

16:20

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Artist Statement

I saw the van full of construction workers on March 18th, 2022, at 16:20 when I passed them near the fourth ring of Beijing. Growing up, I've been told that young, adventurous peasants happily come to work in the cities, constructing roads, bridges, and buildings to build a better life for themselves, and such is the foundation of Chinese Progress. Indeed, their labor built the affluent, international Beijing with enviable public healthcare, education, and transportation. And yet, for the five seconds we waited for the red lights to change, I saw exhausted, aging men—enmeshed in an invisible prison of intellectual boredom and physical drainage—who were, both legally through the hukou system and economically through neoliberalism, alien to all the riches they created.

Under the hukou system, one must have employment or be born in the city to qualify for its public healthcare and education, which are immensely superior to those of the countryside. Naturally, the “peasant workers”—as they are derogatorily called—want to use the public services in the cities they work at and pay taxes to. But they are independent contractors that the construction companies hire daily; thus they face barriers to accessing Beijing’s public healthcare system. The companies also shy away from paying any compensation for work hazards, and wages can be delayed for months or years. Without a hukou in the city, the workers’ children are also disqualified from entering the public education system. They either stay behind in the countryside and see their parents once a year or attend semilegal schools in the slums in the city’s periphery.

This work is the third in my series called “Progress,” which contains snapshots of my personal life, offering a contextualizing glimpse, a momentary revelation into the well-acclaimed liberalization of the Chinese economy.



Media: Oil painting on canvas

Size: 60cm (width) x 50 cm (height)

Date: 08/17/2022

The photo of the painting is taken by me.