CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART AS A PRODUCT AND REFLECTION OF GLOBALISATION IN CULTURE[1]

Rafał Banka[*]

Abstract: At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, China underwent an important social transformation, which was among others manifested by the renouncement of revolutionary aesthetics in both art and everyday life. As a result, one can observe the emergence of a new, pluralistic culture, which nowadays appears to combine the unfinished modernist project with postmodernity. The mutual defining of these two factors constitutes also an important aspect of the ongoing Chinese globalisation within the area of culture, where the global is modified by the local, and concurrently the latter invalidates the identity of the former. This article describes the relation between these two factors in the field of contemporary Chinese art. The analysis of selected artworks by Wang Guangyi, Xu Bing, MadeIn, Ai Weiwei, Cao Fei and Wang Qingsong serves as a departure point of assessing whether the new cultural quality constitutes strong distortion of Chinese aesthetic order or is a new challenge it has to confront.[1]

I. Introduction

Contemporary culture does not constitute a particularly static object of studies. Considering this, reflection upon cultural phenomena requires combining its various stages and parts. A theory by the political philosopher Francis Fukuyama can serve as an example. He shows that the current pessimism resulting from the political and rational crisis in the first half of the 20th century, manifested by previous ideological wars seems to reach its end (Fukuyama 1992: xiii). At this point he refers to Hegel's vision of history, which he modifies for his needs of presenting a certain direction of development of political systems worldwide. Although Fukuyama concedes that Hegel himself was not an advocate of democracy and liberalism, it is political institutions that he expected to see the embodiment of liberty. Apart from this, his views are reconcilable with civil society as well as economic-political activity of humans beyond the state control (Fukuyama 1992: 60-61). Translating into political philosophy, the direction of changes is characterized by the democratization of the social sphere and liberalization of life. Fukuyama understands liberalism as liberating individuals from unnecessary governmental involvement in the areas of life which are related to their views and being as a particular person. As regards democracy, it has to be conceived of as „the right of all citizens to have a share of political power, that is,

[*] Dr. RAFAL BANKA, Faculty of Philosophy, Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations, Jagiellonian University, Kradow, Poland. Email: rafal.banka@uj.edu.pl.
[1] The paper was originally published in Polish under the title: 'Współczesna sztuka chińska jako produkt i obraz globalizacji w kulturze', in in Anna I. Wójcik, Piotr Mróz, Małgorzata Ruchel (eds.), *Kultury Wschodu w świecie procesów globalizacyjnych* (Eastern Cultures in the World of Globalisation Processes), Kraków: Libron, pp. 171-194.

the right of all citizens to vote and participate in politics "(Fukuyama 1992: 43). Fukuyama holds that the analysis of recent 400 years history leads to the conclusion that the direction and completion of state governments development lies in compounding the above trends, i.e. liberal democracy (Fukuyama 1992: 48).

Considering the above, the above views should also apply to China. Following Fukuyama's interpretation, according to which states pursue liberal democracy, there comes the question: what is China's current position at this trajectory? A positive answer is certainly supported by the free market policy and China's entering the global economy circulation. However, it does not constitute the sufficient condition to state that China is a state which pursues liberal democracy, and if this were the case, to what extent it can achieve it. Fukuyama himself notices the counter-argument that states development, irrespective of cultural circle, towards liberal democracy can be accused of ethnocentrism. It can be made more precise by asking why the Euro-American model should enjoy the status of the only correct system, as well as why non-Western countries should necessarily pursue liberalization and democratization (Fukuyama 1992: 69). The criticism seems to be well-grounded in its fundamental meaning that the direction of development and the end of history is merely a product of a regional culture. This argument can also be strengthened with the statement that even if we agree on liberal democracy's being an attractive regional culture product that could win advocates of applying it in various civilizations, its adaptive potential in the case of a different cultural context with a differently 'thought' history remains unknown.

If we suspend the assessment of Fukuyama's historical finale, or a more modest version concerning the direction of political systems development, and concentrate on facts, we can state that China consciously develops free market economy. The situation is also related to the fact that after Deng Xiaoping return in late 1970s the ideological orientation in politics was supplanted with economical one. In Fukuyama's opinion, China after Cultural Revolution has undergone a transformation from totalitarian to authoritarian state, which equips it in the potential of becoming a liberal democracy state.[2] Parallelly to the important for political philosophy transformation, it is also a moment when culture has become liberated from totalitarian dictate. Mao's China was culture-wise obliged to realize Marxist aesthetics, understood at that time as expressing revolutionary ideology.

Resigning from the ideological primate naturally entailed the abolishment of centrally planned aesthetics, which was of monumental dimension in the sense of expressing the communist society aims, concurrently erasing the individualist aspect. The 1980s bring a rapid qualitative change, described as 'aesthetic fever'.[3] The beginnings of aesthetics liberated from institutions can be described in a twofold way. Firstly, the monolithic discourse of social realism becomes replaced with aesthetic pluralism. It can be confirmed by, e.g. the activity of various artistic formations which

---

[2] Fukuyama holds that totalitarian systems are "invulnerable to change or reform" (Fukuyama 1992: 9). Contrarily to them, authoritarian states can be transformed into democracies.
[3] Chin. *meixue re* 美學熱.

identified themselves with *chan* 禪 aesthetics, were inspired with Western artistic trends, or artists pursuing something completely new.[4] This causes the final breakage of great narration of the communist China aesthetics.

Aesthetic pluralism in Contemporary China can be characterized by departing from monumentality and shifting interest among others to the workaday life sphere, which makes another important feature of the post-revolutionary aesthetics. It can be caustically stated that aesthetic pluralism has reached the masses. It means that the aesthetic revaluation is not reserved for art and it has encompassed everyday life as well. The pluralization penetrates into the social process dynamics, and we can risk a statement that it has become a more sensitive indicator of Chinese people aesthetic life than it used to be during the revolutionary aesthetics dictate. It needs to be added that the everyday life aesthetics was not a marginal phenomenon comparing to artistic events. Breaking out from the limitations of revolutionary asceticism was followed by expressive diversity of individuality previously suppressed by collectivism (Li 2006: 23-24). Therefore, aesthetic pluralization in everyday life sphere is a result of social reaction, independent from reflection generated in the realm of art.

We also have to be aware of the parallel process taking place in post-revolutionary Chinese society. The transmission from central planning to free market economy resulted not only in private enterprise but also consumerist society, whose generic consumerism consists in saturating itself among others with culture. As regards the perception of cultural offer, gradually but concurrently fast the high and low culture border became dissolved, which found outlet in, e.g. commercial film productions based on classical literature.

Overcoming the aesthetic monolith dictate as well as commercialization brings the question whether Chinese culture, analogically with Western, has become postmodern. Answers by social and cultural theoreticians are positive on a general level. However, it has to be noticed that there is a difference concerning how postmodernity in Chinese version should be understood or what is decisive in that it can simply be recognized as a counterpart of the Western one.

According to Wang Ning, Chinese postmodernity manifests itself on three layers: post-structuralist discourse, contesting modernity and consumerist culture (2000: 25). This could suggest achieving at least a certain stage which qualifies Chinese culture as transcending modern and ideological discourse, as well as commodification of certain cultural areas. Wang confirms the latter by remarking that proceeding to socialist market economy was reflected mostly in the so-called elite culture, which with varied success takes up the challenge of new cultural landscape. On the other hand, the weakening of strongly modernist cultural canon results in deconstruction, especially in the field of literature and art (Wang 2000: 27).

Liu Kang presents a more moderate standpoint than Wang by agreeing that although China is under the postmodern influence, we cannot talk about its being entirely dominated. To justify this diagnosis, he proposes a triple perspective of politics as economy, ideology and post politics (Liu 2000: 126-127). Not only does it

---

[4] The latter ones were described by Gao Minglu as the avant-garde ones (2011: 4-5).

reveal the inhomogeneous dimension but also the fact that the global-postmodern project has not been entirely completed (if we can assume its purposiveness). As Liu mentions later in the text, the tension between revolutionary ideology and its lack assumes the shape of struggle for establishing its symbolic capital (Liu 2000: 130). However, we have to bear in mind that promoting cultural capital does not necessarily constitute a modernist project. Assuming that the current authorities identify themselves with the ideological option, we reach contradiction which results from the very authorities promoting ideologically foreign free market economy and consumption, or even consumerism. As Leslie Holmes remarks, the Chinese authorities exercise a eudaemonic system (Holmes 1997: 120). It guarantees social stability as well as unshaken governance, regardless of incompatibility with the official doctrine. Considering this, perhaps the ideological debates can be interpreted as a media spectacle hovering above capitalist foundations. Despite this, it still seems impossible to dismiss the fact that the authorities constitute a static dictatorship, in the face of which the *status quo* cannot be labelled post politics.

It is also worth noticing that Chinese postmodern culture is most evident in its irony and experimentalism, which successfully blur not only the traditional Chinese culture narration but also that of the times immediately preceding and concurrently overlapping with contemporaneity. The situation can also be referred to the political realm. Tradition, most strongly represented by Confucian culture, and Marxism being ideologies[5] functioning as great narrations not only confront the postmodern 'alien body' but also each other. Both options strive to impose their ideological paradigm, which in practice however results as their interfusion. We can especially see it as a certain state matrix originating from Confucian political philosophy, which advocates centralized authority and meritocracy. Despite the fact that the polarized political options are merged, it seems that Chinese post politics is still a project in the making rather than *status quo*.

The matured diagnosis of China's postmodern condition seems to be propounded by Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu in his paper 'Global Post-Modernization: the Intellectual, the Artist, and China's Condition'. He observes that Chinese postmodernity makes a different category than its Western counterpart. Firstly, the Chinese variant breaks the Euro-American chronology because of overlapping with the unfinished modernist project. According to Lu, the temporal dislocation should not question the postmodern status; quite the contrary, it makes it a more plentiful variety (Lu 2000: 146) than Western chronological postmodernity. As far as the political sphere is concerned, the ideology diverges from the capitalist free market economy. At the same time, the dichotomy does not apply to the workaday life beyond politics and ideology (Lu 2000: 146). This interpretation allows to explain the coexistence of to

---

[5] It has to be remembered that Confucianism had been institutionalised for ages in imperial China. The official exams can serve as an example. The exam material to be mastered by the examinee included *The Four Books* (*The Analects*, *The Mencius*, *The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean*), compiled by the neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200). Being part of the administrative-political body in China was necessarily connected with being well-versed in Confucian classics.

some extent belated political authority sphere and society plunged in mature, verging on the excessive consumption.

It can be stated that Lu's interpretation juxtaposes the unfinished past with beginning future against the background of present reality, by means of which the modernist and 'chronological' postmodern projects are nullified by 'postmodernity with Chinese characteristics'. Comparing Liu and Wang, Lu shows that the current state of affairs already prejudges Chinese postmodernity. Although Lu is aware of the alternative postulated by some contemporary Chinese intellectuals who wish to continue the modernist project, such as one in the spirit of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 (Lu 2000: 147), it seems very unlikely that options of this sort are capable of redefining the current discourse.

The above account of the Chinese postmodern condition enables to put forward hypotheses concerning contemporary Chinese art. Firstly, it is part of the global art circulation thanks to surpassing previous narrations, not only as a result of Western art impact. Secondly, we should be able to discern in it temporal dislocation in the shape of the unfinished modernist project.

The simultaneous occurrence of modernity and postmodernity on Chinese grounds can be regarded as a certain variant of the globalization process taking place in the area of culture. The unfinished modernist project in China is ideology, the concretion of which is close to dictatorship, or at least central control of certain spheres of life. Despite supervening on a different social foundation, it can be deemed to be a continuation of previous political narration. This makes the current ideology a *sui generis* local cultural formation that participates in the dominating globalization process. Following Arjun Appadurai, globalization is not uniformization in a specific cultural paradigm (e.g. Americanization) or cultural neutralization but a localized process (Appadurai 2005: 17). In connection with this, locality is not ultimately erased and becomes an element that influences globalization process. In such a situation the modernist project participation determines the character of globalised China culture tissue. For clarity, it has to be mentioned that the modernist element is described as such because of its history and not its actual status. By becoming an integral element of the postmodern culture tissue, its earlier identity becomes detached from its modernist essence. Thanks to this it functions as locality contribution influencing the globalization process. However, the above mentioned confrontation of the unfinished modernist and postmodernist projects can be explained by intensive (in comparison with Western postmodernity) presence of the former, which gives the impression of its being literally unfinished. Despite this it seems that by functioning within the postmodern globalization 'order', the modernist element is something which corresponds to non-veridical perception.

In further part of the paper I am going to discuss selected contemporary artworks approach globalization with special concern for the locality element, which allows to assess the character of the process in China. The discussion is intended to, on the one hand, focus on the Chinese characteristics of the process, and, on the other, to attempt at assessing how advanced it is.

II. Ideological Nivelation: Wang Guangyi's Political Pop

An example which is worth attention because of combining the modernist project with postmodern art is Political Pop.[6] Although the phenomenon was constituted by the end of the 1980s, there had been artists who previously created artworks of a similar kind. Political Pop artists included among others Wang Guangyi 王廣義 (b. 1957), Sheng Qi 盛奇, Ren Jian 任戬 or Li Shan 李山, the most important of whom is regarded the first one. Wang Guangyi determined the trend of Political Pop not only with his artworks. In 1988, at the Modern Art Conference,[7] he presented his own artistic manifesto, where he both criticised Marxist art as well as his contemporary avant-garde, which he thought to be utopian. Wang parted with the humanist ethos of art and announced that artistic activity serves financial benefits and winning fame (Gao 2011: 256). Excusing art from spreading humanistic or metaphysical values for the benefit of shifting it to the sphere of consumption shows that by the end of the 1980s there comes a strong revaluation. Not only does it consist in disconnecting art from meanings but also endowing it with a status of game, which makes it even more belong to postmodern convention.

Wang's most representative and concurrently most recognizable work is the series of oil paintings *Great Criticism* (1990-2007). The name is an allusion to the critique of what contradicts socialism, present in the PRC until the end of the Cultural Revolution. The works ironically handle the socialist propaganda convention of the period, e.g. *Coca Cola* (1991) presents workers in a typical not only for Chinese but also Soviet propaganda poster imagery. What introduces the 'pop' element is situated in the bottom right-hand corner logo of Coca Cola, a pan-cultural beverage-icon of pop culture. Another painting from the series is *Chanel No.* 5 (1993), in which the perfume advertisement logo co-occurs with a doubled, saluting pair holding in their hand probably enjoying among the Red Guards Bible status *Little Red Book*[8] with Mao Zedong's quotations. It is not difficult to guess that the intention consists in showing that both of the strategies, advertisement and political propaganda, manipulate human life. However, what makes the works interesting is their composition combining the conventions of advertisement and propaganda, i.e. commercial and political strategies. Apart from analogical juxtaposition of ideology and consumption it is worth having a look on the works as a confrontation of two orders, in which the winner is postmodern commercial pop culture, which subjects the great ideological narration and turns it into game that analogically to advertising strategy is to result in product purchase.

The fact of commercialization can additionally be confirmed by extra-artistic functioning of Wang's paintings, which are sold at high prices on art market,[9] which realizes his manifesto not only in terms of work creation but also its functioning in art

---

[6] Chin. Z*hengzhi Bopu* 政治波譜.

[7] Chin. *Xiandai Yishu Yantanhui* 現代藝術研討會.

[8] Chin. *Hongbaoshu* 紅寶書.

[9] E.g. *Campbell Soup* (1990), was sold at over 200 thousand dollars. Cf. Ravenel 2014.

world. Looking at *Great Criticism* more holistically, its commodification complements the artist's intention. It shows a new status of works of art, as a result of which the main accent is shifted from the artistic to commercial.

Concurrently, *Great Criticism* is an example of art functioning in global circulation. Wang's works combine the conventions that are not only present in, e.g. Soviet art's social realism, but also directly allude to pop art and the very Andy Warhol. It can be testified to by, e.g. *Campbell Soup* (1990), which is a direct reference to the famous work of the American artist. It shows that Wang remains under the influence of the art beyond the elite-popular division. We should not ignore Wang's firm position in the world art market, which only confirms his recognition in global, commercial circulation.

What identifies *Great Criticism* with locality is the Chinese propaganda before and after Cultural Revolution. In Wang's work, it is entirely eradicated from the aesthetics promoting revolutionary values and it is part of a new aesthetics that bases on signs interplay. It seems that in the case of this series of works the signs operate solely on the level of connotation, thanks to which works functioning in a new aesthetic dimension are achieved.

III. Deconstruction of Sign: Xu Bing

Xu Bing's 徐冰 (b. 1955) art can be characterized with relation complexity of traditional and contemporary traditions. The artist himself in his biography combines several historic periods, if viewing through the prism of aesthetic and artistic transformations. Born to an intellectual background family, sent to the countryside during Cultural Revolution, an active participant of the 'aesthetic fever' in the 1980s, having American emigration as well as repatriation experience - all this moulds Xu's very personal approach to art, the medium of which is script.

Since his childhood, Xu has been interested in Chinese characters in terms of expressive and communicative potential. In contrast to most Chinese artists working with script, he creates mainly print works rather than calligraphy. Despite this, his artworks are considerably diverse when viewed from time perspective.

New English Calligraphy (1994) is a work which results from the artist's interest with the English language.[10] It combines installation and interactive art. In the exhibition space, Xu creates a classroom, in which the gallery visitors can use special textbooks to learn the new calligraphy writing. They undergo a very similar training to that of Chinese primary school pupils, by filling in the characters stencils. Despite resembling Chinese script, the characters to be mastered are clusters of Roman alphabet letters making up sentences in English.

Calligraphy in China is regarded as the most important art genre. The contemporary artist Qiu Zhijie goes even further in his claim that calligraphy is the nucleus of Chinese art and other genres, such as music or painting, are merely a variety of it (Sans 2009: 57). The practice of calligraphy can be generally described as

---

[10] Another work, *ABC*, uses the English language phonetic stratum.

transmission at the level of emotions, meaning recording the inner state of the artist at the moment of creating the work. The calligraphy medium is very prone to expression thanks to the free line brushwork, which reaches completeness when combined with the content present in the semantic stratum of the script. Thus harmony is broken in *New English Calligraphy*, where the typographical aspect is exclusively used by being employed in a different script. It is not the language change that makes the difference. For instance, the sense of calligraphy would be sustained in adapting it to the Japanese language. However, Xu's work employs the graphic representation calligraphy in the system of abstract speech representation, which additionally distorts the original iconicity of characters. That which is left of Chinese calligraphy functions as an ornament, not a medium of artistic expression. This operation results in the deconstruction of a most traditional art genre, which in *New English Calligraphy* functions as an ingredient of 'global' configuration.

Another example of an artwork employing script is *Book from the Ground* (2003+), which is an ongoing interactive project. It consists mainly of software that enables an internet 'chat-type' communication in any language input, which is translated into a language made of iconic signs ruled by the English syntax. The iconicity of signs has deliberately been designed in the way that makes them possibly least saturated with some concrete culture context, thank to which two software users coming from any civilizations and not sharing a common language should effortlessly read the sign language on their computer screens. The work can be interpreted as an intention to establish transcultural communication. However, equally legitimate is the interpretation that Xu's work is about pancultural communication, which is situated beyond the interactions of local cultures. The new, software-produced target language seems to confirm it because of nullifying the participation of local culture in the stratum of graphic representation. Additionally, the script communication does not involve the phonetic stratum. The pictographic character of signs successfully eliminates all phonetic elements, thank to which syntax can be regarded as the only remnant of locality.

Xu conducts linguistic globalization. Analogically with other processes of the same type, the new language does not originate in a linear way of transformations but it is a pansystem resulting from nullifying communication in ethnic languages. The local elements, despite being indispensable in the emergence of the global discourse, have become its material, concurrently losing their identities. Not only does it concern the identity inherent in language. *Book from the Ground* is an interactive piece, in which communicating people are inseparable. Language quite often stands for cultural distinctiveness manifested by participation in a given language community. However, on the pancultural level, despite inputting in a given language, the pancultural level utterances are no longer labelled linguistic behavior that confirms a 'local culture' affiliation. The ethnic languages utterances, on which the global discourse supervenes, are necessarily entangled and jointly constituting utterances which transgress the usual interlinguistic communication. The message, although local on the sender's side, by its participation in translation into the pancultural script annihilates itself of its original identity, which inevitably results in a 'post local' communication.

IV. CREATIVE PROCESS AS PRODUCTION: MADEIN AND AI WEIWEI

While looking at Wang Du's 王度 (b. 1956) *International Kebab* (2008), one has no doubts that it has been inspired and explores globalization. It is an enormously big installation presenting a vertical skewer impaled with decks of various photos. Cutting parallelly to the skewer produces photographical bits and pieces. The content represented by them is mixed and the randomness of new composition does not provide any sense-making key for neither the cut fragments nor the pictures ironically stapled by the kebab rack. The assessment of globalization is made directly within the work in exhibition space.

The impact of globalization on art, however, does not necessarily have to mark its presence in the final product, which is an artwork or artistic phenomenon. In many cases, artists create works which do not take up the globalization issue; it is not localized at the very front of the spectator, in the very work, but on the way to it, in the process of creation. An example of art done in this way can be established by Xu Zhen's 徐震 (b. 1977) artistic group-firm MadeIn.

The very name 'MadeIn' is a most obvious reference to labels present on 'Made in China' products. This suggests connotations related to mass production rather than artistic creation, especially the artistic one. However, Xu's group is active in the area of art, at the same time enjoying the structure of manufacturing company in which an artist is not only a designer but also webpage administrator. As the MadeIn founder himself states, cooperation within company structure was induced among others by the prospects of differentiated production in comparison to individual one, as well as the possibility of development   through group work (Sans 2010: 110-111).

Interviewed by Jerôme Sans Xu Zhen explains supplanting his own name with that of group-company, which is not too common in the context of artistic activity. The artist does not perceive the danger of losing one's individuality in this case; quite contrarily, he holds that the group branding provides more freedom, including the opportunity or resorting to what one personally dislikes. In this way, Xu becomes 'dissolved' in MadeIn, by which the group products cannot be directly referred to him (Sans 2010: 111). In this case, the creation process does not consist in the realisation of an individual project in the sense of some message or expression of some concrete artist. Thanks to the individual anonymity and collective name, the artistic process is oriented more at developing a well-selling artistic brand, which in the aspect of internal organisation and image indicates strong the convergence of MadeIn and commercial companies. In this perspective MadeIn, despite dealing with art, moves from its proper area to the sphere of business. The 'dissolution' of individual subject creating art in the company structure, and at least partial taking over company work strategy entails the deconstruction of traditionally conceived of creation process and artist as an outstanding individual who is usually unfamiliar with quotidian matters. From a wider perspective, building art on company foundations means accepting market rules above artistic ideas.

Despite the above, the group's status cannot be definitely qualified as simply business one. As Xu remarks, establishing MadeIn is an enterprise which combines art with business activity, but does not eliminate the former (Sans 2010: 110).

An interesting phenomenon of contemporary Chinese artistic staging in terms of the creative process is the the installation *Sunflower Seeds [or Kui Hua Zi]* (2010) by Ai Weiwei (b. 1957). The work is composed of 100 million ceramic hand-made to real-scale sunflower seeds. The production of them was commissioned by Ai Weiwei in Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province, which has been famous for porcelain production for ages. The work explores the tension between the overwhelming quantity of the seeds.[11] which evokes mass production connotations, and the fact that each of them has been hand-made, which in turn evokes individual creativity associations. In this respect *Sunflower Seeds* shows that what appears itself in experience is a bombarding innumerability, which concurrently eliminates the unique character of the seeds. In this sense we can experience the perishing individual contribution, which irresistibly connotes contemporary Chinese mass production. However, the installation is first and foremost focused upon the creative process and not on the final product. An important aspect of the work is the way in which it came into being. Producing ceramic sunflower seeds involved enormous labour of 1600 artisans in two and half years (Jervis 2014). This makes a conspicuous reference to global economy, in which China participates as a cost-competitive manufacturer. The installation concentrating on its production process highlights the problem of low-paid workers who build global economy. By its entanglement in 'mass' production, Jingdezhen functions as locality, which on joining global economy is bereft of its traditional porcelain producer status.

V. Alternative Reality: Cao Fei

Cao Fei 曹斐 (b. 1978) in her artistic activity is mostly concerned with the issue of virtual reality and second life. Her works are usually interactive projects or videos. Despite that the artist focusses mainly on alternative, imagined or constructed cyberspace realities, the character of her projects is inspired by the real-world, contextualised as contemporary China. In an interview with Jerôme Sans, Fei herself confirms that virtual world architecture is strongly and deliberately saturated with Chinese context. Both *Cosplayers* (2004) and *RMB City* (2008-2010) are examples of this perspective.

In *Cosplayers*, Cao concentrates on the issue of contemporary escapism of young people. It can be described in terms of derealization. The video piece, in fact a documentary, in which the main characters are Guangzhou young people clad in costumes of fictional youth pop culture heroes. They are, e.g. Spiderman, the hit production *Star Wars* characters, or less concrete and more processed at the same time characters from *anime* or computer games. Cao's cosplayers do not resort to a given pop culture icons but they can combine and modify them at discretion. The

---

[11] The seeds occupied entire floor surface of the Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern.

unlimited creation based on the elements of any origin used as identification with the characters causes leaving one's concretely placed reality and entering the omnipresent global fiction that annihilates, or at least suspends for the time of impersonation fictional character, any locality. *Cosplayers* shows it not only through the costumes but also contrasting them with the Guangzhou setting. It is also essential that the artist decided to place the characters not in the fashionable and rich districts of the multi-million metropolis but in poor outskirts or devastated concrete buildings. Thanks to this, an aesthetic contrast between the pop culture kitsch intensity and austerity and greyness of the real world is achieved. On the one hand, the young people present themselves well in the contrastive setting, but they first and foremost give an impression of isolated in their own creations. The additional austerity of the setting amplifies the derealization of the persons dressed in the costumes. Interviewed by Weng Xiaoyu, Cao remarks that the cosplayers do not just change clothes; they wish to temporarily detach themselves from their everyday lives through suspending their identities and concurrent identification with the impersonated character (Wang 2013). The identity transformation places the persons in an imagined yet supervening on Guangzhou reality, world.

If we refer *Cosplayers* to cultural globalization in China, we can see that shifting identity to pop culture, which contrasts with reality locality, is conducted not only on the aesthetic level but primarily in terms of disconnecting from local identity and assuming an alternative one. The Spiderman or imagined *anime* characters constitute a parallel to everyday life. In Cao's work it mainly functions as a form of breaking out from reality and liberating one's imagination in constructing a new identity. Its globalised character is most importantly revealed by the freely composed personality based on the elements detached from their cultural, or generally life, localities. As a result, the identity is not a compound of several localities but it transcends them and culturally resides everywhere in its globalised aspect. Escaping locality in *Cosplayers* can then be treated as a flight into the globalised culture space, which enables assemblages beyond quotidian narrations not only in Guangzhou but any given culture.

RMB City is a significantly different artwork. It is an interactive project functioning in the years 2008-2010. It consisted in the common enterprise of creating a city located in virtual reality. As the name of the project clearly suggests, despite its ontic status, RMB City is a parallel reference to Chinese reality[12]. However, what is intended is not imitating the Chinese socio-political reality but creating an alternative construct, targeting at a variation of 'hard' reality. It can be exemplified by the legal prescription that one can own land, while in the PRC it is entirely state-owned. Also some aspects of RMB City, especially the architecture, are deliberately made in 'Chinese style' to emphasize its necessary reference that serves building an alternative city. The city dwellers, i.e. project participants should not feel alienated in another dimension. For this purpose, the architecture elements reflect real Chinese cities. It is not only realised as typical Chinese urban architecture but also icon

---

[12] The abbreviation RMB stands for the official name of the PRC currency *renminbi* 人民幣.

edifices, such as the Shanghai Oriental TV Tower, the geometrical CCTV headquarters in Beijing, or the Tiananmen gate. The typical and commonly known Chinese architectural landmarks taken to second life are according to Cao's intention create familiar surrounding   for the avatar-residents. However it has to be mentioned that the elements after being transplanted in the virtual space, despite being intended to provide locality, enter an unnatural configuration (e.g. buildings from different cities in the same district), and as a result are no longer 'local'. It can be said that there are signs of locality which are uprooted from their original references. At the level of sign we can have an impression of familiarity, which however becomes nullified when we fail to go beyond the sign. It turns out that the buildings are not displaced (as, e.g. reality represented on a map), but situated beyond geography. The recognition of the familiar can then take place solely on the sign level, sustained by other signs-elements of traditional and contemporary Chinese architecture. The construction consciously makes an ontic shift, which results in globalised space, merely colored with the local history of signs.

If we analyse the phenomenon in terms of Appadurai's views that localities participate in the globalization dynamics (2005: 18), we can state that the architectural elements mixed into virtual reality, which places them practically everywhere, i.e. *alocally*. If we treated architecture as the synecdoche of Chineseness, Cao's project, despite the intentional introduction of Chinese elements, testifies to the perpetuation only on the semiotic level. Concurrently the effect is accentuated by the fact that, e.g. the Tiananmen gate or the Shanghai Oriental TV Tower function as 'postcard' Chinese symbols. This brings the question whether we can talk about identification with pop culture icon at all.

Both works pay attention seeking identity in a different dimension: imagination or a parallel world. The way in which the aim is achieved in the two cases functions well in the globalization process tissue. Despite that the intention of the works is not a social or political message, they can serve as examples of freedom thinking realised in the field of aesthetics as sensuousness. Especially in the case of *RMB City* the participants co-creating a cyber-enclave are not restricted with any superior authority. The variation upon China can also be referred to the real state as a tension between the liberal enclave and Fukuyama's authoritarian society.[13]

VI. Critical Art: Wang Qingsong

The examples discussed so far show that globalization and its accompanying revalidation are strongly present in contemporary Chinese art. The picture would be incomplete without complementing with a critical standpoint, or at least assessment of globalization in Chinese society. Probably the most interesting works in this area are Wang Qingsong's 王慶松 (b. 1966) photographs from the turn of the 1990s and 2000s.

---

[13] F. Fukuyama, op. cit., p. 69.

Wang can be described as an artist who artistically documents cultural transformation processes in China. Photography, the artist's main medium, is content-wise vivid and aesthetically kitschy presentations of reality that are meant to amplify the spectator's impression and evoke her critical reflection. This can be exemplified by the series *Requesting Buddha* (1999), in which the Buddha holds different material goods, such as a mobile phone, gold or money bills. The work primarily criticizes the consumptionist lifestyle in contemporary Buddhist monasteries.[14] It is also interesting that goods, such as Coca Cola, electronic equipment, or Marlboro cigarettes strongly accentuate the presence of Western goods in consumptionist lifestyle, which is perceived as negative.

An even more interesting example is *Can I Cooperate with you?* (2000). The photograph is an allusion to the Tang painter Yan Liben's (600-673) *Imperial Sedan*. The picture presents an event from 641, when Tufan nationality envoys arrive at Emperor Taizong's court to ask for the hand of Princess Wencheng. The Emperor is presented in sumptuous splendor, surrounded by court ladies, while the envoys address him with proper respect. *Can I Cooperate with you?* mirrors the situation in contemporary times. The Emperor in his sedan is replaced with a white male clad in a T-shirt, carried in a rickshaw drawn by Chinese person clothed in ragged shorts. He is accompanied by Chinese women dressed in tawdry colorful summer clothes, which evoke the connotation of typical Western presentations of exotic women from primitive societies. The women cool the white man with large fans bearing a McDonald's logo. The envoys are supplanted with three casually clad Chinese males. Two of them are smaller in size, whereas the third one holds a small Chinese flag in his hand. Wang's work completely strips away an historic scene of dignity and places it in the realm of kitsch, additionally representing Chinese submissiveness to the West.

Can I Cooperate with You? obviously refers to the Chinese fascination with and captivation by Western pop culture. It testifies to the intense impact of the globalizing processes that entail consumerism. It is not an accident that the artist alludes to a painting from the Tang Dynasty, a period when Chinese culture reached its peak. It shows that contemporary Chinese society is ready not only for breaking with tradition but also an enormous aesthetic compromise. The transformation can be understood as the loss of identity: underscored by the simply critical message in *Can I Cooperate with You?*

VII. Conclusion

The above examples of contemporary Chinese art propose that Chinese society is being reorganized by the two processes: globalization and accompanying it in culture postmodernism. Perhaps the processes have not been saturated to a degree that would entitle us to talk about their total domination. However, it is justifiable to describe the

---

[14] Cf. Miller 2006, pp. 86-90.

relations within the above discussed artworks as mutual diffusion or interaction of the local within global and the modern within postmodern.

Lu's diagnosis concerning the unfinished modernist project can be regarded as justifiable. However, we cannot ignore the functional interpretation of this element within the determined direction of the postmodern project. Its participation may be labelled more in terms of an element which modifies the deconstructive architecture rather than strongly delineated opposition that confronts postmodernity. This problem is best illustrated by Xu Bing's works where traditional art's essence, epitomized by calligraphy, seems unable to preserve its generic identity neither in *New English Calligraphy,* nor in depersonalizing even at the level of the civilization project *Book from the Ground.* To a certain extent calligraphy thematically organizes the artworks, but the deconstruction price has to be paid. Thus the participation of tradition appears to be doomed to being bereft of its original essence and assumes a new functionality in a new configuration.

We can similarly summarize the fate of locality, which only apparently is concretely placed. The *RMB City* project clearly shows that nowadays locality cannot exist beyond the global.

The above tendency manifests also on the level of creation strategy, which is based on the on the intuition not unfamiliar to commercial and corporate strategies. In such a case we cannot talk about contemporary Chinese art exclusively as artworks in exhibition space but also as products founded on unnecessarily individualized strictly artistic intention.

Finally, the tension between the 'old and new' manifests itself also in imagination, which enjoys the greatest creative potential in configuring any elements. However, also here, as in *Cosplayers*, the 'hard' individual identity processed and imagined as pop culture content gets disintegrated.

The above qualitative change in art, as well as in correspondent aesthetics, can be described as the disturbance of harmony *he* 和. This traditional, time-transcendent unifying term, which can also be encountered in aesthetics, may seem to be disturbed by the emergence of new 'order' in cultural discourse. However, one has to bear in mind that the Chinese harmony evades from unifying identical elements and essentially contains oppositions. Therefore, it is worth rethinking the contemporary condition not in terms of destruction but as a challenge for the Chinese order in miscellany, to which processual dynamics is not foreign.

References

APPADURAI Arjun (2005), *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
WANG Junyi (dir.) (2013), *Cao Fei*, Kadist Art Foundation, 2013.
FUKUYAMA Francis (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada.
GAO Minglu (2011), *Total Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art,* Cambridge: The MIT Press.
HOLMES Leslie (1997), *Post-Communism. An Introduction*, Durham: Duke University Press.

JERVIS John (2011), *Sunflower Seeds. Ai Weiwei*, [online],
http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/72/SunflowerSeedsAiWeiwei [viewed: 07.12.2014].
LI Zehou, J. Clauvel (2006), *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, Lexington: Lexington Books.
LIU Kang (2000), 'Popular Culture and the Culture of the Masses in Contemporary China', in *Postmodernism & China*, A. Dirlik, X. Zhang (eds.), Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 123-144.
LU Sheldon Xiaopeng (2000), 'Global POSTmoderniZATION: the Intellectual, the Artist, and China's Condition', in *Postmodernism & China*, A. Dirlik, X. Zhang (eds.), Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 145-174.
MILLER James (2006), *Chinese Religions in Contemporary Societies*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
RAVENEL International Art Group, [online]
http://www.ravenelart.com/artwork.php?id=1444&lan=en [viewed: 29.11.2014].
SANS Jerôme (2009), "China Talks. Interviews with 32 Contemporary Artists by Jérôme Sans*"*, Hong Kong: *Timezone* 8.
SANS Jerôme (2010), 'Interview: Made In Adventures across Boundaries' in "Breaking Forecast. 8 Key Figures of China's New Generation Artists," Hong Kong: *Timezone 8*, pp. 107-111.
WANG Ning, 'The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity', in *Postmodernism & China*, A. Dirlik, X. Zhang (eds.), Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 21-40.

Artworks Discussed in the Paper

Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds [Kui Hua Zi]* (2010).
Cao Fei, *Cosplayers* (2004), *RMB City* (2008-2010).
Wang Du, *International Kebab* (*Guoji Kuaican*, 國際快餐, 2008).
Wang Guangyi 王廣義, Campbell Soup (1990), *Great Criticism (Da Pipan* 大批判, 1990-2007), *Coca Cola* (*Kekoukele*, 可口可樂, 1991), *Chanel No.* 5 (1993).
Wang Qingsong 王慶松, *Requesting Buddha* (1999), *Can I Cooperate with You?* (2000).
Xu Bing 徐冰, *Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy* (*Xin Yingwen Shufa*, 新英文書法, 1994), *Book from the Ground* (Dishu 地書, 2003).
Yan Liben 閻立本, *Imperial Sedan* (*Bunian Tu,* 步輦圖, ok. 640).