

# On the Mountain of the Hermits

## “The Becoming of Feathered Beings”

YI XIN TONG

### CURATORIAL STATEMENT

*By Winnie Wong*

One of the most treasured tropes in the Chinese literati tradition is the scholar’s decision—in the face of an objectionable political regime—to withdraw from civic duties. The fourth-century poet Tao Yuanming retreated to Mount Lu (Mount Hermitage) for a life in seclusion, changing his name to Tao Qian (The Hidden). His poetry reflecting on this disengagement became the touchstone for centuries of literary, poetic, and artistic expressions of scholarly abjuration. Retreating to the mountains is the geographical demonstration of the strategic power of visible silence and committed refusal.

In the twentieth century, despite its geographical remove, Mount Hermitage was not disconnected from the political upheavals of the century or the appropriative politics of retreat. Western missionaries, offering a new vision of the afterlife, established a summer resort there, naming it Guling, for “cooling.” They departed before the Japanese invasion, and left behind their European-styled buildings to be recolonized and reinhabited. During its strategic military retreat known as the Long March, the Chinese Communist Party battled Republican forces near one of its lakes. During the Great Leap Forward and through the Cultural Revolution, three Party plenums made life and death decisions from its cool and lofty heights. Today, Mount Lu is a protected touristic reserve, a four-hour drive from the city of Wuhan. Even with its storied heritage as a place of isolation, it is also just a mountain town contending, like so much of China and the rest of the world, with the unequal movement of people from village to town to city, with environmental degradation and corresponding nostalgia for the natural, and with the pandemic

lockdown and ravages of the coronavirus disease on our political and our human bodies.

The artist Yi Xin Tong, born at Mount Hermitage, happened upon the ruins of a zoo in its protected national parks in 2015. Built in the 1950s, with nine modernist pavilions in a garden landscape housing peacocks, pandas, camels, and other exotic animals, the once-glorious zoo had been closed, and its buildings were in disrepair. Tong, however, found the animal pavilions far from abandoned; he came upon many remnants of recent human habitation. Since 2015, Tong has been documenting the reappearance and departure of both people and animals in these secluded and idyllic cages. At times he meets the elderly mountain men and women who appear to be living there; at other times he seeks out and interviews the zookeepers who once worked for the zoo. In videos, drawings, photographs, and installations, Tong interweaves this documentary engagement with a fable: that the humans living in each pavilion eventually take on the form of the animals whose homes they have reinhabited, and take flight. The title of the project, 羽化登仙 (“The Becoming of Feathered Beings”), is a classic phrase from Daoism, describing humans who obtain the Way and, winged, fly to immortal lands.

As many of us are learning in pandemic times, a life in proximal isolation or symbolic seclusion is not necessarily a life apart. Even in retreat, the human animal wrestles with the social ties required for survival, and the urge to flight battles with our sense of civic responsibility and the need to care for our collective lives. Yi Xin Tong’s “The Becoming of Feathered Beings” at Mount Lu joins in an ancient scholarly tradition of struggling, while in seclusion, with human and animal bonds.

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**YI XIN TONG** is an artist and fisherman. Tong studied geology at China University of Geosciences in Beijing and received a BFA in visual art from Simon Fraser University and an MFA in studio art from New York University. Tong creates sculptural and video installations to explore the polymorphic quality of both living and nonliving beings, and with a wry sense of humor, to intervene in societal beliefs in value, decency, and rationality. His work has been exhibited at the BRIC Biennial, the Guangzhou Airport Biennale, the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, chi K11 art museum, the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, CAFA Art Museum, and MOCA Shanghai.

**WINNIE WONG** is a historian of modern and contemporary art and visual culture, with a special interest in fakes, forgeries, frauds, copies, counterfeits, and other nonart challenges to authorship and originality. Her research is based in the southern Chinese cities of Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, and her writing engages with Chinese and Western aesthetics, anthropology, intellectual property law, and popular culture. She is

the author of *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade* (2014), which was awarded the Joseph Levenson Book Prize in 2015. Her articles have appeared in *positions: asia critique*, the *Journal of Visual Culture*, and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, and she has written for *Omagiu*, *Third Text Asia*, and *Artforum*.

## 《金鸡菊》 TICKSEED

前庐山动物园兽医 熊女士 口述 二零一八

熊女士学生 童先生 朗诵 二零二零

*Told by former Mount Lu Zoo veterinarian Ms. Xiong in 2018*

*Read by Ms. Xiong's student Mr. Tong in 2020*

原来每年要打草，原来这好多金鸡菊，他们打草时候说要全部打掉，我说这一片，靠大石头这里要保留。现在还有一点，原来好多。

Back then they weeded every year. There was a lot of tickseed. They said they were going to clear them all. I told them, those flowers over there, near the boulder, should be saved. There's still some left now. There used to be so much.

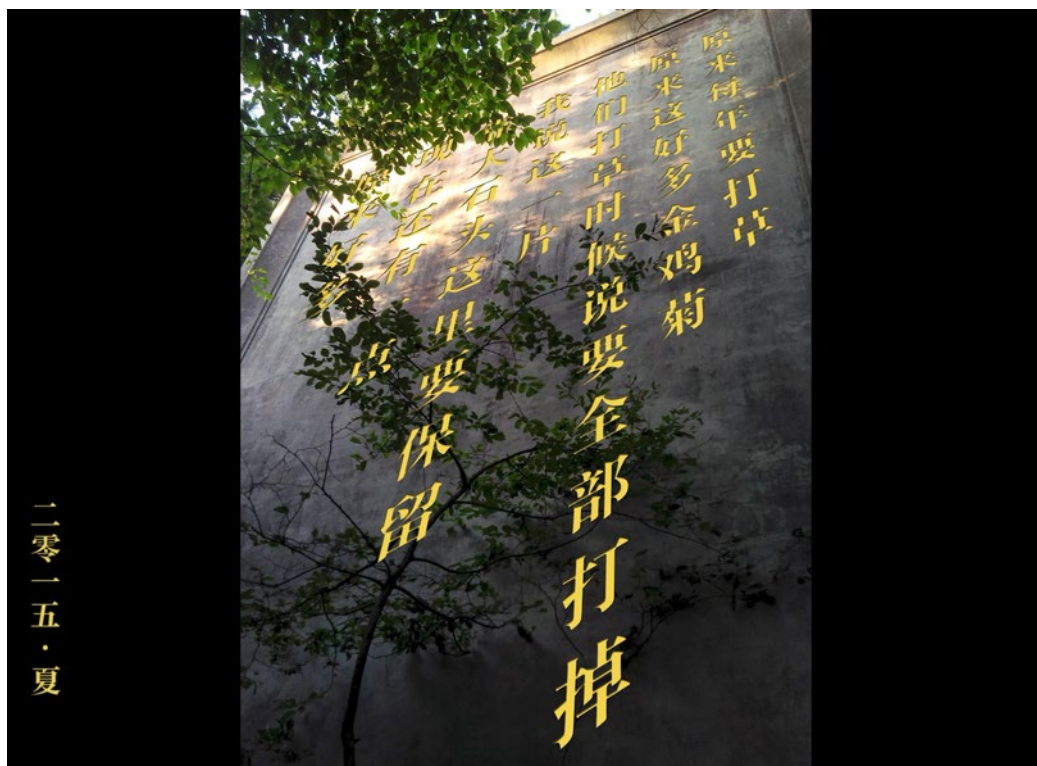


FIGURE 1. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Tickseed*, 3:16. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.

## 《孔雀开屏》 FLAUNTING PEACOCK

孔雀馆建筑师 欧阳先生 口述 二零一八

庐山居民 童先生 朗诵 二零二零

*Told by the architect of the Peacock Pavilion Mr. Ouyang in 2018*

*Read by Mount Lu resident Mr. Tong in 2020*

孔雀馆是我设计的，屋顶很高，让孔雀飞。大家挥手绢，引孔雀开屏。孩子们去了，五颜六色的衣服，孔雀一看到就开屏，一看到就开屏。如果有人穿花裙子过来，它也对着她啪啪啪地开屏，显示它的美，也会炫耀。

I designed the Peacock Pavilion. The roof was so high that the peacocks could fly inside. People waved their handkerchiefs to entice them to spread their tails. When children came in colorful clothes, the peacocks opened their feathers as soon as they saw them. If someone wore a floral dress, they would also flaunt their tails to her, displaying their beauty. They really knew how to show off.



FIGURE 2. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Flaunting Peacock*, 2:17. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.



## 《百鸟朝凤》 HUNDRED BIRDS PAYING HOMAGE TO THE PHOENIX

前庐山动物园兽医 熊女士 口述 二零一八

熊女士学生 童先生 朗诵 二零二零

*Told by former Mount Lu Zoo veterinarian Ms. Xiong in 2018*

*Read by Ms. Xiong's student Mr. Tong in 2020*

孔雀馆前几年还有人住，花径公园的副所长就住在那里。剩下几只孔雀，让它们自生自灭。现在环卫工人在那里养黑鸡。孔雀馆对面有一个毛主席语录牌，原来说要炸掉，我说画个百鸟朝凤，也就是孔雀嘛，配些牡丹。孔雀真的会飞，它飞得好高好远。

People still lived in the Peacock Pavilion a few years ago, including the deputy director of the Floral Path Park. The peacocks that remained were left to survive on their own. Sanitation workers now raise black chickens there. Across from the Peacock Pavilion is a monument inscribed with Chairman Mao's quotations. The management was going to blow it up at one point. I suggested that we paint *Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix* [an auspicious theme signifying peace under a wise ruler], that is to say, peacocks, with peonies. Peacocks can really fly. They fly high and far.



FIGURE 3. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix*, 2:06. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.



FIGURE 4. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix*, 2:06. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.

## 《羽化登仙》 THE BECOMING OF FEATHERED BEINGS

庐山电视台 新闻 二零一九

庐山居民童先生 朗诵 二零二零

News on Mount Lu TV in 2019

Read by Mount Lu resident Mr. Tong in 2020

庐山动物园一九五三年筹建。内饲珍禽异兽，游客络绎不绝。九十年代后衰落被废弃。不久，外来务工人员搬进笼子里安家，改造空间以为居住。二零一零年代，这群人在笼子里住久了，沾染上曾经在这里居住过的动物的习性甚至灵魂。他们长出爪牙和羽翼，撕碎翻烂生活用品。在他们完全变化成鸟兽的时候，它们冲出牢笼，羽化登仙。他们居住过的这些笼子也被称作“仙人洞”。

The Mount Lu Zoo was built in 1953. It once housed rare animals and was a popular tourist destination. Following its decline in the 1990s, the zoo became abandoned. Not long after, workers who came from elsewhere who couldn't afford housing moved into these cages and set up their homes, naming their living cages the "Immortal Caverns." In the 2010s, they gradually became infected with the instincts and spirits of the animals that had previously occupied the cages. They started to grow claws, fangs, and wings, and tore up their living supplies. Eventually, when fully transformed into birds and beasts, they escaped from the cages and disappeared into the mountains.



FIGURE 5. Yi Xin Tong, still from *The Becoming of Feathered Beings*, 2:58. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.



## 《惊蛇入草》 STARTLED PYTHON DISAPPEARS INTO THE GRASS

花径公园办公室主任 李女士 口述 二零一八

庐山居民 童先生 朗诵 二零二零

*Told by director of Floral Path Park Ms. Li in 2018*

*Read by Mount Lu resident Mr. Tong in 2020*

1955年，一蟒蛇，两余米，重四十斤。咬断八号铁丝笼，七八人受惊不得捕，目睹窜入玉屏峰。老动物园的说那条蟒还在。我们刚来工作的时候，它老在附近活动，它一走，茅草就往两边分。同事们看到了说：“你看，那蟒蛇又出来了。”它不走远，总想回它的窝。

In 1955, a python over two meters, weighing twenty kilograms, bit through wire cage number eight. Seven or eight people were frightened and were unable to capture it, but witnessed it fleeing into the Jade Screen Peaks. Old workers of the zoo said the python was still around. When we first came to work here, it was always nearby, and wherever it moved, the grass would split in two. Colleagues saw it and would say, “Look, the python is back again.” It would not go far and always wanted to return to its nest.



FIGURE 6. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Startled Python Disappears into the Grass*, 1:32. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.



## 《棘胸蛙》 GIANT SPINY FROG

前庐山动物园兽医 熊女士 口述 二零一八

熊女士学生 童先生 朗诵 二零二零

*Told by former Mount Lu Zoo veterinarian Ms. Xiong in 2018*

*Read by Ms. Xiong's student Mr. Tong in 2020*

棘胸蛙就是庐山的石鸡。为什么呢，雄性的胸部有好多黑点，扎手，所以叫棘胸蛙。原来我们是准备恢复庐山的石鸡，人工繁殖了很多蝌蚪都放到野外去。这个科研项目在省里还得过奖。后来搞出来也得不到支持，管理局还抱怨说怎么吃不到我们养的石鸡。

The giant spiny frog is normally called rock frog on Mount Lu. Why? The males have many black dots on their chests, thorny to touch. We originally planned to restore the rock frogs on Mount Lu. Large numbers of tadpoles from artificial insemination were released into the wild. This research project even won an award in the province. However, the local administration didn't support our project, and complained that they couldn't eat the rock frogs we raised.



FIGURE 7. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Giant Spiny Frog*, 0:52. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.

## 《猴山之王》 KING OF MONKEY HILL

前庐山动物园兽医 熊女士 口述 二零一八

熊女士学生 童先生 朗诵 二零二零

*Told by former Mount Lu Zoo veterinarian Ms. Xiong in 2018*

*Read by Ms. Xiong's student Mr. Tong in 2020*

零四年还有动物园，还有些孔雀，鸟类啦。哺乳动物都不多了，就剩猴子。狗熊小的卖掉了，大的在他们手上可能死掉了。原来我们猴山的猕猴跑出去过一两次。到山下别人家做客，把晒的东西吃了，冬天把人家庄稼都毁掉，后来就给打死了。

猴山内部一间一间的，便于管理。一间一个品种，平顶猴、黑叶猴、金丝猴、猕猴。猴山里面只能放一个品种。同一群都打架，想引进不同种是不行的，会打架，会打死的。归顺也不行，王不欺负，其他的也都要欺负它。除非那个引进的猴子非常厉害，能够做王。

The zoo was still running in 2004. We had some peacocks and birds. Not many mammals were left, except for some monkeys. The younger bears were sold, and



FIGURE 8. Yi Xin Tong, still from *King of Monkey Hill*, 1:50. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.



FIGURE 9. Yi Xin Tong, still from *King of Monkey Hill*, 1:50. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.

the older ones may have died on their hands. Our macaque monkeys escaped once or twice. They showed up at people's houses down the mountain and ate their food-stuffs drying in the sun outside. In the winter, they destroyed farmers' crops, and were later killed.

The interior of Monkey Hill was divided into rooms, easy to manage. One species in each room: pig-tailed macaque, François's langur, snub-nosed monkey, and macaque. In the open space only one species was allowed. They fought among themselves, so it was impossible to introduce a different species. They would fight, and they would die. Even if they surrendered and the king didn't bully them, others would. Unless the introduced one was extremely powerful and could become the king.





FIGURE 10. Yi Xin Tong, still from *King of Monkey Hill*, 1:50. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.

## 《云里云豹》 CLOUDED LEOPARD IN THE CLOUDS

前庐山动物园兽医 熊女士 口述 二零一八

熊女士学生 童先生 朗诵 二零二零

*Told by former Mount Lu Zoo veterinarian Ms. Xiong in 2018*

*Read by Ms. Xiong's student Mr. Tong in 2020*

我们以前有云豹，好漂亮。养在底下的狮子笼，原来大熊猫也放在里头。从小养大的豹子，跟人可以接触。后来我跟饲养员说不许抱它了，已经大了，伤到了不得了。我跟她说：“你还没有结婚。”

We used to have clouded leopards, so beautiful. They were kept in the lion cage down there, with the pandas. Raised from cubs, these leopards interacted well with humans. Later I told the breeder not to hold the leopard anymore. It already grew up, and that would be terrible if she got maimed. I said to her, “You haven’t even gotten married yet.”



FIGURE 11. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Clouded Leopard in the Clouds*, 2:56. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.



FIGURE 12. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Clouded Leopard in the Clouds*, 2:56. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). HD video and sculptural installation with sound.



## 《鹿死谁手》 WHO KILLED THE DEER

前庐山动物园兽医 熊女士 口述 二零一八

熊女士学生 童先生 朗诵 二零二零

*Told by former Mount Lu Zoo veterinarian Ms. Xiong in 2018*

*Read by Ms. Xiong's student Mr. Tong in 2020*

鹿圈后来出了个大事。那里有炭疽杆菌，人感染后，七窍流血。养的梅花鹿，年年给它去鹿茸。后来生病死掉了，我发现它七窍流血。一般死了鹿，员工要杀了吃掉的，我说这头不能吃，请民工埋了。结果第二天晚上，又有人挖出来分地吃了。其中一个饲养员阿姨，她吃了就烂了嘴。可能经过烹调之后，毒性也减弱了。要不然人扛不住，会死的。

A big thing happened at the deer pen. There was *Bacillus anthracis*. When humans get infected with it, they bleed from all seven openings of their heads. We had a spotted deer, and every year we helped it to shed its antlers. Later it got infected and died. I found blood oozing out from all seven openings of its head. Generally, when a deer died, the employees would eat it. I said this one was unsafe and asked the construction workers to bury it. However, some people dug it up the following night and ate it anyways. Among them was a zookeeper, and afterward her mouth rotted. The toxicity might have weakened after cooking. Otherwise, people would have died.



FIGURE 13. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Who Killed the Deer*, 1:48. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.

## 《护犊食子》 PROTECTIVE INFANTICIDE

前庐山动物园兽医 熊女士 口述 二零一八

熊女士学生 童先生 朗诵 二零二零

*Told by former Mount Lu Zoo veterinarian Ms. Xiong in 2018*

*Read by Ms. Xiong's student Mr. Tong in 2020*

小熊猫有一个好大的特点，我们观察了好久。小熊猫的繁殖要安静，不要人打扰。我跟饲养员班长说，晚上不要去打搅，它一惊到就会把小崽吃掉。这是一种保护，保护小崽，不让人拿走，情愿吃了也不让人拿走。金丝猴也是这样，会保护，虽然不会吃，但死了也不让人拿走。狗熊也是这样，不让人拿。

Red pandas have one very special trait. We observed this for a long time. The birth and nurturing of newborn pandas needs to take place in a quiet environment and they shouldn't be disturbed. I told the zookeeper in charge not to bother them at night, otherwise they would get startled and eat their newborn cubs. That was out of protection for the cubs, so as not to have humans take them. They would rather eat them than have them taken away. The snub-nosed monkeys were also like this. Although they wouldn't eat their babies, they still protected them. They would not let people take the babies even when they were dead. The same was true for bears. They never let people take their cubs.



FIGURE 14. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Protective Infanticide*, 6:05. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.



FIGURE 15. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Protective Infanticide*, 6:05. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.



FIGURE 16. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Protective Infanticide*, 6:05. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.





FIGURE 17. Yi Xin Tong, still from *Protective Infanticide*, 6:05. *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo* (2015–20). Ten-channel HD video and sculptural installation with sound.