Introduction

In recent years an increasing number of Chinese artists, activist and academics have turned towards the countryside in an effort to bring life back into rural villages. The intent is to change local circumstances by impeding the depopulation of the rural areas, reviving a sense of community, and questioning global and local processes such as urbanization, expropriation of farmland, rural development policies, and many more grave issues that afflict contemporary Chinese society. One of the activists engaged in this call for a return to the countryside is the Chinese editor, filmmaker, and curator Ou Ning. In 2010 he drafted a notebook called *Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia*; in 2011 he and his colleague Zuo Jing founded the commune in Bishan Village in rural Anhui; and in 2013 Ou Ning moved permanently to Bishan together with his family. In the years prior to the creation of the notebook, Ou Ning was active as a documentary filmmaker, curator and editor in urban Beijing and Guangzhou, where he worked critically with issues tied to the excessive urbanization process sweeping through all areas of China. With the notebook as a starting point, and with China's oppressive urban and rural realities in mind, Ou Ning began the work that would take him back to the rural China he left as a young man in the 1980s.

The notebook is a graphic montage piece, where comments, thoughts and short accounts from Ou Ning's travels to Bishan are intertwined with drawings, clippings, color-coded text, handwritten notes, pictures and quotes. The forefathers of the utopian community, pictured side by side in a panthéon, are the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) and one of the Chinese leaders of the historical Rural Reconstruction Movement, James Yen (1890-1990). Members of the Bishan Commune are recruited via the Internet, there are no leaders, and decisions are agreed upon through consensus democracy at common meetings. It is not a fully developed utopia, but a probing, reference-saturated draft that presents research into artist communities such as NSK State (Neue Slowenische Kunst Stat) and alternative communities such as Freetown Christiania, critical reflections on urbanization and rural development, a tragicomic review of China's self-proclaimed emperors after 1949, and a collaboration with three Chinese designers, who developed imaginative drafts of the architecture, clothing, passport, logo, and flag for the utopian Bishan Commune. Juxtaposed with the drafts for the Bishan Commune architecture are Ou Ning's references to earlier imaginings of utopian architecture, such as Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, Peter Cook's *Plug-in City*, and Sant' Elia's *Città Nuova*: utopias that, as Ou Ning underscores, primarily take place in urban environments and rarely meditate on how a future rural architecture could unfold.

The notebook distances itself from the Mao era as well as from the development China has gone through since 1978—neither communism nor the hyper-capitalist reality of today are viable routes to take. Ou Ning's goal with the Bishan Commune utopia is, on the contrary, to realize the idea of an autonomous zone, where experiments with co-living, sharing, anarchism, community, self-organization, architecture, art practices, and rural traditions can take place, however difficult this might prove in present-day China.

For the translation of the notebook, we have included an interview with Ou Ning concerning the notebook not previously published in English. In the interview Ou Ning elaborates on the ideas presented in the notebook and answers
questions about anarchism's relationship with the Chinese government and the commune's relationship with the local villagers, and he explains why he should not be considered the leader of the commune. Furthermore, we have included Ou Ning's text “Autonomy: Utopia or Realpolitik?” from 2012 because it provides some important perspectives on Ou Ning's conception of and relationship to anarchism, as well as insights into how can we understand anarchism as an ongoing practice in a totalitarian, capitalist reality.

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