

# Zheng Yunhan

## *A Plan from JiXi*

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**As an artist is it possible to hold your subjects apart from their ideology, to present their close-at-hand concerns, to present the people around you and their lives as they take place outside of larger systems? Chinese artist Zheng Yunhan works with subjects embedded in the cult of ideology, working to avoid being caught up by it in his presentations.**

Zheng has focused on his home town of JiXi, a defunct mining town in China's far North-Eastern Heilongjian province, as his subject for much of his work. JiXi is far away from the central authority of Beijing. Although it was once the focus of China's renewal effort, it has become wasted and forgotten, the mines and miners, and the role they played, are forgotten and neglected. Zheng sees his first works *Sing with me* (2004) and *JiXi Research Project* (2004–) as the beginning of his “long-take and archive of data about my hometown.”<sup>1</sup>

*Sing with me* puts the focus back onto the miners, their setting being undefined and uncertain. Most of this short film is shot in a harsh monochrome, with a soundtrack from a famous, rousing patriotic song (“The Luliang Chorus” composed in 1949 by Ma Ke<sup>2</sup>), but with an ironic awareness of stylised film techniques taken from music videos and film. The figures of the miners’ are the major players, going through the motions of their work against a pure white background. This lack of context is such a striking feature of the film that the appearance of landscape in one short sequence provides a harsh reminder of what we are missing. Looming mine buildings and lift machinery; aerial shots of a town appear. It becomes apparent that the high contrast is perhaps a snowy landscape, contrasting the dense black of their underground product with the surroundings on the surface – neither place seems particularly welcoming.

There is also only one instance of colour used – a looming miner’s face is tinted red, followed by characters spelling out the title of the soundtrack: “Our Workers Have Power,” an (in)famous slogan of encouragement and empowerment for the People. A second text, appearing in the final frame, tells us that “Over the first 12 days of January 2003, 241 miners died in coal mining accidents.”<sup>3</sup> This is the twist of the knife for the workers. They change from being the subject of propaganda, idealised heroes. The film is about real people at all points, dealing with their lives in this dangerous environment where accidents and deaths continue to this day, but it also presents their co-option as material for propaganda.

Zheng’s second work *JiXi Research Project* is a documentary-like archive of visual and spoken records of the lives of the people living in this town. The work mixes contemporary footage of JiXi with archive material, mixing impressions of this forgotten mining town as it is now, with the visual records left behind by the people.

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<sup>1</sup> Zheng Yunhan (2009), *JiXi Plan—To Walk (Proposal)*, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> 《咱们工人有力量》(Translation: Our Workers Have Power), 马可词曲。作于1947年。

<sup>3</sup> [Translation adjusted] 仅2003.1.1-2003.1.12日就有241名矿工死于煤矿事故。

These people are again not the two-dimensional figures onto which we can project an ideal of the hero. Hundreds of photos, each recording someone from JiXi, leave behind a reminder that this place is full of life and experience. The migrations in and out of JiXi have led to the area and people being intimately connected with the rest of China's history and geography.

From here Zheng's later work moves expands to reflect on larger issues of people and their beliefs, but always rooted in everyday experience. The piece which heralds this move is *The Depth of Light* (2008). The structure is something like a machine for producing environmental effects, with a heavy steel frame, divided into squares, each one holding an industrial fan. The fans force out an onrush of air around the piece, buffeting the viewer in their attempts to get close to see the interior. Inside a crystal-coated mesh is raised in a mini-landscape, lit from above by a powerful searchlight. The light eclipses the surroundings, the sound of the fans is deafening, the wind rejects our advances, but the light on the crystals attracts, in a constant push-pull. The piece counter-plays a physical effect of repulsion with a psychological effect of attraction, forcing the audience to come to terms somehow with their relative attachment to the mental or physical. The piece almost seems to be in the activity of masking any meaning it might hold, through dealing with the elements that stand for themselves, rather than being mediated through society into our understanding.

*The Depth of Light* is a crisis point in some way: a point at which Zheng's development and our understanding of it becomes unsustainable without attaining a new perspective. A new perspective that develops with *Sunflower Plan* (2008), this single sixteen-metre wide expanse of photograph laid out before us. It seems to take its cue from Chinese horizontal scroll landscape paintings, which served as a way to represent a landscape, but also to demonstrate the human mark on it. In actuality Zheng's landscape is intimately marked and made for this piece as his family and friends planted this field of sunflowers in the hills surrounding JiXi. On the right in the distance is the town of JiXi, with its distinctive orange roofs, and on the left, barely visible on a green swathe of grass, is a memorial marking a mass grave of victims of the Japanese Army of occupation during the Second World War. The sunflowers in between act as physical link between the living and the dead.

Undertaking this long-term process of creating the setting for *Sunflower Plan* is a methodology that's taken up again in *To Walk*, initiated by the artist's re-enactment of his Grandfather's walk from Shandong to Heilongjiang provinces around 1949. This individual's movement, forced by local famine, is linked by the artist to the historical, larger scale movements of people from the centre to the periphery that has been a constant feature in China, in the not-so-distant past promoted by Mao as a necessary factor in the development of the country.

Zheng's Grandfather is now dead and has been buried in the hills above JiXi, but *To Walk* picks up his story, in reverse. Zheng has retraced his route, covering over 2,000km, taking photographs and video, talking to people and picking up objects along the way. All this material will form the subsequent three performance/installations, each focusing on a particular aspect of the journey, named *Walking*, *Heritage*, and *Sacrifice*.

As the parts progress and build up, Zheng is creating an encyclopaedic artwork of belief based on ceremony. *Walking* is that "human instinctual practice," the body as producer and container of the material that is the mediation and memory of Zheng's experience. The second part, *Heritage* creates a totemic object which embodies the artists distilled sound recordings. And *Sacrifice* calls upon local

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traditions and customs to re-enact a ceremony of death and life. The multifarious forms of ritual, and ritual as it becomes ceremony, are a way to connect with our history and ourselves through that history.

The walk itself becomes a form of ritual for the artist, a working through of an idea, developing a task set in motion decades and generations before. The end performances all become aspects of the work of remembrance, which is Zheng's art.

“The purpose of the whole process is to find out where we come from, and where we are going. The key is to understand what we already know from memory and what we don't know yet. In other words, this is the JiXi of our memory as well as the real JiXi. It makes it possible to conduct research from both the perspective of social science and individual psychology.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Zheng prefers to take a reflective attitude to his material and subjects, as can be seen in his work he inevitably must reflect changes in larger issues because of the impact they have on the micro-scale of his subjects. And, for the audience, Zheng's work is as much about its reception as anything, suggesting that even here ideology forms our understanding of the work. It also leads one to a distinct tone in the way that the works *can* be understood, as Zheng himself says: “The viewers and I, in our specific circumstances, are all creating different realities with our actions.”<sup>5</sup> This shows that although the artist can attempt to maintain a distinction between his activity and ideology, in its reception ideology again becomes an important facet of its meaning, one largely out of his control.

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<sup>4</sup> Zheng Yunhan (2009), *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Li Zhenhua (2007), Interview between Zheng Yunhan and Li Zhenhua. In: Li Zhenhua (ed.), *Sustainable Imagination: Media Art in China Exhibition Series 1999–2007*. Beijing: Arario Gallery.