

## Reinhabiting in Huaniao Island. Creative Practices Work on challenging ‘Culture Aphasia’ Issues in Rural Regeneration

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### Abstract

This paper argues that the loss of cultural memories is an essential issue that challenges the social transformation in Chinese rural regeneration and proposes 'reinhabiting the place' as a potential to empower the traditional community and contribute to renewing cultural connections. Based on my experience of the residency period and other artists' practice on the Huaniao Island, this portfolio explores 'culture aphasia' in the rural revitalization of Huaniao island. It investigates the 2nd Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival's social engagement practice and explores how creative strategies operate to reinhabit the place and re-establish cultural connections. The text explores how artists work proactively with residents and visitors, reconstruct the cultural memories, and renew affective engagement of the community.

**Keywords:** Huaniao Island, International Public Art Festival, culture aphasia, reinhabiting, Chinese rural regeneration, social engagement

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## **Introduction**

Nowadays, notions of remoteness, dilapidation, naturalness and economic backwardness are often associated with traditional Chinese villages. Since industrialization, there have been considerable challenges in retaining the countryside in China. The concept of rural China was once considered backward, and its characteristics has been changed and dropped in the transformation of urbanization (Fei, 1992). Particularly, the demolition of traditional villages and the changed social economic system caused a sense of disconnecting. For these sudden changes, people have not been embedded into the new social context and gained a sense of belonging (Fei, 1992).

However, rural culture is the foundation of traditional Chinese society and the bond that maintains the national sentiment (Fei, 2001). Its concept and meaning contain a sense of home, both physical and spiritual. Therefore, in 1980, traditional village protection was first proposed in academic field. But it was only in 2012 that the government officially promoted the rural protection movement (Zhang, Xia & Lue, 2021). During the past decade, the government, architects, and planners have collaborated on pioneering work to draw more attention to rural culture. However, the practice has proved that improving the spatial environment and public facilities and protecting architectural style is not enough to solve the issue of "rural hollowing and human dispirited" (Zhang, Xia & Lue, 2021). Since 2017, the Chinese government on the nineteenth National People's Congress proposed 'cultural tourism' should be applied in rural society for urban regeneration and reducing the difference between city and village (Ba, 2018). Therefore, in recent years, many cultural tourism projects have sprung up. However, the results are not as anticipated. I argue that the most critical issue should be 'culture aphasia' that is, that because tourism development has ignored the original cultural values of the rural area, its distinctive character has been lost. In addition, tourism industries break down the relational pattern of the rural society, and reconstruction projects destroy the local materials, which are narratives of cultural memories.

According to Fei (2001), the most prominent feature of Chinese rural society is relationship - affective connections between people and people, people and the land, people and space. But today's tourism industries drive a rapid modernized model, which has a colonized trend into a rural area. The new economic system did not provide time and space for the continuation of culture. These consequences have caused the loss of traditions, and the rural society is becoming a past social formation. In this case, re-inhabiting the place from restoring connections and reconstructing a living community seems significant to build new cultural values and memories based on a more profound understanding of the relationship. Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival is a socially engaged art festival that understands the past and empowers rural regeneration and connected cultural tourism. It activates the place physically and emotionally by exploring the local culture and communities. This festival is organized by the Shengsi Government and Huaniao Micro Holiday Tourism Ltd, seeking an alternative strategy to activate rural communities and contribute to cultural tourism. It develops a hybrid mode for artist residencies that involves local on site and virtual gathering. More than thirty artists from different backgrounds from the School of Art at RMIT University, Australia, Shanghai for Science and Technology University, China and EINA University, Barcelona, Spain participated in this festival. These artists worked locally and remotely,

exploring different art forms to empower local culture and renew a sense of place. As a curatorial team member who works closely with all parties, I will introduce this project from the perspective of 'reinhabiting' and propose that 'coming home and 'becoming natives' are critical towards the sustainability of rural culture in Chinese cultural tourism development.

### **Revisiting the place: from the perspective of a visitor to an observer to a native**

From March to May 2021, a group of artists and me I undertook a local residency on the Huaniao Island. We initially experienced the place like a traveller, moving in the environment to seek encounters in the trip.

Natural, beautiful, remote, free, ancient, slow, expectative, wild, dangerous, traditional, modern, inconvenience these words came to my mind when I finished the first time visiting the island. This reflects that natural environment made a deep impression on me. The landscape is enchanting and evokes visitors' affection for the natural environment. However, cultural experience is not rich relative to the natural environment. The current tourism development has not realized the potential of rural culture, and the industrial transformation caused the loss of cultural memory.

With the investigation of the local archives, we learned more contexts and histories of this place. Located in the remote eastern waters of China, Huaniao Island is a traditional rural area with two thousand years of history (Figure 1). It has been colonized by Britain during the war period. Residents lived on fishing, built houses from stone, engaged in simple agricultural activities here in the past. But with the aggravating impact of extreme climatic conditions and overfishing, Huaniao Island has been experiencing population loss since 1998 because islanders have been going away from this island to work (Shengsi Government, 2022). There are only about seven hundred original residents left, most are over sixty years of age, living in two villages on the island -- Huaniao village and Lighthouse village (Shengsi Government, 2022). Young people became rare on this island after the shutdown of the only elementary school.

In 2016, responding to the government policy, Huaniao Island has done the first attempt to develop tourism for social transformation. Tourism industries changed the traditional economic model and modified the Huaniao village (Figure 2) into modern style buildings. However, tourism ignores the cultural dimensions that disembedded social relations from local contexts and caused a sense of alienation. The community is moving towards a state of administration and marketization. The historical value has become piecemeal, even been forgotten, while the new social order is not yet formed in this field. The new community and traditional community are two different powers on the island that seriously challenges the amalgamation and evolution of culture. The new sense of place has not yet formed.



Figure 1. The Lighthouse village (2021). Photo by Zhouzhou Yu.





Figure 2. Huaniao village (2021). Photo by Su Ye.

Considering the previous colonized experience, as outsiders we were careful in making art plans to bring contemporary art to such a traditional island. In order to respond to the place, artists were required to consider the concept of ‘encounter’ and ‘field’, developing a poetic way to engage the local people and environment. Artists focused on a ‘becoming’ process that embraced intersubjective understanding and decolonization. Gruenewald (2003) states that the significant factor involved in decolonization is the development of the ability to recognize ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and place.

It requires artists to see beyond the private and individual and establish a relationship with residents upon mutual interests and respect. The artists’ primary approach was to blend in with the neighbourhood rather than make some loud pronouncement about us coming from somewhere else.

Therefore, we employed multi-sensory ethnography and participatory observation (Figure 3) to achieve my and others' embodied experience. Embedding body into the field, we explored local events, histories, and customs and communicated with local people. These embodied experiences are usually combined with the metaphors of culture, forming the foundations of cultural values (Yu, 2015). Nikos Papastergiadis and Gerardo Mosquera (2014) mention that the vitality and importance of culture relies on exchange and is benefited by communication.

Through this process, we observed several affective structures of the community that were useful for us in identifying the issues and challenged our artistic practice.



Figure 3. Visiting lighthouse village (2021). Photo by Su Ye.

#### *Attachment to nature*

The reason that visitors and investors move onto the island can be often attributed to attachment – the emotional bond between human and natural wonders. People are keen on the wonderfulness of landscapes and want to escape from the city.

#### *Ambivalence of native home*

The following is a summary of dialogues between islanders and me on Huaniao Island.

*Islanders: "Do you like here?"*

*Sherry: "Yes."*

*Islanders: "Do you think this is a good place?"*

*Sherry: "Sure, don't you think so?"*

*Islanders: "No, this is not a good place. Young people don't want to stay here, and they all leave to the big city. There would never be a new mariner because the younger generations have no ability or interest in fishing - and why should they, if it's hard and dangerous work that pays so poorly"*

*Sherry: "Why don't you move out and live with the kids?"*

*Islanders: "I don't want to move; I'm used to the life here."*

The elderly is caught in a contradiction in that they have a deep attachment to this place, but they hold a doubtful attitude towards the sustainability of the fishing culture here. Population migration and low income of the fishing deprives the dignity of original residents.

#### *Cultural nostalgia*

Although the island has been developing tourism industries and investing in renovation projects in the past three years, for the elderly, the community has become more

indifferent. Most of them live alone, and the other rooms of their houses have become empty and dilapidated by long periods of uninhabited conditions and the lack of care. The industrial transformation has gradually exploited and degenerated local environment and traditions, leading to a loss of cultural memories and a sense of belonging.

From the above observation, it was apparent that these emotions are produced by the impact of modernization on the area that finally caused a complex cultural dilemma. I consider this cultural dilemma is a phenomenon of rural 'culture aphasia', and it has several features:

- The affective bonds – the unique characteristic of rural society, have been disconnected in the new community.
- The administrated and market-oriented model deprives the right of the public.
- The reconstruction project changed the place image and degenerated the cultural memories.
- New culture is challenging because of a lack of consideration of the specific context of the place.
- The new cultural value cannot meet the needs of a wider community of life or act as an ecological way of daily conduct.

Therefore, aiming to deal with this phenomenon, I proposed a practice embedded in the concept of re-inhabiting a place that has ever been exploited, destroyed, and hurt. Re-inhabitation describes 'coming home' and 'to become native'. *"It involves identifying, affirming, conserving, and creating those focus on cultural knowledge that nurtures and protect people and the ecosystem"* (Gruenewald, 2003a). This process means continuously hunting for connections with the place, experiencing reciprocity and empathy between people and the living community.

### **Coming home: this is Huaniao Island**

It is essential to integrate different cultural groups and form a social cohesion that respects each other. My research into social practices argues that socially engaged art can offer an activity-oriented approach, and it should be a more accessible model of rebuilding connections.

#### *Culture as the subject of creation to seek exchanges*

Socially engaged art can be an interjection into the lives of the community. It offers a chance for dialogue on an equal footing. Such an approach is based on shared emotions and memories through participation and interaction.

This was the approach taken by all the artists involved in the Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival. For example, artist Yan Wang focused on the food culture on the island and developed an experimental photography project Daily Catch (2021) (Figure 4) on the main street. Her artwork is based on various foods that the artist ate and came across during her residency.

Another artist, Xinwei Wu created To the Lighthouse (2021) (Figure 5). This took the form of a video ethnography that focused on the elderly's living situation and stories in the lighthouse village. Their collaborative art practice built on concepts such as relational aesthetics (Nicolas Bourriaud, 1995) and dialogical aesthetics to facilitate communication between different cultural groups.



Figure 4. Daily Catch (2021), installation art. Yan Wang. Photo provided by the Ruijia Fan.

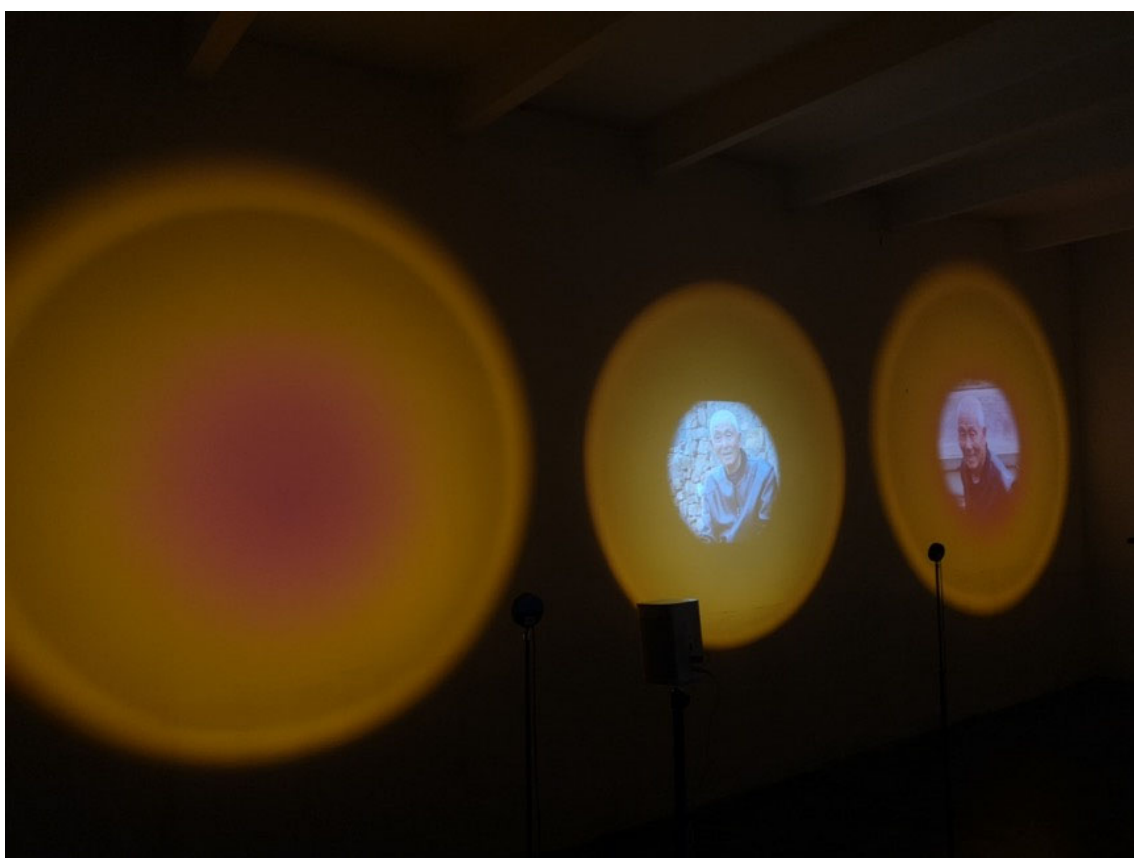


Figure 5. To the lighthouse (2021), installation art. Xinwei Wu. Photo by Xinwei Wu.



According to Grant Kester (2005), “The dialogical practices require a common discursive matrix (linguistic textual, physical etc.) through which participants can share insights and forge a provisional sense of collectivity”. When artists choose culture as the subject, they have to communicate with residents and deepen their understanding of local knowledge, history, and customs. This, in turn, helps residents recognize their living wisdom and cultural values (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Artists Yan Wang and Xinwei Wu communicate with the local elderly residents (2021). Photo by Su Ye.

*‘Remembering the past’ as an event for becoming new culture memories*

Maurice Halbwachs (1952) proposed 'Collective memory' and highlighted the importance of public participation, and the actions of remembering the past could be regarded as remodelling a social mechanism.

Ruijia Fan visited all the fishermen on the island and recorded their stories of the past. She learned the knotting and weaving techniques from local fishermen and created the artwork *Tying Knots* (2021) (Figure 6) hung in the traditional Longevity Pavilion. This artwork became a new cultural memory to communicate and interact with different cultural groups. Its process also focused attention on the past stories and encouraged the sustainable development of traditional skills.



Figure 7. Tying Knots (2021), installation art. Ruijia Fan, Photo by Fuijia Fan.

Memory Preservation (2021) (Figure 8) involved collecting representative objects and sharing memories of these objects. Artists and villagers got together to reflect on the past cultural uniqueness of this place, and jointly explored and revealed the regenerative potential. Their consciousness of the place organically wove into new stories created during the participation.

### **Becoming native: we are on Huaniao Island**

Besides integrating the social powers in the community, re-inhabiting also requires providing an integration context for understanding the place from an ecological and sustainable perspective. Therefore, artists not only needed to see the uniqueness of local life on the island but also realize the relations hidden behind it, the close and harsh relationship between human beings and nature, civilization, and social development. Then, through comprehensive artistic expressions to create various encounters in different dialogues and enlightenment.





Figure 8. Memory Preservation (2021), collaborative installation art by artists and villagers. Photo by Su Ye.

### *Action for 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'*

Developing socially engaged art for public interest and social design is essential. When the project operates, it triggers strong emotional responses because of the meet of social needs hidden under the reality. From the perspective of humanistic care, the Family Portrait Project (2021) (Figure 9) Edward Lin focuses on the living and mental state of the elderly on the island. The project aimed to express respect and care for the elderly. "In the old people's homes, they miss the children who left their hometown, but there are no touchable family photos at home that can remind them of the past. This moment is probably the best we can do something for them" (Edward, 2021). In addition, Artist Dongchen Sun used her graffiti *The word of flower* (2021) (Figure 9) to activate the local space to bring happiness to the elderly.



Figure 9. Family portrait project (2021). Edward Lin. Photo by Su Ye.



Figure 10. The word of flower (2021), graffiti. Dongchen Sun. Photo by Su Ye.



“They are also as cute as children, just like those birds lingering among the flowers” (Sun, 2021). Such projects highlight what can still be learnt from such concepts as the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (Paulo Freire, 1970) and redefine the consciousness of homeland for the public. When the public identifies the voice inside themselves, an intense feeling is triggered and pushes them to accept what they indeed want to change.

*Taking wider responsibilities to the reality*

One of the essentials of socially engaged art is to support the public's rights. But besides the positive and appeaseable voice, artists should respond to the age of terror. Bennett (2012) proposed that art can record the harsh reality and evoke a proactive confrontation for a broader co-existing community. Using bioluminescent algae as the element, Rory Daniel inspected the issue of humans and marine life, attempting to re-imagine the human body as another lifeform. He created the work *Tears of Blue* (2021) (Figure 11) that reminds audiences of the evolution and relationship between organisms.

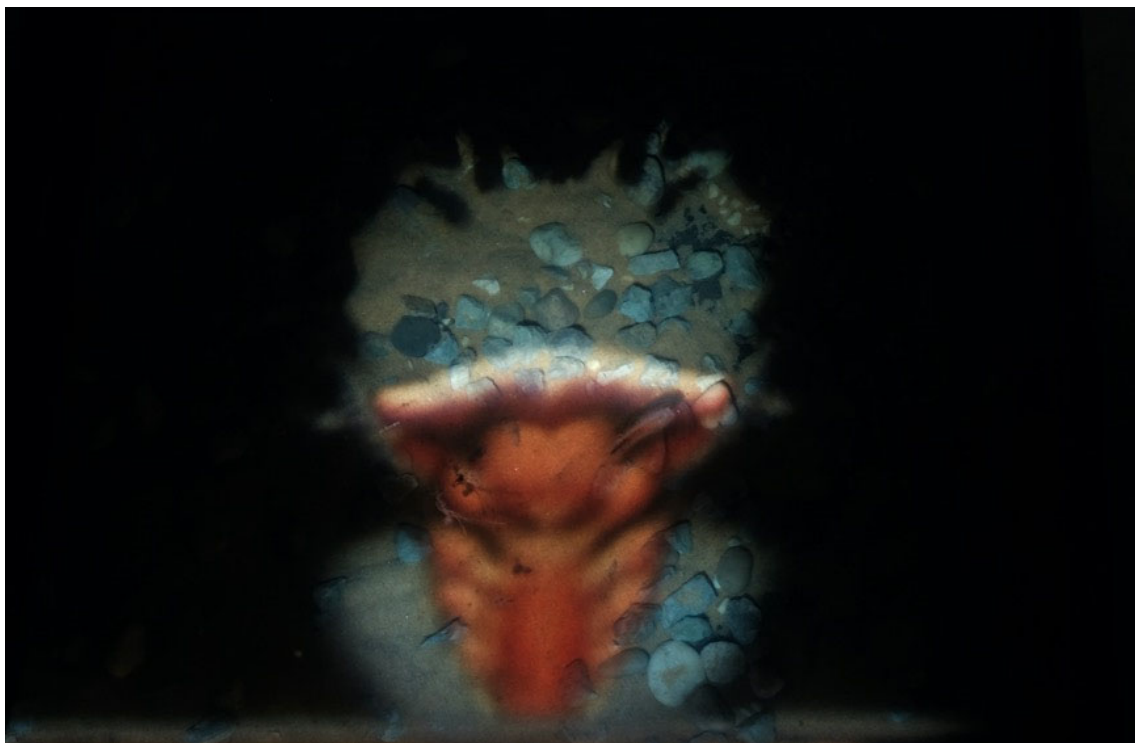


Figure 11. *Tears of blue* (2021), installation art. Rory Daniel. Photo by Ye Liu.

Ye Liu focused on the white pollution on the island and explored the series works *Floating in the blue* (2021) (Figure 12) in collaboration with the public. They picked up the bottles and plastics wastes on the beach and then use cyanotype techniques to create art printing pieces that depict the scene of waste in the sea. These works are educational and critical that rise public concerns and have an alerting meaning. Artists transformed their art into a power to create against indifference and achieve more concerns about broader responsibilities.

Reminding about the harsh topics and realities was not the purpose, but rather to seek changes and build up new community connection from an ecological perspective. As participating artist Clara Chen (2021) explained, “although I acknowledged the pain and frustration of the contemporary world and constructed a whimsical posthuman scene of symbiosis in *Posthuman Convergence* (2021) (Figure 12), my purpose is to induce empathy, care, understanding and response to the urgency in cultural and social changes”.

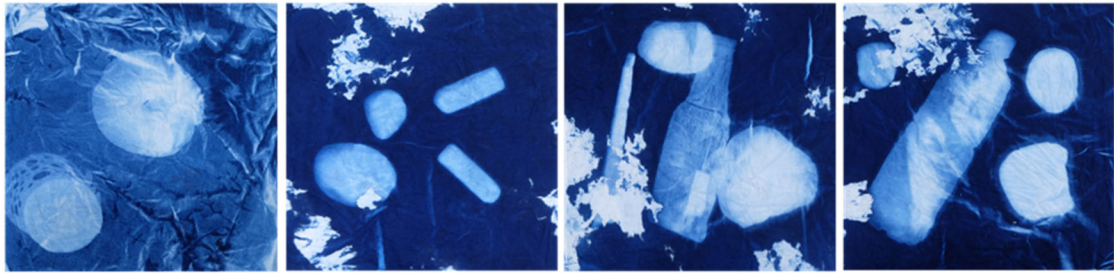


Figure 12. *Floating in the Bule* (2021), socially engaged art. Ye Liu. Photo by Ruijia Fan.



Figure 13. *Posthuman Convergence* (2021), installation art. Mee-Yee (Clara) Chen. Photo by Edward Lin.

## Conclusion

Modernization has profoundly influenced rural society in China. It generates an enduring vision of social development and causes cultural dilemmas for today's China. In recent years, cultural tourism industries have been combined with rural regeneration, while the sudden industry transformation has rarely worked and even backfired. This paper investigates Huaniao Island, as an epitome of a traditional rural community in China, to explore the 'culture aphasia' phenomenon caused by tourism development. By reflecting on my residency and other artworks of the 2nd Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival, I reviewed the context of Huaniao Island development and the impact of the artists socially engaged practice during their residency. This approach effectively built intersubjective understanding because it brought artists and residents into an interactive situation based on contextual learning and embodied experiences. 'Inhabitation' is the method used to implement the artistic projects and explore how this action empowers the local community and seeks the encounters, associations, and interactions among humans, the environment, and society. In this experience, I learnt that cultural regeneration has two priorities: 'coming home' and 'becoming native', which ensure that the art production is local and responsive.

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