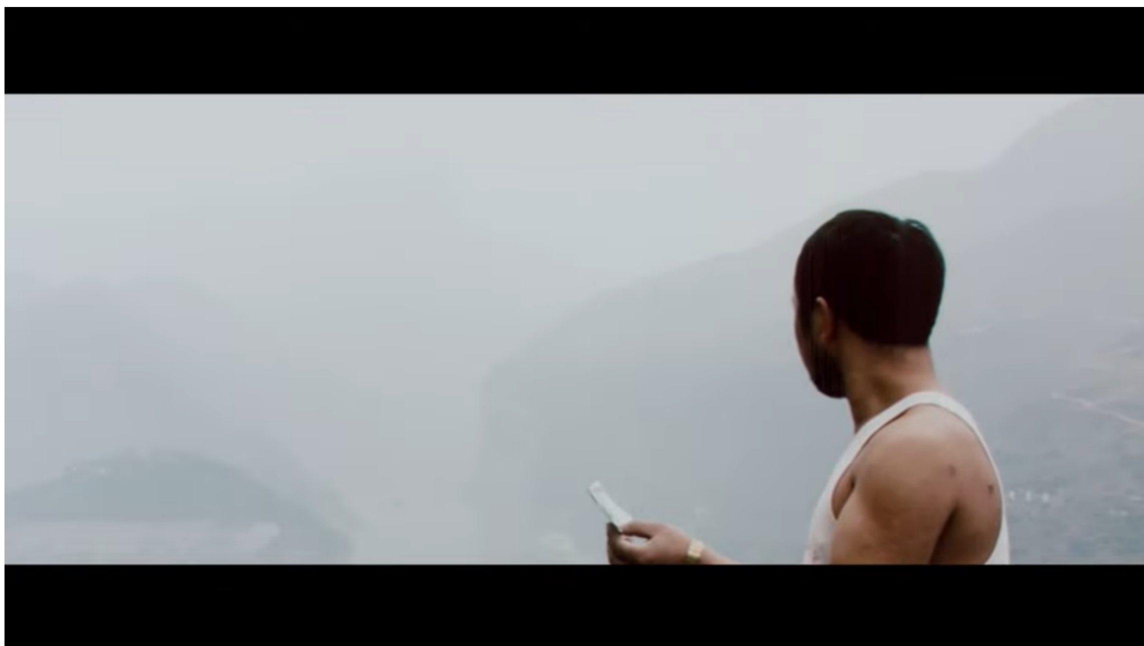

Figure 31: Still from *Still Life*, directed by Jia Zhangke, 2006 (27:22).

Figure 32: Still from *Still Life*, directed by Jia Zhangke, 2006 (27:32).

As with the visual tradition of *shanshui* painting itself, the power of *Still Life* partially lies within its awareness of its ability to both hold and control the viewer's gaze, while also creating visual and temporal gaps both within the *mise-en-scène* and narrative. These empty pauses (for instance, the mist over Qutang gorge) allow the characters and audience's minds to drift towards their own thoughts and feelings.[103] Another example of *liubai* being invoked during a private moment of contemplation can be located when we see Shen Hong sitting alone, drinking bottled water inside a tourist boat (figure 33). Dai Jinhua has interpreted Shen Hong's constant sipping from a water bottle as such:

> "This [drinking] action and this little prop are meant perhaps to intentionally signify thirst: emotional, physical, sexual. She is careful to keep a water bottle with her, even though it is not necessarily one worth keeping, but instead a consumer good meant to be used and discarded. This seems to be an allusion to Shen Hong's marriage or love life, a portrait of the shifting, unstable modern world and present-day China. Everything is being mercilessly cast aside." (81)

[103] Jia has also said he meant to use *liubai* in this way in a 2007 interview with film writer Fabienne Costa.

This may well be a true reflection of how Shen Hong feels, but considered in the context of *liubai* and the generative frontier, I instead view this scene as a step along her journey of emotional healing. This therapeutic interpretation is also supported by Jia himself; in a 2007 interview with the film writer Fabienne Costa, he discusses the intent behind his cinematic use of *liubai* and other *shanshui* painting techniques: "In Chinese thought, it is believed that the landscape allows people to get out of their limited daily life, enabling them to see their life from an abstract point of view" (49).[104] The drinking action could also be seen to signify Shen Hong's efforts to submerge and dilute the pain of her deserting husband's betrayal (she does, after all, end up serving him the divorce papers herself). This shot is especially painterly, as a large portion of the *mise-en-scène* is taken up by a pale and blank stretch of water (echoing how, in a classical *shanshui* painting, water is often suggested by a potent expanse of empty space). As in the *shanshui* tradition, the voids in *Still Life* contain imaginative potential; when superimposed onto and adapted for the cinematic medium, they also suspend the filmic narrative, placing the aesthetic emphasis on the still, ruminative mood of the camera instead of on any action. These pauses can function as soothing, contemplative moments for both the potential audience and for the *Still Life* characters who play out these scenarios.

[104] On considère, dans la pensée chinoise, que le paysage permet aux gens de sortir de leur vie quotidienne limitée, qu'il leur permet de voir leur vie d'un point de vue abstrait.

Figure 33: Still from *Still Life*, directed by Jia Zhangke, 2006 (47:08)

Another interesting point in relation to all this is that Jia's digital tools have enabled him to experiment with *shanshui*-style expressions of light and colour, as he explains himself: "In the Three Gorges region, it is often very cloudy and foggy, which disperses the light. HD is good at filming this type of weather. I also wanted to add a blue-green tone to the end of the film, and I was able to do this during the postproduction process" (Costa 47).[105] As with Yang's landscapes, a digital camera and computer editing software has contributed towards a hyper-real yet easily manipulable canvas. This particular colour palette evokes the blue-green *shanshui* (*qinglü shanshui* 青绿山水) of the Tang dynasty painters (618-907 CE), and while it is most apparent elsewhere in the film (e.g. the lush shots which overlook the Qumen gorge), the blue-green tones are visible in the final scene as Sanming resolutely sets out with his newfound friends in search of lucrative wages elsewhere (figure 34). Thus, the film ends on a frontier-style note of adventure, discovery, and brotherhood.

[105] Dans la région des Trois-Gorges, il fait souvent très nuageux et brumeux, la lumière se disperse. La HD est avantageuse pour ce genre de temps. Je voulais aussi donner un ton vert-bleu à la fin du film et j'ai pu le faire au moment de la postproduction.

Figure 34: Still from *Still Life*, directed by Jia Zhangke, 2006 (1:43:23)

Finally, in addition to the strategic cinematic use of multiple perspectives, scroll-like tracking shots, therapeutic pauses that recall *liubai*, and the blue-green colour palette, Jia's ironic juxtaposing of the micro and the macro is reminiscent of the way that monumental natural scenery envelops the minute human figures and buildings in classical *shanshui* painting. In Jia's film, however, where we see "macroscopic economic forces manifest in microscopic emotional turbulences" (David Leiwei Li 191), it is instead the more menacing man-made environment and unstoppable tide of urban progress that dwarf the people and everyday objects. Part of the healing process for Sanming and Shen Hong, however, is contained within the inner worlds that the residents of Fengjie must build for themselves. Small acts of kindness (for example, the gift-exchange of commodities, or the scene when a brothel-keeper recovers a childhood photograph of Sanming's long-lost daughter) lend themselves to the discovery of resources within or in spite of globalizing processes, or what cultural critic Pheng Cheah has described as "the creation of a smaller world within the larger world that is falling apart" (199). Though acknowledging what has been lost, Jia's cinematic gaze gently subverts the *shanshui*

genre to prioritise meaningful everyday experience on the micro-level and the internal world-building that can arise from this.

Set entirely within what is essentially an enormous construction site (i.e. the world's largest hydroelectric dam) on course to change the landscape of the Three Gorges forever, Jia's camera seeks out the less salubrious side of this state-sanctioned push for progress, marking demolition and the erasure of both natural terrain and manmade place as the most visible component of the project. Many scholars by now have commented on how Jia constructs a "poignant commentary on the devastation incurred by common people in the Three Gorges relocation project and the broader modernization that it represents" (Szete 104).[106] Indeed, as a result of the damage wreaked by urbanisation, the town of Fengjie is shown as a defamiliarised frontier space, an aesthetic strategy seemingly alluded to in the Chinese title of the film, which recalls the playwright Bertolt Brecht and his famous *Verfremdungseffekt*.[107] This feeling of defamiliarization is just one important aspect of the ways in which Jia explores levels of alienation within his own filmmaking.

Moreover, this distancing effect is heightened even further when *Dong* – Jia's 2006 transregional documentary film, a profile of the Beijing-based painter Liu Xiaodong, from which *Still Life* first emerged – is taken into account. Also filmed in HDV, *Dong* adds a significant metafictional layer onto readings of Jia's painterly treatment of the Three Gorges region. It follows Liu as he works on a series of oil paintings titled *Hotbed* (*Wenchuang* 温床). The film is shot in Fengjie, China, and Bangkok, Thailand, and Liu respectively takes male

[106] For instance, see Sheldon H. Lu's 2009 chapter, "Gorgeous Three Gorges at Last Sight: Cinematic Remembrance and the Dialectic of Modernization."

[107] The Chinese title of *Still Life* is Sanxia haoren 三峡好人, meaning "The Good People of the Three Gorges". Jia is thereby referring's Brecht's 1943 play *The Good Person of Sichuan* (Der gute Mensch von Sezuan), an interrogation of morality within a capitalist system. Brecht is also known for his theorisation of the "alienation effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt* or defamiliarisation). Evoked through the use of various techniques (e.g. an actor breaking the fourth wall), the alienation effect acts as a distancing barrier which prevents the audience from becoming too emotionally involved with the characters and "consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer" (Brecht 91).

migrant construction workers and female sex workers as his subjects. The film's title, of course, translates to "East", and a number of associated meanings spring to mind – Liu Xiaodong's name; the film as a project across two Asian countries; but also, the idea of journeying east (flipping round the American frontier trope of "going west" – as Sanming does in *Still Life*, when he heads eastward back to Shaanxi province to do dangerous work in the coal mines and, he hopes, to earn enough to cover his wife's debt and win her back; and even going east to Thailand, as Liu does in *Dong* to record sex worker-subjects for his new paintings).

Curiously, in *Dong*, Sanming appears as one of Liu's painting models – despite this detail never being shown in *Still Life* (in yet another metafictional twist, the actor Han Sanming is also Jia's cousin in real life). In a speech he gave to Peking University students in 2006, Jia explains that his motivation to make *Still Life* came from an uncomfortable sense of feeling like a bourgeois outsider while he was shooting local people for *Dong*. He describes a seminal moment, in which he saw one of his elderly extras "smiling knowingly" (*yibian feichang jiaoxia de xiaole yixia* 一边非常狡黠地笑了一下) after shooting a scene, and he interpreted this smile as a tacit "rejection of movies" (*dui dianying de bu jieshou* 对电影的不接受) and a sense that he was being judged as a middle-class intellectual who had swooped into the local area to make a film. Jia says to his urbanite audience:

> We tourists look at the mountains, water, and houses here through our cameras, as if they have nothing to do with us. But when we sit down and think about it, these drastic changes may also lie deep within our hearts. When we're busy cramming ourselves onto the subway, or when we're coming out of the office at three in the morning and going home alone in our car, our feelings of helplessness and loneliness may be the same [as the sorts of people I show in *Dong* and *Still Life*]. (*Jia xiang* 181)[108]

[108] *Women zhexie youke na zhe sheyingji, zhaoxiangji kan shan kan shui kan naxie fangzi, haoxiang yu women wuguan. Danshi dang women zuo xialai xiang de shihou, zheme juda de bianhua keneng zai women neixinshenchu yeyou. Huoxu women meitian manglu de ji ditie, huoxu lingchen san dian cong bangongshi limian chulai zuo zhe che yigeren huijia de shihou, na zhong wuzhu gan he gudu gan shi yiyang de*. 我们这些游客拿着摄影机、照相机看山看水看那些房子，好像与我们 无关。但是当我们坐下来想的时候，这么巨大的变化可能在我们内心深处也有。或许我们每天忙碌地挤地铁，或许凌晨三点从办公室里面出来坐着车一个人回家的时候，那种无助感和孤独感是一样的。

In *Creativity Class*, Lily Chumley's study of China's art school graduates and the workings of the visual culture industries, she also notes the slippages in character among Jia's migrant-worker-subjects: "Similar disjunctures appear in many of Jia Zhangke's movies, as subjects struggle to maintain the stoic expression that characterizes his art, and sometimes a shot ends when a bit of a smile slips through. It is clear that Jia has asked his subjects to perform the envisioned character of the passive, expressionless worker, and edited the film so that we can see the cracks in the performance." In short, when the metafictional layers connecting *Dong* and *Still Life* are exposed, we begin to see a filmmaker deeply interesting in addressing and coming to terms with his Othering gaze.

Shot on-site through a handheld HDV camera and with a cast that includes a number of non-professional actors, *Still Life* was inspired both by Italian neorealism and by the first-hand process of making of the documentary (*Dong*), and it has often been classed as a "contemporary drama-documentary" by film critics (Bradshaw).[109] But despite its surface appearances (and like Yang's otherworldly cityscapes made up of digitally manipulated photographic fragments of the "real" city), *Still Life* structurally resists the notion of an objective reality in its juxtapositioning of the surreal against the ontological reality of the HDV image. Within the unstable topography of Fengjie, buildings collapse and take off without warning (figure 35); UFOs streak across the sky; and we witness the strange sight of a tightrope walker suspended between two hollowed-out buildings. And while the high level of diegetic noise might add to the "documentary feel" of the film, there is an otherworldly rhyme and rhythm even to the constant sounds of urban demolition, taking the film yet another level away from standard cinematic realism. For instance, just after the Qutang gorge and banknote scene, we hear the monotonous thump and echo of demolition in a distinctive refrain that is then unnaturally

[109] For more on Jia Zhangke and how he has adopted conventions of Italian Neorealism into his own cinema practice, see film scholar Jie Lu's 2014 article "Walking on the Margins: From Italian Neorealism to Contemporary Chinese Sixth Generation".

repeated throughout the film. The placement of such surreal elements within a film largely shot in an aesthetic meant to invoke documentary realism inevitably pushes the viewer into questioning the narrative foundations of the film.

Many scholars have made this point, and cultural critic Akbar Abbas has convincingly written about how these surrealist interjections mean that *Still Life* cannot be taken as humanist social documentary-fiction only: rather, these fantastical elements tell us that the social and temporal space of Fengjie has been inherently twisted by the Three Gorges Dam building project (4). With its complex layering of multi-temporal influences, including Cantonese pop songs, Tang dynasty poetry, western still lives and traditional *shanshui* paintings by old masters, and twentieth-century portraits of Chinese revolutionaries, the fusion of different art forms results in a highly subjective filmic landscape, which is markedly intermedial, and which evokes the historical and cultural layers of human civilisation that have made up the Three Gorges area over the past centuries.

As a final point of interest within this discussion of Jia's surrealist tendencies, it is also worth noting here that he has recently worked with Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul อภิชาติพงศ์ วีระเศรษฐกุล, who has also developed a reputation for his understated magical blend of realism and surrealism (I discuss Apichatpong more in chapter four as a major influence on Bi Gan). Jia (along with his production company XStream Pictures) came onboard as an official producer for Apichatpong's 2021 film *Memoria*, and certain Jia cinematic signatures are present throughout (most obviously, in the image of a spaceship which takes off in the Colombian jungle [figure 36]) – testament, perhaps, to how Jia's interest in weirding space has gone beyond the China-specific sociopolitical critique for which he has garnered so much acclaim.

Figure 35: Still from *Still Life*, directed by Jia Zhangke, 2006 (1:07:27)

Figure 36: Still from *Memoria*, directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2021

V. Shi Weili: generating new models of the city through *Shan Shui in the World*

As a brief closing case study, it is pertinent to this chapter to consider how *shanshui*, the generative frontier, and the algorithmic eye intersect. In order to reflect on this, I now turn to the work of Shi Weili. A young emerging artist, Shi qualified in computer science at Huazhong and Tsinghua universities before moving to New York's Parsons School of Design for a Masters in Fine Art. He now works as a digital designer for a creative agency in New York. His most recent artworks *Terra Mars* (*Diqiu zhaoyao huoxing* 地球照耀火星) and *Martian Earth* (*Huoxing zhaoyao diqiu* 火星照耀地球) have moved into the realm of interstellar space; rather fittingly, like Yang and Jia, his interests include both *shanshui*-inflected environments and the extra-terrestrial. Indeed, he has shown in a number of science museums or science-themed exhibitions.

Shi's 2016 project *Shan Shui in the World* produces *shanshui* images through his custom-built algorithm, written in C++ and with the use of openFrameworks, an open source creative coding toolkit. To make the images, Shi first collected building data sets using Mapzen's vector tile service, downloading all the tiles that covered the area of New York's Manhattan district (figure 37). He then created mountain outlines based on this dataset (figure 38).

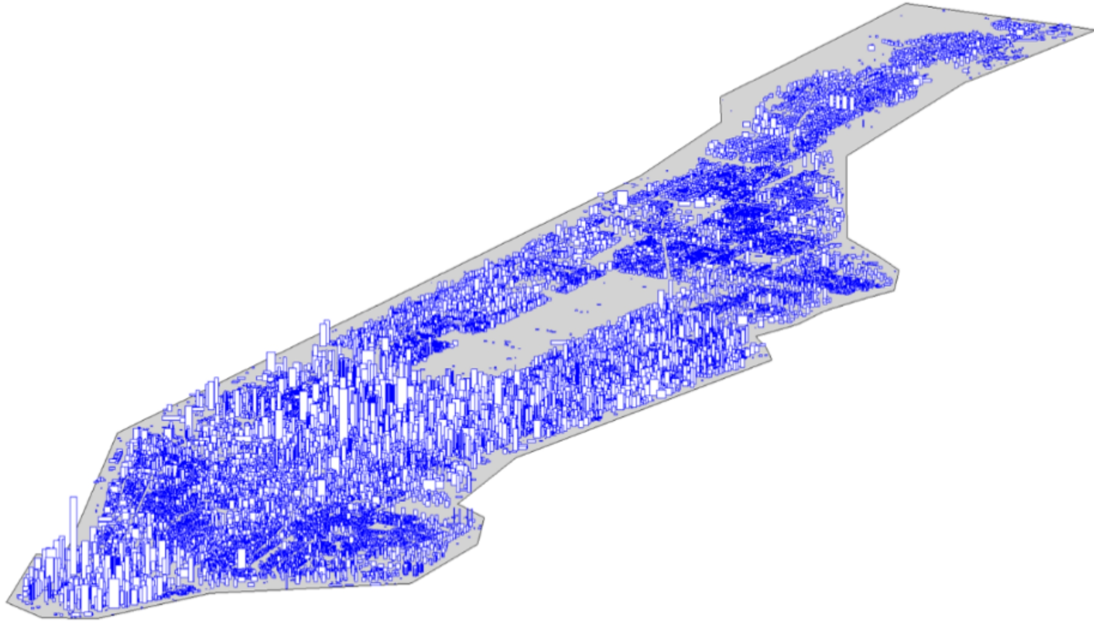

Figure 37: Shi Weili, computational process for *Shanshui in the World*, 2016

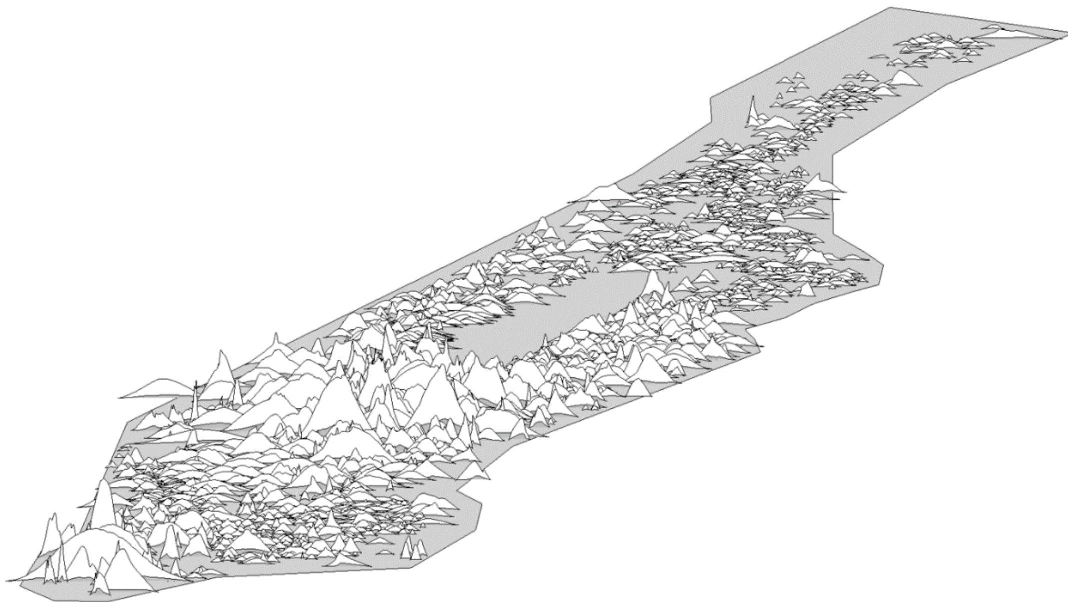

Figure 38: Shi Weili, computational process for *Shanshui in the World*, 2016

After some manual editing (in which he would delete the more "inelegant [of the] shapes" [44] he did not consider suitable for a *shanshui* painting), he then rendered the mountains in the *shanshui* style (using blank space to suggest expanses of water). The series

consists of six computer-generated *shanshui* paintings in total, in ink-wash or blue-green colour palettes. Two are handscrolls and four are hanging scrolls. These were then printed and framed in the traditional style of *shanshui* paintings, and Shi sealed and signed the works by hand (figure 39).

Figure 39: Shi Weili, *Scroll of Blue-green Shan Shui in Manhattan, New York*, 2016

There is an important distinction to be noted in these works. While Yang and Jia also use digital technologies to create their *shanshui*-inflected works, their human eyes arguably play a critical role in interpreting the transition between the real-world space and the elements of traditional classical painting. But in Shi Weili's work, the algorithmic "eye" is foregrounded as the primary creator. This algorithmic lens provides the technology to transform the cityscape into datasets, and then into a *shanshui* landscape – or at least, that is the work's conceit. Of course, Shi, as an artist, then plays a crucial role in reshaping the image. But the artist's role is nevertheless relatively decentred in this process (which runs against the tenets of classical *shanshui* and indeed most of its contemporary practitioners).

Moreover, in the work of Yang and Jia, there's a much greater sense of ambivalent calm – of a void that's waiting to be filled. It carries both threatening and therapeutic qualities. However, in Shi's work, the idea of the "generative" is taken rather literally, in the sense of the

unfolding of a digital process, and Shi himself calls his work a "generative shanshui painting" (43). Nonetheless, out of the three artist examples I use here, Shi most overtly states that he regards his work as a way of healing the urban-rural divide, framing it in an almost utopian light:

> "For an audience living in an urban area, a traditional shanshui painting provides them with spiritual support through the depiction of the natural scene of elsewhere. With generative technology, however, *Shan Shui in the World* has the ability to represent any place in the world – including the city where the audience is – in the form of a shanshui painting based on geography-related information of the place.
>
> The notion that shan shui can exist right here not only underscores the contrast between the artificial world and nature, but also reminds the audience of an alternative approach to spiritual strength: instead of resorting to the shan shui of elsewhere, we may be able to obtain inner peace from the 'shan shui' of our present location by looking inward" (41).

Conclusion

In the hands of artists such as Yang Yongliang and Jia Zhangke, both the contemporary urban landscape and the Song dynasty mountain-water landscape have been deconstructed and repurposed to create a new environment that reflects the multiplicities of twenty-first century China caught up in an era of spatial transformation. (And in Shi Weili's work, he transposes the *shanshui*-inflected theory of perception onto an essentially limitless array of cityscapes around the world.) Early on, I referenced Sophia Suk Mun Law, who asserts that "The theme of *shanshui* is [more] about being rather than seeing" (369). However, as I have demonstrated throughout, the contemporary urban *shanshui* moment is concerned with both ways of being *and* of seeing. Using the conventions of the *shanshui* form to invite active modes of spectatorship is crucial to the work of the artists covered here, whether this is through Yang's ambiguous visual illusions which bring about spatial confusion and a tone of uneasy ambience, or through Jia's signature mode of filmmaking which results in new modes of healing.

Throughout, I resist a common interpretation placed upon contemporary *shanshui*-inspired art: that at heart, they long for a "return" to the utopia of the *shanshui* rural idyll, and that present-day China risks being subsumed by dystopian urban sprawl. Meiqin Wang, who opts for a far bleaker reading of the city in Yang's work, concludes in her study on urbanisation in contemporary Chinese art that the majority of artists are driven to address "a deeply troubled social reality" (253), and this impulse is of course present in both *Artificial Wonderland I* and *Still Life*. However, rather than simply calling attention to the gulf between the *shanshui* image and the present-day city, or modulating between a binary state of enchantment with the rural and disenchantment with the urban, Yang and Jia both draw attention towards the painterly qualities of their urban *shanshui*, foregrounding the constructed nature of both worlds.

As with the characters of Sanming and Shenhong who, by the end of *Still Life*, have moved on to the next stage of their journeys, the therapeutic moments of reprieve afforded by the mediating quality of the *shanshui* world are brief, yet are also enough for them to progress. The mental drift of *woyou* has, in the twenty-first century, become less about "taking us out of ourselves". Rather, through the spaces of the generative frontier that we have glimpsed across the works in this chapter, mind-travel becomes a means of negotiating new narratives (of both living and artmaking) across the ruptures of the rural and the urban.

Chapter three. The yellow leaves of a building: urban exploration in China and the *Cooling Plan* photography project

> "Without yellow leaves, there can be no autumn. Ruins are the yellow leaves of a building. People say that the purpose of yellow leaves is to nurture spring. Yet I say that yellow leaves are beautiful in themselves." (Yu 362)[110]

In a meditative essay titled "Ruins" (*Feixu* 废墟), published in his 1992 volume *A Bitter Journey Through Culture* (*Wenhua kulu* 文化苦旅), the popular writer and scholar Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨 argues for the positive aesthetic value of derelict architecture. He alleges that Chinese culture has historically been unable to tolerate the sight of architectural degradation, and as a result, the nation "has always lacked a culture of ruins" (*Zhongguo lilai queshao feixu wenhua* 中国历来缺少废墟文化; 365). Yu goes on to claim that just the very sight of the characters for the word "ruin" (*feixu* 废墟) is enough to "make people's hearts pound" (*rang ren xinjingroutiao* 让人心惊肉跳; 365) with alarm.

This longstanding cultural aversion to the ruin has since been traced in image form by the art historian Wu Hung, who demonstrates in his 2012 monograph *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* how direct visual representations of ruined architecture "virtually did not exist" in premodern Chinese art, and that there was an "unspoken taboo" against their creation (94).[111] In all the examples of visual art he checked,

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[110] *Meiyou huang ye jiu meiyou qiutian, feixu jiushi jianzhu de huang ye. Renmen shuo, huang ye de yiyi zaiyu buyu chuntian. Wo shuo, huang ye benshen yeshi mei.* 没有黄叶就没有秋天，废墟就是建筑的黄叶。人们说，黄叶的意义在于哺育春天。我说，黄叶本身也是美。

[111] This was not the case in the literary realm, as evinced by the *huaigu* 怀古 genre of classical poetry. Sinologist Burton Watson describes *huaigu* as verse in which "the poet contemplates the ruins of past glory" (88). For an example, see the first set of verse in Cao Zhi's 曹植 (192-233) two-part poem "Seeing Off The Yings" (*Song Yingshi* 送應氏): "On foot I climb North Mang's slopes, / I gaze afar on Luoyang's hills. / Luoyang – how quiet and deserted it is! / The palaces and houses are all burned to the ground. / The walls and enclosures have all fallen and crumbled; / Thorns and briars rise and touch the sky" (lines 1-6; Knechtges).

which span the period from the fifth-century BCE to the mid-nineteenth century CE, he was only able to identify "five or six" depictions of ruined architecture (13).[112] Wu attributes this indigenous attitude of resistance towards the ruin to two main reasons, the first being that Chinese buildings were traditionally made out of ephemeral materials like timber which, unlike stone, would fully disintegrate if not cared for (8); and secondly, that evocations of loss in premodern Chinese art were represented metaphorically rather than pictorially, and an actual ruin image "would imply inauspiciousness and danger" (94). Instead, the ruin (if it entered the frame at all) would be alluded to in symbolic terms.[113]

However, following China's economic reforms of the late 1970s and its ambitious programme of countrywide urban development, mainland artists have since performed something of a *volte-face* as far as the ruin is concerned. The ruin has emerged as an emblematic image amidst all this turbulence, as artists and filmmakers have sought novel ways to "respond to the cities' spatial semiotics of memory, unearth the scars of urban development, and give visual form to the traumas connected with the change in landscape" (Braester 162). Ruins which evoke a sense of trauma and critique the impact of urbanisation have subsequently become a powerful trope in contemporary visual culture.[114] Representative pieces include the now-classic films of Wang Bing and Jia Zhangke, and artworks such as sculptor Zhan Wang's 展望 *Ruin Cleaning Project, '94* (*94 Feixu qingxi jihua* 94 废墟清洗计划), a 1994 site-specific performance piece featuring the "restoration" of a partially demolished house; the *Liulitun* (六

[112] Most of Wu's examples come from the painter Shitao 石涛 (1642–1707). In a detailed paper on Shitao's ruin paintings, and taking *Qingliang Terrace* (*Qing Shitao Qingliang Tai* 清石涛清凉台; c. 1703-7) as an example, Wu observes that there is typically no actual sign of architectural decay, even if the building has clearly been identified as a ruin via the artist's inscription.

[113] See Shitao's ink-wash painting "Plum of Baocheng" (*Baocheng Meihua* 宝成梅花), a leaf in his *Plum Blossom* album (*Meihua* 梅花; c. 1705-7). The large broken branch – represented by three unconnected brush strokes – has been read by Wu as an evocation of ruins ("Shitao" 285).

[114] For scholarship on contemporary responses to the ruin in the artworld, see Kiu-Wai Chu's 2010 essay on ruins in Chinese photography and cinema; Xavier Ortells-Nicolau's 2017 paper, which argues for "an essential element of constructedness" in ruin images (263); and Wu Hung's survey of postsocialist ruin art in *A Story of Ruins* (200-236).

里屯) photographic series (1996-2003) by the Sino-Japanese duo RongRong and inri 荣荣和映里, which documents their life together in the eponymous former artists' village; and avant-garde artist Huang Rui's 黄锐 2004-9 *Chai-na/China* (拆那-CHINA) silkscreen and oil painting series, which overlays the characters of the popular homophonic pun with photographs of demolished Beijing courtyard houses (figure 40).[115] These iconic examples reflect how the vast majority of this ruin-related creative turn frames Chinese urbanity in bleak terms, using the ruin motif to invite broader reflection on the destructive social and environmental impact of the country's urban transformation. This also reflects the tone of the scholarly and cultural discourse regarding the modern-day Chinese ruin, particularly in regards to high-profile sites such as Yuanmingyuan 圆明园 (the Old Summer Palace). These places have been remodelled into nationalistic tourist sites by the state and subjected to a process of "Disneyfication" (as Haiyan Lee has so memorably explored in her 2009 article "The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan: Or, How to Enjoy a National Wound", in which she reads palace ruins as "a spatial metaphor of contemporary China and a schooling ground for the art of socialist neoliberal citizenship" [155]).

[115] "Chai-na" 拆那 translates to "demolish that".

Figure 40: Huang Rui, *Chai-na/ China – 5*, 2005

This chapter, however, turns towards a more amateur and everyday dimension of Chinese ruin representation, which is distinct from the critical portrayal of the urban ruin produced by the professional art world and which has been largely overlooked by the scholarship to date.[116] Here, I demonstrate how obsolete architecture in the mainland has been infiltrated, reframed, and ultimately revered in an alternative urban imaginary produced by a loose network of thrill-seeking hobbyists: China's domestic "urban explorers". A thriving online and offline global subculture which has given rise to a unique visual aesthetic of its own, "urban exploration" (also known as "urbex", "UE", and *chengshi tanxian* 城市探险) was described in 2005 as an "interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover a world of behind-the-scenes sights" (Ninjalicious 3). More specifically, UE is the exploration of off-

[116] To my knowledge, the only study on China-based urban exploration to date has been Judith Audin's 2018 ethnographic article on Chinese ruins and UE as method.

limits, abandoned, or hidden man-made structures, and examples of sites might include derelict factories and mines; abandoned hospitals and schools; sewers and drains; bridges and rooftops; and half-built shopping centres and skyscrapers. Emerging as a subculture in the PRC in the mid-2000s (and directly shaped by the western practice, which dates back to the 1970s), urban explorers contribute to China's contemporary cult of the ruin by seeking out the "yellow leaves" hidden within the everyday city – the aesthetic pleasure of the ruin so poetically articulated by Yu Qiuyu – and circulating their findings online via forums, blogs and social media.

For Yu writing in the early 1990s, China's cultural unease over derelict buildings meant that the fate of the ruin – and, by allegorical extension, China's holistic transition into a new era of modernity – was trapped between the polarising desires of nostalgia and those who wanted to demolish and rebuild the ruin entirely (366). Seeking a third path, Yu instead alighted on the idea that ruins should be recognised as part of "a process" (*feixu shi guocheng* 废墟是过程; 362) and organically incorporated into the modern-day landscape. Moreover, as we have already glimpsed, Yu seeks to accentuate the captivating beauty of the ruin, bound up in the transcendental potency of juxtaposing temporalities: "Ruins can offer us a split reading. They exude a magnetic force that makes people want to linger. Yes, ruins are a magnetic field – one pole is antiquity, the other modernity – and the compass of the spirit responds keenly to this" (364).[117]

At this point I would like to briefly return to the artist Yang Yongliang, whose work we encountered in the previous chapter. But instead of his intense digitally crafted urban *shanshui* photo-collages, I want to dwell on his first photo-series (and his only series to be shot on film),

[117] *Feixu neng tigong po du de keneng, feixu sanfazhe rang ren liulian panhuan de cili. Shi de, feixu shi yige cichang, yi ji gudai, yi jj xiandai, xinling de luopan zai zheli ganying qianglie*. 废墟能提供破读的可能，废墟散发着让人留连盘桓的磁力。是的，废墟是一个磁场，一极古代，一极现代，心灵的罗盘在这里感应强烈。

titled *Outside* (*Waimian* 外面), dating back to 2005, as it provides an important bridge between how photography is deployed to construct liminal spaces from ruins, and how the technology is used to evoke ruins as a site of pleasure and adventure. Across the seven black-and-white photographs of this series, we see a highly evocative treatment of the ruined form. *Outside* takes abandoned rooms in soon-to-be demolished factories as its subject. The formal link across the series is the large window frame that Yang centres in each print, through which he captures the outside view (all of which look out onto some scene of nature – either woods or a field – thereby hinting at his future fascination with rural-urban interplay and hybridity). In his artist's statement, Yang writes: "[The rooms] are spaces no longer in use; they are grey zone [sic] that carries memories and expectations" ("Outside"). Each window allows in a bright square of light that dominates the image, and it is sharply framed by the internal walls of the ruined factory. The way Yang sets up the scene and its play of luminosity, suggests the world outside the ruin as a projection on a screen, or even the uniform canvas of a hung painting. And so there is an immediate sense of pleasure and hopefulness through the juxtaposition of the external landscape with the pensive mood within, as we can quite clearly see in *Outside no. 3*. In this work in particular, Yang highlights the intensely liminal nature of the ruined space, by including a small step-ladder gently leaning against the window-sill (as if to guide the viewer over and out into the wilderness beyond). In doing this, Yang generates a frontier-style sense of excitement and adventure within the image. There is the idea that this window constitutes or signifies some deeper meaning: that it represents, perhaps, a threshold or portal, that can magnetically pull us between worlds.

Figure 41: Yang Yongliang, *Outside no. 3*, 2005

A great deal of UE creative culture reflects how the affective nature of ruined space and temporalities brought into dialogue with each other opens the explorer up to the sort of embodied imaginative experience that Yu and Yang evoke in their respective practices – writing and photography. This chapter is therefore concerned with the generative, playful view of the urban ruin that emerges from China-based UE, which I trace through the cultural forms created by some of its more publicly-minded practitioners, in photographs, videos, written accounts, and press articles. Several major academic studies on UE draw on participant

observation and are written in the autobiographic mode, offering deep and valuable insights into the everyday workings of representative UE groups.[118] However, as my interest here is on ruin representation and the frontier imaginary invoked by cultural traces of the practice, I concentrate on publicly circulated expressions of UE rather than studying the practice itself through an ethnographic lens.

This chapter therefore begins with an introduction to the practice of urban exploration, sketching out its global development and situating the local Chinese example within this field. As Chinese UE is clearly heavily influenced by the cultural production of western UE, this chapter is necessarily comparativist in its approach. UE has been memorably described by its practitioners as an "invisible frontier – a wilderness, thriving in the deep places" (Deyo and Leibowitz 3). Across Sinophone expressions of UE, we can trace a similarly evocative view of the city – emerging in the production of images of the generative frontier, which are inscribed with an exhilarating sense of wildness. I therefore take the opportunity to discuss conceptions of wildness in greater detail later in the chapter, defining the term and referring to scholars who have argued that "wildness" should be distinguished from "wilderness" and understood as an affective quality rather than a place. Secondly, the chapter seeks to move beyond the perennial debate around UE imagery and its problematic "ruin porn" status. This latter argument is heavily premised on the idea that the very practice of UE image-making is intrinsically based upon the act of disassociating a site from its historical and social context: in its innate need to re-frame urban sites as new and undiscovered frontiers, it takes on distinctly fetishistic tones from the perspective of the infiltrator. However, instead of fixating on whether the act of producing these images ought to be critically condemned, this chapter takes the view that it is

[118] See, for instance, human geographer Bradley Garrett's 2013 book *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City* and his 2013 article "Undertaking recreational trespass: urban exploration and infiltration". There is also leisure studies scholar Kevin Bingham's 2020 monograph *An Ethnography of Urban Exploration: Unpacking Heterotopic Social Space*.

more fruitful to explore exactly why the popular visual category of ruin porn holds so much aesthetic power in the first place.

I then proceed to give an overview of how the UE scene in the Chinese mainland represents itself, locating this discourse in accounts of the practice on personal websites, popular media, social platforms, and so on. Explorers who deliberately seek and exoticise spaces of dereliction in fast-developing Chinese cities might be regarded as wilfully out of step with modern times, unlike the UE practitioners who often take as their subject the American Rust Belt cities in the throes of economic stagnation (often making a politicised point in the process), or members of the *Gaoloumi* 高楼迷 skyscraper online fan forum, who actively track and enthusiastically discuss the progress of various Chinese cities under vertical construction.[119] Within their exclusive but socially-charged community, however, the Chinese urban explorer's dissociative obsession with ruin aesthetics and memorialisation brings with it a more distinctive kind of fantasy: the acquisition of symbolic citizenship of a fictional city that develops in tandem with the seen city. Finally, I discuss the example of the *Cooling Plan* (*Lengque jihua* 冷却计划) photography project, established online by the prominent Chinese urban explorer Zhao Yang 赵阳 in 2006. Concentrating on his "Chaonei 81" (*Chaonei 81 hao* 朝内 81 号; 2006-13) photo-series, I show how he presents the ruin as a creative refuge which helps the explorer build a restorative sense of individual autonomy and mitigate the negative mental impact of the "seen" city.

In contrast to an artwork like Huang Rui's *Chai-na/China series*, which uses the image of ruined courtyard houses to critique the destructive nature of China's urban development,

[119] Gaoloumi.com is a popular Chinese-language discussion forum for an online community of "skyscraper enthusiasts" (*gaolou mi* 高楼迷) to discuss high-rise architectural projects in China and across the world. It contains a large number of sub-forums, most of which are dedicated to specific regions of China or to buildings of certain heights (e.g. the sub-forum titled "400 metres and above" (*400 mi ji ji yishang* 400 米级及以上)). *Gaoloumi* had over 130,000 registered members at time of writing.

buildings which no longer fulfil their original purpose have instead been reframed by urban explorers as ludic spaces which enable a psychic retreat from modern-day life. As the geographer Tim Edensor has observed in his extensive work on ruins, it is the defamiliarising nature of ruins – as buildings which have gone to waste and no longer fulfil their original purposes – that enables them to also function as "spaces of fantasy" and "unhindered adventure" (25). Yu Qiuyu ends his "Ruins" essay on a corresponding note of forward-facing exhilaration, with a utopian vision of ruins and the place they could inhabit in China's new dawn, as the nation approaches the end of its long twentieth-century: "Modernity means tolerance, magnanimity, vastness, and boundlessness. We carry the ruins with us into this modern era" (368).[120]

In China, the UE attitude towards the ruin might be regarded as carrying a similarly positivist bent, and indeed, Yu's essay is regularly cited by ruin enthusiasts and journalistic reports of UE across the Sinophone Internet.[121] From this vantage point, ruins are treated as sites of pleasure which are affectively charged with multiple temporalities, and as disorderly, wild spaces which can be both beautiful and creatively liberating in their own right. The worlds contained in these UE images, then, reveal an exhilarating aesthetic strategy of mediating China's ruins, reframing them as a wild and ultimately generative frontier that facilitates adventure and play within the confines of the everyday "visible" city.

[120] *Xiandai, bujin jin shi yi jie shijian. Xiandai shi kuanrong, xiandai shi qidu, xiandai shi liaokuo, xiandai shi haohan. Women, xie daizhe feixu zouxiang xiandai.* 现代，不仅仅是一截时间。现代是宽容，现代是气度，现代是辽阔，现代是浩瀚。我们，挟带着废墟走向现代 。

[121] See, for example, a 2017 feature on the *Xinhua News Network* website titled "Rarely trodden ruins – we bring you to appreciate the beauty of the ruin", which sets its tone with an evocative opening quote from Yu's essay describing the unique affective beauty of ruins. (Liu Xinwei).

I. Invisible frontiers: an overview of urban exploration

> In the shadows of the city waits an invisible frontier – a wilderness, thriving in the deep places, woven through dead storm drains and live subway tunnels, coursing over third rails. This frontier waits in the walls of abandoned tenements, it hides on the rooftops, and it infiltrates the bridges' steel. It's a no-man's land, fenced off with razor wire, marked by warning signs, persisting in shadow, hidden everywhere as a parallel dimension. Crowds hurry through the bright streets, insulated by the pavement, never reflecting that beneath their feet lurks a universe. (Deyo and Leibowitz 3)

So writes L. B. Deyo, leader of the legendary American urban exploration group named "Jinx", in his 2003 book *Invisible Frontier: Exploring the Tunnels, Ruins, and Rooptops of Hidden New York*. Co-authored with his fellow "officer" David "Lefty" Leibowitz, *Invisible Frontier* consists of twelve dramatic "mission" reports, which narrate Jinx's infiltrations into various sites across New York city in 2001, from the dank underground tunnels of the Croton aqueduct to the precarious heights of the George Washington bridge. Throughout, Deyo and Leibowitz frame their group of "agents" as modern-day explorers seeking to resurrect the spirit of a bygone era of imperial adventure: "The Age of Exploration was gone; we of Jinx had never breathed its vigorous air. Ours was not the compass, the machete, or the duel, but the mouse, the flip-flop, and the Casual Friday" (7). Jinx contend that the everyday city is anaemic and effete, lamenting throughout that "twenty-first century culture is shoddy and graceless" (44), and wondering how they can compare to Christopher Columbus and the adventures of yore. The desire to overcome this sense of inferiority gives the group their traction: experiencing New York in urban explorer mode enables these "officers" and their "agents" to reframe the city as "our frontier" (28) – a challenging but exhilarating terrain which they are eventually able to master.

The example of Jinx encapsulates many of the traits common to cultural expressions of UE, both globally and in China. These include: a deep attraction to the call of the wild;

tribalistic affiliations; dissatisfaction with ordinary twenty-first century life; an uncritical enthusiasm for military and colonial metaphors; and the macho (and at times, self-aggrandising) self-representation of the explorer. Positioning itself as an antithesis to the mainstream ordering of city life, UE is typically advocated by its proponents as an authentic way of combatting urban alienation and re-enchanting the city. In his 2005 urbex manual *Access All Areas*, Ninjalicious (the alias of Jeff Chapman, the late Toronto-based explorer who is widely considered the spiritual father of the UE movement) writes, "for too many people, urban living consists of mindless travel between work, shopping and home [...] It's no wonder people feel unfulfilled and uninvolved as they are corralled through the maze of velvet ropes on their way out through the gift shop" (3). Adopting the mindset of the explorer, so the movement tells us, can liberate the urban drone from the humdrum inauthenticity of the modern-day city.

Drawing from American UE case studies (including Jinx), ecocriticism scholar Ben Bunting has carried out valuable work in making a link between the pursuit of wildness (as an embodied experience) and the act of urban exploration. Arguing for the ecological and human benefits that may lie in deterritorialising our experiences with the wild, Bunting draws a careful distinction between wildness as a quality and wilderness as a place: "Wildness is the *practice* we have traditionally married to the *place* of wilderness, thus creating the misconception that wildness is a geographically specific experience" (604). In this vein, we can often witness UE practitioners who seek to reframe the city as an accessible wild space, and in doing so, often end up drawing on classic tropes of nature writing to do so (e.g. "a wilderness, thriving in the deep places […] a universe" [Deyo and Leibowitz 3]). In his highly influential 1995 essay titled "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature", environmental historian William Cronon provides the early foundations for Bunting's argument. While discussing the American cultural nostalgia for the wild spaces Turner evoked in his Frontier Thesis (and anticipating Timothy Morton's critique of Nature, which I discussed previously in chapter two),

Cronon writes: "If one saw the wild lands of the frontier as freer, truer, and more natural than other, more modern places, then one was also inclined to see the cities and factories of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial" (77). Like the artists and writers discussed in this thesis, Cronon seeks to dismantle the rural-urban binary, viewing the everyday veneration of wilderness as ultimately corrosive to the future of human civilisation and the planet (in the sense that, per his argument, it produces a false division between the wild and the modern, between nature and urban-industrial civilisation). Instead, Cronon goes on to argue that "wildness (as opposed to wilderness) can be found anywhere: in the seemingly tame fields and woodlots of Massachusetts, in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our own bodies" (89). Indeed, through the practice of urban exploration, this essential quality of wildness that Cronon articulates can be discovered within the urban environment – and especially in spaces that have been made unfamiliar and strange because of neglect and decay.

The geographer Bradley Garrett, who has carried out leading ethnography on the practice, traces the first wave of UE as an organised movement back to the 1970s–90s, when groups like Jinx in New York, the Cave Clan in Melbourne, and the Diggers of the Underground Planet in Moscow began staking out their presence on the nascent Internet.[122] From the beginning, there was a clear impulse to document and share one's findings with a like-minded community, which coalesced into a global network in the early 2000s; traditional print zines like Ninjalicious' *Infiltration: The Zine About Going Places You're Not Supposed To Go* and Jinx's *Jinx Magazine* were also circulated around explorer groups. Following some

[122] However, it has become standard for practitioners themselves to trace the origins of the hobby back to Philibert Aspairt, a French doorkeeper who died while exploring the Paris Catacombs in 1793 and whose body was eventually discovered in 1804 (Ninjalicious 229). This origin myth, which is noteworthy in its framing of the hobby as for the everyman, is cited regularly across Chinese UE forums and in journalistic features on UE. For example, see a 2005 *Sanlian Life Weekly* magazine article titled "Urban Exploration: Everyone has a youthful curiosity" (Chen Sai and Shang Jin), which mentions the "Frenchman Philibert Aspairt [who explored] the catacombs of Paris with a candle" (*Faguo ren Feilibai Asibei [Philibert Aspairt] dianzhe lazhu tanxun Bali di dixia muxue* 法国人菲力拜·阿斯贝 [Philibert Aspairt] 点着蜡烛探寻巴黎的地下墓穴).

large meet-ups facilitated by the web in Brooklyn and Toronto, the community coalesced into a global network in the early 2000s ("Undertaking recreational trespass" 5).

Ensuring your infiltration leaves no physical mark on a site is central to the UE community ethos. Sticking to Ninjalicious' golden rule – "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints" (20) – ensures that sites are preserved for future urbexers. Urbexers often use photography to document their trips, and many post their images on websites such as *28 Days Later* and the *Urban Exploration Resource* (which have over 50,000 and 70,000 registered users respectively). Some explorers, like Troy Paiva (figure 42) or Wigo Worsseling, might formally exhibit in physical galleries and publish glossy photobooks. However, as Crystal Fulton has shown, the majority of urbex images are shared and circulated by non-professional hobbyists for audiences on the Internet, many of whom are secretive and deliberately conceal their identities (189).

Nevertheless, despite championing a set of aesthetic principles which appears to favour covert, nonprofessional and selectively shared image production (the results of which one might imagine could lead to a rough-and-ready form of photography), many well-known UE photographers end up creating heavily stylized works. For instance, looking closer at Troy Paiva's *The Staircase* from his 2005-7 *Byron Hot Springs* series, for which the UE photographer entered the atrium of an abandoned, decaying hotel, reveals some typical quirks of the genre: the dramatic use of coloured lights to both illuminate the scene of degradation (lit up in a cool blue), as well as to suggest the glow of some mysterious activity, or secret layer within that has yet to be discovered (here signified by a warm emittance of red light beneath the main staircase). Furthermore, Paiva alludes to the interplay of ruined architecture and the growth of the natural world around it, by offering us a glimpse of foliage outside (towards which the central staircase rises). All this to say that despite its professed amateurism, and principles of non-interventionist documentary, the lure of manipulating these images remains.

Figure 42: Troy Paiva, *The Staircase*, 2005-7

While a desire to experience wildness is clearly a huge motivational factor behind the practice of UE, explorers themselves cite a wide variety of reasons as to why they are drawn to the hobby, and by all accounts, are not a homogenous or united group. Garrett, who has popularised the terms "recreational trespass" and "place-hacking" as synonyms for UE, frames the illegality of the practice as politically radical, claiming that it has a subversive potential to "to redemocratise spaces urban inhabitants have lost control over" ("Undertaking" 4). The narrators of *Invisible Frontier* share Garrett's view of UE as an anti-authoritarian act, but lean more towards the libertarian: they brag about sneaking past "at least six cops" (62) in Grand Central Station in one mission, and in another, they triumphantly raise a Jinx flag on the lawn of the United Nations headquarters, an organisation they regard as "an organ for world

socialism" (116) and therefore do not approve of ("As I hoist the Jinx flag, I think of the U.N.'s abuses" [121]).

Legal geographer Luke Bennett, on the other hand, argues against the popular narrative of urbex as political resistance in his own case study of "bunkerologists" (his term for urbexers who explore abandoned Cold War bunkers), stating that there was little evidence that his research participants were "motivated by a desire to perform resistance, transgressive, or alternative readings of these abandoned places". Instead, their attitude towards the bunkers they surveyed was "more positivistic, reverential, and reconstructive" ("Bunkerology" 432). Garrett wrote a terse response to Bennett's study, in which he complained that Bennett sought to paint all urbex activity as "a naïve representational practice tinged with nostalgic fetishism", and (making a broad-brush statement of his own) claimed that "urban exploration is not about aesthetics of decay", and is instead "a praxis that challenges dominant hegemonic spatial control through tactical urban infiltration" as well as being more "about experiencing the world in the here and now" ("Shallow Excavation"). Bennett then forcefully countered in turn, arguing that Garrett was narrowing the practice to ensure that "only the transgressive, emancipator [sic] and cerebral urban explorers remain in view" ("Exploring the bunker"). I recount this academic exchange here as an illustration of the fierce contestation and tribal dynamics that often accompany discussions of urban exploration, and moreover, as a preceding point to my discussion of the Chinese urbex movement, which favours a mode of self-presentation that tracks closer to the pursuit of wildness and reverence of the ruin (and indeed, to bunkerology) than it is to Garrett's performative gestures of political resistance.

In general, public expressions of China-based UE are heavily centred around ruin culture and the aesthetics of dereliction. Unlike many write-ups by high-profile western practitioners, Chinese-language urbex accounts rarely strive to foreground the illegality or riskiness of their practice, and therefore do not resonate well with Garrett's definition of UE.

They instead typically visit accessible abandoned spaces and produce write-ups which are apolitical in tone, favouring a mode of representation which draws more on their individual encounter with the ruin and its potent affect. This chapter therefore accepts a broad definition of UE as the exploration of man-made infrastructure which is legally off-limits and/or hidden from public view. This hobbyist understanding is more akin to the work of Troy Paiva (the American light photographer who we briefly touched on above), and whom Garrett cited in his rebuttal to Bennett (although he did not acknowledge Paiva's sense of inclusivity). Paiva offers a straightforward and expansive definition of the practice in a popular essay titled "Confessions of an Urban Explorer": "For some (people), it's about infiltrating a city's storm drains and subway tunnels. For others, it's climbing bridges and radio towers. Generally speaking, though, UrbEx is the exploration of TOADS (Temporary, Obsolete, Abandoned, and Derelict Spaces). Industrial complexes, military installations, junkyards, asylums, hotels – you name it" (9).

Ninjalicious also wrote in *Access All Areas* that "it's certainly not the case that urban exploration always involves trespassing", noting that the two acts are not necessarily synonymous (4-5). Other scholars have commented on just how varied and multifaceted the motivations behind urban exploration are in their own studies, which include views of the practice as a radical political gesture (one which Garrett argues is ethically comparable to computer hacking [36]) or more about heritage conservation and the urge to survey historical sites (Bennett 2011). Other motivations include the pursuit of embodied experience, edgework, and "sneaky thrills" (Kindynis 2017; Garrett 2013a); a romantic appreciation of ruination and decay (Edensor 2005); an enactment of a masculinist form of geography (Mott and Roberts 2013); a desire to practice psychogeography (Pinder 2005); an abiding interest in dark tourism and "ruin porn" (Arnold 2015); and the pursuit of online virality and transmittable media affect (Klausen 2017).

It is also worth adding here that, as Kindynis has noted, urbex is currently going through increasing levels of hybridisation with other urban practices, such as parkour, rooftopping, and graffiti writing, resulting in “increasingly spectacular and image-centric variants of UE” (984). The incorporation of these subcultural offshoots has shifted the focus of UE away from pure atmospheric and spatial appreciation, and this can also be spotted in its Chinese variants (see footnote 16). In contrast to earlier generations of explorers who (broadly speaking) treated UE images as documentary evidence circulated among small select circles, visual representations of urban exploration have grown increasingly spectacular in recent years (facilitated by the logics of self-representation and engagement on social media platforms like Instagram), reflecting a competitive culture of one-upmanship and even the commodification of the hobby on a global scale. It was perhaps inevitable that the aesthetics of UE would be picked up by advertising creatives. In 2014, Nike launched their ACG (“All Conditions Gear”’) marketing campaign, which heavily appropriated the once-amateur aesthetics of rooftopping/UE photography for high-definition sportswear advertisements (figure 43).

Figure 43: Promotional shot for NikeLAB ACG 2014 A/W campaign

This chapter, however, is primarily interested in the visual representation of UE, and in how the practice dramatically reframes the Chinese ruin and evokes the sense of a generative frontier. While I do discuss the ways in which urbex culture has manifested itself on the public parts of the Sinophone Internet, I concentrate on analysing the urban imaginary that emerges from the photographs in the *Cooling Plan*, a visual project that has received a high level of journalistic attention and which directs its gaze at the derelict urban ruin. Across the works that I explore here, it becomes clear that the central part of UE – at least in its Sinophone manifestation – resides in the "aesthetics of decay". Alongside this, however, corporeal sensations and embodied experiences are undeniably a key part of the motivations of many urbexers, both within China and around the world. Indeed, many explorers describe a physical and even spiritual sensation akin to what Garrett has called "the meld" – the reported sensation of the human body fusing with the city, which creates "new junctions, chains, movements and sensuous dispositions through each exploit" (*Explore Everything* 188). Heavily bound up within this, as Garrett (*Explore Everything* 91) and Kindynis (984) have both noted, is the sensation of what sociologist Steven Lyng calls "edgework": the thrill of voluntary risk-taking, and the metaphorical and literal feeling of teetering on the edge of a sharply defined boundary. As I go on to discuss, this breathless sense of adventure and transgression is exactly what many Chinese UE "ruin porn" images seek to convey, and in doing so, they also gesture towards what I have been identifying as the generative frontier. For some urban subjects in the postsocialist Chinese city, there may be a "dearth of possibilities for spontaneous and self-realizing action" (Lyng 870). Yet through the practice of UE, the urban ruin can be crafted anew into a site of play in which explorer-egos have full rein. Within the generative frontier set up by Chinese UE image-making lies the possibility of reimagining the city, especially its wilder edges, as a completely novel territory, and a world to be pulled into.

II. The city as virgin territory: ruin porn and the Othering gaze

The English-language sphere surrounding urban exploration has been almost exclusively Western-centric in its focus, and at times, appears to further reflect this by adopting a mode of self-representation which references the style of a flag-planting colonial explorer. The classic "hero shot", in which the explorer stands in the triumphant stance of the conqueror, overlooking their newfound territory (figure 44), has become an established motif of the UE image and contributes to its spreadability across social media, where such images flourish (Klausen 7).[123] In the context of this thesis, this hero shot might recall the stances of Xu Zhen and his friends in their Mount Everest ascent, which I discussed in my introduction (figure 2). But perhaps more famously, it's an obvious visual citation of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (figure 45; 1818), whose heroic silhouette, caught in a moment of quiet yet sublime contemplation, has proved such an enduring image repository (and in its modern-day manifestations, has become a frequently deployed trope within role-playing videogames). Here, Garrett's encounter with the sublime is evoked by the bright lights of industry and urbanisation which precede the rising sun on the horizon.

[123] A pose ubiquitous in UE photography, Bradley Garrett's definition of a hero shot is: "A highly stylised photo of an explorer looking smug about an accomplishment in a location" (*Explore Everything* 269).

Figure 44: Bradley Garrett, *Firth on Forth*, 2012

Figure 45: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1817

Many Chinese urbexers – and indeed, urbexers across the world – also draw upon these motifs of the colonial explorer in their self-representation. Many UE practitioners draw upon these traditionally macho tropes to play with the presentation of themselves as "hyper-masculine urban explorers" (Mott and Roberts). An example can be seen in *Invisible Frontier*, when Deyo uses gendered terms to describe his target sites, i.e. "virgin territory for our explorations" (174) or a frontier which is "too promiscuous ever to be fully known" (28). Mott and Roberts report similar phrasing from contemporary explorers in their own web-based research (238). The feminist scholar Anne McClintock has written on how the eroticised female body became connected with mysterious lands as the first European colonial explorers set out into uncharted territory: "Sailors bound women female figures to the prow of their ships … Cartographers filled the blank seas of their maps with mermaids and sirens. Explorers called unknown lands 'virgin' territory" (24). The global UE scene reinforces the masculinised image of the explorer as it attempts to pioneer a new "age of exploration" in this urban era and merge itself with the cultural trope of the Western adventurer.

Some urbexers have expressed rueful awareness of the Western-centric bias in UE culture, in both its self-mythologising narratives and within the community itself. Ninjalicious apologises for his *Access All Areas* guide being "still a little biased towards English-speaking countries" (229), adding that this tendency reflects his pool of contributors. Similarly, Kindynis writes that, in his experience, "the white male demographic … compromises the overwhelming majority of urban explorers" and expresses his belief "that the normative, privileged and exclusionary facets of recreational trespass should be challenged" (989). *Invisible Frontier*, on the other hand, presents Jinx as proud believers in American exceptionalism, with this conviction shaping their own UE identities. Their text ends on a note of anguished and patriotic foreboding: Deyo describes the US as a "pocket of light", akin to his romanticised view of ancient Athens, which (as he makes a reference to the oncoming September 11 attacks), "the

darkness of the outer world will punch through" (214-16). China is summarily dismissed as part of this dark and unfree (and, he infers, non-urbexing) outer world, along with Cuba, North Korea, "much of Asia and Africa", and "most of the Middle East"; for Deyo, these are places where people "[slave] under despotism" (215). This Western-centric gaze shapes even the tenor of Jinx's UE debating club, where they create the position of a "Society Orientalist", who lectures to the audience on "Eastern" topics (142). In their 2014 essay titled "Not Everyone Has (the) Balls", Mott and Roberts express how they were "struck by the authority granted particular exploring bodies: those performing an able-bodied, heteronormative and typically white masculinity" (234). Suffice to say, an Othering gaze is present within much of the UE canon and culture, and this can manifest itself in attitudes towards both the representation of urban infrastructure and place.

UE narratives and images have come under fire for the ways in which they defamiliarise and, at times, exploit the encountered territory. One of the longstanding debates surrounding dereliction imagery is whether or not it warrants dismissal as "ruin porn", an image accused of fetishising the material decay of a manmade structure to an almost carnal degree, and erasing its true history in the process. Critical of the genre for its links to "ruin porn" or "dark tourism", this argument against urbex cultural production as it currently stands highlights a deliberate mystification of derelict space. The derogatory label was first coined by the photographer James Griffioen as he lambasted the exploitative behaviour of "outsider" photographers flooding into post-industrial Detroit, engaging in what he regarded as acts of "dark tourism" and seeking gratuitously derelict shots of a city now synonymous with ruin for their blogs (Thomas Morton). However, urban exploration and its culture of image-making is arguably intrinsically based upon the act of disassociating a site from its sociohistorical context. In the explorer's desire to present an urban site as an undiscovered wild frontier, the subsequent

images inevitably reframe and, at times, fetishise the space. In short, the pornographer's gaze is unescapably bound up in the making of UE visual culture.

In Chinese UE culture, as elsewhere, the sociohistorical context of the ruin is frequently overlooked or ignored in favour of individual thrills and the apocalyptic imagination, setting it apart from the prevailing artworld discourse of the ruin (which is often more ruminative and contextual). To some onlookers, the China-based urbexers discussed here may appear just as self-absorbed as their global counterparts, although I would contend that this misses the point of the endeavour. As Dora Apel has argued in her writing on ruin porn, "no one [denies the popularity of sexual pornography] or its ability to arouse", and it is more useful "to focus on *why* we are so drawn to ruins and ruin imagery" instead (24). In the Chinese examples discussed here, we see that urban exploration and the playful self-presentation it facilitates is intrinsically dependent on disassociating a site from its sociohistorical context. Given that explorers typically seek transcendental encounters with the defamiliarised spaces they enter, it is perhaps unsurprising that this comes about in ways that prioritise the subjective experience of the individual over the broader (and perhaps less thrilling) real-world context of the site.

Many urbexers describe feeling drawn towards the ambiguous suggestibility of ruinous space, and we can see how amenable it is to the explorers' projection of fantasy narratives and cultural tropes. Disordered and derelict ruins have the potential to "become spaces of fantasy, places in which unspeakable and illicit acts occur, places of unhindered adventure" (Edensor 25). In short, for urban explorers, the off-limits city gratuitously packaged as a new frontier becomes a site capable of facilitating a state of play. And, as Klausen has demonstrated in her study on Danish urbexers, these slick images produced for consumption across social media, and with strong levels of affect, which give their viewers a vicarious thrill are more likely to spread across the Internet – the sense of edgework and playfulness is something that can be shared and enjoyed second-hand (7).

Many urban explorers discuss how their practice is deeply rooted in this concept of play and regard a child's approach to space as liberating. Troy Paiva cites the folkloric concept of "legend tripping", the popular childhood act of entering a spooky site as part of a dare and performatively engaging with its myth to prove one's bravery. Paiva locates his adult impulse to urbex in this childhood rite of passage, explaining that he simply "never lost the desire to check out places that were off-limits" (10). Even Jinx's romanticised and serious reverence of UE and their penchant for aliases and military labels, macho "hero poses", and overblown self-mythologising narratives can be framed in the light of Hans-Georgs Gadamer's view that "play itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness [...] Play fulfils its purpose only if the player loses himself in play" (107). In the Chinese context, as I now go on to discuss, the ruined site becomes a private space where the individual explorer can form a more ludic relationship with the city – and as Gadamer argues, this experience of play often unfolds in an intense and earnest framing.

III. Urban exploration in China

Through the creative output of China's urban explorers, an alternative view of urban dereliction enters the country's public discourse: the ruin as a wild space which facilitates a mode of imaginative play and an escape from the everyday world of the regulated city. As I have established, urbexers present the Chinese ruin in a different mood to China's professional artworld, framing it as a stage for ludic narratives of risk and wild adventure rather than as a cipher for socio-political critique.[124] This section discusses how this particular imaginary is

[124] Related urban subcultures, like rooftopping and parkour, have also grown more prominent in the Chinese media landscape, and as in the west, are in the process of becoming increasingly visually spectacular and commercialised. A dark recent example of the explorer-entrepreneur offshoot in China can be seen in viral rooftopper Wu Yongning's 吴永宁 death in November 2017. Wu had successfully built up a lucrative brand on the Weibo platform and who was reportedly competing for a 100,000 yuan pot of prize money in Changsha city when he lost

produced by introducing and assessing articulations of China-based UE across public spaces of the Internet, drawn from hobbyist forums, popular journalism, and personal websites.

Across the Sinophone Internet, the majority consensus is that China-based UE gained momentum as an organised subculture around 2005.[125] It is clear even from a quick glance at the forums that urban exploration in China has been directly influenced by the established global model, and a long 2005 *Sanlian Life Weekly* feature on China-based urbex cites the impact of the worldwide practice on the domestic incarnation of UE: "The global popularity of urban exploration has directly influenced those in China who were already very curious about the practice" (Chen and Shang). Self-contained and skirting the margins of the global urbex scene, Chinese-language UE write-ups clearly have a smaller digital presence than UE narratives in, say, English or French. The "Location Map" on the Canada-based *Urban Exploration Resource* website pinpoints only 13 user-added urbexing sites in China at the time of writing, a paltry figure in comparison to the 2400-plus sites logged in the United States. Stories from western UE history are scattered across the Chinese web, and Ninjalicious' famous honour code is cited in various subcultural guidelines as a basic principle: "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints" (*Chule zhaopian shenme dou bu dai zou, chule jiaoyin shenme dou bu liu xia* 除了照片什么都不带走，除了脚印什么都不留下; 20; C60).

UE in China has received an increasing amount of domestic media attention over the past fifteen years or so, including features in outlets such as *China Youth Daily*, *Vice China*, and *Sanlian Life Weekly*. Alongside Zhao Yang, who I discuss further on, urbexers with prominent public profiles include the Scouts Urban Exploration team (*Beijing chihou chengtan*

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his grip on the edge of a building and plunged a fatal 62 stories (Wong). The video clip of his final moments inevitably then began circulating online, attracting a wave of online voyeurs.

[125] The year 2005 is cited on the *chengshi tanxian* entry on the Baidu Encyclopaedia entry, across UE forums, and in media features, e.g. a UE photo-essay in *Southern People Weekly* titled "Soul ruins" (Bao).

zhanshu xiaodui 北京斥候城探战术小队), a group of five middle-aged men based in Beijing who are notable for the military aesthetic they have cultivated, and Hong Tang Miqi (红唐米奇), a man who is highly active on the *Shanghai Ruins Exploration* (*Shanghai feixu tanxian* 上海废墟探险) Douban community and who livestreams his excursions on Douyin. Another key figure is Brendan Connal, a British national living in Beijing who uploads UE videos onto the *Burbex* YouTube channel and who previously ran the (now defunct) burbex.org blog between 2016-20. A rare example of a female urbexer is the Canada-based scientist Pan Ran 潘然, who posts detailed accounts of her trips on various Chinese social media accounts (often under the alias "Ran Pan"), and who recently released a photobook titled *Ruined America: Thoughts on the North American Rust Belt* (*Feixu Meiguo: Beimei tiexiu didai xing silu* 废墟美国: 北美铁锈地带行思录) with Guangdong Tourism Publishing House. But the field (as elsewhere around the world) remains male-dominated.

Beyond the mainland, the seven-person HKUrbex group are the most prominent explorers on the Hong Kong scene, with a popular YouTube channel, a 2019 print book (titled *Spatial Cemetery: A Journey Beneath the Surface of Hidden Hong Kong*), and substantial global media coverage.[126] Their four-minute 2015 UE video "Abandoned Refugee Prison – 'The Rock'" was even placed in the 2016 *Both Sides Now III: Final Frontiers* (*Bi'an guan zizai – zuihou de bianjing* 彼岸觀自在 III－最後的邊境) film and video art exhibition in Hong Kong, alongside established artworld names such as Feng Mengbo 冯梦波, Larry Achiampong and David Blandy, and Ben Rivers. This reflects how UE images and videos often sit in a grey area between hobbyist and art world cultural production. Common urbexing locations featured across all these profiles include: abandoned industrial sites; unfinished construction projects;

[126] See journalistic profiles about HKUrbex and their activities on the *New York Times* (Ives) and *The Daily Beast* (Cerini) websites. The group also wrote for the *Hong Kong Free Press* news platform in 2015-16.

derelict hospitals and mental health institutions; former Beijing Olympics and Shanghai Expo sites; exhumed mines, laboratories and steelworks; defunct transit systems; abandoned theatres and cinemas; and even entire unpopulated villages and towns.

As well as maintaining personal websites and social media profiles, many urbexers also post on social networks dedicated to the hobby, the main public venues being UERChina.com and various Douban groups.[127] *UERChina* is the most categorised and comprehensive of these online resources, with a public discussion board which has been active since 2015 (figure 46).[128] It is currently made up of twelve sub-forums, which include sections for community newcomers, a second-hand equipment exchange, ruin photography appreciation, and the discussion of urbex abroad. While the website motto is "Explore ruins, discover history" (*Tansuo feixu, faxian lishi* 探索废墟，发现历史), the community posts are more concerned with the aesthetic appreciation of ruins, feelings of nostalgia, and the practice of UE than with concrete discussion of history. This is consistent with the self-oriented nature of UE culture around the world; as Dora Apel has noted, "the sense of history pursued (by urbexers) refers to an imagined personal connection to the past" rather than to genuine conservation efforts (60).

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[127] Due to the intrinsically secretive nature of UE, it is unfeasible to accurately ascertain how many hobbyists participate across any country. However, as a general indicator of interest levels, the *UERChina* forums had over 11,000 registered users; the *Fotiaoqiang Ruins Exploration* (*Fotiaoqiang feixu tansuo* 佛跳墙废墟探索) Douban group had over 40,000; and the *Beijing Ruins Exploration Group* (*Beijing feixu tanxiantuan* 北京废墟探险团) Douban group had over 15,000 followers at the time of writing.

[128] In carrying out this research, I have abided by the ethical guidelines ("Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0") laid out by the Association of Internet Researchers. In regards to *UERChina* and the other urban exploration online communities I mention (e.g. the Douban groups), I have limited my research to publicly accessible source material only, and I have collected no identifying personal data. The active members of web spaces like *UERChina* have demonstrated signs of intentionally placing themselves within the public sphere (for example, creating an official logo, a group banner, and a community tagline; uploading group portraits and videos from community expeditions; and referring to themselves as a "professional urban exploration website" (*women shi zhuanye de chengshi tanxian wangzhan* 我们是专业的城市探险网站) in their newcomers guidelines). However, in order to protect the identity of individual users, I have de-identified the forum contributors and I provide extracts from their postings in my English translation only, rather than in the original Mandarin (with the one exception being the "Newcomers must read: basic guidelines for urban explorers" post (*Xinren bi du: chengshi tanxianzhe jiben zhunze* 新人必读: 城市探险者基本准则), which lays out the *UERChina* community vision and field protocol [C60]).

Reading through the forums' discussion of Chinese UE suggests that for its practitioners and enthusiasts, the weight of the past is experienced in an embodied, emotional manner, rather than intellectualised in any particular way. This dehistoricised, visceral connection to history serves as a pathway for Chinese UE practitioners into the space of the generative frontier.

Figure 46: Screenshot of the UERChina.com homepage

Broadly speaking, Chinese UE can be distinguished in its focus from, say, Bradley Garrett's accounts of London UE (which he frames in the context of resisting neoliberal state surveillance), or Troy Paiva's vivid night photographs of the American rust belt and the surreal grandeur of its post-industrial ruins. And as I alluded to earlier, another major way Sinophone

UE deviates from the western model is in its attitude towards the illegality of the practice. In their documentation, western urbexers often celebrate acts of forbidden trespass, and their write-ups may contain a politically radical or libertarian sentiment akin to what Bradley Garrett describes as "taking back rights to the city from which we have been wrongfully restricted" (*Explore Everything* 8). Over the past few decades, as the PRC has moved from a centrally planned economy to a more marketized system, space has become increasingly commodified. Operating as it does within China's much tougher system of criminal law and restrictions on the use of geographic data and civilian map-making, Sinophone UE culture almost exclusively concentrates on exploring ruins or abandoned building sites, and not on entering highly securitised sites at the heart of major cities. Urbexers in the PRC instead place more emphasis on adventure-seeking, both as an individual and as a team; alternative speculative readings of sites; the historically-charged affect of a space; and the potential of UE as an educational archival strategy. Unsurprisingly, mainland explorers comment on the illegal aspects of their practice far less than Western explorers do, even expressing disapproval over performative acts of transgression.[129] On *UERChina*, for instance, the forum guidelines explicitly state that practitioners should not "break into areas restricted by law" (*bu chuangru falü guidang de jinqu* 不闯入法律规定的禁区); that they shouldn't "show off by disclosing the specific location of exploration sites" (*bu yi xuanyao wei mudi gongkai tanxian didian de juti weizhi* 不以炫耀为目的公开探险地点的具体位置); and that one of their aims is to gradually improve UE community behaviour in China (C60). Such high levels of professed commitment by China's UE practitioners to notions of social responsibility, and a respect for the law and observation of public/private distinctions in space, are noticeably unusual among the global community of

[129] Outside the mainland, UE groups like HKUrbex operate in a different political climate and position themselves accordingly. For example, HKUrbex are quoted in the *New York Times* profile as saying "their videos are visual expressions of the 'localist' political movement that has recently gained support in Hong Kong and reflects a conviction among many younger people that their city's identity is distinct from that of the Chinese mainland" (Ives).

urban explorers, who often veer towards the libertarian in their practices and ideology – the latter framing their adventures in terms of trespass and hacking the cityscape – but as I mentioned previously, the motives behind the impulse to urbex are not uniform among practitioners.

Elsewhere, the urbexer Pan Ran notes that trespass laws in China are actually less codified than in western countries, a point also made in a 2008 blog post by Chinese law scholar Donald Clarke.[130] Clarke observes that Chinese real property law "does not seem to contain a clear prohibition against trespassing", and speculates that this loophole may go back to pre-reform era times when all property was owned by the state, and implicitly, by all people of China. Moreover, the fact that state-sponsored media outlets like *China Youth Daily* and *The Paper* run positive UE features encouraging the practice suggests that ruin trespass is regarded by authorities as a relatively benign activity.[131]

Rather than celebrate the act of trespass as many of their global counterparts now do, Chinese urbexers choose to laud their practice as an effective method of alleviating urban alienation and everyday boredom. The *chengshi tanxian* entry on Baidu, for example, has been edited to claim that Chinese "city-dwellers who have a sense of curiosity and who don't want to be constricted by their boring lives and work are embarking on these journeys of discovery."[132] Furthermore, urbex narratives often draw links between UE and the reclamation of a childlike sense of discovery, appealing to those who feel dissatisfied with ordinary city

[130] See an interview with Pan Ran on *The Paper* website, titled "I am the urban explorer Ran Pan. Go ahead and ask me about what one can experience while exploring urban ruins!". In response to a question about how to get started with UE as a beginner, she advises people to remember that "Unlike China, most counties have laws around "entering ruins"" (*Chule Zhongguo, da bufen guojia dui "jinri feixu"* 除了中国，大部分国家对"进入废墟"这件事都有立法).

[131] See the Pan Ran interview in footnote 17, and also the "Urban Ruin Explorer" article on the *China Youth Daily* website (Jiang Shan)

[132] *Chengshi li haoqi xin ji qiang, tongshi bu yuan bei yue lai yue chengshi hua de wuliao shenghuo, gongzuo shufu zhu de dushi ren kaishi yanzhe leisi de guiji ta shang tamen de fa xian zhi.* 城市里好奇心极强、同时不愿被越来越程式化的无聊生活、工作束缚住的都市人开始沿着类似的轨迹踏上他们的发现之。

life, and the Baidu entry includes a unattributed definition of the practice popular on the Chinese UE Internet, which states that the impulse to explore stems "from the common eternal curiosity of our youth".[133] In his study of adult play within urban space, architecture scholar Quentin Stevens defines play as "a counterpoint to behaviour which is 'normal'" and that it "stands principally in contradistinction to people's assumptions about the everyday functionality of the urban built environment" (26). Accordingly, in China-based UE culture, the urban ruin is predominantly framed as a liberating refuge from the stress and alienation of contemporary everyday life, offering a space to those adventurous and inquisitive enough to venture forth, which facilitates this sort of playful adult transgression. The suggestion is that on discovering these ruined sites, the explorer experiences an entirely different flow of time – both within the space that they enter, and within themselves.

This is a particularly noteworthy characteristic of PRC-based UE: that its urban explorers often express a desire for solitude in China's crowded city environments (as we will shortly see with Zhao Yang), and along with this, their yearning for the opportunity to approach space like a child again – the ability to see the built environment with the wonder and innocence of youth (as we have seen above). Another typical example of this (alongside the unattributed Baidu definition) can be spotted in a *Sanlian Life Weekly* article titled "Urban Exploration: Everyone Has a Youthful Curiosity" (*Chengshi tanxian: renren dou you yi ke shaonianban de haoqixin* 城市探险:人人都有一颗少年般的好奇心). In other words, such framings gesture towards the idea that Chinese urban citizens can use the playful practice of UE to mediate how the imbalances and tensions in how they feel about the built environment, creating a rich inner world and alter-ego that, in turn, enables them to cope with the external pressures of modern-

[133] *Zhe yiqie dou yuan yu women shaonian shidai gongtong de*、*yongheng de haoqi xin* 这一切都源于我们少年时代共通的、永恒的好奇心。

day city living. In highlighting this aspect, we can begin to see that Chinese UE practices have fostered a particularly generative and therapeutic dimension that goes beyond melancholia.

In media interviews, the Scouts Urban Exploration members have explicitly drawn links between UE and a desire to get back in touch with their childhoods. An online article profiling members of their group notes: "If they want to recall those childhood memories now, they can only do so by visiting ruins hidden in mountains or scattered among tall buildings" (Xu Ye).[134] The Scouts Urban Exploration team are a particularly rich example of how some people use the practice to immerse themselves in a ludic experience reminiscent of childhood dramatic play. Their form of UE is driven by a collective enthusiasm for military culture, which they simulate during their excursions. In one of their videos, we see the team unsheathing batons and donning gas masks as they explore a series of abandoned tunnels, caves, and rooms, dressed in camouflage gear and exclaiming about the danger they supposedly face. Taking this world of military make-believe even further than the Jinx Crew (even Deyo and Leibowitz adopt a self-ironicising tone at times), the Scouts Urban Exploration team project a form of urbex which is comparable to a form of immersive live-action roleplay (LARP). Within the diegesis of their earnest, engulfing dramatic play, they are seemingly able to transcend ordinary city life and take on militaristic, heroic identities.

In the video by Scouts Urban Exploration which I refer to in the preceding paragraph, the films opens with a bird's eye tracking shot of the site of exploration and the line of team members approaching it (a wailing soundtrack emerging as the plucky explorers advance into the territory). The short film leans heavily on cinematic, blockbuster-style tropes, such that we are meant to no longer see a group of middle-aged men wandering around dank tunnels. Instead,

[134] *Xianzai, ruguo xiangyao huiwei naxie tongnian jiyi, tamen zhineng qianwang yincang zai shenshan huo sanluo zai gaoloudashan shongjian de feixu li.* 现在，如果想要回味那些童年记忆，他们只能前往隐藏在深山或散落在高楼大厦中间的废墟里。

they are recast as a kind of elite, militarised squad; the members of the group wear arm patches bearing the Scouts Urban Exploration logo – a skull, with lightning bolts for eyebrows, wearing a gasmask (figure 47). Furthermore, certain members throughout the film are seen to be unsheathing batons (shaking to unfurl the weapons as they enter unexplored spaces) – as if they expect to encounter physical combat or hidden dangers ahead (although the film never goes so far as to depict such dangers or combat). Meanwhile, the entire video's sense of heroic purpose is sonically signified too, by being predominantly soundtracked through that staple of 2000s-era film music, Clint Mansell's "Lux Aeterna" which was originally composed for Darren Aronofsky's film *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) but has in the years that followed taken on a life of its own, recycled constantly in other film trailers and across pop culture at large (it is a nebulously recognisable piece of music: which has attained a "know-it-when-you-hear-it" quality). The effect of these visual tendencies, as one can imagine, is to heavily imbue UE practices with a highly cinematic edge. And the point, as exemplified by the presence of batons and badges, seems no longer to merely be about exploring a set of abandoned spaces, but to evoke the entry into another world entirely.

Figure 47: Still from Scouts Urban Exploration video uploaded onto *Tencent* video, titled "Originating from the catacombs of Paris, and popular in Europe for many years, domestic urban exploration is now on the rise" (00:59)

Elements of this militarised roleplay can also be seen in the HKUrbex group, a seven-person team based in Hong Kong, who are particularly interested in using ludic UE and the ruin to experiment with highly stylised visuals and storytelling, incorporating a first-person shooter video game-style interface into some of their video content. For instance, their 2014 "HK Urbex: Inside a Creepy Chinese Psychiatric Hospital" video, based around their infiltration into the former site of the Siu Lam 小榄 psychiatric hospital, features a loading screen, a loose narrative premised on mission objectives (e.g. "Explore Siu Lam Hospital"), site information fed to the viewer through a narrative script read out in a feminised computer-generated voiceover, and – to amplify the drama and its referential qualities even further – a soundtrack that has been lifted from the *Battlefield 3* video game.

The gamification of UE is celebrated throughout, with a loading bar appearing once the video starts playing (figure 48). A protagonist (seen from behind) dramatically dons on his helmet, upon which a video game-like heads up display (HUD) interface appears on the screen, briefly referring to the protagonist as the character "Echo Delta". This narrator (presented as

an automated, feminised voiceover) relays information about the abandoned hospital which at first merely toys with the fantastical: "the chance of airborne viruses inside the facility are also still possible. Exercise caution, Echo Delta." The explorers' wanderings across the abandoned site are perpetually soundtracked by an ominous, grumbling ambience (its sense of tension sonically generated by a patchy low-level rumble playing against a higher-pitched tone), although this non-diegetic source of tension is punctuated by moments of light-relief (one explorer stops to sit, arms folded, on a rusting swing, while his companion comments in English, "well this is fucking retarded"). The video flicks between watching our explorers walk around the site, as well as footage from their headcams, which is visually distinguished by a grainier quality and lines of rolling static complete with the HUD framing. The film finishes with our protagonists fleeing the hospital – the voiceover: "Echo Delta, suggest you leave the area immediately, electromagnetic levels in this room are spiking"; the protagonist: "Oh shit!" – as the soundtrack soars.

Figure 48: Still from HK Urbex video uploaded onto *YouTube*, titled "HK Urbex: Inside a Creepy Chinese Psychiatric Hospital" (0:07)

It is noticeable how HKUrbex are particularly invested in using their wanderings through ruinous space to experiment with video game aesthetics. And indeed, elsewhere in a 2017 video, HKUrbex state: “To many of us, urban exploration is like living inside a video game. But the stakes are real.” (“HK Urbex: The Game”). Their videos recall the online genre of filmed videogame streamed playthroughs, replays or walkthroughs (the latter more specifically geared at providing a guide to the viewer). In doing so, they not only act as a kind of practical guide to the online viewer, but even go so far as to suggest that there is a vicarious thrill to be attained in following the group’s exploits from the safety of your home (and that, in a sense, the viewer is also able to experience something of the lingering, roaming, wandering, and ultimately worldbuilding essence of UE without leaving their computer screen). In addition, the evocation of video game aesthetics draws our attention both back to the ludic dimensions of UE practices (the idea that it is possible to play a video game “in real life”), as well as its very constructed nature (visually framing their exploits in terms of a video game draws our attention to the artifice of the proposed narrative itself). And nor are HKUrbex the only ones to draw out this link between UE practices and video gaming culture: in her *China Youth Daily* profile, the explorer Pan Ran compares the practice of urbex to an “immersive adventure video game that races against time” (*Chengshi tanxian shi ge yu shijian saipao de jinru shi AVG* 城市探险是个与时间赛跑的浸入式 AVG; Jiang Shan). The same could as well be said of the evocation of cinematic/blockbuster aesthetics in the Scouts Urban Exploration film, in the sense that it also draws our attention to its constructed and scripted ideal of narrative-making. The particularly ludic qualities embedded within such Chinese UE practices are intended to gesture us towards a space of mental ambiguity, full of hidden, latent potential – the idea that play can be a regenerative, transcendental force, but that it is also something that is crafted through the power of a journeying narrative. In short, forms of Chinese UE reach for what I have been articulating throughout the chapters of this thesis – namely, the space of the

generative frontier: an ambivalent, peripheral (and sometimes threatening) space bound up in the idea of journeying narratives, within which the tensions and anxieties of the urban can be recast so that the city may be experienced anew in emboldened and potent fashion, both visually, bodily and psychologically.

IV. Spaces of solitude: The *Cooling Plan* photography project

Imaginative play also shapes the creative output of lone explorers, although in the examples covered here, highly developed alter-egos and narratives are most consistently sustained when produced by a like-minded group. The journalist who profiles members of the Scouts Urban Exploration team, for example, observes that the group members show a deep interest in military culture, and that they always address each other by their aliases, even when dining together in the "real" world (Xu Ye). Their high level of engagement with the distinctive fictional world they have created (even to the point at which it seeps back into their "real-world" behaviour) is reportedly stoked by their urban ennui. Using the metaphor of a vinyl record, group member Dahui (大 hui) describes how UE facilitates a mental retreat from the "A-side" of the city (*women shenghuo de chengshi, A mian* 我们生活的城市，A 面) across to the overlooked "B-side" (*chengshi B mian* 城市 B 面). This is a sentiment that is shared across the wider community: urbexers often cite the sense of authenticity generated by their practice and the difficulty of cultivating solitude in China's overcrowded urban environments. Elsewhere, the explorer Li Fei 李飞 is reported as saying: "The fun of urban exploration lies in it always being a psychological sort of pleasure. Conquering one more building, discovering one more secret, seeing another thing lots of people don't ever get the chance to see – there's a feeling of exclusivity in that. At some point in the day, you'll feel as if the entire building belongs to you"

(Chen and Shang).[135] These statements reveal how UE helps its practitioners towards constructing a strong sense of identity via an urban imaginary that makes them feel distinct from the ordinary populace.

The individual's search for solitude in urban China is an abiding theme in our final example, explorer Zhao Yang's online UE gallery *Cooling Plan*. Here, ruins are framed in the first instance as spaces of mental reprieve, and Zhao has discussed in interviews how he loves "the feeling of running away from crowded, noisy urban life" (Jonny Brown). Elsewhere, he says that when he's "at abandoned sites, I feel I'm the only person in the world […] I like this sense of solitude" (Phillips). For Zhao and other practitioners, UE is presented as a way of psychologically managing the pressures of everyday urbanity in China. This struggle over personal autonomy within the city also resonates with similar impulses expressed in the wider realm of Chinese urban aesthetics, as I discussed in chapter one.

Zhao's *Cooling Plan* online gallery was set up in 2006 to showcase accounts of his trips into abandoned sites (figure 49). Born in 1986 and based in Beijing, he is one of China's most prominent urbexers, and has been profiled by an array of international and domestic media outlets, including the *Guardian*, *Vice China*, *Southern People Weekly*, and the *Global Times*. The majority of his featured excursions on the *Cooling Plan* website are from the Beijing area, and include trips into the former Shougang steel factory; the Xiaotangshan SARS hospital; the Baroque-style mansion known as Chaonei 81; Shangyi 上义 Catholic School; Wang Ping 王平 coal mine; and an aircraft boneyard. The title of the project brings to mind the cooling towers in the Shougang factory, which are the subjects of some of Zhao's most striking photographs,

[135] *Chengshi tanxian de lequ jiu zaiyu ci, wulun mian dui shenme, na shi yi zhong xinli kuaigan. You yizuo lou bei ziji zhengfu, you yige mimi bei ziji faxian, you yige henduo ren wuyuan de jian de dongxi bei zija kanjianle, na shi yi zhong zhuanshu gan. Zai mou yitian de mou yige shike, ni gandao zhengge dalou zheng dong jianzhu dou shuyu ni ziji*. 城市探险的乐趣就在于此，无论面对什么，那是一种心理快感。又一座楼被自己征服，又一个秘密被自己发现，又一个很多人无缘得见的东西被自己看见了，那是一种专属感。在某一天的某一个时刻，你感到整个大楼整栋建筑都属于你自己。

and also gestures towards how once-lively sites are now to be found in a “cooled down” state – the opposite of the urban social ideal, with its “hot and noisy” (*renao* 热闹) qualities.[136] Furthermore, the word “plan” indicates an ominous vision of premeditated ruination, reflecting the general enthusiasm for apocalyptic fiction within UE culture (Apel 100).

Figure 49: Screenshot of Zhao Yang’s coolingplan.com homepage

Framing himself as a solitary outsider even within the niche scene of Chinese UE, Zhao aligns himself with global rather than domestic articulations of the subculture. Other urbexers, such as the live-streaming Hong Tang Miqi and the UERChina forum users, are comparatively open about their methods and regularly acknowledge the broader Sinophone UE community in their output. In Zhao’s project introduction, however, the term “Urban Exploration/Urbex” is

[136] For more on *renao* as a desirable urban trait in China, see Farquhar and Zhang (306).

hyperlinked to the English-language “urban exploration” Wikipedia entry, and no Chinese-language definition of the practice is offered at all, although his website is clearly aimed at a Chinese-reading audience. His introductory text is accompanied by a photograph of a human figure (presumably, a self-portrait) standing in a commanding “hero shot” stance – the victorious pose I briefly touched on in the second part of this chapter – in a derelict bathroom (figure 50). Selected from the 2014 *Military Hospital* series (*Jun yiyuan* 军医院), the room is saturated with a jaundiced yellow light cast by a head-torch, the bright beam obscuring any identifying facial features. Secrecy is a key part of Zhao’s self-presentation: we are only given a clear shot of his face in a 2015 “behind-the-scenes” video account of a trip into the Shougang factory (*Shougang lengque muhou* 首钢冷却幕后), and while his videos are generally smoothly edited, he uses the shaky-cam trope here to signal that the viewer is being taken backstage.

Figure 50: Screenshot of the “About *Cooling Plan*” (*Guanyu Lengque Jihua* 关于冷却计划) page from Zhao Yang’s coolingplan.com

Zhao's stated purpose in the "About" section of the website is to "present our past" (*chengxian women de guoqu* 呈现我们的过去) to his audience through the medium of photography. Accordingly, each visual record is accompanied by a brief textual commentary, ostensibly about the historical background of the site. However, as with many other urbexers, the prevailing narrative is Zhao's affective encounter with the ruin, and the historical detail given is often cursory and vague. Instead, we are shown evocative images which raise more questions than they answer: a fiery ring of golden light illuminating the brick tunnel in an abandoned school, with Zhao at the centre; forgotten instruments sounding once again in a derelict theatre; or a ghostly human figure reflected in the glass panels of the Xiaotangshan hospital doors. These stories have an incomplete feel, captured in the process of initial conception and then quickly abandoned.

Like Troy Paiva, Zhao's techniques suggest he must regard himself as something of a painter of light. Consider, for instance, the suffusion of green light in the aforementioned 2014 *Military Hospital* series, which evokes mysterious, glowing trails of discovery (casting back to the visual tropes of film and video games so popular in UE culture, the viewer's mind is guided to think perhaps of the glimmer of a treasure chest, or the dangerous radiance of radioactive chemicals). In one shot in *Military Hospital*, Zhao, hooded and gas-masked reaches into a chest, his face lit up by what he has found inside, casting a vast silhouette of his head on the ceiling (figure 51). The series is premised on such artificial uses of light (and its various textural qualities) – beyond the natural light filtering into the building – in order to inject a sense of dramatic narrative into the ruined space, beginning with the head-on rays of his torch as he faces the camera in a corridor, illuminating the weathered walls and detritus-covered floors, through to switching colours to suggest particular emotional qualities (the use of yellow light from his headtorch in one scene seems to imbue the setting with a sicklier quality). Sometimes these coloured lights are worked into the picture to evoke a more abstract sense of collage: for

instance, in the shot in which a staircase leading upwards is bathed in red light, while its counterpart leading downwards emits a yellow glow – and to the left, the explorer stands, head-torch on and hands on hips, bathed in blue (dividing the site of exploration, as it were, into demarcated zones of illumination).

Figure 51: Zhao Yang, image 1 from *Military Hospital*, 2014

There is a sense of narrative tension set up in such pictures and their use of lighting: in one scene typical of the series, the explorer is identified by his headtorch, standing at the beginning of some passageway, while another room glimpsed closer to the foreground glows with a mysterious light (suggestive of a strange presence that the explorer is yet to encounter). However, not all the photos in the *Military Hospital* series play with such dramatic use of artificial lighting, and so there is a further tension set up when the series is viewed in full, which

draws our attention instead to the artificial and constructed dimensions inherent in the narratives Zhao is evoking within and crafting from the space. Indeed, for the most part, it is the photographs in which Zhao registers his own masked presence (rather than documentation of the space), and in which he foregrounds the use of artificial coloured lighting. The effect of this is to assert a strongly pronounced authorial presence within the ruined space – to invoke the idea that his entry into the scene has brought the space to life, awakening its eldritch magic for the viewer once again.

In his work on the multiple temporalties held in ruins, Tim Edensor reminds us that "ruins do not merely evoke the past", but that they also contain a unique sense of the present, "a shadow realm of slowness in which things are revealed at a less frantic pace" than in the everyday city (125). And this treatment of slowed-down time – and the new dimensions it opens up by revealing the latent potentials of the present day – becomes something of an excuse, as it were, to craft a new sense of being. It hardly needs pointing out that Zhao's practice of UE is inextricably bound up with what happens to his identity when it encounters the space of the yet-to-be-explored ruin. In his pictures, this nebulous zone is used as a site both for building his own narratives, imprinting them – through the use of lighting – onto the architecture itself as we have seen in *Military Hospital*, while also drawing the viewer's attention to his own authorial role and presence. This fusion of creativity within a peripheral zone, then, summons the space of the generative frontier.

But in Zhao's work, the generative frontier is not only about crafting a story of journeying within the space, but also about change within (qualities of which partly hark back to the soldiers of HKUrbex and Scouts Urban Exploration). Throughout the body of Zhao's visual material, this theme of identity in formation becomes increasingly apparent: we see the explorer-subject playfully experimenting with different character types. In his 2009-10 series *White Room* (*Bai fangjian* 白房间), one scene consists of Zhao standing with his back turned,

but then a ghostly face registers on the windowpane of an adjoining set of doors (a reflection or otherworldly presence?); in another scene he stands, fist clenched, looking back to the camera while clad in a hazardous materials suit and gas mask (and then in a photo that follows, a hollowed-out gas mask is seen buried under detritus); and in another photo, Zhao skulks in the shadows, registered merely through his silhouette. Meanwhile, in *Shangyi Normal School* (*Shangyi shifan xuexiao* 上义师范学校, 2012), Zhao stands (his body unnervingly straightened) on a dark stairwell, wearing the iconic Guy Fawkes mask from the *V For Vendetta* series while a devilish red light streams down his body (figure 52); and in another scene, he is glimpsed in a slight crouch, framed by two circles of spinning, fizzing yellow light. Crucially, unlike the Scouts Urban Exploration team, who have clearly defined militaristic alter-egos which remain consistent across their public output, Zhao experiments with a variety of different guises but never fully commits to one.

Figure 52: Zhao Yang, image 6 from *Shangyi Normal School*, 2012

One can read these works as self-portraits in which the artist is trying on an assortment of costumes to see what might fit best. And the effect of this borders on the vertiginous: what, exactly, are we the viewer looking at here? The remains of some abandoned school? A magician communing with the spirits beyond? An adult man playing make-believe away from the mocking, judgemental eyes of society? An artist? Or, perhaps and indeed as Zhao seems to suggest, all the above: the way in which ruined space has become the generative frontier, one in which all kinds of narratives may be plucked from and tried out for size, played with and just as easily discarded among the accumulating rubble. These spaces, Zhao's images argue, are sites of endless narrative potential – stories that may be crafted, consumed, and abandoned.

Chaonei 81 **and** ***A Fantastical Walk Through a Theatre***

In Zhao's images, we see ruinous space charged with possibility and thereby enabling leisurely experiments with the self-presentation of its explorer. His *Chaonei 81* photo-series, which depicts a foray into a derelict Baroque-style mansion in Beijing, is another apt example of this. Made up of 19 images in total, it opens with a "Dear Photograph"-style shot of the photographer's hand holding up an old print of a derelict house and a set of gates, aligning it with the site in its much smarter present-day state (figure 53).[137]

[137] "Dear Photograph" is a composition style which went viral on the Internet in 2011 (Munteán 6).

Figure 53: Zhao Yang, image 1 from *Chaonei 81*, 2006-13

Using two temporalities to frame one setting, the composition typically aims to evoke pangs of nostalgia. There is an obvious material dimension to this nostalgia: in the juxtaposition of a photographic print (and its pre-digitality) held up to its real-world corollary, which creates a hauntological effect (the photograph's document of dereliction haunting the house's current veneer). We are guided into realising that the setting "marks a spatial and emotional reference point (*nostos*) projected in the idyllic world" of the photographer's past, who is invoked by the visible hand (Munteán 8). We also infer from the renovated exterior of the present-day house that the following account of Zhao's infiltration took place some time ago and is therefore being presented to us as a memory. Zhao has clarified elsewhere that Chaonei 81 holds special significance for him as his first UE site. In a 2015 article published under his alias "Huaite zei" (怀特贼), he writes: "In the autumn of 2006, I was a second-year university student who had nothing to do other than turn up to a few useful and not-so-useful classes. One day on an

Internet forum, I came across an article full of rumours about Beijing's famous 'haunted house'. The article contained a photograph of a blue door, marked with a few characters in red paint: 'Chaonei 81'."[138] Accordingly, Zhao's "Dear Photograph" rendering of Chaonei 81 encapsulates his nostalgia both for the site in its once-derelict state and the days of his own youth.

The *Cooling Plan* repeats the widespread belief that the house was built as a language training centre by American missionaries in 1910, but according to historian of Beijing Wang Lanshun 王兰顺, it was actually built in 1921 for the French engineer Georges Boulliard and his wife Zhu Derong 朱德容. Zhu continued to live in the house after Boulliard's death in 1930, renting out rooms to foreign missionaries and eventually selling the property to a Catholic priest in 1948. It subsequently came into the ownership of the Beijing Catholic Diocese, and in 1994, was flagged for demolition. However, this was never completed, and the house fell into disrepair.[139] Chaonei 81 since became known on the Internet as one of the so-called "Four Haunted Houses" of Beijing, and grew especially popular as an exploration site after it inspired Raymond Yip's 2014 horror film *The House That Never Dies* (*Jingcheng 81 hao* 京城81号).[140] The historian Wang Lanshun has dryly noted that the high numbers of "novelty seekers and exploration fans" (*lieqi zhe*、*tanxian mi* 猎奇者、探险迷) turned the supposed ghost house into a "noisy house" (*naowu* 闹屋; 51).

[138] *Na shi 2006 nian de qiutian, wo haishi ge meitian chule qu ji jie youyong de meiyong de ke shangbao dao yiwi wusuoshihi de da ar xuesheng. You yitian wo zai luntan shang kan daole yi pian guanyu Beiijing zhumang "xiongzhai" de wenzhang, libian chule yinyong ge zhong fangjian chuanwen yiwai, hai peile yi zhang zhaopian, zhaopian zhong shi yige lanse damen, men shang yong hang youqi xiele ji ge zi —— "Chaonei 81 hao"* .那是2006年的秋天，我还是个每天除了去几节有用的没用的课上报到以外无所事事的大二学生。有一天我在论坛上看到了一篇关于北京著名"凶宅"的文章，里边除了引用各种坊间传闻以外，还配了一张照片，照片中是一个蓝色大门，门上用红油漆写了几个字 —— "朝内 81 号"。

[139] Wang attributes delays in the process to bureaucratic reasons, e.g. problems with the economic compensation to residents (55).

[140] The Baidu Encyclopaedia entry for "Chaoyangmennei dajie 81 hao" provides several examples of some of the ghost stories associated with the building, e.g. on a full moon night, one can hear the sound of glass bottles being thrown about inside.

In the accompanying text to the photo-series, Zhao distances himself from the ghost tourist crowd, channelling the authority of his explorer persona and telling his viewer that "there is ultimately nothing frightening about this place" (*Qishi zheli de jiben tan bu shang shenme kongbu* 其实这里的基本谈不上什么恐怖). His photographs endeavour to demystify the building as far as ghosts are concerned, although they are still far more invested in the affective aura of the ruin than in actual historical investigation. They are loosely arranged as a house tour, taking the viewer back in time to the old entrance gates and then through the various chambers and levels of the building. They revere the site as a space of decay, but also recognise the role of the house as an alternate thoroughfare for those in the know. For instance, some rooms contain paraphernalia left behind by other visitors, and the walls are covered in graffiti. Zhao writes that, in lieu of horror stories, he is most drawn towards the "sharp (visual) contrast" (*xianming duibi* 鲜明对比) between Chaonei 81 and the ostentatious Chaoyangmen neighbourhood. Accordingly, his final image situates Chaonei 81 within the mainstream city, revealing the everyday architecture and cars scattered around the secret world of the ruin and evoking the sense of exclusivity characteristic to the UE experience (figure 54).

Figure 54: Zhao Yang, image 19 from *Chaonei 81*, 2006-13

Several photos do make use of Zhao's fondness for coloured lighting, and his gas-masked alter-ego. But the series is noticeable, in keeping with the subject itself, less for its interest in the supernatural, and more for its evocation of a secret, buried, and entangled past to be found in the heart of the city. In some rooms, we can see the muddled growth of foliage in the foreground, as sunlight flows through the building's vast windows; meanwhile, in a shot of the staircase, vines have pushed their way into the building from the exterior through a broken windowpane. Nodding to the series' palimpsestic qualities, other photographs show extensive writing on the interior walls of the house – registering the presence of explorers past, peeling away the space's previous encounters – and in the process, showing us how the passage of history itself has created a frontier zone of liminal possibility.

Meanwhile, in *A Fantastical Walk Through a Theatre* (*Juchang huan zou* 剧场幻走),

2015, Zhao brings this taste for inspiring historical settings and his ludic sensibilities to bear. Zhao explains in his introductory note to the series that he discovered an abandoned 1970s theatre in a northern industrial city. In one scene, we see him – back turned to the camera lens – shining his torch at the theatre's stage to reveal an array of draped crimson velvet flags (figure 55). Then, in the next shot, we look from the stage towards the back of the hall, from which a bright light is shining (suggesting a film projector). In another, with the projector glare in the background, we see a hooded Zhang seated alone in the audience seats. The effect of such shots (and as when Zhang shines his torch up towards the ceiling to seemingly illuminate the hall's elaborate system of pulleys and curtains; when he sneaks into a backroom filled with discarded film-reels; or strums a guitar in a corner filled with discarded musical instruments), is not only to accentuate his own desire to play within the space, but to highlight the performative purposes of the building's own history.

Figure 55: Zhao Yang, image 3 from *A Fantastical Walk Through a Theatre*, 2015

Such images, Zhao seems to suggest, indicate how even the possibilities of play and performance can acquire new meanings within the space of the theatre. Once, we are led to assume, it was a site of conducted concerts, attentive audiences, and a team of backstage staffers propping the constructed edifice up. These lie in ruins, and opened up for all of us to see into. Now, Zhang's photos hint, play has been fully liberated – and new stories can be crafted not only on stage, but behind and around it. Within the ruins of this former theatre, the generative frontier posits a Möbius strip of ludic potential, allowing Zhao to perform his personally inflected dramas in every nook and cranny.

Conclusion

Zhao's images contain staged scenes of imaginative conjecture: in his photographs, he might imbue a given space with a surreal and uncanny quality through the use of coloured lights, and in another, he might present himself to the viewer in an anonymous gas-masked get-up. Like the Scouts Urban Exploration group, Zhao's shadowy explorer-self is a highly performative construct, and could be regarded as a form of adult simulative play, defined by Stevens as "the fabrication of a different character or situation [involving] forgetting, disguising or otherwise escaping one's usual self and one's place in the world." He continues by explaining how "simulative acts create the impression of the logic of a world, but a world which is never real, because the simulated actions do not carry real consequences" (39). For Zhao, the ruin enables him to retreat from the everyday city and into the state of imaginative play captured in this mediation of fantasy and reality. It may be precisely because of this that Zhao and other urbexers display little genuine interest in the historicity of their sites: to know too much would puncture the fantasy.

Zhao depicts his relationship to the city as one which enables him to flit between peopled and unpeopled space, catching moments of personal respite in the urban heart of Beijing. Recalling Yu Qiuyu's vision of ruins as a symbol of becoming, Zhao's visual narratives, in their semi-complete yet creatively charged states, show a private world captured in its moments of drafting and construction.

There is far more research waiting to be conducted on subcultural urban practices in China, particularly on related pursuits like rooftopping, parkour, and drone photography, which have seen increasing levels of public interest over the past decade and have developed a distinct aesthetic of their own. An ethnographic study of the Chinese urbex scene would also provide valuable insight into the interior workings of the subculture. By concentrating on personal

accounts and creative articulations of the practice here, however, I have set out to show that the practice of urbex has been positioned in the Sinosphere as a unique coping strategy for city dwellers struggling with boredom and feelings of alienation. The ludic nature of UE is used to mediate the impact of the seen city, creating a rich inner world and alter-ego that, in turn, enables the explorer to cope with the psychic pressures of urban modernity in China.

In contrast to the prevailing Chinese artworld vision of the ruin, which typically concentrates on traumatic representations of the ruin, UE articulations present the ruin as a wild, exhilarating environment that lends itself to creativity and play. Moreover, it is a subcultural movement which is theoretically open to everyone, seeking to inspire participants and offering new ways of engaging with urban degradation and redevelopment. With a form of creative output aimed at browsers on the Internet and community insiders, rather than audiences in gallery spaces and arthouse cinemas, China's urbexers seek to draw their viewers into the alluring counterimage of a city that exists in a collective imagination. By fusing notions of amateur participation and intensely ludic sensibilities, they have forged a vernacular seam within UE practice that places a special emphasis on generation and regeneration: both in allowing the explorer to experience an altered state of time (that transcends the relentless march of history that marks China's processes of urbanisation), as well as – through its referential and self-referential qualities – drawing the viewer's attention to the actual process of constructing a narrative or story. The outcome of all this is to create a space that is thrillingly charged with ambivalence and potential. Here, the generative frontier invites participants not only to wander through its liminal threshold space, but to actively use it on their own terms: to craft new narratives of adventure and identity amid the ruins of the city.

Chapter four. One's back to the city: frontier villages and narratives of healing in Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues*

Just after the one-hour mark in Bi Gan's 2015 film *Kaili Blues*, the protagonist Chen Sheng 陈升 gratefully accepts a lift from a young pop band. The camera follows their truck along the main road – past vibrant mountain scenery, a flowing river, a small pagoda, and eventually, into the outskirts of Dangmai village. The group now pass several large buildings and shopfronts with shiny new facades, and which have clearly been recently constructed (figure 56). Yet despite these normalising traces of urban modernity seeping in from everyday China, Dangmai turns out to be an otherworldly zone full of surreal happenings (and, we are told, simian "wild men" [*yeren* 野人] who supposedly circle the village, lurking in the foliage and quietly stalking passers-by). Here in Dangmai, Chen's past, present, and future have somehow all converged, and he finds himself facing manifestations of his innermost fears and desires through a series of strange, dream-like encounters with his long-deceased wife and grown-up nephew.

Figure 56: Still from *Kaili Blues*, directed by Bi Gan, 2015 (1:03:36)

A small community on the cusp of wilderness and far away from China's first-tier urban epicentres, Dangmai village is exemplary of the kind of frontier space I have been describing in this thesis. Here, at Dangmai's liminal juncture between wildness and human civilisation, place, time, and even identities have become porous and fluid. Chen's rescue mission (he is searching for his young nephew), which has been set up in the first half of the film, leads him into an unexpected diversion, thereby taking him through this sparsely populated village and its surrounding landscape. Dangmai proves a generative peripheral space and ultimately facilitates Chen's process of spiritual recovery and a reconstitution of the self. In this final chapter, I discuss Bi Gan's work in the context of the generative frontier, by examining how it treats narratives of sickness and healing – chiefly through readings of *Kaili Blues*, as well as further considerations of Bi's cinematic vocabulary (by way of the artists Cheng Ran 程然 and Chen Wei 陈维). As we have seen throughout this thesis, the generative frontier is contingent on a sense of mobility and journeying – in essence, the sort of quest or search that one can see

in Guo Xiaolu's *How Is Your Fish Today?* or even the sense of expedition that is so central to urbexing practices. However, in this chapter, I want to re-examine this dimension through the themes of sickness and journeying towards health. For *Kaili Blues* is an intensely lyrical treatment of illness and its strange afterlives.

In interviews, Bi Gan prefers to distance himself from the epicentres of the Chinese film industry, presenting himself as an amiable, laidback drifter from the small mining city of Kaili in China's sub-tropical Guizhou province. The son of a taxi driver and the owner of a barber shop, Bi never went to film school and tells interviewers that he knows "none of the formula in text books to solve problems [when making a film]", that he "[comes up] with [his] own solutions", and that these are intrinsically "basic and raw" (Ho). True to form, *Kaili Blues* was indeed made on a comparatively low budget of only 1 million yuan (Lim). Prior to becoming a professional film director, he took on a series of odd jobs, which included working as a petrol station attendant and a wedding photographer. Bi tells interviewers that he is an autodidact who learned to make films by watching Tarkovsky's 1979 *Stalker* for just a few minutes each day, and binging on pirate DVDs and online streams (Stewart). Even when he "lived next to the Beijing Film Academy for a few months", he didn't drop by for a single class, adding that this wasn't because he doesn't respect the film professors, but rather, he had to remind himself that his films can be made in whatever way he likes (Ho).

Winning prizes at the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland and Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards, *Kaili Blues* was an immediate hit on the international film festival circuit. *Film Comment* magazine praised its "dazzling originality" and how it channels "a multitude of inexpressible sorrows" (Chan); the *New York Review of Books* wrote that it heralds "a new language for Chinese film" (Hoberman); and the Mexican director Guillermo del Toro deemed it "an astonishing first film about a geography of the soul" on Twitter. In 2018, Bi's second full-length film, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (*Diqiu zuihou de yewan* 地球最後的夜晚),

premiered at Cannes and cemented what is now widely recognised as his signature style: neon-drenched spaces; markedly long single takes which, in contrast to the conventions of slow cinema, instead bring an active and embodied gaze to the frame; melancholy electronic soundtracks; metafictional cross-references; and a non-linear and elastic understanding of time. In addition, Bi has become associated with an evocative catalogue of recurring motifs, which include: clocks; trains and motorbikes; stray dogs; running or dripping water; silver disco balls; and underground tunnels. In short, he has cultivated a filmic vocabulary which evokes temporality, reflection, and drift, and which recalls the roaming of the human mind. Bi is now held in such regard, that when *Sight and Sound* magazine published its decennial list of the hundred greatest films of all time in 2022, he was one of only eight mainland Chinese names polled out of the international list of 480 industry-defining directors, alongside figures like Wes Anderson, Hirokazu Koreeda 是枝 裕和, and Martin Scorcese ("Gan Bi").

In the work of newly-emergged indie filmmakers, including figures like Bi Gan, Zhang Dalei 张大磊, and Cai Chengjie 蔡成杰, we can trace how Chinese arthouse cinema is seeking out fresh repositories of creative energy and inspiration in the country's minority cultures and geographic peripheries. Both of Bi's full-length films to date are set in his home province of Guizhou and both involve extensive footage shot in Dangmai, Bi's fictional village which he has described as an "unreal place" (Stewart).[141] Scholars like Mei Gao and Cecilia Mello have linked Bi's world-building and his blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality to the mode of magical realism, particularly in the context of Derridean hauntings and phantasmagoria.[142] Furthermore, and unlike the gritty realism of the directors associated with China's Sixth

[141] Bi chose Ping Liang 和平 village near Guizhou as his filming location for the Dangmai scenes (Stewart).

[142] See film scholar Mei Gao's 2018 article "Between Ontology and Hauntology: Magic Realism in Contemporary Chinese Cinema", in which she links cinematic magic realism to Jacques Derrida's 1993 concept of spectrality and argues that "[magical realism's] organic affinity with Chinese folk culture, cyclic time, and conception of the spiritual world has led to idiosyncratic manifestations" (54) in contemporary Chinese film. See also film scholar Cecilia Mello's 2022 conference paper on Bi's *Long Day* (available on YouTube), which explores its co-existing realist and phantasmagorical aesthetics (FTTReading).

Generation, Bi's cinema is less drawn towards documentary-style representation of the nation's socio-political issues, and instead, is more interested in innovative ways of foregrounding the psychology of the individual, or what Bi has called "the experience of the self" (Jiwei Xiao).

This, of course, is a matter of debate. For instance, the film scholar Li Yang places Bi Gan into the category of the young "art film camp" and situates him alongside the Sixth Generation directors in "chasing […] similar artistic goals" (216). But in his 2016 review of *Kaili Blues* for *CinemaScope* magazine, the critic Shelley Kraicer has noted how "recent Chinese independent fiction cinema has often borne the traces of a social burden, one that is processed via its commitment to a kind of 'social realism'", yet subsequently suggests that "Bi Gan's art is something completely different" from artists like the filmmakers of the Sixth Generation in that "its poetry – not its politics – makes meaning."

I would argue for a compromise between these two placements of Bi's work. For instance, as I discussed in chapter two, we can trace similar anxieties in the work of Jia Zhangke, who is traditionally associated with the Sixth Generation – namely, a cinematic discomfort with his role as chronicler of China's social issues, and thus, a tendency towards surreal and defamiliarising qualities that trouble his documentary aesthetic and which insert themselves into a film like *Still Life*. Meanwhile, deliberately positioning himself on the margins of China's film industry, but aiming squarely at the heart of the global arthouse industry, Bi has taken pains to ensure he is instead aligned with the titans of world cinema, frequently alluding to influences like Andrei Tarkovsky, Béla Tarr, Wong Kar-Wai 王家卫, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Hou Hsiao-Hsien 侯孝贤 in his films (these directors are often associated with the genre of "slow cinema", described by critic Jonathan Romney in a 2010 *Sight and Sound* article as film "that downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness, and an intensified sense of temporality" [43]). Unlike Jia, Bi is less concerned with explicitly foregrounding social commentary, and more interested in depicting psychological journeys

coloured by Buddhist philosophy (the tone of which is set by the sutra quoted at the start of the film). And while both directors are drawn towards urban dereliction, we can see that Bi's visions of ruination are of a very different order from Jia's – they are instead more akin in spirit to Tarkovskian treatments of the ruin that, through their seemingly archaic mythological and religious symbolism, evoke ideas of returning to a more primal and elemental state. Therefore, while Jia's films are rich with close shots of the labouring body, the sounds of demolition, and the shock of state-sanctioned *chaiqian*, Bi's ruin imaginary has a cyclical and haptic quality, aligned as it is with water (both still and in motion), nature in flow, and the passage of time.

Kaili Blues – and in particular, the scenes shot in Kaili city – is full of elegantly decrepit urban infrastructure. Bi Gan himself has said in a 2016 interview: "I avoid modern buildings because they are ugly and they don't deserve to enter my frame. But why do I let those ruins in? They're not beautiful, but they bear the traces of life left over from rural-urban development. They carry emotions."[143] Ruins and architectures of disintegration thus provide a sense of magnetic atmosphere in the film, and at times, even the suggestion of enchantment through their arrangement against the basic elements (especially water and fire) or man-made luminescence (e.g. disco balls and coloured fairy lights). (Unlike Jia's *Still Life*, there's no politicised sense of being "too nostalgic" for "present-day society"). Mei Gao has argued in her discussion of *Kaili Blues* and spectrality that "the impending demolishment of buildings and gradual disappearance of old ways of life loom in the background, but this imagery serves to underscore the sense of a lost past rather than the advent of a new future" (46). It is on this point that I diverge from Gao: as we saw in figure 56, Dangmai (the site where Chen is finally able to start laying his ghosts to rest) contains new-builds which are not framed in such negative

[143] *Yinwei xiandai jianzhu dou hen chou, wo hui guibi shi yinwei ta bu pei jinru wo de yingxiang, danshi naxie feixu weishenme keyi jinru de yingxiang? Tamen bu mei, dan tamen shi chengxiang fazhan yilu xialai de shenghuo henji, jubei ganqing*. 因为现代建筑都很丑，我会规避是因为它不配进入我的影像，但是那些废墟为什么可以进入我的影像？它们不美，但它们是城乡发展遗留下来的生活痕迹，具备感情。

or melancholic terms. Some of the recent constructions are even pasted with red and gold Spring Festival banners, suggesting that they have been successfully incorporated into the social fabric of the village. Furthermore, despite Bi's use of the word "ruin" (*feixu* 废墟), ruination in *Kaili Blues* takes a different form to most of the case studies in this thesis. Rather than being abandoned, derelict buildings not fit for their intended purpose (as in Jia's *Still Life*), Bi's ruins are shabby buildings and urban structures that have surely seen better days but which are still in use (see the dim, peeling rooms in Kaili city where Chen's half-brother and nephew live in figure 57). And they, at times, seem to possess a disquieting field of gravity. For instance, consider Chen's dilapidated house (inherited from his mother) – the only building in the film which is explicitly earmarked for demolition – which, Chen notes, exerts a strange affective pull over his imagination. He expresses a desire to be liberated from its power: as he says, while talking to his colleague Guang Lian 光莲, "I'm glad this old house is going to be torn down. I always have dreams when I sleep here. It's really unsettling."

Figure 57: Still from Bi Gan, *Kaili Blues* (22:15)

In this chapter, I primarily explore the relationship between *Kaili Blues*' depiction of frontier space and the narrative arc of healing undertaken by Chen Sheng. I propose a reading of Dangmai as an interstitial frontier village which functions as a psychologically curative space for Chen, a former convict now working as a doctor, but who seeks redemption and is relentlessly haunted by memories from his past. I also consider the off-screen figures of the "wild men", who roam the peripheries of the region and who serve to manifest Chen's subconscious fears over the wellbeing of his nephew. Throughout, I draw comparisons between *Kaili Blues* and Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker* Сталкер and Apichatpong's 2010 *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* ลุงบุญมีระลึกชาติ (henceforth *Uncle Boonmee*) as they have shaped Bi's visual language so markedly (from Tarkovsky's concept of the Zone to Apichatpong's monkey-ghost). I suggest, ultimately, that it is Chen's spiritual journey through the frontier space of Dangmai village which soothes the turmoil of his inner psyche, and that this constitutes a distinctive example of the generative frontier which I advance in this thesis.

As I have shown, many of the other texts and artworks in this thesis are based around psychologically-charged quests through remote villages and sparsely populated landscapes, leading the central characters through a generative outlier space that enables the processing of past trauma. In *Kaili Blues*, many characteristics of the frontier I have discussed in the chapters so far come together: psychological healing; journeying through a liminal dream-like space; mind-wandering; the Othering gaze; intermediality; and the innovative use of digital technologies. In this chapter, I seek to nuance such readings by re-examining them via narratives of sickness. In his classic 1995 text *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics*, the sociologist Arthur Frank sought to delineate three dominant templates of the sickness narrative, broadly defining them as narratives of chaos, restitution, and quest. In short, the chaos narrative constitutes a loss of self, expressed as "the anti-narrative of time without sequence, telling without mediation and speaking about oneself without being fully able to

reflect on oneself" (98), whereas Frank summarises the restitution narrative as "Yesterday I was healthy, today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again" (77) – the fantasy here is to restore the body back to its pre-illness state. Frank's model has also been affirmed by similar conclusions drawn in contemporary trauma studies; as literature and trauma scholar Christa Schönfelder writes: "Trauma theory that focuses on narrative impossibility rather than possibility […] tends to be critical not only of the idea of integrating and understanding trauma, but also of healing and recovery. In other words, anti-narrative theorizations of trauma tend to be 'anti-therapeutic'" (32).

The quest narrative, on the other hand, "tells self-consciously of being transformed; undergoing transformation is a significant dimension of the storyteller's responsibility" (Frank 118). In making his argument, Frank draws on Joseph Campbell's 1972 model of the monomyth to describe said quest (beginning with the *departure* stage, e.g. when the symptoms begin to manifest; through to the *initiation* stage and the trials and transformations that typically come with this; and finally, the *return* stage, in which the hero comes home no longer ill but is nonetheless profoundly marked by all they have endured [117]). For Frank, the quest narrative is the typology that typically accompanies and facilitates holistic healing processes in both the body and the mind. Evaluating the narratives against each other (while also acknowledging that all three typically overlap and co-exist within the same individual), he surmises: "Restitution stories attempt to outdistance mortality by rendering illness transitory. Chaos stories are sucked in to the undertow of illness and the disasters that attend it. Quest stories meet suffering head on: they accept illness and seek to use it" (115). Importantly, Frank also notes that, as per the quest narrative, the individual takes responsibility for sharing the significance of their experience with others, thereby taking on the role of storyteller.

I argue here that *Kaili Blues* constitutes a variation on the quest narrative (and indeed as we have seen, the idea of questing is deeply embedded within classic frontier tropes and the

contemporary Chinese generative frontier). At first glance, Bi's cinematic style might appear to resist conventional narrative form – it is highly fragmented, non-linear, and poetic; film scholars Jiwei Xiao and Dudley Andrew have even suggested that *Kaili Blues* is so enigmatic that it cannot bear fruit under the usual methods of analysis (they write, "Before the mysterious we all are equal […] If we analyze [*Kaili Blues*'] elements and methods, it is not to master them, but to experience them anew and in another register, relishing the intricacy of the sensible as it congeals into new forms"). However, there are certain guiding formal structures within the film (e.g. Chen's memory scenes are in a different colour palette to his present-day), and moreover, Chen self-narrates most explicitly through his poems, which are interspersed and recited throughout the film.

As I go on to discuss in greater detail, we hear Chen violently coughing before we even see him (in the long opening shot, he is prescribed medicine and then advised to rest). As such, he is immediately framed as an ill person, although as we see, the story of his physical ailment is quickly sidelined and taken over by that of his emotional wounds (as he intones in one of his poems, "Yet I have lived without a heart for nine years" [*Meiyou le xinzang que huo le jiu nian* 没有了心脏却活了九年]). Using *Kaili Blues*, I unravel how the space of the generative frontier provides a platform for the unfurling of the quest narrative. But if *Kaili Blues* is a quest in search of healing, then it is one contingent on subtle and latent elements of Othering and exoticism that gently trouble the smooth dreamlike consistency of the quest narrative itself.

I. Liminal luminescence in Kaili city

Throughout the Kaili city scenes, the viewer is constantly reminded of the highly localised setting (that emphatically it is not and is indeed distant from China's first-tier urban epicentres): news reels and radio channels are only shown to play local broadcasts (filled with rumours and murmurs of "wild men"); and the city itself is a strange hybrid of crumbling concrete and lush

tropical vegetation. As I have discussed, this is a film that, in part, addresses urban change, but in a distinctly more accepting and self-occupied way than many of the highly dystopian films that have emerged from China's concrete revolution. In *Kaili Blues*, Bi is less concerned with socio-political critique and more in the transformative inner growth of his characters. Before discussing the ways in which the film deals with narratives of healing, however, I want to first consider how Bi advances an intensely evocative palette which speaks to the weirded hybridity that dominates this film and gestures towards the kinds of mental travelling which will be so key to the film's catharsis.

Such qualities – and the distinctive way that the generative frontier emerges within this film – are advanced in particular by the director's noticeable interest in evoking spaces of what I term "liminal luminescence". In this vein, Kaili city is shown as an elegantly derelict place full of portals – luminous glimpses that turn the fabric of the everyday into magical plays of light and dark. To illustrate this: a profound longing for psychic recovery is expressed by the second poem recited by Chen early into the film. I discuss this verse in full here, as I think it encapsulates how emotional transcendence, healing fantasies, and a wider visual palette of liminal luminescence come together to gesture towards a vision of the generative frontier to come. Narrated against a shot of Chen peering out from his balcony at night (seemingly looking for the source of the diegetic Miao folk music, which reminds him of his deceased mother), and with a mysterious, glimmering disco ball swaying in suspension behind him (figure 58), the speaker positions himself at China's geographical margins: "Hands behind one's back / at the subtropical inn, / embracing the wind at the door". Here, he evokes the start of an adventure (and his commitment to it): calling on a sequence of images that evoke a transitory place of repose, exposure to the elements, and standing at a threshold.

The camera then cuts to an assortment of everyday household objects (a simple arrangement, yet one that feels strangely posed, like props for a painterly still life): a couple of

small side tables; a silver watch; a vase holding a spray of red flowers; the base of an unused electric fan; and the headboard of a bed. Flitting against the wall, we see small, soft shimmers of light reflected from the disco ball outside, perhaps signifying the gentle ebb and flow of memories within Chen's mind (figure 59). The speaker (Chen) continues in his typical free verse: "Later on, sitting down, / watching the gentle lightning, / one's back to the city. / The riverbank in the subtropical wind; / submerging a bridge not yet sober." Here, the speaker both distances himself from the city while keeping it within the frame. He positions himself and his recovering mind (invoked by the wistful "not yet sober") within a liminal space between the rural and the urban signifiers.

Figure 58: Still from *Kaili Blues*, directed by Bi Gan, 2015 (09:17)

Figure 59: Still from *Kaili Blues*, directed by Bi Gan, 2015 (09:55)

The poetry recitation continues over another tableaux arrangement: this time, we see the dismantled body and blades of the fan; a couple of books (in a metafictional flourish, one cover displays the characters for *Roadside Picnic* [*Lu bian ye can* 路边野餐] – both the Chinese title of the film and Bi's real-life poetry collection, and presumably also now Chen's); a small porcelain statue of a woman; and a window covered with floral plastic film. Chen intones: "Buildings that do not get tipsy / sober up in silence. / Tomorrow, it'll be cloudy". We cut to the next shot, taken from behind, of Chen smoking alone on his balcony, with the disco ball still in the frame. We see it is now morning. The poem continues: "Three to twelve degrees Celsius. / Fix the windscreen wipers, / bring the umbrella." These small, everyday images carry evocations of renewal and resilience, a sense of preparing oneself for what is to come (clouds). Finally, we cut to a pan across the flat roof of a building; there is the odd piece of detritus, and a white dog running (one of the film's many allusions to Tarkovsky). As the camera moves from left to right, we see Chen walking along the green slopes of a small hill, where the edges

of the city and countryside meet. The speaker concludes, ending with an abstract image of catharsis and release: "Trying to get off the drink, / one gets out of the car in vain, / and walks until the sun comes out. / Opening as before, / the wardrobe of the body – / water molecules travel through fibre."[144]

This montage, along with the recitation of Chen's poem, takes us from night-time to morning. And in giving voice to his inner struggles, it introduces many of the liminal motifs and luminescent images (even literary rather than visual: "water molecules travel through fibre") that populate the film. The nocturnal appearance of Chen's mirror ball is particularly striking, possessing the effect of a strange apparition (it hovers in the darkness, and we are not yet given any rationale for its presence – Chen, meanwhile, appears to not register it). The disco ball has arguably become one of the object-motifs most recognisably attached to Chen's cinematic work (a version of it even appearing as an atlas-like globe in the promotional poster for his later film *Long Day's Journey into Night* [figure 60], perhaps speaking to Chen's interest in the disco ball as a portal to other worlds). And one can well understand his attraction to the object, given his interests in the relationship between memory, dreams, and liminal luminescence. It is a haunted object: one that, removed from its most obvious context, suggests faded memories of revelry, pleasure, and glamour (historically speaking, most commonly associated with American disco culture of the 1970s [Söll 237]), yet still retains its ability to enchant. As Xiao and Andrew write in their analysis of *Kaili Blues*: "Comprised of innumerable shimmering facets, [Bi's disco ball] fascinates like a film screen, while enlivening whatever

[144] *Beizhe shou / zai ya redai de jiuguan / menqian chui feng / kan rouhe de shandian / beizhe chengshi / ya redai jifeng de he'an / yanmo hai bu zui de qiao, / bu zui de jianzhu / yong jingmo jiejiu / mingtian yin / sheshi san shi shi'er du / xiu yushua pian dai san / zai jiejiu de yishi li / turan xiache / zoulu dao tian qing / zhaojiu dakai / shenti de yigui / shuifen zi chuanyue xianwei* 背着手 / 在亚热带的酒馆 / 门前吹风 / 晚了就坐下 / 看柔和的闪电 / 背着城市 / 亚热带季风的河岸 / 淹没还不醉的桥 / 不醉的建筑 / 用静默解酒 / 明天阴 / 摄氏三至十二度 / 修雨刷片带伞 / 在戒酒的意识里 / 徒然下车 / 走路到天晴 / 照旧打开 / 身体的衣柜 / 水分子穿越纤维

scene surrounds it with mutating colors that successively float atop and transform what one sees."

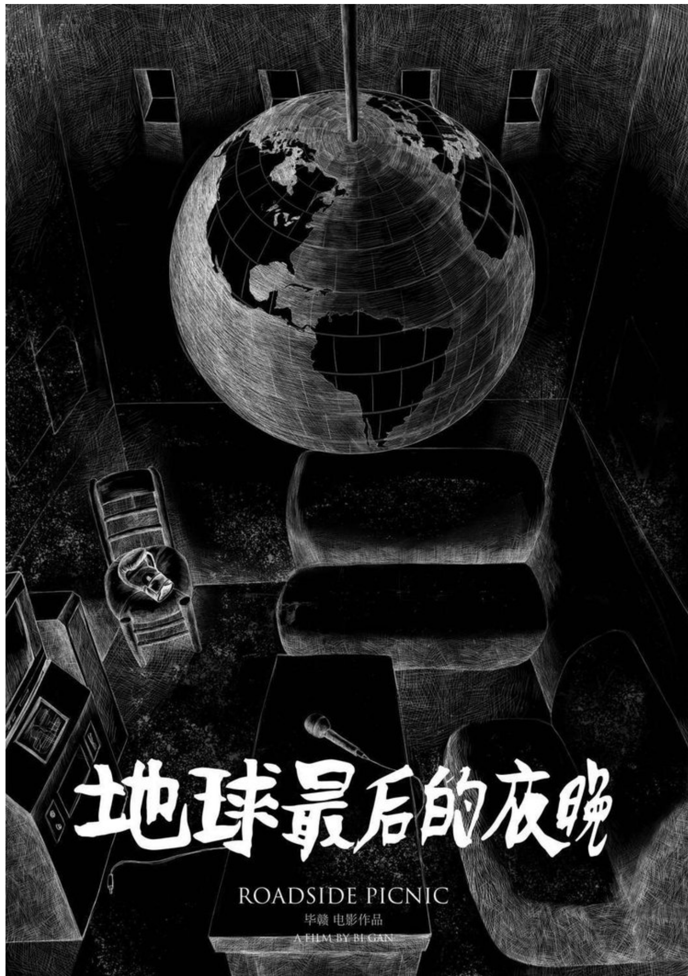

Figure 60: Initial poster for Bi Gan's second film *Long Day's Journey into Night*

It is striking too that the disco ball, and the defamiliarised treatment of the object, is a motif that appears in several works by other Chinese contemporary artists. Take for instance a 2009 four-channel film by the artist Cheng Ran titled *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Shaonian Weite de fannao* 少年维特的烦恼), in which he suspended a series of mirror balls and rotating disco lights from scaffolding to transform a forest at night into a temporarily autonomous club space (figure 61). It's a staged moment: the darkness and strangeness of the natural world briefly illuminated and, somehow, made even stranger; the artifice and theatricality of the scene

plain for all to see, directing our attention towards it; its intensely dreamlike qualities speaking to the artist's interests in charting the drift of the inner psyche. Here, vegetation, the nocturnal elements and a symbol of cheap, shiny glamour intersect and fuse to hypnotic effect. Or consider how such dreams and the evocations of afterlives continue in this mysterious 2010 photograph *The Stars in the Night Sky Are Innumerable* (*Yekong xingxing wushu* 夜空星星无数; figure 62) by the artist Chen Wei: the lone body of a man lying on a thin mattress, his head obscured by a giant disco ball, surrounded by leaves, while a spray of golden light fills the walls around him. The ways in which these artists treat the object – as a somnambulant signifier of the dreams of the past (the inherent melancholia within the idea that the party is over), as a curious juxtaposition to elements of the pastoral realm, as an evocation of a healing realm, and as a jarring prop – might easily serve as a description of how Bi Gan wields it too.

Figure 61: Cheng Ran, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (2009)

Figure 62: Chen Wei, *The Stars in the Night Sky are Innumerable* (2010)

If Chen Wei and Cheng Ran wield the mirror ball and its entrancing splashes of light as a transformative artefact (to cast the land with new light), and one that probes the connections between memory and the present-day mind, then this is also an apt description of how Bi foregrounds a use of various shades of luminosity throughout his film that always gestures towards haunting histories and possible futures. Consider how Bi has embedded images of tunnels and mines throughout the cinematic language of *Kaili Blues*, or infuses so many scenes with a neon-soaked palette to otherworldly effect (particularly when the character Chen is recalling moments with his dead wife). In *Kaili Blues*, light and its luminosities become more than mere palette, but a projection not only of the character's feelings and memories of

loss and loneliness, but also a gesture towards his dreams, desires and the new worlds that haunt and colour the spaces of his present.

II. *Kaili Blues* as healing narrative

The plotline of *Kaili Blues* is relatively straightforward, but makes for an abstract and obtuse viewing experience due to Bi Gan's copious use of flashbacks, allusions, dreams, body-doubles, and poems. The film is edited so that these surreal details emerge as if by the poetic logic of dreams – spontaneously, and with little explanation or linearity. *Kaili Blues* thus constitutes a fascinating variation on the quest narrative, experimenting as it does with non-linear storytelling and cinematic stream-of-consciousness. By way of example, consider the early scene in which protagonist Chen Sheng sees a silver disco ball hanging in a room, as he picks up his nephew. The object acts as a psychological trigger, a Proustian memory capsule which is given visual form by the disco ball blocking Chen's head (and even recalling the composition of the Chen Wei photograph just discussed). Seconds later, we cut to a flashback scene – gently tinted in neon pink tones, as if to signify that this is a memory charged with romance – and we see an out-of-focus woman in a red dress rolling a similar mirrored ball across the ground to him (could it be the very same object? the viewer might wonder), before suddenly cutting back to Chen going about his present day (figures 63, 64, and 65). Given the fragmented and potentially confusing narrative flow Bi crafts here (a representation of the structural workings of human consciousness and memory, described by Andrew and Xiao as "a new cinematic expression of inner experience and spiritual life" ["Poetics"]), I will therefore provide a summary of the main story now.

Figure 63: Still from *Kaili Blues*, directed by Bi Gan, 2015 (05:31)

Figure 64: Still from *Kaili Blues*, directed by Bi Gan, 2015 (05:33)

Figure 65: Still from *Kaili Blues*, directed by Bi Gan, 2015 (05:41)

As already mentioned, our protagonist is Chen Sheng, a middle-aged former convict now living in rain-drenched, subtropical Kaili city. Over the course of the film, we learn that Chen had once been married to a woman named Zhang Xi 张夕, whom he met at a party (she is, it transpires, the woman who rolled the disco ball over to him). After she fell seriously ill, Chen borrowed money from gang leader Hua Heshang 花和尚, presumably to pay her medical bills. A rival gang member (Xu Ying 许英) buried Hua's son alive and also cut his hand off in the process. Chen helped Hua get revenge, attacking and possibly killing the perpetrator. As a result, he is convicted and goes to prison for nine years. His mother dies while he is in gaol (leaving him a small inheritance and a plea that he looks after Weiwei 卫卫, the son of his reprobate half-brother Lao Wai 老歪). Soon after he is released, he learns that Zhang Xi has since died of an illness. These days, Chen runs a small clinic with his elderly female colleague, Guang Lian, making an honest living as a rural doctor and amateur poet. It transpires that Guang Lian has also had her share of troubles: her son died in a traffic accident, his motorbike

colliding with a car driver who (as we learn from a television broadcast) said "he saw a wild man sitting in the backseat of his car" and subsequently lost control of his vehicle.

Death, sickness, and healing are established as core themes from the very start of the film: as the opening credits appear on screen, we hear a man having a violent coughing fit. The first shot opens with a long, slow pan across a shabby room in Chen's clinic: the light is dim; the dirty white paint is fading; and dog-eared notepads and peeling medical posters are tacked up on the grey walls (figure 66). On the right-hand side of the frame, we can faintly make out Chen's head and shoulders reflected in a mirror. He is wearing his white doctor's coat; in this, the audience may recall the Jungian trope of the "wounded healer" (Kleinman 211-213). As the camera continues to pan, we hear Chen violently cough, and the light in the room flickers off and on, momentarily turning the screen black. The overall effect is unsettling and disorientating. Guang Lian is treating Chen after hours (though the specific source of his physical ailment is never specified): she opens the cabinets, hunting for medicine, and they discuss when he was last on a drip (notably, when he was married to Zhang Xi). The camera moves over to Chen, who receives his medicine from Guang Lian. She steps outside to chase away the local drunkard's dog off the balcony areas; having completed a near 360-degree axis spin, the camera follows her as she reminds Chen of the importance of rest. We see the clinic balcony (figure 67); in contrast to the shabby clinic, the world here is rich, otherworldly, and elemental, the wet ground illuminated by a small firepit and a white dog padding across the frame (once again recalling the visual repertoire of Tarkovsky). Chen and Guang Lian's close, familial relationship is thus established, as well as the vibrancy of their inner worlds (despite their faded external surroundings).

In these opening scenes, as I have observed, Chen begins to embody the archetype of the wounded healer by virtue of his current state of health and profession; but it also hints at his role as the wounded storyteller (as Arthur Frank might understand it) in the otherworldliness

that begins to seep into the frame. Critics like Gao and Mello have typically interpreted the film as a magical realist depiction of haunting, as I have mentioned. But I would choose to position Chen, at the start of the film, as inhabiting an in-between zone of illness and wellness (his illness does not appear to impede his ability to function in daily life, although he is shown to be in the grip of his memories and associated guilt.) He may be inhabiting a frontier-like space, but it is not yet a generative one. Think of how in her 1978 work *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag understands illness and wellness as binary states: "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds a dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place" (3). Frank seeks to introduce an in-between zone to Sontag's binary through his notion of the "remission society", e.g. "those people who [are] effectively well but could never be considered cured" (8). In *Kaili Blues*, Chen exists between these kingdoms.

Figure 66: Still from *Kaili Blues*, directed by Bi Gan, 2015 (00:27)

Figure 67: Still from *Kaili Blues*, directed by Bi Gan, 2015 (01:42)

After this opening shot, and around two minutes in, we're shown an intertitle that quotes from the Diamond Sutra (*Jingang bore boluomi duo jing* 金刚般若波罗蜜多经), a passage that lays out the film's Buddhist epistemology and, in short, tells us that our past, present, and future are ungraspable and cannot be understood in their entirety: "The past mind cannot be attained, The present mind cannot be attained, The future mind cannot be attained" (*Guoqu xin buke de, xianzai xin buke de, weilai xin buke de* 过去心不可得，现在心不可得，未来心不可得). Accordingly, time is non-linear in *Kaili Blues*: we slip in and out of Chen's memories with very little directorial signposting. Themes of non-detachment and reincarnation are also introduced through this juxtaposition of the half-sick figure of Chen and the sutra (a juxtaposition that also, incidentally, might be read as a homage to Apichatpong's *Uncle Boonmee*, in which the titular character, who can remember his past reincarnations, is dying of kidney failure).

Chen has a strained relationship with his half-brother Lao Wai (who often expresses resentment that their deceased mother left the imprisoned Chen her house; "Where were you when she died? I was there until the very end" [*Lao ma si de shihou, ni zai na? Quan shi wo yige ren shouzhe.* 老妈死的时候，你在哪？全是我一个人守着。]). Chen is, however, very fond of his young nephew Weiwei. After the first half hour of the film, he learns to his chagrin that Lao Wai has sent Weiwei to live with his former gang boss, Hua Heshang, who is now a watchmaker in the town of Zhenyuan. Weiwei, who is fascinated by watches, has agreed to go.

Chen subsequently leaves Kaili with two purposes: first, he wants to find Weiwei and bring his abandoned nephew back to live with him, thereby both fulfilling his obligations as uncle and observing his mother's last request of him. Secondly, on discovering he was to make the journey to Zhenyuan, Guang Lian asked him to deliver some personal items to her former lover who lives in the town, a Miao man called Airen 爱人 (his name literally translates to "lover"). They lost touch during the Cultural Revolution. These include a cassette tape recording of the 1984 duet "Farewell" (*Gaobie* 告别) by folk and pop singers Li Tai-hsiang 李泰祥 and Tang Xiaoshi 唐晓诗, and a batik shirt (they agreed that the first one to leave would buy the other a new shirt). Airen is apparently close to death and has asked to see Guang Lian one last time; she says she can't bear to make the journey, but asks Chen to visit on her behalf and deliver her gifts. So far, this seems to play out as a relatively uncomplicated narrative of questing (in Campbell's formulation of the hero's journey, this would be the first stage, i.e. the "call to adventure" [49]): Chen must find the boy, and deliver the goods.

But this sense of narrative certainty does not last. At some point on the journey from Kaili to Zhenyuan, we see Chen getting off the train (possibly side-tracked by the sound of Miao folk music) and entering the village of Dangmai. Here, it turns out he has a new agenda (the decision about which is made offscreen): he now wants to find some *lusheng* 芦笙 players,

the sound of which he associates with his mother. On entering Dangmai, the 41-minute long take begins, and Chen has a series of dream-like encounters with various residents of the village: he meets an awkward, socially-ostracised young motorcycle driver who turns out to be called Weiwei (the same name as the child nephew he is meant to be searching for); a young woman called Yangyang 洋洋, who dreams of leaving Dangmai in order to become a tour guide in Kaili; and an amiable local pop band. Chen also has his hair washed by a hairdresser who happens to be the spitting image of his long-dead wife. During all this, Chen even puts on the batik shirt that Guang Lian intended for Airen (Andrew and Xiao write in reference to his act, "Far from a betrayal, this testifies to the spiritual affinity of the two doctors"). Such encounters with these strangely half-remembered, half-anticipated characters, and their unfolding over a long take, have a synthesising effect on the film's sense of narrative and temporality: they literally pull the past into the present. The use of the long take roots us in the action of the here-and-now, and there is no relief from the cut: the technique heightens each encounter that Chen has, as visually, we witness all of this in real-time with him (and the cinematic experience is partly defined by our appreciation of Bi's technical feat – for instance, our attention is drawn to the camera's presence, when it independently takes a different route from Chen and Weiwei, ducking through one of Dangmai's alleyways to catch up with them on Weiwei's motorbike). As Andre Bazin writes of the sequence shot (e.g. the long take) in his discussion of the work of Orson Welles: "the spectator perceives the ontological ambivalence of reality directly, in the very structure of its appearances" (80).

After performing in a village concert with the band (in which he sings his wife's lookalike a song he learned for his wife in prison and then gives her Guang Lian's "Farewell" cassette tape), Chen accepts a lift from the adult Weiwei and finally leaves for Zhenyuan. Here, the long take cuts, and we see Chen fulfil his original mission of checking up on Weiwei. It transpires that the gangster-turned-watchmaker Hua Heshang is also seeking redemption and

has Weiwei's best interests at heart ("I deliver and pick up these kids from school because I'm fond of them," he says), so Chen agrees to let the boy stay in Zhenyuan a while longer. We then learn that Airen has recently died, and a traditional Miao *lusheng* concert is about to be held in his memory. The importance of the original quest has diminished by this point (deflated by the child Weiwei's relative contentment, and the death of Guang Lian's lover). As Chen indicates in his final poem, delivered as a voiceover as he observes Weiwei scampering through a lush agricultural landscape: "All twists and turns are concealed in dense flocks of birds /The seas and sky cannot see them / But with dreams, they become visible."[145] For Chen, his dream-like journey through Dangmai has had a clarifying force on his life. The anxieties and disturbances which he experienced in Kaili city seem to have fallen away, or at least become more manageable.

In the final shot of the film, we see an exhausted Chen falling asleep on the train back to Kaili. As the landscape (and another train) rushes past, we see something strange take shape through the windows: an apparition of hand-drawn analogue clocks, their hands moving backwards as the carriages move past each other (figure 68). The scene reminds the viewer of something the adult Weiwei told Chen as he drove him out of Dangmai: that the village's young woman Yangyang, who wants to become a tour guide in Kaili, promises to only return if Weiwei finds a way of turning back time. (And Weiwei's solution to this, he says, will be to draw clocks on trains.) As the trains flash by in *Kaili Blues*' final sequence, we see how Weiwei's vision, when set in motion, resembles the workings of a film strip. And as for Chen's final state of repose – in interviews, Bi Gan has framed film as a medium that can facilitate a state of rest: "I think it feels good when you sleep during a film and I often do" (Stewart).

[145] Suoyou de zhuanzhe yincang zai miji de niao qun zhong / tiankong yu haiyang dou wufa chajue / huaizhe meimeng que keyi kanjian 所有的转折隐藏在密集的鸟群中 / 天空与海洋都无法察觉 / 怀着美梦却可以看见

Figure 68: Still from *Kaili Blues*, directed by Bi Gan, 2015 (1:46:17)

What ultimately emerges from *Kaili Blues* and this idiosyncratic treatment of the healing narrative is an iteration of the generative frontier. Here, it is at first desired and evoked by the strange luminosities present in Kaili city, and then it is brought about through the peripheral, dreamy space of Dangmai, and Chen's states of sleep, but also through Bi's deployment of cinematic technique. This is a film that is deeply interested in experimenting with both the cognitive impact of the medium itself, and a unique use of China's urban-rural spaces (which has given rise to a curative aesthetic that has become distinctly Bi Gan's). And the generative frontier here is once again defined by a sustained sense of ambivalence (particularly through the anticlimactic conclusion to Chen's original set of objectives). As Frank says: "What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person's belief that something is to be gained through the experience" (115). In Frank's formulation, it is the journey that provides meaning, and in *Kaili Blues* this journey is realised through the space of the generative frontier, and the heightened liminality that it imposes midway through Chen's story.

III. Wild men and the zone

The province of Guizhou in which *Kaili Blues* is filmed has a high concentration of ethnic Miao people, and Bi Gan has identified in interviews as being of Miao heritage himself: "There is Miao identity in my blood, so I have an unforgettable feeling to it, and it exists in my film indistinctly. But I don't want it to be the theme of my film, so I am always trying to avoid making my film to be a fake folkways culture thing" (Stewart). Historically, Guizhou was regarded in geopolitical and cultural terms as a backwards frontier region, and visual traces of these Confucian Han attitudes can be seen in the so-called "Miao Albums" (*Miao man tu* 苗蛮图; the literal translation is "Miao barbarian pictures"). These albums, which depicted the habits and customs of various ethnic groups, were created by Qing officials between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries to aid the task of local governance and also establish where minority people fell on the continuum between "like the Han" (*yu Hanren tong* 与汉人同) and "Other" (Weinstein 122).[146] All this shows that Guizhou has long been a site to project notions of cultural difference and Otherness.

Yet in a fascinating 2019 article on Guizhou province as "an imaginary of remoteness that in turn produces economic yield" (Luo et al. 270), the authors end on a discussion of *Kaili Blues*, which they frame as epitomising "a post-alteric shift in which the exotic Other is gradually being displaced by a generic and visually consumable 'countryside'" (276). They go on to discuss how *Kaili Blues* "neither privileges nor rejects Otherness", constructing a *mise-en-scène* in which "the remote is never sealed off from the urban, the modern" (282). While I concur with the authors over Dangmai's idiosyncratic rural-urban hybridity – hence the film's status as a striking example of the generative frontier – I find it striking that they have left the

[146] Also see Jing Zhu on how "the Miao albums [substantially] reflect the values and ethics of [Qing] Confucian Han Chinese culture" (42).

figure of the wild man out of their discussion of alterity within the film. I would argue that it is in this shadowy simian figure that the frontier themes of Otherness and wildness emerge most strongly in the film.

At various points throughout the film, we are made privy to accounts of the wild men who circle and occasionally enter the urban pockets of the Kaili region, seemingly as harbingers of kidnap or death. An early and evocative description of a wild man comes from a television broadcast, which wakes Chen up as he dozes on his sofa in his Kaili city home one evening. The journalist reports:

> In the peripheries of the Kaili region, wild man footprints have once again been discovered. They are two to three times bigger than the footprint of an average human. The remains of dead sheep, cows and other animals were also found in the vicinity. The last time a wild man was sighted in Kaili was nine years ago. The incident led to a traffic collision [in which Guang Lian's son was killed]. The driver of the car said that, when he was driving en-route, he saw a wild man sitting in the backseat of his car in his rear-view mirror. His whole body was covered in brown hair, his eyes were shining, and his voice was like the rumble of thunder.[147]

As I mentioned in the previous chapter on urbexing practices, I take wildness to be a quality of the generative frontier, constituting a deterritorialised experience typically but not necessarily associated with the wilderness. Depending on how it has been mediated by the environment, wildness can be something to be feared, as the reporter's descriptions of the wild men's trail of the dead indicates. But wildness can also take on a more nebulous, enchanting quality (there is an obviously magical and curious dimension to the description of the wild man's luminescent eyes and voice resembling an elemental force). And ultimately, as we learn,

[147] *Kaili zhoubian diqu zaici faxian yeren jiaoyin, bi putong chengnianren lei da liang dao san bei, fujin ye chuxian le niuyang deng dongwu de shiti. Kaili shangci faxian yeren shi zai jiu nianqian, dangshi fasheng yiqi jiaotong shigu, zhaoshi siji cheng, che kai dao tuzhong, cong hou shi jing faxian houzuo zhe yeren. Quanshen zongse maofa, yangjing faguang, houlong li fachu dalei de shengyin*. 凯里周边地区再次发现野人脚印，比普通成年人类大两到三倍，附近也出现了牛羊等动物的尸体。凯里上次发现野人是在九年前，当时发生一起交通事故，肇事司机称，车开到途中，从后视镜发现后座坐着野人。全身棕色毛发，眼睛发光，喉咙里发出打雷的声音。

wildness – learning to live alongside it – can constitute a generative force (a narrative arc that mirrors Chen's inner journey of accepting his past.)

Bi's concept of the wild men pays clear homage to Tarkovsky's *Stalker* and Apichatpong's *Uncle Boonmee*, which both feature significant child-figures who have taken on simian form. In the latter (the final part of Apichatpong's 2009 art project titled *Primitive*), the protagonist Boonmee's long-lost son Boonsong returns to his father in the non-human form of a benign monkey spirit. Meanwhile, and more pertinent to this chapter's discussion, Tarkovsky's *Stalker* was based upon a 1972 science-fiction novel by the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, titled *Roadside Picnic* (as I mentioned in section one, this is also the Chinese title of both *Kaili Blues* and Bi's own poetry collection, as well as a title that has a cameo in the fictional Chen's own pile of books). The protagonist of Tarkovsky's film is the eponymous Stalker, a man who leads clients through "The Zone", a place which doesn't abide by the normal rules of reality and which only the Stalker knows how to navigate. Like Chen in *Kaili Blues*, the Stalker leaves the known world to enter an off-kilter, unpredictable space, and the group subsequently undergo a profound psychological and metaphysical journey. Here, however, I am most interested in the ways in which all three texts – *Roadside Picnic*, *Stalker*, and *Kaili Blues* – each include the character of a child who is under threat of being contaminated or carried off by agents of the wild.

In the Strugatskys' *Roadside Picnic*, the Stalker has a beloved daughter whom he calls Monkey, and who does indeed appear to be part monkey, just like the Wild Men of *Kaili Blues*. She has, we are told, "huge, entirely black eyes with no whites", and we see the Stalker press "his face to [her] chubby little cheek [which is] covered in silky golden fur" (ch. 2). In Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, the director dispensed with these non-human characteristics, but he gave Monkey both a physical disability and telekinetic powers, as we see in the film's famous last scene when Monkey moves the glasses across the table using the power of her gaze alone (Bi

directly references this moment through his *mise-en-scène* as Chen remembers the incident which resulted in his imprisonment – a wet table, a toppled glass, and water dripping down from overhead). The implication in both *Roadside Picnic* and *Stalker* is that Monkey is genetically different to other children because her father has had too much contact with the mysterious Zone.

Throughout *Kaili Blues*, we witness expressions of Chen's inner anxiety over Weiwei's wellbeing, most frequently in the recurring threat of Weiwei being kidnapped by a wild man, (recalling how the Strugatskys' and Tarkovsky's children were contaminated both by their own father figures' recklessness and association with the wild elements of The Zone). Early on in *Kaili Blues*, a local drunkard taunts Chen by telling him, first, that the Wild Men are coming for him; and in the next shot, that a Wild Man has already caught Weiwei. Chen's fears are somewhat justified, as Guang Lian's son was killed nine years ago by the driver who suddenly found a wild man in his backseat. The possibility of Weiwei coming to harm is rarely far from Chen's mind, however, and throughout the film, we occasionally hear the threat of soft offscreen thunder in the distance, echoing the poetic description of the wild man's voice ("like the rumble of thunder"). However, by the end of the film, both Weiwei and Chen appear to be in a better place as far as the wild men are concerned. The child Weiwei is now being safely cared for away from his neglectful father and is seen enjoying the companionship of other children, while the adult Weiwei knows how to fend wild men off (by tying sticks to his elbows) and even teaches Chen how to do this. Chen himself is now at ease with leaving Weiwei in Zhenyuan for a few more days, in spite of the wild men.

The presence of the wild men and these call-backs to Tarkovsky's formulation of The Zone, have marked Dangmai as a space of generative confrontation. This is made clear in *Kaili Blues* in the first instance by how, in contrast to the village of Dangmai, the city of Kaili is depicted as ailing and worn: throughout the Kaili scenes, we are repeatedly shown dilapidated

buildings; peeling, dripping walls; mentally ill or drunk residents; motorbikes that are constantly falling to pieces; and dank tunnels that local banana sellers have to wander through. Chen's fellow doctor even asks him what the point of their work as clinicians is, in that they "make ill people better, but these people eventually just get ill again." (*Bingren haole, ye haishi hui shengbing*. 病人好了，也还是会生病。) (Her words harking back to Frank's delineation of the chaos narrative of sickness – the idea of there being no way out.) When we are in Kaili, the film constantly brings us to the fitful world of Chen's inner psyche: here, he dreams – of his dead mother's shoes caught in a stream; or he recites poetry; and he experiences flashbacks of his dead wife or his time in prison. Yet the strange luminosities that seep through Kaili city (as we discussed earlier in the chapter), the ways in which they – in a transient and fleeting manner – enchant a given space, gesture towards the character's yearning for transformative change.

Dangmai, meanwhile, is presented as a frontier village positioned at a liminal juncture between urbanisation and wildness, and a sort of gauntlet that Chen must pass through on his road to regeneration. The act of physically moving from the known terrain of Kaili to the unknown terrain of Dangmai runs parallel to Chen's psychological journey that takes him deep within his own emotional interiority. It is here in Dangmai that Chen finally comes face to face with some of the memories and fears that haunted him back in Kaili: his dead wife; Weiwei's future; and even his apparent fear of singing in front of crowds (as we see in an earlier cutback). This transformative stance – that of Chen as an explorer striking out into an unknown frontier – is echoed in the positionality of the speaker in Chen's second poem of the film. Here, the speaker is positioned in a place of transit, the "subtropical inn". They greet the elements at the door, with their back symbolically turned towards the city, and echoing how the narrative to come is that of a person compelled to strike out into new territory. The poem ends on an almost-transcendental note of release, with an image of the speaker walking until they feel that "the

wardrobe of their body" has once again been opened up. For Chen, the experience of passing through Dangmai is ultimately generative.

There is further evidence of the ways in which Dangmai presents a freeing-up of Chen's linguistic potential. Chen is initially presented as a character who struggles to express himself in everyday life, and the film introduces the theme of verbal blockage and inarticulation from the start. As the opening credits roll, and before the first frame of the film appears on-screen, we hear Chen's hacking cough. And yet, alongside this symbolic snag in his throat, Chen manages to compose and perform highly lyrical poetry. But it is when he conducts his journey through Dangmai that this expressive potential is liberated within his prosaic conversation: we see him, for instance, telling the woman who works in the hair salon (his dead wife's lookalike) the story of why he was jailed in the first place.

Furthermore, the Dangmai sequence presented to us in a 41-minute uninterrupted take results in a more concentrated and active viewing experience in contrast to the soporific and passive build-up of the scenes shot in Kaili. The long take accentuates Dangmai's Zone-like qualities (as a sealed space which operates according to its own laws of physics, though perhaps absent of the catastrophic associations that Tarkovsky's Zone possesses) in creating a shared sense of discovery and exploration, but one through which we must be guided (the eponymous Stalker acts as the guide in the Russian texts, while Weiwei is responsible for Chen's passage). Both our gaze and that of the characters remains unbroken, and we experience Dangmai in real-time with them. Bi's long take keeps the here-and-now mode of temporality consistently in the frame, and without the constant discontinuity of the flashbacks, off-screen recitation, or short takes that we experience in Kaili. The effect of Bi's long take in Dangmai is that, like Chen, the audience has a more immediate engagement with the new terrain that is this village/generative frontier, and according to the therapeutic logic of this film, it is in this present-moment state of mind (its heightened qualities of attentiveness, for instance) that Chen

is better able to reap the curative benefits of his journey through this frontier space that gently mediates the urban and the wild.

Conclusion

Kaili Blues did not mark the end of Bi Gan's affair with the imagined space of Dangmai. He revisited the frontier village in his 2018 film *Long Day's Journey into Night* and similarly situated his character's entry into Dangmai after a significant portion of the film is spent in Kaili city. Again, in *Long Day*, the Dangmai sequence is triggered by the start of a long take (which this time was 59 minutes long and is further distinguished by being shot in 3D). Dangmai's otherworldly dimension provides further fruit for the director: one scene involves the protagonist and his love interest taking flight (in an interview, Bi references Marc Chagall's early painting *The Promenade* (1917-18) in which the artist is seen to clutch his wife Bella's hand as her body floats up into the sky ([*Festival de Cannes*]).

Bi, then, is a filmmaker who is profoundly drawn towards in-between, liminal zones which carry their own magical rules, and which offer up spaces that enact journeys of inner transformation and change for those willing to pass through. He is, in essence, evoking the mental landscape of the generative frontier (through his extensive Zone-like use of Dangmai). In the first instance, we have seen how he has been able to offer up a highly distinctive variation on a narrative of healing. The narrative arc within *Kaili Blues* shares a substantial amount of DNA with Frank's formulation of the quest narrative of sickness; and Bi is able to weave in and around this through his own nonlinear cinematography. But this technically innovative iteration of the generative frontier, it must be said, is highly contingent on its relation to Otherness (in the unexplained figures of the Wild Men) and we can perhaps trace this back to the frontier trope's colonial origins (even if, by the end of *Kaili Blues*, the sense of danger seems diminished, and despite the director's own attunement to the perils of exoticising Miao

culture). This relation to alterity and Otherness might serve as a warning: that the generative frontier cannot escape the sense of individual empowerment that arises from having conquered the wildness.

Conclusion

When the characters of Han Sanming and Ma Yaomei are finally afforded their moment of reunion in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, the director frames the encounter in the hollowed-out space of an abandoned high-rise, through one of his signature long takes. Sanming and Yaomei crouch down in the right of the frame, while to the left, an enormous chunk in the wall has been hollowed out, so that we look out through the vertical crater onto a vast urban cityscape. In the faraway horizon, a building collapses, and the couple turn to watch as the reverberations reach them (figure 69). It is a deeply painterly moment, which one gets a greater sense of when examining the scene's stills: firstly, we have the cityscape, the rolling tops of its buildings in the distance evoking hilly terrain, and we register the way it recedes and blurs into the sky's monotonous palette, itself evoking the suggestive gestures and textures of a paintbrush. Next, the city's processes of development, brightly lit, are framed by the ruined structure within which our characters occupy, to great pictorial effect. Finally, our characters' gaze – and indeed our own – is directed outwards. It is a cipher for the embodied city: the juxtaposition of external change and internal reflection well conveying the sharp affective power that urban processes wield.

Figure 69: Still from *Still Life*, directed by Jia Zhangke, 2006 (1:39:14)

Throughout this thesis, and its argument for the presence of the generative frontier (and a turn towards this concept within contemporary Chinese cultural production at large), I have identified counter-images such as this. It is through such moments that I have been keen to nuance and challenge the traditional visual and textual motifs which have governed discussion of aesthetic responses to the programming of contemporary China: namely, the visions of urban ruins, rural havens, and their utopian, dystopian, haunted, and melancholic moods (and other such typical urban imaginaries). As we have seen, urbanisation has emerged as a prominent theme in the creation and production of postsocialist Chinese aesthetics. While not rejecting its predominant signifiers and symbols, and the reams of commentary they have generated, I have sought to argue that aesthetic responses to Chinese urbanism cannot merely be couched in the simple binaries of the rural and the urban, the utopian and dystopian, the pastoral and the profane, and even of submission and resistance (the latter so well signified by the pictorial phenomenon of "nail houses" that has proven so popular in mainstream commentary).

Instead, I have argued that we should make space for the unpredictable and the ambiguous in such discussion: that the slippages between the rural and the urban in contemporary China have also created spaces of undecided, latent potential, which carry a capacity for aesthetic appreciation in and of themselves (this visceral pleasure, for instance, is well articulated by China's surging movement of urbex practitioners who have been able to reframe abandoned dereliction as a new site of play, and in doing so, opened it up to all kinds of ludic possibilities and manipulations). This has, in part, been made possible by the articulation of alternative or shifting temporalities: different notions of time which allow for possibilities different from the prevailing timeframe of China's urban-rural modernisation. To stay with the example of urban exploration, we can see this clearly in how its practitioners are drawn to acts of regression – in the military cosplay of Scouts Urban Exploration, for instance. The suggestion in such performances is that time is both functioning differently within the spaces they have entered, and crucially, within their own interior landscapes when they take on these alter-egos.

In order to articulate and delineate these spaces, I have invoked the language of the frontier as a way of describing an intensely liminal zone, in which we as the audience find ourselves pulled between worlds. This way of framing the frontier – as a threshold zone or portal space – liberates it from understanding the concept in purely territorial terms (and indeed the ways in which ideologies of colonialism, or the borders and competitive pursuits of the nation-state, are tightly woven through its classical definitions). Of course, given the current geopolitical tensions roiling contemporary notions of Chinese sovereignty, it is no surprise that the frontier-as-boundary thesis dominates mainstream discussion. But, as I show, there are other ways of thinking of the frontier: as an elusive, liminal space with deep affective power, and in various depictions, as an antidote to the stresses of contemporary China in-real-life – as a space for self-articulation. This image of the generative frontier that I offer is one in which

the state-of-the-nation no longer dominates, so much as the state of the self. It is a zone in which the rural and urban have dissolved and enmeshed themselves, troubling and complicating the power relations therein. And it is, as I have shown, a highly individualistic space.

As befits a subject which by its nature is so hybrid and intersectional (indeed, a space which constitutes a threshold between worlds), throughout the thesis I have called on a number of works which span the breadth of contemporary Chinese cultural production, analysing works which seek to dismantle binaries both high and low. In doing so, I have been able to delineate the presence of the generative frontier – a liminal space for healing the ravages of China's urban-rural tensions – across a swathe of examples spanning the worlds of art, literature, film, and even amateur subcultural activity.

I first introduced the idea of the generative frontier by juxtaposing two works, Can Xue's 2008 novel *Frontier* and the artist Zheng Bo's *Weed Party* installation, which guide their audience into looking at the city with new eyes. I chart how it emerges from older ideas of the frontier (exemplified well by the exoticising, racialised character of Ying in *Frontier*, who harks back to older ideas of the frontier as a wild, mystical zone, and a site of serendipitous folksy wisdom). I include further caveats, looking at the ways in which the frontier is frequently invoked in cultural manifestations as a set of border/buffer-zones (for instance, the series of artworks displayed in OCAT Shanghai's *Frontier* exhibition on view in 2017). I accentuate instead the frontier's highly mobile and subjective qualities instead – its essential elasticity – in order to chart a new urban imaginary. I contrast works which focus on contemporary urban China as a source of illness (for instance, the shadow puppetry of Lily and Honglei, which is typical of the urban-misery genre) and which frame the countryside as a site of pastoral innocence (e.g. in the Internet videos of video blogger Li Ziqi), with works by Zhang Xiaotao and Zhong Biao which begin to see urbanisation as a reparative story of transcendence (fusing

comedy with kitsch). Nevertheless, both artists also incorporate an Othering gaze into their notions of the generative frontier, which becomes a theme through this thesis.

My first chapter focused attention on how Guo Xiaolu explores notions of selfhood through spaces of regeneration in *Village of Stone* and her film *How Is Your Fish Today?*, in part by repositioning her work as a distinctive contribution to 1990s Chinese urban fiction centred on individualistic women and new urban psyches (the Private Writing genre) – a discussion of gendered space which also incorporated the work of artist Zhou Hongbin. I also examined Guo's treatment of rural and urban space, and the workings of traumatic memory (such that the reader does not simply "read" but is also a witness to confessional testimony). I drew upon psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's theory of potential space to further delineate Guo's description of states of stuckness.

Meanwhile, the second chapter arose from close readings of works by the artist Yang Yongliang and filmmaker Jia Zhangke, through the perspective of *shanshui* art and the contemporary resurgence of interest in this age-old tradition of "mountain-water" landscapes. I charted this contemporary attention to an ancient mode of artmaking (and thinking about art) by emphasising its constructive characteristics (especially striking when the dominant mode of urban artmaking is characterised by violence and detritus). I also introduced ideas of ambivalence and affective ambiguity into the genre – a contemporary mirror for its roots in the dissociative state of mind-travel (*woyou*) – by incorporating the work of media scholar Paul Roquet (imported from his readings of ambient media and Japanese culture after 1960). Yang and Jia create visually demanding images that operate in a clearly phenomenological mode, offering the spectator new ways of framing their subjects and relation to space. Both, as I show, are deeply invested in the consequences of looking and seeing, and the impossibilities of objective reality, about which their works partly function as commentaries. I also briefly

discuss the work of digital artist Shi Weili, who takes a much more literal approach to "generative" art, but in the process, injects an algorithmic approach to space/place-making.

My third chapter took as its subject China's urban exploration movement and an especial focus on the work of a major proponent within this, the UE photographer Zhao Yang. To this end, the chapter represented a turn within my thesis towards a more amateur and quotidian aspect of the generative frontier and its reproduction in contemporary culture, charting a new ludic aesthetics of decay that is distinctive in UE's Sinophone manifestations. In this chapter, I examined the moving-image output of the Beijing-based Scouts Urban Exploration team and Hong Kong's HKUrbex, who both dabble in forms of immersive live-action roleplay, but crucially, distribute their performances online. Both practices suggest that UE has become a way of gamifying urban ruins. I continue into a set of close readings of images produced by Zhao Yang who also frames the ruin as a site of reprieve and adventure, focusing on it as a site of mysterious affective encounter, as well as a space in which he can assert his own authorial presence and stage dramatic scenes for his audiences online. The ruin here, may be a scene of retreat and play, but it has also become a stage for performances – to the point that it almost becomes dehistoricised in order to facilitate this mode of individualistic playmaking.

Finally, my fourth chapter examined filmmaker Bi Gan in the context of the generative frontier, delving into how he depicts narratives of sickness and healing in his film *Kaili Blues*. The chapter drew on sociologist Arthur Frank's classic typologies of sickness narratives, in order to examine the generative frontier as a space in which such stories might be explored. I juxtaposed Bi's work with artists such as Cheng Ran and Chen Wei, whose moody palettes also invoke a sense of luminal luminescence, and spaces of disorientation, malaise, and possibility. I also used the example of Bi to highlight a strain of art that represents a cinematic turn away from the realm of the sociopolitical and towards matters of the self, also mirrored as

a fading interest in speaking of and to the nation, and instead to an international field of cinematic production (in this sense, Bi Gan foregrounds the generative frontier while representing a turn away from the social preoccupations of a filmmaker like Jia Zhangke). Finally, I unravelled his creation of an emotional geography and therapeutic logic that mediates between the known and the wild (the latter evoked through elements of Othering and exoticism) – culminating in the filmmaker's distinctively curative aesthetic.

Several important motifs come to mind when tracking the emergence of the "generative frontier" across twenty-first century Chinese cultural production. I first suggested the concept through the introduction of Pebble Town in Can Xue's novel *Frontier*, a seemingly peripheral space filled with surrealist happenings. Indeed, the trope of the frontier village, and the often weird, uncanny, and defamiliarised presence it takes on, becomes something of a constant theme throughout the chapters of this thesis – whether it is Shitou fishing village in Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone*, Dangmai in Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues,* or even the town of Fengjie in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*.

I raise this, first of all, to acknowledge that the idea of the frontier village and its creative possibilities is not only the preserve of imaginative cultural production. For instance, we might look to the rich (yet understandably transient) histories of artists' villages in China, premised as they often have been on carving out peripheral zones within the urban fabric to allow for various forms of underground, experimental, or alternative creative production. Consider how the Beijing East Village (*Beijing Dongcun* 北京东村) became a destination for avant-garde artistic practices (and a breeding ground for many of the contemporary art scene's stars, e.g. Zhang Huan 張洹) during the early 1990s. Or to take a more recent example (that through its subject matter is more pertinent to the interests of this thesis), Ou Ning's 欧宁 2010 Bishan commune project (*Bishan gongtongti* 碧山共同体) and its accompanying book *Bishan*

Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia (*Bishan gongtongti: ruhe chuanjian ziji de wutuobang* 碧山共同体:如何創建自己的烏托邦), which offers up the compelling case study of an artists' village community project aimed at healing the rifts between the city and the countryside.

And yet bearing these real-world corollaries in mind, it is important to note that the works which I have examined in this thesis blend a curious mixture of the expected and unexpected, of tired tropes and also their defamiliarisation. To stay with the example of fictionalised frontier villages, such texts can trace them as spaces that are enclosed, sealed entities (typical of state visions of Chinese rurality), and impervious to what is happening around them, for better or for worse. And yet at the same time, these heterotopic spaces – operating according to their own internal logics – are the sites of strange happenings and mystical occurrences (the wild men that threateningly stalk the outskirts of Dangmai village in Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues*, for instance, or the UFOs hidden in the landscape, which suddenly light up and take off apropos of nothing, in the background of Fengjie in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*).

All this might be a roundabout way of emphasising that the generative frontier is no mere fact of geography, but is rather a perennially shifting thing. Witness the mental gymnastics that the protagonist experiences in Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone*, in which the city of Beijing can feel just as peripheral a location as Shanhong's childhood village. Or to take another example of how the definition of the generative frontier is forever elastic and contorted, in Yang Yongliang's *Artificial Wonderland I*, what at first appears as a space of the periphery – the zonal points of mountain, water and sky, and the intersections at which they meet and bleed into each other – on closer inspection is revealed to be a city in the midst of frantic development (arguably, by implication, the space in which the viewer themselves is most likely situated). Or consider how the frontier space in Chinese urbexing practices is of course – in the most immediate sense – the ruins that its plucky explorers venture into and document. However,

even here, the generative frontier does not exist solely in the ruined and abandoned site of original exploration but in its afterlives: the online discussion forums within which a discourse of urbex appreciation has been fostered, or the video documentation of the explorers' exploits which can become a form of vicarious thrill (the idea that one can roam and explore these spaces from the comfort of one's home, putting yet another spin on the idea that urban exploration constitutes an "invisible frontier", as Deyo and Leibowitz put it). The effect of such oscillation at first might seem more disorientating than generative to be sure, but it should also point us towards a significant conclusion.

Throughout the thesis, what I have sought to demonstrate is that the generative frontier is not necessarily tied to a specific place, but rather, a specific state of mind. Here, place may be unmade into space, as well as vice versa. This constant project of construction and deconstruction is not only a matter of embodiment (of seeing and feeling) but of thinking. In short, I have emphasised that the generative frontier is a psychological process that its subjects undertake in an act of self-healing and which has emerged specifically – at least in its Sinophone manifestations – largely as a response to the mainland's new cocktail of urban modernity which has been developing since the 1990s. It is responsive to the ways, for instance, in which the ensuing divide between the urban and rural China has fluctuated according to a historically and politically contingent process, as well as China's post-millennial "psy-boom" turn (an increasing interest in the psychological experience of living through China's new century).

An important theme that emerges in my examination within this thesis of generative frontiers is their role in providing a space of healing. For what? In an immediate sense, for the intersections of the alienation brought about by China's urban-rural divide, as well as personal histories of trauma. For instance, we can see how such an intersection plays out in the way that painful and persistent memories of childhood haunt the character of Shanhong in Guo Xiaolu's

Village of Stone – haunting her in a way that leaves her with the sensation of being pulled by both the metropole (Beijing) and the periphery (Shitou). Here too, the generative frontier teaches its subjects new ways of relating to space and place, and in doing so, allows them to confront and transcend their pain and loneliness.

Emotions of estrangement and alienation compel subjects to journey to the edges. Sometimes, we can see this as a gendered consequence (as I suggested in placing Guo Xiaolu within the wider Private Writing turn in 1990s Chinese literary aesthetics, or in my reading of the macho libertarianism inherent in ideologies of urbexing). But whatever the original trigger may be, the evocation of the generative frontier is contingent on a journey that all its characters undertake. This sense of journeying is often multi-layered – for instance, consider how in *shanshui* art, the ideology of *woyou* is foregrounded to quite literally signify a kind of imaginary mental travelling triggered by the frontier, one which seeks to unlock for its creator some form of transcendence or redemption. But then, on another level too, this journey is not only one undertaken by the artist, but also the artwork's audience (literally represented by the play of distance enacted by these paintings).

The generative frontier as a space reimagines the intersections of the urban and the pastoral and in doing so, brings into being a new set of power relations (ostensibly empowering those seeking redemption from the pain of contemporary living). In this sense, we might suggest that it constitutes not only a space, but an ideology. But its way of thinking is far from that of, say, the French '68 slogan – "beneath the pavement, the beach" – but one which ostensibly prioritises the self-actualisation of those who traverse it. It is a space, as I have previously commented, "in which the ego reigns."

Consider the poverty and conservatism of some of its visions: Shanhong's self-actualisation in *Village of Stone* culminates in the material terms of a good life (and perhaps

rather sadly, forsaking her original state of slackerdom for the reassuring prospects of marriage, impending parenthood, and a good job), rather than the fulfilment of any actually utopian or radically charged desire (i.e. any outcome that might upset the actual status quo of existing things). Note, too, how a sense of narcissism emerges in the trigger points for seeking healing in the first place: for instance, in the manner in which Guo Xiaolu describes the act of writing *Village of Stone* as a healing process in of itself, or how the frustrations that beset the protagonist of her film *How Is Your Fish Today?* are actually, at least on the surface, feelings of writerly frustration. Look to how the urbexers of mainland China are careful (at least in how they discuss their practice) not to break legal restrictions in their hacking of the cityscape – the thrill of illegal trespass, it seems, is not for them, even if it is actually how so many of their intellectual counterparts define themselves (seen in this light, their infiltrations are performances without consequences). Note, too, in contemporary reformulations of *shanshui* art how the process of *woyou* is no longer about seeking some kind of higher enlightenment, of communing with the heavens – or even an act of retreat by a scholar-official who has fallen out of favour with his governmental superiors – but can be seen as an ultimately self-soothing characteristic (the cultivation of an ambient calm that might be seen as a coping mechanism).

However, as I have sought to demonstrate, the generative frontier should not be dismissed merely as an extractive or coping strategy for the tensions of life in the neoliberal city. We can trouble such an argument by returning to any of the works I have discussed in this thesis. Consider, as I have argued, how Yang Yongliang's intricate photocollages, in their puncturing of classical pastoralism, opens us up to the darkness (gesturing us towards Timothy Morton's critique of capital-N Nature); or look to the ways in which wildness and the wilderness are reframed in urbexers' image-making practices (as elements to be discovered within the tedium of the city). There is an important upending in these works of what a frontier has traditionally constituted: the dream of violence in *Village of Stone*, for instance – of its

protagonist scattering missiles at the source of her pain – ends in the realisation that this is nothing more than an act of self-harm. The space of the generative frontier is always unsettled and ambiguous, even threatening at times. It cannot be merely said to be a space of salvation or marginalisation, but instead fosters and is distinguished by a mood of "ambivalent calm" (to once again appropriate Paul Roquet's apt formulation). Within the generative frontier, we are never really sure where the threat of danger, or the release from it, might begin and end – by way of example, look at Yang's landscapes, in which the frontier space his works inhabit has been so comprehensibly reworked to the point that it is able to exude an ambiguity that is laced with both thrilling potential and deep foreboding.

This act of tripping up the viewer or reader carries on into the ways in which the generative frontier encourages an otherworldly, repetitive quality, further confounding us. For instance, objects may take on such qualities – the presence of the eel in Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone* for instance, which is a reminder of an unaddressed familial past (the presence of which proves so pungent that it quite literally must be confronted). Or consider also the ways in which disco balls and other sources of winking luminescence in Bi Gan's films form a point of repetition that attains a mediating quality. There is an image-cache quality to such works too: in the ways that we see the formal qualities of *shanshui* landscapes repeating themselves; or even in the seemingly infinite online cache of victorious hero-shots, zones of light, and gas masks that repeatedly imprint themselves on urbex photography. These are spaces whose organising ingredients seep in, repeatedly across time (the assortment of costumes that the photographer Zhao Yang tries on in his urbexing pictures, perennially discarding each, is an apt cipher for this). They become motifs within an overarching quest to write a story.

With this turn to acknowledging the generative frontier as a form of narrative-making, then the genre's treatment of the documentary form is particularly interesting too, since – on their surface – the inclusion of documentary elements in these works might seem to gesture

towards some measure of searching for the "real", or the idea that one day we may be able to see with eyes unclouded. Take, for instance, the English-language edition of Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone* which accentuates references to China's traumatic past; the in-real-life footage in her film *How Is Your Fish Today?*; the photoreal beginnings of Yang Yongliang's *shanshui* collages in which he maps the city via photography; or the explanation by Zhao Yang that the point of his UE photography is to "present our past".

And yet the liminal, nebulous zones these works inhabit typically trouble this vision and call it into question. As viewers, we ask ourselves (as when we look at the frequent plays of perspective and distance in contemporary urban-themed *shanshui*): what are we seeing here? They call our attention to the hazy connections between mind and sight – at once relying on our mind to fill in the gaps while knowing that we cannot trust our sight alone. Think of the haunting apparitions that make their way into Zhao Yang's images of abandoned spaces, that immediately reveal that he is no mere documentarian. Within the generative frontier, the process of construction is a deeply ambiguous one. Like all acts of artistic trickery, the act of deception – the play of reality and unreality – draws our attention to the means by which it was carried out (and ultimately, to call into question our own ways of seeing and thinking).

Understood in this light (the understanding that the art of the generative frontier is also the art of states of reality and unreality), the extent to which the pieces surveyed in this project demonstrate an intense taste for the autofictional and the metafictional is hardly surprising. We should ask questions about just why the space of the generative frontier has invoked this willingness on the part of their creators to produce constant slippages between the real and the fictional. For example, recall the intersections between *Village of Stone*'s account of personal trauma and its author Guo Xiaolu's own accounts of familial pain (and indeed Guo's own professed attention to the literary market) – her seeming inability to keep her own and her character's lives separate in her memoir and promotional material, or the constant haziness

over who the "real" Rao Hui might be in her film *How Is Your Fish Today?*. Consider also how the Scouts Urban Exploration members do not maintain a clear distinction between their heroic alter-egos and their "real" identities. And as we have seen, these metafictional elements can not only be seen within the works themselves, but in the twinning of works – the ways, for instance, in which the discussion of *Village of Stone* is incomplete without proper consideration of Guo Xiaolu's docufictional film *How Is Your Fish Today?*, or how Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* attains even stranger qualities when viewed alongside his "documentary" *Dong* in which the protagonist Sanming appears too, this time as the subject of a painter's gaze, drawing attention to Jia's deep interest in the artist-subject relation (and what this means for his own mode of artmaking).

I have demonstrated that the authors and artists discussed have wielded the generative frontier as a potent tool of narrative complexity: consider, for instance, how Guo's writing of *Village of Stone* gestures towards the constructive approaches of cinematic montage and the narrative complexity which that suggests – the implication, as it were, that we are seeing a piece of art being constructed and manipulated in real-time (we can also visualise this quite literally in the crossover of scriptwriting and real life within *How Is Your Fish Today?*). Recall the flaneur-like journeys that an artist like Yang Yongliang must embark upon to create his intricately constructed collages. Or even, for instance, the revival of interest in using the 1,500-year-old tradition of *shanshui* to reveal new truths about the state of contemporary China (the old ways of storytelling, these works seem to say, still have much to teach us, but in the process, we may also reveal truths about their original ideologies). Note the ways in which China's urban explorers carve out stories of thrill-seeking and adventure from the city's ruined edges – but in the evocation of blockbuster or videogame aesthetics in their UE image-making practices, draw attention to the artifice and playfulness of their original infiltrations (or, the characters that Zhao Yang assumes in his photography-as-performance-art practices). Finally, consider

the long-takes of Bi Gan, used within his films to define life in the frontier zone and its estranged temporalities, as well as to invoke multiple connections to cinematic history.

The generative frontier is about finding a source of healing, and moreover, it is about the process of making art about that healing. The city, and the gulf between the rural and the urban, need no longer be a source of melancholia, these works seem to say. In constantly drawing our attention to new ways of existing within this maelstrom, they ultimately attune their viewer to the processes of construction and regeneration themselves. One of the first works I discussed in this thesis was the potentially endless, loamy passage of Zheng Bo's *Weed Party*; one might say that its unceasing unspooling of vegetation also functions as a cipher for the unceasing unspooling of the human imagination that the generative frontier engenders.

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