Inside Out: Rethinking Contemporary Chinese Art and Global Creative Economy

Tiang Li

Advisor: Professor Jung Joon Lee
Second Reader: Professor Avishek Ganguly

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Inside Out: Rethinking Contemporary Chinese Art and Global Creative Economy

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Tiang Li

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Due to the covid-19 crisis these were approved by Program Directors, and are often unsigned.
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Notes on the Translation and Transliteration of Chinese text

In this thesis, I quote Chinese primary and secondary material using my translations. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated. In transliterating Chinese words, I have used the pinyin system for the Chinese written language based on the pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese.
Abstract

This thesis is to destabilize the Western dominant understanding of contemporary Chinese art when it circulates on the global art market, such as the all-too-common narratives only celebrating Chinese artists who are politically criticizing or resist the Chinese authority. Meanwhile, I also question the authority control inside of China, especially the mainstream criteria of aesthetics and art. Cultural anthropologist Aihwa Ong observes that some Western scholars believe contemporary Chinese art to be “crass opportunism with reduced aesthetic value.” Chinese American artist and art critic Chen Danqing criticizes contemporary Chinese art from the last ten years as too utilitarian: “During the Cultural Revolution, all [Chinese] artists worried about their artworks not being ‘revolutionary’; today, I see they only worry about their ‘tricks’ are not ‘contemporary’ enough.” He critically argued that Chinese art today is a consequence of learning Western art due to a lack of cultural confidence.

I argue that contemporary Chinese art is not market-driven or simply copy Western arts. It has been shaped by the context of its particular socio-political and economic condition since the middle of the twentieth century. I also emphasize the specialness of “contemporaneity” in contemporary Chinese art.
Introduction: The Rise of Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Art Market

Selling art overseas seems easier today than in previous decades, especially in China. China accounts for 21 percent of the $63 billion global art market, and it had the second-largest art market in the world in 2017. Due to the effects of globalization and the nearly simultaneous emergence of the creative economy, artworks can be sold and disseminated to other countries more fluidly. According to the Creative Economy Outlook issued by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD), the global market for creative goods—from visual artworks to published materials—has expanded substantially, more than doubling in size from $208 billion in 2002 to $509 billion in 2015.

A recent global art event about art and life of a nineteenth century European artist has been reflecting this feature of global creative economy. Though he was commercially unsuccessful during his lifetime, Vincent Van Gogh may well have sold most of his work if he lived today. In Van Gogh Alive, a touring exhibition organized by Amsterdam’s Van Gogh Museum, Van Gogh’s works were presented in larger-than-life displays, with massive video panels and accompanying audio tracks, giving global audiences the experience of hearing Vincent’s story firsthand. While the fragile artworks of old masters have trouble traveling globally, this immersive art exhibition facilitates a multisensory connection with audiences.

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across different continents, transcending the limitations of time and space. Beyond its popularity in Barcelona, Seoul, London, and Lisbon, the exhibition attracted huge audiences in Beijing, where it was presented at Joy City, a shopping mall in Chaoyang district, and sponsored by Cadillac. According to data provided by the organizer, more than 360,000 visitors attended the 2015 exhibition in four months. These audiences were not only attracted by the high-tech experience, but also by the by-products of this exhibition, such as souvenirs and reproductions. Though only few can afford an original painting—Van Gogh’s *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* was sold to a private collector for $82.5 million in 1990—many can buy an affordable souvenir from a museum gift shop, or stationery bearing the image of *The Starry Night*, which loses most of its original detail and color upon printing. Gradually, it seems that commodities with depictions of Van Gogh and his artwork have become a fashion trend in China. This is a result of the development of the creative economy in China in recent years. With economic development in China, consumer demand for culture and art has increased. Increasing consumer demand and Chinese government policy on stimulating the development of creative economy in China have shaped the outstanding performance of contemporary Chinese art in the global art market.

The term “creative economy” was coined by John Howkins in 2001 to refer to a system for the publication, exchange, and use of creative products, in which conventional business models are not suitable to understand the new product development that mainly depends on

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creativity. He also describes a “creative ecology” made up of four pillars: change, diversity, learning, and adaptation (together Howkins called these selected attributes a “Quad”); for Howkins, creative ecology is essential for human intelligence today. The four pillars work in pairs: change and diversity work either consciously or unconsciously while learning and adaption work are what human can choose to do. Change and diversity are “the cumulative result of people mixing, interpreting, accepting and throwing away,” then new ideas will be created. Creativity also required a process of learning and adaption.

More capacious than the term “creative industry,” creative economy includes almost every commercial activity associated with creativity. Initially, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) of the United Kingdom initiated Creative Mapping Document (2001), and classified creative industries into thirteen branches, including advertising, architecture, art and antique markets, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, performing arts, publishing, software & computer services, television and radio. Howkins emphasized the divergency of categories of creative economy based on the cultural dynamic of different countries, such as the trade show of China, and home furnishing of the United States. In 2002, Richard Florida put forward the idea of the “creative class” to refer to 40 million creative workers, extending the creative economy into nearly every fabric of

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6 Howkins, 33.

7 Howkins, 6.
different industries, including healthcare, law, finance, and business, which go far beyond the art and design realm.\textsuperscript{8}

Early exploration of the creative economy can be traced back to the “culture industry” in the mid-twentieth century, which was first presented in 1947 by Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in \textit{The Dialectic of Enlightenment}\.\textsuperscript{9} Adorno stated that in all branches of “the culture industry,” such as media, publication, and fashion, products are tailored for consumption by the masses; and all individual branches share a similar structure and fit into each other. Contemporary technical development and “economic and administrative” concentration make “creative industry” possible. In the discourse of creative economy in China, the term referred to creative economy is \textit{Wenhua chuangyi chanye 文化创意产业}.\textsuperscript{10} Chinese creative industry is mainly focused on nine dimensions: creativity and design, digital media and internet, radio and television, publication, animation and games, entertainment, culture and relics, art market, and creative institution.\textsuperscript{11} All these components are sharing a similar meaning and category with “creative economy”. While China may use alternate language to define the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{9} Theodor W. Adorno and Anson G. Rabinbach, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” \textit{New German Critique}, no. 6 (1975): 12.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Translation to \textit{Wenhua chuangyi chanye 文化创意产业} : Cultural and Creative Industry.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Zhu Ying 朱英, “Beijing shiwei shizhengfu yinfa guanyu tuijin wenhua chuangyi chanye chuangxin fazhan yijian de tongzhi” 北京市常委、市政府印发《关于推进文化创意产业创新发展意见的通知》 [ Beijing Municipal Committee and Beijing Government issued the “Notice on Promoting the Innovation and Development of Cultural and Creative Industries”], http://www.goc.cb/xinwen/2018/07/05/content_5303724.htm.
\end{itemize}
In this thesis, the term “creative economy” will be applied to refer to the culture and creative industry.

Art and culture have long been commercially linked; however, not until the past two decades has the commerciality of art and its related industry drawn the attention of economists. Intertwined with post-World War II globalization, the creative economy has become a dominant factor in stimulating global economic growth. The art and culture sectors contribute to over 12 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of Europe, the Americas, and Japan, and account for a higher proportion of their growth. Over a hundred countries have national plans in place for their creative economy.

According to the UNCTAD’s Creative Economy Outlook, the creative economy of China, is a herald in the developing world, and has an outstanding rank on the global stage. China has been the leading force of world exports of creative goods with an annual growth rate of 14 percent since 2002. The creative good is measured using the Harmonized System for the classification of products. All creative and related goods were contained in the following subcategories: art crafts, audiovisuals, design, digital fabrication, new media, performing arts, publishing, and visual arts. Specifically, art market in China has an outstanding performance. Rebecca Wei, Chairman of Christie’s Asia, reports that the greater Chinese market accounts for

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13 Howkins, 6-7.
15 UNCTAD, *Creative Economy Outlook*, 18; The Harmonized System is an international nomenclature for classifying products.
about 70 percent of Asia’s business with Christie’s.\textsuperscript{16} Based on the Contemporary Art Report 2020, in 2007, the contemporary art segment generated over one billion dollars in annual turnover.\textsuperscript{17} This rapid growth in the market share of contemporary Chinese art is due to the explosion of the Chinese economy over the last twenty years, leading to a rise in the number of art collectors.

This shift has not only been driven by the growth of Chinese collectors, but also by the increasing recognition of Chinese contemporary artists in the international art market. After the influential exhibition \textit{Magiciens de la Terre}, held in Paris in 1989, Chinese artists Yang Jiechang(杨诘苍, 1956—), Gu Dexing(顾德新, 1962—), and Huang Yongping (黄永砯, 1954—2019) were introduced to a global audience, calling attention to contemporary Chinese artists.\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Magiciens de la Terre} was followed by a series of overseas exhibitions, international art events, and publications featuring the overseas profile of contemporary Chinese artists. After Chinese artists participated in Venice Biennale in 2005, the growth of Chinese turnover in the


\textsuperscript{18} Julia Friedel, “Exhibition Histories: Magiciens De La Terre,” \textit{C&}, August 12, 2016. https://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/magiciens-de-la-terre/. Magiciens De La Terre was a show curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Georges Pompidou (Pompidou Centre) and the Grande Halle de la Villette (Great Hall of Cattle) in Paris from 18 May to 14 August 1989. This show intended to do away with the monopoly of European – American art but emphasized that artistic practice was a universal and spiritual phenomenon in a global world. Half of the exhibited artists came from “non-Western” countries. This exhibition also was fiercely debated. One side believed that this show swayed the “Western” modernity, while the other side criticized that Martin dealt with religious artifacts and judging them through Western aesthetic standards.
contemporary art segment has multiplied by 65 times while America’s turnover has increased tenfold, and China has generated 33 percent of the global market.\textsuperscript{19} With the increasing presence of contemporary Chinese artists, contemporary Chinese art has drawn great attention in the global art market.

The increasing number of international presentations and the prominent performance of contemporary Chinese art in the global art market soon attracted the attention of art critics, curators, and art historians after its blooming in the global art market in the 1990s. Some scholars consider contemporary Chinese artists are opportunists, suggesting that their artworks are made only to profit off the global market. Others condemn contemporary Chinese art as lacking its own individuality because it is a product of the complete absorption of Western styles and techniques. Cultural anthropologist Aihwa Ong observes that some Western observers believe contemporary Chinese art to be “crass opportunism with reduced aesthetic value.”\textsuperscript{20} Chinese American artist and art critic Chen Danqing criticizes contemporary Chinese art from the last ten years as too utilitarian: “During the Cultural Revolution, all [Chinese] artists worried about their art works not being ‘revolutionary’; today, I see they only worry about their ‘tricks’ are not ‘contemporary’ enough.”\textsuperscript{21} Although contemporary Chinese art is impacted by Western art techniques and styles, the specialness of contemporary Chinese art should not be ignored.

\textsuperscript{19} Ehrmann, “A New Landscape.”


Contemporary Chinese art was shaped in the specific transition period when China switched from the totalitarian ideological control of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to an embrace of globalization due to the Reform and Opening-up Policy (1978), which enabled Chinese artists to embrace and learn techniques, materials and styles of Western arts.\textsuperscript{22} Globalization emerged as a popular term in the 1990s. It is a state of the world that involves networks of interdependence that cross borders.\textsuperscript{23} According to the authors of “What is Globalization?” globalization challenges conventional theories and methods of regional and national governance with the full range of forces and factors that sweep the globe and spread certain ideas, values, and practice.\textsuperscript{24} As Keohane and Joseph point out, it also involves links that form due to “environmentally and biologically relevant substances.”\textsuperscript{25} In the art field, as Marizio Bolognini argues, the impacts of globalization include economic and technological aspects, and affect local identities.\textsuperscript{26} In the 1970s and 1980s, Western art styles and contemporary conceptions, such as avant-gardism, also flowed into China. Nevertheless, in light of Terry Smith’s comment on the China Contemporary Art Forum in 2009, Chinese contemporary art has passed the “learn from the West” stage and asserts the different traits of contemporary art.

\textsuperscript{22} The Reform and Opening-up Policy is also known as the Chinese economic reform or the Opening of China.


\textsuperscript{25} Keohane, 105

between China and the West. Accordingly, my thesis centers on Chinese artwork created after 1970 which is distinct from the movement of Chinese social realism attributed to the totalitarian regime. I argue that contemporary Chinese art has been shaped by the context of its particular socio-political and economic condition since the middle of the twentieth century. I also emphasize the specialness of “contemporaneity” in contemporary Chinese art.

Rethinking Contemporary Chinese Art

The definition of contemporary art has been contested by historians and art critics. Even though the literal meaning of “contemporary” refers to that which is “existing or happening now,” not all artworks made by artists currently living can be categorized as contemporary art. In order to elaborate what is contemporary art, an examination of “contemporaneity” is necessary. The opinions on “contemporaneity” of Chinese contemporary art are also diverse, based on different positions of art historians and art critics, which differs from the definition of “contemporaneity” in Western discourse.

In addition, the time division of contemporary Chinese art is also contested. Terry Smith holds that, “A worldwide shift from modern to contemporary art was prefigured in the major movements in the late modern art of the 1950s and 1960s, was unmistakable by 1980s, and continues to unfold through the present, thus shaping art's imaginable futures.” Some Chinese art historians, such as Wu Hung and Lü Peng, hold Chinese contemporary art emerged in the 1980s.

However, Chinese contemporary art might have already emerged during the 1970s, which will be further discussed in the second chapter.

*Changing Roles of Chinese Museums*

The economic success of contemporary Chinese art would not be so substantive without governmental policy encouraging the development of the Chinese creative economy. Support from the Chinese government helps to increase interactions between artists and audiences because of the proliferation of museums in China, despite the fact that the development of Chinese museums and museology is still in its initial stage. Museology, or museum studies, first appeared in the sixteenth century with the emergence of collectors in Europe, who amassed objects to display their wealth and invited selected visitors for study. The role and definition of museums today are enmeshed in contemporary discourses. The meaning of the museum has expanded to include organizations, such as art centers and planetariums, which may not collect objects but provide instruction and education. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines museums as “non-profitmaking, permanent institution[s].”28 John E. Simmons analyzed the educational function of the museum from the angle of collection.29 Simmons believes that a museum is an institution that evolves, driven by the people’s desire to understand the world. Edwin H Colbert outlines preservation of objects and interpretations as the two core


characteristics of a museum. Curator and activist Monica O. Montgomery believes that museums are both tangible and intangible sites for empowerment. Museums provide education by assembling seemingly random objects and arranging them in a way that makes sense. A museum is a space with an educational function which is open to the public.

In this thesis, I look specifically at art museums in China. The history of Chinese museums began in the early 20th century. Initially, museums in China served as educational tools to cultivate public awareness of nationalism and patriotism. From the establishment of the PRC to the 1990s, Chinese museums had been strictly controlled by the government. During the 1980s and the 1990s, contemporary Chinese art that question China’s socio-political conditions after the Reform and Opening-up were prohibited. However, over the past 20 years, non-profit museums established by private or overseas investments have brought artworks which were censored in China during the Cultural Revolution and post-Cultural Revolution back to the public. For example, *Stars 1979*, an exhibition curated by Wu Hung and Holly Roussell in December 2019 at Beijing’s OCAT Institute, featured a large number of historical photographs, publications, and videos to represent the first exhibition scene of the Star Group in Beijing in 1979—a show which was canceled by the police because it disturbed the public security. Non-profit art museums are encouraged by the Chinese government due to the policy of developing the creative economy in China.

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Research Questions and Chapter Descriptions

In order to explore the specialty of contemporary Chinese art and the changing roles of Chinese museums, this thesis will explore the following questions: What is contemporary art in China and how has it shaped and developed, driven by factors within China – its socio-political and economic context? How has Chinese museums shaped and developed? And what is the PRC’s role in the development of Chinese museum? To explore the uniqueness of contemporary Chinese art, this thesis begins by analyzing the changing socio-political and economic background of contemporary Chinese art. Then it concentrates on analyzing the periodization of contemporary Chinese art, and what makes it contemporary. The third part of this thesis focuses on two case studies of contemporary Chinese artists who were both active during the 1990s but have entirely different paths after the China Avant/Garde exhibition. Meanwhile, I will also discuss the tension between contemporary Chinese art and political authority, which led to difficulties exhibiting contemporary Chinese art from the 1980s onward. I aim to analyze the exhibiting conditions and potential opportunities for Chinese artists whose works do not support mainstream ideologies, and how Chinese museums have developed because of governmental policies. Two case studies will exemplify how museums have developed in recent years.
Chapter 1 Socio-Political and Economic Context of Contemporary Chinese Art

Emerging in the 1980s, contemporary Chinese art showed cultural diversity after the Reform and Opening-up Policy when China joined the increasingly intensive globalization movement because of the socio-political and economic change in the PRC. The influence of Western art materials and styles was obvious in contemporary Chinese art. For instance, the works of highly acclaimed Zhou Chunya (周春芽, 1955—) show the application of the thinking and expressing methods of traditional Chinese painting, *Yixiang* (意象), and the embrace of Western oil painting technique. However, it was already evident in the coexistence of Chinese and Western art in the arts of the Qing Dynasty (1644—1912). The main reason for this is the opening of maritime trade at that time. To understand how economic and political factors shaped contemporary Chinese art in the context of globalization, it is necessary to set it in a longer historical background when arts of other cultures impacted Chinese art.

Chapter one evaluates how political and economic factors impacted Chinese art between the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) and the Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978. Specifically, I discuss several important historical events that dramatically changed Chinese art, starting with the opening of maritime trade that introduced Western art to China during the Qing Dynasty. I then move to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, assessing how the Chinese art world’s socio-political and economic context changed during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the Reform and Opening-up Policy (1978) and discussing how Chinese art was both restricted and opened up. These events
showed the dramatic social and political changes in the PRC. Art in China, art education and the freedom of making art also were impacted by these changes.

**Chinese Art in the Qing Dynasty**

The combination of art styles and materials in Chinese art can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty during the early modern period (1600–1800). With the increasing cross-border commercial exchange in the Qing Dynasty, new art styles, such as China Trade painting, and the old calendar art emerged (fig.1-2). China Trade painting mainly depict landscape and daily life in the port cities in China, applying Western oil painting materials and linear perspective. Gradually, the old calendar art, which also developed based on Western painting techniques emerged as main commercial art in the 19th century in China.

While long-term isolationist policies kept China away from international relations, trade and cross border exchanges have existed in the country for centuries. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), a series of sea ban (Haijin, 海禁) policies were enforced in China to restrict private overseas trading and forbid foreigners from doing business within China to protect the safety of the country. Even though the imperial rulers from the Ming and Qing dynasties held strict control over cross border trades, historical records show that cross border exchanges already existed in China before Emperor Kangxi’s (1654–1722) trade-friendly policies. For instance, in the 1560s, the Portuguese took Macao as their base in East Asia, and the Spanish established a

base in the Philippines to organize the Manila galleon trade, connecting China, the Philippines, Mexico, and Spain.  

Nevertheless, due to restrictions by Emperor Jiajing (1521–1567), only a few religious paintings were introduced in China by foreign missionaries from Europe. Miche Ruggerieri (1543–1607), an Italian Jesuit priest who established the first missionaries’ base in Beijing, brought “some delicate colorful religious icons” as tributes to Emperor Wanli (1563–1620). However, new art styles did not emerge until Emperor Kangxi opened maritime trade in China. In 1684, Emperor Kangxi lifted the sea ban policy and allowed private traders to trade overseas. At the same time, four customs cities, Canton, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Lianyungang, were opened to manage seaborne trade. An increasing number of Western artworks were introduced to China as more missionaries, traders, travelers, and artists traveled there from Europe. Many Chinese artists at the time learned art making techniques from foreigners traveling to China, such as the French artist Auguste Borget (1808–1877), Portuguese artist Marciano Antonio Baptista (1702–1768), and English painter George Chinnery (1774—1852). In addition to the traveling foreigners, a massive number of Western-style paintings and copies came into China. These objects became another source of study for Chinese painters. In the 19th century, 

34 Lü Peng, 吕澎. “Xishan yu haiyang de xiangyu – yanpian zhanzheng hou xifang de yingxiang” 溪山与海洋的相遇——鸦片战争后西方的影响 [The encounter of mountain and ocean: the impact of the Western after the Opium War]. In “Meishu de gushi:cong wanqing dao jintian” 美术的故事：从晚清到今天 [The Story of Art In China: From the Late Qing Dynasty to Today], (Shanghai:Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015), n.p.
35 Zhao, 1-2.
foreigners such as Joannes Ferrer (1817–1856) even opened L'ecole des Beaux-Arts—a studio that recruited Chinese apprentices in painting and sculpture—in Xujiahui, Shanghai, in 1852. This studio later joined Xujiahui’s Catholic church and became known as the Tushawan Orphan Arts and Crafts Institute, stimulated the emergence of the old calendar art.  

As maritime trade and cultural exchange continued, Chinese artists generated new art styles, including China Trade art and the old calendar art, which successively emerged in Canton and Shanghai. China Trade art, mainly depicting Chinese people’s daily lives, developed in Canton in 1720, during the reign of Emperor Kangxi. Canton was the largest treaty port from the 14th century to the First Opium War (1839–42). Most Western traders lived in a restricted area south of Canton called the “Thirteen Factories.” China Trade paintings developed in part to suit the needs of Western traders. According to art historian Lü Peng, “the foreign traders and travelers usually brought back some drawings [to their countries] to let their friends know the landscape and cultures of different countries.” The international art market in China was active during the 18th and 19th centuries. In the late 19th century, and the main buyers were Europeans and Americans. The blooming market further stimulated the emergence of large-scale painting factories, which employed thousands of painters.

36 Zhao, 1-2.
37 Zhao, 1-2.
Early China Trade art was mainly comprised of watercolors of animals, plants, and daily life in Canton (fig. 1). Gradually, European painting’s realistic features, including the sense of space and treatment of light and shadow, found their way into China Trade art. This change is exemplified by Lam Qua (Gua Qiaochang, 关乔昌, 1801–1853), a Chinese artist who specialized in Western-style portraits. Lam Qua was the student of George Chinnery, the first British painter to settle in China, and his paintings were even capable of competing with Chinnery’s in the art market of China Trade art.

China Trade art’s emergence should not, however, be attributed to Chinese artists unilaterally reacting to the Western interest in Chinese art, as it included both Chinese painters and Western painters. In fact, China Trade paintings are classified as “paintings completed by Western and Chinese artists with Western perspectives, methods, and tastes.”41 Western artists at the time produced much Trade art, primarily painting landscapes and daily scenes in China and then reproducing these paintings and drawings in their home country. In this early era of global trade, the Chinese art market attracted both Chinese and foreign artists. Furthermore, Chinese Trade artists adapted the techniques they learned from Western artist to Chinese culture. For instance, many of Lam Qua’s paintings look similar to Western portraits in the centralized position of the figure, the decorative gesture, and somber light (figs. 3-4).42 But his later medical portraiture deviated from the indigenous anecdotal pictures or the formal rhetoric of the continental Grand Style that were prevailing in Europe during the 18th and 19th century. The

41 Zhao, 19-40.

unflinching depictions of tumors on human bodies in his medical portraiture was rare in Western portraiture (fig. 5).

Apart from differences in subject matter, Chinese artists in the middle of the 19th century also used materials representing Chinese culture, such as tetrapanax papyrifer (rice paper), rather than using canvas and Western drawing paper. China Trade paintings on rice paper made up 90% of exported paintings to Europe in 1861–1862. Centuries earlier, in the Jin Dynasty (226–420), rice paper was used in China to make pillows, toys, and herbal medicine. However, this plant was only identified and recorded in Europe in the 19th century at the Royal Botanic Garden in the United Kingdom. Thus, it is evident that Chinese artists prompted the art that they learned from different cultures by applying Chinese materials.

The China Trade painting factories are an important precedent for the state of artistic exchange in contemporary China. Today, there are painting factories in China that provide large quantities of replicas for the European art market. Dafen village, a suburb of Shenzhen in the Guangdong province, is an artist village reproducing the masterworks of Van Gogh, da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Warhol. These reproductions are sold to Europe at low prices. In Dafen village, there are more than 1,200 galleries and art stores and more than 8,000 “painting workers,” but most of these artists cannot afford the tuition of art schools. While many painting workers may dream of being an artist, working in the painting factory is an alternative choice—perhaps the only one—for them to learn drawing and painting techniques. In the process of endlessly copying the old masters, some of them find a way to develop their own style. At the end of 2018,

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the first Shenzhen Dafen International Oil Painting Biennale was held, where 264 oil painting works from more than 50 countries were exhibited, and academic exchanges between Chinese and foreign artists were held one after another. The works of 14 Dafen original painters who initially begin with copying Western paintings, such as Lu Weixuan, Mai Zushang, Shi Fei, and Xie Fei, were also selected for this biennale. In the documentary — *China’s Van Goghs*, Zhao Xiaoyong, one of the painters have been working in Dafen Village for several decades, realized that the international markets prefer the originality of art works after his travel to Netherland. It is no doubt that painting factories like factories in Dafen village were established because of intense globalization and low labor costs in Asia. Chinese painters, especially the *Caogen huajia* 草根画家, cultivate their painting skills by copying Western art, then further develop their ability of creating original works.

*Art after the Establishment of People’s Republic of China*

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the arts in China that had been impacted by Western art entered a new phase due to the Chinese government’s emphasis on boosting political and socio-economic goals. After 1949, Chinese art went through two stages: first, from 1949 to 1976, in the period defined by socialist realism, Chinese art mainly served political campaigns, such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Political

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45 *Caogen huajia*, 草根画家, translation: grassroots painters. In Chinese, *Caogen* 草根（English “grassroots”）mainly refers to people who have lower income or live in underdeveloped areas.
control over art reached a peak during the Cultural Revolution. Although Chinese art’s subjects and contents were restricted to unite social ideology, some artists who were not satisfied with the subsequent censorship secretly produced art not related to the required social ideology and applied Western art techniques and styles. After the Reform and Opening-up Policy, government control of the arts and culture started to loosen. The tension between the state and artists and still exist but become more complicated because of the emergence of the PRC’s capitalist economic system. The ideological conflict between the socialist and the capitalist market impact contemporary Chinese art.

PRC’s chairman Mao Zedong’s (1893–1976) thought about the intimate connection between art and politics led to the totalitarian constriction on Chinese art for almost thirty years. He believed that all arts and cultures belonged to specific social classes and political routes and against arts which did not serve for current political purpose.46 The Chinese Artists Association, established in 1953, was formed by the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and led by the secretariat of the Chinese Communist Party. Its mission was to organize artists to “create highly ideological and artistic works, inspire the people's enthusiasm for labor and fighting, organize artists to study the policies and directions of Communist party and government, and constantly reform and improve the thinking of artists.”47


In 1958, to accelerate the PRC’s economic transition from an agricultural economy to industrial one, the Communist Party set several unrealistic industrial production goals, such as duplicating the annual steel production within one year and substantially increasing agricultural production. In addition to the “great leap” in the agricultural economy, the Communist Party advocated a “great leap” for culture. During the Great Leap Forward, the party’s art and culture goals included eliminating illiteracy nationwide and serving the political propaganda. The ministry of culture initiated a National Cultural Administration Conference in 1957 so that “every person can read, calculate, paint, dance, perform and write.” Other unrealistic slogans spread nationally, such as “every town should have a Guo Moruo,” referring to the Chinese historian, writer, and poet, or “create 60 film scrips in one night.” The central policies by the Ministry of Culture were then transmitted to provincial bureaus of culture in different regions, which started to train artists to serve the Great Leap Forward. In some areas, such as Shanghai and Jiangsu, studios teaching untrained artists were initiated by provincial mass art centers to create unitive propaganda artworks, including murals and illustrations in the public press (fig. 6). In the Hebei province, untrained workers, farmers, and soldiers created 164 murals within three days. Although almost all of them had not received any formal artistic education, they were recognized as outstanding artists because their armature works guided by the Communist Party


represented the Great Leap Forward's core thought. It is evident that during the Great Leap Forward, the “revolutionary” ideal by the Communist party was paramount and surpassed each artist’s skills and individual identity.

The political control of Chinese art and culture reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution. Wu Hung holds that the Cultural Revolution was Mao’s “last attempt to rekindle faith in Communism” while preventing the restoration of capitalism and protecting the Communist party. In “Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?” Mao states that correct ideas are shaped by the struggle for production, class struggle, and scientific experimentation. Furthermore, they come from repeatedly being proven and checked by fact. As he claims, “often, correct knowledge can be arrived at only after many repetitions of the process leading from matter to consciousness and then back to matter, that is leading from practice to knowledge and then back to practice.” It is no doubt that Mao’s thought had a crucial impact on the socio-political campaigns surrounding class struggles. However, the reasons for the Cultural Revolution in China should not be simply attributed to Mao’s conception. There were other critical roles of the Cultural Revolution.

Critically, the cult of Mao’s personality boosted the Cultural Revolution’s influence on subversive movements. In 1966, students on the extreme left created a group called the Red Guards. Most of its members were primary school, middle school, and college students who


called themselves “Chairman Mao’s loyal soldiers.” To present their revolutionary spirit, the Red Guards destroyed symbols of the “Four Olds” of China’s past—old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Initially, these actions were put forward by the People’s Daily newspaper in June 1966. Then, they spread to the whole country. Significant temples, historical sites, cultural relics, calligraphy, and paintings were destroyed, including Confucian temples at Shandong and Buddha heads at Longmen Grottoes. Meanwhile, a large number of propaganda posters were created by Red Guards groups to express their fanatical admiration for Mao.

In 1970, Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife (1914–1991), became a prominent figure directing the Cultural Revolution. She led the Gang of Four—a political faction that controlled the Chinese Communist Party's power during the Cultural Revolution. Jiang Qing advocated the dominance of revolutionary art in Chinese society through the censorship of exhibitions, publications, and certain forms of education, while allowing the creation of artworks that embodied the true spirit of the Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, Western art and traditional Chinese paintings were banned from exhibitions and publications. Schools and libraries were shut down. Students and intellectuals were assigned to country farms as laborers to be reeducated. In order

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52 Four Olds, “破四旧,” https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A0%B4%E5%9B%9B%E6%97%A7(accessed October 30, 2020). “Four Olds” mainly refer to feudatorial and bourgeoisie ideology and related customs that shaped before the proletarian took over the government of China.

53 The other members of this faction include Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen.

54 Wu 19-20.

55 Also known as “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement” in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
to achieve the unity of revolutionary art that Jiang Qing demanded, most artists were criticized, and only a few of them, namely those who were politically aligned, were allowed to make art. Hence, “90% of famous artists were criticized, jailed and even physically abused,” whereas “painters with approved family background and political credentials were enlisted by the Cultural Revolutionary Committee in art schools to create [new-style revolutionary art].”

Jiang Qing’s cultural dictatorship almost entirely manipulated Chinese art during this restrictive period. She decided what constituted good art based on what she personally liked and disliked. In the Summary of the Forum on the Work in Literature and Art in the Armed Forces, Lin Biao, Mao’s designated successor after 1966, endorsed Jiang Qing’s supreme power over Chinese literature and art: “She is very sharp politically on questions of literature and art, and she really knows art. She has many opinions, and they are very valuable… From now on, the army’s documents concerning literature and art should be sent to her.”

“New revolutionary art” used highly-saturated red, yellow, and green to represent the Communist party, visually identifying the artists’ political correctness. The main subjects of the new revolutionary art demanded by Jiang Qing were Mao and proletarian heroes, whose images were found in “model operas,” declaring an end to the era controlled by the bourgeoisie had gone

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56 Wu, 19-20.

57 Lin Biao (1907–1971) and Jiang Qing were later condemned as “counterrevolutionary forces” after the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was filled with struggles between different political forces within the Communist Party. However, considering the limited scope of this paper, the changing political circumstances in China will not be further discussed.
These models of new revolutionary art were found in posters, which codified the rules for all visual art branches and other media, including film and broadcasting.

Nonetheless, although Jiang Qing was a dominant figure, art in this period was also driven by other powerful characters in China’s changing political circumstances. Zhou Enlai (1898–1976), the first premier of the PRC, deradicalized the Cultural Revolution by bringing back the traditional artworks that were censored during the early period of the Revolution. Meanwhile, art schools started readmitting students in 1974, and a few faculty and students started to create apolitical art, even though the spirit of the Revolution was still an essential part of arts education.

After Mao’s death in 1976, the counter-revolutionary forces, including the Gang of Four and the faction led by Lin Biao, were disintegrated. Deng Xiaoping launched the 1978 Reform and Opening-up Policy, which introduced capitalism and globalization in China by encouraging private enterprises and allowing foreign investment. Before Deng’s reform, state ownership and central planning controlled the Chinese economy.

In 1976, Deng Xiaoping prompted the Chinese people to “seek truth from facts,” which stressed the importance of breaking down the existing doctrine shaped by the Gang of Four. Artists started to rethink the strictures of the Cultural Revolution, and freely created art based on their responses. Scar art, practiced by artists like Yin Guoliang (尹国良), Bai Jing Zhou (白敬

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58. Wu, 21.
60. Wu, 21-23.
周), Wen Lipeng (闻立鹏), represented the artists’ indignation and criticism of the regime. Scar art is a new art style emerged after the Cultural Revolution. Some literary and artistic works began to change from the original idealism and heroism to realism, from depicting the performance of heroes to the struggles of ordinary people. For instance, Feng—a comic made by Chen Yiming, Liu Yulian, and Li Bin—depicted the tragedy of a couple who killed each other because of their different political positions during the Cultural Revolution. This comic indicates that the Red Guard killed the real truth because of their irrational fanaticism for revolution. In addition to scar art, artists like Chen Danqing, and Zhou Chunya started to find peace in living and depicting landscapes in remote rural areas. Unlike the artists of scar art who immersed themselves in the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, these landscape artists tried to find peace and truth in nature.

From the Qing Dynasty to the present, it is obvious that Chinese art has absorbed Western art styles and techniques. At the same time, Chinese culture and the changing political and cultural background have given birth to the constant changes in Chinese art. Chinese contemporary art is produced in the cultural and social transformation from the Cultural Revolution to Reform and Opening-up Policy. Since the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution, China has gone from an isolated and impoverished country to a leading power engaging in global cultural exchanges. In the meanwhile, contemporary Chinese art has evolved from an underground movement into one of the biggest art markets in the world, and contemporary Chinese artists have become successful worldwide. Chapter 2 will analyze

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61 These two artists became prestigious in Chinese contemporary art market later.
different opinions on the contemporaneity of Chinese contemporary art in order to understand what constitutes contemporary art from China.
Chapter 2 Questions on Contemporaneity in Chinese Art

Art 21, a nonprofit organization which documents contemporary artists and their works to inspire a more creative world, defines contemporary art as the work of artists who are living in the twenty-first century, and argues that it “is distinguished by the very lack of a uniform organizing principle, ideology or -ism. In a globally influenced, culturally diverse, and technologically advancing world, contemporary artists give voice to the varied and changing cultural landscape of identities, values, and beliefs.” Conversely, Terry Smith puts forward that “contemporary art is most—why not all?—of the art that is being made now.” According to Smith’s analysis on the theoretical development of the conception of “modern” and “contemporary” indicates a new form replacing the “eternal and immutable” modernity when the definitions of “modern” are too fragile to embrace the accelerating changing world and its “internal tensions” in the 1960s and the 1970s. One essential quality of contemporaneousness is its immediacy. Based on the circumstance that visual art is borne of the tension between locality and the impact of global forces, Smith holds that “contemporary” is born in “modern” but is constantly prioritizing the present in current art and theoretical discourse. While he points to the complexity of “contemporaneity,” in the discourse of contemporary Chinese art the meaning of contemporaneity will change based on its specific socio-political context.

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In terms of the contemporaneity of contemporary Chinese art, most Chinese scholars who hold a prominent position in art academies emphasize that contemporary art should serve or present the new society of the post-Cultural Revolution era. Chen Chiyu, a professor at the Academy of Arts and Design of Tsinghua University, addresses contemporary art moving from Mao Zedong’s theory of art as “art for the people” to the idea of the “people-centricity of art.” Chen holds that the “contemporaneity of art means the presentation of important historical events, political subjects, and the aesthetics that are in accordance with the time spirit.” Similarly, Wang Duanting, art critic and curator who teaches at China National Academy of Arts, believes that it is the spirit of times beyond individuality that decides the content and method of making art; these might include the “the spirit of China” guided by Marxism and Mao Zedong’s thoughts, the theories of Deng Xiaoping, the crucial thought of the Three Represents, the scientific outlook on development, and Xi Jinping’s thoughts on socialisms. In this way, contemporary art is distinct from art from the previous socialist realism period. Wang Duanting further asserts that the values in the era of “industrialization, urbanization, and globalization” define contemporary Chinese art. Teaching at Peking University, Shi Shengxun agrees that contemporary Chinese art should follow the steps of socio-political change. Shi argues that arts which are isolated from politics and society and only pursue changes in aesthetic value should be

65 Chen Chiyu 陈池瑜, “Yishu de dazhong xing yu dangdai xing” 艺术的大众性与当代性 [The Contemporaneity and the People-centricity of Art], (Hubei: Social Science) 1998, 13-14.

66 Chen, 13-14.

“corrected”. These works should instead present essential historical events, political subjects, and aesthetic values which correspond with the contemporary spirit.68

The lively debates between scholars and art historians in turn indicate the complexity within the discourse of contemporaneity in contemporary Chinese art. Shi argues that Wang Duanting’s thoughts about contemporary Chinese art emphasize the perspective of globalization.69 However, Wang only identifies the social changes that have impacted contemporary artists within China because of globalization rather than considering how the artworks are considered in Western discourses. Meanwhile, dissident Chinese artists as an essential component of contemporary Chinese art are absent in Wang’s discussion. In his article “What is Contemporary Chinese Art?” Wang distinguishes Chinese art from Western discourse to strengthen national cultural confidence. These prominent scholars seem to be followers of Mao, as they emphasize the strong affinity between art and politics. They unilaterally focus on what has happened in China since the Reform and Opening-up policy, such as urbanization, and omit to closely observe how contemporary Chinese artists inside and outside of China have responded to China's changes in the past decades. For instance, artist Zhang Dali questions the dramatic changes and spatial politics of Chinese urbanization by revealing the debris of historical buildings that were being torn down for the construction of new buildings. Ai Weiwei, a widely recognized dissident artist, questions the ideological control of the Chinese government.

Nevertheless, the mainstream opinion in China on contemporary Chinese art is based in the socio-political condition in China and the control of the Chinese government. In addition to

68 Shi Shengxun, 时胜勋. The Discourse Structure and Value Deposit of “Contemporaneity” in Contemporary Chinese Art, 12.

69 Shi, 11-16.
Mao’s influence on Chinese art, Chinese artists today still undertake the task of culturally strengthening and uniting the People’s Republic of China. In 2014, President Xi Jinping called on Chinese artists to not to be “slaves” of the market or to “lose themselves in the tide of the market economy or go astray while answering the question of whom to serve.” Mao’s thought “became a set of guidelines that continue to resonate, if somewhat faintly, within the vast echo chamber that is official Chinese thought today.” To some degree, art works are responsible for utilizing art to achieve national unity. Perhaps in the future the central institutions' criteria for what counts as good art within China will surpass political goals and emphasize individual identity and creativity.

Unlike these art historians and critics, Chen Danqing, the Chinese American artist and art critic who had been living in the United States since 1982 as a citizen, relocated back to the PRC in 2000. Since he quit his job at Tsinghua University in 2014, he has dissented from other Chinese scholars on contemporary Chinese art: “During the Cultural Revolution, all [Chinese] artists worried about their artworks are not ‘revolutionary’; today, I think [contemporary Chinese artists] only worry that their tricks are not ‘contemporary.’” Specifically, he critically argued that Chinese art today is a consequence of learning Western art due to a lack of cultural confidence.


Scholars outside of China have analyzed contemporary Chinese art in a larger context than the dichotomic coexistence of the socialist social system and capitalist economy in China. Terry Smith claims that contemporary art is the art of “transnational transnationality,” which argues against the idea that art is created under nationalist regimes but prevalent in the international arena.\textsuperscript{73} For Wu Hung, in the domestic sphere contemporary Chinese art conveys a strong sense of “avant-gardism” and is eager to challenge established art institutions, systems, and forms.\textsuperscript{74} Wu’s work on the contemporaneity of Chinese art echoes Smith’s “immediacy, presentences, instantaneity,” but asserts that the contemporaneity of Chinese art in the domestic sphere fails to explain contemporary Chinese art’s global presence. He thinks the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and contemporary China politics and society has encourage a history “interprets the art in light of domestic social and political movements” but “fail to document or explain the global presence of contemporary Chinese art and its growing contribution to a bourgeoning international contemporary art”.\textsuperscript{75} In China, contemporary art inherits Mao’s thought that art should serve for the people and politics. At the same time, contemporary Chinese artists are rethinking and critiquing the doctrine in Chinese art and the changing social-political and cultural condition in China. Just as what Wu says, “We cannot simply expand the domestic context of contemporary Chinese art into a global one, because different forces and present different problems govern these two spheres.”\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{73} Smith, \textit{Art to Come}, 133.
\textsuperscript{74} Wu Hung, 296
\textsuperscript{75} Wu Hung, 298.
\textsuperscript{76} Wu Hung, 298.
Contemporary Chinese Art’s Periodization: Analyze of Avant-garde art in China

Following the diverse opinions on contemporary art and contemporaneity, the periodization of contemporary Chinese art by art historians and critics is also varied. Some Chinese scholars believe that China’s current economic reform has been a critical time for contemporary Chinese art. For Wang, contemporary Chinese art begins in 1978 due to the changes in socio-political and economic conditions, which emerged after Deng’s 1978 policy, such as urbanization, industrialization, and globalization. Even though Wang argues that chronology of art history does not necessarily correspond to the division of history, his opinion on the birth of contemporary Chinese art is still based in the country’s socio-political changes rather than in changes in Chinese artmaking.

Similarly, Chinese art historian Lü Peng refuses to offer a concrete time division of contemporary Chinese art. After writing three books—Modern Art History in China 1979–1989, Contemporary Chinese Art History 1990–1999, and Chinese Art History: 1990–1999—he argues that contemporary history is about today’s art history:

The term contemporary’ began to be commonly used in the late 1990s, the concept of ‘contemporary history’ was given a special meaning. However, in my opinion, the

77 Wang Duangting 王端廷, “Shenme shi zhongguo dangdai yishu”.

problem can be simplified. Contemporary history is undoubtedly related to today and to
the time connotation of ‘contemporary.’ Simply put, it is today's history.\textsuperscript{79}

However, in his book \textit{China Contemporary Art History}, which was the textbook for higher art
education in China, contemporary art is discussed chronologically starting in 1949.\textsuperscript{80}

Many scholars have purported that avant-gardism is one essential nature of contemporary
Chinese art. Art historian Paul Gladston holds that the term “contemporary art” in China
primarily refers to experimental art, avant-garde art, and any other museum-based art produced
as cultural liberalization after the Reform and Opening-up policies. He separates Chinese art
between 1976–1989 as “modern (contemporary) art”, and from 1990 to present as contemporary
art.\textsuperscript{81} Avant-garde groups were an enormously influential part of contemporary Chinese art from
1979 to 1989, which involved the appropriation of attitudes and techniques associated with
Western modernism and post-modernism due to the Reform and Opening-up policies.

However, Chinese avant-garde is not a simple transplantation of Western cultural
thoughts and practices. It is a reaffirmation of Chinese cultural identity as a manifestation of
China’s post-Maoism identity.\textsuperscript{82} “Avant-garde” is a historical term in Western art and refers to


\textsuperscript{80} Lü Peng, \textit{Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi}, 中国当代美术史[China Contemporary Art History], (Zhejiang: China Academy of Art, 2013), 7.


the rise of avant-gardism in Europe and the United States in the late 19th century to the early 20th century. The term “Avant-garde” develops from French, literally meaning “advanced guard.” It was used in English from a literal, military sense. In the first half of the 19th century, French thinker Henri de Saint-Simon advocated that artists would serve as the avant-garde by utilizing the power of art to lead a new society. Then, the meaning expanded to the artistic scene. Avant-garde is commonly employed to emphasize new and very modern ideas and methods. American artist and critic Richard Kostelanetz holds that avant-garde works are aesthetic innovations and initial unacceptability, and that avant-garde artists make genuine discoveries regarding the possibilities of art. In Europe, avant-garde artists began questioned the elements of art from the exterior and interior, driven by the encounter of rethinking one’s being and the organization of the world in the first half of the 19th century. The representative of Western avant-garde could be traced back to the artistic movement Dada. Initially, Dada started in Zurich, then gradually spread to Berlin, New York, Paris, and other cities.

In the discourse of Chinese art history, Gao Minglu uses the term “apartment art” to refer to Chinese underground, experimental, and avant-garde art from the 1970s to the 1990s. He


initially used apartment art to describe artists in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou who made art in private spaces in the 1990s, only to later discover that apartment art was already being made during the Cultural Revolution, when, as early as the 1970s, artists worked together and discussed arts, social-political and cultural issues. Wu Hung applies the term "experimental art" to refer to the unconventional artworks that emerged after the Cultural Revolution. What he describes as the first period of experimental art exhibitions, represented by the shows of the Star Art group in 1979 and 1980, in fact marked the beginning of public exhibitions. He emphasized the “experimental” nature of exhibitions since 1979. Wu argues that Western terms such as "unofficial art" and "avant-garde" are misleading. The former exaggerates the political orientation, and the latter exaggerates the artistic radicalism. Instead, he contends that experimental art is not associated with any particular style, subject matter, or political orientation.

However, Chinese avant-garde art still shows features of political radicality due to its particular socio-political context. Chinese avant-garde art emerged in the interval between the Cultural Revolution and the Reform and Opening-up policy. Following the death of Mao in 1976, China entered a period of political uncertainty. When the power of the Gang of Four was removed one month after Mao’s death, the public suddenly experienced a short-term liberalization; a series of public protests actively criticized the political system of PRC, including


the Chinese Democracy Movement, the first Beijing Spring (1977—1979), the Democracy Wall Movement (1978—1979). The Chinese Democracy Movement was a political group whose manifesto—Fifth Modernization, written by leader Wei Jingsheng, radically criticized the old political system, which remained unchanged, and stated that Communism in China and Deng’s reform were political lies.\(^9\) Wei was arrested for “counter-revolutionary” activities and imprisoned from 1979 to 1993.\(^9\) Similarly, the Democracy Wall in Beijing, which was a wall full of texts, photos and posters, was destroyed in 1979. However, this is not to say that the Chinese Communist Party repeated the same mistake of the Cultural Revolution, suppressing the masses without rationality. What activists like Wei Jingsheng had done was to propose overturning the government of Chinese Communist Party rather than achieving the liberalization of the masses by taking advantage of the mistakes during Cultural Revolution:

> After the arrest of the Gang of Four, the people eagerly hoped that Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping, the possible “restorer of capitalism,” would rise up again like a magnificent banner.…. But alas, the old political system so despised by the people remains unchanged… But now there are people warning us that Marxist–Leninist–Mao Zedong Thought is the foundation of all things, even speech, that Chairman Mao was the “great savior” of the people, and that the phrase “without the Communist Party, there would be no new


China.” … If anyone denies this point, the official notices make it clear that they’ll come to no good end.\textsuperscript{92}

The Democracy Movement questioned the authority of the Communist Party. Oppressed by Cultural Revolution for decades, Chinese artists joined forced to pursue an art form responding to the aftermath Mao’s death. Most avant-garde Chinese artworks criticized the political system and rethought what constituted true art. The Star Art Group was a group of avant-garde artists that used banned Western art styles to challenge the political authority of the Chinese government. Member Wang Keping’s wood sculpture 

\textit{Silence} (fig.8) criticized the disastrous damage done by the Gang of Four. The artist was inspired by a branch of a tree, which had a scar, and felt that the scar was just like a mouth plugged by wood. The grid on the left eye indicates people’s blindness during the Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{93} In 1979, police interfered and canceled the first Star Group exhibition which was held outside of Beijing’s National Art Gallery because “a big crowd gathered.”\textsuperscript{94} The artists responded to the police censorship by posting their protest on the Democracy Wall.\textsuperscript{95} It is clear that avant-garde artists during the political chaos in China after Mao’s death were involved in the politically-related social movements that are considered radical.

Meanwhile, although the outdoor exhibitions were censored in the 1980s and 1990s, the government’s control on art making subverted Mao’s cult and encouraged artists to praise the

\textsuperscript{92} Jingsheng Wei, \textit{The Fifth Modernization: Democracy}, English original.


\textsuperscript{94} Wu and Farr, 12.

\textsuperscript{95} Gladston, 94.

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masses and to emancipate thought by encouraging literary and artistic democracy. The Chinese Art Association which guided the national socialist realist art still followed the directives from the Communist Party. But, different from its functions during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Art Association did not initiate any specific political art project.\(^{96}\) Paul Gladston argues that the seemingly loose controls on Chinese art are in reality wide restrictions on Chinese art.

The political control on Chinese art has not loosened but has converted to a neoliberal approach. This allowed artists to further break down the hierarchy shaped during the Cultural Revolution to stimulate future economic development in the PRC. Although Deng’s policy encouraged the liberalization of Chinese art, the censorship and control on art did not stop. Radical art exhibitions were forbidden. In the middle of the 1980s, a nationwide art movement, 85 Art New Wave, emerged after Robert Rauschenberg’s exhibition in Beijing. In 1986, the Xiamen Dada group’s exhibition in the Fujian Provincial Art Museum was shut down two hours after its opening. In 1989, the China Avant-Garde Exhibition was held at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. It was shut down because Xiao Lu opened fire, shooting her installation in the show.

Considering the radical nature of Chinese avant-garde art, contemporary Chinese art can be dated earlier than the Reform and Opening-up policy. Under the ultra-left control on Chinese art during the Cultural Revolution, art groups such as No Name learned Western art secretly.\(^{97}\) Given that Western books were forbidden, they were considerably limited as learning material. Books that circulated among the members were the Russian National Museum’s catalogs and a

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\(^{96}\) Gladston, 88-89.

\(^{97}\) Most of the members of the No Name group were untrained artists who were based in Beijing and interested in visual art and were recruited to realize Mao’s portrait.
version of *Modern Art of the World* published in Japan.98 The No Name group's artists primarily
drew and painted scenes from real life, such as landscapes at Diaoyutai, Xiangshan, Ming
Tombs, Badaling, and Shichahai, but its members were apparently learning Western art materials
and technologies, such as using oil painting. Importantly, their actions against the dogmas of art,
presenting their contemporary reflection and reaction to their time, pondered and criticized the
absurdity of revolutionary art led by Jiang Qing. As Wang Aihe, the member of the No Name
group, says, “in our time, ‘Socialist Realism’ became a dogma of crude stylistic dictates
dominating all cultural domains … This was literally a time when, as Bertolt [Brecht] declared,
‘to speak of trees’ is almost a crime. In such a time, we painted trees.”99 According to Wu Hung,
the No Name group was initiated in 1973, but the group’s members were active before then. Two
core members of No Name group, Zhao Wenliang and Yang Yupeng, claimed to make art for
art’s sake. They established a private art studio in the 1950s, which further impacted other
members of the group.

In conclusion, two contradictory elements inherent to contemporary Chinese art can be
identified—the tension between government control and artists pursue of liberty, the ideology
shaped by nationalists versus critics of the political system. Based on the radical political nature
of Chinese avant-garde art, the emergence of contemporary Chinese art could be traced back to
the 1960s, or even earlier, rather than suddenly appearing after the Cultural Revolution.

2011), 24

99 Wu Hung, 26
Chapter 3 Different Paths in Contemporary Chinese Art: The Cases of Xu Bing and Xiao Lu

When Deng Xiaoping applied his Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978, China experienced a radical change: the Chinese economy shifted from a socialist to a capitalist model, and China’s rapid economic growth suddenly replaced Mao’s culture with the culture changed based upon the need of consumers. Gradually, communist propaganda was replaced with capitalist advertisements, shifting the Chinese mentality from a collective ambition to work hard for national prosperity to individual competition for the fruits of capitalism. With the Reform and Opening-up policy, Western ideologies flowed into China alongside Western financial investments. These changes, including how Chinese culture has been impacted by Western and capitalist culture and how society in China has shifted, have been obvious to contemporary Chinese artists.

To explore the different paths taken by Chinese artists in these dramatic shifts, this chapter will discuss two contemporary Chinese artists, Xu Bing (徐冰, 1955—) and Xiao Lu (肖鲁, 1962—), both of whom have been active from the post-Mao era to the present. Xu Bing grew to prominence globally because of his piece *Book from the Sky*, which, like most of his artworks, reflected how Chinese culture has been impacted by the Western culture after Deng’s reform. While Xu Bing remains attractive globally, well-known in China, and active in Chinese art academies, Xiao Lu’s influence seems to have faded after the China Avant-Garde Exhibition in 1989. Nevertheless, Xiao Lu’s work exemplifies the rising feminist consciousness in China in recent decades.
Ambiguous Chinese Artist Xu Bing: Make Art for the People

Xu Bing was born in Chongqing, China, in 1955, and moved to Beijing in 1957 with his parents. His father was the head of Peking University’s history department, and his mother was a researcher in the Department of Library Science. During the Cultural Revolution, Xu’s family was caught in turmoil, and he was sent to the countryside because of Mao’s re-education program. In 1976, Xu returned to Beijing after the collapse of the Cultural Revolution, earning his bachelor’s degree from the printmaking department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1981, and his MFA in 1987. He was an active figure during the early stage of Chinese contemporary art in 1980s and 1990s. In 1989, he participated in the China Avant-Garde Exhibition. A year later Xu became an honorary fellow at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and began to exhibit internationally and gain world-wide prominence. He immigrated to the United States in 1990, then moved back to China in 2007. From 2008 to 2014, Xu Bing served as the vice president of Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. He currently lives and works in Beijing and New York. Having experienced the political ups and downs in the PRC from the 1960s to 1990s, and moving back and forth between China and the United States, Xu Bing has been a witness to the PRC’s economic and socio-political changes since the 1950s; his artworks reflect his observations and critiques of the changes in the PRC.


Xu Bing became prominent internationally because of his work *Book from the Sky* (1987-1991), an installation of four hand-printed books containing four thousand invented glyphs and pseudo characters (fig. 9). All the characters look like Chinese script, but none of them can be found in Chinese dictionaries. *Book from the Sky* was first exhibited at the China Art Gallery in Beijing [in what year?]. Soon, Xu received countless scholarly reviews and began to exhibit globally. *Book from the Sky* seems to show the artist’s worship of Chinese characters and culture, but when audiences “actually try to read it, they find these are all fake characters, devoid of meaning. At this point their world turns upside down.” Xu mentioned that these invented glyphs make Chinese intellectuals feel uncomfortable because they are unable to read any meanings, and the unreadable characters might stimulate them to rethink the existing knowledge system. On the Chinese language version of Xu Bing’s website, *Zhishi tixi* (knowledge system) is the original text introducing his intention in *Book from the Sky*. In Chinese, *Zhishi tixi* refers to one person’s knowledge and how they acquire this knowledge, whether from individual study or study in institutions. *Book from the Sky* might implicitly question the educational system of the PRC. The name of the artwork itself conveys an attitude of interrogation—in Chinese, “The Book from the Sky” is a metaphor that refers, colloquially, to illegible writing or gibberish. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Chinese education system experienced great changes. The revolutionary education model advocated by Jiang Qing forbade

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104 Simplified Chinese: 天书 (Tianshu)
any knowledge which was not related to socialist realism, and what was forbidden during Mao’s era started to be encouraged during Deng’s reform. This shift is evident in Wang Guangyi’s pop art, in which symbols of consumerism, such as logos of brands including Coca Cola, Chanel, Gucci, and Nike, were juxtaposed with the propaganda images of Mao’s era (fig. 10).

Recent interpretations of Xu Bing’s work by Chinese scholars have pointed out his creativity in developing Chinese calligraphy. Wang Zhiwei (王志炜) analyzed *Book from the Sky* from the angle of semiotics, pointing out that the exact meaning of real Chinese characters is not important anymore; what is important in Xu’s work is how the audience would rethink the current context of language.105 According to Li Xiaowei (李晓伟), Xu Bing's work breaks through the expressive limitations of traditional Chinese calligraphy by deconstructing and reconstructing the writing to form a new artistic image. As a new type of conceptual expression, the formal use of Chinese characters realizes the vision of localization in Chinese conceptual art. In *Book from the Sky*, Xu abandons the interpretation of words and instead amplifies the pure aesthetic and emotional experiences of Chinese viewers.106 When talking about how culture impact artists, Xu Bing says that “every artist carries their own cultural background with them. I believe our experiences remain in our bodies, and naturally resurface just when we need


them.” The inspiration of Xu Bing originates from the culture he is familiar with and his personal experiences; art making becomes a process of expressing his thoughts by using what is inherent inside him.

Xu’s works could also be considered an interrogation of authority in the PRC. The evolution of Chinese characters in China is often related to the change of dynasties and regimes. To some degree, language is a symbol representing the power of governance in the country. In *Book from the Sky*, the deconstruction of Chinese characters questions the power which has driven changes in language, the daily communicative tool. Further, this power, which originates from the top rather than from the will of the masses, has profoundly changed Chinese art.

Art historians and art critics outside of China have different interpretations of Xu Bing’s works. Art historian Frank Maet considers Xu Bing an “artist-anthropologist who express and

107 Xu Bing in “Beijing”.

108 For example, during the Qin Dynasty, Qin Shihuang (秦始皇，259-210 BC) developed a unified typeface, Xiaozhuan (小篆), based on the original use of Dazhuan (大篆) in the Qin Dynasty (221—207 BC). Xiaozhuan eliminated six different typefaces during the Spring and Autumn and the War State period (770-221 BC), and created a unified form of writing. In the Han Dynasty, with the change of Chinese literati’s aesthetic taste, Lishu (隶书) gradually replaced Xiaozhuan of the Qin Dynasty. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was also a movement in China aimed at replacing the classical Chinese with Bai Hua Wen (白话文, written vernacular Chinese). Hu Shi (胡适, 1891—1962) published "Literary Improvement Review" in 1917, and the Beiyang government (1912-1928) issued a decree in 1920 requiring textbooks in the Republic of China primary schools to be changed to Bai Hua Wen in that year. The Beiyang government (simplified Chinese “北洋政府”), also known as the Republic of China, replaced the Qing Dynasty in 1912.
research how cultural imagination is affected by globalization.”\textsuperscript{109} According to Maet, cultural imagination is the ways cultural objects portray the specificity of that culture. Maet also stressed the specificity background of Xu Bing and other well-known and internationally respected Asian artists — Takashi Murakami and Shahzia Sikandar. All of them have experience living and working in foreign countries. When discussing \textit{New English Calligraphy} by Xu, Bing Maet holds that Western viewers do not practice the original or functional Chinese Alphabet. Thus they are initiated into a formalistic transformation rather than Chinese culture.

Xu Bing’s other artworks from the 1990s—\textit{A Case Study of Transference} (1993—1994), \textit{Cultural Animal} (1994), and \textit{Wu Street} (1993)—also showed his critique of socio-political change in China. \textit{A Case Study of Transference} (figs.11-12) is a performance with two living pigs, one printed with fake English words, the other printed with fake Chinese characters. According to the artist:

\begin{quote}
these two creatures, devoid of human consciousness, yet carrying on their bodies the marks of human civilization, engage in the most primal form of 'social intercourse.' The absolute directness of this undertaking produces a result that is both unthinkable and worth thinking about. In watching the behavior of the two pigs, we are led to reflect on
\end{quote}

human behavior.\textsuperscript{110}

Although the exact meanings of these two different (fake) languages were eliminated in this artwork, it is no doubt that the living pigs in this performance represented two different cultures. Xu here comments on how Chinese culture encounters the Western culture flowing into China. \textit{Cultural Animal} is an extension of \textit{A Case Study of Transference}, similarly, taking the form of a performance installation with live animals.\textsuperscript{111} In this work, a life-sized mannequin printed with false Chinese characters kneels on the ground, and a live male pig printed with false English words makes aggressive sexual contact with the mannequin (fig.13). Compared with \textit{A Case Study of Transference}, the replacement of living pig by the immobile mannequin—signaling a lack of consciousness alongside the animal's primal behavior—in \textit{Cultural Animal} seems to critique the unequal position of Chinese culture with its Western counterpart.

\textit{Wu Street} is a work by Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei (1957—). This work consists of four abstract paintings that the artists found in the trash on a New York City Street. Xu paired the salvaged paintings with a review of American abstract artist Jonathan Lasker, intentionally mistranslated into Chinese, in order to pose questions on the arbitrary nature of critical language and the basis of evaluating contemporary art (fig.14).\textsuperscript{112} In Chinese, “Wu” has various meanings,


including both “misunderstanding” and “enlightenment”. The mistranslation of Lasker makes the interpretation of these abstract paintings more complicated.

Although Ai Weiwei is a collaborator on *Wu Street*, he is very controversial in the PRC. As an artist who always criticizes the Chinese government's authority and is accused of tax evasion, he is not as reputable as Xu Bing in China. Ai Weiwei's installation *Sunflower Seeds*, comprised of 150 tons of ceramic sunflowers seed made by 1600 workers at Jingdezhen in China, won the 2010 Chinese Contemporary Art Golden Palm and 2010 Chinese Contemporary art Golden Razzies at Studio-X in Beijing (fig. 15). These awards' goal was to evaluate contemporary art objectively because of the lack of rigorous evaluation standards. While Ai Weiwei’s work may be recognized aesthetically in China, he is still seen as a dissident because of his radical critiques of Chinese authority.

Xu Bing, on the other hand, advocated making art for the people, which echoes Mao’s thoughts on the role of art. In 1999, Xu created *Art for the People*, a monumental banner decorated with his invented “New English Calligraphy” as part of the Museum of Modern Art’s Project Series (fig. 16). “Art for the People” is a Maoist slogan, which evolved as Xi Jinping’s

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The awards adapt real name voting and comments, and the awards process announced through the media. After the critics put forward two nominations for the awards through their own judgments, through meetings and discussions, they selected the best and worst ten works from the Chinese works that occurred in a year.

thought about who to serve when making art. Despite the critical nature of his work, he has upheld communist ideals and nationalist thought, which allows him to be successful within and outside of China.

**Xiao Lu — A Female Artist Who Was Forgotten for Ten Years**

Born in Hangzhou province in China in 1962, Xiao Lu graduated from the oil painting department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Fine Arts) in 1988. Similar to Xu Bing, Xiao Lu lived in Sydney from 1989 to 1997 and became an Australian citizen, but currently lives and works in Beijing.\(^\text{115}\) However, unlike Xu Bing, who quickly built his reputation in the international art circuit, Xiao Lu primarily exhibited her work in Sydney during the 1990s.

Xiao Lu initially rose to fame because of her installation *Dialogue* in the 1989 China/Avant-Garde Exhibition. *Dialogue* features two telephone booths made of aluminum alloy, in which a man and a woman appear to be making a phone call. In between the booths, and in front of a mirrored surface, a phone connecting the two calls is hanging off the hook, signaling that the conversation cannot be completed (fig. 17). Xiao Lu said of the work:

> The original idea of the work stems from personal emotional confusion. The loss of emotional life makes me fall into a self-contradictory state. Just like the work shows, a man and woman are talking on the phone, but the hanging phone in the middle is clearly

telling people that the dialogue is not possible. This complex and contradictory mental state is the original idea of the work.  

However, the sensational response to her work was because Xiao Lu fired two gunshots at her reflection in her installation on the opening day of the exhibition, which caused the immediate closure of the exhibition and her subsequent imprisonment. Although Xiao Lu’s gesture seems apolitical, the installation was heavily politicized by art critics as a precursor to the Tiananmen Square Incident, the student protests that happened four months later.

The Tiananmen Square Incident was triggered by the death of Hu Yaobang, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, which stimulated student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Class disruptions happened across universities, accompanied by anti-government protests targeting Deng Xiaoping, CCP Chairman Zhao Ziyang, and Premier Li Peng. Students were dissatisfied with the inflation and official corruption caused by the relative economic liberalism that arose after the Reform and Opening-up policies. Later, the government issued a crackdown on the protests, sending the military to occupy Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

As the protests continued, Xiao Lu’s Dialogue became heavily politicized and was referred to as “the first gunshot of Tiananmen.” According to scholar Gao Minglu, the drama of the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition happened because Chinese avant-garde artists’ individuality had been oppressed for a long time due to the Cultural Revolution, continuing well into the 1980s. The liberty of making art in the late 1980s caused their strong desire for self-expression,

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they also hope to compete with other artists and be stimulated by these challenges.\textsuperscript{118} Although artists’ performative gestures during the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition were related to oppression during the Cultural Revolution, this cannot prove that artists intended to be a part of the Tiananmen protests.

An artist who tended to work alone, Xiao Lu did not intend to participate in the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition. Based on Monica Merlin’s interview with Xiao Lu, she did not even know the curators of the exhibition. Zhang Jian, editor of the magazine \textit{New Arts}, sent the piece \textit{Dialogue} on behalf of Xiao Lu, who had no experience with performance art and installation.\textsuperscript{119} Xiao Lu’s works were primarily oil paintings, but she made this piece because her teacher told her to try new media, using photographs instead of oil painting. When asked to talk about her real intention behind the gunshot, Xiao Lu says that she still cannot explain why she shot her piece, suggesting that she acted on impulse. She also expresses regret over her actions at the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition. She says that she shot the installation because of her lack of knowledge of the laws and the consequences of shooting the installation.

Despite Xiao Lu’s downplaying of her action/performance, Gao Minglu believes \textit{Dialogue} can be called the most influential installation and performance work in the history of contemporary Chinese art, as well as one of the most iconic works of contemporary Chinese art. Gao believes that Xiao Lu's impulse to shoot a gun stems from her skepticism about modernity,


using gun violence to destroy modern technology and its material sensibility—specifically, the smooth surface of the phone booth and the perfect form of aluminum alloy. The reason Xiao Lu’s Dialogue was politicalized is perhaps because of the sociopolitical condition in which the work was made. Su Xianting (粟宪庭), one of the curators of the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition, believes that if Xiao opened fire in Hangzhou rather than Beijing, Dialogue could be attributed solely to Xiao’s personal emotions; because it happened in Beijing, everything changed.  

The controversy over Xiao Lu’s art also includes the issue of ownership. In 1989, Su Xianting recorded that the artists making Dialogue were Xiao Lu and Tang Song, her lover. In the years following the exhibition, Tang Song is primarily cited as the creator of this installation. Although Xiao Lu’s intention in creating this piece may not have been directly related to the political circumstances in China, the ambiguous ownership of the work reflected the unequal status of males and females in China during that time.

In 2018, the Tate Modern Art Gallery in London exhibited Xiao Lu's Dialogue (1989) and Franco-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle’s Tirs (1961-1963) in the same hall as part of the Performer and Participant display from 2018 to 2019. In Tirs, Niki de Saint Phalle buried paint bags and small objects under canvas, and then shot the canvas and let the paint splash wantonly, creating a unique form of “shooting art.” In fact, the shooting works of Xiao Lu and Niki de Saint Phalle share the same theme: both female artists express their anger over their experiences of sexual assault by shooting a gun. At the age of eleven, Nicky was sexually assaulted by her drunken father; Xiao Lu had been sexually assaulted as a young girl and suffered for a long time.

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120 Lan Qingwei, Three Dialogues Related to China Avant-garde Exhibition in 1989.

121 Xiao Lu's letter to Gao Minglu.
For Xiao Lu, art has been a way for her to let out her emotions from being sexually abused in her youth.\(^{122}\) Other female artists exhibited in Performer and Participant included Silke Otto-Knapp, and Regina Jose Galindo, a performance artist who opened the dialogue on regional and global violence against women.\(^{123}\)

It is difficult to find a definitive answer as to whether Xiao Lu’s work directly had something to do with the Tiananmen incident at the time, or her shots were just an expression of her emotions. But Xiao Lu has barely exhibited in China in the decade since the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition. Xiao Lu is not the only artist who has had trouble exhibiting their works in China. According to art historian Marie Leduc, many dissident artists whose work challenges China’s political values, such as Yan Pei Ming, Yang Jiechang, and Chen Zhen, are active outside of the PRC but hardly known in the PRC. However, in recent years, with the development of Chinese museums, and especially the emergence of non-profit museums, her first exhibition in China after 1989 was at 798 art districts in Beijing in 2004, after which she held exhibitions in non-official art spaces, such as Yan An Hotel, and non-profit art organizations like UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Today Art Museum, and Wall Art museum. artists such as Xiao Lu might have the chance to present their works in China.

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Chapter 4 Conceptual and Structural Changes of Contemporary Chinese Museums

The oppression during the Cultural Revolution, the Reform and Opening-up policy, and the dramatic social, political, and economic changes in China have inspired contemporary artists to reflect on these changes in a critical way. While the tension between the avant-garde nature of contemporary Chinese art and the government’s control of museums led to exhibition closures, in the last two decades China’s policies supporting the development of a creative economy has led to a rise in non-profit museums supported by private capital and international investments. This chapter will explore the history of Chinese museums from the 20th century to today and discuss the development of Chinese art museums in accordance with the sociopolitical and economic changes in the People’s Republic of China.

A Brief History of Chinese Museums

In the past few decades, the number of museums has increased rapidly worldwide, with three-quarters of all active museums today having been established after 1945. Since 1975, the number of museums around the world has increased from 22,000 to 95,000.124 The worldwide proliferation of museums happened alongside the emergence of the global creative economy in the 1960s. In China, museums have also grown in unprecedented numbers in recent decades, in concert with the development of the Chinese creative economy after the 1990s. In 2003, 150 million visitors attended about 8,000 exhibitions held in China’s 2,000 museums; in 2019, there


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were 28,600 exhibitions held in China, where museums held 334,600 educational activities and received 1.23 billion visitors—an increase of more than 100 million over the previous year.\textsuperscript{125} During the opening ceremony of the 2020 “5·18 International Museum Day,” Liu Yuzhu, director of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage in China, released the latest data on the development of museums in the PRC: as of the end of 2019, there were 5,535 museums registered nationwide, an increase of 181 over the previous year, of which 1,710 were non-state museums. According to this logic, there will be a new museum in China every two days.\textsuperscript{126}

While it is evident that Chinese museums have developed at an accelerating rate in recent years, they have a very short history. The idea of establishing museums emerged during the late Qing Dynasty, when a group of intellectuals, including Kang Youwei (康有为, 1858-1927), Liang Qichao (梁启超, 1873-1929), and Wang Zhichun (王之春, 1842-1906), recognized that science and society were underdeveloped in China as compared to Europe.\textsuperscript{127} Inspired by the Western museum, the first Chinese museum—Nantong Museum, located in Jiangsu Province—was created by Zhang Jian as an educational tool in 1905.\textsuperscript{128}

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\textsuperscript{127} Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were prominent political thinker and reformer of the late Qing Dynasty. Wang Zhichun was politician and diplomat in the Qing Dynasty.

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Although Chinese museums have followed the educational model of the West, European museums were established within a different historical context. The modern conception of “museum” originates from the Greek practice of Museion.\textsuperscript{129} In classic times, the collection of the Mouseion was located in the royal quarters of the city known as Bruchium in ancient Egypt, and only a few of the noted scientists and scholars who lived in the king’s household had access to the Museion.\textsuperscript{130} The early stages of the modern museum appeared in the sixteenth century as the gallery (Italian: galleria), a long grand hall that exhibited pictures and sculptures, and the cabinet (Italian: gabinetto)—a square-shaped room that exhibited specimen and art works.\textsuperscript{131} In German, Wunderkammern, also known as the “cabinets of wonder,” were places for nobles, merchants, and scholars to gather together to present and interpret their wide-ranging collections, which included animals, plant matter, minerals, and cultural relics.\textsuperscript{132} However, those collections were rarely open to the public. In the middle of the 18th century, during the era of the Enlightenment, the museum became a tool for secular empiricism, guiding concepts that laid at the root of modern science. Museums which had specialized collections, including museums devoted only to art, such as the Capitoline Museum and the Louvre, were also established. In the


\textsuperscript{130} George Sarton, \textit{A History of Science: Hellenistic Science and Culture in the Last three Centuries B.C.} (Cambridge, MA: Havard University Press, 1959), 29-34.

\textsuperscript{131} Alexander, 4.

United States, art museums emerged in the late 19th century, founded by wealthy patrons who emulated European models. During this time, the museum was still an unfamiliar concept in China. Nevertheless, before the Western concept of museums entered China in the 19th century, China already had a long history of collections, mainly embodied by the "public collections" of emperors, the "private collections" of the literati, and the religious collections held by temples. The emperors in the feudal period of China all had a hobby of collecting art. Emperors of several dynasties, such as Emperor Ming of the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu of the Song Dynasty, and Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty, were keen to collect paintings by masters. These royal collections also laid the foundation for the later collections of the Palace Museum in China. However, although the emperors of the feudal dynasties ostensibly represented the entire country’s “public collection” of artworks, these royal collections were actually under the emperor’s private control, and they could use these collections for funerals or to reward others at any time. In fact, the public could not visit these collections; accordingly, they cannot be counted as public collections in the contemporary sense.

Another large collecting group in ancient China was the literati, who used their collections of calligraphies, traditional watercolor paintings, and treasures to show their social status and taste. There were also religious art collections in temples since the Three Kingdoms period (220–280); famous religious painters include Cao Buxing (曹不兴, dates unknown) of the Eastern Wu during the Three Kingdoms period, Gu Kaizhi (顾恺之, 348–409) of the Eastern Jin

133 Rodini, “A Brief History of the Art Museum.”
134 The Palace Museum was established in 1925, located in the Forbidden City in Beijing.
Dynasty (266–420), and Wu Daozi (吴道子, 685–758) of the Tang Dynasty (618–907). Unlike the landscape paintings and celebrity manuscripts collected by the literati, religious collections primarily include Buddhist figures and handwritten scriptures. These collections are rarely exhibited to the public or collected for the public education.

The introduction of the modern museums in China can be traced back to the late Qing Dynasty in the late 19th and early 20th century. Kang Youwei fled to Europe after the failure of the Hundred Days’ Reform in 1898. He detailed the collections of museums in Western countries in his book *Travels of Eleven European Countries*. Inspired by the Tokyo National Museum, Zhang Jian, a Chinese industrial entrepreneur and social reformer, established the first museum in Jiangsu province — The Nantong Museum. The Nantong Museum’s main collection consisted of natural collections (animals, plants, minerals), historical collections (ceramics, rubbings, weapons, and musical instruments), and art collections (calligraphy, sculptures, lacquerware, and textiles). Its main goal was to educate the public and protect cultural relics. In 1912, Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), a Chinese educationalist, put forward several ideas for art museums in his "Methods of Implementing Aesthetic Education.” He advocated for the establishment of art galleries (meishu guan), art exhibitions, historical museums, and antique exhibiting spaces (guwu chenlie suo) to promote public education. In 1913, Lu Xun (鲁迅),

135 The Hundred Days’ Reform, or Wuxu Reform, was a cultural, political and educational reform movement in late Qing Dynasty.


137 Gao, 96.

who served in the Ministry’s Department of Social Education, published his "Article Opinions for Broadcasting," clearly stating the importance of art galleries.\textsuperscript{139} These educationalists, reformers, and intellectuals supported the promulgation and implementation of a series of protection laws and promoted the establishment of social art education.

After the establishment of the PRC, museums were erected to enhance the public conception of nationalism, following the Soviet model of museums as “living textbooks.” The China History Museum, which later changed its name to the National Museum of China, was established in 1958. The main task of the China History Museum is to use dialectical materialism to educate the public about Marxism-Leninism, Mao's thought, and patriotism. Regional museums in China were established for the same goal. There were 72 museums in China in 1958.\textsuperscript{140} Nevertheless, from the 1960s to 1970s, the development of Chinese museums slowed because of political campaigns in the PRC. The public education function of museums in China was converted to a tool for political struggle.\textsuperscript{141} Following Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening-up policy, and a series of government policies which encouraged the development of a creative economy, Chinese museums started to become more active, and legislation was developed to define and support different kinds of museums in the PRC.

\textsuperscript{139} Lu Xun, a famous Chinese writer, was also the leader of the New Culture Movement, which criticized classical Chinese ideas and promoted Western democracy and science.


\textsuperscript{141} An, 10.
The Changing Regulations of Museums in China

After the Reform and Opening-up policy, the main function of Chinese museums changed from nationalist education to showcase the advancement of culture and arts and to stimulate local economic development by attracting travelers. In order to understand how Chinese museums have changed their missions in the recent decades, I analyze a series of laws and regulations related to the protection of Chinese cultural relics and museums.

China's early regulations concerning the development of museums can be traced back to the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics, initiated in 1982 by the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China. This law includes a definition of cultural relics under national cultural relic protection; regulations over the establishment and management of a cultural relic protection unit; and the excavation and management of cultural relics, emphasizing the nature of museums as sites of cultural heritage protection and collection. Article 22 states that “nationally owned museums, libraries and other units must classify the cultural relics in their collections, set up collection archives, establish a strict management system, and register with the cultural administration department.” This law also prohibited commercial exchanges of collections.

142 The original text is “quan min suo you,” which means [the museum] owned by all Chinese citizens. In this regulation, the state-owned or private nature of the museum is not clearly stated, but the legality of private collections is confirmed and protected by law.
In 2005, the State Council of the People's Republic of China initiated the Decisions of State Council on Private Capital Entering Cultural Industry.\textsuperscript{143} Aiming to stimulate the development of China’s cultural industry, these decisions encouraged the movement of non-profit capital in several arts and cultural sectors, include museums and exhibition halls.\textsuperscript{144}

In 2006, the Ministry of Culture in China passed the “Measures of the Administration of Museums”. This regulation defines a “museum” as a non-profit social service institution, whose main functions include collecting, protecting, studying, and exhibiting the evidence of human activities and the natural environment—cultural relics, plant and animal specimens, and raw materials.\textsuperscript{145} Although in this law, “private museum” and “stated-owned museum” are not defined, words such as “non-state-owned museum” and “stated-owned museum” are applied. The text of the Measures of the Administration of Museums also encourages museums to find investments from multiple channels. Unlike state-owned museums in China, non-profit museums have more freedom collecting works and holding exhibitions. Because of this freedom, many contemporary artists and art works were introduced in China. For instance, in 2018, Mwoods Museum exhibited Paul McCarthy’s video installations, including \textit{White Snow} (2013), which

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\textsuperscript{143} The State Council the People’s Republic of China, Guowuyuan guanyu feigongyou zeben jinru wenhua chanye de ruogan juede”国务院关于⾮公有资本进⼊⽂化产业的若⼲决定 [Decisions of State Council on Private Capital Entering Cultural Industry] \url{http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2005/content_64188.htm}

\textsuperscript{144} Decisions of State Council on Private Capital Entering Cultural Industry

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were full of indications of sexual violence even though this kind of content was censored in China. 146

Under this law, the commercial exchange of museum collections is allowed, but the collections of relevant museums remain under governmental control. These museums are required to establish a collection ledger and archives of each collection and go through the filing procedures in accordance with the law. Collections acquired by the museum through lawful collection, purchase, exchange, acceptance of donations, and allocation are to be registered in the collection ledger within 30 days.147

In order to encourage the development of private museums in 2010, the State Taxation Administration of China initiated “Opinions on Promoting the Development of Private Museums,” establishing the legal rights and status of private museums in China.148 Museums in China are allowed to engage in commercial activities, but the exchange of cultural relics is not permitted. In addition, exhibitions in China are required to conform to the basic principles established by the constitution and the requirements of safeguarding national security and national unity, promoting patriotism, advocating scientific spirit, popularizing scientific

146 The solo exhibition *Innocence* by Paul McCarthy was held in M Woods Museum in 2018. Forty-three works by McCarthy and selected collaborations was first showed publicly in China.

147 Measures of the Administration of Museums.

knowledge, disseminating excellent culture, cultivating good customs, promoting social harmony, and boosting the progress of social civilization.\textsuperscript{149}

In the changes made between 1980 and now, one can see a shift in how the Chinese government has been reshaping the role of museums in China. In order to stimulate the development of a creative economy, the government’s attitude on commercial activities changed from forbidding to encouraging. The censorship of museum exhibitions still serves the state’s primary ideological and political education, bolstering concepts like patriotism and social harmony. But because of the emergence of non-profit museum in recent years, contemporary artists and their works that were not directly related to the mainstream ideology of the PRC have more chances to exhibit their works in China. The following case studies will exemplify how museums has developed in recent years.

\textit{“Living Textbooks”: A Case Study of the Dayi Liushi Manorial Museum}

From 1949 to the 1990s, the main function of the Chinese museum was to bolster the state’s political narrative. Chinese cultural officials followed the Soviet model of museums as “living textbooks.” The Chinese museums adapt their content in accordance with contemporary politics, and they show different content to local visitors and foreign visitors.\textsuperscript{150} Museums in China became educational spaces where the state promoted ideology suited to their political needs. For instance, in the 1960s, the main goal of the Chinese Communist Party was to enhance

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.

its governance by eliminating its class enemy. In 1958, a museum was established to showcase
the devilry of Liu Wencai, the landlord who oppressed and extracted wealth from his tenant
farmers. Landlord Manor Hall originally held the famous Rent Collection County Yard, a famous
collection of sculptures made by students at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 1965. The work shows
the landlord’s method of exploiting the peasants in 114 life-size characters. In addition to the
Rent Collection County Yard, objects and stories were exhibited in the museum to expose the
Crimes of Liu Wencai. Dennise Y. Ho and Li Jie criticize the authenticity of Liu’s story
propagandized during Mao’s era, proposing that some objects might be substitutes of objects
from other landlord families. The museum recruited local carpenters to make a nine-square meter
“dragon bed” to show the power and wealth of Liu Wencai while most peasants suffered with
hunger.151 Although the authenticity of the story of Liu Wencai is hard to confirm because most
of the evidence provided by Ho and Li is from later generations of Liu’s family, one thing that
can be confirmed is that this museum has changed according to political atmosphere, made
evident in the changes of its name. The Dayi Liushi Manorial Museum (dayi liushi zhuangyuan
bowu guan, 大邑刘氏地主庄园博物馆 ), located in Anren in Sichuan province, was established
in 1958. The name of the museum changed several times: from the Landlord Manor Exhibition
Hall (dizhu zhuangyuan chenlie guan, 地主庄园陈列馆, 1959) to the Class Education Exhibition
Hall (jieji jiaoyu zhanlan guan, 阶级教育展览馆, 1966) to the Landlord Manor Museum (dizhu
zhuangyuan bowu guan, 地主庄园博物馆, 1980) to its current name.152

151. Ho and Li, 10.
152. Denise Y. Ho and Jie Li, “From Landlord Manor to Red Memorabilia: Reincarnations of a
Interpretive texts in the Dayi Liushi Manorial Museum also reflect how the institution changed in accordance with government policies. During the 1960s and 1970s, the text of displaying reflected the obvious class selectivity in the historical content, and gradually replaced the physical position of objects. The text in the Dayi Liushi Manorial Museum in this period contains four dimensions: the decadence and ugliness of Liu Wencai and the landlord class, the painful life of peasants in the old society, the struggle and resistance of peasants under the leadership of the communist party, and the happy life of the peasants in the new society. After the Reform and Opening-up policy, the discourse of the struggle was abandoned step by step, and the number of visitors to the museum dropped sharply. After 2000, under the guidance of the government policy of protecting and utilizing this cultural relic, the heritage value of the estate as a tourist site became the basic framework of the interpretive text. The heritage value of the manor has become the central theme of the narrative, focusing on three dimensions: first, the estate is an important place to understand and study the politics, economy, culture, and history of the Chinese semi-colonial and semi-feudal society; second, the manor is a museum of architectural skills in the western part of modern Sichuan, where the cultural relics, such as mud sculpture, porcelain, jade, and painting, have shown superior artistic skills and precious cultural value; and third, the history of the local modern warlords in Sichuan and the economic and social relations in the rural areas of Sichuan.

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153 Gan Lu 甘露, “Zhengzhi yujing he yichan biaoshu —— sichuan liushi bowuguan biaoshu wenben de lishi bianqian” 政治语境和遗产表述——四川刘氏庄园博物馆表述文本的历史变迁, [Political context and expression of heritage — The historical changes of the text expressed by the Liu Manor Museum in Sichuan], no. 7(2017), Liuyou Xuekan, 93.

154 Gan, 93.
The Dayi Liushi Manorial Museum also became one part of the Jian Chuan Museum Cluster that was established by entrepreneur Fan Jianchuan (樊建川). Today, the mission of the Jian Chuan Museum Cluster is to protect cultural relics and prompt local development. In 1998, the Dayi Liushi Manorial become one of the important projects to stimulate the local travel industry of Chengdu province based on its historical background.\textsuperscript{155}

Based on the development of the mission and interpretive texts of the Dayi Liushi Manorial Museum, it is evident that the museums’ function in China has converted from public political education to a stimulus of local economic development.

\textit{Today Art Museum — A Case Study of Non-profit Museum in China}

Today Art Museum, located in Beijing, was the first non-profit art museum in China and was established by Zhang Baochuan, the chairman of Antaeus Group Zhang in 2002. The mission of Today Art Museum is to develop contemporary Chinese art by supporting young artists in the community and encouraging international dialogue.\textsuperscript{156} In 2019, most of the income for Today Art Museum is its tickets, art store, coffee shop, publications, and public education. Eight percent of its income is from government support and twenty percent from its sponsors. The sponsors of Today Art Museum include national funds, including the China National Arts Fund; Beijing Cultures and Arts Fund; personal funds including the Wang Shikuo Foundation

\textsuperscript{155} Wang Yingxiang 王应祥, “Dayixian liuyouye fazhan xianzhuang ji jinrong zhichi fangxiang”大邑县旅游业发展现状及金融支持方向 [The current situation of tourism development and financial support direction in Dayi] \textit{Southeast Finance}, no.5(2005), 32.

and Beijing Muyun Art & Culture Fundation; and social investments, including Dior, Hyundai Motorstudio, and Epson. The Today Art Museum sponsors are dynamic and combine national support, social capital, and personal capital.

Different from national museums in China, such as the China National Museum, the main collections are historical and cultural Chinese relics, including archaeological discoveries, objects of Chinese revolutionary history, objects of Chinese modern history, ancient artifacts, currencies, rare books; the collection of Today Art Museum is more dynamic, including art works by domestic and international artists. Since its establishment in 2002, the Today Art Museum has collected nearly 5,000 pieces of art of all kinds, and the exhibition collection of the museum consists of three sections: the public welfare collection of the Today Art Museum, the contemporary art collection of Today's International Culture and Art Development Co., Ltd., and the non-sales of the collectors managed by the Today Art Museum. The main collection of the Today Art Museum includes contemporary paintings, and other contemporary art forms, such as, prints, sculptures, images, and installations. The collection of the Today Art Museum includes works from almost all famous contemporary artists, with nearly a hundred works by Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Zhang Xiaogang, and Wang Guangyi.

According to Gao Peng, director of the Today Art Museum, although today's museum is a non-profit museum, its purpose is still to serve the people: “When people talk about

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contemporary art, they think only of the value from an auction, their prices. They often ignore
the art itself. In fact, art is meant to serve the people.” The public programs of Today Art
Museum are divided into adult public education project and children public education project.
The main subjects including the popularization of scientific and cultural knowledge. For
instance, after the exhibition — *The World Image: Dragonfly Eyes* in August 2019, a project
related to fiction and movies was held in October. Projects such as *Forum: Wanwu Fangsheng*,
and The Future of Art and Aesthetics of Technology are related to the connection between art and
science. 160

Although controversial contemporary art works are collected and exhibited in Today Art
Museum, Today Art Museum follows the logic of contemporary Chinese art generally agreed
upon by Chinese scholars and critics — Contemporary art should serve the people. Obviously,
collections in the Today Art Museum are contradictory to China's mainstream values, but its
educational functions for arts and science can still reflect its function of serving the people. In
the future, non-profit museums may offer more opportunities for contemporary art that was
difficult to exhibit in China before.

Conclusion

This thesis explores the criticality of “contemporaneity” in contemporary Chinese art in the context of globalization and China's creative economy. In addition to discussing the historical background of contemporary Chinese art, the thesis also discusses how contemporary Chinese art emerged and was shaped from the Cultural Revolution to the historical turning point of Reform and Opening-up. Contemporary Chinese art is not a product that simply absorbed Western art, styles, and aesthetics, it was shaped by particular political, economic, and social changes that occurred in China, and equally influenced the global art world.

The first chapter examines the influx of Western paintings into China during the Qing Dynasty and the absorption and evolution of Chinese artists, as precedents of artistic exchanges and dialogs between China and the West. The transplantation of Western art in China exemplifies that Chinese arts generate new art styles after meeting different cultures and from days long gone to today.

The second chapter focuses on the discourse of contemporaneity in contemporary Chinese art. By discussing the avant-garde nature of Chinese contemporary art, the beginnings of contemporary Chinese art can be traced back to the Cultural Revolution, rather than the 1970s when the Reform and Opening-up policy was enacted, or in the 1990s when contemporary Chinese art began to exhibit internationally.

In the third chapter, Xu Bing and Xiao Lu are studied as well as how their works reflect China’s social and economic evolution in the twentieth century. As a female artist, the ten-year disappearance of Xiao Lu's work in contemporary Chinese art also reflects the unequal social status of female artists. In the future, I plan to study based on the situation of female Chinese
artists. Contemporary Chinese artists, art historians, and critics can explore what feminism means in China and promote feminism’s development.

Chapter four explores the history of how museums have developed in China over the past century, particularly the evolution of China's museum policies over the past two decades. In China, museums always have an essential role in educating and showing the advancement of Chinese culture to the public. The exhibiting issue of contemporary art in China also indicates the avant-gardism nature of contemporary Chinese art. With governmental policy support for developing the creative economy, Chinese museums have gone from under strict government control to welcoming private and foreign funds for establishing non-profit structures. By investigating the changes in names and the changes in display text at the Dayi Liush Manor Museum, I show how Chinese museums reflect Chinese museum policy changes. In a case study of Today Art Museum, the emergence of non-profit museums provides a more supportive space for Chinese contemporary art exhibitions.

For my future study, I plan on several directions. First, dissident contemporary Chinese artists and active Chinese territory are essential components of contemporary Chinese art. In order to further explore and understand the contemporaneity of contemporary Chinese art and its time division, I will study living contemporary Chinese are who were active during the Cultural Revolution onwards. Further, although China's non-profit museums draw on the Western model, the differences between them and Western museums need to be studied in greater depth, so that the influence of Chinese non-profit museums on contemporary Chinese art can be further studied. Although the main exhibition place of contemporary art in China is now non-profit museums, given the outstanding performance of Chinese contemporary art in the international
market, in the future, Chinese contemporary art is also likely to appear as a symbol of the country's soft power in the public museum.
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