



Weekend Standard

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It takes only about 20 minutes to hike up the muddy slope to the edge of the Nanling National Forest but the blinding rain makes it feel a lot longer.

Though we are all wearing colorful plastic ponchos, we are quickly soaked to the bone, and several members of our procession slip and fall along the way. The news we receive when we get to the treeline doesn't improve the general mood.

“The children won't let us in,” someone says, and this bit of information circulates through the waterlogged crowd in English, French, Putonghua and Cantonese, provoking mixed reactions of amusement and dismay.

“Well, I guess it is their garden,” says a Dutchman in a leather jacket trying to light a sodden cigarette to pass the time in the downpour.

The rest of us huddle beneath umbrellas, hoping to get a glimpse of what we have come so far to see: A playground built by a prominent French artist and some

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Chinese schoolchildren in the middle of a forest.

We are on Nanling Mountain on this rainy Sunday for the official opening of ``Back to Zhong Guo: Fools Move Mountains," an ambitious cultural project in northern Guangdong province.

Organized by Guangzhou's Vitamin Creative Space in partnership with Zhongheng Ecotourism Development and the French Consulate, this ``multi-layered dialogue" will bring four French artists to the region to collaborate with the local community on assorted creative projects.

The inaugural artist is Mathieu Briand, who settled into the town of Ruyang in early February to begin construction, in collaboration with local primary students, of an ``Eternal Garden," a playground in the woods that would be theirs and theirs alone.

Despite this being opening day, visitors are blocked at its entrance because one of the playground's founding rules reads: ``Adults are forbidden to go into the garden without the permission of the children in the management."



This and other regulations had been put into writing at Ruyang Theater earlier in the afternoon, as some 600 locals and more than 100 visitors from Guangzhou and beyond crammed the wooden seats to watch the opening ceremony.

After remarks in Chinese and French, Briand and a

representative from Nanling National Forest Park signed a contract with the children, giving them complete stewardship of the playground and its immediate forest area for the next 50 years.

Briand also picked 10 students' names out of a cardboard box - these children are the first 10 managers of the Eternal Garden.

After six months, each student will pass on their duty (and official ring) to a friend, continuing a sense of ownership and responsibility through future generations.

``This is the most important part of the garden - it's yours," Briand said. ``It's about the idea of community. I told them, `if you choose to burn it down, it's your choice.'"

Of course, Briand doesn't want them to burn it down. Quite the opposite: He hopes that the children's experience in the garden will inspire them to protect their home's fragile environment.

From the beginning, Fools Move Mountains was conceived as a way to raise awareness about the precious natural landscape of Nanling. Chen Xujun of Zhongheng Ecotourism Development says his agency set the project in motion in order to ``preserve the land and encourage a steady development."

In contrast with feverish urbanization elsewhere in Guangdong, the Nanling Mountain area, which extends across the border into Hunan, is still remarkably pristine. The air is fresh, the water is clean and, despite being heavily logged for decades, the semi-deciduous broadleaf forest that covers the hillsides is reviving as an important center of plant and animal diversity.

The woods also remain central to the region's economy, not for timber but as an ecotourism attraction. Zhongheng estimates that 100,000 tourists visit Nanling National Forest Park each year, mainly city-dwellers eager for a bucolic getaway. The profits are not yet high enough to fully support former logging towns such as Ruyang, so the challenge is to make ecotourism into a feasible industry before these towns succumb to less environmentally friendly development.



Zhongheng is trying different strategies to promote ecological care in the district, from public service billboards to the renovation of an old village house into a tourist hostel. But what better way to honor nature than with landscape artworks?

Curator Hu Fang and Zhang Wei of Vitamin Creative Space jumped at the chance to stage an art event in Nanling's stunning topography. "It was always a dream to realize an art project literally against the background of mountains and water," says Hu, explaining a concept from traditional Chinese painting - that the combined elements of mountains and water automatically create a landscape. They accepted Zhongheng's invitation to organize an art project.

Vitamin Space decided to shake up traditional perspectives by bringing foreign artists to do residencies. As part of the Year of France in China, they linked up with French curator Evelyn Jouanno to select Briand, Shen Yuan, Sylvie Blocher and Marc Boucherot as the four participating artists.

Even before the Year of France, a growing number of Chinese art institutions had been importing artists from abroad to do residencies and site-specific work. Hu explains the increase as a result of China's momentous changes.

"I hope it's not just a trend," he says. "It's a really exciting context for European artists to develop their ideas and find new possibilities."

Briand agrees. "To do this project in China is not the same as doing it anywhere else," he expounds, "and it's actually not possible in Europe to produce this kind of thing any more." He describes a children's playground in France with a similar goal for kids to connect with nature, but scoffs at how tame the place is. "Here, they might say it is dangerous, but the children can discover the world by themselves."

So far, the children are doing fine with their project. When the garden's youthful "management team" finally lets the soaking grown-ups in, we gingerly step along the

mountain trail toward a central clearing. After so much anticipation, the playground structures themselves could have been anti-climactic in their simplicity: Three wooden treehouses perch high on soaring trunks, semi-circular amphitheater seats are set into a hill crest, a round Chinese checker table with tree-stump seats, a large concrete igloo, some rope swings and a zip-line.

But it is the arrangement of the components and their integration with the natural landscape that is moving. Cut wood reaches out from raw bark, a small plank bridge spans a gully, the three treehouse lookouts surround the central amphitheater: All are balanced, simultaneously graceful and rugged.

Arty touches exist. A sculpture of tangled weeds is set in a pebbled frame on the ground and a loop of Chinese flute music emanates from the igloo, but these never overwhelm the playground's purpose: To inspire play.

After months of telling Briand what they wanted, and critiquing his sketches, cataloguing the leaves, and raking the dirt, the children finally have their garden and are making good use of it. Despite the persistent rain, they clamber up and down the tree-top platforms, crawl in and out of the igloo and jump back and forth across instant rivers made by the downpour. One child causes a brief scare by falling off a ladder, but is running around again in a matter of minutes.

We grown-ups are mostly too big to fit through the igloo door, too heavy to even attempt the ladders, and can only enjoy the structures vicariously. Guangzhou-based artist Tracy Xie Cuiyi especially likes the igloo dome, as ``a good place for children to hide, think and dream."

The entire playground is dreamlike, a magical landscape cut off from the adult world, complete with special entrance rules and a prestigious fellowship of caretakers.

With any luck, Fools Move Mountains will continue to excite connections between the people of Nanling and their environment, up until the project's conclusion in November. Perhaps some of its installations might even prove eternal.

Xie Peishi, a Guangzhou fashion student in her early twenties, hopes that the garden will last forever.

``This isn't just a garden for children," she says. ``It is a sort of heaven."

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