

The Shifting Paradigm in Developing Chinese Contemporary History:

Collectors of Contemporary Art and the Dynamic Dialogue between the Private and Public in China

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Introduction

The past few years have represented a radical shift in the way the world views collectors of contemporary art. With globalization, collectors from around the world engage in shared platforms that were not available in the past, such as art fairs, biennales, and exhibition events, which enable collectors to share and promote their respective individual and national identities. This is especially true for collectors of contemporary art in China. In recent years Chinese collectors have allocated a significant amount of personal wealth and time toward creating a platform for both the Chinese and global art communities to engage in a stimulating cross-cultural dialogue. Many Chinese collectors of contemporary art now aim to create a long-term dialogue with the local general public that reflects the challenges of today, coupled with a vision for tomorrow. What makes their collections remarkable is their ability to blend Chinese, Asian, and Western pieces into a narrative of globalization and multiculturalism.



Fig. 1. Rear facade view of
MWoods Museum, Beijing.
Credit: Raymond Rohne,
2016.

Serious interest in contemporary art in China and the collecting thereof commenced with European expatriates. Uli Sigg, who amassed one of the largest collections, arrived in Beijing in 1977 to work for a private corporation. He gradually became interested in Chinese contemporary art and began collecting over a decade later.¹ Expatriates also boosted the success of the contemporary art market with the introduction apartment exhibitions showcasing local artists in Beijing. Among the most active was Francesca Dal Lago, an Italian Embassy worker in Beijing, who actively promoted avant-garde artists.² Local collectors began to emerge in the early and mid-1990s, after the government loosened censorship introduced after the Tiananmen Incident crackdown on the avant-garde art movement and the 1989 China Avant-Garde exhibition in Beijing. China's race to development, building infrastructure and globalization through trade, provided locals with the means to collect contemporary art. Art exhibitions and biennales sprang up around China with help from critics and curators like Lu Peng, Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, and Huang Zhuan. New exhibitions not only sparked interest in the local community of collectors, but also challenged the conventional wisdom of what constitutes art. Emphasis on traditional Chinese styles, such as calligraphy and ink paintings, gradually waned, while strong interest in oil paintings on canvas and new media, such as photography, video performances, and installations, increased rapidly. Chinese collectors of contemporary art began buying works from newly formed local galleries, such as Red Gate Gallery, which was established by an Australian expatriate, Brian Wallace, in Beijing in 1991, and through the artists directly.³ This marked an important and radical change in how Chinese people viewed art at the time and would come to appreciate it in the future.

Notions of art appreciation according to standards of socialist and communal understanding or state sponsored images have largely diminished in recent years.

Contemporary art collectors in China, coupled with those in the art community, such as museum directors and curators, have transformed from having a singular, one-dimensional outlook defining globalization and multiculturalism in China into proponents of diversity, adopting various ways of remembering the past.

I. Dynamic government, semi-deregulation, and policies

Scholars have argued that the contemporary history and culture of China is a direct result of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) intervention and interpretation of their own history since 1949. While this claim can be substantiated up to the end of the twentieth century, through Jonathan Spence's *The Search For Modern China*, this paper aims to put forward the argument that the Chinese government has radically shifted its stance, allowing most private museums, institutions, and art collectors to freely create a new, idiocentric, laissez-faire system to publicly engage in

building a new contemporary cultural history that does not necessarily accord with the collective CCP narrative of the past. The origins of this relaxed stance can easily be traced back to Deng Xiaoping's economic and open door policies in the late 1970s. These policies led not only to the development of intellectual curiosity, but also the beginning of a free market in which citizens were able to build wealth, eventually enabling them to explore art collecting.⁴ Furthermore, while contemporary art was not officially recognized by the government, restrictions were loosened during a period in which there was little outside influence.

In *Exhibiting the Past*, Kirk A. Denton argues, "Like other cultural institutions and other forms of culture, museums reflect the many tensions and paradoxes in Chinese society. In the decades since the end of the cultural revolution (1966–1976), the PRC has transformed from a poor, isolated nation with a Soviet-style command economy to a freewheeling market economy that is deeply integrated with the world economy."⁵ Denton is correct in highlighting the fact that museums in China reflect many tensions and paradoxes in society; newly established, privately founded contemporary art museums in China have pushed this further by showing artworks that would have once been considered taboo, including sexual innuendos, nudity, and politically charged content. While turbulent events in the late 1980s and early '90s stalled progressive reforms, today both private and public institutions are working together in creating initiatives that help the development of a new contemporary history in China, and also the way Chinese citizens are veering away from ancient history and the social amnesia that once paralyzed their society. This type of social amnesia is defined by Russell Jacoby as "society's repression of remembrance—society's own past."⁶ It is not my intention to defend the institutional policies or choices of the CCP from their inception in 1949 to other historical events that took place in the past. Rather, I wish to explore the changes that have happened in the contemporary arts community, through collectors of contemporary art and initiatives geared towards the greater development of the arts and culture in China, proving that the idea of social amnesia has waned as the country works toward social reform, modernization, and economic development.

In 2009 the government founded the Chinese Academy of Contemporary Arts, which was a symbolic gesture of the state to officially recognize contemporary art as a major genre in Chinese development and history. While its creation laid the foundation for future development and projects, the central government also took a step further. In 2012 the Power Station of Art was established in Shanghai, the first state-run institution devoted strictly to contemporary arts. It does not have a permanent collection; rather, the institution continually invites renowned curators (both Chinese and international) to create changing exhibitions. In 2016 the Power Station held an important exhibition by Chinese artist turned French national Huang Yongping, titled *Bâton Serpent III: Spur Track To The Left* and curated by Hou Han Ru. Huang, whose work was once banned in the

nation, was able to exhibit a religiously, politically, and historically charged exhibition that did not face criticism or the threat of being shut down by the Chinese authorities. This perhaps left visitors to the exhibition wondering: how involved is the CCP in this current state of affairs in the art community in China, especially in a state-owned museum?

I.I Government contemporary art zones development

At both the national and local levels the Chinese government has been instrumental in creating contemporary art zones across the nation, from major international cities to lesser-known, remote areas. These art zones have exposed local communities to non-traditional forms of Chinese art, departing from the customs and conventions of the past. Contemporary Chinese, Asian, and Western artworks have become staples in these areas, which has in turn reflected on the local communities.

Among the most well-known is the 798 Art Zone in Beijing, which formerly housed a government munitions factory complex. While walking through the area, visitors automatically feel as if they have travelled back to the height of Mao-era China, and some may notice the original propaganda intended for the workers. Beyond what some might consider nostalgia, government influence is minimal at the public level. This is a sharp contrast from what is expressed in an article by Yue Zhang, where the author claims the government is holding tight control over the district's gallery owners and artists, and the messages that they convey.⁷ Yue does not substantiate his argument; rather, he points to common realities artists faced in the early periods of "artist villages," such as Yuanmingyuan (Old Summer Palace), Songzhuang (Capital Art District), and 798 (Dashanzi Art District). Yue does not clearly state the time period about which he is making his argument or who he has interviewed, leaving the reader in doubt as to the validity of his findings. It must also be understood that there is a difference between "art district" and "artist village" within China.

During a visit to the 798 Art Zone in May 2016, I came across evidence indicating that Yue's argument was difficult to substantiate. While walking down the main 798 Road, I saw many exhibitions that would not generally be associated with government propaganda or support. Two major exhibitions that clearly challenged Yue's claims were those at Faurischou Foundation Gallery and Springs Center for Art.⁸ The former hosted Yoko Ono's exhibition, *Golden Ladders*. The inspiration from Ono encouraged viewers to critically reflect on ladders in their own lives and ponder how are they climbed; the exhibition highlighted individuality, not political agenda.⁹ Significantly, Yoko Ono was born in Japan prior to the end of World War II and the exhibition was held during a time of heightened territorial disputes between China and Japan.



Fig. 2. State-owned power plant converted into the Power Station of Art, Shanghai. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2016.



Fig. 3. Exhibition view 1, *Bâton Serpent III: Spur Track To The Left*. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2016.



Fig. 4. Exhibition view 2, *Bâton Serpent III: Spur Track To The Left*. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2016.



Fig. 5. Exhibition view 3, *Bâton Serpent III: Spur Track To The Left*. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2016.

Springs Center for Art held a group exhibition that included a seminal work by the Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei. In contrast to popular belief outside China, Ai's work is widely available for view on the mainland. The Springs Center for Art show was important because the exhibited work was a massive glass chandelier from his Chandelier series.

Ai explains that the work criticizes the new Chinese bourgeoisie, specifically those who amass large amounts of wealth and in turn focus on buying luxury goods, which generally act as gaudy signifiers of economic and cultural expansion.¹⁰ The 798 Art Zone is made up of not just Chinese galleries, but also includes many international galleries, such as Pace Gallery, Galleria Continua, and Tokyo Gallery, which points to the government's openness to international commerce and trade.

I.II Government building of Shanghai Free-Trade Zone

Other government policies have also heavily influenced the development of cultural industry, which has had a positive impact on contemporary art development and the expansion of private collecting in China. For example, the Shanghai Free-Trade Zone is now home to one of the largest tax-free zones in the world for art. This has not only attracted international art galleries and auction houses, but also enabled private collectors to build monumental museums of contemporary art. The Shanghai Free-Trade Zone has also been very active in attempts to mobilize the foreign art community's access to China. Hu Huanzhong, Vice President of the National Base for Cultural Trade and general manager of the Shanghai FTZ International Culture Investment and Development Co Ltd, which is the operator of the new center, has emphasized that policies which have prevented cultural and art-related industries from entering China in the past have been loosened.¹¹ This greatly benefitted the Chinese art market; in the first half of 2016 China accounted for 35.5 percent of the global market share, which was higher than the United States, at 26.8 percent, making it the country with the highest consumption of art.¹²

This trend is significant, as other cities such as Tianjin, Guangdong, and Fujian recently applied for similar zones, and all were approved by the State Council. The Shanghai Free-Trade Zone was originally designed to attract foreign direct investment. This idea has since radically shifted toward being more a policy of social change and national strategy.¹³ These new free economic zones could act as bastions for art development throughout China, as many art collectors face high import taxes and encounter difficulties with local municipalities. Such zones could also spark interest from emerging collectors who lack significant wealth. This can easily be compared to middle-class collectors in the postwar United States, who fueled the art market for



Fig. 6. Typical state-owned factory buildings in 798 Art Zone that have been converted to art spaces. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2016.



Fig. 7. Typical state-owned factory buildings in 798 Art Zone that have been converted to art spaces. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2016.



Fig. 8. Ai Weiwei's Chandelier on view at the Springs Center for Art. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2016.

generations. If a similar phenomenon was to occur in China, it would have significant benefits; the market would spike and new collectors could build a historical and cultural dialogue with the art they own.

II. The collectors

The emergence and subsequent influence of individual collectors of contemporary art in China has led to a new incitement of cultural identity and subsequent individual interpretation of contemporary history. The following three case studies will demonstrate the different paths followed by top Chinese collectors in their efforts to exhibit and share contemporary art with the general public. These collectors are generally very diverse in terms of age and social status, possessing internationally acclaimed collections of contemporary art, and are active in the global art community. Not only are they aggressively buying contemporary art, they are also constructing private, top-tier museums, revitalizing a stagnant contemporary art market, patronizing young artists, and sharing collections with the general public. Many of these new Chinese collectors were made known to the international art community through the online art collector database Larry's List in 2013. Since then, the new generation of Chinese collectors of contemporary art have been widely publicized in global media.

As these collectors began to build seminal collections of both Asian and Western works, attention shifted away from typical Chinese objects made from bronze, jade, and ceramic, as well as furniture, which together generally emphasize China's three thousand years of history. This trend represents a significant change; some collectors are now attempting to remold localized collections that have traditionally manifested a certain degree of Chinese nationalism as assemblages with globalized and sophisticated content. The emphasis has begun to shift from a collective memory of the past to an individual perspective that strives to amalgamate ideas and freedom of expression in order to gather novel art collections.

II.I The influence of private museums

Millennial collectors Lin Han and Lei Wanwan have been actively engaged in bringing the public and local community into their 2,500 square meter space, M Woods Museum in Beijing.¹⁴ The power duo transformed a munitions factory building in the 798 Art Zone into a private and nonprofit, top-tier museum open to the public. The museum opened in 2014, just when many galleries had begun to close in the 798 Art Zone due to a stagnant contemporary art market in China. The general public was beginning to feel bored and fatigued with a repetition of the past that included Mao, the Cultural Revolution, and "Chineseness," and only a few major galleries managed to survive. M Woods went on to transform the art landscape in the 798 Art Zone, and are actively showcasing their diverse collection of art—

comprising both Asian and Western works—which now entails over three hundred major artworks. Lin claims that their collection does not follow a specific theme or concept; instead they purely buy what they like. He gives an example: “We’ve recently acquired a painting from the Northern Renaissance as well as some ancient Chinese works which we have feelings for in the same way as the contemporary work we collect. We can distinguish a spirit in all the works, which could be the unifying feature.”¹⁵ This fusion of culture has redefined the private contemporary art museum in China, and is a testament to Lin and Lei’s commitment and dedication to providing a unique, globalized museum experience to the public. Their individual perspectives and experience with art points to an important core theme of private contemporary art museums in China. These engaging, curated exhibitions have sparked interest within a younger group of art enthusiasts who had never had exposure to such works. This is, in large part, due to the use of social media and grassroots initiatives through educational programs.

MWoods has also been successful in bringing non-traditional exhibitions into China. In August 2016, MWoods opened a major Andy Warhol exhibition, titled *Andy Warhol: Contact*. Lin and Lei masterfully hosted two kickoff events, one academic and the other a social promotion for the young museum. The academic event, titled *Andy Warhol Is Not A Pop Artist*, was co-hosted with the Central Academy of Fine Art Museum (CAFA), Beijing, and included a panel discussion with Christopher Makos, author and photographer of *Andy Warhol China 1982*; Eric Shiner, director of *The Andy Warhol Museum* in Pittsburgh; exhibition curator Presca Ahn; and the director of CAFA, Wang Chunchen. In China there has traditionally been a separation between public and private institutions, a result of the absence of funding as well as different educational outcomes and objectives. This joint collaboration showcased the success, importance, and need for joint academic programs that bridge academia and private institutions. It suggests that the Chinese government has loosened restrictions on public museums, and I have seen little orchestration by the Communist Party, which Professor Hung Chang-tai claims to be prominent when he writes, “A public museum in China is seldom about the past... It is about the current image of the party and how the party wants itself to be seen.”¹⁶

The social event hosted by MWoods was called “Welcome To The Factory.” This was somewhat symbolic, considering that Warhol created his work in “The Factory” in New York and MWoods is located in a renovated factory in Beijing. Lin and Lei incorporated American contemporary art history into their discourse in contemporary museum building and creating a cultural dialogue between the two nations. Over two thousand tickets were sold, and the exhibition became not just an art event, but a celebration of commitment to the arts by the founders of MWoods. It was a star-studded occasion that could be compared to a gala at any major museum around the world.



Fig. 9. Interior of MWoods. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2016.



Fig. 10. Interior of MWoods. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2016.

Another unique trait of Lin and Lei is that they not only showcase their artworks, but also influence netizens through their cosmopolitan lifestyle. On social media Lei has over one million followers, the result of her “blogebrity” and a background in modeling. Her followers are generally just as curious about her daily activities as they are about the art in MWoods. When asked in an interview if the art and fashion worlds have similarities, Lei responded, “Artists and designers are all articulating their feelings about the world we live in. Fashion, like art, can be political, can be spiritual, and can make an individual really think about their physical presence in the world.”¹⁷

This trend is remarkable, as her influence is not just about the art being exhibited but a template of the standard of contemporary culture in China. As younger generations of Chinese search for role models, Lei has emerged as a key figure in the blogosphere and popular culture. The argument can be made that Lei is challenging the traditional role of a collector as well. For example, on social media site Weibo, Lei’s viewers express excitement about all of her activities, from the clothes she wears to the places she visits. What makes this exceptional is the average (young) follower on social media cannot afford a work of art at MWoods, but they can afford to buy the ¥60 (€8.20) for a regular admission ticket, or ¥40 (€5.45) for a student. On Weibo many museumgoers express their biggest disappointment when they visit is that they did not get the opportunity to meet Lin or Lei, which to them is more important than the context of the exhibition itself. This would suggest the collectors’ celebrity status stimulates interest in visiting privately founded contemporary museums, and it could potentially spark the curiosity of someone who has previously never shown interest in contemporary art.

The framework Lin and Lei have created is of tremendous importance. While MWoods was intended to be a platform to showcase their collection of art, it is transforming the way an art collector is viewed in China and around the world. They are not only setting trends for art, but also promoting a new contemporary, cosmopolitan lifestyle among the Chinese public that includes many of the elements absent in Mao’s socialist Chinese society, such as individualism, globalization, and philanthropy.

II.II The art fair as an institution

Collectors David Chau (Zhou Dawei), Kelly Ying, and Bao Yifeng have also made significant contributions by creating a platform for the engagement of contemporary art within China. In 2013 the three established ART021 Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair, which was the first large-scale contemporary art fair to be held in mainland China. The fair was named after the Shanghai dialing code, which gave a sense of localism and also nostalgia, making it truly Chinese. This event was important for the contemporary art

movement in China, as most of the PR and advertisement campaign for the new fair was through social media such as Weibo and Weixin. By using social media the fair organizers were able to reach a younger demographic group, one traditionally not associated with art circles. The ART021 group shares many of the same values, outreach initiatives, and promotion campaigns as M Woods. Chau, Ying, and Bao initially held ART021 in Shanghai's historic Bund District, where Western art deco architecture coupled with contemporary Asian and Western art inside. This environment of a curated art fair gave visitors the feeling they were entering the gates of history and the past, but in reality they were experiencing the collectors' interpretation of contemporary culture and history. Most of the galleries in attendance at ART021 could be classified as commercial galleries, but this is not to say it lacks cutting-edge avant-garde exhibitions. Like Art Basel, galleries and artists are carefully selected. While this might seem like a general art fair framework, it is a radical change within China, moving away from Maoism and an emphasis on communal history, and instead with an emphasis on urbanization, modernization, and defining contemporary memory in a post-socialist China within the global context.

Unlike Art Basel's first Hong Kong edition in 2013, ART021 placed greater emphasis on attracting local [Chinese] collectors, galleries, and the general public. Moreover, ART021 did not maintain the equally distributed Asian/Western standard ratio seen at Art Basel, which allowed Chinese collectors a larger platform for viewing local art.¹⁸ In 2013 Art Basel Hong Kong selected only twenty-four Chinese galleries (including foreign satellites) to exhibit work, out of 245 participating galleries. This was a significant contrast with ART021, which hosted only Chinese oriented galleries. Of the twenty-eight participating galleries, each had a gallery location in greater China, and sixteen of the galleries had participated in Art Basel Hong Kong seven months earlier.¹⁹ Galerie Perrotin and White Cube, with satellite spaces in greater China, took the opportunity to integrate contemporary Asian art with Western art. Since the 2013 edition of ART021, participation from Chinese and international galleries and attendance from both local and international visitors has spiked. In 2014, when asked about the new generation of players in the contemporary art market in China, Ying remarked: "In my opinion, there are many factors that can facilitate the development of a market: one is government support; another is economic. Of course, the active participation of the new generation also plays a positive part in this trend. Their participation can help to break the habitual rules and principles on one hand, and on the other hand, they can also promote communications with the Western world and bring in many new thoughts and mentalities. Now it is just the beginning."²⁰

It must be emphasized that much of the fair's success is owed to the collectors who founded it in 2013. In a 2015 article published by artnet News, an anonymous gallery representative claimed, "ART021 is more fashionable, and trendier than other fairs; the people running it are from PR

and fashion backgrounds.”²¹ This is significant, as this person points out a critical aspect of the changes in Chinese culture and public demand. The founders of ART021 created a dialogue that never existed in the past, one that speaks to the younger generation by promoting the event as fashionable, trendy, and a place to embrace an affluent culture. It can be argued that the founders of ART021 have truly broken the mold of elitism at art fairs by actively promoting it to millennials, who themselves want to be included and will have tremendous buying power in the coming years. While some may openly criticize the curation or promotion of the fair as shallow, the demand for a contemporary cultural and cosmopolitan lifestyle in China cannot be ignored, disputed, or looked down upon. It is the diverse range of interpretations promoted at ART021 that has made it the success that it is, beginning with the vision expounded by collectors of contemporary art in China.

II.III Art park defining a nation

Art mega-collector and developer Lu Jun and his son, Lu Xun, have redefined the traditional boundaries of exhibiting art and architecture in China, creating a monumental €236 million art parkland in Nanjing. The selection of Nanjing was an interesting choice for building a contemporary art and architecture park, as the city is known for its long history and deeply rooted traditions. After the first phase of the parkland was completed in 2013, Lu Jun stated that “Contemporary art and architecture weren’t very accepted here in Nanjing... I wanted to change the narrow minds here.”²² Sifang Park, as it is called, consists of a museum, hotel, conference center, recreational facility, houses, and pavilions. All of the buildings were individually designed, making the empty land a carefully curated grouping of twenty contemporary architectural structures. What makes Sifang different from other developments is that each has been individually designed by both Chinese and international architects. Many of the buildings create a sense of balance, incorporating contemporary elements with styles from the architects’ home countries, which gives them a yin and yang component.

Among the buildings, the most iconic is the Sifang Art Museum, led by Lu Xun. The museum has a 2,000-square-meter exhibition space, designed by American architect Steven Holl. Georgia Lindsey describes how much of the design of the museum is a meditation between Western and Eastern architectural paradigms, such as the Western one-point perspective, common since the Renaissance, versus the two-point perspective seen in Eastern art.²³ Lu was also able to brilliantly incorporate the designs of two of the most prominent Chinese contemporary artists, Ai Weiwei and Xu Zhen, into the park’s design. The museum houses the Lu family’s collection, which includes work by Anselm Kiefer, Luc Tuymans, Zhang Enli, Olafur Eliasson, Danh Vo, and Zhou Chunya. The past few years have also been important for the Sifang Museum as a patron of the arts. In 2014 the museum participated in the Armory Show in New York as a nonprofit art institution, exhibiting work by emerging Chinese artists to a Western audience. It was well received, and

created a bridge between Sifang and other nonprofit institutions in the West. Sifang also regularly hosts artists' programs for months at a time, during which participants can spend time in the local Laoshan Forest and enjoy a sense of peace with nature while creating artworks.

Considering its scale and historical importance, the Sifang complex can easily be considered the best art complex in the world since the creation of the Vitra Campus in 1981, in Weil am Rhein, Germany. The strength of the Sifang Museum and Park rests with its young co-founder, Lu Xun, who has fully devoted his time to the development of the museum since graduating from Cambridge University. The cultural impact of Sifang has the potential to not only attract local visitors with interest in art, architecture, and design, but also expand with the changing scene within China. Since the park is located outside of the metropolitan center of Nanjing, the possibility for growth is considerable. The museum has already gained important notoriety, both within and outside China, making it a model for art park projects in developing nations.

III. Art as a method of urgency addressing social issues and contemporary history

Since the inception of the Communist Party in 1949, the teaching of Chinese history has highlighted its antiquity and development over a three thousand year period. The teachings focus on particular periods of Chinese history, such as the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 CE), and most importantly, the Chinese Communist Party (1949–present), taking pride in their special defining characteristics and the greatness of the achievements during each period. Previous teachings lack an emphasis on individualism, a trait which may derive from the influence of Confucian values, by which a person is defined by their social order at the time of birth and standing within their families and communities. People value communal achievements or those of exemplary individuals who either made sacrifices, fought for, or rendered meritorious service to the nation.

While these values constitute an integral part of traditional conceptions of the Chinese past, there is a large disconnect and cultural divide between those born before and after the death of Mao Zedong. This divide is creating a radical shift in culture and memory. Until recently, cultural memory has been predominantly China-centric, with internal influences taking precedence over external ones. Over the three thousand years of Chinese history, external factors have not exerted great influence on cultural memory-building.²⁴ In the past many Chinese did not distinguish between cultural memory and national history, which created a gray zone of remembrance. Marzia Varutti suggests that much national history has been passed down through folklore and family stories, or derives from the regime in power, when she

writes, "The origins of Chinese civilization are far from historically evident. Mystery surrounding the genesis of Chinese civilization has led to diverse interpretations and theories."²⁵

In China the cultural landscape is rapidly changing as identity has begun to be redefined as an individual encounter based upon personal experiences, interests, and motivations. Jan Assmann defines cultural memory as "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society, and one that is obtained through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation."²⁶ While China is in the earliest stages of developing a contemporary cultural history and memory, the groundwork has been laid for future generations to benefit from this concept.

III.I Contemporary art and cultural history: a case study

It can be argued that contemporary art has been heavily intertwined in the cultural history of the United States and led to soft power abroad. The development of contemporary art, more specifically pop art, connected generations of people and created a cultural and visual history in the United States. This movement has exerted a lasting influence on American cultural development, individualism, and the way the world perceives art. Collectors were a major element in the developing pop art movement. Richard Schull was among its first sponsors and patrons, and became a celebrity collector in the 1960s, easily comparable to current Chinese collectors of contemporary art and their glitterati status. Steven Henry Madoff cites the first book on pop art, by John Rublowsky, in which he explains, "On those walls [the collectors'] images from comic books, advertisements, and packaging looked back with nostalgia to the America of their youth, with facture clean enough to enter, the suburban world into which postwar prosperity had moved them, along with about a third of the American population. And these new buyers would be purchasing their art with a new attitude."²⁷

Artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Jasper Johns represented a major shift away from tradition, and also put forward pioneering methods in the development of this contemporary art. They shifted away from modernism and realism, challenging the roles of Jackson Pollock, Andrew Wyeth, and Norman Rockwell. The new group of pop artists' work was simply a response to society, one with which people felt a connection. It also reflected the material society in postwar America. American collectors in the 1960s played an equally important role, and people like Leo Castelli and Richard Bellamy were able to promote this work to the general public from the walls of their galleries. Many of these new collectors who came from humble backgrounds were able to connect the artworks with middle-class America, a radical shift away from the previous generation of

industrial baron collectors such as Rockefeller, Guggenheim, and Whitney. Everyone, rich and poor, young and old, could easily associate with this art, as it masterfully portrayed objects, people, and the contemporary social discourse that was redefining the United States in the mid-twentieth century.

Peter Kattenberg makes the point that “by taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary in a ritualistic repetitive representation [Warhol] adds to real, ordinary life an artistic quality that it did not have without his art. Because of his work we are now able to view the grocery store as the gallery.”²⁸ Warhol’s work was simply about the present, and how people’s everyday lives were connected to this present. Looking at his work today, three generations can easily have a collective cultural conversation about its contents. One does not need to have intellect, wealth, or even a background in art to feel a seismic connection with his work, regardless of one’s own history. This was essentially elevated by the collectors who patronized Warhol and helped keep his works in the public view before and after his death in 1987. Collector Peter Brant was instrumental in preserving this new social discourse with his donation of Warhol’s monumental Mao painting to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1977.

Many Chinese collectors of contemporary art have also adopted this tradition by blending works into their collections that enable dialogues among different generations. This is not to say that collections must include images of Mao, or even be Chinese artwork; in China’s growing globalized society there is now a mix of East and West, which unlike the American example creates a hybrid of cultural history and identity.

Many elements from the above examples can now be seen in both Chinese contemporary art and the art targeted by Chinese collectors. Much early Chinese contemporary art had put forward a narrative of Chinese history post-1949, much like Warhol and many other pop artists reflected the history of the 1960s and ’70s in America. The majority of contemporary Chinese artists had no “oriental” or even “traditional” elements in their early works. These features marked a radical shift away from ink, landscape, and even the propaganda art of the past. China is now experiencing a critical period of understanding and living through social issues in society, both positive and negative. These new collectors of contemporary art have built a dialogue with the public comparable to collectors in the United States in the 1960s.

Conclusion

This paper highlights initiatives from both the public and private sectors in the development of contemporary history and identity through contemporary art in China. Government policies focusing on cultural development and the gradual



Fig. 11. Warhol’s Mao on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Credit: Raymond Rohne, 2011.

loosening of restrictions have created an atmosphere of individual memory, shifting away from past traditions and teachings. While the state is still an actor in regulating the arts in China, it must be understood that its role has greatly diminished in recent years. Most artists who were banned from showing work in the 1980s and '90s can now easily hold large-scale exhibitions; this also includes foreign artists. This gradual change has benefitted artists, collectors, and the general public, and ideas of heavy censorship and repression are less evident in everyday society. Contemporary collectors, not the CCP, have established their own interpretation of what constitutes a good exhibition, a notion that breaks away from the overgeneralized idea of the current political situation in China.

In my opinion, it is Chinese collectors of contemporary art who are helping to change the narrative of the cultural landscape in China in three important ways: constructing private museums, building platforms such as art fairs, and patronizing the arts. They are also engaging in a long-term dialogue with the general public through public viewing of private collections and art fairs, enabling those outside the art market to participate. This dialogue is meaningful because they are reaching a wider, younger audience.

I believe that it is the collectors of contemporary art, and not the government, who may have a lasting impact on contemporary Chinese culture. While their names might be forgotten in sixty years from now, as have many of the early collectors of pop art in the United States, it is the long-term implications for society that are of great significance. By breaking away from a one-dimensional display of traditional and state-approved works, these collectors in China are truly enabling and promoting long-term effects, such as encouraging the growth of freedom of expression, individuality, and creativity, in a nation that has suffered through trying periods in the past. I believe that, by cultivating these democratic principles in China through contemporary art, a new narrative of cultural memory in China will be built, similar to that in the United States as a result of the pop art movement and its subsequent collectors.

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and the development of privately founded contemporary art museums.

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