

Medium of Medium – Working with Artists Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun

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September 22, 2024: on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of its founding, Aranya Art Center established its first satellite branch, Aranya Art Center North, and presented the first museum solo exhibition of artists Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun. In mid-July, during the preparations for the exhibition, I traveled with the artists to the Three Rivers Headwater Region to accompany and observe them in their work.

I.



The Serpentine Dragon King from the Lebekog Gorge *Wheel of Life* relief carving

Along the Tongtian River is a place called Lebekog Gorge. On the rock face in the gorge, one can faintly make out Buddhist carvings said to have been left by Princess Wencheng and Princess Jincheng on their respective journeys into Tibet between the 7th and 8th centuries. I was drawn in by a depiction of a half-human, half-snake being. My thoughts turned to the *Image of Fuxi and Nüwa* discovered at Astana, Xinjiang. But this was evidently a Buddhist carving. Based on the accompanying inscription, this is the Serpentine Dragon King, a deity from the Buddhist Eight Legions of Devas and Nagas. Dragon Kings control water, and on the next day, I was on my way to Zhidui County to gather with Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun to set off on a journey revolving around “headwaters restoration.” Before this, I had habitually linked restoration to such scientific concepts as environmental conservation and ecosystem management, but I would later become aware of the conceptual bias inherent in that view.



Hall of Headwaters Remembrance at Drokpatsang

In Zhidui County, we stayed at “Drokpatsang” (meaning “Home of the Herdsman”), which was also the home of founder Hashi Tashi Dorjee (who will be referred to hereafter as T’ador for short). I was led into an underground space to visit the “Hall of Headwaters Remembrance.” Here



Image of Lu in the Hall of Headwaters Remembrance at Drokpatsang

I once again saw the image of the half human, half snake figure—the “Lu” in local Tibetan belief, a deity that controls the water. Before this, I had learned some basic information about the Lu in the writing of young Tibetan scholar Sonam Wangchen.¹ Compared to the belief systems of the Han in Central China, Tibetan spirits have a more human touch: they can get sick, and they often throw tantrums. The process of headwaters restoration is a series of rituals to please and heal the Lu. Here, the relationship between humans and deities is not just one of asking and receiving. It also includes processes such as “care” and “healing” that are much more active on the part of the humans. There is more room for action. I have always maintained a cautious distance from the theories of “care” in contemporary art, because it can often be kidnapped by emotional politics and affinity groups to be rendered abstract and artificial. Here, however, care becomes very specific and concrete. It has a specific object, goal, and procedures (the ritual progression). Chen once spoke in a lecture about “treating care as a practice,” and I have now gained a specific, real-life practical model of this concept.

While I may seem able to fluently describe the relationship between the Lu and headwaters restoration today, at the time, Konchok Raptan (hereafter as Raptan), our main companion on the trip, surely saw the skepticism on my face. He quickly pulled out his phone to show me the frog that appeared from out of nowhere when the construction of the remembrance hall was completed. He said they had never seen any kinds of frogs in the area before this, but they always knew that the snake was the princess of the Lu, while the frog was the son-in-law. The Lu, therefore, truly exists, and they are at work here. In the days that followed, many more images and stories of this kind would be presented to me as ironclad evidence. I tried looking up information about distribution and sightings of frogs on the plateau in order to engage in some form of scientific interpretation. My thinking was that since my confusion stemmed from concrete evidence, I could use concrete scientific knowledge to confront it.

At the time, I leaned towards understanding this evidence as “coincidences that would eventually yield to scientific explanation,” but over the months that followed, I came to understand that science would not be able to resolve my confusion. Today, science and faith are seemingly in opposition. To believe in one form of truth implies identification with one particular ideology, which is increasingly built these days on a foundation of values judgment. Thus, when I clutch to the notion that “perhaps the frogs have always been there, and that frog’s appearance was likely due to a chain of explainable coincidences,” my logical thinking is predicated on belief in the rationalism of Western science. But perhaps the true cause of my confusion was about whether or not I should doubt this very premise. In other words, was there perhaps another premise through which we could understand this event? This touches on such issues as language, interpretive structures, and cultural systems. In layman’s terms, this is a question about how to live. Instead of getting to the bottom of everything scientifically, we could also choose to live in another interpretive system and cultural tradition that is also complete and concrete, particularly since the latter has, after thousands of years of evolution and practical affirmation, truly become a positive guiding force in life.

The two artists recommended I read the research paper *Multiple Worlds of Snod and Bcud: Life and Environment on the Snow-covered Qinghai-Tibet Plateau* by Gao Yufang and Ju Tashi-Samge, which discusses the difference between “multiculturalists” and “multinaturalists”: “Multiculturalists believe that people living in different circumstances may have different ways of seeing the world, but they are looking at the same world. In contrast, multinaturalists believe that different lives can look at the world in the same way, but the world they are looking at may be different.”² It follows that as we face events that appear as “coincidences,” we can set aside questions of whether or not to believe them, and instead think about the events on the ontological level: is the phenomenon we are seeing the same phenomenon others are seeing? When we shift from “diverse worldviews” to “diverse worlds,” our field of vision becomes broader.

II.



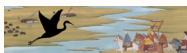
Gonsar Monastery ruins

The main objective of our excursion was to take part in the Asian Headwaters Culture and Arts Festival, co-founded by T'ador and now in its seventh year. When the event was postponed for one day due to a road being washed out, Raptan suggested we visit the Gonsar Monastery Ruins and the Summer Monastery. At the Gonsar Monastery site, I joked that it looked the way Aranya Jinshanling would look if it were abandoned for a century. We pitched a tent on a hilltop with a sweeping view, where we were joined by some local villagers. We all ate and chatted together freely. I couldn't help but feel a bit distracted, however, because I hadn't come here as a tourist. I was here to “work.”



The dried-up spring

The villagers, having apparently realized who we were and why we had come, led us to a flat, unremarkable patch of grass. They insisted that there had once been a spring in this place, but it had dried up. They knew that some skilled person would be able to restore this water source or even divert water here from elsewhere. They really hoped to restore the spring. “Perhaps one day we could realize it together,” they said. In this way, our travels seemed to begin to be related to work. With a half-skeptical mindset, I crossed the Tongtian River with our party and proceeded to the Summer Monastery. T'ador wanted us to learn about the story of the old incarnate lama there.



Back to Mu Village's Fairy Big Lake (still)

Cao Minghao and
Chen Jianjun

2023

Two-channel video
24:46 min.

Commissioned by Tai
Kwun Contemporary
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By the time he reached his eighties, the incarnate lama of Summer Monastery had gone blind in both eyes, but he would still leave half of every meal on the windowsill, as he always did. After doing this for so long, the windowsill became a gathering place for not just birds, but also mountain goats and yaks, who have taken to sleeping below his window. After the lama's passing, the animals left. “Once he was gone, these animals stopped coming.” This story got me thinking about another story Cao and Chen told of their time working in the Zoige Region: we may naturally assume that the drying of the wetland is what caused the black-necked cranes to leave, but the local elders believe that it was the departure of the black-necked cranes that caused the wetland to run dry. If we correlate the cranes and the wetland to “life” and the “environment,” then living beings regain agency, just as embodied by the relationship between the old lama and the other living beings. If we apply this modality



Black tent interior



Black tent exterior

to humans and ecosystems, then humans, as living beings, have space for actual, concrete action. Compared to the non-anthropocentric narrative of the Global North, rooted in the preachy and passive underlying Christian logic of “sin” and “redemption,” this mode of thinking is more positive and future-minded.

Gradually, I stopped asking “how is where we are going or what we are doing connected to the work,” and learned to just accept it. Every moment we were in this land, every person we encountered, every “scene” we saw, it was all part of the “work.” The locals and I faced different worlds, so I needed to listen to and learn their interpretive system and cultural traditions in order to draw closer to their world. It really was like this in the days that followed. We didn’t always know what the next stop on our itinerary was, nor were we told in advance how that stop was specifically connected to headwaters restoration. To work with unknowns and uncertainties like this is to allow for gaps in one’s own body and mind, just like our black tents allow for the sunlight and sounds of flowing water to penetrate within. Only with gaps can there be connections.

III.

In the years since I began working in the art industry, I have encountered many artists who work on-site in various settings. Some artists can “enter” into a social group in a very short time, and quickly draw from a variety of sources to produce an artwork. Cao and Chen, on the other hand, spent a decade tracing the Min River from Dujiangyan to Zoige, producing a scant few artworks in the process. The Three Rivers Headwater Region is the starting point for their next decade of work. I asked to join them because I wanted to see exactly how they work, and why they are so “slow.”

We first met in Chengdu in 2019. In the several years of exchanges, and several days of observations, I discovered that though they engage in a great deal of archival and discursive research before departure, once they actually reach the site, they always clear their minds and render themselves “ignorant.” They do not toss out knowledge for verification, but listen first and then think, letting the locals guide them. This was the case at the Gonsar Monastery Ruins, as it was at the site of the headwaters restoration ritual. They do not set out with preconceived creative plans, nor are they in a hurry to “collaborate” or “co-create” with local social groups. They are always ready for action, but in no rush to act. They watch and wait for the direction of their work to reveal itself. This is precisely the stance we need to take in facing “another world,” and the price of this stance is time.



Monks performing a ritual by the Sacred Lake

We eventually arrived at the site of the Headwaters Culture and Arts Festival. While watching monks chanting scriptures at the lake, I had a sudden epiphany about the connection between Tibetan Buddhism and life in Tibet. In the past, I had mainly seen Tibetan Buddhism’s role through the lens of “spirituality” or “guidance,” but this time I saw no divinity in the monks before me. They were exceedingly “ordinary.” They are ordinary because they are practical. They are more like tools, needed for many aspects of life and production in the region. Here, they served as mediums helping the people to communicate with the Lu.

In other words, the monks have been restored to the function of Shamans, particularly because the object of the communication they are facilitating does not come from their own belief system. Indeed, Shamans have never disappeared; they have only changed their appearance. Today, most people like myself no longer “believe” in Shamans, nor do we “believe” in monks who converse with Nagas. My past self may have said that this is because the social foundation to which Shaman belief corresponds has shifted. But now I cannot help but feel that maybe I have been quietly transported to another world. If we wish to spark connections between this world and that world, we will need a new medium. Specifically speaking, in order to understand the position of Tibetan Buddhism as a medium in this headwaters restoration ritual, we need a medium of mediums, a Shaman of Shamans. I am thinking that perhaps this is the significance of the work of artists Cao and Chen.

In common thinking, the Shaman effects a dialogue between spirits and the living. We are astonished by the “supernatural,” but we often overlook the fact that its essence is in “connection.” Thus we could say that if the actions of a being can establish a connection between two substances, between two non-substances, or between two worlds, then that being is a Shaman. “Connection” is the core of the work of Cao and Chen. They cause the network of hidden connections between all things to become visible. This can be seen not only in their works, but also in their continuing black tent conferences, which bring together actors from various fields.

In the process of revealing this network, Cao and Chen strive to practice resistance against their own subjectivity. Out of curiosity, I once asked them why much of the footage in their films is muted. Why do we rarely hear them speak in their own artworks? Why don’t they write journal entries, essays, and myths to mix into their works? They responded that they hope to let things appear in their own form as much as possible, which requires the artists to remain concealed. They also emphasized the need to avoid the “decorative” effect of sounds. Any added sounds must be closely linked to the content. They even said, “aesthetics should be content-related.” I may not entirely agree with this statement, but I do think this deliberate restraint is something all contemporary creators should reflect on.

But when we are faced with a visual expression lacking our traditional notion of aesthetics (the “decorative”), why are we still drawn to it? I think it is because their actions and artworks are always sufficiently concrete, and this concreteness brings with it a kind of internal order, an order that reshapes “beauty.” Whether it is a song in *Back to Mu Village’s Fairy Big Lake*, a planting scene in *Grass, Sand, and Global Environmental Apparatuses*, or a stone in *Habitat, Geology and Energy Basis*, they speak very specifically about only a few small things in each work, but they speak about them very thoroughly and expand from there.

Gao Yufang and Ju Tashi-Samge write, “Most natural scientists see them as spiritualist nonsense, or merely emphasize the instrumental value of the ideas behind these views, for example the positive role of beliefs in mountain gods or taboos about sacred mountains in promoting conservation... In comparison, the recent ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology advocates taking a more serious approach to the thinking of indigenous peoples, rather than using such expressions as ‘respecting other forms of

belief' to conceal our ignorance of the worlds and worldviews of others.”³
The praxis of Cao and Chen is to approach the site of their work from a position of “ignorance,” turning themselves into mediums of mediums, and using the specific to resist this “ignorance of the worlds and worldviews of others.”

* All images, except for still of the artwork, were taken by the author.

[1] Sonam Wangchen. *Does Tibetan Culture Have a “Sea?” Dragons, Snakes, and Aquatic Animals in Himalayan Art*. Published on the WeChat account “CHARU”, May 11, 2021.

[2] Gao Yufang & Zaxi Sang'e. (2022). *Multiple Worlds of Snod and Bcud: Life and Environment on the Snow-covered Qinghai-Tibet Plateau*. 10.15970/j.cnki.1005-8575.2021.06.008.

[3] Ibid.

Installation view, "Videos by the Sea: Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun,"
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September 22, 2024 - February 9, 2025
Photography Sun Shi



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