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Where There Are No Art Circles: The Long March Project and New Geographies of Contemporary Chinese Art

In the history of the People's Republic of China and the larger history of the Chinese Communist Party, the Long March has always challenged the limits of our ability to conceive of the geography of the Chinese nation. Mao Zedong often reported the length of the Red Army's journey out of the Jiangxi Soviet area to its eventual base at Yan'an between 1934 and 1936 at 25,000 *li*, or the equivalent of about 7,800 miles. American journalist Edgar Snow, who famously went to the Communist base in Yan'an in 1936, provided the first English language account of Mao and the Long March in the book *Red Star over China* (1937), calling the Long March "an odyssey unequalled in modern times . . . it took them across some of the world's most difficult trails . . . and across the high snow mountains and the great rivers of Asia."¹ Snow noted that the army was compiling detailed accounts of the exact mileage and the number of mountains, rivers, provinces, towns, and armies faced along the way, but the force of his poetic description of the geography speaks in a way that defies any mere measurable distance. The physical geography of the Long March that served as the space for the Red Army's struggle for survival has, since the 1930s, continually served as a metaphorical space for the projection of struggle in Chinese history. It is the same mythic, though very real geography, that rings out in the opening lines of "Rock 'n Roll on the New Long March," the title track of Chinese rocker Cui Jian's 1989 album of the same name: "I've heard about, but never seen/twenty-five thousand *li*."

In 2002, the Long March Project was organized by the Long March Foundation, New York (and now based in Beijing), to explore the relationship between contemporary art and the political narrative of the historical Long March, and addressed this overdetermined geography in its first curatorial project. For the project, officially titled *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display*, project founder and chief curator Lu Jie developed a twenty-site itinerary stretching across the historical route of the Long March that was to be traveled by the curatorial team along with a documentary team. Along the way, Chinese and international artists, curators, and critics joined the Long Marchers for site-specific public exhibitions, discussions, film screenings, and community art projects, among other things. The project was an engagement with the utopian narrative of the Long March and was intended to explore, through visual culture, the continuing potential of the Long March metaphor to address the transformations of contemporary Chinese culture and society. At the



Qin Ga, *Miniature Long March*, 2002–05, photographed May 7, 2005, at Jiajianshan Snowy Mountain, Sichuan province. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.

core of Lu Jie and co-curator Qiu Zhijie’s plan to retrace the Long March was a desire for Chinese art to once again address the public realm by bringing contemporary art to the countryside and creating a dialogue with local and folk art practices.² After almost a decade of expansion into the global art world, perhaps best exemplified by the staging of the first officially sanctioned international exhibition of experimental art in China at the Third Shanghai Biennale in 2000, many in the Chinese art world were troubled by how contemporary Chinese art was positioned—caught between global contemporary art and increasingly elite art circles in Beijing and Shanghai that operated in close coordination with the global art world.³ Artist Qin Ga, looking back on his experience creating *Miniature Long March* (2002–05) for *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display*, explained that the key to the work of the new Long March was its site—“When you go to the countryside, there are no art circles.” This statement distills a central component of the project—an exploration of a geography that, in the context of contemporary Chinese art at the time, was available only via ever-receding personal memories or in grand narratives such as the Long March. The four works that I will discuss are from a small subsection of works that were carried out over the course of *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display*. Unlike the works exhibited at a single site, these works were developed with and in relation to the exploratory evolution of *A Walking Visual Display* on the Long March route. They thus provide an entry point into thinking about how the Long March Project began its engagement with the task of relocating contemporary Chinese art. Visual culture theorist Irit Rogoff (who, perhaps not coincidentally, began her tenure at Goldsmiths College in 1997, the year in which Lu Jie began his M.A. in curating at Goldsmiths) has referred to the critical work around geography prevalent in contemporary art and visual culture in the early twenty first century as “an active form of unnam[ing], renam[ing], and [the] revising of [such] power structures in terms of the relations between subjects and places.”⁴ In the process of doing this critical work, *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display* proposed a geography of contemporary Chinese art rooted in the space of the Chinese nation. This initial engagement with geography may

help us understand some of the difficulties that led to the decision to declare *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display* “an uncompleted completion” after twelve of the twenty sites were visited, signifying the challenges in creating a new national art geography within the contemporary art world.

Left: Qin Ga, *Miniature Long March*, performance documentation, 2002–05, photographed July 1, 2002. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.

Middle: Qin Ga, *Miniature Long March*, performance documentation, 2002–05, photographed August 30, 2002. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.

Right: Qin Ga, *Miniature Long March*, performance documentation, 2002–05, photographed May 24, 2005, at Nanniwan, Shaanxi province. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.



Qin Ga: *Miniature Long March*

Perhaps the most direct evocation of *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display*'s geography is Qin Ga's *Miniature Long March*. The work began in the summer of 2002 in Beijing with the artist having a map of China tattooed on his back. There were not many colours in the tattoo at this initial stage, with only Beijing identified by name, along with a star in red. The map was limited to provincial borders and provincial capitals marked with green dots—the Great Wall was also green, China's land borders are deep purple, its sea coast and major rivers blue, and the coastal borders of Taiwan, North Korea, and South Korea blue. It was, in some ways, an easily recognizable political map of China—the modern, nationalist geographic discourse on display in maps that historian Thongchai Winichakul refers to as a “geo-body.” But the work slowly undercut the power of that geography in the unfolding of *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display* that was recorded on Qin Ga's back. At each new site, Qin Ga added a tattoo with the site's name and a corresponding dot in red, with solid red lines connecting each site. He recalls this portion of *Miniature Long March* as “documenting the linkages between myself and my body.”⁵ But it was also a map that triangulated between the artist, the body, and the unfolding of the space of the project. Qin Ga completed the project's route and continued recording the map several years later, beginning in May 2005 at site twelve—Luding Bridge—where he began by crawling along the span of the bridge, an attempt to deepen his body's engagement with the route. But the route did not have to be completed for the geography of the new Long March to be present in Qin Ga's map. Like all cartography, Qin Ga's *Miniature Long March* had already organized and delineated the space opened up by *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display*.

Qiu Zhijie: *Left/Right*

To carry out his work *Left/Right* (2002), Qiu Zhijie wore shoes throughout the journey of *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display* inscribed with the characters *zou* and *you* and their corresponding English translation “left” and “right”—with left placed on the right shoe and right on the left



Qiu Zhijie, *Left/Right*, performance, 2002. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.



Left: Qiu Zhijie, *Left/Right*, performance, 2002. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.

Right: Qiu Zhijie, *Left/Right*, performance, 2002. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.

shoe. Unlike *Miniature Long March*, the work, although also continuously in process along the route, relied heavily on the occurrence of rain—and the resultant mud—to document the journey. Qiu Zhijie made his way across the Luding Bridge wearing the shoes in 2002, providing some of the only visual evidence of his having marked the territory of the route. The work's critique of standard forms of measuring one's step, embedded in the mismarked shoes, is heightened by the impermanence of the traces of steps left on the ground. This calls to mind the seminal work of Song Dong, *Water Diary* (1995), which also confronts the power of standardized measurement to structure our existence as the artist records calligraphy with water on stone only for it to disappear. But, like *Water Diary*, Qiu Zhijie's *Left/Right* does not eliminate the centrality of time or space; instead, it renegotiates its relationship with the individual. What is important to both *Left/Right* and *Miniature Long March* is that the works make use of familiar mechanisms found in geography—cartography and measurement—within the context of the larger project of *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display*. They both record the renegotiation of the space of the Long March for contemporary Chinese art, and they work in concert to highlight the contradictory nature of a geography that is both known and unknown.

Xiao Xiong: *Enter and Exit*

The final two works I will look at, *Enter and Exit* (2002), by Xiao Xiong, and *Sending off the Red Army* (2002), by Jiang Jie, address the limits of geography by capturing the diffuse spaces of the Long March.

Xiao Xiong, *Enter and Exit*, performance/installation, 2002, photographed July 10, 2002. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.



Xiao Xiong, *Enter and Exit*, performance/installation, 2002, a poster of Mao exchanged for a painting, photographed July 31, 2002. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.



Enter and Exit was carried out by traveling the route of the historical Long March in reverse simultaneously with the curatorial team of *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display*. For this project, Xiao Xiong started out in Yan'an with a small bust of Mao Zedong bought in Beijing. He then attempted to exchange this bust for another object, after which he continued on to the next site and repeated the exchange process. Over the course of his Long March, Xiao Xiong recorded each of the exchanges in

a photograph and journal entry that bears witness to the accumulation of exchanges that he made on the Long March journey.⁶ Throughout the course of *Enter and Exit*, he became acutely aware of the way the Long March route took him well beyond the route itself. He notes this in his diary by citing a man he exchanged a bust of Mao with in Longde, Ningxia province, who said, “From now on whenever I look at [the objects], I will think of you, yet none of these things are yours.”⁷ Xiao Xiong attempted to capture the histories and geographies of these objects in the photographic and written records of each exchange, creating a kind of map that traces the objects and their provenance, including the individuals who participated and the sites of the exchange.

Xiao Xiong, *Enter and Exit*, performance/installation, 2002, Xiao Xiong encountered the Long March crew in Zunyi and exchanged a cigarette case with Johnson Chang, photographed August 11, 2002. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.



Entering into this exchange also brought out skepticism in the people he encountered on his journey about Xiao Xiong's motives as an artist—was he tricking people into unfavourable exchanges? Inevitably, this raised varying ideas about the meaning of exchange—a

constant reminder of the importance of site within his particular conceptualization of the space of the new Long March.

Jiang Jie: *Sending Off the Red Army: In Commemoration of the Mothers of the Long March*

Jiang Jie's work *Sending Off the Red Army: In Commemoration of the Mothers of the Long March* utilizes sculptures of an infant body to contest the geography inherent to the historical narrative of the Long March. For this work, she produced twenty identical sculptures of infants, packing them neatly in boxes labeled “Art Work” and instructing the Long Marchers to take the sculptures on the road. The baby sculptures were then to be adopted by individuals and families they encountered along the route who would agree to take a picture of the baby on that same day, and in an



Jiang Jie, *Sending Off the Red Army: In Commemoration of the Mothers on the Long March*, performance/installation, 2002–ongoing, Xiao Honggang fills in the adoption form for adopting Jiang Jie's sculptural replica of a baby. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.

identical manner, every year.⁸ As indicated by the title, the work references directly the mothers and pregnant women who made the decision to join the Long March, which often forced them to leave their children behind, or, for some of those born on the road, to be taken in by local communities. Jiang Jie's work revisits this often-forgotten chapter of Long March history in its focus not on the geography of the Long March but on the geographies created by the dispersal of these children. It is the children—and their adoptive families—in *Sending Off the Red Army* that have the potential to mark out that lost geography. Signaling a similar relationship to that between the historical Long March and the mothers of the Long March, Jiang Jie joins in the new Long March as a challenge to the Long March Project not to revive the triumphalist, masculine narrative of the historical Long March in creating a new geography of contemporary art.

As many observers and participants have noted, *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display* carries within it the tension between a utopian and anti-utopian project. Each of the works that I have discussed here point us toward this tension through their creation of a new geography in the midst of a critique of those associated with the historical Long March and contemporary art. But, once laid out as a geography of the new Long March and a model for a geography of contemporary Chinese art, how does that power to name and order space exert itself within contemporary art both in China and abroad? I think Qin Ga's map is particularly interesting in this respect, as its openness to East Asia and its Asian borderlands perhaps mirrors China's own shifting position at that time as a leader in Asia and the world through providing economic assistance to countries during Asia's financial crisis between 1997 and 1999, its subsequent entry into trade agreements with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001. By 2010, when the Long March Project went to Southeast Asia using the Ho Chi Minh Trail as a point of entry, participants on the Southeast Asian side often felt precisely that power of contemporary Chinese art as it again repositioned itself

Jiang Jie, *Sending Off the Red Army: In Commemoration of the Mothers on the Long March*, performance/installation, 2002–ongoing, the Xiao family sends the family photo with the named sculpture to the artist every year. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.



Jiang Jie, *Sending Off the Red Army: In Commemoration of the Mothers on the Long March*, performance/installation, 2002–ongoing. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Project, Beijing.



within the space of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The seeds of this tension were sown in *The Long March: A Walking Visual Display* and its attention to the creation of a new geography of contemporary Chinese art, which pushed beyond the critical work around geography outlined by Rogoff and, perhaps, toward a new “art circle” that extends throughout the space of China and beyond.

Notes

1. Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 190.
2. Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie, “*The Long March: A Walking Visual Display—Detailed Curatorial Plan Outline*,” <http://www.longmarchproject.com/english/e-discourse13.htm/>.
3. Wu Hung, *Reinterpretation*, 18; Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie, “Curators’ Words,” Long March Project, <http://www.longmarchproject.com/english/e-discourse5.htm/>.
4. Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 21.
5. Qin Ga, *Qin Ga: The Miniature Long March, 2002–2005* (Beijing: 25000 Cultural Transmission Center, 2005).
6. Winnie Won Yin Wong, “Xiao Xiong / Enter and Exit,” *Thresholds*, no. 34 (2007), 57–58.
7. Xiao Xiong, “July 17, Longde,” quoted in Winnie Won-yin Wong, “Xiao Xiong/Enter and Exit,” *Thresholds* 34 (Fall 2007), 61.
8. Jiang Jie, “Sending off the Long March: In Commemoration of the Mothers on the Long March,” Long March Project, <http://longmarchproject.com/jiangjie-imp02/>.