

# Breathing in China: Art, Ethics, and Environment

## Curatorial essay by Yan Zhou

Smog

by Yuan Yongping

Mountains loomed in the smog, white sickrooms.  
Cancers sneaked in the nostrils, the maniac circus wrecked the lungs.  
The signals on the road separated  
This side and that side, between them, the absolute reality of China.  
At that moment, the vast childhood stood in my mind,  
In the countryside, the dawn and the evening were intimate,  
The sunlight was the new-born baby, fresh,  
In the crystal-like country, between this tree and that tree,  
Love shone.

Written in Beijing, 2017

Translated by Yan Zhou, 2018

The place I grew up, Xi'an, once known as Chang'an, was the ancient capital of twelve dynasties. Zu Yong, the Tang Dynasty poet (699–c.746) wrote a famous poem, *Watching the Remaining Snow on Zhongnan Mountains*, describing the views of a late winter evening of the city: "Beautiful the northern side of the Zhongnan Mountains / Snow hovers in the cloud / The surface of the woods brightened by the after-rain sky / Evening coldness increased in the city".<sup>1</sup> The views described in this poem, the

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<sup>1</sup> Zu Yong, *Complete Tang Poems Vol. 131*, eds. Peng Dingqiu et al. (Qing Dynasty, 1705), Chinese Text Project, <https://ctext.org/quantangshi/131/zh>

祖詠, "終南望餘雪", 彭定求等(輯)《全唐詩》卷一百三十一(1705年)。

The poem in its original Chinese version, with English translation by the author:

終南望餘雪 *Watching the Remaining Snow on Zhongnan Mountains*

祖詠 Zu Yong

終南陰嶺秀 Beautiful the northern side of the Zhongnan Mountains  
積雪浮雲端 Snow hovers in the cloud  
林表明霽色 The surface of the woods brightened by the after-rain sky

mountains, trees, clouds, and beautiful sky, were vivid to me in childhood. Since 1990, it has changed; seldom does one see blue sky and the mountains nearby. In a poem reflecting life in post-1989 China, I wrote, “the greyish fog permeated from autumn to spring, swallowed days and suffocated souls ... the grim age, silenced.”<sup>2</sup> In March 2009, I left Xi’an and flew to Canada, where I remain living. On the expressway to the airport as I left China, there was no boundary between the thick yellow-greyish air and the Guanzhong Basin. One could not distinguish sky and earth, only several peach trees blossoming early seemed to add cheer to the world. As captured in Yuan Yongping’s poem, *Smog* (2017), I carried both “the absolute reality of China” and the memory of “a vast childhood” with me to a new country.<sup>3</sup>

Smog is not a phenomenon that has appeared only in modern times. The word smog in the Chinese character 霾 means “the wind brings rain with dust,” and “smoke and dust in the air caused the sky to be dimmed.” The composition of the word includes two components: “rain” 雨 and “the Chinese raccoon dog” 狸, suggesting smog is ominous and indicating a de-harmonized universe. The word was included in early Chinese dictionaries and used in early texts, suggesting that smog appeared in China thousands of years ago and was related to early environmental disasters.<sup>4</sup> In the Loess Plateau of the northwest area of China in the Neolithic period, pottery kilns destroyed forests and vegetation, making the area the birthplace of smog. In the eighteenth century, French Jesuit François Xavier Dentrecolles (1664–1741), who was serving in China, observed environmental damage and hellish night air in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, caused by deforestation and pollution from porcelain manufacturing.<sup>5</sup> (Jingdezhen was nicknamed “the capital of china” because of its famous porcelain.)

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城中增暮寒 Evening coldness increased in the city

<sup>2</sup> Zhou Yan, “1995, From North to South,” in *Time of Celestial Bodies*, eds. Ai Luo and Zhou Yan (Montageau Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Yuan Yongping, “Smog,” in *Daily Fire of Mind*, trans. Yan Zhou (Nanjing, China: Jiangsu People’s Publishing House Ltd., 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See Anna L. Ahlers, Mette Halskov Hansen, and Rune Svarverud, *The Great Smog of China: A Short Event History of Air Pollution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020) and Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> François-Xavier Dentrecolles and Pierre-Martial Cibot. *Arts, Métiers et Cultures de La Chine, Représentés Dans Une Suite de Gravures Exécutées d’après Les Dessins Originaux Envoyés de Pékin, Accompagnés Des Explications Données Par Les Missionnaires Français et Étrangers... Papier de Bambou, d’après Les Mémoires Des P.P. d’Entrecolles, Cibot, Etc.* (Paris: Nepveu, 1815). <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb43990798s>.

殷弘绪，“殷弘绪致中国和印度传教区巡阅神父信，1712年9月1日于饶州及1727年7月7日与北京”；“殷弘绪致某神父信，1722年1月25日于景德镇”，（法）杜赫德、（法）郑德弟（辑著），朱静（译）《耶稣会士中国书简集》第二卷（台北：大象出版社，2001）頁，87–259。

But smog was not omnipresent temporally and spatially across China until recent decades. The people in the West experienced smog more than a century ago, as represented in certain Impressionist paintings, such as Claude Monet's series of haystacks and of Gare Saint-Lazare, and in J.M.W. Turner's paintings.<sup>6</sup> Italo Calvino's short novel, *Smog*, about 1950s Italy,<sup>7</sup> and Georges Bataille's essay "Smokestack," in which he reflected on his childhood memory of the industrial, polluted environment in 1920s France,<sup>8</sup> both describe smog's grimace, horror, and violence. Modernization demands a sacrifice from people and the world, and not in a synchronous way—it follows the movement of capital and the will of the state. The severity of air pollution is a global issue. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "9 out of 10 people breathe air containing high levels of pollutants. Updated estimations reveal an alarming death toll of 7 million people every year caused by ambient (outdoor) and household (indoor) air pollution. Many of the world's megacities exceed WHO's guideline levels for air quality by more than 5 times, representing a major risk to people's health."<sup>9</sup>

In China, before 2010, most people had no clear idea about smog, or, they felt powerless. New terms like "airpocalypse," referring to extreme smog events in China and Asia and "Anthropocene," did not enter public awareness until recently. In 2015, a sensational documentary film about smog—*Under the Dome* (《穹顶之下》) (2015) by popular TV journalist Chai Jing—and its subsequent censorship, became a public event that called out people to address smog grievances.<sup>10</sup> Chai Jing worked for China Central Television (CCTV) from 2001 to 2013. When she was pregnant, her baby daughter was found with a benign tumour, which she thought was related to smog in Beijing. She became an independent environmental activist and investigated China's environmental problems. In the same year, 2015,

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<sup>6</sup> See Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015); Christopher Parker, "Did Air Pollution Influence Famous Impressionist Painters?," *Smithsonian Magazine*. February 27, 2023. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/air-pollution-impressionist-painters-monet-turner-180981710/>; and Jacopo Prisco, "Scientists Confirm Long Held Theory about What Inspired Monet." *CNN*. March 22, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/monet-haze-air-pollution-study-scn/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Italo Calvino, *Difficult Loves; Smog; A Plunge into Real Estate* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, "Smokestack," *October* 36 (1986): 15–16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778540>.

<sup>9</sup> "9 out of 10 People Worldwide Breathe Polluted Air," World Health Organization Media Centre, May 2, 2018. Accessed May 30, 2023. <https://www.emro.who.int/media/news/9-out-of-10-people-worldwide-breathe-polluted-air.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Chai Jing, *Under the Dome*, 2015, China. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6X2uwlQGQM>.

environmental art activist and poet Nut Brother made *Project Dust*; for four hours every day, from July to November, he dragged an industrial-strength vacuum with him while walking across Beijing, collecting smog air. Then, he mixed the collected dust with clay, made a brick from it, and inserted the brick into a wall in a hutong house. The photographs and videos recording his daily march map a “psychogeography” of the Chinese people, undiscernible from a nightmarish cityscape.<sup>11</sup> In an interview with CNN, Nut Brother said, “Air pollution is a problem for everyone, and now we are being deprived of our right to breath fresh air.” He wanted to raise awareness, and for people to take responsibility for their rights.



Beijing in 100 smog vacuum days in sequence, 2015. Courtesy of Nut Brother.

Over the years, I have been deeply disturbed by the smog phenomenon that has affected most areas of China. From 2009 to 2019, I travelled between Canada and China every year, working on cross-cultural art communication projects. Almost everywhere I visited was wrapped in grave smog, like a dirty shroud. In 2016, I took ten Canadian artists to a southern city in China for the public art project *Idiorrhythmic: Canadian & Chinese Artists Urban Art Creation Project*, in which IAIN BAXTER&, Ian Carr-Harris and Yvonne Lammerich, Nadia Myre, Alexandre David, Yam Lau, and others created site-specific

<sup>11</sup> Jerry C. Zee, *Continent in Dust: Experiments in a Chinese Weather System* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022) <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520384101>.

work in the center of Suzhou Industrial Park. After they arrived, half of them fell sick with respiratory-system symptoms.

Smog is not only an environmental problem; it is a result of failed and corrupted political, economic, and cultural systems. The appearance and movement of smog mirrors that of the global state-capitalism-techno mechanism: both beset the people. In their worst and most anarchical forms, smog and capitalism operate together, particularly in authoritarian countries.<sup>12</sup> There is a prevalent feeling of suffocation and desperation among my friends in China. These interwoven existential conditions affect people's health, sensibility, language, and expressions. Living in Toronto's comparatively picturesque environment, I often wonder how Canadians might imagine smog, or the climate crisis? Is it understood as only a problem of the "other," and one that doesn't impact the West?"

Recognizing the severe smog problem and the worsening climate issues in China and the world, and the chronic trauma that people suffer daily, I began to work with a group of Canadian and Chinese artists to explore these existential problems, beginning in 2017. We endeavoured to seek understanding and make creative responses to our contemporary state of being through collaborative work. We intentionally disregarded distinctions, boundaries, and biases that separate different creative talents and form hierarchically exclusive orders in art worlds, instead inviting contemporary artists, environmental activists, architects, photographers, and filmmakers who are distinctively diverse, aesthetically and politically. Unlike curator-centered projects, where a curator researches and develops a theme and then selects and invites artists to participate in an exhibition, with this project, now dubbed the *Breathing* project, the artists and I each proposed questions to discuss together. Each artist then investigated topics of interest individually and created a work.

Because it is a dilemma to address the smog issue and the climate crisis that entangle with personal life and political environment, we chose to trace and weave lines of perceptions and understandings from each one's standing. Aligning the human body and smog on a shared experiential frontier, the project confronts the realities of smog and wagers to circumvent an abstract, mediated representation of smog and instead reflect on smog related to their own experiences of breath, and of imagining different possibilities for breathing in life. One dimension of the project is an aesthetic-ethical reflection on the micrometeorological system (for example, a body) that shares the same behavioral

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<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503609273>.

principles and character traits with its macro-counterpart (or, for example, weather).<sup>13</sup> Hence, it promotes the search for an ethical and aesthetic response to the creation of new, meaningful forms of life (and art) that are intricately enmeshed with an all-pervasive, yet ominous environment. It envisions an enlarged expression of the artist's power and art under this premise, to create an aesthetic depth and to employ creativity as a lasting resistance to the suffocation and injustice at a humanly level.

The current curatorial project has been developing for more than six years. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided to add a component addressing this recent collective experience. Although scholars in the sciences and social sciences—including Robert Wallace, Jane Goodall, Aaron Bernstein, David Quammen, and many others—have warned the world that our ways of exploiting nature and lives will lead to not only climate crisis, but also repeated risks of zoonotic spillovers and pandemics, we did not listen to them. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's critique of the Italian government's COVID-19 policy at the beginning of the pandemic has been debated and condemned in intellectual sphere as conventionalism. He pointed out that state power's limitless expansion in the name of "biosecurity" created an exception state, which intends to remain forever, abolish public space and social life, enslave people under digital surveillance devices, militarize the world, and reduce people to bare life.<sup>14</sup> All these predictions are not merely appalling nonsense of a scholar in an ivory tower, they are the realities of dystopian terrors that have happened in the past three years. We just left a nightmare of three years' worth of suffering and sadness behind—do we still want to reflect on what has happened?

How can the Chinese artists communicate their muted, repressed, and choked tacit feelings to the world through creation and companionship of fellow Canadian artists? How can Canadian artists connect their feelings and thoughts of breathing to a world where people suffer in smog? As an immersive research and creation project, four Canadian artists took multiple trips to China and met with participating Chinese artists in Summer and Fall 2017. Hua Jin is an immigrant Chinese Canadian artist from Montréal. She is a lens-based artist focusing on representations of nature and cultures. I first

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<sup>13</sup> The concept of the Chinese philosophical/aesthetic belief in the body being a micrometeorological system that shares the same behavioral principles and character traits with its macro-counterpart (weather), and the analogy between the movement of smog and of capital, both come from the artist Yam Lau.

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now?: The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. Valeria Dani (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021). For Agamben's theorizing of bare life, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); "bare life," Oxford Reference Online, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095446660>.

collaborated with her in the group exhibition, *Through the Body: Lens-based works by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists*, which I co-curated for the Art Museum at the University of Toronto in 2014. Hua Jin went to Southeastern China and Beijing to do field research in 2017. In Beijing, she witnessed and documented the demolition of an artist's studio and house, one of thousands of cases in the systematic movement of leveling and purging artists and migrant workers in Beijing.



Jean-François Côté



Hua Jin

Jean-François Côté's works often explore entanglements of landscape, mental-cape, and media of contemporary life. Based in Québec City, he did an artist's residence in Beijing in 2009 and has exhibited in China several times. I was deeply impressed by his works, such as *The Chorus* (2010), and invited him to participate in the touring exhibition *The Transformation of Landscape in Canada: The Inside & Outside of Being* (2014–2015), which included artists Michael Snow, IAIN BAXTER&, Edward Burtynsky, Wanda Koop, Rebecca Belmore, Andy Patton, Bonnie Devine, Ed Pien, and others. When I talked to him about the idea of the *Breathing* project, he was enthusiastic to participate. Originally, Côté planned to interview local Beijing people of all social classes, but when he arrived there in late October, Beijing was holding the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Migrant workers were being driven away, and local people feared to talk to a foreigner. With the help of a dozen Chinese artists who dressed in costumes and performed as people in different professions, Côté was able to make the work.



Alexandre David



Mireille Lavoie

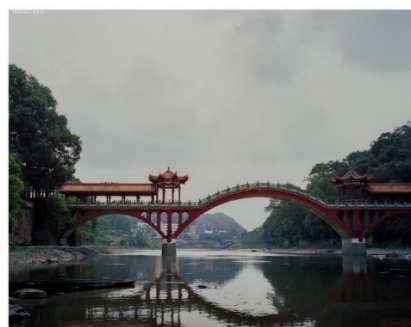
Alexandre David and Mireille Lavoie, both Montréal-based artists, conducted extensive field observation in Beijing. Invited by M Studio, which was also facing demolition in Beijing's Black Bridge Art Zone, they collaborated with a group of Chinese artists and presented a one-day exhibition and talk. Xin He, of Toronto, took trips to China from 2017 to 2019 to record smog-affected landscapes in four cities. Each of these artists' trips gave them embodied experiences of smog, environmental conditions, life, and the culture of people in China. In an unpublished letter commissioned for the online project, *Life in Quarantine: Letters That Flutter in the Śūnyatā Illusions* (2021–2023), which I curated, Alexandre David described three friends sitting together by a campfire in the depth of a mountain, finding the world whole with a recovered sense of completeness in being with each other. The friendship built between Canadian and Chinese artists, and an intimate understanding of Chinese peoples, places and cultures from Canadian artists, is an asset of the project.



Zhang Xiao



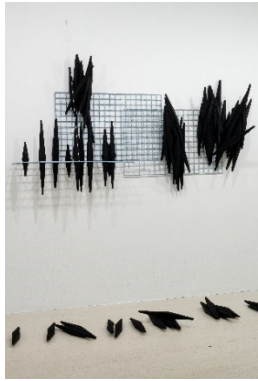
Li Ming



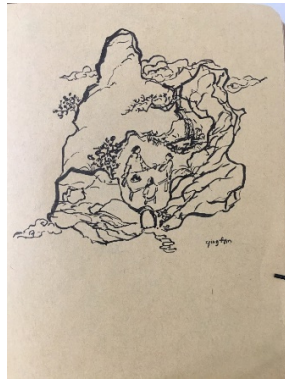
Xin He

We are now presenting this project as a fifteen-person group exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, from June to December 2023. The exhibiting works are organized into three groups: breathing in smog and repressive realities; body, mind, and spiritual reflections of breathing; and breathing during COVID-19 time. Jean-François Côté's performative portraits of the Chinese are poetic presentations of

human bodies intertwined with smog, which suggests the underlying environmental, social, and political contexts of the work. Zhang Xiao's *Shanxi* (2007) captured villagers in a rural village, dressed up in traditional theatre costumes during the Spring Festival. They look like they are sleepwalking, in a day-like evening world, where they transformed the miserable village to a fairyland with their ritual activity. Xin He took landmark photos of a cultural heritage site in Sichuan and of Tiananmen in Beijing, overlapping the images with transferred grey shades of live air-quality data for each day in the year 2018. Hua Jin collected information and photographs from news reports of global smog, and then extracted the colours from the polluted air to create a series of abstract, colour-field images, referring to the Impressionist artists of the late 19th century. Li Ming used wastewater collected from domestic air purifiers to paint in the style of remnants of mountains and rivers of traditional Chinese *shanshui* paintings on *China Daily* newspapers. The work expresses the anguish towards two types of pollution, smog and propaganda media, and expresses a sense of losing the coherent inner world of the Chinese literati tradition.



Ren Jie



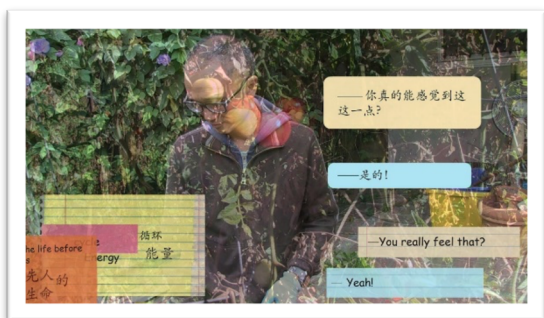
Zhang Qingfan



Yam Lau

In her sculptural installation, Ren Jie uses ultralight clay, which she invented, and black felt cloth, in the form of distorted Plato octagons that suggest the ideal form of the element air to be nonexistent. The work also concerns the breathing bodies of labourers hidden behind industries and trade. Mireille Lavoie's drawing of pulmonary alveoli, bronchioles, and tracheas mixing with motifs of healing flowers represents a vulnerable living respiratory system affected by its environment. Alexandre David conceived a transitional space between an interior domestic space and an exterior public space, where breathing was understood as an action that binds oneself with others: a living space in varied forms that have been invented and used in traditional Chinese architecture and other cultures. For this exhibition, he will show one large photograph of smog, mist, and air currents materialized in a transitional space, as one version of the flexible project, adjusting to conditions. Zhang Qingfan created imagined gardens in

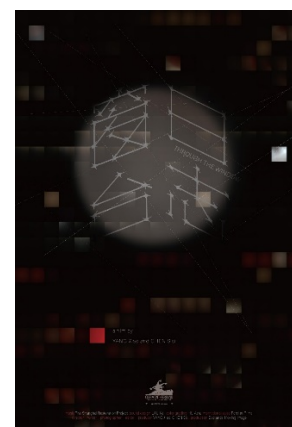
an album of paintings, using inspiration from rockery formation design of classical Chinese gardens and literature, and paintings of China and the West, to perform a quiet resistance that counterbalances the obtrusive existential burdens of the malicious realities. Yam Lau learned tai chi from YouTube to practice his understanding of *Qi* as an atmospheric, flowing, adjusting organism that regulates and symbolizes the state of the body and the universe. His video performance is a specimen of this daily practice. Xu Tan interviewed several people, including peasants in a village in Guangdong province, China, the director of the Kyoto Botanical Gardens, an architect and community activist in San Francisco, and a vegetarian, teacher, and social activist in Singapore. In his videos, these people talked about their imaginations, beliefs, spiritual connections with plants and the world, and their efforts to re-establish fragile relationships between people and nature.



Xu Tan



Gao Jie



Yang Xiao and Chen Sisi

After the disastrous outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan in 2020, the Chinese government took strict measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 and launched the “Zero Covid” policy. In Spring 2022, Shanghai was locked down under the “Zero Covid” policy, causing unimaginable tragedies and disasters across all levels of social and economic life. Gao Jie is a Shanghai-based artist who made visual diaries of people’s lives during Shanghai’s lockdown, based on stories shared on Chinese social media. Most of these stories are extremely tragic, sad, and absurd. Yang Xiao and Chen Sisi are filmmakers, they made a film of their neighbourhood during the lockdown in Shanghai. Both works record and show the agony and suffering of people during the public health emergence. The “Zero Covid” policy caused nationwide protests, along with other political, economic, and public health pressures, such that the authority ended it in December 2022. Works by the artists in this exhibition preserve a testimony of the ineradicable memory of that time.

The *Breathing* project is a collective exploration of artists from Canada and China with support from the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Galerie B-312 in Montréal, who presented an earlier version of the

exhibition from January 9 to February 15, 2020, M Studio in Beijing, and many friends. We appreciate the support from these communities.

\*Edited by Jayne Wilkinson, Melissa Bennett, Bo Shin, and Claire An

Exhibiting works:

- Alexandre David. *Just Like Air*. 2017-2023. Photograph.
- Dong Dawei. *Envy and Environment*. 2011. LED lights, lambency paper, board.
- Gao Jie. *Diary*. 2022. drawings on paper.
- Hua Jin. *The Color of the Air*. 2018-2023. inkjet print on silk, 4 of 24 in total.
- Jean-François Côté, *Smoke and Fog*. 2017-2023
- Li Ming. *Traveling in the Mountains*. 2017-2018. classical Chinese landscape paintings. self-made paint using wastewater collected from domestic air purifiers mixed with watercolour paints, waste China Daily newspapers. 4 of 12 in total.
- Ren Jie. *Something Inside, Something in Between*. 2019. sculpture installation, felt cloth, ultralight clay, metal grid, strings.
- Mireille Lavoie. *Overrun*. 2017-2023. ink on Paper.
- Xin He. *Filtered Scenery*. 2018-2022. two-channels video.
- Xu Tan. *When My Mother Lost in the Woods*. 2015-2018. four channel videos.
- Yam Lau. *Tai Chi... for a sick soul*. 2019-2023. performance, video installation.
- Yang Xiao and Chen Sisi. *Through the Window*. 2022. documentary film.
- Zhang Qingfan. *Imagined Gardens*. 2016-2019. drawings mounted in an album.
- Zhang Xiao. *Shanxi*. 2007. archival ink jet print.