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CONTENTS

FROM THE EDITORS.....i

SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Yih-jye HWANG

Historical and Political Knowledge in the Discursive Constitution of Taiwanese National Identity...110

Kong HO

The Rise of Studio Practice Artists in Contemporary China.....132

Jin CHEN

What I Learned from a Trip to China in July 2005: On the Wealth Divide, Observed Experiences and the Ideological Discourse.....137

ECONOMICS

Shaofeng CHEN

State-Regulated Marketization: China's Oil Pricing Regime.....151

Greg LEVIN

Policy Solutions for Mountain Poverty Alleviation.....173

OYCF TEACHING REPORT

Yanmin YU

Teaching Media Communication at Dali University and Beyond.....185

The Rise of Studio Practice Artists in Contemporary China

Kong HO

ABSTRACT

In examining the careers of two young self-employed artists in southern mainland China, Kung Ho shows in his article that southern Chinese artists have enjoyed significant improvements in their financial sufficiency and exhibition opportunities in recent years prior to which works by northern artists were more desirable. While Hong Kong artists have believed that they enjoy more artistic freedom than their counterparts in mainland China, and though they are right to believe so when China first launched its Open Policy in the early 1980's, economic growth during the last two and a half decades has drastically changed the artistic landscape in China. Ho investigates the phenomenal increase in the number of mainland Chinese artists from both northern and southern China represented in Hong Kong's commercial art galleries in the early 1990s. Relying on first-hand accounts, Ho describes the rise of studio artists in contemporary China and analyzes recent changes in their social status and economic independence in the hopes to provide a better understanding of the trend and future development of contemporary Chinese art.

I. NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN ARTISTS

After China reopened its doors to the world in the late 1970s, major northern cities such as Beijing and Shanghai experienced rapid economic development. Though Southern cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen have experienced similar growth, most Western galleries and museums are still more interested in works produced by northern Chinese artists, especially those from Beijing and Shanghai, and graduates from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, than those produced by young artists from the south. Innovative art or avant-garde work, and other works in the modern Western vein, are produced by southern and recognized northern artists alike. However, based on my observations from 1996 to 2000 working with artists in Hong Kong, works by emerging young southern artists have not been entirely welcomed in the domestic market, and have not been recognized by Western critics nor represented in major Hong Kong and overseas commercial galleries. Consequently, they do not earn as much by selling their work in international markets as do their northern counterparts such as Zhang Xiaogang, Yue Minjun, and Yu Youhan. Chinese artists in the south thus have to find other income sources in the hope that their work will someday find an audience.

II. CHEN ZHIYAN AND CHEN YONGQIANG, TWO ARTISTS FROM THE SOUTHERN PROVINCE OF GUANGDONG

I had some unique opportunities to visit southern Chinese artists with my wife, Dr. Martie Geiger-Ho, who is an American ceramist. Together, we witnessed swift changes in the social status of artists in China during our stay in Hong Kong from 1996 to 2000. While promoting Raku ceramics in Hong Kong with organizations such as Pottery Workshop, I-Kiln Studio, Hong Kong Mural Society and the Macau International Visual Arts Center in Macau, we met Chen

Yongqiang, a well-recognized painter specialized in Chinese ink flowers-and-birds paintings. Chen graduated with a Masters degree in Chinese Painting from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1981, and worked as the academic dean of the Guangzhou Academy of Painting and as the Vice Council Director of the Guangzhou Cultural Council. He is now a curator at the Lingnan School Painting Memorial Museum, and the Vice Chairman of the Guangdong Province Artists Association and the Guangzhou City Artists Association.¹ He also serves in the Chinese Artists Association. During this trip, I also met Chen's son, Chen Zhiyan, a young ceramist who owns a ceramic studio called *Yan Yao* (kiln) and a large-sized gas kiln in Pan Yu, Guangzhou.²

Chen Zhiyan first met my wife when she broadcasted her show, "Kiln Guardians and The Potter's Fire: Part I," on the Provincial Government Television Network at Chen Yong Qiang Art Studio in Pan Yu. The program was sponsored by The Pottery Workshop in conjunction with a ceramic exhibition, "Unity in Diversity (Part III)," at the Guangdong Museum of Art in the summer of 1998. Chen Zhiyan went to Hong Kong the summer after to visit the I-Kiln Studio and my wife for the purpose of finding out recipes for making Raku glazes. He was interested in the colors that were produced by the special Raku firing, and was considering building a Raku kiln in his studio.

A year later, when my wife and I revisited Chen Yongqiang and his son in Pan Yu, Chen introduced us to his unique approach to Chinese ink painting. He paints vertically on a metal wall, using magnets to stretch and hold the rice paper, instead of the traditional way of laying the paper on a table-top. His style is in the tradition of the Lingnan School, which is based on the synthesis of Chinese-style painting with elements of Western and Japanese realist painting. The founder of the Lingnan School of Painting, Gao Jianfu (1879-1951), promoted the concept that it is more important to study directly from nature than to imitate old masterpieces. The Lingnan style allows a more expressive, lyrical, and realistic approach to Chinese ink painting and thus is made more accessible to the general public.³

According to Li Xianting's article, "Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture," published in *Mahjong-Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*,⁴ Chen Yongqiang's art may represent one of three major branches in contemporary Chinese art. These three trends include the traditional Chinese ink painting, socialist realism, and the modern western tradition (or the avant-garde, introduced to China in the early 1980s). With an expanding global market for Chinese art, there has been a fervor for traditional Chinese ink paintings. At the time of our visit, Chen, like other recognized Chinese artists, enjoyed special privileges and could easily obtain travel permits for art and cultural exchange purposes. My wife and I visited one of Chen's exhibitions at the City Hall in Hong Kong in 1998, and learned that he has been recognized as a national first class artist and enjoys the benefits given by the State Council of the People's Republic of China to accomplished artists. The success of his artistic career has not only raised his social status to that of the upper-middle class, but it has also helped his son's ceramic studio and career to flourish.

Like his father, Chen Zhiyan has a ceramic studio with numerous kinds of industrial-scale ceramic equipment -- kilns, potter's wheels, glazing equipments, and other specialized tools. Chen Zhiyan studied pottery with Zuo Zhengyao, a nationally recognized ceramist and graduate

¹ Information about Chen Yong Qiang is collected from the website of Guangzhou Culture and Fine Arts, www.gzwbya.com.cn

² Information about Chen Zhi Yan is collected from the booklet of "Yan Yao" published by Chen Yong Qiang Art Studio in 1997.

³ Information is collected from the website of Lingnan School of Painting, www.lingnanart.com

⁴ Li Xianting, "Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture." In *Mahjong-Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, ed. Bernard Fibicher, Ai Weiwei, Feng Boyi. Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005, p. 25

school peer of Chen Zhiyan's father. Currently, Zuo works as an exhibition curator and academic researcher at the Guangdong Museum of Art, and is the principal of the Guangzhou Contemporary Ceramics School. According to Chen Yongqiang Art Studio brochures, with his father's financial help and Zuo's mentoring, Chen Zhiyan began his studio practice in 1997, and soon started his own pottery business. His work was first exhibited in the Guangdong Museum of Art in 1998. On my visit to his studio a year later, his studio was well-equipped, complete with an attractive showcase gallery. He also had assistants who helped him in all aspects of pottery production from mixing clay and firing the kilns to marketing his art. Chen Zhiyan pursues his art as an independent studio artist, and also invites famous ceramists to make and fire their work, many of which were one-of-a-kind pieces that were experimental in nature.

III. ECONOMIC GROWTH AND THE DEMAND FOR ART

Pottery, unlike other traditional art such as ink painting, sculpture, and oil painting, is considered a specialized craft in contemporary China. New designs, attractive colors, and good marketing strategies help to guarantee its success in domestic and international markets. The criteria for judging the value of contemporary pottery differ from that of Chinese antiques; the criteria for judging antiques are based on the age and rarity of the work, while the value of contemporary pottery is derived from its innovativeness, fashionability, and the promotional strategies.

Many contemporary Chinese potters from both the north and the south, such as the northern porcelain capital, Jingdezhen, and the southern pottery center, Shiwan, located in the suburbs of Foshan in Guangdong province, have aspired to create post-modern ceramic work. These artists' works reveal attempts to experiment with glazes, structural forms, and firing techniques. Ceramists who are affiliated with major pottery production institutes such as Shiwan Ceramic Factory or Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute, enjoy the benefits of using the studio and kiln facilities, and the promotional services offered.

I have observed that the general upper-middle class Chinese is calling for this type of contemporary pottery because it represents the transition and success of the middle class in terms of both their living standards and their artistic tastes. The economic growth in China not only raised the income of the urban middle class, but also sped the demand for modern property. More middle class Chinese are moving into fashionable apartments and houses, and when they do so they fuel the need for modern art.

Contemporary Chinese ink paintings share similar success stories with pottery. The contemporary ink paintings created by Chen Yongqiang and others in the style of the Lingnan School are welcomed by many new middle and upper-middle class citizens. They hope to find in art something that can express both their Chinese heritage and their financial success. Compared to the traditional black and white landscape paintings, multi-colored Lingnan-style ink paintings choose topics that are more relevant to the everyday life, using themes such as flower and fruits, fish and birds, plants and animals. The realistic and colorful style, and the use of common good-fortune symbols in the Lingnan school make art more accessible to the ordinary individual. Thus, Chen Yongqiang's flower and fruit paintings and his use of lucky themes have become very marketable in recent years.

IV. MAINLAND AND HONGKONG ARTISTS

Contemporary potters, sculptors, painters and avant-gardes in mainland China enjoy more financial sufficiency than their Hong Kong counterparts. This is partially due to the low living, labor and utility costs, and the various subsidies from the local government, and partially because the East Asian economic bubble burst in 1997 created major economic setbacks in Thailand,

South Korea, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines, while mainland China was relatively unaffected. Today, mainland artists also enjoy more exhibition opportunities in terms of exhibition venues, gallery promotions, and accessibility to the international market than Hong Kong artists; works by mainland artists are considered to be more "Chinese." These works, whether they are traditional Chinese, socialist realist, or western avant-garde, are have been more desirable, and have been recognized both within and outside China.

V. ART AND POLITICS

Chinese artists have gone from a strictly political propaganda agenda in the Post-1949 period, to individualistic and political critique works in the years after 1989. According to Li, the development of Chinese art has gone through four stages in recent decades: the Post-Cultural Revolution (1979-1984), the New Wave or Art Movement of 1985, the Post-1989 movement (1989-1994), and contemporary Chinese art in globalization (1995 to present).⁵

One significant movement during the Post-1989 era is the Political Pop movement, which was visibly influenced by American Pop Art. A sense of the absurdity of Chinese Communist politics became popular among mainland Chinese artists at the time of the student political unrest in 1989. In the past, Hong Kong artists have believed that they enjoyed more artistic and political freedom and economic advantages than their mainland counterparts. However, the increasing number of mainland artists represented in Hong Kong's upscale art galleries such as Alisan Fine Arts, Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hanart TZ Gallery, and Schoeni Art Gallery since the early 1990s has triggered much discussion. The craze for contemporary Chinese art in Hong Kong was clearly evident by the time of the Handover in 1997. The commercial art galleries in Hong Kong also have no obligation to carry any Hong Kong artworks if they are not more marketable than those by mainland Chinese artists. Based on my personal observations while working at several major commercial art galleries in Hong Kong at the time, Political Pop pieces by mainland artists have become more popular and marketable than works by Hong Kong artists.

VI. ECONOMIC GROWTH AND ARTISTS' CHANGING SOCIAL STATUS, TRENDS AND PROSPECTS FOR CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

The economic growth in mainland China has given the current generation of Chinese artists more artistic freedom and opportunities. Many are searching for new definitions of Chinese art for the twenty-first century. Some choose to use Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution as their subject matter in representational paintings. Others prefer to rebel against traditional cultural values and icons, and to challenge the political regime as well as consumerism. The contemporary Chinese art after the Post-1989 period is infused with different artistic expressions, including large-scale installations, body art, video art, performance art, and digital art, and has also experienced a comeback of the traditional disciplines such as printmaking, sculpture, ceramics, and ink painting. Much contemporary Chinese art developed in response to Western art and to the pressure of globalization; an increasing number of artists are concerned with individual expression and the rejection of societal norms and values. Other works pit city against countryside, modernization against tradition, and Western against Chinese values.

China's rapid economic growth during the past twenty-five years have reshaped the status of artists in China, and have also bridged artistic and conceptual differences among Chinese and international art communities. Many Chinese artists are now not only concerned with national

⁵ Li Xianting, "Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture", in *Mahjong—Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, eds. Bernard Fibicher, Ai Weiwei, and Feng Boyi. Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005, p. 26.

social and political topics, but also with issues that resonate with the international art community.

On the other hand, recent developments have led to the use of materialistic temptations by commercial art galleries and museums. Some artists will thus take any opportunities offered by galleries and museums to become wealthy or famous. However, I believe that materialism should not be the incentive for producing art. It is my hope that contemporary Chinese artists from mainland China and Hong Kong can join with overseas Chinese to work together and share the responsibility of promoting a better understanding of contemporary Chinese art.

It is true that China has already become the world's factory for consumer products. Commodities produced in China are sold in Walmart, the world's largest retailer. China also produces artworks, which are sold in upscale galleries in major cities around the world such as New York, London, Berlin, Geneva, Paris, Tokyo, and Hong Kong. There is much discussion about the future of contemporary Chinese art. Some critics suggest that it is just an appropriation of modern Western art, whether it is about transgression or deconstruction. Some imply that contemporary Chinese art represents a declining culture, which seems to be gradually losing its identity and value. However, while it is difficult to know what Chinese art will become in the future, I believe that contemporary Chinese art has a critical role in reshaping Chinese contemporary culture. As China is becoming increasingly influential on global culture in the twenty-first century, Chinese art should develop its own originality based on China's history and culture, philosophical beliefs and values. I believe that it should be the commitment of every contemporary Chinese artist to take part in this art movement and to create original art that does not imitate Western avant-garde and that can best represent China in the international art world.

The success of the Chinese economy after the Open Policy has provided contemporary Chinese artists not only the financial sources to produce, but also new artistic channels – the concepts and expressions – with which to express themselves. However, while each of us have the right to express our feelings and thoughts, we also share the responsibility to build a better tomorrow for everyone. Being educated does not mean we are better than others or that we have power over others; all educated individuals should actively contribute to society and culture. I believe that real artists make art not because their art brings profits but because their art helps others understand their value as individuals. Art also helps us understand who we are in the world at large. I believe that if contemporary Chinese artists can focus on searching for a new kind of art that relates to China's unique history, including the past and present cultural values and beliefs, then they might be able to establish a new glorious era of Chinese art and gain recognition for all Chinese artists in the art community. If the value of art is about enlightenment, then the value of contemporary Chinese art is not only about its value among Chinese but also among the international society.

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