

# 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 lonely creator used clay and moulded it into a human figure and put it into the kiln. The first mould was fired too long and turned all black. He felt unsatisfied and 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 very satisfied and put it on the ground and hence afterwards everyone in Asia was yellow.

Putting aside its patriarchal overtone, 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 centre (China) to a barbarian periphery (foreign) and by assumptions of its cultural superiority, and of the centrality of the colour yellow in the universe. All converged in the ascription of a negative ontological status to foreigners, who appeared in pictorial



Red, Lu Jia

By  
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texts as furry bogeymen, 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 modernism, 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 raided China's coastal cities with advanced weapons and helped the Chinese Emperor suppress Chinese peasant uprisings. Armies of eight European countries 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 racial 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 shifted world power 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 "centre" can be easily traced in the public, popular discourses and everyday actualities when taking a walk today 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 officials 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-West encounter by looking specifically at some practices of visual arts in China since the 1980s. As a student and later 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 diasporan 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 first art exhibit of this scale from mainland China, it displayed selected works by 14 artists created between 1986 and 1993. These works do not represent the entire radical art movement which so significantly affected the nation in the 1980s, but they offer a glimpse of the social changes, shifts of perceptions, cultural borrowing and inventions 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 oil-painting to China in the early twentieth century and confined to Soviet socialist realism for three decades after the 1949 revolution) is enriched by DADA, surrealism, American pop art, abstract expressionism, and impressionism. Even the traditional Chinese ink painting bears the mark of

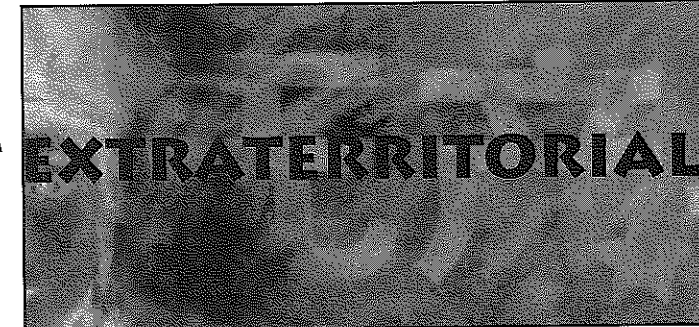
modernity and of aesthetic transgression. For instance, in an interpretation of an ancient Chinese poem, human skulls are scattered on the long misty way of the quest, vanishing into infinity, which violates traditional, elitist aesthetics. In short, the show unveils a significant phenomenon: Chinese artists have absorbed forms of modern Western art and translated them into the language of Chinese avant-gardism.

The rise of a "cosmopolitan avant-garde art" in China, as dubbed by a Western sinologist, 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 genre of twentieth century Western literature proposed by the critic George Steiner as "extraterritorial", a literature by and about exiles. 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 "structures of feelings" of the exile, as once outlined by Edward Said, are perceivable in these art works, that is, solitude, estrangement, frustration, cross-cultural vision, critical 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 homecoming is out of the question, most of them are uncertain about their destinies.

Nevertheless, I detect a certain attachment in their detachment, and facets of typical Chinese national/cultural consciousness in their aspirations to the status of the transcendental. What is embedded in the artists' border-crossing is 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 accentuated 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





Self Portrait, Lu Jia

artists feel threats from another front, that is, consequences of the current Sino-West encounter, which is clearly marked by unequal power relations. *Open Door*, for example, captures accurately the perplexity of the Chinese at the moment when they were finally allowed to step out of the space in which they were restricted to. *Red* reveals a contradiction in Chinese life after the "door" is open: a female PLA (People's Liberation Army) soldier, dressed in an army jacket, red skirt and red high-heeled shoes, sitting against a golden background with the slogan — "World Proletariat are determined to carry the revolution to the end" — juxtaposed with fragments of Western advertisements of cars, cosmetics, and fashion. Under the PLA cap, her young, innocent face smiles through a veil of make-up. The artist's critique of an emerging social formation in China, a hybridity of totalitarian politics and Western capitalist consumerism is apparent.

All the works exhibited indicate a further appropriation of modern Western forms of expression by Chinese artists since the early 1980s. However, unlike what happens in a consumer culture, where race and

ethnicity, as bell hooks points out, "become commodified as resources for pleasure," the appropriation of Western art forms by Chinese artists acts primarily as a critical intervention challenging repression, and enabling critical resistance and cultural reinvention in local contexts.

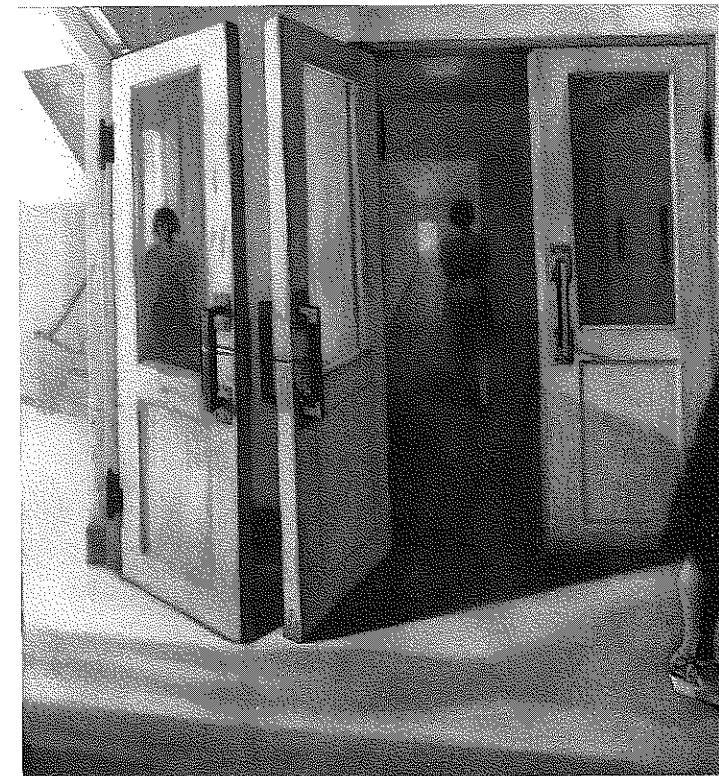
Looking back, the adaptation of Western modern modes of representations emerged in the early 1980s as an integral part of a cultural struggle engaged in several fronts: first, to break down official doctrines of tastes and restrictions (i.e. Soviet socialist realism); second, to express forbidden subject matters and emotions, and to voice criticisms; 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 condemnations 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. They are reminiscent of the African critic Soyinka'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 "poignant affirmation" of traditional society, those who advocate 'Negritude' 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 authentic tradition in the cause of society's transformation process. Needless to say, some of these attitudes can be traced in the exhibition in Peterborough. If some works bear traits of self-negation in the mode of cultural critique, most 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 heritages. However, these attempts do not necessarily reduce the pressure on the avant-garde artists who practise a primarily imported form of art.

If Western modes of representations are readily adapted 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 transplantation of Western art to China 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 dis-orientation lingers. After over a decade's 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 Other(s). 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 at 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 intrusion of Laotzu's serene world by the Western imperialist war machine and commercial culture. The work is in a sense a text of China's modern history and consciousness, capturing a fragmentation in process and the ambivalence 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 skillful in skirting official routes. The fact that a cultural renewal has to be built partially upon modes of expression and representations borrowed from Other(s), and that foreign commercial cultural products are pouring into the country



Open Door, Li Yian Qian

as China's modernization course is becoming more capitalist-oriented, make 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 diaspora, 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 melancholia, anxiety, indignation and subjugation, other works stress the artists' 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



The Unfinished Book, Qin Ming





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 transgression of his own identity — from a university instructor at home to a busboy in a cafeteria in Vancouver — they 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 May Flower* and *The Raft 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 up-rooted by war, economic hardships and political turmoil — largely outcomes of imperialism, modernism, and capitalist expansion into the Third World. Their struggle for survival is told by the steering wheel made of cooking pots and sails 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 margin, they also make possible the articulation of marginalized experiences at the very centre of world power and art.

Despite their shared experience of uprootedness and act of borrowing, compared to practices at home, the diasporan practice entails a special consciousness to strike a balance and reverse the terms of Euro-American art. In my view, the diasporan practice is particularly significant, not merely because it can enrich discussions on "travelling theory" and "travelling 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 travelling of modern Western art idioms to China under its "open-door" policy, and that travel, to a certain extent, also anticipates its journeying to North American 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 practised. While those at home strive to achieve a sameness (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-as-other), the diasporan practice suggests that the "return" of the travelling cultural elements to their origin is subject to the influence of the mediators, or the artists' re-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 remaining Chinese while speaking through 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 diasporan experience, or the "exile consciousness" celebrated by Said. He ascribes "a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) 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 "contra-

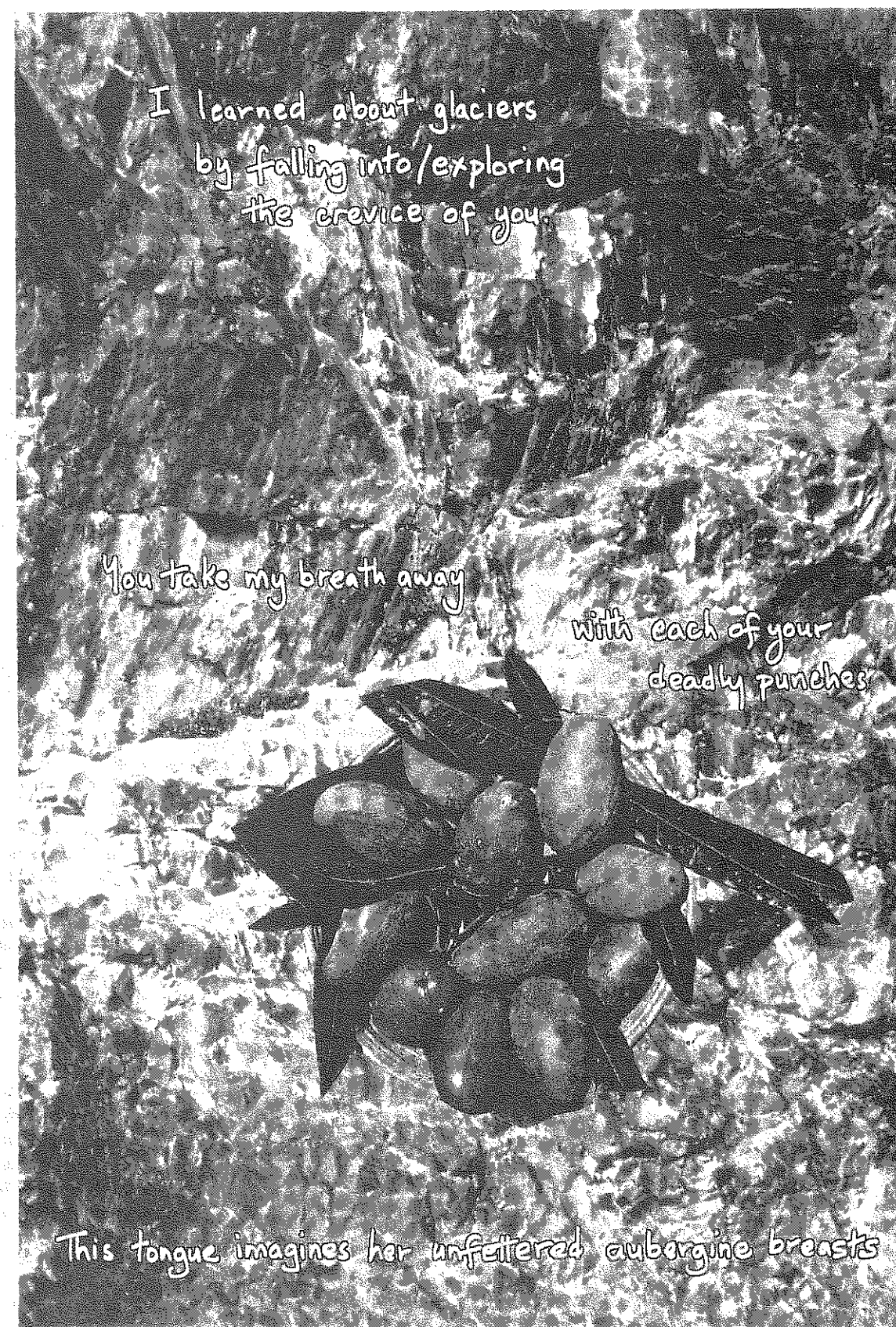
punta". As both in/outside, these artists' critical awareness of cultures, self and others, their own (cultural, racial, social and political) locations in the margin of a white-dominant society compel them to articulate from what Stuart Hall calls "a particular place, out of a particular history, out 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 diasporan practice on the development of a modern Chinese art once it travels back "home".

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There once was a woman from...



Your reading is influenced by... (please pick only one of the following)...

- a) who you think I am    b) Who you are    c) What you think of me

