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The aesthetics of export in Chinese art outside China

ABSTRACT

This article counters the prevailing and frequently disparaging economic and diplomatic associations of the term 'export' in discussions of contemporary Chinese art, and especially those artists who live and work outside China. Drawing attention to the previously underacknowledged political, social and affective aspects of this term, the article offers a new reading of foundational works by Huang Yong Ping (1954–2019), resident in Paris from 1989 until his death; Ni Haifeng (b. 1964), resident in Amsterdam since 1994; and Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957), resident in Tokyo from 1986 to 1995, then subsequently in New York. The article also highlights a concern shared by these artists with the persistence of colonial legacies in contemporary global capital, the connections uniting past and present modes of production and consumption and the essentializing impulses of chinoiserie, Pan-Asianism and related cultural trends. The combined study of these themes is intended to introduce a renewed focus on contexts of display and interpretation, and material, subjective and affective dimensions of meaning, to our understanding of these canonical works.

KEYWORDS

exchange
trade
colonialism
chinoiserie
Huang Yong Ping
Ni Haifeng
Cai Guo-Qiang

The term 'export' has appeared with some frequency in discussions of Chinese art outside China, generally signifying a capitulation to the utilitarian logic of the merchant and the diplomat. There is a tendency to differentiate 'export art' from an allegedly more authentic avant-garde, yet the complex conceptual frameworks generated by the largely *émigré* artists cited as case-studies far exceed this antagonistic art-historical model. This article seeks to uncover

three such frameworks shaped by Huang Yong Ping (1954–2019), resident in Paris from 1989 until his death; Ni Haifeng (b. 1964), resident in Amsterdam since 1994; and Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957), resident in Tokyo from 1986 to 1995, when he moved to his current home in New York. These artists are united not only by their experiences of travelling and living outside China but also by their shared focus on the persistence of colonial legacies in contemporary global capital, the points of connection which they identify between past and present modes of production and consumption and the extent to which they collapse time and distance by interrogating the essentializing impulses underlying chinoiserie, Pan-Asianism and other such cultural trends.

The aspects of export identified in the works discussed, which can be summarized as the political (Huang), social (Ni) and affective (Cai), are intended not to supplement but to complement those of the economic and the diplomatic, expanding on the discussion of several key themes in current scholarship. These notably include an enduring and commendable acknowledgment of colonial power relations, a highly nuanced reflection on lived experiences of travel and translation and a clear recognition of each artist's participation in larger geopolitical spheres of action. Building on existing lines of scholarly inquiry, this article introduces a new focus on the materials that Huang, Ni and Cai have used to express their aims and the specific contexts of display and interpretation in which their works have been shown, recovering sometimes neglected tangible, subjective and affective dimensions of meaning through close visual and comparative analysis. This approach draws inspiration from *Laboratory on the Move* (2006–07), a collaboration between Ni and Dutch art historian Kitty Zijlmans that consciously paired the intellectual process of 'abstraction based on […] fact finding, on recognition and confirmation' cultivated by the scholar with the 'practice-oriented basis in doing, acting, [and] building' followed by the artist (Ni and Zijlmans 2013: 178–79), thereby generating a more nuanced and grounded approach to creative research. Emphasis is placed throughout on visual, material, spatial and affective dimensions of meaning, drawing out those elements of each work which provide the most potent heuristics for understanding the dynamics of export.

EXPORT ART

Two rhetorical perspectives tend to predominate when concepts of export are applied to artistic practice: the economic and the diplomatic. Proponents of the former regard export as a material loss for financial gain, conceded in pursuit of new markets or profit-driven capitulation to foreign interest. Those who endorse the latter prioritize the ideological objectives of spreading cultural influence beyond the borders of the nation state. These points of view are not mutually exclusive and often jointly deployed. Both have long been evident in critical discussions of Chinese artists who live and work outside of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Australian sinologist Geremie R. Barmé, for example, reflecting in 1993 on the 'artful marketing' of Chinese creative products, noted an overriding ambition shared by many artists to *zou xiang shijie* ('go international'), creating 'export-quality goods [to] prove themselves on the world stage'. He took a largely pessimistic view of this trend, associating it with 'a cynicism [that] derides self-respect and […] a shallow and callous wish to manipulate […] the international art market'. Many critics in China, Barmé observed, would likely have agreed, 'fearful that overseas buyers [would] lavish wealth and fame on the undeserving' much like 'colonial powers of the past,

[carrying] off the spoils', while the artists involved had 'moved only marginally away from the status of the "primitive pet"' (Barmé 1993: 69–75).

Hong Kong-based artist and curator Oscar Ho, almost a decade later, attributed this situation to a curtailing of domestic opportunities for exhibition and critical debate, exacerbated by export-driven market reforms: 'The official message was clear: just make money and nothing else'. The 'marriage of communism with capitalism', he argued, had fostered 'a new form of export art' that conflated creative expression with merchandise available to the highest bidder (Ho 2000: 50–51). Like Barmé, Ho attributed a portion of the blame to international curators, collectors and connoisseurs who offered an insatiable audience for Chinese artistic products. By 2006, however, these enterprising investors had been priced out of the market by a spectacular inflation, which Oliver Barker, then head of Sotheby's Contemporary Art division, described in extractive terms as 'a gold rush' (Barker cited in McGee 2006: 40). Sotheby's had opened its first New York-based sales dedicated to contemporary Asian art in March of that year, followed in November by the addition of this category to the Christie's auction in Hong Kong. Works by Chinese artists sold for record-breaking prices, provoking a media frenzy (Barboza 2006: n.pag.). The spectacle of neo-colonial powers 'carrying off the spoils' which Barmé envisioned had, it seemed, come to pass.

A comparable antipathy towards export as an economic or diplomatic phenomenon has animated the theoretical frameworks developed by some of the most respected figures in the study of Chinese art. Hou Hanru, for example, has at times argued for a distinction between genuine and ersatz avant-gardists, which mirrors their respective contact with the global art world. In an early statement of this theme in 1996, he acknowledged that opportunities to show or sell overseas 'could encourage creative freedom', yet, like Barmé, argued that this not only ceded authority to '[the] exotic taste of […] western consumers', but endorsed '[an] ideology that combines a market value system with neo-nationalism'. Hou therefore sought to champion the proponents of 'the *real* avant-garde [who know] the necessity for innovations in art language [and for] alternatives to ideological propaganda' (Hou 1996: 44, original emphasis). In 2005, immediately before the record-breaking auctions noted above, this dichotomy remained evident in much of Hou's commentary. While acknowledging the extent to which 'fever for everything […] Chinese' had catapulted the PRC into 'one of the most attractive centres of attention […] in the global art scene', he cautioned that many artists had continued 'to transform cultural activity into commodities [only to] satisfy the expectations of institutions and the market' (Hou 2005: 96–97). Those who prospered, 'the new elite [who benefit] most from the process of economic liberation', found fame with works '[that] are photogenic rather than conceptually, intellectually, politically, and ethically engaging' (Hou 2011: 8–9). In these cited publications, the logic of export emerges as one of abject materialism and capitulation to foreign taste, driven by hunger for profit at whatever cost.

Comparable arguments have been made by Gao Minglu, who initially gained fame as the curator responsible for the first survey of Chinese contemporary art in the United States, *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art* (1998). In the text published to accompany that exhibition, Gao decried the extent to which 'the art world [had been] dominated by a concern for commercial success [while] critical criteria [were] discarded'. Artists of the 1990s, he contended, had abandoned 'avant-garde mythmaking', entering '[a] relationship [of] dependency […] based on economic infiltration', which had brought them to 'a crossroads,

faced with either jumping into […] the new middle class [or] continuing to be an independent intellectual' (Gao 1998a: 165, 1998b: 21, 28). Again, a line is drawn here between the export market, as a revival of colonial exploitation, and the avant-gardism of artists who turn their gaze inward, away from the allure of the global. Gao outlined this distinction with greater clarity in 2012, reflecting on the moment when he believed the artistic mainstream had strayed. He dated the point of no return to 1996, a watershed year marking a final resignation to 'the material benefits that accrue to artists, collectors, critics, businesspeople, and [the] owners of organisations [involved] in the making and selling of art'. Abandoning earlier visions of social progress, from this moment 'art became subject to the opportunism of the market […] devoid of content, stylised and fashion driven'. Artists aimed only to profit '[in] a world in which the rich competed savagely for reputation [in] the art market [as a] brutal [conduit] for the upgrading of social class', while overseas collectors regarded 'art as capital and […] artworks as though they were stock' (Gao 2012: 210–13, 218).

Elaborating on these critical frameworks for the circulation of Chinese art in the global market, Australian curator Melissa Chiu productively positioned the concept of export within a broader context of circulation and commodification in *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (2006). In this innovative study of *émigré* artists, one of the first to address their work in detail and depth, Chiu seeks to redress the tendency to position such artists on '[a] binary axis of homeland and site of settlement', which, she argues, ignores 'the interstices between cultures or the new experiences of diasporic subjects'. Focusing on individual adaptation to various national contexts, in *Breakout*, Chiu presents a nuanced account of 'Chineseness as an identity […] altered by different cultural environments' (Chiu 2006: 11–13, 36). Rather than distinguishing artists who produce for foreign markets from those who critique domestic conditions, she exposes the mutual implication of these categories. The most valuable aspect of her analysis, however, is her application of the idea of 'transexperience' conceived by artist-traveller Chen Zhen (1955–2000). Chiu defines this as a principle of fluid motion, cumulative growth and flexible adaptation '[that] allows us to interpret the work of Chinese artists as an evolving identity […] constantly changing [rather than] swinging pendulum-like between two mutually exclusive terms' (Chiu 2006: 10, 45).

Chen first defined transexperience in the unorthodox yet befitting form of an imagined dialogue between himself and his fictional alter-ego Zhu Xian. Alongside reflections on travel, Chineseness and East/West binaries, he linked this concept with the verb *zou*, generally translated as 'movement' or 'to walk', but implying a wide range of meanings from searching, wandering and escape, to abandonment, desertion and even seclusion. These associations came together in his philosophical vision of a 'spiritual running-away [from] one's own "cocoon," and [a desire to] to "break away from one's own self"' (Chen 1998: 1, 82n2). A correlation could be noted between transexperience and travel, yet the term describes more than physical displacement, implying a state of mind for which travel can be an important catalyst but is not an essential condition:

> [Transexperience] does not mean the outward signs of an individual having travelled all over the world [but] a type of internal 'loneliness of spirituality and the overlapping of experiences,' a […] 'cultural homelessness' [whereby] you do not belong to anybody yet are in possession of everything.
>
> (Chen 1998: 1–5, 82n2)

Chiu may have been at least partially inspired to integrate this concept within her analysis by a dialogue between Hou and Gao published in the exhibition text for *Inside/Out*, which positions transexperience as an heir to the understanding of 'third space' coined by postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha:

> **GM**: Bhabha uses the term 'third space' to turn what [Edward] Said considered [to be] the opposition [of] East and West into a kind of interactive 'in-betweenness' [which] can help in understanding the work of the Chinese artists overseas.
>
> **HH**: We are now aware that cultural identity is a shifting process [which] goes beyond the traditional […] Bhabha reminds us that cultural identity has always been a changing [and] performative process [while] the thinking and work of [an artist such as] Chen [who draws] on his 'transexperiences' [can open] new spaces through negotiations with contemporary cultural reality.
>
> (Hou and Gao 1998: 184–85, 187–89)

Bhabha's assertion of a proximate space created in linguistic or textual communication offers a convenient locus for situating cultural identity beyond the fixity of essentialist stereotypes. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha defined this as the 'ambivalent space of enunciation' between the source of a statement (a speaker or writer), the subject of that statement and its receiver (a listener or reader) where meaning is produced in an 'act of interpretation […] neither [of] the one nor the other', but inclusive of various subject positions (Bhabha [1994] 2004: 52–56). The meaning of a statement is therefore neither stable nor fixed, but open to translation and transformation in the process of its transmission between subjects, who are thereby also opened to the possibility of change, adaptation or incorporation of differing perspectives.

While Hou and Gao may regard those artists who appear to prioritize market appeal over critical substance with some derision, their reference to the more complex models of cultural exchange proposed by Bhabha and Chen indicates the extent to which their visions of global circulation are not as dualistic as they seem. As close friends and supporters of many of the artists featured in *Breakout*, they frequently address larger concepts of mobility, migration and diasporic identity in their critical statements. The analysis of works by Huang, Ni and Cai in this article is intended as a response to such statements, emphasizing the extent to which all three artists have shaped additional conceptual models of export beyond those of the merchant and the diplomat, implied but not extensively theorized as such by Hou, Gao and Chiu, among other writers on this topic.

THE POLITICS OF EXPORT

Many of those who have decried the economic opportunism and diplomatic instrumentalism of 'export art' name Huang Yong Ping as an ideal case-study for a more independent avant-gardist artistic practice. The conceptual models of export arising from Huang's artistic practice, however, are more nuanced than such characterizations imply, actively foregrounding the extent to which profit and power cannot be separated from the politics of global trade. In *Breakout*, Chiu notes two installations created in 1997 as exemplary expressions of this, in both of which Huang uses porcelain and other commodities to expose the connections between historic and contemporary commerce (Chiu 2006: 127–29). For *Da Xian: The Doomsday* (1997) (Figure 1), created for

Parisien(ne)s (7 February–23 March 1997) at the Camden Arts Centre, London, Huang filled three large porcelain bowls with English packaged foods. The bowls were ornamented in the manner of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century export ware with images of European and North American warehouses, likely those in Guangzhou. In *VOC* (1997) (Figure 2), created for De Appel Centre for Contemporary Art, Amsterdam (1 November 1997–5 January 1998), Huang paired wooden tea chests and cardboard television boxes with two oversized merchant's scales and a chinoiserie-inspired dinner service.

Figure 1: Huang Yong Ping, installation view Da Xian *at Camden Arts Centre, 1997. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2022.*

Figure 2: Huang Yong Ping, installation view VOC *at De Appel Centre, 1997. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2022; De Appel, Amsterdam. Photographer: © T & R Henderson.*

Both works draw an explicit parallel between the long history of mercantilist colonial exploitation associated with British and Dutch imperialism and the contemporary circulation of global capital. This is most evident in *VOC*, the title of which was rendered by the artist as an inverted version of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) or Dutch East India Company logo. Huang used the same logo, in its correct orientation, to brand the tea chests stacked against one wall of the gallery, while the television boxes piled against the facing wall were emblazoned with the more familiar logo of contemporary Dutch electronics manufacturer Philips. In the exhibition text, Hou explains that the inspiration for this pairing arose from Huang's surprise on realizing that Philips had sponsored a display of ceramics in what was then the VOC Gallery of the Rijksmuseum. Hou further noted that the 'valley passage' between the stacked chests and boxes evoked comparison with the street outside De Appel, the Nieuwe Spiegelstraat, 'full of antique shops that trade in Oriental and African objects […] decorated using the most cliched of colonial representations' (Hou 1998: 66–68). The effect of such analogies, as Chiu and Hou explain, was to contrast 'colonial exploitation of Asian countries with the contemporary use of Asia as a cheap manufacturing base for multinational organisations', demonstrating the affinities between the imperial project and the expansion of global capital (Chiu 2006: 128; Hou 1998: 68).

In *Da Xian*, the imperialism of the VOC is signalled not only by the images of company warehouses that adorn the porcelain bowls but also by the 'best before' date of 1 July 1997 stamped on the packages they contain – the date chosen for transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain to the PRC. In conversation with Gavin Jantjes in 1998, Huang remarked that he had intended the bowls to resemble the northern and southern hemispheres, with the ensigns of the warehouses '[giving an] impression of the earth wrapped in all these flags […] at the height of [colonialism]' (Huang cited in Jantjes 1998: 113). He elaborated on this in 2005, in the text accompanying his first retrospective at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, writing that the bowls 'give the impression of the world being wrapped up by Western forces and reflect the imagination and the myth of colonialism in the nineteenth century [as] a peaceful era in the Orient under the protection of colonisers' (Huang 2005: 45).

Jantjes noted an analogy between this 'wrapping of the world' and the packaged foods piled high in each bowl, remarking that the carefully chosen expiration date served to remind that this myth could not endure indefinitely (Jantjes 1998: 113). This is another observation to which the artist returned in 2005, explaining that the 'doomsday' of the title had been intended to signal 'the end of the rice bowl of colonialism' (Huang 2005: 45). Such remarks recall the historic ratification of Hong Kong as a British colony by the Treaty of Nanking following the First Opium War (1839–42), which also brought an end to the monopoly of warehouses like those depicted on Huang's bowls. The relationship between these historical touchstones is clarified by a sketch reproduced in the Walker Art Center text, in which Huang imagines *Da Xian* as a series of concentric circles. At the centre, the words 'July 1997' and 'A large variety of foodstuffs' appear within a circle labelled 'Today', contained in turn by a larger circle labelled 'History'. The work could therefore be read as a material analogy for the encircling of the present by colonial legacies, linking these moments in the history of export while implying that their union will inevitably come to an end.

At the same time, the association of the packaged foods with consumption suggests a transition from the violence of the colonial to a more insidious form of imperialism. While the end of British sovereignty had been scheduled for 1 July 1997, just over three months after Huang's exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre, the artist implied that a local appetite for goods (material and cultural) imported from the former imperial centre would not be sated. Expiration dates do not signal an end to consumption but mark the rhythm of unceasing production, use and disposal at the heart of global capital. These food items would soon be superseded by a new and improved version of the same, as the imperialism of the past would endure in the politics of the contemporary, albeit in altered form. A tension between colonial violence and consumerist acquiescence can be noted as well in *VOC*, in which tea chests and television boxes were juxtaposed with a miniature cannon, emblazoned with the Company emblem. Hou notes that this served as a reminder 'of imperialist violence […] committed by the coloniser over the colonised in the […] expansion of Western capitalism', while likewise exposing 'the continuing violence of […] market expansion' headed by corporations like Philips (Hou 1998: 67–68). Yet the commodities that chest and box are intended to hold – tea and televisions – should not be overlooked. European taste for tea was a principal motivation for imperialist aggression in the nineteenth century, while televisions (many at least partially manufactured in China) are a primary vehicle for transmitting cultural values today.

In *VOC*, Huang made sure to reinforce this symbiotic bond between colonialism and consumerism with the inclusion of what Hou termed 'a "footnote" to the main narrative: a dinner table with eight ceramic dishes […] at the end of the space […] to suggest that the story will somehow never end' (Hou 1998: 67). Painted with *chinoiserie*-inspired motifs, including scenes of domestic bliss, European ships at anchor in Chinese ports, and the ubiquitous VOC logo, like the packaged foods in *Da Xian* these seemingly innocuous consumables suggest that colonial violence is embedded within the rhythms and rituals of contemporary life. A comparable 'footnote' could be identified as well with the form and decoration of the porcelain bowls central to the meaning of this work. Although generally described by the artist and his interlocutors as analogies for the hemispheres of the globe or enlarged rice bowls, these can also be compared with another type of bowl: those designed for punch, the quintessential imperialist beverage. The term 'punch' is likely a derivative of *palepuntz*, 'a delicately perfumed drink [of] arrack (distilled palm wine) and cane […] or palm sugar', flavoured with citrus or rosewater (Gabay 2015: n.pag.). It was intended to be a communal beverage, served in large bowls that became a focus for ostentatious display. Mariners sojourning in Company ports in British India carried a taste for the drink back to consumers at home, who soon realized the facility of porcelain as a suitably extravagant vessel and so despatched designs for bowls along the same maritime routes to China. By the late eighteenth century, when rum became the preferred liquor, this circuit was extended to include Britain's Caribbean plantations (McAleer 2016: 195–97). Like tea – another beverage that united porcelain and plantation – punch has been separated from such imperial legacies and rebranded as an anachronistic but entirely apolitical refreshment. Yet these legacies can never be completely erased, much like the echoes of the VOC in the global dominance of Philips or a lingering British influence in Hong Kong.

SOCIAL EXPORT

Like Huang, Ni Haifeng has created several bodies of work in which connections between colonial legacies and contemporary global capital are exposed. Resident in Amsterdam since 1994, Ni has also engaged with the history of the VOC and especially the Company's involvement in the China Trade, drawing similar parallels between the producing and consuming habits of past and present. This aspect of his artistic practice was especially visible in *The Return of the Shreds* (25 May–29 July 2007) at the Museum De Lakenhal in Leiden, an exhibition which 'centred on the problem of (cultural) globalisation' and the desire 'to represent those, who cannot represent themselves [yet] produce all the things we need' (Roepers 2007: 11; Brouwer 2007: 56). Speaking with Pauline J. Yao two years later, Ni reflected on the sources of his inspiration:

> It has a lot to do with my interest in globalisation and the socio-political condition of global capitalism. I am particularly interested in […] the inner mechanism[s] of global production and consumption […] in a Made-in-China environment [and this] spurs me to investigate the social condition of the 'global factory'.
>
> (Ni and Yao 2009: 37–41)

The Return of the Shreds brought together a series of works that exposed these sociopolitical mechanisms. For *Shrinkage 10%* (2007) (Figure 3), for example, Ni commissioned ceramics-makers in China to duplicate ten Chinese pieces in the museum's collection – most of which, like those in the Rijksmuseum that inspired Huang, had been imported by the VOC. As the title suggests, due to shrinkage when firing, these duplicates were about 10 percent smaller than their models. Ni repeated the process another seven times, using the previous reproductions in each case to create a series of incrementally diminishing duplicate sets, the final version of which is about five times smaller than the original. He associates this mode of production with a line of descent from 'the VOC [as] the first multinational […] that monopolised trades in the colonial Far East [to] the multi-national expansion of […] today's globalisation', and from the exotic image of China 'reified on [such] trophies' to the reductive stereotypes of the present (Ni 2007b: 71).

Ni followed a comparable process of globe-spanning reproduction two years earlier to create *Of the Departure and the Arrival* (2005) (Figure 4), also shown in *The Return of the Shreds*. The objects chosen for duplication in this case were not museum pieces, however, but the detritus of everyday life – 'a broken umbrella, an eggbeater, old water bottles, a pair of skates, scissors, a discarded pan, a potato peeler, old shoes, a disused vacuum cleaner, children's mittens, an old telephone, a tube of toothpaste', among other things (Brouwer 2007: 52–53). These were variously donated by the citizens of Delft, once the seat of the VOC head office, or acquired by the artist at the city's market and municipal dump. Ni's choice of these objects was again motivated by historical precedent; specifically, the shipping of 'dinner plates, gravy boats, teacups, [and] soup terrines, to China to be reproduced in porcelain [and] hand-painted with […] Chinese patterns and motifs' (Brouwer 2007: 52–53). Both this historic precedent and the contemporary networks of exchange that it enabled were evoked in the first iteration of this work by Ni's installation of his facsimiles in the hold of a cargo barge with the boxes in which they had been shipped to the Netherlands. For *The Return of the Shreds*, the replicas

Figure 3: Shrinkage 10%, *2007. Eight sets of replicas and one set of the original porcelain collection of Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, vitrines. Installation, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, 2007.*

were arranged on wooden pallets, 'as though they had just been shipped [and were awaiting] distribution' (Brouwer 2007: 52–53). Reflecting on this work in 2009, Ni explained that he had intended to create 'a mockery of both colonial trade and global commerce' (Ni and Yao 2009: 37). In each work, he draws a parallel between the imperialism of the past and contemporary global capital, exposing how intrinsically and indelibly these systems of export saturate our everyday lives.

However, while Huang focused above all on these political aspects of export in *Da Xian* and *VOC*, Ni also draws attention to its social consequences. This preoccupation is most apparent in three installation-events collectively titled *Art as Gift*, or simply *Gift*, organized in 2006–07 (Figure 5). These are frequently conflated in critical accounts, yet each event introduced a variation on a central theme that radically altered their meaning. Ni organized the first *Gift* for the City of Amsterdam to mark the inaugural Dutch 'Naturalization Day' on 24 August 2006, an event conceived to replace the distribution of citizenship certificates by mail with a ceremony.[1] For this iteration, Ni assembled a miniature replica of the city in wood, bricks and potatoes, 'materials that are quintessentially Dutch […] from a historical and present-day perspective',

1. This date was changed in 2008 to 15 December to coincide with 'Kingdom Day', a national holiday that marks the ratification of the Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands on that date in 1954.

Figure 4: Of the Departure and the Arrival, *2005. Work in progress, porcelain replicas of everyday objects collected in Delft, cardboard boxes, video projection, photographs, documents. Installation*, Ship Scylla Pirola, *Delft, 2005.*

then broke this into component parts, which were shipped to China to be mass-reproduced in blue-and-white porcelain (Ni 2007a: 36). Following their repatriation, these were presented as gifts to new citizens, with 'their own grey, poetic passport [echoing] the "real" passport issued by the Dutch Government' (Zijlmans 2007a: 5). Ni had been selected for this project due to his own relocation from China, while the journey undertaken by the components of his work, and the tension between essence and appearance they suggest, can be read as an analogy for the migrant experience. Like the wood, bricks and potatoes, made uniform by their circuitous transubstantiation, the recipients of Ni's gift – and the artist – were unified by their shared journey, integrated within the body politic by their newly granted Dutch citizenship and bonded by ownership of a part separated from a larger whole.

Similar porcelain components were used for the second *Gift*, staged for the launch of *Laboratory on the Move* at the Basis voor Actuele Kunst, Utrecht, on 2 December 2006. Their fictional identity documents were redesigned to more closely emulate a Dutch passport, with an overlaying of text and image to 'reflect critically on issues of citizenship, ownership, and identity [that challenged] this document's alleged unifying principles' (Zijlmans 2009: 897–98).

Figure 5: Gift, *2007. Work in progress, porcelain objects, carton boxes, booklets. Installation, Museum het Domein, Sittard, 2007.*

Furthermore, these gifts were presented to Dutch-born rather than migrant citizens, 'nullifying the positive discrimination [of] selecting the particular social group to which [they had] initially [been] given' (Ni 2007a: 36). This carries several implications. On one hand, the arbitrary nature of the decision could be read as an analogy for the arbitrary distinctions that citizenship creates, which Ni had earlier identified as a central mechanism of global capital:

> To think like that is to fall into a political trap […] as though the only valid notion of 'The Other' is the negative one […] implied by 'Not Us'. That way of thinking is an implicit part of capitalism [and is] an expression for someone you need to sell things to, or to exploit.
>
> (Ni cited in Brouwer 2003: 46–47)

Reversing the terms of his artistic act, Ni draws attention to the reflexive construction of cultural or national identities through a constant process of negative differentiation. On the other hand, the switch from 'new' to 'old' citizen could be read as a statement on the flexibility of identity in a connected world. This reading may have seemed especially prescient in 2006, when debates over the need to offer asylum to those fleeing persecution and conflict, bureaucratic litigation with the European Commission and questions raised about the patriotism of dual-national Dutch MPs demanded a reformulation of existing models of civic union (Zijlmans 2007b: 15–16). All such distinctions were effaced in the third *Gift*, organized for *Forms of Exchange* (July 2007) at the Museum Het Domein in Sittard, for which 150 passports and porcelain replicas were given away on a first-come-first-serve basis. Installed in the Transformation Zone, 'a transition area between a museum café, museum shop, internet café, a study area, and a space for reflection, discussion, and debate', these keepsakes were 'snatched up inside an hour', making this the most attenuated of the three events (ter Haar 2007: 30–31).

Several themes arise from the various iterations of *Gift*. The dominant narrative in the first two events is one of nationality and migration, exposing the distinctions drawn between residents of the Netherlands based on their place of birth. Like *Of the Departure and the Arrival*, *Gift* can also be read as a parody of the relations of production and consumption created by global capital: again, Ni chose to ship useless and unremarkable objects to China to be reproduced in porcelain and returned to the Netherlands. Yet a more compelling message emerges from these cycles of material transformation and social circulation. Writing in 2009, Yao criticized the extent to which 'capitalism's predilection for "products" has enabled concerns about […] representation to take precedence over [the] intersubjectivity [and] inter-human relations […] of [the] artistic process' (Yao 2009: 10). In conversation with Yao in the same year, Ni reflected on the distance that the 4000 replicas produced for *Gift* had traversed in the preceding three years, generating

> [A] social sculpture [in] the proper sense [of] a sculpture [that] is socially constructed and exists only in a social network […] in the invisible fabric of the social [whereby] interaction and participation become the main engine [of] aesthetic meanings.
>
> (Ni and Yao 2009: 40)

Transcending economic mechanisms of exchange and the global circulation of national identities, the 'gift' of the title thereby evokes the work of French anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950). Citing customs which he had observed in several Pacific societies in the 1920s, Mauss positioned the networks of obligatory reciprocity created by the circulation of gifts in these cultures as a counterpoint to the pursuit of wealth (Mauss [1925] 2002). Echoing this proposition, in the exhibition text for *Forms of Exchange*, Ni

reflects on the extent to which art '[can] provide new conceptions of social relations that reject the rationalist, individualist model on which our society [is] based', observing that 'the practice of the gift [can] provoke […] alternative forms of social exchange in the era of global capitalism' (Ni 2007a: 37).

THE AFFECT OF EXPORT

Each of the four perspectives on export considered so far – the diplomatic, economic, political and social – can be understood in emotive as well as conceptual terms. The critical points of view summarized in the first section of this article indicate the strong emotions provoked by the first two perspectives, while the political and social dimensions of export arguably incite comparable feelings of shock, resentment and anger on one hand or hope, desire and camaraderie on the other. Yet export can also be associated with the inchoate realm of affect from which our emotive responses to the world arise, a realm beyond cognition that defies explanation or representation in straightforward terms. This is a realm that Cai Guo-Qiang has explored in some depth. In late 1993, Cai travelled to Iwaki in Fukushima Prefecture on Japan's north-eastern coast to take up a three-month residency for *Cai Guo-Qiang: From the Pan-Pacific* (6–31 March 1994), at the Iwaki City Art Museum. Working with local shipwrights, carpenters and volunteers, he created two installations for this exhibition using timber salvaged from a mid-twentieth-century ship that had fallen foul of bad weather and washed ashore, sinking into the sand. Following his commitment to 'create a story of this era with the people here', one of three self-imposed rules guiding his residency, 'Cai's intuition told him to excavate the ship […] and he decided to use it as a part of the exhibit' (Hirano 1994: 12–15).[2] Visitors to *From the Pan-Pacific* first encountered the ship's timbers at the museum entrance, where Cai had installed *San Jō Tower* (1994) (Figure 6) – a series of three makeshift structures that recall the tiers of a Buddhist pagoda, made ready, like the timbers from which they were fabricated, for rearranging in new combinations. The resemblance of the three structures to packing crates also evokes broader associations of travel, transmission, trade and even, noting their resemblance to a pagoda, religious transubstantiation.

Cai strengthened these implications in subsequent versions of the work. In 1995, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, the three sections were moved from the liminal space of a courtyard to an inner gallery to create a towering structure for *Art in Japan Today: 1985–1995* (19 March–21 May 1995), the museum's inaugural exhibition. In this iteration, shown as *The Orient (San Jō Tower)* (1995) (Figure 7) in the context of a national survey show for a new municipal institution, the diffuse associations of the initial version gained a more overtly culturalist inflection, perhaps intended to evoke the Pan-Asianism with which Alexandra Munroe has identified Cai's Japanese works (Munroe 2008: 24). Two years later, at the 47th Venice Biennale (15 June–9 November 1997), the suspension of the structure from the rafters of the Arsenale and addition of PRC national flags to its base, illuminated and propelled by electric lights and fans to suggest a fiery tail, effected yet another transformation, evoking a missile caught mid-launch. Renamed *The Dragon Has Arrived!* (1997) (Figure 8), this version satirized both the nationalist ambitions of Pan-Asian ideology and the anxieties that the geopolitical ascendancy of the PRC had provoked in Europe and North America (Friis-Hansen 2002: 70). Setting aside these explicitly political implications, each of these forms – ship, crate, pagoda, missile – also shares an association with motion from one

2. The three rules were: 'Construct my works here, in this place/ Converse [with] the outer space from here/ Create a story of this era with the people here' (Hirano 1994: 12).

Figure 6: Cai Guo-Qiang, San Jō Tower, *1994. Salvaged wood from a sunken boat. Installation view at Iwaki City Art Museum. Photograph by Kazuo Ono. Courtesy of Cai Studio.*

state to another, whether between places, earthbound to airborne or human to divine.

This association with movement was even more evident in the second of the two installations Cai created using the wreck, first for *From the Pan-Pacific* then the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in 2004. In both iterations, rather than treating the salvaged timbers as found materials, Cai recontextualized the hull of the vessel as a gigantic readymade. David Joselit has observed that Cai's approach to the readymade draws attention to an overlooked aspect of this aesthetic strategy. That is, the extent to which it is not only a transgression of the boundaries between object-worlds that gives meaning to such works, but the revelation that the significance of an object is dependent on its circulation, 'where and through what contexts it passes […] not on its objecthood, but on its *actions*'. Joselit further states that this 'corresponds in [Cai's] various projects to three tempos: fast, medium, and slow', from the momentary spectacle of incendiary display to the 'cruelly arrested motion' of works like those created in Iwaki (Joselit 2008: 50, 55–57, original emphasis). Both Joselit and Wang Hui note Cai's foregrounding of the event as a decisive moment 'at a particular time, under particular circumstances, and with particular impulses' marking a 'sudden transformation, turning, or new continuation of

Figure 7: Cai Guo-Qiang, The Orient (San Jō Tower), *1995. Salvaged wood from a sunken boat, seismograph and soil. Collection of DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art. Installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. Photograph by Norihiro Ueno. Courtesy of Cai Studio.*

a predetermined route', 'a moment of *linkage* [on] the passage from one point to another' (Joselit 2008: 57; Wang 2008: 42, original emphasis). Shipwrecks are an ideal case-study for these themes, collapsing time and distance in the lingering remains of a momentary catastrophe.

Maritime archaeologists and scholars of trade and exchange are perhaps the most finely attuned to this temporal ambiguity. Derek Heng, for example, has described a shipwreck and its cargo as 'a time capsule […] akin to microhistory in world history discourse, [from which] macro-level patterns of regional and global significance [can be inferred]' (Heng 2017: 142). The 'momentary eternity' of Cai's installations has inspired similar remarks – Ross

Figure 8: Cai Guo-Qiang, The Dragon Has Arrived!, *1997. Salvaged wood from a sunken boat, Chinese flags, electric fan and lights. Collection of DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art. Installation view at the 47th Venice Biennale. Photograph by Elio Montanari. Courtesy of Cai Studio.*

Gibson, for instance, has written of the 'meshes of causation and repercussion' provoked by the artist's use of gunpowder, the 'thermodynamic urgency' of which enables us '[to] travel through time to see [the] paroxysmic, invisible futures of the seemingly inert world [where] change waits in all matter and moments' (Gibson 2014: 81, 85). Cai has spoken in comparable terms about the conceptual resonance of ships in his practice:

> [Ships are] a recurring image […] Some of it has to do with growing up in a port town, the image being part of my memory. It [also] symbolises my current life of travelling to many places. Yet the idea […]

> encompasses so much more. It's a vessel. It's a carrier. It's one of the first vehicles used […] to travel to faraway places.
>
> (Cai cited in Tanguy 2005: 36)

In *Kaikou: The Keel (Returning Light: The Dragon Bone)* (1994) (Figure 9), his first shipwreck readymade, Cai embedded the hull of the salvaged vessel in nine tons of sea-salt, piled against the wall of the Iwaki City Art Museum. *Kaikou* can be translated as 'brightening' or 'illumination', a title chosen by the artist to recall the rising sun over the ocean seen from his studio window – a recollection doubled in the English subtitle, which paraphrases another translation of *kaikou* as 'a light which can revive memories' (Hirano 1994: 16). The salt, 'the pure essence of the ocean', may have been intended to reiterate these themes of return and renewal, yet it should be noted that Iwaki, at the time, maintained the sole desalination plant on the eastern coast of Japan, so this could be read as a paean to the city's two primary exports: fish and salt, both acquired from the Pacific Ocean. For those employed in these industries, several of whom were involved in the work's creation and installation, the salt and ship may therefore have suggested accumulated wealth awaiting circulation.

Figure 9: Cai Guo-Qiang, Kaikou: The Keel (Returning Light: The Dragon Bone), *1994. Excavated fishing boat, salt (nine tons), plastic wrap, styrofoam and fish. Boat approximately 500 cm × 500 cm × 1350 cm. Installation view at Iwaki City Art Museum. Photograph by Kazuo Ono. Courtesy of Cai Studio.*

Yet the juxtaposition of salt and the bleached carcase of the wreck also evokes an air of desolation that counterbalances such visions of enterprise, perhaps directing visitors to think instead of the risk posed in their ventures by the elemental ferocity of the ocean. The power of natural forces is a recurring theme in Cai's oeuvre. Speaking with You Jindong in 1988, the artist explained the 'primeval sentiments' underlying his working methods:

> My basic idea is that human beings are the children of our mother earth […] all one with nature […] Individual power or capability is limited [and human] lives are short and weak compared to nature, which is strong and limitless. Therefore, I borrow power from nature by using […] materials that are alive as we are alive.
>
> (Cai cited in You 1988: 251)

Cai has reiterated these sentiments on several occasions, remarking to Octavio Zaya in 2002 that 'the fundamental idea behind my work has been to […] derive energy from nature', and reflecting in conversation with David Rodríguez Caballero in 2005 on the basic violence inherent in 'the law of nature […] It's not all just embracing; it's harmony [within] destruction […] my work looks at that aspect of nature' (Cai and Zaya 2002: 13; Cai cited in Caballero 2005: 122). Such remarks are usually made in reference to Cai's use of gunpowder, but in *Kaikou: The Keel* it is the power of the ocean that takes precedence, as a comparably destructive yet productive force. Writing of South East Asia, 'a region linked by internal seas [and] connected to the Indian and Pacific Oceans', Barbara Watson Andaya observes that the sea has for millennia inspired '[a] mixture of respect, apprehension, and fear' among those who live at its edges and depend on its currents:

> The seas, simultaneously life-supporting and potentially life-threatening, [have] provided the food without which the community would perish [and] supported trading networks that [have] sustained communal livelihood [yet] unseen forces [and] even familiar waters [can] still bring about shipwreck, material loss, and death.
>
> (Andaya 2017: 350–54)

In *Reflection: A Gift from Iwaki* (2004) (Figure 10), his second shipwreck ready-made, installed in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery for *Cai Guo-Qiang: Traveler* (30 October 2004–24 April 2005), Cai elaborated on these elemental dynamics with a nod to the equally inscrutable power of the divine. Instead of salt, for this version he embedded the ship's hull in a mound of shattered porcelain images of the Buddhist deity Guanyin. In addition to their comparably pallid yet luminous hue, evocative of bleached sands, like the salt used for *Kaikou* these figurines can be read in economic terms as a typical product of Dehua, a kiln-city in Fujian Province not far from Cai's birthplace in Quanzhou (Vainker 2019: 68). Speaking with Sarah Tanguy in 2005, Cai remarked that his figurines had been factory rejects that were already damaged, and which he had '[broken] even more to achieve the desired effect' (Cai cited in Tanguy 2005: 34). This may have prompted Michelle Yun to identify the work with an objectification of the deity 'in the context of […] exchange between Asia and the West', whereby the smashing of these figures 'raises such issues as the commodification of spirituality' (Yun 2008: 214). Recalling Cai's fascination with natural forces, however, the pairing of broken ceramic and shattered timber might reflect

a parallel desire 'to make visible the matrix of invisible forces that structure our world [and] move beyond the constraints of daily realities to commune with the universe' (Storer 2014: 47). While the piling of the smashed figurines within what remains of the broken ship's hold exposes their mass-production for global export, ship and icons can be read symbolically as vessels for moving between worlds. Their destruction becomes in this reading a transfiguration, an apotheosis of the elemental and divine. These *blanc-de-chine* figurines are a key element for the conceptual model of export exemplified by Cai's Iwaki works: a model of risk and uncertainty that foregrounds the anxiety and blind faith underlying so many mercantile ventures, present and past.

Many artists, art historians and theorists of exchange adhere, intentionally or otherwise, to an idealizing vision of the global that gained popularity during the 1990s and that can be noted in the texts by Bhabha, Gao, Hou and Chiu cited above. In her study of the interconnecting local, regional and global networks of power and profit that reshaped the Indonesian rainforest in the final decades of the twentieth century, anthropologist Anna Tsing identifies this vision with the triumph of central power over collective empowerment, whereby '[globalisation] came to mean corporate consolidation, the

Figure 10: Cai Guo-Qiang, Reflection: A Gift from Iwaki, *2004. Excavated wooden boat and porcelain figurines. Boat: 500 cm × 500 cm × 1500 cm. Installation view at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. Photograph by Cai Guo-Qiang. Courtesy of Cai Studio.*

standardisation of world markets, and the deference of national governments to transnational business demands' (Tsing 2005: 85–86). The horrific events of 11 September 2001 presented the first major interruption to such visions of a world united by 'an integrated globalism of everywhere-flowing money, people, and culture' (Tsing 2005: 11), initiating new forms of imperialist expansion and fundamentalist extremism, alongside a fresh wave of anti-globalist movements. To some extent, Tsing argues, despite ties to resurgent nativism and fear of cultural difference, those who oppose globalization have proven more perceptive than those who blindly endorse cosmopolitan ambitions, highlighting the extent to which 'the spread of capitalism has [always] been violent, chaotic, and divisive' (Tsing 2005: xii–xiii). Cai's shipwreck readymades offer a potent heuristic for understanding such frictions, countering assumptions of a predestined inevitability with a reminder of the concealed hazards and forgotten casualties underlying even the most progressive utopian ideals.

This article is an attempt to foreground the points of contact uniting the various perspectives on the world proposed by artists, art historians, critics, curators and cultural theorists, with a special focus on their divergent understanding of the dynamics of export. While many critics, curators and art historians have tended to endorse a certain model of 'export art' as a capitulation of the aesthetic to the economic and diplomatic, I advocate for a more dynamic conceptual framework that draws inspiration from the creative practice of artists like Huang Yong Ping, Ni Haifeng and Cai Guo-Qiang. The works by these artists discussed above show a mutual material and thematic fascination with the history and contemporary legacies of the China Trade. This fascination is visible above all in their use of porcelain – a medium that carries an especially dense sediment of historical and cultural associations – either as a principal vehicle for their ideas or as a component of larger installations. Huang invites viewers to excavate the layers of meaning hidden beneath the alluring surfaces of *chinoiserie* tableware and punchbowls in *Da Xian: The Doomsday* and *VOC*; Ni highlights the networks of appropriation and adaptation underlying the global appeal of blue-and-white in *Shrinkage 10%*, *Of the Departure and the Arrival* and *Gift*; Cai exposes the power of the elemental forces harnessed to produce and distribute such ceramics in *Kaikou: The Keel* and *Reflection: A Gift from Iwaki*.

Looking beyond each artist's individual applications and associations of porcelain, an expansive array of themes can be discerned when their works are considered as case-studies for a category of contemporary artistic practice that I have termed 'New Export China'. I have associated this category elsewhere with techniques of modularity and mass-production, the deconstruction of historical narratives and myths, a desire to reconnect with a 'lost' identity, the material allure of glazed porcelain and artistic explorations of the erotic and exotic (Burchmore 2021; Burchmore forthcoming 2023). Huang, Ni and Cai address many of these themes in their use of porcelain, but additional points of shared relevance can be noted if we isolate the idea of 'export', variously conceived as a political, cultural and affective motion across, through or between diverse places.

GLOSSARY

Zou ('movement' or 'to walk') 走
Zou xiang shijie (go international) 走向世界

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