

ART BEYOND THE GENERIC CITY: YANG YONGLIANG'S PHOTO

COMPOSITES 2007-2012

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Art Beyond the Generic City: Yang Yongliang's Photo Composites 2007-2012

This thesis examines the digital photo composites of Chinese artist Yang Yongliang (b. 1980, Shanghai) from 2007-2012 by selecting three distinct series that focus on three cities. This thesis approaches Yang's Shanghai-based digital landscape prints (*shuma shanshui*), his 2012 series *A Bowl of Taipei*, and his 2010 series *Greece, Greece* and investigates how they relate to Asian art history, contemporary art discourse, and urban theories, including Rem Koolhaas's 1995 essay "The Generic City." This thesis moves beyond the simple binaries with which Yang's works are often described – past versus present, nature versus city, tradition versus modernity – dichotomies similar to those used to characterize recent urbanization in most major cities, as observed in Koolhaas's writing. This thesis argues that Yang's works inhabit multiple positions simultaneously and offer new potentials for expanding beyond the generic city.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, as the landscape of the People's Republic of China has become increasingly urbanized, many contemporary Chinese artists have appropriated traditional imagery as a means of commenting on modern city life.¹ Either troubled by the chaotic and fragmented situation within urbanizing cities or excited by the rapid development and attendant opportunities, these artists utilize the city as their subject and inspiration.² In various artworks that address physical urbanization (construction, pollution, and consumption), or psychological issues (anxiety, alienation, and despair), the overarching messages in general have been mournful, satirical, or foreboding.³ Shanghai-based artist Yang Yongliang (杨泳梁) explores his understanding of urbanization through both of these lenses in his digital photo composite prints. Yang often uses images of contemporary urban ruin as a critical symbol of modernization in cities, which he combines with traditional forms and compositions. Yang Yongliang's works are often considered in terms of binaries – past vs. present, nature vs. city, tradition vs. modernity – which mirror the characterizations of urbanization today. This thesis will analyze three of Yang's series of photo composites vis-à-vis Asian art history, contemporary art discourse, and urban theories, including Rem Koolhaas's essay "The Generic City," and argue that Yang's works inhabit multiple positions towards the contemporary city and offer new potential for expanding beyond the generic city. The

¹ Within this paper I will refer to the People's Republic of China as China or mainland China.

² Meiqin Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (Routledge: New York, 2016), 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 52.

artist's use of juxtaposition mirrors the dual nature of Koolhaas's interpretation. While the artist has never utilized the term "generic" himself, his works can be interpreted through the lens of Koolhaas's canonical concept of the contemporary city.

"The Generic City" was published in 1995 in the book *S, M, L, XL* by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), a Dutch architectural firm established by Rem Koolhaas in 1975. The 1376-page book combined essays, travelogues, manifestos, and stories written about the contemporary city. Koolhaas's essay presents a depiction of a city shaped by global capital, one that has become "the same" as other generic cities through a shedding of identity, something typically seen as a loss. Today some consider global cities as having more in common with one another rather than the cultural features of their own country.⁴ The architect presents the generic city, asking:

What are the disadvantages of identity, and conversely, what are the advantages of blankness?...What if this seemingly accidental – and usually regretted – homogenization were an intentional process, a conscious movement away from difference toward similarity? What if we are witnessing a global liberation movement: 'Down with character!' What is left after identity is stripped? The Generic?⁵

This idea of the generic city is often introduced through Asian cities.⁶ Major cities in the developing Asian world have become centers of economic growth, political power, and cultural recognition, and thus become the sites for a country's claim for global importance.⁷

⁴ Robbin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

⁵ Rem Koolhaas, "The Generic City," in *S, M, L, XL*, Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995), 1248.

⁶ Koolhaas especially presents Singapore as a generic city, an idea detailed in his essay "Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis...or 30 Years of Tabula Rasa," which can be found in pages 1008-1089 of *S, M, L, XL*.

⁷ Aihwa Ong, "Introduction: Worlding Cities, or the Art of Being Global," in *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, ed. Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2011), 2.

This concept of Asian modernization is further refined by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist in their catalogue essay for the exhibition “Cities on the Move”, where they surmise that modernization in Asian cities is considered as a way to emphasize national identity, yet is often paired with the destruction and disintegration of established cultural values and traditions.⁸ Responding to these dual understandings of modernization, Yang Yongliang’s works present visual and conceptual juxtapositions. His works are simultaneously ephemeral and substantial, restful and threatening, new and old. The ability to navigate between these binaries gives his work power as societal critique.⁹ The artist’s equating of dichotomies presents new questions for contemporary society. As curator Jan Stuart has observed, Yang’s works replicate “the loss of the familiar, the natural, the personal, and the material; evoke the feelings of living in an opaque, mediated dematerialized world; and convey the anxieties of being dislocated from tradition, roots, and home.”¹⁰ These terms connect to the idea of the generic city, which Yang’s works emulate, whether the artist intended to or not.

In his seminal essay, Koolhaas presents two explanations of what makes a city ‘generic,’ one homogenizing and one differentiating. The first presents a city that has eliminated any single, fixed identity that represents the past and the second is a city’s rapid mutation or appropriation of cultural history in order to create a forced identity fitting for the global stage.¹¹ Yang’s practice and the cities he explores through his art

⁸ Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Cities on the Move,” in *Cities on the Move*, ed. Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist (Ostfildern, Germany: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997), 3.

⁹ Jan Stuart, “Hauntingly alluring: digital prints of Yang Yongliang,” *British Museum Magazine* 64 (2009): 46.

¹⁰ Lu Sheldon H, “Tear Down the City: Reconstructing Urban Space in Contemporary Chinese Popular Cinema and Avant-Garde Art,” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 149-150.

¹¹ Esra Akcan, “Reading ‘The Generic City’: Retroactive Manifestos for Global Cities of the Twenty-First Century,” *Perspecta* 41, Grand Tour (2008): 148.

mimic these ideas of the generic city.

Yang's technique and approach to photography and digital manipulation contribute to the overall influence of his work. He first finds source locations, takes photographs, compiles them into a large database, and separates them into different categorical groupings. After determining his desired imagery, he uses Photoshop for all post-production work to create his photo composites.¹² It is significant that Yang takes his own photographs, as this compels him to venture into the city and explore it himself. His images reflect the way he sees the city, rather than relying on found imagery. As composites, the final digital products cannot be considered as photographs in the traditional sense.¹³ He turns his images into objects, where the resulting prints achieve a multi-dimensional combination of photography's form and traditional aesthetics.¹⁴ This combination of formal and traditional aesthetics of form is mirrored in the imagery within his works.

This thesis investigates three of Yang's series ranging from 2007-2012 that utilize three distinct forms of cultural imagery to depict three specific cities. Chapter one will examine Yang's distinctive digital landscapes (数码山水 *shuma shanshui*) and explore how he uses traditional Chinese landscape painting to critique Shanghai's rapidly developing urban environment. This series is connected to Koolhaas's first definition of a generic city, where identity has become homogenized. To explore how the exhibition context of his works changes their level of criticality, three specific works that were later

¹² Robert Shore, *Post-Photography: The Artist With a Camera* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2014): 94

¹³ Barbara Savedoff, "Escaping Reality: Digital Imagery and the Resources of Photography," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 2 (1997): 210.

¹⁴ R. A. Suri, "Yang Yongliang: Field of Impermanence," in *Yang Yongliang*, ed. Bryan Collie, Louise Joel, and Mikala Tai (Melbourne: Melbourne International Fine Art, 2010), 18.

utilized in an environmental awareness campaign by the China Environment Protection Foundation (中华环境保护基金会) will be discussed. Chapter two will discuss his 2012 series *A Bowl of Taipei* (一碗台北), a five-print series that references the tradition of bonsai planting to depict Taipei. The visuals and reception of this series act as a subtle critique of mainland China's modernization and project Taipei through Koolhaas's second model of the generic city. Chapter three will discuss his 2010 series *Greece*, *Greece* (希腊, 希腊), where Yang combines composite images of contemporary Athens with photographs of dilapidated Greek column capitals. This series presents a more hopeful notion of how to interpret the contemporary city, as growing out of and being informed by the past. In the conclusion Yang's oeuvre is presented vis-à-vis larger issues concerning the globalization of art, and his potential future for contemporary cities is further explored.

CHAPTER II

OMINOUS TRANQUILITY: SHUMA SHANSHUI

Classical Chinese philosophy emphasizes the union of man and environment in search of harmony with nature. These themes are embodied in traditional Chinese landscape painting (山水画 *shanshuihua*).¹⁵ In recent years, numerous Chinese artists, such as Shi Guorui (史国瑞), Qui Anxiong (邱黯雄), and Yao Lu (姚璐), have combined new media, such as digital photography and video, with traditional Chinese landscapes in order to represent urban demolition and construction. In contemporary Chinese cities, it is impossible to avoid encountering urban ruins. Unfinished construction projects and vacated industrial buildings as well as extensive demolitions of older city buildings make urban ruin a familiar sight.¹⁶ These artists use the ancient form of landscape painting to evoke memories of older values and project criticisms of the rapidly developing city landscape.¹⁷ Their portrayed urban landscapes do not focus on harmony, like the original works of the old masters, but rather on the growing hostility between humankind and the natural world.¹⁸

This pointed reinterpretation of traditional imagery can be found in Yang Yongliang's digital landscapes (*shuma shanshui*). Yang replicates literati paintings,

¹⁵ *Shanshuihua* or landscape painting refers to a type of traditional Chinese painting that involves and depicts imagery and scenery of natural landscapes. The tradition rose to prominence in the fifth century and has continued to present day. Chinese landscape paintings have been connected to both Daoist and Confucian philosophies. For further discussion of themes within *shanshuihua* see footnote 52.

¹⁶ Chu Kiu-wai, "Constructing Ruins: New Urban Aesthetics of Chinese Art and Cinema" in *Modern Art Asia: Papers on Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*, ed. Majella Munro (London: Enzo Arts and Publishing, 2012), 1-2.

¹⁷ Lu, 140.

¹⁸ Chu, 16.

primarily from the Song Dynasty (960-1279), by digitally compositing contemporary photos of Shanghai – particularly the city’s skyscrapers, construction cranes, and demolition sites – in the same compositions. Yang’s use of Shanghai’s urban ruin reveals his intention to mourn contemporary China’s loss of man-nature unity and to raise awareness of the negative social and economic consequences of urbanization.¹⁹ One issue at the heart of Yang’s works is the essence of “building” – “the grey seriality, the repetition of the same, the proliferative and uncontrolled phenomenon of excessive urbanization, and the antagonistic relationship to nature which underlies it.”²⁰ This idea of a homogenized appearance is similarly stated by Koolhaas, where “the Generic City is fractal, an endless repetition of the same simple structural module.”²¹ This suggests that the homogenization of generic cities can be seen visually, with the propagation of the skyscraper as the modern global building mode.

Through his Phantom Landscapes, Yang critiques the urbanization of Shanghai as a catalyst to the neglecting of traditional culture and the harming of the earth. In 2009 Yang was approached by the Chinese Environment Protection Foundation (CEPF) to collaborate on an environmental awareness advertising campaign. The CEPF chose three extant Phantom Landscape works from previous series, which Yang re-edited to create a more specific eco-critical aim. Yang’s landscape appropriations directly follow older compositions in order to highlight the extent to which China’s contemporary values have changed. Adopting the landscape format in a new medium allows him to criticize urbanization and present his dual intentions of raising awareness of the loss of both

¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

²⁰ David Rosenberg, “The Mirror of Time,” in *Yang Yongliang: Landscapes* (Beijing: Thircuir, 2011), 8.

²¹ Koolhaas, 1251.

environmental integrity and traditional values in Shanghai. Yang Yongliang's *shuma shanshui* prints present one iteration of a generic city as proposed by Rem Koolhaas, where the city exists as a homogenized collection of skyscrapers, a city whose identity has been completely removed from the past.

The "Paris of the East" Returns

Yang Yongliang's art has been influenced by growing up in and around the city of Shanghai. As stated by the artist:

It affected me a lot, otherwise none of my works would exist....I moved to Shanghai in my twenties to go to university. In that period, Shanghai's urban development was peaking, and for me, the contrast between Jiading and downtown was huge, and I think this contrast is reflected in my work....Actually where I grew up has changed a lot, too, and this is bad because the place had an older and richer history, dating from the Song dynasty, than [that of] Shanghai, which is a young city compared to others in China.²²

Shanghai is often considered to be a young city because of its recent rapid development. Some see this rise as a "renaissance" of the city's cosmopolitan glory days of the 1920s and '30s.²³ Once a small city of regional importance, Shanghai became a treaty port in 1843 with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing which allowed British settlers to establish trading lines, most notably of opium. This opening up to Western influence changed the city and turned it into the infamous "Paris of the East" that was known for its cosmopolitan culture and art deco style. Because of the large number of colonial powers that controlled many districts within the city, Western architectural styles completely

²² Yang Yongliang, interviewed by Alessandra Alliaia Nobili, "Tearing Down the Past to Build the Future," *Art Radar*, January 1, 2013.

²³ Xiangming Chen, "A Globalizing City on the Rise: Shanghai's Transformation in Comparative Perspective," in *Shanghai Rising: State Power and Local Transformations in a Global City*, ed. Xiangming Chen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xvi-xvii.

altered the visual fabric. Shanghai of the 1920s and '30s was a Chinese city only by geography.²⁴

Because of this largely foreign influence, in the Maoist era (1949-76), Shanghai was seen as everything that the Communist party disliked. The party put forth a narrative of liberating the local population that had suffered under and silently struggled against the various dominations of both local and foreign oppressors, which included imperialist forces, Japanese colonialists, and the rival Nationalist party.²⁵ Puxi, the area of Shanghai west of the Huangpu River, was considered as the symbol of colonial Shanghai, due to the neoclassical, Neo-Gothic, and Art Deco architecture. The area was thus covered with anti-imperialist propaganda to demonstrate the city's change, an idea that presented Shanghai as a place of positive transformation. After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the city's growth remained stagnant as the central government preferred to delegate resources to the poorer interior cities. It was not until the 1990s that Shanghai again began to enter onto the world stage and exhibit another transformation, but one from local to global. This shift is exemplified in the creation and development of Pudong, which lies east of the Huangpu River. Previously an agricultural district that remained inaccessible to foreigners, Pudong now presents the new vision of China's future and the vanguard movement of the country's push to globality.

In 1999, President Jiang Zemin (江泽民) made a speech at the Fortune Global Forum in Shanghai where he spoke of the government's pride in the "Pudong miracle," stating, "Only six years ago, in this Lujiazui District of Shanghai's Pudong area...there

²⁴ Andrew Galbraith, "New Capitols of Capital – Shanghai: Looking Inward," *World Policy Journal* 28, no. 1 (2011): 27.

²⁵ Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Global Shanghai, 1850-2010* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.

were only run-down houses and farms. Now it is a vibrant modern financial and business zone, full of high-rise buildings.”²⁶ During this time, the skyscraper began to become the emblem of the new Chinese urban culture - the shift from horizontal to vertical.²⁷ This is directly paralleled by Koolhaas:

The Generic City is on its way from horizontality to verticality. The skyscraper looks as if it will be the final, definitive typology. It has swallowed everything else. It can exist anywhere: in a rice field, or downtown - it makes no difference anymore. The towers no longer stand together; they are spaced so that they don't interact. Density in isolation is the ideal.²⁸

This statement is even more illuminating when considering Pudong, an area that has literally changed from rice fields into an urban financial zone.

In contemporary China, the mounting urbanization of cities has caused an increased interest in the idea of the urban ruin. Beginning in the 2000s, artists' conceptual portrayals of city buildings advocate that the structures are not symbols of the nation, but rather the cause of destruction for traditional architectural treasures and historical sites.²⁹ Yang Yongliang seeks to reveal the consequences and implications of these buildings and Shanghai's urban environment, which connects to the changing ideals of urban Chinese culture.

Digital Landscapes as Contemporary Critique

Daoism puts forth the teaching that “landscape rules itself; it obeys its own laws of climate, geography and the seasons; laws of growth and decay determine the structure

²⁶ Michelle Tsung-yi Huang, *Walking Between Slums and Skyscrapers: Illusions of Open Space in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 103.

²⁷ Mark H. C. Bessire, introduction to *Stairway to Heaven: From Chinese Streets to Monuments and Skyscrapers*, ed. Mark Bessire (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2009), 5.

²⁸ Koolhaas, 1253.

²⁹ Xu Gan, “China Spectacle,” in *Stairway to Heaven: From Chinese Streets to Monuments and Skyscrapers*, ed. Mark Bessire (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2009), 71.

and relationship of its parts.”³⁰ Traditional Chinese landscape artists expressed the philosophical idea of the earth as a sacred body, taking inspiration from the sacred mountain and the dynamic movement of the vital *Qi*.³¹ Artists took the viewer beyond the realm of direct representation to a deeper level, where works were not based on a particular place at a specific time, but rather depicted a more macroscopic perspective in order to show the rhythms and laws of nature.³² In Chinese landscape painting, the human figure plays an important role, though human beings appear merely as dots on the landscape, increasing the sense of vastness in the composition.³³ With an unassuming presence human figures direct the viewer’s attention to the larger depicted natural world. They can also act as reminders of moral values, which reveal an aspect of the artist’s temperament and allow a deeper interpretation of the landscape.³⁴ These solitary figures may be representations of the artist, a dweller in nature, meandering and observing in order to learn and benefit from the harmony of the natural world.

Similar to his artistic predecessors, Yang Yongliang is not creating a true representation of what he sees, but is filtering the urbanized Chinese city through his personal prism, creating fragmented visions of modern life. Yang is a dweller and wanderer, but one of the city. In order to take photographs of city structures he must meander through Shanghai’s streets, learning about the new expanding and ever-changing urban landscape. Yet Yang’s wandering is not limited to a physical stroll

³⁰ Susan Clare Scott, “Sacred Earth: Daoism as a Preserver of Environment in Chinese Landscape Painting from the Song Through the Qing Dynasties,” *East West Connection* 6, 2 (2006): 80.

³¹ In Chinese philosophy, *Qi* 气 represents the circulating life force that is inherent in all things.

³² Chu, 9.

³³ An Jingfu, “The Pain of the Half Taoist: Taoist Principles, Chinese Landscape Painting, and *King of Children*,” in *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, ed. David Desser and Linda C. Erlich (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 120.

³⁴ Richard Barnhardt, “Figures in Landscape,” *ArtAsiaPacific* 42 (1989): 65.

through urbanized blocks and buildings, but also a metaphysical walk through the art historical imagery of traditional Chinese landscape painting.³⁵

One of the original three works selected by the CEPF, *Phantom Landscape II – No. 1* (曆市山水二之一) (2007) appropriates the composition of Qu Ding's (屈鼎) (active c. 1023-1056) *Summer Mountains* (夏山圖), a hand scroll from the Northern Song Dynasty (fig. 1). Yang's print is completely born-digital and created in photo editing computer programs through the layering, compositing, and editing of digital photographs that the artist takes of Shanghai. The artist crops the individual elements of the cityscape to make up a traditional composition. With this recognizable infusion of history, the work expresses an apocalyptic foreboding for the China of today.³⁶ This direct reference to the work of an ancient master makes his work all the more evocative for audiences familiar with the art historical tradition of the imagery. Viewers initially misunderstand the print as a traditional Chinese landscape, and only after close reflection do they discover its criticisms, where all of the figurative elements have been altered.³⁷

When viewed from a distance, the print mirrors the tranquility and contemplative nature of the original painting, beyond merely formal similarities like size and scale. Skyscrapers, layered, multiplied, and shaded in minute detail, recreate the elegant mountains. The upward thrust of repeated skyscrapers creates a sense of monumentality in the mountain form. The placement of dainty and diminutive construction cranes resembles the slight dots of paint that make up trees, rocks, and vegetation. The landscape appears to float on top of blank white ground, suggesting water, and the artist's

³⁵ Rosenberg, "The Mirror of Time," 6-7.

³⁶ Julia Tanski-Gilbert, "Phantom Metropolis," *ArtAsiaPacific* 76 (2001): 118.

³⁷ "Schoeni Art Gallery, In Conversation Series Part 9, Yang Yongliang," Youtube video, 7:22, posted by "Schoeni Art Gallery," April 11, 2013.

use of white spaces that move throughout the mountains resembles the misty, atmospheric qualities of traditional Chinese landscapes. The monochrome values evoke the diluted black ink wash of Qu Ding's scroll, while also reminding the modern Chinese citizen of the ever-present smog in China's cities. Yang even reinterprets the appearance of stamped seals and colophons, replacing the former with images of manhole covers and street grates, and the latter with a list of Shanghai subway stops.

Yang appropriates the arrangement and evocative quality of Qu Ding's landscape painting, yet the familiar elements are made from completely man-made structures, transforming the initially tranquil imagery into something more sinister. As curator Maxwell Hearn has argued, these works represent "an ominous reminder that nature often overpowers the human order, especially when mankind does not adequately respect it."³⁸ In placing an urban ruin aesthetic on traditional landscape imagery, Yang is emphasizing man's dislocation from the natural world.³⁹

In a second work selected for the CEPF advertisements, *View of Tide* (观潮) from Yang Yongliang's 2008 series *On the Quiet Water* (止水之上), the artist utilizes the same philosophical ideals as traditional Chinese artists in his conceptual goals (fig. 2). This work is directly copied from Zhao Fu's (赵黻 active c. 1131-62) *Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River* (江山万里图), a depiction of the Yangtze River from the Southern Song Dynasty. This print appears to be a traditional scroll in its expansive length that depicts both water and mountainous scenes. Throughout the print, skyscrapers make up

³⁸ Maxwell K. Hearn, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 106.

³⁹ As is further explained in footnote 52, this sense of dislocation may have also been found in the traditional landscape paintings.

scraggy mountain peaks and electrical towers create dense forests. This print utilizes photographs of water on the ground and cloudy skies in the background. When displayed in full and at a distance, the viewer would at first associate this work with China's landscape painting tradition. Traditional Chinese depictions of nature were never simply representations of the external world; they were instead cultivated landscapes that represented the mind and heart of the artist.⁴⁰ As the ideas behind *shanshuihua* are a combination of religious doctrine and philosophical thought, the paintings are not depictions of what the artist sees, but are instead an expression of the inner artist.⁴¹

Yang follows this tradition – his landscapes do not simply depict what he observes as he travels throughout Shanghai, but instead reflect his understanding and critical view of contemporary society. As Yang stated in an interview with The Creator's Project, "There are still many modern literati that use Chinese painting and calligraphy in search for his or her inner character...As long as the characteristics don't change, the media you use to express the art doesn't matter."⁴² While the medium has changed, the artist retains many similar elements of the original landscape paintings. He even replicates the specific traditional split-brush stroke (皴 *cun*), but through his digital layering. In pen and ink landscape painting, *cun* is both a method and an expression. Painters used the split-brush method as a way to shape the structure of mountains and to depict texture. In the hands of Chinese painters, the split-brush method became a stylized

⁴⁰ Sun Xiaoyan and Jing Lin, "Daoism and Chinese Landscape Painting: Implications for Education for Human-Nature Harmony," in *Transformative Eco-Education for Human and Planetary Survival*, eds. Rebecca L. Oxford and Jing Lin (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2012), 340.

⁴¹ Chu, 9.

⁴² Yang Yongliang, interview by Erica Huang, "Yang Yongliang Brings Chinese Landscape Painting into the 21st century," *The Creator's Project*, July 26, 2012.

practice and technique of depicting landscapes.⁴³ Yang Yongliang's *shuma shanshui* have the same visual characteristics of the split-brush painting method, with layers upon layers of photos adding texture and creating a new form. These works exist as a form of artistic appropriation, a distinct borrowing of formal composition.

Reflecting on the development of traditional Chinese art, one recognizes this notion of appropriation, where the determined imitation of predecessors and following of previous master Literati painters was an established practice.⁴⁴ This older form of appropriation (临摹 *linmo*), is a longstanding tradition in Chinese painting and considered a type of learning method.⁴⁵ Using *linmo* to replicate the style and composition of a previous artist “is to pay one’s respects to these predecessors, as well as to express one’s personal attitude and taste.”⁴⁶ Yang Yongliang follows this tradition by directly imitating the formal compositions of Song Dynasty landscape paintings. Adding to this is his use of photography, a medium that is art historically linked to issues surrounding the idea of “originality” through its inherent ability to be reproduced and altered.

In appropriating and manipulating traditional landscapes, Yang Yongliang emphasizes the changing relationships between humans and the natural world. Despite a strong interest in Western contemporary art in China, traditional landscape painting still

⁴³ Eric Lu, “Yang Yongliang: Synthesis of Digital Landscape Painting,” *MING* (June 2013): B116.

⁴⁴ Xiang Liping, “Copyleft: Appropriation Art in China,” in *Copyleft: Appropriation Art in China*, ed. Xiang Liping (Shanghai: 上海文艺出版社, 2015), 38.

⁴⁵ The four traditional methods of imitating Chinese art, ‘Lin 临,’ ‘Mo 摹,’ ‘Fang 仿,’ and ‘Ni 拟,’ all have their own emphasis. ‘Lin’ replicates gesture, ‘Mo’ replicates pattern, ‘Fang’ replicates form, and ‘Ni’ emulates impression. (Xiang Liping, “Copyleft Appropriation Art in China,” 52.) *Linmo* 临摹 is often translated as ‘to copy.’

⁴⁶ Xiang, 52.

holds a significant position within Chinese culture.⁴⁷ When viewers approach Yang's *shuma shanshui* prints, they initially see a landscape painting, yet when they move in closer and see the disparate elements that make up the composition, they realize it is a depiction of contemporary society. The messages behind these three works are more explicit because of Yang's appropriation of specific traditional landscape paintings. He criticizes Shanghai's urbanization for creating a degradation of the environment that results in a loss of traditional value in Chinese culture.

The third and final work selected for the CEPF collaboration, *Phantom Landscape II – No. 3* (曆市山水二之三) (2007), reveals Yang's critique of urbanization through his noted absence of human figures within city images (fig. 3). The imagery and composition for this work was taken from Xu Daoning's (許道寧) (c. 970-1052) *Fisherman's Evening Song* (漁舟唱晚圖), a Northern Song hand scroll. This print depicts a stark landscape of sharp, jutting mountain forms that are composed completely from skyscrapers and are heavily shadowed. The use of construction cranes and electrical towers is relatively sparse, furthering suggesting a barren landscape. Large white swatches within the composition mimic the typical ambiguity of space found in traditional landscape paintings, where the viewer is unsure where the landscape ends and how far it extends. Roads full of heavy automobile traffic peak out from underneath the mist. Xu Daoning's ancient scroll was a noteworthy painting for Yang to appropriate due to the handscroll's overt presence of the human figure. The fisherman in the center of the composition is surrounded by many other travelers, food sellers, and salespeople and "seems to be almost furiously, tremblingly intent upon his now clearly hopeless desire for peace and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 56.

quiet.”⁴⁸ This appearance of the human figure is notably absent from Yang’s iteration of the same scene.

In his composite, Yang removes the human figure, a constant element of Song landscape painting, and supplants it with a landscape of completely man-made elements. In traditional paintings, the placement of man-made architecture was executed with a reverent respect to nature, where the rocks, water, and trees were never disturbed by the presence of man. Art historian Susan Clare Scott maintains that there is no example of Song dynasty landscape painting where one can find evidence of nature being altered or disturbed.⁴⁹ Yang deviates completely from this tradition, presenting a landscape that represents the implications of human presence in the environment. No element of the work depicts something not changed or made by the human hand. The majority of structures included are from scenes of urban ruin, which follows the commonality of destruction in contemporary Chinese visual culture. These images point to both the physical demolition of the old city and the symbolic disintegration of the societal landscape.⁵⁰ Yang’s works are his critique of contemporary society as a site of disunity between humankind and the natural world. There no longer exists an appreciation for or understanding of nature or tradition.

Yang’s critique of urbanization can be most clearly perceived in his depiction of the “sacred mountain.” In ancient beliefs, the mountain “forms the pivot connecting human and sacred realms and was seen by Daoists as the place where primordial energy, *Qi*, was strong and refined, alive and breathing.”⁵¹ Yet Yang proposes that what is

⁴⁸ Barnhardt, “Figures in Landscape,” 64.

⁴⁹ Scott, 77-78.

⁵⁰ Lu, 137-138.

⁵¹ Scott, 75.

considered sacred in Chinese society has become altered.⁵² The idea of a modernized China – belonging to and participating within global dialogues – an idea represented by the skyscraper, is the new goal rather than harmony with the natural world. The skyscraper in China has become synonymous with modernity and a source of national pride. Yet as stated by artist and art historian Gan Xu, these skyscrapers should not be considered something to be proud of, but as “steles built atop the remnants of China’s 5000-year-old civilization.”⁵³ This interpretation relates to Koolhaas’s idea of intentional homogeneity in generic cities. While Koolhaas seems to present this idea as a potentially positive future, Yang takes a distinctly negative stand. In layering skyscrapers and buildings to recreate the mountain form, Yang represents the disintegration of China’s traditional thought and values in the contemporary city of Shanghai.

“Let the hills be hills and rivers be rivers”

As a longtime student and appreciator of *shanshuihua*, Yang Yongliang feels regret that China’s goal of modernization will result in a loss of the subtleties of Chinese culture. As Yang stated in an interview with the CEO of J. Walter Thompson (JWT) Worldwide, a multinational marketing company:

I think modernization is devouring everything at an ultimate speed, including history and culture, that is to say some humanities, and even a kind of kinship, a kind of human interest that Chinese people value so much. Such elements are now less and less. In my view, development is important. But I think we should think

⁵² It is important to note that historic examples of landscape painting presented “idealized” landscapes which often diverged from actual ecological circumstances at the time. Many scholars find within China a centuries-long intervention with the natural environment, something not depicted in landscape paintings. Thus the idea of harmony between man and nature may have always been somewhat mythic, and not in fact something that has been lost over time. This idea can be further explored in Xavier Ortells-Nicolau’s essay “Gray Pastoral: Critical Engagements with Idyllic Nature in Contemporary Photography from China.” The author specifically presents Yang Yongliang as a contemporary photographer that raises awareness of this traditional lack of human/nature harmony through his 2011 *Peach Blossom Colony* series.

⁵³ Xu, 70. Chinese characters unknown.

about retaining something behind the development, or protect something we should have originally, so as not to lose all traces of [Chinese culture] after a number of years.⁵⁴

This interview was a part of JWT Worldwide’s “Worldmakers” interview series, where the artist sat down with Bob Jeffrey, JWT CEO and Chairman and was asked questions about being an artist within China. The interview reveals connections between art and advertising, and how with increased use of technology in the arts, the distinctions between the two become blended and vague.⁵⁵ This sentiment is quite fitting for the dialogue between the artist and JWT because of their previous history. In 2009, Yang collaborated with JWT Shanghai on an advertising campaign with the China Environment Protection Foundation titled “Let the hills be hills and rivers be rivers” (山非山, 水非水), referencing the tradition of *shanshuihua* – *shan* (山) as mountain or hill, and *shui* (水) as water or river. The campaign included three of Yang’s works that he edited to highlight a more obvious eco-critical reading. The resulting three posters were placed in high visibility areas and subway stations around Shanghai. A corresponding video advertisement also played in People’s Square, one of the busiest subway stations in Asia.⁵⁶ He gave the prints new titles to correspond to specific environmental issues within Shanghai, with corresponding short poems about environmental protection tailored to fit the three respective themes.

The first work, *Phantom Landscape II – No. 1*, was retitled *Industrial Pollution*

⁵⁴ “Contemporary Artist Yang Yongliang on Worldmakers,” Youtube video, 5:22, posted by “JWTWorldwide,” September 5, 2013.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:40.

⁵⁶ “Seen+Noted:ShanShui,” *Campaign Brief Asia*, March 20, 2009. <http://www.campaignbrief.com/asia/2009/03/seennoted-shanshui.html>.

with the subtitle “Let the Hills be Hills and the Rivers be Rivers” (fig. 4).⁵⁷ With this work, Yang re-edited the sky to make it appear darker and smoggy. While he did leave some of the grates and manhole cover seals from the original work, some were changed to toxic signs and radioactive material warnings. The second work, *On the Quiet Water: View of the Tide*, was retitled *Global Warming* with the subtitle “Don’t Let Nature Come to an End” (fig. 5).⁵⁸ The changed seals take the form of weather reports and thermometer readings. He included a chart that shows the small, but significant, changes in temperature over the past decade. The third work, *Phantom Landscape 11 – No. 3*, was retitled *Automotive Pollution* with the subtitle “Leave Nature Alone” (fig. 6).⁵⁹ In this work Yang similarly re-edited certain parts darker, emphasizing smog, and added images of cars on the road, replacing the water of the original. The seals were replaced with a smoke mask and gas gauge reading empty. This campaign ended in 2009 and while it did win a number of awards, it remains unclear how effective it was in having any lasting impact on the general populace in Shanghai.⁶⁰

Yang had previously engaged with the advertising world when, after he graduated from school, he started an advertising business. Soon however the artist began to feel stifled by the field due to the highly competitive nature, subjected to customer’s desires,

⁵⁷ Translation of text paragraph in the print: Stop producing industry pollution and cherish nature. Nature is losing and will never be able to return. A steady flow is continuously entering heaven’s oceans and seas. Millions and millions of tons of industry is crippling the air and the water.

⁵⁸ Translation of text paragraph in the print: Protect the environment and treat nature well. The world will ruin humankind as humankind continuously destroys the earth. The glaciers are melting and the sea level is rising. After 50 years the world temperature has risen by four degrees. The earth’s natural resources are being continuously consumed.

⁵⁹ Translation of text paragraph in the print: Taking public transportation decreases pollution. Action toward protecting nature must start. Exhaust emissions measures in over six hundred million tons. The whole world in one year consumes forty hundred million tons of fuel. The rate of traffic has already been replaced by a sluggish flow.

⁶⁰ Yang Yongliang, interview with the author, Shanghai, China, September 7, 2015.

and the feeling of incessantly copying others.⁶¹ With Yang's past experience working in advertising and his dislike for the field, it is curious that he would choose to collaborate with such a high-profile advertising agency, despite the seemingly positive nature of the campaign. The purpose of the campaign as stated on JWT Shanghai's website was, "The China Environment Protection Fund wants to warn people with these impactful pictures, that if we don't take any more actions to reduce the environment pollution, there will be a day when all the beautiful landscapes will disappear."⁶² This goal is less effective when one considers the exhibition context of these works, which would have been displayed high above viewers' heads or from quite a distance. While the works' titles and nuanced changes presented a powerful message, the way viewers interacted with the works did not allow an intimate reading. Yang's works are often prefaced with a type of "if you dare to look close" mentality, arguing that the viewer needs to have that initial misunderstanding and the ability to closely examine the works.⁶³ When this opportunity is lost, the works aestheticize China's pollution and environmental problems harmoniously within a typical landscape composition.

Yang Yongliang's *shuma shanshui* directly borrow the style and rules of composition from *shanshuihua*, where "the image's moral and contemplative component is ultimately more important than its aesthetic quality," a sentiment more easily recognized when displayed in a gallery context.⁶⁴ Yet when the Phantom Landscapes were displayed more like advertisements, the monotonous seriality of his typical works

⁶¹ Lu, B116.

⁶² J. Walter Thompson: Shanghai, *Content related to Shan Shui/J. Walter Thompson Shanghai*. <https://www.jwt.com/en/shanghai/work/shanshui/>.

⁶³ For example, the article "If You Dare to Look Close – Yang Yongliang's Experimental Shanshui Photographs," written by Gu Zheng and published in *Chip Foto – Video Digital* in 2008.

⁶⁴ Rosenberg, "The Mirror of Time," 8.

was highly dramatized; the aesthetic appearance of the work overshadowed the intent of the campaign. There is a high probability that many Shanghai residents may not have realized this was an environmental awareness campaign, and rather viewed it as another advertisement, maybe even for an art exhibition. Despite the wider audience, the JWT commissions appeared less critical of the city's urbanization than in Yang's other Shanghai-based works. Rather than encouraging a focused interaction with a viewer, the three prints blended into the city landscape.

Yang Yongliang creates his *shuma shanshui* as a way of demonstrating that the traditional human understandings of nature and the natural environment itself are in danger of being destroyed by China's current goal of modernization through rapid urbanization. His photo composites appropriate traditional landscape paintings to show the threat to nature due to China's urbanization. Underlying his apocalyptic warnings and pleadings for environmental consciousness, Yang's artworks also imply a desire for a return to traditional Chinese aesthetics and values, where man-nature harmony can be restored. His use of the "serial monotony" of Shanghai's skyscrapers responds to the idea of a homogenized, generic city. Yet as evidenced by the CEPF environmental awareness campaign, his works need to be exhibited in such a way as to allow the viewer a period of quiet and close reflection to recognize the criticisms within the works.

CHAPTER III

A PLEASING URBANITY: A BOWL OF TAIPEI

In 2012 Yang Yongliang produced a five-part digital print series titled *A Bowl of Taipei* (fig. 7-11). The series was made for the exhibition “A Sprinkle of Salt” where the artist was asked to respond to the city of Taipei within his artwork. After his analysis of the urban space, Yang opted not to utilize his typical mode of representation, *shanshuihua*, but instead referenced a different traditional artistic form – a new mode for a different city. In this series, the artist coopted the visual imagery of bonsai gardens, a Japanese art tradition that originated in China, where a landscape is cultivated in miniature. Yang fused his typical photographic content with a visually different manner of stylization where architectural forms again merge with a natural landscape horizon but on a more miniscule scale.⁶⁵ Yang depicts a microcosm of Taipei’s urban fabric as a compact, yet dynamic, landscape within a bowl. However, rather than exhibiting a work that is ominous, foreboding, or hostile, terms attributed to his artificial landscapes, this series was described by both critics and Yang himself as “pleasing,” “picturesque,” and “tender”, terms that applied both to the aesthetic value of the works themselves but also to the way they portray Taipei’s urbanization.⁶⁶

The series, as exemplified in *A Bowl of Taipei No. 1*, is born-digital and composed of photographed imagery that is composited into a monochrome composition with a full grey background that has an ambiguous horizon line (fig. 7). At the center of

⁶⁵ Suri, 16.

⁶⁶ Personal email correspondence with the artist’s studio assistant; Curator’s essay in exhibition catalogue (page 11).

the composition lies a photograph of a bowl, which appears to be resting on some sort of surface. The porcelain bowl is decorated with what are recognizably Chinese patterns, geometric borders and floral imagery. Inside the bowl, Yang has digitally composed and inserted a small landscape scene based on the aesthetics of bonsai that is composed entirely of buildings and electrical poles in Taipei, the mountain forms made with skyscrapers and lower hills created from smaller buildings and advertisements. The mountain scene is situated to the left side of the composition, mirroring the asymmetry found in rock bonsai. Here the city and the natural scene created are not vast and monumental as in landscape painting, but rather are compact and meant for more intimate contemplation, contained within a bowl. By analyzing the five prints within the series as they relate to Taipei, the tradition of bonsai, and the context of creation, one can see that Yang Yongliang is producing not only a subtle critique of his own city, but also the larger Chinese model of urbanization. Yet the series also raises questions about the authenticity of Taipei when one considers the second model of the generic city, where “in spite of its absence, history is the major preoccupation.”⁶⁷ Rather than erasing references to the past, the city puts forth an adapted heritage and a generalized vision of cultural identity.

The City of Displacement

In order to best understand the various implications behind the series, it is important to first recognize the complicated position of Taiwan, both in the history of China and on an international scale. Taipei, like most major Asian cities, has drastically changed in recent decades. Marked by numerous scholars as a ‘city of displacement,’ the

⁶⁷ Koolhaas, 1256.

city, as well as Taiwan more broadly, has undergone many cultural, architectural, and economic developments that have changed the structure and urban fabric.⁶⁸

Beginning in the late nineteenth-century Taiwan became a part of Meiji-ruled Japan as decreed at the end of the Sino-Japanese War. The Japanese began an extensive colonial reorganization of the island, as Japanese rulers, having heavily studied Western colonial powers as a model to emulate, wanted to “outcolonize” these authorities.⁶⁹ This remaking included language reform, infrastructural changes, and massive urban planning and development, and Taipei became a city of colonial modernity. After World War II, Taiwan returned to Chinese rule, with the Chinese very suspicious of the previously Japanese Taiwanese citizens and the Taiwanese viewing their Chinese rulers as extremely uncivilized.⁷⁰ During the Chinese civil war, the Nationalist party (国民党 *Guomindang*), lost control of the country and had to flee the Chinese mainland to go to Taiwan. Between 1949 and 1950, two million mainland refugees fled the mainland for the island, significantly raising the previously small population to around eight million.⁷¹

The majority of these displaced Chinese citizens settled within Taipei, which was appointed the role of temporary national capital. The party leadership moved into the wealthy, formerly Japanese, neighborhoods while the rest of the population moved into crowded military housing (眷村 *juancun*) and makeshift hovels. These socioeconomic disparities were augmented by how the city was understood and defined, both as a temporary situation and as a bulwark of “Chineseness,” with the Nationalist government

⁶⁸ Joseph R. Allen, *Taipei: City of Displacements*, Seattle: University of Washington, Press, 2012; Shih-wei Lo, “A Palimpsest of ‘Faits Urbains’ in Taipei,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 52, no. 2 (1998): 68.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

claiming to possess the ‘true’ Chinese culture. The National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院) was held up as a symbol of this ownership of authentic Chinese culture.⁷² When the Nationalist party moved to Taiwan after losing the civil war to the Communist party, they took a large portion of the collections in the Imperial Palace Museum at the Forbidden City and placed them in the National Palace Museum of Taipei. Thus Taiwan, and more specifically Taipei, formed in orientation towards the mainland, but because of increased international trade, maintained an independence and developed a unique urban character.⁷³

The state has continued to push this ideology of authentic Chineseness, controlling both definitions of past history and how the past is interpreted today, especially when Taiwan is viewed by foreign groups.⁷⁴ Since the 1970s, the state has heavily intervened throughout Taiwan by imposing a formed worldview on the urban landscape, reinforcing cultural and political policies through monumental and “bombastic” urban iconography.⁷⁵ In order to put forth Taipei as an “international” city, built with Western and Japanese materials, and a product of capitalist modernity, the state puts forth an understanding of the city as being dominated by architecture that is either traditional Chinese or modern, either the temple or the skyscraper.⁷⁶ Yet these modern development projects entail massive demolitions of older neighborhoods. While government authorities champion this new construction, community groups are more

⁷² Ibid, 11.

⁷³ Shih-wei Lo, “A Palimpsest of ‘Faits Urbains’ in Taipei,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 52, no. 2 (1998): 68.

⁷⁴ Hung-Jen Tan and Paul Waley, “Planning through procrastination: The Preservation of Taipei’s cultural heritage,” *The Town Planning Review* 77, no. 5 (2006): 531.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 532.

⁷⁶ Allen, 41.

aware of the erasure of longstanding communities and focus on the created euphemism of *chaiqian* (拆迁), or “demolish and move.”⁷⁷

Thus the architectural fabric of Taipei presents a palimpsest of the city’s urban growth and history. Yet this urbanity is related to a form of urban fiction, something created both by the forces of state politics and the trends of liberal capitalism.⁷⁸ Political changes, colonization, and acculturation have markedly changed Taipei over the last decade and created many different modes of urbanity.⁷⁹ Yang Yongliang, in approaching the city from his outside mainland perspective recognizes these interesting dichotomies and histories in the urban fabric of the city.⁸⁰ In his exploration of contemporary Taipei, the artist chose to represent the city’s urban landscape through bonsai appreciation.

Bowls and Bonsai

A Bowl of Taipei is based on both the visuals and ideological principles of bonsai, *penzai* or *penjing* (盆景), the Chinese and Japanese art of miniature gardens that are made with trees or rocks. The *penzai* tradition has existed in China since before the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), but it was not until the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) that a strong interest in the art of replicating natural landscape scenery in a miniaturized scale appeared. The name for this at the time was *xiezijing* (些子景), or miniature scene, where

⁷⁷ Yomi Braester, “If We Could Remember Everything, We Would Be Able to Fly: Taipei’s Cinematic Poetics of Demolition,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 15, no. 1, Special Issue on Taiwan Film (2003): 31.

⁷⁸ Hou Hanru, “Acting Out in the City: Artistic Intervention as Production of Public Space,” in *Now is the Time – Art & Theory in the 21st Century*, ed. Jelle Bouwhuis, Ingrid Commander, et al. (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009), 77.

⁷⁹ Lo, 68.

⁸⁰ For more information about the cultural fluidities between Taiwan and mainland China, see Aihwa Ong’s *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logistics of Transnationality* from 1999.

the ‘small’ element did not reference the diminutive size, but rather the depiction of a natural scene on a microcosmic scale.⁸¹ During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1644 and 1644-1912), the practice developed further with direct homages to Song dynasty landscape painting and a cohesive artistic concept. At this time there also emerged the practice of using matching containers and stands to further the harmonious aesthetic effect.⁸²

This tradition began in China and merged over to Japan early in history as the two countries have a long history of interaction. Antagonism still exists between Chinese and Japanese bonsai artists as both cultures claim to have initiated the practice. As stated in *The Chinese Art of Bonsai and Potted Landscapes*,

In China, the development of the art of *penzai* and *penjing* was seriously disrupted and impeded towards the end of the Qing dynasty due to internal disturbances and foreign invasions. Meanwhile, Japanese bonsai artists were making serious and dedicated efforts to promote the art which in time developed into a national hobby. Moreover, they were promoting the art of bonsai internationally... In more than half a century’s time, the art of bonsai had spread to almost every country in the world... Because recent hobbyists the world over have acquired their techniques from Japan, there has arisen the misconception, widely held, that the art of bonsai ‘originated in Japan.’⁸³

Based on this statement, it is noteworthy that Yang refers to his practice as relating to bonsai, fully aware of the complicated relationships between Taiwan, Japan, and China. As stated by the artist’s assistant, “A Bowl of Taipei reminds us of bonsai appreciation, seeing the big world on a small scale. Taipei embraces modern invention while preserving Chinese traditional heritage. Its pace of development is pleasing. ... When Yongliang presents landscapes in bowls, the ‘small’ of Taipei could be seen in a large

⁸¹ Y.C. Shen, Beulah Kowk Sung, and C.B. Sung, *The Chinese Art of Bonsai & Potted Landscapes* (San Francisco: Unison Group, Inc., 1991), 22.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 25-29.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

content.”⁸⁴ Thus Yang is connecting the Japanese term of ‘bonsai’, as well as the ideological connections, to the urban fabric of Taipei under the guise of ‘pleasing development.’

Bonsai is a direct transliteration of *penzai*, Chinese for a potted plant or tree that is aesthetically pleasing and has been cultivated to appear aged. Yang’s prints in this series, like *A Bowl of Taipei No. 5*, appear more similar to *shuishi penjing* (水石盆景), also called *shanshui penjing*, or potted landscape featuring mountains and waters, where natural rock acts as the main medium of artistic expression (fig. 11).^{85 86} Within Yang’s print there is less emphasis placed on replicating forests or vegetation, and more focus on compact mountains made from layered skyscrapers. This version of the *penzai* family directly references the compositional elements and conceptual understandings of Song Dynasty landscape painting. As Zheng Yinshu (郑银淑), a scholar from the 1940s stated, “Cultivating a *penjing* is like painting a picture. Every single detail branch and twig has to be tended very carefully, not to mention the overall design... Let something small capture the effect of what is far bigger.”⁸⁷ As Yang Yongliang is extremely familiar with traditional Chinese landscape painting from his *shanshui* works, the use of bonsai, *penzai*, and *penjing* aesthetics is perhaps a natural progression for the artist.

In *A Bowl of Taipei No. 2*, Yang again utilizes the characteristics explicated in the introduction, but with different details (fig. 8). The bowl depicted is more angular and is decorated with stylized dragons. Its imagery is reflected onto the surface underneath. This

⁸⁴ Personal email correspondence with the artist’s studio assistant.

⁸⁵ Shen, 35.

⁸⁶ Zhao Qingquan, *Penjing: Worlds of Wonderment – A Journey Exploring an Ancient Chinese Art and Its History, Cultural Background and Aesthetics* (Athens: Venus Communications, LLC, 1998), 58.

⁸⁷ Shen, 35.

print is slightly more symmetrical, with the mountain mass still skewed to the left but depicted frontal. On either side of the mountains is extremely dense foliage that connects to the edge of the bowl (fig. 12-13). The appearance of clouds throughout the series is analogous from the rest of Yang's oeuvre. Clouds depicted in other landscape scenes of Yang's often represent smog and air pollution. Here the clouds are pure and white, more reminiscent of traditional depictions of landscape. This use of clouds is also noteworthy in *A Bowl of Taipei No. 5*, which seems to replicate the appearance of a *boshanlu* (博山爐) incense burner (fig. 11). *Boshanlu* became popular in the Han dynasty and were designed to make the rising incense smoke appear like clouds around a mountain peak. This mountain peak surrounded by water and mist was a reference to the realm of the immortals.⁸⁸ The visual components of *boshanlu* can similarly be seen in Yang's print, almost suggesting that Taipei is an iteration of this immortal realm. This provides a subtle critique of China's treatment of nature as compared to Taiwan's. It also responds to the Nationalist rhetoric that Taiwan is the true authority of Chinese culture. These two concepts of nature and culture are strongly connected in Yang's works, as the artist associates environmental degradation with a loss of traditional heritage. With this series, Yang alters his practice to include more traditionally harmonious elements in his depictions of Taipei.

Beyond visual similarities, the prints in this series are conceptually inspired by *penjing*. A *penjing* display is thought of as a miniscule space where one "can create a world of mountains, streams, rocks, trees, and thatched homesteads half hidden in groves

⁸⁸ Susan N. Erickson, "Boshanlu: Mountain Censers of the Western Han Period: A Typological and Iconological Analysis," *Archives of Asian Art* 45 (1992): 16.

of green trees. The objects are always in the proper perspective, even the unfilled spaces are deliberate, forming part of the scenery and evocative of what is not immediately visible.”⁸⁹ These multiple perspectives and the ambiguity of space can also be seen in Yang’s works, which are meticulously detailed and require precision in his aesthetic choices. Within *A Bowl of Taipei No. 5*, Yang utilized photographs of shorter buildings at the base of his created mountain, while tall skyscrapers were placed towards the peak. This visually reads as a tall mountain, despite the compact scale and conforming to the container’s shape.

In *A Bowl of Taipei No. 4*, Yang again presents a constructed depiction of Taipei through landscape formed of urban structures (fig. 10). This print in the series has a more realistic scene of the city, where short, orderly buildings are placed in conjunction with a larger mountain (fig. 14). The landscape at the foreground of the bowl is slightly sparser, with squat buildings placed upon a grassy area. The mountains in the background, while small within the larger composition, are understood as a monumental form due to this juxtaposition of scale. This compact representation of the city harkens back to *penjing*, which were made for tabletop contemplation. Scale is a very integral part of *shanshui penjing*, as the small rocks had to be symbolic of the monumental mountain, and thus the smaller elements had to be carefully selected to best create that distance.⁹⁰ Thought of as microcosms of nature placed on a desk or in a studio, a potted landscape provided an intimate vehicle for a personal understanding of nature. Thus the *penjing* created an interesting duality of scale, seamlessly moving between miniscule and monumental. Yang’s *A Bowl of Taipei No. 4* similarly reaches this contrasting level of scale, by

⁸⁹ Ibid, 30.

⁹⁰ Zhao, 59.

depicting the miniature buildings of the city next to the misty mountain.

With the use of vast distances and digital blurring, *No. 4* mimics the ambiguity of space that landscape *penjing* attempt to achieve. While the landscape is contained within a small bowl, lighter mountains appear behind the central composition that extend back to a further distance, suggesting a deeper presence of space than the foreground indicates. A shrinking of scale and atmospheric blur cause the viewer to understand this space as a far off distance. A blurring effect is also seen in the details of the bowl below, which is sufficiently clear to read yet remains hazy when compared to the sharp lines and clear forms of the digitally constructed landscape. The clarity of the manufactured element of the composition and the blurriness of the real artifact create a sense of hyper-reality where it is unclear what is real and what is imaginary.

The containers of bonsai and *penjing* were just as important as the cultivated scene, as only a perfectly combined duo could be considered a true work of art. “When a specimen begins to assume a certain aesthetic shape, it is most important that a container of the right shape is found to complement the plant.”⁹¹ The choice of bowl in *No. 4* creates an interesting juxtaposition, showing a decorative scene representative of China’s feudalistic past, albeit a pastoral idealization. In an interview with the author, Yang noted that originally China and Taiwan were both agricultural, but began a move towards urbanization as the influence of Western countries increased.⁹² This dichotomy is found in *No. 4*, where the feudal past is juxtaposed with the buildings of a contemporary city. Yet while the tradition/modernity trope in Yang’s works is often presented negatively, as in the modern is a destructive element to traditional culture, the composition of this print

⁹¹ Shen, 106.

⁹² Yang Yongliang, Interview with the author, Shanghai, China, September 9, 2015.

is relatively serene. This subtly acknowledges the authenticity of Taiwan's Chinese heritage and also provides insight to Taiwan's less harsh treatment of the natural world.

The five digital prints in this series combine the aesthetics and ideological ideals of traditional *shanshui penjing* practices with constructed microcosms of Taipei's urban landscape. Yet when comparing these works to Yang's previous samplings of traditional Chinese aesthetics in his "Phantom Landscapes," it becomes clear that these works are functioning in an extremely different way. Rather than presenting an ominous depiction, the *Bowl of Taipei* series celebrates the city's urbanity.

To Do Yet Never Overdo: A Sprinkle of Salt

A Bowl of Taipei was made for inclusion in an exhibition titled *A Sprinkle of Salt* (鹽少許). The exhibition, which featured the works of Shanghai-based artists Yang Yongliang and Shi Zhiying (石至瑩), ran from December 5, 2012 to January 13, 2013 at MOT/ARTS gallery, a subsidiary of MOT, or the 'Mall of Tomorrow,' a larger department store complex located in the Zhongshan district of Taipei. As a larger middle class emerges within the Asian economic system, the model of a gallery in a mall has become extremely common. Mathieu Borysevicz, the founder and director of BANK gallery in Shanghai remarks that "contemporary art in China is categorized within the realm of luxury goods...now the malls themselves have taken the initiative to embrace contemporary art."⁹³ It would thus not have been unusual for this exhibition to be in a department store setting within Taipei.

⁹³ Ali Pechmen, "Next to Burberry, a Monet: Galleries in Shanghai combine shopping and exhibitions," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2014.

The exhibition was co-sponsored by the Shanghai-based James Cohan Gallery and curated by Shanghai-based curator Zoe ZHANG Bing (張冰). In the exhibition's catalogue Zhang opens her essay with a reference to Yuan Mei's Qing Dynasty treatise of cooking titled *Suiyuan Shidan*. The curator explains how the guidelines of cooking relate to living in contemporary society to present the theme of a "Sprinkle of Salt": "to be brief yet complete, to be short yet meaningful, and to do yet never overdo."⁹⁴ Zhang further states, "by skillfully contrasting different sets of dichotomies without falling into the trap of overstatement – to do yet never overdo – both artists' works readily embody a classic teaching of the Chinese culinary masters – a small sprinkle of salt is all that is needed, anything more and you risk indulgence."⁹⁵ Zhang is presenting these artworks as similar to how one approaches a perfect culinary feat. By comparing this idea to contemporary society, she puts forth the idea that the urbanization of Taiwan can be considered in a similar way, not overdone but just right.

The many elements of this exhibition present some compelling questions that complicate an understanding of this series. The use of bowls from the National Palace Museum's collection is a noteworthy choice because of the complicated status that the museum has with mainland sensibilities. This choice is connected to the claim previously mentioned of the Nationalists authority over a 'true' Chinese culture based in part on their possession of historical and valued Chinese antiquities. The five bowls that Yang chose to photograph for this series are each representative of a different period of Chinese history, again suggesting that perhaps Taipei retains more Chinese culture than Chinese

⁹⁴ Zoe ZHANG Bing, "A Sprinkle of Salt," in *A Sprinkle of Salt: Exhibition of Shi Zhiying and Yang Yongliang* (Taipei: MOT/ARTS, 2012), 10.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

cities themselves.⁹⁶ In Tan Hung-Jen and Paul Waley's investigation of the changes of Dihua Street in Taipei, they discovered that historical scenery was preserved "not only as something that was meaningful to the development of Taipei as an international metropolitan city, but also as important to all its citizens in terms of establishing and sharing a common history."⁹⁷ Whether or not the Taiwanese citizens that lost their communities would agree with this statement, Yang presents an idea that Taipei has become an urbanized city through more harmonious means, able to appropriately maintain traditional culture while still staying relevant in a contemporary international scene.

Because the series is titled *A Bowl of Taipei* and is understood as a microcosm of the city, it must be asked what truly makes this a scene depicting Taipei? While the photographed buildings are from Taipei, the bowls from a museum located in Taipei, and the series exhibited in Taipei, there is no one resounding visual element that makes the viewer immediately recognize the works as a representation of the city. If this series is interpreted as a purposeful championing of Taipei's urbanization over Shanghai's, then why is the visual language of Taipei not more prominent? In "The Generic City," Koolhaas discusses the overwhelmingly similar characteristics of cities worldwide. In the beginning of the essay he puts forth the idea of 'generic' as the representation of identity, where "these similarities express current authentic articulations of life and that any *individual* identities of cities – derived from clichés and artificial resuscitation of their

⁹⁶ As stated by curator Zoe ZHANG Bing in the exhibition catalogue, *A Bowl of Taipei – No. 2* depicts a blue and white porcelain-ware from the Ming dynasty. *A Bowl of Taipei No. 3* includes a dishware from the Huairen Kiln of the Jin dynasty. The exact origins of the other three bowls are not stated.

⁹⁷ Tan, 540.

histories – are relatively inauthentic.”⁹⁸ Thus the lack of a historical identity is not what makes a city generic but rather is the appropriation and overt pushing of that identity. Koolhaas’s contemporary generic city has a distinct identity, but this identity imprisons and resists both expansion and variation of interpretation, an idea that can be extrapolated onto Taipei.⁹⁹

The exhibition “A Sprinkle of Salt” is an interesting context for *A Bowl of Taipei* once the myriad connections and nuances of curatorial and artistic choices are isolated. Examining the specific details found in the five works of the series raises questions of whether this ‘pleasing’ development of Taipei that has been depicted is truly as harmonious as is pushed by both the artist and by the exhibition promotional materials. While Yang Yongliang is upholding Taipei as the better urbanized city, the Taiwanese city still exists within the frames of the generic city

Yang Yongliang is strongly affected by the easy and quick erasure of historical tradition and visual culture. As stated by the artist:

I was born in a historical town called Jiading, in the town there was an ancient pagoda whose history could be traced back to the Song dynasty, it looked like a dream to me. Along with the gradual modernization of the town, little changes ensued, one day the old pagoda was replaced all of a sudden by a brand-new tower with white paint, and the surrounding streets were also gone, replaced by new streets with archaistic decorations. History became nil in a split second, what was left was pompous ornaments with ancient replication; this kind of stupid restoration really makes my heart ache.¹⁰⁰

As seen from this quote, while a loss of culture is striking, the artist is even more sensitive to the appropriation of culture as used by a higher power for some disingenuous

⁹⁸ William S. Saunders, “Rem Koolhaas’s Writing on Cities: Poetic Perception and Gnomonic Fantasy,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 52, no. 1 (1997): 67.

⁹⁹ Akcan, 147.

¹⁰⁰ Mikala Tai, “In Conversation: An Interview with Yang Yongliang,” in *Yang Yongliang*, eds. Bryan Collie, Louise Joel, and Mikala Tai (Melbourne: Melbourne International Fine Art, 2010), 26.

purpose.

In his series *A Bowl of Taipei*, Yang Yongliang coopts the aesthetic principles and ideological concerns of *bonsai/penzai/penjing* miniature gardens to depict the urban landscape of Taipei. Comparing these five prints to his earlier landscape imagery of Shanghai, the bowls of Taipei contain a more serene, pleasing quality, rather than suggesting an ominous future. Created for display in Taiwan, and exhibited, co-sponsored, and curated by individuals from Shanghai, the series can be read as a subtle critique of his home city's rapid development. The artist presents Taipei as a preferred model for how a city could harmoniously maintain traditional culture and stay current with international trends. Yet the push by Taiwan's government of their true 'Chineseness' could create in Taipei a forced and inauthentic identity, thus moving in the direction of Koolhaas's generic city.

CHAPTER IV

POTENTIAL HARMONY: GREECE, GREECE

Yang Yongliang's print series *Greece, Greece* diverges from his Asia-based works and focuses on the dichotomy between modern and ancient Greece. The four-print series was inspired by the area's history and the architecture of Greek cities, most notably within Athens. In *Greece, Greece*, Yang's combination of ruinous Greek column capitals with congested city buildings again manifests his belief that contemporary cities actively destroy classical architecture, which represents a loss of a nation's unique culture. Yet by presenting the composite urban imagery as following the lines and forms of the capitals, he presents a potentially hopeful future where contemporary development can grow out of but remain informed by history in a positive way.

Yang created the series while participating in a residency program held by the second Thessaloniki Biennale in 2009. This chapter will examine how the internationalization of economic and political spheres in urban cities is mirrored in the art world through the rise of the biennial. In recent decades the biennial model has started working in a vein similar to that of the generic city by either presenting universally generic art or by promoting each nation as a unique place through the pushing of appropriated branded identity. Other critics see the globalization of the art world as a positive and necessary development of late modernity that creates a greater inclusion of art practices.¹⁰¹ Yang's practice incorporates these two views; his focus on distinct

¹⁰¹ Okwui Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form," in *The Biennial Reader*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø (Bergen, Norway and Ostfildern, Germany: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), 428.

localities within his works presents the artist's push against a homogenizing art world while placing his practice in various cultural significances, which corresponds to his opinions of the contemporary city.

Greece's Historical Loss

In the four born-digital prints of the series, Yang merges photographs he took of classical Greek column capitals found in abandoned plazas with images of the congested city buildings of modern-day Athens.¹⁰² Yang employs ruined capital fragments as symbolic representations of traditional Greek culture, while modern city buildings and construction cranes embody the consequences of modernization and urbanization. The decay and erosion call to mind the current-day pollution that is eating away the marble or stone buildings in Athens, and his works act as a plea to preserve these artifacts and the culture they represent.¹⁰³

In recent years, the natural environment of Greece has been influenced by rapidly increasing motor traffic, expansion of industrial activity and tourism, and uncontrolled urban development.¹⁰⁴ As stated by a national state of the environment report by the National Centre for Sustainable Development, the cities with the highest air pollution issues and traffic noise problems are Thessaloniki and Athens.¹⁰⁵ As Greece has recently experienced large economic expansion and development followed by extreme collapse, large pollutants and vehicle emissions have begun to contribute to the phenomenon of

¹⁰² Personal email correspondence with Yang Yongliang's studio assistant, January 27, 2015.

¹⁰³ Yang Yongliang interview, *Art Radar*.

¹⁰⁴ Basil D. Katsoulis and John M. Tsangaris, "The State of the Greek Environment in Recent Years," *Ambio* 23, no. 4/5 (1994): 274.

¹⁰⁵ "Greece," *European Environment Agency*, <http://www.eea.europa.eu/soer-2015/countries/greece>.

acid rain. This has significantly damaged the cultural heritage sites made of marble, such as the Acropolis, transformed by the acid rain into soft gypsum that is easily and inevitably ruined.¹⁰⁶

While many people associate Athens with national monuments and classical antiquity, it is important to note that Athens today is in fact a dense, sprawling city. Architectural structures from antiquity are integrated into the city, effectively swallowed by the urban sprawl. The ruins of architectural elements remain today, either as small segments or as entire buildings, affecting the urban fabric of the city.¹⁰⁷ Athens may not be characterized by imposing skyscrapers like Shanghai or Taipei, but Yang felt similar feelings of cultural loss and despair as he wandered through Greece's cities.¹⁰⁸ His chosen format of combining photographs of urban sprawl with recognizable Greek capitals signifies his mixed feelings toward the contemporary city and desire to hold on to the city's crumbling historical ruins.

Expanding Growth from Dilapidated Ruins

As stated by art historian Wu Hung, "there are two different approaches in remembering and describing a ruined city. In one approach, the city is an externalized aesthetic object for contemplation and longing; in the other the viewer stays inside the city and constantly experiences the decay."¹⁰⁹ The first approach juxtaposes the present day viewer with the past city to elucidate a feeling of nostalgia while the second puts the

¹⁰⁶ John Mink, "Top 5 Endangered Heritage Sites – Acid Rain," *CyArk*, January 9, 2009, <http://www.cyark.org/news/top-5-endangered-heritage-sites-acid-rain>.

¹⁰⁷ Alice Schmatzberger, "Pictorial City: Chinese urbanism and contemporary Photography," *Yishu* 10, no. 6 (2011): 47.

¹⁰⁸ Yang Yongliang interview, *Art Radar*.

¹⁰⁹ Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 211.

viewer inside of the city to experience the continuous ruination.¹¹⁰ Yang Yongliang's series *Greece, Greece* combines both of these approaches by connecting a symbol of ancient Greece with imagery of the contemporary city. This presents Athens as a city where modern buildings are growing out of and taking over the traditional architecture of the past. Yang presents damaged Grecian column capitals as a nostalgic harkening to the past. Ruins can embody symbolic value, where a broken structure is upheld as a cultural treasure.¹¹¹ Ancient Greece is a foundational culture of Western civilization, and these feelings of antiquity and nationality visibly persist in the presence of the Greek architectural ruin. The word 'Greece' evokes for many the image of classical antiquity, temples and marbles, the memory of ancient battles, and a remembrance of the origins of democracy.¹¹² Classical ruins have become an aesthetic marker of Greece's cultural conception. The ancient ruin is embodied with the character of the Greek nation.¹¹³

The first print in the *Greece, Greece* series, *Greece I*, is the only print that does not depict a column capital, but instead shows a truncated Ionic column base (fig. 15). As this was the first print of the series, the use of a base may have been an intentional choice to show the foundation of the capital, and thus the foundation of Greek culture. This print depicts a damaged column capital, as evidenced by the slight pockmarks on the shaft and crumbled sections of the base. Yet the most visually interesting ruin imagery of the column appears where the shaft has been unevenly shortened. This is hidden from the viewer by the overwhelming mass of city buildings on top of it (fig. 16). The appearance

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (New York: Rodopi, 2004), 120.

¹¹² Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press), vii.

¹¹³ Ginsberg, 114.

of streetlights, construction cranes, and electrical towers seen along the apex of the composite section also suggest a notion of growth. The mass of buildings does not have an immediate stop, but has small reaching elements that suggest continual growth, destroying the traditional culture that it ultimately depends on. It is important to note that none of his works depict human figures in the city streets, showing Athens in intensifying isolation, despite the large number of people the city contains.

The second print, *Greece 2*, depicts a severed Ionic capital with only the smallest section of the left volute replaced with city structures (fig. 17). The column has lost the grandeur of its original form, and now survives in a decrepit state. The body of the upper column is heavily damaged, with many cracks and gouged out sections, suggesting pollution damage or lack of preservation. The appearance of Greek writing on the side of the column shaft further connects to Greek nationality, making its deterioration all the more powerful (fig. 18).¹¹⁴ As cultures predominantly make sense of the world through the system of meanings that is associated with language, the written word can be read as another symbol of cultural identity.¹¹⁵ This is particularly true for both Greece and China, where written language visually ties the nations to cultural systems of the past. In this column, the inscription is still mostly intact, with small sections blurred by damage. While the column can be recognized as Greek with the appearance of volutes and Greek script, the ruinous state and illegibility of the written inscription represents a loss of or neglect of Greek identity.

¹¹⁴ According to Classical art historian Jeffrey Hurwit, the script is not able to be fully translated due to damage, but is a dedication made by the “demos,” or the people or the state, in honor of someone’s “arete,” meaning excellence or virtue. The dedication is Athenian and the serifs suggest a dating of the Roman period. It is likely from the Athenian agora.

¹¹⁵ Nick Papastergiadis, “The Limits of Cultural Translation,” in *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, edited by Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art), 335.

Yang's *Greece 4* is the fourth print in the series and initially appears visually whole, despite the altered urban section, as the modified section is organized and edited to mimic the lines and shadows of the capital (fig. 19). The column capital is a variation of the Corinthian order, with acanthus leaves at the bottom surrounded by taller palm leaves. The capital is in ruinous condition, with various sections either gouged out or having roughened edges. The city section is composed of buildings, streetlights, construction cranes, advertisements, and parking garages that replace the original lost section. The stone capital and the urban photo composite fuse together with photographs of grass. This emulates a sense of natural growth, yet the dry, colorless quality of the grass and the overwhelming mass of buildings placed above it negate this perception. While the capital and buildings are both architectural forms, the former is in a state of deterioration while the latter in a state of congested growth. This strengthens the visual idea of the city not only growing out of this traditional culture, but also in turn being built over it. Yet the use of foliage suggests the potential for a more positive urban growth.

The third print in the series, *Greece 3* depicts an ornate Corinthian capital with deep recessed shadows and ruinous damage typical of an old column (fig. 20). In this print the entire left volute and capital top is removed, and the lighting is especially important. The protruding sections of the capital, like the middle acanthus leaf and the right volute are shown in lighter grey values as the result of the light source. The shadows underneath the volute and in-between the acanthus leaves are contrastively quite dark. While there are sections of damage, the contrast between the dark shadows and the highlighted areas dramatizes the appearance of the capital. Many of the elements typical of Corinthian column capitals remain intact, acting as a strong visual reminder of Greek

culture and identity. The ruined stone capital is an architectural symbol of Greece and inspires a universal aesthetic appreciation and understanding.¹¹⁶

In this print, Yang uses a different visual device to connect the two sections, which suggests a more harmonious interaction between the two. Rather than using foliage, the city section mimics the lines and forms of the capital. Yang has manipulated the city section to very clearly follow both the shape, value, and light of the capital's top and volute. As this print maintains almost the full imagery of the original capital, the juxtaposition between the two appears more hopeful. The growth of the city is kept in check by the form of the found capital, suggesting that the capital and city buildings are met in compromise. The lack of foliage in the print furthers this idea; the composite city is not growing over the traditional architecture, but is rather growing in a symbiotic relationship with tradition.

Throughout the series, Yang depicts classical architectural ruins and pits them directly against urban ruin aesthetics. In these two works, the photos of Greek columns are left more intact, strongly making a visual connection with tradition for the contemporary viewer. The copying or repeating of well-known art forms throws the historical order of memory into disarray.¹¹⁷ This along with the pairing of disparate imagery creates both spatial and emotional disorder, creating in the viewer both surprise and unease.¹¹⁸ The juxtaposition of classical and modern architecture creates a strong and obvious contrast, making an easily readable opinion of the harmful effects of

¹¹⁶ Paul Zucker, "Ruins: An Aesthetic Hybrid," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 2 (1961): 119.

¹¹⁷ Boris Groys, "On the New," in *Copyleft: Appropriation Art in China*, ed. Xiang Liping (Shanghai: 上海文艺出版社, 2015), 28.

¹¹⁸ Chu, 10.

urbanization on traditional culture. Yet by utilizing vegetation in the junctures of connection and using the form of the column capitals to inform the shape, shading, and design of the urban composite, there creates a subtle suggestion of a harmonious potential where contemporary development and change can retain some cultural authenticity.

Thessaloniki Biennale: The Rise of a Generic Biennial?

Yang Yongliang's hopeful future for contemporary cities can be mirrored in a hopeful future for the art world when examining his practice in the context of the biennial exhibition. Just as I have argued for two models of the generic city, the first that embodies the erasure of traditional culture to present a homogenized urbanity and the second that coopts historical heritage and appropriates it for the purpose of national branding, there is a similar phenomenon happening in the art world through the rise of the biennial.

The series *Greece, Greece* was created in conjunction with the second Thessaloniki Biennale in 2009 which was titled "PRAXIS: Art in Times of Uncertainty." Yang Yongliang participated in the Young Artist's Workshop which had the subject "Multi-culturality: The Same Place – Other Times." The Biennale, established in 2007, is co-sponsored by the State Museum of Contemporary Art and the Ministry of Culture of Greece, the goal of which was "to place Thessaloniki and Greece in the international network of contemporary art biennales."¹¹⁹ Yet the Biennale organizers also state, "Thessaloniki is far from the European centers of art distribution (such as sponsors, companies and private persons investing in contemporary art) [which] gives the Biennale the freedom to encourage and attract new avant-garde ideas and eventually contribute to

¹¹⁹ *Biennial Foundation*, "Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art," <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/thessaloniki-biennale-of-contemporary-art/>.

the actual development of art, not to its recycling.”¹²⁰ This desire to make clear the event’s difference from other similar art fairs and distance physically from similar art contexts is a result of current criticisms of the general internationalization of the art world. This is due to what some see as a mirrored push towards the generic in the art world, where globalization in the form of biennials homogenizes artistic culture, production, and display.¹²¹

While the exhibition context reveals a corresponding generification within the art world, Yang’s works still retain some hope for the future. In *A History of Chinese Contemporary Photography*, David Rosenberg reflects on the ideal of hopeful interaction between the contemporary city and tradition, “to destroy is not to annihilate. Chipping away at a sculpture, an edifice or a book will not penetrate the underlying ideas beneath them.”¹²² The four prints in the series simultaneously show an unceasing growth of the contemporary city out of and over the traditional ruin, while remaining informed by the composition of the capitals. In his series *Greece, Greece*, Yang is offering a potential harmonious future of cultural understanding, where tradition and modernity peacefully and productively co-exist, and perhaps eventually even thrive.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 16.

¹²² David Rosenberg, *A History of Chinese Contemporary Photography* (Paris: Galerie Paris-Beijing, 2012), 10.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Recently, many scholars of contemporary art have criticized biennials as international mega-exhibitions that represent “the total institutionalization of the practice of art.”¹²³ The international fair’s largely global pretensions create a new form of generic contemporary art and art practice based around the idea of nation branding that is largely controlled by a curator, rather than an artist. The biennial brings local artists on to the global stage, whose countries’ pavilions and artworks present a label of cultural identity that serves as a point of distinction. Art historian Pamela M. Lee argues that the biennale has recently become a place for nation-states to culturally present themselves as able and worthy for entry into the global economy.¹²⁴

A mega-exhibition like the Thessaloniki Biennale, which exhibited Yang’s *Greece, Greece* follows in the trend noted by curator Okwui Enwezor and problematized by art historian George Baker of post-war biennials existing in places that have had traumatic historical ruptures, which Enwezor suggests exist as a positive place that works towards democracy and development.¹²⁵ Baker responds to this by insisting that the emergence of a biennial denies “the magnitude of historical loss through a false euphoria of plenitude.”¹²⁶ While the Thessaloniki Biennale by and large avoids discussing Greece’s recent economic downturn and large loss of cultural heritage from economic

¹²³ George Baker, “The Globalization of the False: A Response to Okwui Enwezor,” in *The Biennial Reader*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø (Bergen, Norway and Ostildern, Germany: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), 449.

¹²⁴ Lee, 13.

¹²⁵ Enwezor, 434-435.

¹²⁶ Baker, 450.

degradation, works like Yang Yongliang's remind viewers of the local context. Yang's series *Greece, Greece* presents the nation's current situation in a stark manner in order to bring viewers' attentions to the external issues surrounding the biennial exhibition. This series, when understood in conjunction to his Shanghai-based *shuma shanshui* and his series *A Bowl of Taipei* presents Yang Yongliang's insistence on locality even within an internationalized art context. Beyond merely focusing on specific cities, each city retains its own form and composition that speaks to the nation's current climate. The practice of locality and specificity of form presents the artist's desire to avoid being placed within the homogenization/differentiation dichotomies.

In 1961, philosopher Paul Ricouer wrote,

We come to the crucial problem confronting nations just rising from underdevelopment. In order to get on to the road toward modernization, is it necessary to jettison the old cultural past which has been the *raison d'être* of a nation?...Whence the paradox: on the one hand, it (the nation) has to root itself in the soil of its past, forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revendication before the colonialist's personality. But in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past.¹²⁷

Ricouer's statement precedes the binaries found in both Yang's artworks and theorizations of the contemporary city as proposed by Rem Koolhaas. This thesis attempts to approach these issues as having potential resolutions and discourses beyond mere dichotomies. Yang's three series – his Shanghai-based *shuma shanshui*, *A Bowl of Taipei*, and *Greece, Greece* – ruminate on the situations of three contemporary cities. His *shuma shanshui* prints present one iteration of the generic city, where traditional heritage and cultural identity have been erased in order to be relevant and engaging in a global

¹²⁷ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson LTD, 2007), 314. Quoting Paul Ricouer from his 1961 essay "Universal Civilization and National Cultures."

context. *A Bowl of Taipei* presents the second iteration, showing how a city can become generic when it appropriates its own cultural inheritance and pushes this identity in an inauthentic manner. Finally, *Greece, Greece* presents the artist's desire to diverge from these binaries by bringing his focus on locality and specificity to an international biennial exhibition. While his prints are often presented as foreboding warnings, I suggest that they ultimately present the artist's hope for a more harmonious future where contemporary cities can only thrive if they acknowledge and respect tradition.

APPENDIX: FIGURES



Fig. 1. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *Phantom Landscape II – No. 1* 蜃市山水二之一, 2007. Epson UltraGiclée print on Epson fine art paper, 60 x 146 cm. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 2. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *On the Quiet Water: View of Tide* 止水之上: 观潮 (section), 2008. Epson UltraGiclée print on Epson fine art paper, 45 x 1000 cm. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 3. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *Phantom Landscape II – No. 3* 蜃市山水二之三, 2007. Epson UltraGiclée print on Epson fine art paper, 60 x 276 cm. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 4. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, China Environmental Protection Foundation, JWT Shanghai. *Industrial Pollution*, “Let the Hills be Hills and the Rivers be Rivers,” 2009. Digital print. Reproduced from *Ekostories*, <https://ekostories.com> (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 5. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, China Environmental Protection Foundation, JWT Shanghai. *Global Warming*, “Don't Let Nature Come to an End,” 2009. Digital print. Reproduced from *Ekostories*, <https://ekostories.com> (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 6. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, China Environmental Protection Foundation, JWT Shanghai. *Automotive Pollution*, “Leave Nature Alone,” 2009. Digital print. Reproduced from *Ekostories*, <https://ekostories.com> (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 7. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *A Bowl of Taipei No. 1* 一碗台北之一, 2012. Epson UltraGiclée print on Hahnemühle Traditional Photo Paper, 150 x 150 cm. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 8. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *A Bowl of Taipei No. 2* 一碗台北之二, 2012. Epson UltraGiclée print on Hahnemühle Traditional Photo Paper, 150 x 150 cm. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 9. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *A Bowl of Taipei No. 3* 一碗台北之三, 2012. Epson UltraGiclée print on Hahnemühle Traditional Photo Paper, 150 x 150 cm. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 10. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *A Bowl of Taipei No. 4* 一碗台北之四, 2012. Epson UltraGiclée print on Hahnemühle Traditional Photo Paper, 150 x 150 cm. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 11. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *A Bowl of Taipei No. 5* 一碗台北之五, 2012. Epson UltraGiclée print on Hahnemühle Traditional Photo Paper, 150 x 150 cm. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 12. *A Bowl of Taipei No. 2* detail. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 13. *A Bowl of Taipei No. 2* detail. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 14. *A Bowl of Taipei No. 4* detail. Reproduced from *Yang Yongliang Studio*, yangyongliang.com (accessed May 26, 2016).



Fig. 15. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *Greece, Greece – Greece 1* 希腊, 希腊 – 希腊之一, 2010. Epson UltraGiclée print on Traditional Photo Paper, 120 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 16. *Greece, Greece – Greece I* detail. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 17. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *Greece, Greece – Greece 2* 希腊, 希腊 – 希腊之二, 2010. Epson UltraGiclée print on Traditional Photo Paper, 120 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 18. *Greece, Greece – Greece 2* detail. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 19. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *Greece, Greece – Greece 4* 希腊, 希腊 – 希腊之四, 2010. Epson UltraGiclée print on Traditional Photo Paper, 120 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 20. Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, *Greece, Greece – Greece 3* 希腊, 希腊 – 希腊之三, 2010. Epson Ultraciclée print on Traditional Photo Paper, 120 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

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