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Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition: Towards a Critique of International and Indigenous Perspectives on the Significance of Contemporary Chinese Art

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Reviewing international and indigenous perspectives on the significance of contemporary Chinese art, Paul Gladston argues for the necessity of new theoretical paradigms.

Modernism is predicated on a belief in the necessity of a breaking with tradition as part of the development of a rationalist progressive society. This belief informs not only conceptions of revolutionary change associated with Marxist-Hegelian thought but also, to differing degrees, liberal notions of incremental social reform. In contrast, post-structuralism seeks to question the possibility of such a breaking from tradition by demonstrating ways in which traces of past or latent discourses are reworked as part of the construction of a present sense of modernity and how this reworking problematises all notions of outright historical continuity and rupture. Post-structuralism can thus be understood to have suspended a conventional rationalist distinction between tradition and modernity as part of a sequential unfolding of pasts, presents and futures, asserting instead shifting networks or constellations of discursive signification wherein neither tradition nor modernity, by dint of their deconstructive differing-deferring (différance)\(^1\) from and to one another, are ever made wholly present.

For those who have embraced such thinking (either implicitly or explicitly) as part of a now internationally dominant postmodernist critique of modernism, tradition and, by extension, differences in cultural identity are considered to be performative constructs rather than actual essences – constructs that, in spite of their perceived continuity, are open to persistent re-contextualisation and re-motivation in the face of spatial (synchronic) and temporal (diachronic) shifts in social relationships and sites of activity (for example, as a result of cultural translation as part of contemporary globalisation).\(^2\) Likewise, modernity is no longer considered to have an identity distinct from the performative vagaries of tradition. Tradition and modernity are thus both revealed as discontinuous and persistently deferred (tradition always-already in a constructed state of becoming and modernity never quite in accordance with the Baudelairean ‘just now’) with the fabric of each consequently shot through with shifting traces of the other.

In spite of the international dominance of discourses critical of modernism, the post-structuralist turn in thinking on the relationship between modernity and tradition is not universally upheld. Owing to perceived affinities between the critical immanence of linguistic post-structuralism and the universalising assumptions of western...
modernism, there has been a tendency within many non-western cultures to reject the former in favour of resistant forms of cultural exceptionalism. Such exceptionalist thinking seeks to contrast western and non-western outlooks and does so through the hypostatising (that is to say, the representation of abstractions as concrete realities) of supposedly essential differences in cultural tradition.

In recent years emerging discourses related to the concept of ‘contemporaneity’ have attempted to extend post-structuralist criticality to encompass differing performative and essentialist conceptions of the relationship between modernity and tradition, giving legitimacy to both as loci of criticality. These emerging discourses have extended the deconstructive asynchrony of post-colonialist thinking as a resistance to asymmetrical western colonialist-imperialist relations of dominance by asserting the multi-dimensional (spatially differentiated) nature of experiences and representations of modernity. As a result of this distinctly spatial turn in thinking, previously ascendant post-colonialist conceptions of the shifting hybridity of cultural identity and of cultural tradition (which, following the example of Derridean différance, assert the pervasive uncertainty of space-time relations as signified by the term ‘Third Space’) have begun to give way to a seemingly intractable (and, in effect as part of contemporaneity, theoretically sanctioned) stand-off between mutually resistant critical positionings. While contemporaneity has sought to broaden the spectrum of cultural criticism beyond the perceived universalism of post-colonialist deconstructivism, it has done so through the ceding of any clearly articulated mechanism for reflexive contestation between differing critical outlooks.

One of the starker instances of the recent upholding of cultural exceptionalism as a resistance to post-structuralism is that of dominant cultural discourses within the People’s Republic of China (PRC), where since the mid-1990s there have been ever-more confident assertions of national cultural identity and of the persistence of indigenous traditions in resistance to the perceived iniquities of western (post)modernity. In this article I shall examine these assertions critically in relation to the development of contemporary art (dangdai yishu) in China since the late 1970s as well as the relationship of that development to nationalist-essentialist discourses on the relationship between tradition and modernity which have remained dominant as part of the building of the post-imperial Chinese nation-state since the early twentieth century.

The reassertion of rationalist modes of critique has, of course, not been limited solely to non-western contexts. In recent years, western commentators including Claire Bishop and Alain Badiou have sought to challenge the perceived abstractness of institutionalised deconstructivist discourses by arguing for a return to more obviously dialectical and/or materialistic forms of critical cultural thinking and practice. In Bishop’s case this line of argument has been supported with references to contemporary artworks by, among others, Santiago Sierra, such as Workers Who Cannot be Paid (2000) and Wall Enclosing a Space (2003), which Bishop argues instill a distinctly antagonist-critical relationship between viewers and instances of social inequality/relations of dominance.

In this article I shall argue that while present-day assertions of Chinese exceptionalism are open to interpretation as a form of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Kwame Anthony Appiah, among others, have referred to as ‘strategic essentialism’, resistant to the persistence of western colonialism-imperialist relations of dominance, in practice, such assertions are wedded to eminently questionable nationalist discourses used to underpin the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s neo-Confucian upholding of the idea of a ‘harmonious’ society. Such discourses continue to be upheld by the CCP not only as an ideological counterweight to the profoundly destabilising effects of China’s precipitous programme of social and economic reforms since the
late 1970s but also as a cornerstone of its own claims to political legitimacy as an effective focus for governance. I shall also argue that seemingly deconstructive anti-nationalist approaches adopted by some Chinese commentators are because of localised restrictions on open resistance to governmental authority, effectively made complicit with dominant governmental nationalist discourses.

I shall then go on to conclude that the multiple contradictions inherent to this complex discursive positioning point towards the critical necessity of new theoretical paradigms oscillating between those currently envisaged in China and in an international context; paradigms that depart from an often highly abstract and uncritical contemporaneity as well as complicit national-essentialist discourses in China in favour of a turn to a more granular and pervasively critical assessment of differing cultural perspectives on tradition and modernity.

**Tradition, modernity and the development of modern art in China**

China’s relationship with modernity has always been a complex and conflicting one. As the art historian David Clarke has indicated, since the deposing of the last Chinese emperor Pu Yi in 1911 and the establishing of republican rule under the provisional presidency of Sun Yat-sen in 1912, China has sought to embrace modernising influences from outside as part of the construction of the modern Chinese nation-state while constantly fearing an uprooting of its own long-established civilisation-specific identity. As a consequence, modern Chinese art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has, in all its forms, shuttled uncertainly and inconclusively between a pursuit of modernity and an adherence to tradition.

As part of the reforming New Culture and May Fourth movements of the early twentieth century, Chinese artists – some of whom had travelled to study in Europe and Japan – began to appropriate a range of technical, stylistic and theoretical influences from Western modernist art. This appropriation, which took place against the background of earlier borrowings from the Western academic tradition initiated by European missionaries during the seventeenth century, resulted in an effective division of Chinese art into three categories for the purposes of public exhibition: ‘modernist’, ‘traditional’ and ‘modern-literati’ (modern-traditional). Examples of artworks belonging to the former category include paintings produced by members of the Shanghai-based Storm Society, who, in 1931, published a manifesto aligning the group with Western modernist movements such as fauvism and dada; while examples belonging to the latter include photographs by Long Chin San that combine modern techniques with imagery more usually associated with traditional Chinese *shan-shui* (‘mountains and water’) ink and brush landscape painting. The third category of traditional art, also known as *guo hua* (national art), encompasses works produced in a traditional manner that were from the end of the nineteenth century upheld in self-conscious resistance to the by then increasing impact of western visual culture on wider Chinese society as part of western colonialism-imperialism.

By the late 1930s the early flowering of modernist art within Chinabecame subject to the pervasively destabilising effects of two simultaneous military conflicts: one between government forces headed by China’s republican president Chang Kai-shek and an insurgent revolutionary communist army under the leadership of Mao Zedong; and another pitting Chinese republicans and communists against invading Japanese imperial forces. Consequently, from the end of the 1930s through to the establishing of the communist People’s Republic of Chinain 1949, the development of modernist art in Chinawas heavily disrupted. Nevertheless, the influence of Western modernism can be seen to have persisted in relation to the making of expressionist style paintings produced by the artist Huang Xinbo, which present a distinctly bleak view of contemporaneous events within China.
Shortly after the founding of the PRC, Chinese government officials issued a directive that all forms of art should reflect the position of the masses and serve the revolutionary aims of China’s ruling Communist Party. Throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s traditional modes of Chinese art-making were encompassed by this directive, thereby instituting a relatively pluralistic landscape of artistic production and public artistic display that saw the making of socialist realist artworks strongly influenced by the cultural policies of the Soviet Union alongside the use of traditional Chinese gong-bi and shui-mo ink and brush techniques as a vehicle for the representation of revolutionary subjects. During the late 1950s the plurality of official Chinese art was further amplified by a call from Mao Zedong for the use of Chinese folk art motifs and techniques as an expression of a specifically Chinese revolutionary identity. This call, which went on to contribute to a nationalist/anti-imperialist rejection of Western political, economic and cultural influences initiated in the wake of the disastrous events of the Great Leap Forward of 1959–60, saw an extension of official Chinese art into areas that significantly compromised any exclusive relationship between revolutionary ideology and the decidedly high-art methods of western academic realism as well as Chinese literati (that is to say, Confucian scholar-gentry) ink and brush painting.

The coexistence of Western and traditional Chinese art as part of the CCP’s revolutionary project was, however, short-lived. During the decade-long Cultural Revolution (1966–76) traditional Chinese culture was violently suppressed in an attempt to force China into a decisive revolutionary breaking with its past. This suppression resulted in the widespread destruction of traditional artefacts not only by Red Guards loyal to Mao but also by private owners fearful of political persecution. At the same time, there was a violent suppression of ‘bourgeois’ modernist art, which led to the destruction of many works of art produced as part of the early flowering of modernism within China before 1949.

Public revolutionary art within China during the Cultural Revolution was not limited, however, to conventional works of representational socialist realism. Alongside paintings and sculptures in a Soviet-influenced academic style and posters representing revolutionary subjects in a highly graphic, cartoon-like style (which had become established as mainstays of Chinese revolutionary art during the 1950s), there were also dazibao (‘big character posters’) carrying revolutionary slogans and street performance events, which served as a focus for the dissemination of public information as well as denunciations of counter-revolutionary activity. Moreover, it would be wrong to assume that the production of art influenced by Western modernism had come to an abrupt halt during the Cultural Revolution. Not only was art of this sort produced in a clandestine manner during the early years of the Cultural Revolution (most notably by individuals who would later go on during the 1970s to form the unofficial No Name (Wu ming) Group of artists), by the mid-1970s it was being made and its associated techniques taught more or less openly outside official artistic circles.

**Contemporary art in China**

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the subsequent acceptance of Deng Xiaoping’s so-called policy of Opening and Reform (Gaige Kaifang) in 1978 (the starting point for China’s precipitous modernisation of the last three decades), there has been a radical rethinking of progressive modernity within the PRC, involving the reopening of China to outside economic and cultural influences as well as the reconstruction of space within the country for relatively autonomous forms of economic and cultural enterprise. As a result of this rethinking, Chinese artists have been able to develop forms of artistic practice that diverge from official strictures imposed during the time of the Cultural Revolution, by drawing openly on modern non-
Chinese and traditional Chinese cultural resources.

This divergence from official modes of production has arguably led to a return to the tripartite division of artistic production that prevailed within China during the early twentieth century in response to the ingress of modernising Western cultural influences. While officially supported forms of socialist realism persist, this once almost wholly dominant mode of artistic production has now been supplemented by three others: a return to traditional forms of Chinese art-making sometimes referred to again as guo-hua (‘national art’); an officially supported modern art that tends towards a rather anodyne formalist mixing of traditional Chinese and modern Western(ised) techniques; and a largely unofficial, though, in recent years, increasingly officially recognised, modern art known as Zhongguo dangdai yishu (‘Chinese contemporary art’) that draws strongly on the influence of Western(ised) modernism and international postmodernism.

Since its inception during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chinese contemporary art has been characterised by an overt use of images, attitudes and techniques appropriated from Western(ised) modernist and international postmodernist art. This appropriation imputes a strong sense of present modernity to Chinese contemporary art that distinguishes it sharply from traditional and to some extent more obviously culturally mixed forms of modern Chinese art. Chinese contemporary art, however, is not simply an extension of Western(ised) and international cultural influences. With varying degrees of openness, it also incorporates aspects of indigenous Chinese cultural thought and practice. Consider here, for example, Wang Guangyi’s Great Criticism series of paintings (early 1990s onwards), which combine stylistic influences taken from European and North American Pop Art with images associated with the poster art of the Cultural Revolution (fig.1). Consider also video installations by Yang Fudong, such as No Snow on the Broken Bridge 2006, which use techniques similar to those of Western filmmakers, such as Ingmar Bergman, in combination with imagery redolent of traditional Chinese shan-shui painting (fig.2). Chinese contemporary art can therefore be interpreted not only as an index of China’s recent entry into globalised modernity but also as a focus for localised reassertions of cultural identity, as well as reconstructions of tradition in the aftermath of the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution. Any searching analysis of contemporary Chinese art must therefore take into account its significance both in relation to established modernist/postmodernist artistic practice and resistant expressions of cultural ‘Chineseness’.
Given its inescapable cultural hybridity, how then might we interpret Chinese contemporary art? Within the context of an English-language-dominated international art world, contemporary Chinese art is widely considered to be a localised variant of postmodernism whose hybridising of differing cultural outlooks or modes of production has the potential to act as a focus for the critical deconstruction of supposedly authoritative meanings. Symptomatic of this international art world perspective is the persistent inclusion since the late 1980s of works of contemporary Chinese art in international survey exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta and the Sydney Biennale, whose curators have sought to uphold cultural hybridity in the visual arts – chiefly in light of influential critical writings by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha – as a deconstructive post-colonialist resistance to Western modernism’s orientalising belief in the historical...
Included among those who have sought to frame contemporary Chinese art as a vehicle for post-colonialist critique within an international context is a group of Chinese artists and curators living and working in Paris. One of the most high-profile members of this group is the artist Huang Yongping, who, since his move to France in 1989, has produced numerous sculptures, assemblages and installations that are, as Alex Farquharson made clear in promotional materials accompanying a 2011 exhibition of Huang’s work at Nottingham Contemporary, very much open to interpretation ‘as allegories for conflicts and convergences in traditions and beliefs under the influences of colonisation and globalisation’. One of Huang’s most ambitious works in this regard is *The Bat Project* 2004, a large-scale assemblage comprising an aircraft fuselage whose cockpit has been hung with the stuffed bodies of dead bats (fig.3). As such, this assemblage can be interpreted as a double-edged commentary on a collision that took place between a US surveillance plane (carrying a bat logo on its tail fin) and a Chinese fighter jet in disputed airspace near to the Chinese island of Hainan in 2001 – the bat being upheld conventionally as a symbol of dread within the US and of good luck within the PRC.

Another high-profile member of the Paris-based group is the curator and critic Hou Hanru, who has published a number of texts that seek to align post-colonialist discourse with aspects of traditional Chinese cultural thought and practice. Included among these is the essay ‘Entropy, Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions: A New Internationalism’, which looks towards Huang Yongping’s bringing together of collage-montage techniques historically associated with Western dada with traditional Chinese divinatory practices associated with the *Yi Ching* (Book of Changes) in works such as *Non-Expressive Painting* 1985, *Big Roulette* 1987 (fig.4) and *Small Portable Roulette* 1988 as something that ‘not only suggests a process of constant change in the universe, the duality and interconnectedness of necessity and chance, of the rational and irrational, culture and anti-culture, but also a strategy to launch “attacks” on the legitimacy of the West-centric monopoly in intellectual and everyday life’. The implication of Hou’s reading of Huang’s work is that non-rationalist aspects of traditional Chinese thought and practice associated with the *Yi Ching* can be understood to have presaged the conceptually uncertain outlook of Western(ised) deconstructivist postmodernism, thereby suspending any sense of the latter’s ascendancy over the former as part of the unfolding of modernity.
This discernibly deconstructivist view of the significance of Chinese contemporary art, however, is not shared widely within the particular context of PRC. While the adjective dangdai in the term ‘Zhongguo dangdai yishu’ can be understood to signify a specific period of time running from the end of the 1970s through to the present day, within the localised context of the PRC dangdai also points towards a more complex, culturally specific notion of ‘present time’ signified by the use of the term dangdaixing (contemporaneity). As the critic, historian and curator Gao Minglu indicates, dangdaixing is frequently used within the Mandarin-speaking context of the PRC as a substitute for the word xiandaixing (modernity). The significance of the word xiandaixing should not, however, be conflated here with that of the English word ‘modernity’ as the marker of a sequential shift from the pre-modern to the modern (and, as Gao would – mistakenly – have it, the subsequent sequential emergence of the postmodern). Instead, xiandaixing signifies what Gao refers to as ‘the particular social and cultural environment of a specific period, or what modern Chinese call shidai jingshen, or “spirit of an epoch”’. The use of dangdai in relation to the term Zhongguo dangdai yishu consequently suggests a departure not only from the sequential logic of a Western modernist conception of history in favour of a rolling, non-sequential sense of the condition of present modernity that remains in some sense continuous with the past and future. It also points to a decidedly non-synchronous view of present modernity as something experienced differently according to the specificity of prevailing localised (that is to say, spatially bounded) socio-cultural conditions.

These conditions, within the particular context of the PRC, are strongly informed, as Gao makes clear, by an abiding consciousness that since the ending of dynastic imperial rule and the establishing of the Chinese republic during 1911–12: ‘Chinese modernity has been determined by the idea of a new nation rather than a new epoch’. Moreover, this idea involves ‘both transcendent time and reconstructed space with a clear national-cultural and political territorial boundary’. In light of which, Chinese artists, curators, art historians and critics involved in the production and displaying of contemporary Chinese art within the PRC have, more often than not, fought shy of international postmodernism’s pervasively deconstructivist transnational vision of cultural hybridity, choosing instead to maintain a starkly exceptionalist view of Chinese cultural identity in spite of the undeniable mixing of Chinese and non-Chinese cultural influences involved in the making of contemporary
Strongly indicative of this latter view is an essay by art critic and historian Li Xu published in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Beyond Boundaries*, which was held at the then newly-opened Shanghai Gallery of Art in 2003. In his essay, Li contends that contemporary Chinese art has, after an initial two-decade period of development, reached some sort of crossroads or boundary. In Li’s view, this situation has been arrived at because contemporary Chinese art has achieved a position of equality with Western contemporary art on the international stage. As a result of the achievement of this position of equality, he argues, contemporary Chinese art now faces questions of its own national cultural identity in relation to that of the West. As Li would have it, this is not simply a matter of the assimilation or translation of Western cultural influences in relation to the demands and concerns of an autochthonous Chinese art world – as Western commentators, including Martina Köppel-Yang have argued – but, instead, of the capacity of contemporary Chinese art to exceed Westernisation by re-discovering ‘the resources of our traditional national spirit’. To which, Li adds the somewhat chilling assertion (as seen from a Western(ised) post-Holocaust perspective) that ‘culture is to a nation … what the flowing blood is to our body.’

This resistant nationalist-separatist stance, which is broadly contiguous with the oppositional Cold War anti-imperialism that prevailed within the PRC during the time of the Cultural Revolution, can be understood to manifest itself in part through the use of readily recognisable signifiers of ‘Chineseness’ as part of the production of Chinese contemporary art. The use of readily recognisable signifiers of Chineseness by contemporary Chinese artists, however, is not open to interpretation simply as a sign of separatist cultural resistance. It has also proved to be a significant selling point for contemporary Chinese art on the international art market; one that can be understood to pander to the orientalising abstractions of non-Chinese buyers who often remain profoundly ignorant of Chinese culture and history. It is therefore possible to view the use of readily recognisable signifiers of Chineseness by contemporary Chinese artists simultaneously as a form of cultural resistance and of commercial self-orientalisation.

Although relatively marginalised within the PRC, other Chinese commentators have sought to look beyond the rigid dialectics of nationalist exceptionalism. Gao Shiming of the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou has, for example, mobilised the term *Bentu* (homeland, literally, ‘original, native soil’) in the context of debates on contemporaneity in an attempt to re-envision contemporary Chinese art not as an expression of essential national-cultural identity but instead as the outcome of a process of historical return and re-discovery involving cultural dissolution and re-construction. In relation to which Gao argues:

> Today we are no longer satisfied with … struggling for space and position in the globalized edifice as we would like to even create a new homeland, a historical site of cultural creation and renewed subjects. That is the site of ‘contemporary Chinese art’ although we lack a profound understanding of ‘contemporary Chinese art’; we even lack the basic discourse and a cognitive framework. ‘Contemporary Chinese art’ is an unfinished plan, a possible world. It is precisely because it is a ‘possible world’ that ‘contemporary Chinese art’ has nothing to do with any forms of nationalism or fundamentalism.

In spite of Gao’s still explicitly spatialised references to the creation of a ‘new homeland’, his open-ended view
of contemporary Chinese art as a ‘possible world’ beyond nationalism or fundamentalism resonates with post-structuralist conceptions of discursive performativity and has been received as such outside of the PRC.

**Indigenous debates on the international reception of contemporary Chinese art**

The tension between performative and essentialist perspectives on the significance of contemporary Chinese art first emerged in the PRC during the mid to late 1990s as part of indigenous debates among Chinese scholars with regard to the international reception of contemporary Chinese art, and, in particular, the international art world’s identification of contemporary Chinese art with the deconstructivist outlook of international postmodernism and post-colonialism.

This debate culminated in two conferences held in 1998: one staged in Shanxi by the China Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and another accompanying the 1998 Asia-Pacific Contemporary Art Exhibition in Fuzhou, which together can be understood to mark the emergence of a strongly internalised vision of the development of contemporary art in the PRC. As Yiyang Shao observes, at these conferences,

> A number of Chinese critics refused to accept the position assigned to their country as part of Western-dominated global discourse through an attempt to regain their lost subjectivity. They advocated the idea of a Chinese version of modernity by creating a new sense of national cultural identity. They also demanded a return of their legitimate rights as self-defined historical subjects, capable of developing their own narrative of modernity relating their own experience and mapping out their own future. This vision recognized the importance of cultural difference. At the same time, it also emphasized dialectics rather than absolute difference between the two poles, and hence went beyond confrontational logic of the self versus the other, and beyond the desire to assert its own subject position as an overpowering one. While May Fourth intellectuals during the early twentieth century could only conceive of and emulate a single Eurocentric mode of modernity, a number of Chinese art critics during the 1990s became conscious of the historical nature and cultural origins of modernity. They began to locate modernity within a global context. The absolute nature of Western modernity was de-constructed, and the myth became a reality defined in the mundane day to day process of Chinese modernization.  

There was, in short, an appropriation of the critical attitudes characteristic of international postmodernism turned not only to a generalised deconstruction of colonialist-imperialist relations of dominance, but crucially to an assertion of the necessity of a localised view of the critical significance of contemporary Chinese culture.

At the same time in the 1990s, there was an increasingly widespread disquiet in the PRC with regard to the encroachment of outside cultural influences on indigenous perceptions of cultural identity. While the PRC’s increasing openness to the global economy during the 1990s had brought with it an ever-more conspicuous entanglement with western and other outside cultural attitudes and practices (as amply demonstrated by the proliferation of commercial art galleries and international biennials and triennials in mainland China), there was throughout the same period a growing sense of indigenous social, economic and cultural confidence. This growing confidence manifested itself both through a significant reinforcing of public antipathy towards aspects
of westernized culture (which the CCP has constantly sought to manage because of its tendency towards extreme nationalism), as well as an officially sanctioned return to traditional Chinese cultural values as a way of supporting social cohesion and harmony.  

The return to traditional cultural values in the PRC during the 1990s, which amounted to an almost diametric reversal of the ideological outlook of the Cultural Revolution, was highly selective. At its core was a reinterpretation of Confucian values of familial piety, self-sacrifice and social harmony that not only played towards a still ingrained conservatism within mainland Chinese society but that also served to gloss over the pronounced social differences and uncertainties brought about by Deng Xiaoping's continuing programme of Opening and Reform.

As Wang Meqin makes clear, this return to tradition also had a profound influence on an indigenous understanding of the significance of contemporary Chinese art:

The revival of centuries-old Confucianism and the search for the authentic Chinese spirit are trends that were seen as complementary to the huge efforts mobilized to meet the standards for entering into the WTO and to be the host of the Olympic Games in 2008. In this context, nationalism is seen as a particular way to circumscribe and practice globalization, while globalization is used to evoke and manipulate the sentiment of nationalism. The two terms have been promoted equally by the Chinese government in Post-Deng Chinese society. Their connection is only one aspect of the complexity of today's economic, social, and cultural conditions within China. Cultural nationalism, like marketization and globalization, has played an important role in the overall transformation of the Chinese art world. Essentially, it brings unofficial contemporary art into the scope of official art while challenging the definition of the art establishment in China.

By the late 1990s, therefore, within the indigenous art world of the PRC conditions for a pronounced divergence of views with regard to the intellectual position from which resistance to international westernized cultural influence might be launched. On the one hand, there were those who sought to resist international westernised cultural influence on its own terms, first by recognising contemporary Chinese art's deconstruction of the dominance of western culture and, then, by asserting the relative specificity of the conditions of cultural production in the PRC. On the other hand, there were others who took the more conventional position of upholding a more or less straightforward opposition between Chinese cultural values and those of the international art world. Moreover, while many of the former continued to align themselves with the 'unofficial' stance of the first flowering of contemporary Chinese art in the late 1970s and 1980s, the latter occupied intellectual ground clearly favoured by official government ideology.

The political recuperation of contemporary Chinese art

As a result of the conservative crackdown on culture that followed the Tian'anmen protests of June 1989, throughout the 1990s, contemporary art in the PRC continued to occupy a position of relative estrangement from mainstream politics. Although some artists, curators and critics sought to extend the humanist project of the 'unofficial' contemporary art movement of the 1980s known as the '85 New Wave by establishing some sort of rapprochement between contemporary art and governmental policy, most contemporary art remained
outside the economic and political interests of the CCP. The high water-mark of contemporary art’s estrangements from mainstream politics was congruent with extreme forms of body art developed in the PRC in the late 1990s, which eventually led to the handing down of the Ministry of Culture Notice outlawing pornography and extreme forms of bodily violence in the name of art in 2001. With the staging of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, however, a new situation began to emerge which saw increasing governmental interest in contemporary art as a progressive manifestation of Chinese modernity both internationally and within the PRC.

The CCP’s interest in contemporary art as a progressive manifestation of Chinese modernity has taken two forms. A growing awareness among government officials in the 1990s and early 2000s of contemporary Chinese art’s prodigious economic and cultural successes in the international art world led to a revised outlook on its relationship with governmental reforms; one that also led to a transformation in attitudes towards the political management of contemporary art. In a speech given on the occasion of the Seventh National Congress of The China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC) on 18 December 2001, President Jiang Zemin gave a brief summary of the CCP’s emerging view of culture as part of the PRC’s involvement in international competition. In his speech Jiang argued that it was important for developing countries, such as the PRC, ‘to preserve and develop the excellent traditions of their native national cultures’ and to ‘promote national spirit, actively absorb the fine cultural fruits from other nations, and push the update of native culture’ (views redolent not only of passages in Mao’s Yan’an talks of 1942, but also of the distancing from Soviet influence which took place in the PRC in the late 1950s).

Jiang then went on to argue that,

Striving to construct our advanced culture and to make it appeal strongly to people nationwide even worldwide is an equally important strategic task for us to realize as part of socialist modernization; as is the endeavor to develop advanced productivity as part of the enlisting of China as one of the developed countries. Only when we construct an advanced socialist culture that is national, scientific and public and that is facing modernization, facing the world, and facing the future, can we meet our people’s increasing demand for spiritual and cultural life, uplift their standards of ethical morality and science and culture, and give correct direction and powerful intelligent support to economic development and advanced productivity.

Jiang had already delivered similar remarks on various occasions before his speech at CFLAC’s National Congress in 2001, repeatedly emphasising the strategic significance of culture as part of a competitive global environment. Jiang’s remarks also build on, and perhaps borrow from, official debates on the significance of Chinese culture in the 1990s, including discussions of the significance of contemporary Chinese art.

In response to Jiang’s vision, CCP officials began to develop new ways of promoting Chinese culture both as an expression of modern indigenous identity and as a focus for the exercising of influence abroad. This amounted to a major shift in outlook away from the CCP’s prior concentration on economic and social reform towards a structural co-ordination of socio-economic and cultural interests in support of China’s continuing modernization. As early as 1998, the PRC’s Ministry of Culture had established a bureau charged with developing policies in relation to the cultural industries. This was followed by the acceptance of a proposal at the Fifth Plenum of the 15th CCP Central Committee in October 2000, that set out a far-reaching policy for reforming cultural production and administration in the PRC and repeatedly used the term ‘cultural industry’. This proposal advocated the progressive focusing of cultural industry policy, a strengthening of the construction and administration of the market place for cultural products, and a ‘centrally driven development of the cultural industries’. The proposal at the Fifth Plenum of the 15th CCP Central Committee was further
supported by the official report of the CCP’s 16th National Congress in 2002, which states that ‘In the current market economy, developing cultural industries is a very important way to achieve socialist cultural prosperity and to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of the people.’

The development of an official policy on the cultural industries in the PRC was accompanied by that of another on the PRC’s use of cultural diplomacy. In 2000 Jiang Zemin asserted publicly that the CCP should be the leading force of Chinese culture, stating that PRC should aim to be a powerful nation not only politically and economically but also culturally. Jiang argued that, in order to achieve this position of economic, political and cultural power, the PRC should engage with cultural developments on the international stage and in doing so promote Chinese culture abroad. At a meeting with Chinese ambassadors in 2004, Hu Jintao, the then General Secretary of the CPC central committee, stressed the importance of economic and cultural diplomacy to the PRC’s future development as well as that of putting the CCP’s strategy of cultural diplomacy into practice.

At the 17th National Congress of the CCP in 2007, Hu further asserted the importance of the PRC’s international diplomacy by calling for improvements in the country’s use of soft power. During a speech at the 6th Plenum of the 17th Central Committee of CPC on the 18 October 2011, Hu went still further by arguing that the PRC’s cultural industries had been greatly enhanced by the process of social and economic reform and that they were a crucial aspect of the PRC’s projection of soft power on the international stage. Political conditions were therefore set for the recuperation of a hitherto overlooked and relatively autonomous sphere of contemporary artistic production in the PRC to the ideological interests of the CCP both in terms of indigenous economic and cultural development and the international projection of diplomatic influence.

The co-opting of contemporary Chinese art to the political interests of the CCP since the early 2000s has taken a number of forms. In recent years Chinese higher education institutions involved in the teaching of art and design have become increasingly subject to calls from the CCP to strengthen the PRC’s creative industries sector. In response many of those institutions have embraced modern modes of cultural production including the use of new digital and computer based technologies which are taught alongside more established modern and traditional approaches. There have also been significant exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art at major national institutions, including a substantial survey exhibition of work by young artists from the PRC at the Art Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing titled The First ‘CAFAM’ Future Exhibition – Sub-Phenomena: Report on the State of Chinese Young Art Nomination in 2012. In addition, there have been a number of governmentally supported exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art outside the PRC. The earliest of these exhibitions were Living in Time, staged at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in 2001, and Alors la Chine?, staged at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 2003. They also include a digitally mediated (and, in international circles, critically dismissed) exhibition of the work of the celebrated guo hua painter Pan Gongkai in the China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011.

Mainstream governmental acceptance of contemporary art in the PRC since the early 2000s may appear as evidence of increasing cultural liberalisation. It may also be viewed as the emergence of contemporary art in
the PRC as a legitimised focus for social critique. Neither is unequivocally the case. Recent acceptance of the value of contemporary art by the Chinese state is fundamentally enmeshed with the CCP’s continuing commitment to internal economic and political reform as well as the projection of Chinese power internationally. Contemporary art in China may have been held at arm’s length from centralised power throughout much of the 1990s in the wake of Tian’anmen, but the 2000s have seen its progressive institutionalisation. Although political conditions in the PRC differ markedly from those during the Maoist period and in particular the Cultural Revolution, the persistent desire of the PRC to manage culture in the service of its strategic aims should not be underestimated. Those involved with the making and showing of contemporary art in the PRC have now effectively seen a realisation of the ’85 New Wave’s desire to close the gap between cultural production and political and economic reform. Absent from that relationship, however, is any accepted social-critical function for contemporary art. In effect, the recuperation of contemporary art to political power in the PRC since the 2000s is little more than a modern variation on the vision of art set out by Mao in his Yan’an talks of 1942. Granted, some intellectuals belonging to the PRC’s ‘new left’, including the literary scholar Wang Hui, have looked towards the development of a localised public sphere as a means of managing the socially divisive effects of Opening and Reform without the conditional necessity of western-style democracy. Such thinking, however, is at best unresolved and at worst in effective complicity with the continuation of governmental authoritarianism.

Open espousal of performative conceptions of the changing identity of Chinese culture within the PRC is therefore not constrained simply by the persistent dominance of ambient national cultural discourses. Since the turn of the millennium they have also been subject to an active governmental recuperation of contemporary Chinese art to inward and outward looking assertions of traditional cultural identity; assertions which, on the one hand, serve to buttress a continuing agenda of anti-imperialist resistance and, on the other, to provide a reassuring sense of social continuity and coherence at a time of significant social and economic upheaval. The combined effect of these constraining factors is an increasing reinforcement of nationalist-essentialist attitudes among Chinese artists and critics.

As writings by Gao Shiming accompanying the Third Guangzhou Triennial, Farewell to Post Colonialism, make all too clear, the use of deconstructive analytic methods by Chinese commentators often remains highly selective in its discussion of localised political conditions within the PRC. In Gao’s view, we are now moving into a ‘post-West’ society where differences between the politics of democracy and autarchy have all but been erased. While this assertion plays well to generalising post-colonialist notions of the deconstruction of imperialist relations of dominance, its profound abstraction also serves to gloss over the particularity of the localised socio-political conditions under which contemporary art has developed within the particular context of the PRC; conditions which continue to place significant discursive constraints on direct criticism of governmental authority. This self-surveying imposition of limitations on criticality is of course understandable given the still highly authoritarian nature of state politics within the PRC. Nevertheless, it has made the adoption of deconstructivist approaches within the PRC effectively complicit with governmental authority as the result of a self-censoring of open criticism of locally dominant authoritarian political discourses alongside the simultaneous retention of an outlook critical of western imperialism.

Present-day assertions of Chinese exceptionalism are, as previously stated here, open to interpretation as a form of what some have referred to as ‘strategic essentialism’ resistant to the persistence of western colonialism-imperialist relations of dominance. In practice, however, such assertions are wedded strongly to
eminently questionable nationalist discourses used to underpin the Chinese Communist Party’s neo-Confucian
upholding of the idea of a ‘harmonious’ society. Such discourses continue to be upheld by the CCP not only as
an ideological counterweight to the profoundly destabilizing effects of China’s precipitous programme of social
and economic reforms since the late 1970s but also as a cornerstone of its own political (il)legitimacy as a
continuing focus for governance.

Towards a multi-voiced critique

As Craig Clunas has indicated with reference to the work of the film and video installation artist Yang Fudong,
the question of whether we choose to emphasise the ‘Chineseness’ or the globalised nature of contemporary
Chinese art is a ‘fundamentally political’ one that ‘has no easy or definitive answer’. Although Clunas does
not elaborate upon this statement, he can be understood to imply that while Chinese national-cultural
exceptionalism remains anathema in relation to internationally dominant post-colonialist attitudes towards the
critical standing of contemporary art, any move to dismiss outright or to overlook that exceptionalism stands in
danger of a return to colonialist relations of dominance. In short, we cannot choose to align ourselves
resolutely with an established international post-colonialist perspective against differing localised points of view
without what would appear to be a self-contradictory denial of difference.

By the same token, exceptionalist perspectives on the significance of contemporary Chinese art are
themselves very much open to deconstruction as both unjustifiably limited in their conceptual scope and as
intellectual adjuncts to authoritarianism. This not only includes those exceptionalist perspectives that align
themselves openly with governmentally supported nationalist-essentialism within the PRC, but also those that
invoke deconstructive thinking ( overtly or covertly ) to justify exceptionalism. Moreover, we should be sensitive
to ways in which localised constraints on criticism of governmental authority within the PRC limit the scope of
deconstructivist critique reducing its interruption on authoritative meaning down to an eminently manageable
abstraction. Indeed, this sensitivity should be extended to discursive conditions outside the PRC where a now
institutionalised deconstructivism is, for example, in relation to contemporaneity, also subject to the limiting
abstractions of political correctness and recuperation by the market.

What persists then is a highly problematic paradox. By taking account of Chinese contemporary art’s dualistic
relationship to modernity and tradition, there is a danger of entering into unjustifiably orientalising or essentialist
views of the significance of contemporary Chinese art and therefore of overemphasising its cultural
separateness from other forms of contemporary art. By downplaying the ‘Chineseness’ of contemporary
Chinese art there is also the risk of overlooking the persistence of tradition as part of the critically resistant
construction of a modern Chinese cultural identity. The work of the critical interpreter of contemporary Chinese
art, as well as of the transnational cultural networks that support its production, display and reception (whether
Chinese or non-Chinese), is thus revealed to be a profoundly challenging one, which points towards the critical
necessity of new (and almost certainly wholly imperfectable) theoretical paradigms beyond those currently
envisaged both within the PRC and in an international context.

One possible way forward, I wish to aver here, is the use of polylogues – that is to say, inter-textual multi-
voiced discourses – as a means of opening up differing interpretative perspectives on contemporary Chinese
art to one another while at the same time internally dividing and questioning their individual authorities; a
strategy exemplified by Jacques Derrida’s radical collage text Glas (1974), which juxtaposes readings of text
by G.W.F. Hegel and Jean Genet to pervasively unsettling critical effect. Such multi-voiced discourses involve
the juxtaposing of differing discursive perspectives whereby the meaning of those perspectives is subject to the possibility of critical remotivation as the result of their mutual recontextualisation in a manner akin to the effects of artistic collage-montage.\(^47\) As the intercultural philosopher Franz Martin Wimmer has argued, in order to go beyond the rash universalism or relativistic particularism of philosophical thinking conducted from a single cultural point of view, it is necessary to engage critically with other cultural perspectives in the form of such a polylogue or ‘dialogue of many’.\(^48\)

Crucial to this methodological approach, perhaps, is Derrida’s conception of inter-textual telepathy. As Claudette Sartiliot indicates, this does not amount to a misplaced belief on Derrida’s part in an occultist connection between otherwise materially discrete instances of signification, but instead, and more justifiably, in the deconstructive openness of the medium of language to ‘distant influences’ as a consequence of the aleatory (chance) processes of reading and re-reading conducted in the space between text and consciousness.\(^49\) The implication of which, Sartiliot explains, is a ‘telecommunication between words within a single language and between different languages’ whereby ‘one’s discourse is always contaminated by that of the other which never allows itself to be either totally excluded or totally included’.\(^50\)

The following two-part text is part of an attempt to arrive at a first draft of such an analysis. The text below addresses ostensible similarities between deconstructivist theory and practice and aspects of traditional ‘non-rationalist’ Chinese thought and practice associated in part with the conceptual pairing \textit{yin-yang} as well as related Confucian notions of social harmony.

\section*{Indigenous Chinese art theory}

As part of dominant cultural discourses within the PRC, there is a persistence of traditional Chinese ‘non-rationalist’ dialectics – as exemplified by the Daoist conception of dynamic complimentarity between the otherwise opposing cosmic forces of yin and yang. This sits alongside and commingles with the official persistence of Marxist-scientific rationalism).

Traditional Chinese thought and practice is informed strongly by a non-rationalist dialectical way of thinking associated with the Daoist concept of \textit{yin-yang}. The term \textit{yin-yang} refers to the notion that seemingly opposing forces in nature (for example, light and dark, and male and female) are in actuality both interconnected and interdependent, and that, as a consequence, all oppositions can be seen as relative as well as open to the possibility of harmonious reciprocation. This notion is a fundamental principle of many aspects of classical Chinese science, philosophy and cultural practice.\(^51\)

A Marxist conception of dialectical realism has been and to a large extent remains strongly influential on Chinese intellectual life as part of official government thinking. According to this official line, China’s development is predicated on a rationalist-scientific approach towards the resolution of social and material contradictions. It should be noted, however, that a Maoist interpretation or translation of Marxist dialectics is often akin to a traditional Chinese non-rationalist dialectics insofar as the desired outcome of class conflict is a state of harmonious social interaction and not simply the outright negation of one class by another. It should also be noted that since the mid-1990s the CCP has supported a return to the traditional Confucian notion of a harmonious society as a way of addressing sharp social divisions brought about by the implementation of economic reforms.

The persistence of traditional Chinese ‘non-rationalist’ dialectics informs a recently revived tendency towards
traditional Chinese metaphysical notions of harmonisation and reciprocal interaction within the PRC.

While traditional Chinese dialectical thinking is distinctly non-rationalist in outlook, it nevertheless tends towards metaphysical conceptions of harmony and reciprocity; for example, a belief, central to both Daoist and Confucian thought, in the desirability of harmonious interaction between humanity and nature. 52

International art theory

International art theory continues to be informed strongly by the theory and practice of deconstruction – that is to say, a performative critique of the authority of legitimising discourses and associated truth claims. The pervasive scepticism/criticality of deconstructivism sits alongside the persistence of metaphysical rationalist thought underlying all discursive representation.

Deconstructivist postmodernism is informed strongly by a non-rationalist dialectical way of thinking associated with the Derridean conception of ‘différance’. Différance is a neologism coined by the French theorist Jacques Derrida to signify his view that linguistic signification is made possible by a persistent deconstructive (negative-productive) movement of differing-deferring between signs. 53 This envisioning of difference and deferral immanent to linguistic signification is broadly similar in conceptual terms to the interconnectedness of opposites signified by the Daoist concept of yin-yang. It is important to note, however, that Derridean deconstruction looks towards a persistent disjunctive deferral of meaning, while yin-yang is conventionally understood within a Chinese cultural context to support the desirable possibility of reciprocation between opposites. 54

Within a mainland Chinese cultural context deconstructivist thought and practice has been compared to the classical Chinese philosopher Zhuangzhi’s opposition to rigid Confucian notions of social order and etiquette associated with the term ‘Li-Jiao’. Along with feudalism and a patriarchal clan system, li (education) constituted one of the fundamental discursive cornerstones of ancient Chinese society. Li later became a central aspect of Confucian ethics underpinning supposedly proper relationships between individuals and social classes as part of a harmonious social order. During the pre-Qin period (3rd century BC) Zhaungzhi criticised Confucian notions of rigid social order on the grounds that they alienated society from nature and, consequently, from a spontaneous achievement of social harmony. Zhuangzhi also argued that conceptual oppositions signified by language were rigid and arbitrary and therefore pointed away from natural conceptions of value. 55

There is therefore a strand of traditional Chinese thought that can be understood to accord to some degree with internationally dominant deconstructivist theoretical perspectives insofar as it questions the authority of linguistic representations of opposition and hierarchy.

What emerges here, in outline at least, is a mapping of significant divergences in attitude with regard to the pervasively unsettling implications of deconstructive theory and practice, particularly in relation to questions of national cultural identity as well as a wider landscape of relations of dominance. At the same time, it is also possible to discern points of ‘telepathic’ convergence with regard to the upholding of non-rationalist forms of critical thought and practice that may at the very least provide a degree of shared conceptual ground for the pursuit of a wider, more searching critical polylogue.

Although this provisional mapping is inconclusive in its scope, there is, perhaps, the beginnings of an alternative critical paradigm. One that departs from the generalising and ultimately unreflexive abstractions of...
contemporaneity as well as complicit national-essentialist discourses in the PRC in favour of a turn towards a more granular and pervasively critical assessment of differing cultural perspectives on the relationship between tradition and modernity in the PRC ‘grounded’ in a close analysis of available evidence.

Clearly, the construction of inter-textually ‘telepathic’ polylogues of this sort lies beyond the agency of monadic individuals and stubbornly partisan groups. It is therefore hoped that otherwise resistant communities of cultural interpreters can begin to look beyond current differences between localised and international perspectives on the significance of contemporary Chinese art to initiate what is a necessarily collaborative work of pervasive criticality.

Notes


8. Shan-shui (literally, ‘mountains and water’) is a traditional style of Chinese landscape painting that uses ink and brush on rice paper or silk to depict natural scenes involving mountains, rivers, streams, waterfalls and lakes. Following the traditional Chinese aesthetic concept of *i-ching*, scenes depicted by *shan-shui* paintings are intended to serve as expressive indexes of their makers’ individual personalities. Viewers are also supposed to enter into an empathetic relationship with the scenes depicted in the paintings and by extension the personality of their makers.

9. There are two main techniques in traditional Chinese painting: *gong-bi*, or meticulous technique, often referred to as ‘court style’ painting, and *shui-mo* (literally ‘water and ink’), freehand technique.

10. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s artists associated with the No Name (*Wu ming*) group developed an aesthetic-formalist style of painting similar to that of European modernism during the early to mid-twentieth century. See Gao Minglu, *The No Name: A History of a Self-Exiled Avant-Garde*, Guilin 2007.


12. Deng Xiaoping’s so-called ‘policy of opening-up and reform’ is, in fact, a series of related policies and directives, including the Four
Modernisations, the Two Hundreds (shaungbai) directive and the Liberate Your Thinking and Search for the Truth in the Facts (jiefang sixiang shishi qiu shi) directive. The Four Modernisations calls for the modernisation of technology, education, agriculture and the military. The Two Hundreds directive, which takes its name from the use of the slogan ‘Let one hundred flowers bloom and one hundred schools contend’, calls for greater diversity of thought and public debate as part of the process of reform, effectively reviving the One Hundred Flowers Bloom campaign initiated by Mao Zedong in 1956. The Liberate Your Thinking and Search for the Truth in the Facts directive seeks to promote experimental research and the discussion of subject-specific questions rather than purely ideological ones.

15. The first international survey exhibition of contemporary art, Magiciens de la Terre, was held at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris in 1989. The exhibition, which was curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, included the work of three artists from the PRC: Gu Dexin, Yang Jiechang and Huang Yongping.


18. See, for example, Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney, ed. by Charles Merewether, Biennale of Sydney, Sydney 2006.


20. See Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chong (eds.), House of Oracles: A Huang Yongping Retrospective, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis 2005, pp.61–9. The Mandarin Chinese word for bat is fu. Within a Mandarin-speaking context fu (bat) is often used as a play on the similarly pronounced word fu, meaning ‘wealth and happiness’.


22. Traditional Chinese thought and practice is informed by a ‘non-rationalist’ dialectical way of thinking associated with the Daoist concept of yin-yang. The term yin-yang refers to the notion that seemingly opposing forces and terms (for example, light and dark, and male and female) are in actuality both interconnected and interdependent. It is important to note that the similarly non-rationalist view of dialectic thinking associated with the Derridean term différences looks towards a persistently disjunctive deferral of absolute meaning, while yin-yang is conventionally understood within a Chinese cultural context to support the possibility of reciprocation between opposites. See Paul Gladston, ‘Chan-Da-da(o)-De-Construction or, The Cultural (Il)Logic of Contemporary Chinese “Avant-garde” Art’, Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, vol.7, no.4, 2008, pp.63–9.


33. Ibid.

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