

Xiao Xiong / Enter and Exit

By Winnie Won Yin Wong

In the summer of 2002, the young artist Xiao Xiong joined the “Long March Project,” an ambitious Chinese contemporary art collective led by curators Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie. With artistic and curatorial projects planned for twenty-six stops on a lengthy itinerary, the group aimed to retread the path of the historic Long March, the epic military maneuver of 1934-36 that is the heroic founding narrative of Chairman Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party.

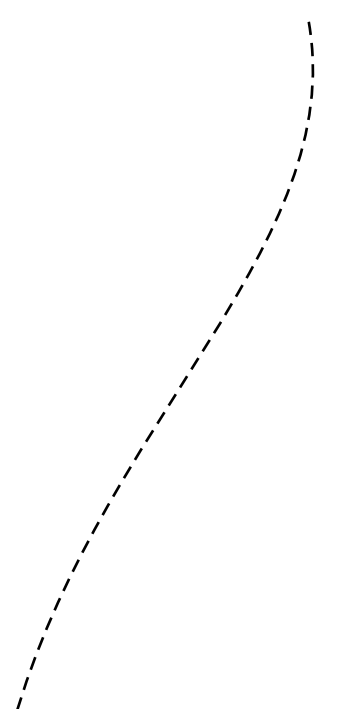
While the artistic and curatorial team led by Lu and Qiu began their journey in Ruijin (the beginning point of the historic Long March), with the intention of arriving in Yan’an (popularly considered the birthplace of the Chinese communist revolution), Xiao Xiong embarked alone and traveled in reverse, from Yan’an to Ruijin. The group led by Lu and Qiu never completed the route of the historical Long March, altering course instead to Beijing to found the Long March exhibition space, but Xiao completed the impressive trek, using rural bus service, in two months.

Along the way, Xiao conducted a *xingwei* art project entitled, “Enter and Exit” (*Jin yu chu*). *Xingwei yishu*, commonly translated as “performance art” in English, refers in Chinese more accurately to “behavior” in the quotidian sense of “conduct,” as well as to “action” in all its socio-political potential. Xiao’s artistic *xingwei*, consisting a series of bartering events, trades, and exchanges with strangers, is thus a “behavior” he enacts throughout his journey, to be distinguished from certain orchestrated events in which the artist and others almost falsely, as he states, “perform” the same actions before an attending audience.

Xiao began his reverse-Long March with a ceramic souvenir figurine of Chairman Mao purchased at the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall in Beijing, and, in Yan’an, he traded it for a pack of cigarettes from a plumber. This pack of cigarettes was traded to two ticket-takers at the Revolutionary Martyr’s Cemetery in the town of Bao’an, who agreed not to punch his ticket after he bought it, thereby giving him a “free” admission ticket. This ticket was then exchanged for a visitor’s pamphlet describing the history of Mao’s Former Residences in Bao’an, which was then traded for an embroidered tablecloth in the town of Wuqi, and so on. Each of Xiao’s trades is recorded with a photograph and a signature on a vintage leather trunk that he used to transport the objects. By the end of his journey, Xiao had completed some thirty trades, in essence transferring objects given to him from over forty sites.

In a daily journal that records this journey, Xiao Xiong ponders the meaning of

Yan’an



each object and gift he acquires, their connection to the historic locales and the myths of Mao Zedong and the Red Army, as well as the nature of exchange, commerce and transfer itself between an artist and people of a range of backgrounds, interests, and ethnicities. Although Xiao in the journal makes clear his impulse to connect his *xingwei* with the history of the Long March, his expectations are often thwarted, overcome, or undercut. As a contemporary and personal history of the Long March, Xiao's journal is thus a story of a multitude of displaced attitudes towards the history and memory of the epic event. As a story, however, of the connections and misunderstandings between an artist and his public, Xiao Xiong's *Enter and Exit* offers a telling account of the status of *xingwei* art in the diverse and rural locales throughout China. There is skepticism from the self-proclaimed "common folk," yes, and disapproval from authorities, of course, but above all Xiao Xiong and his trading counterparts express an overwhelming desire to create transformative meaning through their exchanges. Their trades are ritualized with the signing of names, with inscriptions, with commemorative photographs, gifts, drinks, and blessings. Many participants choose to trade items that are deeply personal, self-made or representative of their homes and ethnic identities. Yet uneasiness with material exchange is also evident in those who are wary of being somehow tricked for Xiao's profit. Concern about money and dollar values resurface constantly, as in a man who "trades" an exquisite chain of Qing dynasty copper coins for the tiny sum of 10 RMB, or numerous townsfolk who refuse to trade for an album of a well-known contemporary artist's paintings in fear that they would never be able to sell it. Often, exchange values creep into Xiao's trades even when they are completely unintended, as in the old gentleman who trades away a family heirloom and turns around to find his son trading for it back with a gold-plated object, in order to get his inheritance a little earlier.

As is clear in his use of the Chinese terms *jiaohuan* to mean the swapping or bartering of objects, and *jiaoyi* to refer to a commercial transaction, Xiao Xiong initially imagines a pure form of exchange devoid of commodification, and a form of participatory art that requires non-capitalist reciprocity from the "people." But, through the course of his journey, the alchemy of exchange leads him on a detour of the already-layered history of the Chinese Communist Party and its place in late-socialist China. In rooting this chain of trades, gifts, purchases, and transactions on the itinerary of a heroic political narrative, Xiao's attempt to "close the loop" of history, reveals instead its open endings, endings made open by the portability of his bartered objects.



July 17, Longde



July 24, Danba



July 27, Luding



August 4, Xundian



August 5, Panxian

Timeline of Trades

July 10, Beijing

Souvenir ceramic bust of Mao Zedong

July 12, Yan'an

Mao Zedong souvenir for a pack of Yan'an Cigarettes

July 13, Zhidan

Yan'an Cigarettes for an un-punched admission ticket to the Liu Zhidan Revolutionary Martyr's Park
Admission ticket for a visitor's pamphlet *Red Comes to Bao'an* and a visitor's guide to Chairman Mao's
Former Residences

July 13, Wuqi

Red Comes to Bao'an pamphlet for an embroidered tablecloth with blue tassels in the Wuqi style

July 15, Huachi

White tablecloth for a champion's trophy won in a youth chess competition
Photograph inscribed with *The Spirit of the Old Liberated Areas Lives Forever* (trophy refused)

July 16-17, Guyuan

Photograph and trophy for a calligraphic couplet written on paper by a group of students, and mementos
from their military training service, including a cap insignia, an armband, and a pair of collar pins.

July 17, Liupan

Calligraphy couplet for an ethnic Hui cap
Hui cap for another white Hui cap, inscribed by an Imam

July 17, Longde

Whitecap and student's military mementos for an artist's calligraphic couplet of Mao Zedong and
Zhou Enlai sayings

July 18, Huining

Calligraphic couplet for a clinic doctor's written prescriptions

July 19, Tongwei

Doctor's prescriptions for an anthology of poems entitled *Expressions from Gansu* and an anthology
of writings from the local Cultural Federation

July 19, Dingxi

ID card for the ID card back (status as "trade" unclear)

July 20, Longxi

Anthologies for a Chinese translation of the Central Asian travelogues of an English watercolorist

July 20, Hadapu

Travelogue for a red purse handmade in the Hadapu style (trade eased by the purchase of some
postcards)

July 22, Rou'ergai

Red Hadapu purse for a Tibetan Buddhist painted icon

July 23, Ma'erkang

Tibetan Buddhist painted icon for a length of Qing dynasty copper coins

July 24, Danba

Chain of copper coins for 10 RMB

July 25, Kangding

No trade

Journal Entries

July 17, Longde

—Afternoon, at Zhang Guoqin's living quarters at the Longde Cultural Center. This was an office of only about fifteen square meters. Currently it served as Zhang's office and bedroom. A large bed and a large drawing desk took up most of the space, and the wall was hung full of calligraphy. Next to the pillow was a copy of Yu Qiuyu's *The Bitter Journey of Culture*. In the corner of the room were a few household items and an everyday electric stove. Though it was crowded, it was not messy!

Zhang told me he was preparing to spend five years to complete a major work: a 249 meter-long Chinese landscape scroll painting entitled *25,000 Miles*. He planned to exhibit it at Beijing's Tian'anmen Square on the 70th anniversary of the Red Army's Long March! At the moment he had just begun the early stages of the work.

I asked him why it was not going to be 250 meters.

"250 doesn't sound good! It's a taboo! The 25,000 miles attributed to the Long March is itself just a rough estimate," he answered, "so I decided on this length after a discussion with my friends." Then, with great pride, he showed me all the souvenirs and photographs he had collected from his own rereading of the Long March on his motorbike last year. He said, "I feel that the most valuable thing I got from this journey was this rope. When I was cutting across the great plains of southern Gansu, I encountered a storm. The rope I had used to tie down my luggage broke and my bike got stuck! In the nick of time, several Tibetan folks passed by and rescued me. In their tents I survived the storm. If they hadn't saved me, I might have froze to death that day. Afterwards because I was sick with a high fever, I stayed in their home for several days. The generosity of the Tibetan people is not something you would understand unless you have experienced it for yourself. When I left, they gave me this piece of rope! It is hand woven from yak hair, as beautiful as it is strong. It is my most profound memory from my Long March...I'm going to cut off a portion of it now to put in your trading trunk, but you must promise me to keep it forever, and never, ever trade it away. In addition I will write a couplet to trade with you."

I found his calligraphic couplet very interesting: The first line was Mao Zedong's: "He who does not reach the Great Wall is not a true hero." The second line was Zhou Enlai's: "The man who fails but drowns is still a hero." Zhang wrote two copies, one to serve as a trading item, the other as a gift to me. On the trunk itself, he wrote about the origins of the yak-hair rope and that he entrusts me to never trade it away. Then he took that white Hui cap, the arm badge and the cap insignia from the Ningxia University students and very carefully placed them on his bookcase.

He said to me, "I seem to suddenly understand the meaning behind your *xingwei*. You see, now that these things are here, from now on whenever I look at them, I will think of you, yet none of these things are yours...Indeed! You modern art people are always full of gimmicks," he continued, "but at its root, it is still art. I get it now after a bit of contemplation! You are truly worthy to be a Long March veteran! You've said it all with one word!" I felt a bit embarrassed by my own paltry compliments to him!

July 24, Danba

I decided to make my trade partner in Danba the young man I had been riding with on the bus all the way here. I made the decision as soon as we arrived. This young man told me that his last name was Zhou, that he was from Zhejiang, and that he was here to promote medical equipment. Cunning, inscrutable, and crafty: this was the impression he left me after more than ten hours on the road together. I did not trust anything he said. On the other hand, this young man was equally suspicious about my own identity and my *xingwei*. This is one reason why I chose him to trade with me.

So it was here, in a place where a river, the Red Army, Tibetans, Hans, merchants and itinerant peddlers have all passed through, that two mutually suspecting people conducted an enigmatic form

of exchange. Precisely speaking, this exchange was actually more like a commercial transaction! At night, in a noodlehouse run by a Sichuan man, we ate Dan Dan Noodles as we negotiated.

The owner of the noodlehouse was a meddlesome Sichuan man, and he nudged the young man with an idea: "These are copper coins, why don't you buy it with real money!?" Zhou murmured to himself for a long time, but he finally brought out 8 RMB to "exchange" with me. The owner exclaimed, "Young man, be more generous! Make it 10 RMB and when you come to eat tomorrow I won't charge you for your noodles!" Between the grip I had on the young man, the meddlesome proprietor's horseplay, the pressure from the onlookers, and the young man's need to save face, the air was thick with trading atmosphere! In a theatre of real time and space, we performed an "unreal" exchange drama.

Here we don't need a Red Army story! There is no revolutionary logic!

Aug 4, Xundian

The part of this town that made the deepest impression on me was an old street with several workshops that made traditional weighing scales. These scales had long been made obsolete by new regulations, but in this town it seems that they were still in use everywhere.

At one workshop, I presented the album of paintings by Pan Dehai and asked the middle-aged proprietor, "This artist is famous all over the country, and this album has his signature, how about I trade it to you for a scale?"

The proprietor stopped his work and after flipping through the album, asked, "What person is he painting here? Why did he make him look so ugly?"

I said, "He's painting himself. He feels that life is full of suffering, so he has painted himself like this..."

He laughed, "You say that he's very famous, then he must have a lot of money, so how can he be suffering? I don't believe you. If he's suffering, the rest of us might as well kill ourselves..."

He politely refused to trade, claiming that he did not understand the paintings.

Leaving the little workshop, I came upon a small bookstore where there was a book rental counter. The manager was a bespectacled young man. I showed him the album and asked him if he would trade it for one of his books. He immediately refused, saying, "No one would want to read this book of yours and no one would want to buy it. The pictures are so ugly. They look like demons, how inauspicious... Why don't you go sell it at the recycling depot, see if they will take it..?"

I asked him where the recycling depot was. He was surprised, "You really want to sell it? It was just a thought..."

I said, "Actually, I think it's a great suggestion. I'll go try it."

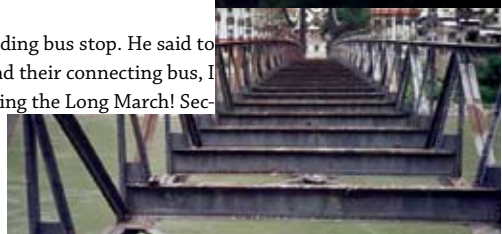
Following his directions to a southwest corner of the city, I found a neighborhood filled with junk shops. I stopped in over ten shops specializing in paper recycling. The reason every one of them refused my offer: "We can't just take a single book, it has to be a bundle of them so that they can be weighed on these scales..."

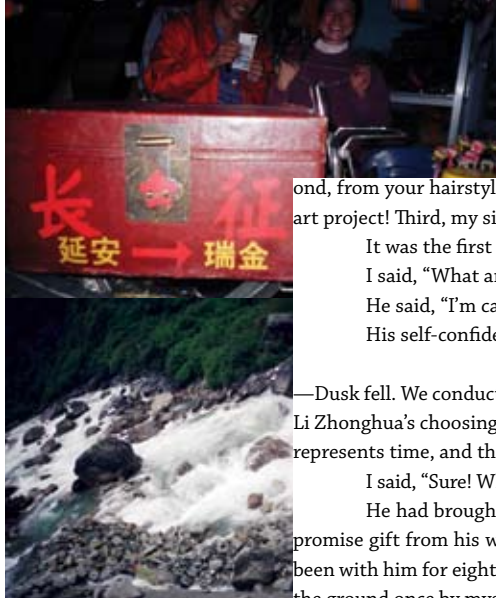
I had to leave that place!

July 27, Liuding

Li Zhonghua was a Lisu ethnic minority from Nujiang in Yunnan province. He graduated from the Chinese language department of the Yunnan Mingzhu College and now he was a mid-level cadre in the tax bureau. He was another friend that I made on my Long March!

We had first encountered each other at the ticket stand at the Kanding bus stop. He said to me, "From the moment you got off the bus to help those four foreigners find their connecting bus, I have been watching you! First, from your trunk, I can see that you are walking the Long March! Sec-





ond, from your hairstyle I know that you are an artist! Moreover, you must be conducting a *xingwei* art project! Third, my sixth sense tells me that you will become my friend!”

It was the first time in my journey that I heard a stranger say the words, “*xingwei* art.” I said, “What are you, a seer? How do you know that we will definitely become friends?” He said, “I’m cannot see the future, but I have strong skills of observation!” His self-confidence and frankness fascinated me!

—Dusk fell. We conducted our exchange on the banks of the Dadu river. This was a time and place of Li Zhonghua’s choosing. He said, “Selecting this place has to do with the water and the bridge; water represents time, and the bridge represents space...”

I said, “Sure! What we are performing here is just one fragmentary moment among many...”

He had brought along two trade items: one pair of magnetic kissing figurines, which was a promise gift from his wife when she was just his girlfriend; one tax administrator’s cap, which had been with him for eight years of his tax-administration career. He said, “This cap has been thrown to the ground once by myself, and once by someone else..!”

He told me that he would give the necklace that I had traded to him to his wife as a wedding anniversary gift! Neither I nor the Tibetan lady Jin Zehua in Kanding could have imagined that the necklace symbolizing the pinnacle of her creative achievements would now become a token of a husband and wife’s “Long March” love, and that it would ultimately find its way back to Kanding.

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Aug 5 Qujing

I needed to trade that 50 RMB bill now in my trunk for something new, to put it back into the market system.

I picked out a shop selling all sorts of little things, because its many miscellaneous items made me think of what it was like to be an itinerant peddler. Nearly everything in the little shop turned out to be counterfeits. From “Rolex” watches to “Playboy” wallets, and so much more.

The shopkeeper was a young man from Hunan. I opened up the trunk and bluntly asked him, “What can this 50 RMB bill buy?”

His face was filled with suspicion: “What kind of business are you in, sir?”

My clothes and my direct manners clearly made him suspicious of my background. I changed my tone and calmly told him about my Long March as well as my exchanges and trades along the way, also telling him that I was an artist and not a businessman.

He seemed to understand what I was talking about. Gradually his doubts seemed to ease. He picked up the 50 RMB bill and meticulously examined it, rubbed it, and then, he brought out a currency-testing machine and tested it. Finally he asked me, “What do you want to buy?”

From his cautious behavior it was obvious that he was still suspicious of me.

I said, “Anything. Whatever you think this money can buy. You choose.”

He fussed around for over twenty minutes and finally settled on three things: One counterfeit Japanese *Citizen* man’s watch, one pocket radio of a generic brand, and one counterfeit “imported” wind-proof lighter.

I said: “The money is real, yet all these things you’ve chosen are fake...”

He said: “If you think they’re fake then they’re fake. If you think they’re real, then they’re real. This is called dialectics. Understand?”—