Transexperience and Chinese Experimental Art, 1990–2000

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SUMMARY

This dissertation focuses on Chinese artists who migrated to the West (Australia, the United States, and France) during the late eighties and early nineties. Their work bears a number of similarities despite settlement in different cultures, most notable amongst these is a reinterpretation of Chineseness. The introduction sets out and examines the theoretical explanations for this interest in China in spite of an absence of nearly a decade. Ideas such as diaspora, exile, and travel are the main focus, with particular attention to the way that a duality tends to emerge in this discourse between the past and present or homeland and site of settlement.

In place of such ideas, this dissertation introduces the concept of transexperience developed by the late Chinese artist Chen Zhen for his own practice, but it is one, I would argue, that can be applied to the artistic expression of all of the overseas artists discussed in this dissertation. The main body of the thesis is devoted to developing this idea of transexperience in relation to Chinese artists who settled in Sydney, New York, and Paris. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that transexperience encourages a more fluid perception of the relationship to the homeland, not only positing it in the past but also the present. This allows us to interpret the work of Chinese artists as an evolving identity that parallels their changing perception of China from the distance of living in the West. The structure of this dissertation, devised in terms of locations, is also relevant to my argument that the site of settlement is a significant determinant in the development of artistic expressions of overseas Chinese artists. For this reason, Chapter One is devoted to a discussion of mainland Chinese artists, which provides a counterpoint to the work of overseas Chinese artists. The development of Chinese experimental art during the eighties is included in this chapter because it was a period that influenced all of the artists in this dissertation and is also cited as the birth of contemporary art in China. A brief conclusion explores some of the most recent developments in the relationships between overseas Chinese artists and their homeland as seen in more frequent travel back, the exhibition of their work (which would have been impossible only a few years ago), and official invitations to represent China in international exhibitions.

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The genesis of this dissertation developed alongside my interest in Asian-Australian art. In the mid nineties I worked with a small group of Asian-Australian artists to establish the non profit contemporary art space Gallery 4A, later named the Asia-Australia Arts Centre, in Sydney’s Chinatown district. It was from working closely with many of these artists in preparing exhibitions of their work (including Lindy Lee, William Yang, Guan Wei, and Ah Xian) and my visits to China that inspired me to begin a dissertation focussed on experimental Chinese art. Undertaken at a time when few written sources on this subject existed, let alone in libraries, I owe much to those who encouraged my research. Foremost in her support was my supervisor Doctor Helen Grace whose advice was always enthusiastic and supportive. Doctor Ien Ang at the Department of Cultural Histories and Futures was also another source of advice. The University of Western Sydney, which awarded me a scholarship to undertake this degree as well as assistance to travel to China, made this dissertation possible in the first place. I am also indebted to the artists and curators I interviewed countless times and spent time with over the course of the last five years including Gu Dexin, Wang Youshen, Li Xianting, Liao Wen, and Xu Tan in China; Guan Wei, Fan Dong Wang, and Ah Xian in Sydney; Cai Guo Qiang, Xu Bing, and Wenda Gu in New York; Fei Dawei, Huang Yongping, Chen Zhen, and Hou Hanru in Paris. Perhaps the most untiring in his belief in me was Doctor Benjamin Genocchio to whom I am indebted. My parents James and Deirdre Chiu have always been gracious in their support of my interest in art from a young age. For this I am grateful.
INTRODUCTION

**Transexperience and Chinese Experimental Art, 1990–2000**

So the act of locating an overseas Chinese’s cultural antecedents in the traditions of China contains at least three question marks: Which tradition? Which strains of tradition? Why that tradition instead of all others? Chinese tradition is richly varied, contradictory and protean. Selected fragments may be used to build a new identity, but the new identity is not the old one, and to claim that it is would be a pretence. (Pan, 1999, p. 23)

“Transexperiences” also represents a concept of art. This is not a pure conceptual concept: rather it is an impure experiential concept, a mode of thinking and method of artistic creation that is capable of connecting the preceding with the following, adapting itself to changing circumstances, accumulating year–in–year–out experiences, and being triggered at any instant. (Chen, 1998, n.p.)

You can understand my [art] works if you make an effort to detach yourself from the material or subject and concentrate on the underlying order that runs through them. The order and attitude never change, while everything else does. It is a matter of looking for the absence of change through a thousand changes. (Cai, in Fei, 2000, p. 134)

**Chinese Experimental Art: A Field of Study**

Over the past decade Chinese experimental art has enjoyed an enormous amount of international attention. Large–scale national survey exhibitions have been staged at a broad range of

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* All transliterations from Chinese to English are in the Pinyin conversion rather than Wade–Giles and all Chinese family names are given first as is the Chinese convention unless preference has been shown otherwise. The most obvious example is Wenda Gu, who since migrating to the United States prefers the Western convention of family name last.

1 The term *experimental art* is used throughout this thesis as a way of distinguishing a series of art movements and practices that evolved largely independent from, and at times in conflict with, government institutions and infrastructure such as art schools, museums, and galleries as well as artists associations. This alternative art system developed from the somewhat uneven political and economic freedoms begun in the eighties and continued in the nineties with greater momentum.
contemporary art galleries and museums in Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia. In 1993, alone, exhibitions such as “China Avant–Garde: Counter Currents in Art and Culture” at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, “China’s New Art, Post–1989” at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in Hong Kong and “Mao Goes Pop: China Post–1989” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney took place, while mainland Chinese artists were represented for the first time at the Venice Biennale. These exhibitions can be seen as the first wave of interest in Chinese experimental art in Europe, Asia, and Australia. A second wave occurred in the United States later in the decade, with exhibitions such as “Inside Out: New Chinese Art” organised jointly by Asia Society in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1998 and “Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century” at the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art in Chicago in 1999. Coinciding with this second wave of interest, Chinese artists were featured prominently in a curated exhibition in the Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1999. By the end of the decade a market for Chinese contemporary art had been established, mainly in the United States (New York), with experimental Chinese artists shown at commercial galleries either exclusively devoted to Chinese and contemporary Asian art or at other contemporary galleries. For example, exhibitions by artists such as Xu Bing and Huang Yong Ping at Jack Tilton Gallery, Zhang Peili at Max Protetch Gallery and Feng Mengbo at Holly Solomon Gallery indicated a rise in interest in Chinese art. Other galleries such as Chinese Contemporary in London, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, Chambers Fine Arts, and Goedhuis Contemporary in New York focus on contemporary Chinese art almost exclusively.

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3 For an account of the history of Chinese representation at the Venice Biennale, see Dal Lago, 2002.

4 This second focus on Chinese artists saw the inclusion of overseas Chinese artists Chen Zhen, Wang Du, and Cai Guo Qiang as well as mainland artists Ai Weiwei, Fang Lijun, Zhang Peili, Qiu Shihua, Xie Nanxing, Ma Liuming, Wang Xingwei, Lu Hao, Zhao Bandi, and Zhou Tiehai.

5 Additional indications of the rise of the market are evident from auction houses. One of the most significant sales of
The increased international attention devoted to Chinese experimental art during the nineties was not restricted to exhibitions. Critical writing on Chinese art was published in magazines such as *Art Asia Pacific, Artnews, Art in America,* and *Flash Art,* while many essays were published in exhibition catalogues. Indeed, one of the most substantial sources of information about Chinese artists are exhibition catalogues from the period. The most significant documents on Chinese art from the eighties were two exhibition catalogues published in 1993: *China’s New Art, Post–1989* at Hong Kong Arts Centre and *China Avant–Garde: Countercurrents in Art and Culture* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Both catalogues are now distributed widely and considered important art historical documents for their inclusion of substantial numbers of artists as well as commissioned essays by writers inside and outside China. Another influential catalogue was the 1997 *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties.* This was a smaller publication, but it signalled a departure from the almost exclusive focus on Political Pop and Cynical Realism in the early nineties: curators and writers were beginning to look at Chinese installation and conceptual art. This publication also provided contact details for artists, curators, and writers in China, serving as a guide to the Chinese art world at a time when information was relatively inaccessible to those outside of China.

The exhibition catalogue for *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* provided a similar resource. As one of the first major American publications to address this subject, *Inside Out* provided essays on the art of greater China, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China and focussed on works

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from the nineties with particular emphasis on what the exhibition curator Gao Minglu termed “apartment art.” Another significant document was *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* written by the Chinese scholar Wu Hung. This was one of the first substantial books on the subject written by a single author and provided an in–depth analysis of a number of Chinese and overseas Chinese artists work. According to Wu, the artists included in the exhibition were fascinated by, in his words, “China’s transformation: the rapid disappearance of the traditional city and its neighbourhoods and the changes in human relationships, lifestyle, taste, and values” (1999, p. 24). Wu describes these artists as representing a “domestic turn” prevalent, in his view, from 1994 onward.

Exhibition catalogues such as *Inside Out* and *Transience* provided some of the most immediate forms of information on Chinese contemporary art. They also responded to recent trends, assisting in the establishment of Chinese experimental art as a field of academic and further curatorial interest. One of the limitations of exhibition catalogues in general, however, is that they limit extensive and contextual analysis beyond the confines of the exhibition theme.

Although these sources form a significant body of scholarship, analysis of Chinese contemporary art remains relatively minimal when compared to the literature surrounding a discussion of Chinese filmmakers and writers. Claire Huot’s *China’s New Cultural Scene* (2000) is a good example, providing a postmodern overview of avant–garde practices including music, literature, film, and the visual arts. Huot devoted one chapter to the visual arts but only as one manifestation of multiple avant–garde practices in China. Chinese filmmakers, and in particular those of the Fifth Generation (*diwudai*) such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, have been the subject of extensive discussions in Jianying Zha’s *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids and Bestsellers are Transforming a Culture* (1995) and Xudong Zhang’s *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant–garde Fiction and the New Chinese Cinema* (1997). Similar to
filmmakers, dissident writers have also benefited from critical discourse. Two expansive anthologies edited by Geremie Barmé and John Minford titled *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (1989) as well as Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin’s *New Ghosts: Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (1992) played an important role in familiarising English–speaking audiences with Chinese writers. A more recent account of some of these writers and other key political leaders in the June Fourth movement who migrated to the West can be found in Ian Buruma’s book *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels From Los Angeles to Beijing* (2001). In fact, writers were frequently the most outspoken in denouncing the Chinese government’s crackdown when they first migrated to Europe and the United States. As a consequence, interest in dissidence focused on writers rather than artists in spite of the fact that art students were some of the most vocal protesters in the June Fourth movement (hereafter called June Fourth) leading up to the violence at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Other significant publications on Chinese contemporary art have emerged in the last two years. Most notably, articles from the website journal [www.chinese-art.com](http://www.chinese-art.com) have been published in books titled *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium* (2000) and *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Present, between East and West* (2001). The importance of these books lies in their translation of articles by Chinese writers since the voices of mainland critics are often missing from discussions of Chinese art outside of China. Expatriate Chinese critic Hou Hanru’s writings over the last decade have also been published under the title *On the Mid–Ground* (2002). This book is useful because it gathers Hou’s texts from different magazines and exhibition catalogues together so that one can see his arguments over the past decade mounted in favour of

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7 Geremie Barmé’s writings provide a detailed account of the reception of Chinese diaspora writers and intellectuals immediately following their migration to the West. See Barmé 1999.

8 The emergence of a number of testimonial accounts of the Cultural Revolution coincided with this interest in dissident writers and artists. One of the most notable was Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1992), which was awarded 1993 Book of the Year in the United Kingdom. Other examples include Canadian Jan Wong’s *Red China Blues: My Long March From Mao to Now* (1996), voted one of Time Magazine’s ten best books in 1996.
the inclusion of Chinese contemporary art in international debates. In 2002, the inaugural issue of
a magazine devoted to Chinese contemporary art titled Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese
Art was published in Taiwan. All these publications have contributed greatly to the accessibility
and knowledge of contemporary Chinese art.

In spite of the emergence of books and magazines devoted to Chinese contemporary art, the focus
remains predominantly on mainland artists with an occasional discussion of those living overseas.
This relative exclusion of overseas Chinese artists from discussions of Chinese art has the effect
of marginalising the specificity of the diasporic experience, seen most notably in an expression of
Chineseness. The lack of specificity found in many accounts of Chinese contemporary art
between Chinese artists residing in mainland China and those in the West is the subject of this
dissertation. In contrast to other studies of Chinese contemporary art that feature mainland and
overseas artists together—and here the main link between them is an identification with
China—this dissertation focuses on overseas artists to explore the similarities and differences
between them as a refraction of Chineseness in a foreign cultural environment through the notion
of transexperience outlined by the Chinese expatriate artist Chen Zhen. More specifically, I
examine how ideas of Chineseness are altered in different contexts through a case study of
Chinese artists from a similar generation (born in the forties and fifties) who migrated at a similar
time (late eighties and early nineties) to a limited number of locations (Sydney, New York, and
Paris). Over a decade has passed since this migration, giving some historical distance and making
possible an evaluation of the common ground linking this dispersed community. By examining
these artists’ work produced over the last decade outside China, this dissertation offers an
opportunity to map the transmutation of Chineseness in different contexts.
A New Beginning: Chinese Art in the Eighties

The eighties are characterised as the first decade of contemporary Chinese art. This was a period when nearly all of the artists discussed in this dissertation were training at art school and had begun to exhibit their work. Academic realism was entrenched within art schools such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts, initially under Soviet influence, from 1952 until 1982, and became less relevant for a younger generation of artists. For younger artists wanting to break from tradition, specifically this state-sanctioned socialist realism, European modernism and American postmodernism were considered new forms of expression to be explored. This was a time of unprecedented artistic fervour and experimentation in modern China, when artists gained access to a range of foreign artistic styles from the increased social, political, and economic freedoms following the Open Door policy initiated in 1979. The cultural production from this decade has been characterised as a “strong impulsive longing for utopia” (Dai 1999, p. 191).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the successive artist groups established between 1984 and 1989. To name only a selection: the Stars, in Beijing (1979); New Figurative, later re-named Southwest Art Group, in Kunming (1985–87); Xiamen Dada, in Xiamen (1985); the Hangzhou Youth Creativity Society, later named the Pond Group, in Hangzhou (1986–1989); and the New Analysts Group, in Beijing (1988–1985). The Stars was best remembered as a radical band of artists led by Huang Rui and Ma Desheng who held an unsanctioned exhibition in a park outside the China Art Gallery in Beijing in 1979. Although most of these artists were the children of high-ranking officials or intellectuals, they were not state artists, nor were most of them trained as artists. When the police closed the Stars exhibition after three days, the artists began a protest at the Democracy Wall that moved to the offices of the Beijing Municipal Party committee under the banner “We mean democracy and artistic freedom!”

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9 This account of The Stars protest is based on Andrews’s (1994) description, but it should be noted that Sullivan’s (1996) account differs slightly stating that the students gathered at the Democracy Wall after, rather than before, the protest at the Municipal offices.
After this first exhibition held by the Stars, other artists began to hold exhibitions to sell their work. Nicholas Jose observed:

In 1985–86, solo shows by unofficial artists were occasional, noteworthy events. News of Lin Chunyan’s show at the old Observatory in April, 1986, was spread by word of mouth. The exhibition was roughly presented, but it was underground work that foreigners with some inside knowledge of China could relate to. A few of the paintings sold, for prices around US$100 or US$200. (1992, p. 54-55)

For the first time since 1949, artists were free to experiment with foreign styles that did not possess a state-sanctioned political dimension. Experimentation with styles based on Impressionism, Cubism, and Dada was significant for a younger generation, with many artists adopting different styles in quick succession. It was almost as if it were a contest of mastery in a style, upon which another style would swiftly be adopted. Examples of this include Zhang Qun and Meng Luding’s surrealism-inspired painting *A New Era: Revelation from Adam and Eve* (1985) and Meng Luding’s *Soccer* (1987). Other works from the same period emulate Western biblical compositions such as Wang Guangyi’s *Big Dolls: Holy Mother and Child* (1988) (fig. 1.1) that depicts a Madonna and child and Ye Yongqin’s *Lost in Thought* (1989) (fig. 1.2) showing Christ with Mary Magdalen. Exhibitions of Western art also began to travel to China. In 1983, exhibitions of Italian Renaissance paintings, surveys of Picasso and Munch as well as French contemporary oil painting were shown. These exhibitions provided an opportunity for Chinese artists to see authentic European works in place of their reproductions in books and magazines.

The proliferation of artistic activity during the eighties makes it difficult to categorise this period especially since it was a national movement with groups of artists banding together to exhibit their work in places as diverse as Hebei, Hunan, Chengdu, Wuhan, Guandong, Lanzhou, Baotou,
and Nanjing. Nevertheless, Tang Qingnian (1991) has identified three main characteristics for the artwork of this period: firstly, a metaphysical tendency; secondly, a focus on spirituality; and thirdly, an interest in anti-art. It was the latter notion of anti-art that appears to be the catch-cry of this period, perhaps embodied in the “China Avant-Garde” exhibition staged at the China Art Gallery in 1989. At the opening of the exhibition, Xiao Lu and Tang Song staged a performance where they shot their artwork with a gun. Officials immediately arrested the artists and closed the exhibition. The “China Avant-Garde” exhibition has assumed a great deal of historical significance because it represented the culmination of a decade of artistic activity. Indeed, the symbol for the exhibition, evident in the banners hung outside the Gallery, was a “no u-turn” traffic sign. The significance of this traffic sign as a symbol of zeitgeist has been described by Zheng Shengtian (1991) as representing the back and forth relationship to tradition adopted by the artists in the exhibition. The mainland artist, Wang Youshen summarises developments in Chinese contemporary art in the following way: “Contemporary art in China really began in 1985, but was formalised with the “China Avant-Garde” exhibition in 1989. Artists who were born in the 1960s are currently the avant-garde.” (Chiu 1996, p. 54)

The “China Avant-Garde” exhibition embodied both the peak and demise of the artistic freedoms of the eighties that came to an abrupt end on 4th June 1989 at Tiananmen Square. In the two years following, artists faced the dubious challenge of operating as “underground artists” in a hostile political environment. John Clark provides a detailed account of this restricted cultural environment, summarising it as government “pressure on art criticism, pressure on artists, pressure on art journalism, and pressure on art teachers” (1992, p. 341). Yet this kind of pressure

10 Wang’s positing the date of 1985 as the beginning of contemporary art in China is corroborated by others such as Tang Qingnian (1991).
11 Rey Chow’s interpretation of the Tiananmen incident takes the form of criticism of the international media. She states that “the demands for the freedom of speech and for an end to bureaucratic corruption [evident at Tiananmen], became the partial or local ‘nodal points’ into which the global media plugged with their own agendas” (1993, p. 96). Chow’s analysis of events argues that the six-week protest at Tiananmen was not just an internal Chinese struggle but also a Western struggle to come to terms with a new China that was played out in the media.
should not be seen in isolation. Within recent Chinese history, for example, periods of liberalization are frequently followed by crackdowns. On 5 April 1976, when mourners for the death of Zhou Enlai laid wreaths and recited poems at the Heroes’ Memorial in Tiananmen Square to protest against the Gang of Four, the police tore down the banners and destroyed the wreaths. A cultural thaw began in 1977 and lasted for two years. In March 1979, the dissident figure Wei Jingsheng was arrested for publicly insisting that Mao’s conception of the Four Modernizations (agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology) could not occur without a fifth modernisation—democracy. This oscillation between periods of liberalization followed by political crackdown show the sometimes unsteady relationship between artists and the state.

Post-Tiananmen: Exhibition Strategies for the Nineties

Although the crackdown that followed the events on 4th June 1989 at Tiananmen Square affected art practices throughout the nineties, government pressure had eased substantially by 1993. This loosening of control was also a consequence of Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 tour to south China, where he visited Guangzhou and the Special Economic Zones close to Macao and Hong Kong. Deng’s speeches reinforced economic reform and encouraged officials to experiment with capitalism and the new market economy. Throughout this decade artists found ways to circumvent government restrictions and interference in their exhibitions. By the mid-nineties, although the mounting of public exhibitions was a rarity, artists sought venues other than museums to show their work. Chinese Contemporary Artists Agenda is a good example of how exhibitions were reconsidered in an inventive fashion. This publication was compiled by Wang Luyan, Wang Youshen, Chen Shaoping, and Wang Jianwei in 1994 and contained hypothetical drawings of installations by over nineteen artists from Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Wuhan.

The publication was in reality another form of exhibition, with the potential for reaching a larger audience within China and abroad because it could be distributed to visiting curators and sent abroad without the difficulty of staging an actual exhibition. The internet was also used as an alternative way of organising exhibitions with fewer opportunities for government interference.\footnote{Websites operating out of Beijing that were active in the late nineties include the now defunct www.chinesegallery.com, www.chinese-art.com, or the current commercial site www.china-avantgarde.com.}

In the mid to late-nineties, artists began to exhibit their work with more frequency. Exhibitions were adapted to the circumstances; they were brief, mostly private, and sometimes in non-conventional spaces. Exhibitions staged at artists’ homes or at studios in the East Village, in Tongxian County on the outskirts of Beijing, were given the name “apartment art” by Chinese critic Gao Minglu. But it didn’t matter that the exhibition wasn’t in the public sphere, since apartments could be raided too. Performance artist Ma Liuming, among others, was arrested at his home during a performance at the East Village in 1994. The authorities were not consistent in their disruption of exhibitions. Artworks were not subjected to censorship all of the time since this depended on the subject of the artwork and location of the exhibition itself. Although there was a general loosening of control over the public sphere at this time, some restrictions remained in place. Tang Di attempts to explain this situation as “No sex. No violence. No politics. No China Art Gallery”\textit{(1997 p.119)}. She also accounts for this more broadly as “Nothing is forbidden. Yet not everything is allowed” \textit{(1997, p. 115)}. One could attribute this uncertainty to the “push and pull” effect of broader societal, governmental, and economic changes within China.

As the country embraced the shift from a Communist, centralised system of production to a consumer-oriented market economy, official responses to artists and the exhibition of their work were frequently assessed on a case by case scenario. Li Xianting describes this in the following way: “It is funny in China; when you drive on the road you can drive as you like. If you break a
rule, then it is fine, but if you are unlucky to be found out, you have to suffer.” (1998, cited in Chiu, p.15)

Deng’s widely espoused dictum “to become rich is glorious,” encouraged consumerism in China, which in turn, installed another set of values that developed autonomously from and sometimes at odds with the state.\(^{14}\) In fact, Gregory B. Lee argues that consumerism accommodates subversion. He comments:

> The pursuit of consumerism as a means of modernisation has been confronted by the seemingly contradictory desire to retain centralised state/party power over cultural consumption. Thus, we have an already hybrid official power itself facilitating the possibilities for cultural hybridisation, and simultaneously enabling the production of a subversive potential. (1996, p. 15)

Experimental art could be considered one such subversion. Evidence of its proliferation during this period can be seen in the formation of artist communities at the Yuan Ming Yuan Artists’ Village northwest of Beijing and subsequently at the East Village in Tongxian County.\(^{15}\) These communities comprised artists from all over China who had broken away from the safe-haven of their work unit, the provision of job security and housing, to become artists in Beijing, the art centre of China for much of the decade. Unsanctioned exhibitions were held at various artists’ studios in these communities. The artist villages formed an unofficial art world that operated relatively independently from the official art world presided over by the Artists Association and the China Art Gallery.

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\(^{14}\) The involvement of entrepreneurs and businessmen in funding and facilitating various exhibitions and galleries offers one good example of this subversion. See Wu 2002.

\(^{15}\) For an account of the development and artists involved in the Yuan Ming Yuan artist community, see Sang 1997, and, for a more recent account of the Tongzhou artists community, see Yang 2001.
Chinese Art as Unofficial and Avant-garde: Perceptions Outside China

The distinction between Chinese official and unofficial art is an important feature of the perception of Chinese art outside China, and one that has had an enormous bearing on overseas artists. Although these terms developed in the eighties, they crystallised in the nineties, especially after 4th June 1989, when restrictions were placed upon what artists, critics, and curators could show in the public sphere. During the eighties, the line between official and unofficial art was less distinct and arts administrators frequently lent their support to younger, experimental artists. A good indication of this was the level of support for students in the rallies at Tiananmen Square in 1989. The creation of the massive Goddess of Democracy sculpture by students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, which came to be the mascot for the students gathered at Tiananmen, was financially supported by The Federation of Beijing University Students. It gave eight thousand yuan towards materials and production. A statement to accompany the statue was also signed by the central academies of arts, crafts, drama, and music, the Beijing film and dance academies, the Academy of Chinese Local Stage Arts, and the Academy of Chinese Music.16

Outside China, experimental art was the preferred art form of international curators—equated with unofficial art. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the employment of 4th June 1989 as a frame of reference for Chinese art exhibitions. Examples included: “New Art From China, Post 1989” in London, “New Art in China, Post 1989” in Vancouver and “Mao Goes Pop: China Post 1989” in Sydney or perhaps obliquely “China June 4, 1990” at P.S. 1 in New York.17 Mainland artists and critics, as well as their overseas peers, sometimes promoted their “unofficial” status

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16 Students in Shanghai had actually used the Statue of Liberty in their protests, but the Beijing students had felt a more Chinese icon needed to be invented and proceeded to sculpt the Goddess of Democracy as a mascot for their protests at Tiananmen in 1989. Gregory B. Lee also draws a parallel between the Statue of Liberty and the Goddess of Democracy, viewing them as interchangeable and ultimately a “symbol of the success of the American ideology.”(1996, p. 241)

when they travelled outside China. But perhaps the most significant “unofficial” style to be recognised outside China was “cynical realism” or “political pop,” terms coined by Li Xianting, one of the curators of the groundbreaking “China Avant-Garde” exhibition at the China Art Gallery in 1989. These painting styles gained recognition from their inclusion in prestigious exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale in 1993. Artists identified with political pop used distinctly Chinese signifiers, such as Wang Jinsong and Zhao Bandi’s use of Tiananmen, Yu Hong’s Red Guards, as well as Yu Youhan and Li Shan’s images of Mao. The figure of Mao in different guises was perhaps the most pervasive iconography of this style. The use of Mao was interpreted by non-Chinese curators as a political critique, reinforcing the “unofficial” status of art in mainland China. Yet cynical realism and political pop also coincided with the Mao cult in China, which was not initiated by authorities but was a spontaneous social development that coincided with the commemoration of Mao’s centenary in 1993. Perhaps one of the most interesting features of the Mao cult was the use of Mao’s figure by both the authorities and unofficial artists for divergent purposes. Geremie Barmé states that the “Chairman was manipulated by diverse groups with totally conflicting interests, even achieving a new popularity with the urban subculture while still maintaining his status as an authoritarian figure” (1996, p. 46). For artists exhibiting outside of China, Mao signified both authoritarian rule and nostalgia.

Although political pop and cynical realism gained recognition outside China they were widely criticised by Chinese critics. Hou Hanru, a Chinese critic and curator living in Paris, questioned whether political pop and cynical realism were valid art movements altogether. He dismissed the artists’ unofficial status, claiming that a “social compromise between official political power and intellectual claims for freedom [was] enacted by replacing the ideological conflicts with

18 For an insightful description of the debates surrounding exiles played out in mainland China and abroad, see Barmé 1999.
19 See Barmé 1996 for a further discussion of the Mao cult.
20 Refer to my discussion of Zhang Hongtu’s work in Chapter Two for the development of this argument.
materialist values” (1994, p. 82-83). Hou saw the veiled criticism of Chinese authority in these paintings as “anti-official propaganda,” satisfying the Western public’s expectation for their own ideological superiority” (1994, p. 82). In short, Hou likened the popularity for Chinese parody to a political agenda that reinforced the division between the First World and Third World. In a similar way, Gregory B. Lee observes the international reception of Chinese poets: “The arrival of the modern Chinese poet on the world stage has coincided with the metanarrative which tells us that Communism is finished” (1996, p. 13). Hou and Lee’s analysis possess a common thread; both refer to an ideological desire to portray Communist China in a state of crisis.

Another reading of the significance of political pop and cynical realism is as a tension between local and international desires within China. Geremie Barmé presents a more equivocal perspective describing these art styles as cynicism “that plays with the tropes of life on the mainland while fixing a gimlet eye on the international art market” (1993–4, p. 71). Barmé acknowledges the role of the international art world as a factor in the production of mainland work but does not disavow local factors. In the nineties, the international art market provided an alternative system of validation as well as financial rewards, which changed the face of contemporary art in China. Reinforcing the influence of an international market further, Dai Jinhua writes “The nineties is a decade of desire rather than a decade of action” (1999, p. 202). Dai’s observation suggests a difference between the eighties and nineties, in which the eighties could be characterised as a somewhat utopian period of political action that culminated at Tiananmen while the nineties saw commercial success being keenly pursued overseas by artists.

If we explore the popularity of political pop and cynical realism outside of China further, one can see a number of similarities between the initial reaction to Russian art in the eighties and Chinese art in the nineties. These artists from Communist countries adopted similar artistic strategies such as the use of images of Communist political leaders (Stalin, Lenin, or Mao) and references to Pop
art. It is precisely these images of different cultural and political systems that served as a point of contrast for Western audiences. Hou Hanru has argued that political pop and cynical realism catered to the West’s desire to see artists from a Communist country criticising their government and thus seeking approval in the West. He maintained that this had the effect of reinforcing Cold War ideology of Western superiority towards Communism. Evidence of this can be found in the paradigm through which Russian and Chinese work was interpreted as taking its cue from the Pop art movement in the United States. The relationship of Pop art to consumerism is also another significant aspect of this cultural comparison between Third World and First World cultures. In the words of Lisa Phillips, Pop Art “validated commercial art and consumer life as high art” (2000, p. 125). The time of Russian perestroika in the early nineties and the Chinese Open Door policy, initiated in 1979, were signals of a growing encounter with consumerism in the modern period by Communist nations. Thus to relate contemporary art developments in Russia and China to Pop Art is also a way of suggesting economic and social change in these countries as seen through an American model of development.

The reception of Chinese art outside the country is frequently mediated by the reviews of exhibitions. Some of the reviews of “Inside Out: New Chinese Art” held at the Asia Society in New York reveal a familiar response to Chinese art in terms of cultural difference.21 More sophisticated reviews acknowledged some of the difficulties of looking at Chinese art from an American perspective. The art critic for the New York Times Holland Cotter stated:

There are problems. Hard-core admirers of the Chinese classical tradition—a tradition entirely about tradition, about transmitting a cultural ideal intact from one generation to the next—are likely to dismiss much of the work out of hand as trendy, irresolute, barely Chinese at all. But anyone coming from deep inside Western contemporary art,

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with its fixation on ceaseless novelty, may find the art uncool for other reasons, seeing, at first glance anyway, only familiar Western styles—Surrealism, Conceptualism and so on—warmed over and, here and there, updated with postmodern tics. (1998a, p. 38)

Cotter’s comments shed light on the problems not only of the reception and understanding of Chinese contemporary art but also the different fields of enquiry that such work straddles, namely traditional Chinese and contemporary Euro-American art. Indeed Chinese contemporary art occupies a difficult space in the United States, where the study of traditional Chinese art is so well developed. Moreover, Cotter’s astute comment draws our attention to the way that museums have essentially been divided into East and West, where scholarship of the East is largely devoted to historical studies.

Another similarity between the reception of Russian and Chinese art outside their respective countries was through ideas of the avant-garde. Exhibitions of Russian and Chinese art in the West have largely focused on experimental art practices. Definitions of the avant-garde explain the role of the artist as a pioneer, innovator, and agitator for change. Peter Bürger (1994) describes the avant-garde as an historical movement of a particular time (the early part of the twentieth century) and place (Europe). Identifying Chinese art as an avant-garde practice places it at odds with these basic tenets of the European avant-garde, which, according to Bürger, must be located in the past. In keeping with Bürger’s theory, the term avant-garde is no longer applicable to Euro-American art practice. What does it mean then, to discuss Chinese contemporary art in terms of avant-garde practices? By applying an historical term to describe current practices in China establishes a linear notion of time where China is positioned as backward in its development. If contemporary Chinese art is considered separate or distinct, as the application of

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the term avant-garde suggests, then its ability to participate in an international sphere is problematised.

On another level, the application of the term avant-garde, as well as Pop art, to Chinese art establishes a tension between the notion of a Western import and a local response. Tuo Li explains this tension succinctly, stating that “... mainland China’s avant-garde art ... and the history of this environment puts avant-garde artists in a most awkward position: although their ‘avant-garde’ guts and passions have been cultivated on Chinese soil, their position as the avant-garde is nevertheless an imported by-product of cultural exchange” (1993, p. 5). Indeed, the role of the agent provocateur inherent in notions of the avant-garde is a relatively new concept in China, only adopted by contemporary artists in the course of the last twenty years. The previous consequences of dissent for artists were severe, with punishment for any challenge to Mao or state policies during the Cultural Revolution including exile to the countryside, imprisonment or, at best, professional alienation.23 Although Western art was in many cases the catalyst for new developments in Chinese contemporary art, Tang Qingnian argues that the actual development of art practices remains entirely Chinese. He states, “The advances in Chinese artistic thought during the Eighties occurred in accordance with art based on Western concepts ... But because of the difference of the Chinese reception of these developments ... the actual trajectory of change in Chinese art during the Eighties did not follow the logic of Western development” (1991, p. 16). Tang attempts to chart the development of Chinese contemporary art as influenced by, yet essentially autonomous from European modernism. In many ways this can be seen as a response to criticism that Chinese experimental art is a mimicry of European modernism (half a century earlier), American Pop art, or postmodernism. This criticism is not isolated to Chinese art but a

23 The treatment of Central Academy of Fine Arts teachers and administrators in 1964 and 1965 is a good example of these systems of punishment. In an act regarded as a prelude to the Cultural Revolution, Dong Xiwen, Ai Zhongxin and Hou Yimin were all sent to the countryside following denunciations by students. For a chronicle of these events see Andrews 1994, 310–311.
persistent problem plaguing considerations of art from other Asian countries such as Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. Such claims have only dissipated in recent years with the emergence of new scholarship that argues for cultural specificity through a focus on the process of interaction between modernity and local cultures. In other studies, Chinese critics have argued that foreign concepts are entirely irrelevant to a consideration of China. Gan Yang, for instance, states: “Theories such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, and feminism have nothing to offer the contemporary situation in China because China and the West are fundamentally different. In this view, Chinese civilisation is essentially temperate and conservative, while Western civilisation is aggressive and innovative. Therefore China should follow its own natural, moderate, and conservative path of development” (1998, p. 46). These arguments regarding the assimilation of foreign ideas in China are largely a reaction against linear models of development that prescribe a universal approach to the cultural, social, and economic spheres. Tang and Gan’s arguments respond to the asymmetrical power relations inherent in many discussions surrounding China. Some critics have sought to go beyond the diametrically-opposed positions inherent in a discussion of Euro-American imports versus local traditions. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang writes “The experience of modernity in China means that it is no longer a question of whether a Western category fits traditional Chinese culture but how a modern global category would work itself out in the particular modernity of China” (1999, p. 17). Yang’s comment can be seen within the framework of recent arguments for localised modernity, emphasising the Chinese characteristics as an argument for local context.

**Overseas Chinese Artists and Transexperience: A Discourse of the Past and Present**

The migration of leading Chinese cultural figures to Australia, the United States, and France in the late eighties and early nineties occurred in substantially greater numbers than in previous

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24Examples of exhibitions that address Asian modernity include the exhibition “Modern Boy/Modern Girl” at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (1998) as well as publications such as Tipton and Clark 2000, John Clark 1993, and Yasuko and Kazumi 1995.
decades. Focusing on artists who migrated to the West, tracing their engagement with different Western cultures (namely Australia, the United States, and France) in the first decade of their residence outside China, I argue that this Chinese diaspora engages in various ways with different cultures to reconfigure a notion of Chineseness. This transformed idea of Chineseness apparent in overseas Chinese contemporary art is produced by the interaction between the new host culture and the original Chinese culture. Although most theoretical explanations for diaspora incorporate this dual or binary axis of homeland and site of settlement, few are able to take into account the interstices between cultures nor the new experiences of diasporic subjects. Indeed the homeland identity, in this case Chineseness, is frequently prioritised. In an attempt to describe the multiple rather than dual experiences of diaspora, the notion of transexperience will be employed as an explanatory model for the way that Chinese artists articulate their diasporic experiences.

The concept of transexperience was developed by the late Chinese artist Chen Zhen for his own practice, but it is one, I would argue, that can be applied to the artistic expression of all of the overseas artists discussed in this dissertation in varying degrees. According to Chen, transexperience “summarizes vividly and profoundly the complex life experiences of leaving one’s native place and going from one place to another in one’s life” (1998, n.p.). In addition to the physical dimension of migration, Chen extends the idea of transexperience into his art practice. For Chen, transexperience is:

...a mode of thinking and method of artistic creation that is capable of connecting the preceding with the following, adapting itself to changing circumstances, accumulating year–in–year–out experiences, and being triggered at any instant. Furthermore, this type of experiential concept relates to an extremely important matter, that is, to immerse oneself in life, to blend and identify oneself with others. (1998, n.p.)

Indeed, the migration of Chinese artists to study in Western art centres has a precedent in the early modern period when Paris was considered a significant destination for artists who either studied for a brief period (Xu Beihong 1895–1953) or settled permanently (Chang Yu 1901–1966).
One of the most important principles of Chen’s notion of transexperience is the idea of evolutionary change. Chen articulates a condition where his residence in a foreign environment has created an ongoing process of adaptation to changing circumstances. Transexperience allows past experiences to inflect the present, a process of “connecting the preceding with the following.” Such an emphasis on change rather than the static identity of being Chinese signals a more complex understanding of migration or perhaps more importantly, settlement.

Transexperience also brings a type of “cultural homelessness”; namely, you do not belong to anybody, yet you are in possession of everything”(Chen, 1998, n.p). The sense of an overlapping unbelonging described by Chen provided him with a framework with which to explore a multiplicity of experiences. His approach towards transexperience suggests a model of cultural interaction apart from an oppositional relationship between China and the West, encouraging him to incorporate his Chinese art training and experience into his contemporary work, which was really about living in France. This is what makes it so relevant to the work of Chinese diasporic artists: it does not rely upon a simple cultural division of here and there, or an interpretation of the dual relationship between the past (China as the homeland) and the present (Australia, the United States, and Europe). Instead, transexperience describes the transformation of Chineseness in different cultural contexts. These connections between time, experience, and place inherent in the idea of transexperience make it a useful term in discussing the work of overseas Chinese artists. Another advantage to the use of transexperience lies in the fact that it has been conceived by an artist to describe an artistic practice. By applying a term that sprung from Chen’s desire to articulate an artistic process, this dissertation avoids the disjuncture that frequently occurs between theory and practice. In this dissertation, transexperience is applied to a
larger group of Chinese artists to focus on the relationship between the artists past experiences in China and their new homes, and perhaps most importantly, how this is represented in their art.

Let us examine for a moment the term transexperience in its strictest sense. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the prefix trans– means “across, beyond, through, into another state or place, surpassing, transcending” (Sykes 1976, p. 1231). By introducing this prefix to “experience,” Chen acknowledged his past experiences in China as well as his desire to go beyond them in a consideration of both time and place, here and now. Transexperience then might be thought of as a theoretical framework to explore Chinese overseas art by questioning its relationship to time, in particular to that of the past, present, and future. In conventional accounts of diaspora described by the academics and theorists such as William Safran and James Clifford, which will be discussed in further detail later, the homeland is figured as the past and the host country as the present. What transexperience encourages is a more fluid perception of the relationship to a homeland, not only positing it as the past but also the present. This consideration of the homeland as both a residual and evolving influence rather than fixed at the moment of migration also goes against the grain of numerous accounts of diaspora and provides evidence that aspects of the Chinese diaspora may not conform readily to strict definitions of diaspora, or at the very least that our ideas of diaspora must be developed further to account for globalization and the shifts that it has brought about.

To apply transexperience to the artwork of Chinese artists living in Australia, the United States, and France we must focus on processes of change. Edward Said’s mapping of the way that ideas and theories are altered by travel is particularly salient here. He writes:

First, there is a point of origin, or what seems like one, a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse. Second, there is a distance transversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from
an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence.

Third, there is a set of conditions—call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances—which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be. Fourth, the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place. (my emphasis) (Said, 1982, p.196)

Said’s four-stage process bears similarities to Chen’s concept of transexperience, adding detail to the process of irrevocable change brought about by travel. Although it describes the introduction of a new idea and its general acceptance, we might in another way apply it to the assessment of changes in the works of art by Chinese overseas artists. If we take Said’s point of origin as China, and furthermore being Chinese, then it adds another dimension to transexperience: the process of strategic adoption and rejection of references to China. This oscillation is best seen in the work of overseas artists in the form of interplay between the past and present. The combination of time–frames is played out in different ways in the work of all the overseas artists examined here, as well as others. At least three main distinctive strategies are used by overseas Chinese artists to explore the past and the present, which are employed both simultaneously and alternately in their work. The three strategies are, firstly, the recovery of Chinese iconography as a way of remembering the past at a geographical and psychological distance from China; secondly, the juxtaposition of memories of China with its current reality; and lastly, the modification of Chinese signifiers, such as Chinese characters, to make them accessible to non–Chinese audiences. I will outline these strategies in more detail.

The first strategy overseas artists utilise to refer to past experiences in China is the recovery of Chinese iconography. Dong Wang Fan and Guan Wei repaint traditional Chinese imagery including dragons, fruits and plants with Chinese symbolism. Similarly, Shen Yuan, whose works
could fit into any of these categories, draws on Chinese sayings for the titles of her work and recogniseable Chinese icons such as the braid. In addition, and more specifically, is Cai Guo Qiang’s re–staging at the Venice Biennale in 1999 of *Rent Collection Courtyard*, a tableau of a feudal scene containing life–sized figures made from clay extracting rent from peasants, and one of the most famous art works of the Cultural Revolution. Made in 1956, the original *Rent Collection Courtyard* toured throughout China during the Cultural Revolution as a statement against feudalism. One of the artists who worked on the original sculptures was even commissioned by Cai to remake them for his work. Yet when Cai re–staged this work, it was distanced from its original political message. Indeed the integration of signifiers from the Cultural Revolution is an increasing trend in the work of overseas Chinese artists, and more recently can even be found in the work of mainland Chinese artists. Overseas artists such as Guo Jian and Zhang Hongtu address the highly codified tradition of Mao portraits and Cultural Revolution imagery in their work, and both consider this as a form of iconoclasm that was not possible when they lived in China. The deployment of iconography from the Cultural Revolution is based on the formative period in these artists’ lives, when most were at school or joining the Red Guards.

The second strategy is one of comparative juxtaposition. By way of example, a number of Chen Zhen’s works sought to contrast his childhood experiences during the Cultural Revolution in the late sixties with the turn towards a market economy and growing consumerism in the nineties, observed during visits back to China after migrating to Paris. Works such as *Daily Incantations* (1996) included chamber pots to symbolize his childhood and recall the daily ritual of women who washed chamber pots in the streets every morning, as he recited sayings of Chairman Mao from his little red book on his way to school. In contrast to these rustic utilitarian objects, Chen included electronic detritus such as computer keyboards, cables, and monitors as symbols of Shanghai’s emergent manufacturing industry. While Chen’s approach is based upon his own memories and responses to change in his homeland, Huang Yong Ping’s installations demonstrate
a wider, historical view of the Chinese diaspora by exploring Chinese immigration as a central theme. *Kearny Street* (1994), offers an historical allegory of nineteenth century Chinese migration and anti–Chinese movements, while *Human Snake Plan* (1993) explores the story of more recent illegal Chinese immigrants. These works acknowledge past and present–day Chinese migration to the United States, which allows a comparison between the Chinese diaspora of the late nineteenth century and that of the late twentieth century. Ah Xian’s porcelain busts might also be included in the category given that they overlay traditional Chinese porcelain designs over porcelain busts of contemporary Chinese individuals. In this way he juxtaposes the old and the new.

The final strategy used by artists living outside China is the modification of Chinese signifiers. This includes the adaptation of Chinese writing, evident in Xu Bing and Wenda Gu’s invention of hybrid forms of Chinese characters. Xu’s “New English Calligraphy,” for example, constructs a new script from English that resembles the form of Chinese calligraphy while Gu’s *United Nations* series of installations combines Chinese with other languages sometimes creating an entirely fictitious and unreadable language altogether. Both artists reform their first language, Chinese, by combining it with English and in some cases with other languages. One might say that this modification of Chinese acknowledges their residence outside China. In a different way, Yang Jiechang modifies the Chinese tradition of ink painting by excluding conventional subjects such as flowers, birds, or landscapes. He removes all figurative references so that his paintings, consisting of hundreds of layers of painted ink, are records of time.

These three strategies chronicle the ways that overseas artists figure China as a site of both past and present relevance. Moreover, by bestowing equal priority on the past and the present, equal weight and acknowledgment is given to Chinese and non–Chinese references. By positing China as a current influence rather than frozen at the moment of migration, the work of overseas Chinese artists illustrates an evolving Chineseness. This is a significant departure from some
accounts of diaspora that position the homeland solely in terms of the past. The idea of cultural identity in flux, elucidated in the concept of transexperience, also allows a discussion of the factors that might influence changes in Chineseness. Key elements here include the place of settlement, the circumstances of migration (such as forced exile or refugee status), and the age of the migrant when they left China. All of these factors will be taken into account at varying degrees throughout this dissertation but the main focus will be on how each artist re-configures in their artworks a notion of Chineseness in vastly different cultural contexts. When we analyse the work of overseas Chinese artists with transexperience in mind, we are able to see transitions and changes as responses to their immediate and present environment. Chineseness, here, is seen as a fluid entity with the potential to respond and reflect new experiences. Nowhere is this clearer than in Cai Guo Qiang’s conception of Chineseness as an omnipresent yet responsive force: in his words, it is “the absence of change through a thousand changes.” (Cai, in Fei, 2000, p. 134)

**Transexperience and Transnationalism**

Transexperience bears similarities to the term transnationalism, which might in turn be considered the successor to globalisation—an idea that gained currency in the nineties based on an economic trend of increased international trade. Ian McClean (2004) acknowledges that globalisation is grounded in a much older desire for unification, with antecedents in Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the “global village” developed in the sixties. Globalisation in the nineties, however, was defined as representing at least two ideas: “the rejection of the nationally constituted society” and a “commitment to conceptualising the world as whole” (King, 1997, p. viii). These took shape in the visual arts as a greater presence and discussion of artists from countries outside the dominant Euro-American axis. Artists from Africa and Asia, for example, gained recognition in art centres such as New York, sometimes showing their work for the first time in exhibitions such as “Transculture” at the Venice Biennale (1999), “Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s” (1999) at the Queens Museum of Art in New York.
York, and “How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age” (2003) at the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis. A significant number of the overseas Chinese artists discussed in this dissertation were included in these exhibitions since the Chinese references in their work and their residence in the West, that is their diasporic position, exemplified this trend.

Yet this process of embracing peripheral cultures in the centre is not without a flip-side. For every example of global culture there is a reverse or local response, leading to a binary system—global/local—where one term cannot exist without the other. This duality between the global and the local has been described by Roland Robertson as a relationship between the universal and the particular. He explains: “…we may best consider contemporary globalization in its most general sense as a form of institutionalization of the two-fold process involving the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism” (1997 in King, p.77). It is here that the debates around the global or transnational are most closely related to transexperience, since transexperience accounts for a changing Chinese identity. Works of art made by Chinese overseas artists demonstrate a universalizing of Chineseness or, more specifically, making Chinese culture accessible to Western audiences. For example, Xu Bing’s *New English Calligraphy* features the invention of a new Chinese script that can be read by English audiences. Xiaoping Lin has identified the work of Cai Guo Qiang, Zhang Huan, and Xu Bing as addressing ideas of globalisation, but argues that this of offset by an interest in Chinese nationalism. In his words, they “have obtained increasing recognition in a glitzy global art community, yet their work remains rooted in and inspired by national traditions”(2004, p.281). Lin’s interpretation of globalisation illustrates the tension between the global (Chinese artist’s participation in international exhibitions) and the local (Chinese references in art work).

A discussion of global/local is also relevant to the mainland Chinese art world. The nineties was a period when Chinese art and artists gained unprecedented international recognition, wielding
influence on local activities and artistic production. Wu Hung aptly describes this in four developments:

First, experimental Chinese artists became regular participants in international exhibitions; many exhibitions of Chinese experimental art were also organized abroad. Second, promoted by transnational commercial galleries inside and outside China, this art became a global commodity. Third, a considerable number of experimental Chinese artists emigrated to other countries; “domestic” artists also frequently travelled to foreign exhibitions and created works around the world. Fourth, toward the end of the decade, some official Chinese museums began to develop exhibition projects that framed Chinese experimental art as part of global contemporary art. (2002, p.397)

Wu identifies the main drivers for a discussion of the global and the local in China as exhibitions (first outside and then inside China), the art market, and artist travel. He also mentions the migration of Chinese artists, a prominent feature of debates on globalisation in the Chinese art world. For example, the catalogue published to coincide with “The First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art 1996–1997” in Beijing and Hong Kong, included articles by Gao Minglu and Huang Du devoted to the subject of overseas artists, international art trends, and local culture. Huang Du’s essay describes Chinese contemporary art as developing in “two parallel directions”:

Overseas Chinese artists are basically creating work influenced by traditional Chinese culture … highlighting … the issue of cultural identity. But their work has virtually lost its connection with cultural reality in China. Many contemporary Chinese avant-garde exhibitions in the 1990s can only be held abroad, which undoubtedly gives the impression that Chinese art is a “culture in exile”. In this sense, it is therefore the responsibility of criticism to establish the order of contemporary art in our society, to examine our position from a global point of view and to implement a strategy of cultural relativism” (1996, p. 43).
Huang distinguishes two streams of Chinese art practices through their location outside and inside China. His understanding of what is happening outside China is equated with overseas Chinese artists, which is also consistent with other critics such as Gao Minglu. But where Huang’s argument differs from others is in his insistence that criticism inside China should include a global perspective. This adds complexity to debates that simply posit overseas Chinese artists as global and mainland China as local, suggesting that artists and critics both inside and outside China operate globally and locally at different times.

Theories circulating around the terms global/local are relevant to transexperience because they articulate differences between inside and outside China, but where they fall short is in describing the process of acculturation. Transexperience emphasises a process of melding together different references from the past and present to create something new, whereas the terms global and local seem to rely too heavily on a model of duality: transnational/national, global/local, inside/outside. Specifically, transexperience emphasises an identity in flux, constantly changing and responding to influences both past and present simultaneously, rather than an identity swinging pendulum-like between two mutually-exclusive terms.

Diaspora Defined for a Chinese Context

One of the most commonly applied theoretical models to overseas Chinese artists is the concept of diaspora. This is because it is one of the most widely used terms to describe the experience of dislocation from one’s homeland. The concept of diaspora has been, until recently, used mainly to describe a Jewish experience even though the experience is much older. Yet the definition has broader applications, helping to explain the cultural effects of displacement as a consequence of

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27 The Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, defines diaspora as “Jews living outside Israel.”
migrant. William Safran’s essay “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return” offers a comprehensive definition of diaspora as a community or people who:

1) have been dispersed from a specific original “centre” to “peripheral” places to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location history and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such as relationship. (1991, p. 86–87)

In general, these conditions can be applied to overseas Chinese artists. The first two definitions, for example, correspond directly to the Chinese artistic diaspora. In spite of the fact that over a decade has passed since their migration, the reference points, themes, and sometimes materials utilised by Chinese artists identify with China. Indeed, if one applies Safran’s definition to artists who left China in the eighties and nineties, there is little doubt that they would be considered a diasporic artistic community. This idea of a diasporic community is reinforced further by the self–conscious identification of an overseas Chinese artist community. Artists Chen Zhen and Xu Bing have both referred to the similarities of life experiences for their generation. They account for this in terms of decades and specifically, the last three decades: one decade experiencing the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath; the second decade of liberalization in China, which
resulted in artistic freedoms and exposure to Western styles; and the third decade living in the
West and engaging with an international art scene. In Xu’s words:

We do identify as a similar generation. I would also like to add that our experiences
also include ten years of education in socialism before the Cultural Revolution, so this
is in fact a forty or forty-five year experience. This is why my generation has so many
complex cultural references. They have been nourished by all of these different
influences. This group of artists, although our work might be very different, it does
share a certain cultural spirit based on similar historical experiences and cultural
backgrounds in China. (Xu, 2000)

With remarkably similar life experiences and a strong sense of community outside of China, this
group provides a case study of Chinese diaspora. The differences between Safran’s definition of a
diasporic community and Chen’s concept of transexperience lies in the relationship to the
homeland. In Safran’s view the homeland is a static entity: an imagined place in the past to which
one hopes to return. Although overseas Chinese artists were initially prevented from returning to
China, after 1993 many began to return to see family and manufacture their work in local
factories. This traffic back to China complicates Safran’s relatively strict definition of diaspora
as a type of exile. In contrast, transexperience accommodates both past and present views of the
homeland, both simultaneously and alternately, since experience can be acquired in the past and
present. Embodied in the idea of transexperience is the idea that cultural identity is mutable and,
furthermore, one’s Chineseness can change according to the context.

Another important element of discussions of diaspora is that of location. James Clifford provides
a useful explanation and discussion of diaspora describing the homeland and site of settlement

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28 Chen Zhen in conversation with the author on 23 December 1999 in Paris.
29 Artists such as Xu Bing, Wenda Gu, and Ah Xian frequently have their work manufactured in China. These works
mostly employ Chinese craft traditions as an integral feature of workmanship. Although one can speculate on the neo-
colonial dimension to such relations, this trend also corresponds with the economic concept of greater China based on
overseas Chinese investment in China.
through the dual locations of here and there. He observes that “the empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there” (1997, p. 247). Clifford presents a view of the new place of settlement as here and the homeland as there. In the case of Chinese artists, this spatial delineation between the homeland and the site of settlement accounts for a sense of physical dislocation from China as well as continued philosophical and emotional ties to the homeland. Indeed, it is this division between here and there that characterises much of the discussion of diaspora. Yet the division of here and there is not only a spatial division but also a temporal one, since it encompasses a reading of the past and present.

For Salman Rushdie, the condition of diaspora relates to past memories. He writes:

It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to me self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being “elsewhere.” (1992, p. 12)

Rushdie’s comments on the creative effects of diaspora hold true for Chinese artists. Yet the adoption of here and there as the sole reference point for diaspora limits the discussion to a bi-lateral relationship between the past and the present, at the expense of considerations of the future. On a similar note, Ien Ang warns of such a trap, stating that “. . . when the question of ‘where you’re from’ threatens to overwhelm the reality of ‘where you’re at,’ the idea of diaspora becomes a disempowering one, a hindrance to ‘identity’ rather than an enabling principle” (1992–93, pp. 6–12). If the homeland is fixed in the past rather than an evolving entity, one’s cultural identity is subjected to similar constraints. Any approach to diaspora should involve not just the past (homeland) and present (host country) but also the future, and with this the potential for evolution.
The use of here and there to describe the experience of migration and settlement has more recently been surpassed by travel as an alternate model. Frances Bartkowski defines travel in opposition to considerations of displacement and diaspora. She states that “Where travel suggests an affirmative sense of groundlessness, a delight in the necessary fictions of language and pleasures of motion, displacement suggests an other/underside of the dialectic—that moment when the headiness of motion turns into fear, into disavowal, and into the abyss in the ground” (1995, p. xx). James Clifford has also argued for the introduction of travel as a term to discuss diasporic identities, replacing the dichotomy of here and there with dwelling and travelling. Although with a clear anthropological emphasis, Clifford’s adoption of the term travel is of interest because he “prefer[s] it to more apparently neutral, and ‘theoretical,’ terms, such as ‘displacement,’ which make the drawing of equivalences across different historical experiences too easy” (1997, p. 39). For Clifford, the corrupted term of travel eschews neutrality, which he contrasts with diaspora in the following way:

Diaspora is different from travel (though it works through travel practices) in that it is not temporary. It involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home (and in this it is different from exile, with its frequently individualist focus). Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots and routes to construct... forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference. (1997, p. 251)

Caren Kaplan also utilises both the terms of travel and displacement “not as synonyms but as signs of different critical registers and varied historicized instances” (1996, p. 3). Whatever the interpretation of the meaning and potential for these terms, each of them contains different levels of relevance to Chinese overseas artists. On the one hand, travel conjures up the movement and relocation of migration but fails to acknowledge the violence or pain sometimes experienced by
refugees. On the other hand, displacement suggests a state of mind, an emotional dimension that is focused on separation from the homeland and has little room for cultural considerations outside a bilateral framework. For these reasons, the meanings and associations of diaspora are perhaps the most salient to overseas Chinese artists when compared to terms such as travel, displacement, and exile. Although all these terms can be applied to the individual circumstances of Chinese artists in different ways, their commonality, and what defines them as a group, is the construction of a relationship with China as the homeland in spite of their various sites of settlement in Australia, the United States, and France. As Barkan and Shelton state: “The importance of the concept of ‘diaspora’ as an explanatory paradigm stems from its malleable qualities given that it can apply to diverse communities” (1998, p. 5). It is precisely this sense of “diverse community” encompassed by the term diaspora that can be applied to overseas Chinese artists. It is a community of experimental artists that once existed in China, now dispersed across three different continents.

Nevertheless, the most persistent problem with discussions of diaspora is an emphasis on the homeland over the new place of settlement. It is the focus on there (homeland) rather than here (residence), on the past rather than the present, that characterises much diaspora theory. A good illustration of this is James Clifford’s discussion of the Moe family, Hawaiian musicians specialising in the Hawaiian slide guitar and singing who travelled the world because of the popular success of their music. Clifford asked “How, for fifty–six years in transient, hybrid environments, did they preserve and invent a sense of Hawaiian ‘home?’” (1997, p. 26). Indeed, his question suggests an “essential” Hawaiian identity. This highlights one of the greatest drawbacks of diaspora—it does not allow for the transmutation of identity within a new context and location. In a transcript of the discussion following his paper, Clifford expanded upon these ideas further by posing another, perhaps more insightful, question: “What is brought from a prior place? And how is it both maintained and transformed by the new environment?” (1997, p. 44).
These questions acknowledge that the condition of settlement and cultural identity are influential yet not always acknowledged forces in diaspora. The concept of transexperience thus lends itself to such an exploration of cultural transformation more readily than diaspora because it is inherently flexible. Nor is it founded upon a sense of loss or displacement from the homeland. Transexperience provides a conceptual framework for addressing questions such as: to what extent has migration affected the work of overseas artists and their sense of Chineseness? Indeed, Chineseness may be the common ground between artists living in Australia, the United States, and France, but transexperience describes the desire on the part of artists to go beyond China as the sole reference point in their work. Indeed transexperience allows us to explore the transformation of Chineseness in new cultural environments.

With similarities to the idea of diaspora, an identity of exile was also applied to Chinese artists when they first migrated to the West because some could not return for fear of political reprisals following the June Fourth movement. Edward Said identifies the condition of exile as an unending sense of loss and process of comparison between the past in the homeland and the present residence in a foreign environment. He states: “Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one’s native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the existence of both . . . For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment” (1990, p. 366). Exile differs in several ways from considerations of diaspora. The most obvious difference is based on the conditions of settlement: exiles did not have choice about their migration, whereas diasporic peoples chose to leave their homeland for various reasons including greater political freedom and economic opportunity. Interestingly, Ong and Nonini have identified the larger Chinese diaspora as based on a desire to pursue opportunities outside of China rather than an attachment to homeland culture. They state:
There are multiple subjective senses of Chineseness that appear to be based not on the possession of some reified Chinese culture but on a propensity to seek opportunities elsewhere, a spatial projection of economic and social desires across geopolitical divides, and a bricolage with different modes of political inclusion and exclusion. (1997, p. 26)

Ong and Nonini’s conception of the Chinese diaspora is one defined by choice rather than the political or economic necessity that we associate with exile. Nevertheless, Said’s discussion of exiles and refugees, denotes the former through “solitude and spirituality” while the latter, as innocent political victims. Although his essay “Reflections on Exile” does appear to romanticise exile within a literary tradition through the writings of Conrad, Joyce, and Adorno, Said claims that he “. . . speak[s] of exile not as a privilege, but as an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life” (1990, p. 365). This “alternative” quality could be applied to descriptions of displacement including refugees, exiles, expatriates, and émigrés, with each of these conditions differentiated principally by the conditions of settlement. As a concept that seeks to explain forced migration and the cultural effects of such a tradition, exile appears less salient to an analysis of Chinese artists because the majority of them migrated of their own choice and, as such, are able to visit China.

**Chineseness as a Strategy for Cultural Intervention**

In recent years, scholars have explored the cultural specificity of the Chinese diaspora. Wang Ling–chi (1998), for example, provides one of the most evocative models, likening Chinese migration to the roots of a plant. He describes Chinese reactions to migration as having two different responses: “growing roots where they land” (*luodi shengen*) or “return to their roots” (*guigen*). Inherent in these two responses is a double meaning for “roots”, since Wang’s term *luodi shengen* refers to plant roots while *guigen* refers to roots as cultural origins. This establishes a double–metaphor that operates on a figurative and symbolic level, given a further dimension by
its correspondence to the tradition of overseas Chinese and Chinese sojourners (*haiwai huaren/huaqiao*). The tradition of Chinese migration suggested by terms such as *haiwai huaren* and *huaqiao* also allows us to consider some of the subtleties of Chinese migration. For example, the difference between overseas Chinese and sojourners is the duration of time away from the homeland, with overseas Chinese settling in a foreign environment while sojourners only stayed for a limited period of time.\(^{30}\)

One might argue however that Wang’s botanical model of “roots” cannot be directly applied to the generation of artists who migrated in the late eighties and early nineties because the June Fourth movement complicated a positive consideration of the homeland. Indeed the movement and its violent aftermath distinguishes this generation from earlier generations of artists who migrated to the West. Some Chinese artists who were already overseas, for example, decided to stay after the June Fourth movement despite the fact they had not originally intended to do so. Rey Chow’s comments upon the violence at Tiananmen illustrates some of these complexities:

> Living after catastrophe for Chinese intellectuals is living with the awareness that their ‘Chinese’ identity is an illusion. It is an illusion not because they cannot return to China. Rather, it is because ‘Chinese-ness,’ to which they intuitively cling, is always an other, which at specific moments also becomes the source of oppression and catastrophe, which they will try to survive. This survival means that they must continue to question the very constitution and centrality of their identity—to displace, in other words, the *zhong* (‘centre’) in *zhongguo* (‘central kingdom’). (1993, p. 98).

This internal displacement described by Chow suggests a process of doubling that is readily applicable to the experience of overseas Chinese artists since 1989. On the one hand, overseas Chinese artists felt that to identify themselves as Chinese was to identify with the government’s

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\(^{30}\) Wang also recognises five types of identity in the Chinese diaspora, particularly in the United States. These are: “1) sojourner mentality; 2) assimilation; 3) accommodation; 4) ethnic pride; and 5) alienation” (1998, p. 189).
exertion of authority on 4th June 1989, while on the other hand they felt all the more Chinese at this time. This kind of multiple consciousness accepts that one can be Chinese and identify with a sense of Chineseness while also rejecting aspects of mainland Chinese politics.31

Inherent in arguments for the specificity of a Chinese diaspora is the notion that it constitutes a new cultural form. This is particularly apparent in Ong and Nonini’s discussion of Chinese transnationalism as a “third culture,” which is no doubt influenced by Homi K. Bhabha’s writings. Bhabha’s concept of a “third space” is defined as: “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (1994, p. 37). Bhabha’s “third space” articulates the cultural transition between cultures that occurs in diaspora and has been particularly important to the development of postcolonial studies. Yet for Ong and Nonini it is this process of translation that actually produces new cultural forms. They state: “Modern Chinese transnationalism can be considered one such third culture, an emergent global form that moreover provides alternative visions in late capitalism to Western modernity and generates new and distinctive social arrangements, cultural discourses, practices, and subjectivities” (1997, p. 11). The shift from Bhabha’s concept of a “third space” to Ong and Nonini’s “third culture” is significant. Although both employ the use of the “third” as a conceptual device to suggest an alternative quality—a space in between the usual binary principles—Ong and Nonini attempt to locate it as a Chinese practice.

31 Such a sense of duality has some parallels with the notion of double consciousness, a term coined by the African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, whose theories on race have wielded enormous influence on cultural studies. The ideas surrounding the development of double consciousness as a strategy can be seen in Du Bois’ 1897 paper “The Conservation of Races” (Du Bois 1995). Du Bois constructed a bifocal explanation of the world for African Americans that has since been adopted by contemporary writers such as James Clifford and more recently Dipesh Chakrabarty who have applied it to a diverse range of conceptual dilemmas. Refer to Clifford, 1997, and Chakrabarty, 2000.
Chinese curators living abroad have also employed this idea of Chineseness as an alternative to mainstream cultural values. In fact, curators such as the U.S.–based Gao Minglu and France–based Hou Hanru have argued that Chinese artists have the ability to critique Euro–American modes of thought because they were trained and grew up in a different cultural environment. Gao Minglu’s discussion of overseas Chinese artists in the exhibition catalogue *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* acknowledges a debt to Bhabha’s concept of a “third space.” He argues: “What is crucial for overseas Chinese artists is not the preservation of Chinese characteristics but rather to act effectively in the third space. . . The artists’ task is to make their own Chinese cultural experiences into efficient languages to intervene in the new social reality” (1999, p. 183). This notion of intervention also characterises Hou Hanru’s discussion of overseas Chinese artists.

Hou’s writings on overseas Chinese artists have, in effect, called for a new interpretation of art from a Chinese perspective. He states that Chinese artists are “critiquing and deconstructing the ‘mainstream’ discourses and practices of western art by incorporating their Chinese background at the centre of their work” (1999, p. 185). Hou’s arguments provide an explanation for the way that Chinese symbolism has been adopted and employed in the work of Chinese artists as an alternative to Australian, American, or European cultural values.

Underpinning the claim for this new, subversive Chineseness is the use of Chinese signifiers by overseas artists. Complicating this further is the fact that the Chinese symbolism featured in works does not necessarily replicate Chinese traditions. Instead, Chinese traditional symbols and iconography are frequently appropriated and altered. For example, Chinese artists living abroad (Huang Yong Ping, Cai Guo Qiang, Chen Zhen, Zhang Hongtu) frequently draw upon traditions including acupuncture and herbal medicine — the antithesis of Western medicine — as a metaphor for the cultural differences between East and West. Yet this generation of artists’ experience of traditions would have been limited because they grew up during the Cultural Revolution, a time
when these practices were largely seen as outmoded and feudal. Therefore, the knowledge of Chinese traditions is frequently a mediated reconstruction rather than a direct cultural experience.

The interpretation of Chinese traditions from the perspective of living outside China is one manifestation of the sense of a multiple consciousness embodied in the term *transexperience*. It is also worth noting that distinctly identifiable Chinese signifiers frequently become more apparent in the artwork of Chinese artists the longer they stay overseas. Chen Zhen explains this as drawing upon his “bank of genes”—meaning, an inescapable Chinese heritage. Memory and, more specifically, memories of China play a key role in the work of overseas Chinese artists. The expression of Chinese traditions, not to mention the comparison of past and present China, are based on the artist’s memories of China. Yet memory itself should be thought of as flawed and somewhat idiosyncratic. Salman Rushdie’s analogy of the broken mirror and its scattered shards is a metaphor for memory’s ability to provide different perspectives on the same occasion. This analogy was used as a device by Rushdie in his novel *Midnight’s Children*. He states, “the shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*. . . The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present” (1992, p. 12). Rushdie’s recognition of the past as a strategy for refiguring the present corresponds to the way that Chinese artists articulate Chineseness in their artwork. Rushdie’s metaphor of glass shards also reflects the relatively fragmentary nature of memory.

At times, however, the inclusion of Chinese symbols may appear to conform to clichés of Chinese culture. This has certainly been the criticism of overseas artists by some mainland critics.32 Homi Bhabha’s comments on the process of identification are salient in this instance:

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32 Wang Nammin’s criticism of overseas Chinese artists calling their work “Chinatown Cultures” is a good example of this. A discussion of his criticism is found in Chapter One.

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The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre–given identity never a self–fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an ‘image’ of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification—that is, to be for an Other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of Otherness. [author’s emphasis](1993, p. 117)

This observation about identity sheds light on some of the issues relating to the incorporation of Chinese symbols in the work of overseas artists. Bhabha’s statement draws our attention to the fact that when Chinese artists incorporate Chinese references into their work it is frequently a transformation or reinterpretation of Chinese culture from a distance. In other words, Chinese identity outside China is distinctly different from in mainland China. Significantly, the idea of transexperience reflects this difference by acknowledging that Chineseness is altered irrevocably by migration and the adoption of other sources of inspiration.

**Different Homes/ Different Places**

As a way of focusing attention on the transformation of Chineseness outside of China, the following chapters of this dissertation are organised according to locations. I have chosen to focus on Australia in Chapter One, the United States in Chapter Two, and France in Chapter Three. The selection of these three sites of settlement was based on the numbers of practicing Chinese overseas artists and their level of recognition in each respective art scene. There are, of course, Chinese artists who have settled in other locations such as Germany (Wu Shanzhuan and Zhu Jinshi), but their numbers do not constitute a substantial community. The motivation behind the selection of these three sites is that a large proportion of Chinese artists have settled in each place, forming diverse artistic communities that have impacted on other local artists, art history, and the market. This can be gauged by their representation in local commercial galleries, museum exhibitions, and even national representation in international exhibitions. Some examples of the professional standing of Chinese artists in these settled countries include Guan Wei’s
The following chapters of this dissertation thus provide an analysis of the work of three distinct communities of artists, recognising the location and circumstances of migration and settlement as significant factors upon the expression of Chineseness. This differs from other accounts of diaspora, to reiterate my main argument, which focus mainly on the homeland as the defining cultural influence in the formation of diasporic identity.\(^3\) In other words, the organisation of this dissertation around the notion of “place” is an attempt to provide an additional dimension to the discussion of Chinese diaspora, one that allows a deeper consideration of the cultural changes that occur with migration to a foreign environment. Stuart Hall has argued that ethnic identity is grounded in an idea of place: “it is located in a place, in a specific history. It could not speak except out of a place, out of those histories. It is located in relation to a whole set of notions about territory, about where is home and where is overseas, what is close to us and what is far away (1997, p.21–22). Ideas of Chineseness are central to the discussion of this dissertation so a discussion of place must be given equal attention. By organising this dissertation by location it brings to our attention the similarities in artistic approaches between artists residing in the same city. Another reason for organising the dissertation in this fashion is because there was a distinction between art worlds outside China. This was frequently explained as a splintering of Chinese art. Fei Dawei, for instance, identified a split in the Chinese art world in the late eighties and early nineties, when “Numerous top talents took up residence abroad and the world of

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33 Hamid Naficy’s study of the Iranian community living in Los Angeles offers a similar argument, that immigrant populations must be understood in terms of the nature of their migration and settlement rather than simply their ethnicity and class. See Naficy, 1993.
Chinese contemporary art branched out into two schools: the expatriates and their counterparts in China. Each school set back to work—only in different environments” (1997, p. 49). This separation in the art world between overseas and mainland artists created a rupture in discussions of Chinese art. In this way, one might describe Chinese experimental art during the nineties as two parallel art worlds.

In one of the few accounts of the Chinese artistic diaspora, John Clark provided a schematic analysis of Chinese artistic diaspora that takes into account the place where artists settled. He observes that: “What artists do with and in the other culture depends as much on the type of culture into which they are received as on any particular properties of the ‘Chinese’ culture they may bring with them” (1998, p. 23). Clark argues that there are three main factors influencing the reception of Chinese artists into a new community, which he calls the “China–receiving community”: firstly, the size of the immigrant community in the place of settlement; secondly, the relationship with this immigrant community or the “China–receiving community”; and lastly, the politics of living in each place for Chinese people. In the case of the latter, he cites the Australian government’s decision to grant nearly 20,000 students and professors residency after the June Fourth movement as an example of the influence of government policy on an immigrant community. Clark’s research treats the homeland and settled culture as separate and discrete in correspondence with conventional accounts of diasporic communities, but his focus on the already-established Chinese community in the site of settlement and its impact upon the Chinese diaspora introduces a new element into the discussion. Clark’s analysis includes a description of the differences between the responses of Chinese artists to their foreign environment. He identifies four responses: firstly, the sojourner artist who returns to identify with “China” (Lee Wen); secondly, the nostalgic artist who is attracted to, but remains ambivalent about, “China” (Fan Zhongming); thirdly, the aloof artist who avoids cultural bracketing but does not disavow origin or the ironic artist who participates in ‘other’ cultures (Li Geng and Xu Bing); and finally,
the resilient artist who resists resolution of any cultural identification (John Young). Clark’s mapping of some of the different experiences among Chinese diasporic artists is notable as an attempt to chronicle the Chinese artistic diaspora although not pertinent to this dissertation given that he is concerned more broadly with Chinese artists from various backgrounds including those born in Hong Kong and Singapore, some of whom, like Lee Wen, continue to live in their home country (Singapore), as well as those who migrated from Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China to all different parts of the world. This dissertation concentrates solely, and more specifically, on artists from mainland China. In addition, the idea of transexperience deals with memories and references to mainland China in the work of Chinese artists, and how these memories and references are reconfigured in a new site of settlement, while at the same time engaging with that site.

The focus on “place,” or the sites where Chinese artists settled, differs in this dissertation from conventional accounts of Chinese experimental art because of its focus on the interpretation of Chineseness as an identity that is altered by different cultural environments. By employing the concept of transexperience to account for these changes, this dissertation attempts to address one generation’s response to migration. It is also worth remembering that Chineseness bears different meanings in different contexts and could be described as a contested term that is not solely defined by mainland China. In addition to the mainland Chinese diaspora dispersed widely across all continents, other Chinese nations such as Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong (until 1997) have defined their national identity as Chinese yet autonomous from the People’s Republic of China. (A discussion of these concerns is beyond the scope of this thesis.) Links between mainland China and the diaspora have been recognised in economic terms, frequently referred to as Greater China, which accounts for the contribution of overseas Chinese capital, investment, and charitable relief support to mainland China. Yet the cultural dimension of Greater China, and in particular the interplay between these two art worlds has yet to be recognised fully.
This dissertation primarily differs from conventional accounts of Chinese experimental art in its focus on “place” and, more specifically, on the expressions of Chineseness across different sites. Theories of diaspora are primarily concerned with the relationship between immigrant communities and their homeland. This discussion of Chineseness adheres in some ways to these concerns, but the structural arrangement of artists into locations of settlement positions the host culture (Australia, United States, and France) as a locus for cultural production in equal standing to the homeland (China). Chineseness retains significance as a point of reference for artists with their responses to a new country cast as variable and dependent upon context. Moreover the structure of the dissertation into chapters that focus on host nations not only complicates monolithic notions of Chineseness but also monolithic notions of the West. With a discussion of Australia, the United States, and France, this dissertation explores the inherent cultural differences between three Western nations, reflected somewhat inversely through the approaches Chinese artists adopt toward them.

The contrast in artistic approaches between these diasporic artists is just one set of differences discussed in this dissertation. These differences are developed through an investigation of how Chineseness is manifested in different cultural contexts. For example, how is an artist’s sense of Chineseness refracted by migration and settlement in the West? And specifically, how do these subtle changes in Chineseness differ from place to place; say, the difference between Chinese artists in Australia, the United States, and France? By examining these questions, the following chapters trace individual artistic responses to a foreign culture over a ten–year period, while, more generally, unearthing commonalities of artistic approach and experience (transexperience) among a diasporic community of Chinese artists living in Australia, the United States, and France.
Reference List


CHAPTER ONE

The Asianisation Debate of the Nineties: Chinese Artists in Australia

This chapter focuses on Chinese artists who migrated to Australia in the late eighties and early nineties. The artists selected for discussion are Guan Wei, Ah Xian, Fan Dong Wang, and Guo Jian, all of whom arrived within three years of one another: Ah Xian in 1989, Guan Wei and Fan Dong Wang in 1990, and Guo Jian in 1992. Why select these artists for discussion and not others? These four artists are some of the most prominent Chinese artists in Australia, having held substantial shows, won art prizes, and gained recognition within the Australian art world: Guan Wei won the Sulman Prize (2002) and held a major retrospective of his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (1999); Ah Xian won the first National Sculpture Prize (2001) and held a solo exhibition at Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum (2001); Fan Dong Wang won the Fisher’s Ghost Art Award (2000) and held exhibitions at a range of galleries; while Guo Jian’s work has toured nationally in his solo exhibition “Mama’s Tripping” (2000). By exploring these artists’ work through the idea of transexperience, we are able to chart their artistic responses to a new cultural environment. The shifts apparent in their work throughout the nineties can be seen as a process of coming to terms with foreign attitudes, beliefs, and values. For Chinese artists in Australia, transexperience illustrates an identification with China. One might say that this relationship to China is defined by residual connections to their homeland, as with other overseas Chinese artists, yet what sets them apart is the retention of these connections. The geographical proximity to China and more importantly, the national cultural policies implemented in Australia throughout the nineties contributed greatly to these connections. Chinese artists did not feel distanced from China to the same degree as artists living in the United States or France. In fact,
their knowledge of the Chinese art scene was frequently viewed as a professional advantage.\textsuperscript{34}

For instance, Guan Wei was selected as one of the curators/selectors for the Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1996 and Fan Dong Wang recalled his lecturer’s advice at art school in Sydney:

\ldots that I should look into my own background as a source for my art work. But I thought, why should I? I came here for Western ideas; that is why I’m painting and why I came to university . . . I was shocked that people thought I should do “Asian art”.

(Fan 2001)

These positive attitudes towards the incorporation of Chinese signifiers in the work of overseas Chinese artists resulted in less of a visual rupture between work produced before and after migration to Australia. In fact, there are a number of continuities within these bodies of works that will be explored throughout this chapter.

**Inside and Outside China: Politics and Exhibitions**

Australia has a long history of engagement with Chinese art. Indeed, the number of exhibitions of Chinese art, in contrast to other Asian art, suggests a deeper relationship that extends beyond the visual arts. This focus on China in the visual arts has mirrored Australia’s foreign policy. Stephen FitzGerald (1997) has documented Australia’s relationship with China from the fifties through the eighties, and it is his belief that in the mid-eighties the Australian government considered China to be the centre of its foreign policy, despite not readily acknowledging it publicly. He asserts that “China has been central for Australia in another, deeper sense in *domestic* Australian politics” (1997, p. 17) because, he believes, Australian attitudes towards China are a metaphorical indicator of Australia’s maturation as a nation.

\textsuperscript{34} Chinese artists in Australia were solicited by commercial galleries much earlier than their counterparts in France and the United States. By way of example, Guan Wei held his first exhibition at Sherman Galleries in 1991 while Fan Dong Wang, Guo Jian, and Wang Zhi Yuan held exhibitions in the late nineties at Ray Hughes Gallery in Sydney.
Although FitzGerald’s comments on Australian relations with China offer valuable insights, one notable exclusion from his discussion is the Chinese diaspora in Australia. In recent years, the contributions of Chinese to Australian culture have been re-appraised by historians such as Eric Rolls. In *Sojourners* (1992) and, more recently, *Citizens* (1996), Rolls recounted vivid details about the Chinese who settled in Australia to mine, tend livestock and farm, and, perhaps most importantly, to make their fortune. According to Rolls, in the 1880s, Chinese considered Australia a golden mountain where “if they ignored the brutalities of long-nosed barbarians and worked eighteen hours a day for two or three years, they could earn £100 to establish themselves and their families for life” (1996, p. xii).

The Chinese have been migrating to Australia for the last one hundred and fifty years, with the greatest numbers arriving during the time of the gold rushes from the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Indeed, there are some similarities in migratory patterns between Australia and the United States, with Chinese travelling to the California gold fields via San Francisco at the same time as they travelled to Victoria in Australia. Early Chinese immigrants to Australia came mainly from the See Yap region of southern China, and this remained the case through the seventies when migrants of Chinese origin from Malaysia and Vietnam began to arrive. It was, however, the early Chinese sojourners that drew a passionate and sometimes violent response. The Federal Immigration Restriction Act of 1901—one of the first acts passed as a federated nation—institutionalised policies to prevent Chinese and other Asian migration to Australia.

Prior to the nineties there was a strong Australian tendency to view Chinese culture as arcane and ancient. Conforming to this view, two major exhibitions of Chinese art and antiquities were organised to tour Australia in the seventies and eighties. One of the most notable was “The

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35 For further discussions of the Chinese in Australia see Fitzgerald 1996 and Giese 1997.
Chinese Exhibition” held at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1977, featuring a collection of archaeological treasures valued at nearly AUD $189 million at the time. Nearly a decade later, in 1989, “Treasures from the Forbidden City” toured state galleries to great popular success. These exhibitions emphasised that the “treasures” had never previously been seen outside China and, although completely different in their focus on traditional art, were precursors to later exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art in the nineties such as “New Art from China: Post-Mao Product” in 1992 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and “Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989” in 1993 at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

“New Art from China: Post-Mao Product” was the first showing of experimental Chinese art in Australia. The curator, Claire Roberts, provided some historical information about Chinese art in her catalogue essay, beginning with the collapse of the Qing dynasty through to the present day. Roberts concluded her account by explaining the relevance of the term “post-Mao,” which in her view, was a more accurate description of Chinese experimental practices often mistakenly termed postmodern. In many ways, this renaming epitomises the contradiction facing the representation of Chinese art outside China. On the one hand, renaming the movement from postmodern to post-Mao takes into consideration the Chinese context and acknowledges an alternative development of postmodernism in China. On the other hand, the term post-Mao maintains the reference point for the artwork as always Chinese, making it more difficult for Chinese artists to participate in an international context. The work included in “New Art From China” was made from 1985 to 1989. Some of the works were also from the ground-breaking “China Avant-Garde” exhibition at the China Art Gallery in 1989, such as Xu Bing’s Heavenly Book and Xu Hong’s Himalayan Wind paintings. Although the majority of artists in “New Art from China” were selected from the “China Avant-Garde” exhibition, it is interesting to note that Roberts also selected other artists such as Chen Haiyen and He Jianguo, who work in the more traditional disciplines of ink painting and printmaking. Their works were noticeably different from the others in the exhibition, which
utilised mediums of installation, environmental work, and photography. There was a visible distinction within the exhibition between experimental and traditional media, but by bringing them together, Roberts attempted to present a broader overview of contemporary Chinese art practices.

Although held less than one year later, “Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989” presented a very different view of experimental Chinese art. Staged at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1993, “Mao Goes Pop” differed from “New Art From China” because it focused on work produced after 1989 whereas “New Art From China” included artwork from 1985 to 1991. The contrasts of these different, yet overlapping, periods were marked. In fact, these exhibitions provide an example of two different movements in recent Chinese art history. “New Art From China” showed the period of frenetic experimentation of the New Wave movement when artists adopted the novel mediums of performance and installation art. It is difficult to identify any specific subjects, themes, or concerns during this period beyond a drastic break with previous academic traditions. In contrast, “Mao Goes Pop” focused on the pseudo-political styles of cynical realism and political pop, which some Chinese critics saw as pandering to Western expectations of a critique of the Communist regime.36 Li Xianting, one of the curators of the exhibition, explained these painting styles as the result of a “Mao complex.” He states: “Mao fever and Political Pop are linked in that there is inherent in both the use of past icons or gods to criticise, or in the case of the latter, to satirise, current reality” (1993, p. 11). “Mao Goes Pop” also included local Chinese artists who had recently migrated to Australia such as Tang Song, Xiao Lu, Guan Wei, and Ah Xian. These exhibitions were significant not just for their ability to provide a cultural context for Chinese artists in Australia but also because they were some of the first exhibitions in the world-wide trend towards national exhibitions of Chinese art.

36 For a review of the “Mao Goes Pop” exhibition, see Clark 1993b.
The Asian Turn: An Argument for Regionalism

One of the most significant cultural shifts over the last twenty years in Australia has been a focus on the Asia-Pacific region. This interest initially came from perceived economic necessity, with the emphasis quickly evolving into debates about the “Asianisation” of Australia. Although it acquired popularity in the media and business sectors, the “Asianisation” of Australia was a problematic concept because it conceived of Australia and Asia as largely discrete, separate, and rigid identities. Ien Ang and Jon Stratton have commented that the “Asianisation” of Australia reaffirms a binary and oppositional relationship. They observed that “where “Asia” was discursively constructed as the Orient, that Other against which “the West” defined itself, “Australia” was constructed as a settled outpost of “the West”, an attempt to realize a society on the principles of European modernity in a space outside Europe” (1995, p. 28). Ang and Stratton’s analysis reflects a model of engagement between Australia and Asia that persists today. Another example of the limitations of binary modes of thought is the lack of acknowledgment of regional differences within Australia. The Northern Territory is a case in point, a place where the long history of Asian, and particularly Chinese, migration has had a significant impact on the community. Although the Northern Territory was governed by South Australia at the turn of the century, Eric Rolls has written that it was “virtually a distant, separate, Chinese settlement” (1996, p. 2). By April 1879 there were nearly 3,500 Chinese living there, compared with 460 Europeans. This history and its contemporary reality, which has come to include diverse populations of Indonesians, Filipinos, and Malaysians, suggests a model for a different relationship between Australia and Asia. In essence, the history of the Northern Territory complicates any simplistic notion of binary relations between Australia and Asia.37

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37 See Giese 1995.
In spite of these philosophical arguments that signal some of the difficulties associated with the “Asian Turn,” as it has been called, this shift in interest toward Asia had an enormous influence on the reception of Chinese artists. In order to demonstrate this, I will focus on a number of the exhibitions that explored themes of cultural exchange and dialogue, and in some cases even included Chinese artists. Perhaps one of the most significant developments during this period was the change in the Australia Council (the federal arts funding body) policy. In 1991, the Council announced that most of its budget for international projects would be directed to projects occurring in the Asia-Pacific region, and between 1993 and 1994, half of its budget was allocated for such projects. This represented a tangible shift in attention toward Asia, away from the previous focus on Europe and America. Exhibitions such as “Out of Asia,” “Here Not There,” “Above and Beyond,” and “Transit”, nearly all funded by the Australia Council, will serve as examples of this shift. But before these exhibitions and their curatorial rationales are examined in detail, it is helpful to look at some other developments in Australian art such as the Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibitions.38

One of the most influential initiatives during the nineties was the Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibition developed in 1993 by the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane. The project demonstrated an unprecedented level of interest in Asia and was one of the first events of this scale focused on the Asia-Pacific region. Others included ARX (Australia and Regional Artists’ Exchange) in Perth, the Asian Art Show, and, later, the Asian Art Triennial in Fukuoka. The effect of the Asia-Pacific Triennial on the Australian art world were broad-reaching, giving Australian curators knowledge and access to a myriad of Asian artists, since many museum

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38 Another influential development during this period was the Asialink program of touring exhibitions and artist residencies throughout Asia. Asialink’s funding was largely provided by the cultural branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as well as the Australia Council. The focus of many of the exhibitions devised was on the export of Australian art to Asia. To illustrate the extent of this program: between 1995 and 1997, Asialink organised nearly eighteen touring exhibitions to Seoul, Manila, Lahore, Singapore, Bangalore, Bangkok, Dhaka, Colombo, Chiang Mai, Taipei, Hanoi, and Beijing.
curators were also selectors for the exhibition. In the Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1996, for example, the organisers boasted no fewer than fifteen curatorial teams with forty-two Australian curators involved. In addition to this, the Asia-Pacific Triennial exposed Australian audiences to Asian contemporary art every three years, providing a sustained sense of artistic developments in the region. Although any consideration of Australia’s interest in Asia throughout the decade must recognise the Asia-Pacific Triennial for its leadership role in providing a forum for Asian art, we must also be mindful of some of its shortcomings. Asian critics and curators have, for example, openly questioned the motives behind the event as well as the selection of countries represented. One might also view the relatively late inclusion of overseas Chinese artists in the 1999 exhibition, with Guan Wei and Ah Xian represented, and their inclusion in the “Crossing Borders” (rather than “Australian”) section as an unwillingness to recognise Asian-Australian artists.

Asia In Australia: The Inclusion of Chinese Artists

In addition to the Asia-Pacific Triennial, a number of other exhibitions focussed on Asia’s impact upon Australian culture. These were distinct from exhibitions in the previous decade—such as “The Asian Interface, Australian Artists and the Far East” at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1983 and “East and West: The Meeting of Asian and European Art” at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1985—because they focused on the immediate relationship between Australia and Asia, rather than from the perspective of art history. Within these exhibitions, artists were frequently cast as mediators. It was in this way that Chinese artists were incorporated into larger debates about both Australia’s multiculturalism and its standing in Asia. The following discussion of the exhibitions “Out of Asia” (1990), “Here Not There” (1993), “Above and Beyond” (1996), and “Transit” (1998), establishes a context for understanding the work of Chinese artists in 39

39 An account of criticism levelled at the Asia-Pacific Triennial can be seen in Xu Hong’s and John Clark’s comments recorded by Clare Williamson (1993). For a detailed discussion of the conception of Australia’s relationship with Asia as seen in the periodical exhibition Asia-Pacific Triennial see my article “Rough Trade: Curating Cultural Exchange.”
Australia. All four exhibitions are considered significant to Australian perspectives of Asia. By examining these exhibitions and, specifically, their incorporation of Chinese artists toward the latter half of the decade, we are able to explore the relationship between, on the one hand, the retention of Chinese symbols by Chinese artists and, on the other hand, the interest in Asian art practices from Australian curators.

Before turning to a more detailed discussion of these exhibitions, it is worth noting Alison Broinowski’s 1992 book *The Yellow Lady*, an art historical appraisal of the impact of Asian cultures on Australian art. Its importance lies in being the first book to revise Australian art history from the perspective of Australian-Asian exchange. Broinowski’s book suggested that the relationship between Australia and Asia was one defined by tensions within Australian settler culture. She states that:

> A divergence had emerged early and would persist between those settler Australians for whom geography was dominant, who wanted to become Australasians, part of the Asia-Pacific hemisphere, and those for whom history, and their British identity, dominated all else. Thus how Australians defined themselves determined their view of Asia. (1992, p. 5)

It is precisely these two conditions—geography and history—that continue to impact Australia’s relations with the region. Cultural critics Ien Ang and Jon Stratton reiterate this, observing that Australia is “caught between the geo-economic imperative of a regionalized present and the historical legacy of a (post)colonial ‘Western’ past” (1995, p. 30). Broinowski concludes her book with a warning that “If Australia’s identity and self-image are to change, they must therefore do so in a way that locates Australia in the Asia-Pacific hemisphere” (1992, p. 205).

*The Yellow Lady* reflected a new period of Australian interest in the region. Yet Broinowski’s identification of Asian influences upon Australian culture was questioned by some critics as
superficial. For instance, Foong Ling Kong (1995) questioned whether travel alone really allowed one to “know” another culture. But perhaps more troubling was the appropriation of Asian influences through European or American art. Broinowski explains the attraction of Australian artists to Asian art. One such example was the Australian artist Brett Whiteley who discovered Japanese ink painting and began to sign his name with a red seal when he was in New York. Indeed this model of exchange, which in reality is a series of sometimes unrelated influences, was reflected in most of the exhibitions in the first half of the nineties. Most notable amongst these is “Out of Asia”.

“Out of Asia” was staged at the Heide Art Gallery in Melbourne in 1990, before touring to Sydney and Canberra. The exhibition was curated by Alison Carroll and featured ten contemporary artists including Micky Allan, Tony Clark, Matthys Gerber, Pat Hoffie, Tim Johnson, Geoff Lowe, Fiona MacDonald, Susan Norrie, Robert Owen, and Gareth Sansom. Carroll’s curatorial rationale attempted to explain how “Asia” had been addressed in the work of Australian artists. She identified two main artistic approaches: the first, artists who had been “thinking about ‘Asia’ for many years” (1990, p. 10), and the second, artists who “confirm[ed] (or at least play[ed] with)” the notion, of an exoticised “other” (1990, p. 11). By focusing on the notion of the exotic “other” in the context of Asia, “Out of Asia” reinvested in the conventional binary division of East and West. Although this has been the conventional approach toward Asia from a Euro-American perspective, it is not necessarily an adequate description for Australia’s relations with Asia, as the earlier example of the Northern Territory suggests.

The art work in “Out of Asia” represented an ambivalence toward Asia in varying degrees. Carroll distinguished between artists who adopt Asian influences through the European tradition of chinoiserie and japonisme and those who depicted their own experiences of Asia. The former
strategy resulted in a superficial approach based on influences gleaned either from books or travel. Moreover, the adoption of Asian influences from Europe or America have the effect of distancing Asia mediating Asia through another culture. This is particularly evident in Susan Norrie’s *Objet d’Art* series of paintings, Pat Hoffie’s interest in Tretiakov images of Asian women, and Tony Clark’s *chinoiserie* landscapes. Clark’s comments in the interview published in the catalogue reinforce this; he states that:

> The concept of failure . . . is important in the idea of using chinoiserie as opposed to going to the source in pure Chinese art, about which, personally, I know nothing. If chinoiserie is interesting, it is because it is by definition a corrupt, artificial style, at a remove from its source. (Carroll 1990, p. 14)

Although Clark acknowledged in an ironic manner the fact that *chinoiserie* was a Western tradition rather than an Asian one, his focus on this tradition suggests a distortion in the model of engagement between Australia and Asia, highlighting a view of Asia from the perspective of Europe rather than Australia. It also suggests that he is more interested in European art history than Asia, thus undermining the exhibition’s curatorial rationale.

Another important factor that prevented “Out of Asia” from making a strong argument for Asia’s effect on Australian contemporary art was the exclusion of the Asian diaspora. Artists such as John Young and Lindy Lee, who are peers of the artists included in the exhibition, were not included in this discussion of Asia. These Chinese-Australian artists could have provided another perspective on Australia’s engagement with Asia as well as complicating further the notion that Asia is the exotic “other.” Carroll’s main argument for the relevance of Asia was through geographical proximity, yet her discussion of Australian visual arts did not include Asian artists who resided in Australia. “Out of Asia,” nevertheless, remains an important example of early attempts to discuss Asia in an Australian context.
In recent years, Chinese artists have been included in exhibitions that explored Australian identity under the theoretical rubrics of multiculturalism, transculturalism, and cultural exchange. These themes were largely attempts to come to terms with, on the one hand, the relationship between Asia and Australia and, on the other hand, a growing Asian Australian art movement. In 1994, Sneja Gunew commented that Asian Australian artists remained under-utilised despite being “uniquely qualified to act as cultural mediators” in Australia’s struggle to define itself anew within the Asia-Pacific region (1994, p. 8). One could also argue that Asian Australian artists presented the greatest challenge to the binary distinctions that maintain the construct of Asia as “other,” and furthermore, Australia as the West. “Here Not There” was one of the first exhibitions to include Asian Australian artists in Australian discourse about Asia. Curated by Hiram To and Nicholas Tsoutas in 1993 at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane to coincide with the first Asia-Pacific Triennial, “Here Not There” included seven artists: Vicente Butron, Simryn Gill, Laurens Tan, Maria Cruz, Felicia Kan, Robert Nery, and Stephen Alderton. By presenting the work of artists who were both Asian and Australian, the exhibition explored the idea of diaspora as a way of complicating strict and rigid ideas of Australia. “Here Not There” was presented as an alternative to the discourse of exotic otherness that had previously dominated discussions of Asia. In some ways, this was an attempt to locate the debates about Asia within Australian culture, rather than the export art model previously applied to exhibitions. The rationale behind “Here Not There” was that the inclusion of Asian Australian artists facilitated a new and specific model of Australian engagement with Asia.

Although “Here Not There” sought to deconstruct some of the prevailing attitudes surrounding Asia by focusing on the work of Asian Australian artists, this curatorial methodology raised an alternative set of difficulties. The complication inherent in exhibitions such as “Here Not There,” a concern for all exhibitions organised on the basis of ethnicity, is that the identity of the artist is seen as of greater significance than the content of the work. This was highlighted by the fact that
few of the works in the exhibition dealt directly with Asia or even the artists’ experience of being Asian Australian. Hiram To acknowledged this obliquely, attempting to unify the artists by what he referred to as a “conceptual commonality.” He also played down the fact that the artists were Asian Australian by saying that it was their “decision to be an ‘artist’ before their choice to be ‘Asian’ or ‘Australian’ that should be considered” (1993, n.p.). This highlights the contradiction embedded within the curatorial rationale for “Here Not There.” While the artists published statements about their identification with Asia in the catalogue, their artwork remained relatively abstract with few obvious references to their Asian heritage. “Here Not There” represented an attempt to expand the discussion about Asia through the experiences of Asian Australians, which was successful in blurring conventional distinctions positing Asia as “other” and Australia as a Western nation.40

Another exhibition that included the work of Asian Australian artists in the context of debates about Asia and Australia was “Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian Interactions” curated by Clare Williamson in 1996. “Above and Beyond” featured thirteen artists from a range of different cultural backgrounds, including Kate Beynon, Neil Emmerson, Simryn Gill, Joan Grounds, Pat Hoffie, Lindy Lee, and John Young. This selection was carried out with a national overview in mind, with artists from Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane represented. The curatorial rationale for *Above and Beyond* avoided making any significant claims for the exhibition. In fact, the essay was devoted to a thorough account of the problems associated with such projects in the context of postcolonial debates. The curators posed the question “How much does this exhibition, and similar projects, further the colonial impetus . . . and contribute to the submerging of difference?” (1996, p. 3). By implicating the exhibition within this question, it was difficult to assess the curatorial motivations for the exhibition.

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40 For an account of the rise of an Asian Australian movement in the nineties, refer to my 1999 article “Asian-Australian Artists: Cultural Shifts in Australia.”
Taking up some of the initial arguments addressed in “Here Not There,” “Above and Beyond” included a significant proportion of Asian Australian artists from a range of cultural backgrounds. A diverse representation of the Chinese diaspora in Australia was also evident, such as the Hong Kong-born artists John Young and Kate Beynon, the Australian-born Chinese artist Lindy Lee, the mainland Chinese artists Guan Wei and Ah Xian, as well as the Malaysian Chinese artist Emil Goh. Indeed, one of the disappointing aspects to this exhibition was a lack of discussion about the evolution and development of the artists’ work in Australia which showed the tension between the different notions of home. Indeed, these differences are evident in Guan Wei and Ah Xian’s relationship to China, having migrated when they were in their thirties, which is vastly different from Kate Beynon and John Young’s, who were both born in Hong Kong and migrated to Australia at a young age. In essence, “Above and Beyond” did not allow for a consideration of diaspora beyond the tracing of cultural heritage. 41

Another concern raised by “Above and Beyond” was the curatorial interpretation of work by Asian Australian artists that paid as much attention to where artists were born and their biographical details as to their artwork. This stands in contrast to the discussion of artwork by the Anglo-Australian artists Neil Emmerson, Kevin Todd, Pat Hoffie, and Joan Grounds which was described in terms of their interest in Asia. The account of Kate Beynon’s work is a good example:

Kate Beynon, who was born in Hong Kong and is now based in Melbourne recently travelled to Beijing to study the Chinese language. Her journey was, in a sense a ‘going back’ to a place that neither she nor her mother (who was born in Malaysia and lived in

41 Another exhibition exploring the Chinese diaspora, in particular those from the mainland, was “Beyond China,” staged at Campbelltown Regional Gallery in 1998.
Hong Kong before emigrating to Australia) had ever known. (Williamson and Snelling 1996, p. 10)

This difference in the treatment of Asian and non-Asian artists designates identity as the primary source of interest in Asian Australian artists. Such assumptions are questioned by Dean Chan, who states that there is a “problematic taken-for-grantedness of origin and essentialist narratives” around the interpretation of Asian Australian art (2000, p. 142).

By focusing on the cultural background of Asian Australian artists, it appears as if their inclusion is based on their identity rather than the work that they produce. One consequence of this approach is the expectation that the identity of Asian artists be evident in their work. Asian American art critic Alice Yang has written that this “perform[s] a special operation—a kind of ethnographic work in which the contemporary artist becomes an artifact of difference” (1998, p. 97). In this way, an artist’s ethnic identity can stand in for thematic relevance.

“Transit” was an exhibition staged at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1998 with a similar curatorial framework to “Above and Beyond.” The exhibition featured seven Asian Australian artists from a range of different backgrounds and ages, a number of whom were also included in “Above and Beyond.” Unlike previous exhibitions, “Transit” did not have an accompanying catalogue but rather a brochure with a brief statement by the curator, Anthony Bond. What was interesting about this text was its avoidance of the term “Asian Australian.” Bond instead chose to discuss the artists as having an interest in “identity and cross-cultural references” (1998, n.p). These cross-cultural references could be seen overtly in some of the artworks, such as Xiao Ping Liang’s calligraphy, Hou Leong’s scroll paintings, and John Young’s quotation of the Italian Chinese court painter Guiseppe Castiglione. Yet there were some notable exceptions, or at least works in which these ideas appeared more tenuous. Bill Seeto’s installation Nocturne (1998), for example, was a site-specific work constructed from glass, mirror, and perspex to create a visual
illusion of infinite space. Bond writes about this work in terms of a visual experience, with no explanation of its cross-cultural references. Akio Makigawa’s onyx sculpture and Savanhdary Vongpoothorn’s labour-intensive perforated paintings also provided limited support for the curatorial rationale, although more subtle cultural connections can be made to the influence of Zen and an interest in Laotian textiles, respectively.

Bond’s curatorial rationale in “Transit” was intended to reconfigure debates about Australia and Asia. He stated: “Each of them [the artists] responds differently to the diasporic nature of Australian life and to the region as a whole.” This represents a significant shift from the exclusion of Asian Australian artists entirely in the 1990 exhibition “Out of Asia.” “Transit,” like “Here Not There,” and “Above and Beyond” constructed an argument for a consideration of Asia precisely from the perspective of Asian Australians. Although the representation of Asian Australian artists within exhibitions remains conceptually problematic in a number of ways, their relatively recent inclusion has provided a more complex view of Australia and its position in the region.

**Seriality as Survival: The Work of Guan Wei**

One of the most successful Chinese artists in Australia, Beijing-born Guan Wei has received a number of awards reserved for the country’s most senior and accomplished artists. These include: selection as one of nine artists to create official prints for the Sydney Olympics in 2000, a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1999, and inclusion in the third Asia-Pacific Triennial (1999). Guan’s migration to Australia was prompted by connections he made while living in Beijing, through people such as Nicholas Jose, who was the cultural attaché at the Australian Embassy. Guan met a number of Australians through Jose and was invited to take up an artist residency in Hobart in 1989. Guan returned to Beijing the same year and produced nearly fifty small works on paper as a response to June Fourth. This body of paintings, *Two Finger Exercises* (1989, fig 1.1), was produced over a six-month period and featured anonymous, naked
individuals brandishing a “V” sign with their fingers. Guan recalled that prior to demonstrations around Tiananmen, people could be seen making this sign. He recounts a story where he made this sign to a little girl who, without hesitation, returned it to him with her own fingers.\footnote{See McKenzie 1992.}

Over the past decade of his residence in Australia, Guan has produced works ranging greatly in subject matter. Gao Minglu, for example, has commented that Guan has “avoided playing the exotic through an over-emphasis on his Chinese background, but at the same time he has not overtly de-emphasised his Chinese identity in order to appear purely as an internationalist” (2000, n.p.). Guan’s representation of Chineseness in his paintings reflects a desire to negotiate different cultural influences. This is conveyed in a methodical, consistent manner with elements such as the rectangular shape and scale of the canvases, the painting technique (flat and cartoon-like in its lack of linear perspective), and the serial exploration of themes consistent from one series of works to another.

Guan’s paintings are characterised by a series of distinctive, yet consistent, formal elements. These formal elements include a vertical format based on the artist’s first stretchers made from window frames, a divided picture plane distinguishing the foreground and background, and generic, frequently sexless, nude figures. Although the three formal elements in his paintings were all formulated when the artist was living in China, he continued to use them in Australia. Guan’s paintings spanning his past decade in Australia, like his Chinese works, contain allusions to his life experiences. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the \textit{Certificate Series} (1990), a group of works on paper originating when the artist arrived in Sydney. These works comprised different images that included identification photographs, those used on official forms and documents, as well as formal photographs of Chinese families. Not only were the photographs...
painted over, sometimes blurring the facial features altogether, but they were also overlaid with a number of red seals and stamps, suggesting the bureaucratic processes that the artist and his wife (Liu Liwen, who followed Guan to Australia in 1992) had to undergo before receiving permanent residency status in Australia. This autobiographical element has been largely unacknowledged in Guan’s work. By analysing his paintings in terms of their biographical content, we are able to trace his reactions to his new home, Australia.

*Living Specimens* (1992) vividly reflected Guan’s encounters with non-Chinese art when he first arrived in Australia. The paintings in this series featured icons of Western art masterpieces (placed within beakers of water) as objects of scientific study. For example, Salvador Dali’s melting clock appears in *Red Nose* (1992), Van Gogh’s vase of sunflowers in *Sunflower* (1992), and the whimsical designs of Joan Miro occupy the central plane of *Fishing for a Miro* (1992). Seen together as a series, these paintings create a disjointed picture of art history—perhaps suggesting the way that Guan would have discovered them, randomly, as reproductions in magazines or books. Another example of this is *Venus Vanishing* (1992), which, like other paintings in the series, is divided into three different sections. In this work, a female figure is shown surrounded by flowers and hovers just above the lip of a beaker containing an open clamshell immersed in water. There are clear visual references to Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (1482–1484), which shows the mythical scene of Venus floating to shore on a giant shell. Guan’s portrayal of European art as a subject of study, rather than a culture to be experienced, draws upon his early encounters with these art works in books and journals when he was in China. He used the metaphor of a beaker to suggest this along with his sense of cultural isolation in Australia. He has said: “I was living in Western society . . . I felt very isolated, like I was inside a glass filled with water” (Cramer 1999, p. 9).
Scientific symbols recur in other works, most notably in *Test Tube Baby* (1992). This series of paintings contrasts traditional Chinese symbols of fertility (pomegranates, lotus, and gourds) with symbols of current scientific approaches to fertility (the test tube). Employing a similar visual format to the *Living Specimen* series, each painting in the *Test Tube Baby* series is divided into four horizontal sections to create a sense of narrative. This can be seen in *Test Tube Baby No. 16, No. 2, and No. 3* (1992, fig. 1.2). In the first painting, an adult hand is shown sprinkling droplets from a bowl of water onto a seated baby who delicately holds a test-tube upright between its hands. The baby is seated in a lotus position frequently identified with the Buddha. Directly beneath a large lotus leaf emerges from a seedpod soaking in a beaker of water. *Test Tube Baby No. 2* depicts a baby riding on the back of a giant carp while gripping a test-tube in one hand and a pearl in the other. Underneath this scene, a gourd stands inside a beaker emitting smoke. Both the pearl and the gourd are Daoist symbols. The dragon pearl is considered one of the eight Daoist treasures while gourds are frequently used by Daoist saints to trap demons. *Test Tube Baby No.3* depicts an adult lying on his/her side, self-administering an injection; directly below, a baby inquisitively peers into a test-tube. Directly beneath, a pomegranate with its seeds partially exposed is immersed in a beaker filled with water. The plants and fruit in these three paintings are traditional Chinese symbols for fertility. They are also connected to different customs and rituals. In China, until recently, gourds were painted on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon to look like children and given to women wanting to conceive. Guan’s inclusion of Chinese traditions and myths is characteristic of his initial views on what his art had to offer Australian and international audiences. Interviewed nearly two years after arriving in Australia, he commented:

> . . . when I came here to Australia, I expected to transmit something of what I had learned over so many years in China. I discovered that Australian friends with whom I discussed this had quite different ideas. They thought I had come to study, to learn. No, I came to exchange and to pass on what I had to offer. (McKenzie 1992, n.p.)
In spite of this belief, one can also trace a shift in Guan’s practice in the mid-nineties away from overt Chinese references toward the incorporation of more diverse influences and sources. *The Great War of the Eggplant* (1993, fig. 1.3) is a series of twenty paintings that illustrates fictitious land and air battles over possession of an eggplant. Guan’s portrayal of these skirmishes and this vegetable’s unlikely role in a war has been interpreted by writers such as Sue Cramer (1999) and Nicholas Jose as a metaphor for the artist’s own journey to Australia. To quote Jose:

> It is a fantastic story [about the eggplant]—with parallels to the artist’s own story of moving from China to Australia—of moments achieved, only to have them lost in the necessary move on to something else, a process of imbalances resolved at stages along the way in stunning acts of resonant equilibrium. (Jose 1995, p. 48)

Jose’s interpretation of Guan’s eggplant wars suggests a sense of movement that corresponds to the idea of transexperience, insofar as it allows for the uneven process of rejection and adoption of new and old cultures that occurs with migration. Guan’s paintings use the eggplant as a metaphor for the processes of transformation; aeroplanes drop eggplants as if they were bombs; they fall gracefully, but as they descend, they morph into elaborate servings on dinner plates. From weapon to food—destruction to nourishment—these transformations are extreme. What sets *The Great War of the Eggplant* apart from previous works, such as *Living Specimen* and *Test Tube Baby*, is that it represents conflict. While the two earlier series could be said to reflect Guan’s interest in studying the new values of his adopted country, Australia, where the legacy of European and American art dominate, *The Great War of the Eggplant* uses tension to articulate cultural differences between Australia and China.

If *The Great War of the Eggplant* embodies conflict between Guan’s Chinese heritage and his Australian residence, then *Treasure Hunt* (1995, fig. 1.4) represents more of an identification with Australian culture. With little trace of the Chinese symbols that characterised his early works, this series of twenty paintings shows animals and humans in pursuit of a giant, elusive
medicine capsule. Guan’s vertically-oriented paintings depict brown earth, expansive blue sky, and piercing clear light, all qualities particular to the Australian landscape, in addition to Australian fauna such as crocodiles, platypus, frogs, and snakes. Five years after Guan had arrived in Australia, these were the first signals in his work that he now lived in Australia. The transition from sombre colours in his early Beijing paintings to light-filled colour and the reduction in compositional divisions from three or four sections to two, to denote the land and sky, makes *Treasure Hunt* a turning point in Guan’s œuvre.

In *Treasure Hunt 11* (fig. 1.4), a crocodile approaches a waterhole filled with tadpoles and a single water lily, while a one-eyed figure grasps a large red and blue medicine capsule. In the background, a blimp floats past in the sky. *Treasure Hunt 12* presents an even more fabulous narrative. A large frog swims towards the surface of a pond clutching a medicine capsule amidst a battle between aeroplanes dropping bombs repelled by ground weapons. Surveying all of this from the side of the image is a figure smoking a pipe, not unlike a field marshal or military general. A tug-of-war between animals and humans for possession of the capsule characterises this work, and others in the series. Sky and land create a single formal division within the composition, although this is offset by the interplay between different objects, animals, and figures in the compressed landscape, making these in many ways more complex and varied than previous works.

Guan’s representation of the Australian landscape suggests an engagement with one of the most significant genres of Australian art—landscape painting. *Treasure Hunt* shows Guan’s attempt to personify Australian culture through an experience of the land, yet the battles taking place also suggest a conflict similar to *The Great War of the Eggplant*. Again, the tensions inherent in forging a new sense of place and identity are seen through the metaphor of battles between animals and humans.
In more recent years Guan’s interest in landscape has been extended to include weather charts, as in *Les Vents* (1997) and *Revisionary* (1998), as well as cosmological maps in *Gazing into Deep Space* (2000). Guan’s incorporation of cartography can be understood as a way of addressing a sense of journey and exploration, not unlike, perhaps, his own migration from China to Australia. The five paintings in *Les Vents*, for instance, alternate between showing aerial views of land and representations of wind patterns. (*les vents* is French for “the winds.”) Other works, such as *Revisionary*, comprise twenty rectangular canvases arranged into two rows with the gaps between each suggesting the folds in the paper of a conventional map. Guan’s map guides the viewer to islands among oceans using various symbols, such as arrows (which represent currents or wind changes) and dotted lines (to show pathways.)

*Gazing into Deep Space* is a map of the stars and the Milky Way. It is a suite of paintings that represents the Milky Way as a collection of diagrams showing the constellations overlaid with their stencilled names, such as Volans, Puppis, and Auriga. By drawing broken lines between the stars, Guan created his own maps. Since early times, stars have been used to navigate, and it is through this that Guan reflects upon his own migratory experience from China to Australia. Some of these paintings also refer to Chinese folk tales, as further evidence of Guan’s Chinese heritage. The Chinese critic Gao Minglu (2000) observed that *Gazing into Deep Space No. 3* recalled the ancient tale of the shepherd and the weaver. This is a Chinese story of forbidden love, where a young weaver, the daughter of the Heavenly Emperor Yu Di, descended from the heavens to marry a shepherd, but the couple were separated by the disapproving Emperor. They are said to reunite each year on the seventh of July on the Magpie Bridge in the Milky Way. In his painting, Guan also included numerous white figures with red spots joined together by lines across their bodies. Although the red dots symbolise stars, they also hark back to some of Guan’s early works, such as *Pillar Series—The Beginning of Autumn* (1999) that featured red dots as acupuncture.
points. The dual references to Western cosmology and Chinese mythology in these works, particularly *Gazing into Deep Space No. 3*, embody a dialogue between Australian and Chinese culture which has been present in Guan’s work since he migrated to Australia.

*Zen Garden* (2000, fig. 1.5) was exhibited at the same time as *Gazing into Deep Space*, and in the same way that *Treasure Hunt* resulted from five years of living in Australia, *Zen Garden* reflected on a decade of such experience. The Australian landscape portrayed in *Treasure Hunt* contained an unprecedented number of references to the artist’s residence in Australia, while in *Zen Garden* Guan returned to more overt Chinese symbolism. Curiously, Guan’s references to his Chineseness increased sharply with the length of time spent away from China, a trait shared by his peers in the United States and France. Yet *Zen Garden* differs significantly in its use of Chinese references to earlier works such as *Test Tube Baby*. In *Zen Garden*, misty clouds, executed in watery paint washes (a new technique for the artist), formed a background from which water lilies, seed pods and leaves emerged. Human hands in different *mudras* were also pictured throughout the series, but no complete figures were shown.

Although the works in the *Zen Garden* series do not depict a Zen garden in the strictest sense, their overall composition is evocative of its simplicity. Another similarity between Japanese Zen gardens and Guan’s paintings lies in the deliberate confusion of the field of vision between the land and sky, or earth and heavens. In Guan’s paintings, clouds and tadpoles inhabit the same space, while rocks, gravel, and trees are used in Zen gardens to symbolise much larger scenes of nature, such as waterfalls, islands in the ocean, and mountains. In another way, though, one might ask why Guan would have wanted to represent a Zen Japanese garden rather than a Chinese garden, which possesses a number of the same principles. One response to this question lies in the idea of transexperience, with the artist illustrating an identification with China while at the same
time coming to terms with foreign beliefs, values, and attitudes—in this case, the popular confusion amongst many people in Australia between China and Japan and all things Asian.

**The Iconic and the Personal: The Work of Ah Xian**

Like Guan, Ah Xian, a self-taught artist who began painting in 1980, migrated to Australia after spending time as an artist-in-residence at the Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart in 1989. Ah Xian was born in 1960 in Beijing and currently lives in Sydney. His work over the past two decades has varied greatly. In China, he made site-specific installations and paintings but when he migrated to Australia he gave up painting and began to make sculptures, some made of porcelain. His Australian works are also characterised by a tension between ideas of the personal and the culturally iconic. This tension is best illustrated in his *China China* series of porcelain busts.

Ah Xian’s porcelain busts are created from casts of mostly friends and family, giving them a personal dimension. This is offset by traditional Chinese motifs from the Ming and Qing periods—the height of porcelain production in China—on the sculptural form. While the discussion of this series will be continued later in this section, *China China* can be understood as the culmination of Ah Xian’s thoughts on the migratory experience as well as his thoughts about his homeland after ten years in Australia. He states: “I believe that even if someone is away from China, they recognise themselves as being Chinese. If you are away from China, you also have a clearer vision of China and Chinese culture” (Ah 2001).

Ah Xian’s works over the last decade reflect this changing view of China; he believes he can see China more clearly from a distance. Like Guan, his view of China is inflected by his experiences in Australia, although, unlike Guan, he never deviated from the use of Chinese iconography. China has remained the cornerstone for his work even though his ideas about the country and immediate source of inspiration have changed.
My ideas about China have changed. When I was there, I always focussed on political issues since I couldn’t avoid them. But once I left, I felt calm and peaceful. They are not important to me although I know that Chinese artists still have similar struggles with the government. I can tell from their artworks, which are disturbing or dirty. One artist recently ate the body of a dead baby. Artists in China feel angry that they aren’t able to express themselves. I think that if I didn’t come to Australia, I would be doing work like them now. (Ah 2001)

One of the first works Ah Xian made when he arrived in Australia was *Heavy Wounds* (1991, fig. 1.6): a suite of paintings that depict surreal scenes of stylised figures with bandaged wounds to suggest both shock and trauma. Although these works contained few references to China, they are perhaps some of the artist’s most insightful works about China made in the aftermath of June Fourth. *Heavy Wounds No. 7*, for instance, shows a poster of a woman with her arm bandaged, stuck to a brick wall, close to a line of men with bandaged heads. Another work from this series, *Heavy Wounds No. 6*, shows a high, grey wall with three windows through which a waterfall is partially visible, as a reference to a natural landscape. Inside the wall, a claustrophobic space contains a line of women facing the window so that only their backs are visible. One women’s head is entirely bandaged. These paintings possess a number of common elements that unite them as a series, such as imagery of people with serious wounds. The sense of isolation and trauma in Ah Xian’s paintings is as much a reflection on China in the post-June Fourth period as it is upon the uncertainty of having just migrated to Australia.

The sense of desolation apparent in the *Heavy Wounds* series continued to inform Ah Xian’s works throughout the nineties, first as a sense of loss and then as an exploration of dislocation between two different cultures. For example, the theme of bandages is continued in his next series of works, *Site Perspectives* (1992, fig. 1.7), a group of small, fragile plaster sculptures stacked to
resemble towers. At the upper-most level of these structures, different sculptures of hands and feet are nestled amongst white gauze bandages. Site Perspectives has the same subject matter as the Heavy Wounds series, although it is manifested in three dimensions.

In the mid-nineties, Ah Xian began to incorporate images from photocopiers and fax machines into his work. Deduction #2 (1996) consisted of three fax machines, from which spewed reams of paper covered in images, in each instance, of the Mona Lisa (c.1503–1506) by Leonardo da Vinci, a self-portrait of the artist, and the Buddha. Above the machines were colour reproductions of the three images. With each successive fax, the image grew fainter until it was not visible at all. The choice of images was not arbitrary but made to reflect Ah Xian’s struggle with different cultural values since his migration to Australia. The artist’s self-portrait was positioned between the Buddha and the Mona Lisa as an illustration of his negotiation of Eastern and Western cultures. On another level, the degradation of the images apparent in each fax transmission is a metaphor for loss or nostalgia for the past.

Fading Books (1996, fig. 1.8) also uses photocopies. This work comprised four cloth-bound concertina books commonly used for practicing calligraphy, each with a different image of a famous contemporary woman reproduced throughout. Each, that is, except for one, since the women represented were Princess Diana, Mother Theresa, Cicciolina, and the artist’s mother. The images were copied over and over so that, as the title suggests, they fade and almost disappear. Although this gradual degradation of the quality of the image might suggest the transience of fame, at least in the case of the books with Princess Diana, Mother Theresa, and Cicciolina, the inclusion of an image of the artist’s mother suggests a melancholic memory: Ah Xian’s inability

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43 Indeed, the artist even devised a chart to map the philosophical differences between East and West based on his experiences of migration (fig. 2.8).
to visit his mother when she was ill in China because of problems with his visa, and her subsequent death, remains a painful memory for the artist. He recalls:

I did everything, but they delayed issuing my visa for about ten days, and during this time, my mother passed away. My family kept this a secret until I arrived in Beijing because they worried about my reaction. I could only see her face. I still dream about her . . . I believe that the sadness will last the rest of my life. (Ah 2001)

Thinking about this statement, Ah Xian’s inclusion of his mother in the above group of famous women was, on the one hand, a form of memorial, but also, more broadly, it juxtaposed a personal relationship with iconic representations of women. The format of the works with the images of women well-known in the Western media transposed onto a Chinese form of concertina books was also a metaphor for links between different cultures.

Ah Xian’s most recent body of work is the China China series, a group of porcelain busts that are casts of friends and family and models decorated with traditional Chinese patterns and motifs. With the use of kilns at Sydney College of the Arts, Ah Xian began to experiment with porcelain in 1998. One of the very first busts he made, China China 2 (1998, fig. 1.9), is covered with a pattern of flowers blooming over the entire surface of the face, neck, and chest. Ah Xian has said that blue and white porcelain designs, particularly from the Qing dynasty, are some of his favourite, and his first experiments reflected this interest. China China 3 (1998) and China China 4 (1998) were painted with blue and white patterns of dragons, waves, and clouds. Other works from this early period of production in Sydney were covered in flowers, plants, and trees, commonly with willow, chrysanthemum, lotus, peach blossom, and banana trees. These early busts remain some of Ah Xian’s most minimal works, for they leave significant parts of the plain white surface of the porcelain visible.
The most significant shift in the *China China* works occurred when Ah Xian was awarded an Australia Council grant to visit Jingdezhen for nine months in 1999 to produce new work. Jingdezhen is a city famous for its fine porcelain production. The city’s reputation as a centre of porcelain production developed during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when it was said to have had three hundred kiln complexes, each with different specialisations. The products made here were not only for local consumption, but exported to Korea, Japan, and central Asia. Later, in the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), plain white wares were transported to Canton for painting and refiring for European markets. In Jingdezhen, Ah Xian worked with different studios and collaborated with artisans to experiment with glazes and designs. In *China China-Bust 34* (1999, fig. 1.10), for example, images of various Chinese antiques (such as cabinets, fans, lanterns, and vases) were painted in oxide glaze onto a white background. Some of the images of antique objects were done in relief, giving them a three dimensional presence. Instead of the antiques forming a surface design, like a tattoo, as in previous works, here they disfigured the face of the figure. This work suggests that one’s culture is inscribed upon the body and is inescapable—a statement on the residual influence of Chinese culture on the artist.

*China China-Bust 25* (1999) is painted with erotic images of couples accompanied by small pink flowers against a light green background. The story behind the imagery suggests an interesting connection between Australia and China. Ah Xian found the imagery used in this work in an album at a Sydney library. Although these albums were common during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it is unlikely that the artist would have been able to find such images in China, since most of the important historical examples have been destroyed or are inaccessible. It is also significant that these sort of images, in China, had a symbolic meaning; they were considered to possess Daoist significance as the union of the male and female forces—*yang* and *yin*. This notion of male and female forms was not only represented through imagery of sexual intercourse but also in the depiction of mountains, clouds, mushrooms, and animals such as deer.
Dragons are another Daoist symbol of male energy, and are a recurring feature in Chinese cosmology. In Ah Xian’s busts, dragons are represented in diverse styles and media. It is also significant to note that all of the dragon designs are placed upon Ah Xian’s male figures. Conversely, the artist reserved female or yin symbols, such as the phoenix, for female figures. *China China-Bust 43* (1999), for example, shows a dragon in white carved relief over a deep-blue, glossy glaze. The single dragon with four claws—the symbol of a high ranking official rather than the Emperor, whose imperial dragons have five claws—snaked around the figure’s head so that the face of the mythical creature was placed on the very top of the man’s head. By overlaying the dragon on the male figure, Ah Xian also gives the figure a dual personality; the form one sees is human, but the image is one of a dragon. Two Chinese unicorns, again in white relief, also flank both of his shoulders.

*China China-Bust 36* (1999) is a similar work, with a dragon coiled around the male figure. This dragon painted in iron-red overglaze, with the detail of its scales and sharp claws evident, appears to be suffocating the figure. This image of constriction is reinforced by the position of the dragon over the man’s face. A repetitive wave design in cobalt blue, across the man’s shoulders, provides a calming visual foil to the threat of the dragon. The imagery on this bust echoes a division between heaven and earth, common in Chinese cosmology, with the dragon and clouds painted onto the man’s head symbolising the heavens while the waves across his shoulders symbolise earth.

Ah Xian’s busts, as noted, combine his personal relationships to family and friends with an admiration for Chinese culture. Indeed, the Chinese traditional designs painted onto his *China China* busts resemble tattoos; the glaze is melted into the purity of the porcelain, as the dye of a tattoo soaks into skin. This process alludes to corporeal memory or, to be more specific, the idea
that one’s cultural heritage will always have a bearing on who we are. This reading is reinforced by Ah Xian’s own comments upon his Chinese upbringing:

Those who have grown up steeped in Chinese ways can hardly escape the influence of thousands of years of Chinese history and cultural traditions, including language, education, religion, and so on—and I don’t speak English well enough for that language to be a frame of reference for me. (McKenzie 1992)

McKenzie’s interview with Ah Xian was conducted not long after Ah Xian’s settlement in Australia. Chinese culture remained the main frame of reference for his work at the time. Yet the presence of Chineseness in his art has changed over the course of the last ten years. Indeed, one can identify a shift in Ah Xian’s work away from the politics of individual expression evident in the *Heavy Wounds* series to an exploration of more overt Chinese forms, seen in his use of calligraphy books and porcelain. He does, however, make a distinction between his use of Chinese references:

Let me clarify something about my attitude toward Chineseness or to the issue of being Eastern or Western. There are two types of ways to create artworks. The first is to use Chinese symbols directly from China. The second type is to take Chinese culture as the source of inspiration for new cultural forms. I use this second technique. (Ah 2001)

Ah Xian’s assertion that his work draws upon Chineseness as a source of inspiration, rather than the appropriation of Chinese symbols, is a difference rarely raised by overseas Chinese artists. But it does relate to the idea of transexperience insofar as it recognises that his notion of China and, in fact, his very sense of Chineseness has been altered because of his migration to Australia. He has begun to forge new cultural values in a foreign environment.
Red Guard Theatrics: The Paintings of Guo Jian

Guo Jian was educated at the China Central Minorities Institute in Beijing, where he was awarded a Bachelor of Arts in Chinese painting and literature. He attended this college instead of the Central Academy, where most other artists in Beijing studied, because his father belonged to the local Chinese “minority culture” from Guizhou. After art school, Guo had a studio at Yuanmingyuan artists village in Beijing from 1989 until 1992, when he migrated to Australia.

Guo served as squad leader in the army for four years, and the political posters he painted during this time have had a lasting influence on his paintings. One example is his frequent depiction of soldiers, featured as central figures in each of his works. The depiction of soldiers has personal and political symbolism for Guo; not only was he a People’s Liberation Army soldier, but, as he has said:

My grandmother told me that the People’s Liberation Army had executed my grandfather . . . I was shocked . . . My father was a soldier. He had to denounce his own father, knowing he’d be killed too if he tried to defend him. And then in 1989, there I was, a former soldier, nearly killed by the P.L.A. myself on Tiananmen Square. (Guo 2000, p. 10)

In some ways, Guo’s representation of China is static, or fixed at a time when the People’s Liberation Army (P.L.A.) had full control over the public sphere; no doubt this was the case when Guo served in the P.L.A. Since arriving in Sydney, Guo has held two solo exhibitions at public galleries: “Double Happiness is a Warm Gun” at the Tin Sheds Gallery in 1998 and “Mamma’s Tripping” at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space in 2000, along with other exhibitions at Ray Hughes Gallery. The paintings in these exhibitions contain strong references to China,
exclusively featuring Chinese people, mostly soldiers, in strange dreamlike scenes with an undercurrent of violence. References to Australia are minimal in these works.

Guo’s continual references in his paintings to his time in the P.L.A. derive from the traumatic nature of the experience. Guo recalls:

I used to have nightmares all the time . . . . Then in the library, I was looking at some pictures of China during the Cultural Revolution and I realised what was triggering these nightmares. Since coming to Australia ten years ago, I’d pushed memories of my years in the Chinese army, and of Tiananmen, out of my mind. But seeing these images triggered memories, and once I started to use them in my paintings, I stopped having bad dreams. (2000, p. 10)

Guo’s paintings frequently represent his experiences of army life and memories of China as dream-like narratives. In short, his works reveal a subconscious sense of Chineseness that can be related to transexperience, insofar as while his works reflect little of his new environment in Australia, it is also evident that he could not have produced these works in China, since they voice his memories and experiences of the violence, corruption, and greed of the Chinese Communist Party.

Guo’s paintings executed in Australia between 1995 and 1997 explore the side-show theatre as a site of latent violence. The main characters are soldiers being entertained by circus performers such as acrobats, knife throwers, and fire-eaters. *Excitement: Sideshow—Qi Gong* (1995, fig.1.11) is a good example of the cacophony of activity that characterises this series of work. P.L.A. soldiers, dressed in full uniform, including soft hats, are seated on both sides of the painting, providing a framing device for the performance. Behind them, a woman lies on her back with her face grimacing at them while a man poised to cut her in half with a chopping knife stands by her side. This chaotic scene is full of contrasts. The tension created by the performance involving
knives, for example, is offset by the soldiers’ casual behaviour of passing a cigarette between them during the performance. Other contrasts are found, for example, between the backdrop for the performance, which is a calming scene of mountains and a waterfall, and the image of a man attacked by a monkey whose paw had taken hold of the man’s head. A 1997 painting, bearing the same title, portrays a similar scene with soldiers wearing only their green army trousers. One soldier holds a mallet, and is poised to strike a stone slab resting on the chest of another soldier, who wears red and white face makeup like that of the monkey character in the Chinese operas “The Monkey King” or “Journey to the West”. Another man seated close-by plays the erhu (a two-stringed fiddle) while a Chinese opera singer stands in the background. Again, a monkey is shown in the background near the backdrop of a pagoda pavilion. The different layers in these paintings are metaphors for the social stratification of Chinese society, for example, between peasants, soldiers, and performers.

*Excitement: Sideshow—Knife Thrower* (1996, fig. 1.12) was another painting from the series. Two soldiers dressed only in their green army trousers hold small knives in their hands while a woman in a red cheongsam stands, naively smiling, in front of a wooden board embedded with knives. One of the soldier’s faces is painted in the signature red, white, and black pattern of the monkey character, (perhaps a reference to the monkey in the background, leaping through the air toward a boy wearing a mask). The painted face of the central figure is common in other works in the series, such as *Excitement: Sideshow—Ring of Fire* (1997, fig. 1.13) and *Excitement: Sideshow—Balancing Act* (1996). In *Excitement: Sideshow—Ring of Fire*, a group of entertainers is crowded onto a small stage in front of a painted backdrop of a traditional Chinese pavilion with a pagoda roof. The performers include an opera singer, musician, and a soldier diving through a ring of fire. Mimicking the soldier, a monkey glides through the air in the same direction. Similarly, *Excitement: Sideshow-Balancing Act* depicts four soldiers and a woman in black lace underwear, who nonchalantly plays a bamboo flute and holds a packet of cigarettes while
watching one of the soldiers, with a knife in his mouth, balancing another knife on its tip to form an angle of ninety degrees. In the foreground of this scene, a bowl filled with two goldfish and water is on a small table covered with a red tablecloth. Fish are a Chinese symbol of longevity, a contrast to the strange, anxious, and dangerous events taking place on the stage.

The paintings in this series possess a number of similarities such as the inclusion of a monkey and P.L.A. soldiers as well as opera singers, acrobats, and musicians. The monkey is shown in each painting as a fleeting figure, always in motion and with its back to the viewer. It holds cultural symbolism as well as personal symbolism for the artist. For example, the monkey is worshipped as “the greatest equal to heaven” (Qi-tian da-sheng) in Southern China, while Guo’s memories of his childhood are filled with the mythical tales of “Monkey,” a character from the Chinese theatre. In addition to the repetition of figures, Guo’s paintings are also redolent with a sense of threat and danger. The atmosphere is always crowded and claustrophobic, creating a sense of expectation that something bad is about to happen. It derives partly from Guo’s use of P.L.A. soldiers, which we associate with war and violence and partly from the strong intimation of debauchery and sexual deviancy.

Guo’s paintings from 1998 to 1999 are much more ambitious in scale and content. They include images of soldiers and generals from the P.L.A., again, but this time in front of various recognisably Chinese scenes. *Excitement: Great Landscape No. 1* (1998, fig. 1.14), for example, is dense with nearly twenty different figures of soldiers, generals, women (some naked and some in underwear), and men in everyday clothes populating a landscape of mountains and a bathing pool. If we focus on the right hand side of the painting alone, we see a woman in red underwear eating chocolate ice cream, a soldier on a rocking horse (painted in black and white), a woman bathing naked in the pool with her breasts exposed above the water, and a man in green shorts poised to dive off a mountain peak into the water. These figures don’t engage with one another at
all, and their scale in the landscape is not pictorially correct, at least according to the principles of linear perspective, since some are oversized while others appear miniaturized by comparison. The layering of imagery is reminiscent of collage techniques, with the foreground figures sitting uneasily against the background landscape. This is intentional, used by the artist to convey the utter artificiality of the scene—a world controlled by corrupt and debauched P.L.A. officers and Party officials. By showing the army soldiers without their uniforms, Guo further disrupts the authority invested in them.

Guo’s *Excitement: Great Tiananmen* (1998, fig. 1.15) from the same series is an even more potent caricature of the P.L.A., portraying soldiers and generals as immoral and ineffectual. Against the backdrop of the gate of Tiananmen, Guo fills the painting with a mass of figures. To the right hand side, groups of soldiers congregate together with cigarettes in their hands, as if posing for a photograph, a common site today in Tiananmen Square. Their image is painted in black and white, like an old photograph, perhaps symbolising a reference to the past. The seeming innocence of these young soldiers is contrasted against the violent acts of other soldiers around them. In the upper right-hand corner, for example, three soldiers hold a man’s arms and neck, restraining him so that he can’t move, while in the centre of the work a soldier pins a naked man to the ground. In another instance, a black official car with Deng Xiaoping standing up and through its sunroof runs over a naked man. Although the men in this painting are mostly soldiers, the women are shown to be temptresses who, either naked or wearing red lace underwear and remnants of army uniforms, cavort recklessly with the soldiers. In addition, a fighter plane flies low across the Square amidst small air explosions that resemble anti-aircraft fire. Guo’s *Excitement: Great Tiananmen* is a strange assemblage of erotic and violent acts, united only by the themes of disorder and conflict. This painting is a statement on the decay and corruption of the P.L.A., made all the more pointed by the inclusion of poppy flowers blooming in the
foreground—a reference to the P.L.A.’s long-rumoured involvement in the drug industry in China.

Guo’s selection of Tiananmen Square as the backdrop for *Excitement: Great Tiananmen* (1998) is notable for a number of reasons, including its political and historical importance. Tiananmen Square was where the People’s Republic of China was proclaimed in 1949 and also the site of the June Fourth uprising in 1989. Tiananmen has also been the subject of a number of significant historical art works. In Sun Zixi’s 1964 painting titled *In Front of Tiananmen*, for example, a group of peasants stand cheerfully in front of the dominant architectural landmark while Dong Xiwen’s *The Founding of the Nation* (1952–53) shows Mao announcing the founding of the People’s Republic of China from Tiananmen Gate to the people in the square below. Not long after being completed, this work was reproduced fifty-six thousand times within a three-month period, bearing testament to its historical value, not to mention the potency of Tiananmen Square as a national monument.44

Guo’s more recent works are based on the *Red Detachment of Women*, a Cultural Revolution ballet of a battle between evil landowners and good Communist soldiers. The composition of this series of paintings, titled *Trigger Happy*, is more formal and structural than in previous works. *Trigger Happy XI* (2000), for instance, features a line of almost identical women leaning forward with their hands on their knees, gazing directly at the viewer. They wear nothing but army helmets as a kind of superficial protection against an aeroplane on fire, nosediving toward the ground in the distance. In front of them, a ballerina from the *Red Detachment of Women*, wearing an army uniform of blue shirt and shorts, performs an arabesque on ballet point-shoes with her arms outstretched, holding a red kerchief and a gun in her right hand. The contrast between the

44 See Andrews 1994, p. 86.
naked women and the ballerina suggests a tension between two stereotypes of women (the seductress and the dutiful woman) as well as past and present perceptions of the P.L.A. In the original production of the *Red Detachment of Women* first produced in the sixties, the Communist army frees the people from the tyranny of feudalism. Today, however, they are more of a police force. In a further comment upon the current status of the P.L.A., Guo included in the painting a male soldier crouched on the ground clutching a gun. He wears only green underpants and a metal helmet, yet his body is covered in perspiration. His mouth is open and smiling and his eyes are half-closed, as if aroused.

Although *Trigger Happy XI*, and other paintings in this series, contain unequivocal references to the decadence and corruption of officials and the P.L.A. in China, there is a noticeable shift in his palette (the use of lighter colours) and the landscape that serves as the backdrop (from mountain scenes to beaches), in contrast to his earlier paintings. This relates in part to his migration to Australia, where he was captivated by the beauty of the continent’s beaches. As Guo has stated:

> The paintings with water and the beach are influenced by Australia. I was knocked out by my first sight of the Australian coast, of the beach. We don’t have any ocean in Guizhou. I love the sea. I still feel I’ve been here for too short a time, and I haven’t digested my Australian experience. Besides, I have to finish one stage in my life before I can start on the next. But you can see how bright the blues are in these paintings—that’s all from Australia. (Guo 2000, p. 12)

Of all the overseas Chinese artists discussed in this chapter, Guo’s paintings appear the least visibly altered by his migration to Australia. Yet Guo has repeatedly stressed that his relocation to Australia has meant the freedom to paint morally-suspect officials and licentious soldiers, subjects that he could not paint in China. As Nicholas Jose has written, “the socialist paradise is parodied in Guo Jian’s work as an Australian paradise, as if the visual environment he has
experienced here, with its elements of garish sexuality and gross comedy, has stimulated him to a degree of release that would have been impossible in China” (2000, p. 6).

**Chinese Relief: The Work of Fan Dong Wang**

Over the past decade, Fan Dong Wang’s work has focused on the differences between the way that traditional Chinese and European paintings record spatial depth. Fan considers perspective to be the major difference between Chinese and European painting: in particular, the shallow and compartmentalised spaces of Chinese paintings as opposed to the linear, deep perspective found in European paintings. This interest has become apparent in his work only since his migration to Sydney in 1990 from Shanghai. Although Fan’s initial reason for wanting to migrate was to study English, June Fourth changed that: he left, in the end, for political reasons:

> It was about freedom of speech. Because of the Tiananmen movement, lots of people were open to Western ideas and wanted a contemporary society. Encouraging things were happening at that time: people had been radical already in other countries and we were looking for ways to be radical too, to work with Western ideas to achieve our goal. Strangely, everything Western was considered good. (2001)

Fan did study English after migrating to Australia and completed two postgraduate degrees at the University of Wollongong and the University of New South Wales. This university study gave him a more theoretical approach to his art work and to thinking about the differences between Chinese and Australian culture.

Fan developed a theoretical model for comparing the philosophical differences between Chinese and European art. His theory of “shifting perspective,” elaborated in his Ph.D. thesis for the University of Wollongong, crystallises these ideas. But before discussing Fan’s theories, it is useful to consider his perception of the cultural differences between Australia and China. In China, he remembers:
[Chen Zhen, his teacher] taught us drawing, what we called “academic drawing,” and Yu Youhan taught us colour. This was normal because we were learning traditional Chinese-style artwork. But we were conflicted between the Chinese traditions that the school wanted us to adopt and Western techniques and styles that interested us.

And in Australia:

When I came here . . . I went to the University of New South Wales and I was told that I should look into my own background as a source for my art work. But I thought, why should I? I came here for Western ideas; that is why I’m painting and I came to the University here. When I went to Wollongong University, I was also shocked that people also thought that I should do Asian Art . . . I had already been dealing with Chinese art for so many years. But later, I understood that approach. It is a kind of a postmodernism; when you look into your own mind you are able to connect with other identities. So, this is new and exciting. It’s a Western way of thinking. On the surface it looks like traditional Chinese art, but it is sort of exciting for Western audiences because it is not. (2001)

Fan’s differing experience of art schools in China and Australia reveals the different expectations of the academy in these respective countries. But it also crystallises, for him, the process of transsexperience. In particular, the notion of “shifting perspective” that he developed (to describe his new Australian work) through experimentation with Western artistic conventions (along with his ability to adjust his work to a new context) provides a perfect metaphor for his sense of transsexperience.

In spite of the inclusion of European and, later, Australian references in his work, Fan’s paintings continue to reflect China as the primary influence. This is clearly apparent in his choice of imagery and is further clarified in a recent comment on the differences between his own work now and that of mainland artists:
Chinese artists in China are aiming at the Western market, so whatever you prefer, they
will make it; traditional, political, or whatever. But Chinese artists here in Australia
belong to two different categories; one group is trying to do mainstream artwork with
portraits and work like that; and the second group, which I am in, is trying to find
themselves in Chinese art, using Chinese imagery. (2001)

In all of Fan’s paintings during the nineties, Chinese and European references reside within the
same picture plane. Fan employs different artistic techniques from different cultures to convey
depth. One of his first experiments in this area, the Descendant Bodies series (1996–1998), used
shadow perspective. Descendant Bodies #1 (Blue) (1996, fig. 1.16), for instance, comprises three
sets of imagery rendered in different techniques, including one using shadow perspective. The
first set of imagery includes truncated and headless bodies (resembling ancient Greco-Roman
statues) painted in black and white using chiaroscuro to define their musculature; in the second
set of imagery, strange floating green machines are rendered in shallow relief with some black
shadows beneath them; and in the third set of imagery, flowers and leaves, painted in dots and
lines to resemble the stitches of delicate Chinese embroidery, form the relatively flat background.
Although the different techniques used to portray the three sets of imagery reflect different
approaches to the idea of pictorial depth, Fan complicated the work further by blurring their
application in areas: the shadows from the figures are neither consistent in colour or shape.

A confusion of techniques and imagery is continued in the second work in the series, Descendant
Bodies #2 (Green) (1996, fig. 1.17). In the previous painting, the figures and machines were
treated as separate, discrete units, yet in this work they are fused together to form hybrid bodies.
The pink male figure at the centre, for example, has a muscular body with a machine for a head.
He kneels on one leg with the other outstretched, casting a black shadow. Other figures in the
composition have mechanical heads and, in some cases, Fan has merged male and female bodies
as well. The latter is evident in the grey figure to the left, which has a male torso with a female
lower body. These composite mechanical/human figures are placed against a background pattern of leaves and flowers. The figure/ground relationship between the bodies and the background is also unusual and fluid. The background sometimes recedes and, at other times, meshes with the figures. Contrasting techniques, Fan creates a provocative sense of visual instability that serves as a useful metaphor for his process of transexperience. The constantly shifting perspective in this series of paintings can be understood as a symbol of the uneven and at times unsettling nature of Fan’s synthesis of different cultural influences—the push-and-pull tension between a self-conscious retention of Chineseness and a desire to identify with Australia.

Fan is also interested in the body as a site of exchange and dialogue between cultures. *Shifting Perspectives and the Body #1* (1998, fig. 1.18), the first work in a series, is based on Alessandro Botticelli’s *Madonna Enthroned with St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist (Bardi Madonna)* (1484). The painting shows the Madonna and Child flanked by the two saints, St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. Fan’s painting disrupts the symmetry of Botticelli’s triangular composition in a number of ways: the figure of the Madonna, most notably, is completely absent and replaced by a Chinese mandarin seated at a table with a computer. In front of the mandarin is a large, mysterious, floating machine, while the background is filled with a screen—a visual device commonly used by Chinese painters to suggest depth within the picture plane as well as a division in domestic environments. In Fan’s painting, however, the screen serves another purpose. The image on the screen is of a local Rugby League football scrum painted in black and white. The players are a tangle of arms and legs protruding in all directions and sometimes beyond the screen itself. Although, at first appearance, the juxtaposition between the references to Botticelli and football seem unrelated, in the context of Fan’s migration to Australia, we see here for the first time the artist contrasting European and Australian references. In particular, he is recognising the importance of sport in Australian life.
Fan’s combination of Chinese and Australian imagery is continued in *Shifting Perspectives and the Body #2* (1998, fig. 1.19). For this work, he took the same Botticelli painting as a starting point, although this time the figures are represented only by their silhouettes. In addition, the work includes, within the outline of the main figures, a large black-and-white image of a footballer being tackled by another player. By creating this picture within a picture, Fan hints at the way that European art forms the basis of Australian culture and society, while also speculating on the emergence of a different, independent idea of Australian culture—albeit one based on sport. Having represented sport in many other works, it is an idea with which he increasingly seems to identify.

The migration of mainland Chinese artists to Australia in the late eighties and early nineties coincided with national debates about Australia’s economic and cultural relations with the Asia-Pacific region. One result of this debate was the establishment of a broad range of organizations (such as Asialink), initiatives (such as residencies in Asia) and exhibitions devised to foster engagement at all levels between galleries, artists, and curators in the region. These activities did not include overseas Chinese artists until the late-nineties, but they perhaps indirectly created a climate that was conducive to the reception of Chinese artists and was supportive and encouraging of the retention of Chinese imagery and culture in their art work. How that imagery was received in this new context, for a new audience, reflects the process of transexperience, as explored throughout this chapter: Fan’s exploration of pictorial depth, Guan’s paintings using Chinese and Australian flora and fauna, Guo’s representations of P.L.A. soldiers, and Ah Xian’s porcelain busts produced in Jingdezhen.
Reference List


Fig. 1.4
Guan Wei
*Treasure Hunt 2, 11*
1995
Acrylic on canvas
127 x 49 cm
Fig. 1.19
Fan Dong Wang
*Shifting Perspectives and the Body #2*
1998
Acrylic on canvas
244 x 180 cm
Fig. 1.1
Guan Wei
*Two Finger Exercises no. 23, 27, 30, 41*
1989
Gouache, wax, oil crayon on card
34.5 x 25.5 cm
Fig. 1.2
Guan Wei
*Test Tube Baby no. 16, 2, 3*
1992
Acrylic on canvas
127.0 x 49.0 cm
Fig. 1.3
Guan Wei
*The Great War of the Eggplant*
1993
Acrylic on canvas
127 x 49 cm ea.
Fig. 1.5
Guan Wei
Zen Garden Nos. 4, 2, 9
1999
Acrylic on canvas
87 x 46 cm ea.
Fig. 1.7
Ah Xian
Site Perspectives #4
1992
Plaster of Paris, cotton, glass, wood, metal and synthetic polymer paint
58 x 28 x 28 cm
Fig. 1.8
Ah Xian
_Fading Book_ (detail)
1996
Toner on rice paper
Fig. 1.9
Ah Xian
*China China 2*
1998
Porcelain
Fig. 1.10
Ah Xian
*China, China- Bust 34*
1999
Porcelain
42 x 40 x 22 cm
Fig. 1.11
Guo Jian
*Excitement: Sideshow—Qi Gong*
1995
Oil on canvas
106.6 x 89.4 cm
Fig. 1.16
Fan Dong Wang
*Descendant Bodies #1 (Blue)*
1996
Acrylic on canvas
178 x 254 cm
Fig. 1.17
Fan Dong Wang
Descendant Bodies #2 (Green)
1996
Acrylic on canvas
170 x 280 cm
Fig. 1.18
Fan Dong Wang
*Shifting Perspectives and the Body*
1998
Acrylic on canvas
244 x 180 cm
Fig. 1.6
Ah Xian
*Heavy Wounds, no. 4*
1991
Oil on canvas
109 x 88 cm
Fig. 1.12
Guo Jian
*Excitement: Sideshow—Knife Thrower*
1996
Oil on canvas
116.3 x 92.3 cm
Fig. 1.13
Guo Jian
Excitement: Sideshow—Ring of Fire
1997
Oil on canvas
116 x 101 cm
Fig. 1.14
Guo Jian
(top) *Excitement: Great Landscape No.1*
1998
Oil on canvas
122 x 200 cm

Fig 1.15
(bottom) *Excitement: Great Tiananmen*
1998
Oil on canvas
145 x 198 cm
CHAPTER TWO

Transexperience: Chineseness as International Style in the United States

Although the United States has a long history of Chinese migration dating from the late nineteenth century, the overseas Chinese artists discussed in this chapter were part of the most recent wave of migration, which, beginning in the late eighties and early nineties saw hundreds of artists, filmmakers, and writers arrive in the United States. Some of the main artists who went to the United States were Zhang Hongtu, Wenda Gu, Xu Bing and Cai Guo Qiang, as well as Cai Jin, Hung Liu, Zhang Jianjun, Hou Wenyi, Chen Danqing, and Xing Danwen. This chapter focuses on the work of four Chinese artists: Zhang Hongtu, Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Cai Guo Qiang. These four artists were selected for discussion for a number of reasons, not least of which is their professional success: all of them have participated in major exhibitions and have shown their work at New York museums such as Queens Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim Museum, The Bronx Museum, and The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.

Although the works of these four artists focus in different ways on Chinese culture, all of them integrate Chinese themes into an international idiom. Indeed, this focus on internationalism, or promoting oneself as a transnational artist, or at least as a Chinese artist operating in the

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45 L. Ling-Chi Wang (1994) identifies three main periods of Chinese migration, the first occurring in 1852 when gold was first discovered in California and which came to an abrupt end in 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act. The limitations placed upon Chinese migration continued in varying degrees until changes to the Immigration Law in 1965, when increased numbers of migrants from China, Taiwan, and South East Asia were admitted. Additional Chinese migration occurred as a result of the 1979 amendment to the 1965 Immigration Law, creating separate quotas for Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China. President George Bush also offered protection to nearly 30,000 Chinese students from the mandatory return to China after 4th June 1989.

international arena, is a quality that characterises Chinese artists who live in the United States, in contrast to their peers living in Australia, France, or even China. This says something about the pre-eminent power and universality of American culture in the world today (Hollywood movies are the prime example), and the position of New York as the centre of the international art market and museum industry. But, just as importantly, it also reflects the way that Chinese artists in the United States have adopted artistic strategies that attempt to transform Chineseness into an international style. This might be understood as a form of cultural abstraction—in effect, the process of transforming Chineseness into a symbolic value for the international art world. One can see this most clearly in Zhang’s continuous use of the image of Mao as a ubiquitous sign in his artworks, such as his silhouettes of Mao made of corn, mesh, and grass; Gu’s woven screens featuring Chinese characters, English, Hindi, and Arabic writing made of hair collected from all over the world; Xu’s creation of New English Calligraphy or Square Word Calligraphy, which is a new language forged from Roman letters written in a Chinese calligraphic manner; and Cai’s use of Chinese cosmology and beliefs such as *fengshui* to explore cultural differences between China and the West.

Close inspection of the work of each of these artists also reveals a more overt fusion of Chinese and other cultural references. Rather than seeing Chinese and foreign cultures in opposition, as in the work of Chen Zhen (France) and Guan Wei (Australia), Chinese artists in the United States tend to meld them together to create a new sense of Chineseness, or an idea of Chineseness as a more international construct. This new idea of Chineseness, which is another variant on the notion of transexperience, is touched on in a statement by Cai, where he intimates that he uses multiple artistic languages in his work to: 1. not be pigeon-holed as a Chinese artist; 2. Stake out a place for himself in mainstream art history; 3. reposition the idea of Chineseness in the international art world. He says:
If we use only one language, we risk enclosing ourselves, then we would have to dig deeper to get out, to bypass this language form, and discover something . . . . At that moment we attain general universal meaning. [author’s emphasis] (Cai 2000, p. 85)

A similar strategy is used by the other overseas Chinese artists examined in this chapter. For these artists, transexperience is a process of transforming Chinese references into universally recognised symbols, as opposed to integrating them into a local context (Australia) or setting up an oppositional structure of East and West (France).

Chinese migration to the United States has been longer, larger, and more substantial than that experienced by any other country discussed in this thesis. This migratory history is important because it created a substantive Chinese world within the United States into which artists and others could come and immediately get jobs, acquire houses, and feel at home in the Chinatowns which sprang up in the major cities around the country. These Chinatowns began with an initial influx of Chinese, mainly from southern China, aiming to make their fortunes on the gold fields in the mid-nineteenth century. At the height of this migration, in 1852, twenty thousand Chinese passed through the San Francisco Customs House. Although the intention of most Chinese was to make their fortune and return to China—they were frequently referred to as Sojourners—many ended up staying.47

The United States, like Australia, attempted to restrict these early Chinese settlers through immigration legislation. The Chinese were prepared to work for low wages, thus undercutting American (largely Irish immigrant) workers. This lead to immense local resentment and calls for

47 A detailed account of Chinese settlement in the United States can be found in the chapter “Chinese America, 1880–1941” in Daniels 1988.
a legal restriction to cheap Chinese labour.\textsuperscript{48} For example, the Naturalisation Law of 1790 declared that any person who lived in America for more than two years could become an American citizen, but this excluded Asians, African Americans, Native Americans, and non-whites. Chinese living in the United States at this time were considered with a measure of suspicion and hostility.\textsuperscript{49} This reached a climax in the Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, designed to prohibit Chinese from becoming American citizens. This reinforced an isolationist attitude among the Chinese population in America, preventing them from participating in American life and thus necessitating the establishment of their own networks and communities—hence the development of Chinatowns in large metropolitan areas all over the country. Erika Lee suggests that the exclusion of Chinese from American citizenship created a condition where Chinese people “were residing in the United States, but were not of the United States” (1998, p. 13). It remained this way for the next hundred years.

The experience of contemporary Chinese artists is very different from that of their historical forbears. This is a generation that was welcomed into the United States: they were given shows at major museums, and their work was featured on the front cover of art magazines and written about in art historical accounts. How can we account for this shift in treatment? Partly it is about changing perceptions and the integration of older Chinese migrants into society, and partly it is about more contemporary events.\textsuperscript{50} An important factor was the uprising at Tiananmen and its brutal suppression by the Chinese authorities, which was cast by the media as a titanic struggle between an intolerant, aged Communist regime and a young democratic movement in China.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} For an account of violence directed against the Chinese community in San Francisco in the 1870s, see “Part Two: 1870s-1920s: Limehouse and San Francisco” in Pan 1994.
\textsuperscript{49} A detailed chronicle of stereotypes of Chinese through popular media can be found in Lee 1999.
\textsuperscript{50} One change was also in the stereotypes of Chinese in the United States. Frank H. Wu has documented a shift from considering Chinese as uneducated labourers to hyper-achievers, embodied in the Model Minority myth. See his 2002 book \textit{Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White} for a discussion of how this new stereotype limits the participation of Asian Americans in public life.
\textsuperscript{51} Rey Chow has, however, cautioned against such a simplistic and ultimately Euro-America-centric interpretation of events. What began as mourning for the death of political leader Hu Yaobang in Tiananmen Square evolved quickly...
Most Americans sympathised with the pro-democracy movement and supported President Bush’s decision shortly after the uprising to offer asylum to 30,000 Chinese students studying in America. Many writers, artists, and dissidents were also granted asylum in the United States in the period immediately following June Fourth.

A useful parallel can be drawn here with American attitudes to the Vietnam War. Although the circumstances surrounding Vietnamese migration were completely different from the post-Tiananmen Chinese migration to the United States, the Vietnam War could be seen as a precursor to the way that Chinese students and artists were cast as refugees seeking political asylum from a communist state. According to Panivong Norindr, the Vietnam War functioned “as a subtext which determined, in powerful ways, the logic behind the adoption and acceptance of the Southeast Asian immigrant in the late seventies” (1994, p. 242). The same logic applied to June Fourth with respect to Chinese immigrants since 1989.

None of the artists discussed in this chapter were part of the pro-democracy movement at Tiananmen. For example, these artists were not in Beijing on June Fourth (except Xu, who left the following year for Wisconsin): Zhang migrated in 1982 to New York, Gu arrived in San Francisco in 1987, and Cai moved to Japan in 1986 and then to New York in 1995. For these artists, the United States offered international exposure and access to a large art market for the sale of their work. Yet they were often assumed to be dissidents living in the United States or at least that they moved there to escape the oppressive policies of their government. For example, discussions of recent Chinese immigrant artists in magazines such as Asian Art News and Art

into calls for an end to bureaucratic corruption. Chow comments that “Many Chinese people said afterwards that had ‘the world’ not been present, the final massacre might not have happened” (1993, p. 96). The decision to disperse the protesters with violence was seen as an exertion of power by the Chinese authorities not so much for the local population but for the international media, precisely because there was so much international attention centred on Tiananmen Square at that time. For this reason, one of the persistent reference points for considerations of China in the United States remains June Fourth. This level of interest is evident in the media’s interest surrounding the publication of the Communist Party’s documents in the lead up to June Fourth, revealing the division within the party between older hard-liners and the younger, tolerant members who were side-lined in the decision to use force to disperse the protest. See Nathan and Link 2001.
News were dominated by the theme of exile and political dissidence, with parallels drawn between the large numbers of Chinese artists living in New York and the mass European migration of artists to New York before and during World War Two.\textsuperscript{52} Another interesting parallel can be drawn here with the reception of Russian artists who migrated to the United States the decade before, many of who were also assumed to be in exile from the tyranny of Soviet communism.\textsuperscript{53}

It is also worth noting that the arrival of Chinese artists in the United States corresponded with an interest in multiculturalism and émigré art in the New York art world. Museum exhibitions such as the 1993 Whitney Biennial; “Beyond the Borders: Art by Recent Immigrants” at the Bronx Museum and “Asia/America: Identities in Asian-American Art” at the Asia Society, both in 1994; and “The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s” in 1990 all sought to document and celebrate the growing immigrant strain in American art, while an unprecedented amount of attention was focused on Latino, Black, and Asian American artists. Although few recent Chinese immigrant artists participated in any of these exhibitions, this shift in focus affected the environment into which they arrived and were received. It also allowed them to assimilate quickly into the art world, helped by a flowering of the Asian American art movement. This flowering was epitomised by the establishment of collectives such as Epoxy Art group and Godzilla. These groups were dominated by Chinese-Americans, reflecting their status as the largest Asian American community. \textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} See for instance Lufty 1993 and Levin 1994.

\textsuperscript{53} The response of the international media towards the Russian duo Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid is one such example. Hedrick Smith (1974) wrote in the New York Times: “Two young artists here have developed a brand of art that satirises the ideological poster art of Soviet Socialist realism, much as Western Pop art satirised the materialism and mass consumerism of the West.”

\textsuperscript{54} For an account of the Asian American art movement during the eighties see Machida 1990.
By the late nineties, political antagonism between the United States and China over June Fourth subsided to allow for trade and cultural exchange. The interest in Asian American art also subsided, replaced by an enthusiasm for Chinese artists. American museums and galleries followed the programs of European and Australian institutions by staging a number of substantial exhibitions of Chinese art. The most significant of these, in New York, were “China, 5,000 Years” and “A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China” at the Guggenheim Museum in 1998 as well as “Inside Out: New Chinese Art” organised by the Asia Society and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1998, which sought to represent the Chinese avant-garde movement that began in the eighties. A small number of Chinese artists living abroad were included in “Inside Out,” including Huang Yong Ping, Cai Guo Qiang, Xu Bing, and Wenda Gu. This enthusiasm for Chinese art also filtered into the art market, with a number of commercial galleries holding exhibitions of Chinese artists, including Chen Zhen (1996) at Deitch Projects, Xu Bing (1998) and Huang Yong Ping (1997, 2000) at Jack Tilton, Feng Mengbo (1998) at Holly Solomon in addition to Fang Lijun (1998) and “Photography and Video from China” (1997–98) at Max Protetch; more recent years have seen the establishment of galleries exclusively devoted to Chinese contemporary art. All of this suggests that Chinese artists have now become part of the mainstream New York art scene.

Absence as Presence: Mao as a signifier in the work of Zhang Hongtu

Zhang Hongtu was one of the first Chinese artists of his generation to arrive in the United States. Before migrating, he trained at the Central Academy in Beijing, where he studied calligraphy and ink painting for nine years. The actual term of his study was five years, but it was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution, during which he spent three years in the countryside as part of a re-education campaign. After leaving art school, Zhang was assigned a job as a design supervisor at

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55 Two galleries that focus on Chinese contemporary art exclusively are further examples of this trend: Chambers Fine Art, that opened in 2000, and Goedhuis Contemporary, in 2002.
a jewellery company. Unhappy at his job, he migrated to New York in 1982. He was thirty-seven years old.

Zhang’s background differs from other overseas Chinese artists in the United States in a number of significant ways. As one of the first artists of his generation to relocate to the United States, Zhang did not, for example, participate in the avant-garde movements during the eighties, such as the New Wave ’85 movement, nor did he show in the landmark avant-garde exhibitions that defined Chinese experimental art such as “China Avant-Garde” (1989), “China’s New Art, Post-1989” (1993) in Hong Kong or “China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture” (1993) in Berlin. His early migration to New York meant, by contrast, that he was often included in Asian American and immigrant shows throughout the early nineties.

Another difference between Zhang and other overseas Chinese artists in America lies in the fact that he belongs to the Chinese cultural minority group Hui and is a Moslem. Moslems in China have often been involved in rebellions for independence from China. Gansu, a north-west Chinese province, where Zhang was born, was the site of a revolt in the nineteenth century led by Ma Hualong (d. 1871), who attempted to establish an independent Muslim state. Zhang speaks eloquently about his ethnic and cultural difference:

Han chauvinism is everywhere in China. It doesn’t only come from the government, it comes from the psychology, from everybody. It’s a terrible thing. The government has spent almost forty years destroying the boundary between Han and other peoples in China, both culturally and psychologically, so I am not very clear about the boundary, even though I live in a Moslem family. (Hay 1994, p. 297)
Zhang also believes that growing up in a Moslem family gave him an awareness of different cultures and traditions much earlier than other artists in China. He has spoken of having an awareness beyond China through the stories his father told of Arabic studies in Egypt and travels to Mecca and Pakistan. He was also affected by his own early studies of the Christian Bible:

> . . . my interest and knowledge were not glued by Confucianism and Daoism. Through religious influence I had more knowledge about the West. I know many stories from the Old Testament, which is also a part of Western culture: if you study Western art history you have to understand the Bible. (Hay 1994, p. 297–8)

Zhang’s art works have always shown an interest in the fusion of Western art with traditional Chinese themes and ideas. When he migrated to New York, he experimented with a number of painting styles. Following June Fourth, however, he began a series of works critical of China, using Mao as a focal point. The story behind this shift is worth recounting briefly. One day, during the Tiananmen protests, Zhang heard about three students from Hunan who were rumoured to have thrown paint on the enormous portrait of Mao hanging on Tiananmen Gate. They were turned over to the police, evidently by demonstrating students, and received harsh sentences: one of the men was sentenced to life imprisonment, and the others received twenty and sixteen years, respectively, in jail. The severity of these sentences inspired Zhang to begin making works with Mao, something the artist knew he could never have contemplated doing at that time in China. It also gave his work a strong political dimension.

Zhang’s *Chairmen Mao* series from 1989, for instance, satirically incorporated Maoist slogans from political posters and modified portraits of Mao. *Serve The People* (fig. 2.1) is one such example. In this work, Mao is shown wearing a white bandana across his forehead like those worn by a mass of protesters standing behind him. The unlikeliness of this scenario—positing Mao as an agent of change—suggest the rigidity of the political establishment in China.

Similarly, *The Masses are the Real Heroes, While We Ourselves are Often Childish and Ignorant*
(fig. 2.2) combines a portrait of Mao with slogans and political propaganda. Looking at this work, we see the title written across the top and bottom of the image in both Chinese and English, while Mao is depicted with the short pigtails of a young girl injecting a sense of humour into the work. Also in this series is H.I.A.C.S. (He is a Chinese Stalin) (fig. 2.3). In this work, we see an image of Mao with Joseph Stalin’s moustache. By making a visual connection between these two political figures, Zhang suggests a previous Sino-Soviet alliance as well as a connection between them: both were ruthless dictators. But the painting of a moustache on Mao might also refer to French artist Marcel Duchamp’s defacement of a postcard of the Mona Lisa for his ready-made L.H.O.O.Q. (1918). Like Duchamp, the defacement of an icon is Zhang’s intention in H.I.A.C.S., whose title also seems to echo Duchamp’s L.H.O.O.Q.

Following the Chairmen Mao series, which utilised iconic portraits of Mao to satirical effect, Zhang began a new series, produced between 1991 and 1995, titled Material Mao. These works were different from previous ones insofar as they did not refer to the Tiananmen protests or Mao’s policies. That said, the format of these works remained the same, consisting of a silhouette of Mao, consisting of materials including grass, wool, and corn, as well as more permanent substances such as brick, concrete, and wire mesh (fig. 2.4). These works were not really portraits since they described nothing of their subject, yet they succeeded in referring to Mao through a mere silhouette. This level of recognition of Mao’s silhouette bears testament to his transformation from political leader to a visual icon.

The potency of these works lies in their suggestion of something latent and omnipresent. The idea of using everyday materials to create a portrait of Mao also suggests the way that he and his policies permeated every aspect of daily life. Edward Lin has observed a connection between Zhang’s use of corn kernels and grains of rice, the staple crops of north and south China respectively, and Mao’s policies which brought about “the starvation of hundreds of thousands
during the Great Leap Forward” (1993, in Philbrick 1994, p. 16). According to Wu Hung, Zhang’s use of Mao also constitutes an anti-monument, which “negates the very notion of a monument as a supreme embodiment of history and memory” (1999, p. 47). Wu views this as different from a counter-monument, which he defines as a form of rebellion against a traditional monument, resulting in a new monumental form.

Zhang’s defacement and satirical depiction of Mao in his artwork reflects a sense of betrayal, felt by many of his generation, at the events of the Cultural Revolution. In the catalogue for his exhibition “Material Mao”, at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1995, Zhang commented:

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, like everyone of my generation, I completely trusted in Mao. Yet, what Mao did during the Cultural Revolution changed my mind. I saw art and culture being destroyed by the Red Guards. I saw people dividing into different groups, fighting and killing each other, but everyone—killers and victims—declared they were on the side of Mao’s revolution.

I found that all the young people, including myself, were all fooled and used by Mao.


It is interesting to note that this exhibition occurred thirteen years after Zhang first arrived in New York, and that the reference points for his work continued to be Mao and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, which occurred officially between 1965 and 1976—when the artist was in his twenties. This suggests that Zhang’s ironic depiction of Mao serves as more than just a denunciation of the hypocrisy of the Chinese government and the lies of propaganda during the Cultural Revolution. It serves, also, as a metaphor to examine and reinterpret the experiences of his youth in China—albeit from the perspective of a much older man living in the United States. This brings us to the idea of transexperience, for although the artists deals solely with his experiences and memories of the Cultural Revolution in these works, it was only possible for him to do so outside of China. Artists in mainland China, for example, did not use the image of Mao
in a satirical fashion until at least two or three years after Zhang did, when the political pop and cynical realism movements emerged. Zhang’s residence outside of China for seven years before June Fourth afforded him the distance needed to begin to deconstruct the influence that Mao wielded over his life. He has stated, supporting this idea, that:

. . . the first time I cut Mao’s portrait with a knife and put it back together to make a new Mao image, I felt guilty, sinful. Can you imagine? Mao died fifteen years ago, but I still felt guilty doing that artwork. (Hay 1994, p. 293)

These pangs of guilt did not deter Zhang’s further exploration of Mao’s residual influence over his memories and thoughts. *Material Mao* (1991–95), for instance, is a series starkly different from *Chairmen Mao* because it does not directly refer to the students’ movement or Mao’s policies. Instead of Mao’s photograph, Zhang sculpts Mao’s silhouette from materials including grass, wool, corn, brick, concrete, and wire mesh. Yet when these works are seen together, the everyday quality of the materials suggests the ubiquity of Mao, reinforced by the fact that the abstraction of Mao is still recognisable. This also bears testament to the transformation of Mao from political leader to icon.

Zhang’s belief in Islam also has a bearing on his defacement of imagery of Mao. Islam’s denial of idolatry, for example, could well have provided Zhang with a justification for his iconoclastic behaviour. Reflecting this, he has said “I believe in the power of the image but I don’t believe in the authority of the image [of Mao]” (1991, in Hay 1994b, p. 298). Nowhere is this more explicit than in *Front Door* (1995, fig. 2.5). This work comprises a standard-sized white door with a number of different photographic cut-outs of locks. The door is shown from an inside view, but it is not intended to be opened. From behind the door, repeated sounds of knocking can be heard, as if someone were on the other side of the door, prompting the viewer to look through the peephole. The person on the other side is Mao. It is a metaphor for Mao’s power in the present: we mightn’t
be able to see him behind the door, but we know that he is there just the same. Zhang is also
afraid of him coming back and so keeps the door firmly locked.

Zhang continued to use Mao as a dominant theme in his work throughout the nineties. In fact,
even when he attempted to experiment with more overt references to European and American
culture, Mao was used as a signifier of his Chineseness. Zhang’s own comments clarify this: “The
challenge is that I have to make something unique, not only from my earlier life experience but
also from my own knowledge of Western contemporary culture” (Hay 1994b, p. 283). Here,
Zhang establishes a desire to deploy references to China and America together. In works that
only featured Mao, such as Chairmen Mao and Material Mao, it was his residence in the United
States that allowed him to conceive of such works because they criticised Mao’s policies at a time
when this was impossible in China. Yet other works from this period also incorporated more
direct imagery from Western art history. Last Banquet [Selected Works of Mao, No.5] (1989, fig.
2.6), for instance, is an appropriation of Leonardo da Vinci’s Renaissance fresco, The Last Supper
(c. 1495). Its composition depicts a long table with Christ seated at the centre, flanked on both
sides by his twelve disciples. The artistic merit of the original painting has frequently been
attributed to da Vinci’s ability to record the personal expressions on the faces of each of the
disciples following Christ’s admonition, “one of you will betray me.” Zhang’s modification of the
original painting was, not surprisingly, the addition of Mao. Instead of the faces of Christ and the
twelve disciples, all we see are faces of Mao. Last Banquet [Selected Works of Mao, No.5] is an
unequivocal commentary on Mao’s omnipotence. In addition, the work casts Mao as both Christ
and Judas—simultaneously the betrayed and the betrayer—demonstrating the ambivalence with
which Mao was considered after his death in 1976. A further layer of meaning is added by Cao
Zhangqing to this work:

Firstly, Mao’s revolution is represented as a cult movement wherein Mao becomes a
Communist religious figure like Jesus. Secondly, Mao becomes something of a spirit in
so far as each of the figures to the side are all Mao Zedong, and this helps show that, within all of us, there is a little of Mao Zedong present . . . . In his [Zhang’s] view, it isn’t external forces that defeated Maoism but the betrayal of Mao by Mao himself. (1998, p. 264)

No doubt, Cao’s analysis is based on an understanding that political support for Mao during the Cultural Revolution is often compared to a kind of religious fervour.

Responses to Last Banquet [Selected Works of Mao, No. 5] varied immensely. The work was censored in the United States while it also attracted the attention of authorities in China. The work was banned from the “Tiananmen Memorial” art exhibition in Washington in 1990, organised by the Congressional Human Rights Foundation, on the grounds that it was offensive to religion. Just which religion was meant, nobody was quite sure: was it the cult of Mao or Christianity? While there is no evidence that the Chinese authorities were aware of the painting or offended by it, Zhang believes that this painting was the impetus for a friend with a similar name being questioned at the Beijing airport around the time of the banning of the work in Washington.

If Mao was such a strong influence over Zhang’s thoughts in China, why did he continue to use the image of Mao in his work long after he migrated to the United States? The answer is encapsulated in his declaration of belief in the power, not the authority, of the image (Hay 1994b, p. 298). Zhang’s appropriation of Mao’s portraits acknowledge Mao’s power, but the alterations to the portraits disavow any authority they might once have had. Another more mundane reason is of course Zhang’s identification as a Chinese artist living in the West. Mao for Zhang is a symbol of his own identity as a Chinese man living in America. In an interview, Zhang stated:

For me being Chinese does not only mean someone who was born in China or still keeps Chinese citizenship but also means someone whose mind or spiritual life is tightly related with Chinese culture, what people call their roots. When I left China I
was thirty-seven years old, and the roots—Chinese culture—had already become part of my life just as a tail is a part of a dog’s body. (Hay 1994b, p. 280–81)

Zhang’s identification with China is defined as an inescapable part of the way he sees the world. With this, he has used the figure of Mao not just as a trigger for memories and experiences of China but also as a way of signalling his distance from China.

The Crisis of Calligraphy: Writing in Hair by Wenda Gu

Wenda Gu’s works are a good example of the process of recontextualising references to China in a contemporary, more international art idiom. Born in 1955 in Shanghai, Gu graduated from the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts, whereupon he enrolled in a Masters of Fine Arts degree program at Zhejiang Fine Arts Academy in Hangzhou, studying traditional landscape painting with the master Lu Yanshao. This technical and traditional training underpins much of Gu’s work, most notably in the Pseudo-Characters series (1984–86), one of the most controversial works that he made while living in China. This series of works is remarkable for their iconoclasm—at least in a Chinese context. The artist used traditional ink-painting techniques and materials, with ink splashed on large sheets of rice paper, to create characters combined, inverted, or written incorrectly, in the style of ancient seal-script calligraphy. Although this series replicated traditional masterworks in its form, it challenged the idea of calligraphy as a system of communication. Similarly, Gu’s works produced after he moved in 1987 to the United States transform calligraphy through a combination of Chinese and other languages as well as written calligraphy in non-traditional materials, such as hair. This tension, which reflects a kind of transexperience, is present in many of Gu’s works, ranging from his large-scale ink scroll-paintings of invented Chinese characters in the late eighties to screens of Chinese and other languages fashioned from hair in the nineties.
One of the most powerful ways that Gu sought to transform calligraphy into a more contemporary form was through a merging of the interrelated disciplines of landscape painting and calligraphy. *Contemplation of the World* (1984, fig. 2.7), from the *Pseudo-Characters* series, consists of three ink-on-paper hanging scrolls. The central scroll shows one of Gu’s “pseudo characters,” created from a combination of the Chinese character for “spirit” (*shen*) and the character for “unhindered” (*chang*). A painted landscape at the bottom edge of the work provides a frame for this newly-invented word. The skill with which this art work is painted—the deft brushwork and studied knowledge of pictorial conventions—makes this work all the more confrontational for Chinese viewers who appreciate the artist’s skill but cannot read the character. Other works in this series, such as *Silent Door God* (1986), also include altered characters written incorrectly, upside down, and sometimes in reverse. In later works, he put traditional seal script along with his own invented characters into exercise books used for practicing calligraphy, suggesting that his invented characters should be studied and copied along with traditional calligraphy. Gu states that he chose seal script in the first place because of its inherent complexity and the fact that very few Chinese people can read or write it:

> Seal script is a double-game because unless you are a professional linguist, a Chinese person would not understand it—it has a very classical format—so you can’t ever find out if it is fake or real. My pseudo-calligraphy is a twist on the past, what are events and what are real facts. (1997, in Kember 2000, p. 200)

For the Hong Kong-based curator Chang Tsong-Zung, these revised and invented characters were especially provocative to Chinese traditionalists because of the traditional link between writing and power in China: since historical times, a requisite for holding a government position in China was the ability to read and write calligraphy. Chang Tsong-Zung says Gu’s error-form calligraphy works may be viewed:
as an extension of the spirit of iconoclasm that swept China during the Cultural Revolution; but to subvert calligraphy and elevate it into the temple of modern art was not part of the revolutionary orthodoxy. The communist revolution endeavoured to overturn heritage, but to attack the written word (especially the forms of writing which had already been ‘revolutionised’) by glorifying the spirit of the absurd, was unacceptable. (1997, n.p.)

When these works were made, Gu was a significant figure in the New Wave movement, the first of many Chinese experimental art movements following liberalisation. Although Gu sought to distance himself from the movement because he did not agree with the widespread appropriation of Western styles, his works embody aspects of this movement, notably a desire to free ink painting “from the specific techniques of orthodox aesthetics”. (Gao 1999b, p. 157)

The uncertainty of meaning and intention in these works attracted controversy when they were shown in China. The Chinese authorities restricted entry to two exhibitions of these works; the first and most important one (at the Beijing Summer Palace in 1987) was closed four hours after the opening. Gu has commented on the intense reaction to the display of these works: “For the Chinese, with their ancient culture and long history—when people attempt to challenge that validity by denying it or varying it, it is as if you were to say to a religious believer, ‘God is dead.’” (1989, in Selz 1989, p. 38). Soon after, Gu migrated to the United States to study at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco and, one year later, moved to New York. When asked why he moved to New York, Gu replied: “New York is a special place with its history of immigration and mobility. It has a mechanism for self-renewal . . . . I am here to seek new experiences and a challenge for myself.” (1989, in Kuo 1989, p. 133).

56 See, for example, Wu Hung’s (1999) account of Gu’s participation in the New Wave Movement in the chapter titled “Anti-Writing.”
One of the first installations Gu created outside China was *The Dangerous Chessboard Leaves the Ground* (fig. 2.8), shown at York University in Toronto in 1987. This expansive installation continued his use of calligraphy, but in a three-dimensional form, comprising eleven square canvases with painted characters placed at equal distances from one another and suspended above the floor to resemble tables. Attached to the centre of each of these paintings were four cylinders that stretched the canvas taut. The cylinders were not unlike three-dimensional representations of the red crosses used in “big-character posters” (*da zi bao*), which were used during the Cultural Revolution as a method of public denunciation. In addition to the eleven canvases, Gu hung thirty red jumpsuits around the walls. The idea was that viewers were meant to put on the costumes, thereby becoming an integral part of the installation. The people in red jumpsuits were meant to symbolise chessmen on a board, as suggested by the title, but also Red Guards and perhaps even brushstrokes on a poster or larger canvas. Large black graphs with the characters *ge* and *ming* written in reverse, then crossed through with red lines, were hung around the walls. Together these characters allude to the Cultural Revolution, for *ge ming* is the Chinese word for “revolution” while, during the Cultural Revolution, a red cross through a name denounced a person on “big-character posters.”

*The Dangerous Chessboard Leaves the Ground* is based on Gu’s memories of the Cultural Revolution. As a high school student, he joined the school’s propaganda team to paint revolutionary posters because, he said, it was the only way for him to practice painting. In fact, Gu believes that these posters contributed to his understanding of calligraphy and, more specifically, constitute a new form of calligraphy:

During the Cultural Revolution there was a change in the attitude to language. People passionately believed in Marxism. The “big-character posters” were made by young people, workers and farmers; none of whom had any formal training in calligraphy.
They would just do this writing. I consider this writing much livelier, more vital and contemporary than calligraphy by the masters. Today the mere reworking of old techniques, even if you are solidly trained, is a historical repetition. The farmers and workers involved in the Revolution did not consider what they were doing as art, but if you look back, their words had their own identity and creativity. Chinese calligraphy is in decline because it just repeats the work of old masters. Even though the format might be more refined and complete it is just repeating history. The “big-character posters” are really a new form of Chinese words. They were about passion too—the people believed in what they were writing. (Gu 2002)

Gu’s references to the Cultural Revolution in The Dangerous Chessboard Leaves the Ground highlight the profound influence of the Revolution over his artistic practice. Although direct references to the Cultural Revolution did not continue in his work, the indirect legacy of the Cultural Revolution can be seen later in the United Nations series—his most important body of works. But first, Gu’s installations employing bodily fluids and materials must be addressed because they are relevant in a number of ways; most significantly, the use of bodily materials serves as a precursor for his later use of hair.

Gu’s works in the early nineties, not long after his arrival in the United States, began to incorporate materials such as soiled tampons, sanitary napkins, and placenta powder. These works not only engaged societal taboos, but also represented an attempt to explore notions of universality through the body. As the artist has stated: “When I started to use materials from the human body I thought of the body as the centre of the universe—the most essential material” (Gu 2002). Begun in 1990, Two Thousand Natural Deaths, later renamed to Oedipus Refound #1: The Enigma of Blood (fig 2.9) involved sixty women from sixteen countries; for the creation of the work, they contributed their soiled tampons and sanitary napkins with comments and anecdotes about their lives. Gu’s installation elicited just as much controversy in America as his invented
calligraphy had done in China. First shown at the Hatley Martin Gallery in San Francisco, the installation provoked such heated debate in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that it was subsequently cancelled from the exhibition program at California State University at Long Beach. After travelling to Poland and Australia, the work was finally shown at In Khan Gallery in New York in 1996. Interviewed later, Gu claimed that he had not expected such an adverse reaction to his work:

> When I exhibited *The Enigma of Blood*, for example, I was not aware of a lot of the issues being discussed around my work. I was still green here in America. When I finished the work, a professor from Minnesota told me about the controversy surrounding Mapplethorpe’s photographs and the National Endowment for the Arts. I wasn’t aware of the reaction that Christians, Catholics or other religious groups would have. I found out gradually, because this was something of a Western reaction to the work. (Gu 2002)

The history of feminist art must also be considered within the context of this work. Just as the tradition of calligraphy provided a context and challenge for Gu’s works in China, feminist art served in the United States. During the seventies, women artists began to use materials such as sanitary pads in order to raise feminist issues. Mary Kelly used soiled nappy liners to investigate the relationship between a mother and her child in *Post-Partum Document* (1978–79), while *Womanhouse* (1971) a feminist work created by the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia also featured tampons and sanitary pads. In one component of this work, *Menstruation Bathroom*, Judy Chicago filled a rubbish bin with soiled tampons and installed pads encased in a glass counter, like a store display. These precursors to Gu’s work differ from his insofar as women’s use of tampons and pads in their work was attached to a social and political agenda, while for Gu it looked as if he was merely seeking attention in the American
art world. In an interview from the time Gu’s work was produced, he speaks of shock as one of his artistic strategies. He comments:

If a challenge provokes a sense of “shock” it means that it is made with intelligence and deliberation, and this phenomenon of “shock” is produced by various levels of meaning that form the essence of the power to shock; the “shock” itself is actually only the phenomenon. (1993, in Brouwer 1997, p. 119)

The intended shock of *Oedipus Refound #1* lies in the inclusion of disgusting materials—soiled tampons and sanitary pads. Equally provocative, though, was that Gu had these objects either resting on specially-made cushions or inside Bibles. It is little wonder that audiences across the United States found this work shocking or offensive. Indeed, you get the distinct impression that Gu had made this work specifically to shock.57

*Oedipus Refound #1* is relevant to a consideration of more recent works such as *United Nations*. It is, for example, a precursor to Gu’s experiments with, and later, exclusive use of, hair. In addition, *Oedipus Refound #1* is evidence of Gu’s deliberate avoidance of overt signifiers of Chinese-ness in favour of a more international focus. While *Oedipus Refound #1* employed a spirit of collaboration with women from sixteen countries, *United Nations* builds upon this collaboration by using hair collected from different locations around the world. Gu reflected on this:

I tried to find the most inclusive subject, to include all cultures in my work. That is why I was happy when I started *United Nations*, now in its tenth year, because it avoided the stereotype of what kind of work Chinese artists should do. *United Nations* covers

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57 Gu’s deployment of the abject in his art also corresponded with a growing American trend in the early nineties toward representations of the transgressive body, as seen in Robert Gober’s exploration of gay issues through truncated body parts, Kiki Smith’s life-sized sculptures of naked bodies that leaked bodily fluids, or Cindy Sherman’s untitled series of photographs from 1987 that depict landscapes of refuse resembling pools of vomit, and the exhibition “Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1993. See Houser, Jones, Taylor and Ben-Levi, 1993.
everything. It is difficult to identify which culture the work comes from because it is international or universal. More than a million people have donated their hair to these works from across the world. (Gu 2002)

Begun in 1993, *United Nations* was originally conceived as a series of installations for twenty-five countries. Gu’s use of hair as the main material for *United Nations* exemplifies his interest in engaging with international concerns since it was collected from hairdressers around the world. Early works in the series explored the symbolism of hair in diverse cultural contexts, while later works were more ambitious architectural structures made from hair. One of the first in the series was *United Nations—Polish Monument: Hospitalized History Museum* (1993) at the History Museum in Lodz, Poland. The installation consisted of two cots from a nearby mental hospital, draped with white bedsheets. They were placed in both the foyer space and on the first landing of the grand, central staircase of the museum. The entire floor of the space was covered with white bedsheets, upon which Gu scattered strands and clumps of hair collected from a local barbershop. Relevant here is that the museum is on the site of a former large Jewish cemetery and close to the site of the Nazi’s concentration camps. The cots and discarded hair suggested the horrible history of those camps, upsetting many local residents. The museum decided to close the exhibition after only one day. Another work, *United Nations—Israel Monument: The Holy Land* (1995, fig. 2.10) elicited a similar response. The work comprised thirty Jerusalem Pink Limestone boulders, each weighing approximately four tonnes, that Gu had covered with hair collected in Israel. These rocks were installed in the Mitzpe Ramon (founded in the early fifties as a labour camp for people working in the region, but now a tourist attraction that offers access to desert views) in a straight line and at regular intervals from one another. Prior to the work’s creation, the merits of the idea were discussed in a radio broadcast convened by the chairperson of Israel’s Parliament. Following this public discussion it was decided the work should proceed. Gu’s *United Nations*
works in both Poland and Israel deliberately engaged with each local political environment and a growing transexperiential internationalism in his work.

Gu returned to the use of language in *United Nations—Africa Monument: Temple of Heaven* (1997, fig. 2.11), a giant screen made of hair (collected from 300 barber shops around the world) glued together in the shape of words cobbled from the English, Chinese, Hindi, and Arabic languages. Similarly, *United Nations: Babel of the Millennium* (1999, fig. 2.12), commissioned for the atrium of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, used hair to make a pseudo-language. This work comprised multiple vertical screens of pseudo-Chinese, -English, -Hindi, -Arabic as well as a new fusion of English and Chinese made from hair. But perhaps the most interesting work from this series was *United Nations—China Monument: Temple of Heaven* (1998), an impressive room made entirely from Gu’s now signature semi-transparent screens of hair, combining both language and architecture. At the centre of the room was a Ming dynasty furniture ensemble made from *huang hua li* wood: eight spring stools, two tea tables, and twelve lamp chairs. Set into the seat of each chair was a video monitor showing repeated images of drifting clouds. The videos created a sense of calmness within the room, evoking the title of the work, but also referenced the Temple of Heaven monument in Beijing, a Ming-period building.

In a number of ways, *United Nations—China Monument: Temple of Heaven* reflects Gu’s attitude toward China after having lived away from the country for eleven years. Although the furniture ensemble could be said to embody traditional Chinese notions of artistic beauty, the insertion of television screens into the furniture, along with the fusion of different languages in the hair screens, suggests an interest beyond simply a representation of Chineseness. Gu is emphatic about this, speaking in words that echo the idea of transexperience:

> Expressing the confrontation between West and East or the relationship between them in an artistic work is absolutely not something I am concerned with . . . . I don’t see the
difference between, for instance, an American artist and a Chinese one, or in general between artists from different contexts . . . . I think that it is artificial and superficial to create an intellectual and emotional distinction between artists from different countries and cultures. This would be to force them into a mould so that their work would represent something which might be called exoticism, (1993, in Brouwer 1997, p. 118)

The Reformation of Language: The Calligraphy of Xu Bing

An interest in the written word is a constant in Xu Bing’s work. This is not surprising, given his upbringing in a scholarly family on the campus of Peking University. When asked how his background influenced the use of books and language in his work, he responded:

Actually my parents worked at Bei Da University, which of course has a lot of books, but we didn’t have many books at home. My parents were often busy teaching so I spent time quite often in the library. In this way, I had access to many books. For most of this time, though, I was too young to read them, but I looked anyway at many Western books, encyclopaedias and reference books. I was interested in their design and binding, their appearance. (Xu 2000)

As the son of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, Xu was forced when he was nineteen to go to the labour fields of Yanqing, where he remained for three years. Returning to Beijing, he enrolled in printmaking at the Central Academy of Arts, where he later completed a Master’s degree. Xu first came to the United States in 1990 for an artist residency in Wisconsin. Since settling in New York, his work has explored language in an attempt to create a new system of communication based on his experiences in China and, more recently, in the United States. His fusion of English and Chinese in his invention of “New English Calligraphy” creates a new form of writing English in the style of Chinese calligraphy. It differs from Gu’s work because it attempts to communicate through an altogether new language. Moreover, while Gu’s early works deconstruct the authority of Chinese calligraphy, Xu focuses on the distortions of language
through reproduction and printing. Xu’s transformation of two languages, both English and Chinese and, perhaps more importantly, the idea of making English resemble the form and style of Chinese calligraphy, reflects his understanding of the notion of transexperience.

Although Xu’s works from the mid-nineties onward are clearly intended for English-speaking, and in particular American, audiences, earlier works possess a similar concern for language and a desire, like Gu, to challenge its authority and role as a means of communication. A good example is the now-seminal installation *Heavenly Book (Tianshu)* (1987–1991, fig. 2.13), which investigated the Chinese language as system of arbitrary cultural symbols. While he was in Beijing, Xu undertook the painstaking process of carving nearly four thousand false characters from wooden printing blocks. The process took him four years to complete. To Chinese viewers, the characters appeared legible, but close inspection revealed that each of the characters were made up from previously unknown symbols or radicals that are used to make Chinese writing. This created an entirely nonsensical language of thousands of incorrect, unknown written characters. These characters were printed onto rice paper in three traditional forms of presentation for calligraphy: scrolls of ancient Buddhist script; hand-bound books; and screens resembling the “big-character posters” (*da zi bao*) from the Cultural Revolution. These different forms of presentation symbolise the ideological dimension of language in China in the form of the promulgation of religion through scriptures, the maintenance of power through the Chinese literati tradition with its state examinations, as well as the “big-character posters” used during the Cultural Revolution to denounce political opponents. Although Xu’s motivation was obviously avant-garde, in the sense of reacting against tradition, one cannot forget that the formal structure of this work is based entirely on tradition. *Heavenly Book (Tianshu)* could be said to exemplify a Chinese notion of the avant-garde, as distinct from a European one, where artists sought to depart from tradition entirely. Xu’s work follows the tradition of Chinese calligraphy and that of replication and repetition embodied in the Chinese literati tradition, the pinnacle of Chinese
writing and literature, but it also disrupts it, insofar as the characters being repeated are radically altered and incorrect. If this is a heavenly book (a reference to the Chinese emperor as a divinity and calligraphy as his means of command on earth) then it is one that is entirely nonsensical.58

*Heavenly Book (Tianshu)* was first exhibited at the National Fine Art Museum in 1988 and later in the landmark “China Avant-Garde” exhibition at the China Art Gallery in 1989. It was upheld by avant-garde critics as an exemplary experimental work of the late eighties, and the critical response to it reveals the different positions in the art world at the time in China—essentially divided between those promoting and those opposed to avant-garde art practices. On the one hand, *Heavenly Book (Tianshu)* was celebrated by critics such as Li Xianting as representative of a new generation. He commented that the installation “used modern Western aesthetic language as a means of uncovering new meaning in traditional cultural symbols” (1993, p. xix) while Chen Weihe stated that the work “shook artistic circles . . . [because it was] the outward sign of the real emergence of Chinese modernism” (1990, in Erickson 1991, p. 11). On the other hand, *Heavenly Book (Tianshu)* was condemned by government officials directly following June Fourth. In an article written by a representative from the Ministry of Culture, the writer accused Xu of creating a work where “ghosts pounded the walls” (*gui da qiang*)—a reference to the tale of a night traveller who still remains within the city walls no matter how fast he runs—a criticism of the futility and folly of Xu’s project. Xu’s disruption to the meaning of language in *Heavenly Book (Tianshu)* might also be interpreted as a disruption to the maintenance of civil order:

> Before Tiananmen, the critics and those who had conservative attitudes were against this work, but after June Fourth, attitudes changed and there was criticism from more people. Chinese contemporary art received wide criticism in general and *Tian Shu* was

58 From the Qin state (221 BCE) onward, considered a brief but influential period of stability and unification in China, heaven was conceived as one part in the triumvirate of heaven, man, and Earth. Within this system all three parts were interconnected reflections of one another. As Yates has observed, “heaven itself was conceived as being a kind of giant bureaucracy, the stars being the bureaucratic officials, mirroring the officials on earth”(1994, p.68).
considered typical because it was challenging. Its obscurity was considered a negative quality. It was thought not to reflect real life. (Xu 2000)

Xu has exhibited *Heavenly Book (Tianshu)* in the United States, United Kingdom, Taiwan, Australia, Germany, and Italy. The responses to this work outside of China have been varied, and it is significant to compare them to the early Chinese criticism. These responses highlight the different cultural contexts with which Xu has had to engage and the way these impact on the work’s meaning for audiences. Outside of China, *Heavenly Book (Tianshu)* was usually appreciated as an admirable feat of technical perseverance.\(^59\) Other more informed viewers of Chinese art, such as Britta Erickson (one of the foremost writers on Xu Bing’s work and the curator of his retrospective at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in 2002), have put forward more complex interpretations. She insists that the work highlights Xu’s focus on the process of interpretation, stating in her catalogue essay that: “The evolving meanings of Xu Bing’s works are part of their fascination, both for him and for his audience. As members of Xu Bing’s audience, we can enjoy contributing to the elaboration of his works’ meanings, knowing that it is part of a process almost required by his works” (2000, p. 232).

The multiplicity of meanings created by *Heavenly Book (Tianshu)* and the level of interaction required by the audience, at least according to Erickson, might also explain why this work has acquired significance for many cultural theorists. One discussion of the merits and meanings of this work is Chinese Australian cultural critic Yao Souchou’s (1997) analysis that argues for a closer examination of the tradition of language in China. He proposes that Xu’s subversion has historical precedents such as *nüshu*, a little-known script created and used by women in rural Jiangyong, wild grass calligraphy script, an obscure calligraphy script from the Qing period as

\(^{59}\) See, for example, the host of reviews that highlight the labour that went into the creation of this work: Barmé 1993 and Rhem 1992.
well as the invented characters used by secret societies like the *Tian Ti Hui* (Heaven and Earth Lodge). Another cultural critic, Sang Ye, has also said that Xu’s seemingly unreadable words are nonetheless real characters, though extremely rare. Both these accounts position the work within a larger Chinese historical framework, which seems to be popular amongst writers and critics living outside of China. Other critics have interpreted the work as a statement about June Fourth, with the artist disavowing the authority of tradition by distorting language to make a political statement against the ruling Chinese regime.

Xu continued to use language in his following works. In *Brailiterate* (1992, fig. 2.14), an installation, Xu created a small, dark reading room with a chair and a table covered in books. The books combined Braille and English text as a way of blurring the conventional distinction between sight and non-sight. This added another layer of communication to his linguistic vocabulary. *Language Lost* (1995), a related work, shown at the Huntington Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, comprised nearly one hundred hand-bound books lying open with rows of tiny silkworm eggs, arranged meticulously on each page in lines and shapes resembling Braille. Over the course of the exhibition, the silkworms hatched into larvae, leaving blank portions on the page. Other objects, such as newspapers, a French dictionary, and a laptop computer were also covered with hatched silkworms that crawled over their surfaces and encased each object with delicate silk thread. Mary Sherman has interpreted this work as a “metaphor for the deconstruction of language” (1995, p. 56) while Jonathan Goodman has written that the silkworms were “interpreters of texts whose meaning is visually beautiful but unreadable” (2000, p. 50). While both interpretations hold some truth, the work seems less about the destruction of language than a commentary on language as a codified system. In keeping with the use of obscure characters, Xu selected a system of writing that is used only by the blind. Ironically though,

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60 For a detailed discussion of *nüshu* and its relevance to gender studies, see A. McLaren 1999.
Braille is one of the few universal languages, even if it is not readily understood by those who have sight. Xu’s use of silkworms to create Braille— the placement of eggs resembling the embossed page— also suggests the impermanence of translation, since the eggs hatch into larvae and feed on the pages of the books for the duration of the exhibition. Being two of Xu’s first works produced in the United States, *Brailliterate* and *Language Lost* symbolise the artist’s search for a new artistic language in order to engage with a new cultural context. His adoption of English and Braille as raw materials for his art works have now all but replaced his use of the Chinese language, yet his strategies of addressing language remain unchanged. He continues to complicate the process of reading and understanding to call attention to the arbitrary nature and cultural, even physical, specificity of language itself.

The metaphorical connection between linguistic translation and material transformation established in *Brailliterate* and *Language Lost* is explored further in the *Tsan* series. *The Tsan Book* (1995), for example, was an installation consisting of different kinds of books (such as the traditional Chinese “butterfly” book and leather-bound hardcover books) and a computer keyboard, lying on a long table covered with live silk worms. Over time, the silkworms covered the books and keyboard in translucent threads of silk. The use of live silkworms to spin silk around objects in *The Tsan Book* raises a number of different issues, the most relevant being the relationship between nature and culture. Not only did the silkworms and their metamorphosis represent nature and the books culture, but the process of encasing books, that symbolize knowledge, in silk is itself a kind of transformation, suggesting that some new kind of language, or culture, will hatch from these book-sized cocoons. This idea of metamorphosis, central to Xu’s practice, serves as a metaphor for his process of cultural adjustment since his migration to the West and, thus, another symbol for the idea of transexperience. Moreover, the use of the silkworm, an insect introduced to the United States from China, where their cultivation was
perfected for the manufacture of silk, indicates that China and a sense of Chineseness still remain important, albeit distant, frames of reference for Xu’s work.

Xu’s *A Case Study of Transference* (1994, fig. 2.15) employs a similar methodology, although this time he combines living pigs with language to reflect on the relationship between nature and culture. This work was a performance/installation first staged in Beijing at the Han Mo Art Centre, although video documentation has been shown subsequently at different venues. The performance consisted of a male and a female pig, held together in a pen to mate, with books in a range of different languages strewn haphazardly across the pen’s floor. Xu hired the pigs from nearby farmers who had created a new breed of pig—a hybrid of the American York and the Chinese Changbai pig. On the pig’s skin he printed using woodblock carvings, incoherently combined English letters and incorrectly written Chinese characters. (The male pig was branded with English and the female pig with Chinese). The video documentation recorded the audience’s reaction to the pigs mating, which ranged from curious stares to furtive, embarrassed glances.62

*A Case Study of Transference* transformed viewers into voyeurs, while orchestrating a symbolic merging of different languages with the idea, through the mating of the pigs, of creating a new one. When *A Case Study of Transference* was staged in New York two years, later it was slightly different from the performance in Beijing. This time Xu placed a sow and a boar, with their skin printed with undecipherable English and Chinese, inside a pen covered with newspapers. The artist introduced a number of piglets, their skin printed with both English and Chinese text, suggesting that they were the offspring of the sow and boar. The video of the Beijing performance was also shown during this performance as a comparison. In contrast to the Beijing event, this time the pigs did not mate.

62 Britta Erickson recounts the occasion when her article discussing *A Case Study of Transference* was not published in a journal because it included a quotation from a Chinese bystander who said “Hey! I understand this work. It’s saying that Asian art still has some stamina left” (1996, p. 10). The editorial board for the journal felt that the statement was too negative a reflection of Chinese culture, in spite of the fact that a Chinese person was saying it in jest.
Xu continues to work with language. *Square Words—New English Calligraphy* (1996, fig. 2.16), for instance, featured a classroom equipped with fifteen two-person desks, all facing a video monitor that showed the artist demonstrating calligraphy techniques. Each desk was furnished with a calligraphy copybook, brush, and ink so that visitors could follow instructions and practice their skills. The Chinese characters that Xu teaches are fictitious, based on his own invention of “New English Calligraphy”—the Roman alphabet arranged to simulate Chinese characters. Once familiar with these invented characters, viewers are able to read the language much the same as English, although Xu’s creation of a new language out of both Chinese and English led to some curious responses on the part of viewers. Xu has observed that:

> Western audiences often see these works as strange and unfamiliar, but when they get used to the words, their attitudes change. Chinese people who can’t read English find it very difficult to understand. English-speakers who have never learnt Chinese can read very quickly, but I find that if they have learnt Chinese it is more difficult for them. I collect the work done in my classrooms [installations set up in museums for public participation in the making of his new calligraphy] so I can see how people are thinking, either through English and Chinese. (Xu 2000)

A similar environment was created for *Introduction to New English Calligraphy* (1994–96), installed at the third Asia-Pacific Triennial in Australia in 1999. This work was included in the children’s public program associated with the event, although adults were also allowed to participate. The overtly pedagogical nature of this work gave it a new dimension, suggesting that children should really be learning Xu’s new language combining Chinese and English. Now Xu is playing with English rather than Chinese, in a curious parallel to his early works in China which manipulated traditional Chinese writing. Perhaps this suggests that Xu now feels comfortable living in the United States and sees English as his new language or as a language that he feels
comfortable enough with to begin transforming to his own designs. In Valerie C. Doran’s words, Xu Bing is “no longer so much interested in jiegou (deconstruction) as in gaizao (restructuring). (2001, p. 87)

Xu’s “New English Calligraphy” is not just a simple fusion of two languages. It draws upon principles of calligraphy to make Chinese legible to an English-speaking audience, while insisting upon a formal structure that remains Chinese. In other words, Xu has created a language in which the sole motivation is to produce new ways to read. Xu has adapted his first language, Chinese, to his present environment, the United States, while at the same time adapting his second language to his first. This could be said to be the most visible evidence of change in Xu’s artistic practice since migrating to the United States and, as such, a metaphor for transexperience.

Material Transformation/Cultural Transformation: The Work of Cai Guo Qiang

“Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write—the positions of enunciation” writes Stuart Hall in his seminal essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1993, p. 392). This idea is clearly apparent in the work of Cai Guo Qiang who, after leaving China for Japan in 1989, began to make installations with gunpowder, a material long associated with China and a popular symbol of Chineseness in the West. Although he had made drawings and paintings using gunpowder whilst living in China, such as Traces of Ancient Explosions (1985) and The Fair Sex (1987), his ebullient gunpowder/pyrotechnic displays in public spaces, in front of large crowds, such as the Projects for Extraterrestrials series, are intimately linked to his diasporic experience. His pyrotechnic works, also, frequently incorporate ideas from Chinese belief systems such as qi and fengshui—Cai was once described by a Japanese art critic as like “a Chinese qigong master or an esoteric alchemist” (Masatoshi 1998, p. 32)—as well as Western art
theories of site-specificity. In this regard, his works might be understood as a reflection on the idea of transexperience.

Born in 1957 in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, Cai recalls that during his childhood alarms would often sound at all times of the day. The alarms were air raid warnings, for Quanzhou was a site of conflict between China and Taiwan. Cai recounts seeing, as a child, “Chinese and Taiwanese fighter planes . . . flying through the sky and the smoky lines of their trails would be mixed with the smoky lines of bombardment from the ground” (Cai 1991, n.p.).63 This experience had a profound effect on him, leading to a life-long interest in cultural conflict and, somewhat relatedly, a later interest in gunpowder as an artistic material. An interest in cultural conflict also became more evident in his work after he migrated to the United States from Japan, in 1995. Reflecting on this experience, he has said:

When I lived in Japan, I found that there were fewer differences between Japanese and Chinese traditions and histories because both are based in the East. In Japan my work was really about man’s relationship to the universe, but since coming to America and living in the west I have more of a perspective on differences between East and West which in turn made me much more interested in conflicts between cultures. (Cai 2000)

This is a main theme that runs throughout Cai’s works as an overseas Chinese artist and will be explored throughout this analysis of his work in tandem with his interest in gunpowder. It is also pertinent to an understanding of transexperience, insofar as transexperience is about the process of engagement, dialogue, misunderstanding, and at times even conflict between cultures.

Cai’s early fascination with gunpowder developed alongside his adoption of a primitive painting style reminiscent of art from the Shang Dynasty (BC 1766–1050). In works such as *Traces of*

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63 Quanzhou was commonly referred to as the “Fujian Front,” the main site of confrontation between China and Taiwan.
Ancient Explosions (1985), The Fair Sex (1987), Battle Songs of the Onslaught (1986), and The Ancient Trend (1985), produced while Cai was an active participant in the New Wave movement, one of the first experimental art movements in China (mid- to late eighties), the artist sprinkled gunpowder onto canvases in the shape or design of stick-like figures and other simplistic representations, which were then lit to create permanent burn marks on the canvas. These works were far more figurative and painterly than anything Cai has produced since, reflecting his training in painting, drawing and sculpture in Shanghai. But they also announce an interest in gunpowder and its explosive potential as materials for making art and a desire to push beyond the boundaries of conventional art forms in China during this period. It was at this point that Cai realised that, in order to continue experimenting in this vein, he would have to leave China.

Cai’s decision to migrate to Japan in 1986 allowed him greater artistic freedom, which saw the development of more ambitious projects using gunpowder. The new pieces, which have now been shown around the world, were largely ephemeral explosions of gunpowder recorded on video and exhibited alongside preparatory drawings using ink and gunpowder. The ambition and scale of these outdoor and environmental works was grand. But they were not without risks, and on a number of occasions they were unsuccessful.64 This did not bother Cai, who seems to have relished the danger of working with such a volatile material. He has said: “I like the hazard of working with gunpowder, it excites me” (Cai 1988, p. 251).

Cai’s works with gunpowder are grouped under the general title Projects for Extraterrestrials. Begun in 1989, this series exemplifies his interest in Chinese belief systems such as qi and

64 Most notable of these unsuccessful attempts to stage works has been Cai’s participation in the second and third Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, which bears testament to the unpredictable and volatile nature of his chosen medium. In 1996, at the second Triennial, Cai’s work accidentally exploded at the factory. In 1999, weather and river conditions made it impossible to launch his fleet of small fire boats.
fengshui as well as the idea of cultural conflict.\textsuperscript{65} Indeed, the somewhat mysterious title of this series derives from the artist’s own slightly esoteric musings about life:

The explosions of gunpowder that have taken place on earth have been mostly for war and environmental destruction under the name of development. How do extraterrestrials receive these human acts? [With my works] humans now send out a different image of humans to the universe, which is not related to war or killing. (Cai 1991, n.p.)

What this quote suggests is that Cai uses gunpowder as a material for the expression of feelings and emotions about the human condition as much as a means of communication. This idea is exemplified in works such as Project for Extraterrestrial No. 14: The Horizon of the Pan-Pacific (1994, fig. 2.17), which was staged at Iwaki, a small seaside town in Japan where the artist stayed for one hundred days, planning his public gunpowder display and exhibition at the local museum. This work consisted of a five-kilometre line of waterproof string-like gunpowder fuse floating in the water. The lit fuse was placed in the water at a distance from the shoreline such that a viewer, standing on the land, saw a burning line of fire along the horizon line. A similar work, Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10: Project to Add 10,000 Meters to the Great Wall of China (1993) consisted of a ten kilometre length of gunpowder fuse attached to the western end of the Great Wall, at Jiayuguan, in an attempt to symbolically lengthen this iconic Chinese structure. The fuse was lit at night and the explosion lasted fifteen minutes. Part of the inspiration for this work was Deng Xiaoping’s 1984 campaign to rebuild and restore the Great Wall as a symbol of Chinese strength, unity, and identity. The campaign was largely propagandistic, for the wall was not one single wall but many smaller ones built at different times by different rulers, which were built to keep out ethnic groups now living within and part of mainland China.

\textsuperscript{65} This series of works also suggests a somewhat bizarre desire on the part of the artists to open up a channel of communication between humans and extraterrestrials. This aspect will not be discussed in this paper.
Perhaps even more spectacular was Project for Extraterrestrials No. 25: Restrained Violence: Rainbow, staged in 1995 for the first Johannesburg Biennial in South Africa. The work was staged at a decommissioned power station and featured a choreographed series of explosions along the façade of the building and winding inside, along a path that smashed windows and walls. The work was intended as a response to the political situation in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela was attempting to transform a post-Apartheid nation into what he referred to publicly at the time as a “rainbow country” through a successive “restraining of violence” among racial and ethnic groups. Mandela’s catch-phrases are reflected in the subtitle of the work, which uses the explosive power of gunpowder as a metaphor for human (racial) conflict. As Cai has said, referring to this work, “the true nature of gunpowder corresponds to the true nature of the power and spirit which humans have possessed since the very beginning of their evolution” (Cai 1991, n.p.).

Themes of cultural conflict became more apparent in the artist’s work after he migrated to the United States in 1995. Nowhere is this more overt than in The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Projects for the Twentieth Century, one of Cai’s first works created in the United States. This work was about war: the artist travelled to a nuclear test site in Nevada where he had himself photographed, his back to the viewer, holding a small cylinder filled with gunpowder, from which a mushroom cloud-shaped explosion emerged. The idea was repeated for A Century with Mushroom Clouds: Manhattan (1996, fig. 2.18), which showed the artist once again standing, his back to the viewer, letting off a mushroom cloud-shaped explosion, with the Statue of Liberty in the background. The artist’s drawings indicate that other works in this series were planned, all in front of important monuments: A Century with Mushroom Clouds: Paris (1996) shows a mushroom cloud next to the Eiffel Tower, while A Century with Mushroom Clouds: London (1996) depicts a mushroom cloud towering over London Bridge. In each image, the site is an important factor in the staging of the symbolic gesture, for by utilising national icons as the
backdrops for simulated nuclear catastrophes, Cai seems to be suggesting that cultural conflict has the potential in the nuclear age to obliterate the human race.

Another explanation for Cai’s interest in mushroom clouds can be found in a series of drawings and notes completed in 1996. Although the mushroom cloud is generally considered a symbol of destruction and death, Cai makes a link in his drawings and notes between mushroom clouds and the symbolic, healing properties of mushrooms found in Chinese traditional medicine. For instance, in *The Century of Mushroom Clouds Playing Cards: Mushroom Poker 2000* (1996) Cai printed playing cards with images of mushroom cloud-shaped explosions images of real, dried, Asiatic mushrooms, now in high demand in Asia for their medicinal properties. In Chinese culture, mushrooms are included among the *xian* or immortal group of plants, with the best-known type of mushroom being the *ling ji*, the fungus of immortality, which, when dried, is said to remain edible for years. (In ancient times, the Chinese believed that *ling ji* could only grow in the reign of a good, stable ruler, while its representation was prevalent in all art forms. These include paintings of fairies carrying long *ling ji*; wooden relief sculptures or paintings, on objects such as vases, of immortals holding *ling ji* or accompanied by animals such as sheep or deer holding *ling ji* in their mouths.) In works such as *The Century of Mushroom Clouds Playing Cards: Mushroom Poker 2000*, Cai combines and contrasts the mushroom’s symbolic, healing qualities with those of the destructive effects signified by mushroom clouds. In so doing, he seems to be juxtaposing a mythical, traditional mode of thought with a rational, scientific one, while also pointing to the inherent energy and alchemical qualities of these two very different forms of mushrooms.

Alchemy, of which the use of gunpowder is a good example, is an important part of all of Cai’s works, as he has said on many occasions. To quote one of them:
Maybe alchemy is really closer to what I am interested in and what I try to achieve in my work. I am interested in taking elements from the past, such as symbols or stories, and reusing them in my work to represent something new. In this way my work is a kind of alchemy—using different elements, that do not necessarily relate, to make something new. (Cai 2000)

Cai’s discussion of alchemy can also be understood as a metaphor for transexperience: alchemy, the medieval forerunner of chemistry, was based on the supposed transformation of matter (particularly the attempts to convert base metals into gold) as well as the pursuit of a universal pill or elixir of immortality. Inherent is a process by which paradoxical results are achieved, or incompatible materials are combined, with no clear explanation. The same can be said of Cai’s understanding of transexperience where, as stated in the quote above, he takes elements from his Chinese past and American present to create something new. An apt illustration of this is Cultural Melting Bath: Project for the Twentieth Century (1997, fig. 2.19).

*Cultural Melting Bath: Project for the Twentieth Century* (1997) was an installation for the Queens Museum in New York, consisting of eighteen limestone scholar’s rocks collected from Lake Taihu, in the Chinese province of Jiangsu, encircling a Jacuzzi.66 These rocks are highly prized in China, as much for their beauty as the fact that they frequently symbolise mountains. The tradition of scholar’s rocks in China dates to the Northern Song period (960–1126), when the appreciation of elaborately-shaped rocks emerged from the popularity of miniature landscape gardens. The connoisseurship of these rocks was based largely upon their resemblance to sacred mountains depicted in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, and in this way they were believed to be talismans of nature. For example, the holes in *taihu* rocks are believed by many

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Chinese people to link exterior and interior spaces, thus symbolising opportunities for imaginary travel.

The Jacuzzi in Cultural Melting Bath was filled with different Chinese roots, herbs, and other medicinal products prescribed by a traditional Chinese doctor to remove toxins from the body. A group of twisted banyan tree roots was suspended above the bath, to create a canopy or shelter. Surrounding the rocks and Jacuzzi in the shape of a triangle was a ceiling-to-floor-length curtain, stained to give the appearance of marble. The public was invited to bathe in the Jacuzzi, although few visitors entered the water. As a consequence, the artist invited friends to sit in the Jacuzzi and documented them sitting and chatting together in the water. The invited bathers were selected to represent different cultural backgrounds, including Anglo-Americans, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans. The artist’s idea was that the medicinal properties of the bath would symbolically heal cultural and racial conflicts in the United States. Although the artist makes reference to Chinese medicine and culture, the work is very much about the artist’s experience of settlement in the United States, with its extraordinary racial diversity, in contrast to the relative cultural homogeneity of China and Japan where he had lived previously.

Boats, the ocean and maritime travel also make sporadic appearances in Cai’s works, marking more conventional references to ideas of transexperience. Returning Light: The Dragon Bone (Keel) explored the local history a small fishing village in Japan; Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot, staged at the Venice Biennale in 1995, explored the history of trade between China and Europe; while Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan and Borrowing Your Enemy’s Arrows addressed the rising economic and political power of China. The latter two are the most important of these works for illustrating the idea of transexperience. Staged at the Guggenheim Soho Museum in New York, Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf consisted of a giant raft, suspended from the ceiling, made from one hundred and eight inflated sheepskin sacks, along
with three running car engines also suspended from the ceiling, as if powering the imaginary craft through the air. The sheepskin sacks were used as a reference to the Mongols (descendants of Genghis Khan) who used them as water sacks and inflatable devices to ford rivers when they invaded China prior to founding the Yuan Dynasty in the thirteenth century, while the car engines suggested a more contemporary mode of transportation. When asked about the meaning of this work, Cai said that it was based on American perceptions of the sudden and powerful drive of the Chinese economy. He states:

> At the time of the exhibition, the Asian economy was very prosperous and China was just emerging as a new world power. There was some concern expressed by the American media that Asia might take over as the leading world power in the twenty-first century, reflected in the front cover news stories of magazines like Time and Newsweek. (Zaya 2002, p. 25)

Thinking about this work in light of Cai’s words, the raft could be thought of as a vessel for invasion, a kind of capsule of Chinese history speeding forward through time to fulfil its destiny as a world power, or as a metaphorical bridge between cultures. Or perhaps it is a metaphor for the artist’s own experience, one of transexperience, as he shuttled back and forth from China, America, and the rest of the world in order to create and show his work, or maybe it is a metaphor for the world speeding toward conflict over trade. Cai leaves this question unanswered, open to the viewer’s interpretation.

Although the artists discussed in this chapter use materials and symbols drawn from Chinese culture, they transform them, as a reflection of their transexperience, into an international, contemporary art idiom. This process is far more pronounced in the work of Chinese artists living in the United States than those who migrated elsewhere and is a testament to the strong internationalism of the United States, in particular of the New York art scene. Xu Bing and Wenda Gu symbolically translate Chinese calligraphy for a Western audience; Cai Guo Qiang
uses gunpowder as a metaphor for cultural conflict and a material for popular pyrotechnic installations; while Zhang Hongtu appropriates and critiques Communist iconography to question representations of China in the West. This might account for why these artists have been so successful on the international stage in such a short period of time while their work generated very little interest in China in the nineties. As Cai has said:

Although I use a lot of materials from Chinese culture, I am most interested in artistic language. I use Chinese symbols and ideas because it is easy for me, it comes naturally. I use them as words to express an idea, but it is the artistic language and contemporary art that I am concerned with. I think that is why my work can hold its own in these large international exhibitions and group shows of different sorts. (2000)
REFERENCE LIST


Fig. 2.2
Zhang Hongtu
*The Masses Are the Real Heroes, While We Ourselves Are Often Childish and Ignorant*
*Chairmen Mao Series*
1989
Laser prints, collage, acrylic on canvas
25 x 21 cm
Fig. 2.4  
Zhang Hongtu  
*Corn Mao* from the series *Material Mao*  
1991–95  
Corn on wood  
99cm diam.
Fig. 2.6
Zhang Hongtu
*The Last Banquet*
1989
Laser print, pages from Mao’s red book, acrylic on canvas
152 x 426 cm
Fig. 2.7
Wenda Gu
*Contemplation of the World*
1984
Ink on paper
247.3 x 182.9 cm
Fig. 2.8
Wenda Gu
*The Dangerous Chessboard Leaves the Ground*
1987
Acrylic on canvas
Fig. 2.12
Wenda Gu
*United Nations: Babel of the Millennium*
1999
Human hair, glue, rope
Fig. 2.11
Wenda Gu
United Nations Series: Temple of Heaven (Africa Monument)
1997
Installation with screens of human hair
732 x 914 x 823 cm
Fig. 2.14
Xu Bing
*Brailliterate*
1992
Bound books
Fig. 2.17
Cai Guo Qiang
*Project for Extraterrestrials No. 14*
*The Horizon of the Pan-Pacific*
1994
Gunpowder, fuse: 5,000 m
Fig. 2.1
Zhang Hongtu
Serve the People,
Chairmen Mao series
1989
Laser print, collage and acrylic on canvas
25 x 21 cm
Fig. 2.3
Zhang Hongtu
_H.I.A.C.S. [He Is A Chinese Stalin]_
_Chairmen Mao series_
1989
Laser print, collage and acrylic on canvas
25 x 21 cm
Fig. 2.5
Zhang Hongtu
*Front Door* (detail)
1995
Mixed-media installation with audio tape
213.3 x 81.3 cm
Fig 2.9
Wenda Gu
*Oedipus Refound #1: The Enigma of Blood*
1990
Soiled tampons
Fig. 2.10
Wenda Gu
United Nations—Israel Monument: The Holy Land
1995
Human hair and limestone
Mitzpe Ramon Desert
Fig. 2.13
Xu Bing
*Heavenly book (Tianshu)*
1987–1991
Ink on paper, bound books
Fig. 2.15
Xu Bing
*A Case Study of Transference*
1994
Pigs printed with ink, books
Fig. 2.16
Xu Bing
Square Words—New English Calligraphy Classroom
1994–96
Installation
Fig. 2.18
Cai Guo Qiang
*Project for Extraterrestrials no. 26*
*The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century*
1996
Gunpowder
Fig. 2.19
Cai Guo Qiang
*Cultural Melting Bath: Project for the 20th Century*
1997
Installation
CHAPTER THREE

Between East and West: Overseas Chinese Artists in France

This chapter discusses the work of Chinese artists who settled in Paris, France, in the context of transexperience, a theoretical concept that, as I have shown, accounts for hybrid cultural references in the work of Chinese artists as ways of coming to terms with new, foreign cultures following migration. The artists whose work will be discussed in this section are Huang Yong Ping, Shen Yuan, Chen Zhen, and Yang Jiechang, all of whom arrived in France over a ten-year period beginning with Chen Zhen in 1986. Yang Jiechang migrated two years later, followed by Huang Yong Ping in 1989 and Shen Yuan in 1990. Other Chinese artists and curators also migrated to France during this period, including Yan Pei-Ming who went to Dijon in 1980 (his work is not discussed here), Wang Du who migrated in 1990 (also not discussed here) as well as the curators and art writers Fei Dawei (1989) and Hou Hanru (1990). Interestingly, all of these artists and curators came from southern China, renowned historically for its trade with foreign nations and more recent interaction with the West through Hong Kong, or other cities, like Shanghai, which have long traditions of interaction with the West.

France, for a variety of reasons, was a natural destination for Chinese artists wanting to leave China. In the first place, France has one of the longest histories of engagement with China of any Western nation, with some of the first European studies of China by French Jesuit missionary writers in the seventeenth century. Examples include Louis Daniel Le Comte’s *Nouveaux Mémoires sur la Chine* in 1696 and Jean-Baptiste Du Halde’s *The General History of China* with its different volumes published between 1709 and 1743. Colin Mackerras, an expert on Western engagements with China, refers to these early French Jesuit missionary authors as the “fathers of Western sinology” (1991, p. 37). Other early French writers who were interested in or
commented on China include Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), Malebranche (1638–1715), Pierre Bayle (1646–1706) and, perhaps most importantly, Voltaire (1694–1778), author of *Orphélin de la Chine* in 1755, who used the teachings of Confucius and Chinese culture as examples with which to attack French political and religious institutions of the eighteenth century. While much intellectual interest focused on the political and civic life of China as an alternative form of governance, there was also much fascination for Chinese art and aesthetic objects. This fascination reached its height in eighteenth-century France, during the Rococo period, with the fad for *chinoiserie*, a European imitation of Chinese art. The style later spread through Europe to Germany, Scandinavia, England, and Russia.\(^67\)

French intellectual interest in China was complemented by a Chinese interest in France, albeit later, especially in the visual arts. At the beginning of the twentieth century, during the Republican period (1912–49), progressive Chinese intellectuals looked to Western, in particular French, philosophy, literature, and art in an attempt to revitalize Chinese culture and society, which they considered moribund. As David Der-wei Wang has written, Chinese intellectuals at the time were concerned with:

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\ldots\text{the renewal of Chinese painting via Western resources, the negotiation between indigenous art forms and global trends, the search for intentional and stylistic authenticity among the competing modes of modernity, and the feasibility of articulating national crisis through art. (2001, p. 29)}
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An interest in Western painting styles and techniques to express local concerns became a dominant theme in Chinese art circles throughout the twenties and thirties. While not all Chinese artists were in favour of the adoption of Western styles (a series of famous debates ensued

\(^{67}\) Although *chinoiserie* is most prevalent in the decorative arts, François Boucher’s painting *The Chinese Garden* (1742) provides an example of its adoption within fine arts. The painting depicts well-heeled Parisians enjoying the luxury of play-acting in Chinese clothes and being waited on by Chinese servants. For a further discussion of *chinoiserie* in France, Germany, and England refer to Jacobson 1999.
between pro- and anti-Western art factions and then among those supportive of the adoption of Western art, many important Chinese artists travelled to Europe to study Western painting. Paris was considered a significant destination, with a great number of artists studying there either for a brief period (Xu Beihong stayed from 1919–26) or settling permanently (Chang Yu migrated in 1920). There was even an exhibition of Chinese painting staged in Paris in the thirties at the Musée du Jeu de Paume. Other Chinese artists who studied in Paris include Xu Zhimo, Lin Fengmian, Pan Xunqin, and Liu Haisu.

The twenties saw the largest concentration of Chinese artists in Paris, partly because of changes in the education system, resulting in new government-sponsored scholarships for study abroad and partly because of a growing desire and curiosity for Western cultures among young Chinese artists and intellectuals. They enrolled in various Parisian schools and studios to learn Western painting techniques, in particular French academic realism, which was seen as providing a means of reinventing the moribund Chinese literati painting tradition. Although there were a number of differences among the Chinese artists living and working in Paris in the twenties (a comparison between the work of Xu Beihong and Chang Yu is instructive here), there was a degree of solidarity between Chinese artists in Paris during this period. This is most evident in the founding of the Parisian artistic group “Heavenly Dog Society” in 1921, whose members included Xu Beihong, Chang Yu, Xie Shoukang, Liu Jiwen, Shao Xunmei, Zhang Daofan, and Sun Peicang. The group’s title plays on that of a Shanghai art group, the “Heavenly Horse Society,” founded by Liu Haisu the year before to reinvigorate Chinese art through Western aesthetics.

68 Indeed the adoption of academic realism as an avant-garde strategy, when it was perceived as a regressive aesthetic in France, reveals the incongruity of the French and Chinese contexts. According to Eugene Y. Wang (2001), the relationship between Xu Beihong and Chang Yu (Sanyu) reveals a lot about Chinese modernism. Indeed the differences between these artists reflects the different art worlds of Paris and Shanghai. Xu arrived in Paris in 1919 and Chang in 1921, both taking up studies in art, but their training could not have been more different. Xu studied in the rigorous academic environment under Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852–1929) and Chang Yu at the less restrictive Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Montparnasse. For a more detailed discussion, see Wang 2001.
With the exception of Chang Yu, all of these artists returned to China and played an important role in the diffusion of Western painting techniques and styles to a younger generation of Chinese artists. Returning from studying in France in the twenties, Lin Fengmian, Pang Xunqin, and Liu Haisu established China’s first modern art movement. Pang Xunqin, along with a group of peers, also founded the Société des Deux Mondes in Shanghai, a society of artists modelled on the French example. Some of these artists also participated in the later New Culture Movement (Xin wenhua yundong) (1916), a Western-influenced movement with a mission to reform Chinese traditional art. With the support of intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu as well as Xu Beihong (the first government-sponsored Chinese student to go to Europe to study art in Paris and Berlin), the New Culture Movement attempted to formulate ideas about a new Chinese painting style predicated upon the adoption of certain Western styles. Chinese artists continued to gravitate to Paris throughout the late forties, most notably the modernist ink painter Zao Wouki (Zhao Wuji) in 1948 and the painter and sculptor Xiong Bingming in 1947.

Chinese artistic contact with French art came to an abrupt end with the triumph of the Communists in 1949. Paradoxically, the rise of Communism in China sparked a renewed French interest in China and all things Chinese, particularly among a generation of Left-leaning French intellectuals. During the fifties, when China was largely inaccessible to foreign visitors, a number of leading French intellectuals made well-documented visits to various parts of China. Simone de Beauvoir visited in 1955 and two years later published a frank assessment of the political situation titled “La Longue Marche, Essai sur la Chine.” Particular attention was paid to the role of women in society. In 1964, France re-established diplomatic relations with China (broken off after the Communist takeover in 1949), sixteen years before the United States did. A year later, André Malraux (French Minister for Culture from 1958 through 1969) visited China, and his account of meetings with party officials and Mao Zedong was negative but nevertheless lenient in his assessment of Mao’s intentions. This was not Malraux’s first visit to China or his only attempt
to write about the country. Two influential books include *The Conquerors* (*Les conquérants*, 1928), and *Man’s Fate* (*La condition humaine*, 1933). Other French writers and journalists also presented a generally positive post-war picture of Communist China, in contrast to their counterparts in Australia and the United States, where anti-Communist and anti-Chinese rhetoric was rife.

Tel Quel, a “literary journal, group, movement and ideology” provides perhaps the best example of a sustained interest in China by French intellectuals (Ffrench and Lack 1998, p.1). From 1960 to 1982, the period that Tel Quel published their eponymous journal, contributing writers extolled the virtues of Chinese culture, language and society, while idealising modern China as a model socialist society. Philippe Sollers’s essay titled “Lénin at le Matérialisme Philosophique” (1970) announced Tel Quel’s solidarity for Maoism while the journal published translations of Mao’s writing in 1970. Sollers’s “Sur la Contradiction,” published in 1971, provided a positive analysis of Mao’s published writings, consolidating the journal’s support for a Maoist version of Marxism. In 1972, a special issue of the journal titled “La Pensée Chinoise” appeared, the content devoted to an investigation of Chinese philosophy and language. Another special issue on China appeared in 1974, this time focussing on China’s political status, following a visit to China by a number of important Tel Quel writers and editors (including Sollers, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and François Wahl) in April and May of that year. Not all of their responses were positive.69

French interest in China had a limited impact on the decision of Chinese artists to migrate to France in the eighties and nineties. Equally limited in its impact was France’s role as a centre of Western culture, one that had a long tradition of curiosity and sympathy toward China. The most important factors in the decision by Chinese artists to migrate to France were timing and

69 Julia Kristeva published “About Chinese Women,” while Barthes and Wahl wrote letters for *Le Monde* that were either critical or ambivalent on the political context in China. Playnet published his own account of his 1974 visit in “Voyage en Chine,” a personal rather than political account.
opportunity. Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang and the curator Fei Dawei all migrated to France following their invitation to participate in “Magicienes de la Terre,” an exhibition curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1989, which coincided with the events at Tiananmen Square. These events prompted their application for permanent residency in France. (Shen Yuan, Huang Yong Ping’s wife, followed a year later). This one event almost single-handedly facilitated a Chinese artistic community in France, which was negligible prior to this time. Chen Zhen was living in Paris, having followed his brother there in 1986, while Yan Pei-Ming was living in the provincial city of Dijon.

All the artists who migrated to France were involved in experimental art in China in the eighties or at least were not producing strictly traditional works. Some of them worked in installation, some did performances, and some made paintings that challenged the Chinese literati tradition as well as the Soviet-inspired socialist realism promulgated by the Chinese Communist Party. Many of them drew on the example of Western art history and iconography, as can be seen most obviously in Huang Yong Ping’s use of a reproduction of a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci in *The Beard was Easiest to Burn* (1986). Since moving to France, their works display less of an interest in challenging Chinese artistic traditions but rather, paradoxically, a revival and exploration of such clichéd cultural traditions as Yi-jing, Daoism, Chinese traditional herbal medicine, Chinese mythology, Chan Buddhism, and ink painting as well as Chinese history. This incorporation of identifiable signifiers of Chineseness, not so apparent or important in their work prior to leaving China, suggests: 1) a sense of displacement and identification with a distant homeland; 2) an acknowledgment of their Chineseness within a foreign context and an attempt to explore their identity through recognisable symbols of cultural affiliation; 3) comment critically on the way that China is perceived within Western countries; 4) an undermining of long-held cultural

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70 The exhibition included three Chinese artists: Gu Dexin, Huang Yong Ping, and Yang Jiechang. Interestingly, Gu Dexin (1997) decided to return to China, believing that if China was to change in any way, “you had to change China from within.”
assumptions of a strict binary division between the East and the West, carried out through combining recognisable icons from Eastern and Western cultures as well as an exploration of personal and historical moments of interaction between China and the West. Some of these moments of interaction are real, and some are staged, but all of them are concerned with the creative possibilities of cultural transgressions—moments where people, things, and images come together yet can be classed as neither belonging to one culture or another: Huang’s *Guanyin with a Thousand Hands* (fig. 3.1), a public work conceived for the Münster project in 1997, combines Marcel Duchamp’s seminal ready-made *Bottle Rack* (1917) with the arms of the Buddhist icon Kuanyin, the Buddha of Compassion; Chen used Chinese traditional medicine to metaphorically heal differences between cultures while, at the same time, create something new; Yang Jiechang’s ink paintings fuse Chinese calligraphy, modern abstraction, and Minimalism; Shen’s flax plaits explore the way that hair styles are gendered and culturally specific and reveal her efforts to break down these stereotypes. This exploration of interactions between China and the West is what broadly sets Chinese artists living in France apart from their counterparts in Australia and the United States, who engage less with their adopted country in their work and what defines their understanding of the idea of transexperience. Before moving to a more detailed discussion of these artists’ works, however, we should pause briefly to acknowledge the important contribution of Chinese curators and critics who migrated to France during this period.

**Cultural Mediators: The Role of Chinese Critics and Curators in France**

Just as the artists who migrated to France in the eighties and nineties were involved in experimental art in China, so were the curators and critics. The two most significant Chinese curators and critics who left China for France during this period were Hou Hanru and Fei Dawei. Both have played an important role in the dissemination of Chinese artists living in the West and Chinese contemporary art in general, operating in some ways as mediators for Western audiences. Other expatriate curators (such as Gao Minglu, who migrated to the United States in 1991) also
played a similar role, although it has been the France-based curators that have had the most sustained and long-term impact on exhibitions and museum culture.\(^7^1\)

Hou is one of the most prolific and widely-respected Chinese contemporary art curators, having worked in Europe, Asia, Australia, and the United States as an adviser and curator for large-scale exhibitions (he was a co-curator of the 2003 Venice Biennale). He has also been a prolific writer on Chinese art for exhibition catalogues and a range of contemporary art magazines and journals, such as *Flash Art*, *Third Text*, and *Art Asia Pacific*. He has also published a book of essays on contemporary Chinese art (in 2002).\(^7^2\) Having migrated to France in 1990, he lives in Paris with his French wife, who is also a critic and writer. Hou was born in Guangzhou in 1963 and studied art history at the Central Academy in Beijing under the influential artist and critic Shao Dazhen. His curatorial activities were limited in China, but he was a participant in the “China Avant-Garde” exhibition at the China Art Gallery in 1989, one of the most important exhibitions of experimental Chinese art in China. His involvement in this exhibition established his reputation as a spokesperson for Chinese contemporary art.

Most of Hou’s activities as a curator and writer have been undertaken since his migration to France. He has single-handedly curated or been part of a curatorium for over forty exhibitions, including: the Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea (2002); the Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai, China (2000); the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in Italy (1999); the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia, (1999); “Cities on the Move” in Vienna, Austria (1997); and the Johannesburg Biennale, South Africa (1997); along with numerous shows devoted to the work of Chinese artists, such as “Living in Time, 29 Contemporary Artists From China” (Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2001), “Parisien(ne)s” (Camden Arts Centre, London, 1997) and “Out of the

\(^7^1\) “Inside Out: New Chinese Art” was curated by Gao Minglu, and although it was not really a ground-breaking exhibition of Chinese art, for other smaller-scale exhibitions of Chinese art had been occurring in Europe and across the United States over the last decade, it was one of the first major museum exhibitions in the United States to feature this art.

\(^7^2\) See Yu 2002
Centre—Chinese Contemporary Art” (Pori Art Museum, Pori, Finland, 1994). Hou also served as an informal adviser and exhibition broker, particularly for those artists living in France, many of whom did not have gallery representation when they first arrived. Hou speaks English and French, making him an invaluable contact for many overseas Chinese artists, most of whom could only speak Chinese.

Hou’s writings attempt to position the work of Chinese artists as a challenge to what he sees as the dominance of a Western bias in the art world. (This is not surprising, given that the contemporary art world is largely run and financed by critics, curators, collectors, and dealers in the West who, not surprisingly, given their investment in the area, determine the terms of debate.) Hou’s writings and conversations in interviews frequently seek to position the work of contemporary Chinese artists in opposition to the “Western mainstream.” His argument centres around their work’s incorporation of references to their Chinese background, which he argues forms the basis of a subversive, critical, artistic strategy, one that negotiates a new, non-hierarchical speaking position. In a recent interview, speaking about the work of Huang Yong Ping, one of the most important Chinese artists who migrated to France, he says:

> It has become necessary, even urgent, to create a space for a new type of intellectual and social freedom. Critical and deconstructive subversion will help transform the established ideological order. In this context, Huang Yong Ping’s introduction of Chinese systems proves effective in negotiating the spaces of this emancipation. (1999, p. 25)

Fei Dawei, another important Chinese critic and curator who migrated to Paris in 1989, makes a similar argument in the catalogue for “In Between Limits,” a Chinese contemporary art exhibition

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73 In an interview in the “Inside Out” exhibition catalogue, he has stated that: “more of them [Chinese artists] are critiquing and deconstructing the ‘mainstream’ discourses and practices of western art by incorporating their Chinese cultural background at the centre of their work” (Hou and Gao 1999, p. 185).
he curated at the Sonje Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, in 1997. According to Fei, the work of Chinese artists living in the West:

\[\ldots\] proves that not only can Chinese artists communicate with the world of Western art, but that they are also members of an international art movement of contemporary art. Through their different culture they not only tried to consciously expose some of the problems that Western art cannot or does not touch upon, but they also used a critical spirit to deal with the basic problems of art and advanced their own opinions. From an administrative level, they are offering new content and future to the pluralism of contemporary art. (1997b, p. 14–15)

There is little evidence to support Hou and Fei’s theory that the incorporation of Chinese references in the work of overseas Chinese artists provides an effective critique of Western art history and cultural dominance, although the simple presence of other cultural references and ideas in the works on display in Western art museums, particularly those from a culture as foreign as China, points to a growing awareness of this work and curiosity among Western curators and thus a potential challenge to Western values and viewpoints. The inclusion of Chinese artists within popular accounts of contemporary art of the period also suggests that their work has become part of the Western art canon.\(^7\)

**Conflict in Nature as Conflict Between Cultures: The Conceptual Installations of Huang Yong Ping**

Huang Yong Ping is one of the most important Chinese artist to migrate to France. His artworks examine the history of relations between China and the West. This quality only became apparent in his work after he migrated to France in 1989. Prior to that, he was making works that were

\(^7\) A discussion of the work of Wenda Gu is included in Lucie-Smith 1996 and overseas Chinese artists were featured consistently on the front cover of leading contemporary art magazines such as *Art in America*: Wenda Gu in March 1999, Cai Guo Qiang in May 2002, and Chen Zhen in February 2003.
more concerned with Western art and art history and their application to local Chinese issues and concerns. What links both series of works, those done in China and those done after his migration, is, firstly, an anti-art quality derived from an early interest in Dada (and the work of Joseph Beuys), and, secondly, a concern with making political statements through art. That said, his works produced after leaving China take the form, mostly, of installations that theatrically recount and restage paradigmatic moments of misunderstanding, dialogue, and interaction between China and the West, focusing on past and present colonisation of China and the history of Chinese migration. These works can also be understood as a metaphor for his own experiences as a Chinese migrant to the West. Huang has spoken about this process in terms that suggest an understanding of the psychological dimension of transexperience:

. . . When you have a home, a stable home somewhere, you don’t have to move. The question of location doesn’t arise. But when you start moving around, become displaced or a migrant, the question of home is raised. Then you have to consider what is your earth, what is your water. So actually when you travel you don’t have a home but you need a home. (1998, p. 113)

Huang Yong Ping was born in 1954 in Xiamen, a city that was open to foreign residence and trade (along with Guangzhou and Shanghai) under the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing. Huang studied at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, graduating three years later. Following graduation, he founded the Xiamen Dada Group, which was part of a broader national interest among artists in experimental art which became known, collectively, as the ’85 New Wave movement. The Xiamen Dada group is best remembered for the nihilistic act of burning a group of their paintings in front of the Cultural Palace of Xiamen following their 1986 exhibition in Hangzhou.\(^{75}\) This act was accompanied by a later manifesto, whose title can be translated as

\(^{75}\) For further accounts of this movement, see Peng and Yi 1992.
“The Declaration of the Fire of 1987: If we do not kill art we cannot live serenely. Dada is dead, beware of fire.” Writing about this work, Wu Hung (1999) makes the unmistakable connection between the group’s burning of its own paintings and the mass burning of books and paintings by the Communists during the Cultural Revolution. Huang has also commented on the explicit political implications of burning artworks in China:

In the [current] social politics in China, art is part of ideology; doubting the nature of art and destroying art is to destroy the political system. If one thinks of art as a metaphor for reality, then to change attitudes towards art means changing ways of thinking. (1992, in Jouanno 1998, p. 37)

Huang’s interest in Western art was not confined to Dada. Other works from his years in China draw upon images by European masters. *The Haystack* (1983), for example, consisted of a copy of nineteenth-century French painter Jules Bastien-Lepage’s (1848–84) painting *Les Foins* which was shown in an exhibition of nineteenth century French landscape painting at the China Art Gallery in 1978. Huang added a plaster cast to the face and a wooden foot to the leg of the image of this peasant woman. This work was important less for the additions to the canvas, which gave it a three-dimensional presence, than for the artist’s experimentation with collage at a time when non-traditional artistic methods and styles weren’t politically sanctioned or taught in art schools in China. The same criticism applied to *The Beard Was Easiest to Burn* (1986), which consisted of four photocopies of Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci’s *Self-Portrait* (c. 1512), each copy burned in the lower section where da Vinci’s beard is drawn. This work has a curious parallel in Marcel Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1918), which shows a reproduction of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa with a pencil-drawn moustache.

Perhaps Huang’s most important work produced in China about Western art and art history, and an icon of this period of Chinese art, is “*A History of Chinese Painting*” and “*A Concise History
of Modern Painting” Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes (1987, fig. 3.2). This work consisted of a history of two art history books (Herbert Read’s “Concise History of Modern Painting” and Wang Bomin’s “History of Chinese Painting”) combined in a washing machine. The books were pulped in the process, and the mass of congealed paper was exhibited on a glass sheet placed on top of a wooden chest. This work symbolized attempts by a generation of Chinese artists to reconcile the new influence of European and American art with the more familiar Chinese traditions. The selection of these two books also suggests an attempt to create a dialogue or union between Western and Chinese art traditions by merging them. Huang also seems to be suggesting that these otherwise distinct histories are not as autonomous as they might seem, since China has a long history of interaction with Europe and America.76

Huang continued to pulp books in washing machines after he moved to Paris, albeit with a different focus. Should We Reconstruct a Cathedral? (1991, fig. 4.3), for instance, comprised the pulp of French and German copies of the 1991 art historical tome Ein Gespräch/ Una Discussione (a discussion between Beuys, Cucchi, Kiefer and Kounellis, 1991). The pulp of these books was mixed with the pulp of exhibition catalogues of the work of these four artists and then piled onto a wooden ensemble of table and chairs. Partly, the work was about trying to identify with an art tradition to which the artist sought entrance, and partly it was about making knowledge and language unintelligible, as a metaphor for the experience of moving to a new country and culture. Huang knew about the history and the work of the famous artists speaking together or profiled in the books, but he could not understand what the texts in the books were saying: it did not matter whether the books were in French or German, for he could read neither language. The destruction of the books also signalled a kind of scepticism towards official histories and bodies of knowledge; whether Chinese or Western, it did not matter.

76 Refer to Colin Mackerras 1991 which provides a comprehensive historical analysis of the West’s perceptions of China, beginning in Roman times.
An important aspect of Huang’s work since he migrated to France is his exploration of European interaction with China. This has, most notably, focused on European colonialism, evident in works such as *VOC* (1998) and *Da Xian—The Doomsday* (1997). *VOC* (fig. 3.4), a site-specific installation commissioned for the De Appel in Amsterdam in 1998, dealt critically with the history of the Dutch East India Company (whose Dutch acronym was VOC), established in the first half of the seventeenth century specifically to trade with Asia. The work makes reference to the trade in tea and porcelain between Europe and China which, along with silk, were the main Chinese exports to Europe during this period. (The tea trade was begun first by the Dutch around 1637, with payment made initially in silver and later in opium.)

The installation consisted of, on one side of the gallery, a series of wooden boxes resembling tea chests stacked neatly along the wall, each printed with the VOC company logo. Directly opposite these chests was a stack of Philips (a Dutch electronics company founded in 1914) television cardboard boxes. They were stacked higher than the VOC boxes, creating a more ominous presence. Dividing the walls of boxes were two large wooden measuring scales, like those once used by merchants in China. On one set of scales was a VOC tea chest balanced by a canon imprinted with a VOC logo, to suggest the violence accompanying European colonial expansion and the protection of trade interests in Asia. The other set of scales balanced a VOC tea chest with a Philips television box. By pairing VOC and Philips boxes on the scales, presented as equal in weight, Huang identifies VOC with a contemporary Dutch corporation. The idea for such a comparison came from Huang’s research for the exhibition, when he found that a gallery in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Holland, devoted to porcelain traded from China by the Dutch East India Company, was sponsored by Philips. The porcelain trade from China was also referenced in the installation, with a series of plates decorated in hand-painted *chinoiserie* designs (an eighteenth-century European decorative

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77 For an historical account of the development of this trade, with particular reference to the role of the English, see Ward Fay 1997.
style that appropriated Chinese designs), including images of foreign ships at Chinese treaty ports, domestic scenes, and the VOC company logo, placed on a table at the far end of the room. This presentation of past and present European trading interests in China compares colonial exploitation of Asian countries with the contemporary use of Asia as a cheap manufacturing base for multinational organizations, particularly electronics companies. Nowhere is this more apparent than in China.

*Da Xian—The Doomsday* (1997, fig. 3.5) is another work referencing the porcelain trade, this time in the context of the handover of Hong Kong, a former British colonial possession, to China. Just as *VOC* was created as a response to the history of Dutch colonialism and trade in Asia, *Da Xian—The Doomsday*, shown at the Camden Art Centre in London, focused on the end of the British occupation of Hong Kong. The work consists of three enormous bowls decorated in designs based loosely on eighteenth-century Chinese export porcelain. The painted designs on the bowls feature foreign hongs or store-houses (used by colonial powers in China to store trading goods) sporting European and American flags. The hongs were probably at Guangzhou (Canton), the nearest mainland Chinese district to Hong Kong and one of the key trading ports for Europeans as large quantities of porcelain was painted there until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Commenting on the designs on the bowls used in this work, Huang has said:

> . . . the bowls are not the traditional Chinese bowls. I have chosen porcelain bowls made by the ‘oriental’ East India company. The motifs on the bowls are theirs, done in a traditional style. What is interesting is that in these images you have a lot of flags of the colonizers…These images reflect the imagination at the height of colonialism in the late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century. (Jantjes 1998, p. 112)

While the painted designs on the bowls reflect the height of European and American colonisation in China, packages of food placed by the artist inside the bowls were stamped prominently with “best before 1 July 1997,” the date that Hong Kong was handed back to China, after being
granted to Britain at the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 following China’s defeat in the Opium War.

Huang has commented on his use of food in this installation: “The food plays the role of a reminder. It reminds us of limitations. Food is not like earth or wood which can last for a long time, it always has a limit” (in Jantjes 1998, p. 112). Perhaps Huang is suggesting that colonialism in China, like food, also has an expiration date: Huang’s choice of Hong Kong as the subject for exploring historical colonial relationships with China is significant because it is the last vestige of the previous colonial age in China, marked by the ignominy of the Opium Wars.

In addition to an exploration of Western colonial contact with China, Huang has also explored patterns of Chinese migration to Western countries. Works such as *Chinese Hand Laundry* (1994), *Kearny Street* (1994), *Human Snake Plan* (1993), and *Passage* (1993) look at the experience of Chinese migrants both past and present. The history of Chinese settlement in the United States is a theme of *Chinese Hand Laundry*, a large-scale installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. For this installation, Huang built two connecting rooms, the first clad with wooden panels. Two benches flanked a central doorway to this room, suggesting that this was a waiting room. Above the doorway was a “Chinese hand laundry” sign, borrowed from the Chinatown History Museum. In the second room, whose entrance was obscured by hanging strips of black curtain, was a gigantic automatic machine, resembling a hybrid between a car wash and a washing machine, with large rotating washers, scrubbers, and polishers. The work made reference to the extraordinary history of Chinese employment in the United States as laundry workers. For example, Lynn Pan (1994) has stated that in 1920, three out of ten Chinese who worked in the United States worked in hand laundries.

In contrast to *Chinese Hand Laundry*, which addressed the history of Chinese employment in the laundry business, *Kearny Street* (fig. 3.6) examines the events around the anti-Chinese movement in San Francisco during the 1870s. Anti-Chinese sentiment was a consequence of widespread
fears that cheap Chinese labourers would take the jobs from local (predominantly Irish) labourers. One of the chief protesters was Dennis Kearney, founder of the Workingmen’s Party, who held nightly mass meetings where he incited unrest with the slogan “The Chinese must go.” On the 23rd of July 1870, nearly ten thousand people assembled in the Sandlot in San Francisco to protest against the presence of cheap Chinese labourers. A major riot ensued, which led to the destruction of Chinese laundries, the burning of Chinese properties, and even random killings of Chinese people.

*Kearny Street* is based loosely on the history of these anti-Chinese incidents. It takes its title from Kearny Street in San Francisco, named after Dennis Kearney. The work consisted of four wooden shelter-like structures, laid out side by side as if to suggest the grid-like organization of an urban environment. Attached to each of them was signs for Kearny Street, along with traffic lights. Each of the lights projected a “don’t walk” symbol, a reference perhaps to Kearney’s opposition to Chinese immigration to the United States. Around the gallery, Huang placed U.S. Postal boxes (a reference to the Pacific Mail Steamship aboard which many Chinese seamen were employed, and consequently a target during the riots), as well as casts of tortoises. Live tortoises also roamed the gallery. Huang’s use of tortoises in *Kearny Street* serves as a memorial to those who were killed in the riots, for tortoises are symbols of heaven and earth in Chinese cosmology—the curved upperside of their shell is thought to represent a vaulted heaven while the underside is the flat disk of earth. (Turtles are also frequently featured as sculptures in traditional funerary tablets because of their symbolic association with longevity.)

Contemporary Chinese migration to America is the subject of *Human Snake Plan* (fig. 3.7, also titled *Fragmented Memory*). The installation comprised a large conical-shaped net stretching more than thirty feet long, almost the entire length of the gallery, inside of which was a bright yellow map of the United States. Beside the narrow entrance to the net was a series of metal
drums and car tyres bound together by rope to form makeshift flotation devices, not unlike rafts. Two lines of string, with clothes hung on them, were also hanging in the gallery. This work was about the perils of migration, which is presented by Huang as a kind of trap in which many impoverished Chinese people have been caught. While the makeshift flotation device and clothes lines allude to the transit of illegal boat people or refugees, the net serves as a metaphor both for getting caught by immigration officials as well as the psychological trap into which some would-be migrants are lured and caught, seduced by the myth of endless happiness and prosperity in the United States. This has now become a huge problem for many other countries around the world, many of which have been inundated with illegal Chinese migrants.

*Passage*, an installation for the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow in 1993, again references contemporary Chinese migration to the West. The work comprised two large metal cages positioned at the entrances to two of the galleries. Each cage contained lion droppings and food carcasses, suggesting the presence of lions. Huang had intended to include lions in this work but was unable to do so because of a gallery policy. The cages were positioned at the entrance of the gallery in such a way as to suggest the Chinese tradition of lion statues at a gate or entrance to a building as symbolic guardians. Above each of the cages hung signs similar to those found at airports, which said “E.C. Nationals” and “Others” in reference to the division of visitors according to nationality. This work is about dividing up the world according to nationality, with some accorded privileged status and others denied entry, yet symbolic lions guard both gates in this work, suggesting that immigration and travel restriction can work two ways. The work also seems to comment on Huang’s sense of frustration at being an artist travelling on a Chinese passport and thus subject to extensive immigration controls while at the same time being a permanent resident in France. It is almost as if he cannot enter either of the doors, being neither an E.U. citizen nor an “Other.”
Huang uses animals as a raw material for his installations in much the same way that painters use paint and canvas. His comments shed further light on this:

For the last few years I have been working with animals, mostly insects, live insects . . . Using animals as a symbolic or metaphoric way of dealing with society or reality the works are about the reality, in which we live today rather than animals themselves . . . When we talk about the relationship between man and animals usually we just say that man uses animals, man is superior to animals, period. But my way of using animals is taken from Chinese mythology in which man and animals are mixed together, using each other. They eat each other to form a kind of food chain. (in Jantjes 1998, p. 112)

Animals, or references to them, are included in many of Huang’s works, including *The Saint Learns From a Spider to Weave a Cobweb* (1998), *One Man Nine Animals* (1999), and *Crane’s Legs and Deer’s Traces* (1999). One of the earliest examples of Huang’s use of animals was *Yellow Peril* (1993), which used insects as a way of addressing the history of relations between Britain and China. For this work, Huang put one thousand crickets and a handful of scorpions together in an enormous yellow tent inside the Museum of Modern Art at Oxford. (As with other works, such as *Fire Sacrifice* (1990) and *The House of Oracles* (1989–92) Huang used the Yi-jing, a Chinese book of oracles made up of hexagrams used to divine the future, to determine which materials would be used). The title of the work referenced the derogatory historical expression “yellow peril,” which originated in the 1890s to characterise British fears of an influx of cheap Chinese labourers. This fear was illustrated in the installation with the crickets, representing the Chinese, flooding the tent-like enclosure occupied by only a few scorpions, representing the English. Yet, as a reflection of the historical reality of European exploitation of cheap Chinese immigrant labourers, the scorpions ate the crickets for the duration of the exhibition. The work thus serves as a violent metaphor for the history of labour relations between the two countries, while at the same time echoing fears of a similar fate awaiting thousands of illegal Chinese immigrants eager to enter Europe and the United States. The strength of this work,
as in so many of Huang’s pieces examined here, lies in their combination of historical references with pressing present social and political problems: ones, it is worth noting, which are intimately connected to his own experience as a Chinese migrant in France.

*The Bridge and the Theatre of the World* (1993–95, fig. 3.8) is another work that utilises insects as a metaphor for conflicts between cultures. The title of the work reflects the rough shape of the two main components: a long thin bridge and an oval-shaped theatre—skeletal cage-like structures made from wood, metal, and mesh are filled with animals and insects. (“The Bridge” component also resembles a snake, while the “Theatre of the World” can be seen as a tortoise shell, which suggests a reference to the Daoist symbol *xuan wu*, which shows a snake wrapped around a tortoise.) Inside the “theatre,” insects (including grasshoppers, lizards, centipedes, and frogs) were let loose to devour one another, not unlike the gladiatorial spectacles that occurred in the Colosseum in ancient Rome. In Daoist beliefs, which are a strong influence in many of Huang’s works, not all of which will be discussed here,78 death and dying are not seen as the end of life but as one part of a continuous cycle of growth and regeneration. Inside the bridge structure, Huang placed live snakes and tortoises as well as Qing dynasty bronzes of dragons and *xuan wu* (both hybrid animals in Chinese mythology) on loan from the Musée Cernuschi in Paris. Speaking about the role of the bridge segment of this work, Huang has said:

> The image of the bridge is a beautiful metaphor. On the bridge you have two points, two ends. Normally we think a person should have only one standpoint, but when you become a bridge you have two. This is also a kind of explanation for the concept of crossing the border of the self: as one person you should have many standpoints. Between these two points, there is one that is more stable, your original personality and

another point, which is less stable, floating. This bridge is always dangerous. (Jantjes 1998, p. 115)

Once again, Huang uses Chinese symbols and animals to reflect as much upon broader issues as his own transexperience as a Chinese migrant to the West.

It is worth mentioning Huang’s installation for the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1999. This work, which also relied heavily on Daoist writings, is additionally important as a symbol for the recognition of Chinese artists in France. It seems extraordinary that Huang, a French resident for only ten years should have been selected to represent France at one of the world’s most prestigious international art festivals. And he did so not just as another participant in the Arsenale (the venue for large, rambling, curated shows) but as an exhibitor in France’s national pavilion in the Giardini. Hou Hanru was the curator. Titled One Man, Nine Animals, the installation comprised nine enormous needle-like columns rising from the floor up to and piercing the pavilion’s roof. On top of each of the columns Huang placed sculptures of mythical animals derived from the Daoist “Book of Mountains and Oceans” (Shanhai Jing) from the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.), which contains descriptions of fantastic animals from distant worlds which are believed to have the power to tell the future. Outside the pavilion, in a square shared by other national pavilions, Huang placed a compass chariot, a third-century Chinese invention for measuring direction and time, with a sculpture of a man on top. Writing about this work in the exhibition catalogue, Hou suggested that the work was a kind of metaphor for the old-fashioned biennale model of national pavilion representation, which he likened to a sick body in need of a cure. Huang’s pillars, which Hou likened to acupuncture needles, traced “the line of the ‘cure’ for the dying body of the system of national representation embodied in the building itself” (1999, p. 23). In addition, Chinese migration to France and Daoism are presented as the means of salvation for contemporary French art.
Layers of History/Layers of Ink: The Paintings of Yang Jiechang

Yang Jiechang, born in Foshan in 1956, studied calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting in Guangzhou, graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in 1982. Like Fei Dawei and Huang Yong Ping, Yang participated in the “Magiciens de la Terre” exhibition at the Pompidou Museum in 1989. Unlike his two compatriots, however, he was already living in France, having moved there in 1989 for personal reasons. (He later married a German woman, Martina Köppel-Yang.) Since moving to France, Yang, primarily a calligrapher, uses ink not for calligraphy or for landscape painting but for the sake of the medium itself. He paints layer upon layer of black ink on the same section of a piece of rice paper over a long period of time, leading to the creation of dense, minimal patterns, shapes, and forms. These inky creations, which are about time and layering, stand in contrast to the works that he produced in China, which by comparison were far more traditional. Yang’s decision to continue making ink paintings in France can be understood as a reflection of his transexperience insofar as his ink paintings, which are essentially conceptual art works informed by the history of Western Conceptual Art, radically question and transform the medium.

Some of Yang’s most important works produced since moving to Paris are Square 100 Layers of Ink (1994–98), 100 Layers of Ink (1992–96) and Circle 100 Layers of Ink (1994–98). Each consists of a shiny black abstract shape produced through one hundred layers of black ink applied to the same section of a sheet of matte white xuan paper over a long period of time. The repetitive layering of ink to create the shapes has more in common with the work of Western minimalist or abstract painters such Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Brice Marden than it does with traditional forms of calligraphy, which are frequently based on copying the works of great masters. The rigorous abstraction of these paintings also has its source in Daoism, the Chinese philosophy of

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79 Yang’s early experiments in China with ink painting were, however, critical of the literati tradition dominating ink painting in the country.
time and change based on the writings of Lao-tzu, which emphasises inner-contemplation and mystical union with nature as well as the abandonment of wisdom, learning, skill, and purposeful action in favour of simplicity and *wu-wei*, which can be roughly translated as non-action, or letting things take a natural course. This is an accurate description of Yang’s painting process, which is about letting the paintings evolve naturally over time. Although Yang’s ink paintings show little concern for the religious aspects of Daoism, the artist has conducted formal studies in this area: he studied for two years with Master Huangtao at Mount Luofu in Huizhou Municipality, situated in southern China’s Guangdong Province at the northeastern end of the Pearl River Delta.

Another inspiration for Yang’s ink paintings, according to Martina Köppel-Yang (1999), was the work of Zhang Feng, a Qing dynasty painter born in Shangyuan, Shengzhou (now Nanjing, Jiangsu Province) sometime between 1645–62. Zhang was a painter, poet, seal-carver, and government official who spent much of his life living as Buddhist recluse. Leading a life of poverty, he pursued various independent scholarly activities, including a kind of subjective, expressionist style of painting remarkable for its daring brushwork and piety. Similar qualities characterise Yang’s layered ink paintings, which also pursue an independent path, eschewing painterly skill and traditional subject matter in favour of an attempt to capture the passage of time.

Equally relevant, too, is the Black Painting movement in China, which occurred in the seventies, particularly after 1974 when artists such as Shi Lu from Xi’an, Lin Fengmian, and Pan Tianshou, both of whom were from Shanghai, started making black paintings as a form of political protest. They were denounced, subjected to self-criticism sessions, and their work was featured in black painting exhibitions circulated around the country. Julia F. Andrews identifies this movement as stemming from a conflict between Jiang Qing and Zhou Enlai, the latter believing that China
should have two standards for the production of art.\textsuperscript{80} The Black Painting movement gave the colour black political associations in China, especially among artists. Yang’s decision to paint exclusively in black thus gives his work a political edge, at least in China, regardless of the artist’s intentions. Yang, however, must surely have been aware of the Black Painting movement, for he was in his twenties and at art school in Guangzhou at the time of the movement’s prominence and denunciation.

Another Yang work about time and the limits of ink painting was \textit{100 Layers of Ink} (1993) shown in a group exhibition of Chinese artists titled “Silent Energy” at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1993. The work consisted of six black ink paintings covering enormous sheets of paper mounted onto white gauze and stretched like canvas. The contrast between the surface and colour of the gauze and the ink on paper created a visual tension, further dramatized by the sculptural quality of the work: the paintings were installed more like sculptures than paintings, either slightly away from the wall or free-standing like screens. Abandoning the scroll format of traditional Chinese ink painting altogether, Yang had begun to treat his calligraphic works as three-dimensional objects. This represented a radical departure from Chinese traditions of ink painting, with their highly circumscribed forms, subjects, and classical means of display.

Following \textit{100 Layers of Ink} (1993), Yang began to produce works that reference something beyond the process of ink painting itself. This is apparent in the titles of the works, a number of which mention the guillotine. \textit{Guillotine I} (1995, fig. 3.9), for example, consisted of an enormous, irregular, black square against a black background measuring 173 by 186 centimetres. The square, produced by multiple layers of ink, was glossy and crinkly in contrast to the smooth black matte surface below and resembled a topographical map, the crinkled surface recalling symbols

\textsuperscript{80} For further discussion, see Andrews 1994, p. 375.
for topographical features of a landmass. Indeed, the square had absorbed so much ink that it no longer possessed the qualities of paper but now resembled the shiny metal surface of the guillotine referred to in the title. No doubt Yang was making reference to one of the most significant eras in the modern history of his adopted country, the terror of the French Revolution. This was the first time his ink paintings referred directly to his adopted country.

*Vast Square* (1990–98, fig. 3.10) was sized on a similar scale. Included in Yang’s solo exhibition at the Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing in 1999, the work was a painting created by numerous layers of ink on *xuan* paper. As with all of Yang’s works, the emphasis was on the surface of the painting, which was rough and randomly-creased due to the many layers of ink, although what made this work different was the addition of small randomly-drawn arrows in pencil over its entire surface. These arrows gave the work a dynamism hitherto unseen in his paintings. Moreover, the combination of arrows and the randomly-formed folds in the paper resonated with diagrams from the *Dao-zang*, the canonical Daoist text, describing the flow of *qi* or vital energy (fig. 3.11). Produced over a long period of time (eight years), this work, like all of Yang’s ink paintings, has a diaristic quality, each layer serving as a marker for the passage of time.

Although influenced by Daoist philosophy, Yang’s black ink paintings evoke a range of interpretations, depending upon the cultural context in which they are exhibited. Yang has spoken about these differences in the reception and interpretation of his work. He states:

In Mainland China, [my paintings] provoked [discussion] as works about a “darkening socialism”. In France, people consider [my works] as “Oriental Black,” representing Nothingness and Nihilism. In Japan, some critics judge this kind of painting as “very romantic.” When my work was showing in the Kunstverein, in Heidelberg, Germany (the epitome of German Romanticism), it was actually attacked as “full of violence”
Although the abstract quality of Yang’s ink paintings allows great flexibility in their interpretation, they retain a degree of cultural specificity. While referring to Chinese traditions such as calligraphy and ink painting (notably through his persistent use of the core materials of the medium, black ink and \textit{xuan} paper, and his constant if oblique references to Daoism), they also reflect his experience as a Chinese migrant living in France. While not necessarily overt, Yang’s ink paintings mix and combine different cultural stimuli, seeking to find a balance between Chinese traditions of ink painting and Western traditions of abstract and conceptual art.

Yang likens this experience to the colour grey, formed from a union of opposites white and black:

\begin{quote}
I am a Chinese living in Europe. I cannot be rid of my eastern background. My experience makes me look at things not just in black and white, but focus on the central grey tone. Not concentrating on right and wrong, I go east with my back to the east: the farther I go, the bigger the distance of grey, and the more possibilities (1999, in Chen 1999, n.p)
\end{quote}

While Yang identifies with the colour grey, as a metaphor for the cultural condition of living outside his homeland, and does not identify fully with either French or Chinese culture, black continues to dominate his paintings. It is simply one of the paradoxes of his work as, too, is his decision to continue making abstract compositions reminiscent of Western Minimal and Conceptual art using ink, a medium heavily identified with painting and calligraphy in China. It is another example of his transexperience.

\textbf{Healing as an Artistic Strategy: The Work of Chen Zhen}

Chen migrated to Paris in 1986 but, unlike other overseas Chinese artists such as Huang Yong Ping, Chen was not a political dissident. He migrated to Paris largely because of family connections—his brother was already living there. He described his first four years in Paris as lonely, consisting mostly of him learning French and studying Western art history. But it was also
a stimulating experience for him. Chen cited these early years in France as significant for the
development of his work, enabling him to re-engage China and his Chinese culture through the
treatment of the English and French languages while at the same time to engage his new location as a
Chinese person living in Europe. For Chen, the experience of migration was not simply one of
displacement from China—that of diaspora as a tension between the place of residence and
homeland—but a process of acquiring new experiences. He called it transexperience, describing
the condition as one of adaptation and accumulation.\textsuperscript{81}

Born in Shanghai in 1955, Chen studied painting at the Shanghai College of Applied Art from
1973 until 1976. After this, he studied at the Shanghai Theatre Institute, where he later taught.
Although involved in the blossoming avant-garde movement in Shanghai, he continued to make
painting throughout his time in China. Chen’s most representative works from this period were a
series of large, grey oil paintings titled \textit{The Flow of Qi (Qi You Tu)} (1985). First exhibited in an
exhibition in Shanghai that Cai Guo Qiang organised in 1985, these works endeavoured to
represent the movement of \textit{qi}, or spirit, a core element of life and the cosmos in Chinese
philosophy. Although not radical in form, the work with its references to ancient and traditional
Chinese philosophy was a provocative political gesture given that these ideas had been
suppressed during the Cultural Revolution. Chen’s works also made reference to the tradition of
Western abstract and expressionist painting.\textsuperscript{82}

Although he was trained as a painter and painted for 18 years, Chen is best known in the West for
his large-scale installations. He stopped painting when he moved to France, where he became
much more interested in working in three-dimensional media, but he made almost no artwork
during the first ten years of his residence in France, or at least not for public display. (He did,

\textsuperscript{81} Refer to his interview in Z. Chen 1998.
\textsuperscript{82} Perhaps an influence over Chen’s works, an exhibition of Robert Rauchenberg’s paintings was staged at the China
however, make a living paintings portraits of tourists at Montmartre and other sites around Paris for a time.) One of Chen’s first major works following his migration to Paris was *Round Table* (1995, fig. 3.12). This work was commissioned by the Geneva office of the United Nations to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. The work consisted of a wooden table with a “lazy Susan” (a circular revolving device placed at the centre of a table to ensure that food is accessible to all diners). On the surface of the lazy Susan was the mission statement of the United Nations written in Chinese, carved and inlaid with gold leaf. Around the table were twenty-nine different chairs collected from all over the world, each representing different continents. Nobody could sit at the table because the seats of the chairs were set into the tabletop. Chen selected the round table as a symbol of democratic union and discussion, for there can be no “head” of a round table. Nor, however, could there be any discussion, for nobody could sit at this table. Chen seems to be saying with this work that the activities of the United Nations are largely symbolic and that no real discussion or dialogue is really taking place. Or perhaps it was a reflection upon China’s troubled relationship with the United Nations, which only recognised the People’s Republic of China as a sovereign state in 1971. Prior to that, Taiwan, the Republic of China, was assumed to be the official “China.” The recognition of the People’s Republic by the United Nations was considered a great victory by mainland Chinese nationalists.

*Round Table* is something of an exception among Chen’s works, in that it was a commission for a particular occasion. By contrast, most of the materials and references used in his works made after his move to France belong specifically to China and in particular relate to his own experiences and memories of living there. For example, one finds in many of Chen’s installations the frequent inclusion of Daoist philosophy, Chinese domestic objects (chamber pots, furniture such as chairs and tables, Buddha statues, abaci), and references to traditional medicine. These references demonstrate a residual effect of his Chinese upbringing—he lived in China until he was thirty-one years old—as well as a sense of displacement as a migrant in France and an
attempt to come to grips with being a contemporary artist living and working in the West but not sharing that region’s culture, history, and traditions. For Chen, the incorporation of Chinese references in his work are essential as a matter of defining who he was as an artist while at the same time articulating the uniqueness of his own transexperience. Speaking about this, he has said:

If you look at things only through the yardstick of Western art history, or speak of things only in a tone consistent with the thinking that ‘contemporary art was invented by the Westerners,’ then not only are you going to lose what you will have, but what you already have will also disappear. (1998, n.p.)

*Obsession of Longevity* (1995, fig. 3.13) is a good example of Chen’s belief that his work reflected his own background, feelings, and experiences. This belief began to take on a serious dimension following his onset of leukaemia, which was diagnosed in China but became much more serious in France. He had always been interested in traditional Chinese medicine and came from a distinguished family of doctors; as his condition worsened, he looked to Chinese medicine for a cure. He taught himself about traditional Chinese medicine and gradually began to incorporate aspects of his studies alongside other concerns in his installations. In short, he hoped that his art works might heal him or that he might heal himself through art.

*Obsession of Longevity* consists of two chambers, back to back, containing different objects and references to Chinese medicine. In one of the chambers is a yellow paraffin mattress with sharp metal points protruding from its surface, which looks like it was designed to administer some kind of random acupuncture. The other chamber is a kind of laboratory, the walls adorned with images of viruses and antibodies. Chinese talismans are also on display around the walls. *Obsession of Longevity* is a mystical healing apparatus, one that ties in with the Chinese obsession with longevity—an obsession that pervades everyday life (such as the tradition of eating “long-life noodles” on your birthday), mythology (the God of Longevity, *Shou-xing*), and
the traditional Chinese science of alchemy (which speaks of the pill of immortality, *dan*). It also takes on a tragically personal dimension given Chen’s life-threatening illness, which was to finally take his life in 2000.

Continuing his interest in medicine, Chen’s exhibition at Espace Culturel François Mitterrand in 1999 was titled “Between Therapy and Meditation” (fig. 3.14). The exhibition comprised an ensemble of works that transformed various medical materials and hospital equipment into distortions of everyday, domestic items. For example, a mop-head was made from thin pink and orange rubber tubes and syringe needles, while a white metal baby’s cot with wheels illuminated from within was cocooned in woven transparent tubing. These works combined forms and materials from both the home and the hospital, blurring the distinction between the two, and thus, it seems, the distinction between the sick and the healthy, reflecting Chen’s own experience as a home patient managing a terminal illness while also acknowledging the ever-present proximity of death. In one of the works, *Empty Cocoon (Cocon Du Vide)* (1998), threads of alternating black-and cream-coloured beads, reminiscent of Buddhist prayer beads or perhaps beads from an abacus, created a cage around a plain wooden stool. The shape of the cage was not unlike that of a gourd, frequently a symbol of fertility, or a vessel used for holding medicines or potions in Chinese mythology. In this case, the gourd-shaped cage of Chen’s invention forms a structure of containment around the stool, preventing its use. Indeed, the reference to a vessel is particularly apt since Chen inserted a water carafe into the seat of the stool, which was inverted so that it no longer had an ability to hold liquids. The visual connection between the cage and the carafe was reinforced by a reflection of the cage inside the glass carafe—it showed the doubled image of the cage for the viewer. Chen’s title for this work, *Empty Cocoon*, suggests futility, for even if one gained access to the carafe, it is empty.
In addition to *Empty Cocoon*, chairs were featured in other works in the exhibition. For example, a Western-style dining chair was transformed into a drum, the artist having stretched skin across its seat. Elevated slightly, it was hung with its back to the wall with a police baton hanging on a metal chain from one side. Visitors were allowed to beat the seat of the chair with the baton as if it were a drum. Directly next to the chair, and hanging at the same height, was a small coffee table, similarly transformed into an unconventional drum. These items of furniture were transformed from passive items into active instruments of sound. Another work to use a chair was *Chair of Concentration (Chaise de Concentration)* (1998). This work comprised a classic Ming period wooden southern official’s hat armchair (*nan guan mao yi*). Protruding from the back of the chair was a metal rod, attached to which were two chamber pots positioned at ear height and in such a way as to resemble large-scale earphones. Each of Chen’s remodelled pieces of furniture serves as a metaphor for the process of healing, one suggesting meditation (sitting in the chair and listening to the intermittent sounds), the other therapy through the release of frustration and aggression (the beating of the drum), embodied in the twin ideas of therapy and meditation. But the transformations of the chairs and other objects in his work also serve as a metaphor for transexperience, mirroring changes in his Chinese identity and his relationship with both China and the West.

The transformation of objects as a metaphor for transexperience also characterises *Fifty Strokes to Each (Jue Chang)* (1998, fig 3.15) which embodies this notion through the physical transmutation of chairs, beds, and stools into giant drums. This enormous room-sized sculpture, made specifically for the Tel Aviv Museum, and later shown at the 1999 Venice Biennale, resembled a cross between a “jungle gym” and a percussion instrument. The piece consisted of an assortment of domestic wooden furniture, such as stools, chairs, and beds, suspended by a series of ropes from large wooden frames. Along one side of the sculpture, two lines of fourteen footstools were suspended by a complex net of rope below a line of chairs, followed on either end by wooden
beds. Each piece of furniture was a different style and shape, with both Chinese and Western furniture included. Both the chairs and stools had stretched leather across their seats, while the beds had leather across their frames, transforming them into an arrangement of irregular-sized drums. A small number of police clubs, sticks, fragments of guns, and ammunition were also hanging from the wooden frames, encouraging visitors to participate in the work by beating the drums. The sheer scale of this work filled the entire gallery, giving it a presence that could be compared with an orchestra.

This work is based on the Chan Buddhist tradition of “giving lessons with a stick” (bang he), which refers to the practice of beating monks with a stick to help them meditate. More specially, it relates to an old Buddhist conflict resolution method whereby each party, regardless of who was right or wrong, was given “fifty strokes each.” Chen chose to make a work based on this idea in response to the nationalist conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, although it also has a broader application. As Chen has said, in relation to this work:

The creation of *Jue Chang* was stimulated by the historical and actual contexts of the Middle East but must not necessarily apply to this region alone: *Jue Chang* questions all kinds of disputes and conflicts in the world (national, religious, territorial, political, social, ideological, economical and cultural) and tries to offer “an efficient solution.” By trying to translate the negative into positive, and to consider the negative from a positive state. *Jue Chang* presents itself as “the possibility of attaining self-enlightenment and self-revelation,” making the ultimate of human voice. (2003, p. 179)

Another dimension to this work, not touched upon in the above quotation, is the transformation of domestic furniture into musical instruments. Like the untitled chair in the exhibition “Between Therapy and Meditation,” which was also transformed into a drum, the aural dimension of the work was dependent upon the interaction of viewers. In Chinese culture, drums are used to ward off evil spirits that bring bad luck, especially during the new year festival. This suggests that the
work served as a giant prayer wheel for viewers: they could beat the drum and make a wish. Perhaps by providing guns and other weapons with which to beat the drums, Chen was trying to transform the negative energy and symbols of violence into something positive, as the quote above would suggest. Moreover, the inclusion of styles of furniture from different cultures around the world suggests a sense of journey not only from their origin—a metaphor for migration—but also a journey from one use to another. It might also suggest an attempt to heal conflicts between cultures.

Chen had also made work reflecting upon the experiences of Chinese migrants in other places. His installation for the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, titled *Field of Waste* (1994, fig. 3.16) was intended as a meditation on aspects of Chinese migration to the United States. Upon entering the gallery, to the left, visitors were confronted by wire fencing and bundles of scorched newspapers, while on the right were three industrial sewing machines each accompanied by a metal chair. Spilling out from the sewing machines, were streams of American and Chinese flags sewn together with clothes, all forming a blanket disappearing mysteriously into a rectangular black hole amid piles of newspaper ash. More wire-mesh fencing was positioned around the gallery, distancing viewers from the installation and suggesting ideas of internment or confinement.

*Field of Waste* refers to a number of aspects of the Chinese migratory experience in the United States. The use of wire-mesh fencing recalls the historical internment of prospective Chinese migrants during the late nineteenth-century, in accordance with the immigration laws against the Chinese. In addition, the use of ash and scorched newspapers might be interpreted as a reference to the burning of homes and stores belonging to Chinese immigrants in San Francisco in 1877. The sewing machines and clothes refer to the sweatshops in New York’s Chinatown and Harlem, where many Chinese immigrants work. In fact, Chen collaborated with one such sweatshop to
make the clothes and flags. The use of Chinese and American flags also gestures towards the bicultural existence of these workers, many of whom speak no English, live in Chinese enclaves, and continue to send money home to relatives in China. This is not dissimilar to the experience of Chinese migrants in other parts of the world, including France and Australia.

In the mid nineties, Chen also made works about the experience of returning to China after an absence of many years. In *Prayer Wheel: “Money Makes the Mare Go”* (1997) Chen examined the rise of consumerism in China and its status as a quasi-religion, while *Game Table* (1996–97), executed for the Shanghai Biennale in 1996, also explored China’s new love affair with capitalism. *Daily Incantations* (1996, fig. 3.17) was another work made in response to transformations in China during Chen’s absence, although this work once again sought to transform domestic objects into musical instruments while contrasting the artist’s memories of his childhood in China with its current social and economic realities.

*Daily Incantations* consisted of one-hundred-and-one chamber pots suspended, from a number of sturdy wooden frames, in graduating heights like a *bian zhong* (a traditional Chinese musical instrument made of a series of bronze bells). Chen’s *bian zhong* was arranged around a spherical metal cage stuffed with discarded technology, including televisions, stereos, speakers, computers, and knots of electrical chord. From the sphere emerged sounds of chamber pots being scrubbed under running water, along with the voice reciting political slogans. The artist decided to use the chamber pots in response to a memory of women washing them at the roadside as he travelled daily to school.83 In this work, the chamber pots signify an idea of Old China, which is contrasted against the New China symbolized by the metal cage stuffed with the detritus of technology. Chamber pots are synonymous with Old China these days, as they are no longer in

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83 This was recounted in the interview published in Z. Chen 1998.
use, and the white calcium sediment that formed on the inside of the chamber pots was used as a treatment in Chinese medicine. But perhaps more significantly this work conjures a sense of nostalgia, which in itself is a product of Chen’s absence from China for so many years and is a common condition among migrants from different cultures.

Chen’s installations during the nineties cannot be categorised in terms of phases or periods, as with other artists, but rather in terms of interrelated themes such as healing and Chinese medicine. Works from 1996 onward reveal Chen’s nostalgia for the China of his childhood, manifested in his perception of a loss of tradition in that country, which he saw when he returned for the first time since leaving it. These later works portray the disruption between his memories of China as a child and its current reality. When asked about the growing use of Chinese references in his work, which accelerated after he moved to France, Chen responded that he was “revitalizing the past and enlivening the present” (1998, n.p.). This is an apt description of his artistic motivations and a wonderful evocation of the creative potential of transexperience.

The Body as a Site of Reflection: The Work of Shen Yuan

Shen Yuan’s installations are about her experiences of migration from China and settlement in France. Her works explore the frequently difficult process of adaptation to a new culture and subsequent reconciliation with an altered self-awareness that migration often generates. Her works often using the tongue as a metaphor for the difficulties of cross-cultural communication comment directly on these experiences and in particular on the problems she encountered after she moved to France in 1990 to join her husband Huang Yong Ping. Other works use hair to reflect upon the rupturing of familial ties brought about by migration. In short, her works are about coming to grips with the sense of cultural loss and confusion inherent in transexperience, an experience felt all the more acutely by Shen because she had never left China prior to her migration to France.
Although Shen has been a practicing artist since graduating from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the Chinese Fine Arts Academy) in 1982, her work is not as known as that of her husband. There are many reasons for this. Partly, it is because she has not made very many works, and partly it is because she is a woman, for female artists have generally been underrepresented in exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in museums and galleries in the West, as well as in China. Shen, it is worth noting, was one of the few female artists included in the “China Avant-Garde” exhibition in 1989, while her work has also been included in a number of major surveys of Chinese art outside of China, particularly in exhibitions curated by Hou Hanru, such as “Paris Pour Escale” at Musee d’Art Modern de la Ville de Paris (2000), “Cities on the Move” at various venues worldwide, and “Uncertain Pleasure” at the Art Beatus Gallery, in Vancouver, Canada (1997). She is one of the few Chinese women artists of her generation to have exhibited internationally.

Shen’s work for the “China Avant-Garde” exhibition was an installation titled Waterbed (1989). This work consisted of a transparent plastic mattress filled with water, small freshwater fish, and plants. Waterbeds, symbols of fashion and affluence, were a fashionable household item in China at this time. Turning this symbol of desirability into one of disgust, the fish were allowed to die (through a lack of oxygen) and rot in the sealed plastic chambers. Leaving aside questions of cruelty, the artist placed the fish in the sealed plastic chambers because the Chinese word for “fish” is yu, which is phonetically identical to “affluence” or “abundance”. By letting the fish die, Shen commented critically on the new consumerism in China. Others have read the work as a metaphor for the political situation in China, in keeping with the strong political dimension to many of the other works included in the “China Avant-Garde” exhibition.84

84 Hou Hanru and Evelyne Jouanno have interpreted Shen’s use of fish and the water in this work as a metaphor for the relationship between the Communist party and the people. See Hou and Jouanno 2001.
*Waterbed* can be contrasted with works that Shen produced after migrating to France, which tend to ignore local Chinese concerns in favour of more personal, meditative ruminations on her experiences as a migrant. *Wasting One’s Saliva (Perdre Sa Salive)* (fig. 3.18), produced in 1994, four years after she moved to Paris, comments on the problems of learning a foreign language as an adult and communicating with it everyday in a foreign land. This installation consisted of a series of over-sized tongues cast in rose-coloured ice, attached to the gallery wall, that melted slowly into steel pots positioned directly below them. As the tongues melted, sharp kitchen knives were revealed within the ice. This concealing of knives within icy tongues might be interpreted in a number of ways: on the one hand, it can be read as a metaphor for the violence of displacement from one culture to another, especially if one does not speak the language of their host country; on the other hand, it reflects Shen’s sense of frustration at not being able to speak to people.

Commenting on this experience in an exhibition catalogue, Shen said:

> Paris [was] the first foreign city [that I visited] after leaving the country where I was born. A sixteen-hour flight and at last I arrive in the paradise I had imaged the West to be . . . my mother tongue becomes useless. Language is nothing more than noise. My brain enters into a sponge-like state. It is like having a mouth, but not knowing how to open it . . . Sixteen hours. It is not a long time, but all the rules have changed. My first reflection: how does one start one’s life again, aged thirty-one? (2000, in Campbell and Tawadros 2001, p. 35)

Tongues appear in a number of Shen’s works made since she left China. *Diverged Tongue* (1999, fig. 3.19), shown at Kitakyushu in Japan, is one such example. Based on a popular party toy, (those folded paper air whistles that unfurl and inflate when you blow into them), the work consisted of a bright-orange forked tongue made from light-weight plastic that inflated and unfurled automatically at intervals with the assistance of an air compressor. The scale of the work
was enormous, giving it a sinister quality that was at odds with its more playful source. This work was all about the difficulties of communicating in a foreign language and the way immigrants are often forced to speak two or more languages with one tongue, something that is all the more confusing for adults who have spent most of their lives speaking only one language. As Shen has said, speaking about a Chinese proverb which prompted this work:

“the one with his tongue stuck out—the one with the forked tongue—speaks with a trill and the accent of a distant place. The one with the forked tongue wishes to speak two languages with one tongue, but neither language is spoken clearly.” I use this as a metaphor for the awkward situation which every émigré frequently encounters, that of his speech being unclear. He wants to speak, but cannot express himself. (1999, in Campbell and Tawadros 2001, p. 18)

Looking at this work, it is curious to see that Shen has used a forked tongue in contrast to a human one. The use of a forked tongue could refer to snakes, which have forked tongues. Some snakes also navigate using their tongues (it helps them sense movement). It follows that Shen might have chosen to use a forked tongue in this work to suggest the need to rely on one’s tongue, as a heightened sensory organ, to navigate a culture into which one arrives and does not speak the language.

Other references to the body also permeate Shen’s works. For example, In Threes and Fours or in Knots (San Wu Cheng Qun) (1997, fig. 3.20), an installation at the Camden Arts Centre, London, consisted of a series of white hemp-fibre screens along a row of arched bay windows. About two-thirds of the way down the windows, the fibres began to converge into plaits, which in turn linked with the plaits of the other windows running onto the floor. Seen from afar, the curved screens with plaited ends looked like the back of women’s heads. While the use of plaits evokes, at least for Western audiences, ideas of femininity, they are also associated with male hairstyles from the Qing Dynasty: during this time men, often wore their hair in a single long plait, called a queue.
Shen uses this confusion to comment on the way in which signifiers of gender are culturally constructed. She is also looking back fondly at her Chinese heritage and the way in which communal bonds are such a strong part of daily life. This is alluded to in the work’s title, based on a Chinese proverb stressing the importance of family and strong communal ties in Chinese life.

*Three Chairs* (1994) explores similar territory, using domestic furniture to examine familial connections. For this work, three sofa chairs were placed facing outward, in a wide triangle, with their backs to one another. The chairs were placed sufficiently far apart to make the exposed backs of the chairs the focus of the installation. Out of the backs, long plaits of flax flowed onto the floor and then toward one another in the centre of the room, where they were joined together. The plaits resembled hair, in the same way that the hemp plaits in *In Threes and Fours or in Knots (San Wu Cheng Qun)* conjured the hair arrangements of women. Here, however, the interpretation is complicated by the use of flax, which was traditionally used in China to stuff chairs before the introduction of synthetic foam. The choice of three chairs might also be interpreted as a reference to the one-child or three-person family policy in China, which has restricted Chinese families to this unit. This work coincided roughly with Shen’s decision to have children and a family of her own.

The body and personal identity remain the foci of more recent works such as *Fingerprint* (1999, fig. 3.21). This work comprised a single slice of ham cut in the shape of a circle and placed in the centre of a white dinner plate. Embroidered onto the ham in gold thread was a representation of the artist’s fingerprint. Ham is one of the most popular meats in France, and the idea of embroidering her own fingerprint on this meat suggested a new identification with her adopted country. Yet while the gold thread endures, the ham, like all meats, decays, suggesting
furthermore that her identification with her new country may only be temporary or that her Chineseness endures, even though she has long been a permanent resident in another country.

*Untitled* (1995) addresses similar issues. This work consists of a single black Chinese slipper, in which the inner sole is covered with fingernail clippings, with a cardboard shoebox sitting next to it. The slipper filled with dirty nails elicits both curiosity and disgust. Yet fingernails, like fingerprints, are a form of forensic identification, and are one of the toughest and longest-surviving parts of the human body. (Fingernails have frequently been found intact in ancient Egyptian tombs.) Shen, once again, appears to be identifying herself with China and her own Chineseness. The mysterious presence of only one shoe and an empty box suggests that Shen has conflicting feelings about migration, and the art work invites us to think about the sense of cultural loss and confusion inherent in transexperience.

In spite of the numerous differences between the work of these artists, what they all share is a concern with interactions between China and the West. One of the more interesting aspects of the works discussed in this chapter is the incorporation of instantly identifiable Chinese signifiers through formal and material means, something that really only became apparent, or at least more pronounced, in the work of these artists following their settlement in France. This is not surprising, given that migrants often embrace their cultural heritage with a new fondness once detached from their country of origin. Partly, also, it seems to be a reaction to their new art context: whereas, in China, many of them made art directly inspired by Western art history and often quoted Western art and artists as a challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy of art forms and styles, in France they are surrounded by Western art and make art for a Western audience with little restriction, and they have sought to distinguish themselves and their work through a re-appropriation of their Chinese heritage. This is not to say that Western and French references do
not appear in their works, for they do, as an important reflection of the artists’ sense of
transexperience, but rather to note that their works in China were, oddly, more visibly inspired by
Western sources. Huang intelligently summarises this: “I was more interested in Western culture
when I was in China. Today, living in the West, I try more to introduce Chinese culture into the
Western art and cultural context” (in Hou and Gao, 1999, p. 186).
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Fig. 3.2
Huang Yong Ping
“A History of Chinese Painting” and “A Concise History of Modern Painting” Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes
1987/93
Papier mâché, wood
80 x 50 x 50 cm
Fig. 3.1
Huang Yong Ping
*Guanyin with a Thousand Hands*
1997
Metal, resin
Fig. 3.3
Huang Yong Ping
*Should We Reconstruct a Cathedral?*
1991
Paper pulp, table, chairs, photograph
Fig. 3.4
Huang Yong Ping
VOC
1997
Wood, metal, cardboard boxes, china plates
1400 x 670 x 370 cm
Fig. 3.5
Huang Yong Ping
*Da Xian—The Doomsday*
1997
bowls, food products
Fig. 3.9
Yang Jiechang
*Guillotine I*
1995
Ink on xuan paper
173 x 186 cm
Fig. 3.10
Yang Jiechang
Vast Square
1990–1998
Ink, xuan paper, gauze
170 x 140 cm
Fig. 3.12
Chen Zhen
*Round Table*
1995
Wood, metal
180 x 550 x 550 cm
Fig. 3.13
Chen Zhen
*Obsession of Longevity*
1995
Metal, wood, plaster, Chinese medicine, paraffin, found objects
355 x 200 x 220 cm
Fig. 3.14
Chen Zhen
*Between Therapy and Meditation*
(installation view)
1998
Chen Zhen

_Fifty Strokes to Each (Jue Chang)_

1998

Wood, iron, chairs, beds, leather, ropes, nails, various objects

244 x 980 x 1000 cm
Fig. 3.16
Chen Zhen
*Field of Waste*
1994
Ashes, flags and clothing, sewing machines, metal
1500 x 1000 x 280 cm
Fig. 3.18
Shen Yuan
*Wasting One’s Saliva (Perdre sa salive)*
Ice, knives, spitoons
6.5 x 4 x 1 m
Installation
Fig. 3.20
Shen Yuan
*In Threes and Fours or In Knots*
1997
Flax
12 x 6 x 5m
Fig. 3.6
Huang Yong Ping
*Kearny Street*
1994
Wood, street lights, U.S. Post boxes, tortoises
Fig. 3.7
Huang Yong Ping
*Human Snake Plan*
1993
Net, clothes, metal drums, rope, tyres
Fig. 3.8
Huang Yong Ping
*The Bridge and the Theatre of the World*
1993–1995
metal, wood, mesh, insects, snake, tortoise
Fig. 3.11
Dao-Zang, The Canonical Daoist Text describing the flow of qi or vital energy.
detail
Fig. 3.17
Chen Zhen
*Daily Incantations*
1996
Chamber pot, wood, metal, found objects, sound
700 x 350 x 230 cm
Fig. 3.19
Shen Yuan
*Diverged Tongue*
1999
Fabric and plastic
12 x 1.5 x 3 m
Fig. 3.21
Shen Yuan
*Fingerprint*
1999
Ham, plate, and gold thread
30 x 30 x 10 cm
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CONCLUSION

New Connections and a Return to the Homeland

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined how ideas of Chineseness are altered and reshaped in different contexts by studying Chinese artists from a similar generation (born predominantly in the forties and fifties) who migrated at a similar time (late eighties and early nineties) to a limited number of locations (Sydney, New York, and Paris) over a ten-year period. This refigured Chineseness, produced by the interaction between the host culture and the original Chinese culture, can be understood in terms of what the late Chinese artist Chen Zhen has called transexperience, an experiential concept that avoids the limitations of traditional notions of diaspora, which tend to posit the homeland in the past and the host country in the present. What the term transexperience encourages is a more fluid understanding of the relations between Chinese artists and their homeland, not only positing it in the past but also the present and thus as both a residual and an evolving influence.

Transexperience also avoids privileging the homeland culture, a tendency again found in traditional notions of diaspora, insofar as it takes equal account of the evolving influence of the site of settlement. As Chen has said, transexperience is about “connecting the preceding with the following, adapting . . . to changing circumstances, accumulating year-in-year-out experiences, and being triggered at any instant” (1998, n.p.). By considering the location of settlement as a significant factor in the work of overseas Chinese artists, this dissertation has sought to open a discussion of the diasporic condition beyond dichotomous relationships of “here/there,” “then/now,” in favour of an evolving, more-fluid identity encapsulating both “here” and “there,” and “then” and “now.” Transexperience thus has the capacity to encompass not only a consideration of an artist’s past in China but also their present and future in a new home.
Essentially, transexperience describes an attempt by Chinese artists to come to terms with Chinese culture in a foreign context. It is what links the work of the overseas Chinese artists examined in this dissertation. Other commonalities can also be gleaned from the preceding analyses, both among artists based in one city and those living in different countries. For instance, the work of the Paris-based artists Huang Yong Ping and Chen Zhen, resonates with the principles of Chinese medicine and alchemy, while for Wenda Gu and Xu Bing, who currently live in New York, Chinese language remains a central aspect of their installations. Similarly, references to Chinese acupuncture and porcelain designs can be found in the work of Guan Wei and Ah Xian, who live in Sydney. Looking at similarities between artists who migrated to different countries, we see a recurrent use of Cultural Revolution iconography in the work of Guo Jian in Sydney and Zhang Hongtu in New York as well as a preoccupation with the Chinese tradition of ink painting in the work of Wenda Gu in New York and Yang Jiechang in Paris. An interest in healing and the use of Chinese traditional herbal medicine also characterises the work of Chen Zhen from Paris and Cai Guo Qiang from New York.

A number of more general observations regarding the relationship between overseas Chinese artists can also be drawn on the basis of the preceding chapters. The first observation is that Chinese artists in different countries, perhaps more so than other migrant artists, share similar difficulties in adjusting to their place of settlement. This has involved adapting their Chinese identity to their environment and getting a sense of who they are in relation to a host country, while also coming to grips with a displacement between their memories and experiences of China and the changes that have occurred in that country during their absence. Secondly, the Chinese reference point, for much if not all of the work of the overseas Chinese artists examined here, is Old China; it is based on traditional rather than contemporary issues, concerns, and daily life in China. This is understandable, given that the artists live outside of the country, but it creates another strange disjuncture, given that a great many of these artists have been upheld by Western galleries and museums as exemplars of “contemporary” Chinese art. Thirdly, language and communication remain enduring preoccupations for overseas Chinese artists, whether in the form of works about calligraphy, about
the difficulty of communicating across cultures, and about the translation of a formal language from one
culture to another. Fourthly, the works comment critically on the way in which China is perceived within
Western countries. This is particularly apparent in the work of the Chinese artists who migrated to France
who were forced to deal with centuries-old perceptions of their country and region embedded in the local
culture. In comparison, Chinese artists living in the United States and Australia engaged with much shorter
local histories of migration and influence.

In spite of the similarities of experiences and artistic approaches discernible among the generation of artists
examined in each of the previous chapters, it is also possible to draw some conclusions regarding their
differences. For example, there was a greater tendency amongst those who migrated to Australia to
continue working in a similar vein to what they had done in China. All of these artists continued to paint, at
least for the first few years, and all make figurative work. The size and shape of Guan Wei’s paintings have
remained consistent, their dimensions drawn from a series of window frames he found while at art school in
China and used as stretchers for his paintings. Artists living in the United States, on the other hand, tend to
reinvent Chinese signifiers within an international idiom. Xu Bing and Wenda Gu achieve this by altering
the Chinese language to make characters legible to English-speaking audiences or, at times, illegible to
Chinese-speaking audiences, while Cai Guo Qiang modifies Chinese teachings such as traditional Chinese
herbal medicine and philosophies of alchemy or *fengshui* to suit an American context. By contrast, Chinese
artists in France seem to be more interested in examining contemporary and historical interactions between
China and the West.

There is a strange cultural logic to these artistic responses, since they also reflect popular perceptions of
these societies abroad. Australia is a young, under-developed culture and thus open to outside influences
and cultures, especially by artists coming from a culture as old and established as that of China. With a
weaker local culture to influence these artists, it is not surprising that there should be so many connections
between their work made in China and in Australia, especially in the areas of subject matter and technique.
By contrast, the United States, as a global power and dominant cultural force, exerts a great influence on artists working not only in the country but also around the world and has done so for the last thirty years.\(^8\)

It is also no surprise to find that France, the nation that developed sinology as a discipline and established Orientalism in art, should engender art works by its Chinese immigrant artists with a more traditional distinction between East and West.

The work of these overseas Chinese artists stands in contrast to that of their peers in mainland China. During the nineties, mainland artists such as Wang Youshen, Lin Tianmiao, Yin Xiuzhen, Zhang Xin, Liu Xinhua, and the Big Tail Elephant Group all regularly employed contemporary references in their work, making little overt reference to Chinese traditions. In each case, Chinese references remain localised and personal, with very little if any reference to Chinese history or traditional art. When Chinese traditions are featured in these mainland Chinese artists' work, their meanings are often very different. For the mainland artists Song Dong, Liu Xinhua, and Qiu Zhijie, the use of calligraphy always involves a tacit criticism of the tradition, which is everywhere around them, yet when overseas Chinese artists employ Chinese writing or calligraphy, it is usually as part of an identification with Chinese culture and a specific art tradition. The work of mainland artists provides a counterpoint to overseas Chinese artists. Artists who remained in China while their peers migrated to Australia, the United States, and France have, not surprisingly, adopted different art practices. Their work must be seen in the context of the enormous changes begun in the eighties: the shift from a centralised, Communist system of production to a market and consumer-oriented economy; the swings between a loosening and subsequent tightening of control over the public sphere; a fracture between artists supported and promoted by the state inside China and those who show their work in international exhibitions.

\(^8\) See, for example, the exhibition “The American Effect,” in 2003 at the Whitney Museum of American Art that explored global perceptions of the United States.
outside of China. These social, economic and cultural transitions are the focus of much of the
work of mainland artists in contrast to other artists living outside China

Differences between the work of artists living in China and those who live outside have begun to break
down in the last five years. Some of the artists who left China for professional opportunities in the eighties
and nineties have since returned permanently, such as Wang Zhi Yuan from Sydney, and Ai Weiwei, Wang
Gongxin, and Lin Tianmiao from New York. Recently, others have begun to travel back and forth between
China and their adopted home, with some of them (such as Ah Xian, Wenda Gu, and Cai Guo Qiang)
having Chinese labourers manufacture their works. Some have even bought property in China and return
for long periods at a time. This re-engagement with their homeland is a consequence almost entirely of the
massive social, political, and economic changes in China over the last decade. Strict prohibitions against
the display of contemporary art have now been lifted, or almost, allowing artists once banned from showing
art in China to display their work. Some overseas Chinese artists have even been invited to show their work
in an official capacity. Cai Guo Qiang was commissioned to design a pyrotechnic display for the 2001
Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit Meeting in Shanghai. This represents an
extraordinary turn-around on the part of a government that for many years maintained a hostile and
adversary attitude toward contemporary art. Expatriate Chinese and even foreign curators have been invited
to curate major exhibitions in China, such as the 2000 and 2002 Shanghai Biennales. The Chinese
government also sponsored the country’s first official participation at the Venice Biennale in 2003.\footnote{China’s participation was not complete in the end (due to complications with SARS), but it showed a willingness on the part of the Chinese government to embrace contemporary artists and art as national symbols in the international arena.} China
now also boasts three large-scale biennale exhibitions (Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou), while the
loosening of economic controls by the Chinese state has led to the birth of a small but significant Chinese
art market.
But it would be foolish to suggest that the conditions of art-making and exhibition display in China are on a par with those available in the West. The Chinese government’s growing relaxation of controls over contemporary art reflects a reluctant loosening of political control in response to forced economic changes and a need to show tolerance and leniency, as part of the nation’s aim to secure foreign investment in China and to improve its human-rights record to gain membership of influential world-governing bodies such as the World Trade Organisation. The Chinese government has also sought to improve its international public image as part of its bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, an event which is usually accompanied by extensive cultural activities from the host country. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that conditions will not revert at any time. This might explain in part why all of the overseas Chinese artists discussed in this dissertation have no intention of returning permanently. They don’t trust the Chinese authorities, and they have built their careers elsewhere.
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