

Between Land and Sea: The Aesthetics of Diasporic Ecologies An Interview with Paolo Shuai Peng

Qian Liu
The Ohio State University, USA
liu.12199@osu.edu

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Cultivating Chinese celery in a suburban canal in Reggio Emilia (painted and provided by Paolo Shuai Peng)

Introduction

At the core of Paolo's artistic exploration is the concept he terms "economadism," where he endeavors to challenge its epistemic boundaries from the art world. Drawing inspiration from philosophers such as Deleuze, Guattari, Braidotti, and many others, he explores in his artworks how the term "nomadism" can serve as a transformative lens, offering new perspectives when considered as inherent to both the natural environment and the cultural, anthropological, and psychological facets of human beings. The first time I met Paolo was during his solo exhibition *Geneulogia* (2023) in the Galleria Atelier in Rome, when I was traveling throughout Italy for my research projects on the African diaspora in Italy and urban ecologies.

Qian Liu: *Let's start the conversation by your background and career trajectory. What sparked your interest in art and what motivated you to pursue a professional career as an artist? How did your family's migration from China to Italy impact and shape your artistic journey?*

Paolo Peng Shuai: I want to divide my career into three phases. Since childhood, I've always liked drawing, particularly with the chalk found on the kindergarten floor. Then my mother enrolled me in a local painting training school. Though initially enjoyable and exciting, in a few weeks, I found that their rigid teaching styles were not what I expected. Their teaching, based on the post-Soviet traditions still prevalent in China then, became stifling. I frequented this extracurricular school from age six to nine, always resisting what I perceived as a tedious and even torturous training process. My initial passion, including multiple contacts with contemporary art, or more specifically, "drawing," turned out to be a somewhat imprisoning pursuit.

The second period I am referring to, in which my engagement with art was more direct and profound, started around 2004, when I joined my family in Italy at the age of nine. My mother wanted me to become a successful artist, and Italy was, for her, the ideal place for this career. At that time, my understanding of the profession was quite limited. All in my mind as a child was basic techniques and how to become famous in the future. But once arrived in Italy, I encountered many challenges about integration, especially at school, where I was bullied several times by my Italian classmates. Later on, my drawing became the only means to gain respect from my peers and teachers. I even won a painting prize for "my" city, Reggio Emilia, in a competition as part of an art initiative between the sister cities, Reggio Emilia and Fort Worth in Texas. Afterward, a local newspaper from Reggio Emilia, ironically, introduced me as "a young artist from Reggio Emilia born in Italy," so they mistook my country of origin. Since then, I have always thought about the questions of migration and identity and how artistic expression can complicate our understandings.

QL: *What marked the third phase that you just mentioned?*

PPS: The third moment was my studies at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, in Milan, when I tried to abandon what I'd learned from Chinese and Soviet academism and find my artistic style. During this period, the issues of migration and identity became a central theme throughout my artwork. Questions of who I am and where I am going were integral to my creative process. I think we should not consecrate the notion of history as a fixed and transcendental entity but one that continues to transform and suggest new meanings and interpretations. This is how history moves forward. For me, art is a mirror of both personal and societal narratives, revealing the traumas of the present and the past. It's not new to say that in addition to its aesthetic function, art is also socially engaged. It is now an essential part of my life. It is my language, my tool through which I express my thoughts.

QL: *For migrant artists, the concept of “identity” often serves as a guiding principle. At the same time, individual artworks invariably carry collective and societal implications. Yet, in your recent pieces, you’ve taken this inquiry to a less common terrain by exploring the intersection between migration and ecology. I’m curious about why you became interested in this and what this shift means. How do you navigate ecological concerns within the context of your own diasporic identity, your family, and the Chinese community in Italy? In this way, art assumes a dual role: a powerful mirror for self-reflection and self-expression and a dynamic platform for artists like yourself to experiment with new ontological and epistemological ideas.*

PPS: I believe that, for every migrant artist, the inquiry into identity is more like a mental habit than a specific guideline. It is inevitable to ask ourselves, first of all, who we are and where we truly belong. Personal stories influence our identities. And abstract or generalized political or philosophical concepts cannot replace experiences and memories. In my opinion, succumbing to such notions would risk flattening singularities and our unique stories, for everyone’s lived experiences change constantly and thus need particular historicization. For example, citizenship is a callous and restrictive thing for those living a nomadic life, especially those from the Global South. At eighteen, I could have claimed Italian citizenship, but I refused because I didn’t want to give up my Chinese citizenship. Instead, I obtained an unlimited residence permit [*permesso di soggiorno*]. I have been away from China, my place of origin, for a long time, and Italy has become a nurturing land for me. But I always feel like a foreigner in Italy, always being “in-between.” I have grown up with both languages and cultures, which, in turn, gives me such a unique experience. Usually, we take this status as a geographical one, which I think is also a temporal metaphor. This “threshold” can span from sunrise to sunset, or to the period of adolescence—a period in which a child is still growing but has not yet become an adult. These periods of unknown duration—we have no idea how long they will last—may change their forms in the next second or remain in the same state for a long time.

My artwork thrives within this invisible gap. It focuses on change and mobility and is always ready to adapt to a new host body. Following Italian designer Enzo Mari, my art resembles a “tireless designer” who continuously adapts to its surroundings. Mari believes that our brain’s vast planning capacity extends beyond conventional functions, considering the broader context even when seemingly unrelated to a specific project. For him, just as all living beings face the principal challenge of death and life, decisions are instantaneous, and survival is contingent upon finding solutions.

So, I wonder whether the human way of “acting” would also find an echo in the plant world. How can we approach migration from an ecological perspective? What would be the epistemological convergences between identity and environmental crisis? As an artist, I have been influenced by many theorists and philosophers, such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Gilles Deleuze, Gilles Clement, and the recent Italian botanist Stefano Mancuso. I would say that the answer seems affirmative. I’ve

started a new artistic journey and shifted the focus of identity crisis towards a posthuman and planetary level.

QL: *I appreciate how you approached the meanings of being nomadic and in-between, which is not just about spatial but also temporal. After all, the term “becoming” itself suggests the progression of time, encapsulating moments of crisis that, as you just pointed out, are beyond our control and often of uncertain duration. This perspective opens up a refreshing mode for thinking creatively about the parallels or connections between human beings and plant worlds. How did you experiment with the concept you termed “Economad” in your works?*

PPS: My work so far has pertained to a notion that I would call “Economad,” which should not be understood simply in a geographical sense as a movement from one place to another, but as an inquiry into the environmental, cultural, anthropological, and psychological dimensions of nomadology. With this perspective in mind, I seek to redirect my attention toward the broader living world. When we talk about ecology, we typically focus on a biological community of specific species of animals, plants, and microorganisms that exist within a particular natural environment and are interdependent. As the French philosopher André Gorz tells us, ecology involves the interconnection between man and nature, in a continuous exchange. However, when we talk about human migration, we often overlook the mobility of many other entities, such as bacteria.

QL: *And in the context of migration and diaspora, how did you grapple with the human-nature dualism prevalent in Western European worldviews?*

PPS: With “Economad”, I aim to underline the phenomenon of multispecies interactivity and the intrusion, or rather contamination, of an alien species into an existing territory. This phenomenon is based on both unconscious and conscious actions of humans or other living species. The term functions as a verb and is post-identitarian—a process wherein we trace multiple transformations and senses of belonging, each contingent on its specific position and growth conditions. Therefore, we must try to map and question the alternative cartographies of our non-unitary selves, as suggested by Rosi Braidotti. This approach rejects any notion of entirely unitary subjects or completely belonging to a certain place, advocating instead for a worldview of coexistence and cohabitation on the planet with other forms of life. This perspective challenges the anthropocentric concept of sustainability, shifting away from a vision where human beings remain dominant over nature. Instead, it embraces a geopolitical understanding of nature where social and ecological concerns are intricately intertwined. This viewpoint takes shape in a “sympoietic” dimension that acknowledges the otherness of all the agents sharing the same destiny on the planet.

QL: *Thank you for your insightful reflections on the concept of Economad. Could you briefly discuss the role of natural locations and landscapes in your art practices? I am*

very interested in this because some of your recent works have been created in outdoor settings.

PPS: The choice to engage with the land and the natural environment arises primarily for personal reasons. Two years ago, I worked only in an indoor setting—my home studio in Milan where I created all my materials. But I then felt a disconnection with the external natural world. At the same time, I was very close to my partner, which also played a crucial role. She grew up amidst the sounds of roosters and birdsong far from urban settings. In 2021, I spent lots of time in her place, the Oltrepò Pavese, immersing myself in its diverse landscape and observing it—wild expanses, the banks of the Po River, and an artificial terrain formed by agricultural fields for intensive cultivation.

This intimate relationship with nature all started with a naïve gaze. Initially, I closely observed the life cycle of corn, from its growth to harvest, until, in 2021, soybeans largely replaced corn cultivation in that area. The newcomer transformed the land into beautiful golden fields, in strong contrast with the Po River banks. This spectacle inspired me to delve deeper into why the glycine max (soybeans) and another wild plant, artemisia argyi, were introduced into this territory. So, my exploration expanded to consider the historical, biological, and economic aspects. In this context, observation involves our eyes, becoming therefore a visual universe. It is thus necessary to differentiate between various visual methods through which we formulate cultural and social linkages with the landscape. Different modes of gaze and seeing have followed one another and coexist in understanding landscapes across the planet's surface. These distinct views thus give “landscape” a true spatial complexity. Living in this spatial complexity is like living within an artwork in a continuous and dynamic exchange between nature and culture. And I am nothing more than a quiet observer who seeks to learn from this ongoing dialogue.

QL: *What you just said reminds me of Jean Luc-Nancy's famous sentence, “the landscape begins with a notion.” Rather than a stable ground with defined contours, “landscape” implies an openness whose meanings are contingent on and shaped by the unknown and the unexpected. In this sense, I would say that the presentation, or in your case as an artist, the creative representation of landscape, resonates with the idea of “dis-location,” evoking a subjective sense of “uncanniness.”*

PPS: I agree with Nancy's perspective. This prompts me to reconsider the landscape not as a mere empty stage awaiting human imagination and intervention. As Tim Ingold says, it is itself “animate,” in the sense that it embodies a multitude of beings animated by different impulses and movements, each bearing intentions and stories. This transforms it into a dynamic entity, an unstable world in which human beings actively participate. I would also like to add that landscape is an integral geography, both physical and human, where plants, animals, humans, and their trajectories and projects, along with environmental factors such as soil conditions, temperature, light, and shadow intertwine, separate, and overlap in a complex web, echoing Latour's notion of “entanglement,” rather than a neatly organized or hierarchical system. In

my video series where I engage directly with nature, particularly with the natural landscape in Italy, I seek to be part of this dynamic and unstable system where it is always possible to generate new ways of existing. What is at stake here would be the disjunction between my cultural origins and the adopted Italian culture. Within this context, I always struggle to establish a fruitful connection between the two.

QL: *Can you give us an example of how you create such a “meaningful connection?”*

PPS: A few months ago, in September 2023, I created a public work, *Moving Garden*, during a residency at Villa De Sanctis in Colle di Tora. The Villa is gorgeous. It is a typical Italian garden established in the last century. This is a literally “nomadic” project that includes a physical platform of foreign, namely, Chinese vegetation that can move through various cities. In this case, the cultivation of foreign vegetation becomes a minor presence and suggests a potential resistance. During the residency, I grew five kinds of plants of Chinese origin in my garden: coriander, chives, bok-choy, facing Heaven pepper, and artemisia argyi. All these plants are considered as wild plants that do not require special care and can survive under any climatic conditions. Their adaptability to new territories resonates symbolically with the death and survival of immigrants once they arrived in foreign lands.



Paolo Shuai Peng is moving his movable garden through the streets of Colle di Tora (photo credit: Emanuele dell’Aglia)



Colle di Tora's local residents gather to visit Paolo's moving garden (photo credit: Emanuele dell'Aglio)

QL: *How precisely did the term “nomadic” work in this project?*

PPS: I found the last plant I mentioned, *artemisia argyi*, near the Po River while I was walking alongside. *Artemisia argyi*, also known as wild wormwood, has been neutralized for centuries in Europe. Originating in China, Korea, Mongolia, Japan, and the Russian Far East, its medicinal properties were first documented in Liang dynasty, almost 1500 years ago. Even today, in my hometown—Hunan province in China, there is still a tradition of eating sweet *artemisia* dumplings during the Qingming festival.

After the exhibition's inauguration, I invited visitors to join on an itinerary through the town of Tora before returning to the exhibition, where I cooked Hunan cold noodles using the plants I had cultivated. While roaming the city with my mobile garden, many locals stepped to me out of curiosity and even helped me push the “moving garden” to the town center. So, this becomes, indeed, a participatory and collective act. After the residency, I left the remaining plants in my garden to the two ladies who had hosted me, and they plan to plant them in their garden after this winter. On a more personal level, this project was also inspired by my father, who twelve years ago had planted Chinese celery near a peripheral canal in Reggio Emilia. For me, my father's act was highly creative, evoking also deep nostalgic feelings. Both my and my father's creations thus imply an ongoing process.

QL: *You mentioned that your choice of working directly with nature is a personal one. Your father also inspired your last work “Moving Garden.” Have there been any artists whose works have influenced you over the years?*

PPS: During my earlier years at the Brera Academy in Milan, one of the migrant artists who inspired me was Huang Yongping, the founder and one of the most provocative artists of the Chinese avant-garde movement, Xiamen Dada. His work really struck me. His *The History of Chinese Painting* caught the attention of the French curator Jean Hubert Martin, and he invited Huang to participate in the exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*, in Paris. A year later, Huang obtained French citizenship. Obviously, in terms of migration, colonialism and orientalism, the French context is quite different from the Italian one. We can see that the topic of West-East collision becomes central in Huang's works. This has been a question in those days but is still unresolved today. His diverse artistic practices involve various issues such as religion, identity, immigration, colonialism, history, and critiques on institutions. What struck me the most is his unwavering stance against art history, especially the Western art system. He tried to decolonize what we call "art history" today as a concept and a discipline.

QL: *Have you participated in any collective projects recently?*

PPS: Currently, I am not involved in any collective project. However, in 2019, I co-founded the artist group ALSO with three other Chinese artists—Cheng Hongtao, Huang Zejian and Yin Shaoqi. Our inaugural exhibition took place at the *Ri-levante* exhibition in an industrial building in Milan, followed by exhibitions in Piero Manzoni's former studio and in Laurentiu Craioveanu's studio in Lodi, in the Lombardy region. Two of them returned permanently to China after graduation, so our projects have remained on hold until now.

QL: *As we wrap up our conversation, would you like to share some of your future plans?*

PPS: For now, I am focusing on expanding Economadism, trying to figure out how to transform my thoughts into specific artistic projects. All of this involves visiting outdoor locales and working hard in my home studio, in the north-east of Milan. In the meantime, I'm now working two part-time jobs, both art-related, to survive in a big city like Milan. For a researcher-artist who intends to resist the marketability of their artworks and not to be influenced by it, maybe the question of how to support yourself by doing serious work while also maintaining your originality becomes perhaps fundamental. I hope to find a new home with a larger workspace, and move from Milan to the Oltrepò Pavese, a quiet, clean, and more affordable place. I want to be closer to the Pò River, where I fell in love.