

Walking towards the Ocean from the Mountain, along the Railway: On Cheng Xinhao's Geo-Anthropological Art

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Introduction

It was one of those scorched days of the 2015 summer in Guangzhou, the third-largest metropolis in China where I spent most of my life living and studying. Known to local folks as common sense, the heatwave in this time of the year could easily 'drown' you in an outdoor environment; therefore, we, the local, preferred staying indoor until the sun went down. On that day, however, this habit I had been upholding for years got broken by one of my 'net pals' (equivalent to 'pen pals' of pre-digital time) whom I had known for over five years, yet never met. Precisely in the mid-day, the heat of which sweat me in a three-minute walk, I met Cheng Xinhao 程新皓, a visual artist who 'works as an anthropologist' (a slogan left in his Instagram profile) in his art practices.

Cheng's works integrates still and moving images of the Mang 莽 people, an unrecognized, or mis-classified ethnic group (as part of the Blang people 布朗族) living in the mountain areas on the border of China and Vietnam. Since 2018, he has started to film himself walking in the mountain areas and on the railways between the two countries. Overall, these works shed light on a wide range of topics, such as mobility, identity, modernity, and the production of knowledge, using local experiences to illuminate the everyday reality of contemporary China. This article, as the first case study focusing on the artist whose work has developed an increasing exposure internationally¹, aims to analyse why and how his works are effective and important in terms of setting up a collaborative framework for interdisciplinary practices connecting anthropology, geography and art. Structurally, it begins with an analytical review of his previous works and exhibitions about the Mang people. It then focuses on his latest video, *To the Ocean* (2018-2020), where I argue that the artist's movement of railway walking serves as a gesture of new methodology for his practice of a 'trek aesthetics'. Lastly, a discussion on the significance and value of this aesthetics, for both a critical evaluation of contemporary society and the methodological inspiration in the anthropology discipline, will be included.

The place we met and dined that day was a Sichuan restaurant, the province known for its spicy food, hot pot and home for pandas. The hot weather, as well as the hot food, however, did not overshadow the fervency in the conversation between us. Cheng proactively introduced me to his plan for a fifteen-year art project focusing on the Mang people. He showed me an exhibition design, along with some latest works he made at that time, including photographic

works of some Mang people hunting in the forest using self-made guns, carcasses of their preys, and several hand-drawings recording how, and from what, those guns were made (the toothpaste tube is one of the components).

Cheng's photos and drawings drew my attention immediately. Formally, it seemed that none of them have the intention to stimulate the viewer's sensorium, creating for them an aesthetic experience. Instead, the way those dead animal bodies are presented, together with the stones, conches and leaves presented in his earlier work, *The Naming of a River* (2014-2018), resonates more to the experience one might receive when visiting a natural history museum: taxonomic or geologic, they are objects in classification. As for the sketches of the gun, they reminded me of something benign for anthropologists—the fieldnote. The neat lines and the descriptive words explaining the configuration and functions of each part of the gun revealed the artist's curious concerns: it has nothing to do with the tension between an object and its image, as Magritte's pipe does. The pipe image may not be the pipe for Magritte, but the gun's sketch *is* the gun for Cheng and his Mang interlocutors. It is not only an object that makes sense in Mang people's hunting and living but also an embodiment of the ethnic group's knowledge production, inheritance and renewal. After all, we may wonder: since when has the toothpaste tube played a part in making a hunting gun? Is it not implying the contact of this marginal minority with industrialization and modernization in the broader, external world?

Between Magritte's pipe and Cheng Xinhao's gun lies a myth about the function of image and purpose of art. The former questions the 'usurp' of the signifier against the signified, hoping to clarify the interrelationship between language, image and the object. The latter, however, demonstrates how 'functional images,' including fieldnote drawings, manual illustrations and maps, strive to fulfil an anthropological aesthetics and poetics by forcing themselves to become as much resemble to their signified. In Cheng's praxis, the doubled identity of artist and anthropologist does not follow the collaborative pattern written by Wright and Schneider. Instead, his own body and being have become the intersection of the two identities. I would argue that such a feature will be determinate and illuminating in terms of imagining the future relationship between art and anthropology.

All these works around the Mang people are included in Cheng's project titled *Strange Terrains*. Launched in 2013, this fifteen-year project is close to its midpoint, with a review of the project's first phrase brought to the public in the form of exhibition in the summer of 2019. In that exhibition named 'The Fool's Gold', Cheng presented seven video-performing works in a black-box-like space, which was designed by the curator Chen Baiqi 陈柏麒 to recollect the winding and rugged mountain terrains the Mang people have been living with.

While the themes and filmed subjects varied, these video works in general traced how the Mang people are dragged into the globalization of capitalism by questioning the power relations derived from a 'centre-periphery' binary structure². In it, the centre can be the contemporality, urbanization, modern living and industrial working, while the periphery the historicity, mountains and bushes, tribal living and hunting.

Interestingly, Cheng is never content with simple oppositions. As an enthusiast of J.S. Bach, he has been inspired by the composer's polyphony techniques and consciously complicated in his work by inserting a multi-layered narrative on the same timeline. *I want to Make a Film* (2018), for instance, employed a double-layered narrative. The video recorded how a Mang man in his twenties, Z, built a temporary wood shelter amidst the rainforest. The artist claimed at the beginning of the film through several lines of statement that as a reflection on Mang people's gradual involvement into 'an economic system dominated by external markets', it was 'a film about their original life, about their living in mountains and jungles, and about the sensibility that accompanies this way of life' (00:05-00:45). As a response to the statement, throughout the video, the camera has been in an absolute stillness on a tripod and kept a certain distance to Z, who was staged at the centre of the frame for most of the time. In front of the camera, Z walked between the woods, logged some branches, cut down large leaves from *musa basjoo* trees, set up fire, and even shoot at animals.

Z's movements, captured by a steady camera, and the dimmed lighting condition derived merely from a headlamp and the fire contrasting the dark forest, seemed to have evoked a sense of actuality, a quality pursued by ethnographic and documentary filmmakers to explore, report, observe, reveal, or confront their subject-matters³. Ostensibly, the display of shelter-building is leading the viewer to enjoy the 'beauty of exactitude'⁴, unleashing the power embedded in the faithful documentation of the periphery—a traditional practice during hunting and food-gathering—against the centre, that is, the modern life and industrial production. However, in the second half of the video, the artist turned to coloured instead of black-and-white images, increased the moving of the camera and inserted some frames where dialogues between him and Z were presented (after 18:32). He kept on telling Z why he was using certain equipment and accessories to film, instructing Z to move and perform in specific poses and sometimes asking Z to repeat those movements for retakes. While

² For an introduction and review of this exhibition, see Cassie Liu, "The Fool's Gold: Cheng Xinhao," *ArtAsiaPacific*, 2019, <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/TheFoolsGold>.

³ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴ Arnd Schneider, "Three Modes of Experimentation with Art and Ethnography," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 1 (March 2008), p. 175.

these conversations may conveniently remind us of Jean Rouch's 'shared anthropology'⁵, the unbalanced power relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed was evident, leading us to question the friendship between the artist, or, the anthropologist and his indigenous informant. Here, the man with a camera took the central place, while the sitter was left little space but to follow and to obey.

Such a self-reflection was further confirmed by the overwhelming sound of the running and falling streams, which was deliberately suppressed in the first half of the video. By adopting the original colour in the image and using the original soundtrack of the water in the second half, the artist restored the geographical textures and ambience of the China-Vietnam rainforest at night. From this point, the aesthetics of realism in the first half shifted into the perception of reality itself. In this sense, it was the reality, the genuine geographical conditions that contextualized the tension between the artist and the sitter. The reality became a method to push away the realism, creating the last layer of the binary structure for contemplations of the unbalanced power relationship, which could be resulted from the intervention of the centre in forms of modern knowledge, modern technology, and modern subjectivity, of which Cheng himself is a sheer symbol.

A much shorter video work, *The Gaze* (2018), which was also presented in the solo exhibition, depicted the acute situation of the Chinese modernization and capitalization faced by the Mang people, and by many other social groups from the marginal periphery of the country. They fled their hometowns for developed coastal areas to pursue a better living, yet many ended up with working as day-paid labourers. The whole work was composed by three screens, two of them recorded a Mang couple in frontal faces, gazing into the camera, respectively. The short film played in the third screen incorporated many ways of documentary filmmaking techniques. The fixed infrared camera was such a curiosity for these migrant workers that they looked into it without knowing that they were filmed. It was also a sharp eye in the dark city to capture how these marginalized huddled up and slept under the neon lights on the street. When the camera started moving with the artist while he was walking, traces of the street lights in the shaking frame further led the beholders to fall into a dizziness: the monstrous city and the global capitalism behind it has always been visible for the Mang couples, who kept on gazing the reality captured by the observational cinema. But looking at it is the best they can do, while doing something is far from an option.

Interestingly, as the filmmaker, Cheng did not halt at recording video clips but

⁵ Paul Henley, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 310.

dived deeply into his informants' life. In an anthropological manner, he decided to become one of the day-paid workers, submitting his ID card to different factory recruiters every day to work on either construction sites or assembly lines. Under the alias Du Li'an (a parody of the fruit durian, the name of a casual artist chat group on the Chinese social media WeChat), he wrote in a long essay, which to me rather a field note, that 'I am not an undercover, as I decide to forget who I am; this is not merely experiencing other people's life either, as it means to look from the outside.'⁶ What stroke me the most was his review on how highly repetitive work on an electrical assembly line had numbed the labourers physically and mentally. While his work content was as easy as to bridge several wires to the circuit, he forgot his purpose of being in the factory, and of course, the fancy theory from Marx and Bourdieu on capitalism in a single day. 'Bourdieu was defeated by three wires,' he said, 'all that in my mind was the wiring box: yellow wires, blue wires, brown wires. I pulled them slightly and then put it away.'⁷ (Du 2019)

'The Fool's Gold' also featured a short video work *The Invasion* (2017), capturing the natural ecology of the rainforest in daytime, the tranquillity of which is broken by a Mang male's gun-shoot towards the sky. In *I am A Tiao* (2017), a young man recalls how he walked from his home in China to his wife's village in Vietnam, touching the ideas of border-crossing for an ethnic minority separated by the national boundary, as well as a traditional way of mapping in mountain areas. Another direct response to the border and nation-state would be the three-channel video, *I will Sprinkle Salt all over Your Land* (2017). Divided by the boundary marker in the middle of the middle screen, one screen depicted the landscape of China, while the other one recorded the mountain view on the side of Vietnam. A flock of cattle, however, keep on wandering between the screens, affected not the least by that marker on the border. As for the two-channel video *Towards the Sweetness* (2018), Cheng puts a go-pro camera on a dog, who runs to the Mang's sugar cane fields with her master. The voiceover is a casual conversation between the artist and the dog owner, chatting over the changes in agricultural landscape and local economy.

From these works described either in details or in brief, we can discover some recurrent themes and subjects in Cheng Xinhao's art: the emphasis on local geographical environment and how the human interact with it; and an ethnographical way of working, namely collecting data and making notes on field sites, which makes his artworks a sort of reproduction of the local knowledge. Underpinned by a geo-anthropological approach, such local knowledge serves as a critical vehicle to interrogate the Chinese modernity

⁶ Li'an Du, "Yige boshi de Sanhe dagong shouji [A PhD's Note of Working in Sanhe]," *NetEase News*, May 22, 2019, <http://renjian.163.com/19/0522/10/EFPBAS81000199ET.html>.

⁷ Du, "A PhD's Note of Working in Sanhe."

cupped by the global capitalism. His method is an echo to what Clifford Geertz once said, 'it is from the...difficult achievement of seeing ourselves **amongst** [emphasis added by the author] others...that the largeness of mind...comes.'⁸

In many aspects, Cheng's works are also comparable to social participatory art. Fundamentally, they are both on the left-wing holding a strong suspicion and hostility towards the capitalism and the market, as well as how they organize economic-cultural production and consumption⁹. Additionally, it is the periphery and the marginalized that they turn to look for answers to the modern crisis and to rehumanize our society. To a large extent, these shared value and practices have urged me to include Cheng Xinhao as a representative artist of the 'ethnographic turn' in Chinese contemporary art since the 1990s, when market economy and consumerism took the lead in the country under the surging opening and reform policy. Unlike his predecessors who either considered the indigenous life, agricultural past or the communist legacy of 'the rampant personality fetish and commercialism'¹⁰, or sought the utopian socialism in rural China¹¹, facing the swept of commodity fetishism in urban areas, however, Cheng's direct engagement in local communities is milder, but his critique upon the social reality through the strategy of revealing and ethnography is by no means moderator, if not more severe and comprehensive.

The new practice and new methodology

The last project this paper is going to investigate, *To the Ocean*, has maintained the artist's geo-anthropological focus. In the meantime, the artist's own presence in the video work, which he started trying in other films made after 2018, has further played as a medium between the geographical space in which the body is situated and the autoethnographic space enabling the artist to contemplate his knowledge structure and memory entangled with specific national and local histories. I find this work significant because its autoethnographic nature has somehow responded to the 'ethnographic turn' dispute concerning both art and anthropology scholars since the 1990s until today. To be more specific, I argue that the work not only finds a way out from Hal Foster's classical doubt on the 'quasi-ethnographic' practices of contemporary artists¹² but also appeases the anxiety raised by Arnd Schneider

⁸ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books), p. 16.

⁹ Clair Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books), 11-13.

¹⁰ Chang Tan, "Art for/of the Masses: Revisiting the Communist Legacy in Chinese Art," *Third Text* 26, no. 2 (2012): p. 178.

¹¹ Mai Corlin, *The Bishan Commune and the Practice of Socially Engaged Art in Rural China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 105

¹² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 124.

and Christopher Wright, who have questioned the possibility for 'border-crossing' of the two established disciplines, respectively¹³.

As I will show in the rest of this section, in general, if *Strange Terrain* and 'The Fool's Gold' exhibition can be considered as an embodiment of the artist's using geo-anthropological methods to demonstrate the confrontations and interactions between the centre and the margin, the majority and the minority, the primitive and the modern, and the tradition and the contemporaneity in today's China by focusing on the Other, *To the Ocean* is then a continuation and expansion of these topics, yet employing a more intrinsic and introvert way. By otherising the artist himself, this work illuminates some new possibilities for contemporary artists to integrate artistic and ethnographic practices, not simply drawing on pre-existing critical strands ethnographic theory and facts have already offered but on a phenomenological pre-set finding its root in the artist's reflexive autonomy.

To the Ocean is a video performance recording Cheng's nineteen-day walk from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province in southwest China, to the China-Vietnam Border Bridge. The route he took was the Yunnan-Vietnam railway built by the French during 1904 to 1910. The total length of the walk reached 464 kilometres, accompanied by a video work and twenty-four diary-like mails he sent to a friend X, recording his physical and mental status from the preparation stage to the final day of the journey. In the video, we can see the artist pick up a ballast stone and put it into his backpack each kilometre, which makes the long walk even more physically challenging.

The long walk, according to the artist in one of the mails he wrote, was initiated from his childhood imagination of the ocean at the end of the Yunnan-Vietnam railway. It is a geological imagination from 'a child living in the mountain area of the hinterland'¹⁴. By emphasizing the terrains the railway had gone through, as well as his encounters with the river, mountain, valley, towns, farming land and other geographical environments alongside the railway during the trek, Cheng reflects on the interactive relationship between this railway, an engineering miracle in early twentieth century, and the places and locations it has connected. From a geographical perspective, in the video work and some of its still frames, we can see plants and vegetations in the wild or along the railway. For ordinary viewers, to call out their names one by one demands the knowledge of botany and geography (and a very local one indeed). For Cheng Xinhao, however, not only their names but also their origins and histories of importation into Yunnan

¹³ Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, "The Challenge of Practice," in *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, eds. Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (Oxford: Berg, 2006), pp. 3-4.

¹⁴ Xinhao Cheng, *24 Mails from the Railway*, trans. Yunchang Yang (Ningbo, China: Jiazazhi Press), pp. 37-38.

are identified. For example, in his Day 1 mail, by identifying the wild grass ('black-jacks from North America', 'wild oat from Europe' and their annoying 'short blackthorns') on both sides of the Yunnan-Vietnam railway, Cheng compares their travelling from foreign lands to Yunnan and then got localised, to Yunnan's being transformed from a 'barbarous' margin to the 'central/middle kingdom' (the literal translation of China's Sinitic name *Zhongguo*) to an integral (yet still periphery) province of China. Playing with such a tension lying in the idea that 'foreign objects would become traditions,' the artist further presents himself as a stranger to both Western philosophy and Confucian thoughts.¹⁵

In a geo-historical manner, Cheng's familiarity with the names and origins of those plants enriches the artwork temporally and spatially. It is difficult not to relate these geographical or botanical knowledge to the artist's nature historical displays of the rocks, leaves and dead prays captured by his camera in *The Naming of a River* and *Strange Terrain* series; only this time, his subjects have not been sorted, classified and exhibited as if they were covered or contained by museum glasses. The mechanism of such enrichments, therefore, depends on his lively and co-inhabitant encounter with these plants (and animals in later descriptions), from which a projection of and sympathy for himself towards those external subjects become possible—both the artist and his subjects are 'foreigners' or 'marginals' being produced and reproduced in different discourses and narratives at regional, national and international levels: histories, modernity, and the restless global capitalist system. In the meantime, his familiarity with these now local yet originally exotic vegetations also serves as a foil to the beholder's distance to this region. Before the audience is given sufficient information by the artist's accompanying writing, the plants are visually inconspicuous. Even if we can memorise their names and histories in Yunnan for some time, they will probably fade out soon in the trifles of everyday urban lives and become 'foreign knowledge' again, unlike their decently sorted and showcased counterparts in a museum or an encyclopaedia.

But more importantly, such a connection is not merely geographical but also anthropological, or, to be more precise, autoethnographical. From time to time, the video showed the artist in his outdoor outfits walking abruptly into local communities on the railway. While he demonstrated an erudite and meticulous understanding of the buildings, crops, and history of the stations and communities he had passed through, the local people seemed quite confused about why he was taking the long walk, which somehow leads the viewers of the artwork to take a more inward, immersive point of view of the artist himself, a perspective exemplified by his bodily experience, his hurt and pain.

In the rain, he walked. With his backpack overloaded, he walked. In dark nights

¹⁵ Cheng, *24 Mails*, p. 36.

and tunnels, he walked. Like a gourmet who knows various dining experiences in different restaurants, Cheng would make a review of the differentiated impacts and pains of walking on sleepers made from multiple materials, either wood, steel, or cement. There were lots of descriptive words, sentences and paragraphs depicting his beat-up body on the railway, in the woods, encompassed by darkness and confronted by steep mountains and deep valleys. His presence in the video and in these vividly written circumstances is an invitation for beholders to 'walk in his shoes'. In this way, unlike the 'beauty of exactitude' in his earlier works, an aesthetics of hurt and pain come into play, which is more straightforward and intuitive.

The movement of walking on the railway also refers to the narrative of trek and the mnemonic technique. In the diary of Day 7, Cheng defined the railway as a conjunction of geographies, locations, the local history and his personal memory. Notably, many versions of aesthetics and ethnographies of walking have been discussed, some of them are contextualized under the *flâneur's* critique towards capitalism and spectatorship in the experience of city strolling¹⁶, some are considered as an everyday, affective device for random urban walkers-photographers to re-discover time and space¹⁷. For others, the theme of 'home-coming' in Odyssey seems to be a usual association with a long walk. But neither of these apply to Cheng Xinhao's work. The geo-anthropological method he has employed to develop the 'trek aesthetics' in his work eventually lies on the intertwine of personal memories and the history of the Yunnan-Vietnam railway. Apart from his early imagination of the ocean through the railway, he also traced the terrific plague that killed 30,000 labourers who built this railway in the tropical rainforest, as well as the traumatic family of his mother, who lived and grew up in a small town beside the railway. Her father, according to one of Cheng's mails, was beaten to death in the school he taught mathematics and physical education during the Cultural Revolution.

The integration of these individual memories, histories, traumas, as well as some geographical information derived from railway engineers who participated in the building of the Yunnan-Vietnam railway in early twentieth century, created a unique 'trek aesthetics' through the artist's long walk. It is an insightful exploration manifesting a Chinese next-generation artist's virtuosity to critically engage with a wide range of important socio-historical topics with interdisciplinary methods. His geo-anthropological approach to artistic creation is indeed a gesture of methodological innovation.

¹⁶ Raymond Lucas, "'Taking a Line for a Walk': Walking as an Aesthetic Practice," in *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, eds. Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (Farham: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), pp. 170-176.

¹⁷ Yi'en Cheng, "Telling Stories of the City: Walking Ethnography, Affective Materialities, and Mobile Encounters," *Space and Culture* 17, no. 3 (2013): pp. 220-221.