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Traditions of reaction: post-revolution art from the People's Republic of China

Marcus Jack

Surveying the recent history of art produced in China reveals a path which is well-worn. The voice of the Chinese artist is at once reactive and cyclical; forever circumscribing a conception of Chineseness itself. In a continuum of political tumult, we witness the intersection of art and authority, and it is in these instances that rhetoric is formed. The dynamic of artist and state oscillates endlessly; herein, we observe the restless banding and disbanding of past and present forms. Played out in aesthetic experience, Chinese art is characterised by the confluence of associations with and withdrawals from the very traditions upon which it is founded. Inquiry will chart the chronic flux of the artist's voice, amid swelling politic and enduring reform.

Since the assumption of full control in mainland China in 1949, the Communist Party of China has had immeasurable influence in shaping the production of contemporary artistic voices. Fluctuating between violent reformism and periods of political conservatism, China itself is at the centre of virtually all of its own creative dialogue. The Chinese cultural identity has become the product of tensile oppositions: past and present, empowerment and disinheritance, compliance and rebellion. Investigating the complex chronology of Chinese contemporary history reveals certain moments of art historical intrigue. It is here, where we may locate the intersection of art and politics, the specific instances at which voice confronts power: Mao's Cultural Revolution and its reverberations, the protests of Tiananmen Square, and capitalist reformation. The artist's voice must always be formed within an artistic discourse; it reflects upon an aesthetic continuum. Herein, an inextricable link is drawn between tradition and identity.

Tradition holds an intrinsic resonance in discussions of Chinese modernity, indeed to divest the nation from its history is to obscure realities. As such, any observation of the artist's voice, the aesthetic of reaction, must too be a contemplation of tradition, its performance, implications and mythologies. Concentrating on image production after 1966, this analysis will endeavour to configure the artist's voice as a force that engages with authority through the mechanics of tradition; a formal and ideological impulse.

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THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION (1966-1979)

'The symbols that highlight modern Chinese art' [1]

From the early adoption of communism, official art was assimilated with the Soviet model of Social Realism, a result of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance in 1950. Artistic forms were endowed with purpose, a mode captured by the great murals of the 50s, and explosion of woodblock propaganda. The fever for neutering vernacular idiosyncrasy in provincial art, aided by the concurrent degradation of higher forms (deemed 'bourgeois spiritual pollution'[2]) saw the inception of a single standard, popularised as New Year Painting. Trends in artistic development from 1949 can be simplified as a prequel to what would be fully manifested during the Cultural Revolution.

Art produced between 1966 and 1976, from the start of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution until his death, reflected China's vehement self-suppression of 'feudal' intellectualism more than in any other period before or since. The 'Decade of Catastrophe' condemned 'pluralist creative visions'[3] breeding a singular artistic direction; the reflection of a contemporary revolutionary ideology. Artists were castigated and ancient forms, especially ink painting, victim to ruthless political iconoclasm. Mao's doctrine consigned artistic production to propaganda purposes and limited subject matter exclusively to the Eight Model Operas – pseudo-moralistic works engineered to serve the communist ideology and purge feudalism from the arts.

Tradition, understood as a visual quality, was forcibly smothered under Mao. The characteristics which developed: 'red, bright and vivid'[4] or 'redness, glory, and light'[5]– reduced art of this period to a formula of false optimism. *Follow Closely Chairman Mao's Great Strategic Plan,* 1968 (fig. 1) is an archetypal example of such practices. 'Not so much a political leader, but a god or a Buddha'[6], the work by an anonymous hand exudes a farcical grandeur. Borrowing figuration from Socialist Realism, Mao rises from the swelling proletariat of red. Although a theoretical rejection of tradition, the influence of antiquated doctrines, perhaps below consciousness, is crucial to the construction of the work. Flattened planes of lurid colour, use of white void space and the value of calligraphy, evidenced in

[1] L. Ci, *Chinese Painting* (Cambridge, 2010), 163.
[2] A. Weiwei, 'The Multiple Predicaments and Upturns of Chinese Contemporary Art' in (eds) B. Fibicher & M. Frehner, *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, (Ostfildern, 2005), 13-14.
[3] M. Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China: 1949-1984* (Hong Kong, 1998), 169.
[4] *Ibid*.
[5] Ci, *Chinese Painting*, 156.
[6] Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, 148.

Mao's clutched brush, motion a reliance upon consecrated iconography. An aesthetic in transition, the artist rescinds tradition, yet is unable to perform without it, perhaps telling of greater disunities.

Zhou Shuqiao's *Hunan Communist Group*, c.1970 (fig. 2), illustrates the Chinese manner of cultural adoption. Utilising Last Supper iconography the work bears 'striking similarities to European religious painting'[7]. Compositionally, a young Mao stands elevated as the head of an apex, citing the practices of western history painting as manifest in Ingres or Delacroix. Galikowski claims that only the 'portrait of Marx on the wall and the pile of scattered political tracts [...] tell us that this is not a depiction of a Christian Saviour.'[8] Embodying absolute perfection in official art, the work is prototypical in its abject refusal of the antiquated voice. Succeeding the expressive hand is the new tradition of Chinese realism, an optical vocabulary which alternates between official exaltation and condemnation restlessly into the millennium.

As a conceptual purge, traditional mediums were still appropriate if applied with a message of modernity, industry and propaganda. Whilst reducing the artistic liberties of the followers of old schools, the Cultural Revolution can also be credited with providing an extraordinary platform for the dissemination of image. Artistic production became an industry itself governed by the necessity to achieve high targets.[9] Hierarchy and opportunity unbridled by class prejudice bred a hypercompetitive environment and called for dynamic maximums within the limits of the framework that the Cultural Revolution imposed. One such work, *Fire Trees, Silver Flowers, The Sky Never Darkens* by Chen Shifa, Xie Zhiguang, Xu Zhiwen, Yan Guoli and Zhang Guiming, c.1972 (fig. 3) exists to defy claims of total artistic castration during the Cultural Revolution. A tribute to the collaborative murals of the 1950s, like Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue's *This Land So Rich in Beauty,* 1959, a sense of epic romanticism glorifies industry, assimilating machinery with natural majesty. Agriculture is rejected as an outmoded component of the Nationalist machine. Even the poetry of the work's title adopts a scheme of quasi-spiritual beautification. The visual practices of tradition remained distinct. The work was a new composition of elements already known; flying white, handscroll narrative direction and active brushstrokes to convey energy. Activist criticism deems this a style of 'weasels giving birth to rats – each generation worse than the last'.[10] However, as an engineered movement we should understand that the works which gained national

[7] *Ibid*., 147.
[8] *Ibid*., 148.
[9] *Ibid*., 81.
[10] Weiwei, 'The Multiple Predicaments', 13.

consumption were the greatest artistic expressions achievable given the climate of restrictions. The voice is operating successfully within the compress of limitation.

The campaign of Revolutionary Realism was not met without derision. Ink painting had been the most revered form in China for over one thousand years[11] and older generations, including academicians and credited artists, refused to abandon its practice as easily as the indoctrinated youth. Subject to torture and humiliation, these artist's works - which did not reflect the progressive politic - were exhibited as Black Paintings in official shows of degenerate art. Jiang Qing and other radicals chose to read 'political dissent and dissatisfaction' into these traditionalist pieces.[12] The painterly voice was either progressive or traditional, the two being officially disunited.

Huang Yongyu's *The Winking Owl*, c.1972 (fig. 4) became the flagship of the Black Painting denouncement. The work conforms to Xie He's 6th century *Six Principles of Chinese Painting*, deriving its ideology from the literati schools in an act divergent from the Cultural Revolution. 'Spirit Resonance' and 'Correspondence to the Object' are elements which drive the successes of the work, not Jiang Qing's Model Operas. Enduring 'months of criticism sessions at the Central Academy of Fine Art'[13], Huang was ostracised for his work which was read superficially as a political allegory. Contemporary criticism now understands the owl as an ill-omen in China, attaching pessimism to its character; it is also true that the owl symbol resonates with western ideas of wisdom[14] and is perceived as irreverent in its confrontation of the viewer. Eugene Y. Wang's study compounds these speculations: 'the overwhelming central frontality of the owl, which claims the viewer's attention, makes explicit the painting's impulse to communicate with the viewer.'[15] The owl, a voice of intellectualism, modestly comments on the 'complexities and absurdities of life.'[16] Extending Confucian sensibility, the artist consciously avoids the attack of Mao's doctrines. Indeed, his colophon to a 1978 version meditates: 'How many people's faces this bird has gazed upon!'[17] The threat of Black Painting, and by extension, the traditionalist voice simply lay in its detached observation of the contemporary.

[11] J. Tompkins & S. Valera, 'Art and China's Revolution', *Asia Society,* 2008. Available: <http://sites.asiasociety.org/chinarevo/>. [Accessed 1.3.13]
[12] Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China,* 160.
[13] *Ibid*., 161.
[14] *Ibid*., 161.
[15] E.Y. Wang, 'The Winking Owl: Visual Effect and Its Art Historical Thick Description', *Critical Inquiry,* 26.3 (2000), 440.
[16] Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China,* 162.
[17] *Ibid*.

Art of the Revolution had to promote the future, not examine the present. Whilst Mao instigated a rejection of tradition, this rejection is still reducible to an engagement. A stifled voice often garners the most attention; the artist's attenuation can then be received as valuable.

WESTERN EXPOSURE (1979-1989)

'artists first, China second.'[18]

In 1976, after the arrest of the Gang of Four, artistic production was reduced to a state of confused ennui. It wasn't until the economic reforms of 1979, which opened the People's Republic up to a global sphere of political and cultural discourses, that art was re-engaged. For the first time since before the Civil War, exposure to western art practices was unfettered and without official stigmas. Responding to new freedoms, the decade that followed saw artistic experimentation accelerate, with multiple movements vying simultaneously and a tempestuous relationship between past and present kept the art world in flux. Elements of Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and Hyperrealism replaced the hybrid of officialdom, a grotesque of both Folk Art and Revolutionary Realism. Intellectualist society was openly in mourning for the tragedies and violence of the Cultural Revolution under Mao.

Dissidence had been all but suffocated and a new visual vocabulary was required to respond to national grievance. Scar Art was a carnal and pragmatic response to a developing disassociation with, or even denial of, immediate histories. Detached from the institutional mainstream, Scar Art refuted its own 'Chineseness' and consciously rejected Chinese painterly traditions – subject, technique, medium - ascribing them to an outmoded, shameful past. A prototype for the movement, Luo Zhongli's *Father,* 1980 (fig. 5) is a rejection of the artificialities of the Cultural Revolution. The deification of Mao is parodied through the stoic provincial labourer, a symbol of the true proletariat, elevated by monumental canvas size (227x154cm), quasi-spiritual title and graphic photorealism, in tribute to Chuck Close.[19] Luo attacks the personality cult and pseudo-religious ritual that surrounded Mao, reflecting on the exploitation of icons within policy.[20] The audacious portrayal of poverty unsettled officialdom. Allegedly, the Sichuan School of Fine Arts 'insisted on the inclusion of the ballpoint pen behind the figure's left ear'[21], symptomatic of an institutional micro-effort to

[18] X. Zhen, 'A Few Words...' in *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China,* curated by S. Groom, K. Smith and X. Zhen (Liverpool, 2007), 27.
[19] C. Clunas, *Art in China*, (Oxford, 1997), 217.
[20] Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, 145.
[21] Clunas, *Art in China*, 217.

industrialise the archaic. As evidence of residual tensions, stigmatising the traditional – here in subject, not application – the addition of the pen exhibits the chronic resonance of Cultural Revolution doctrines both in art and institution.

Filtering the sentimental and instinctive qualities of Scar Art, Stream of Life art formalised chaotic ideologies into two distinct principles. The movement was to reject mythologised heroes who fuelled the lie of the Revolution, and embrace the ordinary individual. A return to existentialist philosophy, Stream of Life art reintroduced landscape as a traditional means to 'achieve universal harmony with nature'[22]. A compound of classical ink painting and American Abstract Expressionism, paintings like Wu Guanzhong's *Pine Spirit*, 1984, embrace both antiquity and Taoist spirituality, somewhat diverging from Scar Art and its aggressive modernity. Wu applies familiar calligraphic techniques; the boneless method and a flying white, while an abstract narrative leads the eye, referent to the handscroll medium. The work aligns more closely with the Literati schools than Maoist academies. A marked difference to Scar Art, whereby Stream of Life art can be understood as the voice of traditional philosophy, adhering to the Confucian principle 'that a work of art should be "full of yearning, but not wound the heart."'[23]

Both modes were supplanted by the '85 Movement, a multi-disciplinary phenomenon which surrounded the 'most intense discussion of culture since the early twentieth century.'[24] An evocation of Surrealism, this incarnation relied on the appropriation of the institutionally taught Revolutionary Realism manner, translated in new metaphysical compositions and symbols. Compounding the self-reflective habit of Chinese art, artist Li Xianting proposes that 'the painting coming out of the contemporary Chinese art scene has developed from a "new tradition" of Chinese realism.'[25] Zhang Qun and Meng Luding's *In the New Era: Revelations of Adam and Eve*, 1985 (fig. 6) exhibits a corrosion of Chinese spirituality in the presence of Christian iconography, not unlike in Zhou's *Hunan Communist Group*. The whole work exudes a western infection: classically modelled nudes cite the Venus Pudica; the apple recalls Original Sin, and the aesthetics attest to a stylistic debt owed to André Breton et al. Nevertheless, the artists' voice is their own. At the foot of the image are the Dunhuang Caves, the source of Chinese cultural identity, an allegorical platform upon which the image is constructed. Here we might locate the artistic voice between celebration and shameful reverence.

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[22] Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, 201.
[23] L. Xianting, "Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture" in (eds) B. Fibicher & M. Frehner, *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection* (Ostfildern, 2005), 25.
[24] G. Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Massachusetts, 2011), 101.
[25] Xianting, 'Contemporary Chinese Art', 25.

The ’85 Movement inspired intellectual endeavour beyond the visual; in philosophy, history, culture and religion re-evaluation accorded with contemporary standards.[26] The artist’s voice seized influence previously unseen in the Republic. With the increasing exploitation of foreign trade as a vehicle for economic growth certain aspects of capitalist practice became essential to Chinese politics. Deng Xiaoping famously remarked ‘no matter if it is a white cat or a black cat; as long as it can catch mice, it is a good cat.’[27] A philosophy to transcend politics and art, China became secondary to the artist himself, and his vision for the canvas.

TIANANMEN AND IDENTITY (1989-2000)

‘Metaphor, interpretation, and specious, deliberately misrepresentative judgements’[28]

All notions of contemporary Chinese art were revised in 1989. The events of this year; namely the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing, and the Tiananmen Square protests, were catalytic in the further reformation of a Chinese voice. Curated by Gao Minglu, the *China/Avante-Garde* exhibition was the first and only appearance of an avant-garde collective at the National Gallery.[29] Indebted to an increasingly capitalist economy, the exhibition drew inevitable criticisms of catering to the bourgeoisie, a familiar Cultural Revolution adage. The reality was in sharp contradiction, the exhibition was ascribed the title of ‘Small Tian’anmen Square’[30] a reference in hindsight to the actively progressive ideologies that endured beyond its closure, later embodied by the Cynical Realism and Political Pop movements.

The Tiananmen Square protests, specifically the June Fourth Incident, were the ultimate reaction to the compounding of social tensions: financial inflation, waning career prospects, a plague of political corruption, and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. China’s values were scrutinised both domestically and internationally. Reassessing the value of communism, and with it ‘Chineseness’, questions were asked: what was the Chinese identity, did it matter, or even exist? Should it be embraced or rejected? Art in the next decade would attempt to define ‘Chineseness’ through its inextricable link with tradition and by extension, the complex past.

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[26] *Ibid*., 101.
[27] A Sichuan proverb
[28] Weiwei, ‘The Multiple Predicaments’, 14.
[29] Ma, M., ‘Memories of 1989’. Artzine China. Available: <http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid252_en.html> [Accessed 4.4.12]
[30] Minglu, *Total Modernity*, 154.

Fig. 1. Anonymous, *Follow Closely Chairman Mao's Great Strategic Plan*, 1968. Gouache. Reproduced from M. Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China: 1949-1984* (Hong Kong, 1998), fig. 14. [N.B. Every effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce Figs. 1-7,]

Fig. 2. Zhou Shuqiao, *Hunan Communist Group,* c. 1970. Oil on canvas. Reproduced from Galikowski, fig. 13.

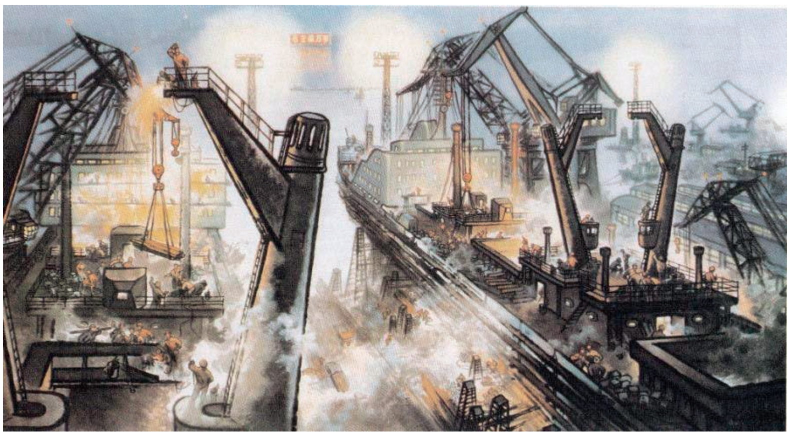

Fig. 3. Chen Shifa et al., *Fire Trees, Silver Flowers, the Sky Never Darkens ,* c. 1972. Ink and Colour. Reproduced from Galikowski, fig. 28.

Fig. 4. Huang Yongyu, *Winking Owl,*1978, after original c.1972. Ink and Colour. Reproduced from Galikowski, fig. 23.

Fig. 5. Luo Zhongli, *Father*, 1980, Oil on canvas. 227x154cm, Chinese National Art Gallery, Beijing. Reproduced from Galikowski, fig. 31.

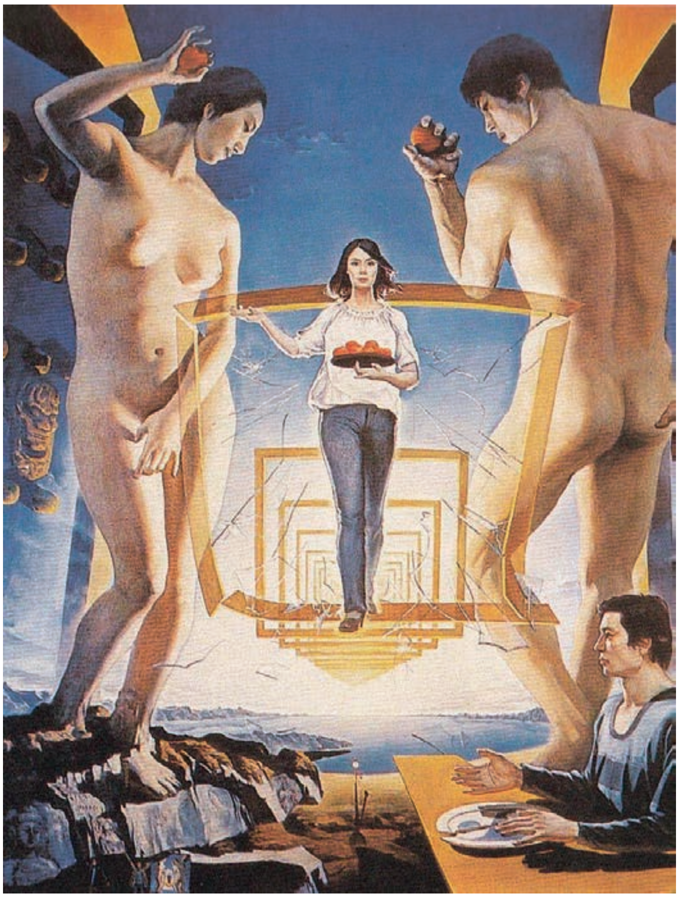

Fig. 6. Zhang Qun and Meng Luding, *In the New Era: Revelations of Adam and Eve*, 1985. Oil on canvas. Reproduced from Galikowski, fig.40

Fig. 7. Zhang Xiaogang, *A Big Family*, 1995. Oil on canvas. 179x229cm. Courtesy Saatchi Gallery, ©Zhang Xiaogang.

Fig. 8. Wang Guangyi, *Chanel No. 5*, 2001. Oil on canvas. 2 panels, 300x200cm each. Courtesy © Sigg Collection, Switzerland

Fig. 9. WOKmedia, *New Breed*, 2006. 69 partly broken upscale porcelain eggs, painted with ink and colour. ~35x28cm each. Courtesy of WOKmedia

Fig. 10. Xia Xiaowan, *Chinese ancient landscape of snowy mountain and hut*, 2008. Glass pencils, 14 tinted glass panes, 6mm each. 173x122x73cm. Goetz Collection, Munich; courtesy Galerie Urs Meile

Fig. 11. Liu Bolin, *Hiding in the City: No. 89 – Forbidden City,* 2010. Photographic print. Courtesy of Eli Klein Fine Art, © Liu Bolin.

Fig. 12: Ai Weiwei, *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* (12 bronze sculptures, ~120cm each + column elevation, 2011). Creative Commons, Eric Huang.

Amongst the first to respond artistically to the violence of protest was Chen Danqing, formerly associated with provincial new realism. His diptychs and triptychs, painted between June 1989 and 1995, paired images of graphic violence from Tiananmen with the exploits of the western youth, salacious nightclub culture, and performance. Linked only by the act of pairing, the artist sacrifices his critical voice in order to disturb the viewer who must discern some connection. Examining the void between Chinese suffering and the depthless concerns of the West, the series can be understood as a solemn plea for global empathy.

Cynical Realism was the natural progression of the Chinese oil painting in the 1990s. Meditative and often ethereal subject matter rejected the violence of recent history. Artists like Zhang Xiaogang and his melancholy Happy Families, or Fang Lijun, whose popi-style series of bald heads understood insanity 'as a method of intellectual self-liberation,'[31]dominated portraiture and figurative painting.

Zhang Xiaogang's *A Big Family,* 1995 (fig. 7) unsettles the traditional family portrait. Citing the late commercial availability of photography, pulverised charcoal and watercolours are used 'borrowing the technique of applying wet paint in the delicate *gongbi* style of traditional ink painting, to produce smooth, intense coloration in a kitsch style.'[32] The title of the work, *A Big Family*, plays on multiple interpretations: an allusion to the breaking of the one-child policy (mother and two children), a manifestation of canvas size (which recalls murals of the 50s), or a perverted irony in the absence of a paternal figure. Cast in an enigmatic soft-focus, the image is centred upon the figure marked in red, a tacit reference to the Red Guard. Fragmentary line interrupts the image, reminiscent of aged film; the canvas becomes an ethereal document of some reality. The artist is again voiceless, the presenter of evidence, not the social commentator.

Conversely, Wang Guangyi's 'Great Castigation' series, from the early 1990s onwards, relies on a critical parody of Cultural Revolution propaganda to neuter the excesses of commercialisation and political hysteria. A crux of the Political Pop[33] movement, the artist fuses western branding with striking, gestural woodblock simplicity, set against a tireless red. *Chanel No.5,* 2001 (fig. 8) is a disfigurement of the familiar. The eponymous fragrance illustrates a terrible commoditisation of the modern global consciousness. Therein the presentation of four heroic youths clutching Mao's *Little Red Book*, identifies the political artefact as an equally impotent commodity. The artist deconstructs consumerism and

[31] Xianting, 'Contemporary Chinese Art', 26.
[32] *Ibid*.
[33] C. Heinrich, 'Wang Guangyi' in (eds) B. Fibicher & M. Frehner, *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, (Ostfildern, 2005), 68.

communism through the pseudo-icon. Wang deliberately entangles the work in metaphor and imagery, a means of distancing and distracting, in the 1990s confrontation of realities is still indirect, complicit in documentation. The artist's voice observes social illnesses without posting treatment.

Increasingly, we witness a critical empowerment contingent on an engagement with tradition. The attenuated artist, so afflicted by the events at Tiananmen Square, must rearrange his aesthetic impulses, formulating a vocabulary which reacts specifically to affirm China's identity. The artist's voice will deliver this vocabulary, a composite of artistic systems embedded deeply within the nation's cultural conscience.

'CHINESENESS' NOW (2000-2013)

'A special Chinese quality will change with time'[34]

In the new millennium the definitive value of tradition remains unconsolidated. Prior to Uli Sigg's 2005 exhibition, *Mahjong*, the question was posed to featured artists '"Chineseness" – is there such a thing?' The responses collected show little boundary to the extremes of opinion on where Chineseness and symbiotically, tradition, lie in the production and consumption of art. Wang Guangyi places total value on understanding histories and tradition, musing 'artistic expression arises from the uniting of an artist with the macro-concept of a nation'[35], whilst the Luo Brothers disregard any function of artistic origins, resolving that 'contemporary Chinese art is a clone of Western art. Only in being painted by a Chinese artist does it have a Chinese quality!'[36]

Disassembling Chineseness as a physical quality, installation art collective WOKmedia (Julie Mathias and Wolfgang Kaeppner) work via the appropriation of a faux-traditional Chinese identity. Their practice asks who can create art which is Chinese, examining China as a facet of a wider global realm, beyond even a migrant or diaspora population. Abstracting the definition of nationality, WOKmedia are critically at odds with artists like Xu Zhen who argues '"China" should not be just a term.'[37] In collaboration with the Contrasts Gallery of Shanghai, *Made in China* (wooden furniture, white lacquer, 2006) is a furniture ensemble embedded with disfigured wooden toys. Emerging from 'childhood memories' the toys are

[34] U. Sigg *et al*., '"Chineseness" – Is There Such a Thing?' in (eds) B. Fibicher & M. Frehner, *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection* (Ostfildern, 2005), 52.
[35] *Ibid*.
[36] *Ibid*., 51.
[37] Zhen, 'A Few Words...', 25.

allegedly ‘invading antique Chinese furniture [and] starting to threaten their traditional past.’[38] A western interpretation of contemporary factory culture, tradition is understood, perhaps wrongly, as an archaic commodity (a bench or a table), and not as an evolving ideological design.

WOKmedia’s *New Breed,* 2006 (fig. 9) ‘consists of 69 partly broken upscale porcelain eggs [...] suspended from the ceiling and strewn on the ground.’[39] Symptomatic of Western beliefs that tradition is a style, not a continuum, inside each egg is a traditional ink painting. The installation claims that the breaking eggs are the artistic liberation of a once entombed Chinese manner. The work does, however, successfully understand China’s relationship with tradition as that of suppression and release. Although produced in China, it is difficult to attain sense of the political complexities that are subtly evident in works of greater authenticity. Artist and dissident Ai Weiwei presents such issues in his essay ‘The Multiple Predicaments and Upturns of Chinese Contemporary Art’, asserting ‘without a firm grasp of China’s history, its current unique predicament and relationship with the West, it is difficult to gain any profound understanding of contemporary Chinese culture.’[40]

‘The assets that have accumulated during the long history of continuous development are unique.’[41] Reading tradition as fluid and ‘continuous’, Xia Xiaowan’s spatial paintings are evidence of art that is both reflective and progressive. *Chinese ancient landscape of snowy mountain and hut,* 2008 (fig. 10) is ‘an experiment in which several principle concepts in realistic painting have been transformed in both form and function.’[42] Xia’s sculpture layers panes of glass creating a dynamic ‘traditional’ image that ‘requires efforts in the fields of art and science as well.’[43] Influenced by calligraphic principles – indication of form through minimal line and a striking adoption of white space – the work is a synthesis of technological craft and ancient aesthetic values, Confucian in thought and antique-modern in form.

Informing photography as a medium, Liu Bolin examines Chineseness and the role of tradition through a conceptual framework. The ‘Hiding in the City’ series involves self-portraiture in which the background of the shot is painted precisely onto the artist who becomes an invisible subject. In *No. 89 - Forbidden City*, 2010 (fig. 11) Liu is consumed by the imperial architecture behind him, itself a symbol of historical censorship; appropriately

[38] WOKmedia, *Made in China*, May 23, 2007, Available: <http://www.wokmedia.com/?p=10> [Accessed 1.3.13]
[39] W. Shaoqiang, *et al*., *Installation Art* (Berkeley, 2011), 22.
[40] Weiwei, ‘The Multiple Predicaments’, 14.
[41] U. Sigg & M. Frehner, ‘Access to China’ in (eds) B. Fibicher & M. Frehner *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection* (Ostfildern, 2005), 20.
[42] Xia Xiaowan, *On Creating Glass Painting*, (Beijing, 2006), 1.
[43] *Ibid*.

coinciding with Google's 2010 decision to stop self-censoring. Indications of identity are suggested only by the play of light and shadow. The series investigates the voice in China, particularly amongst a swelling population; an increasingly popular theme, tackled by Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds,* 2010, amongst others. The work stands in the socio-political tradition of art as remedy, the artist seeks 'a spiritual redress in their defiance of authority.'[44] Born of personal experience, the forcible destruction of his Beijing studio in 2005, the series serves to silently protest, much like the stoicism conveyed in Luo Zhongli's *Father.*

Most recently officials have demanded the removal of live surveillance feeds, which had enabled the constant procurement of his whereabouts by his supporters.[45] Ai's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads,* 2011 (fig. 12) is a recreation of the 12 heads constructed for Emperor Qianlong by European Jesuits in the 18th century, which in 1860, during the second Opium War, were lost when the palace was looted. A conscious irony of design exists in their contemporary placement at Somerset House – former home to the Royal Academy - wherein the originals, modelled in a strictly European style have been *sinicized*[46] by history. Even without physical alteration, the installation is still presented as almost macabre and spiritually foreign; a conjecture based purely on an ideological reversal, proving that the modern *Chinese* voice is a psychological value above all else.

Applied to both art and politics, the Chinese cultural identity can now perhaps be best described through collector Uli Sigg's own analysis:

> [I]f there's one constant that one could call specifically Chinese, it is probably this capacity for taking on board the most attractive elements of other cultures and transforming them in such a way that they are absorbed, improved, bent into shape [...] Chineseness" is therefore not a certain paper, a particular style, drawing a line, or painting a landscape, but this characteristic of absorption and assimilation.'[47]

In the twenty-first century, the Chinese artist's voice is empowered not by a specific medium or methodology, but in its ability to absorb and assimilate. Understood as a continuum, the tradition impulse transforms constantly in what it reflects, yet it never ceases to rely on a conditioning from new and ancient histories.

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[44] A. Celii, "Hiding in the City with Liu Bolin", *TIME*, March 20, 2012. Available: <http://lightbox.time.com/2012/03/20/liu-bolin/> [Accessed 1.3.13]
[45] T. Branigan, 'Ai Weiwei ordered to switch off studio webcams', *The Guardian*, April 5, 2012. Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global/2012/apr/05/ai-weiwei-switches-off-studio-webcams> [Accessed 1.3.13]
[46] 'Sinicize' (verb): to make Chinese in character or bring under Chinese influence.
[47] Sigg, 'Access to China', 20.

Given China's complex discourse with its own historical making, we can understand the artist's voice to be symptomatic of an infinite dialogue with conceptions of tradition, and therefore the notion of 'Chineseness' itself. Tradition can be described through physicality or through philosophy: a particular brushstroke or a Confucian principle. Where unification is sought however, we will observe an ever present aesthetic of reaction, one which pervades our optical experience and perhaps always will. While the artist's voice may be conditioned by authorities, ideological or institutional, it can never be divested from the discourses from which it was conceived. Therein lays the eternal impetus of the creator, bound forever to the discussion of China itself.

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