

To what extent does China seek to use contemporary art to project soft power?

While China is expanding its external influence in foreign affairs building up its international image, an internal influence that is constantly emphasised in cultural strength is becoming more and more centralised. It would take an ever expanding discourse to truly understand Chinese contemporary art within its constantly shifting international context. But it is nevertheless an interesting exercise to consider the following question: To what extent does China seek to use contemporary art to project soft power?

Certainly the traditional artistic sector of the country's culture has been highly regarded as an important part of the nationalism of China. Traditional Chinese art is deeply rooted in historical culture, which will always be strongly sought after by Chinese collectors. It shows how even modern tastes align with a strong sense of cultural identity. This could be what President Xi wants to encourage in his 'new cultural revolution', and perhaps also in the 'China Dream'.

According to Willy Lam, 'Modern Chinese authoritarian figures from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping have seen culture as a means to impose the proverbial one-voice chamber particularly on the nation's intelligentsia and civil society'.¹ Culture can be used to increase nationalistic sentiments, emphasizing a 'great rejuvenation', of China as, 'an ancient civilisation with over 5,000 years of history'.² However, there is a tension in this use of culture. By its very nature, contemporary art tends to involve challenging the status quo, with this ideology of contemporary art apparent in the work of groups such as 'the Stars' and individuals such as Ai Weiwei. Their creativity has instead become a challenge to the Chinese authorities, and even to traditional cultural identity. There is perhaps an irreconcilable tension between the freedom of artists and the national image of China. Indeed, it was recently announced that governmental legislation on NGOs is being considered. This could limit curatorial independence, and artists' freedom of expression. Therefore, contemporary art in the context of a nationalistic society of China must be viewed as a Chinese characteristic of soft power.

Accompanying Xi's consolidation of political power, his influence over cultural, spiritual and personal lives in China has led to a sense that contemporary art could become a mechanism for the exercise of his authority. Together with traditional art, official support for contemporary art education and the avant-garde industry might be increasingly influential in the development of Chinese art and culture. There are numerous problems facing the country at present,

¹Willy Lam, *Xi Jinping uses 'traditional culture' to launch a new Cultural Revolution*, Hong Kong (AsiaNews) - 02/11/2016.

²Gideon Rachman, *War and peace in Asia*, Financial Times - 5/8/2016.

including the difficulty of overcoming challenges arising from industrial overcapacity, slowing GDP growth, rising debt, enduring social problems, separatism in some regions, and rising geopolitical tensions in areas such as the South China Sea. In this context, sophisticated use of 'soft power' could offer the promise of a useful distraction from China's domestic problems and perhaps even a sense of new optimism. However, the use of such a soft power could also be seen as a double edged sword by the authorities, given the subversive nature of contemporary art. Therefore, although China may seek to use contemporary art to project soft power, the works produced in this context are very likely to be sanitized. It remains to be seen whether an avant-garde heavily constrained by political correctness is capable of capturing the attention of sophisticated art buyers.



The Capital Museum Beijing

Let us take a look at some of the discussions that are simmering beneath the surface of Xi Jinping's launch of a 'new cultural revolution'. On 2nd August 2016, the John L. Thornton China Centre at Brookings hosted a discussion on how global and local forces influence Chinese contemporary art in China, and how art reflects the views and ideas of Chinese society. Artist Fan Di'an suggested that the quantity of artworks is not enough to balance a cultural deficit, and that there is a lack of innovation in Chinese cultural identity. His comments reflect some pervading anxieties about the future of the Chinese avant-garde. First, an unsustainable number of museums have been built in the last few years. Remarkably, an average of two new museums were constructed in China every day from 2008 to 2013; while the available funds, number of professional staff, and quantity of exhibits could not keep pace. The survival of these museums is now in question. Second, anxieties stem from how new art districts are being

established in abandoned factories. Although economic imbalances may be reduced by converting manufacturing overcapacity into new economic functions such as art districts, the Chinese system of art galleries (both primary and secondary, commercial and non-for-profit) is far less developed than in the West. Third, the art market in China is not characterised by a strong demand for contemporary works, with local auction house contemporary sales representing only 6% of the total. In the West, the percentage is nearly 45%.

The huge gap between the sale proportion of contemporary art could probably come from people's demands for cultural identity. The artworks could act dynamically with a mutual identity of the culture, that is to say, in modern Chinese society, art as a whole is still very much viewed within the catalogue of traditional fine art. In the traditional art sector, people could easily find their cultural identity, which is shared explicitly in the artwork itself. In this context, a very interesting vocabulary is created: Regional Culture. This notion stands for the importance of the local artists who bare similar original cultural identities. These artists are gathering in their hometowns in the local art community, launching local art fairs and establishing their local reputations. They are not necessarily known outside the region, but their market has been more mature in this local context. Benefiting from this local cultural identity, the local governments could easily support civilizational progress with the support from such artists.

Chinese contemporary art has thus become less international but more national with their regional cultural characteristics. In the international art market, however, the localized art genre seems to be less and less centralised within their original context. Instead of using the term 'Chinese art', vocabulary such as 'Sino-Pacific art', 'East Asian Art' or 'Eastern Art' has come to light in the auction house, cataloguing and the museum sectors. The percentage of specific Chinese art sections in art fairs, such as Hong Kong Basel and auction houses, such as Sotheby's has altered. In the art gallery market today, there is a mind-set that if a gallery only deals with local artists then it does not promise much in this internationalised art world. There seems to be a huge contrast between the emphasis on regional artists in the mainland and the hybrid of international artists in the westernised art world.

Considering this contrast and the anxieties in the development of Chinese contemporary art there is a clear lack of investor confidence. The mainland Chinese contemporary art market is still at an investment level, however the more mature system in the West has become the dominating force of the arts. Despite the truth that the Chinese contemporary art market lags behind the West, the current domestic economy has affected the confidence of the investors to a large extent. The anti-corruption act by Xi has prevented the Chinese art market developing into a gift-giving centred culture in the short term.

One could argue that the gift-giving could have provided a much needed boost to contemporary art and design and a healthier consumption of the arts in general.

Essentially, the major art fairs such as Art Beijing, CZGE, and the Art Nova 100 Artists prize are operating at the forefront of Chinese contemporary art development, with a lot of emerging galleries appearing in the 798 Art District in Beijing. On the one hand, the growth in art fairs has indicated the rising attention Chinese contemporary artists are receiving, in which the artists' exploration and experiment can be seen promisingly. On the other hand, even it is called the, 'dreadful winter of capital', which has currently depressed the art market. Due to the overheated contemporary art market, which is naturally cooling down, this is a good time for galleries to discover promising young artists. This so-called 'winter' of the Chinese art scene could be beneficial as the qualified galleries can connect with new artists, which would, 'fundamentally decide the shape of the Chinese contemporary market in the future five to ten years', quoted Yang Tian who is the marketing manager in Dadadaka online auction platform in Beijing.



2016 Art Nova 100 Artists (Summer Exhibition)

Art Nova 100 was first launched in 2011 and is a promotional platform for the most promising young artists. Each year 100 artists are nominated from across China as well as a small selection of international artists. All the artists are born in or after 1975 and work in a wide variety of media. The exhibition tour takes place in China and abroad.

Back to the title question; to what extent does China seek to use contemporary art to project soft power? It can be answered from two perspectives. From the governmental perspective, contemporary art will be used as the soft power with proper control of the artistic expression excluding the reactionary content. From the cultural perspective, Chinese contemporary art could develop spontaneously into a cultural soft power sharing mutual importance with traditional Chinese art.



Peng Fangshan, *'Social Ladder'*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2015



Weng lo Wong, *Red*, Laquer and wood, 2015