

## Discussion on the Characteristics and Cultural Exportation of Chinese Contemporary Art

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### Abstract

Although the Chinese contemporary art once copied the patterns of Western art, it has been proved that China has its own unique cultural foundation and context. Concerning the understanding of the relationship between “Heaven and man”, “False and True”, “Freehand and Realistic”, the artistic characteristics of “Ethereal” “Freehand” “Scholarization” in Chinese art had been formed.

Chinese contemporary art emerged in the late 70’s. Fueled by “85 trendy”, it eventually became better known internationally with the promotion of Venice Biennale. By comparing Chinese and Western cultures, this article analyzes the cultural origins of the development of Chinese contemporary art, summarizes its characteristics, and explores its development space with more vitality through cultural exportation.

**Key words:** Contemporary art; Chinese and Western cultures; Diversification; Globalization; Cultural exportation

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### INTRODUCTION

In this era of peace with the information explosion, the one who occupies the cultural highland will be the focus of the whole world. As an important branch of Chinese culture, Chinese contemporary art is the highlight of the cultural exportation in recent years. Taking into

consideration different cultural and artistic characteristics of Chinese and Western art, this article analyses the characteristics of several stages in Chinese contemporary art, and expounds the importance, consciousness and strategy of cultural exportation of Chinese contemporary art from the perspective of globalization.

A new favorite of the century, Chinese contemporary art has an intricate venation style. Although Chinese contemporary art has been influenced by Western post-modern art to a great extent, when it comes to the characteristics of Chinese culture, China will not copy the Western post-modern form. If China applied the pattern of Western art mechanically, Chinese art would end up in failure on account of inertness. If we want to probe into the development characteristics of Chinese contemporary art, it is necessary to proceed from the fundamental, clarify the differences between Chinese and Western arts, and explore different cultural origins of Chinese contemporary art and its Western counterpart.

### 1. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURAL ORIGINS HAVE RESULTED IN THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART BEING DISTINCT FROM THOSE OF WESTERN CONTEMPORARY ART

#### 1.1 “Harmony of Heaven and Man” in Chinese Traditional Culture and Western “Man Is Different From Heaven”

The complementation of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism has constructed the most fundamental cornerstone of Chinese culture, a “Stable Golden Triangle”. The Confucian believes that people should

transcend the nature, pay attention to the transformation from the nature to the virtue, in order to achieve the perfect human morality, “Truly, the way of heaven.” (“Mengzi Li Lou I”). Taoism stresses the respect for nature, cultivation of mind and body, and the harmony between man and nature. “Tao Te Ching” said: “Man follows the Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows Tao, and Tao follows Nature”. The core of Buddhism is “Self-consciousness” in order to know the right perception and view. “To cultivate the mind by Buddhism, to treat the body by Taoism, to govern the world by Confucianism”. However, as far as the relationship between heaven and man is concerned, all these teachings, whether it is Confucianism, Taoism or Buddhism, have emphasized the intermediation and the harmony between man and nature as well as the importance of adapting to the nature.

Western culture advocates that people are prior to anything else, nature is different from man, and it is impossible for nature and man to be converted into each other. At the same time, people can understand and explore the nature through scientific experiments. From this point of view, Chinese art has witnessed more mysterious works, more “Creation in Heaven” while Western art flourished with the scientific progress of anatomy, perspective and optics.

### **1.2 Being and Not Being Different From Virtual and Realistic**

“All things that can be described exist, all things that exist have patterns, and all things have patterns are made of spirit” (Zhang Zai “Correction of Ignorance-Qian Cheng”) Chinese Trinity culture of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, assumes that being and not-being can be converted to each other, Qi, Tao and Tathata are the essences of the universe, and Qi, Tao and Tathata that fill in substance and nothingness are the marrow of the nature. Without essential difference, being and not-being are integrated. This concept enables Chinese people to ascertain and explore the unknown not by scientific experiment, but by “The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way; the names that can be named are not unvarying names” which was an obscure theory proposed by ancient people. This, however, makes Chinese people stay calm in the face of the unknown. Perhaps this can be explained from another side why many Chinese artists are scholars: in today’s terms, most of Chinese artists have liberal arts background, and many Western artists are of science background; it also can explain why Xie He of the Southern Qi Dynasty pointed out the supreme state the Art of Painting was invisible and untouchable “Vivid Charm”. (“What are Six Rules? a) Vivid artistic conception, b) Painting strength with pen, c) Description similar to the reflected object, d) Color similar to the painted images, e) Composition and location of the painting, f) Copy the works”—Xie He “Paintings”).

“Objective existence” repeatedly authenticated by

Western scholars is cognitive, and it is opposite to the unknown “nothingness”. Therefore scientific experiments are the best means to explore and analyze “nothingness”. In the history of Western art there were a lot of artists who were scientists at the same time—the famous legendary Da Vinci, one of the three painting masters of Renaissance, at the same time was an outstanding sculptor, inventor, philosopher, medical scientist, construction engineer and military engineer, etc.. “The Father of Modern Art”—Cezanne graduated from Law School, was also one of the best “painters of science”.

### **1.3 Chinese “Freehand Plot” and Western “Realistic Plot”**

As early as in ancient China, Xie He of the Southern Qi Dynasty mentioned in his work “Paintings” “Six Rules” for appreciation of paintings, in which the most important rule is “vivid artistic conception”, the two invisible and untouchable words “Artistic Conception” exactly is the painter lifelong pursuit, it is the highest realm of painting, and embodies “Freehand plot” that is very important in the spirit of Chinese culture. Chinese people want to analyze ego and express the emotion through the painting art, therefore the Chinese art is “egoistic” “spiritual” “poetic”.

Western art has been intimately linked with the development of science and technology. During in the Renaissance period, popularity of perspective and anatomy set off aspirations of the painter to study perspective space, and according to Impressionism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, discovery of optical principle promoted the painters to create a vigorous “Color Revolution”. Western art history is closely interrelated with progress and development of science and technology, and artists often want to explore the world and participate in the society through painting and art. Paying more attention to the “realistic plot”, Western art is “socialized” “physical” and “objective” existence.

With the analysis of the distinctions between Chinese and Western contemporary art in terms of their cultural contexts, it is not difficult to understand the development characteristics of Chinese contemporary art in the following several stages

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## **2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART IS DIVIDED INTO THE FOLLOWING STAGES**

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### **2.1 Ignorant Parody**

In the late 70’s, Chinese art struggled out from artistic shackles “Red, Bright, and Light” “High Large and Comprehensive”, and gave birth to “Scar Art”, “Stars Art Exhibition”, “85 New Wave” and then to “89 Modern Art Exhibition” in 1989, which was financed non-governmentally but attracted the official media. This exhibition pushed Chinese contemporary art to an

unprecedented forefront, leaving a significant impact on China's younger generation of artists. The storm brought about many incredible scenes in the history of Chinese art. Scene One: On the opening day, Shanghai young artist Xiao Lu and her boyfriend Tang Song shot at her own works "Dialogue". When the bullet shot the glass between two aluminum alloy telephone booths, two small holes appeared, instead of a long crack, as was expected by the two artists. This "premeditated" works (afterwards called "Shooting Incident") alerted the Public Security Bureau, which led the exhibition to be suspended twice. The event, as a result, was regarded as the symbol and highlight of the exhibition. Scene Two: budding with "Red Humor" in 85's trendy, Zhejiang artist Wu Shanzhuan displayed his works "Big Business"—on the opening day, in the supreme court of art—National Art Museum of China, he sold prawns; both the artist and the customers purchasing prawns became a part of his works. Scene Three: Artist Zhang Nian, in "89 Modern Art Exhibition" showed his art—"Hatching Eggs". Zhang Nian hunkered on a pile of straw strewn with a dozen eggs, his chest with a piece of white paper "During incubation, argument is forbidden so as not to disturb the next generation", which was particularly garish.

In "89 Modern Art Exhibition", these art forms contrary to the traditional Chinese style began to attract people's attention, resulting in severe criticism of art critics at the time. Now more than twenty years passed, those young artists who once participated in that exhibition, Gu Wenda, Xiao Lu, Huang Yongping, Lin Jiahua, Xiamen Dada, etc have become art heavyweights with domestic and even international reputation great enough to compete with traditional art, and everyone began to regret not setting foot on the boat of this era. So far 89 Modern Art Exhibition had collectively appeared as one non-mainstream artistic avant-garde art in the temple of traditional art—National Art Museum of China, for the first time in the history of Chinese art.

But this "85 New Tide" which generated the trend of West wind blowing gradually to the East had left people feel its enthusiasm superabundant, but lacking in context, as if a hungry man is given more than tenfold the amount of his food intake, and is order to eat it all. The national people satisfied their eyes in this event, but their brain was filled with questions, too. Among the works of artists on this exhibition, there were works which brought the artists into fame, and there were also works which only intended to steal the spotlight. Although its loud crying had really arrested people's attention, this giant mixed-blood baby—89 Art Exhibition, which was bred by "85 trendy", lost the sweet milk for its survival at its birth, and died in its infancy after making a couple gestures of silly imitation.

## 2.2 Returning of Nature

On July 9, 1991, "New Generation Art Exhibition" opened in the Chinese History Museum. This is another landmark

event after 89 Modern Art Exhibition. The participants in the exhibition were mostly young artists born after 60's. From then on, people began to label these artists as "New Generation", among whom the representatives, including Liu Xiaodong, Yu Hong, Song Yonghong, Li Tianyuan, Wei Rong, Wang Youshen, Zhao Bandi, etc., began to move toward the stage of art. These artists do not have a unified purpose of art, but most of them are top students graduated from professional art colleges. With the capacity for the painting of realistic works, they refuse works sentimental and hypocritical; instead, they try to present the audience with intuition and pleasure in the face of life.

When new Generation brought new blood to the contemporary art, people began to pour on them terms such as "cynics", "hooligan humorists" (Li Xianting), "existence" (Gao Minglu), "culture" (Gao Xiaojun), "strong focus" (Liu Xiaochun), "specific" (Fan Di'an) and so on. But no matter how, the works of these artists faithfully reflected the artist's life experience and the survival state. Compared to the far-fetched works of previous "89 Art Exhibition" to be "fashionable" for the "trend", it indicated that the artists again displayed their true emotions in their paintings.

## 2.3 Chinese Style in the Age of Consumption

If it comes to the issue of cultural exportation of Chinese contemporary art, we will have to mention an important international exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia (the Venice International Art Biennale), which was established in 1895. Although China joined the exhibition respectively in 1980 and 1982 by "Folk paper-cut" and "Embroidery", due to the ideology and cultural communication barriers, the expected effects were not reached. Time flies. In 1993, thanks to the promotion by Italian Ms. Francesca Dal Lago, who was quite familiar with Chinese culture, the curator of the 45<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Bonito Oliva, decided to invite Chinese contemporary artists to the global art event. 14 artists were invited, including Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun, with Li Xianting as curator. These paintings known as the "Political Pop" and "Hooligan Art" have attracted much attention in the exhibition.

At the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999, 20 Chinese contemporary artists were invited. The Chinese artist, who accounts for almost 20% of the participating artists, set off a Chinese contemporary art boom in the world. The Chinese National Museum settled at the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennial Exhibition of 2005, when the artist Cai Guoqiang and China Art Gallery Curator Fan Di'an launched a new era for international dream of Chinese Contemporary Art. The international collectors' focus on Chinese contemporary art had led to the emergence of "F4" that we are most familiar with (Zhang Xiaogang, Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun and Wang Guangyi), and there was panic buying on important auctions such as New York Sotheby's and Hong Kong Christie's. Once down-and-out, artists

almost got rich overnight. The painting style of “F4” was also much chased, and its commercial success attracted a group of small-time professional painters who lived on the paintings of “Bald” and “Smiling face”. In the eyes of the Westerners, these are good works which criticize the system, and they should be respected as “Chinese style”. There was a significant relationship between the commercial prosperity of the Chinese art market and the inflow of the Western capital. Therefore, the international Chinese art boom took on a color of strong opportunism and post-colonial cultural psychology.

### 3. CULTURAL EXPORTATION OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART

Through the above analysis, it can be reached that with unique and excellent cultural heritage, Chinese contemporary art has its own source, long and inexhaustible. Echoing with the economic globalization, the development of culture in each country and nation becomes increasingly open and diverse. In today’s cultural and strategic layout, the issue of the Western cultural hegemony is outstanding. Some artists follow the trend blindly and thus become a member of “hooligan culture” without its own identity, the worst is when some artists and scholars face such unfair argument, they acquiesce in and even approve of it.

Chinese contemporary art should strengthen its cultural exportation while understanding and improving itself. Now many scholars are studying the issue of Chinese cultural exportation. As early as in 2004, Wang Yuechuan from Peking University mentioned in the article of “Chinese Identity and Cultural Exportation in the New Century” which was published in “Guangdong Social Science”:

“Discovery of the East” will become a new consciousness of mankind in the new century, ... in the “cultural exportation” the Eastern scholars should have their own independent viewpoint and academic character, so that their “voice of the East” will not be overwhelmed on the global academic arena.

It is high time that the Chinese contemporary artists had cultural consciousness of the era and a good understanding of themselves before building up self-confidence, and creating contemporary art with Chinese characteristics, rather than blindly follow the trend or become “cultural slaves” in the era of peace. Unaware of the advantages of their own culture, some contemporary scholars and artists advocate Western civilization with

a sense of cultural inferiority, which produces “sweet western-style pastry” that cannot be digested in Chinese context. Of course, in China there are also many excellent “international-style” artists who base their works on the local cultures and who are good at learning and absorbing the essence of Western art, such as Zhao Wuji who depicted Chinese “Freehand Spirit” with oil painting, Cai Guoqiang who used one of the four great inventions of ancient China—firework to make works, and Xu Bing who did “Hieroglyphics” with Chinese calligraphy strokes etc..

### CONCLUSION

In a word, with its unique venation of development, the Chinese contemporary art must realize the importance of exporting Chinese culture, establishing its “cultural identity” on the international stage, breaking the stereotype, and seeking its own way. Neither should it repudiate itself and simply copies the others, nor should it close its gate to the world. Chinese contemporary art needs to “go out” while seeking in the traditional Chinese culture the new interpretation of the contemporary art, thus revealing to the world the glowing “National style”. In this way, China’s “new image” will be founded, and the national economy will be promoted in return. When the East encounters the West, the Chinese contemporary art will have an appealing and definite “cultural identity” in the new century

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