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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Diamond on Unsplash.

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FEATURE

PROFESSOR JIAO XINGTAO AND THE YANGDENG ART COOPERATIVE PROJECT

By Jiao Xingtao and Mary Modeen

The following interview was conducted remotely, with the aid of “Iris” Jingwen Zhang who translated for us here. The project and eponymous book referred to below is entitled: *Socially Engaged Art in Southwest China: Yang Deng Art*

Cooperative Project 2012–2017.^[1] It is bilingual, in both Mandarin and English, and, at 422 pages, provides rich textual, critical, and aesthetic documentation of the community and various art projects undertaken over six years.



The Twelve Jing Xiakou, a real scene, Taishan Shigandang. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.

The Yangdeng Art Cooperatives, with a cumulative total of more than 37 artists and students, worked each year in collaboration with local villagers in the small rural village of the same name as the river, Yangdeng, in a remote rural area of Tongzi County in Guizhou Province. Organized and led by Professor Jiao Xingtao, this project, over many years, was begun to “reconstruct the continuity between art and life” through an emphasis on “artistic negotiation.” As such, it constitutes a socially engaged art initiative, locating this remote rural village sited on a river as the experimental art locus for approaching an independent but profoundly collaborative working method. The project is established in this specific location to ground its work in a life space that is lived in everyday experiences, without pretense or allowing of imposed orders or artificial hierarchies. The Yangdeng Art Cooperative attempts to avoid political art or overly simplified sociological types of intervention, and instead attempts to work with the position of “value neutrality,” as they call it, without stereotyped intentions or condescending cultural elitism, in order to allow the artistic collaborations to “grow naturally.” It is precisely the ordinary quality of everyday life in a remote location that enables the daily observations and engagement with locals to happen simply.

What follows is a long-distance translated interview, with my questions put to Professor Jiao and translated by our mutual former student, Iris Jingwen Zhang, who studied both in Chongqing and in Dundee, Scotland. The interview is slightly edited for clarity.

[MM] In the years of the Yangdeng Art Cooperative Project since 2014, Professor Jiao, how would you summarize the local peoples’ understanding of “their” river? Have you seen any change in these attitudes during the years that you have been working there with the community members?

[JX] In my conversations with them, I can feel the dependence of ordinary residents on this river. This kind of dependence is manifested in several aspects. First, the river was the reason for the development of this small town and its existence in the past for a long time. Various folklore and historical stories surrounding the river have become an important part of the residents’ cultural traditions. Second, the river is the place where residents live and gather together; the small shops and roads built around the banks of the river and the three bridges crossing over the river are places for transactions and gatherings of small-town residents. In the past, it was also the site of ordinary people washing vegetables and clothes and dumping domestic garbage. Third, the river is the provider of living resources, especially food. In the past decade, there were many fishers, and some fishing methods were even illegal. In recent years, with the implementation of government legislation and the increase in various policies intended as effective steps toward stewardship, ordinary residents have gradually established a new attitude toward the river. And they have become awed, and have a more protective consciousness, rather than blindly relying on practices of the past.

[MM] In local understanding, are there stories, or a special character, or a “personality,” that are attributed to the river?

[JX] There are many local legends and folk tales related to the river, such as the legend of the snake monster, which lives in the karst caves in the canyon upstream of the river that have been haunted with seasonal rising waters. And the rocks on both sides have been given names and various legends. Contemporary people always tend to talk about how magical and special this river is, how many celebrities and soldiers it has bred, and they are proud of it. They also like to compare the differences in personality, income, and various special products of the residents in

the upper, middle, and lower reaches of the river. They believe that the hospitable and outspoken personality of local people was formed from the historic prevalence of visitors who arrived because they were aided by boat docks in the past on the river, and today, they are proud of this shared characteristic of warmly welcoming visitors.



Use a whole piece of wood as a stool, and according to the height difference of the site, cut off one side of the stool leg, so that it can be laid flat. Image by the Yangdeng Art Cooperative. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.

[MM] How does the bridge function in the local imagination? Is it only a means of crossing from one side to the other? Or does the addition of benches that have been made during the project, for example, change their thinking about the river and their own experiences? Does the bridge also work as a symbol of some kind, and if so, how might that be described?

[JX] There are three bridges in Yangdeng town: two cement bridges—one is at the east end of the town, one is at the west end of the town—and the other is a wooden suspension bridge in the middle of the town. The cement bridge at the east end of the town was built in the 1970s. It was the only road bridge connecting the two sides of the river at that time. The cement bridge at the west end

of the town was built five years ago. It is the only way to connect the old town and the new town. These two concrete bridges connect the Yangdeng town on both sides of the river into a whole, making it extremely convenient for residents to travel to and from both sides of the river.

In contrast to the two cement bridges that were funded by the government, the other suspension bridge was built 20 years ago with private donations made by the residents of the town. The suspension bridge is made up of multiple steel cables connecting the two banks and laying wooden boards on them. It has experienced many summer floods and has been destroyed several times, and each time it has been repaired through private fundraising.



几-shaped bench on the suspension bridge by the Yangdeng Art Cooperative. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.

This bridge can only be used for people to walk on. In summer, it is a place for the residents to relax and enjoy the cool air. In winter, it is a place for the elderly and children to bask in the sun. Compared with the other two bridges, its gathering, social, and entertainment functions far outweigh its transportation functions. It has become the most popular place for residents to go.

In the Yangdeng Art Project, there are many creations and works carried out around this bridge, such as the setting of benches, making rest and

leisure become an interesting event worth talking about. In an art project in 2017, the residents of the town were invited to eat 50 catties of melon seeds for free on the bridge.[2] At the same time, a folk ritual activity of “begging for rain” was carried out on the river beach under the bridge. In 2018, we installed a projector by the river and directly projected the long scroll paintings created with the residents onto the river, making such a suspension bridge a cultural symbol in the town and a carrier of new stories. Compared with the square in front of the town government, this place has become a folk and public place.



Residents collectively created a picture of Yangdeng River 2, once again. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.

First, to explain a term: *Shigandang* are collectively the traditional heritage of worshipping spiritual stones now commonly practiced in Tai'an, Shandong province, and elsewhere. The *Shigandang* custom of worshipping spiritual stones has long been a common belief for Chinese people. According to legend, Shigandang was a brave and strong man from Mount Tai who was renowned for warding off evil spirits. His spirit lives on today through an ornamental stone tablet engraved with the Chinese characters of *Shigandang*, which is often found erected at certain points on bridges and roads across China.



A picture of Yangdeng River exhibited by the riverside. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.



The police are reminding drifters to pay attention to safety. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.

[MM] How does the “shigandang” to exorcise evil spirits actually work in local imagination?[3] Do any other “spirits” inhabit the river area in local imagination?

[JX] “Shigandang” has the function of “shielding evil spirits” in local folklore and daily concepts, and it is often spontaneously set up on the side of roads where accidents frequently occur to residents. This Fibre Reinforced Plastic (FRP) “policeman,” purchased online, is placed by the river in the name of “Shi Gan Dang,” so that the locals can easily accept and recognize its existence and continue to spontaneously endow it with functions and meanings in their lives.

For example, in a leap of imagination, they think it can quell the Dragon King to avoid flooding again, or it can guard both sides of the riverbank to prevent children from drowning when swimming in summer, and they can also give appropriate tips to the boats that are drifting in the Yangdeng River. There is even a local legend that a child hit the “policeman” by throwing a stone and fell ill that night and died. Even if there is nothing to it, everyone seems to be happy to tell such a “magical” story.

[MM] In many ways, the idea of a river is a ready-made metaphor, and can stand for change, for a physical reality that is always dynamic, etc. In your interactions with this Yangdeng town community, has this possibility for change inspired any new actions or projects by the townspeople themselves?

[JX] Nowadays, the flow of the Yangdeng River is slow, and the riverbed is shallow. It is impossible to imagine the situation of the boats passing by in the past. Water transportation was once the most important mode of transportation for

people and materials in Yangdeng. The materials for the rural community and the mountain goods of Yangdeng are all transported by boats. In the 1970s and 1980s, rivers were dredged every year. In many river sections with rapids, people on the boat needed to disembark when going downriver. Only one person was left at the helm, and the others were pressed against the hull on the side of the riverbank to avoid being pushed against the rocks. Ten people pulled the rope at the stern to let the boat descend and move slowly, until reaching a place where the current was stable. When going upriver, one person would get off into the



Xie Xiaochun's work. A picture of Yangdeng River. Image by Xie Xiaochun. Image courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.

water to push the boat and the others would pull the rope. Boatmen were often naked and roared all the way. Now, all of this has disappeared.

Yes, the endless river itself is a place full of infinite vitality and hope. In the past, because the river was connected with the transportation of materials, the river always had a natural connection with the outside world. Along the river, you can enter a broader and more attractive new world. This kind of imagination still remains today; it exists in the ideas and conversations of the locals. In the summer of 2018, the artist and the residents drew a painting about the river on

a ten-meter-long scroll. They each drew as they wished. Then the artist made the painting into an animation. In the summer night, the animation was projected onto the river with a projector. The sparkling and vivid images attracted a large number of audiences and became an unforgettable festival in the local area, quite literally seeing the projected dreams of its inhabitants upon the surface of the river! This has made a lasting impression upon the residents of this village; they are keen to share their ideas and willingly collaborate with the artists who come to visit them and stay with them alongside this river who connects them all.



Li Anwei posed for a photo with his grandson and family portrait. The person in the second row of the mural picture behind him, with his hand in his trouser pocket, is Li Anwei 40 years ago.

[MM] In an environmental sense, has the Yangdeng Art Cooperative Project had a positive effect on the state of the river and its riverbanks? Are there things you could offer as specific examples? And has this been taken up as points of attention and action by the local people?

[JX] In successive years of projects, we have done wall paintings for several houses along the river after obtaining the owner's consent. Of course, this is not the usual decorative and beautifying painting, but adds outlines and shapes based on the traces of the house's various flowing water, and then creates drawings of it. The past historical traces of the house are used as the pattern for the painting, and finally an interesting painting effect is formed. One owner was very satisfied and took his utility room by the river and transformed it into a small gallery with us, dedicated to showing his own paintings. He cleaned the riverbank well, and often invited his neighbors to come to the exhibition. Later, streetlights were installed on the riverbank, which gradually became a place for residents to take a walk and enjoy the coolness.

[MM] In thinking now in retrospect about the choice of Yangdeng town and river as the site for his project, is it still the case that "sometimes being meaningless can be the greatest meaning" (as quoted on p. 420 of your book)?

[JX] For people's choice and life, contingency plays a big role. Respect for this contingency and randomness is probably the most important quality in art, I think. At first, I decided to do this project just because of an idea, a local student and a temporary cooperation, and then I worked here on and off for eight years. People always tend to seek the "meaning" of work and life, but only by recognizing the "meaningless" can we abandon the specific purpose and focus on the work itself, to obtain the so-called happiness and "meaning." [4]

*View video here: [Animation of a picture of the Yangdeng River by the Yangdeng Art Collective](#).
Video courtesy of Jiao Xingtao.*

[MM] In popular stories, the poet Li Po—also known as Li Bai [5]—wrote poems on paper, folded them into boat shapes, and sent them down the river. In thinking about the Yangdeng project, are there similar messages for the future?

[JX] The legend of Li Bai happened in another place tens of kilometers away from this town. The Taibai Academy that was built in memory of his work is very famous. [6] In fact, the artists in the Yangdeng Art Cooperative have already done such a project as you have mentioned with the local residents of Yangdeng village. The artists and the carpenters in the village made more than ten triangular wooden wedges and painted their surfaces in red. Then the artists and the carpenters signed their names together and put them into the river from the suspension bridge, hoping that these red wooden wedges would flow into the Yangtze River and sea, like fishes.

The actions of the Yangdeng Art Cooperative have benefited many people. The residents of Yangdeng village have enjoyed the repeated return of their creative visitors, sharing their stories and lives with them, and collaborating in exciting projects. They cross the bridge over their river more slowly and enjoy sitting on benches that the artists made, reflecting on their creative encounters. For the artists who visited this remote village, they too were shaped by the projects, learning what the lives were like lived in a remote river valley, hearing the stories of generations of inhabitants. They walked the shores and planned projects with people who gladly shared their thoughts, experiences, and dreams. They worked with local carpenters. They painted and drew and made artifacts. And the river? It

took on several shapes under the eyes and hands of the Cooperative. Its rocky banks held statues of policemen; its shores were cleaned; and its bridge became a viewing platform for night-time

projections. It flowed, as rivers do, fostering those thoughts of time and connections, and carried the red wooden wedges...perhaps all the way to the Yangtze.

Footnotes

[1] Jiao Xingtao, Wang Ziyun, and Hai Ren, eds., *Socially Engaged Art in Southwest China: Yang Deng Art Cooperative Project 2012-2017* (Chongqing, China: Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, 2017). ISBN: 978-7-229-14092-2.

[2] A *kati* (or "cattie") is equivalent to 1.36 pounds. Therefore 50 catties = 68 pounds of melon seeds, hence the "rain!"

[3] See Xingtao, Ziyun, and Ren, eds., *Socially Engaged Art in Southwest China*, 64.

[4] Note from the guest editor: I have reflected many times upon the wisdom in this phrase and find it compelling. Jiao's desire to work with contingency and randomness—rather than to impose a pre-conceived idea upon a project—is similar to the work of many contemporary artists. But his distinctive addition of the phrase, "only by recognizing the 'meaningless' can we abandon the specific purpose and focus of the work itself, to obtain the so-called happiness and 'meaning,'" suggests that it is his reflection after the fact that allows for a kind of retrospective knowledge that can be derived from his actions.

[5] Li Bai (b.701–d.762), "(also known as Li Po, Li Pai, Li T'ai-po, and Li T'ai-pai) was probably born in central Asia and grew up in Sichuan Province. He left home in 725 A.D. to wander through the Yangtze River valley and write poetry. In 742, he was appointed to the Hanlin Academy by Emperor Xuanzong, though he was eventually expelled from court. He then served the Prince of Yun, who led a revolt after the An Lushan Rebellion of 755. Li Bai was arrested for treason; after he was pardoned, he again wandered the Yangtze valley. He was married four times and was friends with the poet, Du Fu." ("Li Bai," *The Poetry Foundation*, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/li-po>.)

[6] Li Bai travelled through the Jiuhua Mountains where he left many poems. The people of the Jiuhua Mountains area have memorialized him, first with a memorial built in the Song Dynasty, which was later destroyed. Following this, the Taibai Academy was built; it remains today, located in Qingyang County, Chizhou City.

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About the Authors

Jiao Xingtao is a widely exhibited Chinese sculptor. Some of his most recent work is conceptual, a comment on the consumerist excesses of today's society. He transforms objects—often packaging, such as a discarded Hermès box—with scale and fiberglass to make pieces of art that make a statement about contemporary materialist cultures. He is also a socially engaged sculptor, working with community projects, such as the Yangdeng Arts Cooperative which he founded in 2012 and which is detailed in his contribution here. With this cooperative he aimed to “reconstruct the continuity between art and life” through an emphasis on “artistic negotiation”. He is also the Vice Principal and Academic Provost of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, China.

Professor Mary Modeen, as an artist/academic, lectures in fine art and more broadly across the humanities in relation to creative practices. Her research has several threads: perception as a cognitive and interpretive process, and especially place-based research, which connects many of these concerns with attention to cultural values, history, and embodied experience. As such, this research is usually interdisciplinary. Part of this work appears as creative art, and part as writing and presentations. Modeen addresses aspects of seeing that go beyond the visible, questioning what we know as sentient humans, and valuing the cultural and individual differences inherent in these perceptions.

Her most recent publications include a co-authored book with Iain Biggs, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* (Routledge, 2021), and “Traditional Knowledge of the Sea in a Time of Change: Stories of the Caiçaras,” in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* (November 2020). Her edited book and essay just published is titled *Decolonising Place-Based Arts Research* (Dundee, 2021). She is chair of Interdisciplinary Art Practice and associate dean international for Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee, in Scotland and visiting fellow with the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota.