

Space: White Rabbit – Chinese Contemporary Art Gallery, Chippendale

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White Rabbit, opened in July 2009, is one of the city's only privately owned, non-commercial galleries. The exhibition represents a small portion of owner Judith Neilson's private collection, one that she has been gathering in frequent trips to China over the past nine years; the museum space is a concerted attempt to share her fascination with the art of a new generation of Chinese artists working in the context of a country in the process of enormous economic, social and cultural metamorphoses. The art featured has been produced exclusively since the year 2000, in addition, almost every artist exhibited lives and works in China. Although situated in Sydney, White Rabbit is a cultural outpost that provides a unique reflection of China's artistic self analysis. The focus of this article is not to weigh the significance of this cultural space against the contextual background of its physical location, rather, this article aims to use the critical perspectives of the artists represented in White Rabbit as a platform from which to investigate China's cultural identity. This notion of cultural identity is paramount to an understanding of China today; the current generation of Chinese people have grown up within a society constantly redefining itself against the ideological backdrop of modernity and postmodernity. In summary, this article will attempt to synthesise the most pertinent definitions of China's constantly shifting cultural identity, and in doing so will come to a definition of its own.

Any assessment of China today must begin with an examination of the present dialogue between the forces of the modern and postmodern. Before this is explained, it is important to note that when considering Chinese modernity and postmodernity one must dismiss the involuntary associations one makes with the historicised movements of modernism and postmodernism that are inseparable from a Western historical and social context. Although similar to Western constructions at an ideological level, Chinese constructions of modernity and postmodernity exist in a historical narrative that bears no relation to its Western equivalent. Lu writes, "The postmodern politics of difference, or "identity politics," boils down to the issue of "cultural identity"—the issue of "Chineseness" in relation to the Eurocentric narrative of history, modernization, and capital." (Lu, 42) Western cultural theorists have identified a clear delineation between modernism (which has its roots in the European Enlightenment, and drew to a close in post-WWII Europe and North America) and postmodernism (which has its roots in French poststructuralist philosophy of the 1960's, globalisation and a consumer culture) (Lu, 2001). What makes cultural analysis of China so interesting, on the other hand, is the interconnectedness of the two; for China, both ideological forces have their roots in the attempts to modernise China through the implementation of radical economic reforms of the New Era (1978-88); since this point, the historical and ideological boundaries between modernity and postmodernity have never been clear.

Cultural theorist Xudong Zhang wrote,

Modernism as a specific historical-aesthetic has never been an “established form” in the history of modern China but always a cultural intellectual striving and a transient, embattled, precarious movement... as in Beijing in the 1980’s... Moreover, the socioeconomic condition of the ephemeral Chinese high-modernism – namely, Chinese (bourgeois or socialist) modernity and modernization – is widely considered to be an ongoing project yet to run its full course in Chinese and world history.

Curiously, it is this unfinished project of economic, social and cultural modernization¹ that has, in its uncompromising thirst for progress, sparked the fire of postmodernity, a force set on undermining and subverting the very values that allowed it to flourish. To be more specific, the high-modernist ambition for a powerful and proudly nationalistic China laid down by the Communist Party of China (CPC) has, through the introduction of a free-market capitalism, unwittingly opened the door to a more pluralistic and globalised society (Zhang 2008).

The beguiling and seemingly paradoxical situation within which these opposing ideologies have been forced to coexist has led to the drawing of political battle lines. Zhang writes of a “strong intellectual opposition” to postmodernism defined almost entirely in terms of national politics:

For those who believe in the mandate of enlightenment, modernization and statehood, postmodernism is not only a heresy vis-à-vis the officially sanctioned intellectual discourse of the New Era, it is, more importantly, an alternative mode of cultural production in the realm of mass culture which threatens the cohesiveness of the ideologico-discursive hegemony of the state. (Zhang 2008 157)

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, it has led to a fragmented and disoriented middle class who find themselves in a “commodity world compatible with global capitalism” (Zhang, 2008, 72) that is at odds with the social and cultural “plane of consistence” (Deleuze 1966) still meditated by the Chinese nation-state.

On the first floor of White Rabbit is a work by Zhu Jinshi, titled “DIARY: 25.12.06.” The work is an installation, containing a large canvass half smothered in red oil paint and a shovel, also covered in red paint, resting against the canvas. By the artist’s own admission, the work is abstract, realistic and conceptual, containing elements of “history, society and politics.” (White Rabbit, 2009). Having lived in Germany for many years, his art suggests confrontations and alternating perspectives and: the encounter and (cultural) exchange between East and West, communism and capitalism, past and present. Jinshi’s work conveys a sense of impassioned opposition and inner turmoil. The artist has stated that red signifies both capitalism and communism; the rolling dollops of red paint convey a sense that the artist has committed to a complete extraction of his energy and belief into the confrontation between ideologies. As the ideological contradiction between the official party doctrine and

¹ Influential German social and political theorist Jurgen Habermas believed modernization to be a combination of a cumulative and mutually reinforcing process: the formation of capital and the mobilization of resources; the development of production and productivity; the establishment of centralized political power and the formation of national identities. (He Ping, *China’s Search For Modernity*, 2002)

the nation's liberal economic policy, it would be interesting to know if the artist has his own stance on the issue. In one of the blank white corners there is a small inscription of Chinese characters, which translate, "Art is important, but China is more important!" Is Jinshi sincere or is this a statement of cynicism and sarcastic jest?

Zhang has suggested that "Chinese modernity is losing its grip on Chinese daily life" (Zhang 2008). However, having witnessed recently the 60th anniversary of Communist Party rule in China, one cannot help but reconsider this. 200 000 citizens were part of a mass pageant, while 100 000 members of the Peoples Liberation Army supervised, on the look out for any suspicious activity. Beijing residents were advised prior to the parade "not to go out on Oct. 1 to avoid complications." This event was not for them: it was a celebration for the party, whose grasp on China seems as strong as ever. Although, perhaps these sorts of conclusions are exactly the kind the Party is hoping to elicit; a reaction of awe and intimidation based more on superficial appearances of power than on a deeper understanding of the way the Party's is really upheld by its citizens.

All this recalls the original question: how has this mounting ideological tension affected China's sense of identity? How has this fragmentation of China's cultural continuity affected the way China defines itself? Before these questions can be answered directly, it is still necessary to engage in a more thorough discussion of the profound ways in which postmodernity has disrupted Chinese society. Two phenomenon, in particular, are central in this attempt to understand the legacy of postmodernism in China's recent history: firstly, the melding, in almost every social sphere, of mass consumerism and culture, and secondly, the explosion of information and the decomposition of the "real" in Chinese consumer society.

Fredric Jameson, author of the highly influential study of the link between Postmodernity and global consumerism, "Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism", asserts that an understanding of postmodernity is linked inseparably to global capitalism; he describes this more specifically as the "effacement of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture" (Jameson, 1991). Advertising, mass media and entertainment industries have become extensions of commodity production in which markets are monopolised to produce a mass culture (Featherstone, 1995). In other words, culture is no longer autonomous; it has been absorbed by the forces of commodity capitalism (Connor, 1997)

Incidentally, Jameson lectured on the subject at Beijing University in 1985, triggering a wave of Chinese theoretical discourse on the subject of postmodernity and the emergence of a commercialised mass culture. Towards the end of the 1980's, as the economy continued its improvements in leaps and bounds, the evidence was clear: In 1980 there were ten advertising agencies in China, but by 1987, there were 7000. Today, there are more than 100 000 (Tom Doctoroff, 2008). The dissemination of marketed fantasies had by the end of the 1980's created a nascent mass culture, eager to embrace "TV serials, MTV, popular literature, pop music, fashion shows and karaoke" (Lu 35). Jameson has described this as "an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become "cultural" (Cultural Logic, 87). This profound debasement of the concept of "culture" in China is extremely relevant to a study of Chinese cultural identity and could, very easily, be seen as a destructive force. On the contrary, debate amongst academics in China see the changes as a positive step towards a less aggressively modern and more pluralistic society; in particular, Chinese

literary critics such as Wang Yichuan and Dai Jinhua believe the creativity of the mass culture has freed China from elitist restraints and the stilted divisions between “high” and “low” culture. (Zhang, 76).

Accessory to the ascendance in China of a culture based on commodity and capital has been the rise of the “bubble economy” (Zhang) of images, signs and representation. These virtual symbols of status do not correspond to an item’s an intrinsic material value, but rather to an associated symbolic value of individuality, freedom, sex appeal, etc that is socially conferred (Barthes 1959). The concept is summed up by Guy Debord’s assertion that “The image has become the final form of commodity reification.” The change in what has been socially considered valuable from the physical to that which merely reproduces or *simulates* the physical is a further way in which postmodernity has radically altered the cultural landscape of China, and the second to be discussed in this article. French poststructuralist Jean Baudrillard has written extensively about impact of simulation in society, focussing in particular on the media as the system which, through advertising, “devours meaning.” Baudrillard blames the media for setting up a self-contained, simulated hyperreality that no longer has any connection to reality whatsoever:

It is a circular process – that of simulation, that of the hyperreal. By becoming more real than the real, the concept of the real is abolished. Both communication and “the social” function in a closed circuit, as a *lure* – to which the force of myth is attached. Belief, faith in information attach themselves to this tautological proof that the system gives of itself by doubling the signs of an unlocatable reality. (Simulation and Simulacra, 1985)

On level one of *White Rabbit* is a work by Zhou Xiaohu, titled *Renown*. Zhou Xiaohu stands the casually before a film crew, speaking in Chinese of the need for suspicion when images presented by the media. But is the interview really taking place? Upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the camera crew are fully clothed (and incredibly life-like) models; Zhou Xiaohu himself is nothing more than a moving hologram projected onto a life-sized mannequin. Xiaohu’s work is a self-reflexive warning to his “audience” about the hyperreality “projected” by the mass media. In the interview *White Rabbit* conducted with Xiaohu, he speaks of the perfection of a system based on simulacra. Digital media promise a perfect record of events, he suggests, but in doing so create the possibility for perfect falsification, “Such is the power of media and communication tools that they can transcend truth itself.”

The 60th Anniversary celebrations reveal more about the concept of reality in China today. Currently playing in cinemas around the country, the lavishly produced propaganda film, *The Founding of a Republic*, tells (one side) of a story about the ascendance of the Chairman Mao, the Chinese Communist Party and the People’s Republic of China. In one scene, a lone soldier straightens his back and bellows, “I’m with the Mountain Pagoda regiment in this military parade. I represent the soldiers of the Red Army. The living and the dead. I salute you, Chairman Mao”. Mao, having just won the last and battle of north that signifies the final unification of China for the first time in 100 years, raises his hand in reply and fights back a tear. John Garnaut, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reported that during the preparations for the military parade, all migrant workers and homeless had been banished from Beijing; similarly all rats and mosquitoes had been eradicated from the Chinese capital (Garnaut, 2009). What is the significance of all these trivial details? The Communist Party of

China is interested in creating an illusion of power and control, underpinned by a hegemonic manipulation of reality. According to Garnaut, “The Communist Party intends even to defeat the weather with the help of cloud seeding aircraft and fog dispersing vehicles.” By converting the memory of Mao into a flawless, immortal icon; by purging a city entirely of its biological imperfections; by manipulating even the atmosphere to ensure the clear skies all for the creation a perfected image of Chinese prestige and glory, the Chinese state has created the perfect example of hyperreality, a system of nationalistic signs that form a closed circuit which “envelopes the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.” (Simulation and Simulacra, 3) Just as Zhou Xiaohu projects a holographic simulation of his own image onto an empty form, the Party has projected its identity into the empty space left by the nonexistence of any political opposition. The Party is a perfect simulacra projecting an identity with an “unlocatable reality” (Baudrillard, 1981); an identity whose real truth no longer exists, or only still remains by only by virtue of the copies it has produced to replenish the cycle of hyperreality.

Although the concept of Chinese identity has been in focus throughout the article, having examined the nature and impact of the forces of modernity, and in particular, postmodernity in Chinese society and culture, we can begin to look more directly at the ways in which these have influenced the way in which China defines itself today. Up until this point the analysis of China’s cultural identity has been fairly theoretical; from this point on, in an attempt to bring the article back to the level of Chinese experience, the discussion will take a more humanistic approach.

One of the hallmarks of China today is a certain fragmentation and emotional dislocation from much of the from its cultural history and “traditional” Chinese identity. Despite the best efforts of the Party hold the people to its extremely narrow metanarrative of progress and modernization, Chinese society has undoubtedly become more decentred and pluralistic. for China, this is a very unfamiliar position; as one of the world’s oldest unbroken civilizations it had, prior to the demise of imperial China in 1911, a legacy of over two thousand years of centralised authority. While global capitalism “flaunts its centreless ubiquity” (Connor), China, unlike many other Western nations which have been undergoing projects of modernization in one form or another since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century or earlier, has found itself trying to put the pieces of its cultural identity back together after a particularly turbulent recent history that has seen a rampant socio-cultural change as a result of the forces of both modernity and postmodernity.

To get any real sense, from a humanistic point of view, of China’s cultural identity today, it is so important to consider the collective (and individual) relationship they share with their cultural history and memory. Ban Wang, author of “Illuminations from the Past; Trauma, Memory and History in Modern China”, has attempted to call forward a more nuanced conceptualisation of history that gives space for the “vague, telescopic reminisces and symbolic details” of memory and the acceptance of any trauma associated with it (Wang 2006). Wang notes that the grand narrative depicted in the Chinese discursive representation of history has pushed memory aside, seeing it as a “backward drag” on the modernisation project.

Wang observes a collective trauma in today’s generation of Chinese pertaining, firstly, to the latent memory of past catastrophes of imperialism and colonialism, as well as the atrocities of the authoritarian political order, and secondly, to the impact of transnational capital and the commodification of social relations that has “flattened history into a bloodless, depthless

simulacra” (Illuminations, 12). Similarly, Jameson identifies the failure of historicity to value the subtlety and unpredictable depth of memory. He writes “Our contemporary social system has lost its capacity to know its own past, living in a perpetual present without depth, definition or secure identity.” (Postmodernism and Consumer Society, 125). For the Chinese people, this shared memory of cultural fragmentation has “broken the threads, which in the past, had woven human beings into social textures”. As for the fragmentation and appreciation for the way in which China is bound, albeit painfully, by this shared historical fragmentation offers a different, more subtle definition of China’s cultural identity.

On the first floor of White Rabbit is a work by Dai Hua titled “I Love Tiananmen In Beijing” (2006). The work is a digital art work in a “retro” animation style reminiscent of early 2D computer games. The piece is enormous, (over one metre high and five metres in length) portraying a panoramic view of Chinese State history over the past 500 years. Rather than conveying a sense of collective trauma by emphasising the subtlety, depth and diversity of the Chinese experience in the 21st century, Dai Hua does the opposite. In a very playful manner, Hua has destroyed all visual (and historical) perspective. Events that may have historical significance are treated no differently to events of lesser historical significance; all are standardised and flattened with a comical and colourful, pixelated appearance. The iconic image of the boy standing before the line of tanks at the Tiananmen square protests are represented so infinitesimally it almost escapes attention altogether; the image of a dog walking a naked human nearby is far more eye-catching. Where Ban Wang sincerely expresses her concerns about the state of China’s cultural identity, Dai Hua subverts and parodies and perhaps even embraces a past that has “become nothing but a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” (Postmodernist Culture, 174) and what Baudrillard describes as a “depthless surface, unlimited reproducibility, and radical decentredness.” (Simulation and Simulacra, 44). Hua’s playful sense of humour in the face of a hegemonic state and the insidious invasion into China of a globalised, mass, consumer culture seems to reveal something deeper of the Chinese spirit and resilience.

The effects of modernity and postmodernity in China have been, and continue to be, nothing short of spectacular. Their coordinated assault on the cultural legacy of pre-“New Era” China has brought both profound positives and negatives to political, economic and cultural landscape of the communist nation. And yet, remarkably, China has managed to maintain its unique cultural identity. And what is this identity? The art works in White Rabbit provide a glimpse of a new nation that is pluralistic, audacious and vibrant in the face of radical cultural change. China has discovered the power of the individual. It seems apt to quote Mao, who in a lecture to the people at the Yennan Forum in 1942 on literature and the arts, hinted at the importance of an ability to remain adaptable, while preserving the essential fabric of their social unity and cultural identity:

We should take over the rich legacy and the good tradition in literature and art that have been handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries, but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people. Nor do we refuse to utilize the literary and artistic reforms of the past, but it is in our hands these old forms, remoulded and infused with new content, also become something revolutionary in the service of the people.

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