

INTRODUCTION

This volume is a companion to *China Pluperfect I: Epistemology of Past and Outside in Chinese Art*. Although it contains several examples taken from contemporary practices that exemplify the interactions between the new and the old as well as the inside and the outside in the arts of present-day China, it is not exclusively an illustration of the ideas presented in *China Pluperfect I* as the relationships with past and outside explained in its pages are not the only engine of creativity of the practices presented in this volume. Obviously, the past and the outside are by no means the only engine of creativity, or source of inspiration if we use a slightly more dated vocabulary, in the Chinese world today. Nor are they specific to the Chinese world. And yet, it is important, as was shown in the first volume, to scrutinize the modalities by which these concepts are used, expressed, modified, and understood. This will also help to clarify that art practitioners are not beholden exclusively to these concepts as they explore many other issues.

As for the term *plastician*, already explained in the first volume, it was used in the context of the methodology devised for *Hong Kong Soft Power*. Faced with the problems of understanding the Chinese art field of the 21st century, where art forms as varied as calligraphy and socially-engaged art practices co-exist without having anything in common, I relied on a method called a Piaget group. Devised in the context of poststructuralism and made popular in art history writing by Rosalind Krauss (born 1941), it clarifies the possible connections between these often tenuously related art forms (**Figure 0.1**). This method, which allows for a different arrangement of the usual and problematic classifications in “Eastern/Western” and “traditional/contemporary,” is a possible way to resolve the sense of aimlessness often felt when confronted with the field of art production where permanent novelties may sometimes produce rejection. If the ideas of “East” and “West” are historically unacceptable, a fact that should have been established

once and for all ever since the field of post-colonial studies was initiated by Edward Said with *Orientalism* in 1978, it was, however, important not to reject the “traditional/contemporary” dichotomy entirely, even though it was essential to avoid the usual polarization it often creates. Relying on a Piaget group, a structure that allows the categorization of objects and ideas within a network of relationships, it was possible to classify all the practices of the art field of Hong Kong in a system of connections, including practices that are often seen as completely unrelated. Even though this Piaget group was established with a great deal of personal and subjective choices (there was no claim to scientificity in this tactic), it made possible relating such widely different forms as calligraphy and socially-engaged art into the same field of interactions. To

really make sense of these new associations, they have to be contextualized within the institutions that either generated or supported them. This was done in the first chapter of *Hong Kong Soft Power* concerning this Special Administrative Region, but cannot regrettably be done so extensively in the following pages. This book written about China as a whole, after all, does not have the same purpose as *Hong Kong Soft Power*. Although no effort will be made to fit all the case studies of this volume into this Piaget group, it is still offered here as a reminder that the artworks, art practices, and uses of art analyzed in the following pages are understood as related within this network of nodes.

To go back to Chapter 4 of the first volume, dedicated to the work of calligraphy practitioner

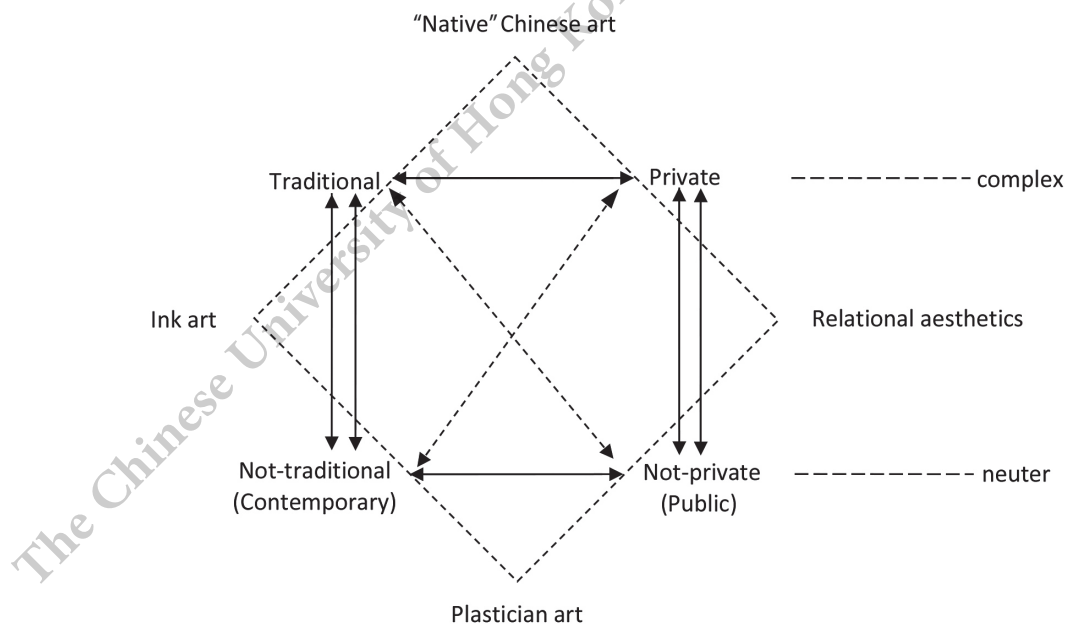


Figure 0.1 A Piaget group with the public/private and traditional/contemporary dichotomies. From *Hong Kong Soft Power*.

Wang Dongling 王冬齡 (born 1945), this Piaget group can help to situate his art practice in relation with other present-day art forms. Although aspects of Wang Dongling's works clearly belong to the "nativist" portion of the Piaget group, especially because of the ties calligraphy always keeps with antiquity in the minds of the practitioners of this ancient art, it makes more sense to put it in the "ink art" section because of the desire of this plastician, and many of his interpreters, to situate his performances into the realm of contemporary practices. "Ink art" was defined in *Hong Kong Soft Power* as any art practice that was consciously related to the past of Chinese art, thus allowing this realm to be opened to media and techniques not limited to the brush-ink. "Ink art" can thus be made with any kind of techniques, ranging from two-dimensional to three-dimensional means, interactive techniques or even conceptual ones. "Ink art" has thus become a complex field of art production nowadays and many of the questions it raised in contemporary Chinese culture have been approached in *Hong Kong Soft Power*. The final chapter of *China Pluperfect I: Epistemology of Past and Outside in Chinese Art* being dedicated to a practitioner of "ink art," it only makes sense to begin this companion volume with a related issue in the context of Hong Kong.

Chapter 1 will therefore observe the institutional treatment of "tradition" in Hong Kong, and the effort to historicize the local art history in the wider context of Chinese art. Chapter 2 will continue this exploration of aspects of artistic culture in Hong Kong through the analysis of what can be construed as a feminist reaction to the very male-dominated culture of the literati. This chapter will also address some of the questions raised by the future of the Hong Kong–Cantonese culture in a country increasingly dominated by a nationalistic agenda. Chapter 3

is about the emergence of an important cultural artefact in many aspects of Chinese culture both in the Mainland and in Hong Kong: the 12th-century painting, representing the ancient city of Kaifeng, titled *Peace Reigns over the River*, or *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (*Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河圖), has become a cultural motive that celebrates the return of China to an urban culture. Observing how that change manifested itself will also shed light on the following sections. Chapter 4 will analyze how a completely new urban environment generated its own artistic environment. The city of Shenzhen will offer an ideal testing ground to understand how the new and the old, the inside and the outside, interact in present-day China. The celebration of the urban, however, comes with a state-governed effort to revitalize the countryside. This effort is led by both economic and cultural means and should be understood in the dual context of a globalized economy and a celebration of the Maoist past characteristic of the Xi Jinping era. Continuing a reflection on the characteristics of the urban-rural dichotomy, Chapter 5 presents and contextualizes experimentations in art education and socially-engaged art in both the People's Republic and Hong Kong. Chapter 6 will explore some aspects of how past and outside manifest themselves in socially-engaged art practices in Hong Kong, and especially how they relate to very different socio-economic positions in a globalized and highly mobile world. This final chapter is by no means a conclusion to this volume, as many more studies on visual culture and art practices in the Chinese world must be conducted to further explore how past and outside manifest themselves and relate to other practices where these notions are not central.