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HU FANG - FIVE DAYS OUT FOR LIFE

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January 18-22, 2003. Five days, a short holiday from life. I used my eyes to see, my ears to listen, my hands to feel a work, a life, which came into being day by day. I use my words to record all that I know, the details of a birth that should captivate all.

In this group, called together temporarily in the name of FIELD, I unexpectedly discovered how a grandiose life philosophy and a fistful of dirt or a bowl of soup - things that seem tiny - can come together, and this was a pleasure I hadn't enjoyed in some time. Antony and his FIELD programmes awaken a memory deep in every participant, silently cleansing their hearts.

I still have no way of saying, nor do I want to draw any conclusions. I only know that the life impulses surrounding FIELD are not so fleeting. In the end, the people living on this plot of land would come to see clearly their own form in the world.

6:30

The earliest feeling is of leaving. You have to leave your daily life, leave the big city, and come to a village on its periphery. You must throw out the life burdens to which you've grown accustomed, come here, grab a fistful of clay, and make it into a living form. You must go to bed early and get up early, like a planter, letting the sunrise and sunset become the rhythms of your life. You must forget the annoyances of life, and then, in the clay, slowly cure them, slowly recover.

I stood on the hotel porch, watching the dawn moon hang dimly in the sky, the open fields gradually meeting a light fog. This is one of the most splendid moments of any day: the moon has not yet disappeared, and the sun is about to rise straight on top of it.

For five days, I slowly grew accustomed to the rhythms of this life. I came to enjoy this sort of moment: dawn, riding a bicycle alone from the hotel to the playground at Xiangshan Elementary School, going in any direction I like along the tiny streets of the empty town, getting closer and closer to the village centre, my scope of vision gradually widening, the fire-red sun suddenly jumping up above the tree tops, my entire face able to feel the warmth of its new light.

7:10

The small road toward Xiangshan Elementary School would begin to get busy, with villagers coming toward the school's small playground from all directions.

I saw Jiang Yongdong and his family of four riding on a motorcycle, turning at the intersection just past the large Banyan tree, heading for school. Yesterday, JiangYongdong's wife Wang Lifan told me that her daughter (Jiang Wanling, a fifth-grader at the school) had woken up at five a.m. each of the last two days, eager to go and make little clay people.

Normally, Jiang Yongdong and Wang Lifan would be in the fields labouring at this hour. Many of the villagers coming here to make little clay people were the same. Normally busy with their land, they understood that this FIELD project was entirely dependent on their own perceptions. The most common reaction I heard was that 'it's fun', and I was curious: if it's only 'fun', will these people make it through to the last day?

Xiangshan Elementary School stands in an ancestral hall, well-preserved from the outside, but full of junk inside. Most of the villagers in Xiangshan village have the last name Jiang. The sign above the threshold reads five characters with which we are all too familiar: 'Serve the People'.

7:40

Before the activity formally began, 50-year old Hu Qunxing had already begun making clay people.

She used a pencil point to give them eyes, and the expressions their eyes bore looked as kindly as those of her grandsons and granddaughters.

'It's no good, it's no good', she insisted, shaking her head back and forth at me.

An old woman sat next to her. I smiled at her, but she was so hard of hearing I had no way of communicating with her, and could only look on from beside her. She was incredibly patient and meticulous, completely enmeshed in a world of her own. I imagine she could hear the voices of the tiny clay men.

The old people appeared coarse, their hands sprinkled with blue veins in stark contrast to the deep brown of the clay, standing amidst dawn sunrays, a special kind of beauty.

8:00

The beginning of a day's work.

Antony uses a megaphone to wish everyone well, and to share with them his ideas on creation.

The second day, he discovered that the clay men couldn't stand, so he especially reminded everyone to make sure their figures wouldn't fall over.

This was one of his three requirements for the little clay people.

The other two were: they must be palm-sized, and they must have two eyes.

These were essential requirements for creating tiny lives.

Otherwise, there were no restrictions.

8:15

The sun has just risen over the hills behind the worksite, with a clear, cold breath that gave everyone a flush of energy. Their hands, idle all night, now thirst to feel again the wet, slippery clay.

The atmosphere on site is serene. Even naughty children concentrated on making little clay people. People's energy is focused on the clay between their hands. Occasionally they quietly exchange a few sentences. I discovered that this serenity came about as people grew slowly enmeshed in dialogue with the clay people.

Antony found a place leaning against the wall, and sat down to make clay people. Everyone's place in the studio was essentially fixed, and Antony seemed to enjoy moving among them. No matter how he changed positions, he would still produce a formidable quantity of clay people each day. At the end of each day, they would be added to a group that contained thousands upon thousands of clay people.

Together they formed a work: FIELD.

70-some year old Jiang Nuanfu knew very clearly what he was doing: 'this is not like manufacturing a product from a template. Products are divided by grade, and here we have no template. We create from the heart. Whatever you make, you love, and it loves you'.

One day, Old Man Jiang's clay people came in many interesting and strange forms, some looking like little clowns with ice-cream cone hats. But in the next few days, the forms of his clay people grew simpler and simpler, and yet more and more vigorous. It was as if he had found the handiest of methods.

He stressed: 'The most important thing is their eyes. You see, 100 clay people have 200 eyes looking at me. I have already made 400, which means there are 800 eyes. One person's heart enters into the hearts of several hundred objects'. When he finished speaking, he smiled, looking at me with a pair of richly experienced and bright eyes.

8:40

I run into Bai Shengyin, carrying clay.

22-year-old Bai Shengyin is a worker at the Xiangshan brickyard. He and 60-plus workers from the brickyard have volunteered to take care of carrying the clay.

120 tons of clay are piled at the entrance to the school, having crossed the several dozen steps which traverse the surrounding hills on the shoulders of the workers.

He is an honest, sincere, massive young man, wearing a red T-shirt. When he gets excited, his speech takes on a slight stutter.

Last night, they moved clay from 7:00 until midnight, delivering more than 30 tons of clay to the playground.

This morning, they began just after 6:00, in order to ensure that by 7:00 people could begin kneading and dividing the clay.

On the second day, Bai Shengyin spent an afternoon making clay people. He liked this more than carrying clay, because, 'after making them for a while, you lose all frustration, and when you see the clay people you have made yourself, you get happy'.

Two weeks later, the clay people are fired in the kiln at the Hexing brickyard where Bai Shengyin works, the flames giving them a new life. Bai Shengyin and his companions have experienced the entire birthing process, from hauling wet clay to the people's hands, through the fierce fire giving permanent shape to the forms pinched in clay by those hands.

9:15

Xiangshan Elementary School teacher Chen Jinfeng comes down to see some little clay people, and her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

These clay people look flimsy, their bodies thin and small. But their eyes reveal an air of intelligence.

The creator of these little clay people is called Zhang Shaoze, a fourth-grade student at Yongguang Elementary School.

I started talking with Chen Jinfeng about her take on the matter. 'Looking at these little clay people, I can see how lonely he must be... his sculptures aren't like those of the other kids. When he was only one year old, he came to live with us. My relatives are very able, constantly tending pigs, planting vegetables, and raising him. There were some aunts who helped as well'.

Zhang Shaoze was orphaned soon after birth, and Chen Jinfeng is his aunt.

Chen Jinfeng felt gratified: his grades were getting better every day, and she had decided along with his other aunts that Zhang Shaoze would be allowed to study at least through high school.

Zhang Shaoze stood to the side, his head buried in the work of making little clay men.

'I have always liked making clay figures', he said in a very light and tender voice, 'and I like to play with other children'. He thought clay figures were a bit like himself, and the more he made, the more they began to resemble him.

9:35

When Xiangshan Elementary School third-grader Jiang Zhuohua meets anyone, he asks, 'do you know where my little clay people have gone?'

Zhang Wei tells him: 'They were shipped away to the brickyard to be fired into little red people. Only after they have been fired can they really become little people, and only then can they go to Guangzhou where even more people can see them'.

'He's been looking for his little people all morning', said his older sister, Xiangshan Elementary School sixth-grader Jiang Lishi, laughing at his side .

Their father, Jiang Canming, stood beside them watching, not revealing his smile. He thought this was a rare opportunity, a treasured thing to be able to make clay people together with his children.

Zhang Wei gave Jiang Zhuohua a blue plastic box, taking him to find his clay people and put them inside. As he arranged the people neatly, Jiang Zhuohua grew happy again. 'When the children know where the clay people come from, and where they are going, they will find the whole process even more interesting'.

9:55

'Look', said Tan Jiaxin, Xiangshan Elementary School sixth-grader, holding up a clay person on whose foot she had carved a character. She thought that this way she would surely be able to find her creation at the exhibition in Guangzhou. 'If they're for sale, I want to buy mine back. I can't stand to leave these clay princes'.

10:00

Time has come for the morning break. Jiang Biling stands up, intentionally circles around to in front of the other girls' clay people. Everyone looks and points at their clay people, speaking and laughing.

'When we look at each other like this, we're appreciating, not criticizing each other. Everyone uses their own abilities to make them, just like raising their own children', she said to me afterward.

I pass the elementary school blackboard, and see pasted there calligraphy samples the students had done using fountain pens. Among these was a poem by Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei, 'Lu Chai', copied by Jiang Wanling.

Empty, the mountain -

not a man

yet sounds, echoes

as of men talking

Shadows swing into the forest

Shift light flashes

On dark moss, above.

Was Jiang Wanling thinking of this poem as she made clay people? Maybe not, but it would stay in her blood, perhaps suddenly resurfacing one day.

I always thought this piece of land was the best place to give birth to clay people. Despite the fact that it is not paradise, it still has a certain clarity that might be recovered at any time in the depths of people's hearts.

11:15

I was attracted by the peculiar forms of Huang Shihua's little clay people.

These figures had clearly demarcated edges and corners, appearing strongly innervated, like the powerfully dry brushstrokes of Chinese landscape painting. Huang Shihua spoke in a slight voice and with great detail. Looking at him from the outside, it is hard to imagine that he is the maker of these clay people. He comes from the Design Academy of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. His school, along with the fine arts department at South China Normal University, had sent 40 fourth-year students as volunteers on the project. Antony called them 'the engines driving the works', the active genes charging the FIELD project, its vernal power.

'The first day, I made these clay people unconsciously, and since then I have been thinking about them continuously, why I am doing it this way. I always remember the rhythm he spoke of. I understand this as a rhythm of the heart, regulated by the forces of greater nature, moving in cycles, multiplying without rest. In the end it is the border between man and nature, man's final return to the ground, his regret at parting with it.

'I think there is a deep connection between these clay men and my own hands. Nature's organic form is a kind of perfect form, and the curves particular to animals and plants have a natural connection to the shapes their lives take. Making clay people is like this, as an ordinary piece of clay in my palm becomes the clay man's spinal column. His shoulders are the result of my thumbs pressing, which comfortably and naturally produce his shape, in rhythms and cadences just like those that govern life itself. If any part is missing, the thing is not complete. Every time the hand moves, its tracks are different, producing clay men that are differently shaped. This is just like nature's creative process.

'Making clay people like this presses close to what I've wanted all my life. I yearn to become an architect, and have always sought out this sort of strong, convulsive feeling toward space, so I look to instill the clay people with this subtle connection to space. Furthermore, I'm enchanted by the boundaries felt by ancient Chinese philosophers; Daoism and Zen have had a deep influence on me'. One could see in the bodies of his clay people traces of Huang Shihua's dreams of becoming an architect.

'Here, everyone is very mindful of their works. Perhaps every man and woman in the village has never had the chance to think about their own existence, but when they make clay people, so quietly and so focused, their hearts are uplifted. This is the most important process. As I understand it,

Antony cares a lot about the creative process. I imagine that later when these are exhibited, the viewers might not be able to enjoy them as thoroughly as we do, because we made these clay people with our own hands, and in making them we entered into an exchange with them. The average viewer will have a hard time experiencing this bond'.

Huang Shihua's home is in Xihui, Jianggu County, Guangdong Province, an environment much like this one. Because of this, he feels like he has returned home. The children here especially like him.

11:50

The students patiently help the children place their clay people, clearing space for the ones that will be made in the afternoon.

12:30

Lunchtime. 300-plus sculptors in their eating-place. The villagers particularly like the uncommon clamour of many eating, the atmosphere of a full cafeteria. Whole families surround round tables, adults feeding the children, children running back and forth under the tables. The TV is turned up too loud, which Antony finds funny. 'Why do we need a TV where we eat?'

People see food as nature, and I discovered that afternoon lunches had a special meaning for the villagers. 'It's not important what we eat, but that everyone eats together', said one. This made me think of the essential activity of dining for Guangdong families. Eating at noon-time, people were supplementing much, much more than the nutrition their bodies needed.

13:00

In a small room in the restaurant, Antony took some time to have a discussion with some of the students from the fine arts department at South China Normal University. The second night, Antony held a serious exchange and dialogue with all of the students. After participating in a few days of making clay people, these students had even more questions and ideas.

The discussion began with the question of whether or not this was mass production.

Antony said, 'if this were mass production, there are lots of ways that I could make this work more easily, and maybe much cheaper. When I came to China for the first time in 1995, I was invited to go to Shandong Province, and every brickyard I visited they said no problem, we can make this work for 0.6 RMB each, and it can be done in two weeks. But it's not just about making my ideas. The whole idea of this work is to create a space, to bring different people together, to enjoy this process together. This is not a process where I give everyone a model and tell everyone to copy it. These are two entirely different concepts'.

'But the people who participate are copying from the clay figures you made at the very beginning', said a student named Yao Rizai.

'I think this is your guesswork about the masses, because you haven't really communicated with them, because you're not willing to communicate with them', said another student, Ma Lihong, refuting Yao Rizai's point.

'You can call me romantic or whatever, but I really believe that unless there is value in the making for the maker, there is no value for the viewer', said Antony.

'I'll speak my own view for a minute. Although the process of making involves replicating a model, this work still turns out as everyone's unique style of expression, because in everyone's eyes, they are all looking for beauty. You make one, and then a second, and then you want to make one even better than the first two. This process is full of people's desire for beauty, and I think it's quite interesting', said a student named Cai Jianbin.

'I think you can find some very pure things in replication. Just like washing your hands, we make the same motions over and over again, and the goal is to wash away the dirty things. Continuous replication is a process of continuous study', said Antony. 'I don't want to speak too generally, but there are two ideas about art. One is expressionist, that allows you to escape from ordinary life. The other is about using art to recognize that in the ordinary which you have never seen before, that lets you understand something about the structure of life. I'm more interested in the second. For me, art is not about the objects, it's not about materials. In the end, it's about transformation, about something you can't possess...'

This sort of debate can never end, and inevitably becomes a part of the work itself.

14:00

We passed through the village and arrived back at the school.

Like in many other Chinese villages, the young adults of Xiangshan have left to find work, leaving children and elders behind. Many families have moved to the newly developed area by the Guanghua Expressway, close to where Guangzhou's new airport will be constructed.

We passed abandoned ancestral halls and ponds littered with take-out fast food boxes. We could see that this was once a lovely village. Students travelling with us told me that they liked the fields near the hotel, but that they had found plastic tubes and industrial waste there.

A village is still a part of social reality.

The afternoon work began.

'Now, after the midday rest, everyone should be recharged and ready to begin our afternoon's work, right?' said Antony, speaking to everyone through a megaphone.

Darvin translated his English into Cantonese so that everyone in the village could understand.

14:25

Sunlight shines directly onto the playground, and many put on straw hats, giving the site an air of peasantry.

A burst of laughter suddenly comes from the clay pile beside the playground. A foreigner and a worker were stepping on the clay, preserving the same tempo, growing fast, growing slow again, like awkward aboriginal dancers.

His Chinese name is Ke Ximen, and he has made a special trip to the site from Shanghai. After a short while, his eyes set upon the pile of clay that resembles a tiny mountain, and he grows happy.

He thought clay could massage and cure feet. To him stepping in the clay and making clay people are the same: they all made people 'very comfortable'.

14:50

I discover among a pile of little clay people that several looked like Guanyin (a Buddhist female deity), with serene expressions.

I ask the sculptor why he had decided to make Guanyin.

'I do what I feel like doing', replies an embarrassed Jiang Deneng, 45 years old.

He thought that making clay people was more fun than his usual routine of planting and sowing, because working the fields never changes, and in making clay people one can 'develop their thinking and unleash their power'. Moreover, 'it's different everyday'. Even if one doesn't know what to do on the first day, as time goes on the figures grow 'prettier and prettier'.

15:00

Time has come for an afternoon rest.

I sit down, looking at other people's clay people, and decide to make a few myself.

I grab a hard fistful of dirt. I use all the strength of my two hands to knead it, feeling it slowly change between my hands, growing warm. Suddenly I am at a loss; I don't know what to do next. I pinch a bit of clay into a circle. It is small to be a head, but it doesn't matter. I use my hands to press, my body heat moving through the clay man's shoulders and spine. I am especially careful when I make his eyes, turning the pencil point for an especially neat result.

It stands and looks at me, naked. I look at it amazed.

It seems to have its own personality, an ineffable uncaring spirit, which throws me.

One, two, three, the fourth seems a bit more powerful, five, six ...the ninth is full of vitality, I like it. And then, the next one is even fuller.

You have no way of summarizing experience, you can only dive into it, do it, in order to know what the next one will be. Groping in the dark, it's as if you know what you expect. One day, two days, three days, one, ten, one hundred, your expectations finally come true, you make the one you like most.

I look at a row of clay people before my eyes, and feel a change in my own body. Slow but deep, it is a faint transcendence and gratification.

I grow aware of the special atmosphere of the entire FIELD production site, and want to convey it to those who have not experienced it first-hand, those friends who have not felt the clay with their own fingers. I am a narrator, and at the same time, I am a maker of clay people, a participant in this giving of life.

I hope my words can convey the reality of this site, where hundreds of voices cried in unison. What I saw, and heard, and felt cannot be complete, but it carries the temperature of all who were on the site. I hope that words can express this, though in the end, perhaps the most important things are precisely those which cannot be conveyed with words.

15:50

Lu Peng tells me: after he gets back to school, he will continue making little clay people, he will extend and develop this theme using his own ideas, and finally will turn it into a work of his own. Lu Peng is a student from the Design Academy of the Guangdong Academy of Fine Arts. His clay people have small eyes. They look forward with confused expressions, as if they have doubts about the world.

'I think clay people reflect my own puzzlement. The speed of development in an information society is too quick, and it becomes easier and easier for people not to know what course to take. People in this society easily feel lost and confused, and at the same time, industrial development comes at the cost of environmental pollution. Rapid development makes people stray farther and farther from their essential nature. People thirst now more than ever for a spiritual home, they look for a sense of completion.

'When I see a crowd of bewildered clay people looking at me, and I look back at them equally bewildered, my heart feels deeply relieved ... If you say that Antony's concept is of a big world, then this world is a combination of many small worlds, including my little bewildered clay people.'

16:30

Photographer Zhang Haier took time to shoot a portrait of every creator and their clay people.

'Toward the end of the shooting, I discovered that this feeling of constant staring is a great stimulus for me, it is why I say this is a process of re-education, it takes different forms, involves very different things, very different people. You can see that men and women, parents and children create in ways that are similar and different. And there are even more things carved on the faces of the clay people. You see the history of the villagers, for example a girl who was abused as a child - this has left traces in her work ... in the past I used to take feature photographs, but nothing like this. After taking these 184 photos, I feel very moved.'

16:45

As the sun sets in the west, a day's work ends.

At this time the sun gives off a gentle, tolerant, warm heat. People's quiet eyes gaze at the clay figures, bathed in sun.

'Slowly I'm beginning to think that many things are connected to each other', one of the creators says to me.

17:00

On the last of the five days, 200,000 clay people quietly stand around, not quite sure of their fate. Nonetheless, they have already become a part of this world.

'This is the end of the beginning', said Antony.

Antony likes to stay in front of the rows of clay figures that had been neatly arranged, bending down to admire them in detail, as if he were listening attentively to their stories.

These clay people combine the fleeting emotions and living powers of all the participants, finally appearing as a common entity. When they meet face to face with people, they can do more than summon each person's memory, they can turn into a kind of collective exchange. I think what enchants Antony, and what enchants everyone, is precisely this kind of shared joy.

I remember finishing work on the second day, as Antony stood with the students and looked at their works. He naturally stopped in front of one student's work, put the clay person in his palm and said: 'The work should be natural like breathing, you grab a piece of earth, and mould it into a shape, just like an extension of your body. This continuous process is teaching you something ... we are not using clay to illustrate something we already know; we just use this form and process to find some way of feeling we don't know.'

19:00

On the fifth day, the clay carriers finally rest their swollen hands.

120 tons of clay have finally disappeared, transformed into 200,000 tiny clay people.

20:00

The playground in the still of the night, the clay people casting long shadows under the lights. This is Zhang Wei's favourite kind of moment, she can quietly put each clay person into a plastic box, piling them up neatly one by one.

'This is a linking point for the clay people; this is the beginning of their movement through space, and the beginning of their transformation. I hope that everyone, as they put their clay people into boxes, will feel like they are setting off on a journey.'

21:00

At the party held on the last night, some villagers who have never danced before begin to move. 'The old people, the children of this town have never been so happy', one villager says.

Fireworks trace beautiful arcs. Light and heat immediately melt the night sky.

This was a celebration for the 440 creators of 200,000 tiny clay people.

The completion of FIELD depended on the participants' willingness to share, and on the blurring of many ways of seeing. It was not an object standing quietly by, but the result of mixing among countless souls and worlds. It was an image of the world in the process of being born. Before seeing the final, complete appearance of the work, no one can conclude anything. But then again, who can claim to have seen the work's complete appearance?

0:00

These five days, we would often debate late into the night.

As I neared sleep, I would always think about little people, standing among nature in the dead of night. Late at night, they would return to a world where they spoke with bananas, grasses, insects. In this world, people were almost superfluous. But come dawn, when the sun rose, we would return again to their side, exchange looks with them, mingle with them, illuminate them. We would stare at each other, and together meet the new day.

We shape clay people; clay people also shape us.

[Material in quotes has been edited from taped footage. The interviewees' dialect has been translated into Mandarin, and then into English. The interviewees have not seen the edited transcripts.]
