

Social Botany

This project starts with the Tanka community but extends to examine the land ownership and use rights in our current global context.



About the project My proposal is to continue work on my project, Social Botanyâ€œLand and Turf. This is part of the Keywords Laboratory series. I have established a relationship with a number of groups in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) of China: farmers and especially the Tanka people who live on the river. The conversations that I have with individuals in these groups and my interest in expanding my research to other groups is the core of my current art practice. Started in 2012, Social Botany is a research-based project using my Keywords methodology to combine social studies and artistic practice. One of the past studies was made in an area of the PRD, Guangzhou, where the Tanka people live. The Tanka people are from the traditional fishing villages of Southern China. They have lived on boats and the water for hundreds of years, therefore they are unable to own land. After 1949, the Tanka people underwent a significant change. They moved into an agricultural life, possessing land-use rights, but they lost the rights again in the 1980s, so they had to go back to living on the water. The latest problem they face is the increasing pollution of their water environment. The Tanka people are losing their basic living, and they have to discover a new way of life. Using my show at OCAT in Shenzhen, which included workshops with activist students and urban farmers, I brought the plight of the Tanka people to their attention and generated lively discussion on the theme of land-use. I propose to continue to do deeper research on the land issues of PRD area, but I would like to expand this research on a global scale, creating a comparative study and educating people about the conditions of farmers and other agricultural workers both in China and in their own countries. About the artist In the 1990s, I was in the Big Tail Elephant Group. My recent work combines art and research. In 2005, I initiated a research-based project Searching for Keywords. The project has evolved from Keywords School (2008) to Keywords Laboratory (2011). Keywords Schools were at the Venice Biennale (2009). I also worked with young Chinese-Americans in a special Keywords School in San Francisco Chinatown. Parts of the Keywords project have been shown in China, Japan, Europe, and the US.

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