

Yugong Yishan: Myth, Utopia, and Community in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the way in which the fable *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* (*Yugong yishan* 愚公移山) has informed the creative output of a range of major Chinese artists (Xu Beihong, Zhang Lin, Zhang Huan, and He Yunchang) over a period spanning the 1940s to the present. Drawing on the field of art history, it examines a variety of works that, despite responding to different or even antithetical positionings, demonstrate a utopian belief in the potentiality of the community or the collective, where perseverance and audacity are able to transform what seems impossible. These seemingly absurd artworks evince the audacity of these artists, as well as their determination to participate in communal projects aimed at changing society through symbolic interventions.

KEYWORDS: *Yugong yishan*, Xu Beihong, Zhang Lin, Zhang Huan, He Yunchang, utopia, modern and contemporary Chinese art.

Introduction

This article explores different artistic practices referring directly to *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* (*Yugong yishan* 愚公移山) included in the book *Lie Zi* 列子, a story attributed to the Taoist philosopher Lie Yukou 列禦寇 (IV BCE).¹ The text narrates the story of an old man who lived in Northern China and explains how each time he left his village he had to go around two large mountains. This elderly man, Yugong, gathered all the members of his family and proposed that they remove the mountains to open an easier path. They all agreed to work on the project, and a neighbour and her young child helped, too. However, some people in the village laughed at their undertaking and told the old man that his efforts were useless and his plan impossible to achieve. Yugong answered that even if he died without seeing it, his children and the children of his children would benefit from it. This paper examines the ways in which this fable has informed the work of a range of Chinese artists from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The artworks have been selected from different historical periods – ranging from the 1940s to the present – and also from various artistic languages, such as paintings, posters, and performance art, to delve into the similarities and differences in possible approaches to this myth. Questions of utopia and community in modern and contemporary Chinese art are discussed in relation to this fable, examining both the interpretation and reappropriation of symbols from different political perspectives, ultimately unveiling a polyphony of readings. The artworks and performances studied draw on this utopia and show a desire to establish close relationships between the individual and the social body, and belong to a utopian tradition in Chinese art. By looking at a selection of important artworks by Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 (1895–1953), Zhang Lin 張林 (1948–), Zhang Huan 張洵 (1965–), and He Yunchang 何雲昌 (1967–) that both

physically and metaphorically move and elevate mountains, lakes, and rivers, I seek to demonstrate how these artists transform the environment in which they live by means of intervening directly in the real world, and what it entails in terms of the status of individual and social bodies, from discipline to resistance. Influences of the 1919 May Fourth Movement (*Wusi xin wenhua yundong* 五四新文化運動) can be observed in the artistic production of the 1940s, particularly in the representations of the myth by Xu Beihong painting bodies of different ages, physiques, and nationalities working together to achieve a common goal during the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War (Janicot 2007). During the Cultural Revolution, disciplined and instrumentalised bodies at the service of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were represented in posters and paintings such as *Today's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes* (1975) by Zhang Lin (Ashton 2010). Upon the death of Mao, when artists recovered more freedom, they did so under the motto “give us back our bodies,” in particular by using performance art (Zhang Nian 2013). In this article, I take into account the relationship between myth and rite – be it current or ancestral – and the capacity of human beings to undertake metaphorical actions in order to transcend reality. These are the underlying ideas in the initiatives of a variety of artists where *belief* becomes essential, even though the feats they present might be either utopian or impossible. In other words, *wanting* and *believing* are a fundamental aspect of all ritual and cooperative enterprise (Maisonneuve 1991). Interdisciplinary in its approach, this article draws on art theory and criticism, as well as interviews with art historians, curators, and artists to analyse the use of this myth in Chinese art.

1. The book *Lie Zi* includes the story “El viejo loco que removió las montañas” (The foolish old man who removed the mountains) in the chapter “Tang Wen: preguntas de Tang” (Tang Wen: Tang’s questions) (2006: 79). This narration can be related to other Taoist texts, being an example of Lao Zi’s reflection about the power of the water that erodes the stones with the passing of time.

The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains: Revolutionary heroes and disciplined bodies

Xu Beihong's painting *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*² (1940) captures the relationship between man and nature as well as the symbolism ascribed to this famous character. To better understand this influential artwork, we need to look closer at the painter's biography and the historical context in which he was working. Xu Beihong was a key figure because of both his political engagement and his efforts to renew traditional Chinese painting, using Western techniques and drawing on French Romanticism and Realism. His commitment to politics coupled with a willingness to experiment with other artistic languages have their roots in his participation in the May Fourth Movement. Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, one of the intellectuals and theorists of this movement, proposed a "Chinese republican aesthetics" that defended art as having a reformatory function (Janicot 2007: 73). In this "modernist utopia," as Janicot suggested, artists drew from Western art in order to reformulate artistic creation that was in accord with a new society, one that aspired to depart from the Confucian order after the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911. This new republican ideology attempted to juxtapose modernity, art, and science with their own nationalist and political programme to transform society (*ibid.*). Xu Beihong studied French at the Jesuit Aurore University (Shanghai) in 1915, and in 1917 he travelled to Japan. Between 1920 and 1924 he studied oil painting at the École nationale des beaux-arts in Paris, and when he returned to China in 1927, he started teaching and took the directorship of various art institutes. He authored a range of articles, among which there are texts in which he overtly rejects Manet, Cézanne, and Matisse (*ibid.*: 68). There were discrepancies within the group of artists participating in the May Fourth Movement, since while Xu Beihong directed his gaze to European tradition and questioned avant-garde experimental practices, Liu Haisu 劉海粟 fervently defended post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Expressionism. Despite the prizes awarded to these artists during the 1950s, in the course of the Cultural Revolution, a substantial part of their artistic production was destroyed because the hybridisation of Chinese tradition and avant-garde artistic languages was considered elitist (Comentale 2010: 29).

The artists associated with the May Fourth Movement were involved in social and political renewal, and during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), Xu Beihong tried to breathe some hope into the Chinese population facing the aggressions of the Japanese. His work *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains* has to be contextualised in this belligerent framework, since it was created during his stay in Darjeeling. Rabindranath Tagore, the president of the Sino-Indian Cultural Society, invited Xu Beihong to organise a series of exhibitions and talks, and it was during this period – which coincided with Mahatma Gandhi's – that he produced a painting of the myth of Yugong as a metaphor for the tenacity of the Chinese population who resisted the Japanese invasion. With regards to this, Éric Janicot stresses the relevance of social consciousness in artistic creation (2007: 79).

In *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*, the artist captures the fable with realism, showing the perseverance of a variety of people in their task to move mountains.³ Xu Beihong represented men of various ages and builds, naked or wearing an Indian *dhoti*, inspired by sketches he drew of various Indians during his stay in Kolkata. The painting includes Indian cultural elements, such as the elephant, which are juxtaposed with the buffalo, bamboo plants, and the figures of an old man and of a young woman that are evocative of China. In this way, the artist brought together a variety of references and techniques of the Western, Indian, and Chinese traditions.

The painting engages with the ideology and socio-political context of China, using the Yugong myth to convey the efforts and difficulties of the Chinese population facing Japanese attacks. Likewise, on 11 June 1945, five years after Xu Beihong painted *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*, Mao Zedong 毛澤東 concluded his speech at the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China by recalling this myth:

Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?⁴

Poster art and political mobilisation in Zhang Lin's Today's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes (1975)

It is important to observe the impact of Mao Zedong's speech at the Yan'an Forum (1942), where he presented the basis of what he considered art at the service of the revolution as well as the collective.⁵ In the 1950s, Maoist imagery proliferated and transformed posters and other representations in political documents that aimed to transmit communist ideology to the population (Evans and Donald 1999). During the three decades of Maoist power, Western avant-garde art and techniques were no longer in favour, whereas artists were encouraged to emulate Soviet artistic sources. The strict control of artistic production was made manifest in the construction of a dominant visual discourse: the images were directed to the masses, using a realist language that enabled identification, since there was a high level of illiteracy amongst the population. One example of this are paintings produced by Huxian (戶縣) farmers trained by artists who had been sent to rural areas. With their amateur aesthetics far removed from the elitist bourgeois intellectuals, they symbolise the expressive power of the revolution undertaken by the working class, the soldiers, and the farmers.⁶

These premises materialise in Zhang Lin's *Today's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes* (1975).⁷ This work consists of four images in two posters that

2. For full details on the artworks, please refer to the list at the end of the article.
3. The re-writing of fables and mythic episodes of history can also be found in his work *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* (1930), based on *Records on the Historian* (Shiji 史記), where he represents the suicide of Prince Tian Heng, who reigned over the Qi state during the Han dynasty, upon being ordered by the emperor to surrender. His 500 warriors also committed suicide (Comentale 2010: 52).
4. Mao Tse-tung, "The Foolish Old Man who Removed the Mountains," Transcription by the Maoist Documentation Project, 11 June 1945 revised 2004 by Marxists.org, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_26.htm (accessed on 8 February 2021).
5. Mao Tse-tung, "Talks at the Yan'an forum on literature and art," Transcription by the Maoist Documentation Project, May 1942 revised 2004 by Marxists.org, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm (accessed on 8 February 2021).
6. Mao's wife Jiang Qing 江青 said that the paintings by the farmers of Huxian – trained in 1958 by artists such as Chen Shipeng 陳世鵬 – should be an example to follow because of their celebration of the values of the party (Ashton 2010).
7. Hong Kong University Library Art Collections translates the title of this artwork as *New Picture of Contemporary Yu Gong* (Dangdai Yu Gong hui xin tu 當代愚公繪新圖); <http://bcc.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/artcollection/k27-018> (accessed on 10 September 2020). However this differs from the title proposed by Ashton (2010): *Today's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes*. Moreover, the Hong Kong University Library Art Collections mentions two authors: Cheng Misheng 程敏生 and Zhang Lin. There are also discrepancies with regards to the date of the work, with the Hong Kong University Library Art Collections indicating the date as 1974 and the Ashton article the year 1975. These two posters were produced by the Huxian group, which promoted the role of the community and was opposed to individual authorship.

evoke the temporal sequence of the construction of irrigation channels and the celebration at the end of the construction. This artwork illustrates the CCP's ideology, which uses the myth of Yugong to teach social behaviours to their followers through the images of Zhang Lin, using the symbolic language of the myth for political propaganda purposes, and as such, it needs to be studied in the Cultural Revolution context. The fable of Yugong in these posters appears anew to stress the power of the collective to transform reality and to achieve, in this case, abundant crops thanks to the modernisation of agriculture. As Maurice Meisner notes, Mao's 1966 speech about Yugong was canonised as "one of the three constantly read articles"⁸ that synthesise the essence of Maoist desire to value effort, austerity, diligence, perseverance, and self-discipline (Meisner 1968: 101-2), as well as confidence in future achievements (*ibid.*: 104).

The allusions to the fable of Yugong in the artwork of Xu Beihong and Zhang Lin respond to separate historical periods. Two clear formal differences reveal that Xu was free to experiment, while Zhang couldn't. In his paintings, the former was able to bring together Chinese tradition with the new styles and techniques that he had learned from his travels around Europe. The work of Zhang Lin instead follows the themes and style promoted by Mao, which understood art as an instrument of political propaganda.

In Xu Beihong's work, the myth of Yugong can be read as a metaphor for the efforts of the Chinese population during the war against Japan, and at the same time, it can also symbolise the Maoist impulse towards modernisation in rural areas.⁹ In Zhang Lin's work, the revolutionary iconography is performed by young, heroic, and exultant bodies that appear exhilarated in their determination to achieve socialist reform. These revolutionary bodies are the ones that appear in the posters that were used for political propaganda purposes during the last three decades of Mao's power. It is important to note that Zhang Lin emphasises the work of a "collective body," showing how a large group of anonymous people bring together their forces to achieve a common goal. The actors of such representations do not show any tiredness or fatigue since, as Zhang Hong 張宏 notes, "*The enemy is the body*, which produces evidence of counter-revolution such as hunger, fatigue, fear, and disease" (Zhang Hong 2013: 20). The communist individual embodies the revolutionary Maoist values that are at the service of the CCP, ultimately rendering them alienated subjects. Meisner exposes the problem of self-alienation in the "prototype of communist man:"

For the "red and expert," (...) "self-consciousness" is not self-realization but the internalization of prescribed values and norms of behaviour. "Freedom" is essentially self-disciplined service on behalf of the party and its organizations, not the free realization and free expression of the individual human personality. (...) But if the "red and expert" of the present is the prototype of the "communist man" of the future, the prospects for personal freedom are something less than promising (1968: 108).

In the same vein, Zhang Hong also reflects on the revolutionary subject's internalisation of values and norms and warns of the Maoist period's expropriation of their bodies:

The "revolutionary body" was established as a model for the public. As the revolution's slogan went, "Communist Party members are made of special material." They were considered not simply as

ordinary beings, but as superhuman, combining revolutionary will with a robust constitution. (...) One of the most popular slogans during the course of the Chinese revolution, "A healthy body is the capital of the revolution," clearly defines the link between the body and the revolution. The revolution was like a business. The initial investment was the expropriation of people's bodies. Through large-scale political mobilization and successive grassroots campaigns, every individual's body was organized, reformed, disciplined, and absorbed into a powerful network, through which the revolutionary will could be realized more effectively (2013: 29).

Zhang Hong contrasts these legitimate and normative bodies modelled by a political power with the determination of certain artists that resist this appropriation:

Artists subject themselves to a destructive moulding of the body in order to resist external political power and the expropriation and disciplining of the body. (...) They encounter the condemnation, derision, and rejection of officialdom, the public and the intellectual elite alike (2013: 38).

In this new scenario, after the end of three decades of Maoist power, intellectuals and artists began to challenge the control to which they had been subjected:

In the name of humanism, the occurrence of the contemporary in China secretly disseminates the most fundamental desire – a kind of fundamental plea: return our bodies. And, in political and economic arenas, this has opened up the complexity of contemporary issues (Zhang Nian 2013: 21).

While the May Fourth ideals transpired in Xu Beihong's rendition of Yugong's myth, heroic, disciplined, and "expropriated" bodies (Zhang Hong 2013: 29) predominate in Cultural Revolution artworks on the same topic. Evidently, these bodies, "dominated" and "disciplined by hegemonic power" (Bourdieu 1986: 185), are "social products" (Foucault 1975) of their time. As the following section demonstrates, the development of performance art in the 1990s constitutes attempts to reclaim the body through action in a move that will transform these "disciplined bodies" into "subversive" ones.

Moving mountains, lakes and rivers: Reclaiming the body in action art

After the death of Mao in 1976 and the Open Door Policy implemented by Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 from 1978, a new wave of avant-garde and experimental artists appeared, eager to explore the relative freedom

8. The other two most read and memorised speeches during the Cultural Revolution were "In Memory of Norman Bethune," *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*: Transcription by the Maoist Documentation Project, 21 December 1939 revised 2004 by *Marxists.org*, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_25.htm (accessed on 8 February 2021), and "Serve the People," Mao Tse-tung's speech in memory of Chang Szu-teh, Transcription by the Maoist Documentation Project, 8 September 1954 revised 2004 by *Marxists.org*, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_19.htm (accessed on 8 February 2021).
9. Judith Shapiro in her book *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* quotes the Maoist maxim "Man must conquer nature" (2001: 64).

recently found. During the 1980s and 1990s, these artists worked together in communities and established new means of expression at the margins of the directives of officialdom (Galikowski 1998: 183). While the numerous avant-garde collectives that appeared in the 1980s had recovered the possibility to experiment that had been lost during the Maoist period, in the 1990s after the Tian'anmen massacre there was a return to the repressive politics that would directly affect experimental art and its critical nature (Li 1993).

In what follows, I will explore the use of the body in a range of works by various performance artists, such as Zhang Huan (1965) and He Yunchang (1967), who reinterpret the myth of Yugong from a different angle and propose actions that elevate and move mountains, lakes, and rivers. These artists question the structures of power that impose normative bodies. Zhang Huan and He Yunchang show their own bodies, exposing both their fragility and potential, as well as presenting their work as a departure point towards critical thought. The performances of Zhang Huan and He Yunchang analysed here make manifest the virtues of perseverance and the audacity to transform the impossible that are characteristic of the myth of Yugong.

Before focusing on the reclaiming of the body in action art, it should be noted that the Chinese term for performance art (*xingwei yishu* 行為藝術) means the "art of behaviour." Art historian Gao Minglu 高名潞 stresses that in Chinese culture the relationship between individual and society is fundamental because it is a sociopolitical aspect proposed by Confucianism (Zhang 2001: 270). He emphasises that the "art of behaviour" exceeds artistic values and enters the field of politics and ethics:

What is different between Chinese *body art* and *performance* or the "art of behavior" is that for Chinese people the body is not individual, it is already collective, already ritualized, it has already been socialized and politicized. It is a long tradition that originates from Confucius, there was no individual body in Confucianism because it always belonged to a collective.¹⁰

Gao Minglu finds some similarities in the works of Zhang Huan, He Yunchang, and other artists who undertake performative actions with a ritualistic structure. The author stresses the social and symbolic dimension of ritual and notes that silence is one of the characteristics of Chinese performance. In so doing, Gao Minglu links silence with ancestor worship, where allegory and gesture are used instead of verbal communication.¹¹ Indeed, Gao Minglu underlines the ability of performance art by appealing to audiences at an emotional level:

Traditional art forms, such as painting and sculpture, require some audience sophistication. Performance art however is able to more directly communicate with its audience through a much more direct and comprehensible way through its use of the human body. For this reason, it has been regarded as a form of dangerous social subversion by Chinese officials and conservatives. Since performance art has always had such a strong ability to emotionally move an audience through its unconventional form, it has never been permitted in China. But this type of taboo or ban has effectively encouraged artists to choose the performance art medium to express their social critiques (2001: 270-71).

Another art historian, Thomas J. Berghuis, states in relation to the "art of behaviour" that in Chinese tradition there is no split between the body and the mind:

The historical discourse of performance art practice in China frontloads the concepts of "behaviour" and "action"; both of which are implied in the Chinese term for performance art, *xingwei yishu*. Such a discourse highlights the role of the body/self as both the object and subject of performance. An introduction to the cultural-historical position of ritual action in the Chinese tradition, helps illuminate the position of the body in relation to behavioural action (2006: 65).

This discourse can be directly related to the expropriation of the revolutionary bodies noted above and with the decision of the artists that work in action art to reclaim their own bodies. The artists wish to recover their bodies, their identities, and to question pre-established models. This desire to experiment and to go beyond hegemonic canons caused Chinese performance art to become clandestine, because the themes and use of naked bodies were penalised by a repressive government that censored experimental art exhibitions and detained artists.¹² An example of this is when Ma Liuming 馬六明 was arrested by the police and most of his work was confiscated when he performed *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch II* in 1994. Zhu Ming 朱冥 was also arrested when the police found photographs of his performances featuring his naked body. Ma Liuming and Zhu Ming were imprisoned for three and four months, respectively, and were charged with producing and distributing pornography. Further, they were also charged with not having a valid ID-card to reside in Beijing (Berghuis 2006: 110). Taru Salmenkari stresses these ideas quoting the artist Rong Rong 荣荣 and the art historian and curator Wu Hung 巫鴻:

Some art forms are necessarily public, including the process of creation. This is one reason for the authorities' intolerance towards performance art, leading to the arrests of prominent performance artists and closure of an artist village in the east village. (Rong Rong and Wu Hung, *Rong Rong's East Village 1993-1998*, Beijing, 2003, In Salmenkari 2004: 243-4)

Action art turned into an instrument to question specific conflicts and a repressive government. Examples of the artists' willingness to use their own bodies to reclaim a space for expression and reflection can be found in the actions *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995) (see Image 1), by the artistic community Beijing East Village,¹³ and in the collective performance *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997) by Zhang Huan.

10. Interview of Gao Minglu by Laia Manonelles Moner, June 2008, Barcelona.

11. *Ibid.*

12. "One way to avoid censorship was to arrange exhibitions privately or outside galleries. Some took place in rented houses or cellars. Although the date may have been known within art circles much earlier, the location and exact time of the opening were kept secret until the last moment" (Salmenkari 2004: 247).

13. The emergence of the community Beijing East Village (*Beijing dong cun* 北京東村 1993-1997) consolidated action art in China. Beijing East Village was the name of a village in the periphery of Beijing where Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming, Rong Rong, Duan Yingmei 段英梅, Cang Xin and other artists started working with their bodies after seeing an action by Gilbert and George in 1993.



Beijing East Village 北京東村 . 1995. 為無名山增高一米 (Wei Wuming Shan Zenggao yi Mi, To Add one Meter to an Anonymous Mountain). Performance. China. Photo: Lü Nan. Courtesy of Duan Yingmei.

Zhang Huan proposes *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* as a group performance, executed by ten artists of the collective Beijing East Village, in which the idea of achieving the impossible is explored.¹⁴ During the process of this action, the artists undressed, weighed themselves, and proceeded to form a pyramidal structure with their bodies. Finally, a collaborator measured the centimetres that the mountain had grown. Cang 蒼鑫, who participated in the performance, explains:

When we performed this action, we were all poor. The community did not accept us; we were strange and the police always checked us. We were all very frustrated. We did this performance in March; it was very cold and during the action we were excited but also felt desolate. We did not know what would happen. We were sad doing the performance and because we were so poor we had to borrow money from our friends to pay people to take us there and to do the measurements. We were all afraid of being arrested by the police. During the process we were nervous. This is one of China's heroic artworks. It is representative of heroism. The action *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* has many interpretations (Manonelles Moner 2011: 30-1).

Zhang Huan uses metaphorical language to incarnate certain myths. The artist reveals:

These works were a necessity for me. The mountain and pond pieces referred back to my need for the countryside. *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* was inspired by an old saying, "beyond the mountains, there are more mountains," which is about humility. Climb this mountain and you will find an even bigger mountain in front of you. *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* was an extension of this idea. It's about changing the natural state of things, about the "idea of possibilities" (2009: 20-1). (...) What I wanted to express in the work was the traditional Chinese saying that "there are always higher mountains and more talented people" (*shanwai you shan, renwai you ren* 山外有山 人外有人). Sometimes our efforts are limited, in vain, and useless. When we left, the mountain was still the same mountain, without any change. We tried to raise its height, but our effort would be in vain (2009: 117).

Likewise, he mentions that he started from the Yugong fable and explains: "In reality it is about conquering the unconquerable. I want to convince people that everything is possible" (Zhang Huan 2001: 255). It could be argued that in this performance the humility and fragility of people is emphasised as well as their desire to change.

In the 1990s, action art was an underground practice, and working in a group became a strategic means against government control. This social dimension that can be identified in the emergence of action art in China is different from the understanding of collective and disciplined art proposed by Maoist ideology. In relation to this, Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu say:

Why did many young artists choose to participate in such groups? The group had two primary functions. The first was defensive. The dangers of a solitary artist creating avant-garde art, and thus attacking society, or even criticizing the art establishment, are obvious. In the face of past governmental suppression, the artists saw the need to form a stronger united force. (...) A second function of such groups was that an artist could find individual value from his group. (...) a third important element was the economic situation. (...) A group was better able to raise funds than an individual (1995: 237).

This idea of the collective is understood in a different way to that proposed by Marxism. Pi Li explains the paradoxes of questioning Marxism from within the collective itself:

But in China in the 1980s, modernism had a strong political bent. This was manifest in a negation of the pressure that collectivism placed upon the individual (1999: 54) (...) But although different avant-garde groups held differing points of view, all were united against the realists; this was the irony, that Chinese artists found themselves using a collectivist approach to condemning collectivism. (Pi 1999: 55)

Pi Li explains that one of the reasons why the artists continue to work collectively is because an individual has no place in Chinese society (*ibid.*: 55). In the case of action art, these artistic practices are managed at the borders of the official system, and they open a common space for experimentation outside authoritarianism and pre-established rules.

This collective dimension can also be found in the action *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997) (see Image 2), in which Zhang Huan employs about 40 migrant workers from rural areas settled in Beijing to raise the level of the pond with the volume of their bodies.¹⁵ This performance, among other interpretations, alludes to the rural-to-urban migration that took place especially during the 1990s. *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* was conceived to question the social policies of his country, but it also reminds us that dozens of people can change history. This message of hope in the future is symbolised in the child that Zhang Huan carries on his shoulders. For Yilmaz Dziewior: "*To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* not only produced images of timeless impact but also created a strong visual impression of the migrant workers, their status and their uncertain future" (2009: 52).

14. Artists such as Francys Alÿs (*When Faith Moves Mountains*; Lima, 2002) and Martin Andersen (*Solspeil*; Rjukan, 2013) are examples of this interest in transforming reality in various sociopolitical contexts. See Manonelles Moner (2018).

15. It is worth noting that the controversial Three Gorges Dam was built between 1994 and 2008 to produce hydroelectric energy and control floods, displacing more than a million people and leading to the flooding of towns, cities, and archaeological sites (Gleick 2009).



Zhang Huan 張涇. 1997. 為魚塘增高水位 (Wei Yutang Zenggao Shuiwei, To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond). Performance. Courtesy of the artist.

Cary Y. Liu relates the approaches to the story of Yugong by Xu Beihong and Zhang Huan, noting that the action *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* drew on Maoist slogans of the titanic feats that the farmers, workers, and soldiers had to carry out to achieve the reforms put forward by the CCP:

Usually perceived internationally in relation to contemporary art as a performance piece, this artwork may hark back to the fable in the *Liezi* of *The Foolish Old Man who Moved Mountains* (Yu gong yi shan) and filled a sea, demonstrating the power of human will and action over nature. Sun Yat-sen used a version of this tale as a metaphor for encouraging China's will to action, and Xu Beihong painted the heroic theme. In *To Raise the Water Level*, however, the performance may respond more directly to Mao Zedong's more extreme stance that "man must use natural science to understand, conquer and change nature and thus attain freedom from nature." This principle was represented in the campaign "In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai" (nongye xue Dazhai 農業學大寨), promoted by Mao from 1964 to 1976 (2010: 290).

Cary Y. Liu relates *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* to the agricultural modernisation campaigns carried out during the Cultural Revolution. However, worthy of note is the fact that the workers that partook in this performance are not revolutionary heroes because they show both their energy as well as their precariousness. These varying interpretations remind us that this is a permanently open artwork with a willingness to engage the spectator. Zhang Huan explains that these collaborative performances share the essence of all myth; they stress the potential of the collective and remind us that the impossible can become possible:

I wanted to raise a mountain or move a building. That's how works like *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995) and *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997) were born. Even though they were impossible events, my inner strength didn't exhaust itself because of these limits. It settled inside my heart and my body, pushing me in the opposite direction, making me come out of myself and explore the limits of my body (2005: 17-8).

These works can be associated with other artworks by He Yunchang, where he also longs to transcend the limits of his body (Ai 2004). In some of his actions, such as *Moving a Mountain* (1999), *Dialogue with Water* (1999), *River Document, Shanghai* (2000), and *Heavy Drinker* (2011), he explores the strength of the individual and that of the community. He Yunchang establishes a dialogue between his body and nature, moving mountains, cutting the current of rivers, and drinking sea water.

In his performances, which explore his physical and psychical limits, nature and myth have a fundamental role. In *Moving a Mountain* (1999) he pulled various ropes for about half an hour and tried to move a Yunnan mountain 835 kilometres from west to east. In this action one can see the importance that the artist grants to the mythic and heroic feat. He does not stop doing it even if it appears to be impossible. That same year, in *Dialogue with Water* (1999), he made two cuts on his arms and hung himself from a crane over a river with the intention of cutting – with the blood that oozed from his wounds – the course of the water. Paul Gladston says about this work:

The significance of the work is open to varied readings. However, it can be interpreted as a sacrificial-moralistic act of bodily resistance both to the overwhelming power of nature and, by extension, centralized political authority (albeit an ultimately futile one) (2014: 222).

Here, we can see man's struggle with nature, with fate, and with what the establishment says is not possible. In the same vein, in *River Document, Shanghai* (2000), the artist spent eight hours removing ten tons of water from the Suzhou River to pour it back into the river at a location five kilometres to the north. This longing to achieve what appears to be impossible and to emphasise people's capacity to resist is also present in other actions such as *Heavy Drinker* (2011) (see Image 3), where he drank sea water for half an hour. His aim was to make us think about what would happen if we all got together and undertook the same action simultaneously. He Yunchang explains:

The idea is very simple: if people from all over the world started drinking sea water, we would run out of sea water in two weeks. Therefore, I have a presumption and it is that the whole world is conditioned by each and every one of us and that there is no elite. In the same way, all society is conditioned by each and every one of us.¹⁶



He Yunchang 何雲昌. 2011. 海飲 (Hai Yin, Heavy Drinker). Performance. Qinhuangdao, Hebei, China. Photo: César Merino. Courtesy of the artist.

16. Interview of He Yunchang by Laia Manonelles Moner, April 2014, Beijing.

The artist is concerned with foregrounding the courage and responsibility of individuals, exceeding the limitations delimited by society. The art critic and curator Wang Chunchen 王春辰 explains: "Drinking water is a kind of symbol for human beings. (...) This suggests that as individuals we are weaker, but if we team up we are strong enough to drink up all the water, to finish all the water."¹⁷

As He Yunchang suggests himself, his actions could be turned into legends in the future; legends about how a man cut the current of river with his blood, moved a mountain, or fought against a hundred people (Manonelles Moner 2011: 72). He draws on myths for his performances, and in so doing, He Yunchang creates his own rites of passage, transcending corporeal and psychic boundaries and showing a vulnerable and wounded body (Erickson, Colonnello and Yang 2016). The discussed performances of Zhang Huan and He Yunchang took place at the beginning of their artistic careers, when creation responded to the clear necessity to share and externalise certain conflicts. These actions, which at first glance would be seen as absurd or ridiculous feats, evince the audacity and tenacity of these artists as well as stressing the power of the community to bring about social change. They can also be regarded as starting points insofar as they are concerned with stressing that the capacity to transform the reality in which we live is in our hands.

Conclusion

The performances discussed here show how the myth of Yugong, who decided to move a mountain without caring about the time, effort, and energy that such a feat would entail, is revised and actualised. The artists' utopian view and their drive towards rethinking the potential of collective processes are suggestive of their belief that empowerment is possible.

All of them coincide with the willingness to promote social transformation, even though each one of them alludes to a different context and their discourses are articulated from distinct angles. There is a clear difference between the nationalism of Xu Beihong, who uses the myth of Yugong to encourage the Chinese population during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the political instrumentalisation of Zhang Lin's work to celebrate the progress of the Maoist party, and the proposals by Zhang Huan and He Yunchang.

In the actions of Zhang Huan and He Yunchang there are neither heroes¹⁸ nor revolutionary bodies at the service of the CCP. These artists reclaim their own bodies and appeal directly to the people, the workers, and the oppressed. Their language transcends realist canons; they have no intention to dogmatise or indoctrinate because their ultimate aim is to make people think. Zhang Huan and He Yunchang, in the same way as Xu Beihong and Zhang Lin, use symbolic language and its multiple meanings. However, in the case of Zhang Huan and He Yunchang, interpretations remain open and appeal to and share the curiosity of the spectator. Zhang Huan and He Yunchang return to the subject his or her sense of responsibility, even though this individual compromise is always linked to the collective.

This paper has examined many readings of the myth of Yugong, showing a polyphony of interpretations. The same fable that appeals to the potential of collective effort can be used from the same power structures to achieve its objectives or function as a means to question a government that attacks the freedom of individuals. The symbolic relationship between man and nature can be addressed from a variety of perspectives. One of them is the belief that men can overcome the forces of nature and mould it, as the titanic enterprises promoted by the Maoist Party showed. Another prism can be found in the works of Zhang Huan and He Yunchang, where the potential

of the individual goes hand in hand with an acknowledgment of his own vulnerability. The revolutionary representations feature the embodiment of Maoist principles while performance artists use their own bodies in their work, literally and metaphorically, evincing also their fragility and aiming to generate critical thinking. As He Yunchang affirms: "Art has to be like a ray of light into the future (...) At the end, the artist can leave a greater imprint on people and can contribute to the building of the mentality of future societies" (Manonelles Moner 2011: 73).¹⁹

Acknowledgements

■ This article is part of the investigation project of the research groups CORDES (University of Barcelona) and InterAsia (Autonomous University of Barcelona). I would also like to thank the artists who provided the images.

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Manuscript received on 21 June 2019. Accepted on 2 May 2020.

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17. Interview of Wang Chunchen by Laia Manonelles Moner, April 2014, Beijing.

18. In his book *Avatars and Antiheroes*, Albertine notes: "Sons and daughters of different revolutions – the communist revolution, the cultural revolution, the more recent economic revolution – these antiheroes, with their often rebellious and cutting-edge attitudes, become the constructors of a new artistic scenario in which the dynamics they create are as much response to their past as to their present live" (2008: 8).

19. He Yunchang also develops this idea in his text *A Fairy Tale for Grown Ups (Chengrennian de tonghua 成年人的童話)* (2002).

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