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Annie Malcolm
Illustrations by Lauren Matthews

Urban Place Making/Performing Rural Memories

The Folk Memory Project at Caochangdi Workstation

In the summer of 2014, at Tsinghua University in Beijing, I gave a paper to my Chinese language classmates and instructors introducing Caochangdi Workstation and its Folk Memory Project. It was an act of translation, both from one language into another and of experience into discourse. Figure 1 is the lecture in Chinese and Figure 2 its translation into English.

By presenting my lecture first, I seek to destabilize linear order, bringing the event itself as closely into the timespace of the analysis as possible. Like trauma, which is a retrospective category, analysis occurs after the event. Here, I produce three modes of translation and repetition of Caochangdi as conceived and re-conceived through multiple registers and forms of representation. Documenting the process of thrice interpreting lends itself to Caochangdi Workstation, a site that similarly mediates between the multiplicities which are meaningfully interwoven through the art that takes place there—the rural-urban dynamic, the past and the present—and the body existing in time and space (Figure 3-4).

Opposite: figure 1: *Triptych* illustration provided by author.

草场地工作站

今天我要给大家介绍北京的一个地方叫草场地工作站。大体上说，草场地工作站是一个位于北京草场地艺术村里的拍纪录片的工作室。可是和其他的画室很不一样，有很多特色。那儿有剪接房，剧场，厨房，图书馆，宿舍和院子。首先，草场地工作站的主要的计划，即“民间记忆计划”是一种民族志，它把艺术，历史和人们的生平连在了一起。其二，草场地工作站的环境让那儿的人的日常生活变得很特别。我先来说一下“民间记忆计划”的发起人吴文光，然后会说一说它的内容，最后会描述草场地工作站的环境。

纪录片导演吴文光是草场地的创办人。他是一九五六年生在云南出生的，被誉为中国独立纪录片之父因为他自己手持摄像机拍摄，采访的时候没有大纲。吴文光自己拍的片子里有叙述，舞蹈和表演。五年以前他开始了“民间记忆计划”，他把八十年代出生的原意参加这个计划的年轻人送到他们老家或者父母的老家跟爷爷奶奶做采访，主要是关于他们一九五九年到一九六一年三年自然灾害期间的经历。这些人不在农村的时候住在草场地工作站剪接和做一些关于他们的采访情况的表演。每年草场地举办两次艺术节给很多中国和国际客人展示他们的作品。表演在草场地工作站的剧场里，包括片段，舞蹈和讲话给人看这个历史计划和他们自己的经验。

“民间记忆计划”之所以有意义是因为中国的历史课本从不详细深入地谈这个时期，所以片子创造了一个另类的历史。在一九五八年，政府把所有的村子都变成“人民公社”家庭的土地和牲畜变成了公有的，人们都需要到食堂吃饭。可是政府报错了作物产量，所以食物不够，被饿死的人多达四千万。老人回忆他们亲戚的死，很多人述说失去兄弟姐妹的记忆，有意思的是他们用平实的语言说很心酸的往事，但是很动人。他们说没有饭可吃，总是感觉非常饿。他们也谈到煮树皮吃的事，去外面扒树皮，挖野菜，煮一下，就吃。要是不吃这样的东西就得饿死。食堂分配给每个人的饭特别少，只有干部有足够的食物，其他的人都得挨饿。同时政府宣传共产主义，在报纸上宣布，要是人民提高钢的产量便能达到共产主义，超过美国和英国。拍摄者问，“你们当时反对吗？”老人说，“要是你反对，离死就不远了。”

老人说的话被拍成了几百个小时的片子。每个年轻人都在农村呆了几个月，甚至几年，收集了很多故事，材料也都遇到了一些不愿意做采访的老人，说他们太老了，已经不记得了，没有有意思的话可以说，太难看了或者说不清楚。拍摄者的父母很多都反对孩子去做这件事，说“你从大学毕业了，为什么不找真正的工作，回农村干吗？中国历史上的灰暗时期你不应该再去深究，只管挣钱就好了，不要闹事！”虽然发生这个跟父母的隔阂但是这些人还是主动去了农村，为了收集老人的记忆，也为了能在这些记忆中找到自己。

草场地工作站之所以很特别是因为他们在那儿剪接片子的同时也在那儿吃新鲜的刚在厨房里作出的饭，还有每天大家都参加舞蹈剧场表演活动。草场地工作站是一个村，大家都带着一样的目标，在一起吃，工作，跳舞，睡觉，学习，生活，就像一个大家庭一样。我今天的演讲就到这里，要是大家有问题可以提出来。

Caochangdi ("Pasture Village") Workstation

Today I will introduce a place called Caochangdi Workstation. Broadly speaking, Caochangdi Workstation is a documentary film studio located in Beijing's Caochangdi Art Village. But it's not like other art studios; it has many special qualities. There is an editing room, a theatre, a kitchen, a library, a workshop and a courtyard. First, Caochangdi Workstation's main project, "Folk Memory Project," is a kind of ethnography, bringing together art, history and people's life stories. Second, Caochangdi Workstation's environment changes the lives of its residents. First I'll discuss Caochangdi Workstation and Folk Memory Project's founder, Wu Wenguang, then the content of the project, and finally, Caochangdi Workstation as a place.

Documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang is the founder of Caochangdi Workstation. Born in 1956 in Yunnan Province, he is known as the father of independent documentary film in China because he uses a hand-held camera and conducts non-scripted interviews. Wu Wenguang's own films combine narrative, dance and performance. Five years ago Wu started Folk Memory Project, sending interested and willing twenty-something's to their home villages, or their parents' home villages, to interview their grandparents, particularly about the Great Famine of 1959-1961. When these young people are not in the countryside, they are at Caochangdi Workstation editing their films and doing performances related to their documentary findings. Twice a year Caochangdi Workstation hosts a festival to show their work to Chinese people and foreigners. The performances, in Caochangdi's theatre, combine film footage, dance and spoken narrative to portray to the audience this history and their own experience.

Folk Memory Project is meaningful because China's history textbooks do not discuss this period in detail; these films construct a kind of alternative history. In 1958, the government turned all the villages into "people's communes;" families' land and crops became public property, and everyone had to go to the canteen to eat meals. But the government was falsely reporting the crop production quantities, so there was not enough food, ultimately costing forty-five million lives. The old people interviewed recall their relative's deaths and the loss of siblings. Using simple language to talk about the misery of the past, the passages are moving. They say they didn't have food to eat, and always felt extremely hungry. Many also talk about eating boiled tree bark, saying they'd go outside, peel the bark off a tree, pick some wild greens, boil and eat them. If you didn't eat those things, you'd starve to death. The food distributed at the canteen was very scant; only the cadres ever had enough to eat, everyone else went hungry. At the same time, the government was propagating communism, announcing in the newspapers that if the people increased iron production, they could achieve communism and surpass the United States and England. "Did you object?" a filmmaker asks. "If you objected you were as good as dead," the old person answers.

The old people's accounts amassed into hundreds of hours of footage. Every young person spent months, even years, gathering these stories and materials, and some also encountered old people who were unwilling to be interviewed, saying they were too old and couldn't remember, that they didn't have anything interesting to say, that they were too ugly, that they couldn't explain clearly. The filmmakers' parents also objected to their children doing this project, saying "you've graduated from college, why don't you want a real job? What are you doing going back to the village? You shouldn't do an in-depth investigation of China's darkest period in history, just make money and it'll be fine, don't make trouble!" Despite this estrangement from parents, these young people are still moved to go to the villages, to collect the old people's stories, and in these stories, find themselves.

Caochangdi Workstation is special because when the filmmakers are editing, they also participate in a movement workshop every morning and eat food made fresh in the kitchen. Caochangdi Workstation is a village, everyone there shares an intention and together they work, eat, dance, sleep, learn and live. That's all for today's lecture, please feel free to ask questions.

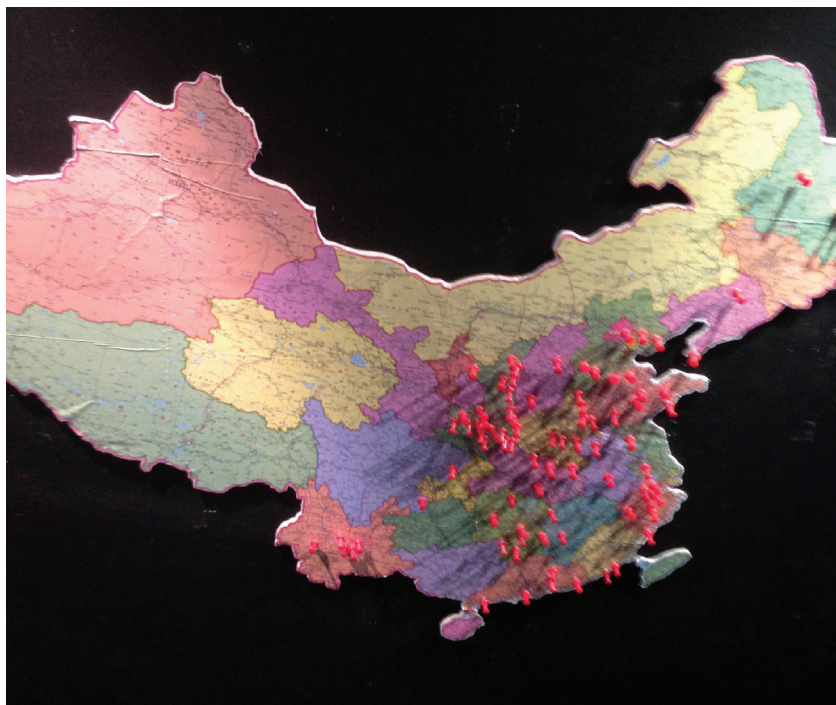


Figure 3

There are four parts to this piece—three illustrations, my original lecture in Chinese, its translation, and my ethnographic analysis.

The first illustration is a map of Beijing with Caochangdi and 798 highlighted in order to visualize the design of Beijing and the locations of the art villages within the city. Beijing has various types of urban forms, configurations of neighborhoods, and rapid gentrification, allowing people to live and practice art in ways and spaces that are constantly emergent. One such form, not unique to Beijing, but particular, in certain respects, to China, is the art village. Art villages do not occur in a singular way, rather, there are variations. In the mid-1980s, Chinese artists began working in abandoned houses near the Old Summer



Figure 4

Palace. In the mid-nineteen nineties they were evicted from there and started moving into the Factory District where 798 Art Zone now stands. Caochangdi, in the Northwest of Beijing, neighbors 798 (Figure 5).

The second illustration is a timeline of the events relevant to the Folk Memory Project, both Chinese historical events and my own ethnographic moments. For the sake of contextual clarity, this story begins in 1949 with Mao Zedong and the establishment of the People's Republic of China. In 1958, according to state policy, villages were converted into People's communes, followed by a three-year famine. The subsequent three decades saw the beginning and end of the Cultural Revolution, and Reform and Opening under Deng Xiaoping. In the

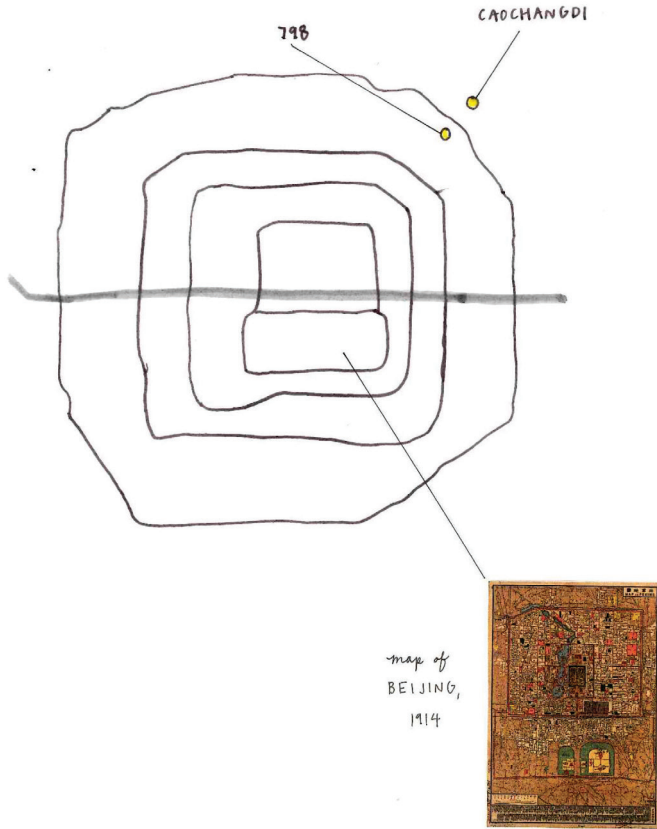


Figure 5: Map. Illustration by Lauren Matthews.

eighties and nineties, the art village movement arose, and, in 2010, the Folk Memory Project began. My account begins in 2014, with this lecture, in which I discuss the work of the artists at Caochangdi, spanning four years, and their mining of a roughly 60-year history. My analysis concludes in the year 2015. This is a story about time, and an exploration in self-reflexivity through form; the temporal content of the art practice demanding a temporally aware register. By inserting

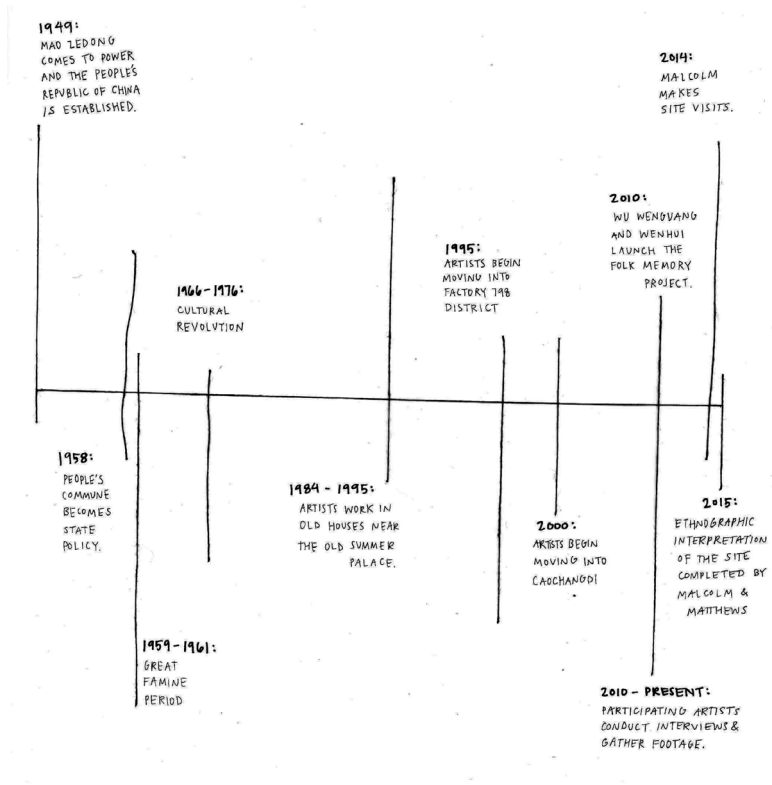


Figure 6: Timeline. Illustration by Lauren Matthews.

myself into the story, I add a second performance and a third historical narrative (Figure 6).

The third illustration, “Place That Weep,” is the illustrator’s, Lauren Matthews, interpretation of the overarching themes -- the past, the urban pilgrimage, time and space compression, the burden of memory, and the aesthetics of the footage. In this picture, the map of China became a figure of a weeping pilgrim as the artist worked through the idea that

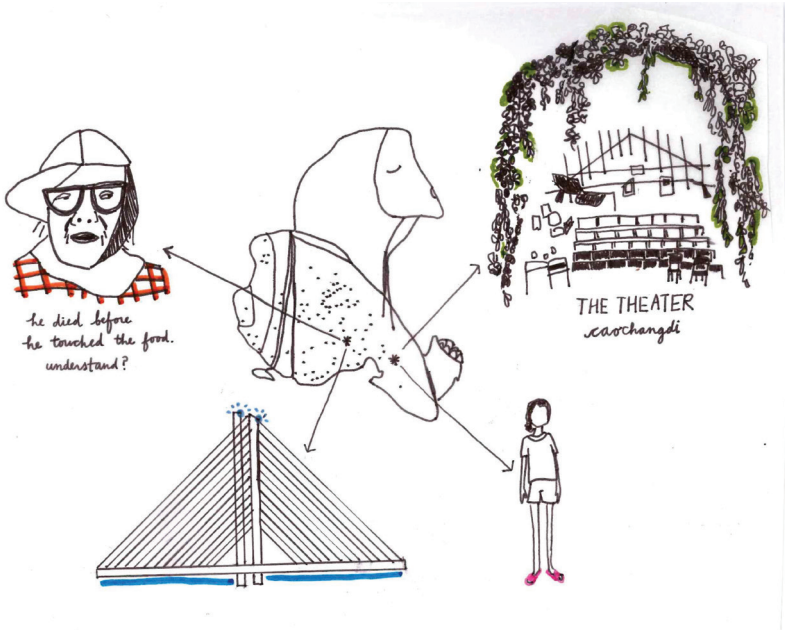


Figure 7: Places that weep. Illustration by Lauren Matthews.

places themselves remember. As with W.J.T. Mitchell's wanting image, the space itself demanded to be an actor in a process of memorialization. Created through a series of dialogues with Matthews, the illustrations mediate my interpretation of the space (Figure 7).

This site is presented in the form of a triptych, an originally religious form, in a piece about a pilgrimage, a typically religious journey. Most obviously, the triptych, a form arising in early Christian art, places this story in conversation with iconography, which has deep implications for reflecting on the Socialist period using visual methods. Mao Zedong demolished China's visual landscape of all images but that of himself. The triptych, parallel to the parodic forms utilized by Chinese contemporary art, especially in the 1990s, serves as a prod at the iconoclasm of the Mao period. It also folds into my understanding of the Folk Memory

Project as a story of three generations: the artists, their estranged and disapproving parents, and the elderly informants, whose voices and faces appear in the hours of footage at the Workstation. Finally, the triptych is about my position as an ethnographer, a translator and an analyst of the visual in three languages: Chinese, English, and illustration. It makes my process of interpretation visible, and mimics the work of the artists who, by offering live presentations about their experiences in the field, continually expose their own methods (Figure 8—title figure).

Ethnographic Analysis

Participation in the Folk Memory Project produces a reversal of the migration from the countryside to the city, which dominates the historical moment in which the project is situated. Like relational aesthetics, which is art practice that employs the social as its medium, the Folk Memory Project uses history as its medium, gathering ingredients, through ethnographic methods, for art production. Participation, in this urban context, creates a space of togetherness, unlike the anonymous existence that is possible in a city as large as Beijing. Beyond the daily habits instilled by group living, participation also transforms the artists by changing their minds about methods of historical understanding, their relationships with their parents and their plans for the future. On a small scale, the site of Caochangdi Workstation alters the possibilities of its inhabitants. The artists enter the space, leave and come back to it, repeatedly, as a part of their residency, and, ultimately, leave changed.

Recent debates prompt thinking about the possibility that art, or what Marianne Hirsch calls, “aesthetic encounters,” may be more effective than monuments at memorializing. In China, cities have histories of trauma; they are themselves monuments to a recent past characterized by destruction and construction. In the past 60 years, urban space in China has been witness to depopulation and then repopulation with

rapid, expansive urbanization. Urban sites in China have an undeniable newness; an effect of post-socialism; they are populated by massive numbers of people who have migrated from rural places. Robin Visser writes, "Urban Chinese will never again be rooted. Yet, aesthetic solutions can create a sense of place through attention to lived, historical space, in turn mitigating the capitalist violence and 'mechanical reproduction' so prevalent in the global city." (Visser: 2010: 81-83).

The artists participating in the Folk Memory Project arrive at Caochangdi from elsewhere and then make it a home precisely by leaving. They are recent college graduates, some with dance backgrounds, some history, others have worked in theatre in China or abroad. The Folk Memory Project brings a set of rural experiences from the past into a contemporary urban space. This (dis)placement is an instantiation of what Walter Benjamin calls, "putting the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself." (Benjamin: 1936: 218). By depicting narratives of the great famine period, the Folk Memory Project addresses a traumatic period; in that sense it is like a treatment for trauma; the media it employs represent a reanimation of these rarely told stories.

It is also resonant with the sensory component of live performance essential to Wu Wenguang's work. Wu employs embodied acts, for example the swallowing of excessive wads of toilet paper in his film, called "Treatment," to express the feelings evoked by the care provided for his mother as she died. Encounters like these force viewers into kinetic empathy, feeling nauseous, violated, full, scratched, by such images, embodying what Wu may have felt during his mother's passing.

The Folk Memory Project represents a compression of time. The artists, in a migratory process mimetic of the movement of the sent down youth during the Mao period and an inversion of the urban migration characterizing the reform period, construct an alternative

history to the state sanctioned narrative. The project reformulates memory through performance and raises questions about form and representation. Because the memories are being presented in a mediated form (not directly by those who experienced the trauma) and because they are presented through a hybrid media, they are apt, as Marianne Hirsch (who would, perhaps, call this work post-post-memory) has suggested, to confronting catastrophe. When I asked Wu what the relationship is between the two forms, dance and film, the footage and the live performances with which they were mixed, he expressed ambiguity, describing a kind of magic by which the two exist alongside and mutually constitute each other. Rather than having a defined connection, the bodies of the filmmakers and the moving pictures they make are in the action of flowing, assembling, undoing, redefining and continual seeking.

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