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Rising Ecological Awareness in Chinese Contemporary Art: An Analysis of the Cultural Environment

Yang Jing | 1.2.2016 klo 13.04 | [Tieteelliset artikkelit](#) | [TAHITI 01/2016](#)

The past three decades have witnessed an unprecedented ecological crisis in China; however, there has been very little study of ecological concern in Chinese contemporary art. Ecological awareness has emerged in Chinese contemporary art since the early 1990s. This paper explores the various cultural factors that are involved. First, the rising ecological awareness in Chinese art in the 1990s is a corollary of ideological changes, both in social politics and in art. Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s experienced a constantly ongoing social turn to counter the dominance of the market and to continue the critical spirit. When this inner need in Chinese contemporary art encountered the thorough re-examination of the anthropocentric view caused by a severe environmental and ecological crisis, a group of artists started to focus on environmental and ecological wellbeing, as a primary concern. Secondly, the rising ecological awareness has been encouraged by a revival of Chinese traditional culture and art since the 1980s. This important factor has encouraged artists to focus on the traditional aspects of ecological concern and to reintroduce it into contemporary art. Thirdly, the rising ecological awareness reveals the impact of grassroots environmentalism in China. The analysis of the cultural environment behind the emergence of ecological consciousness in Chinese contemporary art provides considerable help in understanding the development of ecological art in contemporary China.

I've wanted to apologize to you so many times.

They say you're vile, polluted, and poisonous.

But I remember when you were clean and pure.

They say water is the Mother of Life.

Look what your children have done to you.

I know this is more than you can bear.

Sometimes, I wonder if you regret it,

Regret giving us life...[\[1\]](#)

At the end of the Chinese movie *Personal Tailor* (2013), the chief actor Yang Zhong made this confessional address towards a severely polluted river. His performance *Apologize to Nature* reminds us of the ecological and environmental crisis in China today and implies an aesthetic inquiry into this issue.

In the past three decades, the rise of the Chinese economy at the expense of the environment has resulted in an unprecedented ecological crisis. According to an American researcher, Elizabeth Economy, China's environmental problem is caused by the exhaustion of natural resources, such as water, land, forest, and mineral resources, and at the same time unregulated industrial emissions and waste disposal, due to a dramatic increasing demand of natural resources and energy.[\[2\]](#) Domestically, this has caused many secondary impacts. Vast areas have been turned into wasteland due to deforestation and overgrazing; most rivers and ground water are polluted by toxic industrial waste; and hundreds of millions of urban and rural habitants suffer from sandstorms, smog, traffic jams, noise, water shortages, and frequent mudslides and floods. Globally, China has become the world's largest greenhouse gas discharger and a significant contributor of global climate change and biodiversity loss. Meanwhile, environmental degradation and pollution also pose challenges to the social and economic welfare of the people in relation to migration, public health, social unrest, and declining economic productivity, to name but a few.

Chinese researchers Zhang Quanming and Wang Yude identified 10 major ecological problems that China is facing; among these, six are especially crucial: defects in decision making; land problems, such as soil erosion, desertification and land impoverishment; overpopulation; water shortages and pollution; air pollution; and depletion of forest resources. Other significant issues include waste disposal, noise pollution, species loss, and traffic.[\[3\]](#)

Although the disastrous environmental pollution and ecological deterioration in China have drawn wide attention; up to the present, the most influential studies in the field of visual culture have focused on cinema. Chinese filmmakers have made a series of movies in which environmental and ecological problems were discussed from various perspectives.[\[4\]](#) In other fields of visual arts, the scholarly study of ecological consciousness is underdeveloped. Although there have been sporadic studies on individual Chinese artists and their works—for instance, Sheldon H. Lu (2007)[\[5\]](#) and Chu Kiu-wai (2012)[\[6\]](#) touched on the ecological concern in avant-garde photography—the study of ecological art has never been established as a canon in the field of art studies in China.

In the late 1990s, a group of Chinese artists moved the focus of their work to environmental and ecological problems. Their work, although demonstrating a close connection with traditional aesthetics and landscape art, is different from that of traditional landscape artists, who merely poeticize the harmony between nature and humans. Up to the present, studies on ecological awareness in Chinese contemporary art have generally been under the loose heading of conceptual art. The emergence of ecological awareness in Chinese contemporary art has been influenced by a set of social and cultural factors; therefore, having a thorough analysis of these factors is necessary when exploring the historical course of ecological art in China.

Cultural Environment and Criteria of Ecological Art

Instead of merely concerning the aesthetic aspects, studies of art phenomena often refer to the cultural environment—established beliefs, values, traditions, customs, laws, and practices in a given society in which art is produced, perceived and distributed. The discussion of the cultural environment reminds us of the external and internal factors that influence art. Internal factors centre on the aesthetic aspects of artistic production. External factors focus on the relationship between art and other spheres of culture and society, such as the social, historical, political, economic, religious, ideological, and scientific factors surrounding artistic production.

An understanding of these external factors is particularly significant to ecological art, based on the palpable fact that instead of merely being an art genre, the emergence and development of ecological art is mainly driven by a mission. Art driven by a mission, according to Suzi Gablik, requires that the artists should be “encouraged to be integral to the social, environmental, or spiritual life of the community.”^[7] To reach this goal, ecological artists adopt ideas and methods from many disciplines and collaborate with specialists from other fields.

As pointed out by Linda Weintraub, due to the interdisciplinary nature of ecological art, the examination of the field’s artistic innovation must correlate with real societal changes, and the evaluation of its creativity and innovation must be synchronized with the extent and intensity of these changes.^[8] Weintraub suggested a scheme to examine four aspects of ecological art: art genres, ecological issues, ecological approaches, and the artists’ strategies.^[9] Art genres refer to art forms, materials, and mediums, including paint, print, sculpture, performance, photography, video, biological art, generative art, social practice, digital art, installation, public art, and design. Artists’ strategies refer to the artists’ intentions and methods, such as visualization, metaphorization, activation, intervention, agitation, dramatization, and investigation. Ecological issues involve energy, waste, climate change, technology, habitat, sustainability, and resources. Ecoapproaches involve theories in ecological and environmental studies, including sustainable development and the following types of ecology: social, deep, restoration, urban, industrial, human, and ecosystem.^[10] Weintraub’s scheme maps a comprehensive framework for the examination of ecological art with special concern for a vast range of non-art disciplines and areas of knowledge.

Another art curator, Andrew Brown, categorized six different approaches applied by artists, each representing a particular level of engagement with the physical world. The first category is review—artists passively observing, recording, and reflecting natural processes and human activities. The second type is reform—artists taking their inspirations from natural materials and processes, making creative use of nature by transforming it into aesthetic forms. The third type is research—artists exploring the function of nature and humans’ interactions with it. The fourth type is reuse—artists re-examining humans’ exploitation of the nature. The fifth type is re-create—artists seeking creative solutions to environmental problems, not only in terms of art practice but also to realize a more ecological lifestyle. The sixth type is reacting—artists actively engaging as eco-activists within an art context and using creative means to reach their environmental goals.^[11]

Ecological art is based on a reflection of the contradiction between humanity and nature—in our time, mainly the contradiction between development on the one hand and the protection and restoration of the ecological system on the other. The conflict between humanity and nature always exists, changing

based on the time and place; therefore, ecological art is an ongoing, maybe never-ending process. Studies of the cultural environment not only involve the status quo of ecological art but also record its past and project its future. Still, many ecological art practices, if not all, are site-specific, depending on the artist's understanding of a specific site's natural conditions and cultural contexts.

Barbara C. Matilsky noted that ecological art is rooted not only in natural sciences but also in cultural history.^[12] It is through culture that nature and natural sciences can enter the view of artists and art historians. Cultural factors influence different artists to engage in environmental and ecological issues, such as how to reflect on specific ecological issues; how to choose their breakthrough points and methodologies; finally how to decide on the themes, content, and imagery of ecological artworks; and how to have those works considered and distributed in society.

Rising Ecological Awareness in Chinese Contemporary Art Ideological Changes in Politics and Art

Most importantly, the emerging ecological awareness in Chinese art relates to a thorough re-examination of the anthropocentric worldview and a reassessment (since the 1990s) of the relationship between humanity and nature. As pointed out by Sheldon H. Lu, during the Maoist era, Chinese ideology was dominated by the Maoist philosophy of struggle, which was implemented not merely in dealing with the class struggle in human societies but also in dealing with the relationship between humanity and nature. The philosophy of struggle emphasized the infinite capability of the human will to conquer nature, commanding an extreme anthropocentric attitude toward nature. During the Maoist era, this extreme anthropocentric attitude—the ambition of human beings to change (and eventually completely triumph over) nature—was depicted in countless grandiose visual artworks and expressed in a widespread folk song of the Great Leap Forward:

*There's no Jade God up in heaven,
Nor Dragon King deep in the water.
I am exactly Jade God and Dragon King.
There comes my loud cry,
And all the mountains and valleys shall make way for me.
There I come!
There I am!*

After Mao's death, China launched the Opening and Reform policy. The Chinese Communist Party established economic development as the central task of the country and the party. This narrow-minded pursuit of modernization was measured merely by the annual economic growth rate, which was very high in this era. It seemed that anything could be sacrificed in the name of economic development. Sheldon H. Lu pointed out that, due to this high energy and resource consuming industrial development mode and the poor supervision of pollution, a large part of the country was in fact becoming a global trash heap and wasteland.^[13] By the 1990s, both the Chinese government and the people had recognized that this mode was not sustainable.

The rapid economic growth in China during the 1980s and 1990s and the increasing ecological and environmental problems synchronized with a major change in Chinese contemporary art. As pointed

out by Chinese art critic Lu Peng, the final legitimization of the market economy after 1989 resulted in the combination of political power and capital. When political power gradually gave way to economic power, the market became the new facilitator of art development; art exhibitions and auctions were conducted in such a market system. The Guangzhou Biennale 1992, as a landmark in Chinese contemporary art, marked the coming of a new era when economic forces would fully engage in Chinese contemporary art. This was memorized by Chinese artist Chen Lei: "Now, everybody has realized that success is evaluated only by money and related power; there is no difference in art field."^[14] After the mid-1990s, Chinese contemporary art was gradually incorporated into a global marketing system and an attitude of cynicism and bitter irony about consumerism became a repeatable business strategy.^[15] As an effort to counter the manoeuvre of money, a group of artists started to shift from the general humanistic concern that was highlighted in the Chinese art of the 1980s to a more local and individual concern whilst still maintaining a critical posture. In that period, those artists who resided in coastal regions and big cities first felt the contradiction between blatant materialism and ecological disaster, leading to issues related to public health and social justice. Therefore, the rising ecological awareness in Chinese art since the 1990s is a corollary of ideological changes. When the deep re-examination of the anthropocentric view caused by the severe environmental and ecological crisis met the constantly ongoing social turn in Chinese contemporary art, environmental and ecological wellbeing became the primary concerns of many Chinese artists.

Shang Yang is regarded as a pioneer among Chinese contemporary artists who expresses ecological awareness in their work. He has been taking landscape as the source of his work; however, his work is not traditional landscape painting, as it neither depicts our instinctive obsession with nature nor allows the audience to appreciate it in tranquillity. As pointed out by Wang Min'an, "Shang Yang's work has isolated itself from both the Chinese and Western traditions of landscape painting."^[16] Shang Yang's real interest is expressing his concern about humans' relationship with the environment. The scarred landscape, which was exploited and spoiled by humans in his paintings, is not for leisure and aesthetics; rather, it is like a warning message to the audience that humans' home is on the verge of destruction.^[17]

The basic landscape of postmodern society is chaotic and fragmented, with entirely unrelated things juxtaposed together. In 1993, Shang Yang moved to Guangzhou. In the early 1990s, as the forward region of the Chinese Reforming and Opening Policy, Guangzhou was a strange mixture of humans and building, traditional and modern, tall and low, stylish and rustic. Quoting Shang Yang's words, "The streets [in Guangzhou] were full of motor bicycles and noise; everyone and everything were rushing towards money. The restless I felt everywhere reminded me of volcanoes."

In 1994, Shang Yang had breathing difficulty and was sent to the hospital. His experiences in the hospital further triggered his thinking on the relationship between the body and society. In Shang Yang's paintings, diseased black lungs are a symbol of a pathologic society that is overcrowded, polluted, unbalanced, and dominated by money-worship and consumerism. The feeling of suffocation pervades in almost everyone's lives and living spaces. Thus, volcanoes, lungs, X-ray film of diseased human bodies, and diagnosis gradually became a series of sign images and themes in his works in Guangzhou.^[18]

As a painter, Shang Yang was trying to reveal the chaos and disorder of the postmodern world and the alienation of the human mind in a harmonious picture. Yu Hong, a Chinese art critic and Shang

Yang's friend, stated that, though many Chinese artists realized the confusions of the postmodern, few succeeded in representing them in paintings as Shang Yang did.^[19] Taking the example of his famous Great Landscape series, which drew inspiration from folk Baina cloth, he found a collaged pattern to juxtapose fragmented pieces of different colours and shapes on canvas without hurting the integrity and harmony of the whole picture. He integrated the collaged pattern of Baina cloth with the outline of a massif, which he called "combined structure of Baina cloth and mountains." Later, this structure gradually evolved into a "profile structure of stratums." He randomly inserted items from different times in the history into his paintings; for instance, he included dinosaurs, cigarettes, cars, tall buildings and humans. This became the basic pattern of the series of Great Landscape series.

Revival of Traditional Culture and Art

Ecological consciousness in contemporary art is related to a revival of traditional culture and art since the 1980s, which has encouraged artists to focus on traditional ecological concerns and introduce them into contemporary art. The Cultural Revolution that started in May 1966 was a catastrophe for Chinese culture. Buddhist monasteries, Taoist temples, historical heritage sites, traditional paintings, statues, and calligraphy works, and other precious antiquities were systematically damaged in the name of breaking the evil feudalist tradition.

After the Cultural Revolution, especially after the Third Plenary Meeting of the 11th Session of the CCP at the end of 1978, taking class struggle as the central task was officially abolished, and the working focus of the Party and the whole nation was from then on shifted to economic construction. Beginning in the 1980s, accompanied by reflection and criticism of the catastrophic Cultural Revolution, Chinese people's attitudes toward traditional culture substantially changed. This was followed by a revival of traditional culture in the 1980s and 1990s. Traditional philosophy, literature, art, music, dance, drama and folklore came back to life. The state made a huge investment in restoration of and research into traditional culture and art. Under this circumstance, researchers and artists attached great importance to ecological awareness in traditional culture and art.

Chinese traditional culture highly valued a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature. The unity of nature and man is the basic proposition in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. For example, the great reverence for nature is exemplified by Taoist concepts, such as "to follow and learn from nature" and the idea that "nature is the most beautiful"; and the Confucian metaphorical connection between a gentleman's virtue and nature expresses a similar idea. The unity of nature and man, bearing the deep ecological concern of Chinese culture, has a significant influence on architecture, gardening, painting, sculpture, and literacy. In visual arts, traditional Chinese landscape painting (Shan-Shui, literally "mountains and waters") epitomizes the unity of nature and humans. Shan-Shui represents the mutual joy between nature and humanity and embodies the organic synthesis of the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humanity. It is fair to say that Shan-Shui built up a spiritual homeland for both Chinese artists and the common people. However, in the Maoist era, the tranquil and serene spirit of Shan-Shui painting was considered incompatible with the philosophy of struggle. Traditional landscape painting, while not banned outright, was overlooked. In fact, many artists of the Maoist era added telegraph poles, trains, and factory chimneys to traditional landscape paintings in praise of industrialization and modernization.

Here we still take Shang Yang as an example. In 1997, he left Guangzhou to work at Capital Normal University in Beijing. He then started to integrate Chinese traditional hand-scroll painting into his work; he borrowed the background pattern from the Shan-Shui painting of Dong Qichang, who was the most renowned artist of Chinese classic landscape painting.^[20] To Shang Yang, Dong Qichang was a symbol; Dong's painting and theory conveyed an Eastern imagination of nature, best representing the harmony between nature and humanity, which is inspiring for modern people. However, the word "project" reminds us of the behaviour of modern people, so the two words together create a specious feeling.

Shang Yang regards his *Dong Qichang Project* series as a "serene expression" of the denaturalization of nature and the horrible changes in the relationship between humanity and nature, which is a continuation of the *Great Landscape*. As Shang Yang realized, the previous pure nature had been eroded through the progress of civilization; he adopted a worn and vague pattern rooted in traditional Chinese landscape painting whilst inserting other elements, such as computer-generated images, to reach a parodic effect. He mentioned:

We are too arrogant for this world; although everybody is talking about this issue, we still obstinately stick to this wrong course. For example, we all know the harm of nuclear weapon for humankind, but we are still producing more. I think humanity is a combination of wisdom and blindness. I believe that the artists have a responsibility to discuss these issues to raise awareness among more people.^[21]

Dong Qichang Project-2 is the first and the most renowned piece in this series. When asked about his initiative, Shang Yang remarked upon the memorialization of the "disappearing Three Gorges." In his work, fishes are swimming in the sky and a submarine is emerging among the mountains, which implies that the mountains have been submerged under water. He said:

I feel so sad about the disappearance of the Three Gorges. Unlike the Great Wall or the Forbidden Palace, which are relics of human culture, the Three Gorges is the result of hundreds of millions of years, a masterpiece of Nature. Now, due to the decision of the government—which might be wrong from a long-term view—it was submerged under water. The ecological crisis and natural disaster caused by this kind of behaviour might not be felt immediately, but how about in the future? For short-term interest, we abused and ruined the property that belongs to the future generations. I wanted to express my sadness, frustration and anger in this work.^[22]

Since the *Dong Qichang Project*, inspirations from ancient Chinese culture and art have been highlighted in Shang Yang's work. In recent years, Shang Yang has more focused on mixed media. For example, in his bamboo-themed works made in 2013 and 2014, he put bamboo, scroll paper and cloth (which are often used in traditional Chinese art) together with iron, asphalt, and putty. The contradiction between the opposed types of materials emphasizes the conflicts between agricultural civilization and industrial civilization, and between protection and development.

Another artist, Yao Lu, employed photography as a medium to re-create the imagery of ancient Shan-Shui painting. His pictures look like green-and-blue landscape paintings from a distance, but as one gets closer, one can recognize that the waterfalls, cliffs, mists, and clouds of traditional Chinese landscape painting are in fact rubbish, landfills, and clouds of dust on construction sites. The heavy blackish greenness comes from the green dust cloths used on construction sites to prevent dust from

blowing away.^[23] This parodic contradiction between appearance and reality speaks to the sarcastic consequences of urbanization. For Yao Lu, traditional landscape art is a symbol which no longer serves the pursuit of beauty and harmony; rather, it brings the viewer unexpected sights in order to create a more powerful impact and to promote higher-level thinking about the relationship between contemporary humanity and nature.

In addition to traditional landscape painting, Chinese artists draw inspiration from traditional culture and art. Trained as a sculptor, Zhan Wang chose stainless steel rockeries as his main medium. Rockeries are natural stones usually set as decorations in traditional Chinese gardens to satisfy people's need for the illusion of dwelling in nature. Zhan Wang's rockeries, however, were made of sheets of stainless steel hammered over the surface of real rocks. His work also reveals the contradictions between manmade and natural creation, between modern industrialization and traditional culture, and between the past and the future.

Grassroots Environmentalism in China

Last but not the least in significance, rising ecological awareness was fuelled by grassroots environmentalism in China. The Chinese leadership has developed a five-part strategy to address environmental problems: policy guidance from the centre; delegation of power to local governments; cooperation with the international community; development of grassroots environmentalism; and enhancement of the legal system. This combined environmental protection strategy offered artists vast possibilities for engaging in this issue. Wide participation of social forces and the media in environmental protection was undertaken through several aspects: the emergence of domestic and international non-profit and non-governmental organizations and the roles these organizations played; the endeavours of groups of entrepreneurs and other individuals in environmental protection; and the roles played by the media. All of these aspects opened the way for artists to engage in interdisciplinary thinking and practice; artists could choose their own way to collaborate with these social forces and media.

Reviewing the footprints of Chinese artists in the 1990s, we shouldn't overlook the ecological and environmental art activities in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. In the mid-1990s, the Chengdu government launched the Chengdu Fu-Nan Rivers Comprehensive Revitalization Project, a five-year plan focusing on environmental remediation along the Fu and Nan rivers. From July to August, 1995, American environmental artist Betsy Damon and a group of artists gathered in Chengdu and organized the first Defender of Water exhibition. The artists took installation and performance as mediums and expanded their art to the public space by means of a group exhibition. Chinese artist Dai Guangyu made a performance titled *Water Index Laid aside for a Long Time*. He took a series of photographs of ordinary people and, in a public display, dipped these photos in shallow dishes of polluted river water, allowing the prints to become yellow and decomposed. The exhibition sites, such as streets, bookstores, city walls, and rivers, were included in the artists' works as the materials and mediums. This was the first time in Chinese contemporary art that artists had openly expressed their concern about the antagonistic relationship between humans and nature in front of the public and the media. The Chengdu government looked very favourably on these activities. After the exhibition, the artists held a second exhibition in Lhasa, Tibet, in 1996; a third exhibition ("*Source Life*") in Du Jiangyan (a still-functioning ancient irrigation project near Chengdu) in 1997; and a fourth exhibition ("*Release Water*") in Chengdu at the turn of the millennium.^[24]

The positive interaction among artists, local government, the public and the media played a very positive role in raising people's ecological consciousness and improving Chengdu's environment. Although there have been ecological performances in other cities in China, no other ecological art activity has been as successful as the artists' endeavour in Chengdu in terms of scale and social impact.

In particular, after the first Defender of Water exhibition, Betsy Damon, in cooperation with staff from the Fu-Nan Rivers Restoration Bureau, designed the Living Water Garden. The project began in 1996 and was completed in 1998. The Living Water Garden, located in the city centre of Chengdu, is a functioning water filtration and purification plant. Each day, 200 m³ of polluted river water winds through this ecological treatment system of ponds and filters, finally becoming clear and clean. It is also an environmental education centre—revealing the process of water purification in such an understandable way successfully fits the purposes of teaching and inspiration.^[25] Bringing together artistic quality, functionality, education and entertainment, this project won 1998 United Nations Habitat Award.

Two Significant Characteristics of Chinese Ecological Art

In the Chinese case, severe environmental and ecological degradation combined with the swiftly changing political ideology of the 1990s; the revival of traditional culture and art; and the environmental policies and strategies have branded the developmental history of Chinese ecological art. The examination of rising ecological awareness in Chinese art during the past two decades reveals two prominent characteristics: roots in studio arts and a close connection with traditional aesthetic idea and landscape art.

While Western ecological art is more rooted in land art and earth work,^[26] Chinese ecological art has its root in studio art, as the artists' reflection on the problems caused by human society. It is worth noting that there was no massive environmental movement in China, nor was there an influential work like *Silent Spring*. In addition, there was no prevailing land art or earth art to serve as a precursor of ecological art. The emergence of ecological awareness in Chinese contemporary art has a relatively short history and limited affection. No Chinese artists have involved themselves in ecological or environmental issues from the beginning of their art careers. Instead, they have simply dedicated a certain period of time—the length of the period differs from artist to artist—to being involved in ecological concerns. This speaks to why Chinese ecological art first emerged in the studio and why most artists' works belong to the category of studio art.

Though most Chinese artists who have environmental and ecological concerns still focus on studio art, some artists have moved their work out of their studio. Wang Jianwei is one of them. In 1993-1994, he undertook a project named *Circulation-Sowing and Harvesting*. He worked with a group of farmers to cultivate wheat, observing and recording the whole process. His work blurs the boundaries between natural law, human behaviour (such as agricultural labour), and artistic practice. This work brings the process of plant growth and the natural cycle—both of which are beyond art—into the art-making process and includes the natural cycle in the content of art.^[27] Another artist, Huang Yan, dedicated himself to making rubbings of the architectural details of demolished buildings in urban spaces. In ancient China, rubbing was widely used by scholars for copying stone inscriptions. Employing traditional rubbing as a medium, Huang Yan has called for the restoration of those

disappearing spaces. From 1993 to 1996, he performed his art in many Chinese cities, including Changchun, Beijing, Xi'an, Guiyang, Chongqing, Shanghai, Suzhou, and Nanjing.[28]

Beginning in 2000, Zhan Wang gradually moved his practices from museums and galleries to different venues. He placed a stainless artificial rock on Mount Everest at a height of 8848 meters, let it float out on the open sea, and even attempted to send it into outer space by launching it on a rocket.[29] Instead of presenting the destruction of the environment and ecological system as a stationary phenomenon, these artists' practices are more involved with the process; the artists attempt to present ecological issues as dynamic through process-oriented projects.

In recent years some artists of a younger generation have found more direct ways to become involved with this issue. Their practices are based on an understanding that environmental and social injustice are intertwined and there is a need to seek a holistic combination of environmental justice and social justice to reach a more sustainable future. For example, inspired by the National [Rural Reconstruction Movement](#) (led by James Yen) of the 1930s, an artist, Ou Ning, established the Bishan Commune in 2011 in order to form a new ecological lifestyle by integrating preservation of cultural and artistic heritage with villager education and rural economic development. This project generated international reverberations and much debate, highlighting a constellation of crucial issues concerning artists' attitudes and positions and their interactions with the larger public.[30] Though sociologists have investigated the *Bishan Project*, a systematic examination of these artists and their work from the perspective of ecological art is still missing.

Reflection on the ecological crisis that threatens human society became involved with a self-reflection and with a revival of traditional culture and art. That has provided an example of how Chinese artists could relate their own history and culture while seeking a solution to the ecological and environmental crisis. However, it is worth noting here that the more balanced relationship between humanity and nature in ancient China only existed in a philosophical and aesthetic sense; at the practical level, Chinese agrarian civilization was not so environmentally friendly. It was, in Mark Elvin's words, a type of unsustainable development.[31] Pressured by increasing population and poor productivity, for thousands of years, Chinese peasants and farmers devastated virgin forests for rice cultivation, resulting in severe soil erosion and desertification in many areas in China. According to Zhang Quanming and Wang Yude, the problem of soil erosion in China can be dated back to the Warring States period (BC 475-221).[32] However, the ancient Chinese practices of deforestation and dramatic alterations to the landscape are selectively overlooked in contemporary artists' practices. This may imply a common view among Chinese artists that they are too idealistic about ancient Eastern civilization, which they regard as the opposite of Western modernization and industrialization.

To conclude, during the past two decades, Chinese artists have endeavoured to express ecological concern and to enhance public awareness of these issues. They introduced new ideas, materials, forms and methods to provide provisional and innovative solutions. The evolution of Chinese ecological art demonstrates unique qualities, and it should not be understood simply as a migration of global environmental and ecological art. The analysis of the cultural environment behind the emergence of ecological consciousness in Chinese contemporary art provides considerable help in understanding the origin, course of development, approaches, and tendencies of Chinese contemporary ecological art.

Yang Jing is an art researcher from China. From 2009 to 2015, Yang Jing was studying at Department of Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä. In February 2015, she was awarded Doctor of Philosophy (Art History) by University of Jyväskylä. Her research fields include socially engaged art and ecological art.

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[18] For instance, the profile of volcanoes to see *94 Great Landscape-I, 94 Great Landscape-II, 94 Great Landscape-III, Great Landscape of Diagnosis-I, Great Landscape of Diagnosis-III, Great Landscape of Diagnosis-IV*; X-ray film of pathologic human bodies to see *Great Landscape of Diagnosis-V*; and lungs in medical mobiles to see *Deep Breathing*.

[19] Yu, Hong 2009. Great Landscape: The Art of Shang Yang. http://shangyang.artron.net/news_detail_90342(Applied 24.9.2015).

[20] According to Shang Yang, when he was in Guangzhou in 1994, he had the idea to borrow the background pattern from Dong Qichang's Shan-Shui painting. But he felt that his idea was not enough developed, so he didn't continue.

[21] Wang, Xueqin 2011. Contingency and Necessity: Choice of Dong Qichang—An Interview with Shang Yang. http://shangyang.artron.net/news_detail_164070 (Applied 30.8.2015).

[22] Ibid.

[23] *Prix Pictet* 2015. Yao Lu. <http://www.prixpictet.com/portfolios/earth-shortlist/yao-lu/> (applied 25. 3. 2015).

[24] The Artists who participated in the first Defender of Water exhibition include Dai Guangyu, Liu Chengying, Yin Xiuzhen, Yin Xiaofeng, and Zeng Xun. In August 1996, Dai Guangyu, Zhang Shengquan, Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, Zhang Lei, and Liu Chengyin held the second Defender of Water exhibition in Lahsa, Tibet. In October 1997, Dai Guangyu, Zhang Hua, Zeng Xun, Yu Ji, Zhou Bin, Liu Chengying, Yin Xiaofeng, and Zhu Gang held a exhibition called "Source · Life" in Du Jiangyan, which is regarded as the third Defender of Water exhibition. In 2000, Dai Guangyu, Yin Xiaofeng, Yu Ji, Zhang Hua, Liu Chengying, Zhou Bin, Zeng Xun, Song Yongxing, and Zhu Gang held a exhibition called "Release Water" in Chengdu, which belongs to the fourth Defender of Water exhibition.

[25] Keepers of the Waters. Living Water Garden. <http://www.keepersofthewaters.org/Proj05LWG2012.cfm> (Applied 20.9.2015).

[26] According to Victor Margolin, due to the shift of art from gallery and museum objects to site-specific projects during the 1960s and early 1970s, the 1960s' countercultural experiments and a growing sense of urgency around environmental problems, some artists began to pursue land art and earth art, which represent the artists' engagement with and their intentions to alter the landscape, though not all of these work have ecological concern. To see Margolin, Victor 2005. Reflections on Art and Sustainability. In *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art*. Ed. Stephanie Smith & Victor Margolin. Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 14-15. Also see Beardsley, John 2006. *Earthworks and Beyond*. New York (NY): Asheville Press.

[27] Lu, Peng 2006, 1030.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Zhan Wang's Official Website. <http://zhanwang.artron.net> (applied 31. 1.2015). Also see Lv Peng 2010. A Story about a "Stone" – Zhan Wang's Art Practice

[30] Ou, Ning 2014. Answering Questions about the Bishan Project. <http://www.alternativearchive.com/ouning/article.asp?id=932> (applied 10. 4. 2015).

[31] Elvin, Mark 1993. Three Thousand Years of Unsustainable Growth: China's Environment from Archaic Times to the Present. In *East Asian History*, 6 (December 1993) Ed. Geremie Barme and Helen Lo, 7-46.

[32] Zhang, Quanming & Wang Yude 1999, 958.