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Ocula

“Tao Hui’s Prophetic Multimedia Poetry”

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Tao Hui’s Prophetic Multimedia Poetry

In Conversation with
Shanyu Zhong and Zian Chen
Hong Kong, 20 December 2024

Tao Hui. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Mark Poucher.



The artist discusses his recent body of video, sculpture, and graphic work, which explores narratives of political resistance and hope in contemporary China.



ARTIST PROFILE
Tao Hui
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Tao Hui is a true storyteller. Weaving together traditional folk tales from his rural upbringing in Southwest China, teenage TV dramas, and nonconformist mythologies, such as *Legend of the White Snake*, the artist’s multimedia practice resonates with themes of contemporary queer empowerment. Tao not only explores the narrative form: he is equally engaged with the media through which his stories are told, drawing inspiration from emerging platforms and evolving technologies.

After graduating from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2010, Tao quickly rose to prominence, earning major accolades such as the Grand Prize at the [19th Sesc Videobrasil Contemporary Art Festival](#) (2015) and the Huayu Youth Award (2015). He was shortlisted for the Hugo Boss Asia Emerging Artist Award in 2017 and the inaugural M+ Museum Sigg Prize in 2019.



Tao Hui, *1 Character & 7 Materials* (2015). Exhibition view: *Searing Pain*, Aranya Art Center, Qinhuangdao (4 September 2022–5 February 2023) © Tao Hui. Courtesy Aranya Art Center. Photo: Sun Shi.

Tao's solo exhibition, *Searing Pain* (4 September 2022–26 February 2023), at the Aranya Art Center in Qinhuangdao, China, marked his most comprehensive survey to date. The show featured 18 works from the past decade installed in an upward spiral to echo the architecture of the space.

Early pieces included *The Dusk of Tehran* (2014), in which an Iranian actress re-enacts in a taxi the farewell concert monologue given by pop singer Anita Mui, and *1 Character & 7 Materials* (2015), a phone booth installation that plays nonlinear video clips linked by a narrative voiceover. Overall, *Searing Pain* offered a comprehensive showcase of Tao's signature style: plotlines that oscillate between fact and fiction brought to life through videos and versatile installations inspired by film sets and props.



Tao Hui, *The Fall* (2022). Exhibition view: *Searing Pain*, Aranya Art Center, Qinhuangdao (4 September 2022–5 February 2023) © Tao Hui. Courtesy Aranya Art Center. Photo: Sun Shi.

The exhibition also premiered three new commissions which saw Tao expand his artistic approach. These included the visceral snake-tail installation *The Fall* (2022) and *257 (Digital Painting)* (2022), a sequence of large-format, graphic-novel images suspended from a walkway ceiling to guide viewers through the exhibition space.

More recently, to launch Tai Kwun Contemporary's new Breakthrough series—a platform dedicated to emerging artists with solo presentations and major commissions—Tao presented *In the Land Beyond Living* (26 September 2024–2 February 2025), featuring five new works alongside two recent productions. In style, the new projects oscillate between the viral immediacy of TikTok videos and old-school TV drama.



Exhibition view: Tao Hui, *In the Land Beyond Living*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (26 September 2024–2 February 2025). Courtesy Tai Kwun Contemporary. Photo: South Ho.

The centrepiece of the show was the video installation *Chilling Terror Sweeps the North* (2024), which laid bare the fraught decisions confronting a young couple as the man urges the woman to leave her hometown in search of better opportunities, exposing the alienation of displacement. The piece struck a poignant chord, echoing the precarious reality of life for young people in Mainland China and Hong Kong amid a turbulent political landscape and a punishing economic downturn.

The following conversation, conducted by *Ocula* editors Shanyu Zhong and Zian Chen during the span of Tao's two major institutional exhibitions, delves into key aspects of the artist's evolving practice.



Exhibition view: Tao Hui, *In the Land Beyond Living*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (26 September 2024–2 February 2025). Courtesy Tai Kwun Contemporary. Photo: South Ho.

ZC **The Chinese countryside has often provided a rich backdrop for your work, but *Chilling Terror Sweeps the North*, the cornerstone of your latest show at Tai Kwun Contemporary, brings geography to the forefront, focusing on the northwest for the first time. What sparked this shift?**

TH The making of *Chilling Terror Sweeps the North* was deeply shaped by my perception of reality and the current state of the world. The idea for the work emerged during a brief but impactful 15-day residency in early 2023 in Zhongwei, Ningxia. The video centres on a couple debating migration: the man, originally from southern China, attempts to convince a local Hui woman to leave her hometown for a place with better opportunities. She, however, is determined to stay. It's a story about choices, where every path carries its own shadow of regret.

During the residency, I stayed in a starkly barren landscape—no greenery within a ten-kilometre radius, snow falling relentlessly. The desolation, amplified by nearby abandoned towns, stirred a deep nostalgia for the lush, humid warmth of the south. On a visit to a Ming-era ancient town in Gansu, I found myself asking a villager why they hadn't moved to a nearby city. It was only later that I realised how condescending the question was. The process of self-questioning became a pivotal influence in shaping *Chilling Terror Sweeps the North*.



Tao Hui, *Chilling Terror Sweeps the North* (2024). Exhibition view: *In the Land Beyond Living*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (26 September 2024–2 February 2025) © Tao Hui. Courtesy Tai Kwun Contemporary. Photo: South Ho.

Next to the main screen is a vertical holographic display featuring a *huqin* player blending instrumental performance with narration for the film. At times, the player disintegrates into sand, blown away by the wind, only to reform moments later.

The female protagonist speaks a fabricated northern dialect, blending various regional accents she studied. The narration and closing song are performed by He Chi, an artist of Gansu origin, who sings the classic *Hua'er* folk tune *Thirty Miles of Sand*, *Twenty Miles of Water*, accompanied by a *sanxian*, a traditional Chinese lute, played in the style of his hometown.

The male protagonist wears a stool on his head, while the female protagonist dons a sickle—headpieces inspired by the 'Blood Shehuo' performances of Shaanxi's Longzhou region. Unlike the celebratory vibrancy of traditional Shehuo, 'Blood Shehuo' turns to macabre theatrics, employing props such as scissors and axes in grotesque, Halloween-like displays of staged gore. This visceral pageantry serves as a stark allegory, dramatising the harshness of life with defiant theatricality. Rather than directly depicting the characters' struggles, I leaned on these evocative visual elements as symbolic markers of their unspoken plight.



26 SEP 2024–2 FEB 2025

Tao Hui

In the Land Beyond Living

Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong

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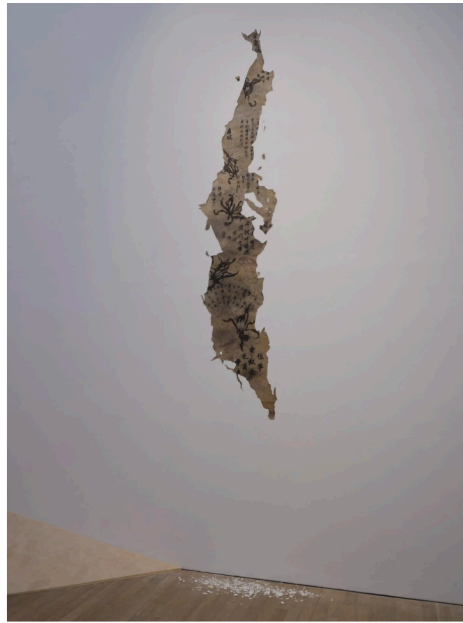
Tao Hui, *Chilling Terror Sweeps the North* (2024) (still). Double channel video 26 min 52 sec. © Tao Hui. Courtesy of the artist.

I also met a religious leader of the Jahriyya order, a Muslim Sufi sect that, in 1781, resisted the Qing government at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. He guided us to a *gonbad* tomb, where we burned incense—an already highly sinicized practice—and recited scripture. I knelt as long as he did, listening to the chanting: it was deeply moving. This experience led me to conceptualise the young woman in the film as a Hui intellectual.

Drawing from these experiences, I set the video in a contemporary-looking mosque with elliptic and eclectic features of Islamic domes. The audience sits on a clean floor, watching the video as if in prayer.

zc **Several other works in this Hong Kong institutional debut build on the world of *Chilling Terror Sweeps the North*, including a mural titled *The Michelia and the Prophetic Poems* (2024)—a medium you haven't explored previously. Could you tell us more about it?**

TH *The Michelia and the Prophetic Poems* draws its inspiration from a 1971 discovery of 18th-century wall-scribed poems at what is believed to be the former residence of Cao Xueqin, author of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1791), one of China's greatest classical novels. In this work, I've inscribed two of the novel's iconic prophetic poems on the female characters Jia Tanchun and Jia Xichun. Though their personalities couldn't be more different, both characters reflect certain resonances with the protagonist of *Chilling Terror Sweeps the North*.



Tao Hui, *The Michelia and the Prophetic Poems* (2024). Exhibition view: *In the Land Beyond Living*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (26 September 2024–2 February 2025) © Tao Hui. Courtesy Tai Kwun Contemporary. Photo: South Ho.

Jia Tanchun, bold and resolute, laments her fate as she leaves her family to marry in the South China Sea region—an echo of the female protagonist in my video. In contrast, Jia Xichun finds fulfilment by renouncing worldly attachments to become a nun, encapsulated in the author's verdict of her: 'Alas, a daughter of so great a house, by Buddha's altar lamp should sleep alone!' Cao also composed another lyric for this character, titled *Record of Ephemeral Blossoms*, which I included in my mural.

In Cao's novel, the prophetic poems foretell the fates of the characters, reflecting a belief in predestination—a core aspect of traditional Chinese society, where fate is often seen as immutable, steeped in a strong sense of fatalism. In my work, while the characters' destinies are shaped by external societal forces, they convey both a sense of powerlessness and a desire to resist.

The michelia flower serves as a metaphor for me, tethering myself to my work. As a child, my grandmother would place these flowers by my bedside during the summer, their fragrance lulling me to sleep. It wasn't until arriving in Hong Kong that I learned these flowers are also a ubiquitous street scent locally, deeply woven into the fabric of collective memory.



Tao Hui, *Being Wild* (2021). Exhibition view: *In the Land Beyond Living*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (26 September 2024–2 February 2025) © Tao Hui. Courtesy Tai Kwun Contemporary. Photo: South Ho.

- zc **While your works often engage with contemporary pop culture, Cao's prophetic poems also form part of this lineage. In *Being Wild* (2021), a video installation featured in both exhibitions, you also incorporate meme culture and explore grassroots politics in China. How did you come to use memes in this particular work?**
- TH *Being Wild* follows a girl roller-skating through settings familiar from contemporary Chinese dramas—university towns, abandoned paper mills, and film sets. In moments of frustration, when words fail her, she shouts 'Yesmola', an internet meme popularised by a rural livestreamer, Teacher Guo [Guo Beibei]. Originally a nonsensical pseudo-English phrase, 'Yesmola' became Guo's signature after she reclaimed it from online ridicule, transforming it into a versatile expression of emotion. Teacher Guo cultivated a devoted following within China's queer community, who celebrated her as a reigning figure. While I was making the film, her social-media ban, prompted by her bawdy humour, was unfolding—and that's how it became part of the narrative.



Tao Hui, *The Night of Peacemaking* (2022). Exhibition view: *Searing Pain*, Aranya Art Center, Qinhuangdao (4 September 2022–5 February 2023) © Tao Hui. Courtesy Aranya Art Center. Photo: Sun Shi.

- SZ **Your video *The Night of Peacemaking* (2022), which was screened at both Aranya Art Center and Tai Kwun Contemporary, presents multiple perspectives on the same scene—participants of a Chinese TV show, inspired by a real programme called *Gold Medal Mediation*, where family grievances are aired on screen in a bid to find a resolution. There's one camera on a robotic arm that feels fully immersed in mediating the conflict, another positioned far away, almost detached from the scene, and a third constantly moving, as if urging us to dive into the tension.**
- TH This piece was meant to capture the dynamics of a film studio by incorporating as many perspectives as possible—directors, actors, crew members, even the cleaning lady working nearby—unlike traditional TV shows, which usually stick to a single perspective. The first camera I added was on a robotic arm. It's amazing—it can create all sorts of angles and moves back and forth so smoothly. It doesn't feel like a camera to me; it's more like a nosy person prying into everything. The second camera is always moving, providing a wide-angle view that captures everyone in the scene. The third perspective includes the crew members and even me. When I worked on post-production, the film company kept asking, 'Did something go wrong? There are so many bloopers—cameras in the shot, your face popping up. What happened?'



Tao Hui, *The Night of Peacemaking* (2022) (still). Single channel HD video, color, sound. 22 min 18 sec. Dimensions variable. © Tao Hui. Courtesy of the artist.

SZ At the end, the camera zooms in on the protagonist as she turns to the lens, tears streaming down her face, before fainting. It recalls a well-known scene from the 1987 adaptation of Cao's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, featuring the fragile and sorrowful Lin Daiyu. I watched *The Night of Peacemaking* during the opening of your show at Aranya Art Center, and everyone marvelled at the incredible performance of your protagonist, played by Xue Qing. Can you talk about that final shot?

TH That moment came from the actor herself. After an intense emotional scene, she couldn't snap out of it. We had to wait for her to calm down, but she said the story felt way too close to her own experiences—it was too real for her. That's when I thought, 'Isn't this exactly what reality shows are about?' While she was crying, I asked her to hold a pose so I could record it. I used the camera to zoom in and out, capturing that moment. Even after we finished filming, it took her another 30 minutes to recover.

What might feel abrupt in my planned design made complete sense at that moment. A lot of people thought her performance was incredible but, the truth is, she wasn't performing—she was genuinely crying. I captured some even more authentic moments where she completely broke down, but I prefer my work to exist in that space between truth and fiction.



Tao Hui, *The Night of Peacemaking* (2022) (still). Single channel HD video, color, sound. 22 min 18 sec. Dimensions variable. © Tao Hui. Courtesy of the artist.

I've worked with Xue five or six times now, and I wrote this script with her in mind. She's not professionally trained, but she's relentless about pursuing acting. In *Joint Images* (2016), she played a pregnant woman mimicking a reality show's hospital birth scene and, once again, she couldn't detach from the role. She told me she spent ages researching the character, even interviewing her sister-in-law about what childbirth feels like. Her performance went beyond realism—it was like she layered and synthesised all the real experiences she'd gathered.

I somehow tend to establish emotional connections with female actors. Funny enough, I've rarely worked with male actors. Growing up, I was surrounded by female family members who took care of me. I've always felt that women's stories are more powerful and carry a deeper narrative richness.

sz What's your take on society's gender stereotypes? The idea of women being self-absorbed or overly emotional or hysterical, for instance? At first glance, these stereotypes seem to align with the female characters in your works.

TH Essentially, I see the crying scene at the end of *The Night of Peacemaking* not as an expression of sorrowful victimhood, but one of powerful resolution—much like the women portrayed in the films of Pedro Almodóvar, my characters are never fragile but deeply resilient.



Tao Hui, *Hello, Finale!* (2017) (still). HD video installation, color, sound. 40 min. © Tao Hui. Courtesy the artist.

sz How do you play with theatricality through script?

TH The articulation of language has played a large part in my work. Quite a few of my sound pieces involve monologues that are part-recited, part-sung. I love listening to fan-edited soundtracks where movie dialogue is spliced into instrumental scores. When I listen to them on the go, the emotional impact feels almost as powerful as watching the movie itself.

Sound has always fascinated me because it carries so much information—volume, dialect, accent—all of which can evoke different layers of meaning. It's no less rich than purely visual elements. That's why I've created so many audio works. When I write monologues, I try to translate the qualities of sound into text, or sometimes into visible, visual expressions that I incorporate into my videos. When the imagery isn't as vivid during the writing process, I imagine the characters speaking directly in my ear—that helps me shape their voices.

sz Your video installations often stand out for their distinctive integration of film props. How do you navigate the decision-making process for the use of props in your work?

TH I tend to turn the exhibition spaces into film sets. For exhibition making, I'm concerned about how to build scenes. Back in *1 Character & 7 Materials*, I re-created a bus stop right inside the exhibition space. In *The Night of Peacemaking*, the film set-like props are from scenes I created for the videos and later reintroduced into the exhibition space. For *Being Wild*, I sometimes would include only a pair of ice skates as part of the installation, complementing the projection. In this case, a single object on its own gives the audience more room to engage and reflect. Adding too much information might dilute its impact.



Tao Hui, *The Dusk of Tehran* (2014) (still). Single channel HD video, colour, sound. 4 min 14 sec. © Tao Hui. Courtesy of the artist.

SZ Would you agree that your work often conveys a sense of destiny?

TH I think karma is something that's always been with me. I have this vivid memory from my childhood, back when I couldn't even speak yet. My parents were rural schoolteachers, and we lived at a village primary school. It was an old earthen building with a courtyard, and the gate opened toward the playground. You had to step over a stone threshold to get in. On one side were classrooms; on the other was our home. Every day after school, one of my parents would fetch water from a nearby well to cook dinner.

One day, my mom went to fetch water, and my dad was holding me as we stood by the school gate. I remember standing there on the threshold and suddenly feeling this overwhelming loneliness and emptiness. This childhood memory later became the opening scene of *Pulsating Atom* (2019), a video installation that explores the costume-based performances of short video creators in China.

At that moment, I felt like I was the only real person in the world, and everyone else—including my parents—was just pretending. That feeling of loneliness has stayed with me all my life. I always revisit that moment in my mind. —[O]