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Introduction

Jason C. Kuo

In the past two decades, contemporary Chinese art and film have attracted a great deal of media and academic attention in the West, and scholars have adopted a variety of approaches to Chinese film and visual studies. As English scholarship in this area has continued to expand, it is time for us to assess progress, problems, and prospects in our research agendas and methodologies.¹ The present volume focuses, therefore, on the uses and status of theory originating in non-Chinese places in the creation, curating, narration, and criticism of contemporary Chinese visual culture (broadly defined to include traditional media in the visual arts as well as cinema, installation, video, etc.). One of the main themes of the book is the appropriateness (that is, the uses, abuses, appropriations, limits, etc.) of Western theory. Contributors reflect on the written and, even more interestingly, the unwritten assumptions of artists, critics, historians, and curators in applying or resisting these theories. They also reflect on the status of theory in our scholarship; by necessity, theory in this case is broadly conceived to include not only critical theory in the West but also basic concepts that enable us to engage in different modes of perception, articulation, negotiation, and interrogation. Theory is also linked to our disciplinary traditions and innovations, as scholars from art history, film studies, and Chinese studies investigate different aspects of Chinese art and film in our knowledge production.

The book begins with Paul Gladston's essay "Traces of Empire: Deconstructing Hou Hanru's 'Postcolonialist' Reading of Contemporary Chinese Art." "Contemporary Chinese Art" is the term widely used in an Anglophone context to refer to modern forms

of Chinese art produced since the late 1970s that involve the active translation of attitudes and techniques historically associated with the western avant-gardes and post-avant-gardes in relation to the demands of an autochthonous Chinese art world (the corresponding term in Mandarin Chinese is *Zhongguo dangdai yishu*—which can be translated into English as “Chinese Contemporary Art”). As a result, contemporary Chinese art can be understood—from the point of view of contemporary Western poststructuralist theory—to have severely problematized ontological-essentialist notions of cultural identity, not only those historically associated with western Orientalism, but also those that inform recent calls among Chinese commentators for a reassertion of the essential “Chineseness” of contemporary Chinese art.

According to a number of commentators, including the Chinese curator and theorist Hou Hanru, the cultural hybridity of contemporary Chinese art has a strong affinity with the Chinese intellectual tradition’s historical reliance on what might be described as a “nonrationalist” dialectics. By contrast with the Western philosophical tradition’s durable belief in the negation of difference as part of some sort of transcendental unity or whole, vernacular Chinese thought and practice upholds the Daoist/Chan Buddhist notion that there is the possibility of reciprocal interaction between persistently differing states of being (viz. the dynamic interrelationship between *yin* and *yang* given visual expression by the well-known Chinese symbol of the *Ba Gua*). Such notions are, it is argued, closely allied to Western poststructuralist conceptions such as “différance” and “trace-structure.”

In his essay, Gladston argues that the conjunction of Western poststructuralism and Chinese Daoism/Chan Buddhism is ultimately a problematic one that overlooks the continuing, and distinctly metaphysical, tendency of vernacular Chinese thought and practice to look toward nonrationalist dialectics as a basis for the (provisional) harmonization of persistently differing states of being. He also argues (with reference to a range of sources, including interviews conducted with contemporary Chinese artists) that this tendency finds significant expression through the formal construction of contemporary Chinese art, which—like traditional Chinese *literati* painting—can often be understood to engender an unfolding

multiplicity of (aesthetic) feelings while also seeking to harmonize those feelings in an ultimately pleasurable way with respect to the presentation of distinctly “good” artistic forms—a process conventionally referred to in Chinese as *wanshang* (“play-appreciation”). On this basis, Gladston seeks to frame contemporary Chinese art not simply as an instance of critical cultural hybridity but also as an attempt to resist the assumed hegemony of Western artistic theory and practice—and in particular the now-pervasive notion of transcultural/national “Third-Space”—through an assimilation of western otherness to an insistently Chinese “empire” of aesthetic feeling.

From a sociopolitical and economic perspective, post-Deng China continues most of the legacies from Deng Xiaoping’s market reform policy. What seems to be new, such as the legalization of the culture industry and the heavy leaning upon cultural nationalism and globalization, can be seen as rational developments as China moves ahead following the strategies that Deng conceived. In the art world, however, the cumulative effects of continuous market expansion and the increasing impact of globalization have greatly challenged the existing mechanism and power structure of the official art establishment.

The Chinese art world now operates in a different way and shows an unprecedented energy. A significant difference is that the Chinese Artists Association, the national organization of artists, art historians, and critics, seems to have stopped being the only officially sanctioned agency of the Chinese art world. This consequentially brings many changes to the official art world and fosters new social relationships among artists of different camps: official, unofficial, underground, independent, and international. The conflict between official art and avant-garde art of the 1980s, or underground art of the 1990s, is finally absorbed into the new ideology that combines the desires of being global, marketable, and nationalistic all at once.

Grounded upon the dynamic economic, political, and cultural developments of Chinese society since the mid-1990s, Meiqin Wang’s essay, “The Art World of Post-Deng China: Market, Globalization, and Cultural Nationalism,” explores the most influential forces in the transformation of the Chinese art world. It illuminates

how marketization, globalization, and cultural nationalism have introduced contemporary media, formats, and issues, as well as Western modes of presenting art, thereby transforming the operating system of Chinese official art. It also examines how the interactive impacts of these forces have complicated the relationship between official art and unofficial art, shaken the supremacy of the Chinese Artists Association in presenting state-sanctioned art, and created room for new discourses from various artistic groups with different agendas. It argues that in the recent tide of transformation and reconstruction, previous boundaries and conflicts in the art world dissolve while new divisions and forces grow. Among these, exhibition of contemporary art stands out as a most attention-absorbing force, calling into question the old practice of the art-displaying-and-perceiving system. Un-unofficial or independent art emerges and steps onto the stage of the Chinese art world, to a large degree replacing unofficial art. At the same time, within the scope of official art, internal divisions emerge and expand, which have put the mainstream art in China on the track of disintegration and reformation.

In the 1990s, Chinese art was widely displayed in some privileged international art exhibitions. But one pertinent subject may need to be addressed: the unduly exaggerated influence that it had on collectors, curators, and museums based in the West in determining the representation of contemporary Chinese art in an international arena. This situation is the result of a specific historical and theoretical condition centered on the concepts of modernism and modernization—concepts that have framed and continue to determine prevailing perceptions about contemporary Chinese art. Focusing on the debates about the international identity of Chinese art, in particular the inside voice, Yiyang Shao's essay, "The International Identity of Chinese Art: Theoretical Debates on Chinese Contemporary Art in the 1990s," questions the legitimacy of Euro-American power in shaping and defining the arts of China by determining the theme and content of international exhibitions, and the intensity of the Chinese internal urge for integration into the international art world.

One of the best-known Chinese works of art since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 is perhaps *Father*, a painting completed in

1980 by Luo Zhongli (born 1948), an artist from Sichuan province. Stephen Goldberg's essay, "Oh Father, Where Art Thou? A Bakhtinian Reading of Luo Zhongli's *Father*" is an exploration of the possible relevance of the theories on language and literature of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), working in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, to an artist working in the aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Goldberg's exploration is motivated by the fact that each in their own ways was obliged to make accommodations with Marxist regimes. Tzvetan Todorov called Bakhtin the *fondeur moderne* of pragmatics.² While Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics limited its field of inquiry to the language system as a separate entity, Bakhtin and his circle were concerned with the study of discourse, "with the socially-situated utterance and with the structuring of linguistic form and meaning by context." These, as Trevor Pateman observes, "relate much more obviously to the contemporary literature on pragmatics...."³ Bakhtin's writings on literature as a polyphonic, heterogeneous discourse must also be seen in contradistinction to Russian Formalism, which attempted to distinguish the poetic use of language from ordinary, everyday usage.

Goldberg's essay undertakes an examination of Bakhtin's thought, with a specific focus on his dialogical theory of "double-voiced discourse" and "addressivity," through a reading of *Father*. Double-voicing (here redefined as the internal bifurcation of visual modes of address) is shown to be an implicit strategy in the artist's attempt to offer a countermemory of the events of the Cultural Revolution. Luo Zhongli's *Father* posed a challenge to the sovereignty of the Communist Party state by undermining, through a rhetorical strategy of parodic inversion, two of the principal discursive instruments by which the legitimacy of this sovereignty was inscribed and rationalized: Socialist Realist paintings and political propaganda posters. First exhibited in 1980, *Father* ignited a decade-long countercultural revolution in contemporary Chinese art, brought to an end by the tragic events of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989.

The appropriateness of Bakhtin's thought to Luo Zhongli's painting, of course, is based solely on one criterion: the relevancy of this theoretical approach to the issues raised by this work, issues, it should be noted, that are certainly contingent on the critical con-

cerns of our own cultural location. If one were to admit a different set of concerns, this would necessitate a different methodological approach.

A landmark of contemporary Chinese art, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* is usually interpreted under the sign of skepticism. Like the numerous works by other Chinese artists that engage the script as central motif, Xu Bing's opus is taken to enact a radical critique of writing, a sustained deconstruction of the cultural and political authorities that language and the script serve to channel. While this may have been the professed intention of the artist, a careful reconsideration of the artwork can take us beyond such authorial intent, bringing us into a far more unsettling theoretical terrain in which the very terms *modern critiques* and *deconstructions* begin to lose their efficacy and self-evidence. Evacuated of meaning and thus divorced from language, Xu's presumably nonsensical pseudocharacters ironically come to assume the autonomy of a graphic system that is subject to no law but its own morphological rules and principles. In "Imperious Griffonage: Xu Bing and the Graphic Regime," Hajime Nakatani shows that the graphic vision of *A Book from the Sky* lends modern expression to the classical Chinese conception of the script, a graphic cosmology in which the world as such is seen as a form of writing whose implicit systematicity the script makes manifest. Nakatani argues that the aim of such a seemingly classicizing interpretation, however, is not to posit a monolithic "Chinese theory" of writing. It is, rather, to suggest how writing in China constituted—and continues to constitute—an irreducible problem, a traumatic kernel to which questions of order and meaning are repeatedly and obsessively referred back.

In his essay "The Discursive Formation of the Role of the Independent Curator in Taiwan during the 1990s," Po-shin Chiang analyzes how the subject position of Taiwan art has continually developed in the context of the international contemporary art exhibitions held in Taiwan since the 1996 Taipei Biennial. Organizing exhibitions used to be the job of museum professionals. Prior to the 1990s, there were a few instances of Taiwan art critics participating in exhibit curation. In the early 1990s, art critics became more actively involved in organizing Taiwan's contemporary art shows. And since 1996, independent curators who have put together con-

temporary art shows have begun to attract extensive attention and interest from both public and private institutes since 1996. Government-run art museums have even held large seminars and invited curators from across Taiwan and around the world to address topics in curatorship, which has since evolved into an independent field of knowledge and expertise. Hence, Chiang's essay focuses on international contemporary art exhibitions organized by independent curators since 1996.

By inviting six outside curators to organize the 1996 Biennial, the government-run Taipei Fine Arts Museum gave up the power of interpretation it had retained for many years and distributed it to the curators in a network of power. Taiwanese art then no longer became the predominant subject advocated by art museums. Rather, it was reduced to an object of information, hidden in a moral education apparatus called an international exhibition. Curators produced and copied their versions of Taiwanese art with an anonymous operating strategy. What kind of subject position has been created in the discursive formation process while curating these exhibitions—is it “Asian-Pacific” or “Asian” or “Chinese”? What kind of evolution has Taiwanese art experienced under multiple pressures from different international blocks?

In his essay, Chiang conducts a genealogical review of the curatorial discourses. He reveals the derivative and connective power relations between the spatialization of curatorial discourse and curatorial discourse per se. He also deals with the process of discursive formation in which Taiwanese art is produced and reproduced. First, after discussing the spatialization of curatorial discourse, he analyzes the origin of, and the backdrop for, Taiwanese curators organizing international contemporary art exhibitions in Taiwan since 1996. Second, by focusing on two international modern art exhibitions held in Taiwan in 1997, he examines and compares the international diagrams depicted in curatorial statements for those shows, and how the subject position of Taiwanese art was addressed. Finally, he explores how the identities of artists from different nations were interconnected by curators using the concept of a geographic sphere. Also, he discusses how Taiwanese artists were positioned in such social sites, and what impact a curatorial model might have on art creation.

Rural China serves as the barometer for Chinese political and historical weather. The notion of rural China, deeply rooted in the Chinese mentality, has navigated and shaped national policy-making and individuals' words and deeds over China's long history. In her essay "Encircling the City: Peasant Migration in Contemporary Chinese Media," Ping Fu traces the complex history of the ever-changing representation of the Chinese peasantry in Chinese cinema and media and examines the rural-urban embattlements and dialectics through a number of acclaimed Chinese films and other media work. She investigates Chinese farmers' once-privileged position, their disappearance, and their regained recognition, both on- and off-screen, against the major social, economic, and political changes and transformations in China throughout last six decades. She responds to inquiries of how Chinese socialist and postsocialist experiences impact the (re)presentation and imagination of the rural-urban dynamics in Chinese cinema, and exhibits how Chinese filmmakers understand and present changing operations and ideologies on the rural-urban paradox and the local-global paradigm depicted in the studied visual materials. She argues the political and historical dimensions have heavily circumscribed the cinematic configuration of both urban and rural spaces in films from 1950s to today. The popular and massive act of farmers encircling the city in China today has greatly enriched and enlarged the film genres of both Chinese urban cinema and rural cinema in terms of cinematic aesthetics and meaning production.

Along with increasing urbanization, globalization, and marketization of art, the complex issues of sexuality and gender have been taken up by many contemporary Chinese artists and filmmakers. In her essay, "Between Realism and Romanticism: Queering Gender Representation in Cui Zi'en's *Night Scene*," Megan Ferry undertakes to read filmmaker Cui Zi'en's *Night Scene* (*Yejing*, 2002), with its focus on male prostitution and homosexuality, as an intervention in the construction and bodily configuration of sexualized individuals in post-Maoist society. Cui's focus on the Chinese gay man upsets the power-invested heterosexual male figure prominent in contemporary Chinese media representation, and underscores the male body as caught within the intricate web of a libidinal economy where both men and women have become objects of

consumption. Employing three formal elements of film (the documentary, feature narrative, and reenactments), Cui disrupts the narrative sequence common in feature and documentary films in order to draw attention to the correlation between sexuality and capitalist enterprise. The paper argues that he is less interested in metaphor than in calling our attention to how bodies and commerce intersect in contemporary China, thereby exposing new sexual economies. Subsequently, the paper explores how the film does not satisfy a need to know the lived experiences of gay male prostitutes as much as it questions the act of knowing itself.

Widely praised by international audiences and film critics, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*CTHD*) is one of the most successful Chinese-language films ever made, having earned in excess of \$208 million worldwide (as of 2001), and it stands as the highest-grossing foreign language film of all time in the United States. Much of the academic scholarship on the film explores its transnational co-production and other global dimensions. Yet although transnational in its production and reception, *CTHD* is thoroughly “Chinese” in its diegesis, taking place entirely within the (imagined) historical, geographical, and linguistic boundaries of Qing Dynasty China. This combination of localized content with global box office success and international film awards has led many Chinese viewers to praise the film for attracting a worldwide audience, depicting an edifying representation of Chinese people and culture, and establishing an influential Chinese presence in the global film market.

Though a variety of scholars, journalists, filmmakers, and others have focused on both the film’s global and local features, what has yet to receive appropriate attention is the ubiquitous logic of racial binarism in the film. The essay “Couching Race in the Global Era: Intra-Asian Racism in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*” by Nick Kaldis is a critical dialogue with the extant scholarship on *CTHD*. Simultaneously expanding upon and critically responding to the many insights and compelling arguments to be found in that scholarship, Kaldis argues that *CTHD*’s manipulation of familiar orientalist tropes for global audiences takes place within a novel representational scheme—an *intranational* racialized exaltation of Han ethnicity, its traditions and social mores. Han Chinese in this film are models of social conformity and propriety, upholding quasi-

Confucian *jianghu* (江湖 “knight-errant culture”) codes; they are thoroughly conservative and hostile toward any type of illicit, uncivil, or antisocial behavior. The lead non-Han characters, on the other hand, are violators of the same social mores, laws, and values dear to the Han characters; they prioritize the carnal over the mental and spiritual, abandoning themselves to lust and impetuously acting on their emotional impulses.

Ang Lee’s film is arguably the first globally successful Hollywood-style Chinese language film with a ubiquitous domestic racist logic as a key element of its narrative structure. Kaldis’s essay carefully dissects the mechanisms by which *CTHD* reconfigures the representation of Chinese culture for a global audience, via its ubiquitous binary racial logic. Careful analysis of the content and cinematic grammar reveals this narrative fantasy in which race, ethnicity, and culture are successfully deployed to serve both global and local cultural nationalist identities and aspirations at once.

In “Filmic Transposition of the Roses: Stanley Kwan’s Feminine Response to Eileen Chang’s Women,” Joyce Chi-hui Liu argues that Stanley Kwan’s film *Red Rose/White Rose* of 1994 should be read as his “feminine” rereading of the “feminist” writer Eileen Chang’s fiction of 1944, half a century before. Through Kwan’s filmic rereading and transposition, the power of Eileen Chang’s words, and the hidden male-dominated ideology behind her text, is literally and figuratively challenged and canceled. Liu points out that Kwan presents before the audience a feminine cinema that not only maneuvers the substratum of the filmic space as his commentary on Chang’s reticence on the historical context, but also unveils the possibility of the fluidity of female desire and the growth of female subjectivity, which are both denied by Eileen Chang. Stanley Kwan thinks and speaks through the materiality of the film. Unlike western avant-garde countercinema, which rejects narrative all together, Kwan retains the storytelling tradition but shifts the focus by forcing the marginalized off-screen space upon the viewer’s consciousness. Furthermore, Kwan pieces together the historical background of China during the modernization period in the 1930s and 1940s, which was never treated directly in Eileen Chang’s fiction, and reveals his remarks on the center-margin dialectics. In doing so, Kwan, unlike Eileen Chang, not only charges against the phallogo-

centric collective morality of traditional Chinese culture but also proposes the possibility of the autonomy of women's subjectivity, and hence subverts Chang's prepossessed bias against the freedom and the growth of women's desire.

In his broad-ranging essay "Ethnicity, Nationality, Translocality: A Critical Reflection on the Question of Theory in Chinese Film Studies," Yingjin Zhang addresses the question, What is the current status of theory in Chinese film studies? This question itself begs questions because "theory" often refers to "Western theory" and, as such, it actually carries a plural designation to cover "theories" of semiotics, formalism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, Marxism, feminism, and so on. The dominance of Western theory in film studies means that Chinese aesthetic concepts are rarely explored in contemporary film criticism, especially in English scholarship. On the other hand, Chinese-language discussions of Chinese aesthetics are often linked to cultural nationalism, according to which cinematic examples of "Chineseness" are enumerated to confirm certain essential elements of national culture. In this context, Chinese national cinema is seen to work for cultural self-preservation and self-invigoration. The irony, however, is that as a theory originated from the West, national cinema has been challenged or even discredited in the West, but it continues to gain favor from states and scholars in Asia.

Zhang emphasizes the horizontal tactics of translocality and argues that more often than not, film production, distribution, exhibition, and reception take place at the scale of the local or translocal rather than that of the national, especially in the market economy. Translocality thus prefers place-based imagination and reveals dynamic processes of the local/global (or glocal)—processes that involve not just the traffic of capital and people but also that of ideas, images, styles, and technologies across places in polylocality. Moreover, translocal traffic is never a one-way street, although it could be if one insists on imposing Western theory on Chinese cinema and pursue problematic readings. On the contrary, the polylocality of capital, people, ideas, images, styles, and technologies allows for the reconfiguration of different spaces and patterns of collaboration, competition, contestation, and contradiction. Filmmaking has always been a translocal practice, and Chinese film studies must re-

think such translocality in filmmaking as well as in film scholarship.⁴

The essays in the present volume demonstrate clearly that Western theory can be useful in explicating Chinese art and film, as long as it is applied judiciously; the essays, taken as a whole, also suggest that cultural exchange is never a one-way street. Ideas from traditional Chinese aesthetics have also traveled to the West. It is a challenge to examine what travels and what does not, as well as what makes such travel possible or impossible. The present volume thus provides an opportunity to rethink how theories and texts travel across cultures, languages, disciplines, and media.