

Visualizing Ut



opia

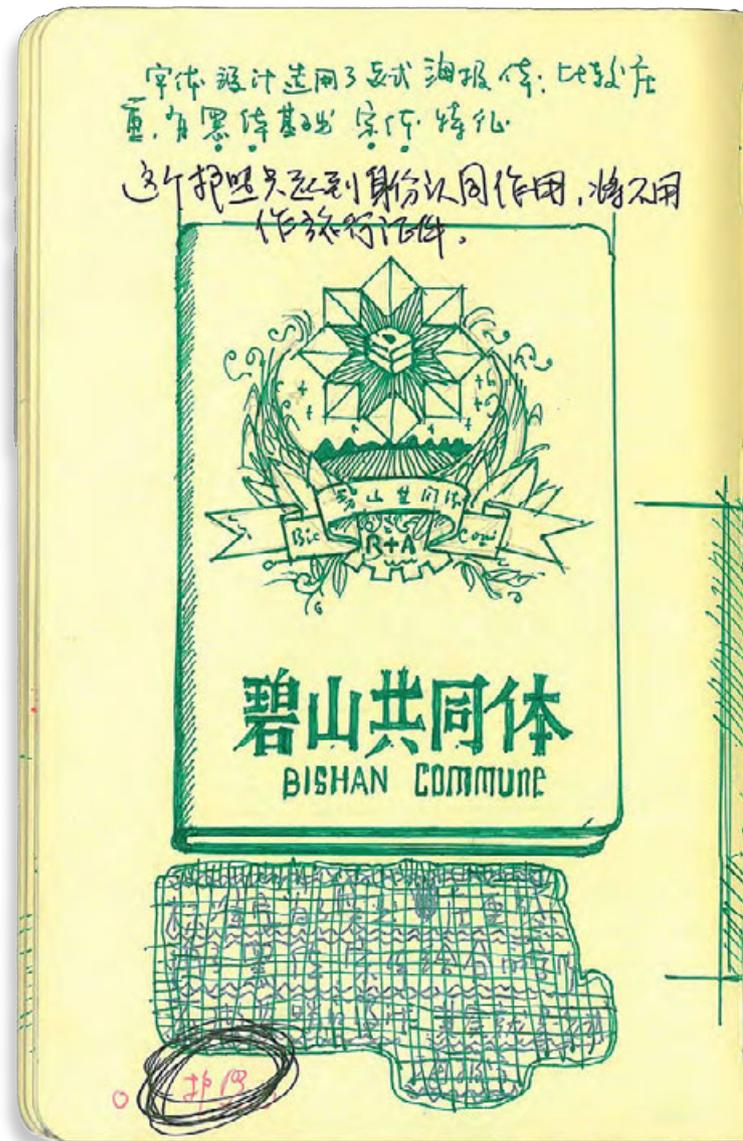
The Trojan Horses of the Bishan Commune

Mai Corlin
Frederiksen



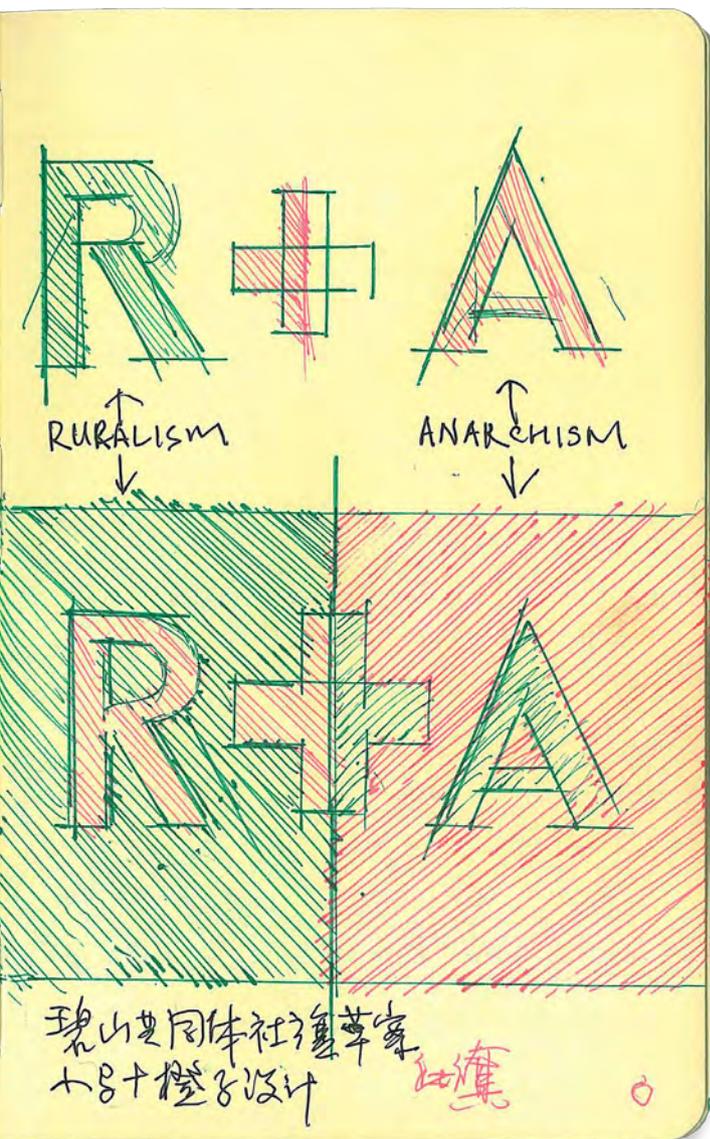


The Bishan Commune project (2010-2016) was an influential long-term socially engaged art project that unfolded in Bishan village in the countryside of Southern Anhui province in eastern China. The project was devised by the artist and intellectual Ou Ning, who in 2010 wrote a notebook entitled “The Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia”¹. The utopia of the notebook was based on the ideas of Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin and the Chinese rural reconstruction advocate of the 1930s James Yen. In 2011, Ou Ning and his colleague Zuo Jing, initiated the Bishan Commune project in Bishan Village in Southern Anhui Province. From 2011 up until its forced closure in early 2016, the Bishan Commune attracted a range of artists, activists, and other volunteers. They came and spent time in Bishan, organizing art festivals, film screenings, second hand shops, reading groups, archery research, performances, sharing sessions, and so much more.² Along with being an anarchist, people-centred endeavour in the Chinese countryside, the Bishan Commune presented itself through changing visual strategies that lead me to the following questions: how did the Bishan Commune present itself visually and why? How did this visuality change along the way? The project existed for five years and had its daily routines in the village, it had a visual presence on social media platforms, it had a strong international presence, it was exhibited worldwide, and it was aware of the importance of its visual statements.³



Imagining utopia

Most people’s first visual meeting of the Bishan Commune – myself included – was often through the notebook utopia drafted by Ou Ning. The notebook contains research into alternative communities across the world and provides a blueprint for how to approach the complex issue of creating your own utopia.



The notebook presents drawings for a possible utopian architecture, for the visual appearance, for a passport and community emblem, and so forth. The notebook drawings serve as proxies for imagining other ways of living in a rural China imagined to be hopelessly lagging behind in terms of culture and social coherence. They propose an egalitarian mindset and a political utopia that does not draw upon the legacy of

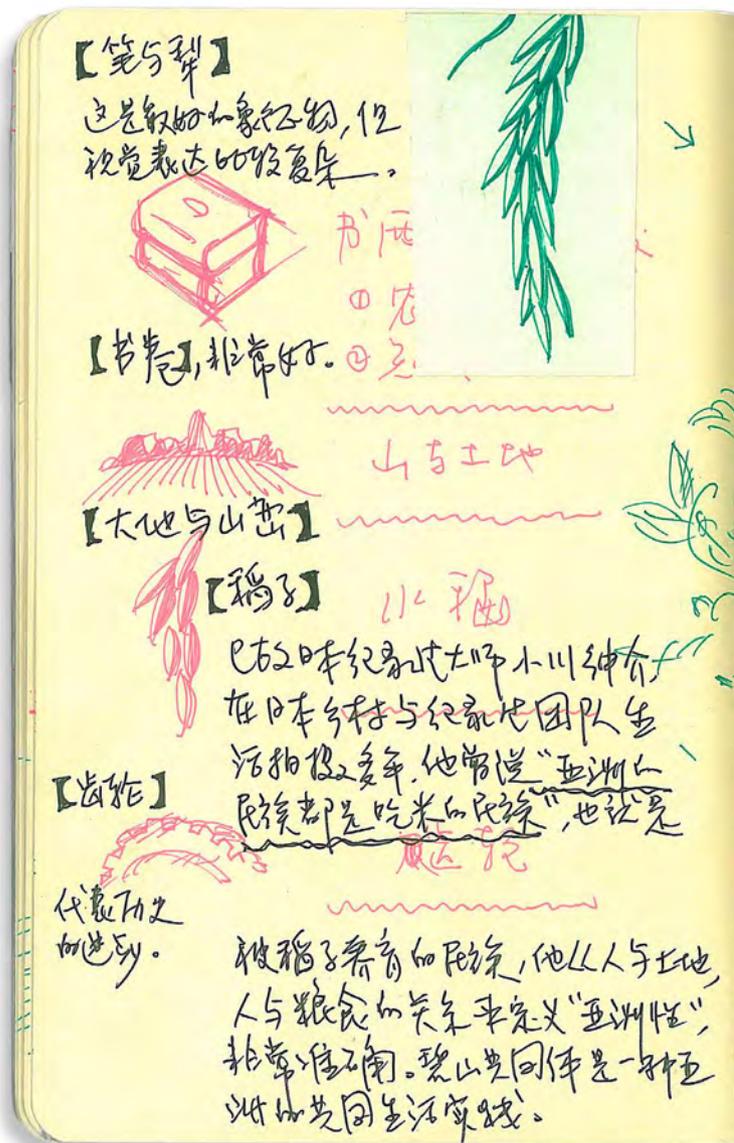


the Chinese Communist Party, but rather sets itself apart by pointing towards historical forefathers (Peter Kropotkin and James Yen), who are not associated with a Maoist past. In the notebook, Ou Ning presents a list of what you should have when setting up a utopia today. Besides a system for architecture, communication, and everyday living, Ou Ning explicitly mentions a “visual system”. Passport, visa permits, vouchers, and the homepage are placed under the category of the visual system, thus placing significant importance on the visual and its ability to attract commune members. The community flag should give a sense of identification, the design and font of the community symbols should not be too refined, instead catering to all kinds of people. The final emblem of the Bishan Commune turned out to be different from the one presented in the notebook (see above). A village was added in the background, as were power pylons connecting the village to the outside world, and a water buffalo (possibly representing Ou Ning’s house named Buffalo Institute) is seen on the field in the front. Next, we shall see how the first visual imagery coming out of the Bishan Project was focused on the ability to attract people from other parts of China (and the world) to come to Bishan.



Bishan from afar

To many people, the Bishan project looked like a specific photograph taken by Ou Ning, which he used in most of his presentations of the project (see above). The photograph depicts a field view of green rice paddies in the foreground, five small grey-white silkworm-breeding houses and a small grey-white pagoda towards the back, and low mountains in the distant background. This representation is perhaps best described by what is not there: no villagers, no traditional Hui-architecture, no artists, no intellectuals, no government, no art, no exchanges, only: agriculture (or to urbanites: nature). People who had not been to the village could have been led to think that it was a very small, remote, rice-growing village consisting of a pagoda and five poor households (mistaking the silkworm breeding house for inhabited homes). The Bishan project as represented by this photograph seems devoid of some of the crucial ingredients of socially engaged art projects: people. It seems to propose a romantic, rural, utopian dream more than the actual project unfolding in rural China. I have included the image here, because it is one of the images most used to represent the Bishan Commune and because it served a very important initial purpose: to attract people to come to Bishan. However, as Ou Ning settled down in the village, the visual strategy changed to one focused more on displaying the traditional Hui-architecture of the village.



The Bishan Bookstore

The Bishan Bookstore opened in 2014 and became a central meeting space for villagers and visiting artists interested in the ideas of the Bishan Project.⁴ Images of the Bookstore reveal an important change in the visual representation of the Bishan Commune. It shows a departure from the somewhat dreamy, utopian ideas of



the notebook and the rather disconnected green and lush rice paddies. It enters the village proper through one of its core structures: a traditional Huizhou forefather temple of the Wang-clan (see lead image).

I see the introduction of the Bookstore into the Bishan Commune project scheme as a catalytic event. This is where the utopian ideas of the Bishan Commune transform into a Trojan



Horse. Here I think of the Trojan Horse introduced by Lucy Lippard as the first activist art work⁵. The Bishan Commune is taking a leap into the village, through the shape of a traditional Hui-structure. The village committee offered the Bishan Bookstore to rent the old forefather temple for free, and thus let the Bishan Commune occupy a central architectural structure in the village. The village committee invited in the Trojan Horse of the Bishan Commune.

School of Tillers

A year or so after the Bishan Bookstore opened, another central institution run by the Bishan Commune entered the scene, namely the School of Tillers (see photograph above). The School of Tillers was located in an old Hui-complex adjacent to Ou Ning's house and housed an exhibition space, a library, and a small store from where volunteers helped farmers sell their farm produce. Through the School of Tillers, a large group of volunteers became involved with the project, slowly connecting a strong network of volunteers and villagers, due to which the ideas of the Bishan Commune began to spread in the village. The volunteers, or commune members, were crucial in this. As the soldiers hidden in the belly of the Trojan Horse, the volunteers swarmed into the village and formed new rela-

tionships with different villagers, some of whom were university village officials serving in the nearby village committees. Through the volunteers and university village officials, the ideas of the Bishan Commune slowly seeped into the village committees – the lowest point of entry to the Chinese authorities. It is important to understand that the ideas of the Bishan Commune should not be considered directly subversive or as openly attacking the government. The Bishan Commune Project collaborated with the local government on more or less amiable terms. However, at the same time the Bishan Commune continually worked with an agenda of mutual aid and active engagement with the villagers of Bishan in an attempt to create a new sociality and a new way of living and being in rural China (based on ideas of anarchism).



Leaving Bishan

With the School of Tillers and the incoming volunteers, the Trojan Horse of the Bishan Commune seemed to be flourishing. However, and perhaps because the Bishan Commune was so successful in creating networks of like-minded people within the village, in February 2016 Ou Ning was told by the central authorities to shut down the Bishan Project and leave the village immediately. With a few days' notice, Ou Ning and his family left Bishan. The local authorities afterwards continued down the path of tourist development and beautified the village to set a good example in the area.

Illustrations

- p. 46: Performance with the Danish art ensemble *Bevægeligt Akkurat* (Moveable Accurate) at the Bishan Bookstore. Photo: Mai Corlin, October 2014.
- p. 48: View of Bishan Village, Anhui Province, China. Photo: Mai Corlin, October 2014.
- p. 48/49, center: Drafts for passport and flag for the Bishan Commune by Xiaoma and Chengzi. Courtesy of Ou Ning and the Bishan Commune.
- p. 49: The final emblem of the Bishan Commune by Xiaoma and Chengzi. Courtesy of Ou Ning and the Bishan Commune.
- p. 50: View of the rice paddies of Bishan Village. Photo: Ou Ning, 2011.
- p. 50/51, center: Draft for the Bishan Commune emblem by Xiaoma and Chengzi. Courtesy of Ou Ning and the Bishan Commune.
- p. 51: The volunteers of the School of Tillers. Ou Ning in the background. Photo: courtesy of Ou Ning and the Bishan Commune.
- p. 52: The new village square after renovation. Photo: Mai Corlin, August 2019.

Endnotes

- 1 Ou, Ning, *Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia*, Hornslet: OVO and Antipyrine, 2014.
- 2 For an in-depth study of the Bishan Commune, see Mai Corlin, *The Bishan Commune and the Practice of Socially Engaged Art in Rural China*, Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020.
- 3 The examples I give here of the visual representation of the Bishan Commune do not span the entire visuality of the project. Besides the photographic documentation of the events and life in the village, groups of artists engaged in the project have produced large maps, card games, stories, seed exchanges, paintings, images and much more – all of which carries a visuality of its own. The entire extent of the visuality (and reality) of such a complex and long running project (which was five years) goes far beyond the scope of this essay.
- 4 The Bishan Bookstore was opened by Ou Ning's long-term friend Qian Xiaohua. Qian Xiaohua is known for establishing a whole chain of bookstores in rural China following the opening of Bishan Bookstore. Ou Ning is not financially involved with the bookstore.
- 5 Lippard, Lucy, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power", in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, pp. 341–58.