

Contesting Global/Local: Chinese Experimental Art in the 1990s

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Works by Chinese experimental artists invariably feature in the important international exhibitions of today. Often combining technical sophistication with fierce psychological intensity, they attract the attention of curators, art critics, collectors and common audiences worldwide. After its emergence in the 1970s, Chinese experimental art developed into an avant-garde movement in the 1980s, finally becoming an important component of international contemporary art in the 1990s. The decade from 1990 to 2000 therefore represents a crucial stage in the course of its development.

'Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)', the First Guangzhou Triennial organized by the Guangdong Art Museum, thus provides a comprehensive survey and attempts a systematic explanation of the field during this period (see Wu Hung, ed., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art*, Guangzhou, 2002). The three main themes of the exhibition, 'Memory and Reality', 'Self and Environment' and 'Global and Local' encompass most experimental works from that decade. This essay discusses the 'Global and Local' theme through selected examples.

The dialogue between global and local was one of the most powerful driving forces for the development of Chinese experimental art in the 1990s. It stimulated experimental artists to explore their self-identity, expand their visual vocabulary, make Chinese concepts and forms part of global contemporary art, and recontextualize international art trends amid domestic concerns. While many scholars have discussed globalization in terms of its political, socio-economic and intellectual contexts, this essay focuses instead on the impact of global/local communication on the content and form of artistic expression.

The globalization of Chinese art did not start in the 1990s, of course. But for a long time it was equated with the Westernization of Chinese art. From the early twentieth century onwards, many Chinese artists abandoned the traditional brush. Some travelled abroad to study Western oil painting and sculpture, but those who remained home also had ample opportunity to learn foreign forms and techniques. The establishment of the People's Republic of China did not stop this process, but restricted the model of academic learning to social realist art of the Soviet Union. For more

than three decades this particular 'Western' style dominated contemporary Chinese art, but it became history after experimental art grew into a national movement through the '85 Art New Wave (85 Meishu Xinchao). Participants in this movement embraced all schools of modern Western art that developed outside the canon of realism (for example, Surrealism, Dadaism, Abstract Expressionism, conceptual art, body art, and Pop Art). More importantly, they began to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western art, which had existed as a fundamental conceptual framework in which artists and art historians envisioned modern Chinese art. Although the dominant influence of the '85 Art New Wave came from the West, it gave experimental Chinese artists the freedom to discover their own potential. Some of the best-known works from this period, such as Xu Bing's *Book From the Sky* and Wenda Gu's pseudo-calligraphy, employ traditional Chinese idioms but reject their conventional meaning. No one disagrees that these are among the most original works of global contemporary art of the 1980s, even though they were made in China by artists who had never been abroad (several years after creating these works, the two artists emigrated to the West).

The identity of Chinese experimental art has long been a contested issue. It is routinely caricatured by official Chinese critics as a local imitation of 'decadent Western contemporary art'. Within the pro-experimental art camp, some critics have divided artists into two groups, based on where they live. Taking a nationalist stand, they have coined the nickname 'banana people' (people who have yellow skin but are 'white' inside) for those artists who have emigrated to the West and gained fame there. Many Western critics tend to emphasize the relevance of Chinese experimental art to China's internal politics. Even though the art itself has transcended the East-West or global-local dichotomy, such views continue to inform discourse on the subject in different ways. Some critics have tried to link it to transnational phenomena such as the Chinese diaspora, but in so doing have often treated this art merely as a social movement.

There is no question that Chinese experimental art is related to all of these – post-Cold War politics, global commercialization and diaspora – but the kind of reinterpretation pursued here is, first of



(Fig. 1) *Brooklyn's Sky*
By Wang Gongxin (b. 1960), 1995
Video installation, Beijing



(Fig. 2) *Impermanence*
By Zhu Jinshi, 1996
Mixed-media installation, Beijing

all, an art-historical one. To return to the '85 Art New Wave, this domestic movement makes it clear that from the beginning, Chinese experimental art was a branch of global contemporary art, an identity determined not by where artists lived but by the concepts and forms of their works and their intended audience. On the other hand, this movement also makes it clear that being global does not exclude experimental Chinese artists from remaining local; the question is how they can internalize two geo-cultural identities productively. The historical significance of the '85 Art New Wave lies not only in its bridging of East and West, but in its initiation of numerous experiments that highlighted individual voices in global/local communication as a whole. 1990s experimental art developed against this background.

Four important developments in the 1990s brought the global/local dialogue in Chinese experimental art to new levels: first, experimental Chinese artists became regular participants in international exhibitions, and many exhibitions of Chinese experimental art were organized abroad; second, promoted by commercial galleries inside and outside China, this art became a global commodity; third, a considerable number of experimental Chinese artists emigrated to other countries, while 'domestic' artists frequently travelled to foreign exhibitions and created works around the world; and fourth, in the late 1990s, some official Chinese museums began to develop exhibition projects that framed Chinese experimental art as part of global contemporary art.

With these changes, the global/local relationship became a constant stimulus, resulting in works that reflected differing

ideas and approaches. Critics have often attributed such differences to an artist's place of residence, arguing that overseas artists and those who remained in China do not have the same self-identities and points of view. But the real situation is more complex. During the 1990s, so-called 'local' artists spent increasing amounts of time abroad and dealt directly with foreign institutions, curators and audiences, while 'overseas' artists made frequent trips back home to create and exhibit their works. It is more plausible to assume that both groups of artists developed global/local dialogues based on specific situations, and not on the official place of residence written in their passports. Instead of taking global and local as two external frames of classification, we should consider them as internal experiences and perspectives. The key to understanding these artists and their works is to discover how such experiences and



(Fig. 3) *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot*
By Cai Guoqiang, 1995
Performance at the XLVI Venice Biennale

perspectives were negotiated through specific art forms invented at a specific time and place.

For the First Guangzhou Triennial, for example, Wang Gongxin has recreated his 1995 video installation *Brooklyn's Sky* (Fig. 1). Wang went to America in 1987 as a visiting artist at the State University of New York in Cortland and Albany, and afterwards took up residence in Brooklyn. From the early 1990s, he and his wife, the artist Lin Tianmiao, embarked on a nomadic lifestyle, travelling between Beijing, New York and other international cities year-round, hoping to create art that would convey their experience. *Brooklyn's Sky*, which resulted

from this desire, was inspired by an American folk belief that if a person dug a deep enough hole, he would emerge on the other side of the world in China. However, since Wang Gongxin is Chinese, he started his fantastic journey from Beijing by digging a well in his tiny apartment. At the bottom of the well he installed a small video monitor. As if looking through a transparent window, the visitor could see on the screen a piece of sky – the sky above Wang's Brooklyn home.

Personal experience also propelled Zhu Jinshi to create *Impermanence* in 1996 (Fig. 2). The material for this striking installation included 50,000 sheets of *xuan* paper, a standard medium for traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. Without leaving a single stroke on the sheets, however, Zhu wrinkled and stacked them into a spectacular fortress-like structure, with a narrow passageway to the interior. The intricate construction struck the spectators as being both massive and fragile. When the exhibition ended, Zhu splattered ink on the sheets and burned them outside the exhibition hall. It is significant that the artist, who had emigrated to Germany in the early 1990s, created this work twice in 1996 as two different parts of a single project. He first installed the paper-fortress in Beijing's Contemporary Art Gallery and later repeated it in Berlin's Georg Kolbe Museum. The idea seems obvious: since the installation



(Fig. 4) *Fog Inside*
By Zhang Jianjun, 1992
Mixed-media installation, Warsaw

hometown in southeast China, and coincidentally, the port from which Marco Polo left China for Venice 700 years ago. Through this project Cai Guoqiang makes a powerful statement that he, an artist from China, is reversing the direction of the East-West traffic; what he brings to the West with him are not just goods and stories, but an 'Eastern view of the cosmos' that has escaped the attention of Western travellers (Dana Friis-Hansen, 'Towards a New Methodology in Art', in Friis-Hansen et al., *Cai Guo-qiang*, London, 2002, p. 80). One should not take this as a nationalist, anti-Western approach, because Cai has staged similar performances to 'bring things to' his native country. The ambitious *Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrial No. 10* (no. 00) is one such example. When Cai returned to China from Japan in 1993, he travelled along the Great Wall to its Western limit. There, assisted by local people, he laid down a 10-kilometre-long fuse in the Gobi desert. Its simultaneous explosion created the spectacle of a 'wall of fire', as if the Great Wall had suddenly come to life and grown to an unprecedented length.

Besides performance-oriented projects imbued with the artists' transnational experiences, many works in 1990s Chinese experimental art conduct global/local dialogues by juxtaposing visual signifiers – art motifs and media, objects in daily



(Fig. 5) *Great Ink Image*
By Hu Youben, 2000
Mixed-media installation

life or written languages – from heterogeneous sources. Zhang Jianjun and Hu Youben both use traditional Chinese ink to make ‘anti-traditional’ installations. Zhang Jianjun, who resides in New York, created *Fog Inside* in 1992 in Warsaw (Fig. 4). The work is minimalist in spirit: a large, flattened cylinder filled with ink-infused water. Although the form of the installation recalls a steel sculpture, the ink water inside it generates a sense of impermanence that is reinforced by steam that slowly rises from the surface of the liquid and dissipates. The subtle movement of steam has a meditative quality, reflecting an organic and wholesome understanding of the cosmos that the artist finds in Chinese philosophy. Thousands of miles away in China’s Hebei province, Hu Youben fashioned huge installations that reveal nothing but layered black paint on a wrinkled surface, negating not only painted images but also the concept of painting (Fig. 5).

Scholar’s rocks and Ming-style furniture, two conventional symbols of traditional Chinese culture, are given new meaning in Zhou Chunya’s and Ai Weiwei’s works. In a series of paintings, Zhou, a German-trained artist, depicts scholar’s rocks as living things in various stages of transformation (Fig. 6). The animated quality of these images, enhanced by sculpted surfaces and fluid brushwork, owes its inspiration both to German Expressionism and to the traditional Chinese *xieyi* (‘inscribing the mind’) style. Ai Weiwei, on the other hand, deconstructs Ming-style furniture with techniques derived from a traditional Chinese carpenter. He takes tables, chairs and stools apart and reassembles them into dysfunctional, postmodern sculptures (Fig. 7). Wang Luyan has also found an iconic object for deconstruction, albeit from more recent Chinese history – the bicycle. Although China is still ‘the country of bicycles’ to outsiders, contemporary Chinese increasingly associate this vehicle with the Mao era, when it provided millions of Chinese with a basic means of transportation. This is perhaps why Wang Luyan often paints his remodelled bicycles red (Fig. 8). But he does more to the bicycle than merely painting it: with two small wheels added to the rear axle, the vehicle becomes a work of conceptual art, moving backward when pedalled forward.

The Chinese written language offers experimental artists a



(Fig. 6) *Taihu Rocks series, No. 8*
By Zhou Chunya, 2000
Oil on canvas
Height 150 cm

special signifier for their cultural origin. Xu Bing and Wenda Gu have both continued their language-based experimentation since emigrating to America in the early 1990s. Xu Bing’s latest project, *Square Word Calligraphy*, involves the creation of a unique writing system that renders English in Chinese writing: by using Chinese components of Chinese characters for English letters, he is able to transform an English word into what looks



(Fig. 7) *Ming-style Furniture*
By Ai Weiwei, 1996-98
Wood installation



(Fig. 8) *Bicycle (20)*
By Wang Luyan, 1996
Post-reform bicycles as exhibited for sale at the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane



(Fig. 9) *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*
By Xu Bing (b. 1955), 2001
Installation
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC

like a Chinese character (Fig. 9). While his 'square words' can be considered a perfect fusion of Eastern and Western culture, Xu Bing's ultimate goal is to create a device that can be of real service to people; he hopes that the system will allow people to learn from one another while maintaining their own cultural heritage. Thus classrooms are set up at his exhibitions, complete with writing tables and tools, in which English speakers can practise Chinese calligraphy in English, and Chinese speakers can learn English by practising Chinese calligraphy. By employing language-based signs, Wenda Gu executed many monumental projects in the 1990s in pursuit of a universal symbolic system. His *United Nations*, a series of spectacular

installations made of human hair, represents the different peoples, nations and countries of the world (Fig. 10). The global/local dialectic remains the central concept of these works, but the artist posits himself as a universal spokesman for all cultures.

As demonstrated by these examples, many experimental Chinese artists are idealistic in attempting to mediate global/local perspectives and experiences; the assumption is that globalization, if freed from imperialistic and nationalist ambitions, can assimilate local creativities in a dynamic and productive way. This optimistic attitude, however, disappears in works that take international power struggles as their subject, and problematize globalization in this particular context. *World Maps*, a series of silk-screen prints created by Hong Hao from 1992 to 1996, is one such work. The artist has cleverly created an optical illusion where each map has the appearance of the open leaves of a traditional Chinese thread-bound book (Fig. 11). Each fictional map reflects a pessimistic vision of the world. 'The Division of Nuclear Arms Map' shows missiles stationed in every corner of the world, including Antarctica, which has been divided into segregated political territories. 'The New World Order Map' changes the locations and shapes of different countries. 'The New Geological World Map' switches sea and land. 'The New Topographical World Map' alters the size of each country according to its military and economic might. 'The Latest Practical World Map' renames cities with trendy expressions in popular culture and tosses economic charts around the earth. Fantastic and absurd, these pictures depict a world governed by violence and greed, a frightening image of the globe that the artist finds himself unable to escape from.

If Hong Hao's pictures are satirical, Xu Jiang's images are tragic. His *Chess Match of the Century* depicts destroyed cities, broken monuments and crumbling architectural spaces – products of civilization that humanity itself has turned into ruins



(Fig. 10) *The Babble of the Millennium: United Nations series*
By Wenda Gu, monuments (b. 1955), 1999
A tower of pseudo-Chinese English, Hindi, Arabic and synthesized English-Chinese, made from human hair
Height 2,250 cm, diameter 1,020 cm
Site-specific installation for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Collection of the museum



(Fig. 11) 'New World Physical' from the *World Maps* series
By Hong Hao, 1992 to 1996
Silk-screen print

(Fig. 12). Floating over these scenes are the disembodied hands of two chess players. Cast in relief, the hands symbolize competing historical forces behind the destruction of civilization. Starting from the late 1980s, Xu began to use the game of Chinese chess to signify both tension and method. Chess is motivated by the desire for control; behind a subtle, prolonged negotiation, there is a hunger for power and a determination to kill. A chess match is both spatial and temporal; consisting of numerous movements on a geometric map, it is never static. Chess is highly rational yet passionate: while following a set of rules, a player must manipulate them in order to win. For Xu Jiang, these are implications that make chess an ideal metaphor for politics as well as art.

On a more general level, the forms that these works take – installation, performance and mixed media – are a concrete expression of the global/local dialogue. Although these forms can be explained through the growing influence of Western contemporary art in China, a more essential reason for their popularity must still be found in the fundamental purpose of the art itself, which is to forge an independent field of production,

exhibition and criticism outside official art. Through embracing contemporary art media that still remain 'unorthodox' in China, experimental artists can effectively establish an alternative position for themselves. Such a break from the establishment is sometimes related to an artist's political ideology. But it can also be a relatively independent artistic decision, as experimental artists routinely find the new art media both liberating and challenging, encouraging self-expression by any means at their disposal. In different ways, experimental Chinese artists utilize the 'global' forms of international contemporary art to express local and personal experiences.

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The exhibition will be on view at the Guangdong Museum of Art from 18 November 2002 to 19 January 2003, and will be accompanied by catalogues in both English and Chinese.



(Fig. 12) *Chess Match of the Century: The Stone Monument No. 1*
By Xu Jiang, 1998
Mixed media
Height 132 cm, length 210 cm