

Modernity's Cultural Politics: China in Context



Friday 23 - Saturday 24 October 2009

ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES

Session 1: Media and the Public Sphere

Jeannine Tang (The Courtauld Institute of Art)

Jeannine Tang is a doctoral candidate at The Courtauld Institute of Art. Previously a fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, she is presently a Critical Studies participant at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program

Xin Xin (China Media Centre, University of Westminster)

Citizen Journalism, Mainstream Journalism and Social Change in China

This paper aims to understand the complexity of the relationship between citizen journalism (CJ), mainstream journalism (MJ) and social change in China. It explores this relationship from three main perspectives. It begins with an examination of the ways in which CJ influences the journalistic practices adopted by Chinese mainstream media. It then uses two case studies to show that CJ serves as a complementary news source for mainstream media as well as an alternative channel for releasing 'politically sensitive' news. The third case discusses how in some circumstances both CJ and MJ might fail to break through China's Internet and media censorship. Finally, this chapter discusses how CJ and the online community nurture Chinese neo-nationalism and tend to be more cynical towards foreign critics than towards domestic social problems. Drawing on a contextual analysis of these four case studies, Xin Xin suggests that the weblog phenomenon and CJ in China are still far away from becoming an engine of radical political change. CJ, just like MJ, is facing challenges posed by a combination of forces, including tightened ideological control, severe market competition and the rise of Chinese nationalism. In order to understand the complex reality of CJ in China, this paper aims to go beyond those polarized accounts about the rise of CJ and the decline of MJ. Instead, it shows how complex the relationship between CJ and MJ is in a fast changing society like China.

Dr Xin Xin began her RCUK Fellowship in Chinese media and culture and their relationship to the wider world in 2006. She also teaches graduates and undergraduates in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication of the University of Westminster. Her research interests include Chinese media and society, traditional and citizen journalism, international communication, China's 'Soft power' and public diplomacy. Email:

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Tsering Topgyal (London School of Economics),

An Etiology of the 2008 Uprising in Tibet

In March 2008, Tibet erupted in the biggest challenge to Chinese rule since the 1950s. While Beijing and Dharamsala engaged in their familiar battle of representations, talking heads and pundits speculated on the causes of the uprising ranging from the bizarrely fantastical to the plausibly relevant. In this first academic treatment of the 2008 uprising, this paper argues that the protests and riots and the continuing aftermath is the latest symptom of the Sino-Tibetan insecurity dilemma. Specifically, Tsering Topgyal argues that Tibetan identity insecurity was the principal cause of the uprising; the uprising was a direct response to the post-1989 hard-line Chinese policies and meant to address their insecurity. Largely peaceful protests and occasionally violent riots in Tibet have been integral to the Tibetan efforts to mitigate the societal insecurities they feel on account of migration, 'assimilationist' policies and 'cultural imperialism'. However, Tibetan protests and riots heighten Chinese insecurities and harden Beijing's policies both inside Tibet and towards the Dalai Lama. This paper reveals the dynamic cycle of Tibetan insecurity and uprising and the resulting hardening in Chinese policies. The 2008 Tibetan uprising constitutes the most recent cycle in the long-running saga of the Sino-Tibetan insecurity dilemma. This paper relies extensively on media sources from Tibet, China, India and the West, encompassing traditional, independent or state-owned, and web-based new media such as blogs and Youtube, as well as, the contents of VCDs and DVDs from Tibet.

Tsering Topgyal was born in Tibet. He is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, nearing completion of a dissertation titled 'The Insecurity Dilemma and the Sino-Tibetan Conflict'. He was the Editorial Production Manager of the European Journal of International Relations. He has given papers on various aspects of the Sino-Tibetan conflict from an International Relations perspective at a number of national and international conferences. He has written on the Tibet issue for The Independent and Far Eastern Economic Review and various Tibetan publications and websites, and participated in radio and TV discussions on the Tibet issue for BBC, CNN, Al Jazheera, Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, among others.

Michel Hockx (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)

Michel Hockx is Professor of Chinese at SOAS, University of London. His research focuses on aspects of the sociology of modern and contemporary literature, especially literary organisations and media for literary production. His most recent publications include Culture in the Contemporary PRC (co-edited with Julia Strauss; Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Literary Societies of Republican China (co-edited with Kirk A. Denton; Lexington Books, 2008), as well as a number of articles on Chinese internet literature. He also publishes on modern Chinese poetry and poetics.

Harriet Evans (University of Westminster)

Harriet Evans is Professor of Chinese Cultural Studies, and Co-ordinator of Asian Studies Research, School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, University of Westminster. She has written extensively on the politics of gender and sexuality in China, and is author of Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949 (Polity Press, 1997), and The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007). She co-edited (with Stephanie Donald) Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China; Posters of the Cultural Revolution (1999). She is currently working with Beijing photographers on an oral and photographic history of revolution and urban transformation in central Beijing, and co-ordinates an international network of scholars examining local identifications of cultural

heritage in China. Evans was President of the British Association for Chinese Studies (2002-2005), and member of the national RAE subpanel (Asian Studies) 2008. She is member of the Executive Committee of The China Quarterly, and of the editorial boards of Intersections (Murdoch University) and Estudios de Asia y Africa (El Colegio de Mexico).

Session 2 : Film and Documentary

Xudong Zhang (New York University)

Market Socialism and Its Discontent: Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Representation of China's Transition in the Age of Global Capital

In this paper Xudong Zhang analyses Jia Zhangke's film production from his early rough-edged, melancholic presentation of provincial industrial towns in his native Shanxi (Xiaowu, Platform) to his intensified critique of urbanisation, marketisation, and the relentless push by the developmentalist state in more recent works such as *The World* (2006), *Still Life* (2008), and *24 City* (2009). Zhang maintains that, as a filmmaker, Jia's entry into the scene was conditioned by a visual politics vis-à-vis China's Fifth Generation filmmakers, whose highly allegorical, and increasingly formulaic, fabulation of China constitutes the stock image of the country against which he sought to define his position. This internal cinematic politics, however, allowed him to focus on shapeless and depressingly unsuccessful corners of China's reforms, namely the Buffalos and Detroits of (post)socialist (de)industrialisation. It is from this angle that he launched the second stage of his career, which centers around a more deliberate attack on the neoliberal regime that held sway in China for much of the past two decades. Whereas his more critical – and, ironically, more commercially and internationally successful – films seem to bear many traces of critics' or intellectuals' movies, Zhang argues that his works should be seen not so much as self-conscious art house experiments as a series of critical-realist, even didactic, exposé directed at and participatory of the ongoing social debate on China's future.

Una Chung (Sarah Lawrence College)

The Itinerant Analyst and the Interpretation of Cultural Transitions in Dai Sijie's Mr. Muo's Traveling Couch (2003)

This paper explores subtle provocations in our thinking about cultural transformation in relation to modernist historiography and global exchange, as suggested by Dai Sijie's novel, Mr. Muo's Traveling Couch. Dai's novel plays with the interpretation of dreams as a promiscuous act of cross-cultural interpretation through the character of Muo, who travels to Paris to study disappeared languages of the Silk Road only to be 'diverted' into reading Freud and Lacan and undergoing analysis himself. Upon his return to China, Muo wanders the countryside as an itinerant dream analyst – often mistaken for a common fortune-teller – in search of a way to extricate his 'beloved' from prison, the bespectacled female political dissident as 'the subject supposed to know.' In the context of China's all too rapid transition to a 'socialist market,' the novel targets anxieties about loss of political legitimacy on the one hand, and nostalgia for an earlier period of heroic revolution on the other, through an irreverently fanciful use of discourses of psychoanalysis in the hands of the master of interpretation himself, Muo-Mao. Thus, this paper is a critical analysis of how the question of what it means to interpret China comes to be raised at the height of global neoliberal dominance.

Yingjin Zhang (University of San Diego)

Third Space in-between Polylocality: China, Modernity, Globalisation

What do we gain if we conceptualise modernity and globalisation in spatial more than temporal terms? Moving between macro and micro scales of spatiality, Yingjin Zhang's paper works toward a framework of third space in polylocality by engaging contending theories of space, modernity, and globalisation and exploring disjunctures of in-between spaces in cultural production and reception. Yingjin Zhang argues that (1) what we customarily accept as 'transnational' are often 'translocal' in scale, (2) translocality must be accompanied by polylocality in order to better understand the unevenness produced by forces of nationalism and globalisation, and (3) third space offers a dynamic model for going beyond binarism and investigating in-between spaces of contradiction, convergence, and transculturation. By proposing 'polylocality as a fruitful approach to different simultaneous and dynamically interactive development, Yingjin Zhang's paper draws on performance studies and rethinks multiple modernities through the exploration of instances of space-time as power-geometries, cultural nodes, and aesthetics articulations.

Soyoung Yoon (Purchase College, Stanford University)

Soyoung Yoon is Visiting Assistant Professor at Purchase College, State University of New York [SUNY]; she teaches cinema studies in the Film Program, Conservatory of Theatre, Arts & Film with a focus on Marxist aesthetics, psychoanalysis, feminist and post-colonial theory, and theories of photography, film, and media. Yoon is also a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Art & Art History at Stanford University, where she is currently completing her dissertation entitled Debord, Détournement, and the Desire of History: The Films of Guy Debord. Recently a Critical Studies Fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program (2006-7), Yoon has also been a Visiting Lecturer at Malmö Art Academy, Lund University (Malmö, Sweden) and School of Media Arts, Royal Danish Art Academy of Fine Arts (Copenhagen, Denmark). She has also served as a curatorial advisor to the American Pavilion of the Third Guangzhou Triennial (Guangzhou, China)."

Session 3: Art Matters

Joan Kee (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)

Why Chinese Paintings Are So Large

More than color, subject, composition, or any other property commonly associated with the material production of artwork, it is largeness that perhaps best distinguishes contemporary painting in mainland China. Despite differences in artistic training, circumstance, and direction, numerous artists have produced painting whose proportions are so large as to physically overwhelm the viewer. So widespread is this production that individual choice can only suffice as an initial explanation of this phenomenon. At issue is a more fundamental lineage of thought revolving around an approach to painting as an act of reclamation intended for a public over which the Chinese state sought to extend its authority. This paper briefly sketches the contours of such a lineage through a number of works, including those of Yun-Fei Ji, Yan Pei-Ming, and Zhou Tiehai. Such works embody the extent to which painting became reified as a site upon which claims were presented, refused, and retracted, despite multiple changes in the larger sociopolitical environment. In focusing on this reification, this paper refuses the idea of a historical break – whether defined in political terms vis-à-vis the 1989 Tiananmen protests or economically, through the contemporary Chinese art boom of the late 1990s – upon which many narratives of modern art in China are based. Rather, this paper argues for a more stratified approach that reaches beyond ideologically charged notions of critique, globalisation, or

postmodernity as heuristics through which to look at the ever-changing condition of contemporaneity.

Joan Kee is Assistant Professor in the History of Art at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. She has published widely on the subject of contemporary art in Asia including articles for the Oxford Art Journal, Third Text, Art Asia Pacific, and Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, as well as catalogue essays for the Brooklyn Museum, the Edinburgh Art Festival, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In 2004 she guest-edited 'Intersections: Issues in Contemporary Art' for Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique, the first instance of a refereed journal entirely devoted to the topic of contemporary art in Asia.

Paul Gladston (University of Nottingham at Ningbo, China)

Curatorial Discourse and the Limits of Speech - Critical Reflections on the Third Guangzhou Triennial: Farewell to Post-Colonialism

The Guangzhou Triennial is a major international exhibition of contemporary art held every three years at the Guangdong Museum of Art in the south-western Chinese city of Guangzhou close to the border with Hong Kong. Since its inauguration in 2002, the triennial has built up a reputation as one of China's leading contemporary art events by staging a series of highly ambitious survey shows, all of which have presented visions critical of established curatorial practice and/or art-historical thinking.

As its title suggests, the third Guangzhou Triennial, Farewell to Post-Colonialism, which took place between 6 September and 16 November 2008, was an attempt to depart from the now widespread use of post-colonialism as a critical framework for international curatorial practice. According to the exhibition's curators (Johnson) Chang Tsong-Zung, Gao Shiming and Sarat Maharaj, post-colonialism has ushered in strongly normative ways of thinking (often referred to as forms of 'political correctness') that have not only undermined the radicalism of post-colonialism's own critical position, but that have also hindered artistic creativity and the development of fresh theoretical perspectives. It has therefore become necessary, they argue, to go beyond these normative ways of thinking – and, in particular, a 'tyranny of the other' brought about by a simplistic East-West dialectical understanding of relations of power – towards the framing of a 'post-West society' involving a complex global network of reciprocal (interactive/non-hierarchical) relationships between north, south, east and west.

In this paper Paul Gladston argues that while a number of the artworks included in Farewell to Post-Colonialism did point convincingly away from the engrained East-West dialectics of post-colonialist discourse, the critical integrity of the exhibition's overarching curatorial vision was severely compromised by its entanglement with prevailing political conditions within the People's Republic of China; conditions which persist in foreclosing any searching discussion of China's involvement with colonialism/imperialism, both as a perpetrator and as a subject of colonialist/imperialist domination.

Paul Gladston is currently seconded from the University of Nottingham as Head of the department of International Communications and Director of the Institute of Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China. His recent publications include an edited collection of essays, China and Other Spaces (CCCCP, 2009), as well as numerous articles on the subject of contemporary Chinese art for academic journals, art periodicals and exhibition catalogues. He is currently writing a book on Chinese avant-garde art groups and collectives for the Hong Kong University Press.

Winnie Wong (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

'To Paint Whatever You Want To Paint': Fictions of Creativity from Dafen Village

China's Dafen village is the global production center for handmade oil paintings. Although it is famed for mass producing commercial copies from the Western canon, more recently, Dafen village's eight thousand painters have begun striving for originality and creativity. Aspiring to be China's next major artist village, the romance of creativity has infused the workshops and studios of Dafen. The lowly lot of its struggling painters have also captured the imagination of some Chinese and Western conceptual artists, who have come to assist Dafen painters' creative efforts through a number of collaborative projects. Equally romantic endeavors have also been produced by Chinese state-sponsored film, television, and media corporations, which tell the stories of migrants who have realised their dreams at Dafen village. This paper explores the romantic portrayals of Dafen village in Chinese official cultural productions and Western cosmopolitan artistic projects. It examines the politics through which both officials and conceptualists attempt to transform Dafen's migrant laborers into original artists. In seeking to recuperate artistic value from the most industrialised form of contemporary art, Chinese state officials and Western conceptualists alike share the same goals: originality without genius and creativity for all.

Winnie Won Yin Wong is a PhD Candidate in the History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her research interests include transnational issues in consumer culture, intellectual property, and 20th-century art, design, and visual culture. She is currently writing her dissertation entitled After the Copy: Originality, Creativity and the Skilling of Contemporary Art in China's Dafen Village.

Adele Tan (The Courtauld Institute of Art)

Wrapping it up: The Bindings of Modernity in Contemporary Chinese Performance

One oft-remarked phenomenon of performance art in eighties China is that of the prevalent motif of binding and wrapping (kunbang or baoza) where artists used a variety of materials – cloth, plastic, tape etc to bind themselves. Such 'bondage art' is a genre of performance that uniquely speaks to the constitution of the Chinese avant-garde. This paper will attempt to analyse the various and overdetermined positions of meaning that the action of binding can occupy, and especially to move away from the predominant visual hermeneutics of tragic social oppression in order to consider the more psychoanalytic understanding of binding where it is consonant with the psychological ambivalence experienced in the cultural throes of the eighties zeitgeist.

Adele Tan has completed a PhD at The Courtauld Institute of Art on post-1979 performance art practice in China. She was recently a Global Art and the Museums fellow at ZKM, Karlsruhe and was also assistant editor at the journal Third Text.

Session 4: Critical Theory after Dushu

Chaohua Wang (Academica Sinica, Taiwan)

A Backward-looking Superpower? – China's Ideological Turns since the 1990s

Chinese intellectuals have long questioned Francis Fukuyama's famous thesis, 'the end of history'. Along with China's continued rapid economic growth and rising position as a global superpower, more and more China observers today begin to join the chorus. In their eyes, Fukuyama's prediction that the world is to become monolithically Western look-alike liberal democracy has failed miserably. What is often forgotten in the repudiation, however, is the significance of the thesis itself. The 'end of history' for Fukuyama summarises a historical period marked by human ideological competitions along a linear projection of history. In

this regard, this paper argues, China's ideological performance since the 1990s actually lends strong support to Fukuyama's thesis of 1992.

Whether it is government slogans, such as building a 'socialist market economy' or a 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', or intellectual themes, starting from 'farewell to revolution' in the aftermath of the Tiananmen suppression, to the lasting effort of 'searching for alternatives' throughout the 1990s and into the new century, and eventually to the recent proposal to 'join together three traditions' [of Confucianism, Maoism, and the tradition of the Reform Era led by Deng Xiaoping], a general moving away from forward-looking ideological lines is visibly evident. Examining the features and natures of the ideological spectrum, the author believes that a relatively stabilised spatial-temporal perspective, Sino-centric and backward-looking, has accompanied the most recent stage of China's rising clout in international spheres. The question remains the paper argues, for China as a world superpower to be not only economically hegemonic but also culturally appealing – that is, to be able to offer ideologically attractive visions into the future, no matter linear or cyclic in their temporal dimension – to peoples outside the traditional Chinese peripheries.

Chaohua Wang earned her MA (1994) and PhD (2008) in modern Chinese culture and literature from UCLA. She is the editor of One China, Many Paths (Verso, 2004) that won the 'Best Academic Titles' award by Choice. She is now a post-doctoral fellow in the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica in Taiwan. A political activist and exile since the Tiananmen pro-democracy movement in 1989, she also writes political commentaries in both Chinese and English.

Peter Osborne (Middlesex University)

'Modernity' in Context

This paper offers some reflections on the problematic of 'global modernity' and the concept of 'cultural politics' as they bear upon the theorization of cultural practices in China today. Its two main issues are: the relationship of 'modernity' to history, in the long transition from a colonial to a putatively transnational 'modern'; and the contradictory place of the subject in any politics of reformation.

Peter Osborne is Professor of Modern European Philosophy and Director of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University, London and an editor of the journal Radical Philosophy. His books include The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde (Verso, 1995), Philosophy in Cultural Theory (Routledge, 2000), Conceptual Art (Phaidon, 2002), Marx (Granta, 2005) and Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory (ed., 3 Volumes, Routledge, 2005). His writing on contemporary art includes contributions to Afterall, Art History, October, Oxford Art Journal, and catalogues for Manifesta 5 (San Sebastian, 2004), Time Zones (Tate Modern, 2004), Zones of Contact (2006 Biennale of Sydney), The Quick and the Dead (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2009) and Matias Faldbakken: The Shock of Abstraction (National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo/Ikon, Birmingham 2009). A Spanish edition of his recent essays, El arte más allá de la estética: Ensayos filosóficos sobre el arte contemporáneo, is forthcoming from CENDEAC, Murcia, October 2009.

Tani E. Barlow (Rice University)

'On the Surface of a Round Mind' and the Advent of Society

Tani E. Barlow's paper examines modernity in the era of the 1890s-1920 by fusing vernacular sociology and advertising media to establish the roots of the future. There is particular emphasis on corporate imperialism and the contribution to Chinese social theory of Japanese sociology. It could be argued that among social scientists in China today many of these core ideas persist and it might be the case that contemporary art seeks ways to subvert precisely these ideas.

Tani Barlow is Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Professor and Director, Chao Center for Asian Studies, in the Rice University History Department. She is author of The Question of Women in Chinese feminism (Duke, 2004) and is completing a monograph that examines to the overlapping worlds of Chinese vernacular sociology and corporate imperialist advertising industry in the inter-war years. She is founding senior editor of positions: east asia cultures critique.

Julian Stallabrass (The Courtauld Institute of Art)

Julian Stallabrass is a writer, curator, photographer and lecturer. He is Reader in art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art, and is the author of Art Incorporated, Oxford University Press 2004, Internet Art: The Online Clash Between Culture and Commerce, Tate Publishing, London 2003; Paris Pictured, Royal Academy of Arts, London 2002; High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s, Verso, London 1999 and Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture, Verso, London 1996. He is the co-editor of Ground Control: Technology and Utopia, Black Dog Publishing, London 1997; Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art, Black Dog Publishing, London 1998 and Locus Solus: Technology, Identity and Site in Contemporary Art, Black Dog Publishing, London 1999. He has written art criticism regularly for publications including Tate, Art Monthly and the New Statesman. He is an editorial board member of Art History, New Left Review and Third Text. He curated the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial, 'Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images'.

This event has been made possible through the generous support of LCACE (London Centre for Arts and Cultural Exchange) and the British Academy

