

Grand Domestic Revolution

Handbook

Interview with HomeShop

by Binna Choi
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Between 缘分 Yuanfen [fate], Real Estate, and Serendipity

BINNA CHOI / MAIKO TANAKA (BC / MT)

After reading an interview about HomeShop, we learned that Elaine W. Ho's curiosity about the public and private dynamics of Beijing was a starting point in deciding to rent the commercial space that became the first HomeShop headquarters.¹ It was also interesting to hear about the impetus to focus on documentary gestures as a key modality for how you process/share your work. But, as has been the case with our GDR project, collectively oriented and evolving projects such as yours may often entail many origin stories! Do you have any thoughts or interesting experiences on this question of origins, especially when it is a typical starting question with interviews, like this one?

HOMESHOP

It's true that a particular story of origin becomes default in its reiterations, something like the refinement of an initial improvisation in object theater, though without an end performance. Elaine has often used the phrase *zírán érrán* (literally "nature, and then natural", to mean something like "following nature" or "spontaneously") when describing those initial conditions and impetuses that shaped HomeShop's beginnings in 2008. But maybe that is not a complete answer, without pointing out that nature is filled with routine, performativity, and the taking of shortcuts for ease. The multiplicity of origins is much more honest, but often it's too big and banal a volume to narrate, especially in an interview scenario.

We have a story of a conversation between Elaine and Xiao Ouyang in June of 2008, we have one of Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga and Elaine trolling all ends of the city in search of cheap materials to renovate and move into the new space in 2010, and we have the story of fortuitously meeting and

beginning to work with Cici Wang in 2011 (hers is the only one that does not begin from the stock story of "friendship" and "having fun"—of course very fundamental and natural forms of "origin", but perhaps obvious ones that do not need to be retold). More importantly, though, the practical uses of origins also beg, in a certain manner, larger questions of affinity and "how to keep the thing together" that imply process and growth over origins. In this sense, "origins" are negotiated between the different actors involved, and an "opening" insinuates a multiplicity of understandings of where origin begins, about the space that creates the possibility for special types of encounters and numerous starting points, and the real conditions these reflect. To think about the confluence of these encounters tells another story, one about those things that get reworked through being brought in and changed; it belies the much more interesting process of *relay* that develops over time. And in a way, this self-reflexivity comes much closer to what is meant by the "documentary gesture" as a relational form of documentary practice.

BC / MT

Who do you see as the main "public" of HomeShop and what and who constitutes that? Your immediate "audience" seems to be consistently the neighbors and locals around the physical space of HomeShop in your old and new locations, yet we see you also reaching out and sharing further discourse in differently configured proximities, such as the wider art world, with the publishing of your annual journal *Wear*, or invitation to the *Continental Drift* project. What are ways in which these audiences have or have not connected? Have there been any surprising encounters among publics you hadn't expected? Are there other "publics"

you are also involved with or do you articulate this connection to "audience" differently from how we have here?

HOMESHOP

Audience and public are appropriately placed in quotation marks in your question.

Beijing is a dramatically changing place crawling with remarkably curious people, which opens up many novel ways of encounter. Of course indigenusness warps with the changes, but that does not necessarily eliminate the differences distinguishing one kind of person as more or less likely to come into the space, to understand what we want to do here, or, sometimes, to get involved. Despite ambiguous signage, having a storefront window and leaving your door open can still open up unlikely connections.

BC / MT

We got curious about the "unlikely connections" you have talked about that form with people who visit the space. Could you describe some examples? Have any of them grown into something that was also unexpected?

HOMESHOP

There is a certain entitled posture and gait of many visitors who come into the shop. When you tell them that there is nothing for sale, the way of approaching the space changes, and they are either embarrassed and walk out or get curious to understand more. The "unlikely connections" happen in the midst of that, probably somewhere in between 缘分 *yuanfen* [fate], affinities, and serendipity. Above we already mentioned Cici whose first visit here to attend a sound performance has grown into collaboration on a more involved, organizational level, and there are other stories, from Abu—a recent college graduate who used to work in

the neighborhood and now comes by regularly to hang out or share a meal together—to Lukáš, an 80-year-old Shanghainese man who speaks Czech and smiles most slyly when he talks about politics.

On the other hand, language (and by this, we don't only mean ethnic/national language, but also genres of language such as philosophical/theoretical/artistic) disallows general participation in certain activities, like the Happy Friends Reading Club (we read mostly English texts) or the *Continental Drift* project (largely a more theoretical discourse). But it is inevitable and natural that certain specific agendas may in effect rule out other publics and audiences.

On an everyday level, there is a form of interaction with the neighbors you mention, who periodically come into the space and check in on what is happening, but it's hard to say whether they feel like audience or participants. The differences between us are enough reason to keep questioning our formats and ways of expressing, but there are also small and cumulative ways to exchange common points that already exist.

For particular public workshops or events we have hosted, organizers and participants bring along their own publics, which juxtaposed with the demographic devices of online participation, manifest some unpredictable but still relatively consistent groups of young culture-hungry people ["文艺青年"]. But even in the activities that we could say speak the most broadly appealing dialects on a citywide level, like the involvement of some of us here in the Country Fair farmers market, food events, public screenings, the Ten Thousand Item Treasury Library (with minor, but diverse participation), or the WaoBao! swap meet, there is always a disjuncture as there is often an overlap.

The publications and certain activities on the blog are works and representations to show processes otherwise hard to picture, and though it is harder to say where these end up, because of format and means of distribution we can presume there is some acquaintance with a community of art books and/or artistic discourse.

At the same time, we are ourselves a public, in our somewhat varied backgrounds, the relative porosity of our structure (compared to other institutions) and the small experiments in presentation and performances that

make up the space here. But if only this, then maybe the occasional claims of being "closed" would be merited. These claims are interesting to consider for a moment, though, as they show differing understandings of what an "audience" or a "public" is. Especially in the context of Beijing, this idea of public sphere is more of a question to be rethought and tempted, rather than a place or activity that we can assume to be there.

From all of these varying "publics", a fractured community emerges. And sometimes it isn't even consciously sought after, but comes about as an effect of the various formats that our activities take as well as the networks that form through self-funding and the odd jobs that many of us take on as individuals to achieve this.

BC/MT

What do you expect or envision from your "fractured community" as mentioned above? Do you see it as sustainable or at least a mode in which ideas of survival, security, or competition don't remain invisible as rules in life? What are the economies of these types of operations? How are they maintained?

HOMESHOP

A fractured community is more so a realistic understanding of one's relations than a category enabling certain goals, and insofar as it is desired, it is not exactly strategic. However, among the values that it could propose and that are worth fostering as alternative to the fear-based economies you refer to, are its horizontal character, recognition among differences, its lack of completion, its willingness to share. Do these "naturally" arise? No, as you suggest, there is some maintenance involved, which has to be accounted for. Within this context, in this day and age, it isn't so easy to clearly distinguish between possible aspects of a gift economy, the pieces of voluntarism proper, or the deliberate construction of political potential.

According to a business or marketing logic, the fractured community will obviously not offer an optimal connection to questions of economy, sustainability, or security. We certainly haven't found the solution to the problem of fair compensation and enfranchisement (corresponding with Gregory Sholette's descriptions of *dark matter*). This is an age-old problem of self-initiatives. But while we can, we conduct our explorations of commercial exchange and communities with a

view to autonomy, which necessitates cooperation.

It could be possible to say, on the other hand, that it is exactly the fractured community that may be most easily sustained, because there is no formal structuring body needed to establish it, maintain it, or declare it dead. Fractures can lead to a wholly other kind of fluidity, where even if we can't kill two birds with one stone and each one remains in its cage ... maybe we can make them sing.

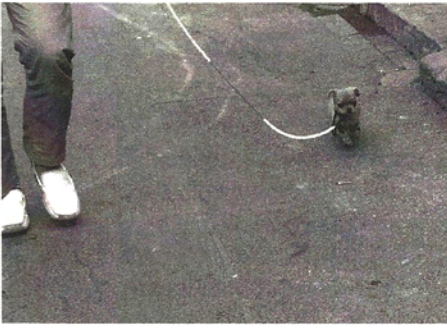
BC/MT

We're also curious about the infrastructures you created in terms of locality, for instance with the *At Your Service* project particularly in the way you articulate it as offering alternative "public" transactions, alternative to, for example, fixed buyer/seller relations. How did this idea develop or change over the years with your projects? Is this focus as productive for an analysis, critique, or alternatives for economic exchanges?

HOMESHOP

The list of services offered on our website and occasionally appearing on the blackboard by our entrance are not only meant as a "project" but are an actual attempt to pool together resources and skills to support our precarious existence and that of Home-Shop. There are, however, no high hopes of it developing into any sort of viable economic model; at times it feels more like an attempt "to give what you don't have" (to someone who doesn't necessarily want it), as per Jacques Lacan's definition of love—but maybe it's too dangerous to mix economy and love in one sentence. At the end of the day, even when photocopying services won't sustain us and no stranger serious about research and reportage would trust our quality of service by the list posted online, the inquiries we do get are an opening for some other possible future, and this is what is meant by the concept of 关系 *guanxi* (the Chinese version of connections/networking).

It's mainly a way to invite participation and trigger various forms of exchange or transaction (under the guise of a commercial transaction that most people are more comfortable with) and at the same time bring up and problematize questions of value, labor, voluntarism, and reciprocity. Of course there's always that lurking fear that by falling back on these economic



Ad for Dog-walking/Pet-sitting, At Your Service, HomeShop, 2010

metaphors we may end up reinforcing the very system we are trying to question—*Who are we really serving?*

This question is not only about choosing one group or another, but about the position of service itself, especially as an artistic mode in which functionality and efficiency come into play. And if our modes of offering service have proven to be less than functional and less than efficient (financially and to a certain degree artistically), of course it leads to a certain criticality towards the “use value” of an open question. Nobody has ever hired us to do dog walking, but is there something valuable in the fact that that possibility exists? If social credit is an undeniable part of the exchange, are we only playing with an already existing system of alternative currency? What are the next possible steps?

These services are still today being offered to an undetermined, mixed group of people, from the neighbor that wants something translated into English, to someone faraway that hires us for a design job. But any such exchange brings up the question of supply and demand, and each time the menu changes and the terms are reconfigured.

BC / MT

Have you encountered any of HomeShop’s services already available in the neighborhood? Does it create any competition?

HOMESHOP

Our predecessors include a neighboring 家政服务 *jiazheng fuwu* [house management service] shop which distributes cleaning services and the clothing store on the corner, which happens to have a larger and faster photocopier machine than ours (*but we have later opening hours!*). But speaking strictly about the actual revenue-generating services of HomeShop, we have not yet faced direct competition in the market sense. We have become aware of a mini-explosion of co-working spaces in Beijing, but it is pretty clear

that those spaces and HomeShop wouldn’t likely be in competition, mainly because they focus on a different economic range and attitude of worker. As a place of freelance work, our premises don’t boast officially registered private office spaces called for by the NGO inquiries or aspire to the professionalized networking environments that start-ups cluster around. In this case, there is a little bit of give going both ways, in that people who remain here usually see it as more than a service offered to them. With services more particular to an individual’s work (translation, writing, proofreading/editing, design, language training) this aspect of solidarity is somewhat less negotiable, though it does happen more actively along existing networks and less by the front-door approach. Does this reflect more about the nature of this kind of work or the neighborhood, which is not (yet) rebranded as a creative district?

In terms of the space itself—an old 单位 *danwei* dormitory with a storefront space and a large courtyard—the organization of the various spaces has allowed various levels of publicity and privacy, as needed for different activities or by different groups of people using the space. The deeper in you move, the more private it gets, with the exception of our roof, which we were last year suddenly forbidden to access when one neighboring family started to fear that we would infringe on their privacy or even jump into their property. But these mini-conflations are temporal blips in an ongoing process of public-private negotiation. This year the roof is already planted, harvest taken in daily!

BC / MT

In what ways has the impact of major architectural changes in your environment (e.g., the disappearance of *hutongs* in China, gentrification, and rising prices) influenced how you might address typical boundaries of private and public over time? Did the particular inhabitation as a project change in unexpected ways from such external changes, or what did these things imply for the storefront identity for example?

HOMESHOP

The former location at Xiaojingchang hutong was a real estate agency prior to our occupation of the space. Before that, it was a residential room, and that evolution of identity in the hutongs (historically, the hutongs were composed of private residences, during the dynastic

era for those with imperial relations, and during the Cultural Revolution according to public-private work-unit allocation)² is exactly the kind of ambivalence that allowed HomeShop to come about. In many ways, it is also the reason why a project like *I Love Your Home* seems relevant to these considerations of architecture and the local urban context.

We moved to the neighborhood of Beixinqiao (part of the remaining hutongs in the center of Beijing) in the midst of an ongoing gentrification, and even though the street seems to have gotten busier lately this hasn’t really had any direct impact on our practice, or maybe it’s too soon to tell. We are still slowly settling in ...

BC / MT

Can you tell us more about moving into the already gentrifying neighborhood? Can HomeShop be seen as part of these processes? Not only in terms of potential monetary value your presence may bring to the area for property owners but also in how HomeShop may be part of disseminating new forces and ideas in the neighborhood.

HOMESHOP

This is a question we have been deliberately asking since moving in, as we are familiar with the discourse and realities of urban change and the creative industries’ involvement in gentrification. To some extent, the gentrification process in Beijing can differ from other places (state-managed development, spatial, and demographic shifts from countryside to condominiums), and its more forceful advances aren’t led so much by culture as by the fantasies of contemporary living, which insinuates that our artistic activity is probably much more aligned with the western historiography of gentrification, at least until we get kicked out or are “harmonized” by the forces above. In a concrete example that illustrates how networks play a role in gentrification, since writing to you last, a friend of HomeShop’s signed a contract for a space across the alley that for the first year and a half in our new location housed an uneconomic little 寿衣 *shouyi* [funerary clothier’s] shop that was no longer deemed desirable by the landlord. Our friend happens to be an architect, so unless you consider funerary rituals part of the creative industries, it seems to be a rather textbook influx. And it also demonstrates by rhyme HomeShop’s



I Love Your Home, installation at HomeShop, 2010

own position. But this is not to say negative, neither regarding the presence of our new neighbor, as you point out. While concrete and visible, positive effects of our being in this neighborhood are difficult to calculate, there is an amount of exchange going on, a lot of us weirdos mixing with the neighborhood crowd, and obviously we believe enough in the benefits of what we do to keep going. But do our actions help the locals (and further, *should* we be “helping” the locals) in ways beyond enriching, exposing, sharing? Hard to say.

Rather than how these conditions influence our practice, gentrification is a reminder that we cannot assume the good effects of our good intentions. But this process is also a bit different here than elsewhere, for both historical and economic reasons.

BC/MT

To jump away a bit from the immediate context of your locality, we would like to learn more about how you approached the project, *The YellowSide Daily* especially, in terms of the temporary shift in location to Guangzhou, the interaction with the inviting institution, and the decision to take a “speculative” angle responding to a different neighborhood. What was the response of the publics involved in this project?

HOME SHOP

The idea for *The YellowSide Daily* came about through long discussions on what can come from projects outside of our local context, when we were invited by Times Museum in Guangzhou in 2011. We were thinking a lot about what can be done in another place, when it is partly the interest to localize an inquiry that links many of our practices as a collaboration. There is something so different about a southern city like Guangzhou, let alone the completely unfamiliar dynamics of the particular location around the Times Museum. We figured the best starting point would be to further develop some approaches

already in progress at HomeShop, which were collaborative and participatory in nature, not only in terms of an internal process.

We wanted to learn more about Guangzhou and the Huangbian district, which literally means “yellowside”, hence the name of the paper, and is an area of dense differences and rapid changes. We didn’t want to just land and coop ourselves up in the Times Museum, which sits on top of a private community called Deconstruction (with the rather conservative Chinese name Times Rose Garden). This is also not why the museum wanted to involve us in the project anyhow. We considered two intertwined strands from our work on *Beiertiao Leaks* (a newspaper initiated in 2010), services, and news as ways of interacting with and exploring life in the area. Services seemed especially relevant because of the disconnection between the museum and the complex’s residents. Despite the free entrance and the extremely bold signage in front, many locals rarely spend time there, or ironically, simply have never noticed that it exists. Services, liberally interpreted and even forced on people, like operating the elevators, going door-to-door and arranging or delivering meals and tea, would be a way to provoke some interactions, and interrogating the role of artist-as-service provider. But there was still the challenge of how to let people know, and the issue of how to present these actions once completed. This may have been where news abstractly re-entered the discussion as the appropriate medium for communicating services; or then again maybe the inherent qualities of the local newspaper that we had already been working with—its multi-authorship and multiple skills, its generic categories, its claim to truth, its temporal index—swayed us to focus on it as a method and theme.

From what we had heard up in Beijing, Guangzhou newspapers have a reputation of greater editorial freedom and of taking risks, as they are at the opposite end of the country from the very centralized capital and highly influenced by liberal Shenzhen and Hong Kong. This was a reputation that we wanted to acknowledge in some way (however, holding a meeting one day with a group of Guangzhou-based reporters at a café in the central district, we met with a hasty rebuttal of these illusions; “local-specificity” is always much more complex than we imagine).

In any case, there was a potential

problem we wanted to avoid, which was the risk of simply skimming the surface of life in Huangbian, reporting on things as if they had importance for locals. We had to recognize that our perspective would be pretty uninformed and limited. On the other hand, we observed that just producing an ostensible “daily” in a land of such controlled media was already a gesture of some kind. But still, what was the process that would identify the particular day to be reported, and what would that tell people, how would that relate to the museum and its temporalities at all? Putting these different thoughts together, and reversing the order of the publication-as-event that we had been working with, the idea of “predictive news” took shape. The news became a sort of script for a day rather than a record, strictly conceived.

We put together a guidebook about the trade of the predictive journalist, and the Times Museum helped collect a team of volunteer reporters who would snoop out and forecast the news for that day.

On October 8, we delivered 4,000 copies of the resulting paper (dated October 9) to every house in Deconstruction, and throughout the streets and urban villages. Many readers were pleased to see a new local newspaper with the words “YellowSide” written in Mao Zedong’s handwriting in their hands. October 9, 2011, started at three in the morning and continued into the night, and we swear a professional oath that everything in the paper, including an inauguration of an art district, a “civilized moto-taxi” campaign, the opening of the area’s first “middle-class” restaurant, and a press conference with Rem Koolhaas, took place just as reported. We made sure of that (and this insurance of news was the parodic undercurrent of critique of the Chinese media in a mostly very playful project), even though some actions were perhaps perceived by nobody else. On the other hand, the meta-documentation of digital pictures and unusual experiences (like a basketball workshop for kids of migrant workers or a blind tour of the urban village) wriggled off into the realms of memory we can only imagine. Only the script remained as the centralized documentation, through a twist of time.

The fact some of us felt a little guilty about was the inevitable inability to form a lasting and consistent newspaper for the area, because of effort required,

the limitations of an exhibition project, and our being based far, far away. The disappointing twin of the elation of seeing the paper distributed was the puzzlement and inquiry about whether it would come out every day, was the only honest answer: maybe ... only in the case that a local entrepreneur or community leader saw it as important enough to take up. Which was equal to saying no.



Residents read the inaugural issue of *The YellowSide Daily*, 2011

BC / MT

Furthering this discussion, how do you think of your work in relation to artistic discourse? How much is it a conscious consideration and in what way do “art worlds” matter to you?

HOMESHOP

There are several of us who come from artistic backgrounds, or are currently working, beyond our associations with HomeShop, within one or another “art world”, so let’s say that we better be conscious about it! But if an art world is only made of the sum and surplus of those who have advanced in media and institutional capacities, then HomeShop might merit the “alternative” box it gets easily placed into as a non-gallery. However, this is a less-than-satisfying scenario, offering a skewed family picture without judgment. The line to negotiate for those seeking meaning along artistic registers is to not render the complexities as a totalized project or even portmanteau, which would prioritize certain languages over others. This can make language an issue, as descriptions always rely on slot-filling, even if art as an over-arching placeholder can embrace broader spectrums of activity. “Relational aesthetics”, “dialogical art”, “social practice”, “event work”, “collaboration”—such terms are sometimes invoked, and stand for something that is necessary, but they often seem like not enough, especially when we are working from China and a lot of these labels just simply cannot be applied in quite the same ways. Perhaps they haven’t even been translated yet into Chinese, or the existing translation

leads us somewhere else. Or further, maybe “artistic discourse” from its outset takes on a very different meaning from the perspective of the Chinese art world. How we see from or into that is a completely different question, but again, the most important issue is not about who matters to whom as a general entity, but about the quality of each particular engagement.

BC / MT

What are you thinking about and working on now?

HOMESHOP

At the time of this interview, there are a few projects on the go. Most imminently, the third issue of *Wear*, HomeShop’s journal, will be printed in September, followed by a series of related launch activities and distribution. For the last two years, we’ve been playing back and forth with the word *ballsy*, which came about as our suitable translation for “有种 yǒu zhǒng” literally meaning “to have seed”. It started as an absurd beginning for HomeShop series number three (the series being a contextual frame by which we organized events and activities while at the Xiaojingchang hutong space), and while such concentration has diffused since moving to Beixinqiao, ballsy has continued as the exclamation point of many dialogues, jokes, and finally, the theme of the third issue of *Wear*. The more cheeky connotations of being ballsy work in both the Chinese and English, and how this relates to questions of courage, subjectivity, and potentiality are all things that we’ve been amusing ourselves with while investigating what having seed could alternatively mean as a theory and a practice.



The YellowSide Daily hot off the press, 2011

Other projects “at work” include more workshops, the initiation of the HomeShop Seed Exchange by visiting artist Pilar Escuder and a series of meetings called Beijing Urban Farmers Union, in collaboration with others and the latter two specifically with agricultural activists and advocates to organize more sharing and cooperation between

different individuals and groups with regard to urban farming.

BC / MT

Where do you see the near and far future for HomeShop?

HOMESHOP

In scattered dialogue since the *Continental Drift* we co-organized with the Compass Crew and Womenjia Youth Autonomy Lab last year, we have been pursuing a discourse-in-process involving colleagues from other parts of China and the rest of Asia for a translation-based project and series of seminars revolving around art, activism, publication, and transcultural exchange.

As far as where daily life bleeds into futurity, adding to an ever-growing list of projects (keeping busy, perpetuation) should find resonance with the longer-term questions of how one sees the systems they build, and how these systems work together or contribute to other existing structures and forms of organization. This is where the “working is the work”, which is to say a thinking and crafting on the nature of work and togetherness itself.

1 (On page 218) Elaine W. Ho and Fotini Lazari-dou-Hatzigoga, interview by Edward Sanderson. “Alternatives: HomeShop Interview,” *i don’t know* (blog), 11 April 2010, <http://blog.escdortdot.com/2010/06/19/alternatives-homeshop>.

2 (On page 220) The *danwei*, or work unit, is the organizing structure under Chinese Socialism, whereby individual services (including housing, healthcare, etc.) were nearly entirely distributed via one’s employment within government-owned industries. “Property rights” were later redistributed based on Cultural Revolution era allocations, meaning people could either buy the property from their *danzwei*, or continue as long-term leaseholders.