

Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art  
Volume 8 Numbers 2 & 3

© 2021 The Author. Published by Intellect Limited. Article. English language.  
[https://doi.org/10.1386/jcca\\_00042\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jcca_00042_1)

Received 23 April 2021; Accepted 9 August 2021

---

**BIAO XIANG**

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

# The nearby: A scope of seeing

## ABSTRACT

*The world during the COVID-19 pandemic became more divided than united, both between states and among individuals. Opinions are polarized partly because, as I have observed in urban China, the public is simultaneously preoccupied by the very near (the self) and the very far (the imagined 'world'), but neglect the space in between, and as a result fail to recognize how the social world is concretely constituted through interconnected differences. This article advocates a way of perceiving the world by taking 'the nearby' (fujin in Chinese) as a central scope. The nearby is a lived space where one encounters people with diverse backgrounds on a regular basis. The nearby brings different positions into one view, thus constituting a 'scope' of seeing. Such a scope enables nuanced understandings of reality and facilitates new social relations and actions. The nearby could form a line of resistance against the power of the state, capital and technology, that is turning local communities into units of administrative control and value extraction. This article calls for a 'First Mile Movement', in which artists, researchers and activists work together to help facilitate citizens with the construction of their nearby as a basis for reflecting upon life experiences, testing grand ideologies and engaging in public discussion.*

## KEYWORDS

the nearby  
scope  
seeing  
neighbourhood  
city  
First Mile Movement

*This article is Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC), which allows users to copy, distribute, transmit and adapt the article, as long as the author is attributed and the article is not used for commercial purposes. To view a copy of the licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.*

*You peng zi yuanyang lai [...] Bi zhu zhi.*  
 ('Friends come from afar [...] We must eliminate them.')

This was allegedly one of the passcodes introduced by a few condominiums in China in February 2020, during the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic there. Multiple versions of video clips circulated in Chinese social media showed how the passcode was used. The security guard would stop anyone entering the condo and utter the first line of the code; only those who responded by reciting the second half were allowed to go through. If the videos are genuine, one must admire the ingenuity of whoever created the code. The passcode is hard to break. Its first half is taken from a famous line of *Analects of Confucius* (around 300 BC): 'Friends come from far away, isn't it delightful'. The second half is an excerpt from *The Book of Han* (111 AD): 'Whoever offended the mighty Han Empire must be eliminated even if they are afar'. Who would have thought of combining these two? The passcode is also fitting. It is by keeping outsiders away that countries, communities and families across the world battled against COVID. The pandemic deepened divide across populations at all levels.

The divides became deeper not because we were so preoccupied by our own safety that we forgot about others afar. Rather, the pandemic heightened our global awareness to an unprecedented level. The virus is, after all, an enemy of humankind. But this global awareness led to tensions: Corona nationalism, racial attacks, mistreatment of migrants (including returned citizens) and the breakdown of friendships due to differing opinions about the outbreak, just to name a few examples. The pandemic exacerbated these divides, but the causes of tensions are much deeper.

This article suggests that the displacement of *fujin* ('the nearby') in public consciousness is partially responsible. In China, educated urban youths commonly derive meanings of life from two extremes. One is their own experiences as individuals. The other is ideological stances that are often tied with global power play ('[s]hould China lead the world?'; '[i]s Western democracy superior to the Chinese system?'). Calculations on the individual level inform decisions such as whom one should marry and what jobs one should take. The abstract concerns shape what it means to be a moral, dignified person, a proper 'Chinese'.

The space between the two – particularly the neighbourhood and the workplace where everyday interactions take place, the nearby – vanished in consciousness. Young people can rarely offer an account about the people whom they meet every day or about recent changes in the place where they live. The self and the world are widely apart but collapse into each other in emergencies like the pandemic. 'My view is the global view'; anyone who diverges from my view is transgressing universal principles. This neglects how the self is constituted by heterogeneous relations, and how one's demands for care may conflict with others' concerns.

'The world two metres away' during the pandemic is a world of paradox. The top-down imposed rules to enforce social distancing and mobility restriction created a sentiment of 'togetherness' by preventing spontaneous encountering. As Jiehong put it aptly, 'we suffer but benefit from the distance and because of it, we are estranged from and yet "connect" with each other' (2021: xii). Estrangement is bodily experienced, and togetherness is imagined and symbolic. When the experiential and the symbolic are divided, we lose anchors for meaning-making. This partially explains why public sentiments

swung from one extreme to another – the dominant mood in China, for instance, shifted from outrage about the government cover-up to the celebration of state-led success within a couple of months. Public discussions would have been less divisive, had more attention been paid to how housewives next door handled domestic violence, how vegetable vendors managed without being able to move or what internet-based home-schooling meant for the family of a security guard of a condo living in the one-room basement accommodation without Wi-Fi.

The missing of the nearby is comparable to what Jane Guyer calls ‘the evacuation of the near future’ (2007: 401). By near future, Guyer means the temporal horizon where concrete sociality emerges and consequential collective actions can be taken. It is a time scope for reasoning and planning. This time scope, in the United States after the 1970s, is replaced by a combination of a fixation on immediate situations and an orientation to a very long-term horizon. In China today, it is the immediate surroundings, where tangible social relations are developed and concrete actions can be taken, that are hollowed out.

The displacement of the nearby in the public consciousness is not unique to China. This seems common among youths, especially in the global South. I met many ambitious young people from the global South during my field research in India and Southeast Asia, and after twenty years of teaching at the University of Oxford. They are well versed with global affairs and committed to the ‘decolonialization’ of knowledge, but have difficulties in describing their parents, neighbours and childhood friends in detail. How can we decolonize knowledge if young people from the global South are unable to give accounts about their own life free from western jargon and normative statements?

This article wishes to evoke artists, activists, and, ultimately, the public, to explore the nearby as a scope of seeing the world. When a citizen perceives the world through the nearby, she tries to know the domestic helpers, cleaners, security guards and repair worker in her condo (the dominant form of residence in large cities in China), and talks to the hair salon worker and grocer, who live next to the condo but are never allowed in. She would also find out how the condo came into being – what the land was used for before, and where the former residents had gone, and on what conditions. In doing so, she reflects on what separated all these people, and what brought them next to each other now on what terms. The different viewpoints will inform her thinking about public issues, be it transport, rubbish collection or welfare reform. The nearby can generate additional capacities of seeing.

Consider art curation. Curation arguably creates a particular scope of seeing. By juxtaposing different items under one view, the curator hopes that we see things that we would not notice had we viewed the items separately. A major challenge facing online exhibitions, as experimented with by several galleries during the pandemic, is the lack of scope of viewing. Online exhibitions bring us closer to individual artworks than ever before – we effortlessly manipulate pixel resolutions and scrutinize the art in a way that our natural eyes are never able to achieve – but we do not see how the artwork is physically positioned in relation to other pieces, nor how they echo or clash with each other. ‘Scope’ related to the nearby is an intensive concept, emphasizing the richness generated from the juxtaposition of differences and the layering of histories, rather than aiming to delineate the size and external boundaries.

This article aims to start conversations between social researchers and artists who share the concerns about the fragmentation of the public and who

1. The online presentation of the theatre performance has two parts. The first part consists responses from persons with diverse socio-economic backgrounds to the questions of 'what is the nearby' and '[i]s the nearby disappearing'. The responses, while widely different, are all anchored in the interviewees' lived experiences. The second part is a stage play by six persons of different ages and occupations, none of whom had performed before. The six and the director had intensive discussions at theatre workshops about the idea of the nearby before the show. From during their performance, memories and bodily experiences emerged as the central motifs. <https://v.qq.com/x/page/q3221raevz5.html>. Accessed 18 July 2021.

see potentials in the nearby as a remedy. Artists in China organized at least four exhibitions in 2020, and carried out many more individual projects, on the nearby (see below and Appendix). A book club set up by college students, scholars and activists in 2021 in a migrant community in Shenzhen, next to Hong Kong, named itself *Fujin*. They all explicitly drew on my conversation with the public intellectual Xu Zhiyuan (Xiang and Xu 2019). I am tremendously encouraged that the idea of the nearby resonates with the public.

I also feel obliged to further clarify what the nearby means, and why this matters. These questions are methodologically challenging. As something yet to be cultivated, there is no systematic data out there to be presented. Yet the nearby cannot be discussed by theoretical deduction. As captured in the theatre performance *Never, Sometimes, Often, Always*, directed by Wang Ziyue in 2020, perceptions about the nearby are rooted in lived, bodily experiences.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, a way of seeing is, by definition, subjective and affective, and has no fixed shapes. To envision the nearby as a scope of seeing, we need maverick approaches to learn from a wide range, apparently unrelated, of experiences. In what follows, I will first draw on my autoethnographic data of 1970s and 1980s in south China to illustrate what the nearby can be like: its fabric, feel and effects on how residents understand history, politics and life. I then revisit my research with migrants in Beijing in the 1990s to show that the nearby perspective can empower marginalized actors.

This is followed by a broad political economy analysis on changes in urban China, both before and during the pandemic. The state, corporations and technology are turning local community into an administration unit, a site of consumption and a source of data extraction. They are displacing the material basis of the nearby as well as the nearby perspective. This explains why the banal word of *fujin* gained tractions: the displacement effects are widely recognized, but there is little vocabulary to express these concerns that are at once visceral, social and political. I also engage with relevant artworks produced after 2019, although the extent is very limited as I can see only a small part of works that have online images. Overall, this article is not a usual academic paper; instead, it aims to mobilize collaboration between artists, researchers and residents. At the end of the article, I propose the 'First Mile Movement' as a possible form of such collaboration.

## WHAT IS THE NEARBY, AND WHAT CAN IT DO?

The nearby as a scope of seeing is fluid and generative. It is fluid because its internal relations are constantly changing; it is generative because it enables us to see and do new things. The nearby is, thus, very different from 'community' that is based on stable membership and homogeneity. In this section, I will first recall how I learned to appreciate history and politics by noticing the fluidity in the nearby where I had grown up. Following this, I draw on the experiences of a migrant community to illustrate that migrants' attention to the nearby greatly empowers them.

### *The nearby as a classroom of life*

In developing the nearby as a scope of seeing, we have a great deal to learn from children. Children learn about the world through their nearby. Intensively curious, children pay close attention to everything around them. As they cannot venture far, children become highly skilled in seeing new things in the familiar. I spent my childhood in a place full of warehouses next to a river

port in a city in southeast China. I lived there with my maternal grandparents from 1972 to 1979 and visited them regularly afterwards till 1990 when I left for college in Beijing. Ten of us – six adults (my mother’s siblings) and four children – lived in a segment of a two-storey building. The total size of the living space was no more than 80 square metres.

Most of our neighbours, including my grandparents, had migrated from the countryside in the 1940s and 1950s. But they had remarkably different life trajectories and social statuses. One neighbour was an underground prostitute. When a client arrived, teenage boys from the nearby would sneak into the narrow path between our kitchen (without doors) and her single room home, and peek through the ‘wall’, which was a few wood panels nailed together with wide cracks between. On the other side of our home were a family of porters. All the adults transported goods from the port to the warehouse on wooden carts, which was also the most common occupation in the neighbourhood. The father was an alcoholic, and the two sons were in and out of the prison all the time. My acutest memory about them was the scream of the mother, and later, more and more frequently, the daughter-in-law, that woke me up in the night with horror. Neighbours, including my uncles and aunts, often broke into their house to stop the husband’s beating.

Among our immediate neighbours were also persons of high status. The man who lived upstairs from the prostitute was a party secretary of a major research institute in the city. Originally from a peasant family, he joined the army, received additional education, and was assigned to the position. His two daughters worked in *difang guoying* (‘local state-owned enterprises’), meaning units that belonged to the city government. Such jobs were the best that young people in that area could hope for; the chance of getting into ‘large state-owned enterprises’ of the provincial or central government hardly existed. Most youngsters worked in ‘collective enterprises’, where pays were lower and working conditions worse. The cadre’s older daughter worked in a canned food factory. She brought back canned fruit during festivals, raising much envy among children nearby. We also had a leading local sculptor living across the small courtyard. His father was a fisherman from the same place as my grandmother. The fisherman saved money and bought the building, including the part where we lived, in 1956, but only to have the house taken by the state as public property a couple of years later. Nevertheless, the artistic son, suffering from a heavy stammer, was admitted to the only art school in city because of his talent.

It is not entirely clear how my grandparents ended up living there. My grandparents were maternal cousins from landlord families. Both of their families lost all their land by the 1950s. One of my grandmother’s brothers set up a papermaking factory in the city after studying engineering in Shanghai. He asked my grandfather, who was running a grocery shop in the countryside, to join him. The factory rented part of the same building where we lived as a warehouse from the fisherman who was known to my grandmother’s family (the fisherman’s family used to work for my grandmother’s family as servants). The paper factory may have recommended the place to my grandparents. When both the factory and living space were turned into public assets in the late 1950s, my grandfather became a manager of the collective enterprise, and paid rent to local government instead of the fisherman landlord.

Buildings in the nearby were also mixed in use and looks. The furthest point that I was allowed to go before attending school was the only running water tap in the neighbourhood. The tap was a landmark because all families

bought water there daily. The tap was managed by an old single lady, known as 'the tap-turning old woman'. This could have been arranged by the local Residents' Committee as a welfare provision for the old lady. Between the tap and our home was an abacus factory, where residents nearby came to use the telephone by paying a fee. Opposite to the factory were a row of grain warehouses. The slogans on the walls were constantly rewritten to reflect the latest political changes, but the large characters were always well proportioned, in a bright red colour. This, alongside large metal locks, signalled the status of the warehouses: they were a state institution. However, the most imposing structure, by far, in the nearby was the navy base. I did have a chance to enter once. I nearly chopped off one of my fingers with a kitchen knife, and my grandmother rushed me to the navy base as that was the only place that she could think of for help. The doctor, who did not speak a word of my dialect, acted quickly and helped to save my finger.

Every morning, neighbours emerged in the shared courtyard for the morning washing, including cleaning the night potties. No family had a private bathroom. We had the first session of collective conversations until adults went to work. The conversations resumed at dinner time. When we sat down for dinner, there were always a couple of neighbours that would come to chat by standing next to the table. Politics was an important topic; film was another regular theme. Older adults talked about rural reform, the 'dual-track system' in which state plans and the market existed side by side, which had major impacts on the provision of daily necessities. The most frequent recurrent themes were the Cultural Revolution, and the merits and shortcomings of Mao and other political figures. Many of their viewpoints were likely to be speculations based on hearsay. Neighbours were frank about their different opinions, but people handled differences with humour and the conversations always went on. People gathered to chat, not to display their stances (I do not remember anybody having a fixed stance). People discussed politics to make sense of their lives together.

The fact that people with such mixed positions ended up living next to each other is a result of the dramatic political changes in modern China, and it is the acute awareness of these changes that enabled people to live together. Such political awareness, in my grandmother's words, helped 'educated people to explain things in the society; thus, they won't be too scared'. She was explaining why she, being illiterate, lived through the upheavals with constant fear. The educated obviously cannot explain all the changes and were not free from fear. But the sense that things change fast – life could be completely different tomorrow – did enhance conviviality, though not necessarily solidarity or a sense of togetherness. Inequalities among the neighbours were obvious, but who knows when things would be turned upside down again.

Finally, the lack of private wealth, especially the absence of private property, prevented divide. Everyone was a tenant of the state. Neighbours did not identify with each other as the same kind of persons, but they consciously shared the same history. Lives were very different but were interconnected and interchangeable: the cadre knew that he could have been a cart-puller, and I am fully aware that I could have become a taxi driver, a factory owner or a failed trader, as my childhood friends turned out to be, and vice versa. Life in 1970s China was tightly controlled, harsh and unpredictable. But people managed it in the nearby – not because the nearby was a shelter that protected people from the turmoil, but rather, the nearby enabled realistic, grounded understandings about these dramatic changes.

### ***The nearby as migrants' 'guerrilla' field***

The nearby as a scope of seeing can generate new capacity for acting. I learned this from the migrant community known as 'Zhejiang Village' in Beijing where migrants came to Zhejiang province in southeast China. (Hence the name.) I did my field work there between 1992 and 1998. Despite the periodical government campaigns aimed at ousting them – the community was about 5 kilometres south of Tiananmen Square – the migrant community grew from six families into a community of 100,000 in less than ten years. Almost entirely based on informal household production and trading, the community became a supply centre for medium- to low-priced clothes for the whole of north and northeast China.

The migrants survived and flourished before the mid-1990s mainly through 'guerrilla' styles of mobility of two kinds. The first took place in downtown Beijing, where the migrants sold their products on busy streets by spreading the garments on the ground. In doing so they developed intimate knowledge about the nearby. They knew which spots were good to catch passengers' attention, what clothes sold well in the proper shops and what was lacking. They also knew by heart where the toilets were (public toilets were hard to find at that time), and critically, what the best route was to run away from patrol police, and where they could hide. Gradually they became acquaintances, and even friends, of staff in state-owned shops nearby. One thing led to another. They persuaded some shops to sell their products, and before long they managed to rent counters from the shops. These collaborations violated formal rules of that time, but the relations forged in the nearby facilitated pragmatic negotiations and tacit agreements that enabled the shop to circumvent rules without appearing so; for instance, by recording the Zhejiang Village migrant as a representative of a fictitious collective enterprise in Zhejiang province (Xiang 2018).

Migrants also engaged in a 'guerrilla' style of mobility around where they lived and worked, as a response to forced eviction by the government. When the district government launched an eviction campaign, the migrants moved to the neighbouring district for a few days; if the order was from municipality, they commonly moved to the neighbouring province (Hebei) for a couple of months. The migrants came back swiftly once the campaign ended. While the government campaigns were almost, by definition, short-lived, the migrants moved around and were able to hang on much longer. As a result, Zhejiang Village expanded *through* evictions. After each bout of ousting, a few would not bother to return to the original site and instead turned to the new periphery of Zhejiang Village. More migrants would join from Zhejiang as more space became available. Obviously, the migrants' intimate knowledge about the nearby areas, and their skills of constantly extending the nearby and creating it, was indispensable for winning this guerrilla war.

Furthermore, the migrants also consciously took advantage of the administrative complexity of the nearby in the core area of Zhejiang Village. A distinct feature of the Zhejiang Village was that the land and housing in that area belonged to a wide range of institutions: ministries, the Beijing municipality, the district, the street, the township, Residents Committee and the army. These institutions had different interests and followed separate lines of command. If the district government cracked down on informal businesses, the ministry and army could easily ignore the order and continue hosting migrants and receiving rents. The migrants, in turn, actively

exploited the inconsistency. They built residential compounds and workshops by working with village committees and built marketplaces through agreement with bankrupt state-owned factories and other institutes who had the use right of the land, although the constructions were formally illegal. Thus, when actors deeply embedded themselves in the nearby, the nearby opens new space for action. Based on their nearby in south Beijing as a scope of seeing, Zhejiang Village built nationwide networks of garment production and trade.

## **THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE NEARBY**

The nearby as a scope of seeing is needed today, not because local places are disappearing. Local places are always there, and in China they are attracting increasing attention from the state and corporations. Urban designers have been promoting the idea of 'fifteen-minute city' (*shenghuoquan*, literally 'life circle'), which means residents can have most daily needs met within fifteen minutes of walking or cycling. Property developers and government officials are both committed to make residential compounds safe, clean and orderly. Residential communities have also become strategic sites for sales promotion and data extraction. These locally oriented developments, however, break down social relations and isolate individuals from one another.

### ***Property ownership and cognitive dispossession***

My childhood neighbourhood was demolished around the mid-2000s. Nobody was too upset. The nearby was losing human feelings from the late 1980s on already. A turning point was the policy to return property rights to previous owners in the mid-1980s. This changed the relations between neighbours overnight. Although the fisherman – now the landlord again – did not ask us to leave, and probably did not even ask for rent, it was clearly awkward to discuss when we may move out, if not what the rent should be, and how the size of our part should be remeasured ... all carefully worded and mentioned in convoluted ways. At the same time, commercial housing in the city became available. The cadre's family purchased a high-end apartment elsewhere and moved out. The courtyard, once full of laughter, debates and occasional quarrels, became eerily quiet by the 1990s. My grandparents started living with their offspring in rotation in different parts of the city, where accommodations were assigned by the offspring's work units. In 2003, the wife of my youngest uncle, in her 40s, died after a lonely battle with a mysterious illness caused by a medical accident, in the room where I slept throughout my childhood with my grandparents. When I was a child, a lonely death was unthinkable in a place like that. Human attention and care was the last thing that we lacked.

This is not a process of 'dispossession', a keyword in the English social science literature on urbanization following David Harvey's (2003) characterization of post-1970s urban development in the West as a process of 'accumulation by dispossession'. When our neighbourhood was demolished, all the inhabitants were offered compensation. We could choose a compensation of a newly built apartment of the same size with full ownership, or cash payment as par the market rate. The fisherman received double compensation. He was compensated for the space where his family lived, and for other parts of the building that they never lived in but now formally owned. My youngest uncle, who was living there at the time of demolition, received compensations too,



even though he did not own the part of the building. Across China, rapid urbanization turned a vast majority of urban residents, who never thought of owning properties, into proprietors. Ninety-six per cent of Chinese urban household own homes in 2019 (Research Group of the Urban Households Assets and Debts, Survey and Statistics Department of the People's Bank of China 2020), compared to 65 per cent in the United States in 2020 (United States Census Bureau, Department of Commerce 2021).

But the formalization of property relations can be dispossessing in other senses. The destructive aspects of formal ownership in Vietnam are vividly captured by the anthropologist Erik Harms (2016). He points out that the emergence of property rights goes hand in hand with mass demolition and eviction. Property became real for the resident – what the exact land titles are, and the market price is – precisely during their fight for compensation for the loss of home. Home became property when it was lost. Second, the notion of property rights debases other forms of claim over homes and other senses of belonging. Faced with the laws and documents that formally define property rights, the languages of attachment, nostalgia, neighbourhood relations, the cool air, the sound of the river – the nearby – all appear too feeble to be effective. In the struggle for compensation, 'qualitative value become reduced to quantitative economic value' (Harms 2016: 189). Or, as Lund put it so aptly in reviewing recent research on urban development in Asia: 'The language of the urban space went from people's belonging to people's belongings, and people became rights subjects in their dispossession' (Lund 2019: 7, original emphasis). When residents became possessing subjects, they are dispossessed of their original languages, perspectives and modes of thinking that articulate what counts as a good life. These sentiments and languages are essential for constructing the nearby.

In an account about outdoor street cafés in Ho Chi Minh City being replaced by high-end bars, Harms suggests that the enclosed space 'allows emerging elites to [...] turn their eyes away from the street and avoid the public life around them' (2009: 200). Where have the eyes turned to? The eyes first turned to 'look inward at each other' (Harms 2009: 200). As Li Zhang (2010) has also demonstrated that middle-class Chinese property owners exhibit an especially strong sense of spatialized 'privacy'. But the eyes also turned upwards and forward, towards the abstract categories of 'nation', 'civilization' and 'consciousness'. Seen through these grand concerns, injustice in urban development is construed as sacrifices for the motherland, and as a necessary price for turning incivilities into the civilized.

Cognitive incapacitation through economic formalization took place in Zhejiang Village too. Migrants' spontaneously developed marketplace and residential compounds were torn down by government. In their stead local government and real estate developers built high-end marketplaces and high rising residence buildings (Xiang 2013, 2018). As informal marketplaces were forbidden, migrants must trade in the formal marketplaces that charge high rents. Those who purchased apartments gained formal property rights that allowed them to settle down in Beijing, but new migrants could no longer find opportunities easily. When new eviction campaigns struck, particularly in November 2017, those who do not own properties had no space to run to. They had to leave Beijing. The nearby as a buffer zone and space of innovation disappeared, and therefore Zhejiang Village is no longer an engine for socio-economic changes in south Beijing. The disappearance of the nearby was not caused by eviction, but by formalization – formal property rights and top-down planning.

### ***Sink down: the safety-convenience nexus***

Government control over residential communities was decisively tightened in 1999 as part of the nationwide crackdown on Falun Gong, a popular spiritual cult movement. A 'grid system' was put in place. A *wangge* ('grid') consists of a cluster of households, ranging from 50 in the countryside to 1000 in cities. Each cluster has a *wangge zhang* ('grid head') who is paid by the state, and one or more *wangge yuan* ('grid managers') who are normally volunteers. The grid head and grid managers are tasked with both political sensitive matters, such as policing religious practices, as well as mundane matters, such as rubbish collection and welfare provision. This grid structure is coupled with the party system (each grid is encouraged to set up a party cell), as well as with the commercially operated condo management, which is hired by *yezhu* ('property owners', as opposed to the old notion of, *jumin* ['residents']). Residents' Committee, which is legally defined as the grassroots self-governing body, either stopped functioning or was absorbed into this grid structure.

This was strengthened during the pandemic. During the lockdowns, grid managers visited door to door to check everyone's temperature and, in the case of collective quarantine, deliver food to families. In addition, government dispatched – literally 'sank down' (*xiacheng*) – officers to communities. In Hubei Province, where COVID was first detected, more than 10,000 officers were sent by the provincial government into grassroots grids from early February to early March in 2020 (Anon. 2020). The Beijing municipal government sent more than 70,000 officers to 7120 residential communities as of 27 February 2020 (China International Development Knowledge Centre 2020) to enforce mobility restriction and social distancing.

Equally powerful in reshaping local space is capital. Large corporations invested in infrastructure for so-called 'Smart Community Service', such as smart lockers and community distribution centre, especially after 2015. It is residential communities, rather than shopping malls, that are predicted to become a major site for consumption. New buzzwords in the business world include 'Local Life', 'online-to-offline (O2O) Community Service' and 'Daily Life Scenes'. Daily Life Scenes mean such scenarios as how a nuclear family prepare breakfasts during weekdays, which can be turned into a commercial opportunity. The most developed smart community service is the takeaway business. China's online takeaway market was expected to grow from an annual turnover of RMB 577.9 (USD 82.47) billion in 2019 to RMB 650 (USD 92.75) billion in 2020 (Hu et al. 2020). According to data from China Internet Information Centre, 40 per cent of internet users in third-tier cities have used online takeaway service by March 2020 (2020).

Residential communities are becoming main sites of consumption partly because of the rapid growth of the logistical industry. Consumption goods can now be delivered to every doorstep. The total turnover of logistics in China increased by nearly 70 times in about ten years: from RMB 4.5 trillion (USD 0.64 trillion) in 2007 (Chinese National Development and Reform Commission [CNDRC] and China Federation of Association of Logistics and Purchase [CFALP] 2008) to RMB 283.1 trillion (USD 40 trillion) in 2018 (Chinese National Development and Reform Commission [CNDRC] and China Federation of Association of Logistics and Purchase [CFALP] 2019). The development of logistics is characterized by an especially high speed of 'sinking down' – penetrating the grassroots. The company of Debang Logistics, for example, opened its first office in Shaji town in east China's Jiangsu Province

in 2011; by 2017, it had additional sixteen offices in the small town, and its monthly revenues jumped from RMB 0.3 million in 2011 to more than 83 million in 2016 (Alibaba Academy 2020).

In both the policy and business worlds, these 'sink down' initiatives are referred to as solutions to the 'last 500-metre challenges'. The 'last 500-metre' is the Chinese version of the 'last mile'. In the sectors of supply chain management, transportation and logistics, the last mile refers the gap between the last transportation hub (e.g. a bus stop or a distribution centre) and the destination of each item. 'Last 500-metre' solutions are meant to be more precise and effective than the international standard. With these solutions, goods will be delivered to – and data will be collected from – everyone.

These initiatives by government and corporations apparently meet the needs of the urban middle class, particularly from their desire for safety and convenience. Government surveillance is believed to improve safety. Community-based consumption makes life more convenient than ever. For some young people, convenience means not only maximum efficiency, but also minimum human interaction. College students living on campus – a major customer of the food delivery service – prefer delivered food to the wide choices of meals right downstairs partly because the delivery, though taking a longer time and costing more money, saves them from encounters in the canteen.<sup>2</sup> Human relations become a burden. Herbert Marcuse alarmed the world half century ago that the 'comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom' (1964: 1) in the industrialized societies turned people into 'one-dimensional men'. In China today, unfreedom is less reasonable and certainly not democratic, but it is more comfortable and smoother. The sink down initiatives make life safe and easy, but also turn citizens into units of the surveillance and e-commerce systems. People lost their nearby consciousness and are becoming ever more one-dimensional.

Lisha Chen, a Chicago-based artist, illustrates this one-dimensional quality in several artworks under the theme Reconstruction. Her video *In the Cracks* presents streets, houses and rooms as transparent glass boxes, and persons as moving dots, as seen through Google Maps, surveillance and commerce apps. Another piece, named *A Cube Head*, is a doll representing a Chinese food delivery worker. The head is a box because '[h]umans provide bodies only; algorithm is the brain'. Yet the box is stuffed with children's soft toys because the delivery workers must try hard, including putting on comical costumes, to please customers. Chen plans to take the doll for walks and picnics along the river – re-establishing relations with those who are nearby but are 'reduced into objects and ghosts' (Chen 2020: n.pag.).

### **Expression without communication**

It is not surprising that we fail to pay attention to the nearby when our eyes are glued to the mobile phone. Can we create virtual nearbys on social media? Virtual communities are qualitatively different from the nearby that I envision here. Take WeChat and TikTok, the two most popular social media platforms in China, as examples. In 2020, WeChat had 1.2 billion active monthly users worldwide, while TikTok had 689 million (Datareportal 2020). On WeChat, memberships to user communities (known as 'Moments') are selected and self-selected. Messages in Moments are more often declarations of one's stance than means to engage in open discussions. Most Moments became echo chambers and information cocoons (Lü 2018). Duan Shaofeng curated

2. I thank Professor Shen Weiwei at China's Law and Politics University for calling my attention to this phenomenon, which is widespread across China.

3. Personal e-mail exchanges with staff at ByteDance, January and February 2021. Staff at ByteDance approached me because local residential communities were a target in their work.

the exhibition *The Disappearance of the Nearby* partly as a response to the changes brought about by virtual communication:

First of all, the language of communication has changed. A face-to-face method changed to a virtual form of information-to-information. Since the tone and emotion in virtual communication are filtered, the Moments communication becomes more and more instrumental, or is based on common interests [of the members]. The danger is that the information is too concentrated on particular concerns. This strengthens this stickiness of Moments, and at the same time can make [the opinions] more extreme.

(Duan 2020: n.pag.)

Unlike WeChat, TikTok is a platform for sharing video clips that are shorter than fifteen seconds with wide audiences beyond personal circles. Many videos are taken in residential communities: a street fight, a traffic crash, an unusual looking dog chasing an unusual looking cat. In 2020, TikTok is also actively building a *tongcheng shengtai* ('same city ecology') that facilitates exchange among those who live in proximity and encouraging users to share information about *fujin shenghuo* ('life nearby').<sup>3</sup> But two things should be noted. First, the videos taken in the physical nearby often turn life in residential communities into sensational fragments. The nearby is not at all a 'scope' of seeing. Second, TikTok's 'life nearby' strategy seems closely related to its plan of transforming itself from an entertainment platform to one that serves comprehensive lifestyle needs, including online payment (Zhang 2021). The attention to users nearby is more likely a means to harvest personal data and to make users dependent on social media, than facilitating the nearby perspective. The poster by Yang Jin, entitled 'Nearby is Electromagnetic Waves', presents the nearby as dense 2.4 Ghz electromagnetic waves that sustain Wi-Fi connection. In another poster entitled 'Watch Out the Nearby', Krystal\_loli suggests that the nearby is full of mobile phones, food delivery boxes and codes for e-commerce transaction and for information security. As a result, it become a place that residents must guard themselves against. The artist explains:

Courier boxes are everywhere, and [so are] the constantly updated mobile phone models. People think their information is well protected, not knowing their data is being stolen through these channels. So, people set up all kinds of passcodes and invented all kinds of encryption tools. Every moment people guard against criminals nearby, everywhere is anxiety and defence.

(Krystal\_loli 2020: n.pag.)

## THE FIRST MILE MOVEMENT

The COVID world was paradoxical not only in that the world became more divided when faced with the supposedly common enemy of humankind, but also, society became ideologically fragmented when the governance of social life is unprecedentedly integrated. Friends fell out with each other, although regardless of which ideological line one takes, few can escape the networks of surveillance, logistics and information dissemination. The functional integration and ideological fragmentation are not contradictory; rather, they are mutually reinforcing. The integration is driven by the state and capital and is

facilitated by large-scale infrastructure and digital technologies; the process integrates individuals directly into systems that are put in place by the state and corporations. Individuals are reliant on these systems, and do not feel the need for the nearby. Lost is the capability of appreciating differences and reflexive thinking. Opinions become simplistic and antagonistic.

There is no easy way out. To start, researchers, artists, designers and activists can work together to cultivate residents' ability to construct the nearby as a scope of seeing by bringing into one view the experiences of cleaners, the opinions of the eatery owner, the historical change of the use of the land where one lives. This scope provides a basis for residents to reflect on personal experiences and general discourses – be they global discourses, national slogans or social norms. We may call such collaboration the 'First Mile Movement'. The 'first mile' is a resident's immediate surrounding, the first leg in one's route to the outside world; for instance, the space between one's home and the nearby subway station. I call it 'first mile' as opposed the notion of 'last mile' in policy and business language. The 'first mile' and the 'last mile' are almost identical physically but mean very different things. The 'last mile' business facilitates the state and capital to 'sink down'; the First Mile Movement empowers citizens to reach out. The 'last mile' aims to render space transparent and empty; the 'first mile' strives to cultivate the nearby that is socially rich.

The First Mile Movement can start with the movement of our eyes, for instance, to look close at everything and everybody on the way from home to the closest bus stop. Artists can make unique contributions in this regard. I offer three examples here as a way of inviting further exploration. The first is the works by photographer Guo Jing. In a video essay (Jing 2020), Guo discussed the 'healing' effects of photographing the nearby. Like so many migrants in Beijing, Guo changed his rented residence frequently and knew nobody living in the same building. Photographing, or therefore attending to, the nearby, offered a sense of stability and belonging. People also started talking to him: 'You are here again taking photos!'. To see things in new ways is to be seen in new ways. Guo Jing had lamented that the office building where he worked in was in the middle of nowhere, until he explored the nearby. He encountered a small settlement of rubbish collectors in an alley, where washed warm slippers were put out for drying side by side with a replica of an ancient Greek statue on the top of a mobile cart that was used to sell pancakes on the street. 'Representation of space' (Lefebvre 1991) – the structure that separates one category of things from another by imposing boundaries – breaks down in corners like this that serve as 'space of representation', the lived space from where people perceive the world.

The second example of photographic depictions of the nearby is found in a recent book by the anthropologist and art critic Harriet Evans. Evans was moved by the works of a local photographer in a disappearing neighbourhood in central Beijing. The photographs represent a vision of:

a diverse and vibrant mix of people, buildings, and spaces whose disappearing material and spatial history leaves unmistakable traces in their present realities [...] His photographs constitute his subjects not as passive observers of practices beyond their control but as active agents asserting their recalcitrant presence in the processes of change of which they are part. As they look out of their frames, they silently affirm their ownership of the places and spaces they inhabit, and of the activities that absorb their energies and that claim our attention as their observers.

(Evans 2020: 190).



Figure 1: Screenshot from Guo Jing, 1 May 2020, 'Street photographs: The disappearance and reconstruction of the nearby'. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwoWnHFuIMQ>. Accessed 6 August 2021.

The photographic images acquire their own life because they represent the nearby as a stage where different kinds of people and things act and interact. The connections, gaps and contradictions among them give the images multi-dimensional richness. We see history moving. It is not accidental that this photographer developed a particularly acute nearby perspective. Apart from documenting life in the neighbourhood, the photographer runs a restaurant nearby, organizes street exhibitions and befriends artists, government officials, tourists and anyone interested in the community life. His daily activities 'demonstrate a trading of sentiments and interests in repeated negotiations between and across [divides]' (Evans 2020: 197). The nearby as a scope of seeing leads to the nearby as space of coordination and interaction for him. Artists may want to explore further this scope quality of the nearby. Among the recent artworks on the nearby that I have access to, few highlight juxtaposition of differences and contradictions. Some artworks focus on the worrying aspects, as mentioned above, while others call attention to the beauty of the nearby. The work may gain more traction if deeper tensions are built in.

The third example concerns 'gap' as a motif in discovering the nearby. This example comes from Zhejiang Village migrants. For me they are great artists as they see the nearby in new ways, and their actions are great artworks. Who had thought that there were so many gaps in the political centre of China? The representations of space, as Lefebvre called it – the maps, the plans, the models and now the algorithm – strive to eradicate gaps, but gaps can be critical points of connections in the space of representation. The reprogrammed space blocks our eyes for gaps. If last mile businesses close gaps, the First Mile Movement can start with discovering, tracing and enlarging gaps into new spaces for thinking and acting.

As our experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic taught us, vague sentiments of togetherness do not close gaps in perception. On the contrary,

ungrounded passions often widen divides in our minds. Close attention to the nearby, including its multiple gaps, will facilitate more realistic and nuanced understandings of the world. The nearby, after all, constitutes a world of itself.

## GLOSSARY

Duan Shaofeng 段少锋

*fujin* (the nearby) 附近

*fujin shenghuo* (life nearby) 附近生活

*jumin* (residents) 居民

Guo Jing 郭靖

Kuayue Bianjie de Shequ (A Community that Transcends Boundaries)

跨越边界的社区

Lisha Chen 陈俪莎

*shenghuoquan* (daily life circle) 生活圈

*tongcheng shengtai* (same city ecology) 同城生态

*wangge* (grid) 网格

*wangge yuan* (grid managers) 网格员

*wangge zhang* (grid head) 网格长

Wang Ziyue 王子月

*xiachen* (sink down) 下沉

Xu Zhiyuan 许知远

Yang Jing 杨菁

*yezhu* (property owners) 业主

*You peng zi yuanfang lai [...] Bi zhu zhi* (Friends come from afar [...] We must

eliminate them) 有朋自远方来...必诛之

## APPENDIX

### **Examples of collective art projects on *The Nearby* in China (2020–21)**

*Tell Me What It Is Like – Before the Nearby Disappears*

告诉我它的样子在附近消失之前

Exhibition, 1–31 May 2020, Shanghai

Curator: Nancy Lee (李小红)

'Varying perspectives on the nearby reflect the artists' in-depth insight into life. In these art works, people, things and events intertwine, and from close connections through tensions. [...] [This shows] each individual is not a closed loop, nor a free-standing subject, but a changing assemblage contingent to historical conditions'.

<http://www.cnarts.net/cweb/news/read.asp?kind=%C5%C4&id=452419>. Accessed 19 July 2021.

*People Nearby*

附近的人

Exhibition, 26 December 2020–17 April 2021, Chengdu

Curator: Cai Liyuan (蔡丽媛)

'In the new stage of China's urbanization, discussions about land planning, environmental governance and community building inevitably return to the discussion about "human". This involves questions about "the nearby" and the "the disappearance of the nearby", including the external

manifestation of the homogenization and estrangement of “the nearby”. This affects our experience about time, space and emotions. Individual artists’ responses and methods are more direct [than social researchers], but the differences among artists are also obvious. I try to describe these differences through “the nearby”.

[http://www.a4am.cn/website/activity\\_info/id/691/nid/4](http://www.a4am.cn/website/activity_info/id/691/nid/4). Accessed 19 July 2021.

*The Nearby Is Full of/All About ...*

附近都是...

2 March–5 April 2020, Guangzhou

Online exhibition through open participation, organized by THE END DESIGN®

‘Modern development has flattened and fragmented our lives. When we turn our attention to future visions and individualist thinking, “the nearby” disappears. Because of this, we need to reflect, we need to construct the nearby, and we need to rethink this relationship’.

[https://www.sohu.com/a/382004156\\_252906](https://www.sohu.com/a/382004156_252906) (Phase I)

[https://www.sohu.com/a/383537719\\_282265](https://www.sohu.com/a/383537719_282265) (Phase II)

[https://www.sohu.com/a/385588614\\_282265](https://www.sohu.com/a/385588614_282265) (Phase III)

Accessed 19 July 2021.

*The Disappearance of the Nearby: Neighbours in the Mini Ecologies of Art*

附近的消失: 艺术小生态中的邻居

Exhibition, 8 August–5 September 2020, Beijing

Curator: Duan Shaofeng (段少锋)

This exhibition displays works by artists from three neighbourhoods in Beijing, alongside photographs about their community life. The exhibition in itself is meant to reconstruct artists’ nearby. The nearby facilitates ‘self-help style’ exhibitions (Duan Shaofeng) that free artists dependence on financial sponsorship and allows for open and genuine exchanges.

[https://www.sohu.com/a/411046584\\_523096](https://www.sohu.com/a/411046584_523096). Accessed 19 July 2021.

*Re-recognizing the Nearby – ...*

重识附近

February 2021, Xi’an

This collection consists of works by students at the Department of Experimental Art, Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts. The works aim to ‘capture nearby details in way that are recognizable to others’. The collection is grouped into six subthemes: factory, park, memory, event site, wall and circulation.

[https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?sub&\\_\\_biz=MzI1MjQzMzUxOA==&mid=2247503587&idx=1&sn=ad9c0ad2fb120b5cd2f60013ac937e1f&chksm=e9e14be2de96c2f4dfe8ff3787afa6d91c289a3f5617e79f41756a4debc6eb0bd66853f3e52&&scene=3&subscene=10000&clicktime=1619818867&enterid=1619818867#rd](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?sub&__biz=MzI1MjQzMzUxOA==&mid=2247503587&idx=1&sn=ad9c0ad2fb120b5cd2f60013ac937e1f&chksm=e9e14be2de96c2f4dfe8ff3787afa6d91c289a3f5617e79f41756a4debc6eb0bd66853f3e52&&scene=3&subscene=10000&clicktime=1619818867&enterid=1619818867#rd). Accessed 19 July 2021.

## REFERENCES

Alibaba Academy (2020), ‘Taobaocun Shinian’ (‘Ten years’ Taobao villages’), Ali Research, <https://i.aliresearch.com/img/20200103/20200103164038.pdf>. Accessed 15 July 2021.



- Anon. (2020), 'Cadres sink down, party flags rise up: Tens of thousands of party members and cadres from the Hubei provincial government strive to fight the epidemic', *Hubei Daily*, 13 March (in Chinese), [https://epaper.hubeidaily.net/pad/content/202003/13/content\\_23134.html](https://epaper.hubeidaily.net/pad/content/202003/13/content_23134.html). Accessed 13 September 2021.
- Chen, Lisha (2020), *A Cube Head*, CIKD, December, <https://www.lishaaa.net/a-cube-head>. Accessed 15 September 2021.
- China International Development Knowledge Centre (2020), 'During the epidemic, why did China let public officials sink to the grassroots?', CIKD, 13 April, <http://www.cikd.org/chinese/detail?leafId=212&docId=1389>. Accessed 15 July 2021.
- China Internet Information Centre (2020), 'Statistics report on China's internet development', 28 April, pp. 42&45, <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzjy/hlwxbg/hlwjtjbg/202004/P02020042859659037028.pdf>. Accessed 15 July 2021.
- Chinese National Development and Reform Commission (CNDRC) and China Federation of Association of Logistics and Purchase (CFALP) (2008), '2007 nian quanguo wuliu yunxing qingkuang tongbao' ('2007 National Logistics Operation Bulletin'), 25 March, <http://www.clic.org.cn/wltjyjyc/133564.jhtml>. Accessed 15 July 2021.
- Chinese National Development and Reform Commission (CNDRC) and China Federation of Association of Logistics and Purchase (CFALP) (2019), '2018 nian quanguo wuliu yunxing qingkuang tongbao' ('2018 National Logistics Operation Bulletin'), 23 March, <http://www.clic.org.cn/wltjwlyx/300920.jhtml>. Accessed 15 July 2021.
- Datareportal (2020), 'Global social media stats', <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users?rq=tiktok>. Accessed 26 February 2021.
- Duan, Shaofeng, (2020), "'To an era when the nearby is disappearing": Preface to the exhibition *The Disappearance of The Nearby* (Beijing, 8 August–5 September 2020)', 2 August, [https://www.sohu.com/a/411046584\\_523096](https://www.sohu.com/a/411046584_523096). Accessed 19 July 2021.
- Evans, Harriet (2020), *Beijing from Below: Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Center*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Guo, Jing (2020), 'Street shooting: Disappearance and reconstruction in the nearby', YouTube, 1 May, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=WwoWnHFuMQ>. Accessed 28 February 2021.
- Guyer, Jane (2007), 'Prophecy and the near future: Thoughts on macroeconomic, evangelical, and punctuated time', *American Ethnologist*, 34:3, pp. 409–21.
- Harms, Erik (2009) 'Vietnam's civilizing process and the retreat from the street: A turtle's eye view from Ho Chi Minh City', *City & Society*, 21:2, pp. 182–206.
- Harms, Erik (2016), *Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Harvey, David (2003), *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, David (2012), *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, New York: Verso.
- Hu, Minghe, Chen, Celia, Zhang, Jane and Pan, Che (2020), 'How China's delivery services platforms are evolving, from smart lockers to "semi-finished" meals', *South China Morning Post*, 24 April, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/3081251/smart-lockers-semi-finished-meals-how-chinas-delivery-services>. Accessed 13 September 2021.

- Jiang, Jiehong (2020), 'Urban transformations and contemporary art in China', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 7:2&3, pp. 171–76.
- Jiang, Jiehong (2021), 'Introduction', in Jiang Jiehong (ed.), *The Otherness of the Everyday: Twelve Conversations from the Chinese Art World During the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Bristol and Chicago, IL: Intellect, pp. 1–18.
- Jiang, Jiehong and Zhang, Zikang (2021), 'An exhibition in the palm of your hand', in Jiang Jiehong (ed.), *The Otherness of the Everyday: Twelve Conversations from the Chinese Art World During the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Bristol and Chicago, IL: Intellect, pp. 67–80.
- Krystal\_loli (2020), 'Modern persons' information' (Caption to the poster 'Watch Out the Nearby'), *The Nearby Is Full of/All About ... Episode III*, online exhibition, 5 April, [https://www.sohu.com/a/385588614\\_282265](https://www.sohu.com/a/385588614_282265). Accessed 15 September 2021.
- Lefebvre, Henri (1991), *The Production of Space* (trans. D. Nicholson-Smith), Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lü, Xinyu (2018), "'Future archeology" in the era of new media: Changes in China's media from the perspective of the political economy of communication', *Journal of Shanghai University* (Social Science Edition), 35:1, pp. 121–40.
- Lund, Christian (2019), 'The urban frontier: A review essay on political power, violence, and paperwork', Antipodeonline.org. 6 July, [https://antipodeonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/book-review\\_lund-on-harms-et-al-1.pdf](https://antipodeonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/book-review_lund-on-harms-et-al-1.pdf). Accessed 13 September 2021.
- Marcuse, Herbert (1964), *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (2020), 'Communovirus', Verso Blog, 27 March, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4626-communovirus>. Accessed 13 September 2021.
- Research Group of the Urban Households Assets and Debts, Survey and Statistics Department of the People's Bank of China (2020), '2019 survey on the assets and debts of Chinese urban households', 24 April, *China Finance*, 9, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/2020-04-24/doc-iircuyvh9570653.shtml>. Accessed 13 September 2021.
- United States Census Bureau, Department of Commerce (2021), 'Quarterly residential vacancies and homeownership: Fourth quarter 2020', 2 February, <https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/files/currenthvspress.pdf>; <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/2020-04-24/doc-iircuyvh9570653.shtml>. Accessed 13 September 2021.
- Xiang, Biao (2013), 'Predicaments of formalization: Twenty years' social changes in China as seen through Zhejiangcun in Beijing', *Twenty-First Century*, October, pp. 4–26.
- Xiang, Biao (2018), *Transcending Boundaries: The Life History of a Migrant Community in Beijing*, Beijing: Three-joint Books (in Chinese, second edition).
- Xiang, Biao and Xu, Zhiyuan (2019), *Thirteenth Invitation*, Season 4 Episode 4, <https://v.qq.com/x/search?q=%E9%A1%B9%E9%A3%99&stag=9>, 27 November 2019, One-way Street Books, China. Chinese transcription [http://www.360doc.com/content/20/1024/15/20028964\\_942170045.shtml](http://www.360doc.com/content/20/1024/15/20028964_942170045.shtml). Accessed 19 July 2021.
- Zhang, Li (2010), *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Zhang, Nan (2021), '(CEO of ByteDance, the holding company of Tiktok). Changes and reflections on Tiktok in 2020, interviewed by Zhang Peng

from Geekpark', Geek Park, 28 January, <http://www.geekpark.net/news/273376>. Accessed 18 July 2021.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

Xiang, Biao (2021), 'The nearby: A scope of seeing', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 8:2&3, pp. 147–65, [https://doi.org/10.1386/jcca\\_00042\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jcca_00042_1)

### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Professor Xiang Biao is director of Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Germany. He studied sociology at Beijing University, China, and received his Ph.D. in social anthropology from the University of Oxford, United Kingdom. He worked at Oxford from 2004. He is the winner of the 2008 Anthony Leeds Prize for his book *Global 'Body Shopping'* (Princeton University Press, 2007) and the 2012 William L. Holland Prize for his article 'Predatory princes'. His 2000 Chinese book *Kuayue Bianjie de Sheque* (published in English as *Transcending Boundaries* [Brill, 2005]) was reprinted in 2018 as a contemporary classic. His work has been translated into Japanese, French, Korean, Spanish and Italian.

Contact: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Advokatenweg 36, D-06114 Halle, Germany.

E-mail: [xiang@eth.mpg.de](mailto:xiang@eth.mpg.de)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3533-5551>

Biao Xiang has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

---