

China's modern image – contemporary Chinese art

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ABSTRACT

As a worldwide cultural phenomenon, contemporary art in China has not only been used as a diplomatic language but also a reflection of contemporary Chinese culture. Contemporary Chinese art, as an emerging field to display China's global role, provides an important perspective to study China's self-position in global relations, China's diplomacy in exercising its soft power, contemporary Chinese culture, and the reinvention of China's cultural/national identity in post-Mao China. Using the 2000 Shanghai Biennale and the Chinese pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale as case studies, this article investigates how the fluid construct of Chineseness is successfully promoted and demonstrated through the government's support of contemporary Chinese art.

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During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has increasingly co-opted contemporary art produced by Chinese artists within the People's Republic of China (PRC) to its discursive projection of soft power, a new form of national powers based on a 'Chinese nation'. This projection of China's soft power involves the assertion of a unifying sense of cultural 'Chineseness' that has been promoted through discourses by the CCP within China to counter the destabilising effects of the political and economic reforms initiated by the Party in 1979. Such assertions run counter to the 'Third Space' (post-modernist-poststructuralist) conceptions of identity prevalent internationally, particularly within Western contexts. A modern China that is subject to the direct influence of globalisation, on the other hand, never casts away the doubt about its cultural security. The fear that Chinese society is led to cultural and further political Westernisation has put the Chinese Government in the position to strongly assert China's 'Chinese' identity.

However, Chinese conceptions of culture are themselves contested. Contemporary Chinese art, as a new form of art in China that emerged with the liberalisation of Chinese society in the 1970s, pertinently provides a case that reveals the transition of contemporary Chinese society directed by two dominant forces: globalisation/Westernisation and anti-Westernisation. This article will focus on two case studies, the 2000 Shanghai Biennale and the Chinese pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale, to explore critically the extent to which

contemporary Chinese art can be viewed as being complicit with or resistant to discourses related to the CCP's projection of soft power both within and outside China.

These two case studies are particularly useful because the 2000 Shanghai Biennale is regarded as a remarkable success of the 'new mainstream' of contemporary Chinese art (Wang, 2007). The inclusion of overseas Chinese artists in this biennale was considered not only as an official sanction for artists who broke away from the official art system in the 1980s but also as a confirmation of the new forms of official art in China (Wang, 2007).

Reflecting a common view in China, Wang (2007) points out that quite a number of people believe that the changing situation in the Chinese art world is due to the effort of a few individuals with personal agendas, rather than simply a party decision (p. 245). However, Wang recognises that this kind of depiction ignores those individuals' identity as governmental officials. In fact, the key figures who played an important role in the 1980s art movement in China often acquired official or semi-official identity. The official identity grants these important curators 'many opportunities that other real independent curators won't have' (ibid.). Therefore, it would be problematic to credit the changes to a certain number of individual curators and artists when they are in fact holding governmental positions or benefiting from governmental subsidies.¹

The establishment of the 2003 Chinese pavilion at the Venice Biennale was seen as a continuing gesture, displaying this significant shift of contemporary Chinese art on the international stage. After a decade, the Chinese pavilion of the 54th Venice Biennale further proclaimed to demonstrate the Chinese aesthetic sense of beauty and how it was different from that of the West in an internationally liberal art space. The investigation of the two cases will provide a closer look at the promoted image of a modern China within the CCP's cultural and political agenda.

China redefines its global role

Since the late 1990s, China, like the United States during the second half of the twentieth century, has sought to employ contemporary art as a diplomatic means to display a specific national image to the rest of the world. After the CCP decided to participate in the capitalist market economy in 1979, following the confirmation of Deng Xiaoping's policy of Reform and Opening up that initiated China's prodigious economic growth over the last four decades, it was necessary for China to redefine its global role in the post-Mao era.² China desired a position of world economic, political and cultural importance. Holding that China's national culture should be the core of its soft power and distinct from others in the global community, the CCP has attempted to project a unified cultural image as a signifier of the country's progressive modernisation. This unified cultural image includes internal and external projections of a specifically Chinese sense of cultural identity which are understood to distinguish China's modernisation from that of the West.

It could be argued that the way to view CCP as a consistent and omnipotent entity is problematic given that the history also reveals the internal division and sometimes erratic policy-making of the Party. In addition, it would also be problematic to ignore the growing tension and conflicts between the central government and local governments in China. According to O'Connor and Gu (2006), China's economic success fuels a rapid growth of consumer culture 'which in turn acts as key legitimate ideology' (p. 276). That is to say, in order to ensure the continuing and advanced economic development, large cities in China

have their own agenda to promote themselves as modern and cosmopolitan and their agenda may not always be consistent with those of the central government.

However, in terms of national policies, especially those in association with foreign affairs, the CCP still stands as the highest authority that controls the decision-making. In addition, despite the fact that the CCP's attitude towards the extent to which China can be open to the outside world has been shifting between loose and strict, the CCP maintains its strong concerns about Western cultures' influence and repeatedly reaffirms the importance of China's cultural security.

A 'Chinese' cultural identity became even more imperative when the CCP believed that China's cultural security was threatened by growing cultural influence from the West. According to Wang (2011):

Following the death of Mao and the restoration to power of Deng Xiaoping ... China has transformed itself from a planned economy to a market society, from a headquarters of world revolution to a thriving center of capitalist activity, from a Third World anti-imperialist nation to one of imperialism's 'strategic partners' (pp. 4, 5).

Reflecting a common sentiment, one Chinese scholar has described the social transformation in the post-Mao era as 'a belief crisis in China', 'post-Cold War Western cultural imperialism' and 'China's self-colonisation' (Gu, 2013, pp. 62, 63). The 'belief crisis' refers to the dominating influence of Western ideas throughout the 1980s.³ What followed Deng's reforms was a belief upheld by the Chinese Liberals that 'Westernisation could save China' as China became increasingly 'derevolutionalized' (Guo, 2004, p. xi). The end of the Cultural Revolution affirmed the invalidity of the socialist ideology that promised to enable China to catch up with the West.⁴ Deng Xiaoping's subsequent Reform and Opening up Policy further placed China under the immediate influence of globalisation (Wang, 2003, p. 64). Believing that the 'Western developed countries have exported a large amount of spiritual and cultural products, political thoughts, and social values with the intention to occupy the cultural market in China', the Chinese Government began to consider culture as performing an important role both in national economy and national autonomy (ibid., p. 45).

In 2001, Chinese President Jiang Zemin stated that it was 'very important for developing countries to preserve and develop the excellent traditions of their native national cultures' (ibid., p. 43).⁵ In other words, along with a higher level of international economic and cultural exchanges, particularly after China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2000, the country's continuing rapid economic growth and success had led to an aggravated concern for its cultural security. In the same speech, Jiang reinforced the emphasis on the importance of 'developing Chinese culture' as an advanced culture for the realisation of 'socialist modernization' (ibid., p. 43).

Jiang's words clearly denote several important ideological shifts in post-Deng China. First of all, traditions were re-evaluated as the essence of national culture. According to Jiang, 'Chinese culture' replaces the communist ideology as the leading force for the realisation of 'socialist modernisation'. Second, China's national culture is redefined as 'Chinese culture' instead of according to the rigid class concept based on the great proletarian class. Third, as a part of the longer process of China's modernisation since the end of imperial China in 1911, traditions are, unlike during the Cultural Revolution, not positioned as an enemy but as an integral part that can contribute to China's 'socialist modernisation' (ibid.). On the one hand, the strong appeal to China's distinct national culture accompanied by China's growing economic force reflects the discrepancy of cultural influence between China and the West; on

the other hand, reinforcing the nationalist sentiment is also the CCP's official policy to shift the domestic focus away from the problems caused by Deng's reforms.⁶ According to Wang Meiqing, nationalism and globalisation are 'two terms [that] have been promoted equally by the Chinese government in post-Deng Chinese society' (ibid., p. 55).

A sense of belonging to a shared history and tradition was largely promoted in the CCP's patriotic propaganda. By repeated assertions that 'Chinese people' were the 'children and grandchildren of the Yellow Emperor', the Party attempted to forge a version of Chinese identity based on a shared past. At the same time, to maintain its socialist legitimacy in order to continue to rule China's market-oriented economic reform, it was also imperative for the Party to show the people that a socialist regime still best represented the 'Chinese nation'. As Guo (2004) states, 'Serious as the CCP may be in its pursuit of national unity, national identity, and national autonomy, its first and foremost consideration is its own position as the ruling party rather than the nation' (p. 29).

The Party's appeal for a great 'Chinese nation' that aims at pulling together people from different racial backgrounds and social status, and bolstering China's self-confidence and nationalism in resisting Western cultural influence was successful. According to Wang, a great degree of collaboration between the Chinese Government and the Chinese people was formed, even though the latter might not always agree with the Party's domestic policies. A shared desire to increase the international influence of Chinese culture based on its 'unique and authentic cultural root' became the common goal of official and unofficial camps. Clearly, projecting a unified cultural image within the PRC in support of Deng's reforms was of equal importance with projecting it outwardly to the West. This unified cultural image that aimed at national unity has been significantly reinforced since the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989 and most notably after the PRC's accession to the WTO in 2001.

In the post-Tiananmen era, the ideological focus has shifted to the 'reconstruction of national culture' and the 'rediscovery of the national spirit' (ibid). The CCP's nation-wide promotion of 'excellent national traditions' gave rise to a 'national essence fever' across the country.⁷

Contemporary Chinese art: a diplomatic language

China's increasing international prestige is always tightly connected to its rising economic force. Beijing's huge investment in the 2008 Olympics is regarded as a well-considered strategy to display China's national ambition. In the same year, the *First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army* exhibition held in the British museum was also regarded as a good example of China's attempts at cultural diplomacy.⁸ According to Lillywhite (2008):

These artefacts require no introduction, and remain at the heart of Chinese heritage, history and identity. Sending them to London suggests China understands the benefits of such gestures and also presents foreigners – especially from North America and Europe – with a framework within which they can approach China without confronting contemporary issues. (n.p.)

The cultural display and interaction provided China with another platform to exercise its international influence without touching upon sensitive political issues. Meanwhile, the international display of national power also facilitated China's promotion of nationalism domestically. Since China's international profile reached its low point in 1989 after the Tiananmen crackdown, China has been seeking to create other forms of international influence. Regarding the social upheaval in 1989 as cultural war in nature, the CCP propagandised

that Chinese culture should represent the image of China 'as a peace loving nation standing for harmony at home and abroad' (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 321). Hu Jintao made this policy official in 2007 and 'the Central Committee reinforced the point in 2011 with a lengthy, formal decision on "deepening reform of the cultural system"' (ibid.). In practice, 'Chinese Year' exhibitions in various countries and exchange exhibitions between national museums were largely organised by the Party (ibid.).

'Denied access to the domestic Chinese audience through public exhibitions and publications, Chinese contemporary art of the early 1990s remained largely unknown in China'. However, in 1993, contemporary Chinese art was introduced to an international audience through several exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale.⁹ In this prestigious international art stage, contemporary Chinese art works, especially those with political implications, such as works of Political Pop and Cynical Realism, were received with great enthusiasm in the West (ibid.).

The unexpected international success of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s was problematic for the Party in relation to China's promotion of cultural industry and national image.¹⁰ The art style acclaimed in the West was characterised strongly by 'a tendency toward satire, indifference, cynicism and self-denial broadly defined under the titles "Political Pop" and "Cynical Realism"' that exhibited an image of China that was not consistent with the CCP's diplomatic language (ibid.). The problem for the Party was that the Western art world was more in favour of challenging and alternative voices and did not pay the same level of attention to artists who honoured the Party line.¹¹ However, contemporary Chinese art could not be ignored by the CCP again, even when it went against the stated Party line, it greatly contributed to China's international profile and cultural promotion overseas. As Nathan and Scobell put it, 'even when the message was not what the government wanted, the rising prices and growing [international] audiences for Chinese works advanced the respectability of China as a cosmopolitan society and culture' (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 324).

In order to assert discursive authority over contemporary Chinese art, the CCP began by establishing China's own international contemporary art biennale, the Shanghai Biennale, in 1996 and included contemporary Chinese artworks in China Festival in Berlin in 2001.¹² In the same year, the CCP seemed to end the exile of overseas Chinese artists after 1989 by inviting Cai Guo-Qiang to design the fireworks display for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit Meeting held in Shanghai, regardless of the tension between Cai and the Chinese art world in 1999.¹³ In 2003, the CCP assembled China's first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and in 2004, official support was granted to some domestic art villages which had mostly been closed down in the 1990s. The Party has made great efforts to show the world China's advancing modernisation through promoting contemporary Chinese culture.

In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping chaired the literature and art forum on 15 October in Beijing.¹⁴ 72 important figures from the 'official' Chinese art world were invited to this symposium. In his speech, Xi stressed that 'We should not tailor Chinese aesthetics to Western theories, and more importantly, we cannot allow business standards to replace art standards' (cited in Xu, 2014). Xi's statements can be read as a gesture to exclude the dominant Western influence on the development and market price of contemporary Chinese art. Xi further gave a definition of 'a good work of art' which 'should first and foremost benefit society, unifying social and economic benefits' (ibid.). Xi's action is a key moment in asserting Party control over culture by assigning specific political agendas to cultural production in China.

It echoes statements in early CCP meetings with key cultural institutions in 1949 demanding compliance with the Maoist directive that art should serve the Party and reflect the view of the masses.

These official statements highlight the complexity of China's search for its national identity. That is to say, while seeking broader international acceptance, the growing nationalism also bears a strong anti-West sentiment, which arguably continues similar anti-imperialist sentiment throughout the Mao era and particularly the time of the Cultural Revolution. For instance, the Chinese New Left and 'cultural nationalists' view Western values as 'Western hegemonic knowledge' that should not be applied to the study of the Chinese context.¹⁵ Furthermore, the use of Western values to judge and evaluate China is also believed to be nothing but an attempt to misinterpret China and interfere in China's domestic affairs. Professor Wang Huning, a key political adviser to President Jiang Zemin, argues that in order to exercise China's soft power on the global stage, Chinese culture must 'rejuvenate itself and be transformed into a culture of universal human values' (Guo, 2004, p. 113).

This nationalist tendency rejects the use of any Western theory to read, explain or criticise China's social, political and especially cultural phenomena. Even overseas Chinese academics' research on or representations of China are seen by certain mainland Chinese scholars as practices intended to place China in a subordinate position to the West and which 'shape and voice China as the West's Other' (ibid., p. 119).

Nevertheless, the complete denial of 'Western' analyses is also problematic due to the fact that China's political system and Chinese society have been highly subject to Western/global influence, especially since 1919. Still, this influence on contemporary Chinese culture does not seem to impede the Party's reinvention of a 'Chinese nation'. The question is raised: how can the Party successfully project a sense of modernity that is strongly associated with China's extended tradition and yet remains progressively modern?

The CCP's equal promotion of globalisation and nationalism, China's ambivalent sentiment towards the China-West relationship, the competing and negotiating of various powers in forming China's official and unofficial discourses, all contribute to this uncertainty and indecisiveness of the 'Chinese nation'. Furthermore, as long as the Party holds firmly to its socialist identity, the dynastic tradition is not the sole origin of cultural identity to which China should return. As Wang (2011) states, 'Based primarily on the requirements of legitimization, the CCP, while thoroughly repudiating the Cultural Revolution, did not repudiate either the Chinese Revolution or socialist values, nor the summation of Mao Zedong thought' (p. 18).

Xi's talk on art in October 2014 emphasised the Party's intent to oppose any option that subjects China to the West. Further, by defining the 'essential aims' of artwork in China – to serve the Party and the people – the Party has adapted a fluid set of criteria for evaluating contemporary Chinese art based on its interpretations of what benefits the Party and the people. The Party has displayed its resolution to place the Chinese art world under its rules. Nevertheless, Xi not only constructed a singular and unified aim of the people and the Party in contemporary Chinese society but also failed to explain how the Chinese art world could reject 'Western commercial standards' while joining the country's aggressive pursuit of globalisation. Contemporary Chinese art, as a 'post-Mao cultural product', demonstrates the contested and negotiated power relations surrounding China's official discourse on cultural identity.

This article argues that while contemporary Chinese art in the West is frequently discussed discursively as a site of resistance to the CCP's authoritarian power in the PRC, it has gradually incorporated into the CCP's diplomatic employment to exercise China's soft power internationally. The ongoing tension between China and the West reflected in the development of contemporary Chinese art facilitates the reading of the problems when China attempts to reconstruct a unitary cultural identity. Contemporary art practices in China have become a locus that witnesses the cultural and political contestation between China and the West. This article further argues that the CCP's strong assertion of a 'Chinese China' constitutes, essentially, 'constructed discourses' that reinforce the Party's rule rather than appealing to a return to a shared past.

The CCP's reinvented official cultural identity has been gradually internalised in contemporary Chinese society. By the further examination of contemporary art practice in China, this article shows that the internalised official discourse can be observed through art's continuous service to politics in post-Mao China. Despite the CCP claims that contemporary Chinese art represents a modern, culturally specific Chinese identity, such claims precede on the basis of Chinese culture as a fluid signifier which can be continually adapted (despite inherent contradictions) to a pragmatic upholding of the CCP's legitimacy.

Two particular events have been selected in this article to illustrate the progress and problems of the internationalisation of contemporary Chinese art: the Shanghai Biennale in 2000, also known as the 'de facto legalisation' of contemporary Chinese art and the Chinese pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale.

Before the further investigation of the important changes of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, it is worth noting the existing conflicts in evaluating contemporary Chinese artwork inside and outside of China. A good case would be the U.S. – based artist Cai Guo-Qiang's award-winning artwork (performance-based installation) at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*. Cai's work shows how a work of art that carried strong Chinese cultural connotations and yet closely related its reading and interpretation to Western post-modernism could be evaluated in very different ways by the Chinese art world and the Western art world.¹⁶ The *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* dispute reveals the tension that has been embedded in the interpretations and evaluations of contemporary Chinese art based on two different art systems: the Western art system and the Chinese art system. The success and fame achieved by the overseas Chinese artists in the late 1990s made it clear to the Chinese Government that contemporary Chinese art could be an important part of China's cultural industry and contribute to China's international profile. As a result of this realisation, China's own international art Biennale – the Shanghai Biennale – in 1996 marks China's important step to set up its own rule for evaluating contemporary Chinese art. However, the 'de facto legalisation' of contemporary Chinese art was not realised until 2000, when the Shanghai Biennale became a real international biennale under the slogan 'from local to global'. The 2000 Shanghai Biennale showed a successful example of the CCP's incorporating art to bolster the Party's political ideology based on its renewed evaluation system.

Over the past three decades, contemporary Chinese art has turned from underground art into a significant branch of China's cultural industry and a strong voice in China's cultural diplomacy. Since contemporary Chinese art entered its highly commercialised period in the 1990s, it has been gradually detached from its initial ideals. Contemporary art practices in China became less experimental and radical and more practical. With the CCP's 'de facto

legalisation' of contemporary Chinese art in 2000, it has continued to serve politics under different political agenda.

The Shanghai Biennale in 2000: the 'de facto legalisation' of contemporary Chinese art

The Shanghai Biennale was China's first public, legitimately organised exhibition of modern art ... After November 6, I no longer had to explain modern art or do the work of disseminating it. I did not need to constantly defend it because it had already achieved the basic right to exist ... The opening of the Shanghai Biennale on November 6, 2000, is a significant symbol of the beginning of China's history of modern art. (Zhu, 2000/2003, pp. 351, 352)

The Shanghai Biennale began in 1996 and has been the most established biennale in China ever since. The third Shanghai Biennale was held from 6 November 2000 to 6 January 2001 in the newly expanded Shanghai Art Museum. Unlike the previous two Shanghai Biennales, the thematic title of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale in English was not directly translated from the Chinese title, *Haishang, Shanghai*. The Chinese title 'literally means "Shanghai Over the Sea"' and 'relates this coastal city to the ocean, marine culture and the outside world' (Köppel-Yang, 2003, p. 46). Holding that Shanghai was the gateway of China to the West, the Shanghai Art Museum emphasised the 'historical significance' of the biennale by asserting that it was 'an officially sponsored evolution from the local to the global' (ibid., p. 47). In order to fully represent the highly internationalised and modernised Shanghai, an epitome of China, the biennale committee set the English title as *The Shanghai Spirit*.

The landmark significance of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was upheld almost unanimously by both official and non-official voices. Although there were still some dissenting views that regarded the participating artists' cooperation and compromises with the biennale as being against the spirit of the avant-garde, hardly anybody denied the importance of the biennale itself. As Wu Hung states:

Generally, however, projects directly critiquing the biennale were few; most works in the off-biennale exhibitions – even in 'Fuck Off' – did not engage with the 'master event' ... Moreover, to my knowledge, no Chinese artist invited to participate in the biennale turned down the invitation. I was also not surprised to learn that the organisers of 'Fuck Off' practised self-censorship to ensure the show's realisation, eliminating and restricting some art projects that might have provoked cancellation by the authorities. (ibid., pp. 48, 49)¹⁷

Officially supported art exhibitions, especially those on the national scale, are still significant art stages for Chinese artists, despite the fact that the Chinese Government can cancel the exhibition at any time. In Wu's view, there were at least two changes that made the 2000 Shanghai Biennale a turning point in the development of contemporary art in China. The first change was the unprecedented inclusion of independent curators in a national art exhibition in China. Considering the fact that important national exhibitions had to be under the direct control of the official art system, allowing independent curators to participate in the decision-making was novel. The second change was the 'normalisation' or 'legalisation' of experimental art, which was not allowed in any national exhibition before the 2000 Shanghai Biennale.

The following section of this article goes on to analyse the radical changes made in the 2000 Shanghai Biennale and illustrate how they were related to China's national policy in the late 1990s.

The 2000 Shanghai Biennale: from the local to the global

The Shanghai Biennale began in 1996, but it was not until the 2000 edition, when it began including new media artists and international artists and curators, that it registered on the international art map. (Chen, 2010, n.p.)

The adoption of the independent curator system and the inclusion of foreign artists, installation artwork and new media artwork were the two main changes that elevated the 2000 Shanghai Biennale from the local to the global. Before 2000, independent curators and foreign artists were not allowed in any national and official exhibitions. Before a further analysis of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, it is necessary to illustrate why the first Shanghai Biennale in 1996 failed to register its importance on the international art map.

According to Wang (2006), one of the reasons for the failure was that after the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989, the CCP issued a notice which clearly banned contemporary Chinese art from being exhibited in any 'big' museums. Thus, installation artwork was ordered to be withdrawn from the first Biennale. Experimental art did not disappear in China because of this policy but it was 'normal' for exhibitions to be closed down when installations or other experimental forms of artwork were involved. The 1996 Shanghai Biennale made people believe that contemporary art was still underground and officially prohibited. Being constrained by the national policy, the first two biennales were not open to foreign artists and thus did not draw much attention from the international media.

In the early 1990s, China took even more active steps towards joining the international community, such as applying to join the WTO and bidding to host the Olympic Games. Following this national policy, it was necessary for the State Council, the Ministry of Culture and the Shanghai Municipal People's Government, which all directly controlled the Shanghai Biennale, to display an image of a modern and open China to the world.¹⁸ 2000 was the year before China officially joined the WTO and was also the year that Beijing had planned to host the Olympic Games but failed. The slogan when bidding to host the Olympic Games was 'An open China is expecting the Olympic Games'. In order to strengthen China's position in the international community and to join the world organisations, the CCP was eager to change the negative perception of China after 1989. Hence, the unexpected changes made in the 2000 Shanghai Biennale were, in fact, largely a necessary diplomatic approach to increase China's international profile.

The independent curatorial system

Another 'radical' decision made by the organisers of the third Shanghai Biennale was to invite two 'foreign' independent curators, Hou Hanru (France) and Toshio Shimizu (Japan), to join the curatorial team.¹⁹ In an interview by *The New York Times*, Hou described how in 2000 the situation in China was still difficult for artists: 'There were very few galleries in the city, museums were still primarily showing traditional art, and the art market had not yet been established' (cited in Chen, 2010). In addition, he recalled that 'I had to work not only on the contents and context of the show, I also had to teach workers and museum staff how to use the tools, to open crates, how to build walls' (ibid.). Though Hou was credited by *The New York Times* as the 'head of the curatorial team in 2000', the Chinese media credited another as 'the head curator'.

The curatorial team comprised five members and the head of the team was Fang Zengxian, who was the dean of the department of national painting at the China National Academy of Painting, the honorary curator of the Shanghai Art Museum and the honorary consultant of the China Artists Association. Wu addressed Fang as 'the museum's chief official and the director of the biennale's artistic committee' (Wu, 2010, p. 44). The significance of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was largely promoted by the museum itself as well:

The significance of [the biennale's] success will far transcend the exhibition itself. As an activity established [biennale] on an international scale that seriously addresses the issues of globalisation, post-colonialism and regionalism, etc., this Shanghai Biennale will set a good example for our Chinese colleagues and is bound to secure its due status among other world-famous biennale art exhibitions (ibid.).

The ambition to build the Shanghai Biennale as a world-famous art stage is clear. Nevertheless, the 'independent' curators were still under the official art system's control. Another two curators of the Biennale were Zhang Qing and Li Xu. According to Zhu (2000/2003):

The event did not come about easily. Rather, it resulted from the struggles of countless artists, critics, theorists, curators, and organisers. In particular, Zhang Qing ... [overcame] many humiliating challenges in order to bring about this particular exhibition. In 1998, Zhang Qing had already completed preparations for China's second modern art exhibition, but since modern art was not legal, it fell out ... Zhang Qing had to deal with so many challenges: ease the negative reactions to modern art, and comply with the agendas of the various curators. He knew how far to go and when to stop. He contacted various artists and critics, and could not avoid offending numerous people who were either overlooked or excluded. (p. 351)²⁰

Zhang, who was also the curator of the 5th (2004) and the 6th (2006) Shanghai Biennales, places great emphasis on the importance for China to have internationalised and legalised contemporary art exhibitions. He believes that establishing China's own internationalised art biennale is the best way to confront and fight the Western cultural-centrism.

Along with the traditions in Chinese society at the beginning of the 1990s, Chinese art has gradually shifted from blindly imitating Western modernist art toward possessing a consciousness of its own culture ... If we were to excavate the meaning hidden within this artistic phenomenon, we would discover that not only was this controlled by supply and demand within the Western art market, but it also conformed to the imagination and discourse of cultural colonialism. Moreover, it was immediately appropriated for use in the 45th through 48th Venice Biennales. At the same time, foreign curators – rallying behind internationalism, postcolonialism, and regionalism – entered China to collect specimens of art 'made in China' (Zhang, 2000, p. 347).

Viewing the Western art system as a symbol of Western cultural-centrism, Zhang asserts that China has to exhibit to the world its unique indigenous experience, which has been developed during the one-hundred-year history of modern art in China (ibid., p. 348). In his view, leading China's own national biennale to join the ranks of international biennales will contribute to establishing China's international influence. He further states that:

Within this present reality in which we confront Western cultural-centrism, the 'discursive power' of contemporary art – its power to evaluate and to choose – is particularly important and prominent. If China did not have the type of internationalised and legalised contemporary art exhibitions exemplified by the Shanghai Biennial, then the power to evaluate and choose would have remained in the hands of foreign biennial curators. Chinese contemporary art would always be like an Echo Wall for Western contemporary art, or even become something like a collapsed tomb figurine, and standards for Chinese contemporary art would have never been forcefully, explicitly and objectively disseminated in the international art world. (ibid.)

Nevertheless, the claim that the 2000 Shanghai Biennale should play an important role in undermining the Western cultural-centrism was criticised for being 'hollow and self-contradictory' (Wu, 2001, p. 46). Wu (2001) argues that the only two independent curators were from abroad and the Biennale invited several foreign star artists to participate in the show. In other words, the 'foreign influence' was by no means undermined in this Biennale. Wang (2006) posits that if making up some reasons that cater to the official ideology becomes the only way to gain permission for exhibitions, contemporary Chinese art will ultimately turn into merely a decoration of politics. Sharing Wang's viewpoints, certain domestic Chinese critics saw the Shanghai Biennale as a 'booth/market stall' of Western biennales or as 'a product of Western hegemony' (Wang, 2007, pp. 214, 215). They regarded the ideas of having international curators and the inclusion of international artists as problematic and a failure to create an international biennale of 'China's own format' (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the two foreign curators' identity actually conformed with the Party's appeal to 'Asian values' for evaluating contemporary Chinese art. The 'French' curator Hou left China in 1990 and Toshio Shimizu was Japanese. In other words, they were 'foreign' but not necessarily 'Western'.

Also, it would be a mistake to regard Zhang's statements as 'made-up' excuses for gaining official support. Zhang's statements did reflect the long-existing tension between China and the West. Further, they revealed the existing complex between the local and the overseas Chinese artists. A group of active Chinese artists and art critics, including those who went abroad for exhibitions and stayed, left China around 1989. Two published letters between Li Xianting, an authoritative Chinese art critic, and Fei Dawei, a famous overseas curator, indicated this complex early in 1991. In the letter from Li to Fei, he states:

Once art leaves its cultural motherland, it will surely die out. Exiled culture and arts have always happened in the macro cultural background in Europe. You [the artists and critics travelling abroad] represent new issues ... Nationality is not the kind promoted by the government, but it does exist. We cannot follow the postmodernist styles in the contemporary West using the so-called principality of modernism. In the world today, nothing can be considered avant-garde. No matter what you do, it always appears to be familiar ... There won't be anything [we do] that would be worth international attention. (cited in Fei, 1991)

In Fei's reply, he highlights that Li's views actually reflected the prevalent perspective of domestic Chinese artists, who regarded the overseas artists as being 'completely annihilated' because they were well known in the Chinese art world before 1989 but failed to have any distinct works of art after moving abroad. Fei recognises the widening gap between the domestic Chinese artists and overseas Chinese artists; however, he denies that the overseas Chinese artists are 'in exile' and, as a strong response, argues that art would surely die out if it remained isolated in its cultural motherland. After the overseas Chinese artists achieved huge success in the mid-1990s with their extensive use of Chinese cultural characteristics, the tension between the two groups became even more severe (Fei, 1991). One example of such tension is that Wang Nanming (2006) holds that the overseas Chinese artists, including international art stars like Cai Guo-Qiang, are making 'Chinatown' and recreational culture to appeal to the imagination and tastes of the Western audience (p. 353). He contends that their artwork has been far from depicting the reality of day-to-day life in China. He concludes that 'by appropriating simple motifs or symbols left behind by tradition, they formulate these motifs into some 'essential' markers of Chinese-ness' (ibid.).

Hence, when one of those overseas curators, Hou Hanru, invited a group of successful overseas Chinese artists to participate in the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, the impression was reinforced that the Chinese Government had agreed to terminate their 'exiled condition' and allowed the internationally recognised contemporary Chinese art to be officially exhibited in public in China. This 'de facto' legalisation of contemporary Chinese art, however, led to a more controversial reading of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale. The inclusion of overseas Chinese artists, who had gained their international recognition in the West, at the Biennale paradoxically affirmed the Shanghai Biennale's adoption of Western standards to evaluate contemporary Chinese art.

Zhang Qing posits that the Shanghai Biennale's internal function was to promote and guide 'mainstream' contemporary art. He contends that one of the Biennale's important tasks was to bolster domestic Chinese artists' self-confidence by creating China's own system of values and standards for Chinese contemporary art. Ironically, the Biennale's selections of art seemed to indicate that contemporary Chinese art would be led by overseas Chinese artists but 'domestic mainstreams'.

The inclusion of installation artwork and new media artwork

Another main reason for the domestic art world to hail the 'legalised' status of contemporary Chinese art was the inclusion of some experimental artists' video and installation works. In fact, it was difficult to exclude installation artwork when over thirty internationally famous foreign artists were invited to participate in this exhibition. Still, the inclusion of experimental art was regarded as a clear victory by local independent Chinese curators and artists who had been campaigning for these reforms for years. According to Wu's comment on this 'victory':

While the museum interpreted the biennale as representing a new stage in an officially sponsored evolution from the local to the global, independent curators and critics linked the biennale to previous unofficial exhibitions. From their point of view, the reforms in this biennale are the result, to a large extent, of their persistent efforts in challenging and reinventing the old exhibition system in China. (Wu, 2001, p. 47)

Though also viewing the Biennale as a postponed victory, Zhu (2000/2003) holds that it would be too optimistic to regard the Biennale as a gesture to allow all kinds of experimental art practices to be displayed publicly after 2000. 'It simply means from here on out, modern art is no longer illegal or a "crime"' (ibid., p. 352). Nevertheless, Wang (2006) questions how this inclusion of installation and new media art can be regarded as the 'legalisation' of contemporary Chinese art, considering the fact that no law was made to protect future exhibitions. He argues that in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989 there was even performance artwork included and yet that did not make contemporary Chinese art 'legal' at that time. He recognises that the 2000 Shanghai Biennale marked a completely different art scene with its inclusion of different kinds of new media art in several satellite exhibitions being held at the same time. Still, the 2000 Shanghai Biennale failed to provide more explicit standards for other museums and biennales in China to judge if a work would be 'legal' or 'illegal' in future exhibitions.

Hence, Wang holds that if the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was viewed as the legalisation of contemporary art within the current Chinese art system, contemporary art in China should be further included in the social system. That is to say, contemporary art in China should be

legally protected from being violated by people who have power. He argues that if the permission was issued merely due to the need of a certain situation, it precisely showed the illegality of the permission. In this view, the fact that installation art and new media art were exhibited at the biennale did not manifest the legalisation of contemporary art in China. Otherwise, the legalisation of contemporary Chinese art would have been realised in 1989. True legalisation depended not on permission from above to allow a certain type of artwork to be displayed but on a sound political and legal system. Only under those circumstances could the claimed 'legalisation' of contemporary Chinese art be fulfilled and applied to the art system (Wang, 2006).

Moreover, Wang states that the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was a generalised exhibition for 'star artists', which included foreign artists and, in particular, those overseas Chinese artists who were able to 'show off their "Chinese" works of art made by the post-colonial standards' (ibid.). Still, the tension between the local and overseas Chinese artists and the nationalistic emotions they evoked were overshadowed by the historical significance of the Biennale. The content of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was generally recognised as being less important than the biennale's cultural significance.

From the perspective of biennial exhibitions, the Shanghai exhibition was neither better nor worse than the Venice or São Paulo biennials, or even Documental at Kassel ... However, considering this exhibition with regard to its sociocultural environment and its historical significance, it was a particularly unusual cultural event ... Issues of quality, methods, style, and organisation were of secondary importance. What was most important was that it was a modern art exhibition and, furthermore, it was a legitimate Chinese modern art exhibition. (Zhu, 2000, 2003, p. 351)

Another direct and significant effect of the Biennale is that Contemporary Chinese art could be reported by national media, promoted and discussed in public space. According to Wu (2001), 'From the moment that the news broke about the Shanghai Art Museums' plan to organise a "truly international" biennale, the exhibition was perceived, discussed and debated in China as an event' (p. 44). The selection of curators and artists, their implications and possible governmental restrictions all became the domestic media's focus. It was due to the fact that these issues dominated the public discussion that 'the exhibition's content and contribution to art itself attracted much less attention' (ibid.).

In summary, the CCP's policy still determines the development of art in post-Mao China if only by weak directives and as a consequence the instituting of a panoptical self-censorship among artists. The shifting domestic policy made contemporary Chinese art an indicator to read the degree of permitted openness of Chinese society. This openness has not increased with time. Rather, it largely depends on the Party reading of China's political situation. In 1989, contemporary Chinese art was banished from the public for its 'anti-Revolutionary' nature. In 1996, the Party determined it was necessary to establish China's own biennale for contemporary art in Shanghai. In 2000, contemporary Chinese art was 'de facto legalised' in Shanghai when Jiang Zemin declared that the CCP should be the leading force of Chinese culture.

The CCP's changing policies shows its adjusted perspective to regard contemporary Chinese art as an important demonstration of 'contemporary Chinese culture'. By including contemporary Chinese artworks in China Festival in Berlin in 2001 and by displaying Cai Guo-Qiang's fireworks for the APEC meeting in Shanghai in the same year, contemporary Chinese art has been officially incorporated as an indispensable part of China's diplomatic language and viewed as a modern display of the distinct Chinese culture.

The other selected case study further investigates how contemporary Chinese art can be 'national', displaying an image of the distinct Chinese culture, when being placed in an international liberal space. The Venice Biennale is regarded as the Olympic games of the art world. After China's decades-long absence from this prestigious art stage, the Party decided to claim its right to a Chinese pavilion and its right to display 'authentic contemporary Chinese art' at the Venice Biennale.

Pervasion

What kind of image of China does the PRC government attempt to present in the Chinese pavilion? The answer was articulated clearly in the introduction to the catalogue for the Chinese pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 by chief curator Fan Di'an:

Similar to China's recent entry in the WTO, its hosting of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, and of the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, China's establishment of a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2003 demonstrates again that China has become an inseparable part of the international community. (Köppel-Yang, 2004, p. 64)²¹

In her analysis of the first exhibition of the Chinese pavilion, Köppel-Yang (2004) notes three 'political correctness' messages delivered by the exhibition. First of all, the exhibition attempted to demonstrate that 'China, not only on an economic level but also on a cultural level, has reached international standards' (ibid.). Secondly, the exhibition concept and the works of art are described with binary comparisons, thus emphasising the idea of the 'local in the global', which refers to 'the traditional and the innovative, or of traditional material and new concepts' (ibid.). Thirdly, the exhibition aims 'to guarantee a pluralist stance ... through the use of diverse media', including installation, traditional Chinese painting and video (ibid.).

The three dimensions are also appropriate for reviewing the Chinese pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. The same concepts are still aptly embodied in this exhibition after eight years. To put it another way, the exhibitions in the Chinese pavilion, all along, have never mainly aimed to exhibit 'the most innovative works of art in contemporary China or its ability of experimenting with new ideas' as Professor Zhu (2011) has stated, but more to appropriately present the image of China in a consistent way to the West. What may be different, though not entirely new, is that the ideology of competing with the West is reinforced in this exhibition at a philosophical level. Apparently, becoming an inseparable part of the international community is no longer enough for China. As Peng indicates:

The names of Chinese artists preferred by foreign curators and by [internationally famous] Chinese curators are usually overlapped. This precisely explains that our contemporary art has been evaluated by the western standards and has followed the western system in the international art world for a long time. Our [internationally famous] Chinese curators are highly Westernised. It is because our [internationally famous] curators are highly Westernised, [that] contemporary Chinese art develops in and continues the Western mode. However, contemporary Chinese art ought to be beneficial to the Chinese culture and be attached to people's life in China, but devoted to the art forms that are no longer close to people's life in China. Contemporary Chinese art should not be defined by the western aesthetic system. We used to understand the Chinese aesthetics by referencing the Western aesthetic system. Along with the rapidly and strongly developed Chinese society, not only Chinese culture, but also Chinese art and the Chinese aesthetic, will exercise more powerful influence in the international community. (Zhu, Peng, & Chen, 2011)

Artwork in the Chinese pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale

From this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why Pan Gongkai's artwork, 'Melt', was selected as the leading artwork in the Chinese pavilion, though it was not selected to be presented in the official short catalogue published by La Biennale di Venezia. Description of the artwork as given on the exhibition label is briefly cited below:

The 'snow' projected onto ink lotus is the English version of Pan's thesis 'On the Border of Western Modern Art'. In [a] literal sense, Western as the shining English characters illuminates Eastern. However, while the English text [is] continuously entering, and illuminating China, it also continuously deconstructs into flake, falling down like snow, piling onto lotus leaves, and melting gradually. This particular dynamic process is the very projection of the Western introduced into Eastern. From the perspective of Western, it is continuously export, while from the perspective of Eastern, it is continuously absorb, digest and 'melt' rather than simply import and accept. For Eastern, the lotus, (which is referring to China and Chinese culture,) is always there

This interpretation could be read as 'the traditional materials and new concepts' proposed by Köppel-Yang and realised by the curator and artist, except that the concept was not literally new. Despite the fact that the curator tried to employ traditional Chinese materials with 'contemporary' interpretations, the discourse was established on the East-West dichotomy and was not much different from the assertions proclaimed by the artists of the older generation in the 1980s. It proved again that the Chinese pavilion did not detach itself from the official art discourse even in the international space that was famous for pursuing uncertainty and hybridity. Peng's proposal pertinently fitted the purpose designed by the Party for the exhibition in the Chinese pavilion. In addition, the designation of specific topics – the five traditional flavours – for each artist by the curator, and not by the Ministry of Culture nor by the committee, in fact ensured the 'correctness' of the content of the exhibition while the new way of selecting the curator appeared to show more liberal space allowed by the Ministry of Culture (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. 'Melt' by Pan Gongkai.



Figure 2. 'Melt' by Pan Gongkai.

Official Chen (2011) frequently contends that the foremost goal for the Ministry of Culture in sponsoring overseas cultural activities is to promote contemporary Chinese culture after the Reform and Opening up policy. He posits that 'Westerners are already familiar with ancient Chinese culture. What we need to do is to show more about contemporary Chinese society. Westerners have little idea about contemporary Chinese culture and art' (2011). Further, in an interview for the Chinese Year of Culture in Germany in 2012, he told the media that 'the Germans are really interested in China but their understanding about contemporary China is still very slight' (Li, 2013). Despite the fact that Chen claimed the effort made by the Ministry of Culture was to introduce contemporary Chinese culture to the world, what was usually presented was traditional Chinese culture decorated in a modern way, as can be illustrated by the way Pan Gongkai was introduced at the Venice Biennale: 'Pan as an ink painter in Modern China with Modern lifestyle – his time mostly occupied by art administration work, art teaching, family life, etc., rather than [continuing] a traditional literati/hermit lifestyle in modern time'.²²

This characterisation leads to another question: what was the understanding of 'modern life' in China? The combination of technology, English words and the ink lotus could represent a current type of 'Chinese modernity'; however, what made it necessary to highlight that the artist was living 'in Modern China with a modern life style'? It is worth noting that before the Cultural Revolution, the pursuit of modernity in China was always related to an adherence to tradition. That is to say, in the Chinese context tradition was what had to be integrated rather than entirely abandoned in the process of modernisation. The pursuit was seriously reversed during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, when considering the display of contemporary Chinese culture with the use of traditional materials, it is worth investigating what part of tradition was allowed by the Party as being compatible with the pursuit of modernity in China. A closer look at the rest of the works in the Chinese pavilion may provide more insights.

Artist Cai Zhisong created 'white-painted tumbler-like devices made of steel and house wind chimes and Chinese tea' (Li, 2011). According to Cai:

Tea makes people waked and enlightened and so many Buddhist monks drink tea to keep a pure, fresh, and light mood ... When rocked by the wind, the clouds emit the scent of tea and the sound of the wind chimes ... My aim is to create a dreamy, Chan-Buddhist atmosphere at the entrance to the Chinese pavilion. (cited in Wang, 2011)

The original design of the artwork – the clouds – were to be flanked by 'empty incense', the work of another artist, Yuan Gong. The device of 'empty incense' outside was later shut down by the organising committee of the Venice Biennale because it caused floods that blocked the route to other exhibition halls (Narrator, personal communication, November 4, 2011). Moreover, 'it is hardly possible to smell anything even if one stands very close to the clouds' (Wang, 2011) (Figures 3 and 4).

'I Plead: Rain' by Liang Yuanwei, is 'a liquid-cycle device that drops huangjiu, a low-proof yellow drink made from fermented grain, in to a sink in an endless loop' (Li, 2011). This is the artwork displayed in the official short catalogue. According to the narrator, the hose was blocked not long after the exhibition started because the liquid became too dirty. Therefore, there was also no scent that could be smelt around the artwork (Figure 5).

Yang Maoyuan's herbal medicine pots, belonging to his installation artwork 'All Things Are Visible', contained nothing but the smells of herbal medicine. According to Yang:

This installation can explain the theory of traditional Chinese medicine and its current developing situation. According to the theory of traditional Chinese medicine, all things are visible, be it the acupuncture points, meridians or collaterals, however, they do not exist at all to modern science ... Traditional Chinese medical prescriptions will be carved on the interior of these pots and their outside will be decorated with traditional designs. (cited in Sue, 2011)



Figure 3. Clouds by Cai Zhisong. Source: image © designboom.



Figure 4. November 2011.

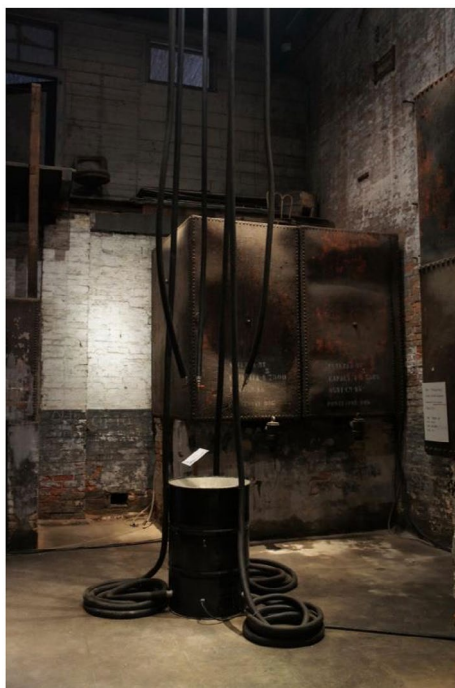


Figure 5. 'I Plead: Rain' by Liang Yuanwei.

Unfortunately, the smell of the herbal medicine also vanished not long after the exhibition began. Due to the space restriction in the Chinese pavilion, the curator decided that the pots could only be placed in the way that the space allowed (Peng, 2011, personal



Figure 6. 'All matters are visible' by Yang Maoyuan.



Figure 7. 'Empty incense' by Yuan Gong.

communication, August, 29). The display of the pots sometimes needed to be re-adjusted when the tourists broke some of them by accident, although sometimes tourists were allowed take a pot away with them as part of the idea for the artwork (Narrator, 2011, personal communication, November 4) (Figure 6).

Yuan Gong's artwork 'Empty Incense' inside the Chinese pavilion was designed as a device which combined incense and electronics. According to the artist, 'the scent is dispersed from nine sources to permeate the pavilion. Light fog is shown on an MP4 player and iPad. The display is inspired by Zen Buddhist teachings that form is emptiness and emptiness is form' (Li, 2011).

Nevertheless, there was neither MP4 player nor iPad shown in the Chinese pavilion with the artwork. The narrator explained that the organisation committee of the Venice Biennale asked the Chinese pavilion to keep only two devices on during the exhibition. The reason was that when all devices were working, the spread mist made the floor wet and the exhibition hall too cold, and thus it was dangerous to and uncomfortable for the audience (Narrator, 2011, personal communication, November 4) (Figure 7).

Pan GongKai's artwork, according to the narrator, was probably the only work that was maintained almost intact, though there was also no scent of lotus disseminated. Nevertheless, the narrator introduced this work as symbolising 'a challenge to the Western contemporary art made by a traditional Chinese scholar' (ibid.).

Conclusion

As the preceding examples illustrate, the Party's aim to display contemporary Chinese art with a strong national character through the Chinese pavilion is clear. As an important image of an authoritarian power, the Chinese pavilion challenges the ideas of the Biennale with its themes and practice of art. Claiming to make a direct response to the 54th Venice Biennale, the Chinese pavilion has projected a consistent vision of a unitary cultural identity with a more traditional outlook. In Peng's view,

the traditional elements we used are still alive in China, so I hope to challenge the stereotype that traditional art has to be totally split from contemporary art ... In the age of globalization, artistic expression should demonstrate the intellectual level of modern people instead of being tied up with such a trivial argument. (cited in Li, 2011)

Peng's contention, nevertheless, fails to resonate with the domestic Chinese art world. 'Pervasion' has reinforced the conviction that under the Party's support, contemporary Chinese art becomes more a diplomatic language than a challenge to convention. Not only the curator, but also the artists sought to make their ideas consistent with the official discourse. The extensive use of traditional elements essentially reflected less contemporary Chinese culture than a vague 'Chineseness'. What the 'Chineseness' conveyed was the repetitive theme – a distinctive 'Chinese' culture – a powerful catchword that was never adequately elaborated. More ironically, even though the works of art in this exhibition were claimed to be 'anti-business', because 'they could not be collected or sold: when the smell fades, their life ends', the 'life' of the works of art ended even before the exhibition did (ibid.). A local media commented on this exhibition,

Chinese art, rather art from China, in the 54th Venice Biennale makes no spectacles or splashes in headlines this year but presents an international audience with emerging artists working in different media and varied artist circles – a welcomed change from the names representing more commercial Chinese art. (Don, 2011)

The Chinese pavilion at the Venice Biennale, a place for the rhetorical use of contemporary Chinese art to display China's national image, probably left little to be observed about contemporary Chinese culture beyond the use of diverse high-tech media that supported China's national image as a modernised country.

Zhang (2010) indicates that there are two factors contributing to the success of contemporary Chinese art in China and turning it from an underground practice into a high-profile phenomenon not only for Chinese society but also for the Chinese Government: internationally famous Chinese artists and 'the insanely high market price' of their works of art (p. 10). The U.S. State Department adviser Ken Miller (2012) makes a similar statement while underlining the changed attitude of the CCP towards contemporary Chinese art. According to his report, the PRC government is arguably overly involved in supporting the arts:

As the economy commenced its double-digit annual growth under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the state began pouring significant resources into the arts, creating a sector that employs over a million people, one which serves as – in the words of professor Richard Curt Krauss – a 'giant advertising agency for socialism.' From 2003 to 2010, state investment in the arts grew at an average annual rate of 33 percent to an aggregate amount of \$14 billion. Eighty thousand students graduated from Chinese art schools in 2010, a 15-fold increase in the course of a decade. (Miller, 2012, p. 2)

Further, the largest contemporary art museum in the world is scheduled to open in Beijing in 2017 (Platt, 2013).²³ Since the beginning of contemporary Chinese art, Western cultural influence has always been a central focus in China's intellectual debates. Contemporary Chinese art practices have never been just about art. The essential issue embedded in those debates is China's cultural anxiety surrounding China's cultural identity in post-Mao China. To what extent should contemporary Chinese art be readily recognisable as 'Chinese'? Moreover, what defines the 'Chineseness' of contemporary Chinese art? The questions that contemporary Chinese art practices have invoked not only reflect the direct influence of globalisation on contemporary Chinese society, but also Communist ideology's increasing distance with China's social reality.

Notes

1. More details can be found in Wang's article 'Confrontation and complicity: rethinking official art in contemporary China' (2007).
2. The series of Deng's political and economic reforms is also called 'the Open Door policy'.
3. The influx of contemporary Western ideas in the 1980s, especially the post-Marx works that were not available to ordinary Chinese readers before Deng's reforms, contributes to the accelerated disintegration of the Marxist historical ideology (He, 2002, p. 155).
4. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, the perception that China failed to become a modernised country undermined the intellectuals' belief in the validity of the established cultural theory which promised to enable China to catch up with the West through a 'scientific' explanation of China's history and a series of social projects based on the theory. The crisis in the belief in the social system motivated Chinese intellectuals to search for a new cultural ideology (He, 2002, pp. 154, 155).
5. There are two ways of understanding the word 'tradition' in contemporary Chinese intellectual discourses. According to the Chinese scholar Qin Hui (2003), there are intellectuals who want to revive 'collective traditions' to resist the spread of Western-style individualism. They look to what they consider China's socialist legacy as the antidote to the disease of liberalism. Their intellectual strongholds are mostly in the humanities. However, the 'traditions' which Jiang emphasised in the official statement above referred to China's historical heritage related to its past as a great civilisation).

6. Such as the increasing social inequality between the urban and the rural, the rich and the poor.
7. By the late 1980s, conservative scholars turned back to traditional dynastic studies with official support. Interests in peasant history had rapidly declined. The 'cultural fever' of the time made all kinds of generic comparisons between 'East and West', in which culture became a vector of national character rather than a historical or social phenomenon. Dwelling on differences between 'China and the West' became a way of minimising differences between past and present, elite and masses, power holders and commoners within China (Qin, 2003).
8. This exhibition included the largest ever loan of figures from the Terracotta Army, with which the First Emperor, Qin Shihuangdi, was buried (Lillywhite, 2008).
9. Another two renowned exhibitions are 'China's New Art, Post-1989' (Hong Kong) and 'China Avant-Garde' (Berlin). "China's New Art, Post-1989", curated by Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting and co-presented by the Hong Kong Arts Centre, the Hong Kong City Hall and the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society in February 1993, was regarded as the first major exhibition of

Chinese avant-garde art to take place outside of mainland China. It was originally conceived four years earlier when Chang met Li at the Beijing China Avant-Garde exhibition, but historical circumstances postponed its opening to 1993. Organized by Hanart T Z Gallery, the exhibition sought to sum up the cultural sensibilities emblematic of the avant-garde in the 1990s, contrasting the more exhilarating but less focused explorations of the 1980s with works done in the intervening years between 1989 and 1991 in the post-Tiananmen era.

'China Avant-Garde' was a similar retrospective exhibition, organised by

Hans van Dijk, Jochen Noth and Andreas Schmid for the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (January 1993), [that] brought the existence of Chinese avant-garde art to the attention of European audiences ... this exhibition attempted to relate Chinese experimental art since the late 1970s to other avant-garde movements in contemporary Chinese culture. It subsequently toured Rotterdam and Odense, and was reshaped to focus more on installation art for the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. (EdWART, 2011)

10. More discussions in relation to the different using of terms between 'cultural industry' and 'creative industry' can be found in Justin O'Connor and Gu Xin's article 'A new modernity: the arrival of "creative industries" in China' (2006).
11. International dealers, curators, and critics who travel around China seeking new trends and sensibilities in Chinese art have tended to sympathize automatically with artists participating in underground exhibitions and have tried, with greater enthusiasm, to introduce them to the global art world.
12. Contemporary Chinese art has started to have a presence in international cultural projects supported by the Chinese Government. 'In 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Culture assembled an exhibition of Chinese contemporary art titled "Living in Time" in Berlin as part of the China Festival during the city's Asia-Pacific week'. The 2000 Shanghai Biennale is regarded as the first internationally oriented show in the series and the 'de facto' legalisation of contemporary Chinese art.
13. The tension between Cai and the Chinese art world is because of his award winning work 'Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard' at the Venice Biennale in 1999. Domestic Chinese artists regarded Cai's work as merely a copy of the artwork 'Rent Collection Courtyard' which was an important work of art for the CCP's cultural propaganda during the Cultural Revolution. Cai's artwork was regarded as a successful reconstruction and deconstruction of the original work at Venice.
14. Xi Jinping has been the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and President of China since 2013.
15. Qin Hui states that there are two basic camps among Chinese intellectuals: The Chinese New Left and Liberals (Qin, 2003). New Left intellectuals advocate a 'Chinese alternative' to the neoliberal market economy, one that will

guarantee the welfare of the country's 800 million peasants left behind by recent reforms. And unlike much of China's dissident class, which grew out of the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and consists largely of human rights and pro-democracy activists, the New Left view the Communist leadership as a likely force for change. (Mishra, 2006)

Yingjie Guo further defines four groups of cultural nationalists: national historians, Confucians, opponents of language reform and cultural linguists, and postcolonialists (Guo, 2004, p. 6).

16. The 48th Venice Biennale was from 12 June to 7 November 1999.
17. The off-biennale exhibition 'Buhezuo Fangshi' – literally meaning 'ways of non-cooperation', but rendered in English by the exhibition's organisers as 'Fuck Off'. Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, curators of the show, described the event as aiming to show an 'alternative' identity. The 'alternative' position entailed challenging and criticising the power discourse and popular conventions; in an uncooperative and uncompromising way, it self-consciously resisted the threat of assimilation and vulgarisation. (Köppel-Yang, 2003, p. 48)
18. The full name of the State Council is the State Council of the PRC, which is synonymous with the Central People's Government.
19. Hou Hanru was originally a PRC citizen who left China in 1990.
20. The first one was referred to as the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989.
21. In a footnote, Köppel-Yang noted that this quote is from *Synthi-Scapes*, exhibition catalogue for the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, Chinese pavilion (China International Exhibition Agency/Guangdong Museum of Art 2003, p. 5). Fan's Chinese text (on p. 4) reads slightly differently from the English version. Fan Di'an is from Fujian Province, like Xu Jiang (Director of the China Academy of Fine Arts and nephew of president Jiang Zemin). Fan and Xu are very close friends. Xu introduced Fan to his uncle Jiang Zemin as an art history teacher and Fan taught Jiang some lessons. Fan is the most important curator for official exhibitions at the moment. He also curated the Shanghai Biennale of 2002 as chief Curator.
22. Description of the artwork as given on the exhibition label.
23. 'With the National Art Museum of China – or Namoc – planning to open in a new building in 2017, and Hong Kong projected to open its M + museum in a new cultural district about the same time, the cities could emerge as twin titans of contemporary Chinese culture. Namoc attracted some of the world's leading architects ... to its design contest for the new museum in Olympic park in Beijing. Xie Xiaofan, a deputy director at Namoc, informally announced at the E.U. – China High Level Cultural Forum in November that Mr. Nouvel's design had been selected, although the decision is subject to the approval of China's new leadership. The director of Namoc, Fan Di'an, said that the new building would house an ever-expanding collection of contemporary Chinese art. It will have 50,000 square metres, or almost 5,40,000 square feet, of exhibition space – six times the current space – with 20,000 square metres for the permanent collection and 30,000 square metres to showcase contemporary art, Republican-era art, and Western art' (Platt, 2013).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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