

Survival in the Third Space: Transnational Chinese Artists and their Cultural Identity

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1 Introduction: Chinese artists overseas

Cai Guo-Qiang emerged on the international art scene in 1993 as ‘the Chinese gunpowder artist’. He was born in 1957 in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, China and received training in stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy from 1981 to 1985. When Cai was a child, he was heavily influenced by his father, a Communist Party member who ran a bookstore in Guangzhou and provided officials with banned books. Every now and then, his father gave him translations of Western literature such as *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett. His father was also an amateur artist, who taught Cai traditional Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy (Schjeldahl 2008). Even though his father had an interest in traditional art and literature, he was truly Maoist and patriotic. Cai rejected the devotion his father had to traditional art and to the Communist Party. In order to break free from his father, he turned to contemporary art (Lubow 2008). Because he felt restrained by the Chinese artistic tradition, he wanted to pursue this dream abroad, to find more receptive spaces for his contemporary approach.

Before Cai eventually left China for Japan in 1986, he started to experiment with gunpowder. He chose this ancient Chinese invention, because Quanzhou City was a centre of firecracker manufacturing. As a child, Cai would see “poorer children [going] to school with their hands stained red, having worked at home to fill red paper tubes with gunpowder for the local firecracker factory” (Lubow 2008, 35). This exposure contributed to his fascination with the material. Apart from the fact that gunpowder was easy to come by, Cai was also looking for a visual language that went beyond the boundaries of nations. Since the explosive is known all over the world, it was an obvious choice (Lubow 2008). After relocating to Japan, Cai further developed the technique of using gunpowder and became the bold originator of a new medium of contemporary artistic expression. Cai currently lives and works in New York. Despite his international recognition, questions about the validity of his work remain unanswered within China. Since Cai emigrated from China, Chinese art critics no longer consider him to be a *true* Chinese artist. He is one of many Chinese artists overseas dealing with questions of cultural identity.

In this essay, I will first discuss the distinct differences and idiosyncrasies of overseas Chinese artists, with a specific focus on cultural identity formation. Secondly, by observing the position of Cai Guo-Qiang as a world-renowned transnational Chinese artist I will develop an understanding as to whether this artist fits the prevailing description of the Chinese artists overseas. What makes Cai particularly interesting is the fact that he has become successful by adopting a ‘post-orientalist strategy’, whereas other overseas artists are often criticised for portraying a form of exoticism. This analysis will exemplify the outlined theory on the post-orientalist strategy in a ‘third space’. Finally, I will summarize my main arguments regarding the cultural identity formation of the overseas Chinese artist community and their discrete characteristics.

2 Theoretical frame: Survival in the Third Space

The division between art inside and outside China can be described as a splintering process. The beginnings of this fracturing can be traced back to 1979, an important moment in history when Deng Xiaoping announced the “Open Door Policy”, meaning foreign trade and investment for China (Chiu 2007). It was during this period that Chinese contemporary art gained international recognition. Fei Dawei, a Paris-based art critic and curator, identified a definite schism in the Chinese contemporary art world in the late 1980s and early 1990s when numerous artists went abroad. These artists were part of the 1980s Chinese avant-gardists, but as they were confronted with new cultural contexts in the West, their ideological concerns about revolutionizing both art and society became trivial (Gao 1998). Their new challenge was how to deal with mainstream western culture. Many artists left the country for businesses opportunities, or to avoid government restrictions on freedom of expression after the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4, 1989. The art world split up into two groups: the migrants, and their counterparts in China. Thus the 1990s resulted in two parallel art worlds “with their own logic and spheres of influences and minimal overlapping” (Chiu 2007, 214).

While the mainland artists were mainly concerned with the self and local issues, their overseas colleagues were especially interested in referring to their Chinese origin. Chiu remarks that the depiction of Chineseness was less relevant to mainland Chinese artists, as they aspired to be associated with the international contemporary art world. The work of these mainland artists should be seen in the context of the enormous changes that began in the 1980s when China dealt with the shift from a Communist, centralized system of production to a consumer-oriented market economy. The emerging transnational economy led to an increasing Western influence on Chinese art, but not enough to grant complete freedom of expression to artists (Adams 2011). The mainland artists were and still are subject to the ever-changing loosening and subsequent tightening of control over the public sphere (Chiu 2007). Nevertheless, mainland artists are by no means fenced off from the rest of the world, as some

cease to stay in the country and venture elsewhere.

These émigrés often went to Sydney, New York and Paris, where they found safety in the use of Chinese signifiers. The longer Chinese artists were abroad, the more important their memories of China became, and such memories were expressed in their work. However, it must be noted that the traditional Chinese symbols and iconography they refer to are not a direct reproduction of their traditional form. This generation of artists grew up during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a period when traditions were largely seen as obsolete and feudal. Their references to the idea of Old China are therefore often an altered reconstruction for a new cultural context (Chiu 2007). Thus, one could say that these expatriates “are playing the China card” by using their Chinese origin as an artistic strategy in their work (Heartney 2002, 94). They are highlighting the issue of cultural identity, although their work has lost most of its connection to the lived reality in China (Du, cited in Chiu 2007, 221). Therefore, mainland critics question the validity of their work, arguing that overseas artists represent a form of exoticism Wang Nanming, a well-known art critic, even referred to overseas artists “as manufacturing ‘Chinatown cultures’ that bear little resemblance to lived reality in China” (in Chiu 2007, 222).

The U.S.- based curator Gao Minglu has less antagonism toward the overseas artists and their success. In the exhibition catalogue *Inside out: New Chinese Art*, Gao discusses the concept of the ‘third space’, as conceptualized by Homi Bhabha. In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha links his notion of cultural hybridity to ‘the third space’, where the “process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Rutherford 1990, 211). Thus, the third space challenges the East-West dichotomy by providing a hybrid cultural space characterized by its in-between state. Referring to the theory of Bhabha, Gao argues: “What is crucial for overseas Chinese artists is not the preservation of Chinese characteristics but rather to act effectively in the third space. The artists’ task is to make their own Chinese cultural experiences into efficient languages to intervene in the new social reality, instead of holding on to a preconceived idea of Chinese culture” (Gao 1998, 183).

How does the origin of non-western artists living in the West function in a constant state of negotiation between the local and the global? In line with Anthony Giddens’ theory on modernity and self-identity (1991), overseas Chinese artists have to operate within a cultural space where the interconnection between extensionality (global influences, structural properties and dynamics), and intentionality (personal dispositions, choices and experiences) becomes crucial. These artists present themselves as independent to reiterate their neutrality; yet at the same time, they are inclined to incorporate Chinese elements in their work as they know that this will increase their chances of international recognition. This strategy of creating art by Chinese artists overseas is what Gao calls ‘post-orientalism’. By this he means that

overseas artists who find themselves in the third space use their Chinese cultural background to create a visual language that goes beyond the borders of nations. They have to be able “to navigate between eastern and western approaches to imagery” (Adams 2011, 39). The post-orientalist strategy can help us to understand the work of Chinese artists overseas.

3 Practical analysis: The Chinese Gunpowder Artist

Although Cai Guo-Qiang gained international recognition as ‘the Chinese Gunpowder Artist’, he is not willing to be categorized as such and has turned to other mediums, such as installation art. One example is *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan* (1996), an installation exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The large-scale installation incorporates approximately 108 sheepskin coracles which, affixed with large branches, form the head and body of a dragon. Three Toyota car engines are located at the lower end of the installation, forming the tail of the dragon. The sheepskin coracles are supposed to remind the audience of the Mongolian invasion of Europe in the thirteenth century, whereas the Toyota car engines represent the dominance of Japanese automobile manufacturers over the American car industry (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, n.d.). In sum, *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf* addresses Western fears of Asian dominance by combining both traditional and contemporary Asian signifiers to suggest the expansionism of a world power.

Cai Guo-Qiang’s installations as well as his gunpowder drawings show us that he is using a post-orientalist strategy to create his art. He utilizes Chinese cultural elements to comment upon contemporary transcultural issues like cultural diversity or the fear of the “Chinese threat” to the West. This strategy of engagement and exotic appeal has become one of the hallmarks of Chinese expatriate art (Tsong-Zung 1998). As mentioned before, Chinese critics keep questioning the validity of Cai’s work. Although it is easy to ascribe his international acclaim to exoticism in his artwork, we can also say Cai is simply trying to survive in the third space by attempting to find an interconnection “between globalizing influences and personal dispositions” (Giddens 1991, 1). Through his artwork, he has shown that he is capable of merging traditional Chinese culture and Western art forms such as performance art and installations. His eclectic style creates artistic expressions that are open to different interpretations and diverse audiences, in and outside of China.

4 Conclusion

Throughout this essay, it has become clear that it is challenging to pinpoint the distinct differences and idiosyncrasies of the transnational Chinese artists in relation to their peers in China. Very often, art critics such as Wang Nanming depreciate the complex cultural identity of the overseas artists by claiming that they simply depict a form of exoticism. Since they have lost their connection with the mainland, their use of traditional Chinese references is deemed

non-authentic.

Referring to the ‘third space theory’ from Homi Bhabha, Gao Minglu tried to voice a different point of view in which the transnational Chinese artist is not reduced to a business opportunist. According to Gao, the transnational Chinese artists find themselves in a new hybrid cultural space characterized as an in-between state, consequential to processes of cultural hybridity and globalization. Surviving in the third space requires a ‘post-orientalist’ strategy in which the artists no longer hold onto a preconceived idea of Chinese culture, but rather translate their Chinese cultural experiences into a visual language that is open to different interpretations. Part of this strategy is the rethinking of one’s own cultural identity as the third space replaces a concept of identity based on the traditional opposition between East and West.

Based on my case-study, I argue that Cai Guo-Qiang epitomizes the post-orientalist strategy. He embraces his belonging in the third space. Cai is not longing to be accepted by the Chinese authorities, nor is he longing to become an internationalist by ignoring his Chinese identity. As a consequence, the identity of Cai is characterized by a constant negotiation, defined by a distinct time and space. Since leaving his home country in 1986, Cai has travelled the world and still regularly visits China for various reasons. Other overseas artists such as Wenda Gu, Ah Xian and Zhang Huan have returned to their native ground several times since their departure in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This shows that Cai’s reengagement with his home country is by no means an exception. These artists are part of a transnational community which transcends the nation. Their mobility allows them to construct a cultural identity that is not primarily based on attachment to a specific territory. This ties in with how Gao describes overseas artists as nomads, for whom the idea of home is primarily theoretical. The transnational Chinese artists illustrate the implacable statements out of which cultural identities are constructed. Due to processes of globalization, this has become a reality that we face every day.

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