

REVIEWS

AMSTERDAM

Taocheng Wang

GALERIE FONS WELTERS

In Taocheng Wang's exhibition "A Home Made Travel MV Series," a display case held a drawing at least thirteen feet long. *Five Weathers*, 2015, depicts the Dutch islands in the Wadden Sea from an unmistakably Chinese perspective, and is somewhat reminiscent of a famous

scroll painting in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. That work, by an anonymous nineteenth-century Asian artist, shows a group of Dutch and Chinese people on Dejima, an artificial island off the coast of Japan. For nearly two hundred years, Japan was closed to the outside world under its *sakoku* policy, and Dejima was its only international trading post. The Rijksmuseum drawing depicts the Dutch through an exotic lens. That's still an unsettling experience for many Westerners; it turns out to be surprisingly uncomfortable to see yourself as the object of an exotic gaze, even today.

In his book *Infelicities* (1998), the anthropologist Peter Mason describes "the exotic object" as one removed from its original, non-Western context and assigned a new meaning in Western culture, one that obscures the object's original significance. Consequently, an exotic object is no longer "at home" anywhere. That precise combination of exoticism, alienation, and elusive meaning informed Wang's exhibition. But the artist, who was born in China and lives in Amsterdam, turns the mechanism around; here, the point of departure was not the Western gaze but that of a Chinese artist who travels to each of the five inhabited Dutch Wadden Islands as a tourist and makes a short video of each visit.

In the Netherlands, these islands, like Dejima, have a somewhat exotic, transitional status; they are seen mainly as tourist attractions, places to enjoy traditional Dutch life. Tourists go to the Wadden Islands in search of a simple, easily recognizable form of Dutchness: a low horizon, cows in the pasture, brick houses, no high-rise buildings, and, where possible, local products such as cheese and cranberries. There's just one problem: Wang visited the five islands in the winter. The effect is like walking onstage after the play is over. The codes—the enticements of the tourist industry—are still present, but they no longer function as they are intended to.



View of "Taocheng Wang," 2015. From left: *Vlieland—A Home Made Travel MV Series*, 2015; *Terschelling—A Home Made Travel MV Series*, 2015; *Ameland—A Home Made Travel MV Series*, 2015.

By stepping out of the "normal" course of events, Wang exploits the full power of her exotic gaze. The intriguing thing about this installation is that she does not air her prejudices about tourism, and therefore is not caught in the trap of preconceived ideas. Like the anonymous artist of the nineteenth-century drawing, she makes the viewer—every viewer—face the question of how deeply one can really understand the value and meaning of one's own culture. For most Dutch viewers, Wang's perspective on the Wadden Islands is uncomfortable, because she confronts us with the central role of clichés in our cultural communication: seals, bricks, cranberry jam. But in the process, Wang also raises other questions: about whether cultural clichés like these are valuable only to the tourist industry or have a broader function; and regarding to what extent a culture changes structurally when seen primarily through the eyes of outsiders. The same questions could be asked, of course, about the Western view of China. In short, Wang has found a smart, accessible way to explore a global problem that is becoming ever more pervasive with the advance of globalization: the question of whether cultures can preserve their authenticity, and to what extent doing so is possible and desirable. After all, the whole world is gradually turning into one huge exotic destination.

—Hans den Hartog Jager

Translated from Dutch by David McKay.