

**Fluidity and Shelter
on Mulan River - Cuò**

By Bao Dong

*The Mulan River Project, named after the river that runs through their hometown, is the most important art project by brothers Chen Yufan and Chen Yujun. The project has been exhibited three times: in the 2011 solo exhibition *Mulan River Project*, the 2012 *Mulan River—Unsettled*, and in the 2013 exhibition *ON|OFF China's Young Artists in Concept and Practice*, where their work *Mulan River | Home* was the largest artwork featured in this group exhibition. This new exhibition is an extension of this artwork.*

As the name implies, the *Mulan River Project* is rooted in a rustic awareness and local experience. The rustic awareness stands as distinguished from urban life. Under the urban-rural divide of today's China, most Chinese people face and deal with these two systems of experience which stand as reference points for each other yet grow increasingly tense. Beyond the rural/urban relationship, this modern tension also contains a "native/foreign", "domestic/international" or "China/West" relationship. This series of tensions is not merely a spatial relationship, but more so a temporal one which touches on multiple narrative dimensions of modern time such as modern and pre-modern, advanced and backward, new and old.

This is not limited to the *Mulan River Project*. The individual practices of the Chen brothers, and even all of Chinese contemporary art, should be considered against this backdrop. In the *Mulan River Project*, Chen Yufan and Chen Yujun have entered into a vast questioning mentality using concrete individual experience as an entry point. Every time they return from the big city—first Hangzhou, now Shanghai—to their old home at Yuantou Village, along the Mulan River in Fujian Province, these conceptual issues are a visceral experience. In fact, this all began with *Lunar January*, which they created while returning home for Spring Festival in 2007. In this work, their hometown and family became artistic material, and a reference for reexamining and reorienting contemporary art practice.

Contemporary art has long been seen in China as a foreign, Westernized, international affair, and is often unthinkingly tied to such banners of "advancement" as modernity, cities, technology and consumerism. Art under this notion can never gain generative capabilities

within the totality of experience, and can only move in successive tides that leave emptiness in their wake. Art has never existed outside of the here and now. Though under the expo and biennale system of today's global art, we see increasing signs of the danger of dislocation, the weight of experience will always bring specific art practices back to the ground, particularly at the moment it needs to grow. The Chen brothers' turn to the rustic and the local is remedying something that has always been there but always been overlooked, through which they can grasp a total structure of experience.

On this level, the region's status as the ancestral home for many overseas Chinese allows them to avoid falling into the oversimplified "local/international" dichotomy, and given them a fluid field of vision from the very outset. It must be stressed here that this fluidity is not just the fluidity between China and the West that has been taking place since modern times. In fact, the cultural fluidity between China's interior and periphery has never ceased. In the *Mulan River Project*, we see an inscription on a doorway arch which reads, "goodness flows from the Yin River." The Chens of central Fujian believe that their ancestors hail from Yinchuan, Henan Province, and gradually made their way towards the southeastern coast in the chaos that followed the fall of the Eastern Han dynasty. Most of these clan migration stories cannot be verified, but the Chinese people ascribe to this idea of "fluidity." Thus, the migrations into the South China Sea since the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the overseas business ventures since the reform and opening, are not so "modern" after all, just fluidity across a wider space. In this sense, **the Mulan River refers to that local geographic position, while also symbolizing a fluid cultural space.**

This concept of "fluidity" is not only manifest in the Chen brothers' content and subject matter, but more importantly, it brings a new understanding of their working approach to art. In the *Mulan River Project*, their focus has shifted from the artwork at the fore to the background dimension which gave rise to the artwork, the cultural and conceptual background, as well as the material and production practice. Thus, a key property of the Mulan River Project is its reframing of the entire chain of artwork production and exhibition. Those components that were once cut off by the "frame" or the "plinth," those things that serve as process and conditions, such as sketches, photographs, castoff materials, packaging materials and exhibition spaces, and the relationships between all of these elements, are treated as language that can be selected and deployed. In this sense, the *Mulan River Project* is a continuing art project, rather than a series of individual artworks.

As people generally understand contemporary art today, there is nothing new about viewing art as a system, and project-oriented art practices are not rare, but most of the time, such artistic practices are established on a starting point of rejecting and criticizing issues within the

art system. Such practices remain within the realm of a presupposed artistic self-discipline—even if it is expanded to the self-discipline of an artistic social system. In comparison, Chen Yufan and Chen Yujun's *Mulan River Project* is directed not at problems within the art system, but instead gradually expands outwards along a “natural/ethical order” from individual to clan to nation to the world. The artistic methodology and language shift with this process, and the specific artworks and projects grow out of it.

In the *Mulan River Project*, each instance of growth is specific, a response, adjustment and breakthrough in regard to specific circumstances. For example, in the *ON | OFF* exhibition, the artwork *Mulan River | Home* used the form of a building facade to assemble a series of units consisting of shipping crates. Many of the details in the structure are inextricably linked to the architectural traits of Fujian Province. The shape of the entire facade was based on a large cross-section of the Ullens Centre exhibition hall, its sheer mass and height creating a form of distant viewing. This ritualized vision made this instance of the *Mulan River Project* resemble something like the memorial arch from Fujianese culture, bestowing it with archetypal monumentality. In the latest exhibition plan for *Mulan River | Home*, the shipping crate units are scattered across the exhibition space, and the audience is placed on a raised walkway, where their gaze can wander about the scene, or stare down from above. The entire space resembles the ruins of a city or courtyard compound. This adjustment from memorial arch to courtyard is at once an adaptation to the exhibition space and an active experiment in ways of seeing. Here, *Mulan River | Home* presents two dimensions that have always been encompassed in the name: fluidity and shelter.