



# THE RENT COLLECTION COURTYARD FIFTY YEARS

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## ROMANTICIZING THE REAL: THE LEGACY OF THE *RENT COLLECTION COURTYARD*

At the opening of *Rent Collection Courtyard* in 1965, one elderly peasant visitor upon seeing the sculptural group raised her walking stick in preparation to hit the figure of one of the landlord's henchmen. Rather than condemn the old woman for attempting to vandalize the artwork, though, the sculptors and media praised her act. Interpreted as her having instantly understood the piece, her impulsive reaction was lauded as confirming the veracity of the scene of peasants suffering under the hand of the landlord and his men and the “class” burden of rent payment. Several similar accounts of emotional engagement, from uncontrollable weeping with the peasant figures to malicious spitting at the villainous characters, were read as verifying the realism of the sculptural group and the truth of its portrayed content (figure 1).

Transcending reality to reveal a universal truth, or in the terminology of the time “revolutionary realism plus revolutionary romanticism,” was a commonly accepted aim of the arts in early Communist China.

ZHAO Shutong and WANG Guanyi, the lead sculptors of the artistic team who created *Rent Collection Courtyard*, remarked that they endeavored to make art that “surpassed life”<sup>1</sup> (gaoyu shenghuo) in reference to the Communist leader MAO Zedong’s assertion from his influential talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942 that “life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual life.”<sup>2</sup> The national acclaim of *Rent Collection Courtyard* was in large part due to its convincing joining of realism and romanticism via its artists’ commitment to realism coupled with its extraordinary visual scale. The sculptural group’s blurring between reality and artifice has come to define its artistic and historical legacy that continues today to fascinate and stimulate new interpretations.



FIGURE 1. Peasant women viewing and weeping with a figure in *Rent Collection Courtyard*. From *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*), December 26, 1965.



Detail of Mother and Son from *Rent Collection Courtyard*  
China, late 1970s-early 1980s  
Clay, glaze, pigment  
USC Pacific Asia Museum Collection  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Whitehead  
1988.37.1B

Realism in *Rent Collection Courtyard* denotes not only a visual strategy but also accuracy to a lived reality. The 96-meter long sculptural installation of 114 life-size figures was installed as a series of six narrative tableaux around the perimeter of an actual courtyard in Sichuan province in west China where rent was once collected. Further, the numerous stories represented, such as the widow weighed down with children and the mother separated from her baby to become the landlord's wet nurse, were collected by the artists in their interviews with the landlord's former tenants though many of these testimonies have since been debunked. The artists also famously left the doors to the courtyard open while they were working so that curious locals could stop by to see their work in progress and offer them feedback.<sup>3</sup> The artists' emphasis on how keenly they listened and collaborated with the locals reflects how realism resided not just in the artwork alone, but also in its documentation of real life and the artists' complete identification with the attitude and intentions of the people they were to represent.

The art team's endeavor for realism as a semblance to lived reality also involved regular trips out on market days to make numerous onsite studies of local people in drawings and photographs to vary and enliven in clay the many figures in *Rent Collection Courtyard*. The tragic expressions and evocative gestures of the figures stand in stark contrast with the contrived heroism and optimism or explicit political posturing that usually characterizes artistic production of early Communist China. The emotional moderation of *Rent Collection Courtyard* developed in a process of trial and error and careful discussion within the art team. For example the figure of



the imprisoned mother unable to pay rent changed several times, including one instance where the mother is made to point accusingly towards the figure of the landlord, before it was decided that this rendering was too exaggerated and “fake”<sup>4</sup> and was altered finally to depict her holding the prison bars in desperation (figure 2). However, such realist considerations became the subject of political scrutiny during the late 1960s at the height of the radical Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when *Rent Collection Courtyard* was accused of “cheating” the masses because it was deemed not revolutionary enough. Subsequently, reproductions of *Rent Collection Courtyard* were revised to be more visually and emotionally deliberate in conveying the ideological content of class struggle, such as raising the head of the old man lying on the ground as well as changing his expression to anger and lifting his finger to point at the landlord figure. In addition, scenes considered more revolutionary and heroicizing of the peasants and the Communist Party were appended to the last tableau so that as many as twenty additional figures were added to the original one hundred and fourteen.

Despite the artists’ adherence to realism over exaggeration in the making of *Rent Collection Courtyard*, the final grand scale and visually random presentation of 114 life-size figures arrayed around the perimeter of the courtyard space immediately disrupts the realism of the sculptural illusion in a bid for a higher plane of meaning. The original plans for *Rent Collection Courtyard* divided the courtyard periphery into separate enclosed rooms in which one family’s story of rent collection would unfold as a series of organized narrative scenes. Later, though, it was decided that the

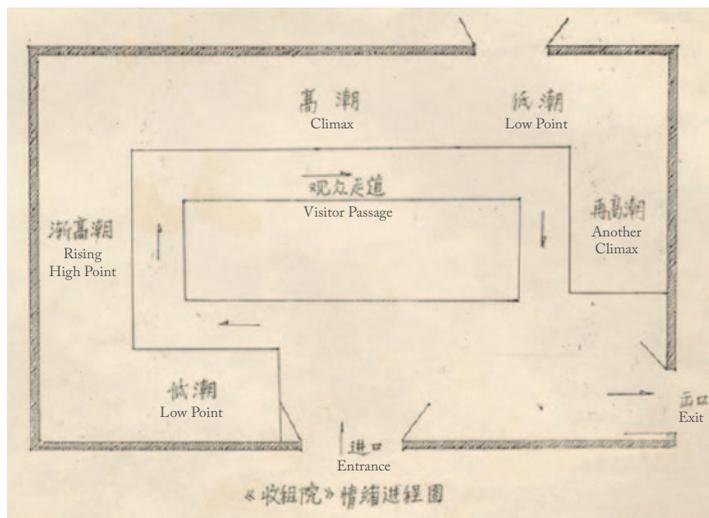


FIGURE 2. Detail of Imprisoned Mother and Her Children from *Rent Collection Courtyard* from the catalogue *Rent Collecting Courtyard* Hebei Art Publishers, 2001



FIGURE 3. "Emotional Processing Diagram of *Rent Collection Courtyard*" (with translation) from the catalogue *Rent Collecting Courtyard*

Hebei Art Publishers, 2001



message of class struggle would be more powerfully presented as a play portraying not just one but many families' struggles together simultaneously. According to ZHAO Shutong, by showing multiple families in the same time and place the art team sought to collapse depicted time, real time and place in the psychological space of the viewer.<sup>5</sup> The artists' diagram of the spatial layout of the courtyard labeled with the progression of emotions *Rent*

*Collection Courtyard* was planned to elicit shows how the sculptural installation was conceived not just laterally as a series of sculptural tableaux, but as a tableau of the whole courtyard space that anticipates the viewer (figure 3). The intentional overlapping of the spatial orders of the viewers' real space and the illusory space of the sculptures transforms the courtyard into a stage and casts the visitor into the role of judge of the sculptural representation's reality and transcendent truth, such as the elderly woman's melodramatic affirmation with her walking stick.

Today in post-Maoist China *Rent Collection Courtyard's* blurring of realism and the romantic element in socialist art in support of the politics of class struggle has led to debate over its anachronism and relevance as a permanent exhibit still in the courtyard of the former landlord's manor that is now converted into a history museum. *Rent Collection Courtyard* as a monument to such absolutes as reality and its universal truth has also attracted the attention of several contemporary artists, most notably CAI Guo-Qiang who partially reproduced the iconic sculptural group as a performance piece at the Venice Biennale in 1999. Suggesting that such monuments may better serve as ephemeral constructs, CAI left his clay re-creation to dry and crumble in the heat of the Venice sun.

—Vivian Li  
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Detail of Young Girl from  
*Rent Collection Courtyard*  
China, late 1970s-early 1980s  
Clay, glaze, pigment  
USC Pacific Asia  
Museum Collection  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack  
Whitehead  
1988.37.1N

<sup>1</sup> WANG Guanyi, interview with author, April 13, 2013; ZHAO Shutong, interview with author, May 28, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> MAO Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," in ed. Kirk A. Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1995), 470.

<sup>3</sup> *Rent Collection Courtyard* collective sculpture team, "Shouzu yuan' nisu chuanguo de gousi sheji" ("The Planning and Designing of the Clay Sculpture 'Rent Collection Courtyard')," *Meishu* issue 5 (1965): 4.

<sup>4</sup> "Speech by Comrade WANG Guanyi," in "Rent Collection Courtyard Clay Sculpture Group Work Experience Study Symposium" (Shouzu yuan nisu qunxiang guangmo zuotan hui shang de fayan), published by Chinese Artists Association for internal study (1966), Sichuan Provincial Archives, 9.

<sup>5</sup> ZHAO Shutong, interview with author, May 28, 2013.



PANORAMA: *Rent Collection Courtyard*

China, 1967

Photographic print

Courtesy of Charlene Makley, Professor of Anthropology, Reed College, Fred Lifton and Tony Moreno, Reed College Computing & Information Services

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COVER: Detail of Tenant and the Landlord

Liu Wencai from *Rent Collection Courtyard*

China, late 1970s-early 1980s

Clay, glaze, pigment

USC Pacific Asia Museum Collection

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Whitehead

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