

The Human Dramatics of Urbanization

Chinese urbanization in the art of Wang Bing, Xing Danwen and Zhang Dali



Fig. 1. Xing Danwen, *Urban Fictions. Image 17*, 2004, C-print, 170.18 x 217.17 cm.

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'Change comes in waves, alike the tides of the Yangtze River.
Floods arise, but the water level will drop again.
One can only hope that every flood will be remembered.
That a trace of our voices will be preserved and listened to.
Here, people are used to adapt to the fickle waves of the river.'

– David Verbeek, *Trapped in the City of a Thousand Mountains* (2018).

Abstract

During recent decades, China has experienced a fast rate of urbanization. Generated by capitalism, globalism, consumerism and economic market reforms, China has undergone many changes. Urban areas have expanded increasingly since the 1990s, affecting and transforming China's environment, society, visual characteristics and traditions. This dissertation presents a research on the effects of urbanization on the Chinese population through an analysis of artworks by Wang Bing (1967), Zhang Dali (1963) and Xing Danwen (1967). It offers an analysis on a selection of their artworks, their artistic practice and their social engagement in the context of contemporary China. This research adopts an interdisciplinary approach which includes art history, urban China studies and urban cultural studies. The research is largely based on the analyses of existing literature, analyses of the artworks and the analyses of their context. This thesis will focus on two main key concepts, namely, urbanization and urban planning.

Within this research, the effects of China's urbanization have been reduced to three main societal issues which occur on a national level within society. These issues are: the transformation of living environments, the increasing number of migrant labourers and the isolation of people living in urban structures, who experience feelings of isolation and become detached from traditional Chinese society. These transformations are driven by urban planning, economic development and material consumption. These processes heavily influence the daily life of Chinese people.

Wang Bing, Zhang Dali and Xing Danwen's artistic practices focus on the above presented societal issues. In their own ways, they offer criticism on urbanization in a society in which state censorship is still prevailing. Wang Bing's documentaries shows the daily life of people who live on the fringes of society, within the age of urbanization. Zhang Dali's *Dialogue and Demolition* (1995-2005) series comments on the urban transformation of Beijing. The plaster bodies in his *Chinese Offspring* (2003-2005) represent the rural migrant workers, who are a neglected minority within Chinese society. Finally, Xing Danwen's *Urban Fiction* (2004-2009) responds to the position of people within urban structures and how this might influence their behaviour and psyche. By adding human drama within her real estate photographs, she questions the proposed idealistic urban future as intended by the government and real estate developers.

Their works indicate the artists' concern about the people who are affected by the processes of urbanization. Through their approaches and personal styles, their artworks investigate the socio-political and economic situation. The analysed artworks embody the artists' criticism of the specific spatial and social conditions of contemporary China.

Preface

In March 2018, I travelled to Beijing together with my fellow students from Hong Kong during a fieldtrip which was part of a course on contemporary Chinese art. In a gallery located in an old military compound, our professor organized an interview with two Chinese artists. The artists, whose names I cannot remember unfortunately, spoke about their artistic practices, cultural significance and approaches. At least, that is what I remember from the translations that my classmates tried to provide me with, since both artists only spoke Mandarin. It is fair to say I probably have never felt more blessed and miserable at the same time in my life. It was during this encounter that I realized the importance of visual language. Since I could not understand any verbal signs, I became extremely aware of the things I was able to understand: non-verbal communication, visual images and my surroundings. Simultaneously, the visual arts helped me to understand Chinese culture and tradition.

Despite the giant buildings, freezing cold and fog caused by air pollution, I felt enchanted by this city where traditional dynastic structures and new urban constructions exist next to each other. Soon, I became fascinated by the urban structures and the rapid changes China experienced in recent decades. The below presented dissertation is the result of my fascination for China, my interest in its rapid urbanization and my deep love for art.

I would like to extend my gratitude to my thesis advisor, Patrick van Rossem for his advice and encouraging me to think critically; Vivian Sheng for her endless knowledge and introducing me to the wonders of contemporary Chinese art; Anton Stolper, for his feedback and critical questions; Sandy Sun for helping me out with the Mandarin translations; my flatmates for their laughter and understanding, and to my family for their love and support. Finally, my warmest thanks to those who believe in me.

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Introduction

Since the early 1980s, Chinese cities have experienced excessive urban development and have undergone impressive visual transformations. Old parts have been demolished to make space for new structures, turning urban areas into international metropolises. Today, skylines are being dominated by high-rise structures and skyscrapers. These major cities have become economic centres, providing jobs, facilities and services to many, causing people to move from rural to urban areas. Urban dwellings are ramped out of the ground at high speed to house the growing population. Influenced by the fast rate of urbanization, the life of Chinese people has changed drastically in the last decades. Since the 1990s, Chinese avant-garde artists have started to experiment with new creative languages, using urban references to express their thoughts and feelings upon urbanization, focusing on the chaos and turbulence of real life and real people. Shanghai based artist Chen Yun (1983) explained that ‘as society goes through demolition and urbanization, the biggest changes happen on the level of human relationships.’¹ This thesis will therefore examine the following research question: *In what manner does Chinese urbanization affect the Chinese population and how is this manifested in artworks by the artists Wang Bing, Zhang Dali and Xing Danwen?*

Wang Bing (王兵; Xi’an, 1967) is a Chinese film director. As a leading figure in documentary cinema, Wang Bing’s films witness the fast transformation of China’s landscape. His video-installation like films, offer views on the everyday lives and struggles of people living on the fringes of Chinese society. Wang Bing lives and works in Paris and Beijing. Zhang Dali (張大力; Harbin, 1963) is a multifaceted experimental artist, who works with various media. In the wake of the failed democracy protests of 1989, he moved to Bologna, Italy, where he discovered graffiti art. When he moved back to Beijing in 1995, he continued his practice as a graffiti artist. Later, he started working with plaster, bronze and marble. Zhang’s art is closely related to activism and emphasizes on the emancipation of people of lower-classes of Chinese society. Xing Danwen (邢丹文; Xi’an, 1967) studied painting in Xi’an and Beijing, and discovered photography during the late 1980s. She was one of few artists in China who were exploring the possibilities of photography as an art form. In 1998, she moved to New York where she started working with mixed media, video and multi-media installations. Her artistic practice is varied and explores globalization,

¹ Emily Feng, “China Embraces Art for the People, by the People,” *The New York Times*, 26 April 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/arts/china-social-practice-art.html>> (retrieved on 4 January 2019).

traditions, environmental issues, dislocation and contemporary living. She currently lives and works in Beijing. These three artists were born around the start, or at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Over a period of more than fifty years, they have witnessed the transitions that China has gone through. Starting during the 1980s and 1990s, their artistic practices respond to their rapidly changing surroundings in a country where state censorship is still prevailing under Xi Jinping's governance. Therefore, their artistic practices are meaningful to investigate in relation to urbanization.

In the last decade, China's rapid urbanization has been a popular theme among museum exhibitions and has inspired Dutch museums to create exhibitions on contemporary Chinese art. One of China's most prominent artists, Yin Xiuzhen, had her first solo-exhibition in the Netherlands in the Groninger Museum in 2012. Four years earlier, in 2008, Xing Danwen also had her first Dutch exhibition in Groningen. 2017 marked an important year for Zhang Dali, who held his first exhibition in the Netherlands in Museum Beelden aan Zee. The year 2018 generated a substantial amount of attention for Chinese art. For example, the exhibition *A Chinese Journey. The Sigg Collection* in the Noord-Brabant's Museum in s'Hertogenbosh and Wang Bing's solo-exhibition in EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. This research conforms to this current interest into Chinese art.

The Conception and Approach of the Research

This research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, which includes art history, urban China studies and urban cultural studies. The method that will be applied within this research will be descriptive and analytical. This research will be conducted from a holistic approach, meaning that all phenomena are interrelated and cannot be seen apart from another. The research is largely based on the analyses of existing literature, analyses of the artworks and the analyses of their context. I will now proceed to elaborate on the literature that will function as the framework of this dissertation.

This research is based on the existing scholarship on contemporary Chinese art from art curators, critics and art historians such as Meiqin Wang and Wu Hung, who are leading Chinese art historians publishing in English. I am aware that they represent only a small part of the authors since I'm restricted hence, I do not speak mandarin. However, Wang and Wu are authors of Chinese origin with a reputation. Therefore, the use of their publications can be justified. Meiqin Wang publications and research concentrate on the recent developments of contemporary art from China and their political, social, economic implications in the context of commercialization, urbanization and globalization. Her book *Urbanization and*

Contemporary Chinese Art (2016), explores the relationship between the ongoing urbanization in China and contemporary Chinese art since the turn of the millennium. Wang provides a detailed analysis of artworks, methodologies of art-making and research into the relationship between artists and their sociocultural origins. According to Meiqin Wang, the urban theme has become dominant in the production of contemporary Chinese art since the early 2000s, when urbanization was starting to take place on a national scale.² Wang's work will function as an important framework within this research to generate a clear understanding of urban development trends in China's recent history. However, Wang does not include Zhang Dali, Xing Danwen nor Wang Bing in her analysis. Therefore, this research will investigate their artworks in order to create a complete representation of artists who deal with urbanization in their art.

Wu Hung has written several exhibition catalogues, critical essays and monographs which form the basis of contemporary Chinese art historical research. Wu Hung's writings focus on the experimental character of new Chinese art, offering analyses of the cultural origins and influences of many contemporary artists who became active during the 1990s. This research will be based on some of his publications including *Contemporary Chinese Art* (2014), in which he provides an accessible, focused narrative of the development of Chinese art across all media from the 1970s to the 2000s. In his article "*Zhang Dali's Dialogue: Conversation with a City*" (2000), Wu Hung offers a deep understanding of Zhang Dali's *Dialogue and Demolition* series (1995-2005).

Another important author is scholar and curator Britta Erickson, who has written numerous books, articles and essays on contemporary art in China. Her *Interview with Xing Danwen to Talk about Urban Fiction* (2006), functions as an important source in analysing Xing Danwen's *Urban Fiction* series (2004-2009), offering insight in Xing's art production. Furthermore, Elena Pollachi's publications on Wang Bing's documentary film will function as an important source within this research. Her current research focusses on Chinese documentary cinema and issues of migration. Her research includes articles on Wang Bing's films such as "Wang Bing's Cinema: Shared Spaces of Labour" (2014) and "Extracting narratives from reality: Wang Bing's Counter-narrative of the China Dream" (2017).

This thesis will focus on two main key concepts. The first concept, urbanization, can be subdivided into three concepts. First, urbanization refers to a situation in which people move from the countryside to the city. Second, urban growth, meaning the growth of urban

² Meiqing Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 14.

populations. Third, urbanism, referring to urban lifestyle and social behaviour. This extends to the entire society.³ In China, however, the concept of urbanization is more complicated and variable, since many scholars produce different definitions on urbanization. Therefore, I will follow the definition as defined by Chaolin Gu, Liya Wu and Ian Cook in their research “Progress in research on Chinese urbanization” (2012). According to them, ‘Chinese urbanization refers to the increase of cities in number and the expansion of urban space, resulting in the concentration of population in urban areas during certain period of time, while at the same time the urban material and spiritual civilization keeps extending to surrounding rural areas during the process and producing new spatial patterns and landscapes along with the continuous changes of regional industrial structure.’⁴ In comparison to western countries, Chinese urbanization faces a series of theoretical issues and more complicated backgrounds. The extremely rapid urbanization is changing China’s societal character from an agrarian into an urban society. Therefore, it has impelled the growth of a complex urban culture and society.⁵ Chinese urbanization occurs in an authoritarian and capitalist manner that only benefits the powerful and the rich. Meanwhile, the majority of Chinese citizens, including artists, are excluded from participating in the process. They do not gain any benefits, however, their living spaces are drastically affected and transformed by urban developments.⁶ Meiqin Wang argues that this experience of exclusion compels artists to take on a critical attitude towards China’s urban development.⁷ Since the 1990s, scholars worldwide have contributed to a rising discourse examining the developments and social implications of the continuing urbanizations in China and its impact on people.⁸ The second concept is ‘urban development’. According to professor in Urban Studies and Urban Planning Reginald Y.W. Kwok, urban planning and development, by Chinese definition, ‘refers to location and physical planning of urban activities which include utilities, transportation, industries and other production activities, community facilities and housing.’⁹ Theories and frameworks of urbanization developed in western countries cannot be directly applied to the Chinese context. Therefore, I will apply the Chinese definition of urbanization from a western perspective.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Chaolin Gu, Liya Wu and Ian Cook, “Progress in research on Chinese urbanization,” *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 1, no. 2 (2012): 107.

⁵ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 33.

⁶ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 19.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 30.

⁹ Reginald Y.W. Kwok, “Trends of Urban Planning and Development in China,” in *Urban Development in Modern China*, ed. L.J.C. Ma and E.W. Hanten (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), 147.

This research was first initiated through my extensive research on contemporary Chinese art and urban development during my studies at Hong Kong University. The courses *Chinese Cities in the 21st century* and *Contemporary Chinese Art* have motivated me to think critically about urbanization and contemporary Chinese art. I have done preparatory research through writing the paper “Imagined urban spaces or landscapes of reality?” (2018) on the representation of urban spaces in artworks by Cao Fei and Xing Danwen.

This research is also based on my own experiences with cities in China. I have travelled to several Chinese cities such as Guilin and Beijing. I gained first-hand experience of the urban environment of Beijing and visited the 798 Art District, museums and galleries. While living in Hong Kong and travelling through China, I explored the urban fabric of the cities and engaged with their urban spaces on a personal level. I have visited residential areas, old neighbourhoods, business centres, shopping malls, demolition and construction sites and some rural areas in Yunnan province. All this has contributed to my contextual understanding of the spatial and physical conditions of Chinese cities.

My observations and analyses of the discussed artworks are combined with reviews and interpretations of art critics, art historians and artists themselves. I have found these reviews and interpretations in exhibition catalogues, articles, brochures, websites and Internet blogs. I have visited the library of Museum Beelden aan Zee to collect sources about Zhang Dali. In the archive of EYE Film museum, I found sources on Wang Bing including reviews, magazines and newspaper articles. This archive provided me access to a recording of an interview with Wang Bing about *Tie Xi Qu* or *West of the Tracks* (2004) and video footage of the film itself. During my visit to TATE Modern in London in November 2018, I was able to see the film *Bitter Money* (2016). I wrote a detailed analysis on this film, which functions as the basis of my research on this matter. Xing Danwen is well-documented online. Literature, interviews and other online sources are readily available. Websites with detailed images of Xing’s *Urban Fiction* photographs enabled me to give a close reading of some of her photographs.

In order to be able to analyse the artworks, it is necessary to comprehend urbanization in the Chinese context. Therefore, the first chapter will provide a historical overview of China’s urbanization trends. This functions as framework in which the research can be conducted and to give the reader enough knowledge to be able to grasp the scope of this thesis. The following chapters will provide detailed analyses of the included artworks in relation to China’s urbanization. The artworks will be discussed in thematical order, connecting the artists’ artistic practices with their social contexts. The second chapter focusses

on China's changing surroundings and how this influences people. Two artworks by Wang Bing and Zhang Dali will be discussed. The third chapter will explore how artworks by Zhang Dali and Wang Bing engage with the issue of migrant workers. The fourth chapter will discuss how Xing Danwen's *Urban Fiction* series relates to contemporary urban life, exploring what happens when people come to live in close proximity to each other. This research will be completed with a conclusion which aims to answer the proposed research question and suggestions will be provided for possible future research.

Chapter 1: Urbanization in the Social Political Context of China

The first section of this chapter introduces the phenomenon of urbanization and how this relates to contemporary China. The second segment provides an insight into the modern history of China in relation to its urban development.¹⁰ This overview is provided in order to explain China's recent political and cultural history and set the context for this research.

1.1 China and its Urbanization

The phenomenon of urbanization has been a general trend in human society. It has been a slow and gradual process for centuries. In recent decades, we have witnessed the emergence of many megacities across the world to accommodate the growing urban population.¹¹ In 1996, The United Nations (U.N.) declared: 'The growth of cities will be the single largest influence on development in the 21st century.'¹² Urban growth already reached a milestone in 2008 when 3.3 billion people, more than half of the world's population, lived in urban areas. Most of the new growth and development will take place in developing countries in Africa and Asia. In 2007, the *State of World Population Report* estimated that the urban population will double between 2000 and 2030 in these continents. In a single generation, the accumulated urban growth there, during the span of human history, will be duplicated.¹³

Being Asia's largest nation, China or the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) is a newcomer in urbanization. Throughout the ages and until the end of the twentieth century, the majority of Chinese citizens lived in the rural areas.¹⁴ However, in recent decades China has developed itself at an extremely fast rate. According to Meiqin Wang, Chinese urbanization has reached a unprecedented level in human history, both in terms of increasing cities and in growth of the urban populations. It has increased by 18.2 million every year since the 1990s

¹⁰ Urban development trends in China can be broadly divided into four major periods: 1949-57 (Adaptation Period), 1958-60 (Great Leap Forward), 1961-76 (Urban-Rural Convergence), and 1977-79 (Reassessment). Each of these periods has its distinct characteristics and different planning philosophies responding to the coexisting national development policies. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of each of these trends, the reader is recommended to read the article "Trends of Urban Planning and Development in China" by R. Y. W. Kwok, which provides a detailed historical description and analysis of the major trends and influences in China's urban planning and development until the 1980s. In addition, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's report *Urban Trends and Policy in China*, presents an understanding of these urban planning trends as well as a description of trends taking place after the 1980s.

¹¹ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 11.

¹² United Nations Population Fund, *United Nations' 1996 state of World Population: Changing Places: Population, Development and the Urban Future* (New York: United Nations Population Fund, 1996), 1.

¹³ United Nations Population Fund, *2007 State of World Population Report: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth* (New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2007), 1 <<https://www.unfpa.org/publications/state-world-population-2007>> (retrieved on 27 November 2018).

¹⁴ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 33.

and the increase has even become higher since 2000 since it jumped to 23 million annually. With this high rate of urbanization, China's urban population reached 690.79 million by the end of 2011, exceeding its rural counterpart of 656.56 million. Urban planners announced this as an indication of China's transformation from a rural country into an urban nation. And Chinese urbanization is not slowed down by China's entry into the urban age. On the contrary, the central governments and various local states have shaped new policies and plans to urbanize China even further.¹⁵ On June 16, 2013, *The New York Times* revealed that China intended to increase its urban population to 70 percent, which is approximately 900 million people, of the country's total by 2025. Additionally, the new Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang was reported to have urbanization and development as one of his job priorities. In order to accommodate this massive urban population, China desires to expand existing cities and construct brand new ones.¹⁶ A survey from the *Chinese National Bureau of Statistic* reported that the number of cities in China had increased to 655 by the end of 2007, while this number was less than 200 cities in 1978.¹⁷ This remarkable growth was a result of the administrative upgrading of original counties and China's tendency to build new cities, many of which are still being planned today.¹⁸

1.2 History of Urban Planning in Modern China

China's practice of urban planning started around 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established under the leadership of Mao Zedong (1893-1976). Before 1949, there had been no systematic urban planning practice in responds to modernization. In the period between 1949 and 1957, the government commenced a national strategy of intensive industrialization, aiming to transform cities into industrial headquarters. Modelled after the former Soviet Union, China's national industrialisation policy focused mainly on the development of heavy industry. The process of industrialisation required many agricultural workers to go into the industrial sector. The national policy stance was to allow both cities and their urban populations to grow. The Chinese urban population experienced a 'great jump' from 1958 to 1961 during the 'Great Leap Forward' in combination with the massive industrialization efforts. This sudden expansion of the urban population had put increasing pressure on cities. To control this movement, a critical policy measure was introduced that

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Liu Zheng and Zhou Yingfeng, "The Number of Cities in China Reached 655," *People's Daily Online*, 5 November 2008, <<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/6528090.html>> (retrieved on 5 January 2019).

¹⁸ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 13.

continues to affect urban development to this day.¹⁹ Regulations were propagated in 1958 that strictly limited rural-to urban migration. According to this ‘Household Registration System’ (*hukou* 戶口)²⁰, all citizens of China are assigned an agricultural or non-agricultural residency designation at birth, based on the one held by their parents.²¹

In opposition to other officials, who had always preferred the urban scale, Mao adopted a rather negative attitude towards the cities. He glorified the rural life and regarded the countryside as a superior element of Chinese culture. Therefore, Mao’s policies were mostly anti-urban. The political and ideological identity of China was grounded in the countryside and its culture was primarily embedded in rural customs.²² The national development policy during the period of 1961-76, aimed to reduce the differences between city and countryside and between industry and agriculture.²³ This was done by ruralizing the cities and urbanizing the countryside. The Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 until 1976, caused enormous damage to Chinese traditional culture and historical relics as well as the loss of countless human lives, leaving China irreversibly scarred.²⁴ Mao’s mythical heroic-image-building strategy played an important role in his ideological control. During this era, urban intellectuals and youth were systematically sent into the countryside to be re-educated by the peasant class and reconnected with the ‘superior’, rural life.²⁵ In the following decade, the development of small-scale cities became more important while the development of large cities reduced drastically.²⁶ In most cities there was no urban construction, except for public buildings and industries.²⁷ Two years after the death of Mao, in 1978, the new president Deng Xiaoping turned his attention to the reformation of the Chinese economy. He established four Special Economic Zones where it was possible (and

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The current ‘Household Registration System’ was introduced by the Communist government in 1958 and was designed to facilitate three main programs: resource distribution and government welfare, internal migration control, and criminal surveillance. Each town and city had its own domestic passport or *hukou*, which provided residents access to social welfare services in that region. People were roughly categorised as "rural" or "urban" residents based on their place of origin. The *hukou* system was hereditary, causing children whose parents are registered as rural *hukou* holders to have a rural *hukou* as well no matter where they are actually born. The *hukou* system was initiated to ensure that China’s rural population stayed in the countryside and continued in providing the food and other resources that urban residents needed. “Migrant workers and their children,” *China Labour Bulletin* <<https://clb.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children>> (retrieved on 4 January 2018).

²¹ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Urban Trends and Policy in China* (Paris: OECD, 2009), 7 <<http://www.oecd.org/china/42607972.pdf>> (retrieved on 4 December 2018).

²² Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 38.

²³ Kwok, “Trends of Urban Planning,” 172.

²⁴ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 86.

²⁵ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 38.

²⁶ Kwok, “Trends of Urban Planning,” 149.

²⁷ This is relatively obvious when it is taken in account that intellectuals from urban areas, including urban planners, were sent to the countryside to work in the agricultural sector.

permitted) to experiment with capitalist forms of production and exchange.²⁸ China has seen rapid urban expansion and population growth in the cities since the 1980s with the beginning of market reform and the opening up policy. Chinese cities expanded particularly during the 1990s with the Chinese government's formal proclamation of market economy as the direction for national economic restructuring.²⁹ After that, the rapid urban expansions across China began.

In 2001, urbanization itself became a conscious policy choice by the Chinese government and was promoted as the strategy for China to further develop its economic progress, strengthen its national power, complete Chinese modernization, and solve social problems caused by the adoption of market economy.³⁰ The Sixteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2002 marked this significant transition. Rural China was brought under attention of urban development when the central government initiated new policies and programs aiming to transform the vast areas of the countryside. Since 2004, plans for urban-rural integration have been laid out in order to reduce the widening disparity between the two worlds.³¹ In 2013, the Chinese government has decided to increase the scale of urbanization as a strategy for economic development and to turn 250 million more rural residents into urban inhabitants within twelve years.³² This decision reveals China's intention to turn China into a consumerist economy by stimulating a new wave of growth by relocating farmers from their land. This way, these peasants are turned from agricultural producers into urban consumers. The Chinese Communist party has clearly shifted its priorities in its drive to find a solution to the slowing economy which depends more and more on a consuming class of urban residents.³³ China's recent urbanization has not only caused rural populations to move into urban living spaces, but also changed the 'means of production, structures of career, patterns of consumption, life styles, and value systems'³⁴ of most people in China, whether they live in cities or still in the countryside.

Contemporary Chinese cities are redeveloped, expanded and created in an extremely conflicted socio-political context. Today, Chinese urbanization is proclaimed to be a national policy launched by the central government aiming to create both economic and social

²⁸ Jaap Guldemond, "New Urban Realities," in *China Contemporary*, ed. Linda Vlassenrood, Jaap Guldemond, Christine de Baan (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2006), 55-56.

²⁹ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 12.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 29.

³³ Ibid., 30.

³⁴ Li Peilin, "Urbanization and China's New growth Phase: On the developmental Strategies of China's Urbanization," *Jiangsu Social Sciences*, no. 5 (2012): 43.

wellbeing for its people and to consolidate its authority over an increasingly diversified society. This state-led urbanization relies heavily on the mechanism of speculative markets and is imbued with the force of global capitalism resulting in what Wang Xiaoming identifies as ‘new systems of power plus capital’.³⁵ These ‘new systems’ dominate Chinese urban governance and are particularly at sway in the domain of land reform and real estate development, which constitute the major drive of China’s contemporary urban transformation.³⁶

³⁵ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2: The Influence of Urbanization on Surroundings

The high level of urbanization in China causes surroundings to change rapidly. These changes have a tremendous influence on people and affects their daily lives and living environment. During the 1990s many artists responded to urban planning, demolition and spatial transformations. This chapter will describe and analyse two artworks by Wang Bing and Zhang Dali, exploring different levels in which these changes occur.

2.1 Worn out Factories and Disappearing Communities

Between 1999 and 2001, Wang Bing wandered on his own with a small rented DV camera through the Tei Xi industrial District of Shenyang in the Northeast of China. This industrial area had been China's oldest manufacturing centre, dating back to Japan's colonizing drives in the 1930s. Following the model of Soviet-style heavy industry after 1949, the area became the pillar of China's centralized economy.³⁷ Until the early 1980s, the factories employed approximately one million workers.³⁸

Wang's journey, which lasted one and a half years, resulted in 300 hours of footage about the remnant factories and the people who lived in the area. He spent another two years editing the footage into his debut film *Tie Xi Qu* (铁西区) or *West of the Tracks* (2004). The documentary unfolds in three parts over nine hours. It is a record of the effects of China's transition from state-run industry and planned economy to a free market economy at the turn of the millennium. Global capital drew economic activity to the coastline and the south, causing the once largest industrial base of China to start falling apart.³⁹

The three parts can be translated into *Rust*, *Remnants*, and *Rails*. The first part, *Rust*, signifies the rusty ruins of the deteriorating industrial infrastructure. It takes the viewer into the dense haze of the worn-out factories and the daily routines of workers in the copper melting factories (fig. 2), overhearing the remaining labourers discussing unpaid wages and disappearing pensions. *Remnants*, indicating the remaining workers, focuses on a group of youths as their community disappears. The final part, *Rails*, which refers to the network of tracks linking the workers to each other and to the outer world, witnesses the resourcefulness of a father and son who survive off scraps of coal stolen from freight trains headed to the

³⁷ Sheldon, H. Lu and Jiayan Mi, *Chinese Eco-cinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge* (Hong Kong: University Press, 2009), 161-162.

³⁸ Jie Li, "Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks*: Salvaging the rubble of utopia," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 50, Spring 2008 <<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/WestofTracks/text.html>> (retrieved on 10 December).

³⁹ Lu and Mi. *Chinese Ecocinema*, 162.

factories.⁴⁰ These titles do not only indicate their subjects, the order of the trilogy also reflects a certain development from the fixity of a place to the increasingly wandering human beings who are trapped in and driven from their place of origin.⁴¹

West of the Tracks opens with a high angle shot of the Tei Xi industrial district, immediately followed by a long tracking shot in which a goods train moves through the snow-covered district's deserted factory compounds (fig. 3). Under the desolate sky, tiny human figures move around in a landscape that lies in ruins and waste. The thundering train evokes the feeling that it will never arrive anywhere and will only stop when it has run out of power and has no choice but to stagnate, left behind only to decay.



Fig. 2. Stills from *West of the Tracks*, 2004. Fig. 2. A labourer at work in a copper melting factory in Shenyang.



Fig. 3. View from the train that rides through the snow-covered landscape.

While the film focuses on the closing down of the aged steel factories, it also offers insight to the lives of the last factory worker who are about to lose their jobs and homes. Without using voiceover, data or any other didactic methods, Wang shows how labourers who stayed behind make time pass by drinking and gambling, how they demolish their residential areas, selling the fragments to get the most out of this helpless situation. Wang offers abundant shots of the workers' futureless existence. These shots involve people acting at their crudest; eating, chatting, talking dirty, cursing or taking showers. We see the workers either in uniform or nude, both denying any difference among them. Lu Xinyu, professor in *Journalism, Television and Film*, argues that the human form has been reduced to an object of

⁴⁰ TATE, *Wang Bing: Traces* (London: Tate Film, 2018), 6.

⁴¹ Jie Li, "Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks*."

indifference.⁴² In the showering bodies in front of the camera, we see the human being in its most animalistic nature. The body parts and genitals look like shrivelled pieces of human flesh. There is nothing left of the proud socialist working class of the old days. The workers' bodies are withering away, like the decaying factories that surround them, under the devastating weight of the unknown forces of global modernity.

Wang shows the reverse side of China's vast economic growth, which the government rather us not see. However, unlike fellow artist Ai Weiwei (1953), Wang Bing has not been labelled as an enemy of the state.⁴³ Wang did not have the authorisation to film *West of the Tracks*, so he had to remain out of sight of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT), who must give permission to every film that is made in China.⁴⁴ Due to his connections with French producers and their financial aid, Wang Bing is able to work independently, without making any concessions and crucially, being controlled by Chinese control-organs.⁴⁵ However, his films can neither be distributed or displayed in cinemas in China. His films can only be seen in small private galleries, or through illegal copies which are secretly sold.⁴⁶ Today, under President Xi Jinping's government, political control is still prevailing in mainland China. According to Wang Bing, censorship has increased in the past years, yet he is still able to work.⁴⁷ During the filming of *West of the Tracks*, he didn't feel restricted by the government, since he knows how to avoid them. He admits that it is not easy to make his documentaries, because there were many rules and constraints to enter the factories. He could not simply enter, since all entrances were watched by guards. Therefore, he made connections with the foremen of factories and railway machinists, which enabled him to film from within.⁴⁸ In times of great social and economic transitions, Wang Bing tells the story of the lives of ordinary Chinese people, who try to survive in a vast changing environment.

2.2 Urban Construction and Demolition

Major governmental influence on people and their surroundings in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium is not only apparent in vast changing industrial areas, but also in urban areas.

⁴² Lu Xinyu, "Ruins of the Future: Class and History in Wang Bing's Tiexi District," *New Left Review* 31 (2005): 130.

⁴³ Het Financiële Dagblad, "De andere kant van China," *Het Financiële Dagblad*, 14 april 2018.

⁴⁴ Leen Vervaeke, "Onder de radar met Wang Bing: 'Een documentaire gaat langer mee dan een mens,'" *De Groene Amsterdammer* (2018): 16.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 17.

Zhang Dali has long been recording the demolition of old Beijing. His *Dialogue and Demolition* series (1995-2005) includes photography of his graffiti project *Dialogue* as well as his writings on the development and changing appearance of China's capital city. This section will focus on Zhang's *Dialogue* project.

The graffiti⁴⁹ project consisted of spray-painted images that were composed of a single black line tracing the silhouette of a strangely proportioned head. The bulging shape of the head, rounded lips, and prominent chin gave them a cartoonish appearance (fig. 4). Occasionally, Zhang marked the images with signatures or 'tags', reading 'AK-47' or '18K'.⁵⁰ An AK-47 is a Soviet assault rifle and represents the violence of a community being torn apart. Zhang Dali wants to generate a discussion about the destructive violence in Beijing. '18K' indicates 18-carat gold and functions as a symbol for the 'economic life of the city'.⁵¹ The graffiti was intended as a provocation aimed to generate discussion about the city's dramatic physical and social transformations. Zhang argues: 'I believe that humans are the product of their environment. I am concerned about the changes in our living environment that have been imposed by money and power'.⁵² For him, "Dialogue" means exchanging ideas and personal experiences related to the impacts of the change of the city on the life of individuals.



Fig. 4. Zhang Dali, *Dialogue*, Beijing, 1998, black-and-white photograph, 100 cm x 150

⁴⁹ The Chinese word for graffiti is *tú yā* (涂鸦) literally meaning 'poor handwriting, scrawl or scribble'.

⁵⁰ Zhang secretly created these images at night, and it was only in 1998, when they became the focus of a public controversy, that Zhang Dali revealed his identity as the creator of the graffiti. This is possibly the reason that many photographs are dated in 1998, since his early graffiti images were not officially claimed by him.

⁵¹ Maurizio Marinelli, "Walls of Dialogue in the Chinese Space," *China Information* 18, no. 3 (2004): 434.

⁵² *Ibid.*

The silhouettes, of which he had already painted 2000 by 1998,⁵³ appeared mostly on walls of condemned traditional structures throughout Beijing, contrasting urban destruction and construction. These structures had been marked with the Chinese *chai* (拆) character (fig. 5).⁵⁴ *Chai* means destruction; but it also refers to obsolete things or ideas that should be destroyed.⁵⁵ Written in white or red, it announces the fate of these buildings: demolition.⁵⁶



Fig. 5. The symbol *Chai* written on traditional *hutong* houses in Beijing.

Most of the time Zhang contrasted destruction and construction in his *Dialogue* series, a method that is demonstrated in a photograph from 1998 (fig. 4). In the foreground of the image, the remnants of a demolished traditional house are seen. On its walls, Zhang has sprayed a row of his famous heads. Two modern buildings rise behind this wasteland. The left one advertises itself as the future ‘Prime Tower’⁵⁷, followed by the number of a sales department.

The same head-shaped silhouette appears as hollowed out profiles punched through brick walls to create the head in the negative space. Among the most reproduced images of *Dialogue* is a photograph from 1998 (fig. 6), depicting a hollowed-out silhouette, through

⁵³ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 190.

⁵⁴ Max D. Woodworth, “From the shadows of the spectacular city: Zhang Dali’s *Dialogue* and counter-spectacle in globalizing Beijing, 1995–2005,” *Geoforum* 65 (2015): 413.

⁵⁵ Zhao Xudong and Duran Bell, “Destroying the Remembered and Recovering the Forgotten in *Chai* Between Traditionalism and Modernity in Beijing 2005,” *China Information* 19, no. 3 (2005): 489.

⁵⁶ The practice of writing big characters on walls can be associated with what happened during the Cultural Revolution when it was a well-known political tactic used by politicians and public against their rivals or potential enemies. However, there was a long tradition of this practice in dynastic China as well, when the government used big characters in public spaces to make important announcements, usually listing criminals or convicts to be executed. In contemporary China, a big *chai* on a building unmistakably refers to a similar kind of government authority. Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 99.

⁵⁷ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 191.

which the Imperial Palace of the Forbidden City (1406-1420) can be seen, juxtaposed against the foreground's landscape of ruins and waste.⁵⁸ The imperial lavishness is a striking contrast against the partly demolished walls of the traditional communities, consisting of traditional houses (*siheyuan*) and narrow alleyways (*hutong*) that have existed just outside the palace walls for centuries.



Fig. 6. Zhang Dali, *Demolition: Forbidden City, Beijing*, 1998, from the series *Dialogue and Demolition*, 89 x 60 cm, C-Print.

During the period between 1995 and 2005, when Zhang created *Dialogue*, enormous areas of Beijing were demolished and rebuilt, clearing the way for new urban facilities and infrastructures.⁵⁹ Meiqin Wang describes how land was recapitalized for a much higher market price, and commercial districts and residential high-rises were built to accommodate the demands of the rapidly growing Chinese economy.⁶⁰ Sinologist Robin Visser affirms that ‘forced relocation and demolition abounded in Beijing and other Chinese cities in the mid-1990s as traditional houses and cultural artefacts were replaced by hotels and shopping

⁵⁸ Wu Hung, “Zhang Dali’s Dialogue: conversation with a City,” *Public Cult* 12, no. 3 (2000), 763-764.

⁵⁹ This wave of redevelopment was driven by the implementation of a market system for urban land leases in 1988, which caused tremendous residential precarity, especially for residents of the inner city.

⁶⁰ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 99.

malls.’⁶¹ In an interview in 2015, Zhang Dali said that the development of Chinese cities has been too fast, which has caused incredible harm to the environment. He argues that tradition does not exist anymore because the design of the newly built spaces is a fast process, not destined to last. ‘The City is beautiful’ is the new slogan, but not for the people living in the city, since the city is overpopulated, the air is polluted, and traffic is chaotic. For Zhang, cities have just become tools which are used by political officials and real estate developers to make quick money.⁶²

Zhang Dali’s project was inspired by a feeling of sorrow for Beijing’s disappearing traditional landscapes and disgust for the new spatial reforms. Zhang said at the time that urban redevelopment was ‘actually destroying the city’s memory, and in a sense, the memory of its people.’⁶³ As a consequence of the intensification of redevelopment activity during the past two decades, Beijing’s traditional urban form, featuring imperial landmarks, courtyard homes, and dense, lively neighbourhoods, has largely disappeared.

Wang Bing and Zhang Dali both reflect on changing environments and the ways it influences people. Although they focus on two different areas, industrial and urban, they both provide a document of something that is about to be destroyed. Wang registers the uncertainty of life for those who try to survive in an industrial area where the last running factories are about to close down. People lose their jobs and houses and are uncertain of what the future beholds. Zhang’s silhouettes painfully mark the disappearing traditional buildings and therefore, the changes that modern urbanity will bring. They evoke the sense of a lost memory, that can only exist in people’s minds. Armed with a camera or spray paint and a hammer, they document the destructive and irreversible violent transformation of communities.

⁶¹ Robin Visser, “Spaces of Disappearance: Aesthetic responses to Contemporary Beijing City Planning,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 39 (2004): 279.

⁶² Beatriz Hernández and Tânia Ganito, “On Imagination and the City: Interview with Zhang Dali,” *Urban Imaginaries* 5 (2015): 8, <https://lisbonconsortium.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/interview_zhang-dali.pdf> (retrieved on 15 January 2019).

⁶³ Woodworth, “From the shadows of the spectacular city,” 413.

Chapter 3: Rootless Wanderers and Remnants

The previous chapter illustrates the consequences of urbanization on the changing surroundings, and therefore the lives of people living in industrial and urban areas.

Urbanization has also caused many Chinese, such as the people shown in Wang's *West of the Tracks*, to move away from their hometown in search of new houses and jobs. Differing in motivation and backgrounds, many of these people, mostly rural labourers or migrant workers (*nong min gong* 农民工), flocked to the big cities in search of work and a better life.⁶⁴

Migrant workers now make up about 35 % of China's total workforce of about 810 million people.⁶⁵ Zhang Dali and Wang Bing have both made artworks that focus on migrant workers, who are part of one of China's most prominent societal issue. This chapter will describe and analyse the role of migrant workers in artworks by Zhang Dali and Wang Bing.

3.1 Hanging from a Thread

Life-sized plaster sculptures are dangling upside down from the ceiling, their weight heavily depending on the steel cable that is tethered to their feet. The scene recalls images of a mass torture from ancient centuries. The variously shaped hanging bodies provide an unexpected viewing angle and evoke a thrilling atmosphere and tension among the audience below. From 2003 to 2005, Zhang Dali created the piece *Chinese Offspring* (fig. 7), in which he duplicated life-size resin casts of one hundred migrant workers,⁶⁶ both men and women.⁶⁷ Each naked, partially flesh-coloured body is designated a number in Chinese and English, a date, the artist's signature and the work's title 'Chinese Offspring' is tattooed onto each of their bodies (fig. 8).

⁶⁴ Since the beginning of the decade, the number of migrant workers has grown by approximately 44 million (18 %). China's total workforce only increased by 28 million, according to official figures, which confirms that rural migrant workers have been contributing most significantly to the growth of China's labour market over the last decade. The total number of rural migrant labourers working in China's cities increased by 4.8 million (1.7 %) in 2017, reaching the total number of 286.5 million, according to the recent survey of migrant workers conducted by the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics. China Labour Bulletin. "Migrant workers and their children". *China Labour Bulletin* (2018) <<https://clb.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children>> (Retrieved on 26 December 2018).

⁶⁵ Based on the official figures for 2016 of 807 million people. Ibid.

⁶⁶ Huang Liping, "The omnipresent Zhang Dali," in *From reality to extreme reality. The road of Zhang Dali*, ed. United Art Museum (Wuhan: United Art Museum, 2015), 6.

⁶⁷ In general, most artistic representations of migrant workers tend to be of male workers. Before the economic reform era, the depictions of female workers, farmers, and soldiers were more equally represented. This echoed Mao's slogan that 'Women hold up half the sky'. Zhang Dali's works dealing with both male and female migrant workers is a notable exception. See: Maurizio Marinelli, "Urban revolution and Chinese contemporary art: A total revolution of the senses," *China Information* 29, no. 2 (2015): 154–75. This imbalance of visibility among male and female migrant workers is a problematic issue in contemporary art, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this research.



Fig. 7. Zhang Dali, *Chinese Offspring*, 2003-2005, mixed media, resin mixed with fibreglass, average height 170 cm each.



Fig. 8. Zhang Dali, *Chinese Offspring*, detail of the back of one sculpture with the date, title and signature of the artist.

The social class of migrant workers has only recently arisen and has emerged as a product of urbanization and the growth of major Chinese cities. Since the 1980s, migrants have moved in large numbers from the countryside to coastal cities in the east and south of China. Just thirty years ago, most people were born, lived, and died in the same village or town. Their job was decided by the local government and those who moved around did so because they were told to do so by local authorities, not because they thought of the idea of being able to seek work elsewhere. When Deng Xiaoping's rose to power in 1978, the economic reforms that were initiated alleviated some of the disparity between agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* holders. Restrictions have been loosened on movement from rural areas to smaller cities, although migration to large cities such as Beijing is still heavily regulated.⁶⁸ With these reforms, mobility has come, and these migrant labourers are now able to seek work wherever opportunities present themselves. They belong to what is commonly

⁶⁸ China Labour Bulletin, "Migrant workers and their children".

known as the ‘floating population’ (*liu dong ren kou* 流动人口).⁶⁹ This term refers to anyone who has moved, either temporarily or permanently, away from their registered place of residence without a consistent transfer of official residence registration, or *hukou*.⁷⁰ As said before, inland migration is still being regulated by the government. Those who move from one state to another without permission are considered illegal. The mostly rural migrant workers are not part of the official register of urban inhabitants. Therefore, they have no right to state education, healthcare or any other benefits in the city they now call ‘home’. They are on the fringes of society and live in scanty homes in abandoned buildings, on the outskirts of the major cities.⁷¹ It must be noted that most migrant workers are desperately poor and often only trying to survive. It is not an easy choice to leave one’s hometown, as it forces them to live on the margins of the Chinese population. One can only presume that this choice is more attractive and promises a brighter future than staying in the countryside.



Fig. 9. Zhang Dali, *Chinese Offspring*, seen from below.

The sculptures in *Chinese Offspring* are often hung upside down, indicating the uncertainty of the migrant workers’ lives (fig. 9). It represents their vulnerability, rootlessness and powerlessness in changing their own destinies. Or as Lu Hong puts it: ‘the migrant

⁶⁹ Arianne M. Gaetano and Tamara Jacka, *On the Move: Women and Rural-to-urban Migration in Contemporary China* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2004), 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Sabine Wang, “Interview with Zhang Dali in Beijing, China, April 2017,” in: *Zhang Dali. Body and Soul*, ed. Museum Beelden Aan Zee (Scheveningen: Museum Beelden Aan Zee, 2017), 84.

workers want to leave but got caught in a merciless situation.’⁷² The *Chinese Offspring* figures portray the lowest class of Chinese society and unlike marble, plaster cannot truly achieve the goal of monumentality. The material is too cheap and cannot produce a sense of permanence.⁷³ It is volatile, like the perishing existence of migrant workers.

The image of the migrant worker first emerged in Zhang Dali’s works in the mid-2000s, but his engagement with migrant labourers dates back earlier. Zhang has stated: ‘In 2000, I began to think of the urban environment as just one aspect of the sweeping changes around us, and that people may be more important because they decide which changes are made. Additionally, the migrant populations that were coming to the city to earn a wage were an increasingly important facet of the country.’⁷⁴ During the early 2000s, Zhang was occupied with his *Dialogue* series, as discussed in the previous chapter. Interestingly, it was already then when he started to involve the migrant worker in his artistic practice by engaging them in his project and hiring them to create the negative space silhouettes.⁷⁵ Zhang refuses to differentiate the migrant workers into ‘us and them’. He has said: ‘My own identity is the same as theirs [...] My life after university was more dire than that of migrant workers, but it motivated me by the same desire to change my circumstances by moving to the city. But migrant workers lack the connections, capital, education, and skill-set, so their lives are very difficult.’⁷⁶ This statement should be considered in the sense of Zhang’s essential kinship with migrant workers, rather than an equalization of situations.

Zhang Dali used to have his studio in an old warehouse, which was marked for destruction, next to a community where migrant workers used to live. Each day, these workers would gather in the early morning on various streets in the city to offer themselves for work to whomever would come along with a job. They would work as labourers at construction sites or other low-paid jobs. They were the sacrificial victims upon which the wealth of the new China has been built. Yet, they are the faceless mass that lives at the bottom of the Chinese society, which the authorities nor the wealthy citizens of Beijing want to see. Zhang, however, documented them. He sought to give these people their identity back, by casting their face and

⁷² Lu Hong, “Form is the extension of Thought- conversation between Lu Hong and Zhang Dali,” in *From reality to extreme reality: The road of Zhang Dali*, ed. Wuhan Art Museum (Wuhan: United Art Museum, 2015), 46-47.

⁷³ Wu Hung, “Instantaneous copying and monumentality. The Historic Logic of “Permanence and Impermanence,” in *Zhang Dali. Body and Soul*, ed. Museum Beelden Aan Zee (Scheveningen: Museum Beelden Aan Zee, 2017), 62.

⁷⁴ Wu Hung, and Zhang Dali, *Permanence and Impermanence: New Works By Zhang Dali* (Beijing: China Nationality Art Photograph Publishing House, 2017), 27-28.

⁷⁵ Woodworth, “From the shadows of the spectacular city,” 417.

⁷⁶ Wu Hung and Zhang Dali, *Permanence and Impermanence*, 31.

body. He emphasized the actual existence of migrant workers to recognize their contribution to Chinese society.⁷⁷ While doing so, Zhang has to be careful of governmental censorship. He is familiar with the power of the state and knows how to navigate state censorship, since he has been censored numerous times from his very first show in 1987. Zhang carefully chooses the gallery spaces and museums where he exhibits. Provincial cities in the south like Wuhan, where his retro-perspective *From reality to extreme reality: The road of Zhang Dali* (2015) was on display in the United Art Museum, are more open and might provide more freedom from official intervention. According to Zhang, northern China is more conservative, and bigger cities have more government surveillance on the art scene.⁷⁸

This project successfully focused people's attention on a major social issue, nevertheless, it also exposed the limitations in providing real solutions to the problem. Zhang Dali took on the role of powerholder, employing migrant workers to perform the art project. The migrant workers themselves remained powerless, contributing to the projects by offering their labour and bodies.⁷⁹

3.2 Making Bitter Money

The harsh life of Chinese migrant workers is carefully documented in Wang Bing's documentary *Ku Qian* (苦钱) or *Bitter Money* (2016). Set in the rapidly grown factory city of Huzhou in eastern China, *Bitter Money* observes the daily lives of workers who migrated from rural areas in search of higher wages. The title *Bitter Money* refers to a slang expression used in Huzhou to describe the sufferings of being away from home and enduring the factories' exhausting working conditions in order to earn an income.⁸⁰ Huzhou is one of the world's biggest producers of garments, and one of the richest areas in China. Its inhabitants have come from different regions across the country to work in the local textile factories. The final credits of *Bitter Money* estimates that more than 300,000 people are working among the 18,000 small textile businesses in the city.

⁷⁷ Lu Hong, "Form is the extension of Thought," 46.

⁷⁸ Lisa Movius, "Chinese artist Zhang Dali on censorship and finding freedom in the provinces," *The Art Newspaper*, 23 September 2015, 3 <http://www.zhangdaliart.com/biblio/wechat2015/201509/Wechat_B_02_Lisa_2015-09-23.pdf> (retrieved on 15 January 2019).

⁷⁹ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 406.

⁸⁰ TATE, *Wang Bing: Traces*, 7.

The film opens with a shot of a rural family discussing the possibility of sending some of its members to the city, hoping to improve their lives. Eventually the film follows three teenage cousins on their train journey from their Yunnan hometown to Huzhou (fig. 10). Throughout the film, the viewer is immersed into the observation of workshops, residential areas and small shops, all related to the production of garments through multiple characters and their families. They perform repetitive work at sewing machines for lengthy scenes, trying to suggest the duration of a twelve- or fourteen-hour workday.⁸¹ The camera follows the characters closely, capturing their true emotions and their disappointments upon receiving



Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.

Stills from *Bitter Money*. Fig. 10. Two cousins on their train journey to Hangzhou. Fig. 11. Ling Ling standing on the streets of Hangzhou, minutes after being menaced by her husband.

their wages after a day of hard work. The camera that cuts quietly from one character's story to another, building a mosaic of life in Huzhou. According to Wang Bing, 'Wandering' has become the main theme in Chinese people's opinion today. 'I used swaying of focuses, wondering from one subject to the other, with a constant stagger of camera shots and characters, in order to tell their stories,' he explained.⁸² *Bitter Money* does not avoid upsetting content and shows the harsh reality of everyday life. One extended, agonizing scene follows migrant worker Ling Ling (fig. 11) enduring physical and emotional abuse from her husband. As he menaces her, the growing tension can be felt by the spectator. Exploitation and abuse are part from daily life. The female worker is shown in her private struggles, which add up to her difficulties as a worker.⁸³ The film shows how violence and oppression stem from the

⁸¹ A survey of 1518 migrant workers in 2013 revealed that they spent on average 11 hours at work each day. *China Labour Bulletin*, "Migrant workers and their children".

⁸² Festivalscope, "Bitter Money," *Festivalscope*, <<https://www.festivalscope.com/all/film/bitter-money>> (retrieved on 26 December 2018).

⁸³ Elena Pollacchi, "Extracting narratives from reality: Wang Bing's counter-narrative of the China Dream," *Studies in Documentary Film* 11 (2017): 224.

inhumane top down systems of industrialization, expanding in the city and tragically affecting people on the bottom rung of capitalist society. For these people, survival has become part of the mundane.

While *Bitter Money* focuses on the lives of migrant workers who moved to the city, Wang's *San Zi Mei* or *Three Sisters* (2012) offers insight into the lives of those who stayed behind in the countryside. *Three Sisters* features three young girls who are partly taken care of by an aunt and their grandparents, although most of the time it is the eldest girl who looks after her younger sisters.⁸⁴ Wang follows 10-year-old Yingying, 6-year-old Zhenzhen, and 4-year-old Fenfen making their way, day in and day out, across the muddy terrain of their village in the vast, high mountain area of Yunnan (fig. 12 and 13). Shifting between the dimly lit interiors of a stone hut and the misty, muddy landscape outside, Wang often traces behind the children while trying to keep up with them, unaccustomed to life at an altitude of over 3,000 meters above sea level. Despite their young age, the girls' lives are filled with hard labour. They collect potatoes, herd pigs and other animals and collect animal manure for the stoves. The only times when they can rest, are during the basic meals at the end of the day.

The harshness of the sisters' lives becomes clear when we learn that their mother has left for another village and their father headed for the city to find work because the Yunnan



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.

Stills from *Three Sisters*. Fig. 12. The sisters in the rural area of Yunnan. From left to right: Zhenzhen, Yingying and Fenfen. Fig. 13. Yingying washes garments in a bucket, while her sister Zhenzhen observes

⁸⁴ Elena Pollacchi, "Wang Bing's Cinema: Shared Spaces of Labor," *WorkingUSA: Journal of Labor and Society* 2 (2014): 36-37.

soil does not offer much prospect of survival. Through western eyes, it is nearly impossible not to see Wang's documentaries as an accusation against humiliating work and terrible living conditions, or at least as a conscious choice of characters living on the marge of society. But in an interview with the *Groene Amsterdammer*, Wang disputes this interpretation. His characters are not people who live on the marge, they are ordinary people.⁸⁵ He uses the three girls as an example. 'The three sisters are common children from a rural area. In any school you will find many children alike them. The [Chinese] media wants us to believe that there is a large middle class in China. However, in reality, the middle class is a western concept and does not exist in China. You can have a house, a monthly salary, food at the table and living a comfortable life, but tomorrow you can lose everything. In China you should divide people between people without power and those who have, which is a very small group. Only with power, one can become wealthy'.⁸⁶ I suggest that Wang portrays these people as such, in order to expose the existing hierarchy in China.⁸⁷ The people shown in *Three Sisters* can be seen as the personification of the Chinese rural population whose only experience of Chinese economic growth is being excluded from it.⁸⁸ The girls will never experience the luxurious life of the city, and neither will their parents, who awaits the fate of a life of underpaid hard work, just like the workers in *Bitter Money*. Ironically, Wang cheekily borrowed his title *Three Sisters* from Anton Chekhov's (1860-1904) play from 1901, in which three sisters from a Russian rural area, desperately want to leave for Moscow, but never will.

Wang's *Three sisters* painfully illustrates the friction between China's traditional history and the consequences of modernization. The traditional life in the countryside is a sharp contrast to the modern city life shown in *Bitter Money*. Together with *West of the Tracks*, Wang Bing explores the impact of economic reforms by showing Chinese peripheral regions in the transition from a planned economy to a market economy.⁸⁹ In fast growing cities, migrant workers have been arriving and hoping for a better life, only to find little opportunities and poor living conditions that push people into violent and oppressive relations.

Zhang Dali and Wang Bing are both moved by the fate of Chinese migrant workers, and try to give a face to a neglected, but substantial group of people who made urbanization

⁸⁵ Leen Vervaeke, "Onder de radar met Wang Bing", 18.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Exposing hierarchical structures and engagement with politics and social justice is a common theme within the Chinese art discourse. However, it is more common to artists who have been active trough the 1980's and 1990s, which were politically unstable times, such as Cai Guo-Qiang and Ai Weiwei.

⁸⁸ Pollacchi, "Wang Bing's Cinema: Shared Spaces of Labor," 36-37.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 35.

possible but are simultaneously victims of it. Zhang Dali's *Chinese Offspring* aims to acknowledge these people's existence by casting their bodies in plaster and thereby giving their faces back. Wang Bing's *Bitter Money* follows the life of migrant workers who work in harsh conditions in the textile production. His *Three Sisters* captures what happens to those who are left behind in the countryside, waiting for their family to return. It shows the possible background of many workers and simultaneously the reverse side of migration. However, there is a difference in Zhang's and Wang's thinking. While Zhang regards his subjects, the migrant workers, as a suppressed group on the bottom ranks of society, Wang sees his characters as ordinary Chinese people with desires and hope for a better future.

Chapter 4: Behind the Façade of Urbanism

China's urban population has grown distinctively during the last decades. Due to high pressure on urban space, authorities have rapidly built residential areas to house the population. Since the late 1970s, Chinese cities have been reconfigured into shiny glass and steel landscapes, a development driven by the age of globalization. This chapter will discuss China's urban landscape in relation to Xing Danwen's *Urban Fiction* (2004-2009) series.

4.1 The Doll's House

Urban Fiction consists of a series of large-scale colour photographs of real estate architectural models. The images are sleek and clean. At first glance, they look like actual real estate advertisements, selling a luxurious urban life. When one looks closer, tiny figures can be seen, enacting a variety of imaginary human dramas. Some scenes are tender and mundane, such as the images of a lonely woman drinking coffee on her balcony or a woman floating alone in her swimming pool. Others are more gruesome; a woman about to jump from the roof of a high-rise or a couple caught up in a violent argument. The tiny figures in model houses evoke a doll's house, however, they do not convey any children's memories. The images are often shot from an aerial view, providing an overview perspective of the city landscape. By zooming in, the viewer becomes witness to the occurring scenes, which would usually remain hidden within private life. As viewers, we are observing and intruding into other lives. While these scenes form only a miniscule part of each image, their actions become the focal point of an otherwise sterile environment.



Fig. 14. Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction*, image 13, C-print, 2004-2005, 219.5 x 170 cm.

For this series, created from 2004 to 2009, Xing photographed architectural scale models created for real estate developments.⁹⁰ Using digital computer technologies, Xing transformed these real estate models into realistic urban settings and inserted portraits of herself into the urban site. The isolated scenes are so small that the viewer must search to find them. Performing different characters, Xing creates various scenes which derive from human life, turning the images into an actual urban scene.⁹¹ The plots are invented, visualized for and staged within the maquettes.⁹² In one image, a woman wearing a purple wig and sunglasses stands with her hands raised in shock (fig. 14). Her top has been ripped open, exposing her shoulders and breasts. On the immaculate white floor before her, the body of a male lies in a puddle of blood, next to him lies a scattered bouquet of flowers. In another photograph from the series, a man dragging his suitcase behind him is walking home only to discover his wife is cheating on him (fig. 15). She notices her husband coming home and alerts her lover. Carrying his clothes in a quickly grabbed bundle, the lover is trying to escape from the balcony.



Fig. 15. Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction*, image 23, 2005, C-Print, 80 x 100 cm.

4. 2 The Universal Evolution of the Vertical

When Xing Danwen lived in New York and travelled through Europe during the early 2000s, she was struck by the worldwide uniformity of contemporary city architecture, especially high-rise residential blocks. After being in so many cities around the world, Xing comprehended that globalization has made urban landscapes everywhere similar causing boundaries between them to blur. Very often, the concept

⁹⁰ Sasha Su-Ling Welland, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art Beijing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 78.

⁹¹ Lotte Hofstraat, *Imagined urban spaces or landscapes of reality?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 2018), 3. Own archive.

⁹² Anti-Utopias, "Xing Danwen Urban Fictions," *Anti-Utopias*, <https://anti-utopias.com/art/xing-danwen-urban-fictions/> (retrieved on 4 January 2019).

of 'here' can be anywhere around the world.⁹³ She realized that these uniform houses only gain personality when they are inhabited by people. Rather than focusing on real buildings, Xing photographed architectural models for her *Urban Fictions* series. These maquettes aimed to promote real-estate developments that were being planned in China at that time. Some of the buildings already existed, and others were soon to be constructed, perhaps using the labour forces of migrant workers. From 2004 to 2009, Xing visited real estate sales agents in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, photographing architectural models of urban dwellings. Using natural light, the series embodies the striking sameness of each developer's vision, as well as their projects' unique approaches.⁹⁴ At the time, Xing said about the maquettes: 'When you face these models showing such a variety of different spaces and think about the life-styles associated with them you start to wonder: is this the picture of life today? Do we really live in this kind of space and environment?'⁹⁵

By photographing the real estate maquettes, Xing documented a wave of utopian desire and material aspiration, which was caused by China's growing market economy.⁹⁶ The large size of Xing's *Urban Fiction* prints emphasizes the scale of the modern, market-oriented developments which she depicts.⁹⁷ The models of high-rise apartments and houses were created to sell to the growing 'middle class', the emerging entrepreneurs, and the global rich who have thrived in the era of 'opening' and market reforms from 1978 onwards.⁹⁸ China's urban landscape has experienced significant transition in the last forty decades. Throughout China's five thousand years of urban civilization, the Chinese architectural tradition has been specifically characterized by traditional architectural philosophies and *Feng Shui* (风水)⁹⁹ For centuries, single-story buildings had predominated in Chinese city planning both in domestic as well as more formal architectural structures. Whether in imperial palaces, gardens, or temples, the spatial representation of power and authority had been presented horizontally rather than vertically.¹⁰⁰ Even after the start of the revolution, Mao continued the horizontal expression of authority

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Andrew Maerkele, "Xing Danwen's Chinese Fantasy State of Art," *ArtAsiaPacific Journal* (Hong Kong: AsiaArtPacific, n.d.): 22.

⁹⁵ Anti-Utopias. "Xing Danwen Urban Fictions."

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ John S. Rosenberg, "Urban Utopias. China's swift march from communal housing to market mansions," *Harvard Magazine* (September 2010): 34 <<https://harvardmagazine.com/2010/09/urban-utopias>> (retrieved on 5 January 2019).

⁹⁸ Anti-Utopias, "Xing Danwen Urban Fictions."

⁹⁹ *Feng Shui* is the Chinese philosophical practice of placement. The fundament of *Feng Shui* is to achieve unity amongst heaven, earth and human by creating harmony between nature, architecture and people. The environment is arranged so that people can live in harmonious spaces. More information on the theory and practice of *Feng Shui* can be found in: Michael Y. Maka and S. Thomas Ng, "The art and science of Feng Shui. A study on architects' perception," *Building and Environment* 40, no. 3 (2005): 427-434.

¹⁰⁰ Anthony D. King and Abidin Kusno, "On Be(i)jing in the World: "Postmodernism," "Globalization," and the making of Transnational Space in China," in *Postmodernism in China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004), 49.

and power. In Beijing, he developed a system of large walled work-unit compounds that functioned as self-sufficient minor towns where urban residents lived, worked and were provided with necessary services such as medical-care and child-care. The traditional *hutong* facades, as presented in chapter two, remained, but the buildings were given an industrial function. Although most urban growth efforts lead to ‘differentiation and isolation’ among individuals, Mao’s model promoted community integration.¹⁰¹ Moreover, his model enabled his strategies of strict government surveillance. Initially, the system appeared to be fruitful: for over two decades, Mao’s approach produced consistent industrial growth. However, the passage of time proved the instability of his plan. China’s minimal resources went into the overpopulated cities. The closeness of living and factory spaces led to problems of air, noise and water contamination. Stagnation and decline set in.

The 1980s marked the ideological shift from the Mao era to the age of market economy and global capitalism which has led to an evident visual shift in the urban landscape. With the rise of global capitalism, low and horizontal housing have been replaced by tall and vertical. In the article “On Be(i)jing in the World: “Postmodernism,” “Globalization,” and the making of Transnational Space in China.,” professor in History Anthony D. King and professor of Comparative and Chinese Literature Abidin Kusno argue that this shift ‘would seem to suggest an acceptance, by the Chinese political establishment, of an increasingly (and selective) global system of architectural signification produced by the logic of a private, for-profit system of capitalist land values, typically represented by Manhattan or Hong Kong.’¹⁰² The outcome of the architectural evolution of China is addressed in Xing Danwen’s *Urban Fiction* series.¹⁰³ It investigates China’s urban modernity in an era of urban development and globalization.

4.3 Selling Urban Fantasies or Disillusions?

In *Urban Fiction*, Xing makes use of actual real estate scale models to reflect on contemporary urban life.¹⁰⁴ Using scale models, real estate developers aim to encourage potential buyers to envision their fantasies onto the maquettes. Their line of reasoning is as such; if people cannot imagine themselves living or working in the building, they will not buy the space before the buildings are completed.¹⁰⁵ Scale models are tiny and delicate constructions which symbolize the ideas and concepts of the architect and real estate developer. According to Shirley Linder and Christoph Jordan, they point towards a future

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 59.

¹⁰² Ibid., 50.

¹⁰³ Maerkle, “Xing Danwen’s Chinese Fantasy State of Art,” 22.

¹⁰⁴ Hofstraat, *Imagined urban spaces*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Britta Erickson, *Interview with Xing Danwen to Talk about Urban Fiction* (Toronto: Gallery TPW, 2006), 3.

structure which is made from solid steel, glass and concrete. The material's solidity and hardness are erased in the scale model. The fantasized construction of a utopian future remains.¹⁰⁶ For Xing, the maquette functions as an advertisement to create fantasies and dreams, because the real estate companies compose a well-defined theme and strong strategy before they start building their projects. The names of the projects are carefully chosen, aiming to lure target buyers for their projects, such as 'SOHO', 'Australia Condo', 'IT Utopia', 'Manhattan Garden', and so on. According to Xing, 'these names are already full of fantasies, which easily lead your dreams and desires into the imaginative lifestyles within a second of your instinctive reaction.'¹⁰⁷ Starting the series, Xing decided to start with the project SOHO, which turned out to be her most famous project. For this photograph, Xing Danwen photographed the maquette of the Jian Wai SOHO real estate project (fig. 16) which was completed in 2007 in Beijing. Initiated by SOHO China real estate development, Jian Wai SOHO is a mixed complex of commercial, office and residential space spread out over twenty-four white office buildings of different heights, designed by Japanese architect Riken Yamamoto (Beijing, 1995).¹⁰⁸



Fig. 16. Riken Yamamoto, *Jian Wei SOHO*, Beijing, 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Shirley Jordan and Christoph Lindner, *Cities Interrupted: Visual Culture and Urban Space* (London/ New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 38.

¹⁰⁷ Erickson, *Interview with Xing Danwen*, 3.

¹⁰⁸ SOHO China, "Jian Wai SOHO," *SOHO China* <<https://srwww.sohochina.com/project.aspx?projectid=15>> (retrieved on 9 January 2019).

At the beginning of the project, it was difficult for Xing to photograph the scale models. She experienced two basic problems. First, the real estate developers thought Xing was a member of the press and were very cynical about her intentions. This is because maquettes are designed to appear very attractive and make you fantasize about a future life within them, although they might not be accurate in terms of the final construction. Real estate developers were worried about the possibility of discovering differences between the maquette and the final building. Second, if Xing approached them as a ‘normal person’, they suspected her to be engaged in industrial espionage to copy their ideas and strategies, since the sector’s competition is extremely fierce. Finally, with the help of an introduction letter from a friend who was well connected to the SOHO project’s head, explaining her intention of wanting to photograph their maquette for artistic purposes only, she was given access.

Xing’s final photographs present alternative scale models which question the ideology of architectural maquettes used by real estate sellers. According to Professor of Comparative Literature and Cinema Studies Yomi Braester, artworks mimicking the scale model, present the unpleasant consequences of the scale model as an autonomous entirety. According to him, the maquette has become a completely modular city that can be reassembled and modified as one desires.¹⁰⁹ To him, the scale models in post-socialist China have come to represent the premanufactured utopia.¹¹⁰ The scale models in Xing’s *Urban Fiction* series mimic their original idiom. However, the work is not concerned with the actual buying and selling of real estate.¹¹¹ Xing explores the influence of real estate agents on the housing market and economy and reflects on ways of living within the urban space. She realized that the desired living environments and quality of life are becoming more accessible. Simultaneously, they have become the standard human desire and condition for happiness. Real estate agents and developers lead people to find a dream space to fulfil their desires.¹¹² In 2015, Zhang Dali made some explicit statements on the Chinese real estate market. He called urbanization ‘just a real estate campaign’.¹¹³ According to him, the real estate sector is an essential motor of economy. In China, land is in full arbitrary control of the government, which causes an increase of wealth from the selling of land use rights. Zhang stated that ‘the government’s propaganda promotes the Chinese Dream, but this is very different from actual real life.’¹¹⁴ Unlike Zhang Dali, Xing Danwen has not experienced much government interference and she is

¹⁰⁹ Yomi Braester, “The Architecture of Utopia: From Rem Koolhaas’s Scale Models to RMB City,” in *Spectacle and the City: Chinese Urbanities in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 67.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 73.

¹¹¹ Hofstraat, *Imagined urban spaces*, 7.

¹¹² Erickson, *Interview with Xing Danwen*, 1.

¹¹³ Hernández and Ganito, “On Imagination and the City,” 7.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 6.

able to exhibit everywhere in China. Although her artworks are socially engaged, they are not as explicitly politically engaged as Zhang Dali's art. This does not mean she is oblivious to state censorship. During the 1990s when she lived in an avant-garde artist community in the Beijing East Village, she experienced police raids and saw how her fellow artists were arrested for performing political and nude performances.¹¹⁵

4.4 A State of Anxiety and Isolation

Being raised in Maoist China, as a child and teenager, Xing could only imagine the modern city and high-rise buildings through magazine photographs and films, which depicted images from the west. In today's Chinese market-era cities, the gated high-rises promise better housing, but they are expensive and out of reach for most of the population.¹¹⁶ The old image of how China used to be is still present in the back of Xing's head, recalling both positive and negative feelings.¹¹⁷ She states that when people who live in old, crowded courtyard houses suddenly have to move to high-rise buildings, they feel happy to have all the basic conveniences such as a kitchen and toilet. But they are no longer living as a big family with their neighbours and they might never even bump into their neighbours in the elevator. Xing argues that 'People might have a bigger space to themselves, and yet feel very isolated and lonely in their heavenly cubes.'¹¹⁸ The models presented by Xing, show lonely and isolated figures inhabiting luxurious but empty urban dwellings. The figures have come to represent Chinese citizens who live in close proximity, only separated by thin walls, but simultaneously live at a greater distance from each other than ever before. The miniscule figures accentuate the absence of humanity in the city landscape.¹¹⁹ Despite China's rapid economic developments, increasing wealth and growing material consumption, Chinese people are not happy nor spiritually satisfied. The majority of people appear to be suffering from depression and anxiety. Wang Xiaoming states that the whole society has fallen into a crisis of immorality and lacks basic humanity.¹²⁰ China has entered into a situation in which major social issues are destroying Chinese society and people are in a constant state of anxiety and disorientation.¹²¹ By fragmenting the space and implanting characters into that space, Xing Danwen

¹¹⁵ Richard Vine, "Xing Danwen: Beijing Confidential," *Art in America Magazine*, 2010 <<https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/xing-danwen/>> (retrieved on 16 January 2019). For more information on the Beijing East Village and Xing Danwen's occupation and art see; Thomas J. Berghuis, "Performance Art in China," *Timezone* 8 (2006): 106-08.

¹¹⁶ Rosenberg, "Urban Utopias," 35.

¹¹⁷ Erickson, *Interview with Xing Danwen*, 2.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Hofstraat, *Imagined urban spaces*, 4.

¹²⁰ Wang Xiaoming, "Where Does Chinese Anxiety Come From?" 22 October 2013, <http://www.21xxom.net/articles/sxwh/shsc/article_2013102294054.html> (retrieved on 13 January 2019).

¹²¹ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 253.

illustrates the current status of Chinese society. Her miniscule figures enacting human dramas, bring the empty architectural models to life, providing a more realistic dimension to the utopian real estate maquette.¹²²

With *Urban Fiction*, Xing intervenes in the utopian fantasy presented by the scale model, adding her own critical vision and raising unsettling questions about China's utopian real estate projects. By interrupting the smooth sanitized fantasies of the future city, she predicts the concrete realities that will inevitably come out of the fantasies as materialized in the scale model. As Xing Danwen's work suggests, living in a utopia may not be particularly utopian.

¹²² Jordan and Lindner, *Cities Interrupted*, 38.

Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the effects of Chinese urbanization on the Chinese population through the artworks of Wang Bing, Xing Danwen and Zhang Dali. This is examined through the research question: *In what manner does Chinese urbanization affect the Chinese population and how is this manifested in artworks by the artists Wang Bing, Zhang Dali and Xing Danwen?* Within this research, it became apparent that all three artists show the impact of urban processes by emphasizing on the lives of Chinese people in their artworks. The consulted literature indicates that these transformations are driven by urban planning, economic development and material consumption.

To answer the first part of the research question, I argue that the effects of urbanization on people can be reduced to three prominent societal issues. The first issue I formulated, consists of the governmental interferences within people's living environment, causing their immediate surroundings to change due to relocation and urban transformations. The second social problem is the increasing number of migrant workers who flock to the city. These people work under harsh circumstances and do not share the same rights as other citizens. The growing number of urban citizens culminates into the third issue, in which new urban residential areas are built at a fast rate to house the growing urban population. However, land prices are high, residential buildings are becoming taller and people live crammed together in small spaces. Meanwhile, people suffer from isolation and become detached from traditional Chinese society. Therefore, I conclude that the daily life of Chinese people is heavily affected by urban transformations.

To answer the second part of the research question, I argue that the artists share a critical attitude towards urbanization and show the reverse side of urbanization, which the government rather us not see. My analysis demonstrates that Wang Bing, Zhang Dali and Xing Danwen incorporate the above presented issues into their artistic practices. Although the artists use different materials and techniques, such as film, urban structures, sculptures and photography, they share a politically engaged approach in which they investigate the socio-political and economic processes.

Through my extensive analysis, I encountered that Zhang Dali is much more explicit about his goals and approaches than the other artists. Therefore, I argue that his artworks derive from a more activist approach than the works by Wang and Xing. Starting this research, I expected all three artists to work from an activist approach. This assumption appeared to be unjustified. I also perceived a shift of subject in Zhang's art. During the 2000's

his focus shifted from the changing environment to the human side of urbanization. This is evident in the physical representation of the migrant workers in *Chinese Offspring*. Xing Danwen's work derives from a less obvious activist approach. She does comment on the real estate development and the market economy, but this is not explicitly mentioned. From a Western perspective, Wang Bing's documentaries show people who might be considered as outsiders to society. However, Wang rather regards them as ordinary Chinese people. According to him, the middle class does not exist in Chinese society. People are either extremely rich, or desperately poor. I suggest he identifies his personages as 'ordinary', in order to expose the hierarchy within Chinese society.

There are three interesting options for further research, namely the examination of the artistic practice of younger or female artists, the representation of female migrant workers and how the artists in other regions deal with the theme of urbanization. While this thesis focusses on the artistic practice of established Chinese artists who were born at the start of urbanization, it is meaningful to analyse the artistic practice and artworks by Chinese artists who were born after the 1980s. These people grew up in a different social environment and, perhaps, with different values. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate their perception on China's urbanization. This could include artists such as He Xiangyu (1986), Cui Jie (1983) and Chen Yu (1983). Furthermore, future research could research the influence of urbanization in artworks by female artists such as Cao Fei (1978) and Wang Yang Preston (1976). Continuing this gendered perspective, chapter three mentions that the female migrant worker is little presented in Chinese art. Future research could investigate the representation of female migrant workers in Chinese art, in order to achieve more inclusion. This corresponds with today's growing interest in feminism. Finally, it is interesting to investigate if and how artists in other regions deal with the theme of urbanization, since this process occurs all around the world. The different approaches can be compared, generating insight in the media and methods by artists who deal with the same theme, although from a different cultural context. The research I conducted, provides a significant stimulus on which future research can elaborate.

The analysed artworks by Zhang Dali, Xing Danwen and Wang Bing provide critical and honest observations on the cruel reality of urbanization, enabling a dialogue for people to think critically about Chinese urbanization. The works indicate the artists' worries about the course of Chinese society and the future. But more important, they show their creator's love of and concern for China's people.

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- Fig. 2. Wang Bing, still from *West of the Tracks*, 2004 (photo: <https://theartsofslowcinema.com/2017/05/16/west-of-the-tracks-wang-bing-2003/>, retrieved on 15 January 2019).
- Fig. 3. Wang Bing, still from *West of the Tracks*, 2004 (photo: <http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/wang-bing/>, retrieved on 15 January 2019).
- Fig. 4. Zhang Dali, *Dialogue, Beijing*, 1998, from the series *Dialogue and Demolition*, black-and-white photograph, 100 cm x 150 cm, Collection Larry Warsh, New York (photo: <http://www.ubcujah.com/past-submissions/postid>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 5. The symbol *Chai* written on traditional *hutong* houses in Beijing, Meiyong Dong (photo: http://www.biosmonthly.com/collection_topic/3493, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 6. Zhang Dali, *Demolition: Forbidden City, Beijing*, 1998, from the series *Dialogue and Demolition*, 89 x 60 cm, C-Print (photo: <https://alchetron.com/Zhang-Dali>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 7. Zhang Dali, *Chinese Offspring*, 2003-2005, mixed media, resin mixed with fibreglass, average height 170 cm each, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney (<http://astrongbeliefinwicker.blogspot.com/2017/01/>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 8. Zhang Dali, *Chinese Offspring*, 2003-2005, mixed media, resin mixed with fibreglass, average height 170 cm each, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney (photo: <http://astrongbeliefinwicker.blogspot.com/2017/01/>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 9. Zhang Dali, *Chinese Offspring*, 2003-2005, mixed media, resin mixed with fibreglass, average height 170 cm each, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney (<http://astrongbeliefinwicker.blogspot.com/2017/01/>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 10. Wang Bing, still from *Bitter Money*, 2016, Courtesy Pyramide International (photo: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/film/wang-bing-traces/wang-bing-bitter-money>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 11. Wang Bing, still from *Bitter Money*, 2016, Courtesy Pyramide International (photo: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/film/wang-bing-traces/wang-bing-bitter-money>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 12. Wang Bing, still from *Three Sisters*, 2012 (photo: <http://www.visualpoetics.be/?action=project&id=47>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 13. Wang Bing, still from *Three Sisters*, 2012 (photo: <http://www.gncr.fr/films-soutenus/les-trois-soeurs-du-yunnan>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 14. Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, image 13*, 2004-2005, C-print, 219.5 x 170 cm (<http://www.danwen.com/web/works/uf/index.html>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 15. Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, image 23*, 2005, C-Print, 80 x 100 cm (<http://www.danwen.com/web/works/uf/index.html>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).
- Fig. 16. Riken Yamamoto, *Jian Wei SOHO*, Beijing, 2007 (photo: <https://srwww.sohochina.com/project.aspx?projectid=15>, retrieved on 17 January 2019).