

INTRODUCTION

This book is a reflection on concepts that manifest themselves everywhere in present-day Chinese culture in the form of dichotomies like traditional/contemporary and native/foreign, or, as the title indicates, past/present and inside/outside. These dichotomies underpin the whole field of cultural production and particularly the field of visual arts and visual culture. Depending on different kinds of participants, these dichotomies are applied according to various tactics and strategies. Tactics are understood here as practices enacted within various non-official institutions as well as the art market, while strategies are defined as being applied directly or indirectly by the state and/or governing bodies in the political realm of soft culture and inside official institutions. Both tactics and strategies have effects and consequences in the way visual art and visual culture are perceived and utilized. Considering how all these dichotomies are employed for various reasons within intense debates where solidly argued and supported ideas coexist with profoundly contradictory—and

sometimes xenophobic—arguments, this book is titled *China Pluperfect* for the following reasons.

Also called “past perfect simple,” Wikipedia describes pluperfect as “a type of verb form, traditionally treated as one of the tenses of certain languages, used in referring to something that occurred earlier than the time being considered, when the time being considered is already in the past.” Not “it was done before” (present perfect simple, which puts emphasis on the result) or “it has been done before” (present perfect progressive, which puts emphasis on the course or duration, not the result) but “it had been done before,” which implies that whatever is being considered is twice removed towards the past. Applying pluperfect to an action therefore implies two consecutive movements of distancing. The first distancing is made by considering that anything happening now has already happened before. It can be found, for instance, in this quest for proof that whatever has been considered to be inventions in the “West” had already been invented before in

China, like football or the stirrup. The fact that it is often historically true is almost inconsequential here: the only thing that matters for the people raising those questions is to show the superiority of China in the past, an attitude that translates into the notion of Chinese exceptionalism. The second distancing is made by considering that whatever discourse is being created about that thing in the past has also already been created before, thus making of the latter discourse something irrelevant and not worth considering. It can be found, for instance, in the very dismissive attitude of many scholars inside and outside Mainland China towards any use of methodologies and conceptual tools, like the ones created in the context of Euro-American structuralism/post-structuralism. In the eyes of these critics, these methodological tools should be rejected because they are coming from the “West.” For example, emphasizing the foreignness of the “West” in regard to China allows some art critics and art historians to rely on the old/new dichotomy in order to reject an analysis of ancient Chinese art through the methodological tools of gender studies—often reduced to the name of “feminism.”

One of the ideas addressed in this book is to show that it is perfectly justifiable to use these methodological tools for several reasons. The first and most simple reason is because these tools were developed, often in a philosophical or social science context, to be applicable to any human society and culture. The argument stating that, because they were made in Euro-America, they must be rejected outside of Euro-America should be dismissed. However, these reactions of rejection are often perfectly understandable and justifiable because of the colonial past of many Euro-American states. Obviously, some attempts at imposing certain methodologies and historical examples to profoundly different circumstances may be

felt as yet another colonial incursion. As a matter of fact, the questions raised by the international movement demanding a decolonization of university curricula will also be approached in the second volume of this book. In the end, however, rejecting certain methodologies and concepts because of their place of origin, without considering their adaptability to different circumstances, is simply a mistake. The second reason will be considered at length in this book and concern specifically China and Euro-America. It can be shown that the two epistemes started producing, around the 18th century, concepts that present many points of contact. If we accept that the European and Chinese epistemes have developed independently towards greater similarities over the last two to three centuries, it becomes possible to accept that the concepts developed in Euro-America are also adaptable to a Chinese context, and vice versa. The fact that Euro-American cultural theorists have come up with many ideas related to art and its understanding before the Chinese ones is easily explainable in historical terms, has nothing to do with being “better” and does not have to rely on any culturo-centrist ambitions.

With the advent of structuralism and then post-colonial studies, the civilizations of the so-called developing countries, those that were part of what was called not so long ago the Third World, were given as much importance as any other. This new methodological choice relied on the realization that no culture is more advanced than any other and that the traditional measures used to establish any kind of cultural dominance were never justifiable. For instance, the oral cultures of Africa or the Pacific islands are not inferior to the cultures of the text. Similarly, technological sophistication should not be seen as an indication of any kind of superiority. In his book *Race and History*,¹ the structuralist

anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) introduced the idea that “Western” culture was not superior to any other so-called “primitive” culture. In this seminal book, he explained that technological sophistication is only the result of favorable geographical conditions, conditions that made communications with large human groups and getting natural resources easier.² Isolated human groups like the Eskimo, for instance, did not have a similar level of technology as the Europeans not because of inherent shortcomings but because they were isolated geographically and could not exchange ideas and resources with other human groups. In the end, even the term “primitive” is meaningless, since it is often used in the sense of “underdeveloped,” “from a remote past.” There are no primitive cultures; all cultures are from the present and none of them is better than the others.

Keeping this in mind, it becomes obvious that the creation of new ideas must not be seen in a competitive context. In the same way, establishing historically which culture was the first to come up with a new concept or a new invention should not become the justification for any kind of misplaced cultural pride. For instance, if the Chinese have had for the longest time a relationship with science very different from the one that founded scientific research in Europe after the revolution brought by Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), and Isaac Newton (1642–1727), it does not mean that the Chinese were “worse” scientists than the Europeans but only that their material conditions and their episteme made them look for things that had a very different meaning in a European context. Very strangely, some of the best Euro-American sinologists are still disturbed by the so-called shortcomings of past Chinese science. Derk Bodde, for instance, in *Chinese Thought, Society, and Science*,

tried to itemize all the things that could have kept the Chinese from creating a Newtonian-type science,³ and had to conclude in a very baffled tone that he could not understand why that type of scientific attitude did not appear in China before the importation of Euro-American technology in the 19th century. The truth is that, in philosophy and aesthetics, and also in technology and science, the Chinese have produced many major and civilization-changing inventions and ideas a long time before the Europeans. But once again, this is not a competition. To conclude on that topic, it seems also important to silence the other argument against recent concepts not being relevant today: they would not be applicable because they are new and should not be used for the Chinese art of the past. One can easily argue that these concepts were also new to Euro-American art when they were elaborated, and it did not mean they could not be applied fruitfully to the Euro-American art of the past. In conclusion, the arguments against using the ideas of the likes of Michel Foucault (1926–1984), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), Edward Said (1935–2003), or Hal Foster (born 1955) to talk about Chinese art are generally groundless and probably coming from a misplaced nationalistic sentiment, a sentiment of the kind that breaks any possibility for exchanges and leads to crippling feelings of intellectual xenophobia.

This choice of title also expresses an almost automatic, albeit false, association of ideas that makes of “pluperfect” something more than perfect (pluperfect is, in French, literally “more than perfect”: *plus-que-parfait*). This ironic stance on the idea of perfection is aimed at shedding a critical light on two notions that have often poisoned the debates on the art field of Mainland China, cultural exceptionalism, and contemporaneity. The issue of contemporaneity will only be very briefly mentioned here as it will come back in

various forms in the book and particularly in the conclusion to this volume, with references to my previous book on the art ecology of Hong Kong.⁴ For the moment, suffice it to say that the idea of “contemporary” in the present debate about art has surprisingly never been really clarified, even though it seems to have replaced the concept of “postmodern” that was prevalent in the 1980s and up to the mid-1990s. In the Chinese art world, contemporary is often opposed to traditional in a dichotomy that forces participants to take side: defenders of tradition in art are generally vehemently opposed to “contemporary” art which is often reduced to something “Western.” In this context, there is very little communication between practitioners who have taken side in Mainland China. This issue is not as serious as it sounds however, and the only real problem is that this sharp divide is made particularly visible because of how vocal their participants are. The fact is that most art practitioners in China are still very aware of the fact that whatever divide there is between the past and the present, or between the contemporary and the traditional, is entirely porous and generally only exists for those who have decided, for ideological or political reasons, that it is there and unbridgeable.⁵

The idea of exceptionalism first appeared in relation to the United States as being unique among all other nations. Appearing very early in the history of that country, this was a theme approached, for instance, by the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1849) in his most famous book written between 1835 and 1840, *Democracy in America* (*De la démocratie en Amérique*). The idea of Chinese exceptionalism appeared very quickly after the first hopes that the Chinese economy would sooner or later overtake that of the United States were made public in Mainland China. In his article “Sino-speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the

Politics of History,” William A. Callahan separates mainstream views about China from that of specialist academics, making clear that the former is inconsequential to the latter but that these views tend to have more influence on policymakers and therefore on the future of the world. Callahan describes an author such as Martin Jacques, who wrote the 2009 bestseller *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, as a “new Orientalist” because he emphasizes China’s difference with all other countries, and especially those of the “West,” to make of this country an entity that will never assimilate into a world order. Jacques’ definition of China as an ancient “civilization state” would put that country entirely apart from the much younger “nation states” of the rest of the planet. Most academics have criticized Jacques’ book as being weak on historical research and too eager to follow what the Chinese state wants the rest of the world to believe. The discourse of Chinese exceptionalism also reinforces the idea of an “eternal China” that would always follow the same underlying principles, any perceived variation from these principles being only an incapacity of the rest of the world to identify them while hoping for change. These notions have also characterized other writers, among whom Liu Mingfu 劉明福 and his 2010 book *The China Dream: The Great Power Thinking and Strategic Positioning of China in the Post-American Age*. This very popular publication in China supports the development of a military rise of the People’s Republic whose destiny would be to take over the US and its global influence.⁶ Both books, and many others, have all defended Chinese exceptionalism.

Some art critics—generally, but not always, those defending “traditional” forms of art—have also used the idea of Chinese exceptionalism to defend the rejection of notions coming from the

outside, like the “West” or whatever culture that could be construed as being antithetical to the historical values of China. If some Chinese art critics are guilty of relying on “eternal China” or “China as the Other of the West” to support certain art forms construed as inherently Chinese, that attitude can also be found in the writings of some Euro-American theorists and art critics. They are not entirely wrong however, and when the philosopher François Jullien explains how some things are absent from Chinese art, like the nude for instance, he is right of course, but only because he is writing about literati art and assumes that it represents the entirety of Chinese painting.⁷ Concluding that “Chinese” painting does not portray the naked body is ignoring both professional image makers from the past, who had no hesitation producing erotic illustrations, and completely putting aside a very large portion of Chinese modernist art from the first half of the 20th century as well as many instances of contemporary Chinese art practitioners. The problem with cultural exceptionalism is that it creates hierarchies: a culture is represented as being at the top of the hierarchy of cultures. If we reject the unacceptable idea of a hierarchy of cultures however, the way Claude Lévi-Strauss did in *Race and History* where he proved that no culture is better or worse than any other, and exceptionalism makes no sense: every culture is an exception because every culture is different. Exceptionalism also generally includes a sense of purity, the idea being that only cultures that have not been polluted by the outside are worthy of occupying the top of the exceptionalist hierarchy. This is clearly a dangerous point of view that has proven to be deadly in the past. The fact is that no culture is ever pure—they are constantly exchanging, communicating, and as we shall see, misreading each other in productive ways. Sadly however, some forms of

exchanges have also proven destructive as in the case of colonialism and this book will also, from time to time, confront these situations.

Before moving on to a quick presentation of the structure of this volume, I need to explain that I will use the term “plastician” to describe artists engaged in the type of art practices generally called “contemporary.” In two of my previous books, *I Like Hong Kong: Art and Deterritorialization*⁸ and *Hong Kong Soft Power*, the word “plastician” was described in the following terms. To avoid the problems attached to the use of the word “artist” which was already in existence at a time art was a very different activity, the name coined in France in the 1980s was preferred: instead of “artist,” I will use the term “plasticien,” and even anglicize it by writing it “*plastician*.” This word also takes into consideration the fact that “artist” was far too often associated with the idea that art had to be painting or sculpture. Today’s *plasticians* often have no such specialization and are using an increasingly varied number of media, from painting to video, from sculpture to installation over a wide range of tactics. Most of the art makers considered in the first two chapters of *China Pluperfect I* belong to the past and they will be called “artist” most of the time. Only towards the end of this volume, with practitioners active closer to our times or still active, will the term “plastician” become a more logical choice.

This volume is based on research undertaken some time ago about art theory in China and Europe in the 18th century. Published in French under the title *Academicians and Literati—Comparative Analysis of Painting Theory in 18th-Century China and Europe*,⁹ this study avoided considering the entirety of Chinese painting theory as a single body of work, which is an issue with authors like George Rowley¹⁰ or even François Jullien who had no problem stating that a Song dynasty 12th-century text is presenting

exactly the same ideas as a mid-Qing dynasty 18th-century treatise. While analyzing the art theory written on painting in the cultural and political contexts of 18th-century China and Western Europe, it became quite clear that an extraordinary number of similarities had allowed the first fruitful intellectual and artistic exchanges between the two worlds to happen. It is these similarities, as well as the many differences that interfered and actually enriched the debate between the two worlds, that will be addressed in detail in this volume. By historicizing the present-day cultural debate about the old and the new as well as the inside and the outside in China, it became quickly obvious that only certain conceptual tools would clarify the reasons why these modifications within both worlds occurred and how they allowed for more interactions. In order to illustrate, with the work of a contemporary practitioner, some of the tactics rendered possible by the traveling ideas explored in volume one, the last chapter will be dedicated to calligraphy—an artform considered ancient and “traditional”—and performances of artist Wang Dongling 王冬齡 (born 1945) by situating them in a comparative approach to the understanding of the body in art making.

As a result, this volume developed around arguments that puts it squarely under the aegis of Michel Foucault and his archaeology of knowledge. Understanding the changes that took place at the deep level of episteme will help understand how cultural and artistic interactions developed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. These interactions were, of course, frequently interrupted through a long period of instability that had unavoidable consequences on the degree of exchanges possible between the two worlds. That period of instability was created by deeply adverse historical circumstances, like

the disasters caused by the Taiping rebellion, the Opium Wars, the semi-colonial situation of the early 20th century, the Japanese invasion, and the first decades of economic experimentations of the People’s Republic. Some of these periods however, in spite of the sufferings they created, can still be seen as periods of exchange with the outside, like the semi-colonial times of the Treaty Ports like Shanghai where an extraordinary form of modernism was created, as well as the first decades of the People’s Republic when artistic exchanges took place with the rest of the communist bloc. Although the scope of this book covers a period ranging from the late imperial period to the 21st century, it could not be expected to cover this entire time frame in details and readers will soon realize that a lot more could have been said concerning the early modernist period in China. This author hopes to deal with this extraordinarily rich moment in the art making and theorizing in China in another volume that will very certainly take more years to complete. In the meantime, I do believe that the ideas presented in *China Pluperfect I* are coherent enough to make up for this lack and will keep the reader interested enough to wait for this new book. A companion volume to *China Pluperfect I*, and titled *China Pluperfect II: Practices of Past and Outside in Chinese Art*, has been written at the same time as this volume and intends to contextualize many of the concepts presented here in the context of contemporary art practices in present-day China.

Relying on many texts taken from the discourse on art, ranging from art theory to art history and art criticism, this volume contains many notes that are not considered as mere references. Although some of the notes are just citations (indicating the source of a quote or a text), some of them contained essential information that should be read as supporting

the main text. As the volume evolved, it became clear that keeping these sections into notes would make reading the book too cumbersome and it was decided to put the main ones into inserts within the text. These inserts should therefore be understood as a form of hypertext, a structure where there is no difference of degree or level between the body of the text and the content of the inserts.

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