

Chinese Contemporary Art from Traditional and Commercial Perspectives in the Context of Western Influence

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Abstract: This dissertation explores the impact of Western influences on Chinese contemporary art from two perspectives: traditional symbols and commercial symbols. It synthesizes diverse perspectives from scholars, critics, artists, and curators, revealing both concerns and opportunities regarding the state of Chinese contemporary art. The globalization of culture, spurred by China's economic growth and Opening-up policy, has introduced Western philosophies and art forms, reshaping production, presentation, and theoretical frameworks within Chinese contemporary art. Interviews with three prominent Chinese artists provide nuanced insights into this phenomenon, highlighting differing perspectives on the integration of Western influences and the preservation of "Chineseness" in artistic expression. While some scholars lament a potential loss of cultural identity, others see internationalization as a defining theme in contemporary Chinese art. Overall, the discourse underscores the importance of cultivating a distinct Chinese aesthetic while engaging with global artistic currents.

1. Introduction

Chinese contemporary art, evolving since 1978, reflects various dimensions. Its development can be categorized into four periods. During the fourth period, beginning in 1999, Chinese contemporary art encountered the challenges of globalization and Western influence, particularly evident after the 1985 Art New Wave movement. This period raised questions regarding cultural identity, as highlighted by Liu Yuedi's exploration of "Chineseness" in his work "Chinese Contemporary Art: From De-Chineseness to Re-Chineseness.":

From 1978 to 2008, Chinese contemporary art transitioned from de-Chineseness to re-Chineseness, symbolizing a historical shift from de-contextualization to re-contextualization. Despite globalization, Chinese art is rediscovering its original context, once overlooked by the Western art world. This pursuit of re-Chineseness aligns with global art trends, underscoring the increasing significance of Chineseness in contemporary art discussions [1].

Over the past three decades, Western influences, including globalization and economic

expansion, have significantly shaped Chinese contemporary art, prompting diverse scholarly perspectives [1]. This dissertation explores the impact of Western cultural symbols on Chinese art across three chapters: traditional symbols like calligraphy, commercial symbols influenced by Western consumerism, and interviews with three Chinese artists. While other factors like modernization and political changes also play a role [1], the dissertation focuses primarily on Western influence, aiming to understand its effects on Chinese art and artists' perspectives on the current state of the field.

2. In the Traditional Aspect

In this chapter, the convergence of Western influences and traditional aspects of Chinese culture in Chinese contemporary art can be understood as the influence of the artistic creation with the theme of traditional culture among active contemporary Chinese artists. Traditional symbols in Chinese contemporary art can be seen as cultural and local perseverance from Chinese artists. At the same time, China, as one of the four ancient civilisations, is the only civilization that has preserved its culture to this day. Chinese artists all have a natural tendency to involve traditional culture or local characteristics in their creations. Nevertheless, Western art and ideology following the process of globalisation have affected the Chinese art world in terms of production, presentation, and consumption.

After the Cultural Revolution happened between 1966 and 1976 in China. Chinese art started to gain its autonomous identity instead of being positioned on its identity of 'Social Realism'. After two years, in 1978, political interventions in artists' works were eliminated. Chinese artists were free to practice art. From that time on, Chinese art has begun its non-reversible path. There are four art periods of the development of Chinese contemporary art since 1978. It is crucial to provide the background of Chinese contemporary art in this dissertation for readers to get a more complete picture. Besides, Chinese art has never discarded the traditional cultural symbols throughout the long process of history. However, since the early nineteen-eighties, globalisation has grown gradually. It is a phenomenon which leads to communication of cultures, ideologies, trade, economy, agriculture as well as others between the East and the West. Likewise, at the starting point of Chinese contemporary art, Deng Xiaoping, the second generation supreme leader of the People's Republic of China initiated and founded 'the economic reform and opening-up' policies. At this point, China entered a new period of transformation of economy and society. Moreover, closely followed by the accession to the World Trade Organization, this chapter delves into how contemporary Chinese artists blend traditional cultural themes with Western influences. Traditionally, these symbols represent cultural resilience and China's heritage. However, globalization has introduced Western art and ideologies, reshaping Chinese art's production, presentation, and consumption.

Following the Cultural Revolution, Chinese art evolved independently, with political interventions ending in 1978. Its development unfolded across four distinct periods amid globalization. Deng Xiaoping's reforms and China's entry into the World Trade Organization further integrated it into the global art scene, reinforcing Western influence. Yet, traditional cultural symbols persist amid this evolution.

During the initial period (1978-1984), 'Social Realism' dominated under government restrictions. The emergence of the '1985 Art New Wave movement' marked a significant shift, challenging 'Chinese Socialist Realism' and allowing artists to explore humanist concerns, advancing the autonomy of Chinese contemporary art [1].

Between 1990 and 1998, Chinese contemporary art transitioned into three categories amid economic expansion and mass culture's rise, blending national, high art, and mass culture [2].

Since 1999, Chinese contemporary art has entered its fourth phase in the era of globalization,

characterized by works with both Chinese and global traits, leading to its recognition as 'post-modern art' by 1998. This period symbolizes the fusion of globalization, postmodernism, and Chinese contemporary art [1].

Since the late fourth art period, there's been a focus on redefining 'Chineseness,' explored further in subsequent chapters. Scholars express concerns about the potential decline in Chinese contemporary art's creative potency amid globalization, influenced by factors like Western contemporary art and the preservation of traditional Chinese culture [1]. Globalization, or "Complex connectivity" as described by Tomlinson, represents a rapidly evolving network system intertwining various human activities, echoing the views of Manuel Castells [3]:

The global city is more than a location. It's a dynamic process. It involves connecting centers of advanced services and local communities globally, while minimizing ties with their surrounding areas, primarily through information exchange [4].

The term 'Chinartscapes', coined by Ming [5]. It is used to describe the allocation of the opportunities for Chinese artists to create and distribute their works globally while remaining rooted locally, contributing to the 'glocalisation dream' [6]. This concept of glocalisation, balancing global and local adaptation, is integral to Chinese contemporary art discourse, as noted by Gordon Matthews [7]. Artists aim to integrate traditional culture into their works while preserving local identity, reflecting a trend towards localism observed by Barnet and Cavanagh [8]. Amid globalization, Chinese contemporary art navigates the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, as explored by Arjun Appadurai in '*Modernity At Large*' [9]. Subsequent examples of contemporary Chinese artworks showcase the interplay of Western influences with Chinese traditional symbols, illustrating the evolving landscape of Chinese contemporary art.

In Hong Hao's artwork "*The Great Wall*" (1999), he adopts an optimistic approach by portraying himself as a tour guide leading a group of smiling foreign tourists at the renowned Great Wall. This piece reflects China's confidence and positive self-perception, as well as its global image.

Hong's "*The Great Wall*" artwork is a powerful response to Appadurai's view on globalization, emphasizing its role in reconnecting humanity and embracing global diversity, contrary to cultural homogenization [9]. Precisely speaking, it is about associating the human community again as well as embracing the outside world [10].

Scholars examine the impact of internationalization on Chinese contemporary art within the context of globalization and Western influence, probing its implications for cultural identity [11]. Chen Xiaoxin and Wang Chunchen advocate for Chinese artists to cultivate unique artistic values by integrating tradition with contemporary contexts [12]. The tension between 'Chineseness' and 'Westernness' persists, with Wang Chunchen prioritizing internal dynamics over external influences [13]. Since the Cultural Revolution, Chinese artists have engaged with foreign modern art, broadening their intellectual horizons through the study of translated works by thinkers like Freud and Nietzsche.

The coexistence of Chinese traditional symbols and Western ideologies in contemporary Chinese art is evident, reflecting the global influence of Western culture. For example, Ji Wenyu's oil painting "*Mona Lisa in China*" depicts three Mona Lisas adorned in traditional Chinese attire against the backdrop of the Great Wall, blending Western imagery with Chinese motifs. Further analysis of Ji's techniques influenced by contemporary commercial art will be explored in chapter two.

In Ji's artwork "*Chinese Food is Well Known to the World*", he celebrates the global appeal of Chinese cuisine. The piece showcases four sides adorned with couplets expressing Ji's admiration for Chinese food, translated into English. This fusion of text and imagery invites viewers to reflect on the cultural significance of Chinese culinary traditions.

Chinese contemporary art often reinterprets traditional cultural elements creatively, as Liu

observes [1]. Xu Bing, a notable artist, embodies this notion with his inventive use of Chinese characters. Liu's concept of "Composite Meanings" is evident in Xu's artwork "Artworld", where he constructs a character resembling Chinese using English letters. This fusion of languages prompts viewers to reflect on cultural symbols in a global context [1].

Chinese artists, influenced by globalization, experience shifts in art forms and themes [5]. Western influences drive experimentation and new production methods [5].

Currently, the Western art scene favors philosophical frameworks, particularly in video and installation art, emphasizing conceptual approaches. Moreover, there's increasing interest in expanding the market for Chinese contemporary art.

3. In the Commercial Aspect

In the past three decades, China has rapidly transformed with modern and futuristic cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou [14]. This urbanization, fueled by substantial foreign investment, is reshaping the country's landscape. Scholars like Sassen and Castells highlight China's accelerating development, with an annual GDP growth rate of 9.5% [15].

A developmental state is defined by its legitimacy rooted in the promotion and maintenance of steady economic growth and structural changes domestically and internationally [16].

China's Reform and Opening-up policy, after joining the World Trade Organization, has driven regional economic integration and the globalization of Chinese contemporary art [17]. Western influences, notably in commercial symbols, have shaped Chinese art amid globalization and economic growth. Liu suggests that Chinese artists uniquely reinterpret Western commercial culture [1]. Additionally, traditional Chinese elements add global appeal to art, seen in cityscapes featuring traditional architecture.

Chinese artist Can Fei uses ironic rhetoric in her artworks to address economic expansionism and brand-oriented culture. In her video piece "*Rabid Dogs*", office staff in Burberry attire sport canine makeup, offering a critique of career and social aspirations in today's competitive workplace and consumer-driven society.

In the early 1990s, China's entry into the Western art market elevated its contemporary artworks globally, altering production and presentation methods. However, this integration also raised concerns about the potential loss of spiritual depth. Scholars like Gao note a detachment of contemporary art from societal engagement due to market competitiveness [18]. Wang Chunchen express concerns over the commercialization of Chinese art driven by globalization [13]. Liu Xianting, an art critic and curator said it was Chinese artists themselves who made artworks first in China, then their works had been selected to be presented in the West and other foreign countries [19]. Interviews with artists Wang Jian, Wei Hua, and Chen Qian offer nuanced perspectives, encouraging readers to delve deeper into the matter.

4. Interviews with three Chinese artists

To further explore the dissertation topic, the viewpoints of three contemporary Chinese artists—Wang Jian, Wei Hua, and Chen Qian—are essential. Through interviews conducted via questionnaire, they provided insights on Western influences on Chinese contemporary art, shedding light on both traditional and commercial dimensions. Their responses offer valuable perspectives on the present state of Chinese contemporary art.

Wang Jian, an expert in Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, serves as director of the calligraphy institute at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. He's renowned for his contributions to preserving Dunhuang murals and possesses deep insights into Chinese contemporary art.

Wei Hua, holding a master's in environmental ceramics, was a professor at the Guangzhou

Academy of Fine Arts. Proficient in ceramics and sculpture, he explores traditional Chinese cosmological concepts in his artworks, which have gained international acclaim.

Chen Qian, a versatile artist and designer, specializes in ink painting and calligraphy. He incorporates his creative style of Chinese characters into his abstract artworks and operates a design team to transform them into products for the local market.

Wang Jian's creative process is influenced by nature's diverse elements, including mountains, trees, rivers, and even children's artwork.

Wei Hua finds inspiration in Zhangjiajie, Hunan province, known for its stunning landscapes and diverse ethnic communities. His childhood experiences fuel his passion for nature and cultural diversity, shaping his artistic perspective. Wei's works, influenced by multiple cultures and emotions, aim to evoke profound sentiments and transform urban landscapes. Notable among his creations is a monumental nude sculpture resembling himself.

Wei combines Western and Chinese artistic elements in his "Oil Painting and Contemporary Art" projects, utilizing stoneware sculptures.

Chen Qian's inspiration stems from daily life's nuances, including impending parenthood and cooking, influencing his expressive style.

Chen Qian incorporates art into everyday items like umbrellas, phone cases, and pillow cases, highlighting the fusion of art and daily life.

Wang Jian emphasizes the importance of the line in Chinese Calligraphy, symbolizing minimalist expression and mindfulness. Chen Qian's art evokes Chinese tradition poetically, igniting viewers' imagination. Wei Hua, influenced by Western art education during China's Reform and Opening-up Policy, values humanity's universal essence in both Western and Chinese art. He highlights the significance of cosmology, particularly the concept of 'nothing' or 'emptiness', in his artistic expression.

In China's era of economic growth and globalization, Chinese contemporary art embraces internationalization. Chapter one explores scholars' perspectives on Western influences in traditional Chinese art. Wei Hua acknowledges these influences on contemporary Chinese art while advocating for the preservation of traditional cultural expressions. He promotes a blend of global and local perspectives in artistic creation, seeing Chinese contemporary art as a platform to express national identity and address global concerns.

Wang Jian views globalization as a chance to revive ancient Chinese traditions through contemporary art. While recognizing Western influence, he cautions against blindly adopting Western cultural ideas, which could hinder genuine innovation in Chinese art.

Chen Qian suggests that globalization mainly impacts the emotional expression methods in traditional art rather than causing significant changes. He believes any adjustments would likely involve adopting or imitating Western artistic concepts.

Wei and Wang encourage Chinese contemporary artists to participate in both global and local markets. Wang argues against favoring a single cultural center in globalization, stating that contemporary art receives equal recognition globally and locally. He emphasizes the need to overcome barriers created by differences in levels, themes, times, and values.

Contemporary art serves as a platform for unique cultural patterns to gain global recognition. Wei emphasizes that active participation is essential for the global acknowledgment of Chinese contemporary art.

While Chinese contemporary art diverges from Western standards, it often finds inspiration in innovative Western concepts shaping global trends. Chen Qian offers a contrasting viewpoint, suggesting not all Chinese artists need to engage in the global market. He argues that authentic artistic expression resonates universally, akin to the Chinese proverb "the eyes match." Thus, while some Chinese artists gain global recognition, Chen emphasizes that not all seek such validation.

Scholars debate whether Chinese contemporary art risks losing its 'Chineseness' under Western influences or if blending the two can create art with unique Chinese traits. Wei Hua, Wang Jian, and Chen Qian share their perspectives on this matter.

Chen Qian emphasizes bridging Chinese and Western artistic traditions, recognizing shared human experiences despite cultural disparities. He blends Western techniques with oriental elements to enrich his artistic expression.

Wei challenges the idea of 'Chineseness,' acknowledging complex influences on Chinese identity. While noting Western impact on Chinese art, he strives to maintain ties to his Chinese heritage in his work, urging fellow artists to cultivate a unique voice rooted in their culture.

Wang Jian notes the ongoing integration of Chinese and Western cultures amid societal differences. He questions the relevance of specific cultural concepts in today's interconnected world, viewing misunderstandings of Western contemporary art as internal challenges. Wang advocates purposefully integrating Western influences into the Chinese cultural landscape.

These artists provide insights into how Western influences impact Chinese contemporary art commercially.

Chen Qian prioritizes artistic passion over market acceptance but remains open to commercial opportunities aligned with his creative vision. Wang Jian navigates the art market with uncertainty, while Wei Hua offers a nuanced perspective, acknowledging challenges in integrating into the Western art system.

Their perspectives on Western influences on Chinese art's commercialization differ. While some are hopeful, others express concerns, particularly regarding commercial symbols.

Chen underscores the trend of commercialization in Chinese art, emphasizing the importance of maintaining artistic integrity while enriching human culture. Wei discusses the dual aspects of art commercialization, noting the intersection of public art creation with commercial interests and the need to preserve individual artistic expression.

Wang Jian sees commodities as cultural conveyors but believes artistic expression remains robust, likening artists' recognition to a widespread echo. Conversely, Wei suggests art criticism should target commentators rather than artists' perceived loss of creative autonomy. Chen acknowledges the struggle to maintain artistic integrity in a profit-oriented society, stressing the enduring influence of an artist's skill and character.

Chen notes compromises in artistic integrity due to Western commercialism, while Wang Jian sees it as fostering creativity and market growth. Wei Hua concurs, highlighting the positive impact of Western commercial practices on the Chinese art scene. Despite traditional art's dominance, Wei highlights the growing global presence of Chinese contemporary artists, challenging perceptions of contemporary art as niche.

In conclusion, the artists' insights on Western influences in Chinese contemporary art enrich the dissertation's inquiry.

5. Conclusions

Chapter One delves into scholars' views on Western influences in Chinese contemporary art, focusing on traditional symbols and the fusion of cultures in a globalized world. Chapter Two explores scholars' concerns about Western consumer-driven influences, contrasting with Chapter Three's interviews with artists Wang Jian, Wei Hua, and Chen Qian, who view Western impacts on the art market positively.

The artists recognize Western influence but stress the importance of maintaining Chinese identity and aesthetics. They prefer in-person interviews for deeper dialogue.

To sum up, artist Wei Hua's suggestion to young Chinese artists is a fitting end: "In a much-

globalised world today we should not only understand the phenomenon of global art and culture, but also it is necessary to investigate into regionalised native culture. It is sure for Chinese contemporary art to have greater development in accordance with the booming development of the Chinese economy. New media and new technology is the biggest opportunity and bonus for young artists.”

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