

A Chinese Cultural Identity in Contemporary Chinese Art

“How do contemporary Chinese artists establish a contemporary identity in art, and how do they represent this image in the arena of global art?”



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Introduction

I did not think of myself as a ‘woman artist’ and I did not care about that identity, but many interviewers like yourself have asked me about feminism. That prompted me to think about whether I am a feminist and about what I should say as a woman artist. My thinking was rational, not from a bodily dimension or intuition. I had a conversation with a critic, which touched me deeply. For a year after that, I felt lost. I wanted to find out how our society perceives women and how that perception has evolved. One thing I found is that the standards for women are created by men. Can we create our own criteria? Can I have my own criteria to define who I am? Once we have answered those questions, we can become free and open.¹

As is touched upon by this quote, contemporary Chinese artists like Lin Tianmiao (b. 1961) are searching for ways in order to define who they are, whether this is in the local Chinese art sphere or in the area of global art. Previous developments of contemporary Chinese art, and the political happenings that impacted this process of contemporary Chinese art, have shaped this idea of the search for their cultural identity. In order to research how contemporary Chinese artists like Lin Tianmiao create their own cultural identities, my research question is the following: “How do contemporary Chinese artists establish a contemporary identity in art, and how do they represent this image in the arena of global art?” In researching this, I use Hao Liang’s (b. 1968) *Streams and Mountains without End* (2017), Lin Tianmiao’s *Badges* (2011-2012), and Cai Guo-Qiang’s (b. 1957) *Sky Ladder* (2015). Due to developments in Chinese art history these works will be placed in a time period from 2008 until now.

China’s contemporary art world is ever-changing up until today. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), various traditions and art works were banned or demolished. Theatre and writing were state controlled and art predominantly turned into propaganda art. Since the 1980s, after Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) launched the Open Door Policy in 1979, Western art, with its publications and practices, became gradually available to Chinese artists in the form of reproductions and exhibitions.² This marked the beginning of the contemporary Chinese art sphere, in which Chinese artists were introduced to modern artistic styles that led to artistic experimentation in materiality and techniques in China.³ Multiple Chinese artists unified themselves in contemporary art groups or were defined by movements, such as The Stars group, who exhibited their works in 1979 and 1980, and the ’85 Art New Wave movement.⁴

Besides the introduction to modern artistic styles, the political situation in China left its mark on the development of contemporary Chinese art. Two of the most influential happenings are the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition held in the National Gallery in Beijing, that both opened and closed in February 1989, and the tragic ending of the student movement and protest on June 4th, 1989, at Tiananmen Square.⁵ The development of contemporary Chinese art came to a sudden halt, when after these happenings unofficial art, exhibitions, and publications were banned.⁶ Although this political

¹ Lin Tianmiao, “Lin Tianmiao,” interview by Monica Merlin, *Tate*, February 21, 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/women-artists-contemporary-china/lin-tianmiao>.

² Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 15.

³ Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (Milano: Charta, 2006), 21.

⁴ Wu, *Transience*, 17.

⁵ Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989. A Semiotic Analysis* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 62/64.

⁶ Wu, *Transience*, 20.

climate of banning contemporary Chinese art by the Chinese government occurred, exhibitions were adjusted to the situation and became primarily private events that were held in non-conventional spaces outside of museums and galleries.⁷ Internationally, however, there was a growing interest in contemporary Chinese art which led to contemporary Chinese artworks appearing in overseas exhibitions.⁸

By 1993, government control and pressure on contemporary Chinese art and artists had loosened significantly.⁹ However, this did not mean that there was no governmental censorship: anti-government involvement, such as direct criticism of the party and the government, remained forbidden.¹⁰ After the commercialisation and internationalisation of contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s, there was a shift of focus to China's social issues and individual artistic experimentation.¹¹ From the mid-1990s onwards, a new generation of contemporary Chinese artists came to light, for whom their creativity and identity were essential in their creation of art works.¹² The fast-changing economy, together with the simultaneous transformation of China, and the undefined place of the individual in these developments became recurring topics in contemporary Chinese art works of this period.¹³

The years after 2000 were characterised by a period of globalisation and depoliticisation for contemporary Chinese art. This process began with the Third Shanghai Biennale, held from November 2000 to January 2001, that resulted in multiple large-scale biennials and triennials emerging in major Chinese cities.¹⁴ The Third Shanghai Biennale was a breakthrough in not only formally announcing the official acceptance of international-style exhibitions of contemporary (Chinese) art, such as at biennials and triennials, but also marked the official acceptance of contemporary Chinese art in Chinese public art museums and galleries.¹⁵ The emergence of art districts, such as Beijing's 798, the growing amount of commercial galleries in Beijing and Shanghai, and the record-breaking selling prices for contemporary Chinese art at auctions like Christie's and Sotheby's, demonstrate the rise of a contemporary Chinese art market in the international art sphere in this period.¹⁶

Especially the year 2008 was a turning-point for the position of contemporary Chinese art in the global art scene, initiated by the Summer Olympic Games in 2008 in Beijing. It marked the end of an era of contemporary Chinese art being 'outlawed' and resulted in the recognition of contemporary Chinese art in the global art scene. This event was used by Chinese authorities to display the nation's cultural significance and value on the world stage.¹⁷ It showcased China as "cosmopolitan, world-historical, and emanating culture and creativity,"¹⁸ and created the position for contemporary Chinese art on an international stage.

As I have mentioned earlier, the introduction of modern materials and techniques, and the changing political situation in China have shaped the contemporary Chinese art world. However, there is a third aspect that influenced the contemporary Chinese art world, which is the notion of *chuguo re* (*chūguó rè*, 出國熱), or 'leave the country fever.' *Chuguo re* stands for Chinese artists

⁷ Chiu, *Breakout*, 25.

⁸ Marie Claire Huot, *China's New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 142.

⁹ Chiu, *Breakout*, 24.

¹⁰ Wu, *Transience*, 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s > 2000s* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 352/357.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 359-60.

¹⁷ Lin Zhang, and Taj Frazier, "'Playing the Chinese Card': Globalisation and the Aesthetic Strategies of Chinese Contemporary Artists," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017): 568.

¹⁸ Zhang, and Frazier, "'Playing the Chinese card,'" 568.

leaving China for artistic opportunities overseas.¹⁹ There were two flows of *chuguo re*, the first one being initiated after the Open Door Policy in 1979, followed by a second wave after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989.²⁰ However, from the mid-1990s onwards, many contemporary Chinese artists decided to return to their homeland after having lived abroad for multiple years, or were invited to show their work in exhibitions in mainland China. This return to, or reconnect with their native country can be traced back to Chinese authorities loosening state control on art practices and China's rising position in the global art scene.²¹

How can the aforementioned developments in contemporary Chinese art, with its events and art practices, be tied to the process of identity making? According to the Cambridge and Oxford online dictionaries, *identity* can be defined in multiple ways. *Identity* can be described as 'who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others,' or as 'the reputation, characteristics, etc. of a person or organisation that makes the public think about them in a particular way.'²² Words often used in combination with *identity* are *collective identity*,²³ *national/cultural/personal identity*, and *ethnic/racial identity*.²⁴

Art is often seen as a way of expressing oneself. Expressing oneself, in case of the contemporary Chinese artist, can lead to the establishment of a trademark style in art. This particular style can either be individual to every artist, or can be bestowed upon a group of artists. It can thus be translated into an individual identity or a collective identity in art. However, limits to this expression in art can put a stop to the process of identity making. As we have seen in the developments of contemporary Chinese art, periods of tightened state control over art practices were common. By the method of experimenting, contemporary Chinese artists challenged existing taboos and tested the limitations attached to artistic freedom in China, sometimes even rejecting every connection with China in terms of concepts, materials, and techniques.²⁵ Nevertheless, with the introduction of contemporary Chinese art to the global art scene, there is a renewed interest from Chinese artists to express and establish themselves into this new realm.

In light of developments that shaped contemporary Chinese art and how the local art sphere is affected by this, the notion of identity is central to my research. Terms such as *transexperience*, introduced by Chinese overseas artist Chen Zhen and highlighted by former Asia Society Museum director Melissa Chiu; *tradition*, as coined by Eric Hobsbawm; and *borders*, mentioned by Wu Hung, are included in this thesis to cross-examine the process of identity making in contemporary Chinese art.

¹⁹ Chiu, *Breakout*, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 361.

²² *Cambridge English Dictionary*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), s.v. "Identity," <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/identity>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), s.v. "Identity," <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/identity>.

²⁵ Wu, *Transience*, 14.

Literature Review

Internationally, contemporary Chinese art has been subject of debate. Whereas some books and articles give a clear overview of developments in (contemporary) Chinese art, such as Wu Hung's *Contemporary Chinese Art*, others critically engage with the process of identity making in Chinese art, such as Aihwa Ong's piece "What Marco Polo Forgot: Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global". What these writings all have in common, however, is that these are either written from an Eastern or a Western perspective, with the latter mostly focussing on politically critical Chinese artists like Ai Weiwei. The notion of writing about contemporary Chinese art in an Eastern or a Western perspective can also be problematic for me. I am conscious about my position, being a woman born and currently living in the West, and aware that I can be unknowingly and unintentionally tempted to write from a Western perspective. However, I try to avoid a one-sided perspective by incorporating both Chinese-based and Western-based sources and critically engage in this East-West dichotomy.

The first author that gives a clear overview of developments and movements in Chinese art history, while simultaneously tying these to historical and social happenings in China, is Martina Köppel-Yang. Her *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989, A Semiotic Analysis* focuses on the fact that contemporary Chinese art is not to be seen as a copy of Western modernity or post-modernity, but as, to use Stuart Hall's words, "a set of cultural translations."²⁶ Köppel-Yang also reflects on the distinction between the terms 'avant-garde,' 'modern,' and 'contemporary,' made in Western publications on Chinese art. In Köppel-Yang's opinion, Chinese art critics and artists do not deal with these distinctions in their publications.²⁷ In light of this, the book can also be read as a critical note to Western researchers, on being too focussed on this kind of terminology.

Wu Hung's *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* is a catalogue on the 1999 exhibition that bears the same name. The exhibition divided contemporary Chinese art works into three categories: Demystification, Ruins, and Transience, with all of the works differently responding to historical and social transformation in China. Wu Hung recognises four historical phases of contemporary Chinese experimental art, which are 'the emergence of unofficial art' (1979-1984); 'the '85 Art New Wave movement and the China/Avant-Garde exhibition' (1985-1989); 'the post-89 period and the internationalisation of Chinese experimental art' (1990-1993); and 'the domestic turn - art as social and cultural technique' (1994-present). Wu Hung explains that "this fourth phase represents an ongoing development that no longer reacts against the Cultural Revolution and is thus no longer part of post-Cultural Revolution art. Many experimental artists have freed themselves from the past, and their works increasingly respond to a rapidly changing Chinese society."²⁸ The notion of border(s), which in this book refers to "a political, geographic, or ideological space around which problems of identity are thematised,"²⁹ according to Wu Hung, is crucial to mention when writing about contemporary Chinese art. In Wu Hung's opinion, experimental art tends to be diverse and to cross cultural borders, and the realm that experimental art opens up, is free of conventional cultural and political territories.³⁰

Contemporary Chinese Art is another book written by Wu Hung that gives a chronological overview of the developments of Chinese art. This book includes artworks from the 1970s until the 2000s, in which Wu Hung places these in both China's contemporary art world and in the global

²⁶ Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁸ Wu, *Transience*, 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

arena. The book introduces key art movements, styles and trends, and highlights important artists, exhibitions and publications on contemporary Chinese art.

These sources are crucial for my research, as to give me an overarching summary on important developments in (contemporary) Chinese art, in combination with the historical happenings in China at that time, that have influenced the contemporary Chinese art world. A comprehensive overview like this can lead to new insights on developments in Chinese art history, as it can bring forward recurring tendencies and movements.

In order to gain more knowledge on the process of identity making, I use Adam Geczy's *Transorientalism in Art, Fashion, and Film: Inventions of Identity*. Geczy starts out by including Edward Said's 'Orientalism,' in order to state that Orientalism underlies the negative and limiting images of colonial countries towards colonised countries.³¹ Examined in this book is how cultures that have been associated with Orientalism, such as China, have been able to deal with this orientalist view while creating and reworking their art, fashion, and film.³² Highlighted are concepts such as 'transorientalism,' and 'transnationalism.' These terms are tied to identity, in which 'transorientalism' tries to dodge thinking in terms of the 'Orient' and 'Occident,'³³ and provides adjustability of identity and precedes shifting boundaries.³⁴ In 'transorientalism,' the gaze is not focused on one direction, as in 'Orientalism' when the gaze is one-sided from the Occident (West) to the Orient (East), but instead is a "double helix or a room of mirrors, no less than when people, most conspicuously artists, designers, and writers, train the gaze on themselves, participating in their own 'Orientalisation' usually in places outside of their assumed identity."³⁵ Also the term 'transnationalism' is coined as a term for the intercultural exchange on social, economic, and political levels.³⁶ The reason why Geczy mentions these terms, is to point out that the course of identity making has been complicated due to globalism, and that identity is something that is always changing.³⁷ To strengthen his argument, Geczy mentions Homi Bhabha's saying, "identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product,"³⁸ in order to state that depending on choice and circumstance, a sense of belonging and identity can change over time. In relation to China, Geczy concludes that contemporary Chinese art is fundamentally 'pan-national,' or a co-creation between China and the West.³⁹

Not only Adam Geczy, but also Aihwa Ong engages with the notion of 'identity.' Ong's "What Marco Polo Forgot: Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global" discusses how an artist like Cai Guo-Qiang can challenge the Western view of contemporary Chinese art and simultaneously challenge the Eurocentric view on the development of contemporary Chinese art. Ong explains that "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."⁴⁰ Ong argues that non-European and European artists should be considered as equal factors in the global art sphere.⁴¹ Chinese artists being both experimental and chauvinistic, as well as Chinese artists both being praised by Western art critics and appreciative towards their homeland, are assumptions that are not able to

³¹ Adam Geczy, *Transorientalism in Art, Fashion, and Film: Inventions of Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁰ Aihwa Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot: Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global," *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 4 (2016): 481.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 473.

exist in both China and the West.⁴² Ong therefore opts to regard contemporary Chinese artists as “catalysts of shifting geopolitical perceptions.”⁴³

Eric Hobsbawm gives definitions of ‘identity’ and ‘tradition’ in his introductory book chapter *Inventing Traditions*. Hobsbawm makes a statement about a very clear difference between traditions and ‘invented traditions,’ in which ‘traditions’ are “specific and strongly binding social practices,”⁴⁴ and ‘invented traditions,’ or ‘new traditions,’ are “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”⁴⁵ The notions of continuity and repetition are important for (invented) traditions, in which continuity with the past can blur the lines between traditions and invented traditions.⁴⁶ Adaptation of old traditions to be incorporated in a modern society is crucial for not enabling invented traditions to take over, as new traditions fill in the gap when old traditions are unable to be used or adapted in the setting of a modern society.⁴⁷ Hobsbawm highlights three types of invented tradition. The first invented tradition establishes or symbolises social cohesion among people; the second one establishes or legitimises authority among institutions; and the final is the invented tradition “whose main purpose was socialisation, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour.”⁴⁸ In his concluding words, Hobsbawm highlights the importance of invented traditions to the creation of a nation. Its nationalism, national symbols, and national history namely all rely on deliberate and innovative invented traditions.⁴⁹

‘Power, identity and antiquarian approaches in modern Chinese art’ by Chia-Ling Yang argues that “the contemporary concept of ‘China’ has been subject to debate, and as such, it is also difficult to define what the term ‘Chinese painting’ means,”⁵⁰ and therefore, “many prolific artists and intellectuals sought inspiration from ‘jinshixue’ (*jīnshíxué*, 金石學, ‘epigraphy’) as a way to revitalise the Chinese painting and literati tradition in modern China.”⁵¹ Yang’s focus is the artistic production in Shanghai, because it is not only considered to be emerging in terms of technological and intellectual modernity, but it is also a cosmopolitan city of cultural diversity.⁵²

Ian Buruma’s *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing* eliminates the existence of one ‘China,’ one ‘Chineseness,’ and one ‘Chinese.’ Buruma argues that this myth of one China is embedded in the cosmic idea that “China is all that is ‘under Heaven.’”⁵³ Buruma explains that while the Chinese refer to the Han race when speaking of ‘Chinese,’ even the Han comprises of multiple different ethnic groups, with some having origins outside of China.⁵⁴ Also exemplified in thousands of years of conflict and disorder in Chinese society, is that the idea of the cosmic state under heaven supposedly representing harmony and order, cannot be sustained.⁵⁵ “‘China,’ then,” Buruma concludes, “is an orthodoxy, a dogma, which disguises politics as culture and nation as race.”⁵⁶ While critically thinking about the concept ‘China,’ Buruma states that the Chinese written

⁴² Ong, “What Marco Polo Forgot,” 482.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 475.

⁴⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁰ Chia-Ling Yang, “Power, identity and antiquarian approaches in modern Chinese art,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 10 (2014): 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵³ Ian Buruma, *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing* (New York: Random House, 2001), xxi.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

language is able to transcend national borders, as to creating a sense of ‘Chineseness’ among Chinese writers living abroad.⁵⁷

Melissa Chiu’s *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* focuses on overseas, mainland Chinese-born artists in order to explore similarities and differences between them and their counterparts in China in the process of Chinese identity making. Chiu introduces a case study of Chinese artists from a similar generation - born in the 1940s and 1950s - who have migrated during the late 1980s and 1990s to either New York, Paris, or Sydney. Terms, such as ‘transexperience’ - “it encourages a more fluid perception of the relationship to the homeland, that deals with memories and references to mainland China in the work of Chinese artists,”⁵⁸ are central in this book. Chiu also mentions the importance of ‘space’ in identity, where one’s location, circumstances and settlement are “significant factors affecting the expression of Chineseness.”⁵⁹

China’s New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes, written by Marie Claire Huot introduces the importance of the Chinese language in contemporary Chinese culture, in which the Chinese written language is the epitome of today’s power.⁶⁰ In Huot’s opinion, “words are still at the root of all changes.”⁶¹ Huot strengthens her argument by adding a quote of Wu Shanzhuan, who stated that the Chinese language is different from other languages in the world because it is made out of ideograms, for it can be seen as the last stronghold of Chinese culture.⁶² By giving examples of contemporary Chinese art, poetry, literature, music, and film, Huot introduces the complexities of an art that “does not want to be American, yet does not care to be labeled Chinese either.”⁶³

The aforementioned sources on identity and ‘Chineseness’ enable me to identify how previously done research critically conceives the processes surrounding identity making, either in general or in China specifically. By including sources from Asian and European scholars, among others, it enables me to distinguish contradictions between their perception of identity and ‘Chineseness’ to incorporate in my research.

The relevance of my research to this body of written works is the method of analysing contemporary Chinese art while researching the process of identity making in contemporary China. Based on the aforementioned books and articles, there has not been done enough research in the connection of identity and contemporary Chinese art, without the main focus on politics or terminology. Of course, the fact that politics have had significant impact on the development of contemporary Chinese art should not be forgotten. However, the main focus of my research will be on the individual artists and their artworks, which has not been done before in combination with the notion of identity. I realise that my research is just one written work concerning identity and contemporary Chinese art, and will therefore not have that much impact nor will it be able to cover every detail of identity and contemporary Chinese art. This is exactly why I propose to do more research in the future.

⁵⁷ Buruma, *Bad Elements*, 110-11.

⁵⁸ Chiu, *Breakout*, 10.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁰ Huot, *China’s New Cultural Scene*, 146.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 143-44.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Research Design

In my master thesis I apply a discourse analysis approach, in which I make use of a qualitative method to answer my research question. Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a French philosopher and sociologist, is the initiator of the term ‘discourse.’⁶⁴ There are multiple definitions of the term ‘discourse,’ of which one is “anything written or said or communicated using signs.”⁶⁵ Discourse theory is usually related to human expression, often in the form of language. It emphasises how these expressions are linked to human knowledge.⁶⁶

A discourse analysis has been used in earlier done research on contemporary Chinese art in combination with a Chinese identity, while focussing on the Chinese written language. An example is Claire Huot’s *China’s New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes*, where Huot argues that “there is and has been such an overwhelming presence of Chinese written ciphers in society - in the recent past, and especially in the Cultural Revolution - that they are anything but innocent signs to use; they ought to be the perfect target and weapon.”⁶⁷ Huot undermines the idea of ‘China as one culture’ by using the Chinese written language, stating that the Chinese language has multiple dialects that are able to reduce the authority of the official language, Mandarin Chinese.⁶⁸ Another source that highlights the importance of the Chinese (written) language, is Ian Buruma’s *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing*. Buruma’s research concludes that only the Chinese language is able to exceed national borders as to preserve ‘Chinese-ness.’⁶⁹

As earlier done research has proven, a discourse analysis on a Chinese cultural identity through the Chinese (written) language is a valid method. This method gives a certain idea about the use of language in a specific time in history, which in the case of Huot and Buruma, is contemporary China. The idea of the Chinese language as a discourse can also be applied to Chinese art. As identified by Wu Hung among other authors, Chinese art made in a certain time period can give emphasis to particular tendencies in that specific time period. An example of this is the use of foreign techniques and materials in Chinese art pieces after the opening up of Deng Xiaoping in 1979. This indicates that contemporary Chinese art can define a ‘zeitgeist,’ which is “the general set of ideas, beliefs, feelings, et al, that is typical of a particular period in history.”⁷⁰ Therefore, the same theory as Huot and Buruma is applied in my research, however the discourse focusses on contemporary Chinese art instead of the Chinese language.

My research is done through a qualitative research method, since my research is based on non-numerical, textual data, and my findings are supported by evidence of pictorial data. In order to make my case, I am using a selection of artworks of three artists, covering the period in between 2008 and now. The reason for this timeframe can be found in the development of contemporary Chinese art, when from 2008 onwards, Chinese art was able to position itself in an international arena of art. The three artists chosen for my research are mainland-Chinese-born artists Hao Liang, Lin Tianmiao and Cai Guo-Qiang, who have all established some degree of an international reputation by (temporarily) living abroad or by participating in exhibitions abroad. Lin Tianmiao has temporarily lived in New York, the United States, from 1988 to 1994, before taking residency in Beijing. Cai Guo-Qiang emigrated to Japan in 1986, and moved to New York in 1995 where Cai has been living ever since.⁷¹ Hao Liang is the only one out of these three Chinese artists who has not lived abroad, but Hao participated in significant group and solo exhibitions abroad, such as the *My Humble House 2010* -

⁶⁴ Florian Schneider, "Getting the Hang of Discourse Theory," May 6, 2013, <http://www.politicseastasia.com/studying/getting-the-hang-of-discourse-theory/>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Huot, *China’s New Cultural Scene*, 146-47.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 186.

⁶⁹ Buruma, *Bad Elements*, xvi/110.

⁷⁰ *Cambridge English Dictionary*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), s.v. “Zeitgeist,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/zeitgeist>.

⁷¹ Cai Guo-Qiang, “About the artist,” Accessed June 26, 2020, <https://caiguoqiang.com/about-the-artist/>.

Exhibition of A New Generation group exhibition in the My Humble House Art Gallery in Taipei, Taiwan, in 2010 and his solo exhibition *Portraits and Wonders* in the Gagosian gallery in New York in 2018.⁷² Lin Tianmiao had a solo exhibition in Galerie Lelong & Co. in New York in 2017, and participated in multiple group exhibitions, such as in *Afterimage: Dangdai Yishu* in London, England, in 2019.⁷³ Cai Guo-Qiang had a solo exhibition in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2008, named *I Want to Believe*.⁷⁴ Among other solo and group exhibitions, Cai has been invited to join in the *Dialogues with Contemporary Art from the Collection of the Setagaya Art Museum* exhibition in the Setagaya Art Museum in Tokyo, Japan, in 2012.⁷⁵ Interesting to point out, is the connection of these artists to New York. Only two of these artists have lived in New York, but all three artists have had a solo exhibition or exhibited their works in group exhibitions in this particular city.

Hao, Lin and Cai have all participated in international biennials, both in China and/or overseas. Hao Liang was included in the 57th Art Biennale in Venice, Italy⁷⁶; Lin Tianmiao participated in the Istanbul Biennale, Turkey, in 1997, the Shanghai Biennale in 2002, the Ireland Biennale in 2002, the Gwangju Biennale, South Korea, in 2002 and 2004⁷⁷; Cai Guo-Qiang was included in multiple Venice art biennials from 1995 onwards, the 5th International Istanbul Biennial in 1997, and the Shanghai Biennale in 2000 among many other biennials.⁷⁸

The most significant commonality between the three artists, is that they do not agree with their labeled identity within the art world. Hao Liang states: “I see myself as a painter. A painter who works using a traditional Chinese ink painting method, while making use of the possibilities offered by modern techniques. I try to modernise and to find originality in tradition. But my work does not only involve transforming old into new. Because I believe it is important to uphold the classical working methods; and I am interested in understanding how the artists of the past worked as, unlike me, they were not influenced by modernity. Of course, I belong to the contemporary Chinese art scene.”⁷⁹ This statement is not in line with how Hao is portrayed in the West, where researchers and authors quickly conclude that contemporary Chinese artists like Hao Liang are influenced by the West. Hao himself states: “How can we complicate this narrative of contemporary art in China? Certainly not by drawing comparisons with Western analogues and precedents - it is not the case that whatever happens in the West, there should be a Chinese equivalent. There should be a different narrative system.”⁸⁰ Hao Liang states that he is not influenced by the West, but influenced by modernity.⁸¹

Along with Hao Liang, Lin Tianmiao also disagrees with her labeled identity within the art world. Lin states: “I am often called a Chinese woman artist. But I would rather say that ‘I am an artist, I am a woman, and I am Chinese.’”⁸² Art made by women, not only in China, is quickly tied to the idea of feminism in art. Lin argues: “A lot of people would say my work is feminist, but I would say that in China we do not have that tradition. I only got that notion from New York. But for me, no

⁷² “Hao Liang,” Vitamin Creative Space, accessed June 29, 2020, <http://www.vitamincreativespace.art/en/?artist=haoliang>.

⁷³ “Exhibitions: Lin Tianmiao,” Galerie Lelong, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.galerielelong.com/exhibitions/lin-tianmiao3>. & <https://ocula.com/artists/lin-tianmiao/exhibitions/>.

⁷⁴ Cai Guo-Qiang, “Curriculum vitae,” Accessed June 26, 2020, <https://caiguoqiang.com/curriculum-vitae/>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Hao Liang.”

⁷⁷ “Lin Tianmiao,” Galerie Lelong, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.galerielelong.com/artists/lin-tianmiao>.

⁷⁸ Cai, “Curriculum vitae.”

⁷⁹ “Hao Liang Interview,” YouTube video, 3:19, “Fondation Louis Vuitton,” May 4, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ti_K8s0ReD4.

⁸⁰ “Hao Liang: Portraits and wonders,” Gagosian Quarterly, May 21, 2018, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2018/05/21/haoliang-portraits-and-wonders/>.

⁸¹ “Hao Liang Interview.”

⁸² Phyllis Teo, *Rewriting Modernism: Three Women Artists in Twentieth-Century China - Pan Yuliang, Nie Ou and Yin Xiuzhen* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2016), 239.

matter how you look at it in terms of politics or in terms of feminist art, it is better to have respect in mind and equality in mind.”⁸³

In his manner, Cai Guo-Qiang states: “I have been called an installation artist, but I still love painting, and often search for new possibilities of painting (...).”⁸⁴ Cai has also been labeled an ‘immigrant’ artist, or ‘émigré’ artist, due to his moving to Japan and eventually the United States.⁸⁵ As explained by Li Shiyun, Cai Guo-Qiang rather wants to be seen as an artist who overcomes the cultural gap between China and the West: “Cai Guo-Qiang avoids focusing on the identity claims as exemplified through the theme of cultural differences between two worlds. Instead of articulating matters of cultural identity in terms of difference, relentlessly refining his discourse to achieve the desired definition, Cai Guo-Qiang explodes all differences.”⁸⁶ One could say the term ‘global artist’ can be tied to the aforementioned explanation.

Due to the gap between their labeled identity and how these artists portray themselves, I was intrigued by the idea if this would also be visible in and represented by their artworks. Therefore, I have created a small selection of these artists’ works, made after 2008, with one art piece of each artist as foci. The focus points in my research are Hao Liang’s *Streams and Mountains without End* (**Figures 1, 2a-b**), Lin Tianmiao’s *Badges* (**Figures 3a-b**), and *Sky Ladder* by Cai Guo-Qiang (**Figure 4**).



Figure 1. *Streams and Mountains without End* (installation view at Gagosian Madison Avenue, New York), 2018. Ink and colour on silk, 42,4 x 1.004 cm.

Figures 2a-b. Hao Liang. *Streams and Mountains without End* (details).



Figure 2a.



Figure 2b.

⁸³ Barbara Pollack, “Wrap Artist,” *Artnews*, October 8, 2012, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/wrap-artist-2107/>.

⁸⁴ Friis-Hansen, Zaya, and Takashi, *Cai Guo-Qiang*, 31.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁶ Li Shiyun, “Analysing Works of Cai Guo-Qiang in Relation to Ancient Chinese Concepts”, *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 1-2 (2016): 73.

Figures 3a-b. Lin Tianmiao. *Badges* (installation view at Galerie Lelong & Co., New York), 2012. White silk, coloured silk thread, and painted stainless steel embroidery frame, variable dimensions.



Figure 3a.



Figure 3b.



Figure 4. Cai Guo-Qiang. *Sky Ladder* (realised off Huiyu Island, Quanzhou), 2015. Gunpowder, fuse and helium balloon, 500 x 5,5 m.

These three art works are similar and different in multiple ways. One similarity is that the three art pieces all include a traditional element of China or Chinese art, whether this is in the form of an object, its technique, or material. For Hao Liang, the traditional element in his *Streams and Mountains without End* not only lies in the traditional object of a hand scroll and the traditional Chinese technique of landscape painting, but also in the use of traditional Chinese materials, here silk and ink. Simultaneously in *Badges*, Lin Tianmiao also uses silk as the basis for her embroidered text. Cai Guo-Qiang's *Sky Ladder* uses the traditional Chinese concept of Heaven and earth in his art work, in his attempt to connect the two through his ladder. Cai also uses firework, which is a Chinese invention, to (literally) light his ladder up.

Another similarity between these works of art is that the artists have all experimented with a modern element in their artworks. In *Streams and Mountains without End*, Hao Liang enlarged his hand scroll to a monumental size in a way that it can almost be considered an installation art piece. Lin Tianmiao's *Badges* is an installation piece that can fill up an entire exhibition space. *Sky Ladder*, on the other hand, is an installation piece that can also be seen as a performance art work. Due to the non-recurring nature of the piece, only sketches, photographs and film of the art work remain.

These works of art cannot be completely understood without prescience of contemporary Chinese art and its developments. Especially with Hao Liang's art work, as argued by Philip Tinari, who is the director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing. Tinari states: "It is true that Hao Liang's work requires a viewer who is not conversant in Chinese art history to put in a bit of extra effort to build a context for what they are looking at. Many will find this cumbersome, but think about how much referentiality and intertextuality there is in works by contemporary Western

artists.”⁸⁷ This lack of knowledge on contemporary Chinese art and artists has been going on for years. Former director of the Asia Society Museum in New York, Melissa Chiu, argues: “I think people’s understanding of what Chinese contemporary art is here in the United States has come a long way from 1998, (...), when people were saying there is no such thing as contemporary Chinese art, to today, of course people acknowledge that there is a very vibrant art scene, but their knowledge of that art scene is really seen through the framework of the marketplace where there are three top-selling artists, mostly painters and all men.”⁸⁸ Due to this lack of knowledge, these art works are quickly labeled ‘Chinese,’ without concern to the multilayered meanings.

Although these art works differ in various aspects, such as the use of text and colour and the level of conceptuality, the common background of the artists and the fact that there is a gap between their labeled identity and the way they portray themselves, can be seen as a zeitgeist of contemporary Chinese artists in the global sphere. Chinese artists like Hao, Lin and Cai want to break away from stereotypes, such as “a Chinese artist is a painter and a Chinese artist represents certain Chinese iconography.”⁸⁹ In their search for their identity within contemporary Chinese art and in the global art arena, these artists incorporate Chinese traditional elements, together with modern elements in their works of art. These artworks are not aimed to politically critique Chinese society, but are rather aimed at embracing traditional Chinese characteristics in art, and bringing these together with modern elements. Whether this is because the artists want to break away from stereotypes, want to transcend national borders with their art, or want to bridge cultural differences between East and West, one thing is evident: through this bringing together of traditional and modern elements, alongside the message these art pieces convey, these artworks can be seen as a reflection of how these artists deal with their cultural identity.

The idea that this merging of traditional and modern elements in Chinese art is a Western influence that was introduced after the opening up of China in 1979, stems from the idea of an East-West dichotomy, of the West being inferior to the East, that is rooted in Edward Said’s term ‘Orientalism.’ A Eurocentric perspective on the development of modernisation, also in the area of arts, says that modernisation started in the West and spread out to the East. In this case, the East is seen as imitating the Western process of modernisation. However, as Köppel-Yang and Ong among many other scholars have argued, is that the modernisation process in the West and China cannot be compared. This is also a reference point for my research in arguing that in this case contemporary Chinese artists do not necessarily have to be influenced by the West: the use of traditional characteristics together with modern elements can also be a way of experimenting, or can be a way of letting Chinese traditional elements interact with modernity in art. Either way, it is a means of giving their own narrative to and perspective on contemporary Chinese art, as it is anticipating in the global arena of art.

The three specific art works of these three artists constitute a paradigm in my research, because each work represents their identity in a visual manner. Furthermore, all of the three art works are made in one decade (2008-2017), and therefore, characterise this time period in their display and representation of identity making. I approach all three cultural identities in a different context. For Hao Liang, I will look from a traditional point of view. For Lin Tianmiao, I will look from a feminist point of view. And for Cai Guo-Qiang, I will look from a global point of view.

⁸⁷ Taylor Dafoe, “Meet Hao Liang, the Young Chinese Artist Whose Reboot of Ancient Ink Painting Has Become a Bona Fide Market Sensation,” *Artnet*, June 20, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/meet-hao-liang-the-young-chinese-painter-primed-to-take-over-the-western-art-world-1305689>.

⁸⁸ “Chinese Contemporary Art and Lin Tianmiao,” YouTube video, 24:00, “SinoVision 美国中文电视,” November 8, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qULqBjYgMFU>.

⁸⁹ Pollack, “Wrap.”

Chapter I. Tradition and Identity

In *Streams and Mountains without End*, Hao Liang combines traditional Chinese materials as silk and ink with the traditional Chinese technique of landscape painting. Silk has been a significant element in Chinese civilisation, as raising silkworms has had a history in China for over 5000 years.⁹⁰ Among materials such as jade and rice, silk represents early Chinese civilisation, and the origins of silk production have associations with the early concepts of the connection between humanity and the cosmos in ancient Chinese cultures.⁹¹ The idea of immortality implied by the life cycle of silkworms was associated with real life, with the cocooning of silkworms regarded as the inescapable process of death before ascending to heaven.⁹² Therefore, silk was originally used during ceremonies, although silk was also applied in clothing and as currency, when silk was used as a method for paying taxes.⁹³

From the third to the ninth century onwards, among tea and chinaware, silk was traded along the Silk Roads on land and via the seas, finding its way to Korea, Japan, central and western Asia, and eventually Europe.⁹⁴ By the eighteenth century, silk became a highly used export commodity, especially desired by the Western world.⁹⁵ For centuries, China was the only place where silk fabric was made, which created the image of silk being an esoteric luxury and mystical material to the outside world.⁹⁶

Not only silk, but also the tradition of landscape painting is a crucial element in Chinese history. Next to the art of calligraphy, landscape painting has been regarded as the highest form of visual art by the Chinese.⁹⁷ According to Michael Sullivan, the art of landscape painting “is a language of extraordinary richness and breadth, able to embody the strongest emotional and poetic feelings and the profoundest philosophical and metaphysical ideas.”⁹⁸ In China, the educated Chinese landscape painter was not only a painter, but was also a philosopher and later a poet as well.⁹⁹ The message of a landscape painting is not only focussed on the representation of nature, but also on the theme, the artist’s brushwork, the artist’s style, and the artist’s inscription.¹⁰⁰ Specifically the brushwork of the artist is the element that makes the painting ‘alive,’ only then the landscape painting is admired by critics.¹⁰¹ This element of liveliness in the painting comes from the concept of ‘qi’ (*qi*, 气), which is the cosmic breath or energy.¹⁰² ‘Qi’ can either be expressed by the artist’s brushwork, or as a depiction of the cosmic force by the clouds and vapours around the mountains portrayed in landscape paintings: ‘qi’ is the representation of the essence of life.¹⁰³ Not only the clouds and vapours, but also mountains, rocks, water, and trees are indispensable elements in a landscape painting. The mountains are sacred, and are the embodiment of the cosmic being; its bones are represented by rocks; water is the blood that streams through its veins; its hair is represented by trees and grasses; and its complexion is translated to mist and haze.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁰ Zao Feng, *The General History of Chinese Silk* (Suzhou: Suzhou University Press, 2005), 2.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Shelagh Vainker, *Chinese Silk: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick: British Museum Press, Rutgers University Press, 2004), 6.

⁹⁴ Zao, *The General History of Chinese Silk*, 2.

⁹⁵ Vainker, *Chinese Silk*, 8.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* (California: Stanford University Press, 1979), 6.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰² Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (Berkeley, Cal. [etc.]: University of California Press, 1962), 166.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 1/166.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Song dynasty (960-1279) masters of landscape painting became the classic models for following generations. It was also the starting point of the idea that the landscape painter was a painter and a poet, that culminated in the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), when inscriptions of artists were as important as the painting itself.¹⁰⁵ During the twentieth century, while making use of traditional symbolism, landscape painting became the embodiment of Chinese people's deepest thoughts, in which mountains and streams represent China's revival, and the liveliness of mountains and rivers are the epitome of China's new strength.¹⁰⁶

Hao Liang was born in 1983 in Chengdu, Sichuan province, and was introduced to traditional Chinese painting very early in his life. Hao's father not only studied under Zhang Daqian (1899-1983), who was a prominent Chinese artist of the twentieth century, but was also a collector of Chinese art.¹⁰⁷ After concluding his study at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in the department of Chinese painting, he enrolled at the master's program in 2007.¹⁰⁸ From 2009 until 2015, Hao has mostly exhibited his artworks in group and solo exhibitions in China, whereas from 2016 onwards, museums and galleries overseas began exhibiting his work. In 2016, Hao had his first solo exhibition overseas in the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht, the Netherlands; in 2017, Hao was included at the 57th Biennale di Venezia in Venice, Italy; and in 2018, Hao had a solo exhibition in the Gagosian gallery, New York.¹⁰⁹ Hao currently works and lives in Beijing.

In *Streams and Mountains without End* (**Figures 5a-b**), the technique of landscape painting is evident: the incorporation of mountains, trees, rivers, clouds and vapours, among others, make this artwork closely related to it. But when looked upon closely, the distinctions become clear. Hao's artwork is made in the form of a hand scroll, which has its origins in China as well, is traditionally done in ink on silk, and is meant to be viewed from right to left.¹¹⁰ However, when moving from the outer right part of the painting (**Figure 6a**), to the outer left part (**Figure 6b**), the painting becomes more colourful and abstract with its scenery gradually turning into angular-shaped forms. For this artwork, Hao Liang drew inspiration from Ming dynasty (1368-1644) artist Dong Qichang's (1555-1636) artworks (**Figure 7**), who was well-known for his calligraphy, paintings, and theoretical writings,¹¹¹ and Russian modern artist Wassily Kandinsky's (1866-1944) paintings (**Figure 8**), who is renowned for his expressiveness and use of geometric forms.¹¹² One part in the middle of Hao Liang's hand scroll painting (**Figure 9**), can even be seen as Hao's interpretation and translation of Kandinsky's *Several Circles* (**Figure 10**). By uniting Dong's and Kandinsky's techniques, characteristics, and theories, Hao Liang's artwork can be seen as a movement through time, and as a coming-together of art practices that are three centuries apart. Even the gradual change from figurative painting to abstract painting can be translated to the shifts in real life art history, as exemplified here by Dong and Kandinsky.

¹⁰⁵ Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity*, 103.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁰⁷ Dafoe, "Meet Hao Liang."

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ "Hao Liang," Gagosian, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://gagosian.com/artists/hao-liang/>.

¹¹⁰ Holland Cotter, "Chinese Landscapes at the Met: If Those Mountains Could Talk," *New York Times*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/arts/design/chinese-landscapes-at-the-met-if-those-mountains-could-talk.html>.

¹¹¹ "Dong Qichang," Artnet, accessed July 4, 2020, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/dong-qichang/>.

¹¹² "Grosse Studie," Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://www.boijmans.nl/en/collection/artworks/3970/grosse-studie>.

Figures 5a-b. Hao Liang. *Streams and Mountains without End* (details), 2017. Ink and colour on silk, 424 x 1004 mm.



Figure 5a.



Figure 5b.

Figures 6a-b. Hao Liang. *Streams and Mountains without End* (installation view at Gagosian Madison Avenue, New York), 2018 (detail).



Figure 6a.



Figure 6b.



Figure 7. Dong Qichang. *Five Sacred Mountains*, 1616. Ink on paper, 221 x 99 cm.



Figure 8. Wassily Kandinsky. *Grosse Studie*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 79.3 x 101 cm.



Figure 9. Hao Liang, *Streams and Mountains without End* (detail).



Figure 10. Wassily Kandinsky. *Several Circles (Einige Kreise)*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 140.7 x 140.3 cm.

Streams and Mountains without End is a narrative through time and space, overlapping multiple centuries of art history. Hao implemented visual elements of traditional Chinese landscape painting, such as the suggestion of multiple dimensions, and gradually altered them into Kandinsky-style forms, as a way of bridging different time periods, different styles, and different techniques in art practices. Although this can be a way to “modernise and find originality in tradition,”¹¹³ it can also be a means to “understand where our modernity came from, to construct our own subjectivity, and our own art system.”¹¹⁴

In the technique of traditional Chinese landscape painting, there is no use of scientific perspective, shading, or three-dimensional modelling in the painting.¹¹⁵ However, mountains have three different dimensions, simultaneously existing in landscape paintings. Height, or ‘hither distance,’ is established by looking up to the top from below; depth, or ‘deep distance,’ can be created looking toward the back from the front; and a horizontal dimension, or ‘horizontal stance,’ is initiated by looking across at a mountain from an opposite height.¹¹⁶ This technique of multiple dimensions is not only visible in *Streams and Mountains without End*, but also in other artworks of Hao Liang, such as *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang - Relics* (**Figure 11**). *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang - Relics*, just like *Streams and Mountains without End*, bridges time and space, by combining multiple historical, textual relics from previous landscape painting traditions. Here, Chinese literati traditions from the Jin (265-420) and Tang (618-907) dynasties, and landscape painting traditions of Song-dynasty artists come together in *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang - Relics*, edited into Hao Liang’s style.¹¹⁷



Figure 11. Hao Liang. *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang - Relics*, 2015-16. Ink on silk, 387 x 184 cm.

Returning to *Streams and Mountains without End*, its scale is monumental, especially for a hand scroll. Hao Liang has stated that by intentionally painting in larger sizes, his landscape paintings “become something different from the historical ones.”¹¹⁸ Size is also an evident element in Hao’s *Day and Night* (**Figure 12a-b**), constituting of two separate panels that are differently sized. Although

¹¹³ “Hao Liang Interview.”

¹¹⁴ “Exhibitions: Hao Liang,” Gagosian, accessed July 2, 2020, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2018/hao-liang-portraits-and-wonders/>.

¹¹⁵ Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity*, 8.

¹¹⁶ “Hao Liang - about Eight Views of Xiaoxiang - Relics,” Vimeo video, 13:28, “Kadist Paris,” April 13, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/264614449>.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ “Relics.”

showcasing the exact same landscape, the smaller panel (**Figure 12a**) represents this landscape during nighttime, whereas the large panel (**Figure 12b**) illustrates daytime. In this specific art piece, Hao Liang proves that by applying a contrasting scale, texture, and brightness, it is able to change one's readability and memory.¹¹⁹



Figure 12a. Hao Liang. *Day and Night (Part I)*, 2017-18. Ink and colour on silk, 48.5 × 124 cm.



Figure 12b. Hao Liang. *Day and Night (Part II)*, 2017-18. Ink and colour on silk, 173 × 441 cm.

Hao Liang's approach to art is similar to that of a traditional Chinese painter. By doing extensive visual and textual research and by applying the method of copying, Hao finds himself in the tradition of an educated painter.¹²⁰ Hao's implementation of custom-made paint retrieved from plants and materials, creating subdued colours in his artworks, is in line with the traditional practice of ink and wash painting.¹²¹ As in true landscape artist fashion, Hao Liang inscribed his *Streams and Mountains without End* on the outer far end of the artwork. (**Figure 13**).

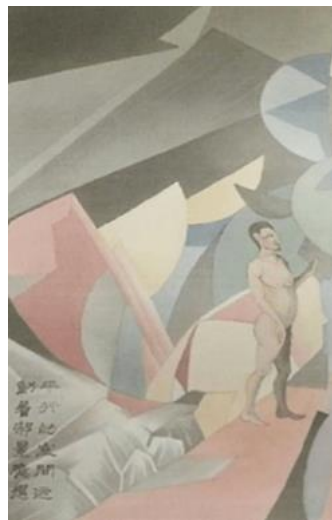


Figure 13. Hao Liang. *Streams and Mountains without End* (detail).

The notion of moving through time, thus connecting past to present, is also important for old traditions to be preserved. As Eric Hobsbawm has argued, the adaptation of old traditions into modern times is crucial for not enabling invented traditions to take over, as new traditions fill in the gap when old traditions can not be used or adapted in modern society.¹²² While Hao Liang is modernising traditional Chinese elements into his artworks, he establishes a version of modernity in art that is

¹¹⁹ "Exhibitions: Hao Liang."

¹²⁰ Barbara Pollack, "How Contemporary is Contemporary Ink? Hao Liang & Gagosian Answered," *COBO Social*, June 6, 2018, <https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/hao-liang-gagosian/>.

¹²¹ Dafoe, "Meet Hao Liang."

¹²² Hobsbawm, *Introduction: Inventing Traditions*, 5-6.

intrinsic to Chinese culture.¹²³ This is in line with Martina Köppel-Yang's notion that contemporary Chinese art should not be seen as a direct copy of Western modernity.¹²⁴ The unique appropriation of traditional Chinese elements in Hao Liang's contemporary artworks is a means of paying homage to tradition.¹²⁵ By connecting and uniting concepts and elements from the past and present in art history, Hao is crossing generational borders as a means to understand and rediscover the past.¹²⁶ While his work embraces the flow of time, Hao encompasses the coexistence of the past and the present: "the mountains and the cosmos, the body and the mind."¹²⁷

¹²³ Dafoe, "Meet Hao Liang."

¹²⁴ Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 21.

¹²⁵ Chia-Ling Yang, "Power, Identity and Antiquarian Approaches in Modern Chinese Art," *Journal of Art Historiography* 10 (2014): 33.

¹²⁶ "Relics."

¹²⁷ "Exhibitions: Hao Liang."

Chapter II. Femininity and Identity

Lin Tianmiao was born in 1961 in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, in a culturally-engaged family. Lin's father was a Chinese painter and an acknowledged calligrapher, whereas her mother was a teacher in traditional dance.¹²⁸ As a child, Lin Tianmiao helped her mother with sewing projects by winding balls of thread. During the Cultural Revolution, Lin became acquainted with Western art due to her father's collection of Western art catalogues.¹²⁹ Lin Tianmiao met her husband, Wang Gongxin (b. 1960), who is a Chinese video artist, while studying at the Fine Art Department at Capital Normal University in Beijing.¹³⁰ After receiving her bachelor's degree in 1984, Lin moved to New York with her husband, where she earned her degree at the Art Students League in 1989.¹³¹ Having lived abroad for about 6 years, Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin returned to China in 1994, where Lin truly pursued her career as an artist.¹³² Since 1995 Lin has been included in many group exhibitions in China and overseas, followed by overseas solo exhibitions of her work from 2007 onwards. Lin's first solo exhibition in the Loft Gallery in Paris, France, in 2007, paved the way for many more overseas galleries and museums to exhibit Lin's work. Especially in New York, where Lin Tianmiao had a solo exhibition in the Asia Society Museum and Galerie Lelong in 2012, and a second exhibition at Galerie Lelong in 2017.¹³³

Lin Tianmiao draws inspiration for her work from her childhood memories of thread winding. The practice of thread winding, just like weaving and sewing, are traditionally seen as a women's practice. The ancient Chinese phrase 'men plough and women weave' (*nángēng-nǚzhī* 男耕女織) clarifies the traditional idea on the division of labour.¹³⁴ The production of textile remained a female profession even during the industrialisation in early modern China.¹³⁵

The method of thread winding in her artworks has become Lin Tianmiao's trademark practice. Not only this method, but also the used textiles in Lin's art, such as silk, thread, hair, cotton, and felt, expose suggestions and symbolism of femininity.¹³⁶ As mentioned in the previous chapter, silk has been an important element in Chinese traditional culture since its organic material is directly tied to nature and the lifecycle of the silkworm. Using organic materials like silk remind Lin of her childhood memories and ancient techniques allow Lin to return to simpler times. According to Lin, "these basic materials connect us with the physical world and with our own bodily realities."¹³⁷

In the installation artwork *Badges* (**Figure 14**), not only the use of silk and thread enhance the artwork's connection to femininity, also the use of text evokes the female body.¹³⁸ Lin Tianmiao used terms from the Chinese and English language that are intended to describe women in a depreciative way. English terms like 'tramp,' and 'diva' are placed next to Chinese terms, such as 'chuan nu'

¹²⁸ Scarlet Cheng, "China: Lin Tianmiao," *Artillery*, January 6, 2015, <https://www.artillerymag.com/china-lin-tianmiao-domestic-silence-scarlet-cheng/>.

¹²⁹ Barbara Pollack, "Wrap Artist," *Artnews*, October 8, 2012, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/wrap-artist-2107/>.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ "Lin Tianmiao: Biography," Wang Gongxin, accessed July 8, 2020, <http://www.wanggongxin.com>.

¹³² Pollack, "Wrap."

¹³³ "Biography."

¹³⁴ Vainker, *Chinese Silk*, 9.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ "Lin Tianmiao: Systems," Exhibitions, Rockbund Art Museum, accessed July 11, 2020, <http://www.rockbundartmuseum.org/en/exhibition/overview/955cqsr>.

¹³⁷ Lin Tianmiao, "'No Feminism In China': An Interview With Lin Tianmiao," interview by Luise Guest, *The Culture Trip*, October 26, 2016, <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/china/articles/no-feminism-in-china-an-interview-with-lin-tianmiao/>.

¹³⁸ "Lin Tianmiao: Badges," Exhibitions, Galerie Lelong, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.galerielelong.com/exhibitions/lin-tianmiao/installation-views?view=slider#5>.

(*chuàn nǚ*, 串女), which translates to ‘a woman ‘sleeping around.’¹³⁹ For this art work, Lin Tianmiao and her team collected slang words like these that are used to label women. Lin explains: “Today, terminology for women has been and is being rapidly expanded, enriched and changed in a more and more diversified fashion; manifesting the transformation from passive to positive involvement of women in society [...]. Of course, in the present male dominated society, the traditional cognition of women is still the mainstream.”¹⁴⁰ Chinese terms like these can mostly not be found in dictionaries, but exist in the spoken language. Although such terms disappear as easily as they are invented, these raise societal issues, and have a vigorous impact on society.¹⁴¹ By placing these derogatory terms on enlarged badges in colourful thread, hung throughout the exhibition space with museum visitors walking around them, Lin Tianmiao ridicules these slang words as an accepted, standard language.¹⁴² However, walking through the exhibition room, the artwork can evoke a sense of unease as well, as the oversized badges can be quite confronting.



Figure 14. Lin Tianmiao. *Badges* (installation view at Galerie Lelong & Co., New York), 2012. White silk, coloured silk thread, and painted stainless steel embroidery frame, variable dimensions.

The project for *Badges* already started back in 2009, when Lin Tianmiao's first-made badges were showcased in Shanghai in 2009 (**Figure 15**) and in Beijing in 2010 (**Figure 16**). Different from the badges in New York, is that these badges consist of terms written in only Chinese, and most of them are complimentary towards women, boosting the social perception of women.¹⁴³ For instance,

¹³⁹ *Baidu*. (Baidu, 2020), s.v. “串女,” <https://bks0.baidu.com/item/串女>.

¹⁴⁰ “Lin Tianmiao: Badges.”

¹⁴¹ Lin Tianmiao, “Interview: Lin Tianmiao on Art, Influence, and ‘Bodily Reaction’ as Inspiration,” interview by Sun Yunfan, *Asia Society*, September 26, 2012, <https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/interview-lin-tianmiao-art-influence-and-bodily-reaction-inspiration>.

¹⁴² “Lin Tianmiao: Badges.”

¹⁴³ Lin Tianmiao, “Inspiration,” interview.

'yafengnü' (yáfēngnǚ, 牙縫女), meaning 'beauty with a gap between the front teeth,' is included among many others.¹⁴⁴



Figure 15. Lin Tianmiao. *Gazing Back - Badges* (installation view at Shanghai Pujiang OCT, Shanghai), 2009.



Figure 16. Lin Tianmiao. *Constructive Dimension - Badges* (installation view at National Art Museum of China, Beijing), 2010.

¹⁴⁴ Lin Tianmiao, "Inspiration," interview.

The use of written text is a recurring theme in Lin Tianmiao's work. As in *Badges, Protruding Patterns* (**Figure 17a-b**) is made out of stitched-together antique carpets, embroidered with text in Chinese, English, French, among other languages.¹⁴⁵ Continuing the search for expressions about women that started from Lin's *Badges* projects, *Protruding Patters* consists of a selection of negative and positive words, gathered from newspapers, the internet, and conversations.¹⁴⁶ By using a mix of appreciative and depreciative expressions, Lin Tianmiao focuses on the progress that society has made towards the position of women during the years. The incorporation of multiple languages indicates that the terms used in the artwork transcend cultures and time.¹⁴⁷ By utilising antique Chinese carpets, the artwork generates a sense of history, and simultaneously indicates how language develops through time.¹⁴⁸ As in *Badges, Protruding Patters* encourages bodily movement, inviting museum visitors to walk all over the artwork.

Figures 17a-b. Lin Tianmiao. *Protruding Patterns* (installation view at Galerie Lelong & Co., New York), 2017. Wool thread, yarn, and acrylic, variable dimensions.



Figure 17a.

¹⁴⁵ Sarah Cascone, "This Artist Gathered 2,000 Words for Women—and Now, She Wants You to Walk All Over Them," *Artnet*, October 16, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/lin-tianmiao-carpet-galerie-lelong-1113395>.

¹⁴⁶ "Installation views: Lin Tianmiao," Galerie Lelong, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.galerielelong.com/exhibitions/lin-tianmiao3/installation-views?view=slider>.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*



Figure 17b.

Figures 18a-b. Lin Tianmiao. *Protruding Patterns* (details).



Figure 18a.



Figure 18b.

The bodily movement in *Badges* and *Protruding Patterns* is also an important element in *My Garden* (Figure 19). While walking through the garden, the green coloured liquid pushes itself through the tubes that are executed in different sizes as to resemble a forrest of plants.¹⁴⁹ Even the element of femininity makes a comeback, present in the soft pink carpet on the floor. After having worked with her trademark technique of embroidery and use of natural materials, Lin Tianmiao opted for glass in *My Garden*, as it is a man-made material extensively used in modern life.¹⁵⁰ Etched onto these glass tubes are names for well-known plants, both in Chinese and English. The English names, however, are not understandable or known, as these are translated back from Chinese into English in

¹⁴⁹ “Lin Tianmiao: Systems.”

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

vernacular terms. Like so, the *Lawsonia inermis* plant, in Chinese known as ‘zhijiahua’ (*zhǐjiāhuā*, 指甲花), is translated back to ‘nail dye flower.’¹⁵¹ By using this retranslation of plant names, Lin Tianmiao highlights the importance of language to the creation of our understanding of the world.¹⁵²



Figure 19. Lin Tianmiao. *My Garden* (installation view at Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai), 2018. Aluminium frame, glass, liquid circulation system, carpet, variable dimensions.

As exemplified by the aforementioned three artworks, the use of language and the notion of femininity are themes that are found throughout Lin Tianmiao’s works. Especially Lin’s application of textiles and traditionally female crafts has led Chinese and Western art critics to portray Lin as a ‘feminist’ artist.¹⁵³ While not paying much attention to an identity as a ‘woman artist,’ Lin started thinking about the issue of feminism after being asked multiple times whether she was a feminist artist or not.¹⁵⁴ Never having thought of the issue before, Lin did not know where or how to start,¹⁵⁵ which can be logically explained as feminism in China has never been a movement inflicting individual force.¹⁵⁶ Throughout Chinese history, Chinese women’s liberation has been closely tied to and gradually evolved through national revolutions.¹⁵⁷ Lin Tianmiao started her research into feminism in traditional Chinese dictionaries, where she searched for words invented for the roles a woman could play in society.¹⁵⁸ As her findings became the starting point for *Badges*, Lin noticed that no more than 200 words were invented that described women in their professional capacities, of which many were about professions that have not survived throughout history.¹⁵⁹ As Lin later turned to the internet and Chinese social media among other sources, she discovered that in the last couple

¹⁵¹ “Lin Tianmiao: Systems.”

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Lin Tianmiao, “No Feminism,” interview.

¹⁵⁴ Lin Tianmiao, interview.

¹⁵⁵ Lin Tianmiao, “Inspiration,” interview.

¹⁵⁶ Teo, *Rewriting Modernism*, 24.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Lin Tianmiao, “Inspiration,” interview.

¹⁵⁹ Lin Tianmiao, interview.

of decades there had been an outburst of new words and descriptions to name and label women in society, coming across more than 900 terms.¹⁶⁰

Unlike Western feminism, Lin Tianmiao argues that feminism in China is an imported idea, that evolved from different social and cultural contexts in China.¹⁶¹ Due to feminism being a term from the West, Lin argues that the Chinese are not able to implement and duplicate the term, as China and the West do not share an interchangeable history and have their own locality.¹⁶² However, she believes that she has an individual sense of feminism, that comes from the basic instinct that women that women should advocate more for themselves.¹⁶³ By using methods like thread winding and embroidery in her work, Lin elevates traditional women's work to a position of art.¹⁶⁴ Although her artworks can convey a message of how women's roles are evolving in society, particularly as in *Badges* and *Portruding Patterns* where she establishes an international stage of exploring women's feelings towards their evolving societal roles, Lin states that "the label feminism restricts the interpretation of my work, and how I think about it."¹⁶⁵ Labelling Lin Tianmiao's work as 'feminist' can be seen as a Western misinterpretation of her art work and a misreading of messages they convey.¹⁶⁶ As a Chinese artist and woman herself, Lin hopes that one can look at her artwork without being prejudiced against ideas of China or women.¹⁶⁷ This notion can be tied to the idea of Chinese woman being "doubly colonised," which stems from the fact that Chinese women not only face gender issues in China and overseas, but are also marginalised as an ethnicity across other cultures.¹⁶⁸ On the notion of 'Chineseness,' Lin Tianmiao herself argues: "I feel that the "Chineseness" is something very natural. It is in my blood. I do not need to express it through special or iconic symbols. I do believe that I embody many Chinese traditions and philosophies and my work reflects them naturally. But they do not need to be deliberately pronounced."¹⁶⁹ Through her artworks, Lin Tianmiao initiates a gendered experience, accentuating the female body,¹⁷⁰ and is crossing conventional borders on masculinity and femininity, while staying true to her own position as a contemporary Chinese artist.

¹⁶⁰ Lin Tianmiao, interview.

¹⁶¹ Lin Tianmiao, "Inspiration," interview.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Lin Tianmiao, "No Feminism," interview.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Cascone, "This Artist."

¹⁶⁶ Lin Tianmiao, "No Feminism," interview.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Teo, *Rewriting Modernism*, 24.

¹⁶⁹ Lin Tianmiao, "Inspiration," interview.

¹⁷⁰ "Chinese Contemporary Art and Lin Tianmiao."

Chapter III. Globalism and Identity

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was a crucial turning point in recent Chinese art history, as contemporary Chinese art entered the global arena of art. The team in charge of planning and directing the opening and closing ceremonies was highly international, with stage designers and choreographers coming from all over the world. The artist responsible for the fireworks, was contemporary Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang. Cai was born in Quanzhou, Fujian province, in 1957.¹⁷¹ With a father, an artist of Chinese calligraphy and bookseller who had an extensive collection of books, Cai was exposed to art at a young age.¹⁷² After receiving his degree in stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy in 1985, Cai emigrated to Japan in 1986, where he got accepted to the Tsukuba University in the Department of Total Art.¹⁷³ In 1995, Cai moved to New York with an Asian Cultural Council Fellowship, and has been living there ever since.¹⁷⁴

While Cai was experimenting with materials and techniques, the use of gunpowder has become a key element in his artworks.¹⁷⁵ Being a Chinese invention, discovered by Chinese alchemists that were initially searching for an immortality medicine, gunpowder contains cultural and historical symbolism in China.¹⁷⁶ Cai was not only interested in using gunpowder due to its historical importance, but also because of its dual tension. Gunpowder is either celebratory when used as firework at festivities, or violent when used as bombs and bullets.¹⁷⁷ In Cai's *Sky Ladder* (**Figure 20**), gunpowder is used to illuminate the 500-meter-long ladder, as it is taking off into the sky.¹⁷⁸ The idea behind the creation of *Sky Ladder* dates back to 1994, being Cai's first attempt to realise the project in Bath, England, when the realisation was canceled due to rain.¹⁷⁹ The realisation got postponed two times after that: his second attempt in Shanghai in 2001 was canceled due to security matters in the aftermath of 9/11, whereas the permit for the third realisation was revoked in Los Angeles in 2012 due to a high risk of forest fires.¹⁸⁰ Without seeking official permission to realise the project, Cai was finally able to realise the project in his hometown of Quanzhou in 2015.¹⁸¹ While the ladder gradually gets lit, it is creating a connection between Earth and universe.¹⁸² As already mentioned in connection to Hao Liang's artwork, the early Chinese concepts of the connection between humanity and cosmos can be tied to the connecting of Heaven and earth in *Sky Ladder* as well.

Cai's trademark use of gunpowder can also be traced back to his artwork *Odyssey* (**Figure 21a-b**), a landscape scroll painting covering an entire exhibition space in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.¹⁸³ The tradition of landscape painting is applied in an unconventional manner, with the result of gunpowder explosions depicting symbols and characteristics of traditional Chinese landscape paintings, such as mountains, grasses, and flowers. The black marble on the floor was a specific choice by Cai, as it has a highly reflective quality and therefore can blend in museum visitors with the reflection of the art piece on the floor.¹⁸⁴ As the installation painting is fifty meters long and covers an entire exhibition space, it creates the possibility for the audience to become part of the

¹⁷¹ Cai Guo-Qiang, "About the artist."

¹⁷² Sarah Cascone, "Cai Guo-Qiang Sets the Art World Aflame in New Netflix Documentary," *Artnet*, October 14, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/cai-guo-qiang-sky-ladder-netflix-652061>.

¹⁷³ Dana Friis-Hansen, Octavio Zaya, and Serizawa Takashi, *Cai Guo-Qiang* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 44.

¹⁷⁴ Cai Guo-Qiang, Stijn Huijts, and Lars Nittve, *Cai Guo-Qiang: My Stories of Painting* (Maastricht: Bonnefantenmuseum Publisher, Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016), 105.

¹⁷⁵ Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 303.

¹⁷⁶ Zhang, and Frazier, "'Playing the Chinese Card,'" 578.

¹⁷⁷ Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 303.

¹⁷⁸ Peter Bradshaw, "Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang review – jaw-dropping pyrotechnics," *The Guardian*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/13/sky-ladder-the-art-of-cai-guo-qiang-review-kevin-macdonald>.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Cascone, "Cai Guo-Qiang."

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Cai, Huijts, and Nittve, *Cai Guo-Qiang*, 108.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

painting. This idea to bring people into his paintings, was a concept that arose after Cai moved to New York.



Figure 20. Cai Guo-Qiang. *Sky Ladder* (realised off Huiyu Island, Quanzhou), 2015. Gunpowder, fuse and helium balloon, 500 x 5,5 m.

Figures 21a-b. Cai Guo-Qiang. *Odyssey* (permanent installation view at Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), 2010. Gunpowder on paper, mounted on wood as 42-panel screen, 3,15 x 49,38 m overall.



Figure 21a.



Figure 21b.

The incorporation of traditional Chinese cultural elements in his art adds to the multilayered meanings that Cai conveys with his art. According to Cai, art should be fun, without the burden of some sort of critique or opinion.¹⁸⁵ However, central to his art is overcoming the cultural gap between East and West. This gap is rooted in Edward Said's 'Orientalism,' which is a point of view that has its origin in colonialism and differentiates the West (Occident) as superior and the East (Orient) as inferior.¹⁸⁶ As an internationally well-known and achieved artist, Cai received Western criticism as being a commercial showman and a sham artist, which stems from the threat that contemporary Chinese artists and the huge growth of Asian art markets have on contemporary Western art as a leading force in the global art arena.¹⁸⁷ While contemporary Chinese art has established a prominent position in the arena of global art, there exists a certain unease towards contemporary Chinese artists due to the connection with their motherland.¹⁸⁸ Lack of knowledge on contemporary Chinese art and its developments has led Western art critics to label contemporary Chinese artworks established overseas as politically opposing China in an attempt for international freedom.¹⁸⁹ The idea that a contemporary Chinese artist cannot be proud of his/her homeland while being celebrated in the West, comes from the Western perceptions of and requirements to contemporary Chinese art to perform according to their political presumptions, in which an artist from China cannot be authentic in his/her simultaneous being of a Chinese subject and a modern artist.¹⁹⁰ As in the case of Cai Guo-Qiang, who designed the firework shows at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, he was criticised in the West for taking on a project for and working together with the Chinese government.¹⁹¹ Criticising Cai for being compromised, as creative experimentation has its limits in China, Western art critics are falling short of more nuanced interpretations of Chinese artists' intentions.¹⁹²

Contemporary Chinese artists have become mobile in applying and avoiding 'Chineseness' in their artworks,¹⁹³ as from a Western point of view, a contemporary Chinese artist cannot simultaneously be Chinese and modern. However, Cai's artwork can be seen as a way of disturbing such Western perceptions by using traditional Chinese elements, such as gunpowder and landscape painting, into the creation of an installation art piece, which is a modern concept. Cai transgresses boundaries between different forms of art, and thus creates a visual dialogue between East and West.¹⁹⁴ While creating a dialogue, Cai Guo-Qiang attempts to transgress cultural boundaries, overcoming the cultural gap between East and West. This notion can be tied to 'transnationalism,' which is a term for intercultural exchange,¹⁹⁵ and is illustrated in Cai's artworks by merging multiple cultural elements in his artworks.

As gunpowder was invented in China and brought to the West by Marco Polo along the maritime Silk Route, Cai's artworks can be interpreted as returning gunpowder to its original Chinese creators:¹⁹⁶ "Cai is reclaiming and redefining the 'signs and systems of ancient Chinese culture' within the postmodern global arena."¹⁹⁷ Within Cai's work, concepts as 'China' or 'Asia' are no longer dominated by a Western perspective, as he turns such concepts into methods so as to observe the world we live in.¹⁹⁸ By creating a space of dialogue where the East and West can encounter one another, Cai Guo-Qiang places his artworks in a new type of 'global,' where Western perceptions of

¹⁸⁵ Cai Guo-Qiang, "Cai Guo-Qiang with Ellen Pearlman," interview by Ellen Pearlman, *Brooklyn Rail*, April, 2008, <https://brooklynrail.org/2008/04/art/cai-guo-qiang-with-ellen-pearlman>.

¹⁸⁶ Geczy, *Transorientalism in Art, Fashion, and Film*, 5.

¹⁸⁷ Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 473/475/478.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 482.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 474.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 481-82.

¹⁹¹ Cascone, "Cai Guo-Qiang."

¹⁹² Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 482-483.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 305.

¹⁹⁵ Geczy, *Transnationalism in Art, Fashion, and Film*, 6.

¹⁹⁶ Li Shiyan, "Analysing Works of Cai Guo-Qiang in Relation to Ancient Concepts," 72.

¹⁹⁷ Lin, and Frazier, "Playing the Chinese Card," 578.

¹⁹⁸ Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot," 483.

contemporary Chinese art are brought to light and reconsidered.¹⁹⁹ This new type of ‘global’ can be connected to the notion of pan-nationality. Geczy states that contemporary Chinese art is fundamentally ‘pan-national,’ indicating that it is a co-creation between China and the West.²⁰⁰ It could be argued that the visual dialogue and encounter of East and West that Cai creates within his artworks, can only exist within a pan-national space.

¹⁹⁹ Ong, “What Marco Polo Forgot,” 475.

²⁰⁰ Geczy, *Transorientalism in Art, Fashion, and Film*, 109.

Conclusion

My research question is the following: “How do contemporary Chinese artists establish a contemporary identity in art, and how do they represent this image in the arena of global art?”

After 2008, when contemporary Chinese art emerged in the global art arena, contemporary Chinese artists were finding a way to position themselves into this global art sphere. Before emerging into this new arena, contemporary Chinese artists had already been experimenting with modern art forms. What had proven to be effective, was the combination of modern and traditional Chinese elements and techniques, and thus creating a zeitgeist for contemporary Chinese artists. Ideas about and views on this technique started appearing from all over the world, either in the form of approval or critique. Due to a lack of knowledge on Chinese art and its developments, contemporary Chinese artworks were subordinate to Western misreadings, as contemporary Western art was leading the global art sphere. As a logic result, Western interpretations and perceptions were assigned to contemporary Chinese artworks, while the multilayered meaning of these artworks were overlooked.

Within this emergence on the global art sphere, contemporary Chinese artists were greeted with a preconceived identity. These labeled identities all came from a Western perception of the world, where ideas of tradition, feminism, and globalism were already formed. With contemporary Chinese art as the new actor on the global stage, Western concepts of the world were placed onto these artworks. However, Hao Liang, Lin Tianmiao, and Cai Guo-Qiang have all been leading artists in crossing these conventional borders.

Hao Liang, who modernises traditional Chinese elements into his artworks, establishes a version of modernity in art that is specific to Chinese art. While Hao connects past to present as his artworks contain a notion of moving through time, the appropriation of traditional Chinese elements is a way of paying homage to tradition. Hao is crossing generational borders by connecting and uniting concepts and elements from the past and present in art, and thus encompasses the coexistence of the past and the present in artworks.

Lin Tianmiao’s use of textiles and traditionally female crafts has led her to be labeled a ‘feminist’ artist. Even though her artworks have contained the concept of women’s social positions in society, Lin argues that a feminist interpretation restricts the interpretation of her work. By elevating traditional women’s work to the position of art and taking the female body as a protagonist in many of her works, Lin is crossing conventional borders on masculinity and femininity.

Cai Guo-Qiang's aforementioned artworks are concerned with the cultural gap between East and West. By uniting Chinese and modern characteristics in his artworks, and therefore visually presenting a dialogue where East and West can encounter one another, Cai creates another ‘global’ sphere. While creating this new global sphere of dialogue, Cai crosses conventional borders of Western perceptions of the global art world.

In the merging of traditional Chinese concepts, techniques and materials with modern ones, Hao Liang, Lin Tianmiao and Cai Guo-Qiang have been appropriating the contemporary Chinese zeitgeist in their artworks. While establishing themselves in the global art arena, they are leading in crossing conventional borders.

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