

## **Toward a General Critical Theory of Contemporary Art in the People's Republic of China:**

### **Defamiliarization, Contemporaneity, the Traces of Syncretic Neo-Confucianism and Oblique Resistances to Authority**

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Contemporary art (*dangdai yishu*) in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has since its inception during the late 1970s and 1980s typically involved the use of defamiliarization techniques and associated modes of presentation characteristic of European/American avant-garde modernist, postmodernist and contemporary art brought together with localized Chinese imagery, cultural thinking and practice. Artistic defamiliarization includes, *inter alia*, the disjunctive use of collage-montage, assemblage and appropriation, all of which excise images, texts and sounds from their usual settings before placing them within others whereupon they take on supplementary significances in addition to their generally accepted meanings. Exemplary of this bringing together of defamiliarization and localized Chinese imagery and culture in the PRC are video artworks by Zhang Peili such as *Happiness* (2006) which render the significance of short excerpts taken from Chinese propaganda films of the 1960s and 1970s increasingly uncertain to the point of almost complete meaninglessness by presenting them on repeating loops (Gladston 2019). (Figure 1)



Figure 1: Zhang Peili, *Happiness (Xingfu)* (2006). Two-channel video (PAL), sound/colour, 6'39". © Boers-Li Gallery, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist and Boers-Li Gallery

Artistic defamiliarization has been subject to differing interpretations over time. From the standpoint of dialectical-rationalist discourses associated with early 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde modernism, defamiliarization has the capacity to reveal repressed social realities by shocking viewers out of their existing ideological preconceptions (Brecht 2018) and/or to rework the everyday along the more radically playful lines of revolutionary artistic expression (Trotsky 1972). From the standpoint of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century poststructuralist postmodernism, defamiliarization deconstructs supposedly authoritative meanings by demonstrating their inherent contradictions, disunity and unsustainability (Owens 1980). In the case of poststructuralist postmodernism there is a suspension of oppositional avant-garde rationality in favour of invocations of a profoundly subversive semiotic indeterminacy – beyond authorial intentions and the control of readers - known as ‘post-criticism’ (Ulmer 1985). The abiding traces of which can now be found in relation to transgender and other related forms of non-binary theory and practice (e.g. Lemma 2021).

Despite poststructuralist postmodernism’s suspension of categorical meaning, there is a persistent – and incompatible - post-Enlightenment belief within the international Western/ized artworld that art can maintain some sort of progressive distancing from its targets of criticism (Habermas 1981). In the case of poststructuralism that distancing becomes qualified as one of dislocation/disjuncture — that is to say, of being out of joint: a dislocating disturbance of rather than a complete breaking with a usual/conventional state, situation or place. As the art historian Stephen Melville describes it,

Deconstruction presents itself as, in general, a practice of reading, a way of picking things up against their own grain, or at their margins, in order to show something about how they are structured by the very things they act to exclude from themselves, and so more or less subtly to displace the structure within which such inclusions seem plausible or necessary. Like an analyst listening to an analysand, deconstruction attends to the other that haunts, organizes and disorganizes, a speech that takes itself to be in control of its meanings and identity. (Melville 1998 [1990]: 401-402)

Melville continues,

The term *deconstruction* itself was coined by [Jacques} Derrida as, at least in part, an interpretation of a nest of terms in the philosophic writings of Martin Heidegger that had been variously rendered ‘destruction’ and ‘retrieve.’ With these terms Heidegger attempted to name a relation to his tradition that was at once radically critical *of* and profoundly attached *to* it; (Melville 1998 [1990]: 402)

This is not the radical breaking with the past envisaged (notionally) by progressive rationalist modernism, but instead a more complex entanglement of the traces of such rationalism with an occluded (implausible/unnecessary) and inherent non-rationalism. Or, as the Art Historian Donald Preziosi puts it, something akin to the ‘situation of the child discovering the fallibility of its parents and remaining committed to loving and caring for them whilst learning to comprehend, to think through and with, their contradictory behaviours’ (Preziosi 1998: 397).

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a distinct moving away from deconstructionist postmodernist uncertainty/indeterminacy and a return toward more digestible forms of oppositional criticism associated with socially engaged art and activism (Kester 1998; Adelphi University 2023), albeit often sieved through the spectral non-binarism of the deconstructionist turn. Socially engaged art and activism seek to intervene directly in real-world settings outside conventional studio, gallery and museum spaces as a means of raising awareness of social injustice, building communities of resistance and bringing about positive socio-political change. Such works are typically intended to support social diversity, equity and inclusion. Forms of socially engaged contemporary art and activism have become established in the PRC in recent years often in conjunction with government-initiated programmes of urban and rural revitalization (Ou 2020)

Contemporary artists have also repurposed modernist and postmodernist defamiliarization techniques and media, turning them into means of conveying readily understandable politicized messages. Examples of which include the work of Banksy and other street artists. The urgency of that repurposing is understandable given continuing and even heightened social inequities regarding race, gender, class and sexuality as well as the increasingly deleterious global impact of climate change. In contrast to which the concerns of poststructuralist postmodernism with semiotic indeterminacy may appear to be little more than scholastic fiddling while the planet, quite literally, burns and/or an unwelcome all too readily usable means of undercutting supposedly self-evident truths. Added to which are perceived associations with more recent Trump-era debates related to the concept of ‘post-truth.’

Repurposing of this sort chooses to wilfully overlook the disjunctive effects of deconstruction, which according to Derridean theory/practice are not so much a critical methodology or mode of analytical reading as an immanent and eminently observable quality of linguistic signification: *différance* - which is the very movement that gives rise to meaning and the continual negation of its absolute authority through the productivity of diverse readings (Derrida 1984, 1-27). Contemporary art has continued to employ the characteristic tropes of modernism and postmodernism – which give it definition as being of the ‘present’ – while at the same time returning to limited - conceptually unilateral - ideas of representation that precede the deconstructionist critical turn.

It is also important to view the significance of artistic defamiliarization in relation to post-Cold War globalization. Post-Cold War globalization is characterized by an intensified social and cultural interconnectivity (Tomlinson 1999), seen by some as the basis for a post-capitalist/post-West world without geopolitical borders (e.g., Solomon 2020). Post-Cold War Globalization has also brought about a rapid, historically unprecedented, tilting of socioeconomic, political, and cultural power toward the east and south. This tilting has re-/energized and enabled the upholding and dissemination of socio-political and cultural outlooks divergent from European/American post-Enlightenment conceptions of modernity and postmodernity (Foster, Krauss, Buchloh and Bois 2004, 599), resulting in what has been described as a global condition of antinomic ‘unity in difference’ (Jameson 1998, 50-72;

Osborne 2013) referred to in some scholarly contexts as ‘contemporaneity’ (Smith, Enwezor and Condee 2008). Indicative of which are sometimes fractious debates related to questions of identity and decoloniality (e.g., Mignolo 2018). The seemingly intractable factionalism of contemporaneity (dis-/unity in difference) has paradoxically been amplified still further during the last decade by the de-globalizing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to renewed world-wide tensions and conflicts regarding geopolitical sovereignty and associated differences in political ideology.

The antinomic conditions of contemporaneity, raise significant questions regarding the critical interpretation of culture. While it is important to recognize culture’s demonstrable heterogeneity from the point of view of a current leftist emphasis on diversity downstream of poststructuralist postmodernist turn, there is also a necessary ethical acknowledgement of constructions of culture that diverge from and/or are decolonially resistant to European/American post-Enlightenment discourses including those of poststructuralist postmodernism. Once (notionally) dominant Western/ized discursive paradigms are now in the process of being eclipsed by a constellation of competing, decidedly siloed socio-political and cultural concerns.

Contemporary art’s bringing together of defamiliarization with localized imagery, cultural thinking and practice in mainland China has been interpreted internationally - in accordance with poststructuralist postmodernist discourses - as deconstructive of authority (e.g., Cacchione 2017). In the PRC such readings are heavily overwritten however not only by a pervasive cultural conservatism, an increasing emphasis on the commercialization of art and institutionalized limits on freedom of expression - all of which stymie open criticism of authority - but also an ingrained desire for social harmony running throughout contemporary Chinese society and politics as a habitus reflective of classical Confucian values – viz. Beijing’s upholding of neo-Confucianist principles alongside socialist ideology in pursuit of a harmonious Chinese society and the ‘China Dream’ (Bell 2010). In the PRC, deconstructivism is consequently something of an anathema, it’s insights too uncertain and too disruptive for public consumption.

Confucianism is a pragmatic-idealist school of thought which aspires rationally toward harmonious - just and moral - relationships between humanity and divine authority as well as between individuals and groups within a stable, hierarchically ordered society. Practices associated with Confucianism - including, among other things, study of and careful reflection on the past, filial piety (*xiao*—respect for elders/others), self-cultivation (*xiu yang*), and proper confirmatory rites (*li*) - are considered fundamental to China’s historical cultural-intellectual identity. Confucianism downplays metaphysical speculation in preference to a concentration on how temporal life might be best lived and governed.

Despite its idealistic aspirations toward social stability, Confucianism is far from being a monolithic and unchanging school of thought. Its principles and practices have been continually debated and adapted to changing historical circumstances (Davies 2007). From the Tang dynasty (618-907) Confucianism sought to incorporate Daoist and Buddhist principles to form a durable and constantly evolving syncretic body of thought and practice referred to since

then as neo-Confucianism. Buddhism spread from India to China during the mid-second century and was assimilated to Chinese culture over the next one hundred years. That assimilation took place principally through the work of Chinese scholars and translators who adapted Buddhism's core belief in the obviation of human suffering through meditation and non-desiring enlightenment to Daoist cosmological principles (Mitchell 2002, 180-181).

Confucianism's pragmatic-idealist vision of a harmonious society is underpinned by a non-rationalist form of dualistic thinking immemorial to Chinese culture signified by the conceptual pairing of *yin-yang* – respectively that which is masculine and turned toward the light and that which is feminine and turned toward the darkness. The pairing of *yin-yang* – which appears in the classical Confucian text the *I-Ching* (Book of Changes) before going on to inform the foundational text of Daoism, the (Laozi 2000) – signifies a dynamic cosmological reciprocity between seeming opposites with the potential to arrive at states of harmonious metaphysical as well as temporal unity. Confucianism can thus be described, most emphatically in its manifestation as syncretic neo-Confucianism, not simply as rationalist but as rationalist/non-rationalist in outlook.

Although direct comparisons with poststructuralist postmodernist thinking and practice are, as Chow (1993) indicates, sorely misplaced, syncretic Confucianist rationality/non-rationality is nevertheless structurally akin to the Derridean performative conception of *différance*, whereby deconstructive differing-deferring between signs is both the very means of signification and its continual undoing. Confucian-Daoist non-/rationality and the poststructuralist postmodernist envisaging of *différance* (Crawford 1984) each suspend any notion of absolute separation – the former with a view to desired states of totalizing harmonious reciprocity between all things, and the latter serially incomplete linguistic definition and disjuncture.

Confucianism does not simply aspire to a durable social harmony. It also incorporates ideas of resistance to overweening authority in the service of a perfectible Chinese state. The principal exponent of such resistance is the scholar Zhuangzi (Zhuang Zhou) (fourth century BCE), who upholds the non-rationalist Daoist principle of *wu-wei* (effortless action in spontaneous accordance with the way of Nature) - a humanistic 'being-in-the world', rather than to 'be in the being of God' (Imamichi 1981) - as a corrective to unduly rationalizing legalistic authoritarianism to which Confucianism is susceptible (Chuang Tzu [Zhuangzi] 2007; Loy 1985). Forms of oblique resistance to authority adopted by imperial China's Confucian administrative class - known as the *Shi* in China and the Literati in Western contexts - include withdrawal from public life as well as irrational behaviour and drunkenness, feigned or otherwise. Such oblique resistance is exemplified by the actions of the so-called Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove who retreated from their administrative positions to debate Daoist ideas and engage with Daoist inspired artistic practices as a sign of displeasure with political conflict during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Asia Society – no posting date given). It therefore becomes possible to see Daoism as a reciprocally conjoined esoteric supplement to Confucianism that both sustains *and* critically qualifies the exoteric authority of the latter.

Cognate forms of rationalist/non-rationalist criticality are discernible in relation to the work of contemporary artists in China which intentionally incorporates aspects of Confucian-literati

tradition. Performance works by the artist Xiao Lu making use of materials traditional to Confucian-literati ink and brush painting and calligraphy, for example, can be interpreted as demurring from the patriarchalism of historical and present-day Chinese culture (Gladston and Howarth-Gladston 2019). (Figure 2) Here Lu intervenes bodily - as a woman - in the conjunction of ink and paper whose aesthetic designation as part of Confucian tradition is pervasively gendered in accordance with the Daoist conception of *yin-yang*. Lu appeals instead to *yin-yang* as a unifying locus of social equality and harmony.

Works by the artist Fu Xiaotong involving the use of *Xuan* paper – a traditional support, along with silk, for Confucian-literati ink-and-brush painting – which depict mountain landscapes and water through subtractive pricking techniques rather than the additive use of ink can be interpreted in a similar way (Gladston and Howarth-Gladston 2018). (Figure 3) In this case, (supposed) feminine absence supervenes over masculine presence. Viewed in this specific cultural light, Zhang Peili's video looping becomes open to interpretation not simply as a variation on modernist and postmodernist defamiliarization but also by parallaxic turns as resonant with meditation on the illimitable meanings of Buddhist *kōans*.



Figure 2 – Xiao Lu, *One (Yi)* (2015). Performance, rice paper, water, black ink, glass bottle and plastic bucket, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.





Figure 3: Fu Xiaotong, *723,000* (2014). Handmade *Xuan* paper, 116 x 75cm. Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art and the artist.

For those looking in from the peripheral positioning of a Western/ized liberal democratic standpoint the critical function of Chinese contemporary art may, of course, seem unduly weak because of its lack of distance from prevailing authority. However, this is to overlook the specific localized conditionalities of artistic production, display and reception in China both now and historically. In dynastic-imperial China and the contemporary PRC high-art was/is discursively bound up with social governance and the upholding of Confucian ideas of metaphysical and temporal harmony. That discursive binding together is certainly anathema to Western post-Enlightenment discourses and their envisaging of some sort of effective critical separation between art and society. It does, though, incorporate a potential for oblique criticism of authority codified historically by syncretic, Daoist/Buddhist inflected, neo-Confucianism.

Aspirations towards harmony not only inform the possibility of oblique localized resistance but also, a deleterious controlling impact on contemporary culture and society in China associated with the coincidence of political and commercial interests. Chinese contemporary art's use as a means of criticizing authority may indeed appear to be entirely foreclosed by its long-term entanglement with discursively dominant sociopolitical authority in the PRC. However, that perception is heavily dependent on institutional Western/ized conceptions of some sort of necessary critical distancing between art and its objects of criticism. In Chinese cultural-linguistic contexts there is another historical view of the critical relationship between art and society; one that situates artistic expression and aesthetical feeling as part of a more general syncretic neo-Confucian sense of 'being-in-the-world' associated with Zhuangzi's historical injunction against overweening authority and, therefore, as indeterminately somewhere and nowhere between an upholding of authority and oblique resistance intended to

preserve the justice, morality and harmony of the Chinese state – a practice closer to (constructive) critique than (oppositional) criticism (or, perhaps more fittingly, a reciprocal commingling of the two).

It should also be observed that Western/ized post-Enlightenment ideas of critical distancing – consistent through modernism, postmodernism and contemporaneity – are misleading. As numerous commentators including Debord (1967) and Bürger (1974) indicate, radical cultural thinking and practice have been subject to continual and accelerating recuperation by mainstream society. Where once it was possible to envisage an avant-garde culture always pointing progressively toward the future, since the 1950s the aspirations of the historical and neo- avant-gardes and those of the socio-political mainstream in liberal-democratic contexts have become ever more conspicuously entwined making contemporary art arguably little more than a controlling aspect of late capitalist spectacle. This entwining may be seen as a triumph of liberal-democratic progressivism, but it also reveals the idea of a durable critical distancing of art from authority to be a myth. Critical opposition to authority remains, despite the justifiable vehemency of contemporary socially engaged art and activism, thoroughgoingly self-deconstructing.

In Western/ized liberal-democratic contexts contemporary artists have now effectively reneged on the more pervasively unsettling implications of defamiliarizing avant-garde modernism and poststructuralist postmodernism to pursue what they see as an urgent, starkly oppositional intervention with established authority. In conjunction with which there has been an ushering in of politically correct views veering ever more strongly toward the authoritarian that are supported by supposedly liberal public institutions.

In this problematic regard, neo-Confucianism's vision of artistic resistance to authority – poised as it is between support for and ethical resistance to authority – is perhaps a more 'realistic' prospect. China's intellectual and cultural traditions are adaptable on their own terms to changing circumstances. Moreover, they demonstrate a singular capacity for syncretic reciprocity not only regarding the durable historical conjunction of Confucianism with Daoism but also, as Chinese contemporary art shows us, the assimilation of modernist, postmodernist and contemporary Western/ized cultural thinking and practice. In the specific case of Chinese contemporary art there is also a discernible shuttling between syncretic Confucianism's aspirations toward a harmonious, just and moral, society and unsettling deconstructionist interventions with authority without a simple adherence to one over the other. A neo-syncretic shuttling of this sort is both in keeping with Daoist-inflected Confucianism's non-rationalist view of an enfolding reciprocity between differing ontological states and deconstructivism's inherent capacity to be deconstructed - recontextualized and remotivated - beyond itself (Spivak 1976, xvii).

The ostensible choice between Chinese contemporary art's entanglement with authority in the PRC and the critical potential of its signature adoption of defamiliarization is not, of absolute necessity, a zero-sum game. The sociopolitical and cultural conditionalities of China and Western/ized liberal democracies represent distinct, mutually resistant visions of humanity. They are also relatively incomplete with respect to one another. Oblique Confucianist



resistance and deconstructionist post-criticism are perhaps unreconcilable but can nevertheless be seen to resonate productively regarding the possibilities of artistic criticality across historical (diachronic) and cultural (synchronic-spatial) boundaries.

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