



# Xiyadie: Queer Cut Utopias



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The Drawing Center

# Xiyadie: Queer Cut Utopias

Hera Chan  
Rosario Güiraldes  
Alvin Li



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# Director's Foreword

Laura Hoptman

6 During the first few years following the founding of The Drawing Center in 1977, our institution's exhibition program concentrated exclusively on work by emerging contemporary artists. Our endeavor was to add to the art discussion through the display of innovative works on paper by artists whose work was not (yet) hanging in a museum or a commercial gallery, and we did this with aplomb, introducing the work of Julie Mehretu, Kara Walker, and Shahzia Sikander, among others, to New York audiences. Over the decades, the definition of "emerging artist" has changed along with opportunities afforded to new art in the art marketplace and in museums and alternative spaces. The Drawing Center's focus has changed as well to reflect the ever-expanding meaning of "contemporary" to encompass more than new work by younger artists, including lesser-known work by older artists, work by non-American artists that has not been seen in the United States, as well as various kinds of drawing that are rarely exhibited in an art context.

The exhibition *Xiyadie: Queer Cut Utopias* introduces the work of an emerging artist, but it also highlights a kind of work rarely seen in a contemporary art context. Indeed, it is the first institutional exhibition in the United States that the Chinese artist Xiyadie (b. 1963) has had. Working under a pseudonym that means Siberian Butterfly—at once delicate and enormously resilient—the artist was born into a farming family in the rural Northern province of Shaanxi, learning the ancient folk tradition of paper-cutting from his mother. Paper-cutting in China is usually a feminine pursuit, and the results are typically displayed in doorways and in windows for good luck. Though Xiyadie identified as a gay person from high school, as an adult he married



a woman and had two children. Seeking economic stability, he eventually relocated as a migrant worker to Beijing, where he found a gay community in which he could express himself and where his increasingly elaborate compositions were first displayed at the Beijing LGBT Center. The vicissitudes of gay life in China are many—benign neglect by the government allowed gay social life to exist, if not flourish, in the 1980s and '90s, but by the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s, the government had forbidden depictions of queer love on television and in social media.

Because of the many barriers that the exhibition of his work faces, Xiyadie's papercuts have enjoyed only a small measure of visibility in Europe, which is where our curator, Rosario Güiraldes, first saw it. In 2020, when Rosario and I were co-organizing an exhibition of the work of the Chinese self-taught artist Guo Fengyi, Rosario visited China as part of her research for that project. Primed by those experiences to appreciate the tension between an ancient folk tradition and contemporary subject matter so eloquently displayed by Xiyadie's work, as well as recognizing the artist's bravery in expressing himself, Rosario was passionately convinced that The Drawing Center needed to exhibit this body of work. We now do so proudly with a display that includes cut-paper works from the past forty years.

This exhibition could not have happened without Rosario's commitment to the artist, his work, and its message of joy in love. She was aided in her study of Xiyadie's work by Hera Chan, Adjunct Curator of Greater China, Supported by the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation, at Tate. Hera is Xiyadie's closest contact within the art world, and she has served as a consulting curator to the show as well as a contributor to this publication. Colleagues at The Drawing Center from all departments have enthusiastically supported this exhibition with their expertise as well as with the desire to be advocates for queer expression. Joanna Ahlberg, TDC's editor, must be singled out for special thanks for her work to make this publication as beautiful and worthy as the art that it describes.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, without whose support this exhibition could not have been presented. We are proud to list them as sponsors of an extraordinary exhibition.

# Acknowledgments

Rosario Güiraldes

8 I would like to begin by thanking Hera Chan, the curatorial consultant on this project who made this exhibition possible. Hera met Xiyadie in 2017 when she and David Xu Borgonjon were doing research for *In Search of Miss Ruthless*, a group exhibition of twenty-three international artists at Hong Kong's independent art space Para Site. Hera has since developed a close friendship with Xiyadie and has been crucial in helping the artist gain critical attention for his work by organizing group and solo exhibitions, introducing the work to artists, curators, critics, and gallerists alike. As Xiyadie's most passionate advocate, she provided me with crucial research materials and advice, contributed an incredibly insightful essay to this publication, and most significantly, connected me to Xiyadie himself. Now as the Adjunct Curator, Greater China, supported by the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, at Tate—a position she holds jointly with Alvin Li—Hera focuses on the work of artists from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. We are very fortunate that Alvin Li also agreed to write about Xiyadie's work for this volume, and I offer my sincere thanks for his key contribution.

I am deeply grateful to Alex Lau, Director of Empty Gallery in Hong Kong, for connecting me to Hera. Alex and I met in Hong Kong in 2019 when I was en route to Beijing on a research trip prior to the exhibition of Chinese artist Guo Fengyi that Laura Hoptman and I co-organized at The Drawing Center in 2020. It was Alex's idea that Hera should introduce me to the work of Xiyadie. My sincere gratitude also goes to Nick Yu, curator, writer, and former Associate Director at Blindspot Gallery in Hong Kong, who was a generous and thoughtful ally throughout the process of organizing this show. My thanks go to Luca Barbeni and Olga Boiocchi at Nome Gallery and to Amadeo Kraupa-Tuskany, Sebastjan Brank, Lotta Pick, Isabelle Thul,

Daniela Brunand, and Mascha Nehls at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler for their invaluable assistance. Thanks also to Anselm Franke, Agnes Wegner, Zairong Xiang, Marleen Schröder, and Berenice Korstik, at Haus der Kulturen der Welt for their help in securing a fundamental loan for this show. I thank Payam Sharifi from the art collective Slavs and Tatars for sharing insights and for providing images for this publication, and Anna Sophie Loewenberg who, as a close friend of Xiyadie, also shared invaluable insights.

I am grateful to the The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, whose support made this exhibition possible.

At The Drawing Center, I would like to offer special thanks to Jiwon Geum, Project Curatorial Fellow. Jiwon's enthusiasm for Xiyadie's work during her summer placement as a Graduate Student from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, spurred her dedication to various critical aspects of this project in its early stage. My thanks also go to Olga Valle Tetkowsky, Deputy Director, and to Kate Robinson, Registrar, for their indispensable work on this exhibition project. I am likewise grateful to my colleagues Laura Hoptman, Executive Director; Rebecca Brickman, Director of Development; Aimee Good, Director of Education and Community Programs; Allison Underwood, Director of Communications; and Aaron Zimmerman, Operations Manager and Head Preparator. As with every publication I have worked on during my time at The Drawing Center, this book was realized thanks to the careful and persistent work of editor Joanna Ahlberg and designer Peter Ahlberg, to whom I remain deeply grateful.

Finally, my most sincere thanks go to Xiyadie himself for his brave and tender work. Xiyadie and I have yet to meet each other in person, but through our ongoing conversations over the course of organizing this show, I am now proud to call the esteemed artist my friend.

# Dance With Abandon: Xiyadie's Transformative Paper-Cuts

Rosario Güiraldes

10 On October 13, 2022, a man hung two banners on a highway overpass in Beijing to protest the Chinese government's punitive Covid restrictions and the curtailment of rights under Xi Jinping's totalitarian regime. He used a column of gray smoke to draw attention to his banners. "Go on strike. Remove dictator and national traitor Xi Jinping," read one. "Say no to Covid test, yes to food. No to lockdown, yes to freedom. No to lies, yes to dignity. No to cultural revolution, yes to reform. No to great leader, yes to vote. Don't be a slave, be a citizen," read the other. Within minutes of this tremendously courageous action, the protestor was detained and has not been seen since. But his slogans have not been disappeared. In fact, within two months they were replicated again and again all over China as tens of thousands of people took to the streets in what has been the biggest demonstration in the country since 1989.<sup>1</sup>

The artist Xiyadie (b. 1963, Shaanxi Province, China) has led a life marked by repression and, in turn, personal declaration under the same totalitarian conditions. Xiyadie has never been able to freely show his work or live openly with regard to his sexual orientation. The name Xiyadie, which translates to Siberian Butterfly, is one the artist chose for himself to describe his upbringing in cold and conservative Weinan, a city in the Shaanxi Province of Northwest China. It also reflects the subsequent evolution of his personal and artistic expression and his remarkable resilience. Xiyadie makes paper-cuts—one of the oldest and most popular

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1 CNN's Beijing bureau, "Rare Protest Against China's Xi Jinping Days Before Communist Party Congress," CNN.com, October 13, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/13/china/china-party-congress-protest-banners-xi-intl-hnk/index.html>.

traditional Chinese folk arts—as a form of visual storytelling. He has practiced his craft for more than four decades, resulting in a body of astonishingly intricate paper-cuts that articulate his longing to freely express his queer desire. With a strong sense of artistic autonomy, Xiyadie’s highly graphic works on paper include narratives from his personal life, including his erotic experiences and fantasies, depicted against the backdrop of both private and public spaces. As Alvin Li observes in his essay in this publication, “From a deeply personal standpoint [Xiyadie] has traced with his scissors the unfolding of a queer public in China from the 1980s to the present.”<sup>2</sup>

Xiyadie’s artistic language started with traditional folk-art themed paper-cuts—a skill he learned from his mother (the practice is largely reserved for women) during childhood. The artist went on to develop intricate compositions that fuse traditional folk forms and iconography with images from his own life. Performing this ancient practice with dexterity and the highest level of craftsmanship while expressing defiant individualism through his work’s subject matter, Xiyadie makes paper-cuts from his own space of desire, a natural position that is nevertheless largely seen within China’s conservative public discourse as “other.” In this way, he transforms the traditional space of paper-cutting, inserting queerness and his own lived experience into the vernacular. Recurring motifs include doors, walls, and caves, all of which allude to the artist’s concealed identity as a gay man who maintains his role and duties as a father married to woman. At the same time, “The overwhelming flora and fauna in Xiyadie’s works indicate a harmony that is ecological,” Hera Chan notes in the essay she contributed to this volume. “It naturalizes queer love into built structures and further encapsulates all that into nature.”<sup>3</sup>

The artist has emphasized both the role of imagination in his artistic process<sup>4</sup> and the biographical nature of his work. “I think art should reflect real life, so the things in my life, who I am in real life, I express in my art,” he explained. “I use traditional Chinese symbols to mirror my life.”<sup>5</sup> In a 2012 video documentary during a period when his work began to receive attention in the international

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2 See page 24 of the present volume.

3 See page 23 of the present volume.

4 Hongwei Bao, “Life of a Butterfly: Subjectivation and autonomy in Xiyadie’s papercutting art,” in Hongwei Bao, *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020), 177.

5 “The Siberian Butterfly,” SexyBeijingTV documentary, July 24, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTsXOIfQ2CQ>, 10:55 to 11:20.

contemporary art world, Xiyadie described in detail the process of making his works: “When I cut, it is as if I am in a dream, my scissors glide naturally through the paper. I don’t make an effort,” he explained. “Sometimes cutting is playful. Like, ‘Oh, we were in the cave, we had that moment, oh yeah.’ And then I just start cutting, cut, cut, cut... and this paper-cut appears.”<sup>6</sup>

Xiyadie’s work is tremendously underrepresented in China for numerous reasons, including censorship and self-censorship due to fear of persecution as well as conservatism among galleries, patrons, and critics.<sup>7</sup> But the scholarship that does exist unanimously emphasizes the “queering” element of his practice. Xiyadie’s paper-cuts disrupt the ancient art form by placing eroticism at the center of the artwork’s imagery while conjuring a kind of “queer utopia,” the term that the late Cuban American scholar José Esteban Muñoz utilized to “foreground the notion of hope as a mobilizing affect”<sup>8</sup> for “queers of color who have often been excluded from Western, metropolitan gay life.”<sup>9</sup> Many of Xiyadie’s works depict duos and trios of male lovers in acts of queer erotic love that are based on the artist’s sexual life and fantasies. These experiences, coupled with his artistic expertise, inspired Xiyadie to virtually “cut” a new life for himself, using rice paper as his primary medium and a pair of Chinese scissors as his main tool. “This is my stage. Here I can dance with abandon. I can give free rein to my thoughts, I can live out my fantasies,” the artist explained. “Here, I can fly to the moon. Here, I can become a butterfly. Here, I can love, and I can hate. This is the place where I can be free.”<sup>10</sup>

His subject-position as a farmer has also led to the creation of works that express the “current inequalities and injustices in contemporary Chinese society as well as the harsh realities of everyday life in China for poor and socially marginalized people.”<sup>11</sup> A never-before-exhibited large-scale work created during the 2008 Beijing Olympics incorporates this subject-matter [FIG. 2]. Xiyadie’s

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6 Ibid., 17:51 to 18:10.

7 Alvin Li, email to the author, October 11, 2022.

8 Germán Garrido, “A Queer’s International: Copi and His Deviations from ‘Lo cosmopolita,’” paper presented at LAILAC Student Lounge, CUNY Graduate Center, New York, November 2022, 4.

9 Hongwei Bao, a writer and professor of Contemporary East Asian Cultural Studies with an expertise in LGBTQ culture in China, references Muñoz in relation to Xiyadie’s work. Bao, 178.

10 SexyBeijingTV, 7:35 to 8:05.

11 Bao, “Life of a Butterfly,” 173.

works depicting class struggles are yet to receive critical attention from “gay communities and the contemporary art market,” who “seem more interested in celebrating the emergence of a Chinese queer artist, whose creative energies are believed to have been unleashed by his gay identity and a capitalist art market,” scholar Hongwei Bao has observed. “After all, words such as class, exploitation and capitalism,” he continues, “hold little appeal in a highly commercialized art market and a global ‘pink economy’ in a post-Cold War that has recently witnessed the ‘end of history’ and the ultimate triumph of neoliberal values.”<sup>12</sup> Bao points out that many of Xiyadie’s queer-themed artworks possess a distinct “class” sensibility in that they “portray the lives of the rural, migrant and urban poor living on the fringes of Chinese society,” most of whom “struggle for a living and have to use public cruising grounds to find sex partners.” This is a fundamental point Bao makes about how sexuality in contemporary China should be read against the grain of intersectionality—that is, how social categorizations around gender and sexuality are further intersected by race and class.<sup>13</sup>

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Xiyadie’s paper-cuts were first exhibited in a solo show organized by the Beijing LGBT Center in 2010. Having moved to Beijing in 2005 to become a migrant worker in order to support his financially-struggling family, Xiyadie found a welcoming queer community in the city.<sup>14</sup> Xiyadie’s works were eventually introduced to an international contemporary art public through his inclusion in major exhibitions including *Spectrosynthesis: Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now* (2017) at Taipei MOCA; the 12th Gwangju Biennale (2018); the 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts organized by art collective Slavs and Tatars (2019); and by curator Hera Chan, who has been a fierce advocate of the artist since meeting him in 2017. In spite of this recent attention, because he is self-taught and his paper-cuts were produced outside of the mechanisms of the international art world, Xiyadie’s work has not been adequately contextualized in contemporary Chinese art discourse.

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12 Bao, “Life of a Butterfly,” 174-75.

13 Ibid.

14 Xiyadie’s discovery was “situated at a critical historical juncture, when China’s LGBTQ movement was in full bloom after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997 and its depathologization in 2001,” Bao points out, which “coincided with a relatively relaxed political atmosphere since China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the flooding of HIV/AIDS-related international funding into China, which lent support to mushrooming LGBTQ grassroots organizations and social movements.” Bao, “Life of a Butterfly,” 163.

The designation of Xiyadie as a self-taught artist is technically correct, but it is nonetheless insufficient and limiting. Professor Shi, a folk-art scholar from Shaanxi Province who was responsible for Xiyadie's first significant exposure as a paper-cut artist and whom the artist views as a mentor, has argued that traditional paper-cutters tend to replicate local folk culture rather than fusing new ideas with inherited ones as Xiyadie does. "What sets him apart," Shi explains, "is his expansive mind and heart."<sup>15</sup>

Even if Xiyadie incorporates familiar and established imagery inherited from folk art culture into his paper-cuts, he also leads the artistic language into the future by breaking from its discourse. Indeed, in an interview on the heels of the artist's first solo show at an LGBTQ space in Long Beach, California, in 2014, Xiyadie acknowledged his self-determination as a creative act. He stated, "Paper cutting is my own spiritual world. It is my world. In [that world] there are no worries and sorrows, only peace and free imagination."<sup>16</sup> Xiyadie's description brings to mind the well-known modern and contemporary artists who have made cut-paper works. From Matisse's mural-scale "cut-outs" or "drawings with scissors,"<sup>17</sup> as he famously called them—which can be characterized by their fusing of "decoration and fine art, sculpture and work on paper, the architectural and the painterly"<sup>18</sup>—to Kara Walker's signature room-scale installations of cut-paper silhouettes (first exhibited at The Drawing Center in 1994) inspired by her desire to create "pictures that tell stories that people can understand,"<sup>19</sup> these paper-cut practices are connected to Xiyadie's work through their shared hybridity and strong impulse towards legibility. These artists similarly utilize the paper-cut's formal and conceptual capabilities, most significantly "the simplification of shapes into signs, the exploitation of relationships between positive and negative, the transformation and slippage of subjects, the harnessing of the decorative."<sup>20</sup>

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15 SexyBeijingTV, 21:55 to 22:00.

16 Xiyadie, in Christopher Harrity, "Artist Spotlight: Xiyadie," *Advocate*, April 21, 2012, <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/artist-spotlight/2012/04/21/artist-spotlight-xiyadie>.

17 Karl Buchberg, Nicholas Cullinan, Jodi Hauptman, and Nicholas Serota, "The Studio as Site and Subject," in Karl Buchberg, Nicholas Cullinan, Jodi Hauptman, eds., *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 12.

18 Glenn D. Lowry, "Foreword," in *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs*, 6.

19 Laura Hoptman, "Popular Culture and National Culture," in *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 106.

20 Lowry, "Foreword," 6.



As Hera Chan has pointed out, “We are at a pivotal moment in the artist’s career, which is on a belated upward trajectory, as it helps one think about what constitutes artistic practice in queer Asian culture, in drawing, in popular culture, and in personal narrative.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, as my colleague Laura Hoptman has argued in relation to the exhibition of Chinese artist Guo Fengyi that we co-organized at The Drawing Center in 2020, there is an argument here for embracing Xiyadie’s indigenous—as well as, in this instance, queer—status, as it too might serve to “question static and blinkered notions of artistic contemporaneity.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed Bao calls Xiyadie an “indigenous queer artist,” claiming that he offers queer communities a much needed example of intersectional queer diversity. He explains that Xiyadie’s work exemplifies that “queer, art, and queer art can be rural, working class, and Chinese too.”<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that despite increasing recognition as an artist, the designation was rejected by Xiyadie himself, who maintains: “I never thought about becoming an artist. Some people saw my work and then called me one. I’m only a farmer, belonging to my yellow soil land.”<sup>24</sup>

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Recognition for Xiyadie’s spectacular oeuvre is long overdue both inside and outside of China. “When I cut I forget about everything,” he has said. “With my scissors I can create anything that is out of my reach, and I can reach those things.”<sup>25</sup> Through the extraordinary worlds conjured and stories told by Xiyadie’s paper-cuts, we can reach them too.

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21 Hera Chan, email to the author, November 1, 2022.

22 Laura Hoptman, “To See from a Distance Is Still to Be Seen: Guo Fengyi at The Drawing Center,” in *Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2020), 13.

23 Bao, Bao, “Life of a Butterfly,” 163.

24 Xiyadie, in Harrity, “Artist Spotlight: Xiyadie.”

25 SexyBeijingTV, 0:10 to 0:22.



# The farmer is an artist, the artist is a gardener

Hera Chan

Siberian Butterfly is first a farmer, then an artist. The tendrils of his gardens of desire grow from penises, nipples, spiky blond hair, and the limbs of mostly men and some women. Rabbits, cats, and fish rest in the crevices between vegetal life, existing as the symbolic and serving as a list of animals the artist does not eat. Beginning in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 CE), artists have made paper-cuts in China to adorn windows and doorways to bring prosperity and fortune to their households. The exact dates of the first paper-cuts remain disputed, with some scholars making a case for paper-cutting techniques employed on materials such as tree bark, silk, hide, and gold and silver foil prior to the invention of paper.<sup>1</sup> One origin story describes a lovelorn Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty who suffered from insomnia and lack of appetite when his wife, Concubine Li, passed away. To ail the emperor's broken heart, one of his ministers cut the figure of Concubine Li into linen and positioned a dim candle behind it in a tent. The minister warned the emperor not to approach the shifting shadow so as not to scare away her spirit. As the light slowly faded away, the emperor wrote an elegy to his departed wife, the first of many writings—including this one—to reflect an enchantment with life animated by cut sheets. In a diaristic mode like writing, Xiyadie cuts and inks large sheets of paper; the work becomes the doorway itself, initiating an intimacy with us and the dream interpretation of his love stories. The narrative of each work is a slip in duration—a moment recalled without nostalgia, impossible to bracket within a time.

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1 Crystal Hui-Shu Yang, "Cross Cultural Experiences Through an Exhibition in China and Switzerland: The Art of Paper-Cutting: East Meets West," *Source* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 29-35.

The secrets that he kept are intertwined with his practice. Most of the paper-cuts he shares in this volume and for this exhibition were cut for an audience of one: himself. Their compositions are centered around homoerotic encounters and his relationship with his son, which sow the seeds for a cultivated garden of earthly delights not yet afforded by the conditions of his material world. His work takes cues from the San-bian style, which covers the areas of Jingbian, Anbian, and Dingbian in the northern Shaanxi Province, and is characterized by a gentle treatment commonly seen in the Southern School of paper-cutting—distinct from the weight more typical of the Northern School.<sup>2</sup> In *Train* (1985), Xiyadie and his first boyfriend Minghui embrace each other while en route to Xi'an [FIG. 1].<sup>3</sup> Made after their



**FIG. 1** *Train*, 1985

breakup, the paper-cut depicts Xiyadie's body invested with magenta and blue flowers, while his left leg has been transformed into a coupling rod connecting him to the chugging wheels of the steam engine train. Minghui is a train attendant, and his leg is a coupling rod as well. Encased in a cabin, they see only each other. Passengers dine in an adjoining car and the conductor faces forward, all abed a railway under which a red-eyed rabbit holds a red conductor flag. A monkey dances outside, a mouse creeps underfoot, and little birds rest between the vines. The love-making of the two men pushes forth the train or rather, it is consummated in tune with the train's strident musicality.

2 Crystal Hui-Shu Yang, "Cross Cultural Experiences," 29-35.

3 Hongwei Bao, "Metamorphosis of a butterfly: Neo-liberal subjectivation and queer autonomy in Xiyadie's papercutting art," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 6, no. 2-3 (September 2019): 243-63.

In the twentieth century, paper-cuts have been seen as a “domestic craft, a site of rural purity, a marker of Chinese civilization, and more recently, a national intangible cultural heritage.”<sup>4</sup> During the Yan’an period (1936–47), the Chinese Communist Party spearheaded the promotion of the craft as an “art form of healthiness and honesty,” a departure from the urban decadence they associated with the Nationalist Party. Traditionally passed down the matrilineal line, the form has been mobilized for expressions of women’s liberation as described by Ka-ming Wu of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and as a site of new discourse in relation to the erosion of traditional techniques. Xiyadie learned paper-cutting from his mother in Shaanxi, where he grew up in a household with six other siblings. His paternal grandfather was a gardener before the advent of the Cultural Revolution, growing flowers that covered their land. Xiyadie’s family was very close, to each other and to folk craft. His father is remembered as a kind farmer. Later, Xiyadie becomes a farmer too, on an apple plantation and wheat field, before moving to Xi’an and then Beijing as a migrant worker when there wasn’t enough food at home. His first homoerotic encounter was between the orderly rows of trees in the apple orchard—a tender and surprising experience that had no spoken language to demarcate borders and even now finds its form only through art. The privacy inherent to a singular audience marks the early period of his work, which is dominated by internal musings. This can read as a return to the autobiographical, a self-absorption of the artist, yet the diary is also a “form of writing that relinquishes authorial control to the passing moods and contingencies of the day.”<sup>5</sup> Xiyadie does not sketch his compositions beforehand and at most cuts a small rough draft to see if his characters will have the space they need. The cutting verges on the somatic, exquisite details subject to minute deliberations in only the small section of paper the artist holds; the whole will not be seen until completion.

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Several sheets of white rice paper are affixed together, allowing for a thickness that will meet scissor blades. After cutting, Xiyadie uses a brush dipped in dye commonly used for coloring festive bun assemblages to submerge sentience into his scenes. The gateways, buildings, and trains that frame beings are composed of blooming,

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4 Ka-ming Wu, “Paper-cuts in Modern China: The Search for Modernity, Cultural Tradition, and Women’s Liberation,” *Modern China* 4, no. 1 (2015): 90-127.

5 Margaret Iverson, “The Diaristic Mode in Contemporary Art After Barthes,” *Art History* 44, no. 4 (September 2021): 798-822.

sneaking foliage. His private work was first shown to a public in an exhibition setting on January 31, 2010, in a solo exhibition at the Beijing LGBT Center. On the invitation and coaxing of his close friend and curator Yang Zi, whom Xiyadie met through his doctor known as G, and the help of *Gayspot* editor-in-chief Zhao Ke, the artist opened a new page of his diary. He chose the alias Xiyadie, a Siberian butterfly that can survive the harshest conditions. The name doubles as a wish for his son, whom he often depicts as a butterfly and whom he has survived. Following the Beijing exhibition, he began to move some of his love stories from domestic interiors to public plazas, expressing a wish for a queerness and humanity that can be seen. The most common paper-cuts we encounter are made for holidays, cut by scissors or carved by knife into red paper. Decorating glass sheets and wooden panels of windows and doors, they are thresholds for spirits and people to pass through, ushering forth fortune in all its interpretations. Many of Xiyadie's works are called "Door" or "Gate," but they feature nude men entangled between the traditional red doorways studded with yellow iron reinforcements. In *Gate (Tiananmen)* (2016), a couple kisses amid their embrace in the thrown-open doors of Tiananmen, or the Gate of Heavenly Peace, located at the northern end of the square in Beijing [PL. 10]. They rejoice with abandon, flanked by green carved dragons embedded in the brick façade and cheered on by figures with their arms raised—perhaps in former days of protest—as roots grow from their legs and the soles of their feet. Pomegranates burst from lush dancing stems, a farmer's wish for prosperity and fertility.

The largest work Xiyadie has made to date was shown briefly affixed to a wall in Songzhuang, Beijing, in 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics or the emergence of China on the world stage. *A Harmonious World* (2008) measures nine meters wide and 140 centimeters tall [FIG. 2]. Less fluid than the fever dreams of his other works, this one is composed of parts that make a whole—different paper-cuts attached to the wall to formulate a humanitarian desire. Six figures of different skin colors wearing different ethnic minority clothing and headdresses hold hands, carrying ornate vases between them. In unison, they dance on the ground blossoming with flowers as butterflies flit about them and birds sing an ode to the horizon. In the center grows a tree. Olympic mascots are speckled throughout the scene, and the rightmost figure holds up the Olympic torch. On either side of the figures are homes filled with happy scenes, replete with red paper-cuts in the windows. Underfoot and underground, coal workers toil in gray mines, the energy source from their bodies



**FIG. 2** *A Harmonious World*, 2008

extracted from the central tree trunk above and extended into its internationally reaching branches. On SexyBeijingTV in 2012, Xiyadie said: “Although I am a farmer, I also want to make art. So I use a farmer’s perspective and method to express myself on the theme of harmony. I feel that there is a lot of discord in this world, and people from all nations should hold hands and stop fighting.”<sup>6</sup>

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At this time, the promise of world peace feels impossibly antiquated, a goal that no one seems to believe in pursuing anymore. Even fewer can afford to hold still long enough to allow that possibility to occupy their imagination. Harmony is an arrangement of parts. Its longstanding hold in the cosmology of the Chinese Empire takes cues from Taoism—in search of oneness, non-interference in the natural, fluid like water—and also from Confucianism—advocating social stability through mutual respect. The notion of harmony has been variously co-opted by the current government to enforce a working collaboration, compelling stability through hyper-securitization. Considering Xiyadie’s life, even as his friend, it is sometimes difficult to not mythologize the artist when his works themselves continuously construct a mythology. That mythology is at odds with any cynic’s reading of the world and in ideal harmony with his own experience. The stories accompanying each diary entry are often rife with explicit adult content yet told through expressions of deep intimacy: his glance enters a room. In an expansive sweep of thinking of his work through writing, curators Inti Guerrero and Chantal Wong commissioned three new works by Xiyadie last year for the exhibition *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*.<sup>7</sup> They asked him to make work

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6 Bao, “Metamorphosis of a butterfly.”

7 The exhibition was held at Tai Kwun Contemporary and co-presented by Sunpride Foundation (December 24, 2022-April 10, 2023). It drew from “queer mythologies” by gathering a diverse range of artistic idioms related to LGBTQ+ perspectives from over sixty artists from Asia and its diasporas.

based on three unauthored—as is the tradition—tales of homosexuality from the Warring States Period dating as early as 540 BCE [FIGS. 3–5]. In the story “Crying Fish,” Lord Longyang begins crying in a fishing boat in the presence of King Anxi of Wei. Upon goading, Longyang admits that he weeps out of fear that the King will be tempted by other, more beautiful men. In response, the King forbade any mention of other beauties in his presence—a edict enforced by the death penalty.<sup>8</sup> The sentimentality in these anonymous tales is about felt love, implicit in its complete complicity.



FIGS. 3–5 *Crying Fish*, 1985; *Cut Sleeve*, 2022; *Split Peach*, 2022

The work in Xiyadie’s life shifts over time. In thinking of how farming has been generative for thinking of art practice, we can think too of how art practice can be generative for our thinking of farming. In *Sorting sweet potatoes (Dad, don’t yell, we’re in the cellar sorting sweet potatoes)* (2019), commissioned by Slavs and Tatars for the 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts *Crack up – Crack Down*, two men play with each other’s parts [PL. 20]. They are fully clothed with their penises out as the father figure works aboveground. The roots of the trees grow into the soil between the earthen surface and the dank cellar, while other roots sprout from a gathering of sweet potatoes below. In Masanobu Fukuoka’s *The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming* (1978), equally memoir and manifesto, he outlines a form of rice farming against “work.” Starting as an inspector for the Yokohama Customs Bureau in the Plant Inspection Division, his main job was to work in a laboratory focused on plant pathology. Over time, Fukuoka’s preoccupations

8 The second tale is “Cut Sleeve,” in which Emperor Ai and Dong often slept on the same mat. One afternoon, the emperor awakes with his sleeve under Dong’s slumbering head. To avoid waking him, the emperor cuts off his silken sleeve. The third tale is “Split Peach,” in which Mizi XIa, a favored courtier of Duke Ling, would share a peach he had bitten into in order for the duke to taste the sweet nectar. Sadly, as Mizi’s looks faded, the duke turned against him, insisting that being given half a peach was an insult to his station.



went beyond agriculture. Establishing a farming site in which experimentations on “no-work” methods of cultivation could be carried out, he mused on the insufficiency of intellectual knowledge. “Everything that had possessed me, all the agonies, disappeared like dreams and illusions, and something one might call ‘true nature’ stood revealed.”<sup>9</sup>

When Xiyadie and I were in Berlin together on account of his solo exhibition at Nome Gallery in 2018—the time we met Slavs and Tatars—we walked from the hotel into the center of Kreuzberg. Along the way, he espoused a lexicon of weeds and stray plants through a taxonomy of what could or could not be eaten and how he would cook it. When I ask him where he is from, he always says he is a person from the yellow earth. The yellow earth he speaks of I’ve only seen in mediated images, in Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (1984), in photographs of the rush of the Three Gorges Dam—a matter only as real as my belief in what people tell me. In another way, grounded in present concerns, the overwhelming flora and fauna in Xiyadie’s works indicate a harmony that is ecological. It naturalizes queer love into built structures and further encapsulates all that into nature. These are images that show the unity of all lifeforms flourishing, deeply embedded with each other, an antidote to environmental extraction. All sentient beings share one pictorial plane, cut from one sheet, harmonious and necessarily connected. The apple orchard in which Xiyadie worked and the wheat fields he tilled are state-owned since his birth, and the belonging he speaks of has somehow found its grounding in a state of landlessness. If a farmer works in service of fruit, vegetable, and wheat production, then a gardener tends to flowers, trees, and vines for their beauty—life for life’s sake. If a farmer’s relationship to the land is overridden by the logic of extraction, he can become a cultivator of secret gardens to evoke sentimentality in the harsh environment of true nature. Dispossessed from the yellow earth that is public land and moving toward the private gardening of pictorial scenes, Xiyadie’s storytelling simultaneously moves the other way on the same timeline, from cutting private stories to wishes meant for the public.

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9 Masanobu Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming*, trans. Larry Korn, Chris Pearce, and Tsune Kurosawa (1978; rept. New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), 7.

# The Butterfly and the Queer Public

Alvin Li

24 Itinerant, polymorphous, and exquisite, the butterfly is a universal symbol of metamorphosis, movement, and beauty. In Chinese folklore, the butterfly also holds a particular connection to all-engulfing desire.<sup>1</sup> When he chose the pseudonym Xiyadie, which translates to Siberian Butterfly, the paper-cut artist had just moved to Beijing to live his life as a father, a gay man, a migrant worker, and an artist in the Chinese capital. From a small county near Weinan in Shaanxi Province, then to Xi'an, then to Beijing, Xiyadie's journey as an artist—prior to his gradual introduction to an international audience over the last few years—coincided with his queer becoming. His paper-cuts documenting explicit gay sex scenes in public spaces, combining biographical elements based on the artist's real-life encounters with artistic fabrications. Far from a narrative of smooth linear progress, the carving out of a public space by and for queer people in China is a story interrupted by continual backlash. In such a context, where research and preservation of local queer histories is limited due to unpredictable suppression, Xiyadie's work serves as a remarkably rare archive. From a deeply personal standpoint, he has traced with his scissors the unfolding of a queer public in China from the 1980s to the present.

Xiyadie was born in 1963 to a family of craftsmen on the outskirts of Weinan, a city in east central Shaanxi Province. His

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1 The earliest account of this association between the butterfly and romantic love can be attributed to the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai. At the end of the story, the two transform into a pair of butterflies to stay together forever, after their love in the human world is made impossible by social circumstances. While Liang and Zhu are a heterosexual couple, they meet and fall in love while Zhu is in drag as a man to attend classes, which imbues the story with a queer undertone.

grandfather was a gardener. His mother, like most women of her generation in the region, practiced paper-cutting and made colorful molds for decorative steamed buns. It was this upbringing that nurtured Xiyadie's interest in art, especially paper-cut. After attending an art-focused high school, Xiyadie moved to Xi'an and found work in the arts departments of various companies and institutions, including the Xi'an Film Studio.

Xiyadie knew he liked men when he was in high school in the late 1970s, but the subject of queer desire would not enter his work until the 1980s when he moved to Xi'an, a historic city home to many traditional art forms indigenous to China. He married a woman—as many gay men did, and still do, due to family pressure—and was deeply frustrated by the heterosexual life thus forced upon him. *Train* (1985) is one of his earliest attempts at expressing these feelings [PAGE 18]. Two flamboyant men—one in uniform—are seen embracing each other in the center of the frame, their lips barely an inch apart. The work is inspired by one of Xiyadie's first queer sexual encounters that occurred with a young conductor on a train ride from Xiyadie's hometown to Xi'an. According to the artist, the conductor spotted Xiyadie on the train and took him to his office. There, the conductor shared a tomato and a boiled egg with Xiyadie before they started making out. Xiyadie never forgot that moment, when his heart was beating as fast as the train wheels rolling underneath—a memory that influenced his decision to connect the paper-cut figures' lower bodies to the wheels of the train. In constructing this dramatic scene, the artist draws a tie between mobility, urbanization, and sexual awakening.

To my knowledge, Xiyadie is the only artist in mainland China who was engaging with queer themes in the 1980s. I would even argue that Xiyadie was among the first to unfold such a deeply personal approach to art-making. In the 1980s, the Chinese art world was opening up to new modes of expression and language after a decade of the Cultural Revolution. From the expressionistic outbursts of the Start Group to the iconoclasm of Xiamen Dada, the period was marked by an explosion of artistic experimentation across the country. However wild these experimentations may have been, together they remained a largely macho movement that prioritized rational, philosophical, and conceptual investigations, while dismissing any expression of private affects. A few examples that came close to achieving the latter would be the return of ethnic minority painting in the early 1980s at the hands of such artists as Ai Xuan (Ai Weiwei's brother) and Chen Danqing, who withdrew

from the urban center and retreated to the frontier to express a kind of humanism after the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Or Yang Yushu and Zhao Wenliang from the No Name Art Group, who painted landscapes together after meeting in 1958, including throughout the Cultural Revolution, when any art form other than revolutionary realism was banned. Despite their best efforts, their display of personal yearnings was not straightforward but bestowed upon a landscape, continuing the lyrical tradition in Chinese literature and art.<sup>2</sup> Compared to this kind of symbolism, the daringly explicit, highly individualistic nature of Xiyadie's work from the same period bespeaks an idiosyncratic and groundbreaking voice of the time.

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In contrast to the 1980s, the 1990s marked a turning point for public discourse around personal feelings, especially those concerning gender and sexual identity. American anthropologist Lisa Rofel has famously described this transitional period—amid the accelerating economic reform that followed the 1989 Tiananmen protests—as the emergence of a “desiring China,” where “sexual, material, and affective self-interests” (unthinkable even a decade earlier) had not only become acceptable but had indeed become integral to the image of the new Chinese citizen.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 1990s, sociologists such as Li Yinhe and her partner, the late writer Wang Xiaobo, delved into queer theory and gender studies to secure a space for such discussions in the public sphere. Meanwhile, cultural centers in China, principally Beijing, witnessed a rising tide of experimentation involving gender performance across the arts, from the Beijing East Village artists to Zhang Yuan's and Chen Kaige's cinema and Mou Sen's theater, raising general public awareness of sexuality and gender. Ensuing developments in the 1990s eventually led to the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997 and its removal from the official list of psychiatric disorders in 2001.

The progressive atmosphere outlined above was not, however, Xiyadie's experience of the 1990s. During this period he toiled as a migrant worker in Xi'an to support his family of four—his wife, a son (who developed cerebral palsy three days after birth), and a daughter. Rather than gradually coming to terms with his sexuality, Xiyadie struggled with acceptance and sought medical treatment

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2 For more on the lyrical in twentieth-century Chinese literature and art, see David Der-wei Wang's *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

3 Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

for it. This explains why so many of his queer-themed works from this period are marked by a tone of shame, regret, and repression. In *Gate* (1992), two men hide behind a red door while one performs oral sex on the other. Inside the house, a female figure—Xiyadie’s wife—attends to their son, who lies beneath a floral-patterned quilt [PL. 25]. *Gate* speaks to Xiyadie’s guilt over his uncontrolled homosexual desire, which, in the work, is positioned as a distraction from familial duty. In another, more unequivocally devastating work titled *Sewn* (1999), the central figure—Xiyadie himself—is seen sewing up his penis with a needle while looking at a photo of the train conductor [PL. 6]. Xiyadie’s experience, as documented in these pain-filled tableaux, illustrates the asymmetry of access across geographical and class divides to nascent formulations of subjectivities and knowledges in 1990s China. Although Xi’an is a major city with a population of over 8.5 million in its metro area (2.2 million around 1990), its economic and socio-cultural development in the 1990s was incomparable to that of cities on the east coast, which benefited from more experimental economic policies (especially in the areas designated as “special economic zones”) and the ensuing, accelerated cultural flows.

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Xiyadie moved to Beijing with his son in 2005. While the move was primarily spurred by his family’s financial needs, Xiyadie also looked forward to this relocation for personal reasons. Prior to moving to Beijing he had come across an article in *Wenming Huabao* (which translates to Civilization Pictorial) about a number of cruising spots for gay men in Beijing. He took notes and paid visits as soon as he arrived in the capital. “Only after moving to Beijing did I realize that there were so many of us,” he recalled.<sup>4</sup> The 2000s were arguably the most liberal period for queer expression in Chinese public culture. While queer entertainers such as female pop star Li Yuchun (aka Chris Lee) rose to national sensation (winning the Chinese singing contest Super Girl in 2005 with over 3 million votes), queer nightlife venues mushroomed across urban centers like Beijing and Shanghai.<sup>5</sup> Eddy’s, arguably China’s first gay bar, opened in Shanghai in 1995, followed by Shanghai Studio in 2004. Destination, Beijing’s first gay club, opened in 2004 and is still in business.

Compared to these commercial spaces, public cruising spots in China have a far longer history that stretches back to

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4 Xiyadie, in conversation with the author, November 16, 2022.

5 Francesca Tarocco, “New Cities, Old Troubles,” *Frieze* 191 (November 2017).

the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> While their locations—parks, public bathrooms, and bathhouses—shifted over the years to avoid sporadic police raids, these sites remained shelters for the more disenfranchised of the queer community. The 2018 work *Yuquanying subway station* (*A chance encounter on a subway station, which used to be the base of homosexuals from the western suburbs of Beijing*) is inspired by one of Xiyadie’s earliest cruising experiences in Beijing [PL. 28]. The station is located near the South Third Ring in Fengtai District, southwest of the city center. Compared to better-known cruising spots such as Dongdan Park (which inspired the 1996 classic film *East Palace, West Palace*, directed by Zhang Yuan), the men’s toilet at the Yuquanying subway station never received the same level of media exposure, and its secret was only accessible through word of mouth (or via accidental encounter). In the work, two nearly-identical bathroom stalls are divided by a thin, yellow wall. On the left side is a standing male figure, and on the right is a kneeling male figure, the two bodies connected by the standing man’s penis, which protrudes through a hole in the wall. While Xiyadie was no stranger to the clubs in China (he told me that he also frequented Beijing’s Destination in the early years) and abroad (encountered on his journeys as he started showing internationally in the last decade), he still found inspiration, as recently as 2018, in the men’s toilet at a suburban train station. Xiyadie’s partiality for the most unglamorous of all gay public spaces reveals a position of solidarity with working-class queer men.

By the time of the work’s completion in 2018, many such queer spaces, whether online or offline, had disappeared due to various government policies. While some of these policies are explicitly homophobic, such as the ban on the portrayal of homosexual romance on national television (since 2016) and the Internet (since 2017), others are ostensibly in the name of urban renewal, but conceived so as to de facto exclude unwanted populations or close spaces where such populations convene. While gay nightlife venues can and do easily resurface, however ephemerally (their lifespans largely depending on their relationship to local police authorities), public spaces for working-class queers, once denied, are lost forever to history. In the face of this erasure,

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6 For a history of gay cruising in Beijing, see “Secret Documentary: The Life of an Old ‘Comrade,’” Phoenix TV, aired November 29, 2016, <https://v.ifeng.com/news/society/201611/01314fbb-60f4-414c-9ff9-2e4df5527d1e.shtml>.



**FIG. 6** *Kaiyang*, 2021

works such as *Yuquanying subway station* (2018) stand as powerful evidence of a place that, however fleeting, did once exist.

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Yet perhaps we should look at Xiyadie's works not just as documentation of a lost past but rather as blueprints for a future.<sup>7</sup> Completed in 2021, *Kaiyang*, one of Xiyadie's largest works to date, is based on his experience of the eponymous bathhouse in Beijing that operated in the early 2000s and was eventually shut down [FIG. 1].<sup>8</sup> In this arresting orgy scene, numerous bodies are seen kissing, sucking, fucking, dancing—no longer hidden behind closed doors but directly in front of Tiananmen Square, the Temple of Heaven, and occupying every corner of the city. As in many of his works, pomegranates, mice, flowers, and birds—representing fertility, beauty, and freedom—grow out of these bodies, speaking to the life-affirming vitality of sexual exuberance. Through the indigenous art of paper-cutting, Xiyadie captures the hope that our insatiable desire for pleasure and freedom will break all boundaries and shackles, releasing the world back to us again.

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7 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

8 The artist also cites a 2019 visit to Ficken 3000 in the company of queer Chinese filmmaker and activist Fan Popo as an inspiration for this work.





# Plates



PL. 1  
*Butterfly*, 2006



PL. 2  
*Joy*, 1999





PL. 3

*Boiling (A boiling pot resembles helplessness  
and suffering of humanity), 2018*





PL. 4  
*Flowerpot*, 1991



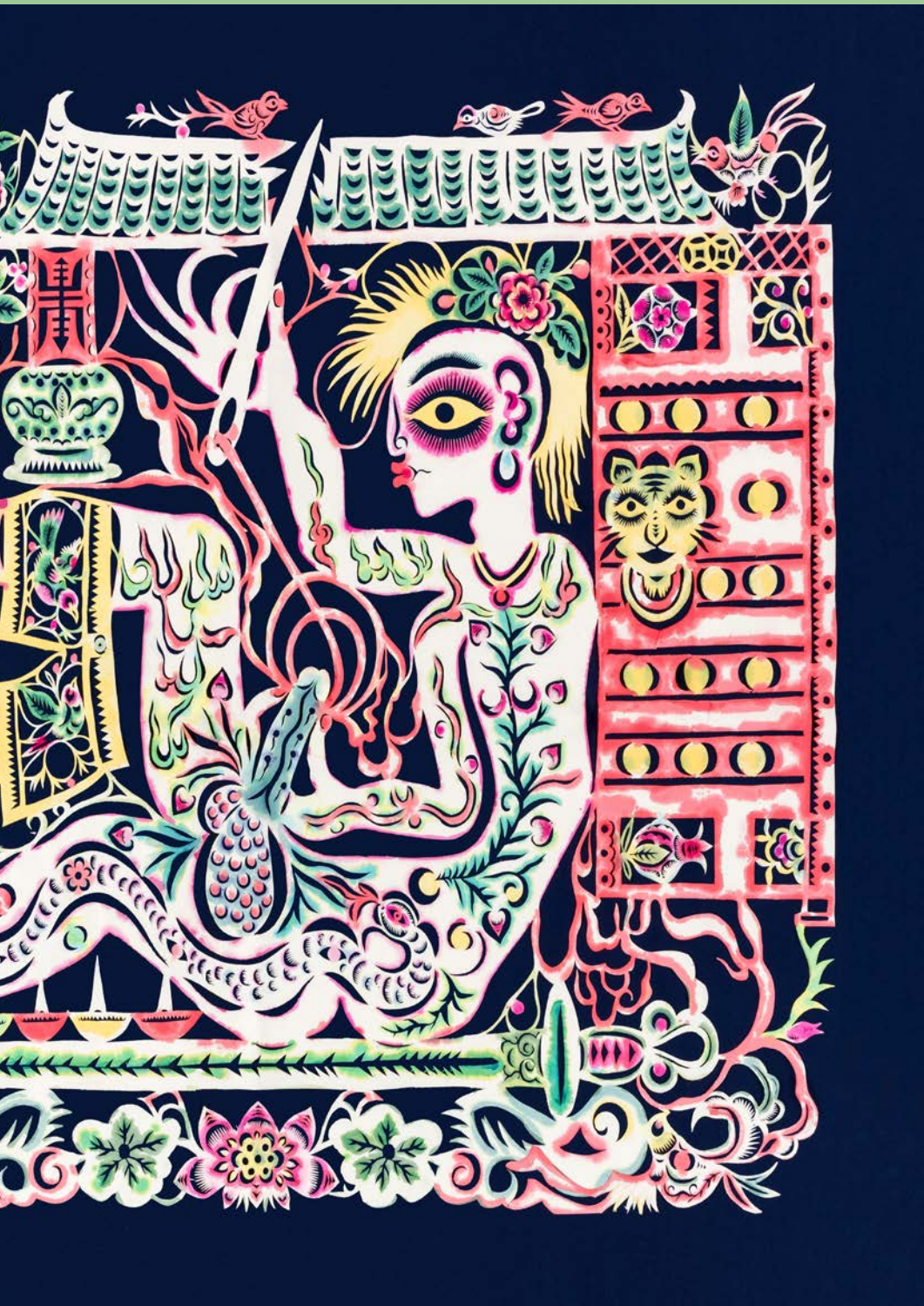












PL. 7

*Fish on a chopping board (Human suffering, depression and helplessness are like a beheaded fish on a chopping board, but at this very moment we are still happy), 2018*





PL. 8

*Fish on a chopping board (Human suffering, depression and helplessness are like a beheaded fish on a chopping board, but at this very moment we are still happy), 2018*







PL. 9

*Double happiness (Lovers are often together), 2018*







PL. 10  
*Gate (Tiananmen)*, 2016







PL. 12  
*Gate, 1992*







PL. 13

*Boiling (A boiling pot resembles helplessness  
and suffering of humanity), 2018*





PL. 14

*Your lightbulb is fine (Such natural mutual love  
is part of human nature), 2018*





PL. 15

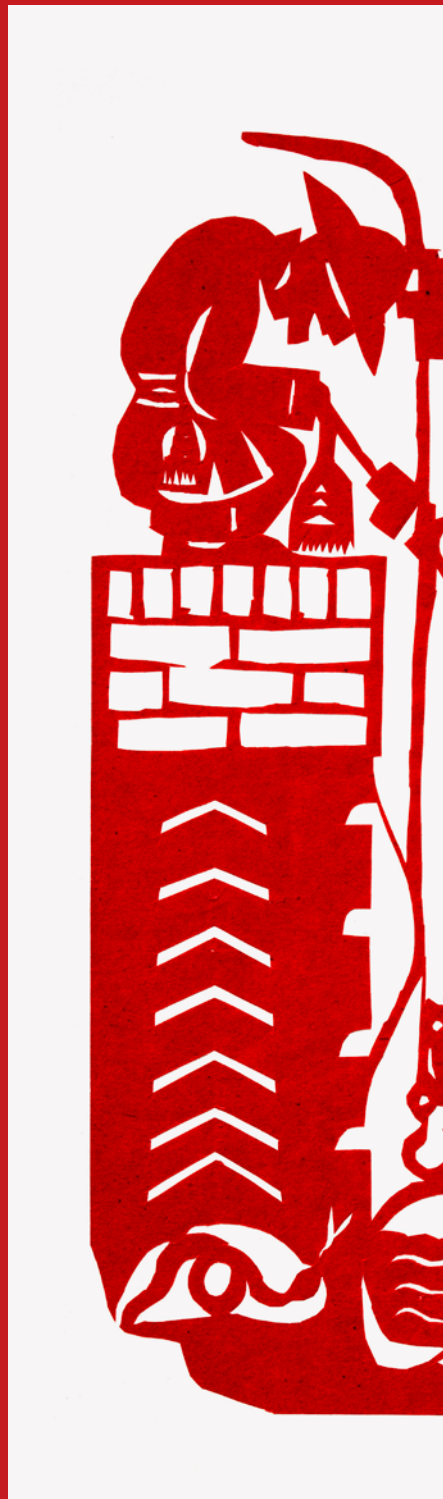
*"Don't worry, mom is spinning thread in the next room" (A love scene, when high school student is at home writing homework), 2019*





PL. 16

*Sorting sweet potatoes (Dad, don't yell, we're in  
the cellar sorting sweet potatoes), 2019*











PL. 18  
*Gate*, 1999









PL. 20

*Sorting sweet potatoes (Dad, don't yell, we're in  
the cellar sorting sweet potatoes), 2019*











PL. 22  
*Joy*, 1999





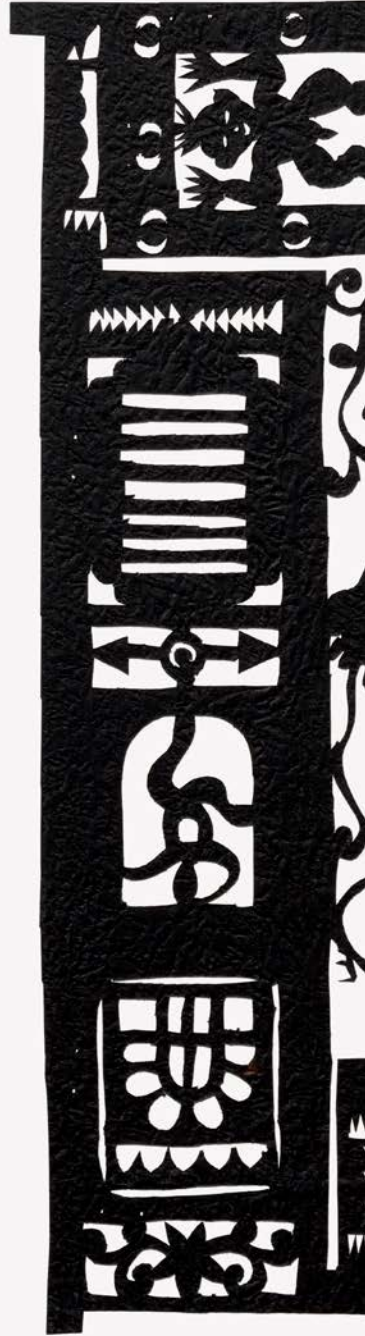
PL. 23  
*Joy (Happy together)*, 2018





PL. 24

*Door (A pair of rotating doors is representing tradition and modernity, as the universe rotates day after day, so our lives are focused and the joy of love continues...), 1982*

















PL. 27

*Double happiness (Lovers are often together), 1982*



PL. 28

*Yuquanying subway station (A chance encounter on a subway station, which used to be the base of homosexuals from the western suburbs of Beijing), 2018*

















## Works in the Exhibition

All works are courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

### FIG. 6

*Kaiyang*, 2021

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 118 1/8 inches (140 x 300 cm)

### PL. 1

*Butterfly*, 2006

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
11 x 11 4/5 inches (28 x 30 cm)

### PL. 2

*Joy*, 1999

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

### PL. 3

*Boiling (A boiling pot resembles helplessness and suffering of humanity)*, 2018

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

### PL. 4

*Flowerpot*, 1991

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

### PL. 5

*Joy*, 2016

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

### PL. 6

*Sewn*, 1999

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

### PL. 7

*Fish on a chopping board (Human suffering, depression and helplessness are like a beheaded fish on a chopping board, but at this very moment we are still happy)*, 2018

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

### PL. 8

*Fish on a chopping board (Human suffering, depression and helplessness are like a beheaded fish on a chopping board, but at this very moment we are still happy)*, 2018

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

### PL. 9

*Double happiness (Lovers are often together)*, 2018

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

### PL. 10

*Gate (Tiananmen)*, 2016

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

### PL. 11

*Joy*, 2005

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

### PL. 12

*Gate*, 1992

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

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*Boiling (A boiling pot resembles helplessness and suffering of humanity)*, 2018

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

## PL. 14

*Your lightbulb is fine (Such natural mutual love is part of human nature)*, 2018

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

## PL. 15

*"Don't worry, mom is spinning thread in the next room" (A love scene, when high school student is at home writing homework)*, 2019

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

## PL. 16

*Sorting sweet potatoes (Dad, don't yell, we're in the cellar sorting sweet potatoes)*, 2019

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

## PL. 17

*Wall*, 2016

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

## PL. 18

*Gate*, 1999

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

## PL. 19

*Joy*, 1982

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

## PL. 20

*Sorting sweet potatoes (Dad, don't yell, we're in the cellar sorting sweet potatoes)*, 2019

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

## PL. 21

*Joy*, 1999

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)

## PL. 22

*Joy*, 1999

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

## PL. 23

*Joy (Happy together)*, 2018

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

## PL. 24

*Door (A pair of rotating doors is representing tradition and modernity, as the universe rotates day after day, so our lives are focused and the joy of love continues...)*, 1982

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

## PL. 25

*Gate*, 1992

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
55 1/8 x 55 1/8 inches (140 x 140 cm)  
Private collection, Hong Kong

## PL. 26

*Joy*, 2005

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

## PL. 27

*Double happiness (Lovers are often together)*, 1982

Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)



**PL. 28**

*Yuquanying subway station (A chance encounter on a subway station, which used to be the base of homosexuals from the western suburbs of Beijing), 2018*  
Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

**PL. 29**

*Joy, 1999*  
Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

**PL. 30**

*Joy, 1999*  
Paper-cut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper  
7 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches (20 x 20 cm)

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**Additional Image Credits**

FIGS. 3–5 Courtesy of the artist and Sunpride Foundation

FIG. 6 Courtesy of Studio Bowie / HKW

PLS. 3, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 23, 24, 27, 28 Courtesy of Slavs and Tatars, Photo by Urška Boljkovac

## Contributors

**Hera Chan** is a curator and writer based in Amsterdam by way of Hong Kong. She is Adjunct Curator of Greater China, Supported by the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation, at Tate. Her work engages with performative infrastructures such as elections—as co-producer of KomBJI TV, a political talk show aired in the Netherlands the occupied Dutch Antilles leading up to the Dutch parliamentary elections of 2021; beauty pageants—as co-founder and curator of platform Miss Ruthless International in Hong Kong; and diasporic networks—as founding director of para-institution Atelier Céladon in Montreal.

**Rosario Güiraldes** is Associate Curator at The Drawing Center.

**Alvin Li** is a curator and writer based between London, UK, and Shanghai, China. With Hera Chan, he serves as Adjunct Curator, Greater China, supported by the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, at Tate. He has curated exhibitions at UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing; Para Site, Hong Kong; chi K11 Art Museum, Shanghai; and Antenna Space, Shanghai, among others. His writing has appeared in anthologies and catalogues published by Dancing Foxes Press, MIT Press, and Sternberg Press, among others, as well as in international publications such as *frieze*, *Artforum*, *e-flux Architecture*, *Mousse*, and *Art Agenda*.

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# Xiyadie: Queer Cut Utopias

The first publication to document and explore the work of Chinese paper-cut artist Xiyadie (b. 1963), *Queer Cut Utopias* features a selection of the artist's astonishingly intricate works dating from the early 1980s through today. Xiyadie's singular artistic language originated in the traditional techniques of Chinese paper-cutting, fusing traditional folk forms and iconography with narratives from his personal life. Articulating a longing to express his queer desire, Xiyadie embraces the ancient art form while subverting it with defiant yet joyful expressions of individualism. In the artist's words: "This is my stage. Here I can dance with abandon, I can give free rein to my thoughts, I can live out my fantasies. Here, I can fly to the moon, I can become a butterfly, I can love, and I can hate. This is the place where I can be free."

Contributions by  
Hera Chan  
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