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MAP OF CHINA: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE SHIFTING POSITION OF CHINA'S CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse how ongoing globalizing tendencies, through the reconfiguration of the previously Western-dominant epistemic framework, have bolstered the visibility of the Chinese art scene. The dissemination of "contemporaneity" as the prevalent theoretical paradigm in art history (Osborne, Foster, Agamben) has facilitated the questioning of the past socio-economic and ideological modes of organization, marking the insertion of the "non-European alterity" (Mignolo) within a predominantly Eurocentric framework. The theoretical project of contemporaneity is usually understood through the lenses of heterogeneity and plurality. As such, the main objective of a "contemporary" approach is that of synchronizing the extant discrepancy between different spaces and temporalities, such an imperative becoming visible in the cultural sector, where contemporary artists are shaping a new intellectual ethos through novel spaces of global encounter. Therefore, certain previously neglected art scenes (deemed as "primitive" by the norms of the Western canon) have received increased critical attention, becoming pivotal agents in the articulation of the artistic praxes nowadays. This being the case for the Chinese art scene, I examine how this repositioning has stirred a new global artistic dynamic, highlighting the strategies that propelled China to a leading position on the art market.

Keywords: Chinese art scene, art history, artistic praxes, contemporaneity, contemporary approach, art market, Eurocentric framework, Chinese artists.

Introduction. The category of the "contemporary" seen as a "global transnationality"

The aim of this paper is to analyse how ongoing globalising tendencies, by prompting the reconfiguration of the previously Western-dominant epistemic register, have bolstered the visibility of the Chinese contemporary art scene. When addressing the issue of "contemporary art", it is essential to expand upon what the category of the contemporary entails, as many critical attempts have been made to trace the central axiom underpinning this notion. Perhaps what Peter Osborne designates as "global transnationality" (Osborne 26) best epitomises the foremost objective of contemporaneity. The gradual erosion of territorial borders, facilitated by increasingly globalising tendencies, has enabled the establishment of a meeting point between so-called peripheral countries and the metaphorical centre, represented by metropolitan nations (Osborne 27).

Undeniably, this physical permeability, spurred by globalisation, has been supported by what Walter Mignolo identifies as an "epistemic shift" (Mignolo 47). Delinking from previous patterns of colonial thinking defines this epistemic shift, counteracting the universalist and hegemonic pretensions of the West. The universality claimed by the Occident over the last centuries has been a fictitious and fallacious assertion, serving to monopolise "non-European" countries for the extraction and maximisation of economic gains. Epistemological decolonisation, therefore, facilitates a genuine interchange of experiences and meanings between nation-states that could legitimately form the foundation of universality. The regulation of these earlier modes of ideological and socio-economic organisation, steeped in Eurocentric thought, has marked the inclusion of "non-European" alterity within the totalising interiority of Western hegemony, as Mignolo argues (Mignolo 47).

The corrosion of these universalist narratives, propagated by the hegemonic status quo of the West, can be attributed to a growing proclivity for plurality and inclusion, which has been increasingly articulated through a series of transnational intersections. The recognition of heterogeneity thus becomes a pivotal premise of

contemporaneity, whose principal aim is the synchronisation of temporal disparities across various spatialities. The defining framework Osborne proposes for this new category entails the "will to force the multiplicity of coeval social times together" (Osborne 27).

The art domain swiftly adopted and embraced the aims of contemporaneity, functioning as a "market utopia of free movement" (Osborne 27). Seen as a privileged cultural field, the artistic sector, imbued with intentional futurism, has consistently sought to position itself in the "presentism" of its time by vehemently addressing societal issues deemed problematic. It is little wonder, then, that this new category of the contemporary has been rapidly embraced by the art world, or rather, that the art world has provided a platform for contemporaneity to become visible. The cohesion of different social spaces and temporalities has already been facilitated by the emergence of the International Biennale, which broadens the margins of exploration through the artistic practices of geopolitically and culturally diverse communities (Osborne 27).

Although this collision of spaces, in an attempt to reconcile their contrasting temporal rhythms, is widely accepted as the central project of contemporaneity today, the notion visibly lacks a theoretical framework, raising further questions. One of the primary issues Hal Foster addresses in *On the Contemporary* concerns the fictitious character of this still-nascent category, its utopian aspirations, and its lack of historical determinism. Foster observes that "What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment" (Foster 3). Consequently, he conducts a survey, inviting critics to articulate their perspectives on this new paradigm, which appears to have been swiftly embedded and disseminated within the contemporary artistic climate. The absence of a theoretical corpus, however, has not hindered the institutionalisation of the contemporary as the prevailing paradigm through its integration into various museum spaces. As Foster further argues:

> At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, «contemporary art» has become an institutional object in its own right: in the academic world there are professorships and programs, and in the museum world departments and institutions, all devoted to the

> subject, and most tend to treat it as a part not only from prewar practice but from most postwar practice as well (Foster 3).

If one considers the historical progression for a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary's establishment within the breadth of today's artistic practice, Catherine Millet's observations provide significant insight. In her book *Contemporary Art: History and Geography*, she notes that in the 19th century, the term "contemporary" referred to any object generated through an artistic practice — not necessarily a "modern" one — but simply existing within a specific timeframe. By contrast, in the 1960s, those who identified the "street" as a painting or tore strips from posters were truly regarded as "contemporary artists" (Millet 24).

This illustrates the gradual shift in the term's meaning: initially, it referred only to an object coexisting with another—whether that was another object or the artist himself. In the second example, however, the term denotes a specific temporal category attributed to the art space, with the "contemporary" emerging as a substitute for "modernity." This transition was largely driven by a reconfiguration of the centres of power during the 1950s, shifting from Europe—traditionally seen as the epicentre of authority—to American dominance. Millet observes that, "although modernity is the project initiated by the French ethos," contemporaneity represents the "emancipation of the United States derived from its duty to Europe"[1] (Millet 24). Historian Marc Fumaroli further emphasises this distinction, stating that "«modern art» is the art created in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century, whilst «contemporary art» constitutes the change of direction from this modern art, beginning in the 1960s on the American art scene" (Millet 25).

Peter Osborne also offers a temporal categorisation for the roots of the contemporary within the artistic climate of the 20th century, describing a threefold temporal axis. The first segment, centred around 1945, aligns with Millet's observation of post-war American hegemony, which began to dominate art institutions through the rise of the neo-avant-garde. The second timeframe addresses the emergence of performance, minimal, and conceptual art during the 1960s. The final temporal segment pertains to artistic developments after 1989, a critical moment marked by the

[1] The translation from Romanian was made by the author of this paper.

geopolitical reorganisation of Europe, the collapse of Eastern communism, the dissolution of left-wing parties, and the decisive victory of a neoliberal globalisation of capital (Osborne 18-20). While each of these temporal divisions could plausibly underpin the rise of the contemporary, the second warrants particular attention. According to Osborne, from a geopolitical perspective, this period is the most expansive and inclusive, encompassing the art of the 1960s and 1970s in the Second World, including the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Chinese art after 1989. Simultaneously, this era coincides with the spread of anti-imperialist approaches and movements toward national liberation (Osborne 20). This historical overview illustrates that the proliferation of the contemporary as a distinct category has extended even into Eastern artistic climates — particularly in China. As this research focuses on China's artistic scene, the following sections will delve deeper into its exploration.

Another perspective worth mentioning regarding the position of the "contemporary" in current artistic practice is articulated by Claire Bishop in her book *Radical Museology: Or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art*. She contends that with the proliferation of museum spaces dedicated to contemporary art, "a more radical model of the museum is taking shape: more experimental, less architecturally determined, and offering a more politicised engagement with our historical moment" (Bishop 6). By leaning into its political dimension, contemporary art facilitates the reconfiguration of marginalised communities (Bishop 6).

Thus, the project of the "contemporary" is to create a safe space where every opinion is acknowledged. The generalisation sought by the Western monopoly—imposing its specificity on other cultural spaces—has been replaced by universalisation, which provides a secure foundation where differences are not ostracised or dismissed but accepted and embraced. Bishop identifies two main directions for understanding what contemporaneity represents: on one hand, it is linked to the concept of "presentism", "the condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking"; on the other hand, it can be viewed "as a dialectical method and a politicised project with a more radical understanding of temporality" (Bishop 6). She further elaborates that the second model "does not designate a style or period of the works themselves so much as an *approach* to them" (Bishop 7).

Bishop's perspective is indeed innovative, as it advocates suspending traditional attempts at periodisation based on predefined criteria and instead addresses contemporaneity through the lens of a homogenising temporality. This notion aligns closely with the definition Osborne assigns to the contemporary, as manifest in present-day artistic practices: "The coming together of different times that constitutes the 'contemporary', and the relations between the social spaces in which these times are embedded and articulated, are thus two main axes along which the historical meaning of art is to be plotted" (Osborne 27). Through this collision of temporalities and spaces, the "contemporary" in the artistic sector seeks to bring to light the ostracisation of the marginalised and stigmatised, contributing to the reorganisation of historical trajectories. By embracing and expanding its political implications, today's artistic practices aim to explore the foundations of an all-encompassing socio-cultural plurality. This is achieved by blending the historical significance of the past with an anticipation of the unknown future.

The first articulations of the contemporary art landscape in China

Acknowledging the idea of various communities intersecting without nullifying individual cultural specificities promotes the emergence of spaces for global encounter, where productive dialogue becomes possible and generates innovative practices. As Jiang Jiehong argues in his book *The Art of Contemporary China*, during the last decade of the twentieth century, China experienced the influence of a neoliberal economy, opening its doors to the international art market. As will be discussed in the next section, Western influences began making their way to China in the early decades of the twentieth century, spurred by the rapid collapse of imperialism. However, it is only in recent decades, through "the Chinese government's vision of urbanisation, a growing national awareness of and anxiety about developing cultural and creative industries within urban spaces, the institution of biennials, triennials and art fairs" (Jiehong 6), that the "contemporary" has been fully embraced in China. Jiang Jiehong's historical account reveals that the notion of "contemporary art" was introduced by "Chinese critics and artists in the early 1990s to proclaim a pivotal transition, from 'modern' to 'contemporary'", and it has since become one of the most frequently and commonly used terms (Jiehong 7).

When attempting to understand the implications of “new art” in China, its defining scope encompasses multiple approaches. Jiang Jiehong identifies three main viewpoints that intersect with the meaning of new art: from a political standpoint, from the perspective of artistic radicalism, and through the concept of “experimental art” (Jiehong 7). Regarding the first viewpoint, “new art” is divided into “official” and “unofficial” art within a totalitarian regime. From the second perspective, it reinforces the antagonistic stance of the Western avant-garde (*qianwei*) against conformism and institutionalised art. Lastly, “experimental art” signifies the idea of “radical innovation” while retaining the implication of “something that can be exploratory, or tentative” (Jiehong 7).

Wu Hung’s observations on the distinctions between “modern” and “contemporary” art further illuminate the aims of the latter, describing it as “spatial and synchronic” and as conveying “a sense of rupture and demarcation—the end of an era as well as the kind of historical thinking associated with it” (Wu Hung 7). This diffusion of certain Western models within China’s cultural identity does not equate to the total annihilation of the latter. Moreover, these Occidental “prototypes” should not serve as a mechanism for periodising China’s artistic development. Instead, they should function solely as a foundation for a modernity aligned with China’s cultural norms and needs. This investigation, therefore, aims to demonstrate how this cultural fusion has enhanced China’s visibility in the art sector, the chronological progression of artistic practices beyond the Western context, and how China’s innovative approaches have secured a leading position in today’s globalised art world. To provide a more nuanced understanding of the transformations China has undergone over the past century—transformations that have profoundly influenced its contemporary artistic landscape—a presentation of the key artistic trends that have shaped China’s art scene is essential.

An overview of the major artistic trends in China during the twentieth century

The socio-political climate in China at the beginning of the last century was marked by a series of unfortunate historical events that significantly destabilised the country’s autonomy. The undermining of imperial authority and the imposition of colonial policies began with the invasions by Western powers during the two Opium Wars. This

was followed by the transition from imperialism to republicanism under Sun Yat-sen, the impact of Japanese imperialism during the Second Sino-Japanese War, and ultimately the Civil War between the KMT and the CCP over control of state power. The Communist Party's victory brought an end to these socio-political upheavals, but it also introduced an authoritarian regime. Under Mao Zedong's leadership, Maoist-style Marxism-Leninism was instilled as the standard of values. This reality defined much of the 20th century and profoundly shaped China's economic, social, political, and cultural development.

The importation of Western modes of thought underscores the influence the Occident exerts over non-European territories through its hegemonic reach. However, this conceptual apparatus, introduced by the West, underwent significant internal adaptations to align with China's unique identity. These new influences were thus articulated through what Li Xianting describes as a "cultural dialectic between China and the West, marked by a pattern of mutual influence and change" (Xianting 10). According to Li, with the overthrow of the Qing dynasty's monarchical rule in 1911, China adopted a reformist policy characterised by the circulation of three major cultural currents rooted in the Western model. In the process of adoption and assimilation, the Western paradigm underwent a series of mutations and transformations. This visible divergence highlights how the evolution of the contemporary Chinese art scene has taken a distinct and singular trajectory, different from that of the West (Xianting 10).

The spread of Western Realism

The first period of cultural transition in China began with the May 4th Movement of 1919, characterised by a strong anti-feudalist revolt and a return to traditional values. This movement accelerated the integration of Western-style Realism into the artistic scene to facilitate the reorganisation and modernisation of the traditional cultural paradigm, which most intellectuals viewed as obsolete. The second stage—Maoist Revolutionary Realism—emerged with the establishment of the communist regime in 1949 and persisted throughout the Cultural Revolution. The spread of communist ideology marked a shift towards an artistic model that, thematically, emphasised utilitarian social values and, stylistically, combined elements of Chinese folk art with Soviet Socialist Realism (Xianting 10).

The final progression, which emerged in the early 1980s, shaped China's avant-garde ethos, informed by a post-revolutionary historical context. The isolationist policies during the Cold War and the Cultural Revolution created a period of cultural stagnation. However, the end of Maoist hegemony facilitated the incorporation and circulation of Western ideas, which articulated the key artistic principles of the Chinese avant-garde. Several cultural phenomena of the time—the perpetuation of the traditional model embraced by the intellectual class, remnants of Revolutionary Realism, and the characteristics of Western-style modernism—converged to form a cohesive framework that later fostered novel artistic practices. As a result, this newly articulated cultural paradigm was neither a continuation of traditional Chinese culture nor a direct reinterpretation of the Western model but rather a convergence of these ideational and aesthetic factors (Xianting 10).

Given that this research paper focuses on China's current artistic climate and its assimilation into the global art market, only a brief overview of these earlier major trends in Chinese art will be provided to contextualise its evolution. In this regard, Li Xianting's chronological account is particularly useful for understanding the cultural identity of the country. A series of political upheavals—including the dissolution of the Qing dynasty and the Maoist period of governance—sparked significant debates within the intellectual class. A growing divide emerged between those who supported the integration of new values (reflecting a notable shift towards the Western canon for innovation) and those who sought to preserve China's traditional cultural heritage in its unaltered form. This interplay of influences continues to shape the cultural identity of China's art scene to the present day, with its constant reconfigurations and updates resulting from the ongoing interplay of these cultural, ideational, and artistic forces.

The emergence of Maoist Revolutionary Realism

The emergence of Maoist Revolutionary Realism was conditioned by Mao Zedong assuming leadership over the entire country. In 1942, he presented his manifesto, "Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art," which articulated two key principles: "that art should serve political ends and that art should entertain and edify the masses" (Xianting 12). At this time, the dissemination of the new ideology relied heavily on the model provided by the Soviet Union. As Perry Anderson notes: "The Chinese Revolution grew

directly out of the Russian Revolution and remained closely linked to it, as inspiration or critique, until the common moment of truth in the late 1980s" (Anderson & Chaohua 23).

Under the influence of Soviet dominance, China underwent extensive Sovietisation, characterised by the adoption of popular artistic practices. These practices, shaped by Maoist political idealism (Xianting 12), culminated in the development of this new artistic style, which was deeply embedded with political implications. The primary objective of the Maoist model was to eradicate pro-capitalist bourgeois revisionism and to promote the establishment of a communist revolution. Paintings from this era conveyed themes of proletarian heroism, calls to mobilisation, and the elimination of pro-capitalist influences (Xianting 13).

The Cultural Revolution of the 1970s, a tumultuous period in China's history, aimed to eliminate opponents of Maoist doctrine and is often considered the apex of Mao's leadership. Historians' attitudes towards this phenomenon are highly polarised. While some European thinkers, such as Anderson and Badiou, may appear to adopt a more optimistic view of the Revolution[2]—perhaps due to their distance from its direct consequences—these assumptions are unfounded.

Both Perry Anderson and Alain Badiou share a critical perspective on the Revolution's goals, though they acknowledge some positive implications. Anderson summarises that the Cultural Revolution sought to address the economic crisis triggered by the Great Leap Forward of 1958 and to purge the emerging bureaucratic class within the Party—a trend that had already become apparent in the Soviet Union. Anticipating similar developments in China, Mao relied on the mobilisation of student youth rather than security forces to remove revisionist elements (Anderson and Chaohua 34). Similarly, Badiou contends that the Cultural Revolution's central aim was the eradication of social classes—not through the forced repression seen in the Soviet model, but via the internal mobilisation of the proletariat (Badiou 113). In contrast, Wang Chaohua adopts a strongly critical stance, denouncing the catastrophic

[2] The "optimism" attributed to European thinkers stems from their approach to Mao Zedong. Rather than condemning the whole historical phenomenon Mao generated and antagonizing his figure, they tend to highlight the positive motivations that stood behind it. As Badiou observes, the central objective of the Cultural Revolution was precisely the annihilation of the social classes, not by means of forced repression, associated with the Soviet model, but by an internal mobilization of the proletariat. Such mobilization contains, at its core, a positive determination that, in the end, derailed from its initial purpose.

repercussions of the Revolution. Nonetheless, she emphasises that the economic crisis was the most pressing factor, exposing the dysfunctionality of the old system and leaving it vulnerable to bureaucratic revisionism (Anderson and Chaohua 107).

Xing Li, in his article "The Chinese Cultural Revolution Revisited," highlights the ideological dimensions of the Revolution. He argues that Mao's primary aim was the "Sinisation of Marxist-Leninist ideology" (Li 140), seeking to establish new moral foundations for socialism by fostering a collective devoted to the Communist Party and the government apparatus. However, Li asserts that the internal contradictions between Mao's discourse and practice rendered his ideal unattainable. The revolutionary vision was incompatible with the pro-capitalist tendencies of many Party insiders, whose financial power grew significantly during Mao's leadership (Li 147).

Although these perspectives differ in tone and emphasis, they converge on a shared conclusion: the economic, political, and social failures of the Cultural Revolution created a space for modernisation. However, the intentions of progressive liberalisation were fragmented within a society still ill-equipped to undertake this transition cohesively. As a result, the Cultural Revolution is rightfully seen as one of the most turbulent periods in Chinese history. Nevertheless, it generated significant enthusiasm for the prospect of a democratic China, paving the way for reformist policies under Deng Xiaoping's leadership. These reforms catalysed a series of transformations that propelled China into a prominent position in the globalised art market.

Cultural shifts in the post-Revolution period

As mentioned earlier, the inherent contradictions of Maoist ideology ultimately led to its decline, paving the way for the democratization of the contemporary art scene under the reformist policies of Deng Xiaoping. New trends, already established in the West, quickly disseminated across Chinese territory. According to Li Xianting, this new historical climate is shaped by three primary concerns: establishing a dialogue with modern Western culture, probing and discovering one's own cultural identity, and awakening a "humanist" consciousness, which acts as a catalyst for critical cultural discourse (Xianting 13). This diversity of emerging inquiries also spurred a multiplicity of artistic expressions, which, as Li Xianting notes, evolved through four major phases (Xianting 14).

The first phase is defined by the emergence of three major artistic movements and one influential group: New Formalism, Scar Art, Native Soil Painting, and the Stars group. These movements, in alignment with the Western modernist ethos, shared a commitment to stylistic freedom and the need for experimentation in both technique and content (Xianting 14). During the Maoist dictatorship, the rigid artistic constraints limited exploration of alternative forms and concepts. However, during this phase, artists began to embrace influences such as impressionism, fauvism, and cubism (Xianting 14). The earliest manifestations of social critique emerged in the Scar Art (伤痕艺术) and Native Soil movements, reflecting a deep need to explore reality through diverse representations of rural life.

The Stars group (*xing xing* - 星星) emerged in the early 1980s. Their "unofficial" exhibition on the façade of the National Art Museum in Beijing in 1979, initiated by Hang Rui (黄锐) and Ma Desheng (马德升), is widely regarded as a key moment marking the transition to contemporary art in China. Although Jiang Jiehong highlights two main reasons for this chronological milestone—the end of Maoist dictatorship and the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's reforms—this interpretation is somewhat reductive (7). The interaction with new Western paradigms was made possible because the Chinese art scene was already prepared to engage with these elements. Thus, the early foundations of contemporary Chinese art were laid within the context of cultural despotism. As Jiang Jiehong, paraphrasing curator Hans Ulrich Obrist in *Ai Weiwei Speaks: With Hans Ulrich Obrist*, notes, it was achieved through "the resistance of avant-garde artists in the face of all these difficulties" (Obrist apud Jiehong 9). While Western models provided a starting point, future developments adhered to China's unique cultural identity, resulting in an approach that was no longer a replica of the West but a distinctly Chinese interpretation.

The second phase is marked by the rise of what is often considered the largest modern Chinese movement: the *New Wave '85*. According to Li Xianting, this movement adopted principles from the West and outlined three ideological directions: emphasising the conceptual transformation of art, promoting cultural criticism and the need for a new ideal, and fostering an awareness of "existential tragedy" (Xianting 16).

The third phase saw the emergence of the *Back-to-the-Roots* movement. Similar to the Native Soil movement, it centred on exploring Chinese aesthetics, philosophy, and culture to highlight their uniqueness. The *Back-to-the-Roots* movement developed alongside another artistic trend, *Purified Language*, which sought to create a visual language untainted by foreign influences. Recurrent motifs included Daoist and Zen philosophy, mysticism, and the revival of the "ink-play" technique (Xianting 18).

The last decade of the 20th century marked a pivotal moment in the reconfiguration of numerous political, social, and cultural paradigms. China, too, was undergoing a profound transformation, with the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing in February 1989 serving as a key turning point in the Chinese artistic landscape. In the early 1990s, two major trends emerged that would later achieve international recognition: *Political Pop* (Zhengzhi bopu - 政治波波谱) and *Cynical Realism* (Wanshi xianshi zhuyi - 玩世现实主义). Both movements adopted an anti-idealist stance, characterised by their engagement with popular culture and a deconstructivist approach. These trends are understood as reactions against heroism, metaphysical transcendence, and idealism (Xianting 20). Although avant-garde art in China held a marginal position during the 1990s, its status began to change in the early 2000s. In 2003, China presented a series of avant-garde works at the Venice Biennale, signalling attempts to establish closer ties with the West and facilitate integration into the global market. However, as Meiqin Wang notes, the modernising nature of these paintings was somewhat illusory, as their content was entirely overseen by the government, which controlled both the selection of participants and themes (Wang 113).

The earliest political efforts to liberalise China's art market are associated with Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992. As part of his strategy to strengthen China's economic status, Deng encouraged the opening of art galleries, which later evolved into highly marketised cultural institutions, such as the Red Gate Gallery, Courtyard Gallery, and ShanghArt Gallery. As noted earlier, Deng Xiaoping's policies played a crucial role in fostering the expansion and development of China's contemporary art scene. Externally, China undertook measures to join the globalised circuit of artistic production by increasing its participation in biennials, triennials, and art fairs. This

growing cultural visibility was further driven by the country's urgent desire to join the World Trade Organization, a goal it achieved in 2001 (Jiehong 16). This strategy underscores the use of culture as a mechanism to maximise economic capital, integrating the cultural and financial sectors. Carol Yinghua Lu explicitly highlights this intersection when discussing the emergence of China's fledgling art market: "Since the 1990s, a newly developed and unconstrained art market took over the Chinese at world as it was still in its infancy, before it had achieved the institutional diversity that characterizes longer-established art infrastructures on other countries" (Yinghua Lu 3).

Consequently, cultural production was harnessed to serve economic goals, which significantly contributed to the increased visibility of China's cultural sector in recent years: "As a result, contemporary art in China has become almost entirely dependent on market forces, which have set themselves up as the dominant, and virtually the only system of evaluating and crediting artworks and the success of the artists" (Yinghua Lu 3). Globalisation also played a significant role in the dissemination of Chinese artistic productions and practices. Chinese art began to be showcased in prominent international institutions such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Saatchi and Hayward Galleries in London, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Simultaneously, Western artists were invited to exhibit their works in China, fostering a bidirectional flow of artistic exchange.

The overarching conclusion is that post-Maoist China's urgent desire to maximise capital — whether economic, political, or cultural — has been the driving force behind its strategies in every field of activity. Enhancing its image as a leader in educational and cultural values has also contributed to strengthening its economic sector. Given the progressive dissolution of physical borders and the amplification of intercultural communication brought about by globalisation, China had little choice but to join this international project. This integration not only bolstered China's economy but also cemented the cultural sector's role in its economic advancement. The following section will focus on three case studies, analysing the practices of three Chinese artists whose international notoriety has played a pivotal role in elevating the recognition of China's contemporary art scene.

Contemporary Chinese art: a case study of Cao Fei's, Ai Weiwei's and Xu Bing's work

The year 1989 marked not only a major socio-political turning point but also a significant cultural one. Alongside the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing, which at first glance appeared to signal openness to innovative artistic practices, the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* was held at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. Chinese artists such as Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin, and Yang Jiechang were invited to participate. Their involvement heralded a transgression of cultural boundaries and the establishment of artistic spaces for global encounter, significantly enhancing the presence of Chinese artists in the Western art scene (Yinghua Lu 1).

However, the primary motivation for these artists to showcase their works in the West lay in the necessity to create art free from the constraints imposed by the Chinese government on local artistic productions. This issue was addressed in a discussion between two Chinese art critics, Li Xianting, based in Beijing, and Fei Dawei, based in Paris. In his letter, Li Xianting criticised those who had chosen to leave China, arguing that their work would lose its relevance in an "inter-" and transcultural context. According to him, art should remain within local borders, as these represent the only context where the value of such works could truly be appreciated. This reductionist and nationalistic stance was a recurrent theme in early discourses around art as China's contemporary art scene sought to define itself amidst the new values promoted by globalisation.

In contrast, Fei Dawei's response offered a more nuanced perspective, advocating for understanding and supporting artists who sought to promote themselves abroad. He argued that "the main reason was precisely the particular intellectual quality and way of thinking that were cultivated in their intellectual native land" (Yinghua Lu 4). Further expanding on this point, he stated: "Only when the «native culture» walks out of its «native culture», can it become the real «native culture.» It's time to reverse what Lu Xun proposed in the thirties, «what is more national is more international,» into «what is more international is more national»" (Yinghua Lu 5). Dawei's concluding statement is particularly pertinent in highlighting the necessity of embracing the openness fostered by globalisation: "What we are doing, and what we want to do, is to gradually place

issues brought from the Chinese context into the larger cultural background of the world, in a lively and creative way, so that it can set in motion a process of becoming «common» and «extensive»" (qtd. in Yinghua Lu 4).

In line with Fei Dawei's reasoning, the Chinese artists discussed below have succeeded in disseminating China's cultural singularity within the global circulation of artistic practices. Their achievements demonstrate that Chinese particularities can seamlessly integrate into a broader cultural framework. The global exposure China has gained through the efforts of numerous artists has resulted in a notable expansion of its cultural boundaries, embracing new forms of expression. Consequently, China's increasing global visibility has cemented its position as a co-partner in shaping the international cultural landscape.

Cao Fei

Cao Fei is an internationally acclaimed contemporary multimedia artist whose works explore the routine realities of Chinese citizens, shaped by the rapid pace of multifaceted progress (Fei). Her ability to work across various mediums has enabled her to participate in some of the world's most renowned international biennials and triennials, including the Shanghai Biennale (2004), the Moscow Biennale (2005), the Sydney Biennale (2006 and 2010), the Istanbul Biennale (2007), the Yokohama Triennial (2008), and the Venice Biennale (in 2003, 2007, and 2015) (Fei). Her artistic practices are characterised by a fusion of diverse elements, such as consumer aesthetics, social criticism, and documentary conventions. Through this amalgamation of praxes, she creates works with a distinctive singularity (Fei).

A notable example of China's connection to global digital culture is Cao Fei's project *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning* (2007). The project is centred on a fictional city built within the online platform *Second Life*, which allows users to construct their own fictional worlds. This virtual city, accessible to the public, serves as a platform for experimental creative activities. Through this medium, Cao Fei and her collaborators question the boundaries between the physical and virtual aspects of existence (Jiehong 143). To emphasise the theoretical implications of this platform, academic Chris Berry, quoted by Jiang Jiehong in *The Art of Contemporary China*, draws a parallel between the concept of "heterotopia" and the virtual space created by

Cao Fei: "*RMB City* becomes a mirror heterotopia of rapidly urbanized and highly industrialized China, when the artist 'opens up an *alternative* rather than *oppositional* space for thinking, feeling, and doing that is parallel to the world of Chinese culture and society beyond the artwork itself'" (qtd. in Jiehong 144).

Another central project contributing to Cao Fei's international recognition is *Whose Utopia* (2006), in which she documents a light bulb factory in southern China. This work critically examines the struggles of factory workers, highlighting the oppressions and restrictions imposed by the capitalist economy. By engaging directly with the workers, Cao Fei juxtaposes two antinomic dimensions: on one side, the forced industrialisation that compels individuals to adapt to a new reality; on the other, the notion of individual utopia, where workers transcend their constraints and envision a phantasmagorical realm where their ideals and dreams are realised.

Cao Fei's work exemplifies the possibility of preserving national identity while engaging with what Li Xianting describes as the "Western otherness" (qtd. in Yinghua Lu 3). The diverse cultural spaces in which her art has been exhibited clearly demonstrate the ideational multiplicity fostered by globalisation, while simultaneously reinforcing China's position within the contemporary art world.

Ai Weiwei

To introduce the next artist whose artistic practices are relevant to the theoretical framework in question, a reference to one of Jiang Jiehong's ideas proves both pertinent and illustrative. In discussing the notion of "art at large," Jiehong highlights that the term's meanings are perceived differently by Westerners and Chinese people. He argues that in the West, the contemporary art environment is defined by the intersection of artistic and curatorial practices that can take place both within and beyond museums or exhibition spaces. In China, however, the term "art at large" (*逍遥法外 – xiaoyao fawai*) derives its meaning from political, cultural, and linguistic contexts, translating as "being unfettered leisurely outside restriction or sanction of the law" (Jiehong 155). The term encompasses three key connotations. The first refers to a condition of being "unrestrained and unruly," evoking the prevalent attitudes within art circles during the post-Maoist period. The second concerns the idea of "being outside rules and

regulations" and "off-site" from legitimised, hierarchical, and conventional institutions (Jiehong 155). The third associates the term with the notion of an "incident" rather than an "exhibition," which might occur outside traditional museum walls and spark broader societal debates (Jiehong 155). This rebellious spirit is particularly characteristic of artists who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, a group Jiang Jiehong identifies as "the rebels" (Jiehong 155).

One such artist is Ai Weiwei, whose work interrogates the internal tensions of Mao Zedong's rule and the Cultural Revolution. As one of the most prominent political opponents of the Chinese socialist regime, Ai Weiwei vocalises his critiques through his diverse body of work. According to his official website, his artistic practice spans architecture, installations, social media, and documentary filmmaking, producing "powerful aesthetic statements that resonate with the geopolitical phenomena of the times we live in" (Weiwei). Recent exhibitions of his work have been held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Monterrey, Mexico; the Mildred Lane Kemper Museum in St. Louis; and K20/K21 in Düsseldorf. As with Cao Fei, the diversity of exhibition spaces for Ai Weiwei's work underscores the intercultural communication fostered by globalisation.

One of Ai Weiwei's notable projects, *Study of Perspective*, comprises photographs in which he immortalises his middle finger raised towards various cultural landmarks, including the White House in Washington, D.C., the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Red Square in Moscow, Tiananmen Tower in Beijing, and the Reichstag in Berlin. Ai Weiwei credits Mao Zedong's advocacy of self-criticism as the inspiration for his critical stance on social injustice (Jiehong 162). Mao encouraged individuals to write self-criticisms, particularly if they were suspected of pro-capitalist tendencies. Ai Weiwei extends this concept, applying it to every system of power or cultural institution with which he interacts. Jiang Jiehong argues that the core meaning of each photograph lies not in the institution depicted nor the gesture itself, but in the tension created between these two elements, symbolising rebellion and dissent against power structures (Jiehong 162).

Another project exemplifying Ai Weiwei's dual role as a political activist and an agent of cultural convergence is *Remembering* (2009). Displayed on the façade of Munich's Museum of Contemporary Art (*Haus der Kunst*), the installation comprises

the phrase, "She had been living happily for seven years," constructed from the backpacks of 9,000 children. It commemorates the victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China. The work's political resonance lies in its opposition to the Chinese government's attempts to obscure its culpability through censorship, suppressing awareness of the disaster's devastating consequences. Ai Weiwei's investigations revealed that approximately 80,000 people, predominantly children (JoAnne Artman Gallery), perished due to poorly constructed school buildings, hastily erected to meet growing demographic demands.

Ai Weiwei's work aims to interrogate the visibility of identities that have become victims of systemic neglect, challenging the validity of their experiences in a world where rulers often prioritise their own autonomy over the welfare of their citizens. His choice to "narrate" this event using a calligraphy style not specific to Western conventions—while potentially evoking exoticising implications—places the onus on the viewer to interpret these connotations, whether they project them or not. This approach highlights the cultural confluence that enables dialogue between two previously disparate environments that, until this historical moment, appeared diametrically opposed.

By exposing a humanitarian catastrophe, Ai Weiwei's work emphasises the universality of shared emotions and experiences that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries. His artistic praxis, therefore, is grounded in intercultural exchange, allowing national specificity to be disseminated without compromising its essence or disrupting the status quo of other states. This encapsulates a defining characteristic of the contemporary world: the convergence of spatial and temporal multiplicities in a conciliatory, rather than conflictual, posture.

Xu Bing

Perhaps a semiotician by nature and an artist by choice, Xu Bing's works strikingly expose the cultural fusion between the Occident and the Orient. Chinese cultural identity is interwoven with a Western conceptual framework, generating a novel approach to cultural hybridity in which differences are minimised and similarities are emphasised.

Renowned for his engravings, Xu Bing introduces an intriguing element of incomprehensibility into his works. Each character is individually designed so that it is unintelligible to both Chinese and Western audiences. As Jiang Jiehong notes, Xu Bing asserts that "Mao's revolution of culture infringed upon the most deeply rooted aspect of society – language – because the Chinese language directly influences the methods of thinking and understanding of all Chinese people" (Jiehong 99). Xu Bing further explains, "To strike at the written words is to strike at the very essence of the culture" (Jiehong 99). Through this process of construction and deconstruction, Xu Bing explores the illusory nature of semantic meaning, challenging established modes of understanding.

One of Xu Bing's prominent projects, *The Square Word Calligraphy*, involves creating a dictionary called *New English Calligraphy*, which combines English and Chinese words. In this work, English letters are arranged in a "square" format, mimicking the visual style of Chinese calligraphy while remaining readable (Bing). Beyond its textual aspect, the project invites participants to adopt the perspective of a learner encountering the elements of a new language. Through this linguistic (and implicitly cultural) fusion, Xu Bing encourages the questioning and reorganisation of traditional mental frameworks. Participants engage with unfamiliar words, experiencing both alienation and re-familiarisation with the new script. By doing so, Xu Bing demonstrates that the perceived distance between one's own linguistic system and another's is merely a mental construct (Bing).

Xu Bing's defining principle lies in articulating cultural confluences through his artistic practices. This operational mechanism is also evident in his ongoing project, *The Genetics of Reading Image*. Since 2004, Xu Bing has been developing a book of public signs intended to be universally understood. The project continues to expand with the proliferation of this new visual culture, facilitated by digitisation. Xu Bing's concept of "new visual culture" refers to the use of emoticons by younger generations to convey feelings in a manner that is more representational than verbal. These "tools" align with the verbal economy adopted by modern youth.

In this project, Xu Bing juxtaposes emoticons from everyday life with traditional Chinese characters, inviting spectators to associate the two columns. By placing these two linguistic models—Chinese calligraphy, with its millennia-old tradition, and the

emoticons specific to contemporary visual culture—side by side, Xu Bing prompts reflection on previous modes of thought and their adaptation to current habits of expression. Beyond this immediate interpretation, the work also highlights the profound visual inspiration underlying Chinese ideograms. For example, the character "shan" (mountain) visually resembles the object it represents, suggesting that the creation of Chinese characters can be likened to the development of emoticons. While the centrality of the image might appear to be a feature of the modern era shaped by technological innovations, Xu Bing's work refutes this notion. Ideographic writing, specific to Chinese culture, illustrates that the image as a representation of reality has long been an organising principle of human understanding. Furthermore, his work dismantles the concept of cultural differences through the shared dominance of visual representation. Communication, Xu Bing suggests, can transcend linguistic barriers by drawing on visual constructs rooted in the "common sharing" of reality, as described by Jacques Rancière.

Conclusions

Spurred, or perhaps motivated, by the globalising trends of the late 1990s and a new economic impetus, China has mobilised its resources to surpass its "competitors." Although the driving force behind this progress remains economic advancement, China's artistic discourse and practices have gained increasing visibility, thanks in part to the efforts of key figures such as Cao Fei, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing, whose central aim has been to explore new tools and methodologies, as discussed in the previous section.

The initial introduction of Western modernism facilitated the reconfiguration of traditional paradigms, which were then fused with national specificity to form the foundational identity of contemporary Chinese art. The work of the aforementioned artists, which has significantly contributed to the global visibility of Chinese artistic practices, is rooted in this singularity. Their creations are not mere imitations of Western modernist principles but rather unique and organic adaptations of these characteristics to their own socio-cultural environment, shaped profoundly by the political turbulence of the time. This paradigmatic shift would not have been possible without the establishment of a new category: the "contemporary."

The emergence of a climate conducive to inter-state dialogue marked a pivotal moment of transition. Communities that had previously been excluded from, or relegated to an "inferior" status within, the cultural economy of the Western world moved from the periphery to a more central position. This shift allowed them to assume a more prominent role in shaping the global socio-political and cultural landscape. The final conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that the expansion of the "contemporary" as a new temporal category has created a context for the reorganisation of power—economic, socio-political, and cultural—on a global scale. Artistic practices within China have transcended national borders, becoming integrated into the global art circuit. Their relevance lies primarily in the themes they explore: cultural hybridity, the challenging of linguistic differences through the articulation of new semantic systems, and the sharing of common experiences to critique state authority.

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