NEW CHINESE ART IN EXILE

There are a number of tales circulating among the Chinese, explaining the origin of the world’s human races. One tale recounts that humans were created when one day the loveliest creatur was made and moulded into a human figure and put into the kiln. The first mould was fired too long and turned all black. He felt unsatisfiand threw it far away — to Africa. The second one was allowed to bake only for a short while. He thought that it was too white and threw it to Europe. The third was baked to perfection. It was all yellow. The Creator was satisfied and put it on the ground and hence afterwards every race was yellow.

Putting aside its patriarchal overtones, the tale’s racist implications are consistent with the discourse of race in China up to the 20th century. As suggested by the mythology, classical texts and popular lore, the Chinese imagination was trapped in a narrow dichotomy that opposed a civilized center (China) to a barbarian periphery (foreign) and by assumptions of its cultural superiority, and of the central-ity of the color yellow in the universe. All converged in the ascription of a negative ontological status to foreigners, who appeared in pictorial texts as furry hog-men, animalistic creatures, and were consistently referred to as “barbarian devils” and “foreign devils.”

Ethnocentrism, however, is only one term to understand the racist representations of non-Chinese. The Chinese experience of modernity, their violent encounter with the imaginary (white) Other in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century may be another factor. Most Chinese know that it was the Europeans who added Chinese exceptionalism to social discourse. They are strewn in advanced weapons and helped the Chinese Emperor suppress Chinese peasant uprisings. Armies of eight million Chinese citizens also stormed Beijing leaving ruins of an imperial palace standing silently in the city’s northern suburbs as a witness of that destruction and robbery. While social prejudices against black people continue, from the Opium War onwards, the Chinese are no longer able to absorb or expel the (white) Other through imagination. Now they are located in a shifty world of post-relation — the centre of the world has moved to what was formerly considered the “barbarian” West.

The perception of the West being the modern world’s “centro” can be easily traced in the public, popular discourses and everyday actualities when taking a work now on the streets of China’s cities, and scanning the signs of Western pop culture and lifestyles. Never has there been a moment in China’s history when both the officiants and populace are so enthusiastic about the West. Chinese national pride has given in to a general acknowledgement that the (white) Other has created, in the past few hundred years, a culture “superior” to the indigenous, judging by its technological material development, and cultural/artistic innovations

Rather than write about how the West (Euro-America) is represented in China today, I will turn to a broader issue — that of the current Sino-Western encounter by looking specifically at some practices of visual arts in China since the 1980s. As a student and later as an instructor in Chinese universities during most of the 1980s, I witnessed the advent of a “new Chinese art” and the struggle surrounding it. Last year I was delighted to meet in Toronto some artists from the same university I attended. Since then we have been discussing many of our concerns, all related to China’s cultural predicament and identity, and its cultural future. Clearly, the years in Canada have failed to undo who we are. To a large extent, our diasporic experience serves as a symbolic return to “home.”

Earlier this year my Chinese friends and Canadian artist Bruce Parsons organized an exhibition of contemporary Chinese Art at Artspace, in Peterborough, Ontario. The art work was on this scale from mainland China, it displayed selected works by 14 artists created between 1986 and 1993. These works do not represent the eastern radical art movement which so significantly affected the action in the 1980s, but they offer a glimpse of the social changes, shifts of perspectives, cultural borrowing and assimilating taking place. Thematically, they narrate experiences of repression by both traditional and current authorities, thoughts about modernity and globalization, and apprehensions of cultural breakdown. They display a fusion of Western modern art forms, indigenous cultural symbols and local concepts. The type of artistic practice called “Western art” in China (which originated from the transplantation of European classical painting to China in the early twentieth century and continued to Soviet socialist realism for three decades after the 1949 revolution) is extraneous by DADA, surrealizing, American pop art, abstract expressionism, and impressionism. Even the traditional Chinese ink painting bears the mark of modernity and of aesthetic transfiguration. For instance, in an interpretation of an ancient Chinese poem, human skulls are scattered on the long way of the quest, vanishing in infinity, which violates traditional, elitist aesthetics. In short, the show reveals a significant phenomenon. Chinese artists have absorbed forms of modern Western art and translated them into the language of Chinese avant-garde.

The rise of a “cosmopolitan avant-garde art” in China, as dubbed by a Western aesthete, is intrinsically connected to both local realities and globalization. These art works visualize transitions in the social and aesthetic history of China in the process of modernization and particularly, the increasing presence of the (white) Other in the yellow Middle Kingdom. They map territories of experience shared by those living at intersections of times, spaces and cultures.

Thus these works bear some resemblance to a whole gamut of twentieth-century Western literature proposed by the critic George Steiner as “extraterritorial”, a literary by and about exile. To be clear, these artists are not real exiles — none of them are banished from their homeland for political or other reasons. My somewhat strained parallel points to the effects of modernity — the Chinese are losing contact with a sense of wholeness as a result of the rapid changes in the country. The typical “structure of feelings” of the exile, as once outlined by Edward Said, are perceivable in these art works. That is, solitude, estrangement, frustration, cross-cultural visions, cultural perspective, intellectual reserve, and moral courage. Caught in a transition to the "modern", the artists have a lucid sense of what it means for all of us to be out of place. While it is obvious that a homoscapes is out of the question, most of them are uncertain about their destinies.

Nevertheless, I detect a certain attachment in their detachment, and bounds of typical Chinese national cultural consciousness in their aspirations to the status of the traditional. What is embedded in the artist’s border-crossing in a preoccupation with the lost or transforming “home”. This preoccupation has been a key characteristic of Chinese cultural nationalism — since the late nineteenth century, the Chinese intelligentsia have engaged themselves in searching for solutions for China’s predicament. The national project of cultural critique and the awareness of China’s predicament are accomplished by a number of works. On one hand, the Chinese must move into the outside world as a strategy to eradicate feudalism and local repression, as Self-Portrait and other works suggest. On the other hand, the
Looking back, the adaptation of Western modern modes of representations emerged in the early 1980s as an integral part of a cultural struggle engaged in several fronts first to break down official doctrine of texts and restrictions (i.e. Soviet socialist realism); second, to express forbidden subject matters and emotions, and to voice criticism and finally, to move out of the shell of tradition and forge a cultural renewal. Given the fact that the new art has grown out of government condemnation and frequent closures of exhibitions, the representation of local realities and popular sentiments through foreign and hybrid forms demonstrates its significant role in the Chinese popular struggle against the totalitarian regime.

Trends of thought exist behind these activities. These trends of thought are the recent inventions of the Oriental critic Bynick’s discussion about the various attitudes held by writers in post-colonial Africa toward their encounter with alien cultures. These include those who negate self or hold a “pessimistic affiliation” of traditional society, those who advocate “Negatives” and those who achieve “stylistic bridges” through a synthesis of indigenous and alien cultural elements, and those who strive to root their creativity in the aesthetic tradition in the cause of society’s transformation process. Needless to say, any one of these attitudes can be traced in the exhibition in Cambodia. If some works bear trace of self-negation in the mode of cultural critique, one of them can be seen as examples of “stylistic bridges”, that is, a mix of foreign and indigenous techniques and cultural codes. Some, like the traditional ink painting, try to incorporate modern Western elements while rooted in Chinese cultural heritage. However, these attempts do not necessarily reduce the pressure on the avant-garde artists who practice a primarily imported form of art.

If Western modes of representations are readily adopted for local political projects, Chinese artists face an identity crisis and other consequences of borrowing from a powerful Other. How can they clear themselves of accusations of imitation and inauthenticity? Furthermore, although the original transmutation of Western art to Chinese can be seen as a fact of cultural exchange, its location in the aftermath of the European imperialist crusade cannot be erased. The origin of China’s Western art, and the positioning of China at the world’s margins, circumscribe Chinese practices to the judgement of the dominant aesthetic and cultural discourses, i.e., those of the West. Chinese artists claim of originality, creativity and universal validity at home, and their recognition by the “world” or the West — depend greatly on their seeming identification with Western aesthetic configurations.

Even leaving their traditional ethnocentrism and national pride behind, a sense of inferiority and disorientation lingers. After a decade of ardent exploration and experiment, it is still not clear how they can maintain their identity as Chinese while employing a visual language primarily invented by Others. To describe their predicament, I would use the term “Chinese complex”: their feelings of subordination, marginalization and despair are mingled with their recognition of existing world power relations, admiration for Western innovation, anxiety of the increasing pressure from outside, and desire to rise from the predicament.

Such a typical “Chinese complex” clearly imbues a number of works. The Unfinished Book, an installation in the form of an ancient Chinese book, narrates the illusion of Laut’s serene world by the Western imperialist war machine and commercial culture. The work is in essence a text of China’s modern history and consciousness, capturing a fragmentation in process and the ambivalences toward the West. From The Second State, where Andy Warhol’s influence is visible, I can sense the terror of being squeezed by state restriction and pressure from beyond national/cultural boundaries. What should be pointed out is that the major problem may no longer be state restriction since the artists have become quite skilled in skirting official routes. The fact that a cultural renewal has been built upon modes of expression and representation borrowed from Others, and that foreign commercial cultural products are pouring into the country as China’s modernization course is becoming more capitalist-oriented, makes it an urgent task for Chinese artists to find specific paths through modernity. To be able to live as Chinese and at the same time to participate in a global dialogue, understood by those artists in themselves, is the imperative project of identity reconstruction. Such an awareness seems to open up possibilities to deal with the problems inherent in the act of borrowing.

If The Unfinished Book and The Second State reveal feelings of melancholy, anxiety, indignation and subjugation, other works stress the artist’s desire and determination to make a modern art of their own. As both a survival and resistance strategy these artists play with the Centre to transform what originates from the Centre to meet the specific needs of the Chinese. The works by He Gong, Li Ning and Gu
Xiong, three artists currently living in Canada, suggest a trend of subversive appropriation in a cultural encounter marked by unequal power relations.

Gu Xiong's Pizza! Pizza! and other works not only register the transposition of his own identity—his life as a university instructor at home to a bunny in a cafe—these works also whip consumer culture in North America, and ridicule the corporate capitalist dream of capturing the world as market. Installations by He Gong and Li Ning, This Is Not The Way Flowers and The Suit Of Medusa, transgress the historical Euro-American events by shifting our attention to the voyages made by millions of migrants to North America, who were uprooted by war, economic hardships and political turmoil—largely outcomes of imperialism, modernity, and capitalist expansion into the Third World. Their struggle for survival is told by the steering wheel mode of cooking pots and ovens made of patched, faded T-shirts of a variety of colours and sizes, with phrases of Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese, and other languages from the world's margins. These works, in other words, visualize a mode of "travel" which James Clifford calls attention to the "journeys" made by those rendered invisible because of their class, gender, ethnicity and race. Employing a language from the Centre, these artists not only assign central importance to those in the margins, they also make possible the articulation of marginalized experiences at the very centre of world power and art.

Despite their shared experiences of uprootedness and act of borrowing, as opposed to the case of home, the diasporic practice entails a special consciousness to strike a balance and reverse the terms of Euro-American art. In my view, the diasporic practice is particularly significant, not merely because it can enrich discussions on "travelling theory" and "traveling cultures", but also because it may offer a breakthrough in Chinese artists' learning from the West. The "new Chinese art" would not be possible without the traveling of modern Western art idioms to China under its "open-door" policy, and that travel, a certain extent, also anticipates its journeying to North America and Europe. Is this a return of the Western elements which have voyaged to the Far East mediated by Chinese artists?

Said points out that as a theory travels, the new location in time and space would necessarily affect how it is accepted (or rejected). In the Chinese case, although all artists make use of Western modes of representations, the outcomes bear the mark of the specific locations in which they are practiced. While those at home strive to achieve a sensuousness (as close as to that of the West) in order to declare their radicalism and rebellion against Chinese authority and tradition (which, unfortunately, could mean the internalization of the self-other), the diasporic practice suggests that the "return" of the traveling cultural elements to their origin is subject to the influence of the mediation, or the artists' insurgent racial, ethnic, cultural and national consciousness and their positions in the margin. Unlike those at home, artists in the diaspora are conscious of the significance of reclaiming Chinese values through speaking with a cosmopolitan language. Therefore, striving for differences rooted in their own cultural heritages while achieving certain identification with practices in the centre is the other strategy of resistance used by Chinese artists in the diaspora.

Such consciousness and efforts indicate the positivity of diasporic experience, or the "exile consciousness" celebrated by Said. He describes "a scrupulous (not indulgent or self-righteous) subjectivity" to the exile. It is the capability to see "the entire world as a foreign land" that gives rise to a plurality of vision and an awareness that is "contextual". As both insiders, these artists' critical awareness of cultures, self and others, their own (cultural, racial, social and political) locations in the margin of a white-dominant society compel them to articulate from what Stuart Hall calls a "particular place", out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as "ethnic artists". This enables them to maintain their difference through creative ways of interrogating and appropriating what they borrow from the Centre. I am anxious to see the impact of the diasporic practice on the development of a modern Chinese art once it travels back "home".