



‘Playing the Chinese card’: Globalization and the aesthetic strategies of Chinese contemporary artists

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Abstract

This article examines the art and travels of two contemporary Chinese artists – Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang – to explore how each of them successfully navigates the rapidly shifting terrains and interests of the Chinese state and the global high art industry while simultaneously articulating a distinct politics and practice of creative ambivalence. We argue that these two artists’ creative productions and strategies: (1) refute various western critics’ critique of Chinese artists as inauthentic imitators of western art who produce exotic representations of China and Chinese identity for western consumption; (2) call into question the Chinese government’s numerous efforts to simultaneously promote and control Chinese contemporary art for nationalist/statist purposes. Furthermore, we unpack how both artists deploy various resources to produce complex works that interrogate and demonstrate the clashes of power, culture and identity in global spaces of encounter.

Keywords

Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang, China, contemporary art, cultural globalization, Olympics, soft power

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The year 2008 was a watershed in Chinese contemporary art's growing global visibility and market share within the western-dominated high art industry. For one thing, by 2008 China had claimed the second largest share of the contemporary art market, which signified a sweeping transformation as Chinese contemporary art had spent the previous three decades at the art world's margins (Robertson, 2011). But even more, clear evidence of China's ascent within the art world could be found by looking at 2008's *ArtReview*'s Power 100, with that year's list including famed dissident artist Ai Weiwei and conceptual artist Cai Guo-Qiang (*ArtReview*, 2009).¹ Also significant was the fact that the magazine's recognition of the two artists came just months after the successful completion of the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, a monumental sports competition where art and creative spectacles played a prominent role in reshaping China's international image.

More than just an opportunity to demonstrate the Chinese government and people's competitive spirit and ability to competently run a widely attended and celebrated series of multisport contests, the Olympic Games were treated by the Chinese state as a 'coming-out party', or a pivotal site to exhibit the nation-state's cultural significance and value on the world stage. This strategic promotion of Chinese soft power should be read in the context of the state's 'cultural reform' – a series of policy and industrial measures implemented since the dawn of the new millennium to advance the country's creative and cultural industries (Keane, 2006; Wang, 2004; Zhang, 2006), and a prelude to a new round of the 'going out' campaign launched in 2009 to assert China's global voice and cultural influence (Chu, 2014). From the detailed attention given to the city's architecture and landscape to the art performances and large-scale spectacles that were part of the Games, the government mobilized all possible resources to showcase China as cosmopolitan, world-historical, and emanating culture and creativity. A central aspect of this state project was deploying Chinese artists and creative cultural producers of different backgrounds to participate in this imagining, construction and transmission of China's image for the world. And Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang played important roles in this process, creating unique works that framed China's arrival on the world stage as fueled by a history of diverse intercultural influences and conflicts, as well as by government malfeasance and controversy.

The Chinese government's interest in Chinese artists such as Ai and Cai, and its patronage and promotion of Chinese contemporary art, are stimulated by contrasting objectives. It is aimed at broadening China's cultural currency in a western-dominated international art market but also at re-emphasizing and reinforcing nationalist sentiments and state control among China's citizenry – two different agendas that illuminate China's post-socialist tug-of-war between globalization and nationalism, repression and liberalization. Simultaneously, over the course of the past decade, the western art establishment has labored to take advantage of the global economic and political shifts that have produced a rapid increase in the number of Chinese artists and, even more fundamentally, the growth of a base of affluent Chinese art consumers and collectors. Yet prior to the Olympics and, moreover, in its aftermath, several art critics and academics (such as Cotter, 1998; Perl, 2008, 2013) attributed Ai, Cai and other Chinese artists' success mainly to the art establishment's 'new internationalism', that is to say the field's growing investment in the rhetoric of multiculturalism, cultural

hybridity and cultural difference; its 'institutional inclusion of non-Western visual art'; and proclamations of abandoning 'a hitherto prevailing Eurocentric notion of "internationalism" in the visual arts' (Philipsen, 2010: 16, 9). These critics derided Chinese artists such as Ai and Cai for 'playing the Chinese card' – flaunting exotic, stereotypical cultural and political symbols and representations of China for commercial profits and career advancement.

The above displays a complicated terrain that contemporary Chinese artists such as Ai and Cai have to navigate. This article consequently explores the transnational cultural traffic and strategies that Ai and Cai make use of to negotiate and find success within this political and cultural environment. We first assert that negative readings of Ai, Cai, and Chinese contemporary art in general as inauthentic imitators of western art and salesmen of Chinese exoticism evade critical unpacking. There is a lack of nuanced engagement with the distinct and practical strategies and artistic works that these artists utilize to intervene and at times contest both the Chinese state and western art establishment's efforts to fashion Chinese art's success towards their own institutional interests and cultural power. To portray these artists as merely 'playing the Chinese card' does a great injustice; it reinforces the commoditization their identities and artistic practices, and fails to consider how these artists contributing to a historical, transcontinental field of aesthetic imagining and production. But more importantly, this narrow and reductive framing of Ai, Cai, and other Chinese artists ignores how they produce creative works and enunciate fluid cultural identities while balancing the interests and objectives of different power holders both inside and outside of China.

This article consequently considers the distinctive and contrasting ways through which Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang effectively 'play the Chinese card'. More specifically, we are interested in how they creatively and entrepreneurially mobilize visual aesthetics, cultural differences and ambivalence to 'reorient' the Chinese state's nationalist agenda and the 'Western expectations of the oriental towards the unexpected' (Gao and Hou, 1999: 183). We argue that their art conveys a transnational, diasporic sensibility that is immersed in diverse artistic languages, traditions and milieus. We consider these themes within the historical juncture of the Beijing Olympics, an international event where contending representations of China as a nation-state and Chineseness as embodying a distinct mode of nationality and identity were articulated and reshaped.

The article begins by briefly tracing the globalization process of Chinese contemporary art since the late 1970s. It then explores the uniqueness of Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang's different visual politics and diasporic practices of cultural production, most centrally in the period leading up to and during the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Of chief import is how both artists utilized this event and other opportunities and artistic works to articulate the contradictions and ambiguities of dominant domestic and international constructions of Chinese life and national identity. We maintain that the global themes articulated in these artists' works, and both men's strategic maneuverings between the interests of the international art market and Chinese state, offer a unique perspective on the challenging reality faced by many successful Chinese artists – a complicated political and cultural terrain that cannot easily be subsumed under the pejorative rubric of 'playing the Chinese card'.

Chinese contemporary art and the new global art world

The end of China's Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution and the decline of Mao's radical leftist state regime in the late 1970s marked the emergence of Chinese contemporary art. The 'high culture fever' of the 1980s (Wang, 1996) brought forth a new generation of avant-garde artists who embraced western modern art. No longer suffocated by the state-sanctioned doctrine of socialist realism, these artists' newfound artistic freedom, though constrained, led many of them to appropriate modern art styles from the West. The increase in overseas travel and a flood of information from the West also produced an exodus of Chinese artists to western countries in pursuit of better opportunities (Munroe, 2008), among whom were Ai Weiwei, who left Beijing for New York City in 1981, and Cai Guo-Qiang, who set off from Shanghai to Tokyo in 1986 and then relocated to NYC in 1995. These shifts culminated with the New Wave Movement of 1985–8, where hundreds of avant-garde art collectives blossomed across the nation. In a dual quest for Chinese modern identity and artistic autonomy, these artists experimented with western artistic languages and approaches to contest and reinvent mainstream Chinese constructions of art and culture (Gao, 2011).

This wave of experimental artistic energy however came to an abrupt end in 1989 after the debacle of the Tiananmen pro-democracy movement, where the Chinese Communist Party-state crushed the growing tide of liberal opposition emanating from Chinese students, journalists, and intellectuals. Disappointed with the utopian social projects of both the Chinese Right and the Left, Chinese contemporary art transformed drastically in the aftermath. A modernist agenda concerned with self-consciousness, aesthetic introspection and human progress was replaced with a postmodern sensibility of cynicism, satire, pastiche and kitsch. The 1990s consequently witnessed the rise of political pop and cynical realism. This generation of artists depicted the struggles between the logics of the market and the state, using their art to mock both the Chinese Communist Party and the overall system of a socialist market economy. These artists' turn towards postmodern visual aesthetics furthermore paralleled the post-Cold War neoliberal expansion of the international art market, the latter shift giving birth to a burgeoning art market endorsed mainly by western capital and shaped by western taste and aesthetic standards (Philipsen, 2010).

Regarding the shifts in the international art market and Chinese contemporary art's postmodern turn, the Chinese government was late to both parties. Throughout the 1990s the Chinese state continued to convey hostility towards contemporary art and the emerging global art market. The government's lack of interest in this market and the growing expansion of the international art market thus compelled aspiring Chinese artists to go abroad or reach out to dealers and collectors in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West to sell their works and cultivate audiences. The combined effect of the lack of a domestic market and growing overseas demand for Chinese contemporary art, moreover, led some Chinese artists to engage in self-exoticization, producing art that replicated dominant western discourses about China and what it means to be Chinese. Consequently, at the close of the last century, these works triggered serious critiques from art critics both in China and abroad. For instance, the American art critic Britta Erickson (2002) observed that three issues, namely the colonialist search for exoticism in the other, the Tiananmen

massacre, and the tendency to dismiss Chinese contemporary art as derivative from western art, dominated the western perceptions of it at the time. In a similar vein, the Chinese art critic Huang Heqing, in his somewhat nationalistic book *The Conspiracy of Art*, compared Chinese contemporary artists to China's export-oriented small manufacturers, calling them 'self-employed entrepreneurs' (*ge ti hu*), who 'manufacture art products for foreign trading' and commented: 'everyone can tell that Chinese contemporary art is not an art for the Chinese public but is conceived and produced for the International market' (Huang, 2005: 151).

Since the turn of the new millennium, marked particularly by the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, the Chinese government has shifted its course regarding contemporary art. Concerned with its international image and alarmed by what it perceived as the domination of western taste and influence in Chinese art, the People's Republic of China has gradually abandoned its former stance of restriction and censorship and now devotes immense resources towards recognizing and promoting contemporary art. Increasingly, the party-state treats art as an emerging industry for capital accumulation, a medium for expanding the country's international soft power, and a means to re-articulate Chinese power and Chinese nationalism. In the process, China has witnessed a nationwide art boom, brought forth by the likes of privately owned commercial galleries, urban art districts, and officially endorsed international exhibits and auction houses. While extending its domestic power and presenting a more open and liberal international image of itself lie at the heart of the Chinese government's efforts to promote Chinese contemporary art, its advancement has nonetheless opened up numerous opportunities for Chinese artists to voice powerful aesthetic alternatives to the Euro-American dominance of the international art establishment.

The combined forces of the market and state support have been gradually transforming the power dynamics of the global art world. With the quick rise of global-trotting Chinese art collectors, dealers, curators and critics, and the internationalization of Chinese auction houses and domestic art market following China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the international division of art labor is also shifting to become more accommodating to Chinese artists. By 2008, right before the Olympics and the bursting of the overheated economic bubble, China was at the height of a new 'cultural fever' of commercial high art. It was in this context that Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang came to artistic prominence.

While both artists produce works that stage the complexity of Chinese identity, history and life, they also artfully negotiate the strategic and exploitative agendas of the Chinese state and western-dominated art world. However, despite the political economic and cultural transformations that have taken place in the new global art world, some western and Chinese critics still adopt a colonial or nationalist lens in evaluating and interpreting their art. For instance, Ai Weiwei is frequently heralded and criticized as an activist-artist who is critical of the Chinese state. But media and popular culture's circulation of this particular narrative has become so prominent that it eclipses a deeper examination of the strategic position that Ai has mobilized in relation to both the Chinese government and the western art establishment – an artistic persona that cannot be reduced to being merely reflective of an anti-China political sensibility. On the other hand, Cai Guo-Qiang's frequent involvement in government-endorsed events, such as the Olympics

and APEC Summit, has been frowned upon by some critics and interpreted as demonstrating the ‘distinctly nationalistic’ (Cotter, 1998) intent of his art and identity. Such reductive evaluations of Cai hinder a more complex and nuanced reading of his work. In particular, how it confronts the geo-cultural constructions of West and East, and deploys the Chinese and Asian experience as a ‘method’, rather than merely case studies or objects of western knowledge, to challenge the universalism of western values and aesthetic standards without falling into the traps of propaganda art (Wang, 2008). In the end, Ai and Cai, like many other Chinese artists have suffered a similar fate, frozen into pre-established identity categories and fixed political stances by their critics.

The remainder of this article spotlights several of the works Ai and Cai produced amid the build-up to and aftermath of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. We unpack the aesthetic politics of these artistic works and, moreover, the political and cultural context of their creation. We argue that these works offer unique portals to Ai and Cai’s different, though intersecting, practices of artistic production and political critique. From this vantage point, what becomes clearer is that both men are cultural producers who are deeply invested in rigorously interrogating the transnational cultural dynamics and traffic that shape both their profession and, more broadly, China’s engagement with the world.

Ai Weiwei: an anti-China activist?

As early as in 2004, Ai was enlisted by Swiss architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron to work as an artistic consultant on their proposal for the Beijing National Stadium, a site that later came to be known as the ‘Bird’s Nest’ (Ai and Lee, 2011). As the only Chinese member on the team, Ai was indispensable in helping the firm connect modern architecture aesthetics to traditional Chinese forms (Hawthorne, 2004). Nonetheless, amid the building of the Bird’s Nest and the various other Olympic construction projects, western media’s criticisms of the Chinese government increased. These critiques revolved around several issues – the severity of air pollution in Beijing, the state’s media censorship, repression of political activists, and demolition of housing and displacement of residents in order to construct numerous competitive and commercial sites for the Olympic Games.

In view of these growing denunciations of the Chinese government, Ai seconded the call to boycott the Games, using his Sina blog as a central platform for his interactive public art activities until the government shut it down in May 2009. In a statement titled ‘Different Worlds, Different Dreams’, the idiom a play on the Olympic Games’ publicized theme/motto of ‘One World, One Dream’, Ai condemned the government for its lack of transparency and its disrespect for human rights:

This is Beijing in 2006, only two years before the Olympics. This capital, becoming more international by the day, is revealing the true meaning of Olympic slogan to the world: ‘New Beijing, New Olympics.’ Or ‘One World, One Dream’.... The whole city is like a poorly assembled and cheap stage where all the people passing through it – men, women, the young, and the old – were nothing more than props, all part of an unsightly performance on culture, history and political achievements. Once again, the rights of the common people, humanity, their emotions and sense of self-determination have been taken from them, after a thousand

such brutalities. Truly perplexing is why this society, lacking in both honor and integrity, is so fond of painting and powdering its own face. (Ai and Lee, 2011: 98)

In another post, he distanced himself from his earlier participation in the Bird's Nest and the Chinese state's effort to represent China to the world. 'You've called me the "consultant representing the Chinese side" countless times', he pointed out, 'Let me admonish you one more time: I have nothing to do with "*the Chinese side.*" I've never worked on *your side*' (Ai and Lee, 2011: 176, emphasis added).

Consequently, in the period leading up to the Games and afterward, Ai's art actively drew greater awareness to government injustice and abuses, functioning primarily around an activist aesthetic that blurred the boundaries between art and politics, art spectators and participants, and everyday life and performance. The most notable example was the *Sichuan Earthquake Names Project (2008–2009)*. This project was a social media-initiated campaign that Ai led in response to the devastating earthquake in Sichuan on 12 May 2008, just a few months prior to the opening of the Olympic Games, after learning that more than 5000 of the earthquake's victims were school children, who had been crushed by the shoddily constructed walls and foundations of their school buildings. Ai organized through his blog more than 50 volunteers who traveled to Sichuan to collect the names of the deceased children and interview their parents. Their objective was to celebrate the lives of the victims of the tragedy and highlight the fact that the tragedy could have been prevented; they asserted that it was not the earthquake that caused the buildings' collapse and these people's deaths, but rather the poor construction of the schools, which was a product of government negligence and corruption by local authorities and officials. Ai and the group consequently made it their project to call attention to the government's attempts to cover up their part in this atrocity and its silencing of the victims' parents, who demanded state accountability for their children's deaths. Ai's multiple visits to the quake site also inspired him to create several installation art pieces, the best known being *Remembering* (Figure 1), a work later exhibited at his 2009 Munich retrospective show *So Sorry*. This work recreates a tragic scene that he witnessed at one Sichuan rescue site where the school backpacks of the young victims were scattered and left unattended in the rubble. In response, Ai covered the façade at Haus der Kunst art museum with 9000 schoolchildren's backpacks that collectively spell out in Chinese characters, 'She lived happily for seven years in this world', a quote from a mother whose child died in one of the schools that collapsed during the Sichuan earthquake. *Remembering* and the *Sichuan Earthquake Names Project* grew out of Ai's post-Olympic criticisms of the government. Both projects represented his attempts to construct monuments and public archives for Chinese citizens who are rendered voiceless and nameless by the violence of the state. These works, furthermore, offered a unique and powerful counter to the Bird's Nest, an edifice and icon of the Chinese state that labors to project an aura of Chinese modernity and statesmanship.

Nonetheless, despite the strong political messages conveyed in the *So Sorry* exhibit and Ai's social media-based dissenting art practices, the complexity of these and other works is often sidelined in favour of the dominant western media's depiction of Ai as an anti-China political artist and activist. Among western art critics, Ai's focus on political and social issues within his art, for example, has been criticized for reflecting more a



Figure 1. *Remembering, backpacks*, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2009.

political tactic than a work of imagination, beauty, and originality (Perl, 2013). In response to these particular artistic works and others, several Chinese art critics, state media personnel, and nationalists within the public sphere have also lambasted Ai as a ‘slave of the West’ (*Xi Nu*), an artist whose creative work is aligned ‘with the Western media’s efforts to slam China’ (Huang, 2011).

Consequently, what is frequently missing from current assessments of Ai’s art is a consideration of the competing forces and multiple ideological systems that shape the content of his expression and to which much of his work responds. Instead of reducing Ai to a quintessential anti-China political dissident, it is appropriate to view him as an artist who performs the role of an activist – a cultural producer who situates his political convictions within artistic and performative experiments (Cheng, 2011). The art then becomes a heuristic device for Ai to articulate and interrogate his own political views, and a means for him to encourage the viewer/reader of his art to conduct a similar critical autopsy of his/her own perceptions and beliefs. In a recent email interview conducted by Kerry Brougher with Ai while the latter was under house arrest in his Beijing studio, Ai conceded that ‘a piece of art cannot change the political or social conditions of the world directly’, but what could in fact change was himself. Ai asserted that his art offers him a lens into how he participates in these conditions of hegemony cultivated by the Chinese state and global economic and cultural elites such as the international art market. In doing so, he gains an understanding of the relationship between his art and society: ‘it helps me feel grounded in the creative process. I am not seeking to create complete or perfect works. I am doing what I must do’ (Brougher et al., 2012).

This incomplete and exploratory nature of Ai’s art must be recognized if we are to fully understand the complexity, equivocality and contradiction inherent to his artistic practice. So, for example, the meaning behind *So Sorry*, the title of his Munich show, is widely interpreted as a reference to the apologies given by the Chinese government to the

victims after the Sichuan earthquake. But Ai offered a more nuanced explanation in a 2009 interview with Mathieu Wellner:

The artist has to struggle, he may even hurt himself or do damage to others. The title of the exhibition is *So Sorry*... It comes from how we look at the world: it's a world of rationality, a result of our logic, it's the result of results. It's everything... We are not really controlling it, even if we might think we are. It's about how we look at the world, how we look at it as humans or as artists functioning in the world – you know, your own performance and the performance of others. You want to be understood this way or that. (Ai and Wellner, 2013: 421)

Here, Ai positions his dissident art projects as a struggle not just against the Chinese state's authoritarian rule but, more broadly, against the rational and unequivocal ways we as individuals or collectives approach and operate in the world, the results of which are often unintended and beyond our control. What he is suggesting is that humanity's biggest enemy is not any particular political or ideological system, but rather the blind conviction and certitude of people's own righteousness, traits that often prevent them from taking a stand against injustice, repression and ignorance.

The best term to describe Ai's artistic practice and stance towards both the government and international art world is that of 'ambivalence'. It is true that Ai Weiwei has continuously resisted what he perceived to be the government's incorporation of radical avant-gardism by Chinese cultural producers. For instance, at the 2000 Third Shanghai Biennale, the first government-organized Chinese contemporary art exhibition open to a global audience, hosted by both the state-owned Shanghai Art Museum and the Ministry of Culture, Ai contested the Biennale by staging an independent exhibit in a privately owned commercial Shanghai gallery. However, a more nuanced reading of Ai's exhibit complicates the conventional account of this exhibit as being representative of a simple anti-Chinese government outlook and an activist persona. Ai's exhibit, *Fuck Off* (Figure 2; translated as '*bu hezuo fang shi*' or, 'uncooperative manner', in Chinese), was a two-week unofficial satellite show of the Biennale co-curated with Feng Boyi. It showcased the work of 46 avant-garde Chinese artists – a group whose works were perceived by state bureaucrats as too bold and experimental to be included in the government's official exhibit. According to the curatorial plan, the show's goal was to 'emphasize the independent and critical stance that is basic to art existence, and its status of independence, freedom and plurality in the situation of contradiction and conflicts' (Ai and Feng, 2000).

The show's curatorial philosophy was best encapsulated in a series of photos where Ai gives the middle finger to the viewer and to seven geographically dispersed global architectural icons. At first glance, this collection of photos is not so different from the Warholian anti-establishment irreverence easily found in the works of many western pop artists; Ai appears to be demonstrating his contempt for power of all stripes by giving the finger to their symbolic monuments. However, the work becomes more complex and unique when it is viewed not as an imitation of the aforementioned western genre of pop art, but instead as a space of global encounter and mistranslation. This can be gleaned by considering the subtle difference of meanings in the exhibition's Chinese and English titles and the presumed anti-establishment disposition represented by the middle finger displayed in each image. The Chinese translation of the shocking and provocative



Figure 2. Ai Weiwei *Study in Perspective Series 1995–2003*, exhibited at *Fuck Off*, 2000.

English phrase ‘fuck off’ is *bu hezuo fang shi* (‘uncooperative manner’), an idiom that is far less controversial and far more toned down and ambiguous. Furthermore, the Chinese phrasing leaves the issue of who the images’ antagonist is unclear – viewers might look at the images and ponder over the question of ‘with whom must I be uncooperative? – Is it the Chinese government? Or the international art market?’

Most historical accounts of the Shanghai Biennale portray the exhibit as an avant-gardist challenge to the Chinese state’s efforts to take advantage of Chinese contemporary art’s increasing global success and visibility. But this narrative betrays the fact that the Chinese government was complicit in allowing Ai’s satellite show to take place exclusively for an international audience (Wu, 2001). The show, to some degree, did not represent a mounted protest against the Biennale, but rather a corresponding fringe part of the event, an additional component of the larger spectacle. It is also important to note that Ai’s photos at the exhibit were presented to the global public at a historical turning point marked by the Chinese government’s transforming attitudes to contemporary art

from censorship to promotion. Ai's juxtaposition of Tiananmen and Beijing with Washington, Hong Kong, Venice, Paris and Switzerland in these images subtly assisted the Chinese government in depicting China as global power equal to other western powers and Beijing landmarks as sites of cultural cosmopolitanism equivalent to that of the Louvre.

Such contradictions trouble western media's typical framing of Ai Weiwei's as an artist-activist. As we have elaborated, Ai's post-Olympics fame is as much a result of his artistic exploration and performance, and the Chinese government's deliberate staging of its now reformed global image as patrons of dissident art. In a recent interview, Ai ruminated on the relationship between his artworks and his dissident cause:

In normal circumstances, I know it's undesirable for an artist to be labeled a political activist or dissident. But I've overcome that barrier. The suits that people dress you in are not as important as the content you put forth, so long as it gives meaning to new expression. The struggle is worthwhile if it provides new ways to communicate with people and society.... These roles cannot be separated. Maybe I am just an undercover artist in the disguise of a dissident; I couldn't care less about these implications. (Brougher et al., 2012: 39)

In this statement, Ai highlights the ambivalences of his art. Although his latest embodiment of the artist-activist hybrid has been celebrated by his western (and some Chinese) followers and condemned by a Chinese government no longer tolerant of his political art, he is perfectly aware of the benefits and limitations brought by his new role to his art. Though not blatantly speaking to negotiations, consent, and cooperation at play in staging art exhibits such as 'Fuck Off', the statement relays Ai's cognizance of how the art industry's, and even his own, branding of his art as 'political art' at times masks the power relations at play.

Cai Guo-Qiang: a pro-China nationalist?

Cai's participation in the 2008 Olympic Games developed after he was appointed by the Chinese government to be the director of special effects for the Games' opening and closing ceremonies, tasked with curating the much-acclaimed pyrotechnic display. While Ai Weiwei openly called the Games into question, Cai saw them as an opportunity to re-imagine a global event like the Olympics beyond the narrow confines of Chinese nationalism, and to produce public art that engages with a global audience. Cognizant of the potential risks and challenges of working with the Chinese government, Cai commented:

The biggest challenge of working for the Olympics is the possibility of being reduced into a propaganda instrument serving the government.... But a more dangerous scenario is that of accomplishing little of artistic value after spending two years in Beijing.... Isn't it ironic that nothing is out of bounds nowadays for contemporary artists except working for the [Beijing] Olympics?. (Yang and Li, 2010)

Walking a fine line between a Communist government accustomed to treating art as a tool for propaganda and an international community critical of the regime, Cai has therefore designed his art to be open to multiple interpretations and inviting to participants of



Figure 3. Giant footprints, pyrotechnic display for the Beijing 2008 Olympics.

differing backgrounds. In a recent biography, citing the Chinese idiom ‘*Yasu gongshang*’ (appealing to both refined and popular tastes), an artistic strategy inspired by Mao’s ‘mass line’ philosophy, Cai explained how his Olympic design – fireworks displaying 29 giant footprints traversing the sky from Tiananmen to the Olympic Stadium (Figure 3) – communicated a multitude of messages to different audiences (Yang and Li, 2010).

On one hand, the artistic methodology behind the design is consistent with his previous projects of ‘communicating with the extraterrestrials’ – giant footprints placed along the central axis of an ancient city symbolize imprints left by powerful forces from the ‘unseen world’ beyond the East–West binary. This is a continuation of Cai’s signature gunpowder performance and painting, a series of works that had thrust him onto the international stage. At the core of these works is the dialectical tension inherent to all social and natural forces, what Cai summarizes as the Daoist idea of mutual transformation and the Maoist principle of ‘No Destruction, No Construction’ (*Bupo buli*). Cai appropriates the rich cultural and historical symbolism of gunpowder – initially discovered by Chinese alchemists searching for an elixir of immortality; it was later used for centuries in the East for fireworks, before being diffused to Europe by the Mongols and deployed by Europeans as powerful weapons to invade and colonize Asia and Africa. Cai plays with this polysemic metaphor to challenge the problematic division of East and West into oppositional spheres of imagination. The Olympics thus served as another site for him to call into question this geographic and geo-cultural divide, and visualize the mutually transformative relationships between different cultures that shape the past, present and future. Gunpowder and fireworks represented Cai’s effort to reclaim and redefine the ‘signs and systems of ancient Chinese culture’ within the postmodern global arena of sport, public diplomacy, and cross-cultural traffic (Munroe, 2008).

Contrary to Ai Weiwei, whose open protest against the Chinese government during the Olympics and his dissident art thereafter boosted his international fame, Cai’s implication



Figure 4. Venice's *Rent Collection Courtyard*, commissioned by the 48th Venice Biennale, 1999.

in the historical event as a collaborator, from the perspective of the liberal democratic art establishment, tarnished his artistic integrity. Cai's ambivalent political stance and artistic practice baffle western critics, who seek to freeze him within a political identity of being either for or against the Chinese state. Consequently, Cai's work is sometimes criticized for being 'distinctly nationalistic' (Cotter, 1998), and dismissed as apolitical sham avant-gardism deployed for profit and careerism. Along similar lines, numerous Chinese nationals read Cai's performance for the Olympics as emphasizing a strong nationalist ethos, which displayed the world's embrace of China as a rising global power and China's 'long march' towards international recognition (Yang and Li, 2010).

But more than all of this, what Cai's Olympic work represented was his attempt to repurpose and redefine the state-sponsored historical event for his own artistic visions and politics (Wang, 2008). The open-endedness of Cai's Olympics work bespeaks his versatility in maintaining his artistic autonomy while respecting the patriotic sentiments of his fellow compatriots and, more importantly, in mobilizing and reframing this energy to form a forward-looking internationalist vision. Cai's recent reflection on his Olympics experience perfectly illustrates some of this:

I could have done better at depicting the growing openness and freedom in China to the outside world.... I don't want to simply put the blame on the government and the leaders. I believe that the artist has to be more proactive and to push the limits. We have to think and act ahead of our time, to intervene in the system, and to bring out the social potentials that most people cannot see ... (Yang and Li, 2010)

Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard (Figure 4), an earlier artwork by Cai, is organized around similar objectives. Just like Cai's gunpowder art, the *Courtyard* appropriates Chinese symbolism, tradition, and history to illustrate the ambivalent cultural strategies and competing cultural and ideological identifications that contemporary Chinese artists

are compelled to navigate and negotiate. The original *Rent Collection Courtyard* was collectively created in 1965 by professors and students at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. It consisted of 114 life-sized clay sculptures installed in the courtyard of a former rural landlord in Sichuan to showcase the miserable fate of the peasant class under the exploitative system of the pre-Socialist Chinese society. As the epitome of socialist art production, the work was highly praised by the Maoist regime and was subsequently replicated multiple times under state commission during the height of the Cultural Revolution to be exhibited for propaganda purposes both at home and abroad in the former Communist bloc. During the 1999 Venice Biennale, Cai staged a performance project in which he invited ten artisans, including one creator of the original *Courtyard*, to re-enact on-site its production process for an international audience.

Dressing a piece of state-endorsed canonical socialist realist art in the postmodern language of conceptual art and restaging its reproduction at a major western art exhibit, Cai toys with time and space to accomplish a paradoxical task – reminding the western art establishment of the sophistication, sincerity and aesthetic value of socialist art while commenting on the instrumentalization of art and artists under the socialist regime. The deep ambivalence that Cai felt towards both the Chinese socialist art system and its western antithesis was revealed through his contradictory appraisals of state-sponsored art on different occasions. At the Venice Biennale, he was reported to have lamented over the loss of sincerity and utopianism in contemporary art compared to artists of socialist China: ‘I do not know whether it is the artists of the Cultural Revolution or us who hold the strongest attachment to art, but the people of that time believed in a new society and an ideal for mankind’ (Perl, 2008). In a more recent interview with Yang and Li (2010), he offered a different appraisal in critique of the instrumentalization of art under the socialist and post-socialist regimes:

The humiliating experience of China in the past century has turned art into a tool for nationalist mobilization and social reform, eulogizing utopian socialism while exposing the darkness of the old society. Avant-garde art in post-revolutionary China is again instrumentalized for facilitating reform and promoting democracy. In this context, art in China always appears to be quite miserable. (Yang and Li, 2010).

How do we make sense of the two seemingly contrasting comments? Straddling two competing cultural and political systems, Cai perceives merits and problems in both. Refusing to privilege either one of these systems, Cai renders visible points of comparison and fusion between the two, referencing one to comment on the other and ultimately highlighting points of convergence and possibility for mutual transformation and learning. For instance, in discussing the original *Courtyard*, Cai emphasized qualities such as utilizing ‘used ready-made materials’ (farm tools, tables and chairs) to create a ‘site-specific’ work (the courtyard of a local landlord) – concepts that happen to coincide with the latest trends in western conceptual art (Zhu, 2001).

Chinese history, cultural symbols and experience consequently become part of Cai’s methodology in intervening within the West-dominated contemporary art establishment and as a means to encourage people to reflect on the complicated legacy of China’s socialist past in both constraining and enabling art production in contemporary China.

Ultimately, Cai confronts and visualizes these clashes of ideologies in his art without submitting to anyone. A great indication of this creative ambivalence is his witty response to the argument that Chinese contemporary art only serves as ‘spring rolls’ in western exhibitions: ‘perhaps we are still in some ways the spring rolls at the banquet, but if the spring rolls carry bacteria, they can ruin the entire party’ (Cai, 2008).

Examining Cai’s Olympics project in light of his biographic history – his search for culturally hybrid and personally meaningful artistic languages – confutes the simplistic readings of his collaboration with the Chinese government as nationalist or apolitical careerism. Instead, we see Cai’s artistic ingenuity in fusing western and eastern aesthetics to confront cultural contradictions and render visible, rather than conceal, unequal power relationships. Different from Ai Weiwei, who, despite of the complexity of his work and his ambivalent attitudes towards power of all stripes, decided recently to form an alliance with western mainstream media to advance his political art, Cai’s aesthetic strategies constitute a different kind of ‘anticipatory politics’: a politics that disrupts received cultural boundaries, challenges established identity categories, and rethinks the meanings of both the global and local (Ong, 2012). Compared to Ai’s direct intervention into politics, Cai’s participation in global events represents a different type of political praxis through deconstruction and the transformative potentials of art generated in spaces of global encounter.

Conclusion

The post-Cold War expansion of the international art market has incorporated growing numbers of non-western artists into the game and facilitated the emergence of multiple regional centres of contemporary art in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Philipsen, 2010). However, when non-western artists confront such issues with their own cultural experience, they are still too often dismissed as derivative, unoriginal and are blamed for playing the identity card. An ancient civilization, a former semi-colony, and a socialist regime turned the world’s second largest economy – China at the time of the 2008 Olympics only further complicates the issue. Eager to boost its ‘soft power’ internationally while trying to contain a growing liberal democratic trend at home, the state found itself both endorsing and jailing contemporary artists. These changing power dynamics have thrust global Chinese contemporary artists into a thorny position along the nationalism-globalism continuum. What is often missing from current research into China’s international expansion of cultural power and industries is how artists/cultural producers strategically navigate these quickly shifting global power dynamics and cultural currents.

Regardless of their success as two of the most well-known Chinese contemporary artists and their vastly different cultural strategies, Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang’s resourcefulness and entrepreneurship in navigating the intricate power maze are still often cited in order to question their artistic authenticity and sincerity (Ong, 2012). Faced with challenges both at home with a transitional authoritarian government, and abroad with an international art market eager to consume exoticism and attack the Communist state, Ai has been branded and self-brands himself as an anti-government activist-artist, whereas Cai is often criticized for engaging in Communist-Capitalist double talk. But

hard to ignore is the performative aspect of the two artists' cultural identities and artistic practices and, moreover, their ambivalence in aligning either with the global or the national in their aesthetic and political negotiations with the demands and interests of the Chinese state and the international art world.

On the one hand, Ai Weiwei's transnational dissident art practices against the canvas of the biggest rising global power hijacks international politics and global media to challenge high art's relationship to politics through internet-assisted popular participation; all of this works in the interest of his dissident cause against political authoritarianism and his efforts to problematize the separation between life and art. Ai's artistic strategies have certainly changed over the years, and his post-Olympic persona comes to resemble more and more closely the western archetype of Chinese artistic activist as a political rebel and a liberal icon. However, a close examination of his artistic trajectories and early works reveals a more complex Ai. An artist who is more ambivalent both regarding the Chinese government's incorporation of contemporary art as propaganda, and the western media and art establishment's tendency to freeze Chinese artists into the role of an exotic cultural and political symbol in justifying its superiority and righteousness.

On the other hand, beneath Cai Guo-Qiang's seemingly 'nationalistic' or 'apolitical' attitudes to art are different creative strategies and political aesthetics that refuse categorization and reduction to either 'for' or 'against' China or the West. His creative visualization of global tensions, juxtaposition of disparate cultural elements in global spaces of encounter, and resistance to fixed identity labels embody a nuanced cosmopolitan subjectivity through art, methodologize rather than objectify Asia and China, which constitute a challenge to both nationalistic assertions and the Eurocentric world order. Ai's and Cai's international fame as celebrity contemporary artists might set them apart from other lesser-known but professionally successful artists in terms of the resources that they can mobilize in realizing their artistic visions. However, the strategies that they deploy in communicating a creative ambivalence and in navigating the shifting political space in-between the Chinese state and the global market are not unique. As China expands its global cultural and political, not just economic influence, more and more artists working with different genres will have to learn to constantly search for a language of creative expression under competing political agendas. Activist or artist? Nationalist or globalist? In the end, these questions might not matter that much if we begin to deeply unpack the strategies and complex routes embarked on by these artists in relation to the state and the international world of art, spaces where they and others artfully 'hold together competing, if not conflicting claims on identity' (Ong, 2012: 6).

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Note

1. *ArtReview* magazine's annual list of the contemporary art world's most influential and powerful figures, a ranking that runs the gamut from artists and curators to collectors, gallerists, and museum directors.

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