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# Introducing and practising 'curating' for contemporary Chinese art: The transnational trajectory of Lu Jie from London to China and the development of *Long March: A Walking Visual Display*

## **ABSTRACT**

*Through a close reading of the curatorial project Long March: A Walking Visual Display (2002), this article considers that Long March was an experimental curatorial response to the conditions of contemporary Chinese art and contributes to introducing the discourse and practice of 'curating' to China. Tracing the main curator Lu Jie's curatorial motivation, this research looks into what Lu has termed 'the dilemma of contemporary Chinese art' during the 1990s – the division of*

## **KEYWORDS**

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1. In 1934, besieged by the Kuomintang (the Chinese Nationalist Party), the Red Army – the military force of the Chinese Communist Party – began an over one-year arduous trek across China, from Jiangxi Province in the southeast to Sha'anxi Province in the northwest. As the Long March is a narrative frequently used in propaganda, Chinese artists of contemporary art often avoid it or only appropriate it for satire. However, in *Long March: A Walking Visual Display* (abbreviated as *Long March* in the article), Lu Jie engaged with the Communist revolution without irony.

discourses from realities and artistic practices in the curating of contemporary Chinese art, which led to invalid transcultural communication in international exhibitions. This research paid special attention to Lu's study in the 'Creative Curating' MA programme at Goldsmiths, University of London (1998–99), which encouraged Lu to experiment with alternative exhibition formats and review art in visual culture. These inspired Lu to relocate 'contemporary Chinese art' from the institutional context to its original realities in China along the historical route of the Long March. Analysing the development of Lu's curatorial proposal *Long March: A Walking Exhibition from 1999 to 2001*, this research shows how the main elements of Lu's curating shifted from objects to participants and argues the project's curatorial intention to provoke participants was a process of localizing 'curating' in the Chinese context. Instead of assuming that 'curating' was imported into China from the West, this article views the introduction of 'curating' as a new discipline which helps local practitioners identify the artistic values and authorship in making art public.

For Chinese practitioners with an interest in art, *cezhan* is not a strange word. *Cezhan*, the abbreviation of *cehua zhanlan*, literally means devising/planning exhibitions. On the Chinese social media platform *xiao hong shu* ('little red book'), it is common for posts about guidelines for exhibition-making to win hundreds of likes. This wave of public attention follows a series of academic efforts: in 2018, the official institute Artists Association in China put forward to establish *zhongguo cezhan xue* ('Chinese curatorial studies') (Artron.net 2018: n.pag.). *Cezhan*, the widely accepted Chinese translation for 'curating' is usually taken as a discipline introduced from the West. Therefore, scholars and practitioners in China have attempted to build a more local system of knowledges and discourses about curating. This article focuses on *cezhan* in the curatorial project *Long March: A Walking Visual Display* (abbreviated as *Long March*), an internationally renowned curatorial project in 2002 that took place along the path of the Long March, a military action celebrated as the founding legend of the People's Republic of China.<sup>1</sup> Developed from the late 1990s to the early 2000s and involving about 150 Chinese and international artists, critics and scholars, the project greatly contributed to the spread of the discourse of curating among Chinese practitioners of contemporary art.

As a case-study, the research traces the transnational trajectory of *Long March's* main curator Lu Jie (1964–present), who earned an MA in 'Creative Curating' from Goldsmiths, University of London (1998–99). Through close reading, the research reveals that Lu Jie's curatorial drive for *Long March* was rooted in a 'dilemma' of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s – the separation between theories and artistic practices in curating, which was intensified in overseas exhibitions with the need to interpret contemporary Chinese art for international audiences. While some Chinese artists were anxious about their works as representations of traditional Chinese culture or political statements in exhibitions curated by European and North American curators, Chinese curators' propositions were also far from the realities of Chinese artists' practices. The research argues that the curating of *Long March* was largely a response to this incongruity and was greatly influenced by the non-conventional and anti-institutional agenda in the 'Creative Curating' programme in Goldsmiths.

The article contains three sections. The first section uses Lu's essay 'Outside in' (1999b) as a clue to review what Lu called 'the dilemma of contemporary

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Chinese art' in transcultural curating and the perception of curating in China during the 1990s. The second section focuses on the context and curriculum of the 'Creative Curating' programme at Goldsmiths, University of London and the influence on curating from the new discipline of visual culture, which inspired Lu to review contemporary Chinese art in a larger field. The third section analyses and compares the different versions of the curatorial proposal of *Long March*, *Long March: A Walking Exhibition*, initially written by Lu as a programme submission in Goldsmiths. Drawing on the change of the proposals' main elements from objects to participants, the research argues that the curating of *Long March* did not directly transplant 'Creative Curating' to China but localized 'creative curating', with the aim of provoking contemporary Chinese artists.

Art historian Wu Hung coins the term 'experimental exhibitions' to denote the displays of art in 'non-exhibition spaces such as shopping malls, bars, abandoned factories, and the street' after the mid-1990s (Wu 2002a: 7). This followed the term 'experimental art', which Wu put forward to denote non-conventional art practices in China during the 1990s. Wu considers that 'experimental' is more neutral and elastic than 'avant-garde' (Wu 2002b). He sees the significance of 'experimental exhibitions' lies in 'inventing new forms, spaces, and modes of interaction with the public' (Wu 2002a: 7). However, the term 'experimental exhibition' cannot include forms of public-facing activities, like events. In this article, I use 'experimental curating' to refer to Lu Jie's versatile curatorial practice in *Long March*, which included temporary displays, screenings, seminars and assemblies in various locations and social spaces in China. Compared with exhibitions, curating can demonstrate the value of organizing events and emphasize the process of making art public.

This article has benefited much from granted access to the archive of the Long March Project and over twenty interviews with the participants of *Long March*, including Lu Jie, Qiu Zhijie (the executive curator), scholar Zheng Shengtian, curator Anna Harding, curator Grant Watson and the late artist Xiao Xiong. Besides these interviews, I have also consulted rich primary literature and existing research. Together they contributed significantly to this article's restoring the historical scene of contemporary Chinese art and Lu's circumstances in London. They also led this researcher to review *Long March*, at the intersection of the heated days of contemporary Chinese art and the emergence of curating as an independent discipline in the West during the 1990s. By situating the project in its context, the research regards *Long March* as a curatorial attempt to diversify 'contemporary Chinese art' by juxtaposing revolutionary propaganda, folk art and the art of ethnic minorities in China with contemporary art. Making assemblies of participants from different art ecologies and location, *Long March* aimed to broaden the visions of the participants. In this process, the discourse and practice of curating were also introduced to local practitioners in China, integrated with *Long March's* aim to build an alternative ecology of art.

## 1. 'A DILEMMA OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART'

In 1999, while in London, Lu wrote an essay entitled 'Outside in'. In this piece, Lu stated that 'contemporary Chinese art [...] has departed from its audience, moving away from the public toward the elite, from private studios to bureaucratic institutions [...], from China to overseas' (Lu 1999b: n.pag.). He also lamented that his fellow Chinese artists overlooked the richness of

their own history. Lu used his peers' reactions to the exhibition *China: 5,000 Years* (1998) at the Guggenheim Museum (New York and Bilbao) as an example. He noticed that many artists were disappointed at the exhibition, where their works were displayed alongside revolutionary propaganda and traditional Chinese antiques. Lu considered that such frustration exposed not only Chinese artists' desire to be acknowledged in the history of western art but also 'their ignorance of the significant ties between leftist art, socialist realism, the art of the Cultural Revolution and contemporary art from China' (Lu 1999b: n.pag.). In his view, Chinese artists' problematic perception of the West was the other side of Chinese artists' blindness of the 'local context' in China. While Chinese artists were generally in a 'love/hate' relationship with the West, Lu reminded them that, 'the problem of facing the West is essentially that it entails facing ourselves' (Lu 1999b: n.pag.). This diagnosis reveals Lu's opinion that to relieve the anxieties of Chinese artists towards curators and the art system in Europe and North America, Chinese artists needed to turn their gaze towards their own realities.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, Chinese art practitioners' understanding of exhibition-making centred on critics and their propositions. As Lu recalled, 'the editor was the curator at that time' (Lu 2018: n.pag.). In a largely domestic environment, editors of art journals were the most influential characters in contemporary art, or 'new art' – art that was not traditional, not socialist realism, not propaganda and often in the form of installations and performances. For contemporary art, it was difficult to find a platform of circulation. The state-sponsored National Fine Arts Exhibition was held only every five years and could not exhibit radical art experiments. Self-published folk leaflets (*minkan*) and self-initiated exhibitions in alternative spaces appeared from time to time, but these unofficial practices with political risks could not circulate widely. With these conditions, a few art journals edited by open-minded editors provided a crucial national platform for artists and critics. Publishing in year-round running state-own journals – such as *Jiangsu Pictorial* (*jiangsu huabao*), *Fine Arts Thoughts* (*meishu sichao*) and *Art News of China* (*zhongguo meishubao*) – was the most effective approach for artworks and artists to be noticed. As artists around China sent letters and slides of their works to editorial offices, editors naturally became key nexuses of the art world.

Artist Huang Yong Ping (1954–2019) acutely sensed that art criticism in China did not only mean endorsement, it also denoted making connections and forming allies between artists and critics. Editors were in a more advantaged position compared with artists with respect to power dynamics. As Huang wrote in 1987,

I think in this art movement, the most important ones were not artists making works in different places, but a group of young editors. [...] In current China, editors in different places' art journals are the patrons and critics of art. Publishing a work equals collecting a painting. Surely the meaning doesn't lie here but in wide circulation.

(Huang 1987: n.pag.)

Huang was referring to the 85' Art New Wave Movement (*meishu xinzhao*), in which critic Gao Minglu (1949–present), who edited *Fine Arts* (*meishu*) from 1984 to 1989, played a crucial role. In 1986, Gao organized the influential '85 Youth Fine Arts Trend Slides Exhibition, for which artists and critics supporting contemporary art in China gathered in Zhuhai. As the editors found it

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necessary to present the avant-garde art movement publicly, they devised an exhibition in Beijing in an official institute (Wu 2000: 11–23). In February 1989, the significant exhibition *China/Avant-Garde* (*zhongguo xiandai yishu dazhan*) was held in the symbolic National Art Museum of China, Beijing. By organizing events, promoting artists and producing discourses, editors like Gao, as Lu Jie suggested, performed a role similar to that of curators. In researcher Wu Mo's observation, this exhibition was significant in exploring techniques of independent exhibition-making, e.g. the sponsorship and division of labour. However, as Mo indicates, with the exhibition's chaotic process, it might be more appropriate to call these critics as 'exhibition-organizers' instead of 'curators', because they were not experienced exhibition-makers (Wu 2014). In fact, *chouzhān rén* ('exhibition-organizer') was also what Li Xianting (1949–present), another key contributor of the exhibition and editor of *Fine Arts* and *Art News of China*, called himself (Li 1989).

In 1988, Lu Jie, a graduate of ink wash painting from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, became an editor in Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House (*shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe*). When Lu arrived at Shanghai, the heat of '85 Art New Wave was dimming down. Lu did not make a name for himself as an influential editor. Instead, as more foreign art professionals visiting China, with Lu's fluent English earned by his hard work during the college, Lu explored other possibilities as a network broker between international visitors and local artists. He acted as a local guide, translated conversations, made connections and facilitated deals. Lu's particular experience as a transnational mediator in Shanghai brought him to the scene of contemporary Chinese art in Hong Kong. From 1992 to 1996, Lu frequently travelled between Hong Kong and Beijing as a gallerist for Schoeni Art Gallery.

During the 1990s, there was nearly no public funding for contemporary art in mainland China and the infrastructure of contemporary art in the West, like public museums, commercial galleries and biennales, did not exist yet either. It was people like Lu that mediated between different systems to make things happen. With such conditions, as art historian Peggy Want points out these 'middlemen' often had multiple roles and worked in both commercial and non-commercial fields to bridge art market and art criticism (Wang 2013). For example, critics like Lü Peng initiated *The First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* in Guangzhou in 1992 (Debevoise and Yung 2015), with the hope to cultivate a domestic art market to support contemporary Chinese art. The concern underlying such bold attempts was to interpret artworks with local discourses and contexts, instead of in the political and cultural contexts in Europe and North America.

During the 1990s, the exposure of contemporary Chinese art rose rapidly internationally. Critics like Gao Minglu and Li Xianting also became spokesmen for contemporary Chinese art and sometimes, curators in oversea exhibitions. However, art from China and other non-western areas was often excluded from 'fine art' defined by the western art history. Instead, they were reviewed under an ethnographic or regional view as cultural or political representations. As Hou Hanru pointed out in 1994, 'contemporary art' had become a newly invented heritage by the West. According to Hou, Huang Yong Ping, artist who had already moved to Paris in 1989, was criticized by some western critics to have imitated 'conceptual art' because of the absence of obvious Chinese techniques and cultural symbols in his work (Hou 1994: n.pag.). No matter what kind of artistic language Chinese artists chose, it was difficult for them to be deemed 'contemporary' by the western art world.

For Chinese artists, being interpreted in representational politics and reviewed in a west-centric system came as a by-product of the overseas opportunities of exposure and funding. Qiu Zhijie, who was actively practising conceptual and video art and organizing exhibitions in Shanghai and Beijing during the 1990s, recalled that for some artists around him, despite the fact that their wealth quickly accumulated, the initial excitement of 'Striding to the World' (an official slogan of the Chinese government) was gradually replaced by anxieties (Qiu 2018). Influenced by multiculturalism and postcolonialism, art and cultural institutions in Europe and North America pursued for an equal representation of artworks from different ethnicities and regions (instead of artworks mainly by White and European artists). This brought more international attention on regions like China and more museums invited Chinese artists to exhibit. However, Chinese artists were not in this cultural context. They often felt awkward about overseas audiences interpreting their works according to their Chinese identity.

The anxieties about being misinterpreted became a long-term issue in contemporary Chinese art. Sometimes, the unsatisfaction could result in harsh animosities towards international curators. Scholar Zheng Shengtian noted that when Okwui Enwezor visited China in 2000 as the curator of Documenta 11, the group of international curators were greeted with direct expressions of hostility: Enwezor's lecture in China Academy of Art, Hangzhou welcomed a full-house audience, but some students compared these international curators to 'agents for galleries, officers of the United Nations and even a virus' (Zheng 2014: n.pag.). In this tension between Chinese artists and the international art world, the middlemen in the art market were put into difficult positions. While the overseas market for contemporary Chinese art might be not so lucrative as often imagined (Debevoise 2014), this did not ameliorate local artists' sarcastic view of Chinese gallerists. Chinese gallerists were often considered to be businessmen who did not hold a patriotic position or only dealt in art for profit.

In my interviews with artists, some recalled that Chinese people who worked for western galleries, like Lu, were called *maiban* ('compradors'). 'Comprador' is originally a Portuguese word introduced into Chinese in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when China was partially colonized. It refers to a Chinese manager working for a foreign firm (Ho 2021). The term 'comprador' was used in contemporary Chinese art with negative connotations. For example, in his essay 'Exploit, export, expropriate: Artful marketing from China, 1989–93', the Australian scholar Geremie Barme warned readers that some Chinese art critics were 'increasingly anxious to become the insider-traders/compradors of the arts scene' (1993: XLIX), taking advantage of the gap of information. Despite that Lu's career as a gallerist was very successful, he was also exposed to the biases of Chinese art practitioners.

Lu was also a dedicated observer of the curatorial strategies used by Chinese critics and curators in overseas exhibitions. Chinese critics had strong wills to speak for Chinese art with their own terms and discourses on the international stage. From 1998 to 1999, Gao Minglu curated an influential exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* that travelled from San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to Asia Society Galleries and PS1 in New York. In this group show, Gao included not only artists living in mainland China and overseas but also artists living in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Gao argued that people need to change the framework of understanding contemporary Chinese art. He considered that, from the identity of a specific area 'towards a transnational modernity', the 'nationalist modernity' that Chinese intellectuals and

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artists concerned during the 1980s had considerably changed in the global era (Gao 1998: n.pag.). However, in Lu Jie's opinion, Gao's curatorial framework could not effectively present the 30-year development of contemporary art in China to the West. He criticized that Gao's endeavour to reinterpret China and his emphasis on modernity were ineffective in a museum in the United States because American audiences and art practitioners did not share the cultural understanding of China. Lu argued in 'Outside in' that, '[i]ts real audience was not there, and the "West" it so painstakingly catered to did not really care. This curatorial ambiguity illustrates a dilemma in contemporary Chinese art today, namely the use of ideology against ideology' (Lu 1999b: n.pag.).

'The use of ideology against ideology' referred to the fact that Gao's curatorial proposition about modernity was as abstract and grand as the celebration of cultural diversity in the West. As a result, such curating 'further cast the narrative of Chinese visuality in the West into a state of utter loss in translation' (Lu 1999b: n.pag.). Gao provided his theoretical framework to interpret artworks by Chinese artists, but this discourse was still detached from the realities of China and Chinese artists. The American audience still needed to decode the academic phrases, while the real context of these artworks was not delivered. Lu later summarized that, in the 1990s, 'the theory and art practice are separated' in contemporary Chinese art: 'You see lots of Western jargon introduced and overused, but it has little to do with practice' (Lu cited in Tinari 2002: n.pag.). In Lu's analysis, what was limiting the curating of contemporary Chinese art was not whether Chinese artists and critics had chances to speak out, but the separation between the realities of art practices and the discourses in exhibitions. Moreover, if the local practitioners' perception of art was already far from reality, how could the exhibitions tell a grounded story of contemporary Chinese art? This curatorial jeopardy was the dilemma of contemporary Chinese art Lu was referring to.

In 1996, Lu decided to leave China and travel worldwide. But as he said, while travelling around the world, he was still thinking how to 'articulate contemporary China to the world' (Lu 2018: n.pag.). He sought for alternative strategies for the dilemma of contemporary Chinese art and this led him to encounter a discipline that had not yet been acknowledged by Chinese practitioners yet: curating.

## **2. 'CREATIVE CURATING' AND LONG MARCH: A WALKING EXHIBITION**

From 1998 to 1999, Lu studied curating at Goldsmiths College, University of London. The official title of Lu's programme was MA in Fine Art Administration and Curatorship, but the programme went around with its unofficial name – 'Creative Curating'. The unofficial name, adding the rebellious characteristic absent in its official title, was coined by its director Anna Harding, who set up the programme in 1995. What is 'creative curating'? According to Harding, when she was invited by artist Michael Craig-Martin to set up a curating programme in the Department of Visual Arts, they regarded curating as a practice equally creative as art and aimed 'to teach curating the same as teaching art' (Harding 2021: n.pag.). In the 'Creative Curating' programme, curating was not about stewardship for artists and objects, but contained intrinsic artistic value.

'Creative Curating' was committed to train independent curators. Starting from recruitment, the programme clarified that they aimed at those

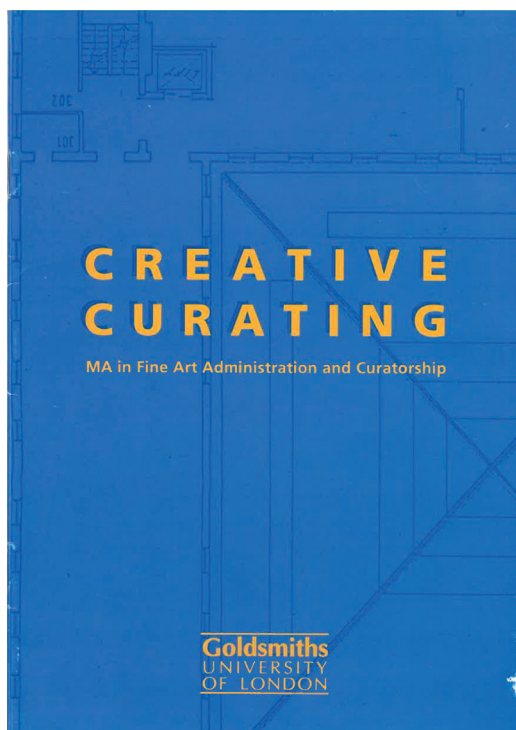


Figure 1: Cover of the promotion leaflet of the 'Creative Curating' programme, possibly in the year 1998. Courtesy of Goldsmiths, University of London and Grant Watson.

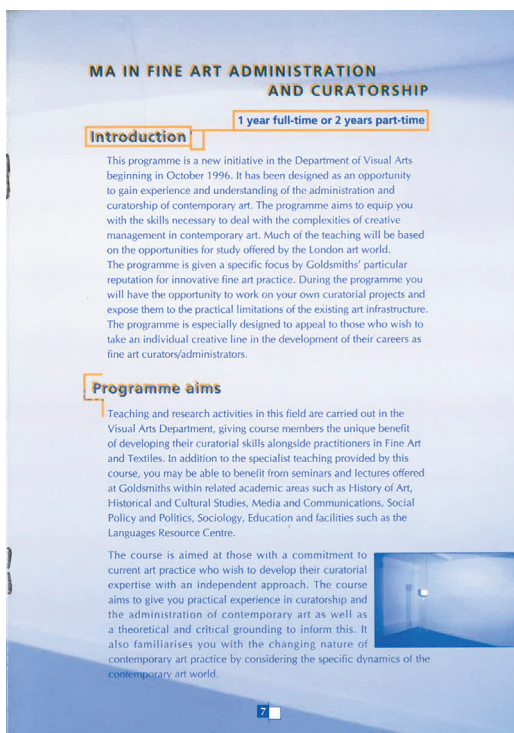


Figure 2: Page 7 of the promotion leaflet of the 'Creative Curating' programme, possibly in the year 1998. Courtesy of Goldsmiths, University of London and Grant Watson.

'independent' spirits who would not be assimilated into the existing institutional system (Department of Visual Arts, Goldsmiths College, University of London 1998: 7). Different from other curatorial degrees, like 'Visual Arts Administration: Curating and Commissioning Contemporary Art' MA in the Royal College of Art, which trained curators for museums and galleries (Royal College of Art 2019), 'Creative Curating' was anti-institution, encouraging individuals to express themselves via alternative curatorial formats. Harding distanced the programme from art histories or institutional management and gathered a group of tutors among whom were artists, philosophers and writers. For students, Harding also did not ask for an academic background in art history. In Lu's year, there were about fifteen students including artists, critics, art workers and researchers in various fields.

It was then not strange that one of the tutors asked the students in 'Creative Curating' to engage in 'counter-curating' (Lu 2002: n.pag.). By 'counter-curating', the tutor encouraged the students to abandon conventional ways of exhibition-making in national museums and commercial galleries, which had defined the common understanding of 'curating'. Similarly, in the core course 'Artist/Curator/Audience', all conventions of curating were questioned: timing, context, venue, approach and the

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curator's role (Department of Visual Arts, Goldsmiths College, University of London 1999: 7). The curriculum, designed as a one-year, full-time or two-year, part-time programme, was boldly designed to equip students with the ability to challenge the existing art ecology. As Harding said, they believed that 'artists can do equally good exhibitions without the prestige of having a large budget and institutional recognition' (Harding 2021: n.pag.). This radical attitude towards exhibition-making and the encouragement for experiments with exhibition formats clearly inspired Lu Jie to think out of his previous experience of exhibitions.

The emergence of curating as a discipline in high education in the United Kingdom was also a moment of revolutions in knowledge. In Goldsmiths, Lu met scholars like Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj, who exposed him to critical discourses like cultural studies, postmodernism and postcolonialism. These theories and the experiences of living in London led Lu to profoundly understand the cultural contexts and intellectual debates in the United Kingdom. Among these theories, visual culture completely changed Lu's perception of art. Theorist Irit Rogoff, who was teaching in Goldsmiths, was a leading figure in building new multidisciplinary subjects to bring critical philosophy, contemporary politics and art practices together. Rogoff was unsatisfied with studying artworks only within art history and called for replacing 'art history' with 'visual culture', which 'opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds, and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another' (Rogoff 1998: 24). This shift from fine art history to social scenes directly responded to Lu's thoughts about the division of discourses and practices in contemporary Chinese art. The comprehensiveness and transdisciplinary approaches of visual culture inspired Lu to look at the realities where art is created. He later recalled,

Before going to the UK, I was planning to find out how they did research on visual art but later I found they have turned visual art to visual culture [...]. By contrast, what was being taught in the department of art history and theory in the fine art colleges in China? When fresh students came to the college, they were welcomed by learning the historical paintings in the Dynasties of Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing. So, I was in a completely refreshing environment.

(Lu 2018: n.pag.)

Through Rogoff, Lu also encountered two important concepts, 'geography' and 'context', which helped him bring contemporary art out of white-cube museums. Irit Rogoff was working on the book *Terra Infirmis* (2000) and contemplating on how geography spatializes conflicting histories and social powers. When Lu heard Rogoff talk about 'geography' in Goldsmiths for the first time, he was extremely confused and thought he had gone to the wrong classroom. This confusion pushed him to understand these concepts and theories with his own experience. 'What could geography possibly have to do with art and curating, I wondered? So I tried to put Chinese art into this general atmosphere, and looked at it' (Lu cited in Tinari 2002: n.pag.).

Rogoff's interpretation of geography inspired Lu to bypass western art histories and the international art system and relocate contemporary Chinese art to its original spaces – the vast land of mainland China, the everyday life of Chinese people and among local histories and literature.

Through events of seminars and reading groups, Lu could bring together different discourses and narratives along with artworks. This would solve the dilemma of contemporary Chinese art and fill the gap between theories and practices. When Lu was asked to devise a curatorial proposal as his major submission in 'Creative Curating', he came up with the idea to take the historical Long March in China as the framework for a series of exhibitions and events.

The title of Lu's curatorial proposal was initially *Long March: A Walking Exhibition*. As the title suggests, the site of this 'exhibition' was not fixed but realized as a series of exhibitions and events along the Long March road. The original document is not a typical proposal composed of a list of artists and a budget. Instead, it is an itinerary, a tour guide and a list of artworks, books, films and images. The 26-page proposal (Lu 1999a) had ten appendices and each appendix was relatively independent. The form of each appendix varied: some were rather simple and only with several images; some were more developed, with long sections of writing. For example, the first appendix, 'Appendix 1, Event 1, Day 1', included two sections: 'History' and 'Exhibition – Revolution'. The first section retraced the historical connection between the Chinese Communist revolution and peasant revolutions in the Qing dynasty; the second section bridged art and revolution, connecting revolution theory (*Problem of Chinese Revolution* by Leon Trotsky in 1932) to western contemporary art discourses (*Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, 1994) and contemporary artworks. Lu gave equal importance to books and artworks and these books would also be a crucial part of the exhibition. Interweaving these materials, Lu demonstrated the entanglement between the local forces in China and the western influences – a dynamic shared by both the Communist revolution and contemporary Chinese art.

In the proposal, Lu was not re-iterating the propaganda narrative of the Long March. Instead, he braided several worldlines to create a much more charged context for contemporary Chinese art. As an example, there were various portraits of Mao Zedong, who led the historical Long March and proposed a road of independence for China. Mao appeared as a promising Saviour in artist Liu Chunhua's *Chairman Mao Goes to Yan'an* (1967), as caricatures in contemporary artist Li Shan's oil painting *Chairman Mao* (1995) and as a popular image in Andy Warhol's silk print *Mao* (1973). These artworks in different locations and eras had utterly different characteristics: sometimes solemn, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes patriotic, sometimes nihilistic. Lu questioned the readers, 'is Mao a Nationalist or Internationalist? Or both, or neither of them?' (Lu 1999a: 13). Considering Lu's existing concerns over contemporary Chinese art, such a question could be also read as 'is contemporary Chinese art national or international?' It echoed to the classic argument between the critics Li Xianting and Fei Dawei, respectively based in Beijing and overseas, about whether Chinese contemporary art should be *minzuhua* ('nationalized') or not (Li and Fei 1991: n.pag.). Lu did not conclude the debate but he prompted readers to think from different perspectives.

Instead of directly discussing contemporary Chinese art, Lu invited participants to think about the Long March. Lu sensed that the Long March has been celebrated in textbooks, films, poems and performed through pilgrimages. Ingrained into mainland Chinese' memories, people have

constantly enriched its meaning. The Long March has, therefore, become a *lieux de mémoire* ('site of memory') in French historian Pierre Nora's term (Nora and Kritzman 1989), accommodating different interpretations generated over time in political campaigns, commercial tourism and contemporary art. Lu regarded the Long March as a synecdoche of the People's Republic of China: 'In every Chinese mind, the Long March is the narration, the story of the beginning of conflict, the rupture with tradition, the problem with modernity, and then, the search for utopia' (Lu cited in Tinari 2002: n.pag.).

In this original proposal *Long March – A Walking Exhibition*, Lu used the geographical space and the narrative of the Long March to set up the curatorial framework to reposition contemporary Chinese art from the international institutions to the everyday realities of China. Through the Long March, the discussion of contemporary Chinese art was extended from the China–West confrontation to the lived experience of the participants. However, this conceptual proposal was still in its very early stages. To turn the proposal into reality, Lu still needed to develop a more detailed plan.

#### Appendix 1, Event 1, Day 1

##### History

Jinggangshan Mountains, Jiangxi soviet. After the Communist Party was formerly organized in 1921, it took the form of Russian revolution based on organizing workers in the cities. Defeated by the Nationalist government, they went underground in foreign-controlled Shanghai. However, unsatisfied with the urban insurrections policy guided by the Comintern's representatives in the Communist headquarters in Shanghai, Mao took the route of organizing peasant revolutions in the mountain. He formed Red Army and created his theory of 'rural soviet movement'. Marxist-Leninism must be redefined with Chinese reality. He successfully build the Jiangxi soviet in 1929. The Chinese Communism has its own route through the peasant's uprising which also has a history of changing many dynasties. 'The Sharing Wealth Party'-the Communist party's name in Chinese, echoed the slogan 'The Wealth must be Shared' by the Taiping Movement, a combination of peasant rebellion and Christian belief. At one point Taiping took over half of the China in the south and in 1853 set up their capital in Nanjing. Taipings were suppressed by the imperial government and the foreign powers who shared interests in China, 'which postponed Chinese Revolution for sixty years'. Captain Charles Gordon of the Royal Engineers played key role in the final defeat of the Taiping movement.<sup>1</sup>

Mao said, 'The Chinese bourgeois-democratic revolution is in essence a peasant revolution...the basic task of the Chinese proletariat in the bourgeois-democratic revolution is therefore to give leadership to the peasants' struggle.<sup>2</sup> Combining Marxism-Leninism and Chinese traditional pattern of peasant revolts, Mao's principle contribution to Communism is, in semi-feudal, semi-colonial countries such as China, a revolutionary Leninist Party could successfully carry out revolution and remain Marxist without relying on the proletariat.



Li Shan 'The Rouge Series: No. 6, 1990, Acrylic on Canvas



Mao, Yan'an, 1937

##### Exhibition - Revolution

Read Leon Trotsky's *Problem of Chinese Revolution*,<sup>3</sup> which he started to write in Moscow but finished on exile in Alma Ata and Turkey. Trotsky was the most criticized communist in Chinese political life. Being a Trotskyist meant being dead in political life in China. Trotsky's writing is not banned any more, but few have interest in reading them. Are Maoism and Stalinism orthodox Marxist communism? Has communism failed? Has it started yet?

Figure 3: Page 1 of Long March – A Walking Exhibition: A Detailed Curatorial Plan (1999). Courtesy of Lu Jie and Long March Project.

1

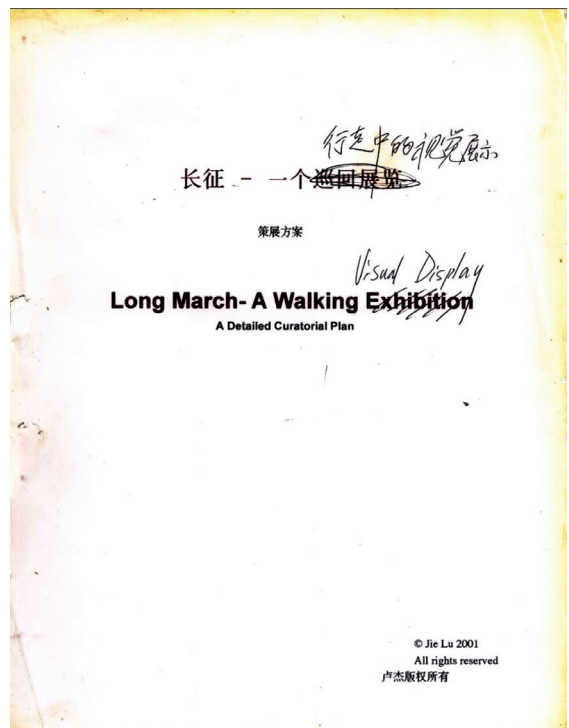


Figure 4: Cover of Long March – A Walking Exhibition: A Detailed Curatorial Plan (2001) (the title was later changed to Long March – A Walking Visual Display). Courtesy of Lu Jie and Long March Project.

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**Site 3, Day 15, on the road, traveling from The Red Army Mansion in Longshen County and The Bridge of Wind and Rain in Sanjiang Dong Minority Autonomous County, to Guilin City, Guangxi Province**

**History**



Wuyang Bridge, Yudu River Ruijiang - where the historical Long March began



Mao said that the 'base area' is the ass of Red Army. What does he mean by this metaphor? The Communists were forced to forfeit their base area in order to begin their retreat, carefully named the 'Strategic Transition'. After a Red Army military conference in Ruijin, they decided to withdraw. Near Yudu River, in Jiangxi, the final order was given. The Long March began on October 16, 1934. By the time they reached their final destination in Yanan, one year later, the Red Army had marched across 6,000 miles, about twice the width of the American continent. The journey took them

through some of the world's most difficult terrain, often unfit for wheeled vehicles, across the high snow mountains and great rivers of Asia. The Army began in the province of Jiangxi, travelling through Guangdong, Fujian, Guangxi and Hunan. By the time they arrived in Guizhou, after completing only the beginning of their journey, one third of the soldiers had already lost their lives.



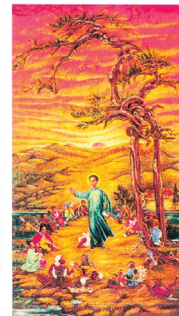
The Red Army marches

**Exhibition - Journey**

This event will take place on the roads of Jiangxi, Hunan and Guangxi provinces, which were the first roads of the Long March. Along the way, on the bus<sup>1</sup>, in the markets and elsewhere, we will talk with local people about the passage, pilgrimage and the construction of the icons of the Long March. The history of visual art, its theory, and the construction of "gaze" will all be explored in their relationship to this journey. Guilin, Guangxi, is the most popular tourist destination in China. Each year millions of tourists, representatives of the new bourgeoisie Chinese class emerging from the economic reforms of the last decade, come here to visit the picturesque Li River and mountains. What do these tourists of the 90s and early 00s China think about the passage of the Red Guard through this area during the Cultural Revolution in the 60s, and how are they linked with the heroic Long March in the 30s? Most of this area is regarded as holy, filled with sacrosanct places visited by the Red Guards during



Liu Chunhua, "Mao Goes to Anyuan," 1968



Liu Dahong, "Untitled No. 3," 1993

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Figure 5: Page 7 of Long March – A Walking Exhibition: A Detailed Curatorial Plan (2001). Courtesy of Lu Jie and Long March Project.

### 3. FROM CURATING OBJECTS TO CURATING WITH PARTICIPANTS

From 1999 to 2001, Lu polished the proposal while conducting research and travelling between New York and China. In its later version, the proposal was enriched to over 90 pages and composed of twenty 'sites', each corresponding to a specific place along the road of the Long March (Lu 2001b). The exhibition was also imagined to move from the first site in Ruijin to the last site in Yan'an, imitating the trajectory of the historical Long March. During

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consulting art professionals and intellectuals in China in early 2002, Lu was advised by scholar Fan Di'an to change the project's subtitle from 'A Walking Exhibition' to 'A Walking Visual Display', as the liveliness of the project went beyond what would be provided by a still exhibition (Lu 2019a: n.pag.).

The 'walking exhibition' in its original title, however, is a clue connecting the project back to the curatorial and exhibition studies in the United Kingdom. During the 1990s, apart from experimental projects exploring formats of events and exhibitions, there were also academic discussions in exhibition studies. In 1996, a collection of essays across fields was published under the title *Thinking about Exhibition*. In one of the essays, art historian Rosalind E. Krauss drew on André Malraux's term *musée imaginaire* ('museum without walls' or 'imaginary museum' in English) to discuss the conception of a new and post-modern museum, similar to a flea-market, in which different artworks and objects annotated each other (Krauss 1996). Such co-existence of heterogeneous works also appeared in Lu's developed proposal (2001b: n.pag.) and was realized in 2002: artworks from different contexts appeared in the project, which were often in the form of reproductions: prints, digital copies and projections. Though Lu did not use the term *musée imaginaire*, he frequently applied 'juxtaposition' and 'contrast', showing different works and materials together in his curating. These were the typical methods to realize the heterogeneity of *musée imaginaire*, when usually an exhibition emphasizes similarities among works.

Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie, the two curators of *Long March*, were fully aware of the project's experimental dimension in curatorial methods. In the manifesto published on the website Arts.tom.com (*meishu tongmeng*) before the project's launch, the curators declared,

The *Long March* is an exhibition about exhibitions. It is not an exhibition in the traditional sense, with artworks hanging in a fixed space, both literally and metaphorically. [...] The whole *Long March* project will become a multi-media, multi-layered study in the anthropology and sociology of art, a hypertext connecting urban with rural and reality with imagination.

(Lu and Qiu 2002: n.pag.)

These statements echoed with Lu's plan in the proposal. He designed a symbolic act: he would talk about creative curating with the director of the governmental museum on revolution in Zunyi who might have never heard about this term (Lu 2001b: 20). Lu was conscious that his approaches in *Long March* were innovative curatorial gestures and he planned to demonstrate these perceptions of curating with exhibition-makers in China who had worked in a propaganda system.

The main experiment of the project, as the subtitle suggested, was its constantly moving and evolving nature. However, the project's 'walking visual display' was not accomplished by the curators' travelling with a large quantity of artworks, which was similar to the mode of touring exhibitions. Apart from various reproductions at the site (e.g. using prints of paintings), the project was enabled mainly by a series of different assemblies of participants: artists, volunteers, scholars and ordinary audience members. For example, when the project was realized in 2002, Lu invited two female artists with absolutely different practices to meet each other: the self-taught Chinese artist Guo Fengyi, who drew paintings as a spiritual practice, and the American feminist icon Judy Chicago, making contemporary installations with strong political

propositions. Lu Jie invited artists with various backgrounds and practices to expose the divergences and similarities between individuals in specific places and ecologies. By inviting participants to directly meet each other, Lu aimed to replace abstract signifiers like 'China', 'the West' and other corresponding identities with dynamic assemblies composed of specific, complicated and multi-faceted individuals who resisted simplified categorization.

From 'A Walking Exhibition' to 'A Walking Visual Display', the change of the subtitle reflects a change of main elements in the project: from objects to participants. When Lu drafted the initial proposal, his thoughts centred on miscellaneous materials and their contexts. When he arrived at the proposal in 2001, Lu demonstrated a clear emphasis on participation and the reaction of individuals. In the proposal of 2001, Lu became clearer about the effects of curating and expected some situations in the project to be 'provocative'. Instead of introducing artworks to audience with full explanations, like in public museums, Lu's curating often aimed to let the audience 'not understand' and feel their own limits when seeing artworks. For example, along the road of the Long March, Lu planned to exhibit radical artworks to unprepared audience members, who would be in a state of 'shock'.

The radical curatorial engagement with participants also responded to the mutual misunderstanding and misreading between China and the West that Lu was concerned with in contemporary Chinese art. In the proposal of 1999, Lu discussed the reception in China of Italian left-wing filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972). Antonioni was invited by the Chinese government in 1972 to make a documentary about China's development. While shooting the film, Antonioni intentionally used long shots of ordinary details to realistically present what he saw (Lin 2014). However, the film's visual language was so different from Chinese propaganda films that it was condemned by the Chinese government to be 'an openly anti-Chinese, anti-Communist and counter-revolutionary work' (Lu 1999a: 3). Lu questioned if such miscommunication was 'a classical problem of East meets West, of mutual incomprehensibility' (Lu 1999a: 3). In the proposal of 2001, Lu planned a screening event of *Chung Kuo, Cina* for villagers in China. Lu hoped to hold a belated screening for the film because in the summer of 1973, people around China were organized to join in the mass critique of Antonioni without even seeing the film themselves. By showing the film and organizing discussions, Lu intended to engage with participants' memories, complicate their understanding of an artwork they already knew and remind people of the tremendous influence of ideologies on their perception of art.

While the curatorial proposal of *Long March* in 1999 was mainly a curator's prosaic reflection with tentative thoughts, the proposal in 2001 presented clear curatorial methods aiming to affect participants. Lu intended to instigate participants to respond to their personal experience and the local context. In this project, the space of *Long March* would be a site of encounters and collisions, bringing changes to contemporary Chinese art. This concern of Lu's contemporaries also attracted Qiu Zhijie. When invited by Lu to join *Long March* in 2001, Qiu agreed immediately and sensed that 'Chinese art needs [*Long March*] at this moment' (Qiu 2018: n.pag.). The curators, Lu and Qiu, deemed *Long March* to be an alternative path to 'contemporary mainstream exhibition culture' (Lu and Qiu 2002: n.pag.). The anti-institutional spirit of the 'Creative Curating' programme was translated into *Long March*. The curators tried to build a grassroots and comprehensive network instead of institutional platforms like the third Shanghai Biennale in 2000, which imported

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global art infrastructure into mainland China. It is also worth noting that Lu's emphasis on participation was also because of the bleak reality that there was no institutional funding for the project, either in China or abroad (Long March Project 2002). The lack of public funding pushed Lu to call for volunteers and participants' support. During this process, the curatorial methods and contents developed to fit the realities of China at the turn of the millennium.

This curating, relying on massive mobilization, was so different from the typical still exhibitions in China. Together with Lu and Qiu's discourse and their great visibility as the protagonists of the project, the term 'curating' was introduced to more art practitioners in China as a creative and artistic practice related to the exploration of forms. Lu himself became one of the earliest art practitioners in China, who identified himself primarily as a 'curator' instead of as a critic or researcher. The two curators of *Long March*, who called themselves *cezhanren* ('curators'), actively interpreted their curatorial approaches. In *Long March*, Lu also showed clear awareness of his curatorial authorship and actively claimed the value of curating: he put a credit line 'Jie Lu © 2001/All rights reserved' on the cover of the curatorial proposal, like an artist's signature on the work (Lu 2001b). Before this, few organizers of non-exhibition events in China would deem a proposal a form of independent authorship. *Long March* provided a discourse about curating and raised the awareness among people of the values, authorship and potential in making art public, which had not yet been fully discussed in China.

As curatorial theorist Gao Shiming reflected, *Long March* introduced many new discourses and terms into China. Among these terms, there was 'curating' – one of the participating artists Hu Liu said, she participated to have a look 'how they make things' (Hu 2019: n.pag.). Hu was referring to Lu and Qiu's curating. But, as Gao further pointed out, hearing these terms for the first time did not mean local art practitioners had not conducted such practices before; it was 'just people hadn't heard about [these discourses or terms]' (Gao 2012: 382). The introduction of 'curating' in *Long March* helped people identify the artistic value of exhibiting artworks and making events, which used to be described under notions such as *zuzhi* ('organizing').

In parallel with *Long March*, Lu also tried to set up a systematic and critical framework about curating in China through education. In April 2001, Lu drafted a *cezhanren jiangxiban jihua* ('plan of seminars for curators') about setting up an 'international and translocal' programme for Chinese-speaking students from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and other countries in East Asia, to train local curators and introduce 'how local art and visual culture are integrated into the international map' (Lu 2001a: n.pag.). Though China Academy of Art did not accept this proposal, it set up the Research Centre for Display Culture (*zhanshi wenhua yanjiu zhongxin*) on curating in 2003. From 2021, Lu Jie became the head of this centre.<sup>2</sup> Lu's endeavour to establish curating as a discipline in academies in China demonstrates his own being deeply influenced by the discourse and practices of curating in the United Kingdom. *Long March* should then also be understood in this context, while curating was introduced to China as a new discipline within the art field.

## CONCLUSION

*Long March: A Walking Visual Display* was a curatorial experiment responding to the dilemma in the curating of contemporary Chinese art, a global phenomenon during the 1990s. As one of the earliest professionally trained

2. This centre later was renamed as Institute of Contemporary Art and Social Thoughts (*dangdai yishu yu shehui sixiang yanjiu suo*).

3. *Long March: A Walking Visual Display* led Lu Jie to establish the 25,000 Cultural Transmission Centre, a cultural space in 798 Art Zone in Beijing. Since 2002, the Centre has evolved into two closely interconnected entities that have shed great influence on contemporary art in and out of China: the Long March Project, which has initiated a series of curatorial projects exhibited internationally, and the Long March Space, which actively participated in the international art market during the 2010s. Researchers have analysed *Long March: A Walking Visual Display* from various particular aspects, not limited to contemporary art; for example, the Long March Project's expansion of the art world in China from cities to the rural areas (Shea 2017), the clash between western feminism and local Chinese women's art at the Lugu Lake site (Welland 2018: 135–76), the appropriation of the communist legacy (Chang 2012) and the choice of the particular geographical space saturated with revolutionary memories (Zhang 2016: 64–107).

Chinese curators, Lu Jie was inspired by the possibilities of 'Creative Curating' in Goldsmiths, University of London, which encouraged him to break from conventions of the mainstream art ecology. The experiments with alternative sites and formats of exhibitions and the understanding of art in visual culture inspired Lu to take the historical Long March as an 'organic' curatorial structure which could 'include many issues connecting with contemporary Chinese art' (Lu cited in Tinari 2002: n.pag.). By going back to the geographical space of China, *Long March* brought discourses of contemporary art and the Chinese society – the realities of art practices – together.

The trajectory of Lu Jie does not mean that *Long March* imported 'curating' from London to China, like the typical narrative that the peripheral areas copied the centre's mode of modernization. As Lu developed the curatorial proposal, the curating of the project had become more integrated with his thoughts on the existing curatorial practices of contemporary Chinese art. As Lu aimed to provoke his peer artists and ordinary participants, the main elements of the project also shifted from objects to participants, from artworks to artists. This transition should be considered as a process of localizing what Lu learnt as 'creative curating' in the United Kingdom. This research argues that a discipline like 'curating' rooted in Europe can become a new lens through which local Chinese practitioners discover the value of something already in their own practices and make further experiments in their contexts. *Long March: A Walking Visual Display* was, therefore, a watershed moment for the emergence of curating in China.<sup>3</sup>

## GLOSSARY

Cezhan (curating) 策展  
 Changzheng (Long March) 长征  
 Fei Dawei 费大为 (1954–present)  
 Gao Minglu 高名潞 (1949–present)  
 Gao Shiming 高世名 (1976–present)  
 Hu Liu 胡柳 (1982–present)  
 Huang Yongping 黄永砗 (1954–2019)  
 Li Shan 李山 (1942–present)  
 Li Xianting 栗宪庭 (1949–present)  
 Liu Dahong 刘大鸿 (1962–present)  
 Lu Jie 卢杰 (1964–present)  
 Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 (1969–present)  
 Xiao Xiong 肖雄 (1962–2020)  
 Xiexiang (going to the countryside) 下乡  
 Zheng Shengtian 郑胜天 (1938–present)

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