

Chineseness in Contemporary Chinese Art Criticism

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Of the many controversies riddling China today, one of the most interesting and ideologically profound is occurring in the small but fast-growing arena of contemporary Chinese art. From its inception, Chinese modern art was an anomaly. Its ideas were not native and its forms were acquired. Having been isolated for decades, Chinese artists of the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's struggled to situate themselves in the fully developed modern art tradition of the west. Attempting to understand the new world open to them, these artists adopted the avant-garde forms of pioneers like Braque, Duchamp and Warhol all in a ten-year period. What was remarkable was not the speed at which they traversed the canons of modern art, but rather their adoption of art styles that had no cultural significance to their development or their people. This prompted many critics – in the west and at home – to accuse them of being mere imitators of western art, producing insignificant ectypes of the real thing. For these artists the challenge was in making themselves relevant to a western aesthetic hegemon without being marginalized by their Chineseness.

One of the most interesting factors impeding the Chinese modern artist is Chineseness. The term, coined by the West during the early 1990's to describe a particular quality of the art and the people of the Middle Kingdom, has been the catalyst for a refinement and review of the essential characteristics of China. The development and subsequent discussion of the idiom “Chineseness” is colored by multiregional and often-contradictory views of what it means to be Chinese. While some see it as an exogenous deprecation of the Chinese, others take the term to denote a pre-existing

quality that necessarily identifies China in contrast to the west. Such ambivalence surrounding Chineseness has caused and promoted deep-seated misunderstandings about Chinese contemporary art. Cultural critics have had an especially difficult time with the concept trying to delineate, differentiate and defend Chineseness from other forms of postcolonial exoticisms like *japonisme*. With so much at stake, the contemporary Chinese art critic must walk a thin line between being too Chinese and being too western. The question that will be discussed here is how has Chineseness affected Chinese contemporary art criticism?

To define the role of an art critic is a difficult task, one that requires a thoughtful characterization of art, and the critic. In most cases, understanding the critic is a less daunting exercise than grappling with the meaning – or meaninglessness – of art. Loosely, an art critic is one who evaluates a piece of art. Depending on how one limits the term “evaluates,” the title could extend to everyone or no one. Regardless of the number of professional critics, it is, however, the case that this role is being played by more and more people as the art market grows to ever-larger lengths (and monetary figures). As the latest record for a contemporary Chinese artwork shows – 6 million U.S. for a 1995 Zhang Xiaogang oil painting – the prices are rising and the number of galleries and art shows selling contemporary Chinese art are following suit. In 1996 the first independent Chinese art gallery, ShanghART, opened in the lobby of a local hotel. Currently there are at least three “art districts” in Beijing – Song Village, Factory 798, and Chaoyangdi village – that are “bursting at the seams;”¹ with every gallery owner and artist practicing a little bit of art criticism. For Clive Bell, the late 19th century

¹ Nancy Moffett, “China’s All the Rage,” *Chicago Sun Times* (December 26, 2000).

British aesthetic theoretician, a critic acts as a sort of guide who directs the uninspired towards what is aesthetically great, showing them the *significant form* latent in a work of art. Perhaps following this method, one might say that it is the critic's job to distill years of experience into bite-sized pieces for the insensitive art lover and to point out the noteworthy aspects of a painting, sculpture or cave drawing. The work of an art critic is at once a subjective inference and an objective analysis: presenting what art is, and trying to make the viewer "see something that moves [him]."²

This understanding of the 'art critic' may indeed have its own critics, however, the term is grounded in a Western aesthetic conception that systematizes, develops and prioritizes key Occidental art-critical standards based on the prior writings of Western philosophers and aestheticians. Bell's view that art is independent of the cognitive formulations of life finds much opposition in the writings of art historians, critics and curators in China. The work of Li Zehou, Wu Hung, Li Xianting and Zhu Qi present this division, either directly or in their treatment of art criticism. In Li Zehou's *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, he holds to the idea of cultural essentialism: that each culture has its own way of understanding and seeing the world. This concept is not foreign to the West: in *Truth and Other Cultures* Michael Baxandall describes a "perceptual training"³ that draws upon the culture one is a part of. The ideas are similar, but their presentation is vastly different. Baxandall folds this thought into his theory of intentionality and perception, developing his own philosophy of art that is both contextualized and universal. Li Zehou, on the other hand, shows us this idea by

² Clive Bell, *Art* (New York : Rupa & Co., 2002), 18.

³ Michael Baxandall, "Truth and Other Cultures," in *Patterns of Intention*, (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1985), 107.

particularizing Chinese aesthetic history using examples from thousands of years of civilization in China. Describing the *Guofeng* section of the *Book of Songs*⁴ Li says: “Unlike the ancient epic poems of other nations, they are short verses that, from the very beginning, influence and inspire people by their lyricism and practical rationality. They are works of art that embody the national characteristics of Chinese aesthetics.”⁵ Through this national characterization of aesthetics, Li compiles a distinct aesthetic theory that is rooted in the history of China’s culture. He gives the Chinese an aesthetic that belongs to their soil and spirit, an art with roots in the people and land of China.

This sentiment is by no means applicable to all the cultural critics in China. However, a sense of responsibility to society in the aesthetic theories and critical dialogues surrounding contemporary Chinese art is a distinguishing quality of Chinese critics. The very recent history of the People’s Republic of China is still so fresh in time that it seems almost wrong for a critic to think of contemporary art outside of politics. Even the ‘International’ art like that of Xu Bing, as we shall later see, continues to be read through the lens of politics. Such was the case particularly in the years after the Cultural Revolution. During this time, the idealism of the late 1980’s subsumed all aspects of art to the service of creating a new culture for China. This new culture was supposed to be outside the repressive regime, but in doing so, constantly referenced the collectivist government as the other. Thus, the artwork and its reception were always politically charged.

⁴ *Shi Jing*, translated as the *Book of Songs*, is China’s earliest collection of songs and poems. Compiled during the Spring and Autumn period, it consists of 305 pieces divided into three categories: *Feng* or *Guofeng* (‘Styles’ or ‘National Styles’ – a collection of popular songs), *Ya* (‘Elegance’ – courtly songs) and *Song* (‘Odes’).

⁵ Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* (Hong Kong ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1994), 52.

A pioneer of the '85 New Wave (an art movement that began in 1985 and lasted until 1989), Li Xianting is one of the most influential voices of Chinese contemporary art.⁶ He is considered the “godfather” of today’s Chinese artists who affectionately call him *Lao Li*, which is translated as “Elder Li.” In an interview with Andrew Solomon of The New York Times, Lao Li is described as devoted “to encouraging those ways of thinking that empower his society.” Solomon characterizes Li as being driven by his “sense of moral purpose.”⁷ Although Li’s lifestyle reflects a certain dedication to the Chinese avant-garde, Solomon’s portrayal of Li as a benevolent and selfless teacher reiterates a Confucius-like figure that may have more to do with the Western idealization of a Chinese educator, than with Li’s actual engagement with artists. Nevertheless, historical and literary accounts show that in the 1980’s, Lao Li along with the '85 New Wave attempted to change society through an idealized model of art. Reminiscent of the elitism and drive for societal improvement of early American museums, this movement’s sense of responsibility to society is still apparent in the writings of Lao Li. His devotion to the Chinese society reflects a deeper consideration of his role in the art world. In addition to being an art critic, he serves as teacher and supporter of the arts.

Another distinctive aspect of contemporary Chinese art criticism is its relationship with its more established and well-acquainted Western counterpart. When the gates to the West opened in the 1980’s, Chinese intellectuals read as much Western philosophy and aesthetic theory as they could get their hands on. The artist Huang Yong Ping

⁶ The '85 New Wave is considered the culmination of avant-garde trends that occurred in China during the 1970’s and early ‘80s. Made up of over 100 unofficial art groups that criticized authority, and questioned both tradition and Western aesthetic thought, this art movement was the umbrella under which artists experimented with western art forms.

⁷ Andrew Solomon, “Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China,” *New York Times Magazine*, December, 19 1993.

admitted to having “spent the whole summer of 1984 reading Wittgenstein and attempting to reconsider the nature of art.”⁸ However, as the art world in China matured, artists, critics and curators began questioning the universality of these models and looked to a post-colonial consideration of Chinese art criticism. This perception is most notable in younger art critics like Pi Li, who warns against blindly accepting a Western interpretation of a piece of Chinese contemporary art. Pi contends that by not examining the “exterior critique” the art of China could fall into a false existence, subservient to Western taste.⁹ By questioning this critique, Pi asserts that the ideas and interpretations behind Chinese contemporary art can be enriched and reinforced. Although he is suspicious of the Western analysis, Pi also advises a reconsideration of the “interior critique.” Many, if not all, Chinese art critics use Western idioms and value judgments, making self-reflection a necessary part of Chinese cultural criticism. Pi’s skepticism is reminiscent of Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism,’ which is most apparent when the young critic expounds on the “Western logo-centric and essentialist” process of modernization in Chinese society. Where Said’s book *Orientalism* is a study of the western-framed discourse of the Orient other, Pi’s interest lies in the internalization of that discourse by the Chinese critic. Furthermore, in chapter 3 Said considers the retranslation of an Oriental individual’s notion of self after a trip to the west, yet Pi’s critic need not have journeyed so far to participate in the western Orientalist dialogue. Indeed Said’s post-colonial standard seems to have influenced Pi Li’s understanding of Chineseness in

⁸ Li Xianting “Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture,” in *Mahjong-Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher (Ostfildern-Ruit : Hatje Cantz ; New York : Art Publishers [distributor], 2005), 27.

⁹ Pi Li, “My Life, Me Decision: The Political Nature of Chinese Contemporary Art,” in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. John Clark (Hong Kong: New Art Media Limited, 2000), 46-51.

Chinese cultural criticism, yet it is apparent that he is motivated by more than post-colonial theory.

What animates the Chinese art critic is complicated by her historical construction. For the art critic, it has been a fairly recent development that she could make a living writing about art. In the 1980's, "art commentators" would praise the art made by artists who had devoted their lives to the greater good of socialism. However, the tides changed when the government loosened its grip on the flow of Western philosophical literature coming into China. An Avant-Garde underground began to emerge and the modern art "critic" would write in support of the cultural renewal. The word "critic" was used purposefully in contrast to the art commentators that continued to support the socialist cause. Because the idea of an art critic was non-existent before its western introduction, it was seen as a step towards the freedom and modernization that the '85 New Wave was trying to usher in. According to former editor of Beijing's *ART Magazine* Qian Zhijian, the term *critic* was totally foreign to the world of Chinese art. Before then, art criticism was considered to be secondary to art creation because the discipline had not developed into its own branch of the humanities. Critics during the Communist era were the "art commentators" who, faced with art that violated official guidelines such as abstract art and nudes, would warn against "'alienation' of the people" and "moral decadence."¹⁰ According to Qian, the term *critic* was first translated from English for use in the field of literature and culture, and then appropriated by the art world after the Tiananmen Square incident demonstrated the significance of criticism. A precursor to the 1989 protests was

¹⁰ Hans van Dijk, "The Fine Arts After the Cultural Revolution: Stylistic Development and Cultural Debate," in *China Avant Garde*, ed. Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pohlmann and Kai Reschke (Hong Kong : Oxford University Press, 1994), 16.

the Beijing “Democracy Wall,” a fifty-meter partition on which various uncensored newspapers, poems and cartoons were posted for several months between 1978 and 1979. The literature on this wall was critical of the government and its effect on the culture and people of China. And, although the “Democracy Wall” was manifest for only a few months, its contents reverberated through the entire country.¹¹ Subversive and critical literature as well as art, albeit underground, continued to grow into the 1980’s and eventually gave birth to the cultural and art critic in China today.

Although essentially a western profession, the art critic in China functions in a different way than her western counterpart. At first, the art “critics” of the late 1980’s were the leaders of the ’85 New Wave: curator/writers like Li Xianting, Gao Minglu and Fan Di’an were also working in the national art academies as teachers and chairmen. This gave them authority and some official power while also putting them in contact with the new talent going through art school. It was they who supported subversive art by putting together underground exhibitions and creating the first two journals dedicated to modern art.¹² As curators and writers, they were seen as “spiritual leaders” of the time. However, when the dissent culminated in June of 1989, and the avant-garde’s hope for utopia came to a crushing halt, many of the outspoken fled to less hostile lands. Gao Minglu went to the United States, Fei Dawei to France and Hou Hanru to Italy. Only a few stayed in Beijing like Li Xianting, and although Li was revered in art critical circles, he could not get any of his writings published in China.

¹¹ Jochen Noth, “Beijing 1979-1992: Frequent Changes of Scene,” in *China Avant Garde*, ed. Jochen Noth, Wolfer Pohlmann and Kai Reschke (Hong Kong : Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

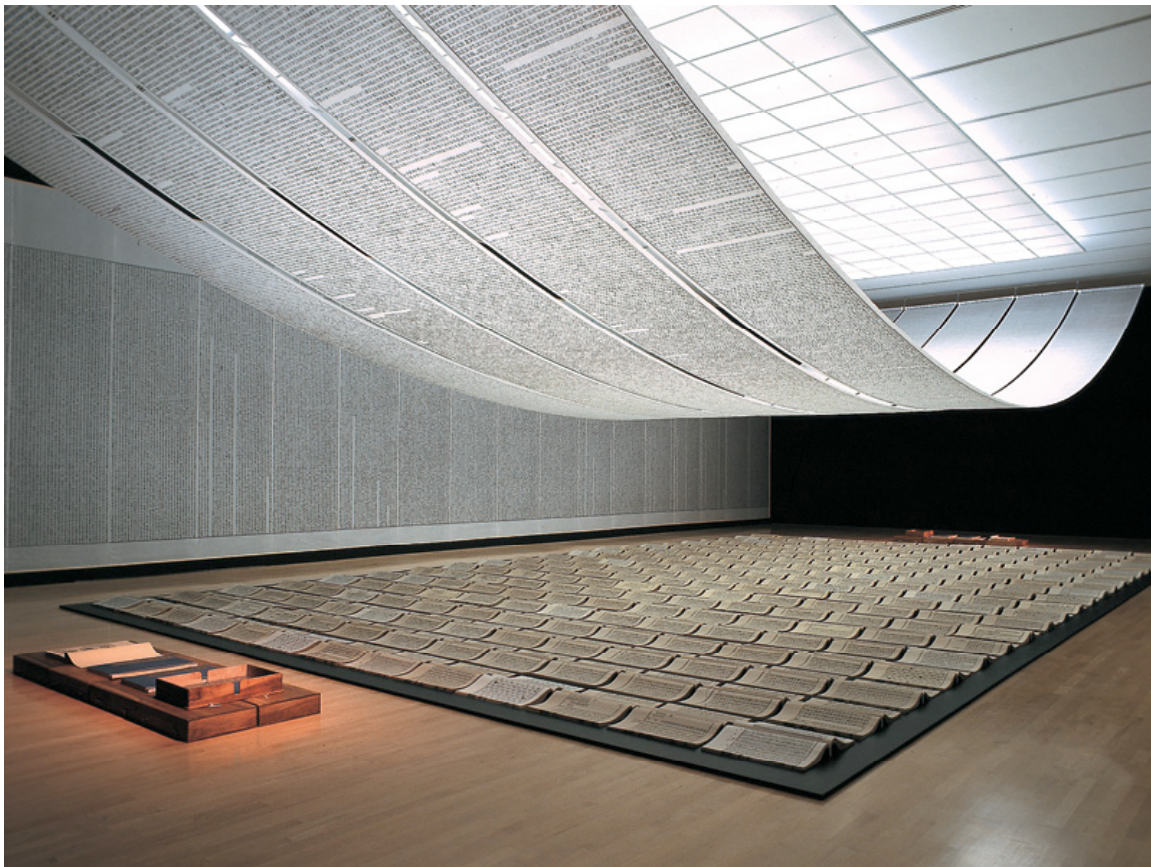
¹² The two art journals are *Fine Arts in China* edited by Li Xianting and *The Trend of Art Thought* edited by Gao Minglu. Both were started in 1985.

During the 1990's Deng Xiaoping's Open-Door Policy (initiated in 1978 to stimulate foreign trade and encourage foreign direct investment) pulled China out of its economic backwardness and created a market for Chinese art. Gallery shows, as opposed to museum exhibitions, were seen as an asset to the growing economy and were given government sanctions for the sake of modernization and growth. Some of the curator/critics of the 1980's, as well as a growing number of younger critics began to curate contemporary Chinese art shows in and outside the mainland. In one case curators dedicated to "bringing contemporary art into the market," held auctions for the exhibited works on site.¹³ Because these shows were an investment that gallery owners, artists, curators and the Chinese government all had a share in, the curators of these shows were put in a sensitive position. They came to inhabit, to use Qian Zhijian's term, "critic-as-dealer" roles *selling* Chinese contemporary art mainly to foreign collectors and institutions, but also to the nouveau riche of China. This became the case either for financial reasons (as art critics would be paid little or nothing at all to review an exhibition in China) or for furthering their careers as curators of Chinese art in the international art world.¹⁴ The development of this "critic-as-dealer" character puts into question the integrity of the Chinese art critic. It also serves to highlight the reverberation that the western concept of *critic* has generated through its translation into the Chinese art world.

¹³ The exhibition titled *Reality, Today and Tomorrow: An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Art (Xianshi, jintian yu mingtian)* was organized by the new generation of art critics, Leng Lin, Feng Boyi, Qian Zhijian, Zhang Xiaojun, and Gao Ling. Held in Beijing in 1996, it featured recent painting, sculpture, installation work, and video by a new generation of artists, including Fang Lijun, Zhao Bandi, Zhan Wang, Sui Jianguo, Song Dong, Wang Jin, and Sun Liang.

¹⁴ Qian Zhijian, "The Changing Role of Critics in the 1990s," in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. John Clark (Hong Kong: New Art Media Limited, 2000), 25-28.

One Chinese art critic and curator who attempts to bridge the gaps between western and Chinese notions of critics is Gao Minglu. His scope is broad drawing from western giants like Barthes while looking back to ancient dynastic Chinese history. His purpose in criticism is not overtly Chinese and his readings mesh well with western conceptions of criticism. In looking at a work of art, critics bring with them their own preconceived notions of what art is and how their role as critic requires them to react. A comparison between the writing of Gao Minglu to that of American postmodern art critic Hal Foster on the art work of Xu Bing will help to clarify the actual affect of cultural and contextual formation. Xu was born in Chongqing in 1955. He was an active artist of the '85 New Wave, but after the tragic events in Tiananmen Square, Xu Bing immigrated to the United States, where he continues to reside today. His work is among the most highly



Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, 1987-1991. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

regarded pieces of contemporary Chinese art in the international art world and his most famous piece *Book from the Sky (Tianshu)* was hailed by Michael Sullivan (a significant art historian of modern Chinese art) as the most important work of Chinese art of the twentieth century. Trained as a print-maker, Xu's primary medium is the written language and his art often takes the form of books as installations. These books however, are filled with an invented script that looks Chinese but is actually unintelligible. He says of his own art: "To strike at the written word is to strike at the very essence of the culture. Any doctoring of the written word becomes in itself a transformation of the most inherent portion of a person's thinking."¹⁵ Xu writes abundantly on his own work in Chinese and English, and he exhibits with some regularity both in China and the west. Hypothetically, Xu Bing is an artist who is equally accessible to Chinese and westerners. His art, however, is a different story.

Hal Foster's critical essay comes from a collection documenting Xu Bing's exhibition of *Book from the Sky* at the Princeton University Art Museum in 2003. The essay, entitled "Xu Bing: A Western Perspective," relates the work of Xu to the Western exploration of semiotics and linguistics. In it Foster draws ideological and thematic parallels from the *oeuvre* of Xu to the art of various Western idioms. Linking the work of nineteenth century Orientalist Jean -Léon Gérôme to Dada sound poetry to early Jackson Pollock to Xu Bing's meticulous creation of over 4,000 fake Chinese characters, Foster posits that these artists were (or are) all searching for an "invented script that aims at an

¹⁵ Brita Erickson, *Words Without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 13-14.

effect of authenticity or purity.”¹⁶ Foster asserts that the connection lies in their use of signs to affirm or question the origins of language and the formation of the social subject. He points to the influence of de Saussure, and Panofsky in his readings of Xu’s art while the marks of Barthes and Derrida play out in his diction throughout the essay. However, he never considers Chinese, or even non-western, philosophical thought. By interpreting these works through a strictly Western theoretical foundation, Foster’s understanding of Xu’s work is limited in its scope.

Although Foster denies, and even questions the possibility of, appropriating Xu Bing’s work into a Western artistic tradition, he seems intent on finding something familiar in Xu’s art. He affixes, however humbly, the work of Xu Bing into the Western categories of “avant-gardist,” “postmodernist,” and Conceptual art, all the while reiterating the danger of coupling the disparate entities together. In the end, Foster makes a point of differentiating Xu Bing from the imposed Western groupings, and instead offers Xu’s work as a model of a “post-medium art” that belongs to the global culture. What is most striking about Foster’s analysis is the desire to make Xu Bing’s art accessible, not only to Westerners, but also to himself.

This type of justification is unnecessary – and indeed nonexistent – in Gao Minglu’s examination of Xu Bing’s *oeuvre*. In his essay “Meaninglessness and Confrontation in Xu Bing’s Art,” Gao reveals his historical and culture-based interpretation through an analysis of four (and by extension, all) works by Xu Bing. He begins with Xu’s seminal piece, *Book from the Sky*, and demonstrates the influence of

¹⁶ Hal Foster, “Xu Bing: Western Perspective,” in *Persistence | Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*, ed. Silbergeld, Jerome and Dora C.Y, Ching (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 89.

Chan (Zen in Japan) Buddhism on the piece through the concept of “emptiness.”

Understanding and experiencing “emptiness” is a crucial step towards enlightenment in Chan, and Gao suggests that *Book from the Sky* opens up a similar type of space that is free from meaning and sound. Gao links this idea of unrealized space to a Western theory: in particular to that of Roland Barthes who places the reader in the space hollowed by the death of the author.¹⁷ This interpretation underlines Gao’s effort to combine the thoughts of East and West – asserting the democracy of thought. Perhaps Gao’s objective in juxtaposing the two different perspectives was to upset the dominant position of the western theoretical tradition. By maintaining the appropriateness of both Chan Buddhist philosophy and Barthes’s theory, Gao is able to legitimize a culturally based position while demonstrating the unifying potential of Chinese art criticism.

The political nuance of Xu Bing’s art is also an important dimension for Gao. In assessing the meaning of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (1990), a gigantic rubbing of a section of the Great Wall using a painstakingly time consuming technique for reproducing carvings of calligraphy, Gao formulates the political meaning behind the piece by relating it to a popular Chinese folktale. The tale is that of a lost traveler, who ends up walking in circles in the night as if ghosts had built a wall around him so that he could not continue on his journey. Xu’s title recalls this hopeless story while the image of the Great Wall reflects the disorientation and helplessness of a Chinese nation unable to continue on its chosen path. A similar sense of powerlessness is at the center of Gao’s understanding of *Cultural Negotiation*, an installation exhibited by Xu Bing in 1992. The

¹⁷ Gao Minglu, “Meaninglessness and Confrontation in Xu Bing’s Art,” XuBing.com, http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/texts/meaninglessness_and_confrontation_in_xu_bings_art/.

work consists of 300 volumes filled with the counterfeit script from the *Book from the Sky* delicately bound in a traditional blue cover and 300 volumes of an unintelligible English jumble of the King James Version of the New Testament and a trashy contemporary novel bound in heavy leather. These two types of “books” are strewn across a large conference table, symbolizing the encounter of China and the West. Gao, however, sees the weighty western tome as overwhelming the *Book from the Sky*, signifying the West’s dominance over China.



Xu Bing, *Cultural Negotiations*, 1992

Gao's interpretations are based on the contextual significance of Xu Bing's art. Instead of solely focusing on the theoretical, Gao elucidates the cultural influences affecting each piece and then analyzes it from the perspective of a Chinese art historian; reading through the lens of a deep and colorful Chinese history. Gao, however, is also indebted to Western philosophy and incorporates key art critical idioms such as Barthes's 'death of the author' and the 'gauze of representation' – Brian Wallis's interpretation of Baudrillard.¹⁸ Furthermore, by suggesting a political aspect in Xu Bing's work, Gao underscores his own experiences of growing up in China. Having lived through the Cultural Revolution and been an active member of the avant-garde art movement himself, Gao's personal attachment to the subversive roots of Chinese contemporary art is apparent in his analysis. Noticeably, this political element is missing from Foster's understanding of Xu Bing's work, as is a connection of the art to its socio-historic origins. These differences point to a larger problem that Gao asserts is exacerbated by many Western critics, art historians and curators.

The issue is multifarious and elicits different responses from each critic. For Gao Minglu, it is that even in light of the changes China has gone through in the past decade, Chinese art is still "misread" through the ideologies of the Cold War. He posits that the driving force behind the Chinese avant-garde in the 1980's was a utopia-seeking political one, but has now become one engaged with the realities of an economic global culture.¹⁹ His problem with this "misreading" is that the artists whose work is being supported by

¹⁸ Gao Minglu, "Meaninglessness and Confrontation in Xu Bing's Art," XuBing.com, http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/texts/meaninglessness_and_confrontation_in_xu_bings_art/.

¹⁹ Gao Minglu, "Extensionality and Intentionality in a Transnational Cultural System," *Art Journal* (Vol. 57, 1998): 37.

the West is no longer avant-garde. Western infatuation with Political Pop and Cynical Realism have made artists like Wang Guangyi and Fang Lijun much wealthier than the average Chinese, while simultaneously overshadowing other avant-garde trends. One such movement is what Gao calls “Apartment Art” which opposes the mass-consumer materialization of Chinese art and culture. Generally unmarketable artworks or temporary happenings, Apartment Art responds to the commodity fetishism of contemporary China’s global society.

Many Chinese art critics share this resistant sentiment. In Zhu Qi’s essay “Do Westerners Really Understand Chinese Avant-Garde Art?” he straightforwardly answers No. The reason, according to Zhu, is that Westerners oversimplify their understanding of contemporary Chinese art; treating their encounters as an adventure into the psyche of a strange land. This shallow grasp of Chinese art leads to the commercial specialization of Chinese artists who know what kinds of art to make and how to act around Western collectors. What they produce is art that has been popular abroad: “politically realist art that borrows its form from the West.”²⁰ Zhu’s objection to Westerners appropriating contemporary Chinese art is due to his belief that they aren’t interested in the work itself as much as they are interested in the expression of the inconceivable societal changes occurring in China after the Cultural Revolution. Essentially, what they are collecting is not art but a pseudo-souvenir of an experience that they can only look at. To actually live through the changes in the culture and know its effects produces a familiarity that

²⁰ Zhu Qi, “Do Westerners Really Understand Chinese avant-garde Art?,” in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. John Clark (Hong Kong: New Art Media Limited, 2000), 56.

privileges the Chinese. The current system, however, is distorted and Zhu speculates that it will cause more harm than good.

The critics who find the status of contemporary Chinese art unfavorable in the international art world are numerous and vocal. Yet there are a few who see this development of the Chinese avant-garde as a positive contribution to the growth of a global culture. One such art critic is Huang Du who posits that the “works of Chinese artists are bridging the gaps between Chinese culture and modernity, and art is now realizing its own cultural identity... Chinese artists are thinking and are enhancing their global vision.”²¹ In the shrinking world of jet travel and the Internet, the global reach of Chinese art, and that of other cultures, has given rise to an “International art” that is without boundaries. International artists seek to engage a global audience using different mediums and methods to bridge diverse cultural identities. Chinese artists who live abroad are key participants of this movement as they are directly in contact with the Western art mainstream. Gu Wenda, Cai Guo-qiang, Xu Bing and Huang Yong Ping are all participants of a global art movement, demonstrating a tendency towards the universal in the various countries from which they draw their material and in which they exhibit. The maturation of an art culture without a national culture raises questions of where any culture begins and ends. Thus a questioning of “Chineseness” and what makes something or someone Chinese becomes an exercise in identity formation and a major concern for today’s Chinese artists and art critics. Along with the establishment of a Western vernacular of art criticism in China, the introduction of the International identity dilemma is now affecting the way Chinese critics talk about art.

²¹ Patricia E. Karetzky, *Contemporary Chinese Art and the Literary Culture of China* (New York: Lehman College Art Gallery, 1999), 56.

One of the terms that contemporary Chinese art critics are reconsidering is “Chineseness.” The discussion surrounding this concept has been extremely diverse, ranging from antagonistic sentiments towards the West for the creation of such a label, to an inward analysis of Chinese culture over the centuries. The ways in which Chinese critics, curators and artists respond to the question of “Chineseness” characterizes the inherent ambiguity of the term and serves to illuminate the underlying costs at stake. Considering the idea’s trivial origins from the West – stemming from a rudimentary analysis of Chinese art – how Chinese define the term will have more to do with how they see themselves in the global and local art world than with changing the Western view of Chinese art. An analysis of this self-definition will show that at the heart of the matter is the centuries-old question of identity characterized by postmodern plurality.

In Wang Gungwu’s *The Chineseness of China*, the Chinese intellectual is posited as the paradigm of the human expression of “Chineseness.” Wang develops this Chinese intellectual’s role through the dynasties by drawing similarities in how they cultivated their beliefs and how they served the best interest of their people. He points to the influence of Confucianism, Chan Buddhism and Taoism as key agents of the Chinese intellectual’s integrity, responsibility and knowledge. In his concluding chapter, Wang suggests that the essence of being Chinese lies in how the intellectual’s principles shape his purpose in society. When the Imperial government – of which he was a crucial part – supported his beliefs, the scholar staunchly stood by the government. However, when he felt that the system had become corrupt and retrogressive he fiercely criticized the state and often died for his principles. As Wang depicts in his book, this pattern is evident over the centuries of Imperial China and through the volatile twentieth century. While

examining the “Chineseness” of the actions of Mao Zedong and his Marxist-Leninist peers Wang observes:

“Their acts of rebellion were made in the belief that the mandarin Confucianism of their fathers had become degenerate and that China needed the modernizing values of the West in order to restore the Chinese people to their self-respect as members of a rich and powerful country. Theirs were patriotic acts made in order to save China. The content of their new faiths might have been foreign in origin, but the impulse and purposefulness of their actions were Chinese.”²²

Thus, for Wang, it is not a particular belief that makes someone Chinese, but rather her mode of thinking and fidelity to China. This sense of responsibility to the country is not a dead tradition; Li Xianting, for example, echoes his intellectual ancestors by supporting and mentoring the avant-garde artists in China today. Although Wang’s understanding of “Chineseness” incorporates the historical and sociological foundations of the Chinese intellectual, it lacks the contemporaneity to deal with the issue of Chineseness relative to Chinese avant-garde art. His definition, however, demonstrates the historicity behind a Chinese intellectual tradition that can add to an understanding of what it means to be quintessentially Chinese.

An opinion closer to today’s art world comes from Ai Weiwei, longtime artist and curator of contemporary Chinese art. His view on “Chineseness” is not unlike that of Zhu Qi, whose judgment of the Western term bundles it up with other misconceptions of the Orient such as *chinoiserie* and *japonisme*. Having lived in New York for ten years, Ai draws upon his own experience of the Western art system to form his outlook on the effect this concept has had on the art coming out of China today. According to Ai, “Chineseness” is the forced articulation of a “cultural colour” by contemporary Chinese

²² Wang Gungwu, *The Chineseness of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 290.

artists extorted by the West's fascination with the Other. The artifacts produced by today's Chinese artists are not exquisite porcelains (although, in Ai's case, they are) but mementos of a repressed culture of the very recent past. In an interview with Chinese art aficionado Robert Bernell, Ai laments this development of the Chinese art world, but feels Chinese artists are powerless against it. Ai describes the commercialization of art as a rampant trend. "Among the young artists I have seen, I would say sixty to seventy percent package their works."²³ At the expense of real creativity and avant-gardism, contemporary Chinese artists capitalize on the idea of "Chineseness" and buy into a system that eclipses the work of truly innovative artists.

In 2000, Ai and fellow curator/artist Feng Boyi objected to the further expansion of a Western art system that supported the destructive and insubordinate artistic practices of today's Chinese artists in an exhibition entitled *Fuck Off*. Timed to coincide with the Third Shanghai Biennale, this exhibition was not only a statement against the Western imposition of Chineseness on the Chinese art scene, but of the institutionalization that the West brought into China. "We were very clear about what we wanted to say towards Chinese institutions as well as Western curators and institutions and dealers; their functions are all similar in one way or the other. It's all about the deal, about labor, how to trademark different interests. We had to say something as individual artists to the outside world, and what we said was 'fuck off.'"²⁴ This sentiment, of the Chinese artist pitted against the world, is reiterated in the exhibit through works that are subversive towards established modes of producing and thinking about art. A traditional Chinese

²³ Ai Weiwei and Robert Bernell, "Ai Weiwei," in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. John Clark (Hong Kong: New Art Media Limited, 2000), 180.

²⁴ Brita Erickson, *On the Edge* (New York: Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Art, 2004), 46.

landscape was painted on a slab of pork; an artist drove a forklift through one of his paintings, which was a derisive promotional poster; a dog's skeleton was placed in a glass case filled with supposedly highly poisonous gas that could kill everyone in the gallery in three minutes. All this to proclaim the Chinese artist's liberation from "Chineseness."

The factors that have contributed to the development of such a term are economic, sociological and ideological in nature. The phenomenon of globalization has created a series of complex effects that have fundamentally altered Chinese society. Intellectual diasporas, ambiguous national identification and unconstrained materialism have all taken a toll on the Chinese sense of self. The recent and volatile political history of China has added to the dissatisfaction of the Chinese people, producing discordant generations varying in national pride and notions of Chinese tradition. More to the point, the influx of Western concepts and models of thought severely fractured the world of Chinese cultural criticism, necessitating a reconsideration of what is Chinese and what constitutes Chineseness.

If the globalization experience has taught us anything, it is that the Chinese are more capitalistic than not. The Western fascination with struggling avant-garde artists coupled with the exoticism of communist China, spawned a market for art that exudes these characteristics. To use the term, these works have a "Chineseness" about them that is neither authentic nor avant-garde. The political approval of Chineseness in contemporary art exacerbates the problem Chinese artists and art critics have with the concept. With a tradition of tension between Chinese intellectuals and an unsympathetic

government providing the historical and cultural basis for repudiation, most art critics do not support the opportunism engendered by Chineseness in art.

However, the effect of Chineseness on art criticism is harder to generalize. The various and divergent voices contributing to the definition and discussion of Chineseness in art and culture creates a dialogue that is rich yet inconsonant. Anti-Chineseness views such as that of Ai Weiwei clash dramatically with Huang Du's optimistic sense that Chinese art is contributing to the creation of a global culture. This consolidation of cultures into an International identity is countered by the socio-cultural interpretations of Chinese artworks by critics like Gao Minglu and Li Zehou. Furthermore, while Pi Li, Zhu Qi and Qian Zhijian are all weary of the Chinese appropriation of Western idioms, concepts and collectors, their objections vary in intensity, expectation and influence; leading to unequal definitions of Chineseness. The correlations and differences between all these critical assessments of Chinese art and culture constitute a definition of "Chineseness" that is characterized by plurality and openness. In only a few decades, Chinese art criticism has grown from superficial supporting character to complex and spirited protagonist. Legitimizing this advancement in the face of a Western art critical hegemon has been a challenge. Yet, through open and opinionated dialogue Chinese art critics have produced a remarkably multifarious and telling definition of "Chineseness" that overcomes ideological – and perhaps even national – boundaries.

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