DIASPORA RACE
Navigating Identity in Asian Modernity

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INTRODUCTION: Navigating Race in Contemporary Aesthetics

As the global influence of China continues to rise, a compelling question emerges: Will the international standing of Asians rise alongside it? While some herald this transition as a new era for Asian identities, it's crucial to examine whether the growing Asian diaspora merely alters Western perceptions of Asian racial differences, or actively disrupt the entrenched global status quo.

Under Western imperialism, European discourse came to shape the dynamic of identity-making, inflected by the notion of racial difference, across the world. Colonial domination and knowledge shaped aesthetics of human worthiness, perceiving non-white subjects through lens of contrast, degradation, and subjugation (Said, 1978). Imperialism also drove massive population displacements, causing peoples to navigate the convoluted landscape of global cultural regimes. For instance, in colonial Southeast Asia, Chinese traders who regularly crisscrossed Western-imposed spheres of influence were dubbed "wild men," and early modern China considered them "overseas Chinese." Overtime, their laboring and entrepreneurial activities laid the foundation of regional capitalism, and in the process forged cross-cultural and cross-border identities (Ong and Nonini 1997)

In the post-colonial world, Asian states sought to define cultural identities in nationalist terms (Ong 2006), but actually existing cultural identities are shaped at the confluence of multiple forces within and beyond the machinations of national governments. By the end of the 20th century, the rise of Asian tiger economies, and especially of China, greatly expanded the Chinese diaspora beyond the East Asian region to the rest of the globe. Western-educated merchants, professionals and students demonstrated increasing cross-cultural dexterity and facility with cutting-edge technology, thus creating cosmopolitan opportunities at home and abroad (Ong 1999). Diaspora identity-making happens in the vortex of global politics, technology, and ethics (Ong and Collier 2005), circumstances in which migrants acquire new powers not only to escape nationalist definitions, but also to undermine Western regimes of aesthetics of race and class.

The Aesthetics of Diaspora Race draws together my observations of the unstable and precarious position of Chinese in diaspora who must negotiate and manage their identities at the intersection of global power dynamics, thus becoming new kinds of subjects. According to Michel Foucault (1983), subjectivity is the social outcome of the interplay of strategies in shifting fields of power. This view illuminates how the situated interactions of practices of self-making and of institutional-making crystallize subject-positioning and racial identity, as I have illuminated in my study of refugee and ethnic minority formation in the United States (Ong 2003). As migrants attempt to define their own identity across geographical sites, they inescapably do so within the subjectifying effects of global political and market values.

Western aesthetic regimes that depend on the dehumanization of global others are increasingly unsettled by the expansion of Asian diaspora in their midst. The dynamism of self- and other-making operate within an aesthetics of human superiority based on rankings of race, gender, class. In diaspora, migrants more directly interact and challenge the set of hegemonic image-effects that stigmatize and marginalize Asian identities in the world at large.

In the history of imperialism, hegemonic aesthetics regimes anchored in the human body – gender, size, shape, color, texture, etc. -- inscribing levels of worthiness on perceived racial differences (Weheliye, 2014). Aesthetic regimes have operated as disciplinary mechanisms of racial supremacy, as in slavery and labor control throughout institutions of global capitalism. For instance, the aesthetic perception of Asian women for their pliant nature and nimble fingers made their more suitable than males for assembly-line work (Ong 1986). Thus, the politics of aesthetics not only determines what becomes visible, but also how perception shapes value (Ranciere, 2004). Western aesthetic perceptions of bodies became firmly entangled with capitalist value and human worthiness from the start.

But the dynamism of global capitalism can also disrupt established aesthetic hegemony as Asian nations and peoples came to be integrated within capitalist systems and values. With the rise of Asian tiger economies and especially the ascent of China, proliferating images of affluent Asians seem to challenge racial hierarchies upheld by liberal humanism. In the West, the ubiquity of Asian peoples is unsettling the discourse of race and the universal experience, creating conditions for a nuanced process of re-racialization.

Individual chapters capture select moments of identity (re)making forged in situations of cross-cultural encounters, media projections, and artistic exhibitions. Collectively, the following themes are threaded through the articles.

a) Globalization has opened up a variety of transnational arenas for Asian actors to intervene and rework Western perceptions of their identities. From world-class cities to bustling airports to mega exhibitions, elite Asian migrants deftly deploy both capital and symbols to challenge global racial hierarchy, and in the process, invent new ways of being international subjects.

b) Beyond discourse and critique, Western aesthetic regimes can be challenged through the exercise of economic and cultural practices that shape the norms of globality. Some argue that economic power can be easily converted into symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1984), but in transnational situations, the convertibility of entrepreneurial prowess into aesthetic distinction is hindered by existing racial hegemony (Ong, 1999). Asian cultural productions such as architecture and artworks increasingly play a role in shaping a global racial identity aligned with Western liberal values. Furthermore, Asian digital platforms have proliferated positive Asian imagery and taste, thus sparking identification among Asian peoples scattered across the world.

c) Nevertheless, even as Chinese in diaspora critique perceptions of racial inferiority, they often adopt or rail against Western standards of human ranking if only to show that Asian peoples measure up in similar or comparable ways. Many well-heeled Asian

figures mimic Western norms of consumption and lifestyles in order to promote their own global flair and status. Others engage in ironic resistances against outdated Western thinking about racial superiority. For instance, visionary Chinese artists mock Orientalist portrayals and East-West narratives by inserting China into the story of contemporary art. Through such varied and creative ways, diaspora tactics shape a reimagining of global identities forged in spaces where capital, culture, and power intersect and clash.

d) Aesthetic models of humanity are political formations, and thus vulnerable to changing geopolitical circumstances. Great power struggles are consequential for the aesthetic representation of racial differences and common humanity. A portray of Asians as global subjects has had some positive effect on the image of Asian minorities long marginalized in many countries and in Western media. However, does the newfound cultural capital of being Asian represent merely an adjustment of Western aesthetic models rather than a fundamental departure?

Despite the efforts of the Chinese diaspora to forge a positive global image for all Asian peoples, the rise of China has made it an adversarial nation in the eyes of the United States. Even as mobile Chinese elites seek recognition by symbolically coalescing into a single global race (at least in global markets and international media), their arrivistes status is precariously dependent on forces of capitalism and spectacles of power.

Spectacles of Sovereignty

In "Hyperbuilding: Spectacle, Speculation, and the Hyperspace of Sovereignty," I argue that Asian cities have undergone a transformation, erecting supertall buildings that symbolize confident sovereignty and a desire for global architectural prominence. Iconic structures such as the CCTV Tower in Beijing (designed by Rem Koolhaas) and the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur operate under "an anticipatory logic," suggesting that spectacular architecture will attract investment and elevate national status. However, these hyperbuildings can provoke backlash from disaffected citizens, who voice their

dissent through online critiques and subversive humor that frame these structures as emblems of state surveillance and political overreach.

Navigating Aesthetics of Race

From redrawing the urban skyline, the aesthetic profile of global China also colored the international perception of the Chinese diaspora. Three articles track the fluctuations in the aesthetics of Chinese ethnicity that unsettled prevailing Western racial hierarchy. Earlier negative images of the Chinese as laboring masses, communist societies, and racial minorities gradually gave way to the perception of Chinese as capital-bearing entrepreneurs and professionals (Ong, 1999). In global images, Chinese ethnicity tethered to circulating economic value loosened the association with racial nationality (China) and more connected to economic liberalism (globalization). The new racial valuation of the Chinese as worthy humanity enhanced their global position, a precarious perch that could be easily upstaged by older stigmas of backwardness.

In "The Enigma of Return: Troubling Bodies," I reflect on my many returns to Malaysia, and the how airport receptions reflected changing attitudes to ethnic Chinese subjects. Arriving in an airport in the late 1980s, I received a surprisingly warm welcome. Earlier arrivals home encountered uncomfortable treatment by airport officials, and performing a style of "cultural citizenship" through dress and language seemed de rigueur in order to allay suspicion. But with Malaysia emerging as a manufacturing hub, state officials now viewed ethnic Chinese as potential investors, not resented minorities. The emotional and psychological toll of being an ethnic Chinese lifted with the rise of China.

As the diaspora expanded, attacks on Chinese minorities anywhere drew more broad based intervention from emigrants scattered across the world. "Cyberpublics and Diaspora Politics among Transnational Chinese," describes the birth of a multinational Chinese website in response to attacks on Indonesian Chinese during the Asian financial crisis of 1997. This digital mobilization first developed a discourse of "global Chinese"

(huaren), becoming one of the earliest examples of how the internet could shape the construction of a racialized diaspora . But by thus mobilizing diverse ethnic Chinese communities under the banner of humanitarian intervention, the website may have inadvertently intensified tensions between ethnic minorities and local populations in host countries. Additionally, as a dynamic aspect of global positioning, transnational strategies of self-racialization reinforce sweeping Western categorization of race.

In "Not-So-Crazy-Rich Asians: Re-racialization in the Global Hall of Mirrors," I further trace the role of media platforms in pulling diverse groups around the world under the global Chinese rubric. A stunning example is the internationally acclaimed film "Crazy Rich Asians." By depicting well-heeled Asian subjects gamboling across cosmopolitan cities, the movie gave newfound visibility to Asian minorities everywhere, especially in the United States. The lush and glamorous portrayal entangles Asian identities with images of world-class lifestyle, wealth, and moral worth. Platforms serving the Chinese diaspora shaped aesthetic codes of "Asian taste," which define beauty, success, and global influence, displaying an ironic subversion of Western economic hegemony. But despite their new adeptness at code-switching, diaspora Asians remain ensnared in the crosshairs of older Western racial biases that re-emerge in times of global crisis.

The above articles track stages in the transnational aesthetics of self- and other-racializing by deploying spectacles of hyper-building, fabulous wealth, and global success. Besides entrepreneurs, moviemakers, and bloggers, contemporary Chinese artists are perhaps
 The most trenchant in their criticism of Western models of human superiority.

Contemporary Art Disrupts Orientalism

Seemingly overnight, with the ascent of China, Chinese artists, burst upon the contemporary art scene in world capitals. Notably, provocative figures such as Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang, challenged Western perceptions of China and its global position. Initially met with skepticism, contemporary Chinese artists were often dismissed as imitators or as failing to meet Western avant-garde standards. Conversely, I contend that

these artists embody a unique blend of cultural traditions and innovative practices that by transcending East-West dichotomies, remake the global art market and forms of modernity.

In "In a Time of Earthquakes: Chinese Artists Shake the World," I introduce "rooted cosmopolitanism," describing artists like Ai Weiwei, who engage with universal human rights themes while maintaining a strong connection to their Chinese heritage. Their works challenge the misconception of cosmopolitanism as cultural homelessness. For instance, Ai Weiwei's act of smashing ancient Chinese urns in a German museum critiques Orientalist expectations and elevates these artifacts' status within the Western art world. Similarly, Xu Bing's installations of invented Chinese characters critique the elitism and potential oppression embedded within traditional Chinese art forms romanticized by the West, while their works challenge the commodification of Asian culture and contemporary authoritarianism in their homeland.

"What Marco Polo Forgot: Asian Art Negotiates the Global" discusses Cai Guo-Qiang's Guggenheim exhibition, juxtaposing traditional Chinese motifs with contemporary technology to disrupt dominant narratives of East-West encounters. Cai's installations reimagine history to interrogate Western understandings of cultural innovation and binary oppositions. Additionally, Cai's art highlights certain historical practices and artifacts from China that promote healing global divisions. Both Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang engage in "anticipatory politics," using their art to critique existing power structures and envision alternative futures for China and its role in the world.

In "A Questionnaire on Diaspora and the Modern," I reflect on how diasporas influence American art exhibitions, drawing from my visit to the controversial "Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World" at SFMOMA. This exhibition, featuring powerful animal imagery by Chinese artists, faced backlash in New York City. Critics, particularly animal rights activists, overlooked the deeper commentary on the dehumanizing conditions in China's rapid modernization. By employing animal imagery, these artists critique authoritarianism and the plight of ordinary people, revealing a racial bias in the Western

rejection of these artworks that frames Chinese experiences as "less than human." Museum curators must facilitate deeper engagement with the complexities of art, history, and globalization.

Chinese diaspora artwork not only overturns entrenched Western aesthetics, it is reframing East-West narratives and re-shaping the global art market. More broadly, as cultural diplomats, Chinese diaspora artists establish China as a vibrant hub of contemporary global art.

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This collection highlights the dynamic ways in which Asia actively shapes and interrogates the contours of global modernity. From audacious architecture to thought-provoking art that critiques established narratives, Asia asserts itself as a powerful force rather than merely a passive recipient of globalization. However, this transnational cultural process is fraught with tensions, as regimes of racialized aesthetics are destabilized in conditions of accelerated multiculturalism, interconnectivity, and market gyrations.

The first section delineates evolving ambitions within Asia. As skylines rise, the concept of "starchitecture" is redefined, marking a shift in global modernity. Monumental structures serve as political symbols aimed at bolstering state prominence. Yet, many citizens, including those who constructed these corporate edifices, do not share in their benefits, revealing the limitations of state-manufactured infrastructural ambition.

The second section analyses the global processes of re-racialization, as the Asian diaspora acquired the aesthetics hallmarks of wealth and glamour amidst China's rise. The internet and the media became worldwide platforms that can unite compatriots worldwide under the umbrella of a global race. Frequently, the goal was to celebrate worldly accomplishments, and to overturn racial hierarchies; however, this racialization process can also reinforce beliefs in essentialized differences. By forging notions of an

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arriviste global class, the Chinese diaspora also came up against the cultural limits of flexible citizenship, i.e. growing legitimacy and authority do not always translate into cross-cultural acceptance of common humanity.

Third, contemporary Chinese artists emerge as potent agents of disruption against Orientalist biases, and challenging the established foundations of Western art history. By employing anticipatory politics of cosmopolitanism, they deploy "China as method," showing that China is integral to the understanding of contemporary art. Through the fantastical merging of cultural legacies and contemporary technologies, these artists actively rework ideas and images of global modernity,

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of contextualizing identity formation within converging forces of contemporary capitalism. Ethnic Chinese, perhaps more than other diasporic groups, continuously navigate the complexities of reconciling cultural heritage with an evolving sense of belonging in a globalizing world marked by shifting perceptions of race, identity, and power. Contemporary diasporas are altering the aesthetics of racial status; however, their cultural artifacts, performances, and interventions have merely splintered—rather than shattered—the global mirror. By examining these intricate entanglements of class, consumption, and aesthetic judgment, we gain insights into the cultural aspects of the China-US relationship in the 21st century.

As diaspora communities work to redefine Asia's global status in global capitalism, media, and art, their practices and interventions into aesthetic schemes of racial supremacy vitally shape an evolving Asian modernity that transcends nations. Ultimately, the emerging "racial capital" of being Asian suggests a recalibration of Western aesthetic models rather than a complete departure from their historical constraints. Taken together as a collection, these articles weave an innovative approach and concepts for understanding how transformative diaspora experiences entangle aesthetic assessments of value, humanity, and modernity, thus contributing to a reimagined global landscape.

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Hyperbuilding: Spectacle, Speculation, and the Hyperspace of Sovereignty

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The Chinese love the monumental ambition …. CCTV headquarters is an ambitious building. It was conceived at the same time that the design competition for Ground Zero took place – not in backward-looking US, but in the parallel universe of China. In communism, engineering has a high status, its laws resonating with Marxian wheels of history.

Rem Koolhaas and OMA (2004: 129)

Urban Spectacles

The proliferation of metropolitan spectacles in Asia indexes a new cultural regime as major cities race to attain even more striking skylines. Beijing's cluster of Olympic landmarks, Shanghai's TV tower, Hong Kong's forest of corporate towers, Singapore's Marina Sands complex, and super-tall Burj Khalifa in Dubai are urban spectaculars that evoke the "technological sublime." Frederic Jameson famously made the claim that the postmodern sublime has dissolved Marxian historical consciousness, but nowhere did he consider the role of architectural sublime in indexing a different kind of historical consciousness, one of national arrival on the global stage (Jameson 1991: 32–8). Despite the 2008–9 economic downturn, Shanghai's urban transformation for the 2010 World Expo will exceed Beijing's makeover for the 2008 Olympics.[1]

Spectacular architecture is often viewed as the handiwork of corporate capital in the colonization of urban markets. For instance, Anthony King and Abidin Kusno, writing about "On Be(ij)ing in the world," argue that the rise of cutting-edge buildings in Beijing is an instantiation of postmodern globalization transforming the Chinese capital into a "transnational

space" (King and Kusno 2000: 41–67), a process driven by the apparent self-realization and development of capital. Such a perspective is based on the assumption that corporate power and Western technologies are creating a global space that is effacing national identity and undermining the capacity for a nation to control how it wants to be and how it wants to act in the world. Capital here thwarts national sovereign self-determination by subjecting "local" spaces to the overarching logic of a capitalist system with translocal or placeless determinations. Metropolitan studies have long been monopolized by Marxist perspectives that see capitalist hegemony as a determinative or agentive force in the shaping of urban landscapes and symbolism. There is, however, an urgent need to expand our analytical perspectives to include the analysis of sovereign rule and its control over the production of spectacle, speculation, and urban futures.[2] Sovereignty is not simply erased or replaced by the overwhelming power of capital, but is reconfigured through a variety of processes and practices whose outcomes cannot be determined *a priori*, or separate from the singular situated moments of particular forms of entanglement.

Rather than understand the development of new urban forms as merely the reflex of the expansion of capitalism or corporate power, this chapter proposes a theory of sovereign exception in shaping urban spectacles for political and economic ends. Asian cities and governments are neither merely the passive substrate on which capital erects and constructs itself, nor are they being reconfigured in a way that can be easily understood in terms on an implicit scale of "more" or "less" sovereignty. In emerging Asian countries, the rule of exception variously negotiates the dual demands of inter-city rivalries on the one hand, and the spectacle of confident sovereignty on the other. As I have argued elsewhere (Ong 2006), the rule of exception permits political flexibility in zoning practices for variable investments in property and citizen-subjects. Spaces are thus variegated, in a state of potential flux, and always potentially amenable to rezoning as a moment in the assertion and implementation of various forms of sovereignty. The global significance of a building frenzy in Asian cities requires an approach that explores the connection between the political exception and the variegated governmentality of urban spaces, where corporate towers and official edifices stand shoulder to shoulder. The variegation of the urban spectacle requires a more subtle analysis than has been attempted, and at least an exploration of the tensions between showy and flamboyant urban architecture embodying global capital on the one hand, and the spectacle of self-assured sovereignty on the other. In other words, the play of exception permits the spectacularization of urban success as well as of national emergence; that is, two modes of "hyperbuilding" that shape the urban profile in competition with other cities, and in the process, configure

the global space of the nation, or configure the sovereign national space as one that is also emphatically and intractably global.

I borrow the term "hyperbuilding" from architect and thinker Rem Koolhaas, but use it more loosely. For Koolhaas, the "hyperbuilding" is the "anti-skyscraper"; that is, not defined by its exhilarating height, but by a striking and gigantic presence of the ground surface (*China Daily* 2004) (see Figure 8.2 below). I invoke hyperbuilding as both a verb and a noun to denote the two related urban trends in Asian cities. On the one hand, there is hyperbuilding as an intense process of building to project urban profiles. On the other, the hyperbuilding as a physical landmark stages sovereign power in the great city, or in cities aspiring, through these edifices, to greatness. The interactions between exception, spectacle, and speculation create conditions for hyperbuilding as both the practice and the product of world-aspiring urban innovations.

Hyperbuilding as worlding practice

My approach to urban spectacle centers on how different elements – a neo-liberal logic of maximization, the mobilization of political exceptions, and impressive development – are brought together to propel urban makeovers and leverage city futures. Political exceptions permit the varied and variegated use of metropolitan space, including the production of spectacular infrastructure that attracts speculative capital and offers itself as alleged proof of political power. Building a critical mass of towers in a new downtown zone animates an anticipatory logic of reaping profits not only in markets but also in the political domain. As Asian cities compete with other in the construction of ever more spectacular displays, it is not surprising that remarkable buildings become invested with contradictory symbolism about the nation itself.

Hyperbuilding as a hyperspace of sovereignty

While skyscrapers have long been associated with global capitalism, a different kind of impressive structure looms in the name of political futures. Whereas powerful architecture has long been associated with totalitarian rule (ancient Egypt, Nazi Germany, Soviet constructionism, Chinese communism), gigantic and spectacular buildings in contemporary Asian cities are associated with mixed symbolic meanings. State-commissioned edifices are planted closely alongside corporate skyscrapers. Rem Koolhaas' paradigmatic "hyperbuilding," the CCTV headquarters in Beijing, will be discussed later in its aspiration to be a connective structure that creates a public space that is not obliterated in a glutted concentration of tall buildings that, in other circumstances, would dwarf it or overshadow it. The CCTV media center

suggests the spectacular presence and power of Chinese sovereignty, and offers itself as a potential index and manifestation of the power that brought it to materialization – but it also engenders pornographic jokes that criticize both the building and the agency it houses. Hyperbuilding, as both a process and the set of monuments it erects, raises broader questions about the political implications of the shift of the urban hyperspace to the Asian metropolis.

Hyperbuilding: Exception, Spectacle, and Speculation

Our reading of spectacular urban spaces has been dominated by a Marxist focus on the proliferation of postmodern corporate forms that instill a sense of disorientation and placelessness among ordinary people. In his landmark book on postmodern culture, Frederic Jameson has influenced subsequent views on urban spectacles as mirrors of the global circulation of corporate sign-values; that is, hegemonic images that have a depoliticizing effect of displacement and disorientation among urban-dwellers (1991: 43–5, 95–6). Building on Jameson's claims, David Harvey remarks that the "stable aesthetics" of Fordist modernism gave way to an aesthetics of difference, ephemerality, and spectacle – a kind of flexible aesthetic regime that parallels and constitutes the accelerated commodification of cultural forms (1989: 156). More recently, Scott Lash and Celia Lury directly tie the function of capitalist spectacles to urban strategies (2007: 141–8). They argue that zones of spectacle are about city branding, a mode of value-making in symbolic differentiation that makes a site stand apart from others. Branding intensifies city associations with certain objects or indices of globality (often the insignia of an increasingly globalized commercial sphere: Nike, Samsung, Coca-Cola), thus improving the host city's capacity to mobilize and mediate among things and actors. In this account, by amassing spectacles – associated with certain industries and special events – urban centers are involved in the creation of regimes of (capitalist) iconicity that influence the quality of experience in these cities. Despite an interest in city branding, the focus is again on the effects of corporate iconography on materializing and driving our consumer imagination. This is an argument about the cultural hegemony of corporations and the domination of their surroundings. At a broader level, Guy Debord (1995) has argued that the spectacle society orders all relations of accumulation, producing a momentary unity among spectators who have become profoundly alienated by the processes of both the production and the consumption of the commodity. In short, for Marxist theorists, the spectacle is primarily associated with all aspects of capitalism, including the use of modern media as a technology of manipulation that also conceals the social fact of domination. The spectacle is thus taken to be embedded in a set of technologies aimed at maintaining specific forms of

hegemony, creating the conditions of a dangerous and mystified political alienation and effectively thwarting the possibility of social change.

While the above analyses linking spectacle to disorientation and alienation are important, my approach looks at the state and its promotion of hyperbuilding and technologies of spectacle for political ends. These spectacles are thus productive, playing a constitutive and performative role in the assertion and realization of different political and politicized ends. Just as early twentieth-century Chicago stood as a potent projection of American dreams of being a rising industrial superpower, urban spectacles in Asia today play an aesthetic role in promoting future values and new political orientations. As Georg Simmel notes, value is not based on fixed, objective or enduring causes. Rather, economic, social, and aesthetic values are purely relational, emerging only in the context of specific exchange relationships and regimes of exchange (1900: 577–603). In other words, cultural values do not merely serve to reproduce an existing social system, but can expand geometrically through a proliferation of connections. In conditions of uncertainty, the spaces of spectacle animate an anticipatory logic of valorization; that is, speculations that anticipate economic, aesthetic, and political gains through circulation and interconnection. The political exception also engages value-making by permitting the spectacular zones that engender speculation in urban assets and thus accelerate the rise of a metropolis.

We can identify two the kinds of hyperbuilding logic at work in Asian cities. First, building frenzy helps to leverage gains beyond the market sector; that is, not only by inflating real-estate values, but also by raising hopes and expectations about urban futures and, by extension, the nation's growth. The hyperbuilding becomes part of an anticipation of a future that is asserted as a guarantee. Second, in a related phenomenon, hyperbuilding inter-references spectacular structures in rival cities, thereby fueling a spiral of increasing speculation in urban forms. The dynamic of this inter-referential practice constitutes competitive hyperbuilding as a parameter in which urban rankings will be understood, and, in this condition, hyperbuilding generates more hyperbuilding. A dynamic approach to spectacular cities thus shows that the stakes in urban spectacles go beyond mere capital accumulation to include the generation of promissory values about the geopolitical significance of the city and the country that it stands for in metonymic relation. The skyscraper megalomania of Asian cities is never only about attracting foreign investments, but fundamentally also about an intense political desire for world recognition.

From Shanghai to Dubai, cities in emerging countries are renovating at a furious rate, amassing glittering malls, museums, opera houses, and science parks. They have also been busy staging world events such as the Olympics, art biennales, world fairs, and scientific conventions. Visually stunning urban projects can be viewed as leveraging practices that anticipate a high return not only in real estate but also in the global recognition of the city. We

must thus challenge Jameson's claim that the centrifugal proliferation of commercialized cultural forms destroys our sense of "critical space" shaped by history, class, and politics (1991: 43–5, 95–6). In fact, commodity signs articulate certain situated historical imaginaries and aspirations. While the commodity-saturated environments of a Ginza in Tokyo or of Wangfujing in Beijing can indeed induce disorientation, the proliferation of signs does not destroy a need for cultural hierarchy, or diminish a sense of critical spatial politics. One should point out that in developing countries, the critical spaces of the nation trump those of purported class mobilization (Jameson's concern). Indeed, the glittering surfaces of global capitalism are added value to the political emergence of the nation on the world stage, rather than the sign of their imminent replacement by a disembedded corporate-capitalist process.

Urban-dwellers in Asia's big cities do not read spectacles as a generalized aesthetic effect of capitalism, but rather as symbols of their metropolis that invite inevitable comparison with rival cities. Shanghai sees itself as the international gateway to China, and is therefore a critical site of China's urban representations, as well as its symbolic encapsulation of the world and the potential of globality. A city of 12 million, Shanghai has been trying to spread its ever-growing population beyond its city limits. It has constructed a ring of nine satellite cities to accommodate at least half a million residents. Given the craze for faux-European urban environments and lifestyles, each mini-city is designed by international planners and named after a Western country or town such as Weimar, Thamestown, London, Bellagio, and Santa Monica. Perhaps somewhat tongue in cheek, Shanghai authorities declared in 2002 that "foreign visitors will not be able to tell where Europe ends and China begins" (Beech 2005). In this series of developments, Shanghai is of course implicitly and sometimes explicitly rivaling Hong Kong, China's leading commercial center, and both cities are competing with Singapore, which is remaking itself as an international knowledge hub and casino center (Ong 2005).

Such inter-city competition drives the building frenzy that one encounters throughout East Asia, as well as putting at risk anticipated gains in the urban economy and/or in politics. Real-estate values are especially parasitic upon an excess of corporate signifiers. For instance, Hong Kong is home to dozens of corporate towers above 700 feet, the most important of which operate as part of a symbolic code for the port's commercial fortunes, especially since the return of the former British colony to mainland rule in 1997. Hong Kongers give their iconic buildings pet names, and tend view them like pieces in a chess game. The Cheung Kong Building is called "The Box that the Bank of China came in." Meanwhile, the nearby HSBC Building, a venerable colonial structure with roots in British imperialism, is seemingly being menaced by the I.M. Pei-designed Bank of China. Fondly referred to as the Cleaver Building, its sharp edges are interpreted as sending

bad *qi* toward the HSBC building. The close juxtaposition of these warring buildings reinforces the palpable feeling of tension between the powers of the global financial world and of the Chinese state intersecting in Hong Kong.

Thus, far from merely serving as props of capitalist hegemony, Asian urban skylines advertise their own city brand of can-do-ism, providing a visual and infrastructural attraction that draws international actors, capital, and information and cultural flows to the city. Elsewhere (Ong 2007), I have analyzed the synergy between flamboyant cityscapes and the influx of "pied-a-terre" residents and international workers whose very presence adds further economic and cultural clout to Singapore or Dubai. Hyperbuilding as a mechanism to leverage global funds and status has been most obvious in inter-city rivalry to raise the tallest tower, build the sleekest airport, or set up the latest knowledge or design center.

Singapore's models of science parks and biotechnology hubs has spawned copycat projects in other cities (see Chua Beng Huat, this volume), but other urban templates are also being developed in East Asia. Recently, Seoul metropolitan authorities boasted of the city's innovative "Global Zones" plan to turn the metropolis into "a remarkably business-friendly – and business savvy – global city" for global actors.[3] As self-proclaimed "World Design Capital 2010," Seoul will design a "universal, ubiquitous, and unique" sustainable city dedicated to cultural, environmental, aesthetic, and social living. Architect Zaha Hadid will design a modern center for fashion and design. Clearly, the political ambition is to go beyond the old industrial model and become a world cultural city that hopes to rival or even surpass Tokyo or New York. Urban innovations in Asia are thus caught up in this larger game of translating spectacular towers into schemes for scaling political heights, but there are pitfalls in some attempts to bring about joint urban–national ascendancy.

There is, however, no certainty that hyperbuilding practices in any particular city can leverage global investments and draw global actors in significant numbers, or guarantee the rising fortunes of an ambitious nation. For instance, in the 1990s, Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir of Malaysia spent lavishly on urban development, following the premise of "if you build, they will come." Unfortunately, the multimedia corridor, including a new cyber-capital, failed to blossom into an Asian Silicon Valley, and has been operating as a node in a second-tier circuit dominated by Indian cyber-firms (Ong 2005). The Petronas towers in Kuala Lumpur were for a few years the highest buildings in the world, until overtaken by Taiwan's Taipei 101 tower in 2004. Despite costing billions of petrodollars, the Petronas' telecommunications function is obsolete in an age of satellites, while its location contributes to a traffic gridlock in the capital's downtown area. This underused structure has become a white elephant, reminding citizens of their leaders' profligacy and desire for hollow symbols of national advancement. At the street level,

Malaysians casually refer to the Petronas towers as Mahathir's "double erections." The symbolism of these towers can stand for stalled attention-grabbing urban showpieces that stir the imagination of citizens about the danger of their governments grasping for glory beyond their reach (even with billions of lost dollars). In short, hyperbuildings cannot always leverage actual values, or realize a city's dreams for its nation. As Tim Bunnell has noted, the multimedia corridor's attempt to link up with the information age has merely "reaffirmed Malaysia's global peripherality" (2004: 3).

The hoped-for synergy between urban spectacle and speculation has been taken to an extreme in Dubai, the most flamboyant urban wonderland of the new century. Despite being the least oil-rich of the nine United Arab Emirates, Dubai has built a thousand skyscrapers in less than a decade. This brand new city is most famous for its indoor ski slope and off-shore palm-shaped and globe-shaped manmade islands, all suggesting a level of ecological unsustainability and decadence in a desert redoubt. Beyond its skyrocketing rise as a global financial and transportation hub and a playground of the rich and famous, the city is made up of special zones with independent laws. There are also over a hundred independently master-planned commercial, industrial, and residential districts. The spectrum of mini-cities includes a financial center, an academic hub, an information-technology center, a free media zone, and even a humanitarian service site. Special jurisdictions cater to foreign professionals, with relaxed rules for drinking and lifestyles that are exceptions to laws imposed elsewhere in the city. The over-zoned city is a vivid example of the urban effects of graduated rule; that is, the constitution of variegated spaces for expatriates, guest workers and citizens, each zone regulated by different kinds of biopolitical investments and social controls (Ong 2006). During the boom years, this urban mirage in the desert attracted billions of investments from global banks as the city projected itself into the global stratosphere of international banking and living.

By the fall of 2009, a year after the global recession, Dubai had gone into free fall as its profligate borrowings created a debt of $3 trillion that it could not repay. Dubai has turned to oil-rich Abu Dhabi for a $10 billion debt-relief package. The completion of the Burj Dubai, renamed as the Burg Khalifa after Sheikh Khalifa of Abu Dhabi, has become a symbol of gratitude and of hope. As the world's tallest skyscraper at over 2,700 feet, the rocket-like tower is expected to stimulate and oversee Dubai's revival as a global business hub. Nevertheless, the gamble of betting on spectacular skyscrapers to draw in global capital has its limits, and the city has become a symbol of over-leverage. In contrast, Shanghai and Hong Kong are deeply anchored in the world's most dynamic economy, the so-called "banker to the world." But are there, even in Chinese mega-cities, political hazards to the leveraging powers of urban spectacles?

II.   The Hyperbuilding: The Hyperspace Moves East

The role of the state in building exceptional structures and even entire cities has a long and venerated tradition in many Asian civilizations, and the current state-sponsored construction of hypermodern urban spaces reveals a political urgency that surpasses urban developments elsewhere. Among developing countries, political investments in architectural icons have been crucial in establishing a particular modern national identity. Postcolonial nations in earlier decades, however, have sought to imprint their global signature by building new capitals that spoke to universalist values. In *The Modernist City*, James Holston (1989) identifies how the internal contradictions of modernist urban planning were played out in the design of a futurist Brasilia. But Holston argues that this image of an ideal city and its utopian promises of democracy failed in the daunting social realities of an emerging nation. On the opposite side of the world, New York architect Louis I. Kahn designed a capital complex for Dhaka, the capital of post-Independence Bangladesh. Kahn's template blended elements of Bengali architecture with a modernist sense of governing and clarity; the complex was to be an island of rational governance in the midst of a chaotic city. The utopian urban projects in Brasilia and Dhaka both shared beliefs that the formal structure of modernist architecture had the capacity to transform the political structure and habitus of emerging countries in accordance with the purportedly universal principles of enlightened modernity.

By contrast, contemporary Asian countries seek eye-catching urban landmarks that cannot be easily read as bearing the imprimatur of democratic modernity or capitalist triumphalism. They do not stand as integrated material metaphors of a hoped-for single modernist future. Viewing urban aesthetics through the lens of what he understands as a unified global process, Jameson claims that in the "post-industrial era," the logic of multinational capitalism erases barriers between cultures, languages and nations in a "postmodern hyperspace" of capitalist mirage (1991: 44). Jameson's conception of a multicultural hyperspace where people lose the capacity to locate and orient themselves echoes Guy Debord's (1995) observation that in the image-saturated environment, the spectacle has come to mediate the relationship between people by inducing in them the false feeling of an imaginary commonality in apparently shared spectatorship. While one can easily agree that the hyperspace can have a disorienting effect and that a virtual world may reshape social relationships, it would be a stretch to thereby maintain that urban-dwellers also lose a sense of their ties to the nation. Especially in emergent countries, a surfeit of images, cultures, and peoples in the cities becomes an index of national development. Globalized urban milieus are by definition pulsating with the constant mixing and remixing of

Figure 8.1   The CCTV tower, Beijing
Source: courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), The Netherlands.

disparate signs and symbols from business, media, culture, and politics. In China, the wildly entangled and discordant signs of unfettered capitalism, rampant consumerism, cosmopolitan lifestyles, and political authoritarianism are the expected mediated chaos that goes with *Chinese* urban growth. The kind of hyperspaces opening up in Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Beijing are distinctive from, say, postmodern Los Angeles in that the sexy handiwork of borderless capitalism bears the heavy imprint of China's state power, and cannot be understood outside a reconfigured aesthetics of this power.

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Koolhaas' remarks that since the 9/11 attacks on New York City, "the parallel universe in China" (and, one may add, Seoul, Singapore, etc.) has become the space of international architectural design. Koolhaas has long been interested in the potential of architecture and urban planning to contribute to the formulation of culture worldwide. He observes that "Beijing has become the staging ground for the definitive urban design for the twenty-first century" (Ellis n.d.). As the co-designer of the Chinese Central Television headquarters (see Figure 8.1), Koolhaas self-interestedly claims that the hyperbuilding will "revolutionize" the Asian city landscape, as well as the world of urban architecture. Such assertions have inspired questions about the role of radical architecture in a

historical moment of emerging autocratic states. Will Koolhaas and his partner Ole Scheeren of the firm OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture, the Netherlands) participate in the opening of the forbidding Chinese state, or will they simply help build a spectacular hyperspace of sovereignty?

Post-9/11, East Asian countries are the ones with the deep pockets and the political will to commission revolutionary buildings. As Scheeren has remarked, without apology, "Historically, architects have built for those in power. How else are great buildings made? Or paid for?" But Asian sovereign wealth funds are only part of the explanation for artistic turn to Asian cities. The OMA architects defended what they considered to be rare opportunities for pushing the boundaries of global architecture, and using architecture to push open closed societies. For instance, the building spree leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics was viewed by an international cast of designers as an opportunity to inject, via avant-garde architecture, conditions of "accessibility," "accountability," "transparency," and a "new publicness" in a politically repressive society (Fong 2007). Western critics have asked whether these buildings both configure and symbolize potential freedoms that are denied by the state, or whether "starchitects" are engaging in a kind of propaganda for autocratic regimes (Zalewski 2005).

Another misgiving about Asian cities stocking up on impressive towers and structures is that the availability of huge funds and cheap labor in Asia marks a post-utopian opportunism that destroys the traditional character of the city. There are the ethics of building an extravagant foreign-designed spectacle (the CCTV project cost over $1 billion) in a developing country, and the eviction of hundreds of residents from the building site. Furthermore, only foreign firms were invited to bid for high-profile projects in Beijing, while established Chinese architectural firms that cut their teeth on socialist designs were bypassed. City planners and Chinese architects worry that such prestige structures have no connection to the surrounding landscape. For instance, the Chinese partner of a Shanghai firm complains, "When you have gargantuan projects created by administrative fiat, it looks spectacular in a photograph, but that's not the recipe for a livable city" (Frangos and Chang 2003). The criticisms echo objections by Jane Jacobs to plans for expressways that threatened to ruin the vitality of Manhattan neighborhoods in the 1960s (1993 [1963]). And unlike the Singaporean model, this project is not intended by officials to be replicable by other aspiring cities as a model for integrated urban development; its very unlivable and unwelcoming qualities, and the emphatic discord of the building from its site, are a mark of its unique character and role in Beijing's future.

Beyond the worry of preserving old urban character, critics making the post-utopian charge objected to its initiation by a repressive state. As a US-based architect, Sze Tsung Leong, notes, the CCTV structure can only be built in a country with an autocratic tradition of large-scale destruction

and rebuilding of the urban landscape (while dislocating huge populations in the process) in order to mark regime change (Leong 2004). Koolhaas has, somewhat elliptically, defended the destruction of some districts of historical architecture (*hutong*) in the construction of the CCTV project as "sacrificial zones" that are necessary to allow other zones to be "tourist free" (Koolhaas and OMA 2004: 129). The sacrifice of antiquated districts is not taken lightly (as in land expropriated for the construction of condominium towers, as is the case elsewhere in Beijing), but to establish a new base of state power to which foreign tourists are not especially welcome. The attraction for OMA seems to be that only state-driven projects can secure the extensive funds, population clearance, and the mobilization of resources needed to break ground for a new kind of publicness! The CCTV center is a building of barbaric beauty that presides over four city blocks in China's capital, facing off with the towers of corporate capitalism. It gives material figuration to an autocratic state grappling with the global flows in and out of a distinctive kind of hyperspace. Let us take a brief look at the Koolhaas project as a design.

The CCTV hyperbuilding

The headquarters of the CCTV is giant colossus that appears to straddle Beijing's new Central Business District, outside the Third Ring Road. Unlike the Forbidden City model laid out in rigid symmetric enclosures, Koolhaas' design defies stability; "the scary aliveness" of his design displays "elasticity, creep, shrinkage, sagging, bending (and) buckling" (Koolhaas and OMA 2004: 129). The architectural forms play with the vertical and transversal possibilities of disjointed connections, combining features of vertical overlook, sky-bridges, and ground-level flows so that instead of two separate towers (of seventy stories each) there is "a single, integrated loop." The continuous series of vertical and horizontal sections links different realms of news administration, broadcasting, studios, and program production. The overhang between the two towers includes public spaces for canteens and a public viewing deck (162 meters above ground; see Figure 8.2). This "single, condensed hyperbuilding" houses 200 television stations and such a big population that it becomes an urban center in itself (*China Daily* 2004). An entire building as a self-enclosed city suggests something like the Pentagon, the largest office building in the world, which is only slightly bigger than the CCTV fortress.

Bert de Muynck (2004), a European architect, characterizes Koolhaas' architectural intervention in China as "not phallic but vaginal, one that contributes to the modernization of communist culture and to the definition of architecture." This interpretation registers a shift in the symbolism of modern architecture from a tower reaching for the stars to an enclosing structure that absorbs power into the body politic. Designed according to
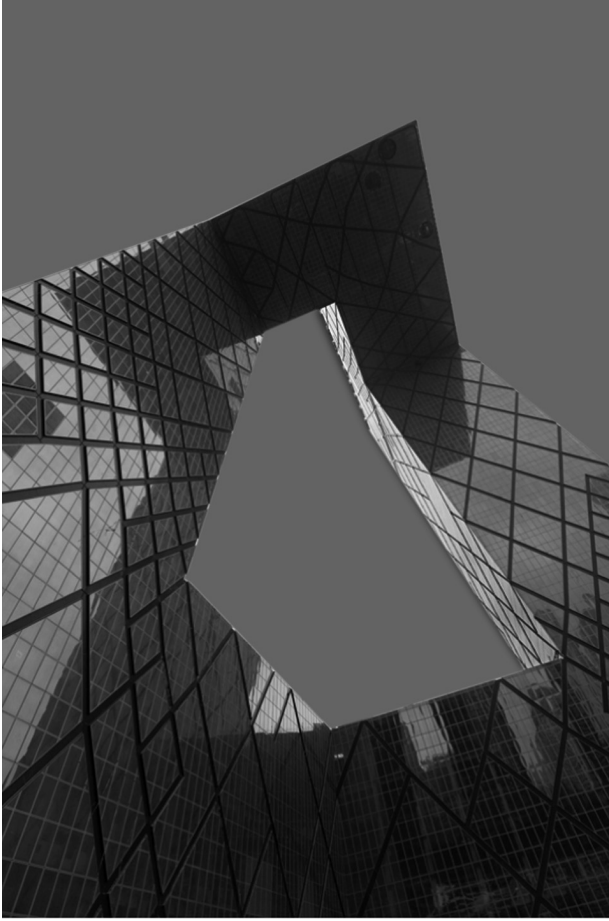
Figure 8.2   The cantilever joining the CCTV towers
Source: courtesy of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), The Netherlands.

the principles of "connectivity and opportunity," this hyperbuilding in downtown Beijing configures a kind of publicness that is circumscribed and enclosed within an immense trapezoidal loop. An army of media producers and protectors are gathered in a centralized infrastructure to manage the risks and security of information flows. Koolhaas' engineering skills in designing the building seems to achieve a diagnostic synthesis of the various information technologies and practices that will shape the Chinese picture and projection of the world. The very design of this outlandish structure broadcasts the state agency's role in regulating transnational flows while maintaining a network of enclosure.

CCTV and technological prowess

In 2006, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao articulated a new policy that favors "independent innovation" (*zizhu chuangxin*) as a new emphasis in China's development project. The state recognizes that at stake in China's emergence as a global power is the production and control of ideas, information, culture, and invention that can be disseminated across the world. Part and parcel of this emergence, then, will be the terms in which this dissemination can be managed, stimulated, and controlled. In this broader context of China's desire to exert cultural influence at home and abroad, CCTV, as China's biggest state-controlled news organization, has spent billions of dollars not only on the construction of this revolutionary flagship building, but also on the expansion of facilities to launch respected international news organizations overseas.

CCTV, Chinese Central Television, is thus both a state mouthpiece and the largest conglomerate in China vested with the responsibility for controlling media in the name of "cultural security." Despite joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, CCTV has not significantly liberalized local content, but maintains control over the TV medium by defining "that which can be made commercial, that which cannot, and that which is in-between" (Wang 2008: 250). CCTV regulators favor non-controversial topics such as finance and economy, science and technology, leisure and lifestyle, but tend to control news and TV documentaries with domestic content. At the same time, CCTV is worried about the increasing presence of foreign media corporations such as CNN, CNBC, Bloomberg, and other global channels, whose broadcasting rights are limited to diplomatic compounds, elite hotels, and Guangdong Province. Nevertheless, the foreign media exerts its influence in mass market offerings such as game shows, talk shows, sports programs, and dramas that are accessible across much of the country (Wang 2008: 249–51).

The CCTV headquarters is therefore a gigantic state presence, symbolically and materially, in the world of global network media. The structure houses a hybrid state agency and commercial broadcaster, with 10,000 workers running the sixteen national channels, many broadcasting on a twenty-four hour cycle. The audience is estimated at over one billion people, and some Chinese intellectuals have charged the center with whitewashing the news, especially on the touchy issues of human rights and minorities, for a susceptible public. As a state-owned TV monopoly, it has been called one of the largest propaganda entities in the world. Indeed, the CCTV building was completed in time for the Beijing Olympics so that it could display the state's "charm offensive" by showcasing the games for an international audience. CCTV has gone global by opening a multilingual channel that broadcasts Chinese views

to the world. The hyperbuilding thus materializes, in a dramatic way, the "evolving" nature of Chinese propaganda.

Premier Hu Jintao has called for "raising China's cultural propaganda abilities," which "have already become a decisive factor for a national culture's strength" (Feuerberg 2009). The new strategy is to have CCTV replace propaganda (*xuanchuan*) with explanation (*shuoming*) and a more "informational" approach to the news. Such declarations, especially in the midst of on-again, off-again crackdowns on artists, journalists, lawyers, activists, and ordinary dissenters, seem to teach the lesson that selective news is more sophisticated than sheer propaganda. With its immense digital network, the CCTV machinery permits the technicalization of information control as a way to depoliticize the content of propaganda, to control domestic cyber-activities, and deflect global Internet penetration.

The CCTV headquarters is thus central to the state defense of official conceptions of Chinese culture, values, and identity in the midst of ubiquitous digital and news flows, as well as disseminating the definitive normative judgment for Chinese publics on matters of official political correctness. The development of an elaborate communications apparatus facilitates the strengthening of censorship of information available to private citizens and corporations. Before and after the Beijing Olympics, minority protests led to the shutdown of Internet activities in parts of Xinjiang Province. Since the Olympics, there has been a severe tightening of electronic and Internet communications, mainly in the name of uprooting pornography, piracy, and other illegal activities, or activities deemed problematic for national harmony. The authorities have closed hundreds of web sites, including the blog of artist Ai Wei Wei, which had posted 5,000 names of children who died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. An anti-pornography campaign against netizens (web-based citizens) has been extended to controls on texting by cellphone users found to use "unhealthy" key words (LaFraniere 2010). The increased digital prowess of CCTV is reflected in extensive cyber-surveillance and interruptions of information flows that are viewed as detrimental to state authority.

CCTV is an emerging force as well in controlling the influx of foreign news, information, and entertainment, both on media networks and in cyberspace. Since 2006, Microsoft, Google, and Yahoo had complied with earlier demands to filter or remove political content in their China services. In mid-2009, the Chinese government demanded that all new computers to be sold in the country must carry pre-installed filtering software. The move to control free access to information is formally justified as an anti-pornography campaign by the Ministry of Health. The campaign is called "Green Dam Youth Escort" (*lvba huaji huhang*), a name that suggests the healthy protection of the young from informational pollution. Although the demand was later withdrawn by the Industry and Information Technology Ministry, the

domestic charge was that pornography was easily accessed on cyberspace, and therefore search engines must be strictly regulated.

Beyond the state objective of controlling the content of foreign media, CCTV technological capacities are also deployed for generating economic gains. For instance, global media corporations such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, Disney, Time Warner, and Viacom, among others, have created vast new media markets and audiences in China. CCTV seeks to nurture the rise of a Chinese media world that can meet these challenges by promoting Chinese cultural content. At the same time, China's new communication technologies have been linked to the escalation of cyber-attacks on the security systems of Internet firms and other kinds of foreign companies. While it has been difficult to trace Internet sabotage to the Chinese state, in 2010 the mix of cyber-censorship and cyber-attacks prompted Google to withdraw from the Chinese mainland and relocate to Hong Kong.

But whereas foreign critics have focused on freedom-of-information issues, what is often overlooked is how cyber-attacks create a bigger space for Chinese media companies to expand their opportunities and influence. There are over 430 million Internet users in China, served mainly by private companies such as Baidu.com, Alibaba.com, and Sohu.com. Already, with Google.cn's departure from the mainland, many local cyber start-ups both mimic and seek to replace foreign web sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and so on. More important, the new CCTV center has laid the technological foundation for the creation of a government-run search engine as well as an online video site that will compete with Chinese cyber-companies in controlling the Internet in China. An official of Xinhua, the official state-run news agency, explains that the state-run search engine platform is "part of the country's broader efforts to safeguard its information security and push forward the robust, healthy, and orderly development of China's new media industry" (Barboza 2010). In other words, the CCTV complex is a singular expression of the state's desire to scientifically diagnose what it considers as a cultural security issue, and to effectively counter the powers of free-floating information managed by private Internet companies. The CCTV complex acts as a state filter for political news at home, and also a national battleground for China's fight against what it calls "information imperialism" by the West (Buruma 2001).

The new media technologies also help to extend China's global reach. CCTV is opening more news bureaus that publish and broadcast to international audiences by broadcasting in English, French, and Spanish, as well as other languages. There is a plan to create a twenty-four hour news channel modeled on Al Jazeera, a media outlet for the Arab-speaking world, that would reach the United States, Europe, and other regions. The CCTV headquarters stamps Beijing as a global media center, and in its technical

and symbolic forms, enables China's competition with Western media outlets in shaping international news, spreading Chinese cultural values, and improving the nation's image globally. More broadly, China often views foreign arts and films as hostile to or inappropriately interfering in Chinese internal policies, and thus the new and expanded media agency plays the crucial role of patrolling the content of outside media production and its portrayal of matters deemed to be "Chinese."[4]

Whether intended or not, the surface of the CCTV monolith brilliantly displays this tension between propaganda and news, obfuscation and transparency. The net-like gridwork on the building's glassy façades seems to give expression to the flows of information that enter and leave the structure, not freely but as though through a sieve. On smoggy days, which are plentiful in Beijing, the latticework is even more visible, as a kind of political matrix, while the rest of the building dissolves into the polluted atmosphere.

The view from below

The sophisticated building design seems to have elicited a range of reactions from ordinary people. In China, public symbolism plays a big role in political culture, shaping ideas about politics in a way that can preempt public debates. The CCTV design is an especially rich target for all kinds of allusions about the staggering nature of state power. Western journalists have compared the building to a blank TV screen, a particle accelerator, and a deformed doughnut, and other rather decontextualized terms that reference Koolhaas' playful aesthetics that belie the media center's function in conquering the airwaves. What has been the reception of people in Beijing to this startling structure?

Chinese citizens have found the CCTV puzzling, and out of place or resonance with their notion of stable and staid modernist buildings. At the same time, however, to many others, the angled arch formed by conjoining the two towers suggests a grand gateway into the heart of political Beijing. Other metaphors the media center calls up include a twisted Chinese ideograph for "mouth" (*kou*); that is, a figuration that alludes to the building's role as the mouthpiece of the government. But to some Chinese netizens, the CCTV structure seems to frame a "knowledge window" (*zhichuang*) onto a new kind of architectural space.

Cultural theorists have argued that the legibility of the urban landscape often escapes the experiences of pedestrians and viewers. What is socially marginal ("the everyday, "the low life," the pornographic) can provide central symbols to the experience of urban life (cf., Stallybrass and White 1986). The CCTV center viewed from the street level or on the web site has generated a slew of transgressive jokes that poke fun at Koolhaas (who has become a

household name among the urban elite), but also at the state's pretensions at media control. The squat and angled shape of the headquarters has inspired nicknames such as "big shorts" (*da kuzi*) or boxer shorts (*da kuzha*). Comparisons of the CCTV structure to a giant toilet or the public staging of a pornographic act mock an emerging psychic topography shaped by reconfigured relationships between foreign architects, the powerful state, and ordinary citizens. Cyber-jokes about Koolhaas' hyperbuilding trace the multiple displacements that cut local people off from massive urban transformations.

In June 2009, a Beijing architect, Xiao Mo, attacked the CCTV headquarters as "hindquarters." Xiao had earlier made a summary of posted netizen comments opposing the behemoth's design, and charged the media for not reporting dissenting opinions to the general public. With this design, was Koolhaas playing a cruel joke on "1.3 billion Chinese people"? Mo reports his shock at the finished building, which when viewed at an oblique angle, suggests a kneeling figure with its rear end (the overhang) poised in relation to a nearby annex tower (*Danwei* 2009; and see Figure 8.3). While Mo appears to be genuinely horrified by what he sees as Koolhaas' "genital worshipping" structure, netizens have had a field day posting pornographic CCTV images, some of them featuring a satiated Mao. Cyber-smuttery also takes a jab at the state, recasting CCTV as CCAV (Chinese Central Adult Video), thus suggesting that political vulgarity is part of the state broadcasting content.

The proliferation of building pornography compels the CCTV to undertake the embarrassing chore of stamping out cyber-jokes. In the run-up to the Sixtieth Anniversary of the nation's founding, in 2009, the Central Propaganda Department handed down directives to various departments to eliminate all web site and Twitter references to the "CCTV Porn Joke" the "CCTV big pants designer," "CCTV building, sex organ" and even "Koolhass, CCTV" (McCue 2009). The mixed reception to CCTV has made it Beijing's most controversial structure. Among Chinese architects, there are calls for rethinking the cultural trend of falling "in line with the West" (*Danwei* 2009). Furthermore, if viewed in non-pornographic terms, the mammoth building can seem, to passers-by below, a threatening presence looming above. Instead of hindquarters, the hawk-like angle of the cantilevered top can be experienced by pedestrians as symbolizing being put under state surveillance. As elsewhere in Asian cities, urban pornography rewrites the meaning of controversial architectural space, producing an underground narrative that subverts and overturns the symbolic hierarchy and dignity vested in overweening power structures.

The view from the West

Western critics view the flow of cutting-edge urban designs to Asia with a mix of hope and foreboding. The relocation of radical architecture to East

Figure 8.3   A view of the CCTV figure poised next to an adjacent tower
Source: courtesy of Ole Scheeren and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA),
The Netherlands.

Asian cities has been viewed as a blatant cooptation of architectural
innovation by repressive states. Shannon Matten notes that "[a]s the medium
of television grows increasingly decentralized through digitalization and
mobilization, and as China's state media faces increasing competition from
other media in other forms and from other places, the symbolic significance
of a huge, monolithic structure will become even more important in signally
the continuing power of this state institution" (Matten 2008: 869–908).
Edwin Heathcote of *The Financial Times*, while admiring the "staggering and
innovative" CCTV structure, bemoans that "China has co-opted architectural

and artistic radicalism in a manner that might be described as visionary, or perhaps as shrewd, or perhaps as coolly cynical." He calls the structure "modernism without utopia" (Heathcote 2007: 17). For Matten and Heathcote, it appears that whatever "cool" cynicism Koolhaas exhibited had been in seeking authoritarian sites to stage his outlandish designs, thus perverting the association between radical architecture and modern utopianism.

Koolhaas had expressed the desire to use risky architecture to open up authoritarian China, but has his experiment misfired in playing with the politics of opening and closure? The CCTV project is not widely viewed as a monument to transparency and openness, but rather as a condensed symbol of deep tensions as Beijing seeks to be simultaneously an open city and a forbidden capital. To many ordinary Chinese, the CCTV headquarters is experienced as a massive affront to their cultural sensibilities, a kind of collective urban shame that may induce a retreat from Western urban conceptions. For the Chinese state, however, the stunning hyperbuilding has established Beijing as a global stage, a hyperspace that is dominated by Chinese sovereignty.

Conclusion

This chapter has compared and contrasted two related sets of distinctive practices associated with the hyperbuilding in ambitious East Asian cities. A notion of exception allows us to identify the variable uses of spectacular spaces for accumulating capital and for raising the metropolitan ranking in the world at large. Hyperbuilding as a verb refers to the infrastructural enrichment of the urban landscape in order to generate speculations on the city's future. Hyperbuilding as a noun identifies a mega-state project that transforms a city into a global hyperspace. Hyperbuilding is about the world-aspirations of the state, and my approach challenges studies that disconnect urban transformations from the national environment and aspirations, or view spectacular spaces as the exclusive tool of global capitalism.

A focus on exceptional city spaces highlights the politics of urban transformations and the various processes and built forms that compete to position the metropolis on the global stage, and the nation as a global actor. However, there is no guarantee that spectacular zones will realize urban dreams of world conquest. The over-leveraged city of spectacle or the arriviste nation is especially susceptible to global market gyrations abroad, and subversive disruptions at home, or perhaps, as in the Malaysian case, to continue on unnoticed.

Frenzied over-building in Asian cities gives us a picture of what happens when powerful emerging countries configure their own hyperspaces of sovereignty. The pivotal urban spectacle is not global capital alone but also

sovereign power. This should not be surprising, as massive public buildings were also erected at the peak of European empires. What is different about the contemporary emergence of an architectural hyperspace in Asian cities is the unease it has stirred among theorists of modernity. There is a new questioning about their capacity to interpret contemporary trajectories of monumental change when it happens outside the Western world. Radical architecture is responding to profound geopolitical shifts, and rapidly innovating Asian cities rupture conventional understandings of urban innovation as either modernist utopia or dystopia. While urban spectacles in Asia have been defined by international actors and designs, Asian cities and political codes are also shaping how we use and think through contemporary architectural forms and spaces.

Notes

1 Beijing was estimated to have spent US$3.5 billion on the Olympics, while Shanghai's preparation for the 2010 exhibition was estimated to have cost over US$4.2 billion.
2 There is no space in this chapter to discuss the synergy between spectacular spaces and spectacular events in promoting the urban standing of Asian cities.
3 For examples of this, see www.seoul.go.kr or http://wdeseoul.kr
4 For instance, the Chinese authorities have protested the showing, at home and abroad, of documentaries and films produced by foreigners that deal with sensitive topics such as Tibetan or Uyghur minorities, or the victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, subjects that raise questions about the actions of the Chinese state.

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The Enigma of Return

Troubling Bodies
Aihwa Ong

This summer, upon returning to Malaysia, where I was born, I was greeted pleasantly by immigration officers. I was surprised. Previously, former citizens, upon re-entry, could expect thinly veiled hostility for having left the country. Have Malaysian immigration authorities put into practice their motto of 'Malaysia, truly Asia', I wondered, by welcoming Asians of all shades, regardless of their citizenship? Things were different in the 1970s when I was a young (ethnic Chinese) Malaysian citizen attending university in New York. During my visits home, my stomach would churn as I approached the immigration counter. The display of my Malaysian passport did not deflect the barely concealed disdain of border officials. The resentment, perhaps, was of my privilege of having gone abroad for higher education. Class hostility was also tinged by ethnic and gender bias. In one startling reception, a customs officer searching my bags ripped open a box of Tampax and scattered tampons across his desk. To avoid possible vile encounters thereafter, I made sure to wear batik dresses and speak Malay when meeting immigration officials. Minimally, such performance of cultural citizenship, a token display to some ideal of nationalism, seemed to ease my transit through Malaysian airports, even after I became a US citizen in the early 1980s (Ong, 2003).

But on my most recent trip back, I was warned by relatives living abroad that ethnic Chinese returnees speaking Bahasa or wearing batik are more likely to incur scorn than smiles, and at the airport, a locally-born ethnic Chinese person acting 'foreign' may be more welcome than one acting 'Malaysian.' Immigration authorities seem to sift through a constellation of ethnic, legal, cultural and economic forces as they screen ethnic Chinese subjects for multiple associations, some desirable, others not. This politics of ethnic identification and performance at the arrival point induces disorientation in the former Chinese-Malaysian citizen who has to decipher and mirror the shifting perception and reception of the border guard.

As nodes of international passage, airports have a charismatic place in the semiotics of contemporary vertigo. Different accounts tap into a tension between a placeless cosmopolitan freedom of movement, or a site of national checkpoints through which identities are evaluated, vetted, or dismantled. Anthropologists give opposing views on airport arrivals and the experience of identity. Marc Auge (2001) paints a schematic picture of the modern traveller who, after moving through the anonymous 'non-space' of the airport, upon arrival regains his identity along with his luggage, and sense of place. Ethnographic attention to specificity, however, reveals that for certain 'kinds' of persons, the airport arrival is the beginning of confusion or an unravelling of identity. Sara Friedman (2010) observes that mainland Chinese 'marital migrants' to Taiwan are interrogated by immigration officials as to the 'truth' of their claims. For travelers perceived to have ambiguous affiliations (for example where ethnicity blurs the link to citizenship), the immigration encounter dissolves identity into an enigma.

In postcolonial upheavals, multi-ethnic worlds created under colonialism were forcibly reshaped into the policed politics of new nationalisms. 'Ethnic' categories were re-constituted and incorporated as minority modes of national belonging. More than in other postcolonial countries, citizenship in Malaysia rests on maintaining a particular multi-racial composition, a set-up that still considers the diminishing Chinese minority as a political thorn in its side. In Malaysia, the national structure of feeling, favours, and fortunes is carefully calibrated to maintain and expand the demographic majority of ethnic Malays (*bumiputras*). The special status of Malay bumiputras makes Chinese, Indian and other racial minorities second-class citizens. Maintaining this ethnic ranking, the immigration regime screens the racial ratios of returns and arrivals. But compared to earlier forms of ethnic intimidation,

today we find a slick, perhaps neoliberal style at play when it comes to managing the back and forth flows of Chinese persons.

What to make of the neutral or even cheery reception of previously disdained former citizens? Former citizens of Chinese ancestry once faced an icy welcome at Malaysian immigration counters, but a new calculation of political advantages shapes their welcome now. By emigrating, they are doing the country a favour, by reducing the size of the minority community, and they are welcomed back, not as visitors to a beloved homeland their ancestors played a major role in building, but as bringers of cash. Still judged as never Malaysian enough, the Chinese minority transmutes into a blur, between building a nation as citizens and building its economy as former citizens.

In these global times, Chinese ethnicity is glossed with wealth and recoded as potential human infrastructure for channeling resources. With China looming in the background as an economic giant, former hostility to returning citizens of Chinese ancestry has been supplanted by the welcoming of money associated with Chinese peoples (of various ethnicities and nationalities) from the world over. Next time I visit, I would be sure to bring more dollars, and eschew Bahasa in favor of Mandarin. This intricate maneuver in flexible citizenship (Ong, 1999) illuminates the paradox that the impersonal and international style of airports does not banish the enactment of the personal and the particular required of travellers by immigration regimes.

As I rush through Asia's supermodern airports, I note that the Malaysian tourist map of 'truly Asia' is plaiting together ethnic and investment flows, and is not a political expression of genuine multiculturalism. This window dressing of Asian diversity shapes the ritual performance of ethnic citizenship in airports, while the ethnic belonging to the nation remains in doubt. Envisioning my next return home, I run through options for playing the 'truly Asian' game; brace for rejection or misidentifications; project a wealthy demeanor; or display the dubious identity of an overseas Chinese? It is the expectation of such historically-generated stereotypical rituals that strangely de-positions the returning person, thus extending her motion sickness into the existentialist realm.

Notes
1 I humbly invoke V.S. Naipaul's richly compelling novel, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1988). In this melancholy memoir, Naipaul ruminates on how the perceptions of the immigrant shape his sensitivity to new surroundings. The mysterious sense of self and belonging for the immigrant is further troubled by his love of a country that has been deeply transformed.
2 For a brief account of that fraught experience, see Ong (2003), xiii-xix.

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Referencing 'Migration: The COMPAS Anthology'

CYBERPUBLICS AND DIASPORA POLITICS AMONG TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE

Aihwa Ong

CYBERPUBLICS AND DIASPORA POLITICS AMONG TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE

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citizenship

cyberpublics

diaspora

Indonesia

overseas
Chinese

transnationality

In August 1998, a global Chinese (huaren) website mobilized worldwide protests against anti-Chinese attacks in Indonesia triggered by the Asian financial crisis. This set of events provides the occasion for a discussion of the necessary conceptual distinction between diaspora and transnationalism. I maintain that diaspora as permanent political exile is often conflated with contemporary forms of fairly unrestricted mobility. 'Diaspora', however, gets increasingly invoked by affluent migrants in transnational contexts to articulate an inclusive global ethnicity for disparate populations the world over who may be able to claim a common racial or cultural ancestry.

I use the term 'translocal publics' to describe the new kinds of disembedded diaspora identifications enabled by technologies and forums of opinion-making. I consider the promise and the danger of cyber diaspora politics that intervene on behalf of co-ethnics in distant lands. The rise of such diaspora politics may inspire in the members an unjustified sense that cyber-based humanitarian interventions will invariably produce positive results for intended beneficiaries.

The Huaren cyberpublic promotes itself as an electronic watchdog for ethnic Chinese communities across the world. But, while ethnic Chinese in Indonesia were grateful for the spotlight cast on their plight, some felt cyber misrepresentations of events and criticisms of Indonesia jeopardized their attempts to commit themselves as Indonesian citizens. Thus, Internet-based articulation of a disembedded global racial citizenship can create invidious essential differences between ethnic others and natives, deepening rather than

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> *reducing already existing political and social divisions within particular nations. In short, discourses of a racialized diaspora raise the question of who is accountable to whom in a transnationalized world.*

The triggering event

In August 1997 a financial firestorm swept through Southeast Asia, bringing chaos and suffering to millions in Suharto's Indonesia. Following the precipitous decline of the rupiah in late 1997, millions of Indonesian workers laid off from their jobs returned to poverty-stricken neighborhoods and villages. A picture of Suharto signing away his power, with the stern IMF chief standing over him, his arms crossed, had been a widely-publicized image of national humiliation.[1] A handful of army generals, indigenous business competitors and Muslim intellectuals deflected anger against the ruling elite by stirring racist nationalist feelings against ethnic Chinese. Indonesian Chinese were called 'new-style colonialists … who plunder the people's wealth' and traitors who keep their wealth in US dollars and send their money overseas. Rumors flew about Chinese shopkeepers hoarding food, raising food prices, and Chinese 'traitors' fleeing the country with ill-gotten capital. Combined with the invisibility and unpredictability of market forces, such metaphors of evil turned fears into rage.

In May 1998 and the following weeks, ordinary people looted and burned Chinese stores and homes, while soldiers stood by, observing a destruction that mimicked the devastation visited on the lives of the poor. In the chaos of the destruction, soldiers disguised as hooligans were reported to have attacked dozens of girls and women, many of whom were ethnic Chinese. Human rights activists claimed that the rapes were organized rampage by military men out of uniform. A related process of witch-hunting was set off by rumors about anonymous men in black called ninjas who killed Muslim leaders and dumped their mutilated bodies in mosques. In some neighborhoods, local vigilante groups hunted for ninjas who were killed on sight, their heads paraded on pikes. Such grisly attacks, and the demands by the masses for some kind of redistribution of 'Chinese' wealth in favor of the *pribumi* (indigenous) population, again made the scapegoat community stand for the ravages of the global markets.

It is important to note that, while ethnic and religious differences have long existed in Indonesia, under Suharto's New Order regime (1969–98) a few Chinese tycoons (*cukong*) enjoyed special political access which enabled them to amass huge fortunes and dominate sectors of the economy. The majority of ethnic Chinese (numbering some four million) are small business operators, professionals and working people who bear the brunt of a historical legacy of anti-Chinese sentiments and suffer from a legal status as racialized

1 The IMF imposed disciplinary conditions for loans, requiring the Indonesian state to cut subsidies for basic commodities such as flour and cooking oil. Millions of Indonesians driven to the edge of starvation turned their anger against the most visible target, ethnic Chinese shopkeepers.

2 For a brief historical view of anti-Chinese discriminations in Indonesia, see Skinner (1963). For a recent overview of the

citizens.[2] The Suharto government, through inaction, had practically 'legalized' attacks on Chinese property and persons, allowing the army to manipulate events to displace anger against the Suharto regime onto the ethnic Chinese (Coppel 1999). The seeming global indifference sparked an international response among ethnic Chinese communities around the world, linked through the Internet.[3]

The rise of a Huaren cyberpublic

politics of Chinese economic domination, see Schwarz (1994).

3 At the 1998 Manila meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Madeline Albright, the American Secretary of State, condemned the Burmese state for its mistreatment of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, but she made no mention of the ongoing attacks on ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.

On 7 August 1998, and the days following, coordinated rallies protested the anti-Chinese violence in front of Indonesian embassies and consulates in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Asia. These rallies were held mainly in cities in the West – Atlanta, Boston, Calgary, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Toronto, Vancouver, and Washington. In Asia, demonstrations took place only in Hong Kong, Manila, and Beijing. China issued a rare warning to Indonesia over redress for the victims of the riots and mass rapes.

The global protests were organized through a new website called Global Huaren ('Global Chinese People'), set up by a Malaysian Chinese emigrant in New Zealand called Joe Tan. Enraged by the seeming indifference of New Zealanders and the world to the anti-Chinese attacks, Tan linked up with ethnic Chinese engineers and professionals in Canada, Australia, and the United States, who saw parallels between the plight of Chinese in Indonesia and European Jews. They established the World Huaren Federation (WHF) in order 'to foster a stronger sense of identity among Chinese people everywhere, not to promote Chinese chauvinism but rather racial harmony' (Arnold 1998). Huaren chapters have been formed mainly in Southeast Asian cities, but they are beginning to appear in all continents, and the federation anticipates a membership of ten million in a few years.

This 'revolution' in Chinese political activism is attributed to the fact that 'at least four million of us around the world are computer users, computer geeks and techies', according to an American Chinese attorney, Edward Liu, who heads the San Francisco chapter of Huaren. As reported on its website, this construction of a global Chinese public identifies race as the unifying feature. Tan maintains that the WHF is not intended to encourage Chinese chauvinism but 'to eradicate the intimidation which some governments are subjecting Chinese and other ethnic minorities to. We want to ensure that such atrocities will never happen again to anyone of any race and color.' He adds: 'Like any other race, the Chinese are expected to be responsible citizens in their country of birth or adoption.'[4] As a diaspora public set up by overseas Chinese professionals based in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the US, many of whom have no prior experience with or links to Indonesia, Global

4 See <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 14 June 1999).

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5 The teach-in, organized by ICANET (Indonesian Chinese American Network), and sponsored by a San Francisco councilman Leland Yee – one of two American Chinese elected councilmen in America's largest enclave of American Chinese – was dramatized by the personal accounts of the Jakarta riots by three Indonesians of Chinese descent, who spoke anonymously, behind a screen, to protect them from potential retaliation by the dark forces within the Indonesian government. This event was reported on <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 14 June 1999).

6 See *San Francisco Chronicle* (1998). Reproduced on <http://www.huaren.org>

Huaren seeks to act as a kind of disembedded and placeless political watchdog on behalf of the Chinese race.

Edward Liu, who spoke at a San Francisco rally, criticized President Habibie (President Suharto's successor) for being complicit in a *de facto* 'ethnic cleansing' of Chinese influence in the cultural, economic, and social fabric of Indonesia.[5] He thanked ethnic Indonesians such as Father Sandiawan Sumardi and other pribumi human rights advocates who risked their own safety and lives in support of the victims. He condemned the 'Chinese Indonesians' who were at one time cronies of Suharto but 'now have ingratiated themselves with Habibie in the same rotten system of corruption, cronyism and nepotism'. He went on to lecture the Indonesians:

> Chinese Indonesians have a right to be good Indonesians. They have a right to be Chinese culturally too. They have a right, as I do, as a Chinese American of Filipino background to be proud of my ties. I am proud to be a Chinese. I am also proud to be a Filipino. I am also proud to be a San Franciscan and an American.[6]

This speech demonstrates extreme insensitivity to the situation in Indonesia. Liu makes distinctions in racial terms, and seems to give primacy to Chineseness, when most ethnic Chinese prefer to refer to themselves as Indonesian Chinese, and not the reverse. Liu seems to essentialize the Chinese race and to conflate race with culture. He criticizes Habibie, who though politically weak had worked to improve the citizenship protections of ethnic minorities.

The diaspora politics protesting anti-Chinese activities around the world is cast in the language of moral redemption for the Huaren race, posing the need to balance racial protection against economic advantage. For instance, the World Huaren Federation was lauded by the *Straits Times* in Singapore which claimed:

> Previously, Chinese communities were more concerned with commercial and economic matters. The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia had been pummeled by rioting in the past decades – but they had always absorbed the punishment meekly to preserve their commercial interests. This time around, a landmark shift occurred with modern communications technology becoming the unifying force. (Soh 1998)

In on-line discussions on the Huaren website, the attacks on Indonesian Chinese have become a stimulus for a moral resurgence around the concept of a Chinese race. New American Chinese have logged on to confess their 'shame' for having failed 'to help Huaren refugee[s] in Vietnam and in Cambodia'. A subscriber urges his compatriots: 'Don't sell our pride and value for short-term personal and materialist gain. Wealth without pride and compassion is not success or achievement.' He bemoans the fact that wherever any Chinese was mentally or physically discriminated against, the majority of

7 'JT': 'Our shame for failing to help Huaren refugee[s] in Vietnam and Cambodia in the past' <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 14 June 1999).

8 'Dennis': 'Re: Our shame for failing to help Huaren refugee[s] in Vietnam and Cambodia in the past' <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 14 June 1999).

the 'so called "successful" business Huaren' were nowhere to be seen.[7] A respondent notes that for the past two decades many Chinese emigrants were ashamed of China and Vietnam for being communist and poor countries, and their lack of sympathy to the Chinese boat people was influenced by the 'Western propaganda machine'. Now his own view has changed:

How and when I realized that I was not just an internationalist (I was a parasite) but a human first and foremost, I can't pinpoint …. Being racial is not necessarily negative. Racial discrimination and persecution is obnoxious but it is necessary to contribute towards one's race. One is as whole as [what] one's ancestors [have] built in the past, and each man in the present must maintain and build for the descendants…. [The] Chinese must begin to let loose their embrace on self-gain …. the stronger must fend for the weaker, the more able to contribute more. This is something new to [us] Chinese and we must set the example.[8]

The conflation of diaspora and transnationalism

This paper considers differentiations among migrant populations who share an ethnocultural or racial ancestry – a diverse assemblage of co-ethnics who have been conceptually reduced to homogeneous 'diasporic communities'. Popular books such as *Sons of the Yellow Emperor* or the *Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas* seek to unite diverse flows of people in different parts of the world through their Chinese heritage and ancestral mainland origins (Pan 1990, 1999). In recent decades, as new flows of well-educated, middle-class Chinese from Asia have flocked to North America, there has been an intensification of Asian American interest in a search for cultural roots (see *Daedalus* 1991). The term 'diaspora' has suddenly begun to be invoked by activists and academics in order to claim an overarching framework for heterogeneous peoples who may be able to trace ancestral roots to China.[9] Conceptually speaking, 'diaspora' as widely used today refers not to permanent exile, but rather to the global imaginary invoked by transnational subjects located in metropolitan centers who wish to exercise a new form of power through the use of informational technology.

9 On American campuses, ethnic studies, which originally framed the study of minorities within the American nation, began to be reoriented towards a study of 'diaspora' and of roots in the homelands of immigrants. This is in part a recognition of the transnational connections sustained by new immigrant populations, but also a re-articulation of ethnic claims in a global space.

What is necessary, then, is to differentiate between the political use of the term 'diaspora' and the conceptual meaning of diaspora as exile. Many analytical perspectives however conflate diaspora as permanent exile with contemporary forms of fairly unrestricted mobility. The terms 'transnational migration' and 'diaspora' are often used in the same breath, confusing changes in population flows occasioned by globalizing market forces with earlier forms of permanent exile. While some migrations are involuntary or occasioned by war (hegira in Islamic countries), most cross-border flows today are induced and channeled by the ease of travel and the reorganization

of labor markets within the global economy. For instance, the terms 'diasporic communities' and 'global ethnoscapes' have been used to refer to migrant communities that have an unprecedented effect on the politics of the homeland (Appadurai 1995). But the term 'diasporic communities' seems to suggest that migrant populations who have the potential of belonging to the same ethnic group are internally homogeneous, have similar imaginaries, and seek to affect state politics in the same way. The effect of this is to essentialize migrants as particular kinds of ethnics, when our task is rather to sort out the different categories of people who can be described as, for example, ethnic Chinese traveling abroad, but who are often in different class, gender, and labor circuits, and who form discrepant alliances and pursue divergent politics.

The term 'transnationality' better describes the variety of cultural inter-connections and trans-border movements and networks which have intensi-fied under conditions of late capitalism. Contemporary transnational flows may have overlapped with the paths of earlier migrants from the same country of departure who had left under involuntary conditions. When we think of Southeast Asians refugees in the United States, for instance, we might consider them part of a diaspora created by war and resettlement abroad. But a generation later, many of same refugees and their children are engaged in multiple home visits and cross-border exchanges. They are participating in contemporary movements of people back and forth, propelled by trade, labor markets, and tourism. Indeed, most original diaspora populations – initially occasioned by expulsion with no hope of return – now have the possibility of multiple returns and/or participation in global circuits formed by commerce. The ease of travel today means that few migrants are truly exiles, or experiencing diaspora in its original sense of a lack of hope of return to one's homeland. Diaspora sentiments may linger but it may be more ana-lytically exact to use the term 'transnationalism' to describe the processes of disembedding from a set of localized relations in the homeland nation and re-embedding in new overlapping networks that cut across borders. It seems to me, therefore, that the old meaning of diaspora – of being scattered or in dispersion, with no hope of return – is too limiting an analytical concept to capture the multiplicity of vectors and agendas associated with the majority of contemporary border crossings.

As Zygmont Bauman reminds us, there is a polarization between those free to move and those forced to move, e.g., between travelers and refugees, businessmen and migrant workers. This 'global hierarchy of mobility' is part of a worldwide and local redistribution of privileges and deprivations; a restratification of humanity (Bauman 1998: 70). The scholarship of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia has been meticulous in analyzing this internal kind of fragmentation and cultural diversity within seemingly unified diaspora populations, but such works remain largely unfamiliar to contemporary

10 The literature is too extensive to be listed here. Skinner (1957) is just one classic study of the stratifications and cultural diversity within emigrant Chinese populations in Southeast Asia.

diaspora studies.[10] More recently, *Ungrounded Empires* brought together interdisciplinary analyses of diverse ethnic Chinese flows and transnational subjectivity emerging within situations of 'flexible' capitalism in the Asia Pacific (Ong and Nonini 1997). This volume, among others, has influenced China historians to turn to the study of the Chinese diaspora (heretofore considered a residual phenomenon) and, as mentioned, has opened up Asian American Studies to a whole new field of investigation. One important work documenting unexpected circuits and cultural complexity is Adam McKeown's *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii 1900–1936* (1999). Nevertheless, despite such studies of multiple trajectories and ambiguity in identity, there is still a dearth of scholarly attention focusing on these tensions between translation networks and local ethnic situations in particular locations. Clearly, one needs to differentiate between diaspora as a set of differentiated phenomena and diaspora as political rhetoric.

Thus, I would consider discourses of diaspora not as descriptions of already formed social entities, but rather as specific political practices projected on a global scale. Ironically, then, diaspora politics describe not an already existing social phenomenon, but rather a social category called into being by newly empowered transnational subjects. The contemporary transnationalization of ethnic groups has engendered a yearning for a new kind of global ethnic identification. The proliferation of discourses of diaspora is part of a political project which aims to weave together diverse populations who can be ethnicized as a single worldwide entity. In other words, diaspora becomes the framing device for contemporary forms of mass customization of global ethnic identities. Aided by electronic technology, the assembly of a variety of co-ethnic groups under an electronic umbrella thus disembeds ethnic formation from particular milieus of social life. Indeed, as the above Indonesian incidents and Global Huaren have shown, information technologies play a big role in engendering and channeling desires for a grand unifying project of global ethnicity that flies in the face of the diversity of peoples and experiences. As we shall see, 'Chinese' peoples from around the world are among the most diverse of the populations that have been lumped into a single category.

Contemporary flows of overseas Chinese

There are approximately fifty million people of Chinese ancestry living outside China, and they are dispersed in 135 countries. Analysts and activists have often referred to this linguistically and culturally heterogeneous population as a single diaspora community, even though it has been built up over centuries of countless flows – first of exiles, then of migrants – out of the Chinese mainland. Most of the flows from China stemmed from the late

nineteenth century, when British incursions, the disruptions of agriculture and trade, and the resulting famines generated the great south Chinese exodus to Southeast Asia, North and South America. Previously, I have used the phrase 'modern Chinese transnationalism' to describe the re-emigration of overseas Chinese subjects who have settled in postcolonial Southeast Asian countries to North America and other continents.[11] The 1965 family unification law allowed the children of earlier waves of Chinese immigrants to join their parents in the United States. In the early 1980s, new waves of ethnic Chinese flocked into Canada, Australia and the United States. In some cases, these were students seeking higher education; in others, families seeking resettlement abroad before the 1998 return of Hong Kong to China rule. Economic affluence in Southeast Asian countries and in Taiwan also encouraged business migrants and professionals to pursue opportunities in the West. At the same time, events in China opened up opportunities for outmigration. These outflows from the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan have been diverse, in some cases more remarkable for their differences than for their similarities.

Since the late 1980s, most ethnic Chinese immigrants to North America have been from China (as opposed to ethnic Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong). China's opening to the global economy, the impending return of Hong Kong to China rule, and the Tiananmen Square crackdown were major causes for an outflow of students, business people, professionals and ordinary workers seeking political refuge or economic opportunities in the West. Plunging into the market is referred to as diving into the ocean (*xiahai*), and many ambitious Chinese link expanded business and professional activities with seeking opportunities abroad. Legally, 40,000 leave for the US, Canada, and Australia each year. Currently migrants from China are of a higher professional and economic status than earlier ones in the 1980s, and the perception is that the US embassy is raising the bar for skilled immigrants from China, creating fierce competition among Chinese urban elites to enter the United States by making business investments, using family connections, applying to college or contracting bogus marriages with American citizens. The other major category of mainland Chinese emigrants is that of illegal migrants, mainly from the southern province of Fujian, who seek entry into the United States and Canada. Many end up as exploited restaurant and sweatshop workers (Kwong 1997).

Thus the people with Chinese ancestry in North America include citizens from China and overseas Chinese from a dozen other countries in which their ancestors had settled. Such immigrants do not see themselves as a unity since they have different national origins, cultures, languages, and political and economic agendas. They do not necessarily associate with, or view themselves as having any continuity with, earlier waves of immigrants from the mainland. Indeed, the range of nationality, ethnicity, language, and class origins

11 For this historically informed, multi-sited view, see Ong and Nonini (1997).

among Chinese immigrants is vast and unstable, splitting and recombining in
new ways. For instance, in Vancouver, affluent Hong Kong emigrants are
very insistent in setting themselves apart as 'high-quality people' from poor
Chinese illegals smuggled in shipping containers (Ong, forthcoming (a)). In
the United States, even among the recent waves of immigrants from China
and Taiwan, great distinctions in terms of class, dialect, and region are
brought by the newcomers to the new country. Such divisions are only one
example of how one cannot assume a unified diaspora community constituted
by people who may be construed as belonging to the same ethnic grouping
or hailing from the same homeland. There is great diversity among peoples
who may be able to claim Chinese ancestry, and they may or may not use
diaspora-like notions in shaping their public interests or political goals. I
therefore suggest that, instead of talking about given identities, it may be
more fruitful to attend to the variety of publics where specific interests
intersect and are given particular formulations.

Translocal publics among new Chinese immigrants

12 I explore three
different kinds of
Chinese-identified
translocal publics,
linked by
international Chinese
media audiences,
networks of ethnic
Chinese professionals,
and business circles
located mainly in
Southeast Asia (Ong
1999: 139–84).

Given its currency in the age of transnationalism and multiculturalism,
'diaspora' should not be considered as an objective category, but rather
treated as an ethnographic term of self-description by different immigrant
groups or publics. More and more, diaspora becomes an emotional and
ideologically-loaded term that is invoked by disparate transnational groups
as a way to construct broad ethnic coalitions that cut across national spaces.
Previously, I have used the term 'translocal publics' to describe the new kinds
of borderless ethnic identifications enabled by technologies and forums of
opinion-making. These publics play a strategic role in shaping new ethni-
cizing and cultural discourses for audiences scattered around the world.[12]
Here, I identify three kinds of milieus that have different potential in shaping
transnational ethnic Chinese fields of political action.

Diaspora as an extension of the motherland

One can identify a 'Chinese' public that sees itself as an extension of the
homeland and as sharing a continuity with earlier waves of Chinese patriots
who possessed the conviction that the experience and status of Chinese
abroad was a direct result of the status of China within the international
system.

> If Chinese people were bullied locally, that was because China received no respect
> internationally. To be Chinese, anywhere in the world, was to be a representative

of the motherland, to have a stake in the future of China, and to recognize the claims of China and Chinese culture over their loyalty. (Williams 1960: 128)

Today, Chinese who see themselves as an extension of territorial nationalism are primarily new migrants from the Chinese mainland whom the Chinese government calls *haiwai huaren* ('Chinese abroad'). They may be living and working in the United States, but their hearts and politics are tied to the interests of the Chinese nation (Tu 1991; Liu 1999). One can say that there is one transnational public that takes mainland China as its frame of reference, another transnational public which is an extension of Taiwanese nationalism, and also a Hong Kong network. These different publics may overlap at the margins, but their orientations are towards politics and social relations with the home country.

Translational identities of Southeast Asian immigrants

Southeast Asian immigrants with some kind of Chinese ancestry do not fall naturally under the category of *haiwai huaren* (or the older term of *huaqiao*), although in their re-migration to North America some conditions exist for re-Sinicization, as I discuss below. Ethnic Chinese whose departures from Southeast Asia have been historically shaped by earlier migrations out of China (since the early sixteenth century), European colonialism, postcolonial nationalist ideologies and globalization tend to stress their nationality rather than their ethnic status. Under colonialism, creolized and mixed-race communities – called Straits Chinese in Malaya, mestizos in the Philippines, and Peranakans in the Dutch East Indies – flourished. But in almost all of postcolonial Southeast Asia, a series of native, colonial and/or postcolonial government actions have integrated different kinds of Chinese immigrant communities as ethnic minorities (Malaysia), as an ethnically marked shop-keeping class (Thailand), or through policies of erasing the stigma of Chinese ethnicity which both encouraged and compelled these immigrants to pass into the dominant native community through intermarriage and the adoption of dominant languages and cultural practices (in degrees of severity: Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia). Thus people refer to themselves as Malaysian Chinese, not Chinese Malaysians. Among ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, the Philippines, or Thailand, the Chinese ancestry is often eclipsed or uninscribed by name, language, and cultural practices because of forcible state integration of these minorities. In countries where religion has not played a major role of assimilation, people with Chinese ancestry have become part of the ruling class. In all countries but Singapore, where a majority of the population is of Chinese ancestry, Chinese ethnicity is politically underplayed because of the state emphasis on majority

rule. Thus such differences in group identity and relationships to nationalism make for extremely complex assemblages of ethnic, cultural, and national identity among overseas Chinese. After a few centuries of migration and settlement, Southeast Asian peoples who can trace Chinese ancestry think of their identities as produced out of a cultural syncretism which is associated with westernized middle-class attributes and cosmopolitanism, although there has been a revitalization of ethnic Chinese connections to China since the 1980s. But in Southeast Asian countries, any political suggestion of diaspora sentiments is avoided, for it implies disloyalty and lack of patriotism to the country of settlement.

When Southeast Asian Chinese subjects re-migrate to North America (and elsewhere in the West), they tend to identify themselves in terms of their home nationalities, and call themselves Thai, Cambodian, and Filipino American. Ethnic Chinese from these diasporas may be highly conscious of the fluidity of identity formation in the shifting field of modern geopolitics, and are more likely to resist the hegemonic discourses of political nationalism among those immigrant Chinese who closely identify with China and Taiwan. Because they are relatively small in number and have come from different Southeast Asian countries, overseas Chinese from Southeast Asia, and especially Indonesia, have not yet come together in a self-conscious production of an all-inclusive ethnicity.[13] Indeed, many of them would fit Stuart Hall's notion of translated identity, seeing themselves as the product of a rich confluence of traditions, histories, and cultures (Hall 1996). For instance, Southeast Asian immigrants participate simultaneously in various media publics – from homeland print cultures to Chinese kung fu movies – in sharp contrast to people from the Chinese mainland who rarely express interest in other Asian cultural spheres.

13 Policy-makers have stuck the label Southeast Asian American on all immigrants from mainland Southeast Asia. It has come to be an all-inclusive ethnic category for links to major institutions and for gaining access to resources. However, deep cultural, ethnic, and national differences persist among the variety of peoples from the region. See Ong (forthcoming (b)).

Ethnic absolutism in the cyber age

For the disparate groups of immigrants who can claim Chinese ancestry, the whole issue of a broader, collective Chinese ethnicity emerges in multicultural America: should they identify more strongly with their new nationality, their old one, or with a potentially resurgent ethnicity driven by ambitious Asian Americans?

I argue that the translocal publics constituted by professionals on-line are now directly engaged in the production of global ethnicities. Specifically, economic globalization has scattered a new kind of transnational Chinese professional (managers, entrepreneurs, engineers, programmers) throughout the world. Over the past two decades, alongside Chinese business migrants, tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese professionals from Southeast Asia and China have moved abroad to global cities while maintaining family, economic, and professional links with their home countries. These expatriate Chinese

professionals have formed middle-class Asian neighborhoods in cities such as Sydney, Vancouver, San Francisco, New York, Washington, London, and Paris, and are beginning to think of their Chinese identity in global terms. In North America, the concentration of ethnic Chinese professionals in particular cities (Sunnyvale), neighborhoods and high-level corporate occupations has produced conditions for a diversity of people who claim ethnic Chinese ancestry to become re-Sinicized through the universalizing forces of cyber-power, and through discourses of human rights and citizenship.

14 For a discussion of various Asian populations in the Silicon Valley economy, see Ong (forthcoming (c)).

Asian immigrants – professionals, managers, entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists – are powerful members of the American corporate world.[14] In Silicon Valley, a majority of the foreign-born engineers are from Asia, mainly Taiwan and India. Besides their technical skills and wealth, these new immigrants 'have created a rich fabric of professional and associational activities that facilitate immigrant job search, information exchange, access to capital and managerial know-how, and the creation of shared ethnic resources' (Saxenian 1999). They maintain professional and business links with cities in Asia, fostering two-way flows of capital, skills, and information between California and Taipei. The very economic clout of such transnational Asian professional communities is, however, undercut by their invisibility in North American cultural and political life. They do not share the histories of earlier waves of immigration from Asia, but constitute a globalized yet politically amorphous collection of ethnicized professionals, incompletely disembedded from their original homelands but playing a dominant role in international commerce and industry. They exist in a social vacuum, and the imbalance between professional power and political-cultural weakness creates conditions that seem ripe for the emergence of what Stuart Hall calls 'ethnic absolutism'. What can they turn to that will allow a kind of re-territorializing – a way of tracking back to those far-flung and myriad ethnic Chinese communities in Asia – which can help 'restore coherence, "closure", and Tradition' in the face of political displacement, cultural diversity, and existentialist uncertainty (Hall 1996: 630)?

Cyber Huaren: the vicarious politics of electronic intervention

We can now return to the opening scenes of the paper: why do a group of high-tech ethnic Chinese from disparate places intervene in the 1998 anti-Chinese attacks in Indonesia? How has the Internet allowed for a simplification of identities, such as 'Chinese people in diaspora'? What are the positive and negative effects of rapid Internet interventions on the political sovereignties and the situated realities of peoples in distant lands?

The distinctive practices of international business – space-annihilating technologies, digitalized information, the flexible recombinations of different

elements – provide a strategy for producing a unified ethnicity that is seemingly borderless. The Internet, Saskia Sassen has noted, is a powerful electronic technology that 'is partly embedded in actual societal structures and power dynamics: its topography weaves in and out of non-electronic space' (Sassen 1999: 62). At the same time, the rise of digitalized publics means that people with limited access to the Internet are less powerful in affecting distant events than those connected to websites.[15] Privileged émigrés who control the electronic network to shape diaspora politics seek to subvert and bypass the sovereign power of nation-states, but are they able to control the effects of their rapid-fire interventions? What are the consequences when diaspora is invoked to assert an ethnic solidity and to deploy human rights discourses, thus framing particular conflicts and problems in terms of global racial identity? As we shall see, such rapid and remote electronic responses to localized conflicts can backfire against the very people, situated outside electronic space, that they were intended to help.

Following the international uproar over the anti-Chinese attacks, and appeals by various NGOs in Indonesia, President Habibie quickly tried to reassert state control and to revise legal discriminations against ethnic Chinese minorities. In early October, 1998, he announced a decree that would require all government bodies to provide equal treatment and service to all Indonesians. A new law also seeks to revise all policies and laws that are discriminatory 'in all forms, character and ranks based on ethnicity, religion, race, or family records' (Coppel 1999). The terms 'pribumi' and 'non-pribumi' were to be discontinued in all government offices and activities. This news was greeted by Huaren spokesman Edward Liu with an invective about official 'doublespeak' and an assertion that global Huarens should react with 'a great deal of skepticism and sarcasm'.

> If true, this is indeed a small stride in the right direction … if this is merely a political placebo – empty rhetoric camouflaging a sinister, bad-faith … public relations attempt to stem the flight of Chinese Indonesian human and capital … and sanitize the bad image of Indonesia as a lawless, racist society – then we are afraid the downward spiraling of Indonesia will continue.[16]

Liu goes on to warn that in 'an increasingly globalized and digit[al]ized world, Indonesia can least afford to expunge and erase ten million of its most productive and resourceful citizens of Chinese descent.… The eyes of the Global Huaren are fixed on Indonesia.' This language of the multinational diaspora subject is shunned by people who consider themselves fundamentally – culturally, socially, legally, and politically – Indonesian. By creating invidious essential difference between races, the diaspora discourse reinforces the alien status of Indonesian Chinese who for long have suffered under the dual citizenship policy of Suharto.

15 This observation borrows from the insights of Massey (1993).

16 <http://www.huaren.org> (downloaded 8 October 1998).

What happens when electronic messages from a cyber community are received in sites of political struggle on the ground? On the one hand, we can applaud the role of Global Huaren for its timely mobilization of protests around the world which has been effective in casting a strong spotlight on the Indonesian atrocities, compelling Habibie to take action protecting minorities. On the other hand, some of the tactics of Global Huaren have misfired and jeopardized efforts to rebuild trust between Indonesian Chinese and the pribumis after the crisis.

The Huaren website has carried repeated stories and pictures, including bogus ones, of ongoing rapes. For instance, in mid-1998 the Huaren website circulated a picture, later found to be false, that depicted an Asian-looking rape victim in a shower-stall. This stirred anger in Indonesia. Another Internet account reported that a woman claimed her rapists invoked the name of Islam. The story went on to note that since the era before the coming of Islam 'the act of raping women has been assumed to be the most effective way to conquer races'. Despite controversy surrounding the truth of this story and these claims, rumors were produced about a Serbian-style masterplan to drive the Chinese out of Indonesia through an ethnic-cleansing operation (Sim 1998).

Indeed, to Indonesian Chinese who fled the country and to many overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, the attacks might have seemed like the result of a policy of ethnic cleansing.[17] But we have to be wary about making such strong charges, since, after all, a government-sponsored team traced the rapes of minority women to a special branch of the Indonesian army (Kopassus) headed by Suharto's son-in-law, then lieutenant-general Prabowo Subianto. In other words, the attacks on minority women were limited to a renegade faction of Suharto's army, and were not the result of official government policy.[18] There is no evidence that the Indonesian public had been engaged in a campaign to oust Indonesian Chinese. Overseas accusations of ethnic cleansing have been adamantly rejected by Indonesian leaders such as President Habibie and General Wiranto. Furthermore, Abdulrahman Wahid of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, the 35 million strong Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and another leader, Amien Rais, went on record to condemn whatever rapes had occurred, and to express their fear that such Internet-fueled rumors could sharpen racial and religious polarizations.[19] Furthermore, disagreements surrounded the reports of the actual number of rape cases.[20] The public, including many pribumi-operated NGOs, seem more likely to believe that the army was directly involved in all kinds of abuses, partly to displace the rage in the streets against the government onto Chinese and other minorities. While these questions will probably never be fully resolved, the Indonesian Chinese who have not fled the country reject the tendency of overseas Chinese to blame *all* of Indonesia for the violence, as well as their talk about ethnic cleansing. Attempts to consider Chinese people

17 Tens of thousands of Indonesian Chinese fled to surrounding countries. Some decided to settle in Perth, Australia, but many stayed with relatives or in hotels in Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Thailand. The wealthy ones have since settled abroad, while others have returned permanently to Indonesia, their homeland and source of livelihood.

18 Prabowo was also involved in the disappearance of twenty-four activists earlier in the year. See reports in the *Jakarta Post* (14 July 1998) and APS (21 December 1998).

19 In 1999, Wahid succeeded Habibie as President.

20 There is still disagreement as to whether there were eighty-five (verified) cases of rape during the riots, or 168, as many NGOs claim. Twenty of the rape victims subsequently died. See <http://members.xoom.com/>

in the world as a diaspora race distinct from their citizenship in particular countries may jeopardize the post-crisis efforts of Indonesian Chinese to rebuild their society within the context of a broad-based coalition to fight for human rights within Indonesia.

Embedded citizenship versus cyber-based race

The horrendous events of 1998 have convinced more Indonesian Chinese to participate in human rights activities that serve a variety of marginalized groups. Three national commissions – on human rights, women, and children – are building a coalition around issues of anti-militarism and citizenship based in international law. Feminist NGOs formed a national commission on Violence Against Women (VAW) in the aftermath of the army-instigated rapes of minority women in Java and throughout the archipelago.[21] The Urban Poor Consortium has been fighting for the rights of the unemployed and the homeless. The Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras) is urging support for an international tribunal to investigate reports of military collusion in the killing of East Timorese, despite the strong objections of the Indonesian state. Other groups include CARI (Committee Against Racism in Indonesia), which is combating racism and pressuring the Indonesian government to stop the systematic killing in parts of Indonesia (Aceh, Ambon, West Timor, and Irian).

In contrast to Global Huaren, Indonesian Chinese using the Internet to mobilize global support have stressed their sense of embedded citizenship in Indonesia. We can say that such counter-webs seek global support for Indonesians in general, and not exclusively for ethnic Chinese, as is the case with Global Huaren. There are multiple websites set up by Indonesian groups, and their messages focus on the suffering of a range of victims. A website called 'Indo-Chaos' operates in both Bahasa Indonesia and in English, and is directly connected with the United Front for Human Rights in Indonesia.[22] It commemorates the Indonesian Chinese victims of sexual violence, but also deplores the Indonesian army-instigated violence against other ethnic groups in Aceh and East Timor. An NGO called Volunteers for Humanitarian Causes notes that, altogether, 1,190 people were killed in Jakarta alone.[23] Yet another website set up by Indonesians stresses the status of the victims not as Chinese but as Indonesian citizens, and appeals for help in their campaign 'against human rights violations, injustice, and racism'.[24] A leader of CARI, the anti-racism group, noted that humanitarian interventions should be careful to avoid inadvertently inflaming the entire population:

> The responses of the Chinese communities in Australia and the West to the May Tragedy were obviously overwhelming and to large degree welcomed by the

21 For a UN fact-finding report on the May 1998 rapes of minority ethnic women in Java, Sumatra, and East Timor, see Coomaraswamy (1999).

22 <http://members.xoom.com/Xoom/perkosan/main_menu.html>

23 See <http://members.xoom.com> (downloaded 25 March 1999).

24 See <http://www.geocities.com/Soho/Atrium/5140> (email message from soc@indonesia, 10 August 1998).

Chinese in Indonesia. It is always good to know that the International communities, including governments, defended the Indonesian Chinese rights and condemned Indonesian government for their failure to protect their citizens. The problem with these protests was associated with the way some of the demonstrators expressed their anger. Some of them used anti-Indonesia expressions and burnt Indonesian flags. Some even ridiculed Islam religion. Such attitudes … prompt reactions which further jeopardize the positions of the Indonesian Chinese in Indonesia. We need to urge the International communities to direct their protests to the Indonesian government and military forces, not the people in general. We should avoid actions which induce racial or religious conflicts at all costs.

This statement is not only an expression of the importance of a non-racial approach to humanitarian intervention; it is also a plea for the international community to recognize and respect the embedded citizenship of the majority of Indonesian Chinese who have chosen to remain. Indonesian Chinese have much work to do to re-imagine Indonesian citizenship by repairing their damaged image and reassessing their own relations with the government and with their fellow Indonesians. Besides forming a political party and many associations to fight racism and discrimination, they have lobbied the government to erase all forms of official discrimination. As mentioned above, the government recently banned all forms of discrimination on the basis of distinctions between pribumi and non-pribumi. Indonesian Chinese are now working to induce the government to re-categorize ethnic Chinese from the stigmatizing label 'Indonesian citizens of alien Chinese descent' (*warga negara asing/keturunan Cina*) into the category of 'ethnic groups' (*suku bangsa*) which they would occupy alongside hundreds of other ethnic groups in the country.[25] Ethnic Chinese groups have reached out to pribumis in a process of 'native' empowerment through the construction of a people's economy (*perekonomian rakyat*). Some have given their support to an affirmative action program to channel economic and social resources towards the uplift of the indigenous majority. Thus what Indonesian Chinese do not need is to allow themselves to become part of an ethnicizing transnational public.

25 Coppel (1999). The dual categories of citizenship – which treat ethnic Chinese (citizens of foreign descent) as categorically different from indigenous Indonesians – date from the Dutch colonial era.

The promise and the risk of cyberpublics

'We live in a world of "overlapping communities of fate"', David Held and others have said,

where the trajectories of each and every country are more tightly intertwined than ever before …. In a world where [powerful states make decisions not just for their own people but for others as well, and] transnational actors and forces cut across the boundaries of national communities in diverse ways, the questions of who

should be accountable to whom, and on what basis, do not easily resolve themselves. (Held *et al.* 1999: 81)

Translocal publics can indeed challenge the sovereignty of nations and can have humanitarian effects, bringing international opinion to bear on the mistreatment of a nation's citizens. International interventions, for instance, have stopped bloodletting in some conflicts (in East Timor, for example). Cyberpublics based on nation or religion, such as the Falun Gong movement that emerged in China, can constitute a community of fate that evades state oppression, exposes injustice, and turns a global gaze on a state's shameful behavior. Cyberpublics thus can put pressure on governments to be accountable to their own citizens, as well as to the global community.

But cyber communities of shared fate may also inspire in their members an unjustified sense that an electronic-based humanitarian intervention will invariably produce positive effects. The actions of Global Huaren have demonstrated both the promise and the risk of romantic appeals to autonomy and citizenship beyond the reach of the state, illustrating the potentially explosive danger of the vicarious politics of diaspora. A resurgent Chinese cyber-identity based on moral high ground may be welcomed in Beijing (though not always), but is not necessarily welcomed by ethnic Chinese minorities elsewhere. The cyber-based articulation of a disembedded global racial citizenship can create invidious essential differences between ethnic others and natives, thus deepening rather than reducing already existing political and social divisions within particular nations. The loyalty of local citizens becomes suspect when they are linked by race to global electronic patrons. Rapid-fire Internet interventions, unaccompanied by a sophisticated understanding of specific situations in different countries, may very well jeopardize localized struggles for national belonging and an embedded concept of citizenship.

As I have argued, transnational populations now have the technological means to express their desire for an inclusive global ethnicity that can claim representation for a multitude of others, both on and off website systems, bringing them under an electronic umbrella of diaspora. By proclaiming itself a cyber watchdog, Global Huaren poses the question of accountability in an even more problematic and elusive fashion. What are the stakes of a cyber-based racial community for diverse social groupings (with and without such global web-postings) around the world? Furthermore, Internet discourses of a racialized diaspora cannot make up for the sheer anonymity of the members, clients, and other participants who can log in randomly from anywhere at any time. Websites allow a 'false' amplification of the power of a few individuals who can proliferate at hurricane-speed, unsubstantiated claims about racial interest and fate. A video-game logic can create instantaneous simplifications of good global activists versus bad governments,

racial oppressors versus victims, contributing to rumors that might fuel a chain of violent events. Thus an instantaneous citizenship which can be activated by a keystroke has notoriously uncontrollable effects, putting into play disparate information and actors, thus exponentially confusing and conflating the stakes of particular conflicts and struggles.

Acknowledgements

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Not-So-Crazy Rich: Re-racialization in the Global Hall of Mirrors

"Crazy Rich Asians" (2018; CRA), is a romantic comedy that revels in the extravagant lifestyles of super-rich Asians, particularly those from the Chinese diaspora. Based on the novel by Singapore-born Kevin Kwan, the film paints a vivid picture of the opulent lives of nouveau riche Asians, termed by Kwan as "crazy rich."

The meteoric rise of China as an economic powerhouse has birthed millions of millionaires and a significant number of billionaires in a remarkably short span. Wealthy families indulge in global luxuries, from lavish mansions and private jets to luxurious Ferraris. Weddings transform into grand spectacles, showcasing ostentatious consumption and serving as performances to impress relatives, friends, and the wider public, often circulating through social media. A recent example from Chengdu detailed a rich man who ordered a fleet of Hummer limousines to escort his bride from her home. While affluent Chinese constitute only about 3% of the population of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the term "crazy rich" has evolved into a global brand, embodying the triumph of Chinese wealth in the contemporary world.

Yet, despite the emergence of China's vast middle class and the influence of overseas Chinese and other Asian groups, the reality remains that most Asians are neither "crazy" nor "rich" as they navigate this global hall of mirrors. The new prestige associated with being Asian is often tied to economic and technological advancements, but the politics of wealth accumulation intersects with aesthetics. Asian transnationalism is not solely a tale of pursuing extravagance; it involves redefining what it means to be Asian through a racialized logic of humanity. Asian high achievers are subjected to an aesthetic politics that delineate visibility and invisibility, potential and limitation, and the complexities of workers' rights and human worth. Various representational regimes dictate who counts within aesthetic and ethical frameworks as more or less human. Consequently, upwardly mobile Asian individuals traverse diverse registers of humanity, morphing from corporeality to capital, animal to human, and national to international.

This piece examines how representations of affluent Asians—despite their wealth surpassing that of many Western counterparts—continue to challenge the racial hierarchies upheld by liberal humanism. The presence of ultra-rich Asians complicates discussions on race and the universal experience, creating a nuanced process of re-racialization.

In recent decades, the global interpretation of "Chinese" has come to embody different material and symbolic values. In a globalizing economy, elites have redefined their populations based on their ability to transcend the material limitations of life. Ann Anagnost notes that industrial capitalism in China has sparked discourses contrasting urban elites—who cultivate '*suzhi*', or cultural and human capital—with rural migrants, who often represent unskilled labor.[1] I interpret the *suzhi* model as an intra-racial form of biological disciplining, where laborers experiencing physical deprivation are stripped of their social personhood and deemed non-humans (*bushiren*). The new Chinese elites derive value from the disciplining of the working masses and their subsequent devaluation as human beings.

In this era of unparalleled mobility, the meaning of "Asian" shifts within the politico-aesthetic frameworks of liberal humanism. How does the reordering of the post-socialist body politic in China—shaped by varying standards of human quality—interact with Western aesthetic ideals that govern humanity? The biopolitics of racialization extends beyond biological differences. Aesthetic and ethical regimes surveil global imaginations about the stabilized borders between humans, races, and animals. Political semiotics often relies on binaries such as visibility/invisibility and animal/human to delineate distinctions and maintain racial hierarchies.[2] Below, I explore the experiences of well-heeled Chinese with racializing rhetoric as they navigate the global hall of mirrors.

What emotional connotations are associated with the high-end escapades portrayed in "Crazy Rich Asians," traveling from glittering cities to luxurious hotels and idyllic islands, especially in relation to the liberal humanist frameworks that have long held an ambivalent stance toward Asian identities? The media's sensational portrayal of

ostentatious Asian wealth elicits a sense of optimism about Asian representation on the global stage. Still, it casts long shadows over the significant Asian majority, many of whom are far from wealthy. The film's glamorous depiction of transnational Asian wealth echoes Ann Anagnost's examination of the intertwined nature of emergent class formations and the evolving discourse around human quality.

Possibly, some affluent Asians believe that public expressions of extravagant lifestyles can foster emotional confidence for navigating a broader world. However, while the visibility of Asian billionaires and millionaires helps dismantle material constraints, ethical objections to Asian humanity remain deeply entrenched.

Asian Brides & Beauty: the Aesthetics of a Global Race
"Crazy Rich Asians" presents cosmopolitan Asian characters traversing the Pacific, featuring pre-wedding excursions to exotic islands, ceremonies reminiscent of paddy fields, and outdoor celebrations illuminated by dazzling fireworks.

In a serendipitous twist of fate, just months after the film's premiere, I found myself captivated by a magnificent wedding orchestrated by an affluent family in Singapore. This ethnographic vignette captures the entire spectrum of the event—from the engagement to the honeymoon—an affair that, while somewhat less extravagant than the CRA wedding, still left a lasting impression with its grandeur.

Last spring, the couple, Adele and David, both in their late twenties, announced their engagement from aboard a hot-air balloon soaring above the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. Their announcement was a spectacle in itself, accompanied by a whimsical photograph of an engagement ring perched on a reimagined Monopoly board, humorously dubbed "Duopoly." The board playfully declared, "for richer and poorer," cleverly referencing the financial foundations that support their lavish lifestyle.

Both Adele and David hail from Singapore's upper echelons. Adele is a Yale alumna, upholding a family tradition that boasts several graduates from the prestigious university.

Her family's wealth is rooted in rubber plantations, banking, and real estate development. David, while not as affluent, has a background in real estate investments and finance. The intersection of plantations, banking, luxury properties, and Ivy League educations forms the backbone of Southeast Asia's elite, necessitating a transnational lifestyle that has become synonymous with their class. On their wedding day, guests flew in from across Southeast Asia, the United States, Europe, and Australia, gathering to celebrate at a splendid colonial-era hotel. Soon after, Adele and David set off on a honeymoon in South Africa, with plans for a subsequent trip to New York.

One might be tempted to dismiss this affair as mere excess from a wealthy Asian family; however, the journey from proposal to wedding was meticulously chronicled through professional photographs, videos, and illustrations that circulated on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and email, reaching friends and family around the globe. The abundance of videos, music, and fashion representations capturing Asian weddings and honeymoons has created a burgeoning platform for an elite Asian lifestyle, one that diaspora communities aspire to emulate. This digital depiction of Asian affluence embodies aspirations for personal freedom and limitless opportunities, echoing the ideals of the American Dream. Yet, these aesthetic expressions of Asian identity do not exist in a vacuum; they achieve global resonance through Western standards that shape our perceptions of success, freedom, and beauty.

But growing media circulations – including the Bollywood phenomenon, Japanese anime, and the South Korean wave – are expressing Asian aesthetic desires, performances, and powers. From "Framing the Bride" to "Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet," [3]scholars have explored the transition of Asian beauty and fashion onto the world stage, highlighting media-driven narratives of Asian female agency, self-affirming expressions, and taste-making in consumer markets. Indeed, displays centered around weddings and fashion have encouraged a culture of extravagant consumption among young Chinese consumers, positioning Asian styles, icons, and themes as salient in global tourism and luxury sectors.

These transnational efforts toward image-making do not unfold within an insular notion of "Asian modernity." Instead, the portrayal of Asians as "crazy rich" challenges Western representative frameworks that dictate the parameters of racial aesthetics in global discourse. Hegemonic aesthetic politics operate according to a logic that defines not only "what is seen" but also "how it is perceived." [4] In the global hall of mirrors, lavish Asian weddings—marked by opulence, site multiplicity, and scale—both disrupt and reconstruct global corporate norms of glamour, romance, and consumption shaped by dominant racial aesthetics.

Rey Chow argues that Asian representational frameworks craft an affective ecology that "both captures and captivates … transnational affiliations."[5] Audiences yearning for self-affirmative images resonate with the newfound visibility of distant overseas communities. While "Crazy Rich Asians" centers on affluent families in Singapore, in the U.S., the film has sparked joy, pride, and identification among a diverse array of Asian Americans, overseas Chinese, and Southeast Asians. Media depictions of elite Asian lifestyles, family celebrations, and fashion illustrate affective connections among dispersed audiences, who are not accustomed to seeing Asians portrayed beyond laborers or subjugated groups. Such media-driven Asian cultural identities transcend national boundaries, converging into an image of a transnational race that is both exotic and familiar, potentially easing Western anxieties regarding a rising China.

Enhancing the Image of Asian Americans
A Vietnamese American woman in New York City, who leads a reading group focused on Asian American literature, shared with a New York Times reporter that many Asian viewers were moved to tears by "Crazy Rich Asians." "It's simply that these people had never seen themselves portrayed this way before. In that moment, you realize the boundaries of what's possible have changed." [6]A Filipino American confided that the film surprised his white friends, who had no idea that Asian minorities enjoyed glamorous, globe-trotting lives. The film taps into a profound desire among Asian minorities in the U.S. for images of a racialized community depicted as modern, educated, and cosmopolitan. Interestingly, Singapore, more than either Beijing or Shanghai, emerges as

a cosmopolitan homeland for some diasporic Asians, characterized by English-speaking, Western-educated professionals.

While "Crazy Rich Asians" is often praised as an Asian American narrative, most of its characters are not American; it is set entirely in Singapore. This setting represents a dreamland of racial majority for diasporic Asians, yet it is a world city where whiteness is statistically less dominant, even as international norms in business, education, lifestyle, and fashion continue to prevail. For Asian Americans, Singapore symbolizes a glamorous realm where these individuals can embrace their ethnic differences, eschewing earlier generations' pressures to assimilate into whiteness, while also pursuing traditional markers of success. In this context, Singapore acts as a placeless icon of a successful global Asian race.

Asian Taste and Sweatshops

The drive for a high-profile, transnational Asian lifestyle can be viewed as both a celebration of cultural capital and a preparation for conspicuous consumption appropriate for an emerging global elite. Against the backdrop of Western aesthetic judgment, affluent Asians signal their transcendence from the past associations of material deprivation often ascribed to their identities. Their pursuit of elevated status extends beyond accumulating human capital and prestige; it requires achieving global recognition through aesthetic practices of racialization. Eye-catching public performances challenge Western models that have long depicted "Asian" identities as backward and impoverished.

In Southeast Asia, however, "Crazy Rich Asians" faced immediate backlash for casting a highly distorted image of life in the region. Critics pointed to the film's narrow focus on elite overseas Chinese characters, neglecting other significant racial narratives. The film portrayed a drastically skewed picture of the economic realities faced by the majority in Asia. In truth, ultra-wealthy Chinese families likely account for less than 0.3% of the continent's population. This critique resonates with Pham Minh-ha's exploration of "Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet," which examines the global phenomenon of Asian

fashion superbloggers who engage in creative taste-making. The prominence of Asian bloggers is tied to the burgeoning fashion markets in Asia, and the value that accrues to garments showcasing "Asian-taste." The influence of Asian taste has expanded the global fashion market, thus generating job opportunities for garment workers worldwide. The bloggers and their narratives often omit the hidden exploitation faced by an underpaid racialized labor force in the global garment industry. [7] The ostentatious displays of fashion-conscious individuals on social media mirror the lavish celebrations of Asian weddings, complicity contributing to the invisibility of myriad Asian laborers who toil within sweatshops globally.

Mimicry and Subversion

A third layer of affect arises from the ostentatious adoption and circulation of Western elite styles, slightly adapted to reflect Asian tastes. Such lavish spending and displays of wealth that mimic and integrate Western aesthetics amplify the media representation of Asians as a global racial class. However, we must acknowledge the nuanced skepticism that emerges from these seemingly ostentatious displays. Sometimes, extravagant Asian showcases evoke a sense of irony, undermining the superiority once associated with Western cultures. The allure of wedding events often includes hiring White help and outspending White friends; for instance, Adele contributed to the costs of her Yale classmates' travel to her wedding in Singapore.

In the CRA film's opening scene, Michelle Yeoh's character encounters a posh British hotel that refuses to accommodate her drenched family. She steps outside and calls her wealthy husband to purchase the hotel, only to return and demand that the staff tend to her family's needs. This moment serves as a clever subversion of entrenched British racism, reveling in a newfound power that illustrates the shifting material wealth away from historic norms. Elite Chinese families—now wealthier than the traditional British aristocracy—reshape the dynamics of that old-guard racial hierarchy.

The Pitfalls of Straddling Cultural Frontiers

The burgeoning wave of Asian wealth and optimism spilling into North America appears to empower Asian minorities, offering emotional security and a renewed sense of cultural significance. American media have often focused on the split identities of these groups, but being "foreign looking" increasingly enables individuals of Asian descent to cultivate novel representations of Asia within the United States. However, being too visible comes with its own set of challenges. Media portrayals and online imagery of successful and talented Asians have sparked a rallying around the themes of race, wealth, and meritocracy among Asian-Americans. For instance, Netflix's reality series "*Bling Empire*," showcases ultra-wealthy Asians from diverse backgrounds who residing in Los Angeles, positing California as a potential new haven for the Asian American dream.

Moreover, celebrity figures reinforce the notion of Asian Americans as individuals who navigate complex cultural divides and become subjects of political and capitalist manipulations. China's official media outlets have attempted to reclaim the diaspora narrative by linking issues of race to loyalty to the People's Republic of China. A prominent example is American skier Eileen Gu, who chose to represent China at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, thereby being celebrated as an emblem of reclaimed racial talent. Concurrently, Gu, a biracial model, attracts endorsements from global brands eager to tap into China's vast advertising market.

However, the PRC's portrayal of Gu as a racial icon may have backfired. Chinese netizens have drawn sharp contrasts between Gu's celebrated status and the invisibility of poorer, oppressed women in China. A viral WeChat post questions, "What does Eileen Gu's success have to do with ordinary Chinese people?" The Chinese state has swiftly censored discussions surrounding Gu's citizenship. [8] As a product of American upbringing with ties to freedom and an education at Stanford University, Gu chose to retain her American citizenship while maneuvering within the complex intersection of global racial aesthetics, capitalism, and Chinese nationalism.

Despite these new Asian images in American popular culture, have they truly diminished Western racial bias? The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly revived anti-Chinese sentiment,

once again casting Asians as targets of widespread resentment. Former President Donald Trump's terminology, such as "Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu," recontextualized Asian Americans as perilous contaminants. This new wave of anti-Asian rhetoric precipitated a surge in hate crimes, predominantly targeting elderly and female Asian individuals— those seen as frail, vulnerable, and easily victimized. While some incidents stemmed from opportunism, many were fueled by racially motivated hatred. The resurgence of white supremacist discourse has reasserted the belief that Asian peoples can be socially, rhetorically, and violently oppressed.

In summary, the visibility of capital-bearing Asians has not dispelled older stereotypes of Asians as disease vectors but rather has recast negative images linked to labor, conflict, and communism. The consequences of the pandemic have compounded the frustrations resulting in increased racist attacks against the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. Even Asian healthcare workers have faced indignity from patients they are striving to assist. In response, protesters in San Francisco have waved signs declaring, "Asian is not a Virus, Racism is," and "My Ethnicity is Not a Virus." This raises a critical question: how can diverse groups unite in post-racial struggles for equity in wages, health care, and education while upholding American principles of equality and justice?

Conclusion

This study underscores how mobile status and visibility influence local perceptions of racial others, highlighting the inherent pitfalls of traversing and straddling ideological borders. Public expressions of Asian material success and achievement are juxtaposed against the backdrop of the ironic subversion of white supremacy and the profound suffering prevalent in parts of Asia. Mobile Asian elites have honed the ability to navigate and manipulate aesthetic differences sanctioned by conflicting racial structures. Diasporic Chinese elites demonstrate proficiency in code-switching, converting racial deficits into racial capital, thereby explicating transnational movements that both subvert and reinforce existing racial hierarchies. At the same time, Asian Americans, invigorated

by these global portrayals, find themselves perpetually ensnared in the crosshairs of entrenched American racial bias, particularly during times of crisis.

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[1] Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*)," *Public Culture* 16(2): 189–208, 2004.

[2] See Alexander G. Weheliye argues that race is a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans. She notes that while the disciplining is not biological per se, it frequently depends on anchoring political hierarchies in human flesh. See his *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human.* Duke University Press, 2014.

[3] Bonnie Adrian, *Framing the Bride: Globalizing Beauty in Taiwan's Bridal Industry*, University of California Press, 2003; and Pham Minh-ha T., *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender, and the Work of Personal Style Blogging.* Duke University Press, 2015.

[4] Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Trans. with an Introduction by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004, p. 13-14.

[5] Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture*. Duke University Press, 2012.

[6] Alford, H. "Reading Clubs are now especially clubby," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2019, C. 21

[7] Pham, Asians *Wear Clothes on the Internet.*

[8] Fearing the ideological pitfalls of allowing an American citizen to represent China, the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China has banned the topic from the internet.

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CHAPTER 6

In a Time of Earthquakes:
Chinese Artists Shake the World

Aihwa Ong

Earthquake Art

This talk is about forms and networks of circulation, collecting, and accumulation: of artworks and concepts, of people and reputations, of information and value. It has many connections with the previous essays about the virtual library and the mobile forms of collecting and copying in Ancient China and Early Modern France, but updated to the accelerated global locations of the contemporary art world. It's a development and refocusing of themes I explored in in an essay in 2012 on Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang and his riffs on the history of Western acquisition of Chinese materials, much of it passing through Venice, from the time of Marco Polo until today, and the ways in which artists are able to work their "Chineseness" into a form of branding and value-making in the dislocated sites of the global contemporary art market. The central actor in my paper today, Ai Weiwei, has become far more famous than Cai Guo-Qiang, to the point where he has now become an international icon.[1]

Following the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, Ai Weiwei catapulted onto the world stage as the *enfant terrible* of China's art world with his *Earthquake Names Project.* The project memorializes the innocent victims of shoddily-built schools by reassembling debris taken from the rubble. A serpentine installation made up of thousands of backpacks commemorates student victims. The collected artworks, which include recovered steel-reinforcing rebar arranged to suggest broken earth, expose

hidden political abuses that are rampant in China. Perhaps because of the audacity of his protest on behalf of voiceless victims in the country, Ai was arrested in early 2011. He was charged with the crime of tax evasion, but during his 81-day imprisonment, Ai was mainly questioned about his political activities. Upon release, Ai defiantly continued his protest—this time, in the medium of film—by producing the documentary, *Never Sorry*.

As an artist who specialized in depicting hidden social and political ills in China, Ai attracted international attention. Exhibitions of his works proliferated in Western capital cities. In Europe and North America, Ai is celebrated for working at a nexus of the political repression and artistic revolt, and is lauded as an artistic exemplar working in the Western *avant-garde* tradition today. His astute ability to enrage his homeland's ruling regime has won him accolades, including this assessment by a Canadian journalist: "Is Ai the most important artist on the planet because of his politicization, or in spite of it? The answer, simply, is yes."[2]

In contrast to the reception of Ai's politically-infused works, other examples of contemporary Chinese art are viewed by Western observers as less high-minded or innovative. Take, for example, Dafen, an art village in South China that has produced copies of Western art classics for the global market, and which is located near the Apple factory zone. Unsurprisingly, the metaphorical stereotype of China as one mass assembly-line has reinforced a Western view that much of contemporary Chinese art is derivative and mechanical. In her book *Van Gogh on Demand*,[3] Winnie Wong disagrees; she argues that there is a complex synergy between creativity and copy, performance and struggle, in shaping art markets. She positions artists from Dafen as engaging in a form of postmodern appropriation. According to Wong, these artists, by making copies of Van Goghs and Matisses, reanimate the aura of Western masterpieces which has faded under the glare of global commercialization. Thus, the artisanal practice of Chinese art reproduction ironically counters the depleting effects of the worldwide circulation of images of Western art.

The growing flows of contemporary art out of China are disrupting international art markets as well as art practices. One effect is the destabilization of conventional museum approaches to artworks produced outside the North Atlantic sphere. In 1989, a conference entitled *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris challenged what French curators recognized as the colonial biases of art exhibitions. The proposition was that by increasing focus on more "third world art," for example, from Africa, Western museums could move away from ethnocentrism in the organization of their exhibitions. While this was a first step, there has been little serious engagement with changing meanings of "the third world" (an obsolete term for non-North Atlantic countries that have traditionally been associated with primitivism and backwardness), and the art forms originating outside the North Atlantic. While this was

a first step, there has been no dramatic shift to serious consideration of evolving meanings of what is contemporary, what is Asia, and what "contemporary art" may be about today.

Chinese Art as Ink Art

Many museums in the United States continue to hold on to notions of Asian art stemming from the ancient trade with China. Western curators, scholars, and collectors, steeped in the tradition of appreciation of China's distinctive aesthetic traditions, tend to view contemporary Chinese art as a transition between what they call the two worlds of "continuity or rupture" with past Chinese art forms. For instance, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has long been a major leader in collecting and curating the (re)presentation of Asian art in the United States, thereby aiding in legitimating its objects, establishing frameworks for evaluation, and thus providing powerful effects in structuring the market for these collectible objects. It was not until April 2014 that the Met launched its first exhibition on *contemporary* Chinese art entitled, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*.

On line, the Met claims that the show "will demonstrate how China's ancient pattern of seeking cultural renewal through the reinterpretation of past models remains a viable creative path." Furthermore, the curators claim that despite new modes of expression, viewers will recognize "thematic, aesthetic, or technical attributes...that have meaningful links to China's artistic past."[4] While this model provides a set of lenses through which to view Chinese art, it narrows consideration of contemporary art to its role of reanimating ancient forms.

Art history views contemporary art in and from China as descended from the mountain-water (*sansui*) landscape calligraphic tradition.[5] This construction not only gives primacy to ink paintings, but also puts contemporary art forms into the straightjacket of repetition and rectification of an established class ical form. This tradition suggests that contemporary Chinese artworks can only exist in continuity or in tandem with ancient traditions.

Such claims of continuity are made even when the Met exhibition displays contemporary pieces that mock Orientalist assumptions of cultural renewal. Even when ink is used, some paintings deliberately disassociate and even critique ancient aesthetic forms. For instance, Zhang Huan's *Family Tree* series depicts the progressive blackening of the artist's face by inked characters (see Fig. 6.1), Zhang Huan seems to be suggesting that ancient calligraphy and by extension the Mandarin language and culture can smother individual character.

Figure 6.1. Exhibition poster, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 2013.
Family Tree by Zhang Huang.

At the same Met exhibition, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* mounts another chal-
lenge to the revered art of Chinese writing. Long banners filled with carefully writ-
ten, made-up characters are draped across a large, traditionally-appointed Chinese
room. This elegant space exudes a hushed reverence for the aesthetics of Chinese
writing, even though it is rendered in a style that is essentially meaningless to those
who can read it. Xu Bing seems to be saying that in this new China, while ideo-
graphic characters are not defunct, they seem to be an obfuscating written form
for grasping contemporary thought and reality. After all, Chinese calligraphy is
an ancient, elite cultural medium (it takes years and resources to master) that can
viewed as an oppressive class practice over which most people will never achieve
control. This revered writing form is inseparable from Confucianism and other
ancient ideas associated with oppressive, hierarchical values seen to be out of step
with today's world. Indeed, under the guise of valorizing the ancient forms, there
are other artworks in the same Met exhibition that mock a fetishized reading of
contemporary Chinese art as irrevocably tied to the ink tradition.

The contemporary Chinese art milieu, I suggest, is crystallized by a "global as-
semblage"[6] of artists working in China interfacing with North Atlantic collectors,
curators, and audiences. Also in play are different meanings and intentions that
animate the trans-Pacific art world currently dominated by Western art establish-

ments. As examples of artworks originating from China circulate throughout the world, the "Chinese" in "contemporary Chinese art" cannot be divested of the notions of "what is art" and "what is contemporary" from divergent vantage points. The "Chinese" in this globalized art environment refers not only to originating cultural traditions, but also to the distinctive experimental space and its ironic, disruptive effects on norms of aesthetic judgment and curatorship in the West. In cross-border venues, Chinese artists run into the predicament of being stereotyped less by Orientalist desires than by avant-garde expectations of how artists from the People's Republic of China ought to perform.

THE *ENFANT TERRIBLE* OF CHINESE ART

Ai Weiwei has become the *enfant terrible* of the globalized Chinese art milieu by manipulating the disjuncture between Western valorization of ancient Chinese art and expectations of the role of contemporary Chinese artists today. One can trace the beginning to a triptych by the youngish Ai Weiwei *Dropping a Han Vase, 1995*, that captures his famous performance at a German museum. This celebrated image of Ai as a destroyer of ancient Chinese objects has since circulated to major museums in the West. Other examples of Ai's desecrating works include dipping ancient urns in automobile paint and writing "Coca-Cola" on a Neolithic vase.

As an anthropologist, I find it both appalling and intriguing that by destroying and desecrating ancient Chinese treasures, Ai Weiwei has ascended in global esteem. Why do Western museums that cherish ancient Chinese art forms celebrate their destruction by Ai Weiwei? Clearly, as a museum category, Chinese art can no longer hide from the realm of geopolitics.

There are different interpretations as to why Western museums and critics find such stunts compelling. For some, Ai's destruction of Neolithic urns dramatizes how rampant consumerism in China today has destroyed the culture's ancient roots. An opposing view maintains that Ai enacts a symbolic shattering of antiquated Chinese cultural forms that exert an enduring oppressive influence on contemporary Chinese politics and culture. By provoking contradictory readings and critiques, the urn-smashing exercise plays with Western fears of the potency of China stemming from its ancient roots in combination with its emerging capitalist power. As a destroyer of Chinese patrimony and a provocateur of China's might, Ai Weiwei has been celebrated for smashing his way onto the global stage. Ai's iconoclastic acts resonate powerfully with Western anxieties about China.

It seems to me that for Western curators and audiences, art as vandalism, though a longstanding trope of the Western avant-garde seems particularly politically

meaningful when enacted by Ai Weiwei. This is evident when considering cases of art vandalism from the recent past that were judged as being merely criminal. In 2012, the artist Maximo Caminero smashed one of Ai's urns that was being exhibited at a museum in Florida. Caminero claimed his artistic protest was directed not at Chinese antiquities but rather at the museum practice of showcasing Ai's works but not those of local artists. Surprisingly, instead of expressing solidarity with less famous colleagues, Ai demanded compensation, and Caminero was subsequently fined one million U.S. dollars for the destroyed urn. A former refugee from the Dominican Republic, Caminero mimicked Ai's desecrating act as an expression of both admiration and criticism of the artist as celebrity, an irony perhaps not lost on the Chinese artist himself.

Vandalizing ancient treasures as an act of protest is thus judged in the context of a specific protest. In contrast, whereas Ai Weiwei's vandalism of Chinese art objects in a Western museum is still considered acceptable—and even celebrated—there was widespread condemnation of the (admittedly much more massive) destruction of sixth-century giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, by the Taliban in 2001. Thus not all destruction of ancient art is judged in the same way by international museum authorities. In one case, we have a charismatic Chinese artist who seems to personify our model of the avant-garde artist, and in the other, a religious fundamentalist organization bent on purifying their culture. To Western eyes, the jihadist militants are world destroyers, but Ai Weiwei is a rare Chinese hero who, by destroying artifacts of Chinese feudalism, champions cosmopolitan culture.

Beyond these oppositions, I read Ai's urn-smashing with a slight nuance. By staging his vandalism of Chinese antiquities in a German museum, Ai simultaneously repositions himself as an artist, and reframes Western perception of what Chinese art(ists) can do. His act has been read as a protest against the untrammeled commercialization that has destroyed Chinese history; but at the same time, by defacing ancient urns and displaying them in Western museums, Ai enhances and underscores their value as precious art objects that have been contaminated by capitalism. He demonstrates that he belongs not to a singular civilization, but to a global society. In one maneuver, he shatters the Orientalist framing of Chinese aesthetics, and repositions contemporary Chinese art as a global political phenomenon.

In other words, Ai Weiwei is an adroit artist who is alert to geopolitical tensions and cross-cultural (mis)perceptions. Contemporary Chinese artists exhibit a "rooted cosmopolitanism." Their works should be considered as artistic explorations of what China's present and future can be.[7] Indeed, such aesthetic works address an imagined audience, invariably one located in the North Atlantic world where people pay attention to art as a mirror for contemporary Others. From such viewpoints, the "Chinese" in "contemporary Chinese art" cannot be considered

separately from the distinctiveness of the artworks as they are being evaluated through an ideologized lens. The "Chinese" in this global art collectivity refers not to cultural traditions or essences, but to the distinctive experimental space, and the very ironic challenges that Chinese artists have unleashed on Western art elites and audiences for whom contemporary art has become a privileged lens through which to grasp contemporary China as both threat and hope.

Through Western eyes, contemporary artists are viewed as witnesses, diviners, and visionaries of their homeland. By engaging in a profoundly anthropological, aesthetic enterprise, Chinese contemporary artists make arguments about the human condition in contemporary China. Their aesthetic interventions attempt to capture the past-present and envision alternate present-futures in China, as well as in China in the global context. Invoking "China" in multiple registers is part of the dynamic work of (re)making new conditions of possibility for addressing diverse issues in contingent time-space configurations. Artworks, even those held in storage while awaiting an eventual sale or gift, are therefore not imprisoned in a temporality we call "contemporary," but rather are performative of a form of "anticipatory politics." By intervening in the present-future of China, such artists express their embeddedness in Chinese culture while addressing cosmopolitan interests in China now that it has become a global power. As "rooted cosmopolitans," these artists configure strategic and provisional affiliations in the world. By establishing their presence on global platforms, Chinese artists pursue some kind of universalistic ethics and yet are very firmly anchored in China and its fate.

Because they transmit contemporary Chinese experiences of upheaval, as well as actual geological, cultural, and geopolitical ruptures, I argue that their practices can be called "earthquake artworks." Contemporary artworks gain power not so much from within tradition, but from commenting on the extreme and varied dislocation that Chinese people and the nation at large experience. Somewhat paradoxically, by making artworks that transform the everyday into living ethnography, or transfigure our notions of cosmopolitanism, Asian artists also open themselves up to the seductive lures of Western fame.

Self-Ethnography: the Artist "Speaks Bitterness"

In an anthropological sense, Chinese artists are "contemporary" because they act as observers and recorders of actual lived realities. Indeed, Hal Foster has compared contemporary artists to ethnographers in that, as fieldworkers, they engage in practices of appropriation. Even when artworks are often semi-masquerades of the real, the artist's self-fashioning remains unchallenged.[8] Contemporary Chinese

artists engage in this epistemic-aesthetic exploration of the daily travails and minor histories of Chinese reality. By giving ethnographic significance to everyday (dis) locations, Chinese artists practice a kind of democratizing art—an art as living ethnography.

Figure 6.2. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot, 1995*.
Courtesy: Cai Studio, New York.

Ai Weiwei is an exemplary artist-ethnographer of this ilk, one who draws inspiration from events big and small in recent Chinese history—from the Sichuan Earthquake to the discarding of traditional artifacts in the life of a prostitute—that cumulatively capture the dislocations of China's cultural earthquake. Through the ethnographic reassemblage of found objects (backpacks, doors, stools, bicycles, clothing, books, etc.) Ai's artworks critique political corruption, the breakup of an ancient civilization, and the suffering of ordinary people in an age of rampant capitalism.

After his arrest in 2011, Ai Weiwei exploited his time in prison to powerful effect by turning to self-ethnography. In 2014, Ai exhibited *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, a series of installations that re-create his imprisonment, and that are sharply focused on the silent suffering of the individual as a prisoner of the state. Against overwhelming powers, Ai resorts to ethnographic realism to convey the naked authenticity of this imprisonment. The installation shows Ai closely accompanied by guards at all

times—eating, sleeping, showering, and even relieving himself. In the scenes, the materiality of state surveillance over the living process is juxtaposed to its immateriality: the materiality of things, of human waste, set against the immateriality of human rights.

It is important to note that as a form of self-ethnography Ai's prison installations are *not* a celebration of subjective individualism in the Western sense. What is being claimed by Ai's depiction of his humiliation at the hand of the state is an insistence on the collective rights of individuals. In contrast to the Western canon, Ai's artistic style is continuous with the Chinese practice of *suku,* of "eating or speaking bitterness." Since the communist revolution, *suku* has been a mandated form of registering complaint against society in order to expose and expunge it. Ai deploys art as a tool for the revelation of bitter personal experience in order to expose problems of a sociopolitical collectivity and to demand social justice. He has argued that the art world and the world of social media can be allies, united as anticipatory infrastructures for claiming human rights. In a tweet related to the exhibition of his prison installations in Brooklyn, Ai claims that "art is activism, activism is art; inspiration comes from daily life. The small things, the people we meet—are not from books, but from daily life and events. Everybody can be an artist."

Rethinking East-West

Other provocative Chinese artists also stand at the crossroads between politics and aesthetics, the material and the immaterial, but their recombination and repositioning of old and new objects are key to more subtle political commentaries. Mobilizing traditional objects, and juxtaposing them with the collections of today's equipment, are keys to their interventions. Two other Chinese artists who are celebrated in the United States—Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing—use ready-made objects to redraw and reinterpret East-West relationships, recasting encounters that are opportunities for cross-cultural re-symbolization and healing. In globally-connected cities, Chinese artists can cultivate potential audiences who may be more receptive to alternate notions of East-West relations. They deploy curative, therapeutic forms to dispel Western anxieties about an increasingly powerful China.

A resident of New York City, artist Cai Guo-Qiang has, in his many installations, reinterpreted East-West encounters in order to recast global events and reposition cross-border entanglements in a more positive light. Cai's most famous performance is *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* (Fig. 6.2), performed at the 1995 Venice Biennale. By sailing a Chinese junk boat down the Grand Canal, Cai raised a provocative question: if Marco Polo had carried Chinese medicinal

herbs instead of gunpowder, would the fraught history of East-West relations have been radically different?[9] By re-interpreting and calling into question historical East-West encounters, Cai suggests that the West has converted China's ancient inventions into weapons but neglected Chinese medicines that could now be shared to heal global wounds.

Figure 6.3. Xu Bing, *Book from the Ground*. 2012. From www.xubing.com

In another work of assemblage, Xu Bing gathered discarded tools and materials from construction sites in China and refashioned them into a pair of phoenixes, an ancient Chinese icon. Clearly, the dual message of the work is that out of the ashes of Chinese reconstruction rises the phoenix, just as China ascends into the global world. Recently, a pair of Xu's phoenixes sailed through the atrium of the Cathedral of St. John in New York City. Different spiritual traditions can entangle and fruitfully co-exist. Thus in his recent works mourning the loss of Chinese roots, Xu Bing reflects on how changing conditions of literacy, communication, and growth in China have increased global integration, representing a changed China, one enmeshed with the West (Fig. 6.3). As global artists, Cai and Xu engage the poetics of Chinese transformation in ways that entertain as well as anticipate differentiated forms of cosmopolitanism.

A Homeless Dissenter?

By contrast, Ai Weiwei's practice typically consists of "in-your-face" performances. More recently, however, he seems to have shifted away from China as the all-consuming target of his dissension, making artworks that are site-specific to Western landscapes. One of the latest of these works was an exhibition aptly titled *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* (Fig. 6.4), which opened in June 2014 on the island of Alcatraz in the San Francisco Bay. It is important to note that at the time, Ai was prohibited from traveling outside of China. In the West, the exhibition was advertised as a showy fundraising ploy for the California Park Services, but Ai used the occasion to assert himself as an international freedom-fighter. With the exhibition, he sent this message: "The misconception of totalitarianism is that freedom can be imprisoned. This is not the case. When you constrain freedom, freedom will take flight and land on a windowsill."[10]

Figure 6.4. *Refraction* by Ai Weiwei, Alcatraz, 2014. Credit: Robert R. Ng.
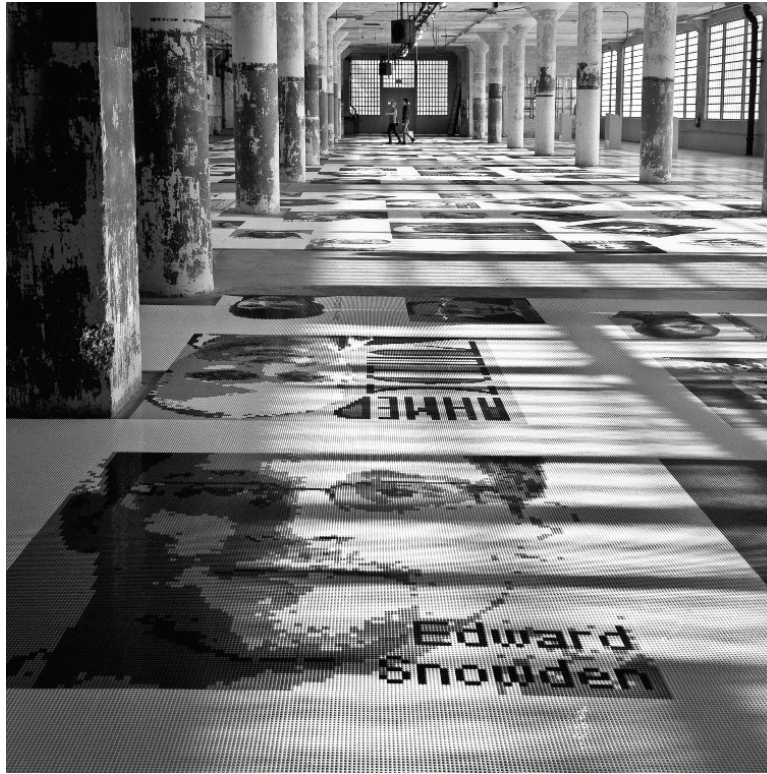
Figure 6.5. *Trace* by Ai Weiwei, Alcatraz, 2014. Credit: Robert R. Ng.

The statement not only alluded to Ai's inability to travel outside of China; it also positioned him as a critic of political oppression on a global scale. The main exhibition at Alcatraz, *Trace* (Fig. 6.5)*,* is a floor display that comprises a community of imprisoned activists portrayed in Lego blocks, which clearly and excellently signals Ai's shift in practice. In and through *Trace*, Ai moves beyond China by making images of seventy-five famous "prisoners of conscience," from blind activist Chen Guangcheng to Nelson Mandela, and from imprisoned Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo to NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden. The Legos suggest a flattening of political points, as assembled on Twitter. The larger implication of this piece is that Ai is now operating not from China, but "at large," moving from a specifically situated culture to the boundless space of a globally anointed artist.

Ironically, Ai's exhibit at Alcatraz unwittingly eclipsed memories of Native American protests over the use of the island and the centuries-long oppression of indigenous peoples in the United States. While visitors to the exhibition did hear haunting Hopi chants from one of the dank cells (a faint gesture to Native Americans imprisoned there in the late 19th century), there was absolutely no mention of the American Indian Movement activists who occupied the prison in 1972, claim-

ing native sovereignty over the island, and rejecting its use as a site for museums.

Only Ai Weiwei could have engaged in this kind of trendy, long-distance proxy that subsumes California's history of oppressive politics. During my visit to the exhibition, I was both amused and impressed by his impresario performance *in absentia*: beefy prison guards more familiar with closing heavy metal cages circulated the grounds while directing visitors by saying things like "Ai Weiwei this way." By making Ai Weiwei a household name, the California Parks Department gentrified the infamous prison real estate, anticipating an alternate future for the space as a venue for global art.

For Ai, Alcatraz was a convenient platform from which to launch his re-entry into the world. Shortly after the exhibition, the People's Republic of China returned his passport, allowing him to travel overseas. Now, Ai is free from the clutches of the Chinese state—and perhaps released from his role as the passionate ethnographer of Chinese earthquakes. Now ensconced in Berlin, he seems poised to be the homeless *avant garde* artist of the world, a vision that is championed by Uli Sigg, the Swiss collector of contemporary Chinese art who has helped stoke the critical enthusiasm and rising value of such works. But, cut off from his Chinese roots, will Ai Weiwei cease to be China's *enfant terrible*? Will he become just one among many versatile Asian artists who zigzag around the world in the service of an ungrounded global art and politics?

Ultimately, contemporary Chinese art is an aesthetic expression of anticipatory politics that requires both rootedness in Chinese culture and the agility to straddle cosmopolitan expectations. Major artists from China must navigate two kinds of political anticipation. The first is that the art world expects laudable Chinese artists to be dissidents who criticize the Chinese state. Ai Weiwei's design of the Olympic stadium in Beijing captures this predicament; the "bird's nest" design symbolizes his contrary positioning between an ancestral location in a nation that constrains freedom, and an individual desire to slip from his bonds and take wing. The second kind of anticipatory politics is performed by Chinese artists who are less easily described as "dissidents," because their more ambiguous practices anticipate the emergent global politics that is engendered by earth-shattering transformations taking place in China today.

Debate

Geoffrey Bowker

Though this is definitely not my field, I was interested in the theme of dislocation and continuity. Could you talk a little bit about what happened under Mao Tse-Tung? When you referred to the "traditional" you referred to old forms of Chinese art. But presumably there was a moment of dislocation and discontinuity after 1949? So what happened in that intervening period? How much continuity was there between that moment of modernization and the traditional Chinese art forms? Related to that is, what are they teaching in Chinese art schools? Have they been teaching the traditional forms, the Socialist Realist forms, the *avant garde* forms?

Aihwa Ong

There are other kinds of framings, but I'm trying to argue that when I look at this collection of art works, I see them as constituting a real rupture. Certainly there was a Socialist-Constructionist period vastly influenced by the Soviet Union in the early years of socialism. Also, in many Chinese provinces there are academies that continue to teach traditional practices and skills. But I'm specifically trying to trouble the term "contemporary" in the Western context because it is merely a time marker, while within the "contemporary" there are a variety of coexisting styles. In Hong Kong they're beginning to track and keep account of the varieties of currently existing Chinese art forms that you can find in China and around the world. My talk only explored a narrow, specific set of these styles.

Glenn Most

I have a question about Ai Weiwei, and another question. I understand and sympathize with your argument that he isn't a completely ruthless non-Chinese painter, artist, and creative person; one has to understand him within his traditions. But looked at from the point of view of Europe, much of what he's doing is very similar to the traditional European *avant garde* in so many ways. I wonder whether this is one reason why he has such success in Europe, aside from the political aspect, because he's easily understandable in European artistic terms. Though this might not also be true about his intention, at some level. The second question is about contemporary Chinese art. You mentioned a Swiss collector, but does anybody collect it in China, or is it primarily collected outside of the country?

Aihwa Ong

Well, that's what I mean by "rooted cosmopolitan" in referring to a figure like him. With him, there is the mixture of being really anchored in the problems of China, and of being Chinese, and trying to deal with these issues through the lenses of different time periods while at the same time espousing a universalist ethic and emphasizing human rights. So it's a mix of styles—in a word, he is not homeless, he's a "rooted cosmopolitan." The collector Uli Sigg would think "Well, maybe Ai Weiwei will one day will be just representing *avant gardism* as a homeless figure." But I'm trying to make the argument he can never be homeless. For a long time he could not even leave China; but even with his passport, he's still profoundly concerned with China and the possibilities for an alternate future in China.

Glenn Most

Do contemporary Chinese artists like him?

Aihwa Ong

I don't think so. No, the general thinking about him in China is just awfully ugly. Many of these things don't make sense to them. They consider him a creature of the West, a Western figure. He's a creature of Western museums, curators, and collectors, and whenever I ask people in China, they answer that they just don't really like him. Perhaps there's this sense of him being a bit of a turncoat.

Ruth Padel

I was interested in the reception of Ai Weiwei by the Chinese public on the whole. I'm thinking also of making a parallel with Salman Rushdie, who felt that he'd written *Midnight's Children* and indeed *The Satanic Verses* for migrants from the subcontinent; he told me once that he was writing his works for them, not English audiences. So India turning against him made him feel rather blindsided. He felt that they resented him for showing off their government to the West. Does that feeling not have any resonance at any section of Chinese society?

Aihwa Ong

I don't know specifically, but maybe. There are some activists in China who

appreciate Ai's work. Not as art, perhaps, but as theatre, and perhaps he is about theatre and less about art. But, it's very complicated to be a Chinese subject because you don't easily discard your loyalty, your patriotism for your nation, regardless of the government and how foul it is. So they're trying to deal with those issues and of course there are thousands of protests in China going on all the time to correct the political situation. But to display it in the way Ai does is perhaps not kosher for many Chinese people.

Luca Massimo Barbero

You were mentioning both materiality and meta-reality, which I think is a rather interesting point of view in the case of producing contemporary art. You also pointed to the problem of, precisely, the "contemporary" in Chinese contemporary art. So, Ai Weiwei is a Western creation, or his reputation is maintained because of an incredible popularity with Western audiences, and you said that this at least partially stems from a deliberate move against tradition. One of the questions that comes to mind in this context is why, with such political or conceptual social political themes playing into their art, Chinese artists need so many objects, so many physical bodies of work? That's what Ai Weiwei actually does—proliferate physical bodies.

The second point is: I'm with you when you say he's not exactly representing himself, but not one hundred percent with you. How come he's usually using old devices, old handmade materials—the first sculptures were neo-Dada, there were chairs, there was furniture. I'm also thinking about his Guggenheim installation using broken porcelain, and so on. What's the relation between the material, the immaterial, and going against tradition using traditional objects? I'm also thinking more about fireworks and other performative artworks. Chinese artists you've described seem to be re-performing a certain kind of *avant garde* scene, at least in the Western perspective, because we recognize those performances insofar as they resemble the Western *avant garde* tradition, even if they're using Chinese values and social contexts.

Aihwa Ong

Yes, there is this Western influence, but there's also an appreciation for ordinary Chinese artisanal capacities, skills, and artifacts. When I say that there's a rupture, I'm talking about a rupture with traditional Chinese high aesthetics, which is about transcending this world and its cares. That traditions is not about this world—this petty, everyday junk that people live with. My Chinese colleagues, for example,

refuse to ride bicycles because it's kind of low class. But with these Chinese artists, there are all these handmade household objects that are now being treasured and displayed. The junk of a prostitute is on display in a Western museum. Ai Weiwei is trying to capture these ethnographic elements of everyday people whose lives are dislocated and in upheaval. He wants to show, to give back perhaps this image of a rapidly disintegrating world, even if it's shown in the West. It's a mix of styles. And materiality is part of it. And meta-reality. I'm not saying they didn't learn anything from the West, but they're trying to say, "We learned from the West, but we're not really so much *about* the West; we're really concerned about China."

Dagmar Schäfer

I want to ask a question about Ai Weiwei's understanding of history, the approach to history that he's actually reflecting in his way of using objects, because I think there is a little bit more to it than we've admitted so far. So, if you look at Ai Weiwei and his approach to history, how would you describe it?

Aihwa Ong

Well, this is where Orientalism comes in. Have you seen the movie *Raise the Red Lantern* directed by Zhang Yimou? In it, he uses this Oriental imagery of a "pure" China, one with none of the messiness of the Communist upheaval, because he wanted a Western audience. There's a kind of seductiveness to this notion of a "pure" China. These people are monsters at seducing the West with ideas like this. But at the same time they are also doing other, possibly more subversive things. I'm not trying to say that these artists are pure figures of protest—they are also interested in capitalism, making lots of money, and global fame. But they are also interested in fighting for human rights in China.

Luca Massimo Barbero

Don't you think that sometimes their game is aimed toward seducing the Western market instead of the Western public?

Aihwa Ong

Both!

Luca Massimo Barbero

Alright. Because when you were talking about cosmopolitanism, I tend to think they're playing pretty heavily with cosmo-capitalism. It's again the idea of reproducing a double play of seductions. One element in this double-play is the artist reproducing her—or himself in the image of an exotic ideal, in the Orientalist image, which is very dangerous.

Aihwa Ong

In a sense, if you are from Asia you cannot escape being Orientalized. This image becomes a token of exchange that you can give back. It's the currency you have to operate within. Self-Orientalizing is very well-recognized—you have to self-Orientalize because, if this is the projection that people impose on you, rightly or wrongly, then you have to return that projection to them in the same coin or language. Cai Guo-Qiang, for example, refuses to speak English. He has lived in Brooklyn for almost twenty years; he doesn't ever utter a word of English.

Simon Schaffer

Lots of people in Brooklyn don't speak English.

Aihwa Ong

All the same, these poses are part of the act. I'm trying to say these are not pure figures, and just as Luca pointed out, they need to be very savvy to have risen so far up the global art market food chain.

Matthew Battles

I'm interested in this concept of rooted cosmopolitanism. I wonder to what extent it can be, as it were, uprooted and transferred, if there are other soils that are fertile for this particular kind of cosmopolitanism. To look for some directions towards answering that question, I wonder, first of all, about the artist's biography. Correct me if I'm wrong, but Ai Weiwei did spend a period of time as a young artist in New York City, more or less attempting to be a rootless cosmopolitan. I mean, he was trying to be a New Yorker, to embrace the cosmopolitanism of New York City. I'm wondering how he renews that encounter with China in his work (if it can even be considered a renewal.) That's one question.

And then there is the question of the art market. I think it's interesting that he's not collected in China, or not extensively collected in China. But at the same time, isn't it true that Chinese art collectors have played a role in the global art market in the last few years? I mean, there's been the disruptive element of the sheer amount of money that has been mobilized to buy European art specifically. This has been talked about in interesting and troubling ways in the West, perhaps in a kind of middlebrow critique of China as a whole.

I think this can relate to your discussion of Ai Weiwei's Alcatraz project and the effacement of Californian dispossession of Native American peoples there. Of course Alcatraz is a prison; it's implicated in an American history of criminal justice that is dispossessive through and through. So, certainly in North America, there's a middlebrow line on China that this kind of art is a just a very unreflective criticism of Chinese government and Chinese ways and Chinese impact on the world. There's there's a fear that motivates it. What does Ai Weiwei have to say to that kind of 21st century naïve Orientalism of fear? And what kind of rooted cosmopolitanism could we hope to cultivate in other contexts where, say, the dispossession of First Nations in North America is systematically effaced as part and parcel of tradition?

Aihwa Ong

Ai Weiwei spent part of his life in China, then in New York, and then he went back to China because his father was dying. Maybe I ran through "cosmopolitanism" too fast. It means many, many things. Cosmopolitanism with a big "C" is the Kantian cosmopolitanism, or world citizenship, a kind of weakening of one's particularized ties to a home country and expressing solidarity with people everywhere. You have a little bit of that in Ai because he has become a kind of global spokesman for human rights for people under repressive regimes. At the same time, there's a kind of commercial cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitanism with a small "c," which is about being at home crossing borders, managing different people's cultures and expectations of what the "immigrant" is and doing well in a financial sense. Bluntly: it's about buying property. That's the part that stirs up resentments and fears, especially in North America and maybe in England too, about these Chinese who have arrived from around the world and have begun buying up Louis Vuitton bags. Well, I'd like to have one too, but…

I'm trying to show how the embrace of the Chinese artist is in a sense ironic because he's made into, and makes himself into, the kind of "Chinaman we can live with." I can bring back Alcatraz in this context. Next to Alcatraz is Angel Island, where they incarcerated all the Chinese coming in to the Bay Area because there was a rule excluding people from China at the turn of the 20th century, unless you

had relatives already there. So there was the phenomenon of "paper sons," where you pretended that your dad is actually in the San Francisco Chinatown, and you would have a paper to show it. But these people were incarcerated on Angel Island, sometimes for years, before they could present their case and be allowed onto the mainland. There's a kind of complicated resonance there.

Matthew Battles

But you're also suggesting this show on Alcatraz is the way for the dying liberal state to protect its natural resources, to get an injection of money.

Aihwa Ong

Yes. And fame for Ai. But it is also a kind of cosmopolitanism in that it shows a different feature of China to my undergraduates. That's my main audience—the undergraduates who are smart but misinformed and afraid. This is something they can live with and be interested in, so they're getting more cosmopolitan, too. The art market is also very interesting; my sister works in an art gallery in New York City, and her gallery has opened a branch in Beijing to buy Chinese art, even though their focus is on Impressionist paintings. Art galleries like hers are moving into Chinese art because there's the mystique about them.

The other thing that I didn't mention here is that the whole art market has shifted, and there is a sense among curators that contemporary art in the West is not that interesting. I mean, how many Jeffrey Koons can you bear to look? It doesn't have the deep history of suffering and dislocation, or the weight of history and culture you see in these Chinese installations. Asian people are also collecting Chinese art now rather than just European art, even if they're not necessarily collecting Ai Weiwei. This then raises the whole question of the critics. What kind of role can Western art critics play with this kind of shifting landscape of collecting original pieces? There's a lot of anxiety around that.

Ann-Sophie Lehmann

Thank you, Aihwa, for giving us a brilliant example of the enormous complexity of this issue. I only have a few comments. I think it's so easy to criticize somebody like Ai Weiwei, through our either still-colonial or post-colonial gazes. He plays with these lenses very shamelessly sometimes, but he's also very smart. With the sunflower seed project, which was funded by Unilever at the Tate Gallery, he re-

vived the porcelain manufacturing industry at Jingdezhen by providing people with salaries for over five years for painting sunflower seeds, which was a political comment on Maoism. But of course, the criticism is obvious: those people earn money for five years and then Ai Weiwei moves out, all the sunflower seeds move out, and the money is gone again. So, what's happening here?

At the same time, he played an enormously important role in Chinese youth culture and the criticism of Internet control by the government when he posted his "leg-gun" on Twitter. The image became viral within hours all through China and internationally. He also published a book with Ai Weiwei-isms, which are so bad that you cannot even quote them—example include things like, "The Internet will free us all," or "arts and crafts are really important." In a sense, it's wonderful that there is a Chinese artist at center stage to begin with, and that he has moved art history out of a very, very specialized field where only people who have been studying Asian art for years and specific domains of the museum were allowed to talk about it at all. So that is a good thing.

Finally, I would like to address how, currently, there are museums being built by the dozens in China, and Chinese collectors come to Europe or come to America to buy collections and fill these museums very quickly. There is this opposite movement as well—maybe Dagmar knows a bit more about this.

Dagmar Schäfer

I actually have a student who is researching this growth of museums in China—mostly science museums, or actually science exhibition halls, according to the American model: there is natural history, and then there's science in history, and then there's modern sciences—and then there is also modern art. It is a really total reshaping of the museums. Just consider that within about five years they built two hundred science museums, and I think one of these museums is probably the size of the Berlin Museum, so it's tremendous. And they're not empty.

Ann-Sophie Lehmann

And this is true for art museums as well. So, what kind of rooted globalism or cosmopolitanism is this then, compared to Ai Weiwei being on center stage in the West?

Aihwa Ong

I want to stress that I'm bringing a critical view on Ai Wewei, but I'm not saying

he's a good or bad guy. It's not an issue of morality. I'm trying to break up the binary frameworks that we use in that context. I wouldn't call him post-colonial either, nor an entirely *avant garde* artist. I'm just trying to show the confluence of influences that went into shaping a figure like him. One way to show this is to bring a critical perspective. But that doesn't mean he hasn't done a lot of good things.

Regarding museums, the West used to collect all our stuff, and now maybe it's our turn to collect their stuff. If you look at how Americans and Europeans collected stuff from all over the world… When I first came to Europe, for example, I arrived in Amsterdam, and I was shocked at all the stuff I saw in the buildings that I could trace back to Indonesia. Perhaps the fear and the prominence surrounding Ai Weiwei all have to do with the reemergence of Asia onto the world. This is very unsettling on multiple registers; unsettling, primarily, of the Western notion of a unitary history, that powerfully enacts novel forms of popular agency in shaping possible futures. Against this, there's this aura of return. Cai Guo-Qiang's whole Marco Polo thing is about Marco Polo returning to Europe with medicine instead of gunpowder. Here you have, in a sense, the return of Asia onto the global stage, with all these possibilities of wealth, artistic capability, showmanship, capacities for manipulating Western perspectives of this and that. Asia is retuning to the world in various guises. These artists are going to play a role in the reimagining of the stakes of our very multiple and yet shared futures. So, you know, it's not so much a question of this individual, but the kind of phenomenon surrounding that individual. I'm less concerned with whether he's a nice guy or not.

Ann-Sophie Lehmann

Simon called what we're experiencing right now the "mirror stage" of the West. I think that's very apt, somehow.

Aihwa Ong

That's right! Yes, the "mirror stage."

Simon Schaffer

I want to be a little clearer about the set of histories to which your analysis, which I think is very powerful, wants to belong. For these reasons: first, one of the most powerful things in the last thirty-five years of history writing in Europe and North America (Dagmar is one of the experts here) has been to point out the enormous

centrality of Asian social and economic systems in world history for a very, very long time indeed. And connoisseurship Venice and in London, hundreds of years, organized around elite taste in the works of Chinese artists. So I'm very puzzled by what the language of return is doing here. In 1700 in London, to be elegant was to fill your house, exactly as you say, with material from Goa and from Gujarat and Canton. Mainly to eat and drink it, obviously, but also to wear it. It was recognized as such, and people knew where it was from. It was named after the places where it came from. It was "calico," for example. So I just want to be clear on where the gap occurs, after which the return is made? This is exactly Geoff's question. Is this a post-1949 PRC gap? Is this the Opium War gap? Is this, God help us, the Great Divergence gap? I actually wonder what gap it was.

So on the one hand there is this longstanding notion that everything civilized and good comes from China. At the same time, and for a very long time, European markets were completely obsessed with another great principles, which is also false. And that's the idea that, and I will quote from an Englishman visiting Canton in China in 1743, "the Chinese are a very ingenious and industrious people, but their principal excellency seems to be imitation… They now make in Canton just as well as anything made in London, and at one third of the expense, all those ingenious pieces which we used to send to China in vast quantities from England." That is from 1743. That is absolutely Winnie Wong's story, in her book about the industry of reproducing European masterpieces.

So again, my puzzlement is that the Europeans have these two views. They have this view that the Chinese are brilliant at copying, and they also think that every European art already existed in China. So the second great challenge to the notion of "returning" to the world stage is that Europeans had somehow to reconcile the idea that everything Europeans do comes from there, but all the Chinese can do is copy. No eighteenth-century *philosophe* actually worked out how those two thoughts could be true simultaneously. How can all these people invent everything and yet they can't invent anything at all? I also want to get a handle on whether you and Winnie, who have both given us these absolutely brilliant and refreshing re-readings of this material, want us to think differently about the great European-Orientalist dilemma, which is that the Chinese have invented everything and we know that; and yet they can't invent anything at all.

Ruth Padel

There is that saying, "for all the tea in China." The things you're talking about penetrate the vernacular consciousness just as much as that of the connoisseurs.

Aihwa Ong

As a result of the Opium War, China was shoved off the world stage by British gun boats in order to open up the market for opium. They feel that they went into a spiral of profound decline down from "Masters of Asia," if not the world. Then in the interim, the Europeans arrived and made use of cheap Chinese labor. But here we've got to go back to the story of the Willow pattern, right? There was an earlier Chinese Willow pattern, used on dishes the Dutch and British loved. And eventually the Chinese copied the European copy to sell it to the Europeans. So they were very good with trade, and part of that capacity with manipulating trade networks involved the capacity to mobilize labor cheaply and effectively, and to produce (and copy) desirable goods. Nevertheless, they went into political decline, and as the Chinese love to tell me, they endured a hundred years of humiliation. Even though they worked very hard, and even after the market reformed and they displaced London as the workshop of the world, they still felt and still do feel humiliated. They've got a chip on their shoulder.

John Tresch

Do you have anything you want to add to this question of the paradox of, on the one hand, China's being attributed an absolute foundational originality, and on the other hand, being seen as having the ability only to copy?

Aihwa Ong

Copying and creation constitute a very interesting dynamic, because in the Chinese art tradition you in fact copy the masters. The whole point is not to strive for originality, but to strive to achieve the kind of high status established by former masters. You have that in medicine just as you have it in art. But I want to move away from talking about the Chinese only. I think that in many cultural traditions copying is part of learning and training. In fact, it's the basis of creativity. Why do they copy all these things? Because, well, this is what the world wants. The world wants those dishes and fake paintings.

So the "return" is in part an economic and political return. With that, there is a cultural return as well, and the government doesn't want that cultural return to be represented by Ai Weiwei. They want to be represented by some glorious Chinese thing, like the Olympics. That's the kind of cultural image they want you to see. Perhaps our Western audiences are happier with someone like Ai Weiwei because

he speaks to them. He understands Western traditions; he is a cosmopolitan in that sense of actually embracing what I call a "weak universal," which is human rights. It's weak because it's contingent—you don't have to be clear *what* human rights are. He's playing this game.

John Tresch

That's exactly the kind of figure that the Europeans are willing to recognize as the return.

Aihwa Ong

Because he's less scary! He is such a cute guy!

Geoffrey Bowker

I've become very interested in these acts of erasure of the recent past in order to achieve continuity with the distant past. That's something that's going on in Iraq, for example. As a schoolchild in Iraq you do not currently learn about the Saddam Hussein regime—you learn about traditional Iraqi history and what happened after the American occupation. It's like the period between those two never happened. I just think that's a very general and interesting phenomenon.

I also wanted to pick up on one of your comments, Luca. When I saw that picture of Weiwei towering over the island of Alcatraz, I was thinking of Christo—I don't even know what he looks like, but I mean, his cult of personality. When we we're talking cosmo-capitalism, in your term, the product seems to be as much Weiwei as the cultural figure as it is the art. In a sense the art becomes somewhat irrelevant; his money, his value comes from himself and his personality.

Stéphane Van Damme

I have some difficulties with the notion of the rooted cosmopolitan applied to Ai Weiwei. I don't think he is either rooted or cosmopolitan. For me it's beautiful example of pop art. His parodic dimension is really strong and powerful. He completely mastered the iconographic grammar of contemporary art, of course, but I can't fully understand why there is no reception for him in China.

Aihwa Ong

Because he's alien to them.

Stéphane Van Damme

Exactly. For me, the reuse of stereotypes, for instance, about Chinese or China, doesn't make him rooted. Another impression I have is connected to the work of an anthropologist of India, Denis Vidal, working on current contemporary art in India. He proposed to read this contemporary art through the category of post-primitivism, in fact; I don't know if that's just another problematic category. Or if you take the exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*, you have this tension between something which is really a kind of global curiosity about other arts, which is something which is clearly revisiting our own tradition—our own primitivism, for instance, the early 20th century surrealist interest in African art, in Asiatica. So I was wondering if we can contrast on the aesthetic scene several different possible strategies to deal with rooted cosmopolitanism, and what—because it's a political theory— what do you do with that?

Luca Massimo Barbero

I want to bring back the theme of materiality. I don't know if we should distinguish between a cup, a dish, or a print or a painting. Don't you think that it's kind of a history repeating itself, with this flowing and circulating of objects, with all these Chinese contemporary artists sending all these objects—I'm using that word in order to be physical and materialist—to the Venice Biennale, to the Whitney, to the United States markets without stopping, with American being so up and immediately open to that arrival? They were just received as international Chinese contemporary art. And then finally, when the Western market accepted and validated them, now they're going to go back to China. It's this circularity: appealing to the Western market in order to be recognized by the Chinese market. And the second question is, maybe you can help me: do we have a register, a database, or, I don't know, an association that is registering important Chinese objects of art, which leave Western collections and go back to China? Do we record that somehow?

Aihwa Ong

The affluent Chinese are buying Western art; they are also buying Oriental objects at many times their value, to repatriate them to China.

Luca Massimo Barbero

Is anyone controlling or monitoring that?

Ann-Sophie Lehmann

Simon asked where we can locate the "return." One very important element that Dagmar reminded us of is that there is authorship now. Works in libraries, Dagmar said, used to be ordered by title, not by author. All these objects were authorless. And now there is one name that we all know. It's a big brand, a very powerful name of a single person. That, I think, is really a shift towards a global use of what the art market does everywhere. Also, I don't think we can say Ai Weiwei is not of interest in the whole of China. There is a very lively art production market that's very cool and young and hip. There are people who, in general, are traditional, so they maybe will not put Ai Weiwei in their museum. But there must be others with an interest in him, just as they are interested in other international contemporary artists.

Geoffrey Bowker

On Lucas' point about circulation: there's a classic article called "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher" by Michèle Lamont, where the argument is that you have to go outside of France after your reputation dips there.[11] You get a market in America, and then you're reintroduced into France as the great philosopher—Derrida is the case study of this article.

Ruth Padel

Maybe this is the one area where nobody knows what to know. How noble is what he's doing, and how noble, or proper are our reactions, and other people's reactions?

John Tresch

Let's get a sense of some of the topics that we want Aihwa to try to respond to. We've got, in no particular order: the historical caesura that you skip in order to connect to a history that's further back; Ai Weiwei's personality cult, selling himself and not an art object; in what sense is he really a rooted cosmopolitan, and how does one make use of that term; if it makes sense to relate this work to a kind of

post-primitivism; what is the status of the body of the work in comparing it with the history of other Chinese commodities that have circulated in the past; if there is there a database counting how many Chinese works are moving back from Europe to China; how much does authorship change things; and, finally, how do you become a dominant French philosopher?

Aihwa Ong

All right. I don't think they are deliberately erasing the Mao era. There's an incredible historical memory of every bad thing that happened. The government does try to blot things out, but it doesn't mean that individuals, the ordinary people don't remember. One thought, within this framework of Orientalism, and linking up with the West, I remember when I was a graduate student, my colleagues, my peers were in love with Chinese socialism, in a period of the Cultural Revolution. They had no idea what was going on in China, but they loved it. And many of them later on felt that they ruined their careers, because they chose the wrong team. So I don't think it's an issue of wiping away bits of history.

But, but for these artists—and I'm not defending them, I'm just studying the social phenomenon—when they come into the global circuit, they are actually articulating Western desires about China. There's always already that framework of Orientalism. There is a sense of "OK, we have given up on the Chinese socialist experiment, it was a disaster, eighty million people died during that period, so let's move on to this older, more interesting aesthetic tradition," and so on. But then at the same time there's this figure who emerges that is not an old socialist hack, but is in fact someone to promote human rights in China. And that's enormously appealing.

So I don't think that this is a case where anyone's deliberately pulling the wool over our eyes about Chinese history. The government is doing that, of course, and there it's just like what Geof says about Iraq: in school-books they do not teach the period of disaster surrounding the Cultural Revolution, just like the Japanese schoolbooks do not cover the period of the Second World War and what they did to the rest of us in Asia. So there are many different scales of operation, so you cannot think about these characters as tools of the government. They are not! They're actually pretty autonomous individuals operating with quite a bit of finesse on a global stage. For the other questions… There's definitely a buying back of Chinese artifacts—on a very, very big scale.

John Tresch

There was also the question of authorship, and the cult of personality. And I was also very curious about the artwork you briefly showed, coated with characters, bringing out their weight and their meaningless materiality. How these invented ideograms interact with the role of books, and the critique of writing in the new moment of art. But that's another question.

Aihwa Ong

In that artwork, Xiu Ping is in a sense saying that in this new China that he's trying to intervene in, these characters, this literate, calligraphic tradition is defunct. It's useless. It represents futile oppression. So he prefers this kind of icon, these global brands. Which is kind of amazing. The worshipful Orientalist approach towards Chinese traditions is fast fading in China. And we feel the loss here because we love them, right? I mean, I love them. I go to the Metropolitan just to look at the East Asian wing. But these Chinese artists are tired of that stuff. It's the kind of loss that comes with the end of the ancient regime, which has been in decline but is finally on its last legs.

I feel that whenever I give a talk on China in any setting, I'm always forced into a position of defending the totality of it. When what I'm trying to do is provide a complex, multi-angled view. It may still be that we don't know enough on either side to have, either a fruitful or more satisfying discussion.

John Tresch

Thanks to Aihwa, for pointing us to zones that we need to know more about.

Notes

1.   Ong, Aihwa, ""What Marco Polo Forgot": Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global." *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 4 (2012): 471-483.
2.   Whyte, Murray, "Ai Weiwei Merges Art and Politics in AGO Show: Review," *The Star*, August 14, 2013, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2013/08/14/ai_weiwei_merges_art_and_ politics_in_ago_show_review.html.
3.   Won Yin Wong, Winnie, *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

4. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Exhibition Overview," http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/ink-art.

5. See Dagmar Schäffer's essay above, where the transliteration "shan shui" is employed.

6. For a discussion of the "global assemblage" concept, see Collier, Stephen J. and Aihwa Ong, "Global Assemblages, Anthropological Problems," in *Global Assemblages*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005, 1-21.

7. See Aihwa Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot: Asian Art Negotiates the Global," *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 4 (August 2012), 1-24.

8. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996, 196-200.

9. Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 1-24.

10. *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, *For-Site Foundation*, April 26, 2015, http://www.for-site.org/project/ai-weiwei-alcatraz/.

11. Lamont, Michèle. "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida." *American Journal of Sociology,* 93 (3) 1987: 584-622.

CA☆ FORUM ON ANTHROPOLOGY IN PUBLIC

"What Marco Polo Forgot"

Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global

by Aihwa Ong

In 1995, Cai Guo-Qiang set adrift a Chinese junk on the Grand Canal in Venice, marking the seven-hundredth anniversary of Marco Polo's return to Europe. In 2008, as the world spiraled into a far-reaching financial collapse, a historian warned that in the long haul, "New York could turn into Venice." These two historical moments set the stage for a discussion of how contemporary Asian art navigates the world of conceptual geography. An anthropology of art expands beyond expertise on "native artifacts" corralled in Western collections to the active interpretation of contemporary art alongside artists, curators, and critics in cosmopolitan spaces of encounter. Drawing on Cai's exhibition *I Want to Believe*, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 2008, I focus on the contrasting interpretations of Cai's key installations, that is, the perspectives that dramatize different notions of the global. Is contemporary art the latest form of Chinese entrepreneurialism or an expression of an emerging global civil society? Or should modern Chinese art be viewed as a distinctive kind of anticipatory politics in undoing Western categories of knowledge? In an art of assemblage and juxtaposition, how is China repositioned from an object of Western knowledge to a tool of global intervention?

What Marco Polo Forgot

In 1995, artist Cai Guo-Qiang set adrift a Chinese junk on the Grand Canal, Venice (see fig. 1). The event was the 46th Venice Biennale. Marking the seven-hundredth anniversary of Marco Polo's return to Venice, Cai filled a junk with Chinese herbs and medicines that Marco Polo apparently forgot to take with him on his departure in 1291 from the port city of Quanzhou (Cai's hometown).

Cai's staging of this epic encounter has drawn intense controversy. An American scholar points out that in some Venetian monastery, there is a record of Marco Polo bringing back Chinese herbs. But anthropology goes beyond a literal truth to look for meanings in acts of cultural negotiation. At first blush, Cai's installation seems to be an ironical commentary for our times—that Marco Polo forgot to bring back to Europe Chinese spiritual traditions embodied in the medicinal plants. At the end of the twentieth century, a Chinese artist seems to ask, "What can China give the world besides opportunities for trade?" In the fall of 2008, as much of the world spiraled into a financial crisis, the historian Niall Fer-

guson (2008) warned that, with China as the global banker to indebted nations, in the long run, "New York could turn into Venice."

The two historical moments—the opening of Europe's trade with China and the irony of Chinese state capitalism saving Western capitalism—are geopolitical shifts marked by Cai. These events raise the following questions: Is contemporary art the latest form of Chinese entrepreneurialism or an expression of an emerging global civil society? Or should modern Chinese art be viewed as a distinctive kind of anticipatory politics in undoing Western categories of knowledge? In an art of assemblage and juxtaposition, how is China repositioned from an object of Western knowledge to a tool of global intervention?

From Structure to Juxtaposition

Like an "armchair Marco Polo," Eric Wolf was a twentieth-century anthropologist tracing the itineraries of economic enterprises beyond the Western world. In the 1960s, at a time when anthropologists charted islands of culture, Wolf tracked the spread of European capitalism around the globe, spawning a mix of conquest, colonial adventures, and commercial production (Wolf 1982). Called a "systems Marxist," Wolf analyzed the structural integration of entire regions into a single modern world system. The dispersal of capitalist trade and production, he argued, ultimately incorporated non-Western

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Figure 1. Cia Guo-Qiang, *Bring to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot*, 1995. At the Grand Canal, Venice. For the exhibition *Transculture*. Installation incorporating a wooden fishing boat from Quanzhou, Chinese herbs, earthen jars, ginseng beverages, bamboo ladles, porcelain cups, ginseng (100 kg), and handcart. Photo by Yamamoto Tadasu, courtesy Cai Studio. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

peoples at great cost to their well-being and cultures. Wolf's key achievement is his reorientation of the story of capitalism, from one of Western self-narrative to a transnational story involving a multitude of peoples, political struggles, and cultural contestations. The expansion of European capitalism subsequently destroyed non-European cultures and, in the process, produced "the people without history," as Wolf ironically called them.

This Europe-centric vantage point is still influential in our everyday thinking about the contemporary world. Scholars and policy makers continue to be guided by ideas of global transformation that view a progressive division of the modern world in two halves: colonial and postcolonial, backward and capitalist, the global North and the global South. Beyond the optic of capitalism making the modern world, a newer discourse of new humanitarianism also envisions a European postsovereignty ideal that will spread the growth of multilateral governance across the world. Both models of global order based on borderless capitalism and transnational humanitarianism fly in the face of actual world events, robust nations,

and geopolitical conditions. For instance, Wolf and others did not foresee the rise of Asia as a global region that raises doubts about the preeminence of North Atlantic nations and their reigning ideas. Human rights theorists who talk about the a "global civil society" do not sufficiently engage the realpolitik of resurgent nationalisms (Held et al. 1999). Entrenched theories of the world, defined by a singular system of political economy or a transnational regime of virtue, are clearly inadequate for engaging complex and dynamic conditions transforming global relations.

Today, the future recedes because it is no longer forecast by a sole historical horizon, an unchallenged cultural superiority, or an overwhelming sense of moral certitude. Many anthropologists no longer invest in theories of a world system or in the inevitability of universal transformation according to the precepts of Enlightenment ideals. We are skeptical that social phenomena can be read as stabilized or neatly reproducible structures or that social change can be thought of as unfolding according to some prescribed futures. Our accelerated interconnections have surpassed old geographies of

East-West divisions, and the linear temporality of universalist thinking, in its guise as hegemonic globalization, continues to apprehend the world in terms of structural binarism and predetermined outcomes.

Against such totalizing models of political domination, anthropologists have turned to an ethnography of the local. They seek to liberate non-European "others" from theories that render them fixed and subordinated in global peripheries. Leading anthropologists have called for presenting the local in terms of cultural particularities or resistances that challenge metropolitan power. Some have called for "the native's point of view" (Geertz 1973) or "letting the subaltern speak" (Spivak 1988), while others celebrate the local modification or even rejection of foreign ideas and products.[1] By privileging cultural spaces, particularities, and agencies, these approaches unwittingly reinscribe the binarism of a global North and South and view new spaces of global encounter subsumed within a hegemonic world system.[2] But the framing of a capitalist global versus a cultural local is overdetermined by spatial fixity that does not engage complex transnational dynamics that condition the politics of space and truth claims.

The philosopher Michel Foucault (1984) observes, "We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment. I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (1). Practices of assemblages and reassemblage, I argue, are key to our understanding of the making and unmaking of contingent spaces that disrupt old notions of spatial division and connection.[3] In an earlier time, world-exploring projects such as Marco Polo's voyages brought disparate peoples, places, and things into transborder interrelationships, thus configuring a new space of intersubjective exchanges. Today, in a world of far superior communications, there are myriad projects that variously link diverse actors and viewpoints and that in interaction crystallize novel conditions of possibilities.[4]

I view contemporary art as a distinctive mode of space rupturing and conceptual reconfiguration. Anthropologists have argued that the modern art world and market are global sites where bounded notions of observer and observed are being challenged. As international museums and exhibitions proliferate, George Marcus and Fred Myers note the increasing role of anthropologists in mediating and critiquing Western "appropriation" and appreciation of ethnographic artifacts as "art" from the Third and Fourth Worlds.[5] My approach is very different, focusing not on the circulation of indigenous art but on the circulation of contemporary artists exercising novel ideas in spaces of global encounter. I see the anthropologist as not merely an expert on "native artifacts" installed in Western collections but a cointerpreter alongside artists, curators, and critics of contemporary art, especially that produced by non-Western artists.

The artist Sol Lewitt notes that conceptual art is art in which the idea takes precedence over traditional concerns with craftsmanship. It can be defined as "the idea that becomes a machine that makes the art" (Lewitt 1967). There is a productive resonance between this definition and what Foucault calls criticism. Critique, he says, "consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based" (Foucault 1994:456). Conceptual art, I argue, as idea and critique, can be viewed as a distinctive kind of anticipatory politics that engages a given situation as a question; that is, it is an art that simultaneously ruptures familiar modes of reasoning while anticipating emerging problems. It is critical therefore to consider non-Europeans and Europeans encountering each other as equivalent actors in reforming the global intellectual zeitgeist and in envisioning the world anew.

Bringing What Marco Polo Forgot

The Rise of Contemporary Chinese Art

Western readings of Chinese avant-gardism either reject contemporary Chinese art (CCA) as sham avant-gardism or celebrate it for its presumed cosmopolitanism. A brief account of the global emergence of CCA is in order. In the post-Mao period, Chinese artists had newfound freedoms to experiment with Western forms that broke with socialist or romantic realism intended for educating the masses. By the 1980s, they had found their own artist language to depict not "what the world should be like, but what it is."[6] The rise of CCA is a momentous development, as heretofore, Asian conceptualists included only a few individuals, such as expatriate Japanese artist Yoko Ono and the Korean artist Nam June Paik. Chinese conceptual artists, variously inspired by Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Damian Hirst, had by the 1990s blossomed on the global art scene.

China has a vast pool of contemporary art talent, with

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1. Peter Worsley's (1970) *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo Cults" in Melanesia* was an early study of cultural "resistance" to colonialism and capitalism. There is great variation among cultural resistance scholarship, including works on the "moral economy of the peasant" associated with James C. Scott. Recent anthropological approaches to "cultural globalization" focus on postcolonial resistances to new waves of consumer goods and ideas. See, e.g., Inda and Rosaldo (2005).

2. For the paradigmatic formulation, see Marcus and Fischer (1986).

3. For an earlier discussion of assemblage and reassemblage as transnational practices, see Ong (2005).

4. "Assembling the Global in Anthropology" series. Aihwa Ong, Stephen J. Collier, and Janet Roitman, eds. Palgrave-Macmillan, New York.

5. For this reason, they claim that "anthropology and its traditional subjects are increasingly involved in the production of art and the institutions on which its production depends." See Marcus and Myers (1995:4).

6. "Orville Schell and Uli Sigg in Conversation." *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection.* Berkeley Art Museum, September 14, 2008.

artists creating a wide spectrum of installations, performance art, and computer works. However, many artworks are highly uneven in quality, and those exhibited abroad have been dismissed as "formulaic and facile" in their blatant commercialism (Smee 2009). One trend is a seemingly automatic copy of Warhol's style, by inserting images of Mao in novel contexts (e.g., *Marilyn/Mao* by Yu Youhan). Western observers tend to view the Warholian repetitive style in CCA as copycat techniques intended for a commodity economy shaped by the international gallery system.[7] Though Warhol and Jeff Koons have been criticized on similar grounds, they are also often held up as exemplars that dramatize the banalities of affluence, while Chinese artistic citations of Pop Art or global icons such as Marilyn or Mao are condemned as crass commercial opportunism with reduced aesthetic value.

Swiss collector Uli Sigg, whose collection includes *Marilyn/Mao*, notes that there are about a hundred world-class figures among the thousands of artists who traffic in trivial commercialization, bad workmanship, and so on.[8] The best works have been snapped up by Western art collectors who began to generate a market for CCA in the West. Art Biennales further exposed CCA to international audiences, thus increasing their demand by the global art market. American collectors and curators have also begun to look for fresh art in China, and to some extent India and other Asian countries are considered the new sources of innovative artwork.

President Jiang Zemin's 2002 visit to Europe had also intensified global interest in modern Chinese art. Official China, which had considered contemporary art incomprehensible and ugly, began to sponsor it by building museums and tolerating avant-gardism. The rapid conquest of global art markets by CCA suggested the possibility that contemporary Chinese artists can help raise China's global image as a cultural force. At the same time, however, the Chinese authorities have retained the practice of deciding which artworks are banned, that is, forbidden to be shown in public and yet not inaccessible to foreign buyers. Here, the depictions of Mao in compromising positions, such as swimming in a sea of blood or kneeling in remorse for wrongs committed;[9] Mao as Mickey Mouse; or Mao as dolls with naked female breasts have been banned from public showings. The Public Security Office, as well as the developers that control the 798 Art District in Beijing, frequently pose guards or shut down exhibitions that satirize Mao and other political figures. But the very vulnerability of the most provocative art to state censorship engenders the commercial art boom, as state repression seems to intensify the global commercial interest in forbidden Chinese art.

Many foreign collectors and curators attend underground exhibitions and play the role of gatekeepers, whose criteria and choices shape Western perceptions of modern Chinese art. For instance, a New York gallery set up PaceWildenstein in Beijing to collect works by painter Zhang Xiaogang and performance artist ("mystical madman") Zhang Huan. Besides the obvious reason of their capacity to attract high prices, Peter Boris of PaceWildenstein commented, "We are not overly concerned with censorship. It creates a tension in China that is absent in New York or London. It allows for heroic art to be made. . . . In reality, we are witnessing the birth of an emerging identity" (Lankarani 2008). The productive relationship between state repression and an enhanced art value for foreign buyers fosters a dualistic perception that Chinese experimental art can be celebrated for its cosmopolitanism or rejected out of concerns of its propaganda or mere art entrepreneurialism. But much of their inspiration, I argue, comes from attempts to reframe modern mainland experiences and China's relationship to the world.

Diaspora Artists and Cosmopolitanism

Thus, Western commercial and cosmopolitan interests, on the one hand, and the Chinese state's ambivalent relationship to experimental art, on the other, have led to a bifurcated reception of CCA in the United States. Innovative elements in paintings and displays, for instance, are frequently read as avant-garde impulses in an unambiguous support of cosmopolitan freedom. A description of the Gwangju Art Biennale 2008 connects the florescence of Asian art to "global formations of civil society, where relationship between state & civil society hovers in a state of animation & contestation, e.g. civil society as a platform of the global multitude."[10]

This view of the rise of a global platform for civil action is inspired by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) in their book *Empire*. Invoking Immanuel Kant's notion of cosmopolitics, Hardt and Negri maintain that in a world dominated by capitalism's empire, denationalized multitudes gathering in global sites of cities, exhibitions, and cultural fairs create a space of "communication and collaboration in a common political project" (Hardt and Negri 2000:218). The multitude in its desire for liberation is united only by its hostility to the system of national borders and its tenacious desire for cosmopolitan freedom (Hardt and Negri 2000). This global versus national framework underpins Western investments in

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7. The practice of embedding foreign or borrowed elements in artistic works has a long history in East-West trade. Think of the exports from China in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, when Chinese ceramic motifs and colorings were designed for the European markets; such Chinoiserie elements and blue-white schemes became standard English and Dutch china ornamentations.

8. "Orville Schell and Uli Sigg in Conversation," *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, Berkeley Art Museum, September 14, 2008.

9. In *Ash Red*, a 2006 exhibition that was shut down, the artist siblings Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang displayed paintings of Mao swimming in a sea of blood. More recently, their sculptures of a kneeling Mao with a removable head and of many Mao figures aiming their rifles at Jesus Christ (echoes of a Goya painting) have also been forced underground.

10. "Formations of Global Society and Domains of Public Culture." Report for the Seventh Gwangju Biennale, Beijing, October 28–November 1, 2008.

experimental art as the medium with potential for spreading communicability and commensurability in universal values. It shapes a positive view of CCA as a vehicle that propagates ideals of world citizenship.

At the same time, leading New York art critics have been highly critical of the rapturous embrace of modern Chinese art and its display in storied museums such as the Guggenheim. They view CCA as sham avant-gardism developed in response to global market interest. The critics cite shoddy methods, art entrepreneurialism, and pretend or illusory avant-garde messages (Schjeldahl 2008). Accusations of modern Chinese artists as nothing more than veiled propagandists of the Chinese state claim that the "Mao craze" was abetted by European fascination with fascist art. Jed Perl, a New York art critic, puts it this way: "There is a world of difference between an icon freely chosen and an icon imposed from above, and the difference has more than a little to do with the difference between a liberal society and an authoritarian society. Warhol's way of blurring this distinction leads straight to the political pornography that characterizes so much of the new Chinese art" (Perl 2008). Perl's judgment echoes the kind of reflexive condemnation in the business world whereby foreign managers wish to remake Chinese workers as neoliberal subjects but these same workers and China are then criticized as prime examples of neoliberal opportunism run wild (Ong 2006).

Such criticisms are haunted by the apparent passing of avant-gardism to Asian artists and the worry that the explosive growth of Asian art markets threatens contemporary Western art. Given that the innovative energy in avant-gardism now arises in the East, will American critics be able to retain their position as preeminent arbiters in the world of modern art? Furthermore, the indirect style and allegorical tendencies of Chinese modern art are unsettling established aesthetic norms, thus undermining the authority of Western art experts.

In short, the overseas displays of Chinese conceptual art have sparked events that arouse both hopes of cosmopolitan commensurability and suspicions of sham art as propaganda. Such contradictory receptions, I argue, are framed by Western obsessions and fears of East Asia as an object of insurmountable difference. On the one hand, there is the insistence on the international relevance of neo-Enlightenment projects now taken up by "the people without history" or from the heretofore periphery; on the other hand, there is the expectation that the Chinese experimental artist must take on the tormented legacy of modern European history.

Indeed, Chinese experimental artists use their works to interpret historical events—Marco Polo's return to Europe, the end of the Cold War, 9/11, and the rise of China—to index shifts in global and national orders. The question therefore becomes one of how conceptual Asian art in global contexts can change Western perceptions of China and a Chinese role in shaping the global. What are modern Chinese artists bringing to the West that Marco Polo did not (see fig. 2)?

Instead of viewing non-European artists as cosmopolitans or propagandists, we can regard them as catalysts of shifting geopolitical perceptions. Adorno's analytics of the political are recast by Espen Hammer as an "anticipatory politics" that responds to social configuration and are reached in a condition of social uncertainty and exception (Hammer 2005: 120). As a form of micropolitics or immanent critique, Martin Jay (2006) remarks, anticipatory politics "neither papers over contradictions nor forces" and does not even point to their positive or facile resolutions. It is an ethical practice that "gains leverage by defying the reduction of experience to the concepts that define it" (Jay 2006). I view conceptual art as a distinctive form of anticipatory politics that confronts existing social arrangements through border-rupturing experimentations. By assembling and juxtaposing disparate elements (West-East, past and present, culture and technology, etc.) in global spaces of encounter, modern Chinese art is anticipatory of a new global, one that embraces inevitable heterogeneity, subversion, and uncertainty. I next track an aesthetic politics in Cai Guo-Qiang's installations at the Guggenheim Museum, against his critics who deploy notions of Chinese threat and the absence of advocacy for a cosmopolitan civil society in Chinese art.

Cai's Spectacles in a Space of Global Encounter

In spring 2008, Cai Guo-Qiang, an émigré artist living in Brooklyn, had a major exhibition in New York City. Called *I Want to Believe*, the show is the first by a China-born artist at the Guggenheim, and it delivered a mix of spectacular paintings and installations redolent of transgression and magic. A curator notes the "unique aesthetic iconography" that draws freely on Chinese medicine, maritime history, Taoist cosmology, fireworks, and Maoist revolutionary tactics (Krens 2008:11). There is no time to go into the many exhibits, including Cai's famous paintings by gunpowder and spectacles by fireworks. Cai has been viewed as an alchemist, spinning gold out of dirt and dust (Chan 2008). He also converts the American view of China as a cultural desert to an impassioned debate about the nature of Chinese experimental art. Is Cai a master of Chinese avant-garde opportunism or an authentic champion of artistic freedom?

That April, I walked into a crowded audience at the exhibition *I Want to Believe*. People were craning their necks to look at a chain of American automobiles tumbling from the ceiling. Electric light rods protruding from the cars emitted flashing lights, thus heightening the image of a sequence of car explosions. This vertical installation was called *Inopportune: Stage One*, indicating the imageries related to acts of terrorism and the violent uses of American technology (see fig. 3).[11]

11. The Cai Archives provided images of installations from earlier exhibitions, but they are the same as the exhibits I observed at the Guggenheim Museum in 2008.

Figure 2. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Bring to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot*, 1995. Cai helping to load wooden fishing boat from Quanzhou, Chinese herbs, ginseng (100 kg). Boat: 700 × 950 × 180 cm. Commissioned by the 46th Venice Biennale. Museo Navale di Venezia (fishing boat), private collections (other components). Photo by Yamamoto Tadasu, courtesy Cai Studio. Figures 1 and 2 are of the actual Cai installations that took place at the *Transculture* exhibition, 46th Venice Biennale, 1995. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

In another room, there was a wooden Chinese boat, its surface studded with approximately 3,000 arrows, that was also suspended from the ceiling. Attached to the bow was an electric fan, blowing a red Chinese flag (see fig. 4). The museum copy notes that this work alludes to a legendary story involving a Chinese general (Zhuge Liang, 1812–1834) who provided a lesson on the importance of resourcefulness and strategy. In order to produce tens of thousands of arrows for an impending battle, Zhuge had his men fill 20 boats with straw figures and set out just before dawn. War drums attracted the enemies, who fired arrows into the straw dummies, thus effectively delivering Zhuge with the weapons. The curatorial statement notes Cai's analysis of China's emergence in the late 1990s through a tactical borrowing of Western technologies (Krens and Munroe 2008:204–205).

Whereas the work symbolizes technological borrowing, my own reading finds a deeper message about mobile weapons and different cultural deployment. Cai seems to set up a contrasting parallelism between the installation of exploding American cars and this display of a boat bearing stolen arrows.

Whereas American technology has been put to violent uses by enemies (and Americans?) against the source country (i.e., in a kind of technological blowback), in Chinese hands, Western weapons are combined with Chinese tactics to defend Chinese lives. A historical continuity of guerilla tactics is invoked in the display of an ancient Chinese boat sailing home after using their weapons to disarm opponents, with the national flag fluttering in the wind (also a condition of possibility enabled by Western technology). In other words, technology is meaningful only in the context of its strategic uses in anticipation of specific political outcomes.

Another display featuring indigenous knowledge and foreign technology depicts the ark used by Genghis Khan in his invasion of Eurasia. The ark is composed of 108 inflated sheepskins and three Toyota engines that are kept running to keep the raft aloft (see fig. 5). Museum curators interpret the juxtapositioning of Khan's skills as a warrior and the tale of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" as a caution to Western audiences about their fears of Asian dominance. Newsmagazine clippings that line the gallery wall "document the mutual de-

Figure 3. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Inopportune: Stage One*, 2004. Nine cars and sequenced multichannel light tubes. Dimensions variable. Seattle Art Museum, gift of Robert M. Arnold, in honor of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum, 2006. © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. Photo by David Heald. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.
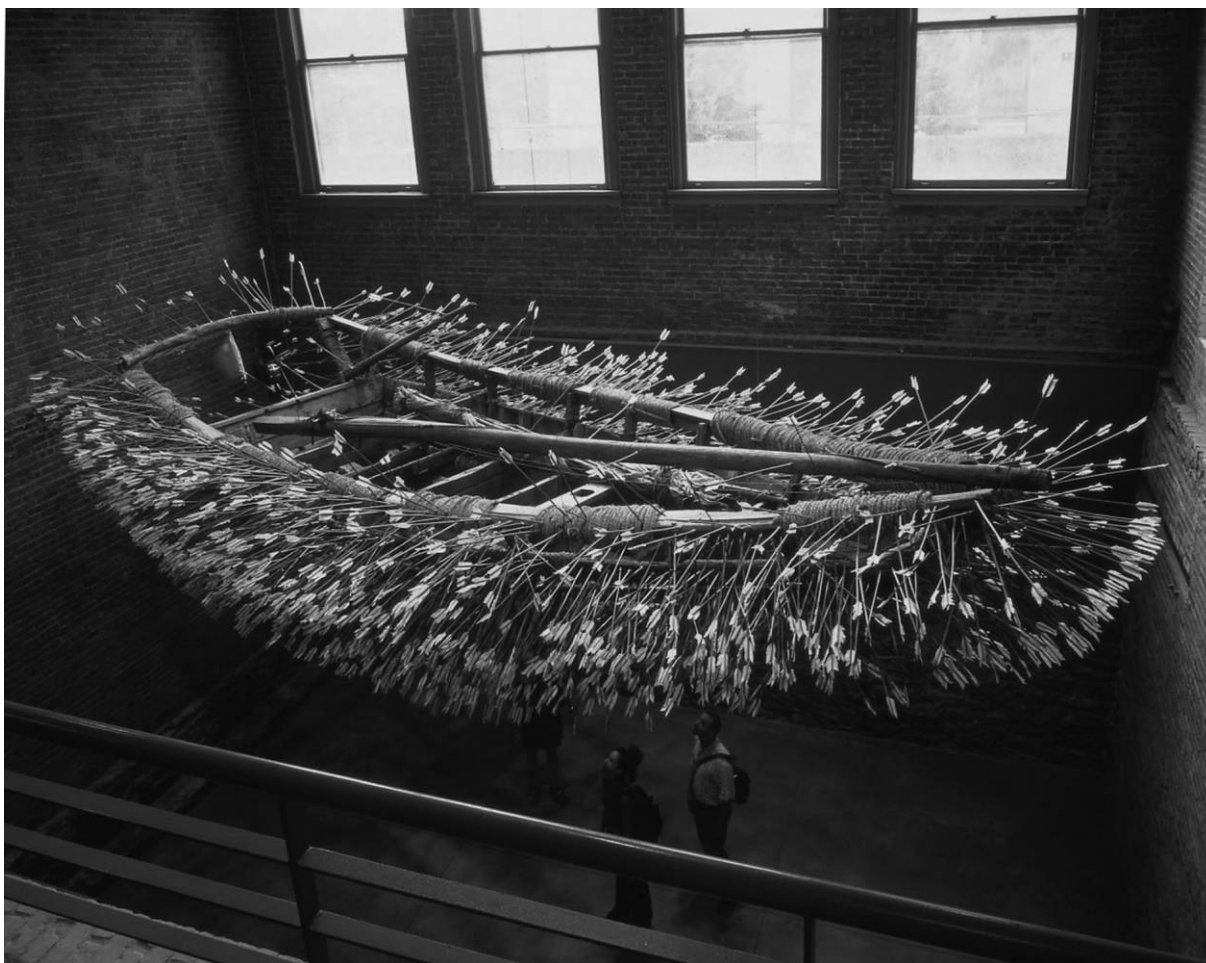
Figure 4. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows*, 1998. Wooden boat, canvas sail, arrows, metal, rope, Chinese flag, and electric fan. Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros in honor of Glenn D. Lowry. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

pendence—characterized by attraction and repulsion—between East and West in the era of globalization" (Krens and Munroe 2008:193–197).

Again, the above reading seems to miss a more subtle and hopeful message. Asia's historical resourcefulness in using technologies from different sources is exemplified by Kahn's success in enlarging his dominion. Today, Cai's magic dragon is an allegory of how our world is kept afloat by cross-cultural technologies that animate ancient skills. The Toyota engines allude to Asian companies making use of American technology to provide affordable transportation for the world's population. Such novel combinations of disparate skills and artfulness should be viewed not as dangerous but as contemporary forms of cultural creativity that draw on disparate skills from many lands to form, in often surprising ways, bridges across political divides of time and space.

The broad reception of Cai's works has been mixed. Cai is recognized as head and shoulders above many China-based artists. Nevertheless, some American art critics have characterized Cai as a clever showman and sham artist who is overpromoted by greedy corporations. They note his past as a stage manager, identify technical flaws in his work, and criticize the use of factory products, such as stuffed animals, in his installations (certainly Warhol and Koons both used mass-production techniques and faced similar objections). The Guggenheim is vilified for using this avant-gardist opportunist to "turn the museum into a space of corporate spectacle" (Davis 2008). Because Cai refuses to speak on behalf of the Chinese government or use the language of civil society and human rights, he is viewed as lacking in ideology and interested only in making a lot of money.

Cai's most explicitly political work at this exhibition was *Rent Collection Courtyard*, a pre-Liberation scene composed of life-size peasants bringing rent to a landlord. As a reproduction of an iconic socialist critique of feudal oppression

Figure 5. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan*, 1996. One hundred eight sheepskin bags, wooden branches, paddles, rope, three Toyota engines, and photocopies of various magazine covers and article clippings. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

that originated in the Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts in 1965, Cai's display is controversial on many fronts (see fig. 6).

In China, the original work has been used as a model for political and educational purposes that give voice to peasants and workers speaking out against class exploitation. In 1999, the director of the Venice Biennale asked Cai to reproduce a small-scale version of *Rent Collection Court*, perhaps as an ironic appropriation of what Westerns viewed as a Maoist propaganda showpiece. Commenting on this example of socialist-realist aesthetics, Cai was reported as saying, "I do not know whether it is the artists of the Cultural Revolution or us who hold the strongest attachment to art, but the people of that time believed in a new society and an ideal for mankind" (Perl 2008). Invoking this quote, Perl, the New York art critic, condemns Cai for his "Stalinist double-talk," in suggesting that only "proletarian art, the people's art, is real

Figure 6. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Rent Collection Courtyard*, 1999. Realized at Deposito Polveri, Arsenale, Venice. One hundred eight life-sized sculptures created on site by Long Xu Li and nine guest artisan sculptors, 60 tons of clay, wire, and wood armature. Commissioned by the 48th Venice Biennale. Photo by Elio Montanari, courtesy Cai Studio. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology.*

art" and thereby seducing "the mass audience that visits to-day's tonier museums. . . . These artists have pulled off a feat unprecedented in modern history: they have figured out a way to be communist fellow travelers and capitalist fellow travelers at the same time" (Perl 2008). Here is an instance of an impassioned reception that sees the world in black-and-white terms. The liberal West has free subjects; totalitarian China has robotic propagandist artists. Global spaces are now dangerously connected by copycat Chinese artists and greedy American collectors and curators who abet and showcase them in Western centers of prestige. Perl's rancor is framed by an orientalist perspective incapable of viewing East Asian subjects as having independent thought, creativity, and political agency. The overseas activities of Chinese artists are rejected as propaganda efforts to aestheticize the catastrophe of the Maoist revolution and hoodwink free people everywhere with the aesthetic virtues of totalitarian art.

While a conceptual work need not coincide with the intention of the artist, good experimental art unfurls a chain of ideas that takes us to different conclusions. Cai's comments about the artists who built the original *Courtyard* project recognize their authentic passions, but such empathy for the

original artists who championed the suffering masses need not be read as an automatic support for the totalitarian regime that followed. First, the relocation of the *Courtyard* scene in a startlingly different way challenges the claim about a restaging of state propaganda. Especially for Chinese audiences, Cai's model of this icon of peasant suffering and cry for social justice in prerevolutionary China can engender mixed emotions that rupture links to past culture and past politics. On the one hand, there is profound revulsion at the cruelties associated with Chinese feudalism and relief that many of its forms have been eliminated.[12] On the other hand, the re-creation of an earlier socialist agitprop in contemporary times outside China can be a jarring reminder of the political mistakes and catastrophes that betrayed the dreams of the Chinese masses. There is deep embarrassment (perhaps not limited to ethnic Chinese audiences) in being forced to contemplate a revolutionary piece that embodies an unyielding tendency toward the past and the mindless adherence to the collective will.

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12. For mainland criticisms of Chinese feudal culture, see, e.g., Tu Wei-Ming (1991).

Furthermore, a close inspection of the display discloses that the figures have been constructed of clay and wire, a technique that shows them going through various stages of crumbling. Is the disintegration of both the peasant and rent-collecting figures a subtle performance of the disintegration of the socialist-realist dreams over the passage of time? By assembling a propaganda icon in a novel context, while exposing its material form to the natural conditions of deterioration, Cai's project subtly erodes Maoist thinking and juxtaposes feudal violence with the larger revolutionary violence that haunts this work. In Cai's hands, *Rent Collection Courtyard* is stripped of its original power, and in its undisguised banality in the Guggenheim, the scenario becomes a message that the revolutionary past and its utopian dreams should be allowed to fade away. This oblique message about time and hindsight destroying faith in revolutionary politics and state authoritarianism is echoed, again in a paradoxical way, in another Cai installation.

In *Head On*, 99 wolves suspended in a stream slam into a glass wall (see fig. 7). Viewers tend to see this work as a celebration of individual freedom that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. But in a recent comment, Cai notes that the work can be read not as 99 individual wolves but as a single entity in motion, one that repeats the same mistake over and over again (Davis 2008). So a project that is widely interpreted as individuals rushing to freedom can also be read as an oblique criticism of the herd instinct of the collective that drives the multitude to reproduce political disasters again and again. Can it be that *Head On* uses Eastern Europe as the stand-in for China and its disastrous blunders in recent history?

Although foreign audiences frequently miss the complex links to traumatic events and revisionist remembering of recent Chinese history, artists such as Cai trouble Western perceptions of and demands on Chinese art to perform according to their political assumptions. By challenging established thinking about time and space, Cai enacts a form of aesthetic politics in global sites that anticipates emergent experiences of the global.

American curators who defend Cai want to promote Asian artists as émigré artists whose art expresses cross-border freedoms and contributes to Western ideals of cosmopolitanism. However, leading Chinese artists refuse to give comfort to such assumptions about commensurable cosmopolitanism. Arthur Lubow, a *New York Times* journalist, notes that Cai is a global citizen who both discomforts his country and is also "very patriotic" (Lubow 2008). And yet, Chinese artists

Figure 7. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Head On*, 2006. Ninety-nine life-sized replicas of wolves and a glass wall. Wolves: gauze, resin, and painted hide. Dimensions variable. Deutsche Bank Collection, commissioned by Deutsche Bank AG. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio. Figures 3–7 are of Cai's earlier works similar to the installations in the *I Want to Believe* exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008. Although my discussion is focused on the Guggenheim exhibits, Cai Studio furnished the images of earlier installations. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

stir unease because of their attachment to China as the motherland. Whereas in conventional anthropology of art, the focus is on the "authenticity" of "primitive" objects, here we have a new global situation where the problem is focused on the "authenticity" of the modern artist, a criterion that does not go with being an "authentic" Chinese subject as well.[13]

Authentic Artist, Inauthentic Chinese?

Such conceptual compartmentalization compels artists to swerve between being framed as genuine avant-garde artists (cosmopolitan) and being framed as authentic Chinese (Chinese patriots)—but not both at the same time. Assumptions about an artist's distance or closeness to China as motherland enact a moral audit of his or her art. The new twinning of Chinese identity and global capitalist power also contributes to such binary oppositions. The question of what is "Chinese" in CCA is thus viewed as a source of geopolitical apprehensions as well as global market value.

In 2005, an Italian collector who opened a gallery in Beijing noted that "you cannot tell from their work that they are Chinese. They express strong ideas with a lot of freshness" (Lankarani 2008). Here is the familiar premise about the incommensurability of being a Chinese and an avant-gardist. Thus, Chinese artists have had to manage perceptions that they are interested only in commercial benefits and/or propagandist influence overseas. In Western contexts, many artists claim that their "Chineseness" is incidental to their art, even when global markets want art from China. At the same time, the very "Chineseness" in CCA has been an irreducible part of its cultural appeal to Asian collectors who may otherwise have been indifferent to experimental art. This divergent valuation of Chineseness—as having market value in Western and Asian markets but questionable political valence in Western art circles—has conditioned the more commercially driven artists to be highly sensitive about their Chinese identity. Given the politics of reception that require modern Asian art to be either lucrative or avant-gardist, but not both at the same time (as compared to Hirst's works), Chinese artists have become agile in dodging "Chineseness" as a damning category. Cai was recently interviewed in New York about how he sees himself as a border-crossing artist. Cai replied that he checks all the boxes for "international," "Chinese," "Asian," and "contemporary," but the most meaningful category is as "a New York artist . . . [where] you can be a normal person."[14] Here is an instance of the entrepreneurial artist who wants to get passports and be welcomed in global cities

but who also knows how to play the Chinese card very well when necessary.

The question is, Are these artists also troubling authoritarian politics at home? What mode of politics is at stake here? Indeed, the adjacency of world-renown Chinese artists to the Chinese state is extremely troubling to Western observers who seek in CCA explicit critiques of the Chinese party-state. American obsessions about the threat of China's capitalism to Western avant-gardism and suspicion of Chinese uses of art as propaganda can be traced to the uses of modern art by state socialism and for the glorification of the Third Reich. For art critics, there has been no problem with commissioning ethnic Chinese artists such as Maya Lin to create the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or I. M. Pei to redesign part of the Louvre Museum for the glorification of France. But contemporary Chinese artists who are nationals of China are always already judged as compromised when they work on national projects for China. The assumptions that one cannot be both an avant-garde artist and a patriotic Chinese, or be loved by Western art critics and love your Chinese homeland at the same time, block more nuanced interpretations of modern artistic experiments.

For American critics, the 2008 Beijing Olympics was a global show put on by a fascist state, and many refused to give it legitimacy by watching it. Thus, when Cai, Zhang Yimou, and Ai Weiwei variously participated in staging the Beijing Olympics, they were judged as selling out. Critics claim that by taking a position of adjacency to the state, they lend their talents to the glorification of China itself (Lubow 2008). But one can also read the involvement of leading artists as a way to convert a nationalistic show into a reimagination of the global. Zhang Yimou, the film director in charge of the Olympics cultural performances, said, "The Olympic circle is round. The National Stadium is circular. There is Cai's circle in the sky. The circle is very important in Chinese thinking—the sky is round, the earth is square. Round symbolizes limitlessness, also fullness and completeness" (Lubow 2008). In the opening ceremonies, Cai orchestrated the fireworks spiral that suggested a dragon unfurling out of the "Bird's Nest," that is, a pyrotechnical display of China's spectacular but peaceful rise in consonant with the Olympic theme of "One World, One Dream."[15] Such a legend issued by another country would be considered benign or a gesture to the Olympic global spirit, but these Chinese displays have been received as contamination by the state and not as a cultural celebration that anticipates a globality of spirit transcending the Chinese nation.

Chinese art is shaping global encounters that do not necessarily produce the kind of commensurable politics Western progressives associate with their ideal of a global civil society.

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13. The debate on the political "authenticity" of the artist is an important problem that is underdeveloped in conventional anthropology of art, which tends to dwell on "authentic" versus "fake" art objects. See, e.g., Morphy and Perkins (2006).

14. See *Wall Street Journal*–sponsored event, "Art without Borders," Summer Festival at the Lincoln Center, July 1, 2009. http://online.wsj.com/video/art-without-borders/642509E4-957E-4A95-BC0C-CD5BEC7D38D3.html (accessed July 3, 2009).

15. The slogan "One World, One Dream" is conspicuously borne on a giant banner attached to a major viewing site of the Great Wall. Here is a state promise that China's new prominence seeks to promote global solidarity rather than division.

As anticipatory politics, experimental art tends to expose differences and conflicts, to generate conditions of possibility for new forces that do not fall neatly into a pregiven institutional form. For instance, Ai had collaborated in the design of the Bird's Nest, but he disputed the image of the new stadium as a container of Chinese culture or launching pad for China's political glory. Ai says that the design of the stadium represents emptiness and that the conception "was free of any obstructions of traditional notions" (Zhang 2008). His refusal of Chinese elements is an interesting contrast to Cai's redeployment of the same in his art. But Ai's iconoclastic move is to break from contemporary Chinese politics ("We must bid farewell to autocracy"; Ai 2008), a struggle depicted in the elliptical web of steel columns that seems to strain to contain intense activity within. Jacques Herzog, of the Swiss Herzog and de Meuron firm that built the structure, notes that "the building is made to be open. It is a work of public sculpture" (Ouroussoff 2008:A1, A14). Although the Chinese government built a fence around it, the Bird's Nest anticipates a new politics of public space (in sharp contrast to the massive surveillance of Tiananmen Square). Ai feels that the state has (temporarily) misappropriated his symbolism of the national stadium (he refused to attend the Olympics). Clearly, the designers view the Bird's Nest as a free-flowing structure (redolent of Taoism?) that transcends public-private divides and reaches between national barriers for a new global openness.

The vector of ideas unleashed by Cai's and Ai's works disrupts Western binarism and fears of Asia to suggest a new configuration of global possibilities. Their projects are commentaries on historical events that benchmark steps in the arrival of a new global era. Asia as an object of Western reflection is being taken up as an object of aesthetic revision and intervention in our confrontation with global realities. China's leading public intellectual, Wang Hui, has observed that "with Cai, 'China' or 'Asia' is no longer an object of 'Western' eyes. . . . Cai does not objectify his own experience and tradition, but rather methodolizes them in order to observe the world in which we exist. Precisely in striving to turn 'China' and 'Asia' into a method," Cai's style as an aesthetic catalyst draws on a literary tradition of using civilization (*wen*) to oppose savagery (Wang 2008:47–48). For this reason, perhaps, Cai can be compared to a traditional Chinese healer, a conjurer of possible futures out of the unpromising detritus of materiality, culture, and history.

Conclusion: The Artist Problematizes the Global

Marco Polo opened a route to China, but we are still grappling with the concepts of the world as an interconnected mutuality. Contemporary Chinese artists actively juxtapose Chinese and Western idioms in works that rupture and animate the global as a problem-space of ideas. CCA intervenes in the power relations of global representations.

As a distinctive form of anticipatory politics, Chinese art,

in addressing our global wounds and existentialist crisis, our loss of old certainties in politics and beliefs, unleashes a spiral of new ideas. Artists such as Cai take spatial and mystical leaps that do not follow logically from sociological causes and connections. The mobile art of anticipatory politics, through its novel combinations and disjunctures, can heal global wounds while anticipating new global possibilities. Chinese artists subvert old categories without being frozen into a political stance of being for or against China. Experimental Chinese art problematizes established notions of global civil society and avant-garde politics while proposing new ways of thinking that do not settle for predetermined resolutions or outcomes. Because anticipatory political art operates in the vector space that takes multiple sites as points of reference, it makes conflicts more visible and engages in a "continuous criticism" (Foucault 1994:457) of institutionalized relationships. It crystallizes conditions for reenvisioning the world as heterogeneous and always in motion.

In closing, I call for an anthropological engagement with art criticism that both interprets the art objects individually and also critically engages with interpretations of non-European refigurations of the global. As rooted cosmopolitans, mobile artists cannot be reduced to stereotypical figures of a global civil society or of a particular culture or state. Poised at the junction of nations, their novel reassemblages of disparate cultural elements are involved in a continuous interrogation of received categories that have long frozen our picture of the world. Conceptual artists are exemplary figures of what cosmopolitan anthropologists can and should be in contemporary times. As anticipatory political actors in the world at large, Chinese artists perform their role as "authentically modern" global subjects. At stake are new ideas that rethink the global.

Acknowledgments

Comments

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As Aihwa Ong suggests in her paper, international interest in Chinese contemporary art is framed by curiosity about China's reform era, in particular curiosity about cultural

transformations resulting from structural transition. English-language critical writing on Chinese art tends to refer to "emerging," "developing," and even "burgeoning" sensibilities, deploying the same spatial and temporal rhetorics that journalists use to describe China's "rise."

The politics of desire that surround the transnational circulations of images of resistance are an object of ironic reflection among artists in China. Here is a joke: why is it that even now, 35 years after his death, so much "contemporary" art (especially in the '90s genre called "Political Pop," which the collector Uli Sigg helped bring to international prominence around the turn of the century) *still* depicts the face of Chairman Mao? Answer: because he is the only Chinese political figure that Western buyers can recognize.

Western buyers of Chinese contemporary art have been consistently fascinated by work that seems to express political opposition. But it is not always clear what these collectors want Chinese artists to oppose or, rather, which object of resistance they want to see in the images they purchase: the communist past? the contemporary party-state? the excesses of unregulated capitalism?

The confusion of oppositions in which post–Cold War Western art collectors find themselves is paralleled in the often-conflicting political orientations and economic commitments of many artists and intellectuals in China. This political ambivalence is aptly described in a spoken-word piece by the avant-garde musician Yan Jun: *Fandui, fandui women ziji, fandui yiqie, fandui women bu keneng fandui de yiqie* (Oppose, oppose ourselves, oppose everything, oppose everything we cannot oppose). In this context, ostensibly political signifiers such as Red Guards in green uniforms tend to operate ambiguously, both at home and in the international art market. Inserting such images into a Chelsea gallery, rather than "undoing Western categories of knowledge," may actually confirm them.

Certainly, many Chinese artists who came to prominence in the 1990s (often as émigrés to the West) had personal and political reasons for exploring the socialist iconography of the Cultural Revolution. However, they also understood the inscrutability of most of that iconography outside of China. In a time when the market for Chinese contemporary art was almost entirely foreign, the limitations of Western audiences set limits to their explorations, in many respects more confining than those set by censorship (given that many of these artists were living in the West and that the Chinese party-state apparatus has historically been relatively less concerned with restricting niche genres). The work of becoming cosmopolitan has never been equally distributed.

In a class in the Central Academy of Fine Arts that I observed as part of fieldwork in 2008, a young woman made a series of conceptual art pieces about Mao's poetry. In one piece she wrote lines from his famous poems on toilet paper, in water. The teacher told her: "This is not your life. Why make work about the past?" He insinuated that she was trying to make something that would sell by repeating themes from famous artists—integrating Xu Bing's conceptual calligraphy and the ironic Mao references of Political Pop. However, the contrast between this student's work and the famous art it recalled is telling. Her toilet paper calligraphy was heavily dependent on local references to specific texts and textual practices. To the teacher, those familiar lines of poetry seemed clichéd, but for an international audience, they would seem arcane and require rather more translation and interpretation than many venues are willing to offer young artists. In contrast, far from subverting "old categories" or problematizing "established notions," Xu Bing's famous text pieces avoid presenting Western viewers with the limits of their own interpretive capacities. What at first looks like inscrutable Chinese calligraphy turns out to be English after all, or else (in another piece) illegible nonsense, which there is no need to read.

Cai Guo-Qiang presents an interesting case in this context. Cai has persistently insisted on using textual explication to communicate with foreign audiences. Most non-Chinese visitors to the Guggenheim will be forced to read museum copy in order to even begin to interpret the *Rent Collection Courtyard* or *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows*. It is not just a reference but also a history lesson. In that sense, it is certainly a "tool of global intervention." But if this is an "anticipatory politics," what kind of politics is it? Cai's reproduction of *Rent Collection Courtyard* as a crumbling monument is evocative, even haunting. But is it a challenge to the dominant narratives of contemporary political economy, according to which we find ourselves in a capitalism that appears, for better or worse, as the "end of history"?

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A quick glance at the daily news reveals considerable anxiety about China's status as a global power and growing Euro-American dependence on a country that has married authoritarian governance to unbridled capitalism. If the twenty-first century will be a Chinese century, what will this future bring, and how will it differ from the previous "American" century? Aihwa Ong insightfully interrogates this possibility by asking how contemporary Chinese art challenges Western categories of space, knowledge, and power by staging new global configurations and imaginaries. As in her previous work (e.g., Ong 1999, 2005, 2006), Ong integrates novel articulations of people, places, ideas, and forces to expose diverse formulations of the global with sensitive analytic flair. Here, she examines both contemporary artworks and the presence of Chinese artists in a marketplace formerly dominated by Euro-Americans. These artists, Ong argues, radically un-

settle Western arbiters of artistic excellence by deploying a form of "anticipatory politics" that shifts geopolitical orientations and foreshadows new global possibilities.

Ong rightly takes to task Western art critics whose particular brand of cosmopolitanism requires pigeonholing Chinese contemporary artists as either nationalist propagandists or advocates of global civil society and human rights. Although the works of Cai Guo-Qiang and Ai Weiwei certainly offer possibilities for transcending those binaries and Western-centric global orientations, the artists persistently encounter their own Chineseness as a problem around which they dance with care and some ambivalence. Yet, their ability to subvert national identifications may be more constrained than Ong suggests. Cai, for example, literally embodies the burden of modern Chinese nation building (his name, Guo-Qiang, translates as "nation strengthening"). Hence, in Cai's desire to neutralize his Chinese origins, to be known as a "New York artist," we sense a struggle to escape his very personal inscription in the nation.

At stake here is the nature of politics in "anticipatory politics." Contemporary art is a world of the elite, and the new global configurations that Ong astutely finds in these works speak to elite sensibilities more than to the aspirations of the masses. Another approach to anticipatory politics addresses how the urban poor strategize in relation to unexpected possibilities that may create new opportunities for advancement or simply reconfigure the contours of global marginality (Simone 2010). This attention to the everyday practices and experiences of politics offers additional insights into how different visions of the global take shape along a continuum of elite and popular interests.

Here I briefly sketch two lines of inquiry inspired by Ong's rich analysis. Contemporary art's potential for political critique emerges partly through its sheer materiality: defined by presence, scale, and detail, these works thrust themselves into the viewer's sight lines and demand engagement. The medium matters. Ong's perceptive reading of Cai's reassemblage of the high socialist work *Rent Collection Courtyard* demonstrates how his choice of clay and wire, media that slowly crumble over time, critically redefines the revolutionary attack on feudal oppression as a totalitarian project destined for the dustbin of history. This critique, Ong argues, creates a conceptual space for envisioning a Chinese politics that does not reject the animating passions of the revolutionary past but recasts them through the sobering reflections of a contemporary gaze. Yet, if the reassemblage of this work in the Western-inflected space of the Vienna Biennale unsettles existing cosmopolitan frameworks, it does so by demanding commensurability primarily from an exclusive group of contemporary art critics and aficionados.

What does the staging of contemporary art mean for politics on the ground as experienced by the artists themselves? Ong concludes by identifying conceptual artists as "exemplar figures of what cosmopolitan anthropologists can and should

be in contemporary times." This suggestive equation underscores the simultaneously rooted and mobile personas of Chinese artists whose artistic vision and reception remain deeply inflected by national politics. Ai Weiwei's fate in the aftermath of the Beijing Olympics provides a cautionary tale for the future of cosmopolitan art and anthropology alike. Jailed for three months in spring 2011 (ostensibly for financial irregularities), Ai now faces restrictions on his movement within China and internationally. His outspoken critiques of the Beijing Olympics and iconoclastic artistic performances have made him more rooted than ever before, and although he has been commissioned to design a pavilion for the 2012 London Olympics, he is unlikely to see his work in person.

Whether the new global possibilities enacted through contemporary Chinese art and its transnational encounters transform politics on the ground is clearly an open question. As anthropologists, how can we cultivate a sensitive eye for the increasingly heterogeneous visions of the global emerging in diverse contexts while also remaining attuned to the possibilities and consequences of living those visions? Ong's article provokes us to ask how our futures as cosmopolitan anthropologists will be shaped by our responses to this challenge.

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Gunpowder Artfully Deployed

Witnessing the explosive presence of contemporary Chinese artists on the international scene—sometimes literally explosive, deploying gun powder—Aihwa Ong describes this work as symptomatic of the destabilization of "old geographies of East-West divisions," revealing the "complex transnational dynamics that condition the politics of space and truth claims." Ong takes Cai Guo-Qiang's 2008 Guggenheim Museum retrospective, *I Want to Believe*, as her primary focus, a mingling of traditional motifs and modern technology that makes playful and sometimes poignant allusions to Chinese history, both recent and distant. An artful shape shifter, Cai's work resists easy characterization as "Chinese" or "Western," "propaganda" or "critique"; it is, in Ong's terms, a "border-rupturing" experimentation. I applaud Ong's project and with it the particular challenges that any consideration of contemporary East Asia poses to tidy dichotomizations of the West and the rest. While Ong is primarily concerned with the rise of Asia as a contemporary global phenomenon, the region has always defied easy disciplinary generalization—peoples with history in spades and sometimes their own imperial projects. Ong's critique here puts indigestion to constructive use. But while

I applaud her "call for an anthropological engagement with art criticism that . . . critically engages with interpretations of non-European refigurations of the global," all of this would be greatly strengthened had Ong resisted some simplifications of her own.

"Art critics," and sometimes "New York critics," are the bête noire of Ong's piece, and some do, as she says, describe the work of contemporary Chinese artists as sham avant-gardism, blatant commercialism, or even veiled propaganda, but critics seldom speak with one voice, and others seem genuinely intrigued. Where critics repeatedly express puzzlement that Cai Guo-Qiang or even the overtly dissident Ai Weiwei can be simultaneously Chinese and cosmopolitan, critical and deeply patriotic, some among them seem genuinely intrigued by the capacity of this work to shake their own preconceptions about a place called "China" (e.g., Cotter 2008, 2011; Lubow 2008). When Peter Schjeldahl (2008), writing in the *New Yorker*, describes his own feeling of "provinciality" on meeting Cai, "of blinking in the face of an intricate sophistication that is grounded elsewhere," he seems to be navigating Ong's reconfigured world map. A more nuanced reading of art reviews and the possibility that at least some critics "get it" would actually support Ong's notion of border-rupturing experimentations, testifying to the world-remapping power of the work that she engages in her own commentary.

In staking her own space, Ong is dismissive of the anthropology of art and apparently has not drunk deeply from this well. She observes that this field is concerned with the "authenticity" of "primitive art," perhaps not realizing that far from policing this boundary, the work of Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim (1990), Ruth Phillips (1999), Christopher Steiner (1994), and others has done much to productively muddle it. Nor is the anthropology of art solely concerned with the morphing of ethnographic artifacts into museum pieces, although much good work has been done on this topic. The project initiated by Marcus and Myers (1995) also considers the context of art consumption: the markets where art circulates and the deployment of power within them (e.g., Geismar 2001). Ong's throwaway comment about the gatekeeping role of foreign curators and collectors seems naive in the reconfigured universe that she invites us to contemplate: Chinese artists exhibit in MOMA, the Tate Modern, and the Guggenheim; Art Basil takes on a Hong Kong venue, art fairs and new art districts sprout up in Asian cities, contemporary Asian works command record prices in major auction houses, and Chinese buyers are visible players in all of these developments. The anthropology of art seems well positioned to take on the ethnographic challenge of these developments. Ong's essay—focused primarily on the art itself—should energize such a project, and the combustion of these two approaches could be most illuminating.

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Everyone is looking for something in the Chinese artist—hero, survivor of a government crackdown, champion of the marginalized, master, friend, and lover. Many are after the next success story—that artist who might sell a piece on the cheap and one day fetch a million dollars at a Sotheby auction. With this provocative essay, Aihwa Ong examines emergent global art spaces of capital, desire, and discourse. She calls for a new anthropology of Chinese art criticism, much of which has failed to see how Chinese artists are creatively reconfiguring the global. She also provides us with a kind of manifesto for how *not* to read the politics of the artist.

Ong's intervention operates on many levels. As she details, the global Chinese art scene is about many things, but her main concern is the critics and experts who organize, stage, and interpret the meaning of a piece of art or an exhibition, thus her detailed focus on Cai Guo-Qiang's Guggenheim exhibit and the buzz that surrounded it. Ong probes the liberal art scene's obsession with finding artists and elevating them as antistate dissidents, and she shows how Chinese artists are often seen as commercial fakes or altogether inauthentic Chinese. She is critical of the tendency to see Chinese artists as participants in a progressive global civil society. These ways of "framing" Chinese art, she argues, are inadequate to the task of making sense of what artists such as Cai do when they make art: undoing universalist thinking, disposing of well-worn binaries, reconfiguring the global.

I find Ong's arguments compelling. Questions remain, however. Does the attention to the assumptions and discursive orderings of the critic constitute a sufficient ethnographic entanglement with the global scene of modern Chinese art? Does the critic always write in English? What of art criticism that circulates throughout the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan? Does it traffic in the same universalisms and binaries? If part of the project is to consider "how non-Europeans and Europeans [encounter] each other as equivalent actors," then we also have to consider encounters in multiple languages, locations, and scenes. I have often wandered into art "happenings," heady openings, and walked the back alleys of artist enclaves in Beijing and other cities in China. In these varied spaces one finds all kinds of characters and practices. We see young entrepreneurs and experts on Chinese art, some European, most not. They raise capital to open galleries, create salons to discuss art; many travel the world, hopping exhibits. Expat connoisseurs of Chinese art mingle with hipster Chinese artists; languages, knowledges, dollars, and market skill all mix and collide in these spaces of encounter. These spaces surely have something to tell us about other ways in which the global is being reconfigured.

How does the critic read the *politics* of the artist? Ong argues

it is a mistake to find in artists such as Cai the making of a progressive global civil society, where the multitude is said to linger, remaking the world. The real object of critique here is not just the art critic but also the work of Hardt and Negri. Where Hardt and Negri might lead some to see the international art exhibit as a space for the articulation of a common political project, Ong sees their brand of theory enabling a global-national binary and the reassertion of universal values. This is a point for further debate. In this context, I do not see much value in going after Hardt and Negri. Rather, I think it makes more sense—which is what she does so well in this essay—to focus on how some curators and critics, in their relentless search for the political potentialities of modern Chinese art, traffic in all kinds of high theory, which they may or may not understand. Writing against the figure of the global multiple, Ong wants us to discard, once and for all, the global-national binary. For this framework, she asserts, forces us to read artists such as Cai and Ai Weiwei as either agents of the global multitude or always in an oppositional stance to the Chinese state. Neither does justice to the complexity of their work and the worlds they inhabit.

In the end, Ong wants us to see—one is tempted to say, liberate—these artists outside and beyond the narrative confines, the prison house, of Western universals and the philosophical traditions of liberalism. Hers is a vision of the artist as Taoist alchemist, blending styles, traditions, structure and form, East and West, the economic and the political, the complicit and the antagonistic. Cai and others are creating new mappings of the world, new geographies of time and space, and a new political sensibility that is decidedly not *reflective* of a singular identity, history, or particularity. Their work is indeed anticipatory of something new, perhaps of a radically contingent and unpredictable mode of being and acting in the world. Let us hope this mode of being and acting in the world continues to stir up trouble.

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I want to explore briefly one set of issues stimulated by Aihwa Ong's essay that concerns a relation of paraethnography, so to speak. Because of the strict word limit on *CA* comments, I am unable to develop a second set of issues that concerns the straightforward dimensions of an ethnography of Chinese artists in the scope of the distinctive art worlds in which they are situated and which they constitute for themselves, but I just wanted to place it on the agenda for future discussion of this very rich essay (with the example of work by Myers [2002] in mind and, more recently, that of the narrative ethnography by Marc Abélès [2011b], of his experiences in Beijing's leading artist district, Pékin 798, occupying a former

huge factory complex; his ethnography offers invaluable perspective on the mixed entrepreneurial/aesthetic/critical motives of the Chinese artistic avant-garde outside the heated, fearful cultural politics of their reception in Euro-American art writing and commentary).

So, how do the contemporary practices and ambitions of an anthropology of the contemporary (cf. Rabinow et al. 2008) align themselves with those of conceptual art, specifically, the distinctive variety of it being produced by the cosmopolitan and successful Chinese artists that Ong discusses? More seems to be at stake than an ethnographic interest in a global art world phenomenon coming out of China. Is "the circulation of contemporary artists exercising novel ideas in spaces of global encounter" a model for ethnographic method as well as a subject of it?

Though anthropologists and artists have very different publics, accountabilities, and forms of expression, they seem to share deeper affinities of purpose and practice. "Conceptual art," as Ong argues, "as both ideas and critique, can be viewed as a distinctive kind of anticipatory politics that engages a given situation as a question; that is, it is an art that simultaneously ruptures familiar modes of reasoning while anticipating emerging problems." This sounds a lot like latter-day "anthropology as cultural critique," having located its expressions and purposes precisely in the same anticipatory temporality of the contemporary as have the Chinese artists that Ong describes. While, of course, conceptual artists and ethnographers are not the same (see especially Foster 1995; Marcus 2010), they crucially share an ethos of experimentation, perhaps more derivative of the former by the latter. By interpretative fiat that makes them subject to the ethnographer's gaze, and the artists become the surrogates of anthropologists in contexts of spectacle and bold public appeal. Yet, posing this affinity between the intellectual work of conceptual artists and that of ethnographers does not necessarily suggest partnership or collaboration, though those are possible and have occurred (Calzadilla and Marcus 2006; Kester 2011; Marcus 2008, 2010; Papastergiadis 2012). Rather, it does suggest a trading zone of methods (Galison 1997) in which ethnographers in their own tradecraft might be encouraged to ask what of the artists' practices, designs, and stratagems in producing spectacle might be incorporated in the far more low-key ethnographic research process. In her essay, Ong provides the impetus and some of the language to encourage such an exchange or, at this juncture, such an appropriation by ethnographers with the imagination for it and when the opportunity arises.

Recently, in connection with a team ethnography project situated in the headquarters villa of the World Trade Organization in Geneva (Abélès 2011a), I worked out a feasible design for an installation as an intervention in fieldwork (Marcus, forthcoming) that had become significantly blocked by a culture of diplomatic discretion and secrecy (see Deeb and Marcus 2011). We had considerable access but not

enough to overcome the formidable and contradictory constraints that policies of transparency imposed on us. The controlled spectacle of the installation artist within the space of fieldwork promised to generate "data"—talk, reception, directed engagement on the part of our subjects—crucial to ethnography but otherwise blocked by the invisibilities of transparency. Something like a controlled version of Cai's act of conceptual art in Venice, for example, is possible within ethnography.

Perhaps this play within ethnographic method in terms of the practices and imaginaries of conceptual art is occasional and serendipitous and does not have much a future. More likely, as in Ong's suggestive arguments, is a capacity to perform the ethnographic imaginary vicariously through what conceptual artists are able to do—but ethnographers are not. They share an ethos with an anthropology of the contemporary, but they are operators for it in ways that ethnographers mostly cannot be, who look on with admiration and, perhaps, envy. As Ong concludes, "Because anticipatory political art operates in the vector space that takes multiple sites as points of reference, it makes conflicts more visible, and engages in a 'continuous criticism' . . . of institutionalized relationships. It crystallizes conditions for reenvisioning the world as heterogeneous and always in motion." This sounds like what the project of the ethnography of the contemporary would do if it could. Art is thus a spectacular extension of the more subtle ethnographic, or a possible model for it. What, then, is the proper or possible relation of anthropologists to such artists, if the latter are to be more than just the subjects of second-order ethnographic observation and commentary?

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I read this provocative and well-crafted article with great interest. As in most of her previous publications, Aihwa Ong is never satisfied with focusing on specific ethnographic cases of merely one place or group; instead, she asks important big questions confronting anthropologists and other researchers today across different regions. Her incisive analysis and bold thinking provide us with productive interventions in current debates on the shifting global configuration of power relations and identity, cosmopolitanism, and the cultural politics of contemporary art.

"What Marco Polo Forgot" is a piece of original and refreshing scholarship that urges us to rethink global connections through the lens of contemporary Chinese art at a time when China is gaining an increasingly prominent position on the world stage. It effectively challenges a series of entrenched conceptual binaries that form the basis of a habitual way of thinking through compartmentalization (i.e., cosmopolitan vs. national patriot, avant-garde vs. authentically indigenous, civil society vs. authoritarian state, and so on). In developing the notion of "anticipatory politics" and pondering the new political possibilities that the twenty-first century offers, Ong highlights the techniques of assemblage and juxtaposition as a way of understanding the contemporary world. These theoretical insights, however, do not come from abstract claims; rather, they emerge from her careful reading of the artworks by Cai Guo-Qiang, an influential traveling contemporary Chinese artist. Further, the divergent and controversial interpretations of Cai's bold art raise another important question about what is considered commensurable and incommensurable in the politics of identity today. Artists such as Cai frequently disrupt the logic of Western identity politics by refusing to follow the either/or mode of identification and categorization that does not allow the possibility of one simultaneously inhabiting multiple positions or speaking in diverse voices (i.e., being a genuine cosmopolitan artist and an authentic Chinese patriot, drawing from and glorifying certain Chinese cultural elements while not being afraid of making cultural critique).

Yet, a hegemonic paradigm of thinking about the world and politics as shaped by unequal power relations and uneven capitalist development continues to exist even though non-Euro/American conceptual artists among others have begun to challenge this dominant and often taken-for-granted framework. While fully recognizing the significance of this new critical trend and potential, I wonder whether Ong's reading is a bit overly optimistic about the degree and extent of the impact such avant-garde artists might have. It seems to me that there is a long way to go before we reach the point where such challenges and cultural negotiations can take root among a broader social spectrum at home and abroad and thus destabilize the established global order of things. But precisely for this reason, I agree with Ong that contemporary anthropologists can and should play a more prominent role in fostering a radically different way of thinking about the world and envisioning a different future for a larger public.

While the article largely focuses on how contemporary Chinese art can serve as a means of global intervention, it also raises a crucial question of how it might alter the politics at home. Like Cai, several other internationally recognized Chinese artists all have a delicate and complex relationship with a state that itself is also undergoing transformations. Yet, as Ong rightly points out, such a complex relationship is often not adequately recognized by ideologically driven Western critiques that characterize any artistic participation in state-orchestrated projects (such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics) as a sign of "selling out." Building on her observation, I would like to take the argument even further. The notion of "selling out" here suggests a mechanical one-way perspective on power and social change in postsocialist China shaped by the

lens of authoritarianism. For these critics, the Chinese state remains a powerful figure that can co-opt even critical social actors into its nationalistic projects with the lure of personal fame and status. This interpretation fails to acknowledge the possibility that the operating mode of state power is also shifting and that such high-profile participants are also able to transform partly the meanings of the projects involved. Entrepreneurialism and political ambitions need not be mutually exclusive for both the state and the artists. Another intriguing issue explored in the article that could be unpacked further is the unstable and sometimes unpredictable relationship between market value and political stance, economic capital and social capital for conceptual artists.

I have no doubt that Ong's article will appeal to a broad readership and stimulate further exciting and meaningful debates among scholars, artists, and the general public about how better to grapple with the complex conditions and new possibilities of contemporary human existence through new social imaginations and novel conceptions of the world. As Walter Benjamin reminded us a long time ago, art has great potential to transform politics and engender profound social change.

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What Can We Bring to the World?

As a China-born global artist, Cai Guo-Qiang is widely discussed, especially after the first success of his work *Bring to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* in 1995. Cai's work has been criticized by both Western and Chinese art critics, and he was even sued in 2000 for his work *Rent Collection Courtyard*. Different from solely looking at the circulation of art, Aihwa Ong uses an alternative approach to provide insight into the notion of the circulation of the artist, Cai's ideas in spaces of the global encounter. This approach, similar to Latour's actor-network theory, aims to use the network of Cai to illustrate the asymmetrical power relation between the Chinese and Western media and the Chinese artist's position in this dynamic relationship.

As Ong points out, the different gazes of the Chinese and Western critics are based on their expectation of how the global Chinese artist should present. When Western critics focus mainly on the authenticity of the art by judging him as a "showman and sham artist," they expect him to be an "independent, creative, and political agent." On the contrary, the Chinese media, especially the Chinese artists, have their own imaginaries of how Chinese-born global artists should

be. People expect him to present his art to change the Western perception of China instead of selling China to satisfy the Western media.

Thus, Cai has been trapped in a dilemma between both sides due to his dualistic position as a pure avant-garde artist or a pure patriotic artist. There is a popular Chinese saying that influences the current generation of Chinese, which is "a person's character decides his destiny" (*xingge jueding mingyun*). Being a global artist, Cai is trying to pave a way beyond borders, of playing the Chinese role to shape Western perceptions of China. Being a Chinese cosmopolitan artist, he aims to search for a middle way in the process of dialogue between the world and China. This approach is very close to the Confucian's ideology of "Doctrine of the Mean." Through his work, consciously or unconsciously, he presents the artistic idea of value. Thus, as Ong states, Cai's experience with the world develops his lifelong pursuit of the artist career, which connects to the past, the contemporary, and the future.

The critics from both sides (China and the global) and his encounter with curators have forced him to create a certain "emergent identity." Being a cosmopolitan artist does not mean that he has a position to be both a border-crossing artist and simply a man. Cai's dream to be "a normal person" exactly presents his way of looking at the world and his art. He is presenting his emergent identity to the world through his "anticipatory" political position by "the dualistic perception that Chinese experimental art can be celebrated for its cosmopolitanism or rejected out of concerns of its propaganda or mere art entrepreneurialism."

In Ong's article, the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony perfectly presents this dualistic position and the complexity of identity. The event, presented by three leading Chinese artists, Zhang Yimo, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Ai Weiwei, showed the asymmetrical power relationship between both sides of the media and the dialogue between the world and China. If Zhang presented the voice from the Chinese authority and Ai used his idea of freedom "of any obstructions of traditional notions" to refuse the contemporary China politics, Cai's attitude and his work indicate his identity as a mediator. His approach showed the possibility to make a novel idea in the space of global encounter and "methodolize" his experience to observe and present the world, without being politically for or against China.

Ong's work does more than call for an anthropological engagement with art criticism as a cointerpreter. Her approach raises a similar question of being both a Chinese anthropologist and a global anthropologist, that is, how to play the role as a mediator for both Western and Chinese academia. Similar to Cai's case, the border-crossing identity leads such anthropologists to acquire a dualistic position. Their work can be interpreted as selling Western theories by the Chinese domestic scholars or criticized as inauthentic without touching the real ground by the Western scholars. Is it possible, as Cai's story illustrates, to use what they have learned and their cos-

mopolitan experience and tradition, to present to both Chinese and global academia? It seems that the Chinese global artists or scholars can hardly be understood as "normal" people. Nevertheless, their continuous struggle with the situation will never end. Thus, we return to the first question put forward by Ong: What we can bring to the world and to the global?

Reply

The above comments richly expand the conversation on contemporary art on the world stage. In the essay, Cai Quo-Qiang's 2008 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum was the event that crystallized contested meanings of the global. I deployed the global in many registers: as concepts of heterogeneity and exchange and as emerging configurations of cosmopolitanism. The plunge of world-famous Chinese artists into the New York art scene also raises broader questions about an anthropology of the global. I accept the invitation to expand on the anticipatory strategies—crouching in the wings, rupturing borders, messing with the props, and casting spells—that deploy things Chinese as a global method.

Double Positioning

Mobile artists not only rupture national borders but also recast them in relation to shifting norms of cosmopolitan art. The Cai exhibition is the event and the field through which contemporary Chinese art negotiates the forms, meanings, and experiences of cosmopolitanism. Remarks on the double positioning of mobile artists identify different kinds of cultural sophistication in two very different milieus—New York, China—and what the effects of the artworks may be.

It should be clear to the attentive reader that my focus is on specific responses to Cai's art at the Guggenheim and not on implicating all New York curators and media scholars. From her perch at the Museum of Natural History, Laurel Kendall doubtlessly has a privileged view she is free to elaborate upon, but it is not the subject of my essay. I have a sense of the New York–Chinese art world. My sister works at Wildenstein, New York City, which in 2008 opened a gallery in Beijing devoted to works by artists such as Zhang Xiaogang (see Ong 2010). This is a fairly new phenomenon. While there is a contemporary Asian art expert, Melissa Chiu of the Asia Society Museum, the Guggenheim Museum is the first of its kind to only recently hire a senior curator of Asian art and to seek exchanges with contemporary artists working in the developing world.

More on target are remarks on how border-running artists experience limits of interpretation by respective audiences. Lily Chumley identifies "the politics of desire" among Western buyers or critics who may not "get" the messages embedded in Cai's artworks. She captures the fluid ambiguity of the artists, intended perhaps not to fully disclose the "history lessons" but rather to disrupt Western expectations of political opposition or resistance in the installations. The political significance of Chinese art is less in embedded cultural messages than in the act of challenging Western definitions of cosmopolitan norms.

When it comes to potential audiences in the People's Republic, comments focus on the limits of artistic subversions among the public. Obviously, international exhibitions are still mainly the stuff of elite cultural exchange. I agree with Sara Friedman and Zhang Li that the masses in China may not grasp any challenges to nationalist sentiments posed by Cai or Ai Weiwei in their various works.

Rather, my point is that major Chinese artists are also playing subterfuge with categories of the national and the international among intellectuals and politicians at home. Instead of anticipating "optimistic" effects of such artists (Zhang), my attention is on the play of strategies that may alternate between the alignment and the disarticulation of artistic "entrepreneurialism and political ambitions" (Zhang). In short, when it comes to the Chinese milieu of art reception, I do not claim the artworks in question are transforming politics "on the ground" (Friedman) or challenging the idiom of "contemporary political economy" (Chumley). Rather, I merely wish to highlight the role of artists in shaking up conventional mappings of national and global spaces and how we may think about cosmopolitanism today.

Anticipatory Politics

The politics of Cai and his colleagues therefore both disorder and reorder geopolitical definitions of what is modern, contemporary, and global in art. I am not able to examine the burgeoning inter-Asian art markets, but New York is the preeminent global site of art as "capital, desire, and discourse," as Ralph Litzinger notes. By staging their works in New York (rather than, say, Hong Kong), Chinese artists co-construct art cosmopolitanism beyond the "prison house" of "Western universals and the philosophical traditions of liberalism" (Litzinger). Indeed, there is perhaps no "correct" way to interpret the work; the politics of anticipation surround how the intrusion of Chinese artists into an elite West media center can stir up unease and unsettling feelings about one's location in the shifting terrain and practices of contemporary art.

Here the comments suggest two ways of thinking about the reframing of the global. First, paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan, is contemporary art a particular instantiation of "the medium is the message"? Is the reconfiguration of the global context more politically fraught than the content of the art itself?

Second, when it comes to the definition of modern Chinese art, the politics of reflecting on the past moves forward by

Figure 8. Jacob Ki Nielsen, Ph.D. fellow, Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen, *Urban Imaginaries* poster, 2012. A color version of this figure is available in the online edition of *Current Anthropology*.

engaging non-Chinese forms or styles of art. Such anticipatory politics unsettle what is "Chinese" at home and in the world, as well as conventional reception in international settings.

What Can China Bring to the World?

As different commentators note, by seeking to slip by judgments of what is commensurable or incommensurable in art practice, content, identity, and media power, the Chinese artist operates as a mediator of value in the space of global encounter. Yujie Zhu notes, in the search for a "dialogue between the world and China," Cai seems to pose the question "What can we bring to the world?" Zhu seems to invite me to say more about China as an unsettling and dispersing gesture. Cai's shamanistic style seamlessly circumvents old borders and heals old wounds of East-West encounters. He returns ghosts to the past (ghosts of Western obsessions about China, the universal, as well as ghosts of Chinese narratives of the West, cultural revolution, national identity, etc.). Cai's works perform Daoist flows of nowhere and everywhere, rupturing labels that fix us to places and identities. His installations enact the dance of dualities and the interplay of concepts and nonconcepts in a constant process of appearance, animation, and creation. Beyond the works described in the essay, Cai's gunpowder paintings, mushroom imageries, and fireworks art express an animistic energy that unsettles spatial and temporal orders in suggesting a world without beginning or end. Can Daoist sensibility, a kind of thermodynamic theory of the world, deconstruct contemporary cosmopolitanism and animate a rethinking of the global contemporary?

The Cosmopolitan Anthropologist

George Marcus poses a provocative question of what is at stake in an anthropological encounter with novel contemporary art. "Is 'the circulation of contemporary artists exercising novel ideas in spaces of global encounter' a model for ethnographic method as well as a subject of it?"

The question triggers another one. Are not anthropologists presumed already to be cosmopolitan researchers, experimenting with appropriate tools for studying globalized situations? Like mobile artists, anthropologists unsettle designated spaces (of culture, resistance, human rights, and power) by being attentive to practices and ideas that shape emerging spaces of the global. My view on contemporary ethnography is that one needs to be skeptical of some of the hype and the misnomer surrounding "ethnography" (the "ethnos" within the disciplinary confines of territory, race, or culture has been destabilized). Rather, stripped of its more precious claims, the anthropological method is vitally based on (first- and second-order) observations, a low-flying technique that Stephen Collier and I have called staying "close to practices" (Collier and Ong 2005). Instead of describing an ethnos, anthropological observations track the variability of practices and strategies that destabilize concepts and social arrangements but also conjure up new configurations of politics, ethics, and sociality.

So, while I greatly admire the incandescent effect of Cai's works on multiple publics, I am not proposing that the anthropologist borrows the artist's arrows for our decidedly less flamboyant display of "the ethnographic imagination." Whose imagination, and from which vantage point have we collectively been imagining the changing world? The ethos of experimentation is coming from sites undergoing great transformation. The anthropological method is challenged by an array of startling changes and novel configurations not anticipated in older frameworks, concepts, and obsessions. I therefore see the anthropologist not as an envious bystander but rather a cosmopolitan cointerpreter and comediator of cosmopolitan artists. Exercising different sets of skills, anthropologists and artists are engaged in contemporary venues, having vital roles in molding international cultural conversation and understanding (see Ong 2011*a*).

One kind of cosmopolitan ethnographic approach can involve the study of art projects in an unstable field of power that includes artists, collectors, curators, and critics. The interactions of commentaries, political goals, and cultural sensibilities shape emerging global forms that anticipate our overlapping futures. It has been some time since the Cai Guggenheim exhibition in 2008, but the sense of China's expansion into international art shows is still relatively novel. Recently, the *New York Times* reports on the intrusion of Chinese art into major New York museums, citing the reaction of Fan D'ian, the director of the National Art Museum in Shanghai: "For the Western point of view, the 20th century is Western art, and the art of Modernism. I don't think that is fair. These days, when Western scholars discuss modernity, they should also discuss Chinese modernity" (Perlez 2012). These comments, perhaps, are pertinent as well for an anthropology that would be contemporary.

From the vantage point of Southeast Asia as well, the sense of being poised at a momentous juncture is palpable. On his return trip to Venice, Marco Polo in 1292 stopped in Sumatra and discovered evidence of Islamic culture. In 1511, Afonso de Albuquerque arrived in Malacca (bearing gunpowder that Marco Polo had encountered in China) and set off the first salvo in the centuries-long Western rule of huge swaths of South and East Asia. Five decades later, in 2011, Asian leaders quietly noted the end of the long shadow of Western domination of the region. The future, as reflected in the spectacular skylines of Asian cities, is being reimagined rather differently than through the lens of the past (see Ong 2011*b*).

For the cosmopolitan anthropologist, truly significant cross-cultural debates, whether in art, anthropology, or the social sciences more broadly, are haunted by the ghost of civilizations vanquished and resurgent powers in contemporary times. New ethnographic sophistication is needed to grasp complex social practices circulating in heterogeneous sites and conversations. For instance, by putting old ghosts

to rest, do contemporary Asian artists also rethink "civiliza-tion" as a modern force in Asia's modernity (see Chakrabarty 2012)? Cai was born in 1957, in the ancient seaport of Quan-zhou on the southern Chinese coast. It is richly ironic that his personal name, as Friedman points out, means "nation strengthening" (an effect of the post-1949 mode of subjec-tification). But wielding gunpowder, arrows, and fireworks, Cai adroitly subverts and disperses disciplinary definitions of culture and nation, carving a global space that is neither East nor West but their radically reglobalized intermingling.

—Aihwa Ong

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AIHWA ONG

Forged in the tumult of radical transformations in the East, experimental Asian artists have often turned to the problem of the human and the universal in modernity. Western museums have long served as a global hall of mirrors through which contemporary Asian art is framed as diasporic and racially refracted. However, these recent years of unsurpassed cultural globalism have witnessed entanglements of politics and aesthetics that raise issues of translatability across cultural sensibilities.

Leading American museums enhance their cosmopolitan value by staging varied and novel works that are deemed "art in diaspora." The museum as institutional mediator of the semiotics of humanity plays a political role in translating multiple ways of being human today. By providing a relatively safe space for the situated interplay of cultural flows, museums act as laboratories where artistic performances, curators, and viewers negotiate and experiment with different ways of being both human and modern. Yet museums are also places where ethical pitfalls loom large, where affects of racial and rights regimes can be instituted as well as disrupted.

I have written about "contemporary" Chinese art in major museums in the West through the prism of works that renegotiate and subvert East-West identities and spaces.[1] Here I look at another assemblage of Chinese "experimental art" (s*hiyan yishu*) interacting with American curators and viewers, an encounter that seems to instigate liberal-rights concerns that both racialize and dehumanize Chinese subjects. The proliferation of images of "crazy rich Asians" notwithstanding, Western representative regimes determine the inscription of racial aesthetic forms in the global community.

Hegemonic aesthetic politics operate according to a logic of racial signification that determines not only "what is seen and what can be said about it" but also aesthetic "ways of doing and making."

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In the fall of 2017, the traveling exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* opened at the Guggenheim in New York, becoming the largest exhibition of art from greater China ever to be shown in the US. The artworks were produced in the period between the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989 and the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the era of China's ascendance onto the world stage. Bohemians, drifters, and the homeless converged on a so-called East Villages (named after NY's namesake) forged the beginnings of contemporary Chinese art in the shadow of high risers. "This assemblage of the uprooted sprouted artworks is collected in Art and China after 1989."

1.   Aihwa Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot: Asian Art Negotiates the Global," *Current Anthropology,* Volume 53, Number 4 (August 2012), pp. 1–24.

The show featured seventy artists and was organized by a transnational consortium of museums, protagonists, and curators from America and Europe, as well as the Guggenheim's Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation's Chinese Art Initiative. According to the Guggenheim's director at the time, Richard Armstrong, the goal of the show was to open up the conception of global art history and contemporary art to multiple, intersecting flows and to help "diverse American audiences better understand the cultural expressions and creative achievements of these critical witnesses to China's rapid, yet uneven political, social and economic transformation—a geopolitical shift that increasingly defines America's own global position and identity." But can Chinese experimental art challenge or deconstruct the global art canon, especially when, despite an expanded American view, Western viewers have troubling seeing Chinese experiences in universal terms?

Before *Art and China after 1989* had even opened, three works in the show, all of which feature animals in some capacity, were targeted by animal-rights activists and removed from the exhibition. One such work was *Dogs that Cannot Touch Each Other*, by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, a seven-minute video depicting eight American pit bulls on (non-motorized) treadmills. It seems a pretty straightforward illustration of the cruel rat race required to attain Chinese economic modernity. Another was *A Case Study of Transference*, a video of two copulating pigs (one stamped with absurd Chinese characters, the other with nonsensical English words) enacting what the artist Xu Bing suggests is the transference of diluted cultures. Xu poses the question: What kind of offspring will issue from enthusiastic East-West exchanges, from the consumption of each other at the most basic level?

Many New Yorkers' sensibilities were also offended by the mistreatment of insects and small reptiles in Huang Yong Ping's two-part installation *The Bridge* and *Theater of the World*. *The Bridge* was a painted steel structure containing snakes and tortoises. It arched over *Theater of the World*, a round wood-and-steel enclosure that housed hundreds of millipedes, beetles, cockroaches, crickets, and grasshoppers along with a few lizards under an overhead lamp. The use of antagonistic animals to invoke China's authoritarian state may have been unnerving to American viewers in a time of great uncertainty for Western liberalism.

Though the Guggenheim indicated that the works thematized oppression in China, street protests and an online petition expressed outrage at the perceived cruelty toward animals. After close to a million signatures demanding "cruelty-free exhibits," as well as threats of violence directed at museum staff, the Guggenheim pulled the works from view. Some art historians supported taking down works that seemed to sanction animal abuse; many artists criticized the move as a blow to artistic freedom—Ai Weiwei said that "pressuring museums to pull down artwork shows a narrow understanding about not only animal rights but also human rights." I would argue, however, that the issue is more complex and that it represents more than a clash of animal and human rights.

When *Art and China after 1989* came to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2018, the three artworks were no longer part of the show; in their places

were texts explaining why curators had pulled the works. *Dogs that Cannot Touch Each Other*, the San Francisco curators noted in the spot marking its absence, "has been at the center of a heated debate about the morality of artists' work with animals, the ethics of what a museum presents as historical artifact, the boundaries between metaphor and perceived cruelty, and the implications of withdrawing works from display out of concern for public safety." The text goes on to say that these works involving humans and animals "are disturbing because they deal head-on with the links between violence, theater, and power."
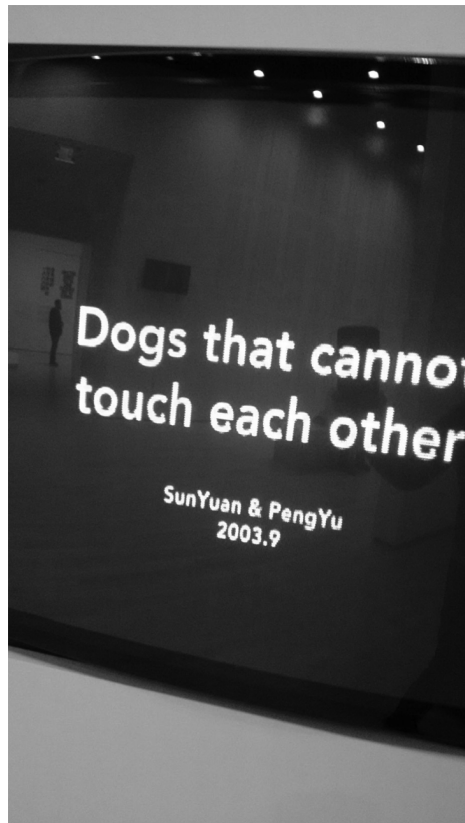
Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's Dogs that Cannot Touch Each Other, *2003, represented by a legend rather than the video itself.*

Similarly, SF MOMA curators tried to illuminate the intended message of *Theater of the World*. SFMOMA followed the Guggenheim in displaying *Theater of the World* as an empty shell to acknowledge the fact that "the tension between political activism and animal rights is now part of the history of the artwork." It also included artist Huang Yong Ping's statement on the controversy: "It is said that more than 700,000 people are opposed to this work that involves living animals, but how many of those people have really looked at and understood this work?" He blames the servility induced by the modern media that compares the work to Hobbes's

Huang Yong Ping, Theater of the World, *1993,*
and The Bridge, *1995, shown without animals.*

"war of all against all." "Is this not a 'miniature landscape of a civilized nation, in
contrast to natural savagery, as described by Hobbes? This structure presents what
people might consider a peaceful, safe, and orderly state of 'governance.'"

Huang stressed, "Isn't this *cruelty realized by the exquisite governance*, here
embodied by the 'cage'? An empty cage is not, by itself, reality. Reality is chaos
inside calmness, violence under peace, and vice versa . . . Insects and humans,
predator and prey, the one who dies for the other and the one who lives by the
other." This intensely nihilistic quote resonates in the context of a critique of
authoritarianism.

Perhaps it was too much of a jump for the New Yorkers who objected to what
they saw as the use of animals for cruel and titillating artistic ends to grasp that the
art in question was about people who must live and die like animals in order to
bring about China's great transformation.

As mentioned above, Ai Weiwei identified the class of interpretation and also
human rights[2]. American viewers tend to see art that exploits animals in furtherance
of its messages as condoning violence against life itself. Art historian Sarah Cohen,
for example, argues that using animals to make artistic points is bad art, that "using
pigs as performers to 'inform' human spectators about their cultural hang-ups is a
shopworn strategy—as old as dancing bears and the circus." And the president of
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals commended the Guggenheim "for

2.   Aihwa Ong, "In a Time of Earthquakes: Chinese Artists Shake the World," *Bibliotechnica*, edited
by John Tresh (Venice: Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 2018), 175–206.

withdrawing these vile acts of cruelty masked as creativity. . . . China has no laws protecting animals, so withdrawing these pieces may help the country and its artists recognize that animals are not props and that they deserve respect."

Statements that raise ethical issues about the treatment of less-than-human animals in Chinese art, that compare their deployment to the use of dancing bears, and that bemoan lack of laws protecting animals in China all reveal an implicit re-racializing of mainland Chinese as themselves less than human. Or this mode of Chinese animal art is too avantgarde and the mainstream art-criticism narrative in vogue reflects American unease about our industrial and scientific treatment of animals?

I read these artworks not as a human-versus-animal opposition but as depicting human beings spiraling into and out of an animal-like existence. The way the pieces work as critique depends on the notion that one must not be mistreated in the same way that animals too frequently are in China, that being compared to a dog is a feature of authoritarian rule, not an endorsement of cruelty to animals. In the Chinese social context, the critique requires the animal as originally abject in order to make a claim about human political abjection.

In the fall of 2018, I visited a smaller version of the exhibition at SFMOMA. Viewed in the constellation of other artworks, the banned installations and videos collectively engage the intensity and intensification of dislocation, fragmentation, and ruin experienced by ordinary people. The works vividly symbolize the overturning of the animal-human hierarchy in which, ironically, animals are in a similar if not superior position to humans.

Wang Xingwei's painting *New Beijing* is based on a photo of students rushing two wounded people to a hospital on June 4, 1989. By replacing the injured students with two emperor penguins—a species not native to China—Wang avoids a direct critique of the state while depicting the kind of heroic rescue valorized by it. Oppressed humans who cannot rebel openly must use an animal masquerade. Meanings are further layered in that the Chinese public would be familiar with the penguin pair as mascots of Tencent QQ, one of China's giant Internet technology companies.

Meat, by Zeng Fanzhi, depicts butchers saturated with the viscera and blood of dead animals, working like living animals in one of the most dangerous jobs for the laboring class. Bleeding meat and shirtless bodies symbolize the sacrifice and suffering of less-than-human beings who feed the growing appetite of the middle and affluent classes. By depicting the desperation of Chinese workers, Zeng seems to raise a question about the meaning of life in contemporary China.

All of these Chinese artworks radically juxtapose animal and human parts, violence and power; they speak to the magnitude of human subjugation and sacrifice in China in the making of the "Chinese Dream." By objecting to the use of animals as a mode of artistic critique of dehumanizing oppression, Western audiences seem not to comprehend. American animal-rights protestors oppose displays of tooth-and-claw existence as a violation of animal rights, refusing to comprehend the ghostly suffering of

Zeng Fanzhi.
Meat. *1992.*

the Chinese who are the actual subjects of the artworks. After all, *Theater of the World* is a critique of the world as a menagerie within a menagerie, in which humans lead an animal-like existence organized by the carceral state. Indeed, the themes adumbrated by the banned artworks of *Art and China after 1989* eerily foreshadowed] the Chinese zero-COVID policy that locks down entire cities and confines hundreds of millions of ordinary citizens within digital cages.

What are the implications of global museums' banning the use of less-than-human animals to represent less-than-human humans in Asia? American objections are both aesthetic and ethical, with viewers/critics judging the art as disturbing and unethical and racializing Chinese artists as anti-animal. By privileging animal rights, Western viewers ignore the human rights of invisible Asians who live, work, and die like animals. Bowing to the protests, museums reinscribe the racial inferiority of Asian artists by judging them and their artworks as cruel to animals. The likening of Asian artworks employing animals to antiquated forms of entertainment such as dancing bears implicitly positions Asian aesthetics as primitive and infantile.

Can we discard such conceptual oppositions that blind Western liberalism to actually existing animal and human existences in less privileged parts of the world? After all, the global museum fosters the crystallization of a weird assemblage of Western animal-rights protests and Chinese art-using-animals, thus providing a rare space for Chinese dissident art that demands a multi-perspectival engagement.

It becomes difficult to understand the misreadings and re-racializing discourses as separate from the larger geopolitical "rise of China." Asian aesthetic assemblages cannot easily be disarticulated from a larger, free-floating unease about a dystopian future in which liberal values are seemingly challenged in the West's great museums. Ironically, viewers' calls for the smothering of artistic expression contribute to the decline of a more innocent form of liberalism that used to command the global theater of race, illusion, and power. The global visibility of Asian materialism and achievements, combined with coded messages about massive dislocation and despair in Asia, are a prompt as well todisrupt the Western codings of animal-human differences that have long underpinned racial-aesthetic lens.

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