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Spreading Seeds: Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds and His Performative Personality Received in the West

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SPREADING SEEDS:

AI WEIWEI'S *SUNFLOWER SEEDS*
AND HIS PERFORMATIVE PERSONALITY
RECEIVED IN THE WEST

By
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Introduction

On October 12, 2010, after five months' preparation, Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London, opened its door for the latest installation of the new Unilever Series, a project inviting artists to create large installation works specifically for Turbine Hall.¹ From Louise Bourgeois to Miroslaw Balka, Turbine Hall had welcomed many world-famous international artists to display their groundbreaking work. This time, visitors were surprised by an artwork beyond their imagination: 100 million porcelain life-size sunflower seeds covered the immense 10,764 square-foot floor, and visitors were invited to touch, to step on, and to play with these porcelain seeds.²[Fig.1]

This work called *Sunflower Seeds* was created by the contemporary Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei. His unique personal history and his revolt against the Chinese government make him stand out in the international art system. Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 to Ai Qing,³ a leading modern poet at the time. During the Cultural Revolution in China from 1966 to 1976, the Central Government considered Ai Qing to be one of the Rightists who opposed Dictatorship of the proletariat and socialist system. Ai Qing was then sent to be reformed in Northeast China and then in Xinjiang province for sixteen years with his wife and his son, Ai Weiwei. Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing in 1976 after the Cultural Revolution and attended Beijing Film Academy in 1978. In 1980, he participated in the second Stars exhibition with six watercolor paintings. The exhibition was organized by the Star, the most influential and controversial avant-garde art group in

¹ "The Unilever Series." *Tate*. Accessed November 26, 2016, .

² 10 days after its opening, visitors were no longer allowed to stand on and play around these sunflower seeds because the porcelain dust might be a health hazard. See, " *Tate*. Accessed July 6, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>. However, I will be focusing on the interaction mode Ai intended for his work.

³ Ai Qing's real name is Jiang Zhenghan, and Ai Qing is his pen name. Ai Weiwei used to have Jiang as his family name, but he decided to change his last name to the pen name of his father.

China. The group supported “artistic intervention into society” and self-expression, and many participants displayed evident political content in their works.⁴ In 1981, Ai moved to the United States and attended Parsons School of Design. After his scholarship was terminated because he failed a class, he became an undocumented immigrant. In the United States, Ai was strongly influenced by Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, and he produced art actively through photographs and ready-made objects, including *At the Museum of Modern Art* [1987][Fig.2].

Although the most powerful influences on Ai came from the United States, most of his major works were produced when he was in China. In 1993, Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing to look after his sick father, and he has remained active in Beijing since then. His works usually transforms traditional craft objects into contemporary art pieces, where he explores the relationship among craft, tradition and politics in China. One of his first internationally famous works was *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* [1995][Fig.3], three photographs of Ai dropping a Han Dynasty vase and breaking it on the ground. In addition to the photographic piece, Ai also interacted with traditional Chinese urns in his other works in which he over-painted these urns with Coca Cola label or acrylic paints. In 2007, he was invited to Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany with *Fairytales* [2007],⁵ in which he brought 1,001 Chinese volunteers to Kassel in five groups, each group consisted of roughly 200 people and stayed in Kassel for eight days. This work boosted his international fame as a contemporary Chinese artist who could be compared to Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys. In 2010, the Unilever Series invited him to Turbine Hall.

⁴ Gao Minglu, *Total modernity and the avant-garde in twentieth-century Chinese art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 92.

⁵ Although *Fairytales* is a temporary installation art work made for Documenta 12, it was recorded and the documentary is available online.

Looking through his biography, it is reasonable to say that Ai was at the pinnacle of his career when he was invited to Tate Modern, and *Sunflower Seeds* therefore can be considered one of his most mature works. In fact, *Sunflower Seeds* is one of his most popular installation pieces. In various scales and displays, it toured around China, Germany, the United States, Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden, Netherlands and Spain from 2009 to 2013. Although the version shown in Turbine Hall is not the first, it was the largest and most frequently discussed among its siblings, and therefore it will be the focal work of this thesis.

The thesis will be organized into three chapters. The first chapter will look at *Sunflower Seeds* through five different perspectives: the material porcelain, its production and aesthetic effect, the global issues addressed in the work, its relation to food culture and its reference to Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution. Despite many available interpretations on *Sunflower Seeds*, the discussion lacks a comprehensive survey, which synthesizes these interpretations. By incorporating these five lenses, the first chapter will ground *Sunflower Seeds* in the contexts and environments of its production and reception and present a more comprehensive picture of this work than any single academic paper.

The second chapter will analyze how *Sunflower Seeds* conforms to the Western aesthetics and ideologies by comparing the underlying meanings of *Sunflower Seeds* with the prevailing ideas and practices in the contemporary art world. The chapter will continue to illustrate how Ai has endorsed the Western ideas throughout his career. By aligning himself closely with the Western ideals over democracy and directly against the totalitarian stereotype of China, and by creating art works which can be openly interpreted as “contemporary” but still retains Chinese elements, Ai created the appealing

Sunflower Seeds which fulfilled the Western expectation for a contemporary Chinese art work, boosting his career and establishing his status in the international art world.

The third chapter will extend the argument on the expectation put on non-Western artists. By comparing Ai's career and fame with two other Chinese artists, Cai Guo-Qiang and Zhou Chunya, the paper concludes that there is a certain way Chinese artists must act in order to be accepted to the mainstream international art world.

Chapter I

The Meanings behind *Sunflower Seeds*

As a Chinese activist artist, Ai creates art in the international arena and carries multiple and controversial identities. His works are equally complex. The vast number of seeds in *Sunflower Seeds* implies the numerous and diverse meanings and contexts layered in the work. This paper will look at *Sunflower Seeds* through five different perspectives: the material porcelain, its production and aesthetic effect, the global issues addressed in the work, its relation to food culture and its reference to Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution. The material of this work reminds people of the long tradition of porcelain production in China and the porcelain trade between Britain and China in the nineteenth century. As an artwork, it challenges the responsibility of the artist during the production of art and relates to many art trends such as Conceptual art. It also addresses broad social concerns such as globalization and income disparity. In relation to China, *Sunflower Seeds* tells a story about Chinese food culture. This piece also connects back to the Cultural Revolution as sunflower is a metaphor for the Chinese public and the Sun a metaphor for Mao Zedong in the Cultural Revolution. By incorporating these five lenses, this paper will ground *Sunflower Seeds* in the contexts and environments of its production and reception.

Ai's voice and interpretation are crucial in understating this work, and there are two primary sources in which Ai explains his work in his own language. The first source is the documentary film *the Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds* conducted by Kate Vogel, the executive producer at Tate Media at Tate⁶. The documentary records the

⁶ Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, film, dir. Kate Vogel, (2010; London: Tate Modern.), Online Video. Accessed November 6, 2016,

entire production process and display methods of this piece without outside narrations. Ai is the main narrator and character in the documentary and he can communicate freely without the interference of an interpreter. The documentary also records Ai's conversations and interactions with local workers in the project, which demonstrates the workers' attitudes towards *Sunflower Seeds* and Ai's knowledge of the porcelain production. The other source is a conversation among Ai, Juliet Bingham the curator of the exhibition and Marko Daniel the Convener of Public Programs at Tate Modern.⁷ This conversation helps me formulate the themes of this chapter based on Ai's own interpretation of his work. For instance, Ai talks about the political aspects of this work, including China's manufacturing power and the Cultural Revolution. He also mentions Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp as major influences of this work. Both the political implications and aesthetic influences will be discussed in the following sections.

Since *Sunflower Seeds* was exhibited in 2010, British visitors' reactions to this work are no longer available as primary sources, and I have to rely on secondary sources, which mention the public's attitude. Simone Hancox's *Art, Activism and the Geopolitical Imagination: Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds* published on *Journal of Media Practice* quotes and cites some viewers' comments.⁸ However, as this article is mainly concerned with Ai's political requests and assertions on China and the globalized economy, the selected quotes are highly limited in content. Hancox also discusses the hierarchy between producer versus consumer, and the Euro-American "us" versus the Chinese "other"

<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>.

⁷ Ai Weiwei, Juliet Bingham, and Marko Daniel. 2010. "A conversation : Ai Weiwei, Juliet Bingham and Marko Daniel," in *Ai Weiwei : Sunflower Seeds*. ed. (London: Tate, 2010) , 74-100.

⁸ Simone , " *Journal of Media Practice* 12, no 3 (2011) 279-290.

embodied in the work and in the general contemporary art world, which I will discuss in the third section.

China and china

Sunflower Seeds is made of fine porcelain in Jingdezhen, China, which is known as “the capital of porcelain (*Ci Du*/瓷都)” in China. Porcelain, especially made in Jingdezhen, is a significant cultural symbol to Chinese people. Historically, porcelain not only was sought by the imperial families, but was also popular with the general public.⁹ Consumers today still appreciate the material and the designs such that porcelain objects remain an important part of Chinese people’s daily life. In addition, in the nineteenth century, Jingdezhen porcelains were exported to Europe and the United States, which influenced the design of local porcelains and introduced the material to Western society. Therefore, both the properties of Jingdezhen porcelain and its trade history are important in understanding *Sunflower Seeds*.

The history of porcelain-making in Jingdezhen dates back at least to the Han Dynasty (202BC ~ 220AD), and Jingdezhen began supplying goods for the imperial court during the Song Dynasty (960 ~ 1279). Under the Qing Dynasty (1644 ~ 1912), Jingdezhen became famous for its expertise in making *trompe-l’œil* porcelain to substitute for more precious and rare materials, including gold, jade and bamboo.¹⁰ The history of imitation enables Jingdezhen artisans to present the textures of various surfaces, including that of sunflower seeds. Although there is no evidence that Jingdezhen artisans had produced sunflower seeds before Ai’s commission, the hard and smooth surface of a

⁹ Zhu Yan, *Tao Shuo Yi Zhu*[Translation and Interpretation of *Tao Shuo*], trans. Fu Zhenlun (Beijing: China Light Industry Press, 1984), 1. The original book, *Tao Shuo*, is written in classical Chinese, and Fu translated it into simplified Chinese. This book has also been translated into English by Stephen W. Bushell.

¹⁰ Zhu, *Tao Shuo Yi Zhu*, 11.

sunflower seed is similar to that of porcelain. Local workers can apply the imitation technique for bamboo to achieve the same organic plant surface on sunflower seeds. In addition, as a sunflower seed has a simple black and white pattern, it is easy to paint, and workers in Jingdezhen are familiar with the process of painting on porcelains. Since Ai is not an expert in porcelain making, it is not surprising that he chose Jingdezhen workshops to make his sunflower seeds.

Not only does Jingdezhen have expert artisans, but the materials are also of the highest quality. The clay excavated in Jingdezhen, *Bai Pi*/白丕 (white earth), is known for its whiteness, smoothness and jade-like quality, which explains why it is known as “Jade from Zhao Zhou (*Zhao Zhou Yu*).” The variations of patterns and delicacy of pictures painted on a porcelain object at Jingdezhen also offer great aesthetic pleasure, sometimes exceeding the delicacy of real painting.¹¹ In addition, porcelain can produce a melodious sound, making it not only pleasing to the eyes but also pleasing to the ears. The valuable material, fine polish and glaze, and the clear musical note all correspond to the Chinese definition of highest beauty.¹² As a result, porcelain goods were highly sought after among the imperial families and literati, who created poems praising the unique characteristics of porcelain. One of the most famous poets in the Tang Dynasty, Du Fu, writes that, “the porcelain made in a major city is both light and hard, the jade-like sound spreads to the whole city.”

¹¹ Emperor Qian Long in the Qing Dynasty wrote many poems on his porcelain collection, one of them named *To the Red Vase made in Xuan Kiln*(咏宣窑霁红瓶) reads: “(the beauty of the porcelain) will shame flowers in it, and no paintings can ever be compared to its beauty.” (插花应使花羞涩, 比画翻痴更是空)

¹² Victoria and Albert Museum. Ceramics Department. and W.B. Honey, *Guide to the later Chinese porcelain, periods of K'ang Hsi, Yung Chêng and Ch'ien Lung*, (London: Pub. under the authority of the Board of Education, 1927), 11.

In 1912, the last dynasty in China history, Qing Dynasty, was overthrown by the Revolution of 1911 led by Sun Yat-sen, and the Republic of China was established. After the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945) and Chinese Communist Revolution (1946-1950), People's Republic of China was established in 1949. During the Cultural Revolution, many porcelain objects from the previous dynasty were destroyed through the campaign to destruct the Four Olds, namely old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas, where student activists known as the Red Guards destroyed "schools, temples and churches, signs, books and art objects"¹³ However, porcelain making was preserved and allowed for daily uses since the delicate craft represents the diligence in the workers, and Jingdezhen continued to serve Mao Zedong, the new Chairman of the Communist Party of China. A collection of finest porcelains was made for Mao's daily use from the Red Official Ware in Jingdezhen, which is now known as "Mao Porcelain (*Mao Ci*/毛瓷) [Fig.4]." While it is still uncertain whether Mao commissioned or actually used the collection, Mao had openly appreciated the delicacy of porcelains and the effort porcelain workers put in making the collection.¹⁴

Porcelains created in the Mao era now have tremendous economic value and are extremely marketable and popular in porcelain auctions, because they symbolize the rule of Mao. In other words, the global art market today is aware of Mao's association with porcelain. It is also fair to say that Ai knows the connection between Jingdezhen and Mao. In the documentary film produced by Tate Modern for the exhibition, Ai asked one of the oldest workers whether she produced Mao Porcelain. Ai is known for his opposition to and activism against Chinese totalitarianism under Mao. By using the same workshop

¹³ Eric Reinders, "Monkey Kings Make Havoc: Iconoclasm and Murder in the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *Religion* 34, no 3 (2004): 194.

¹⁴ , " *National Humanity History* 15 (2013): 110.

and even the same people as those who produced Mao Porcelain, Ai refers to Mao's term materially in this piece. The connection becomes more obvious since sunflower seeds are a powerful metaphor in Mao's era, which I will be discussing in later sections.

At the same time, Jingdezhen porcelain is related to another historical development: foreign trade between Britain and China starting in the eighteenth century. Although exported porcelain objects were usually made in Guangdong the port city rather than in Jingdezhen, they influenced British people's perception on porcelain objects and would also affect their reaction to *Sunflower Seeds*. The ships of the East India Company originally sailed for porcelain orders, and they soon discovered a more profitable good, Chinese tea, which became extremely popular in Britain.¹⁵ The fad not only helped establish the trading route permanently, but also fueled the demand for high quality porcelain tea sets. The low price of these imported porcelains made them affordable for the British public, and the consumption of imported Chinese porcelains soon became common in Britain.¹⁶ In the trading center of Guangdong, this foreign demand produced many factories which specialized in putting final decorations for export goods, in other words for British consumption and pleasure.¹⁷ While their techniques were perfect, the workers were dismissed and looked down upon by British merchants because of their lack of creativity in the design process. As Chinese workers were not familiar with the patterns European consumers demanded, they could only copy the designs given by British companies and could not offer any suggestions. They copied the patterns so well

¹⁵ John Goldsmith Phillips and Helena Woolworth McCann, *China-trade porcelain; an account of its historical background, manufacture, and decoration, and a study of the Helena Woolworth McCann collection.*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

that the instructions sometimes also get copied on the porcelain object.¹⁸ The stereotype of Chinese laborers as blind copyists continues throughout the centuries; in the interview with Juliet Bingham and Marko Daniel, Ai criticizes Chinese workers for uncritically following instructions and the demand of the market.¹⁹

In transferring Jingdezhen porcelains to Tate Modern in Britain, Ai and his team assume the role of the East India Company in a new cultural trading route. In the nineteenth century, the East India Company hired Chinese people to evaluate the quality of their commissioned porcelains because British merchants didn't have the same knowledge.²⁰ *Sunflower Seeds* is commissioned by Tate Modern and produced by Chinese workers. Similar to those hired by the East India Company, Ai assumes the role of the quality-controller who decides what art is and isn't good for British customers. In addition, *Sunflower Seeds*, like porcelain, became a significant economic capital in the art world in general. On May 9, 2012, a one-ton portion of *Sunflower Seeds* was sold at Sotheby's New York for \$782,500.²¹ *Sunflower Seeds* can thus be seen as a metaphor of the porcelain trade in the nineteenth century.

Artistic Inspirations outside China

In addition to porcelain's rich cultural history, international art trends also inspired Ai in creating *Sunflower Seeds*. When he was studying in the United States, Ai was strongly influenced by Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp and Conceptual art. As *Sunflower Seeds* was exhibited outside of China, British visitors would understand the creation

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 80.

²⁰ Phillips and McCann, *China-trade porcelain*, 35.

²¹ "Auctions and Sales," *Ceramic Monthly*.(November 2, 2012): 39, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost. Accessed November 27, 2016.

process and aesthetic impression of the piece mainly through its connection with established artists and genres.

To begin with, the creation process of *Sunflower Seeds* points to the role contemporary artists play in the physical production of their art works. Although more and more contemporary artists assign parts of their large installation projects to workshops or assistants, the extent to which Ai Weiwei was physically involved in the creation process was even more limited. When Ai studied in the United States from 1981 to 1993, he was impressed with and influenced by Andy Warhol,²² who also used a big workshop in the printing process of his art works. While Warhol's exact role and actual involvement in his factory is uncertain,²³ Ai's role in *Sunflower Seeds* is clear: he decided the number of sunflower seeds and left the workers to figure out the creation process. As an outsider and novice to the traditional porcelain techniques, Ai didn't have a lot of control over the creation process. Nowhere in the documentary on *Sunflower Seeds* by Tate Modern did Ai direct the workers on how he would like the seeds to be molded or painted. It is unlikely that the directing scenes were intentionally excluded from the documentary, because they would demonstrate Ai's agency and ideas more clearly to the audience. On the contrary, there are many scenes where Ai consulted the workers how they would make the mold and paint the seeds.²⁴ In the interview with Tate curator Juliet Bingham, Ai admits that he tried to make some sunflower seeds, but his attempts were discarded because they didn't meet the requirement.²⁵ It seems like the only thing Ai supplied was his intention to create his piece.

²² Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 97.

²³ Henry, "Art Monthly 364 (2013): 37. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost. Accessed November 27, 2016.

²⁴ Ai, *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, film, 4:27.

²⁵ Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 96. The exact definition of the requirement is not mentioned in the

The idea that artists only supply concept and intention for their art works is similar to that of Conceptual Art. Conceptual art emerged in the late 1960s and had a dramatic influence on the next generation of artists. The major claim of Conceptual artists was that ideas and concepts were more important than the materiality of an artwork.²⁶ In *Who is Afraid of Conceptual Art*, philosophers Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens reduce the materiality even more by arguing that “in conceptual art, there is no physical medium: the medium is the idea.”²⁷ Similarly, in *When Form has Become Attitudes—And Beyond*, Thierry de Duve points out that the new generation of conceptual artists dematerialized their art works to present their concepts without clinging to any medium.²⁸

Although physicality is present in many Conceptual artworks, it is used to illustrate an idea rather than to create a visual spectacle. For instance, in *One and Three Chairs* [1965][Fig.5], Joseph Kosuth juxtaposes a real chair, the text citing the dictionary definition for “chair” and a photo of the chair blown up to life size. The real chair is the object, the text explains the chair and the photo illustrates it. To highlight the relationship among language, image and object, these three elements must coexist. The materiality thus serves the concept embodied in the work, and this work “had its basic tenet in an understanding that artists work with meaning, not with shapes, color or materials.”²⁹ On the other hand, the materiality of *Sunflower Seeds* makes it hard for visitors to grasp the concept. In the Turbine Hall, 100 million porcelain seeds covered 10,764-square-foot

documentary or other related interviews.

²⁶ Wesley D. Cray, “Conceptual Art, Ideas, and Ontology,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 72, no.3 (2014): 235. *Art Full Text*(H.W.Wilson), EBSCOhost. Accessed November 27, 2016.

²⁷ Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 33.

²⁸ Thierry de Duve, “When Form Has Become Attitude - And Beyond” in Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, eds., *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985* (Blackwell, 2005), 28

²⁹ Joseph Kosuth, “Intention(s),” *Art Bulletin* 78(1996): 407. *Art Full Text*(H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost. Accessed October 27, 2016. This quote is not Kosuth’s interpretation of his art work, but his definition for Conceptual art in general.

floor, and the entire installation was 3.93 inches in depth. Visitors would be confronted by a sea of sunflower seeds and they were soon in awe of the scale and the quality of these porcelain seeds. Only later would they start thinking about the concepts behind his works.

Marcel Duchamp is another clear aesthetic influence on *Sunflower Seeds*. When Ai studied in the United States, he was impressed by Marcel Duchamp whom he mentioned in the conversation with Bingham and Daniel.³⁰ However, what he borrowed from Duchamp is not the found object demonstrated in Duchamp's most famous work *Fountain*. What Ai really found fascinating in Duchamp was his wittiness and the surprises embodied in his work. Ai admitted that he was inspired by Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy* [1921][Fig.6], a piece made of a bird cage containing other found objects and some sugar cubes made of marble.³¹ Ai recalled his astonishment when he found that only after the visitors touch the piece (lift the cage) would they realize that the sugar cubes were unreal.³² Likewise, in *Sunflower Seeds*, instead of using real sunflower seeds, Ai presented sculptures of them, and visitors would be surprised when they found that these sunflower seeds were not real by touching them and possibly biting them.³³ The idea of transforming food into marble/porcelain with the intention of fooling the visitors until they start to look closely or to touch it are exactly the same as the idea demonstrated in *Why not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy*. By taking advantage of the *trompe-l'œil* technique of Jingdezhen, Ai successfully created his own surprise for the visitors.

³⁰ Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation", 97.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Ai, *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, film, 00:46

The production of *Sunflower Seeds* also highlights the traditional Chinese craft skills in making porcelain. However, although this work is made of porcelain and Ai indicates traditional craft's potential to become contemporary art, it maintains the hierarchy between artist and artisans. To begin with, this piece doesn't demonstrate the critical thinking of the artisans, and creativity is one of the most important traits in modern and contemporary art. De Duve points out that, in the 1980s, "neither talent nor creativity were needed to make art but, instead, 'critical attitude' was mandatory."³⁴ But Jingdezhen workers are famous for their superb techniques rather than creative and critical design. Traditionally, the designs on Chinese porcelain objects either imitated the patterns on textiles or duplicated scenes from famous paintings, and it was crucial to remain loyal to the imperial design.³⁵ During the porcelain trade, as workers weren't familiar with foreigners' taste, they would simply paint what they were given.³⁶ In *Sunflower Seeds*, Ai didn't illustrate the workers' critical thinking in interviews or documentaries. Therefore, visitors might easily assimilate them with blind producers in an industrialized factory and not with artists. In addition, the reputation hierarchy of *Sunflower Seeds* is similar to that of a Renaissance art studio, where a master led apprentices and assistants in major art projects. Although the apprentices may execute more manual works than the master, the master got the most credit and fame because he directed the main work.³⁷ Although Ai shows sympathy towards the poor living status of Jingdezhen artisans, he didn't list their names as artists or creators for *Sunflower Seeds*, nor did he refer to them as artists. In other words, Ai implies that there is a distinction

³⁴ De Duve, *When Form has Become Attitudes*, 27.

³⁵ Zhu, *Tao Shuo Yi Zhu*, 37.

³⁶ Jean McClure Mudge, *Chinese export porcelain for American trade, 1785-1835* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1963): 53.

³⁷ Martin Wackernagel, *The world of the Florentine Renaissance artist: projects and patrons, workshop and art market* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 310.

between the local artisans and him. Therefore, although the piece attracts attention to and tries to modernize the declining craft, *Sunflower Seeds* doesn't elevate the status of local artisans in Jingdezhen to artists.

Consuming China

In addition to understanding *Sunflower Seeds* aesthetically, this piece carries many political implications, including China's global image as a huge manufacturing country exploiting local workers and invading the international market. This piece also enters the discussion on the global concern of Post-colonialism. These issues are widely discussed in British media and would be familiar to British visitors, who would interpret *Sunflower Seeds* through these lenses.

To begin with, as each seed was handcrafted in a big workshop in Jingdezhen, China, *Sunflower Seeds* demonstrates on the unparalleled manufacturing ability of China. In 2010, the same year *Sunflower Seeds* opened to the public, China replaced the United States as the world's top manufacturing nation.³⁸ Through China's development into the largest world-manufacturing enterprise, the label of "Made in China" becomes unavoidable to any foreign consumer.³⁹ In addition, *Sunflower Seeds* employed over 1600 workers to produce the work for over two years. The enormous number of people involved in the project refers to the huge labor power in China. *Sunflower Seeds* would confirm for the viewers that China is now a powerful manufacturing and labor country.

However, the manufacturing-giant label is not always a positive thing for China. Chinese booming manufacturing power is often compared with the European industrial

³⁸ "China Became World's Top Manufacturing Nation, Ending 110 Year US Leadership." *MercoPress*. Accessed October 28, 2016. <http://en.mercopress.com/2011/03/15/china-became-world-s-top-manufacturing-nation-ending-110-year-us-leadership>.

³⁹ According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, in 2010, 38% of British imported machines came from China and 18% of imported textiles came from China.

growth in the nineteenth century. Although cheap labor also contributed to Europe's prosperity, a more powerful force was the technological improvement in the industry. On the other hand, China's manufacturing power relied more heavily on cheap and abundant labor.⁴⁰ To maintain the cheap labor, China's government strictly controls the exchange rate between China Yuan (CNY) and other foreign currency, such as US Dollar (USD) and Great Britain Pound (GBP). The controlled rate creates the disparity in labor cost between China and developed countries. The labor force in China in the early twenty-first century was almost ten times cheaper than that in any developed country. Many international and Chinese companies therefore based their factories in rural China and exploited the cheap local labors. Similarly, due to the unaffordable labor cost in Britain to handcraft 100 million seeds, *Sunflower Seeds* was commissioned by a British company (Tate Modern) and produced in China. The feat was easily achieved in China, because the minimum wage in Jingdezhen was only paid 6.8 CNY (1 USD) per hour⁴¹, while the national minimum wage in Britain in 2010 was 5.93 GBP (9.49 USD).⁴² As Ai maintained the unequal exchange rate for cheap labors, the viewers might also question the "politico-economic inequalities of place-based labor upheld" in *Sunflower Seeds*.⁴³

Despite relating to the exploitation of the local workers, the viewers might alternatively see Ai's commission as a positive action, because he gave workers in

⁴⁰ "Made in China?" *The Economist*. May 14, 2015. Accessed October 28, 2016.

<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21646204-asias-dominance-manufacturing-will-endure-will-make-development-harder-others-made>.

⁴¹ This is the minimum wage for Jiangxi, the province Jingdezhen belongs to, based on the data from Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China. See http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshbzb/gongzishourufenpei/zcwj/zuidigongzi/201106/t20110629_87277.htm. Accessed November 14, 2016.

⁴² This is the minimum wage for the United Kingdom, based on the data from The National Archives of the United Kingdom. See <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121015000000/https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>. Accessed November 14, 2016.

⁴³ Hancox, "Art, Activism and the Geopolitical Imagination," 282.

Jingdezhen a job to support themselves and he brought attention to the declining porcelain craft. In the conversation with Bingham and Daniel, Ai expressed his wish to help individual craftsman and to promote traditional craft.⁴⁴ Rather than producing sunflower seeds by machines, Ai deliberately chose to produce these seeds manually in a traditional and intricate method dating back to the Tang Dynasty.⁴⁵ Since the Ming Dynasty, Jingdezhen had produced extensively and primarily for imperial consumption; the high and unique quality of porcelain also attracted foreign eyes, and it was exported and given as gifts to foreign envoys and companies.⁴⁶ However, as the workers are only skillful in producing traditional porcelains in pre-existing designs, they were unable to remain competitive in a changing market looking for more innovative design, and Jingdezhen gradually went into decline.⁴⁷

As the entire town is still centered on traditional porcelain production, people struggle to make a living because of a lack of demand and a lack of alternative industries in the area. Many traditional porcelain techniques are disappearing because they are no longer profitable in the new market and many people of the new generation leave the town for other opportunities. The internationally staged *Sunflower Seeds* demonstrates the delicacy of Chinese porcelain and calls attention to the preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage in China. By using traditional technique to make contemporary art works, Ai demonstrates the innovative potential and aesthetic power of traditional craft. Moreover, Ai points out that many ideas embodied in the traditional crafts are worth excavating and studying to improve modern machinery. For instance, even in the old

⁴⁴ Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 81.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁶ Victoria and Albert Museum. Ceramics Department. and Honey, *Guide to the later Chinese porcelain*, 8.

⁴⁷ Chen Yuqian, "Saving Jingdezhen," *Ceramics Monthly* 62, no.5 (2014): 21.

porcelain-making technique dating back to the Tang Dynasty, there exists a division of labor and the idea of streamlining, which didn't appear in Western society until Henry Ford invented his first assembly line and publicized it. Streamlining improved efficiency in modern Chinese factories and contributed greatly to the industrialization of China. By showing the potential of mass production in traditional craft, *Sunflower Seeds* explores the possibilities of traditional crafts in improving contemporary industry.

Sunflower Seeds also indirectly comments on the consumption of the “other” culture, here the Chinese culture. In the art world, there is a long tradition of consuming exotic “other” for the Euro-American “us,” which rates “other” cultures as inferior and marginal, open for appropriation and exploitation, such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ depiction of erotic and exotic Turkish bath[Fig.7], and Picasso’s appropriation of African masks in *Les Femmes d’Alger* [1907][Fig.8]. The gradual disappearance of colonies in the society in the twentieth century didn’t terminate the consumption of “other” cultures by the Euro-American “us” in the art world. In 1989, the controversial exhibition at the Pompidou Center, *Magiciens de la Terre*, highlights the aesthetic differences between and non-Western art without investigating the cultural context of non-Western cultures. Through the powerful gaze on exotic and foreign objects, Western consumers can interpret the “other” through their Western lens.⁴⁸ The gaze empowered the Western consumers but left the “other” cultures vulnerable for misinterpretation, commodification and consumption. The same gaze was imposed on *Sunflower Seeds* as well. Although *Sunflower Seeds* represents Chinese artisans, “it is the western audience who are able to have upon the workers and the town in which they are located, watch the

⁴⁸ Thomas McEvelley, *Art & otherness*, (Kingston: Documentext/McPherson, 1992): 96.

production processes on the film.”⁴⁹ Viewers of *Sunflower Seeds* felt that the objects were made for them, which implies their privileged beneficiary position and condescending attitude towards the artist and the artisans.⁵⁰ Therefore, *Sunflower Seeds* at Tate Modern, an artwork produced in China but displayed and consumed in Britain, echoes the Post-colonial consumption of a foreign culture.

Ironically, in China, the producers of these porcelain seeds didn’t accept their inferiority to Western consumers. They didn’t care who would see the work and what feeling they might feel; on the contrary, the only thing on their mind was that this project provided precious income.⁵¹ As a result, the hierarchy could be the opposite according to the local artisans. Since they were happy to accept the job and couldn’t understand why this was called art, they might be secretly mocking the naivety of British people towards art and towards Ai Weiwei. The artisans might think they were the exploiters of Western capital and that they “robbed” the foreign investors and increased Chinese GDP. Their practical thoughts show that people’s evaluation of the dominant power could differ greatly from culture to culture, a fact that demonstrates the ridiculousness of Post-colonial hierarchy between producer and the consumer and between a Chinese “other” and a British/Western “us.”

Eating Sunflower Seeds

In addition to the virtual consumption of *Sunflower Seeds* as an artwork, sunflower seeds are popular snacks among Chinese people, and its by-products are widely consumed. Therefore, *Sunflower Seeds* is closely related to Chinese daily life and the food culture. As the collective memory around sunflower seeds is unique to Chinese

⁴⁹ Hancox, “Art, Activism and the Geopolitical Imagination,” 283.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ai, *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, 6:22

people, this important layer of meaning is often lost to or neglected by a British visitor and worth excavating here.

Although non-native to China⁵², sunflower seeds quickly became an important food source after the Ming Dynasty. Sunflowers are very easy to cultivate, and nearly every part of it is edible. For instance, the seeds can be pressed into sunflower seed oil, which is rich in unsaturated fat and suitable for high temperature cooking. The stalk and flower are often used in traditional Chinese medicines. The food source generated by the seed is an attractive feature for China, which needs large amounts of food to sustain its large population. In addition, sunflower seeds are popular snacks in every region in China. The short mature time and the long shelf time promise its constant supply throughout the year and its affordability to the general public. They thus become a shared memory among all Chinese people. Ai explained how sunflower seeds are closely associated with social activities and the formation of the collective memory in the interview with Juliet Bingham:

“In China, when we grew up, we had nothing, except maybe a bed, a stove, a stool or a chair. Whatever you see today, we didn’t have... But for even the poorest people, the treat of the treasure we’d have would be the sunflower seeds in everyone’s pockets.... So during a marriage ceremony or before the movie came on-everybody went to see these same five movies that had been circulating for maybe twenty years - we always had this secret friend and we could always eat it. If you went to somebody’s home, they would - at that time we didn’t have tea- just

⁵² Sunflower originates in North America and commercialized in Russia. The first Chinese documentation of sunflowers is *Qun Fang Pu (Manual of Flowers)* by Wang Xiangjin in 1621, the Ming Dynasty.

serve sunflower seeds. So we'd all talk and eat them. It was partying. This is a really strong memory of Socialist society. ”⁵³

Ai's memory indicates the popularity and availability of sunflower seeds among the general public in China. Even when Chinese people have more choices for snacks and entertainment today, sunflower seeds are still popular. Since Chinese visitors have their own interesting anecdotes about sunflower seeds, they can add their own memory to their interpretation of *Sunflower Seeds*. For instance, when I was young my parents prevented me from eating sunflower seeds because they would cause inflammation in my mouth. When other kids were happily eating however many sunflower seeds they wanted, I would be green with envy. *Sunflower Seeds* was a dream come true for me when I was “given” a sea of sunflower seeds that I could “eat” forever. Thus, the memory around sunflower seeds enabled a unique personal reaction to this artwork. Since British visitors don't traditionally consume sunflower seeds, they don't have the shared memory of sunflower seeds and they will not react to it personally like Chinese people. British people might see sunflower seeds as an emblem of the healthy eating trend popular in many developed countries. Many visitors also associate the sea of small particles with playing on the beach, another public activity that evokes sweet memories.⁵⁴ While they could relate personally to this work in their own manner, it is different from the “shared experience” intended by Ai. Cultural background thus becomes a crucial aspect in interpreting *Sunflower Seeds*.

⁵³ Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, “A Conversation,” 79.

⁵⁴ *Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds at the Tate Modern*, documentary, presented by Matthew Springford. 2010. BBC Scotland. <http://www.aiweiweiseeds.com/videos/bbcs-ai-weiweis-sunflower-seeds/video-5>. 10:40-11:22. Accessed October 16, 2016.

In addition to the pleasurable and sweet personal memory associated with sunflower seeds, *Sunflower Seeds* recalls another, more tragic and disastrous event, the Great Famine from 1959 to 1961 in China. Although in China, the Great Famine is also called Three Years of Natural Disaster, natural disaster was only a small factor. The main reason lies in corruption in the communal kitchens and excessive demands on agricultural yield, both systems formed under the totalitarianism of the Mao era.⁵⁵ To meet the production target set by the central government in the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), many regions disregarded the actual production and made exaggerated reports. At the time, farmers were required to sell grain to the government based on their net production, and the false report actually increased the amount of grains to be submitted, leaving farmers with inadequate food.⁵⁶ Things became even worse when farmers were not allowed to cook on their own and had to give all their remaining food to the communal kitchens so that food could be distributed “evenly.” Corruption was so prevalent in the communal kitchens that the people in charge would have excessive food while farmers were starving to death.⁵⁷

By using porcelain seeds, which are infertile and inedible, *Sunflower Seeds* relates to the time when millions and millions of people starved to death due to lack of edible food. The porcelain seeds symbolize those died in the disaster and can no longer reproduce. The fact that these seeds will never grow also reminds people of the Great Famine when non-existent food production was fabricated and submitted to government officials, which would not contribute to next year’s growth or this year’s consumption.

⁵⁵ Yang Jisheng, *Mu Bei: Zhong Guo Liu Shi Nian Dai Da Ji Huang Ji Shi [Tombstone: a Record of the Great Famine in China in the 1960s]* (Hongkong: Cosmos Books, 2008), 11. The book has been translated into English by Edward Friedman, Guo Jian and Stacy Mosher.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

However, most people who survived the Great Famine and still have a fresh memory don't have the opportunity to view *Sunflower Seeds* in Britain. The extent to which *Sunflower Seeds* could remind the viewers of the Great Famine is highly limited, and this association is therefore rarely discussed in any reviews on *Sunflower Seeds*.

Sunflower Seeds and Mao Zedong

In reading modern and contemporary Chinese art works, critics often emphasize how these works relate to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and former Chairman Mao Zedong. Modern and contemporary artists are often portrayed as dissidents against the totalitarian control and state-focused collectivism under Mao's term, symbolized by the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution. While such an association may not apply to every artist and some artists may reject the association, Ai Weiwei doesn't hesitate to admit his incorporation of Mao in *Sunflower Seeds*.

In an interview with Juliet Bingham, Ai argues that, "the Chinese have been called sunflowers because Chairman Mao was referred to as the sun and the sunflowers always face the sun. That was perhaps the most published image during the Cultural Revolution. We were all sunflower seeds. [Fig.9]"⁵⁸ While some Western visitors might see the association as subtle and indirect, to anyone growing up in China, the metaphor is blatantly apparent. Although the badges and posters with Mao and sunflowers are no longer widely distributed, the songs written about the association are taught in nearly all primary schools in China. Among the numerous songs created in the Cultural Revolution and taught to generations of children, the most popular one is called *On the Golden Hill of Beijing*, and one of the lyrics explicitly states, "on the golden hill of Beijing the light

⁵⁸ Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 84.

shines brilliantly, and Chairman Mao is the golden sun.” Another song *People in Yanbian love Chairman Mao* reads, “all the rivers go to sea, and all the sunflowers bloom towards the sun.” Here, both rivers and sunflowers are metaphors for the public who go towards Chairman Mao (the sea and the sun). A more obvious lyric appears in *Chairman Mao, We will Always be Loyal to You*, “Chairman Mao! You are the brilliant sun, and we are the sunflower seeds which bloom happily under your light.” While these lyrics sound strange today, they were extremely popular in the Cultural Revolution and still are. During the Cultural Revolution, Ai and his parents were transferred from Beijing to Northeast China and then to Xinjiang Province. Both places followed closely the dictates of Chairman Mao, and Ai would have grown up listening to these songs repetitively.

However, *Sunflower Seeds* carries more political meaning than the symbolic reference to Mao Zedong. During the Cultural Revolution, numerous people were persecuted because of their careless words against or ambiguous commitment to the rule and the policy of the Chinese Communist Party and Mao. Many people were sent to be “reformed through labor,” where they were forced to do hard manual work with little food and receive criticism and denunciation on a regular basis. As many writers, poets and artists have the tendency to oppose authority, many of them were sent to be reformed, and some of them died because of illness or intense labor. With this in mind, Ai’s choice of porcelain seeds instead of real seeds turns out to be more complicated than an aesthetic preference. The porcelain sunflower seeds, which are still sunflower seeds and should follow the sun (Mao) in the future, now lose the potential to do so. They are silenced and all their future hopes are deprived. The porcelain black and white seeds can therefore be

seen as the tombstones of those who suffered, reformed and died in the Cultural Revolution.

At the same time, the sunflower metaphor can be extended to the leaders of another system: the art world. Who is the great leader in the contemporary Chinese art world? Who are these sunflower seeds pointing to or will be pointing to in the future? From the 1970s, many avant-garde Chinese artists, including Huang Yong Ping, Gu Wenda, Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei, moved overseas to pursue a more open environment and to explore their art practices.⁵⁹ Many of them stayed abroad and rarely returned to China. In addition, after the June 4 revolution in 1989, when students protested against corruption in Tian'an men Square and were severely suppressed, the social, political, and academic atmosphere became static. As a result, when Ai returned from New York in 1993, the art world in China was disorganized and lacked a leader, and artists were poorly educated on contemporary art trends outside of China. Attempting to revitalize and connect the Chinese art society to the rest of the world, Ai and other artists co-published the first journal on avant-garde Chinese artists, *Grey Cover Book*. Therefore, Ai was one of (very likely the most important) the leaders and guides for Chinese art in the late 1990s. Given Ai's international reputation in 2010, he was also a leading Chinese artist at the time and many art students admired and followed him: on the Internet, his followers and fans refer to him as the God of Ai/Love (*Ai Shen*), and Ai didn't appear to be irritated or confused by such a reference.⁶⁰ Does Ai fully embrace his deified Stature By creating a million sunflower seeds, was Ai assuming the role of the great leader and the sun of

⁵⁹ John Clark, "Chinese Artists in France," Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher, eds., *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004): 210.

⁶⁰ Giorgio Strafella and Daria Berg, "'Twitter Bodhisattva': Ai Weiwei's Media Politics" *Asian Studies Review* 39, no.1 (2015): 146.

contemporary Chinese art followed by young artists? While Ai's true intention is not verifiable, the possibility of such an association is interesting and worth considering. If Ai identifies with this deified image, then he might perform accordingly to the public and the media to enhance this persona.

Chapter II

Ai Conforming to the Western Expecatations

There has long been a division of the contemporary art world broadly into the West and the Other. These two terms are not defined geographically. There are many regions that are geographically West but culturally Other, for instance Eastern Europe. The West is an area revolving around established global contemporary art centered in the United States and Europe, namely London, Paris, Los Angeles and New York. Considering the development of contemporary art, the West represents the mainstream art world; and the Other refers to all other non-Western culture, including African art, Latin American art and Asian art. The term “Other” reinforces the idea that, in the current art world, the West is seen as the center and the self, and non-Western culture as an insignificant other whose definition depends on the West. The Other art is also referred to as the marginal art, since only recently does it gain major notice in the mainstream art world and it is still judged by the Western standard. While the terms the West and the Other present a stronger dichotomy, the Other is not widely used in the contemporary art discourse. This paper will use the global, the non-Western and the Other interchangeably, as the former two are more often used to refer to these geographical areas and the later one might cause misunderstanding with other with a lower case “o.”

The definition of Eurocentrism is closely related to the dichotomy between the West and the Other. Historically, Eurocentrism has referred to Europe as a center of power and culture for its colonies. However, from the end of World War II, the United States has become the most powerful country and has developed the most influential cultural hegemony. The world art centers have since moved from Paris and London in the modern

period to New York and Los Angeles until the early 1990s. Although the United States and Europe have many differences, they shared the same legacy as the United States was established by European settlers; in this chapter, they are also both referred to as the West. As a result, in the following discussion, Eurocentrism referred to both Europe and the United States taking themselves as the center of the globe and influencing others through economic expansion and cultural exportation.

This chapter begins by laying out scholarly discussions around Eurocentrism and exoticism in the art world facing non-Western artists and how non-Western artists are expected to behave in a certain way. It continues by connecting back to the first chapter to analyze how Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* exemplifies the Western expectations for a contemporary Chinese art work. Finally, the chapter concludes that rather than unconsciously following the trend, Ai intentionally performs his persona and designs his art philosophy to win the favor of the contemporary art world.

In the 1990s, the contemporary art world made various attempts to include art and artists beyond Europe and America. Artists from Africa, Latin America and Asia were invited to biennials and triennials, and many contemporary art museums have acquired their works. However, although it looks like the contemporary art world today opens up new doors for artists all over the world, the central values, themes and practices are still the same. In fact, although non-Western artists enjoy increasing exposure, the contemporary art world is still oriented to the West, which exoticizes and holds bias against ideologies and traditions in other cultures. If international artists of non-Western origins want to succeed in the contemporary art world, they have to utilize the same

practices and conform to the same ideologies that are well established in many international art centers including New York City, Los Angeles, London and Paris.

Many scholars have noticed the paradox, among them Julian Stallabrass reveals the stunning uniformity in the contemporary art world in “The Rules of Art Now.”⁶¹ At first look, contemporary art seems overwhelmingly complex because of all the new media used and new concerns embodied. However, the formal variation conceals the underlying uniformity. First, contemporary art, when viewed in its own epoch, always challenges a certain ideology or established traditions. To name a few, Impressionism challenged the Royal Academy for being rigid; Expressionism challenged Impressionism for lacking personal and spiritual expression; and Apartment art in China in the late 1970s challenged the political systems which oversaw and monitored their art production. In other words, to be an “authentic” contemporary artist, one has to rebel against something, either traditions in the art world, or political structures and inequalities in real life. For instance, institutional critique artists criticize the visible and invisible hierarchy in museums and other art spaces; Jeff Koons mocks consumerism; and Xu Bing opposes the Chinese Communist Party and its government for silencing the public.

Second, in the current contemporary art world, most works are strongly influenced by Conceptual art and spectacle art. Stallabrass cites Tobia Rehberger’s *Seven Ends of World* [2003][Fig.10], an installation piece of 222 glass lamps, as an example to show that it is “both a technically accomplished, spectacular and appealing object, and a manifestation of ideas.”⁶² The same description can be applied to many artists. For instance, Richard Serra’s works are all accomplished with the help of structural engineers

⁶¹ Julian Stallabrass, “The Rules of Art Now” in *Art Incorporated, The Story of Contemporary Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 150-175.

⁶² Ibid., 152

and the works generate a visual spectacle. A side effect of the influence of Conceptual art is the reducing reliance on skills. Many contemporary artists, mostly influenced by Andy Warhol, have their own workshops so that their ideas can be materialized through people rather than their own proficient skills. Other artists, influenced by Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp, utilize ready-made objects in their art. These two trends of workshop production and of ready-made objects originated from Western art are two dominant and popular practices in the contemporary art world, and many non-Western artists also apply these practices.

The uniformity in art practices and ideological concerns in the contemporary art world is often seen as universal values, when in fact these trends and concepts are Western. In “The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism,” Gerardo Mosquera argues that the term “art” itself is a recent Western definition formed in the eighteenth century, and the current popularity of non-Western art was trending because “postmodern interest in the Other has opened up some space in the ‘high art’ circuits for vernacular art and non-Western cultures.”⁶³ In addition, through the universalization of Eurocentrism, many Western elements in the metaculture “cease to be ‘ethnic’ and become internationalized as intrinsic component of the world shaped by Western developments.”⁶⁴ In particular, Western standards and value systems were gradually seen as universal and were used to judge non-Western culture according to a Western standard. In “In the ‘Heart of Darkness’,” Olu Oguibe points out that Occidental culture has a condescending and arrogant attitude towards other culture, and that the value system of the contemporary art world is decided by the West, which neglects

⁶³ Gerardo Mosquera, “The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005), 220.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 219

modernity in other cultures.⁶⁵ As “modern” and “contemporary” art are primarily defined by the West, modernity in other cultures is either denied or deemed inconsequential. It becomes more problematic that the authenticity of other cultures in contemporary art is determined by Western ideologies. Although Oguibe mainly uses African art as examples, the same claim can be extended to Latin American, Asian and indigenous art. It is a common for a Western reviewer to criticize that some art is not “non-Western” enough, where the definition of “non-Western” is based upon stereotypes or pure imagination.

As non-Western art is judged by Western standards, the Eurocentric art world also imposes certain expectations on marginalized artists. Mosquera argues that Post-modern interests in the global have encouraged vernacular and non-Western cultures to enter the “high art” sphere, but it also encourages exoticism which assumes that non-Western cultural production was made for consumption by the center/West.⁶⁶ Mosquera points out that “Third World artists are constantly asked to display their identity, to be *fantastic*, to look like no one else or to look like Frida...[Fig.11]”⁶⁷ The artists who win the favor of the market are usually those who can meet the expectations of a stereotyped exoticism prevailing in the Eurocentric art world. As the Eurocentric idea is so perpetually established in the art institutions, many non-Western artists, curators and critics seem willing to accept exoticization in order to gain access to and succeed in the contemporary art world.

Another trend in contemporary art is the emphasis on the art work’s social and

⁶⁵ Olu Oguibe, “In the ‘Heart of Darkness’ ” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005), 216.

⁶⁶ Mosquera, “The Marco Polo Syndrome,” 220.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 221. The name Frida in the quote was not specified in the original article, but it is very likely that Mosquera meant Frida Kahlo, a Mexican painter famous for her self-portraits full of Mexican exotic flavor.

political significance. Contemporary artists nowadays believe in art's power to make political changes. In "Art, Truth and Politics," Terry Smith points out that many times artists, including visual artists and writers, are often extolled for their political stances rather than their actual production. Many contemporary artists, including Thomas Hirschhorn, believe that, rather than making political art a genre, art in general should be made politically.⁶⁸ In other words, every contemporary art should always relate itself to political events or it should at least have political implications. Among various movements attempting to voice their social concerns, site-specific or community-specific art works are often seen as most effective because they are directly placed in the target community. In "History that Disturbs the Present,"⁶⁹ Gregory Sholette analyzes various site-specific art in the 1990s, which sought to expose the hidden history of transgender struggle and buried civic violence.

Although Western artists are also expected to convey their political and social concerns through their art works, they were often treated as independent individuals from their compatriots, and their origin or hometown doesn't matter as much. When voicing their political requests, contemporary American artists usually identify with a community, which might have nothing to do with their birthplace. In contrast when artists have non-Western origins, all of a sudden everything they create will be linked back to their background, and they are often seen as representatives of their nation and their ethnicity. In "World's Apart: Problems of Interpreting Globalised Art," Wu Chin-Tao notices that artists coming from other regions, especially politically unstable countries, are required

⁶⁸ Thomas Hirschhorn, "Interview with Okwui Enwezor," in *Thomas Hirschhorn: Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake, The Art Institute of Chicago; World Airport, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago* (Chicago: Lowitz + Sons, 2000), 13-14, quoted in Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009), 218.

⁶⁹ Gregory Sholette, "Histories that Disturbs the Present" in *Dark Matter, Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 71-93.

by the critics and the audience to convey political claims in their art.⁷⁰ Wu first points out that it is difficult for artists from other cultures to convey their true intention to Western consumers without distortions or misunderstandings. Western viewers are always going to interpret non-Western art works according to their own ideologies and standards. As a result, Western viewers are more willing to read things that reinforce the superiority of the West, such as inequality, tyranny, war and other political turbulence in non-Western and non-democratic countries. Gradually, non-Western artists are all expected to link their art works with their ethnic or political background, which troubled some other contemporary artists who prefer to tell personal story rather than national trauma. Shirin Neshat, an Iranian woman artist mentioned in Wu's article, argues that people always read her works politically as a representative or speaker for Iran, while she did not intend much social or political meaning but focus on her personal experience.⁷¹

Similarly, in "The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism," Jean Fisher argues that cultural differences and characteristics are "too readily marketable" that the art world encourages "excessive invisibility."⁷² Therefore, artists of non-Western origins are "expected" to create art works that reflect their different ethnicity and political requests. To be included in galleries or museums, global artists must "demonstrate appropriate signs of cultural differences,"⁷³ which are judged by Western standard. The signs of ethnic identity satisfy the Western thirst for the exotic other. For instance, Ai's work demonstrates his opposition towards the Chinese

⁷⁰ Chin-Tao Wu, "Worlds Apart," *Third Text* 21, no. 6 (November 1, 2007): 719–31. Accessed July 10, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528820701761236>.

⁷¹ Taped Interview between Chin-Tao Wu and Shirin Neshat, quoted in Chin-Tao Wu, "Worlds Apart," *Third Text* 21, no. 6 (November 1, 2007): 724.

⁷² Jean Fisher, "The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism" in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005), 235.

⁷³ Ibid.

communist government, which is unfamiliar and thus exotic to Western viewers and consolidates their sense of superiority against other non-democratic political systems.

It is reasonable therefore to say that the prevailing value system for contemporary non-Western art is largely Eurocentric. Non-Western artists are expected to use the same artistic practice as Western artists; meanwhile, they are also required to be exotic and reveal the political and social problems embedded in their ethnicity and origins. While some marginalized artists openly oppose such an imposed value system, other artists conform to the existing standard and use it to their own advantages. I argue in the following section that Ai Weiwei willingly satisfies the contemporary art world's expectations for a Chinese avant-garde artist. *Sunflower Seeds*, among his many other works, is a product not of Chinese values, but of Western ideologies.

We have analyzed the multiple interpretations of Ai's *Sunflower Seeds* from five major perspectives in the first chapter. These five perspectives can be categorized into four major themes: its relationship with the traditional Chinese craft porcelain, its representation of China's global image, its reference to the Mao era and China's current political system and its link to Western artistic trends including Conceptual art. All these themes are of strong interest to a western viewer.

To begin with, *Sunflower Seeds* relates itself closely with popular and influential art trends in the international art society. Firstly, it has been constantly referred to as a Conceptual art work, and Conceptual art is the dominating art form in the contemporary art world.⁷⁴ Although he didn't use the word "Conceptual," in his interview with Juliet

⁷⁴ Stallabrass, "The Rules of Art Now," 152.

Bingham, Ai admits that he likes that visitors will try to understand his work and interpret the hidden meaning, implying that this work is driven by a hidden meaning or idea.⁷⁵ In addition, *Sunflower Seeds* was created under the “Warhol factory,” in which the artist gives a general command and artisans realize the artist’s idea. Each porcelain seed was manufactured by a factory rather than by Ai himself. The fact that Ai only supplied concept to this art work reinforced the conceptual character of *Sunflower Seeds*. Secondly, the scale of this work, a million porcelain seed is a spectacle, which confronts viewers first with strong visual impact. The contemporary art world also welcomes art works with large dimensions, as Jeff Koons’s giant *Puppy* [1992][Fig.12] sits next to Guggenheim Bilbao and Richard Serra’s ‘7’ [2011][Fig.13] in the Museum of Islamic Art Park in Doha, Qatar. Thirdly, the interactive quality of *Sunflower Seeds* is a popular element that loosely connects back to Relational Aesthetics developed in the late 1990s.⁷⁶ By touching the seed, the viewers feel connected to the artisans in Jingdezhen, China who made the seed; by playing with the seeds, the visitors had created a new community in which each member shared a similar experience.⁷⁷ To sum up, rather than relating to Chinese aesthetics, Ai integrated more western artistic trends in *Sunflower Seeds*.

Ai also incorporated another widespread trend in *Sunflower Seeds*: to explore the possible contemporary applications of a declining craft. Ai transformed the traditional technique into a contemporary art work, a practice common to many contemporary artists from marginalized cultures. For instance, Ghana artist El Anatsui’s large installation art works remind many viewers of traditional African textile and abstract decoration [Fig.14];

⁷⁵ Ai, Bingham and Daniel, “A Conversation,” 76.

⁷⁶ Nicholas Bourriaud, “Relational Aesthetics” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 160.

⁷⁷ The visiting experience has been thoroughly analyzed in the first chapter.

Jimmie Durham also applies Native American decoration and jewelry in his works from the 1980s [Fig.15]. Once again, Ai was able to join the latest trend in the contemporary art world.

Moreover, *Sunflower Seeds* carries political and social implications of China's manufacturing power and political system, two major issues Western viewers would be familiar with. I have elaborated in the first chapter how *Sunflower Seeds* referred to China as the manufacturing giant and how it referred to Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution and the Great Famine. Although the contemporary art society does not show particular interests in these events, these events still influenced many Western people's impression on China today. The label "Made in China" has been constantly brought up in the press, often in a negative way. Factories in China have always been criticized for inhumane treatment of laborers both financially and physically, and many people accuse China for destroying local business and job opportunities as international companies are more willing to base their factories in China rather than in their home countries.⁷⁸ When confronted by a vast sea of porcelain sunflower seeds, viewers wouldn't hesitate to connect the work with their impression of China as a manufacturing country. Rather than generating a thoughtless after-effect, Ai intended the association. In the interview with Bingham, he overtly criticized China for being a blind and unsustainable producer.⁷⁹

In addition, the Western press has always emphasized the undemocratic totalitarian Chinese government, and it has been targeting the lack of freedom of speech in China for a long time. Mao Zedong was often mentioned in these criticisms because he initiated the Cultural Revolution, which forbade free speech. Ai responded to the criticism by using

⁷⁸ Catherine Rampell. "A Trip to China Can Make a Guy Hate His iPhone." *New York Times*, Vol 161, Issue 55546 (October 02, 2011): 4. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost. Accessed April 17, 2017.

⁷⁹ Ai, Bingham and Daniel, "A Conversation," 80.

small porcelain sunflower seeds, which have a close reference to Mao as the Sun. Many journalists have noticed and discussed this layer of meaning. For instance, Andrew Graham-Dixon points out that, on one hand these sunflower seeds can never be opened and never reproduce, which symbolizes the downtrodden public; on the other hand, these fake seeds don't follow the sun/Mao anymore, which symbolizes the "dismantling of the totalitarian system."⁸⁰ Laura McLean-Ferris also brings up the controversy surrounding Chinese-government censorship including the Cultural Revolution and Liu Xiaobo's⁸¹ issue in her review.⁸² Rather than exposing more universal governmental problem such as the exacerbating income gap and corruption, Ai chose to emphasize on the lack of freedom of speech, which was more peculiar to China and was more often discussed in the Western press. Since *Sunflower Seeds* fulfills and reinforces Western viewers' expectation and impressions of China, the audience responded enthusiastically and this work was established as one of the most popular and influential examples of contemporary art made by a Chinese artist, which further enhanced Ai's reputation.

Furthermore, Ai also added a hint of exoticism in *Sunflower Seeds*: porcelain making. Suggested by its name, porcelain (china) originates in China and was brought to Europe and America through the porcelain trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It is widely acknowledged that porcelain is a significant cultural symbol of China. Although Chinese culture developed and flourished before many Western cultures, its

⁸⁰ Andrew Graham-Dixon, "Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds, at Tate Modern, Seven Magazine Review." *The Telegraph*, (October 15, 2010). Accessed October 13, 2016.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/8066846/Ai-Weiwei-Sunflower-Seeds-at-Tate-Modern-Seven-magazine-review.html>

⁸¹ Liu Xiaobo, born in 1955, was known as the human rights activist in the West, and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. However, he was arrested on charges of "suspicion of inciting subversion of state power" in China in 2008.

⁸² Laura McLean-Ferris, "Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds, Tate Modern Turbine hall, London." *The Independent*, (October 13, 2010). Accessed May 17, 2016.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds-tate-modern-turbine-hall-london-2104909.html>.

low industrial competence and closed-door policy in the Qing Dynasty, the last feudalist dynasty, made it appear backward and inferior to the Western powers. Modern China was under semi-colonialism in the late nineteenth century. Consequently, Chinese culture became one of the marginal and inferior cultures; traditional Chinese crafts, including porcelain making, were deemed old-fashioned and exotic by Western consumers. When making *Sunflower Seeds*, to enhance the exotic craft, Ai didn't use the modern porcelain techniques, which are not unique to China, but hired workers from a porcelain town that used to make imperial commissions, and used the traditional Chinese craft that dates back to the Tang Dynasty in China. In other words, Ai intentionally infused the idea of exotic craft in his work to satisfy the thirst for exotic culture in Western viewers.

To sum up, Ai fulfills the Western expectations of a contemporary Chinese artist. When making *Sunflower Seeds*, Ai applied a Conceptual framework and created a spectacle; he embraced Western ideologies such as democracy and freedom of speech; he discussed past and present political issues surrounding his home country; and he retained his Chinese-ness by using traditional Chinese craft. Ai is a perfect example for Fisher's argument that successful contemporary international artists ought to "demonstrate appropriate signs of cultural differences."⁸³ As we can see through many of his reviews, these interpretations were widely acknowledged in the Western press including *the Telegraph* and *the Guardian*. This interpretation should not be underestimated as transient. In fact, throughout his artistic career, Ai applies the same formula to produce different art works, and he was gradually known as the Chinese artist fighting for human rights.

⁸³ Fisher, "The Syncretic Turn," 235.

Many journals wouldn't hesitate to call Ai Weiwei "the" contemporary Chinese artist and activist. *The Independent* called him "China's most famous and politically outspoken artist;"⁸⁴ *the Guardian* eulogized him as "one of the most famous artists of the century and a hero to many for his defiance of the Chinese state."⁸⁵ However, when we look at his works closely, it is noticeable that he embraces Western ideologies much more than he upholds Chinese philosophy. In spite of his Chinese ethnicity, he appears to be a Western contemporary artist.

As discussed in the previous section, Ai presents and supports the dominant Western aesthetics and ideologies in *Sunflower Seeds*. His workshop originates from Warhol's "factory" and links back to the apprenticeship tradition in the fourteenth century; his Conceptual art framework resonates with Joseph Beuys;⁸⁶ the emphasis on traditional craft and spectacular materiality also has a Western root; his political requests for more speech freedom and democracy in Chinese government corresponds to the Western ideal; his family link with the Cultural Revolution satisfies people's curiosity about a different and old China.

In fact, in addition to *Sunflower Seeds*, many of his other works also demonstrate a similar tendency. Among Ai's representative works, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*[1995] is another iconic piece. In the photographic triptych, Ai recorded himself dropping a Han Dynasty Urn and shattering it into pieces. While it is debatable whether the urn used in this artwork is truly from the Han Dynasty, it is clear that Ai wanted to include something

⁸⁴ McLean-Ferris, "Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds."

⁸⁵ Jonathan Jones, "Who's the Vandal: Ai Weiwei or the Man Who Smashed His Han Urn?." *The Guardian* (February 18, 2014). Accessed January, 8, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/feb/18/ai-weiwei-han-urn-smash-mia-mi-art>.

⁸⁶ Ai, Bingham and Daniel. "A Conversation," 97.

from the ancient China. By smashing the ancient pottery, Ai was not only making a nihilistic gesture, but he was also referring back to the Cultural Revolution when traditional objects and customs were destroyed for being outdated. In addition, he criticizes the Chinese government for sacrificing traditional architecture and customs for modern infrastructure and fast development, a criticism familiar to Western viewers. Therefore, *Breaking the Han Dynasty Urn* also satisfies Western curiosity and conveys Western ideologies.

Another work that contributed to Ai's international status is *Fairytale* [2007][Fig.16], in which he took 1001 Chinese citizens to Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany and recorded their time and activities in the foreign city. The vast number of people involved in the project formed a community. While Ai never openly acknowledged his inspiration for *Fairytale*, the idea to include a community and use collaborative effort of non-art audience would remind people of relational aesthetics developing in the turn of the century. In addition to bringing real Chinese people, Ai also placed 1001 Qing Dynasty wooden chairs in the dorm for these Chinese visitors, adding some traditional and ancient flavor to this project. However subtle, *Fairytale* also reminded people of the turbulent China in the 1960s and 1980s. In "Ai Weiwei's Humane Conceptualism," David Coggins argues that the travel from China to a Western contemporary art center connects to the departure of many avant-garde Chinese artists, including Ai, to the West after the Tiananmen Square incident, and thus many of his works, including *Fairytale*, "reveal a healthy irreverent toward the power of the state."⁸⁷ Therefore, *Fairytale* connects both materially and historically to China. While the ancient

⁸⁷ David Coggins, "Ai Weiwei's Humane Conceptualism." *Art in America* 95, no. 8 (September 2007): 121.

furniture satisfied Western viewers' exotic gaze, the major historical events related to this work about democracy and totalitarianism attracted journalist interests in the West. This work is thus widely discussed in the media, which promoted Ai one of the most famous Chinese artists in the century.

While there is no problem in talking about personal history, discussing problems concerned by the West and identifying with Western ideologies, Ai didn't show much critical thinking of these ideologies in his interviews or his art works, which leaves people questioning his sincerity in his claim and political request. In "Art, Activism and the Geopolitical Imagination," Simone Hancox argues that Ai was "raising awareness of human rights abuses in China and pleading to Western states for their support and intervention; the legitimacy of his claims are upheld by his apparent authenticity as a Chinese citizen and reliability as an artist."⁸⁸ However, Ai's political request is contradictory. On one hand, he criticizes China for being hegemonic to its own citizens; on the other hand, by calling for another country to intervene in the governance of China, Ai seems to support the hegemony of Western democracy over other countries. In addition, Ai sometimes ignored the problem within Western democracy. Around the time when *Sunflower Seeds* was exhibiting in Tate Modern, Ai praised Britain for being a society where any questions can be openly discussed and the government will adjust their position according to the public's idea, while Hancox believes that "given the UK's political ferment in 2011 (including mass protests, the News International scandal and England riots, to name but a few), Ai's own geopolitical imagination of the UK's model of politics as a universal aspiration seems a little utopian."⁸⁹ Therefore, Ai's political

⁸⁸ Hancox, "Art, Activism and the Geopolitical Imagination," 285.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 286.

claim is based more on blind trust rather than critical thinking.

If Ai doesn't think too much in voicing out his political request and there is no evidence that he has thought critically of it, it is more likely that, by acknowledging western values, Ai designed his identity as an activist artist opposing the Central government of China in order to gain success in the international art world. This argument was inspired by Meiling Cheng's article "Acting is Believing."⁹⁰ In the article, the main question Cheng asks is why and how the arrest of Ai in 2010 generated such a huge discussion. She argues, firstly, that Ai's own dissent character is constructed by himself because he wants international fame as a political artist; his dissent happened to be in a critical time (around the Arabian spring, when the atmosphere in China was more intense and the government more worried about any revolt or uprising); finally, China's authoritarian and savage image confirmed in its brutal arrest of Ai triggered Western press's strong plead against Chinese government to release Ai, which gave Ai more exposure and attention in the West.

Meiling Cheng calls Ai "a consummate performance artist."⁹¹ She explains this title later in the article:

The more Ai performed dissent, the more he found reasons for his dissent; the more he found a solid basis for his critique, the more he reduced the distance between his "faking," by ambiguously embracing contradictory positions, and "acting," by committing to a unitary position. For Ai, to fake was now more and more to act according to his newfound convictions, which revolved around the individual's right to voice opposition and expose corruption. Ai's tactics in acting out his

⁹⁰ Meiling Cheng, "Ai Weiwei: Acting Is Believing," *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 7-13.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

convictions included pushing existing sociopolitical boundaries within China and fraternizing with the Western media and contemporary art establishment: he used the former to cultivate his international fame and sought the latter to endorse his political art.⁹²

In other words, Ai's dissident standing and his international fame grow mutually out of each other. The Western society has always viewed China's rising global power as a potential threat to its domination, and the popular media often cast light on the Chinese government's brutality and totalitarian strategy. Around 2010, when Ai gained international notice and when he created *Sunflower Seeds*, *the Economist* criticized China for being unwilling to play according to the international trade rule.⁹³ The BBC documentary *The Chinese Are Coming* exposed and criticized China's abuse of Congo laborers.⁹⁴ These representations reoccurred in the West repetitively, and China was often portrayed as a country that, despite its growing economic power, is politically oppressive to its citizens and other countries. To win the favor of international/Western art world and society, Ai chose to perform according to their expectation for a Chinese contemporary artist. He chose themes including human rights, freedom of speech and democracy that are the most identifiable with Western viewers; he reaffirmed the prevailing fear in the Western media for China's global uncompromising domination; and he reassured the legitimacy of Western democracy by exposing China's political incapability and persecution of its citizens.

⁹² Ibid., 11.

⁹³ "China's Export Prospects: Fear of the Dragon." *The Economist*. Accessed March 10, 2016. <http://www.economist.com/node/15213305>.

⁹⁴ *The Chinese Are Coming*, Documentary, Presented by Justin Rowlett, BBC, 2011.

Chapter III

Other Chinese Contemporary Artists Compared to Ai

From the second chapter, it is reasonable to conclude that, rather than challenging the dominating Western ideologies, Ai conforms to it without questioning its legitimacy. This conformation not only enhanced his international reputation as an artist, but also established him as an influential human rights activist in the non-art world. However, it is unfair to blame Ai for performing his identity. Although the contemporary art world claims to be inclusive to people from different backgrounds and with different schools of thought, it only gives exposure to non-Western artists conforming to a certain image. To justify the argument, the last chapter will compare the different reception and different philosophies of Ai and the other two artists, Zhou Chunya and Cai Guo-Qiang. The former is famous only in China, and the latter only has a notable reputation in the art world rather than in the society.

Cai Guo-Qiang

Cai Guo-Qiang is an important figure in contemporary Chinese art. While his name and works are less mentioned in non-art journals and magazines than Ai, he enjoys a high status in the international contemporary art world. His artistic practice embodies many noticeable Chinese elements, and includes performance art and installation works which are welcomed and accepted internationally. However, in terms of political activism, he is less supportive to Western ideologies than Ai is, making him less favorable for the Western media, and some of his works went under attack for being nationalist and anti-American.

Born in 1957 in Fujian, China, Cai experienced the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 just as Ai Weiwei did, and Cai's father was also active as an artist as Ai's father. When Cai's father was disappointed in the corrupt political system at the time, he didn't choose to rebel, but retreated to remote mountains and was never persecuted as Ai Qing, Ai's father. Cai's experience of the Cultural Revolution is therefore less dramatic and less personal than Ai's.

Although Cai was exposed to traditional Chinese paintings and calligraphy at a young age, he was not interested in them and chose to "rebel" against the tradition by ignoring them while focusing on Western art forms such as watercolor and oil painting.⁹⁵ In 1985, Cai graduated from the Department of Stage Design of Shanghai Theater Academy, where he learned to apply multiple mediums within art, including performance, installation, painting and video. In the later 1980s, the first avant-garde movement in China, the 85' New Wave was just starting to gain influences. While Cai did participate in some of the group exhibitions, he didn't experience its full effect, nor did he appreciate the exposure to Western art trends brought by the movement. In fact, as Cai later recalled, he was not interested in the iconic Western figures including Vassily Kandinsky, Salvador Dali and Pop Art introduced to China at the time.⁹⁶ Almost immediately after graduation, Cai left for Japan in 1986. He spent the next ten years in Japan, where he formulated his philosophy and aesthetics. In 1995, he moved to the United States and stayed there for artistic practices ever since.

Cai is well respected in the international art world. He had been invited to multiple biennials and international group exhibitions, including four Venice Biennials, and he

⁹⁵ Fei Dawei and Cai Guo-Qiang, "To Dare to Accomplish Nothing: Fei Dawei Interviews Cai Guo-Qiang" in *Cai Guo-Qiang*, Cai Guo-Qiang and Foundation Cartier (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 122.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 123.

was the curator of the first China Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennial. He was also cited as one of the most important contemporary Chinese artists by many important scholars, including Wu Hung, a reputed scholar working in University of Chicago, in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*.⁹⁷ Many of his iconic works, such as *Borrowing Your Enemies' Arrows* and *The Rent Collection Courtyard*, are widely discussed in the public press and in the art society. The later also won him the “International Award” of the 48TH Venice Biennale.

In addition, Cai's artistic achievement and creativity are widely acknowledged in China. He was the director of Visual and Special Effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Beijing Olympics and was the director of firework performance for celebrating the 60th Anniversary of National Day in China in 2009. Both events promoted China's global impact and patriotism, and therefore both appointments are huge national honors to Cai. An important curator, Fei Dawei, who curated the first exhibition in France solely on Chinese artist, *Chine Demain Pour Hier*, called Cai one of the most creative artists who recklessly experiment on different methods and different media for his art works.⁹⁸ Chen Danqing, another important art critic and artist based in China, notices the almost peasant-like frankness and sincerity embodied in Cai's works.⁹⁹ Therefore, Cai is welcomed both by the Chinese government and by the Chinese art circle as an outstanding artist.

⁹⁷ Wu Hung, Peggy Wang and Museum of Modern Art. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010). Cai's work *The Rent Collection Courtyard* was rendered a section in this book from 366 to 379 consisting three essays.

⁹⁸ Fei Dawei, “Amateur Recklessness” in *Cai Guo-Qiang*, Cai Guo-Qiang and Foundation Cartier (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 9.

⁹⁹ Danqing Chen, “Wo Kan Cai Guo Qiang De Cai Chuan Yu Jie Jian [My Comment on Cai Guo-Qiang's Straw Boats and Borrowing Arrows],” *Sina Collection* reprinted from *The Economic Observer* (March 24, 2015). Accessed April 5, 2017. <http://collection.sina.com.cn/plfx/20150324/1355183156.shtml>.

Looking at Cai's work, it is noticeable that his art doesn't have a signature style. His art ranges from dynamite explosions to bone sculpture to sand park to public bath, just to name a few. For instance, in *The Elixir of Immortality* [1994][Fig.17], he invited a Chinese opera group to the Setagaya Art Museum of Tokyo to sing, while the stage is masked with a transparent curtain, leaving the audience with a nebulous display of light and sound. In *Cultural Melting Bath: Project for the 20th Century* [1997][Fig.18], he put a bathtub in the Queens Museum of Art and surrounded it with several rocks from the Lake Taihu. This wide spread of artistic forms makes it hard for the audience to connect his work with his name, which he acknowledged to Fei Dawei in an interview.¹⁰⁰ However, most of his works carry some Chinese elements. For instance, he used dynamite in many of his explosion performances, and the Gunpowder Picture series exploded gunpowder on canvas to create images[Fig.19]. Dynamite was first invented by the Chinese, and it was originally used not for military purposes but for fireworks and for entertainment. Similarly, Cai didn't use dynamite violently, but as a form of art. Cai also uses rocks from the Lake Taihu in his large installation works including *Cultural Melting Bath: Project for Naoshima* [1988] and *Cultural Melting Bath: Project for the 20th Century*[1997]. What's more, the names of his works were sometimes borrowed from Chinese culture, including *Borrowing Your Enemies' Arrows* [1998], which was inspired by a story in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In other words, the Chinese elements or the exotic flavor that Western viewers are looking for are evident in Cai's work. Cai's practice is similar to what Ai did: to make the exotic obvious.

¹⁰⁰ Fei and Cai, "To Dare to Accomplish Nothing," 121.

While Cai didn't disguise his ethnicity, he was less willing to admit the influence of Western culture. Although he learned Western art practices including oil paintings and watercolors in his early age, he didn't embrace Western ideologies and philosophies. In his interview with Fei Dawei, he indicated multiple times that he didn't want to be put into categories in Western contemporary art trends, and that the art trends generated by Western history didn't suit a Chinese artist.¹⁰¹ At the same time, he didn't identify with Western culture. Cai asserts that, "Despite invitations from all these galleries and museums, I am not part of this (Western) world; I don't even believe in their gods. What grasp do I have of their cultural references, national tradition, and history? None."¹⁰² Nevertheless, he was attracted to the idea of total artistic freedom, that "art allows you to do anything and everything."¹⁰³

Although Cai refused to be put into Western artistic categories, he admitted that he was inevitably influenced by the Western society after he moved to the United States, and he had been adopting Western artistic rules and methods ever since. While Cai didn't give specific examples, many of his works show Western influences. First of all, when asked why his works take so many forms and are always changing, Cai argues that "you can understand my works if you make an effort to detach yourself from the material or subject and concentrate on the underlying orders that runs through them."¹⁰⁴ The idea that there is an underlying principle or concept which is most important to one's artistic production corresponds to the idea of Conceptual art. Secondly, While Cai asserted that many of Joseph Beuys's concerns are irrelevant to his culture and his historical

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰² Ibid., 124.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 134.

background, he was nonetheless influenced by Beuys's idea of Conceptual art and ready-made objects. Cai often uses works by other artists in his works. For instance, *The Elixir of Immortality* [1994] presents a Chinese opera live performance executed not by Cai himself but by a professional group. In *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* [1999][Fig.20], Cai duplicated the famous clay sculpture in the Cultural Revolution *Rent Collection Courtyard* [1965][Fig.21], which recorded landlords' ruthless exploitation of peasants. Using ready-mades and appropriation as a new form of art implies that the concept and intention behind the reproduction and appropriation are enough for art works to be deemed original. This idea is purely Western. In fact, Cai's duplication of *Rent Collection Courtyard* caused a huge controversy in China. Many critics criticized him for stealing from the original work. Therefore, Cai's artistic philosophy is also influenced by Western ideas.

From the discussion above, it is reasonable to say that Cai and Ai both intentionally enhanced the Chinese-ness and both of them use Western artistic practices in their works. However, their attitudes towards China are quite different. In contrast to Ai who has been arrested by the Chinese police and was "persecuted" according to Western media, Cai didn't have a dramatic and intense relationship with the Chinese government. As mentioned above, Cai actively participated in the 2008 Summer Beijing Olympics. In fact, this task was not a dictated assignment to Cai. In an interview with *Haixia News*, Cai recalled his experience as one of the seven members in the central creativity group for the Olympics.¹⁰⁵ Rather than being invited to the event, he competed for the bid for the

¹⁰⁵ Cai Guo-Qiang and Haixia News, "Ao Yun Yan Huo Shi Cai Guo Qiang Tan Ao Yun Yan Huo: 29 Ge Jiao Yin 29 Liang Che[Cai Guo-Qiang the Firework Designer for Olympics talk about Olympics Firework: 29 Footsteps and 29 Cars]," *Haixia News* (August 9, 2008). Accessed April 5, 2017. <http://ent.sina.com.cn/s/m/2008-08-09/09032132107.shtml>.

firework performance design in 2005. When his design was accepted, he then joined the executive board led by Zhang Yimou, an Oscar nominated Chinese director, to make the opening and closing ceremony “more international, modern and artistic.”¹⁰⁶ As Cai voluntarily joined the group and was in the central board, it is reasonable to say that he wanted to present a better image of China to the world. It also implies that he was still patriotic to China and embraces his Chinese identity.

Moreover, Cai often avoids commenting directly on controversial political questions. In an interview with Andrei Ujica, when Ujica tried to connect Cai’s desire to “bypass earthly perspective” with the fact that Cai grew up in a restrictive totalitarian regime, Cai didn’t show accordance or agreement, but directed the conversation to human’s universal curiosity of the unknown and the universe.¹⁰⁷ On the contrary, when Ai was asked a similar question in his conversation with Juliet Bingham, he quickly turned a discussion of China’s economic power to a criticism of its political system.¹⁰⁸ In addition, although he now mainly operates in the United States, Cai identifies more with the socialist China where he grew up than the capitalist United States.¹⁰⁹

One of the works that demonstrated all the above traits and is one of Cai’s most controversial works is *Borrowing Your Enemies’ Arrows* [1998][Fig.22]. This piece has been exhibited around the world for many times, but it made its first appearance in the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. This work is an installation art piece. An old fishing boat excavated in Quanzhou, China, where Cai was born, was hung halfway in the air. The boat is pierced with 3000 made-in-China arrows made of bamboo tipped with

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Cai Guo-Qiang and Andrei Ujica, “A Conversation” in *Cai Guo-Qiang*, Cai Guo-Qiang and Foundation Cartier (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 82.

¹⁰⁸ Ai, Bingham and Daniel, “A Conversation,” 86.

¹⁰⁹ Cai and Ujica, “A Conversation,” 85.

bronze points and furnished with goose feathers, the kind of arrows used in battle in ancient China.¹¹⁰ The title of the work is based upon a Chinese proverb, which translates literally to “borrowing arrows with straw boats.” The story originated in one of the Four Great Classical Novels in Chinese, *San Guo Zhi* [*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*].¹¹¹ In an attempt to gather 100,000 arrows in three days, Zhuge Liang prepared twenty straw boats with straw soldiers, and sailed them in a misty night to their enemy’s camp, making their enemy alarmed of incoming attacks and shot many arrows to the straw boats, which Zhuge Liang collected afterwards.¹¹²

The story and the boat are both strong Chinese elements easily noticeable to the West as exotic, which should make the piece highly successful and popular. However, although in the original novel, the enemies are all fighting to reunite China and the story is about wisdom and how to use the environment to one’s own advantage, the term “enemies” was understood in the United States as a negative gesture towards the United States, the “enemy” of China [Fei, 130]. In *Art That’s a Dragon with Two Heads* published in *New York Times*, Holland Cotter accused *Borrowing your enemies’ Arrows* for being “distinctly nationalistic, implicitly anti-Western bent,” and he asked suspiciously: “Is China’s new art based on such opportunistic strategies, fulfilling Mao’s famous directive to make foreign things serve China?”¹¹³ Cotter’s argument was countered by Lin Xiaoping in “Globalism or Nationalism? Cai Guoqiang, Zhang Huan,

¹¹⁰ Xiaoping Lin, “Globalism or Nationalism? Cai Guoqiang, Zhang Huan, and Xu Bing in New York.” *Third Text* 18, no. 4 (July 2004): 284. *Art Full Text* (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost. Accessed April 2, 2017.

¹¹¹ *San Guo Yan Yi* [*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*], written by Luo Guanzhong, is a historical novel set in the years towards the end of the Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period in Chinese history, from 169 to 280 AD. The story is a mix of historical facts and legends, and it depicts the personal and military battles and struggles of three states of Cao Wei, Shu Han and Dong Wu to achieve dominance and reunification of ancient China.

¹¹² This story is not historically correct and is Luo Guanzhong’s fictional creation. However, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is so popular that almost everyone growing up in China will recognize the story and the characters.

¹¹³ Holland Cotter, “Art That’s A Dragon With Two Heads” *The New York Times* (December 13, 1998). Accessed February 7, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/13/arts/art-that-s-a-dragon-with-two-heads.html>.

and Xu Bing in New York.”¹¹⁴ Lin argues that, rather than being aggressive against the United States, Cai’s work was reactive to “many anti-China theories and actual threats from the West,” and Cai was being a globalist rather than a nationalist.¹¹⁵ Chen Danqing also spoke highly of this work in the review mentioned above. The contradictory reading of the same work shows that, when the Western press questions Cai’s nationalist ideologies, China actually supports Cai. In other words, Cai’s works didn’t conform to Western ideologies, and the Western press hasn’t always come to his support as to Ai Weiwei.

Cai’s attitude to the West is similarly critical. While Ai blindly believes in the freedom and fairness in the Western press, Cai saw the absurdity and its power structure more clearly. Cai argues that, “Western societies have compassion for non-Western artists as long as they make a critique of the culture or government of their country of origin.”¹¹⁶ In other words, Cai realizes that, when Chinese artists don’t openly identify with Western ideologies and criticize their own government, they would not get the same exposure and endorsement in the Western press. Cai went on to elaborate that “a truly pluralistic culture will take form the day Western nations accept that other nations will challenge them,” implying that the harsh comments his work received was due to the intolerance of Western culture towards other culture; he also accused the United States for being the one borrowing arrows from the enemies, as the United States “used China in order to surround the USSR.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, rather than conforming to Western ideologies, Cai aligned himself with China.

¹¹⁴ Lin, “Globalism or Nationalism,” 282-285.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Fei and Cai, “To Dare to Accomplish Nothing,” 130.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 130.

To sum up, although Cai mainly operates oversea in the United States now and his works demonstrate enough exotic elements, he didn't identify with Western ideologies or didn't embrace popular artistic practices in the contemporary international art world. Unlike Ai, Cai rarely makes any controversial comments against China, which is more interesting to the press. As a result, while Cai did enjoy a relatively high status in the art world, he was only an artist and not a celebrity often mentioned in the non-art society.

Zhou Chunya

Although Cai Guo-Qiang doesn't openly criticize the Chinese government and identify with Western ideologies, after all he still operates within the Western contemporary art circle and was inevitably influenced by the environment. While Cao didn't identify with Joseph Beuys, many of his art works show the tendency of being Conceptual Art, and most of his art works are spectacular installation art, a popular trend in the current art world. In addition, Cai's work still satisfies Western viewers' demands for exotic Chinese elements, whether it is a dragon symbol or it uses dynamites. On the contrary, Zhou Chunya takes several steps further from the stereotypical image of a contemporary Chinese artist. Not only does he operate mainly in China and concede to the Chinese surveillance and restrictions, but he also doesn't practice Conceptual art at all. The Chinese element hidden in his paintings is also almost undetectable.

Born in 1955 in Chongqing, China, Zhou Chunya experienced the same China as Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang. As an educated young teenager, he participated in the "Shang Shan Xia Xiang[Young People Goes to Poor Areas]" Movement led by the Chinese government.¹¹⁸ In his early artistic careers, he mainly focused on recording his

¹¹⁸ This movement started in 1966 and ended in 1977, which corresponded to the Cultural Revolution. Although it was not originated from the Cultural Revolution, it was certainly boosted by the Cultural Revolution. The idea

real life experience and feelings as a “Zhi Qing[Educated Youth].”¹¹⁹ Returning from the rural areas, he attended and graduated from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 1982, where he systematically learned about block printings and oil paintings. He graduated from the Gesamthochschule in Kassel, Germany and studied art. In contrast to many of his peer artists who went abroad and stayed there, after graduation Zhou immediately returned to China and started working in China as an artist until now.

Zhou gained extreme commercial and artistic success in China. One painting from his iconic *Green Dog* series, *Green Dog No.3*, was sold for roughly a million dollars by Sotheby’s Hong Kong in 2013. In the year of 2012, the net turn volume of Zhou’s work reached 4.7 billion Chinese Yuan, making him the most expensive living artist of that year. In the same list, Xu Bing was ranked 66 and Cai Guo-Qiang 80.¹²⁰ Although commercial success is not the only parameter for a great artist, at least it is reasonable to say that Zhou is well-known and influential in Chinese contemporary art market. In addition, Zhou has been invited to multiple museums for group and solo exhibitions in China. In 2010, Shanghai Zhou Chunya Art Institute was established in suburban Shanghai, which is the first Art Institute named and operated by an individual artist. It proves that Zhou’s artistic accomplishment is widely acknowledged in China. His talent and fame are also recognized by other artists. For instance, Zhang Xiaogang, another oil painter active in the international art world, said that Zhou always maintained the passion

has started in the 1950s, and the movement intended to decrease the differences between cities and rural areas by assigning educated young people to under-developed areas so that they can learn the diligence and perseverance of poor farmers and also help farmers gain latest technology and scientific information. The assignment also decreased the unemployment rate of young people in the cities and dismissed the Red Guardian. However, many people were forced to go to rural areas and lost the opportunity to have further education.

¹¹⁹ “Zhi Qing” is an abbreviated form for “Zhi Shi Qing Nian,” which translated to Educated Youth.

¹²⁰ “2013 Hurun Art List,” *Hurun Report*. Accessed March 23, 2017.

<http://www.hurun.net/CN/HuList.aspx?nid=4>.

and curiosity to life and art, and that his art reflects his personality.¹²¹ Li Xiaoshan, the Vice President of Hunan Designer Association, refers to Zhou as one of the best living Chinese artists.¹²²

While Zhou is successful and well-known in China, rarely any major survey books published in the United States in contemporary Chinese art will mention him as an important figure. One of the few books listing his name as one of the major artists of contemporary Chinese art is *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West* edited by Wu Hung. In the book, Jonathan Goodman writes “Zhou Chunya: Heading Neither West Nor East,” in which Goodman describes Zhou as an artist living in the dichotomy of Chinese and Western art traditions.¹²³ By analyzing some of Zhou’s series including the rock series and *Green Dog* series, Goodman argues that his “style evidences a thoroughgoing understanding of Western, or more particularly German, neo-expressionism.”¹²⁴ While recognizing that the internal philosophy and inspirations of Zhou’s paintings are usually related to his experience as a Chinese, Goodman didn’t mention any stylistic Chinese elements in Zhou’s works. In other words, for Goodman, if not for many other critics and scholars, Zhou appears more like a Western painter than a Chinese painter.

Goodman holds a reasonable observation. Zhou’s current aesthetics was developed and established mostly when he was studying in Germany, when Expressionism just

¹²¹ Xiaogang Zhang, “Shi Ren Tan Zhou Chunya[Ten People Talks about Zhou Chunya,” 99 Art News reprinted from *New Weekly* (January 15, 2018). Accessed March 3, 2017. http://news.99ys.com/news/2008/0125/9_54205_1.shtml.

¹²² Xiaoshan Li, “Shi Ren Tan Zhou Chunya[Ten People Talks about Zhou Chunya,” 99 Art News reprinted from *New Weekly* (January 15, 2018). Accessed March 3, 2017. http://news.99ys.com/news/2008/0125/9_54205_1.shtml.

¹²³ Jonathan Goodman, “Zhou Chunya: Heading Neither West Nor East” in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2001). 291-300.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

quitted the mainstream and Neo-expressionism was flourishing. Therefore, unlike other Chinese artists who went to the United States and were strongly influenced by Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol, Zhou was influenced by these German genres. Before he went to Germany, he was attracted to Vassily Kandinsky [Fig.23]; at the time when he went to Germany, Neo-Expressionism was developing furiously and he was struck by its vitality. In his interview with Su Xianting, Zhou repetitively mentioned Georg Baselitz as his major influence [Fig.24].¹²⁵ Baselitz's strong and spiritual color influenced Zhao's later works, including his famous *Green Dog* series [Fig.25]. According to Zhou, the color green was not plotted before he started painting. He started painting a black dog and coincidentally dropped some green paints onto the canvas, and suddenly wanted to try it with some bright green, resulting in a completely green dog.¹²⁶ The idea of using color that reflected the instant state of mind and emotions is similar to Kandinsky's idea that color alone can convey strong emotions, as "these feelings[as parallels of the colors] are only the material expressions of the soul."¹²⁷

Moreover, Zhou didn't make the Chinese element in his work explicit. While the *Peach Blossoms* series does relate to a long Chinese tradition of praising peach blossoms in poems and drawings, not all Western audiences will recognize the link; the *Green Dog* series was even less "Chinese" as Zhou depicts dogs of western breeds. The odd and arbitrary combination of the green and pink ink on the dog recalls Georg Baselitz's bold use of bright colors in his drawings rather than any traditional Chinese artistic practice.

Although earlier in his life he recorded experiences as an Educated Youth during the

¹²⁵ Su Xianting and Zhou Chunya, "Zhou Chun Ya Fang Tan Lu[Interview with Zhou Chunya]," *Artron* (December 1, 2010). Accessed February 17, 2017. <http://artist.artron.net/20101201/n137264.html>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Vassily Kandinsky, "The Language of Form and Colour" in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael Sadlier (Waiheke Island: Floating Press, 2008).

Cultural Revolution and the views in the Tibet Autonomous Region, his early works were not fully documented or carefully preserved, and the style of these paintings are still more Western than Chinese [Fig.26]. Goodman, as mentioned earlier, sees Zhou's paintings as "international in style and address an international audience."¹²⁸

Nevertheless, it is inaccurate to accuse Zhou for abandoning the Chinese heritage. In fact, among many of his peers including Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang, Zhou is actually the artist who applies the techniques and ideas of the Chinese literati painting the most extensively and deeply. Although he never studied traditional Chinese painting systematically, in the early 1990s, he started to imitate the brushstrokes and textures of Chinese literati paintings mostly by Huang Binhong [1865-1955][Fig.27] and Zhu Da [1626-1705][Fig.28].¹²⁹ Zhou quickly picked up some elements in these literati landscape paintings. In his most recent *Peach Blossom* series, Zhou uses a composition familiar in many traditional Chinese paintings, and the brushstrokes on flowers also comes from traditional Chinese practices [Fig.29].

Among Zhou's many series, his early *Rock* series best represents all the above characteristics. One of the representative works in this series is *Rock Shaped Up* [1993][Fig.30] created in 1993. At first glance, the bold, bizarre and surreal color reminds people again of German Neo-Expressionism. The large blocks of blue, green and earthy red represents emotional impression rather than natural colors. However, the arrangement of the rocks is very similar to traditional Chinese rockery in a garden or in a miniature landscape bonsai. Painting man-made rockery to avoid excessive travelling and to practice one's drawing skills was a popular practice in ancient China, and many literati

¹²⁸ Goodman, "Zhou Chunya: Heading Neither West nor East," 300

¹²⁹ Both Huang Binghong and Zhu Da(aka. Ba Da Shan Ren) are important masters in traditional Chinese paintings, and both of them specialized in painting landscape, flowers and birds.

landscape paintings are based upon man-made rockery rather than real scenes. In addition, underlying the bright colors, the textures and brushstrokes of the rock and surrounding bamboos clearly came from traditional Chinese painting. Therefore, *Rock Shaped Up* embodies both German Neo-expressionism and Chinese traditions, while the former more obvious and the later almost undetectable without close inspection. Compared to Ai and Cai who makes the Chinese elements evident in their works but Western influences subtle, Zhou goes far from the stereotype for a contemporary Chinese artist.

If Zhou's artistic practices don't satisfy Western viewers' curiosity for exoticism, his political stances towards China are even less radical and less satisfying for the West. Zhou was more attracted to the formal beauty rather than the concepts or stories behind art works. In an interview with *Xian Dai Yi Shu* [Modern Art], Zhou admitted that he was never interested in telling a story through art; he was more interested in color and modeling and was very emotional in making art.¹³⁰ In other words, Zhou was more interested in making aesthetically pleasing and emotionally powerful art rather than making art for political changes. In the time when most contemporary artists, including Ai Weiwei, speak out their ideological concerns and become activist artists, Zhou looked outdated and less radical. In addition, Zhou consistently worked in China under the inspection and restraints of the Chinese government. Although Zhou openly disagreed with painting political propaganda art, arguing that these art can never be good when the artists don't personally know or fully endorse the leaders, he rarely commented or criticized the governance of the Chinese Communist Party.¹³¹ While it is impossible to

¹³⁰ Zhou Chunya and Xian Dai Yi Shu/Modern Art, "Charm of Tradition: A Conversation with Zhou Chunya," *Xian Dai Yi Shu/Modern Art*, Vol. 01(2002). Accessed January 5, 2017. <http://www.cqvip.com/read/read.aspx?id=12474882#>.

¹³¹ Su and Zhou, "An Interview with Zhou."

know if Zhou secretly disagrees and opposes the Chinese Communist Party, it surely doesn't bother him so much as he has to leave for another country. In addition, Goodman also points out that Zhou always refer to himself as a Chinese artist rather than an international or a Western artist.¹³² Zhou was far from a radical activist compared to Ai.

Although there are many profound Chinese elements in Zhou's art works, as pointed out before, these connections are too implicit to be noticed by a common Western viewer. These nuances are hard to explain to someone who never studied Chinese paintings. On the contrary, the Chinese elements in Ai and Cai's works are explicit and well-known to Western consumers. As Zhou didn't openly conform to the Western ideologies, embrace Western art practices, or demonstrate sufficient exoticism, he was overlooked by the international art arena for a long time.

¹³² Goodman, "Zhou Chunya: Heading Neither West nor East," 300.

Conclusion

Comparing Ai Weiwei, Zhou Chunya and Cai Guo-Qiang's careers and levels of popularity, one will notice that a Chinese artist's success in the international art world depends on one's artistic practices, educational history and even their political stances. On one hand, Ai identifies most with Western political systems and ideologies, was influenced by conceptual art and installation art, and made the Chinese elements obvious in his works. These characteristics satisfied the Western desire for a Chinese activist artist. On the other hand, neither Cai nor Zhou rebelled against the Chinese central government as furiously and radically as Ai did, making them less favorable to the popular media in the West.

There are of course many other factors that contribute to an artist's reputation and fame. For instance, Ai actively engaged with his admirers and general art lovers through twitter and Weibo (before it was shut down by the Chinese government), and was known as the "Twitter Bodhisattva."¹³³ His twitters and posts have been compiled and some critics argue that his social media is part of his artwork. In contrast, neither Cai nor Zhou enthusiastically popularize themselves through social media, and neither of them regularly communicate online with non-art audiences about their political requests or insights. The public might thus feel more connected and closer to Ai than to Cai and Zhou, which contributed to Ai's fame as the most popular and well-known Chinese celebrity artist even to someone not interested in contemporary art. In addition, while Ai speaks English fluently, Cai didn't speak English although he now mainly operates in the United States, and Zhou is still based in China. The language barrier might also limit Cai

¹³³ Girogio Strafella and Daria Berg, " "Twitter Bodhisattva': Ai Weiwei's Media Politics," *ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW* 39, no. 1 (2015): 138-57.

and Zhou from accessing an international audience who use English as the primary language.

How important is English to an artist from a non-English speaking country working internationally? In the current era when more and more people spend increasing time on social media, how can artists take advantage of the new platform? Due to the limit of time and volume, the differences above cannot be fully discussed in this paper. However, Ai, Zhou and Cai's different attitudes towards social media and the English language reflected their political stances. While Ai wants to speak out his political request and seeks support and political asylum from a Western country; Cai has a more distant relationship with Western countries and media; and Zhou works primarily in China. In other words, the ostensible differences among Ai, Zhou and Cai are all rooted in their different attitudes towards Chinese and Western ideologies, which resulted in their different reception in the West.

Today's art world is certainly more inclusive and does a better job for presenting non-Western art than the art world in the 1990s did. However, when the art world celebrates international artists from different continents or different cultures, it is not actually celebrating their indigenous culture or their own political and social background. It is still talking about the same package of Western ideologies, and it is still celebrating the dominating Western standard. Non-Western artists are still expected to behave according to the stereotype set by Western viewers and critics. Among many non-Western artists, Chinese artists sometimes face another challenge because of the huge political and ideological differences between the West and China. Those who

embrace Western ideologies usually gain more sympathy and exposure than those who still identify with Chinese values.

In “In the ‘Heart of Darkness’ ,” Oguibe argues that multiple centers and timelines should be established for non-Western cultures, so that non-Western artists can be evaluated from a non-Western and less biased perspective. However, in addition to the difficulty of having a discourse with multiple timelines, this suggestion is also less useful when the globe has truly become a “village” where information are shared among everyone. What should be reformed and abandoned so that non-Western artists are treated fairly is the idea of exoticism and the immediate response to link anything with recent or historical central political issues. These two ideas disregard and distort artists’ own artistic inspiration and intention behind their art works.

Figures

Figure 1.

Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010. Porcelain. Overall Display Dimensions Variable.

Temporary displayed at the Unilever Series, Tate Modern. Tate Modern, London.

Image source:

<http://www.aiweiweiseeds.com/works/100-tons-sunflower-seeds-unique/exhibition-the-unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>.

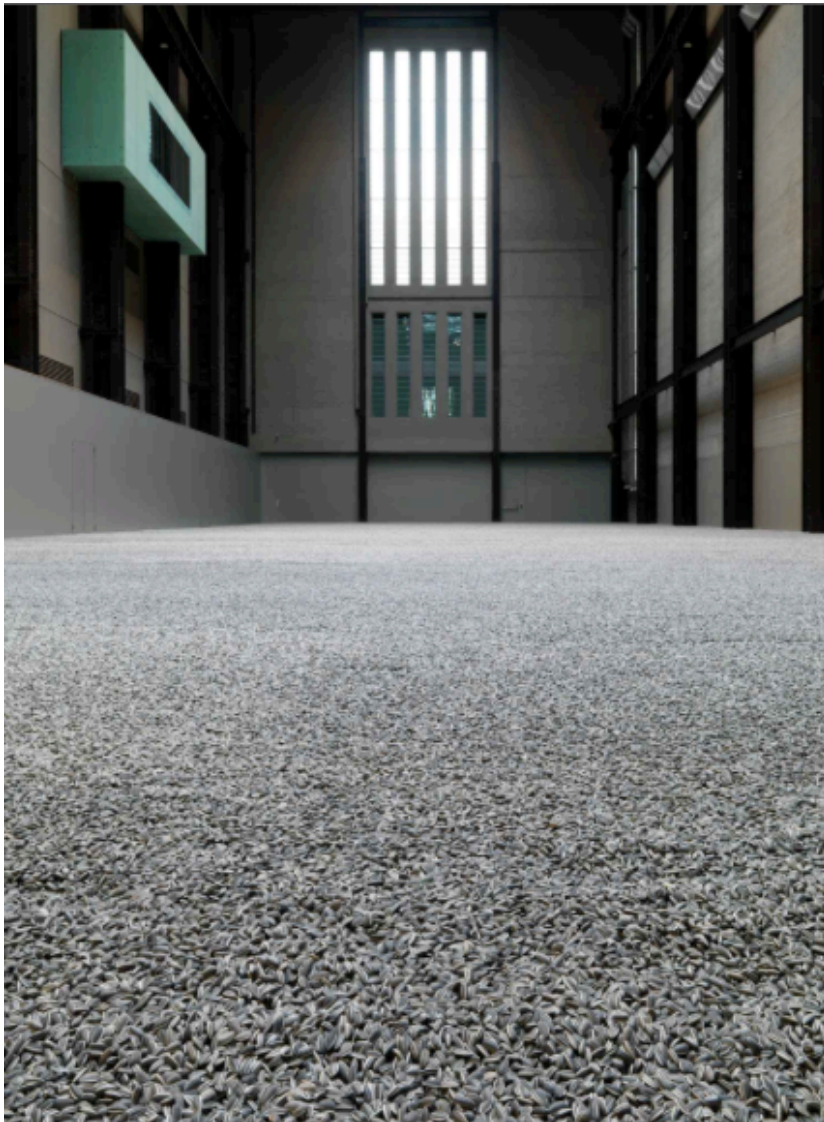


Figure 2

Ai Weiwei, *At the Museum of Modern Art*, 1987. Photograph. the *New York Photographs* series 1983–93, Collection of the artist. Andy Warhol artwork © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

Image source: <http://www.warhol.org/AndyWarholAiWeiwei/>



Figure 3

Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995. 3 black and white prints. Each 148*121 cm. Collection of the artist.

Image source: <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/ai-weiwei-beginners-guide>.



Figure 4

Mao Zedong photographed reading newspaper with a porcelain cup.

Image source: <http://baike.baidu.com/pic/红色官窑>

[/2673044/987143/4bd1e803b46b831f3812bbf4?fr=lemma&ct=cover#aid=987143&pic=4bd1e803b46b831f3812bbf4](http://baike.baidu.com/pic/红色官窑/2673044/987143/4bd1e803b46b831f3812bbf4?fr=lemma&ct=cover#aid=987143&pic=4bd1e803b46b831f3812bbf4).



Figure 5

Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Wood folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of "chair,"
Chair 32 3/8*14 7/8*20 7/8", photographic panel 36*24 1/8", text panel 24*30". Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Image source:

https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/joseph-kosuth-one-and-three-chairs-1965.



Figure 6

Marcel Duchamp, *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy*, 1921, replica 1964. Wood, metal, marble, cuttlefish bone, thermometer and glass. Unconfirmed: 114*220*160 mm. Tate, London.

Image source:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-why-not-sneeze-rose-selavy-t07508>.



Figure 7

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*, 1852-1859. Oil on canvas glued to wood. 1.08*1.10 m. Louvre Museum, Paris.

Image source: <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/turkish-bath>.



Figure 8

Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, 1907. Oil on canvas. 96 in*92 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Image source: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79766?locale=en>.



Figure 9

Propaganda image of Mao Zedong. The text reads: “Chairman Mao is the red Sun in our heart.”

Image source: <http://m.052k.com/read/3996197274/>.



Figure 10

Tobias Rehberger, *7 Ends of the World*, 2003. 222 glass lamps, bulbs, mountings and computer unit. Dimensions variable. Magasin III, Sweden.

Image source:

<https://www.magasin3.com/en/artwork/7-ends-of-the-world-2/multimedia-15008-img-2/>.



Figure 11

Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait Dedicate to Leon Trotsky*, 1937. Oil on Masonite. 30*24 in.

National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C..

Image source: <https://nmwa.org/works/self-portrait-dedicated-leon-trotsky>.



Figure 12

Jeff Koons, *Puppy*, 1992. Stainless steel, soil and flowering plants. 12.4*8.3*9.1 m.

Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, Bilbao.

Image source: <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/48>.



Figure 13

Richard Serra, '7', 2011. Extending 80 feet. Museum of Islamic Art Park, Doha, Qatar.

Image source: <http://www.qm.org.qa/en/project/7-richard-serra>



Figure 14

El Anatsui, *Intermittent Signals*, 2009. Found aluminum and copper wire. 132*140 in.

The Broad, Los Angeles.

Image source: <http://www.thebroad.org/art/el-anatsui/intermittent-signals>



Figure 15

Jimmie Durham, *Malinche*, 1988-1992. Guava, pine branches, oak, snakeskin, polyester bra soaked in acrylic resin and painted gold, watercolor, cactus leaf, canvas, cotton cloth, metal, rope, feathers, plastic jewelry, glass eye. 177*60*89 cm. Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK), Ghent, Belgium.

Image source:

https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2017/jimmie-durham-at-the-center-of-the-world/#gallery_18d380c91e000867dab9fed34de9af4423aaa957

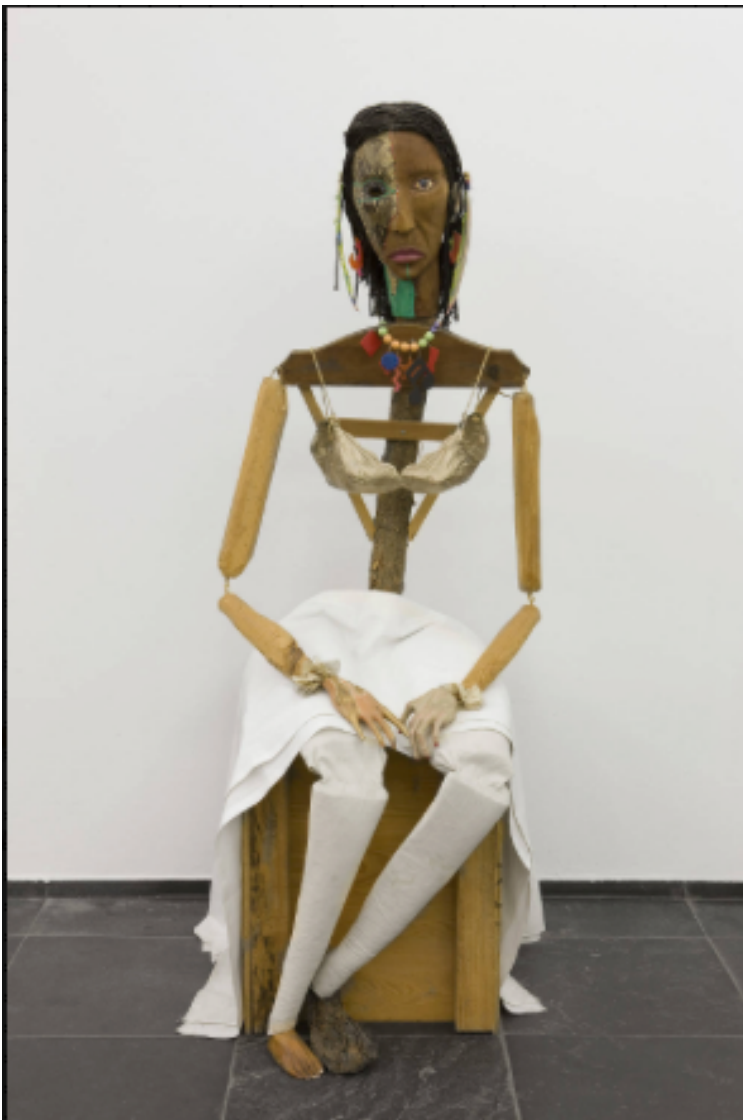


Figure 16

Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale*, 2007. Photographs of some of the 1001 Chinese visitors. Slought, Philadelphia.

Image source: https://slought.org/resources/fairytale_project.



Figure 17

Cai Guo-Qiang, *The Elixir of Immortality*, 1994. Photographs of on-site performance.

Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo.

Image source: <http://www.caiguoqiang.com/projects/elixir-immortality>.

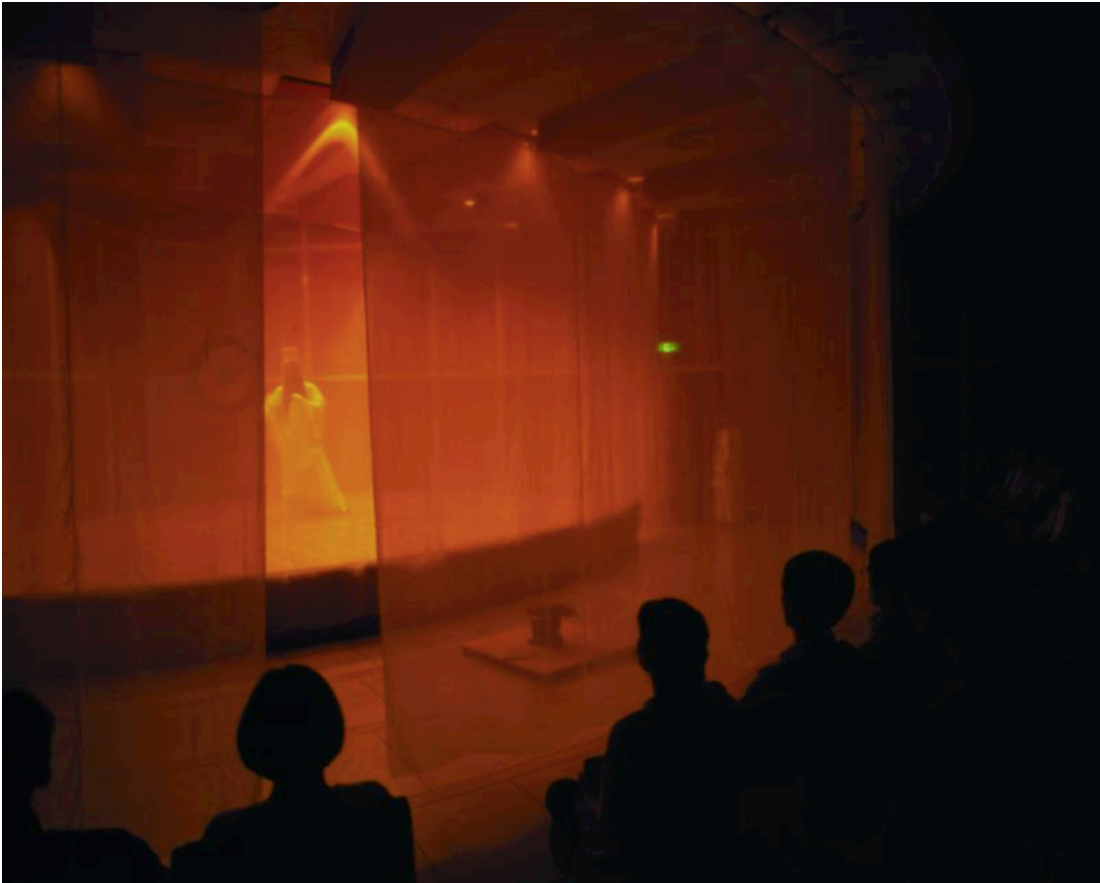


Figure 18

Cai Guo-Qiang, *Cultural Melting Bath: Project for the 20th Century*, 1997. Wood, rock and bathtub. Dimensions variable. Queens Museum of Art, New York City.

Image source:

<http://www.caiguoqiang.com/projects/cultural-melting-bath-projects-20th-century-1997-queens-ny-usa>.



Figure 19

Cai Guo-Qiang, *Self-Portrait: A Subjugated Soul*, 1985/1989. Gunpowder and oil on canvas. 167*118 cm. Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

Image source: <https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/early-works>.



Figure 20

Cao Guo-Qiang, *Venice Rent Collection Courtyard*, 1999. Art work not extant. First realized June 1999 at Venice Biennale, Venice.

Image source: <https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/installations-2/>



Figure 21

Zhao Shutong et al., *Shou Zu Yuan*[*Rent Collection Courtyard*], 1965. Clay. Group sculptures. Dayi Liushi Manorial Museum, Sichuan, China.

Image source: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_477809ad01017ig0.html.



Figure 22

Cai Guo-Qiang, *Borrowing Your Enemies' Arrows*, 1998. Wood boat, canvas sail, arrows, metal, rope, Chinese flag, and electric fan. Boat approximately 152.4*720*230 cm, each arrow approximately 62 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Image source: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81348>.



Figure 23

Vassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation*, 1914. Watercolor and pencil on paper. 35.6*44.8 in.

Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Image source: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/33718?locale=en>.



Figure 24

Georg Baselitz, *Rebell*, 1965. Oil on canvas. 162.7*130.2 cm. Tate, London.

Image source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/baselitz-rebel-t03442>.



Figure 25

Zhou Chunya, *Green Dog No.3*, 2007. Prints and multiples, Siebdruck. 120*80 cm.

Artchina Gallery, Hamburg.

Image source: <http://www.artchina-gallery.de/index.php?id=1205&L=2#>.



Figure 26

Zhou Chunya, *New Generation Tibetan*, 1980. Oil on canvas. 149.3*198.4 cm. Christie's, Hong Kong.

Image source:

<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/zhou-chunya-b-1955-new-generation-5751428-details.aspx>.



Figure 27

Huang Binhong, *An Autumn Day*, 1942. Ink on paper. 85*37.8 cm. Christie's, London.

Image source: <http://www.comuseum.com/painting/masters/huang-binhong/>.



Figure 28

Zhu Da (Bada Shanren), *Jackdaw Bird on an Old Tree*, year unclear. Hanging scroll, ink on paper. 178.5*91.5 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

Image source: <http://www.dpm.org.cn/shtml/117/@/8192.html?query=八大山人>.



Figure 29

Zhou Chunya, *Peach Blossom*, 2010. Oil on canvas. 279.5*197.5 cm. Sotheby's, Hong Kong.

Image source:

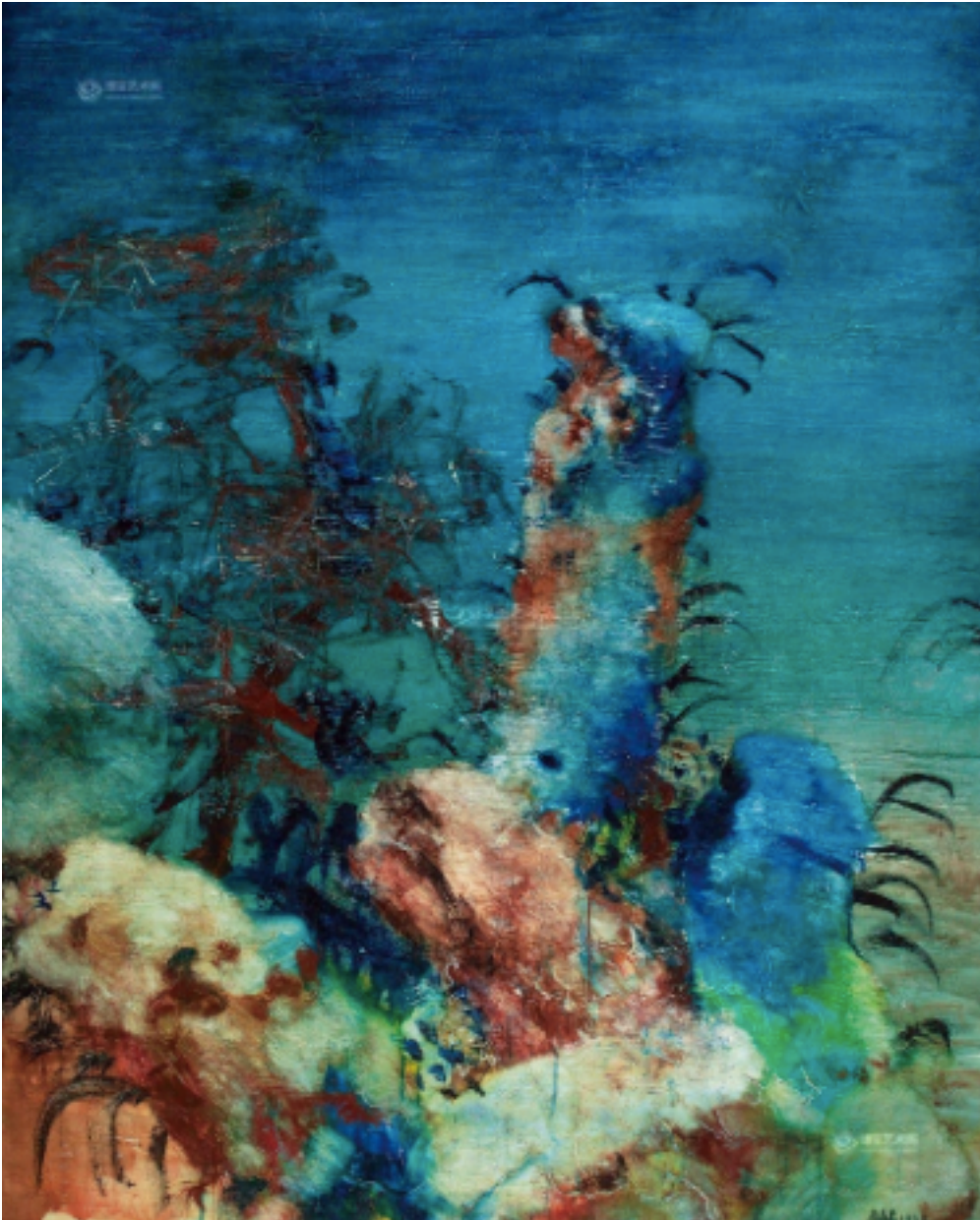
<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/beijing-modern-contemporary-chinese-art-cn0015/lot.20.html>.



Figure 30

Zhou Chunyu, *Xing Zhuang Xiang Shang De Shi Tou* [Rock Shaped Up], 1993. Oil on canvas. 162*130.5 cm. Ravenel International Art Group, Taipei.

Image source: <http://auction.artxun.com/paimai-96238-481188226.shtml>.



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