

The Foreign as a Force for Transformation

Michael Lucken, a historian and lecturer at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations, specialises in modern and contemporary Japan, and in the ways in which forms, ideas and images circulate between societies. His research rejects the view that cultures are definitively closed systems. Instead, it examines what happens when a society transforms elements originating from elsewhere.

In *L'Universel étranger*, Lucken broadens this line of thought by proposing a 'xenology': a general study of foreign realities and the relationships we maintain with them. His starting point is simple: no perspective on the 'other' is neutral. We observe through the lens of a language, a history and categories that already shape what we can recognise. We may treat the other as an object, using them to confirm what we already believed.

Lucken distinguishes four functions of knowledge of the other: apprehension, critique, generalisation and metamorphosis. Apprehension refers to the grasping of an external reality, with the risk of appropriating it. Critique allows us to re-examine our assumptions. Generalisation seeks a shared horizon, but may impose the viewpoint of a culture as universal. Metamorphosis occurs when the encounter transforms individuals, their practices and the communities to which they belong.

This line of thought celebrates neither difference for its sake nor a fusion that would erase singularities. It invites us to conceive of the world as multifocal and interdependent. The phrase 'dissociate the similar, pair the dissimilar' sums up this dynamic: recognising the differences hidden beneath deceptive similarities, then creating unexpected connections between realities that seemed alien to one another.

For FUQIAO, this approach offers a particularly fruitful curatorial method. When an artist responds to an international call for entries, like Setouchi Triennale, their initial intuition must not be transplanted into a new territory. The place itself, its history, its customs, its inhabitants and its resistance must put it to the test. A site-specific work does not use the context as a backdrop or a reservoir of symbols. It arises from a dialogue in which the artist accepts that their initial vision might change.

FUQIAO thus helps the artist to situate their perspective, identify their assumptions, choose the relevant partners and distinguish what remains specific to their approach and what may evolve through exchange. It also ensures that local residents do not reduce to sources of stories or mere participants, but that they play a defined role in the process.

The artist must make this transformation clear in the application dossier. FUQIAO translates it into a narrative, a collaboration protocol, artistic choices, images, a timetable and verifiable commitments. The dossier no longer merely presents an appealing intention: it demonstrates why the work needs this location, how the encounter will alter its form and what it may produce in return. Personal intuition thus

becomes a unique, context-specific and credible proposal, one that could only have come about through the relationship between the artist and this territory.