

Negotiating histories: Traditions in Modern and Contemporary Asia-Pacific Art

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Abstracts

1. Kenji Kajiya , Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts, Hiroshima City University
Posthistorical Traditions: Strategies of Anachronism in Japanese Art between 1955 and 1978

This paper investigates the ways in which a small number of global-minded artists, critics, and architects reinterpreted the notion of tradition and strategically utilised it in the critical context of postwar Japanese art.

From Gutai to conceptual art, many postwar Japanese artists expressed their aversion to the artistic traditions of their own country. They often conceived new artistic ideas and forms by critically absorbing the latest trends in Europe and America rather than by examining art works and movements in their own history, recent or distant. Under the banner of 'international contemporaneity' in the late 1960s, artistic activities were legitimised mainly through their degree of rupture with Japanese art history.

Nonetheless, important arguments in favour of tradition did appear, mostly by individuals who had previously spent time overseas. Among them were artist Okamoto Tar, art critic Hariu Ichir, and architects Tange Kenz and Isozaki Arata. This paper examines how a small number of writers and practitioners transformed the notion of 'tradition' in Japan, moving from that which affirms the historical continuity of the present, toward a posthistorical notion of 'tradition' that questions the conventional colonial framing of modernity in postwar Japanese art.

2. Wang Chunchen, Curator of the Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum, Beijing, China
From Transfiguration to Re-China

Transfiguration of China is a fact; how transfiguration happens in China is not completely decided by those governing, but by the tendency of Chinese history. The paradox, however, is that when China chooses the modern ways to update its state, the methods and thoughts become complicated choices. As for art, it is also an uneasy menu to label as Chinese; at the moment the images of Chinese art are ambiguously illustrated as accompanied with its political images. Such ambiguities and vagueness cannot be avoided when we discuss and write about contemporary Chinese art. So the ensuing question is how do we start our research and writing work?

Therefore, transfiguration becomes its purpose, but it could not be realised with active actions. Re-China as a result becomes a choice practically and culturally. It is only when Chinese artists commit themselves to the subjective alternatives of re-thinking contemporary China and its art that the re-writing and research of Chinese contemporary art becomes possible. The possible Chinese subjectivity ought to be constructed, even a paradoxical practice. I think that the real challenge for art made today is that the independent creativity should be emphasised and the value of the individual ought to be elevated, such is the wholeness of the independent values which are changing the attitudes of art in China, though slowly, expectedly rewarding for gradual transfiguration and transformation of those stereotyped ideologies. Its result is a Re-China.

3. Birgit Hopfener, Freie Universität Berlin

Qiu Zhijie's Self-Conception as an Artist in Transcultural and Critical Historical Perspective

Introducing the contemporary Chinese artist Qiu Zhijie, looking at how he positions and defines himself between traditional Chinese and contemporary conceptual definitions of the artist, my paper aims to contribute to critical discourse on how to link contemporary Chinese art to traditional Chinese art (history).

By focusing on his concept of *total art* I investigate how he appropriates the traditional concept of self-cultivation. Furthermore, I am interested to find out what relationship between art and life is implied by his use of the term 'going through'.

4. Ann Adachi, The Graduate Center (CUNY); CMAP Program Coordinator in the International Program at The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Parallel Emergence of Video Technology in Japan and the US and the Perception of Belatedness

When discussing art using traditional Western mediums such as painting and sculpture produced in non-Western regions, it is often difficult to escape from referencing Western art historical narratives, post-colonialism, internationalism, or awareness of geopolitical borders as basis for comparative examination. Such analysis foregrounds issues of power and brings up the issues of influence, authenticity, and belatedness which relate to geopolitical and temporal grid. When examining early video art (late 1960s–early 1970s), the simultaneity in which artists' experimentation in the brand new medium occurred in Western Europe, North America, and Japan, allows a separation from the above mentioned issues and instead, it is able to be comparatively examined on the equal basis of video's medium specificity. Emerging on the consumer market in 1965, the portable video recorder opened up possibilities for experimentation by Japanese and American artists who produced work in relatively similar social and cultural environments.

The surprising similarities in the types of activities artists used video in Japan and in the US highlight the inherent, key characteristics of video, such as instantaneous feedback, its historical connection to the broadcast television technology, and the ease of use, partly encouraged by the relatively inexpensive cost of portable video recorder. These characteristics attracted people of diverse training to use the technology as a way to extend their expressive means: fine artists, media theorists, political activists, filmmakers, among others. Artists in both countries simultaneously proceeded with technological experimentation, closed-circuit television events, documentation of society, or conceptual exercises like examination of traditional notion of perception. The paper will examine the works and events by artists including Nam June Paik, Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette, Raindance, TVTV, Dan Graham, Yamaguchi Katsuhiko, Limura Takahiko, Video Hiroba, Muraoka Saburo, Kawaguchi Tatsuo, Keiji Uematsu and Matsumoto Toshio.

The development of early video art in the two countries will be examined in connection to the institutional support and initiatives that fostered these activities, which, in a broad reflection of the video art history in the two countries today, can be observed to have contrasting infrastructures for cultural preservation and production related to moving image arts. In the US video art history has been well integrated into universities and museum practices, and it is accompanied by distribution systems and preservation archives that provide pedagogical resource and support for artists; whereas on the other hand in Japan, divergent histories of Japanese video art exist, which have not been integrated in educational institutions. The lack of organisation in preserving any legacy has kept researchers and students from developing Japanese video art history. A review of the rich history of early video art in Japan and the US emphasises the important role that institutions and initiatives for cultural preservation serve.

5. Jung-Ah Woo, Assistant Professor at the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences in Postech (Pohang University of Science and Technology), South Korea
Plastic Tradition: Choi Jeong Hwa's Objects and Labor-Intensive Production

This paper reconsiders the use of plastic and the labor-intensive production process of Choi Jeong Hwa, the internationally acclaimed Korean artist and designer.

Choi first used plastic, his signature material, for his artwork in 1991, at a time when the Korean art community was split between two opposing factions: monochrome paintings and *Minjung Misul*, or 'people's art'. While monochrome painters stressed Eastern philosophy as their artistic origin, *Minjung* artists revitalised folkloric traditions as a way to challenge the stifling authority and elite intellectualism of the monochrome branch. For Choi, both of these 'serious' art movements, with their commitments to remote traditions, were ignoring the harsh realities of contemporary Korean society, which he symbolised with plastic.

Amid the frenzied economic growth of Korea in the late 20th century, plastic – artificial, superficial, cost-effective, and mass-produced – replaced conventional materials, signalling a shift from pre-industrial modes of manufacturing everyday goods and living environments. However, Choi's latest use of plastic in his 2013 solo exhibition, *Kabbala*, appears at a time when the majority of those plastic objects are no longer made in Korea; plastic, once omnipotent and omnipresent, is now being rapidly replaced by eco-friendly materials in the 21st century. Thus the title of the exhibition comes into focus; surely some mystical transformation has taken place over the last two decades, to change the once new and futuristic material of plastic into a sublime, nostalgic – or even traditional – work of art that vividly recalls Korea's recent past.

6. Yuko Kikuchi, Reader at TrAIN (Research Centre for Transnational Art Identity and Nation) and CCW graduate school, University of the Arts London
Recentering Craft in Postmodern and Postcolonial Rewriting of Visual Cultural History

Over the last decade the craft debate has stimulated contemporary visual culture. Questions such as 'what is craft?', 'how do we define craft against fine art and design?', and 'why is craft important to us?' have been hot topics. Notable publications in 'Angloamerica' include Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft* (2007); Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (2007) and *The Invention of Craft* (2013); Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (2008) and Matthew Crawford, *The Case for Working with Your Hands* (2009). In a tantalisingly interesting correlation, visual culture in Japan has also been excited by a craft debate offered by Kaneko Kenji, *Concepts of Creating Form in Contemporary Ceramics* (2001); Fukumoto Shigeki ed. *K gei is Fascinating in the 21st Century* (2003); Kitazawa Noriaki, *Craft after Avant-garde* (2003); Mori Hitoshi, *Modernity of Japanese 'Crafts': As a Foundation of Fine Art and Design* (2009) and Inaga Shigemi ed., *Traditional Japanese Arts & Crafts* (2007). The heated debates engage with each other to some extent. However, where it is primarily a postmodern question in 'Angloamerica', in Japan it is an empowering postcolonial moment at which its own visual cultural history is being rewritten through redefining 'tradition' and national identity. But a key question must be, what are the implications of these craft debates for contemporary art when one examines the work of artists like Grayson Perry, Takashi Murakami, or the COLLECT exhibition at Saatchi Gallery, and, indeed, the Mingei revival. Are they interesting because of their *avant-garde-ness*, or is it more like the empire striking back?

7. Nixi Cura, Course Director, Arts of China, Christie's Education London; Hon. Research Fellow, University of Glasgow
Making 'Ink' Visible in Contemporary Chinese Art

Within the last decade, 'contemporary ink', often simplified to 'ink', has emerged as a distinct category of practice in contemporary Chinese art. Replacing the retrograde term 'traditional Chinese painting', ink assertively claims its position to counter the dominance of non-ink – oil

painting, mixed media, installations and performances – in critical discourse, in museum exhibitions and in the art market. This study will explore the origins of 'ink' (*shuimo*) as a statement of difference, tracing backwards to the 'New Literati' movement in the 1980s and 1990s; post-Cultural Revolution seeds in the work of artists' groups such as Caocao (Grass Society); its demonisation and later propagandistic repurposing from the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art forward to the New China; and finally its elevation as 'national painting' (*guohua*) in the Republican era. How has the focus turned towards the medium of ink as modal marker, as opposed to the other constituent materials of brush or paper? How does 'ink' relate to received frameworks of analysis, such as chronological periodisation (e.g. tradition v. modernity) or social structure (e.g. literati v. professional)? Comparison to the debates around 'ink painting' (*sumi-e*) in Japan could reveal analogous developments, as well as distinctive features in the case of China. This involves the role of various agents – artists, dealers, auctioneers, museums, government – who can work with the possibilities of 'ink' absorbed to encompass a wider geographic 'China' as well as a retrospective historical 'China', while in the same stroke reduce 'ink' to identity and nation.

8. Adele Tan, Curator, the National Art Gallery Singapore

'I Don't Want to Be a Part of Your Legend': Refractions of Tradition in Southeast Asian Contemporary Art.

This presentation takes the title of a video work by Indonesian female artist Arahmaiani as its point of reference and departure. It seeks to discuss some of the over-determined terms by which 'tradition' is parlayed, mobilised and understood in certain practices of contemporary artists in Southeast Asia. While recourse to elements of long-standing cultural traditions is an often-seen aesthetic strategy for artists (i.e. working with wayang rituals in Indonesia, or reconfiguring representations of stupas in Thailand), the state of continuity with tradition is also discursively used by scholars and curators to demonstrate the qualitative difference of Southeast Asian art from its Western counterpart, despite the former's entry into putative artistic modernity. However, the generated aura of the past and its presence can only exist ambivalently and insecurely in the work of these artists because the reception and reinscription of traditional forms cannot but be problematised by the respective traditions' own historical passage in their specific localities. Therefore tradition is given as not only exploited or repudiated but its varied invocations are seen as imbricated within the political narratives of national histories and art historiography. I will aim to speak comparatively about artists from Indonesia and Thailand and to show how claims of tradition and traditionalism are fraught with power relations but also that its complexities can be acknowledged and re-presented by art.

9. Carol Yinghua Lu, Contributing editor for Frieze magazine and Artistic Director of OCAT, Shenzhen

In Such a Lonely History, What on Earth are we Afraid of? - On Attempts to Imagine Being in the Past as Being in the Present and Being in the Future

Since 2010, together with artist and curator Liu Ding, we have been making several attempts to revisit our recent histories through exhibition making. From *Little Movements: Self-practice in Contemporary Art* to *Accidental Message: Art Is Not A System, Not A World*, we have been exploring a sense of history that is not a linear order of historical facts isolated by a particular regional discourse, but one that prioritises individual experiences, recognition of various forms of practice besides the making of an artwork, accidental happenings and cross-cultural entanglements. Our look back at our recent, modern and contemporary histories are not about seeking answers to uncertainty, confusions and anxiety, but are about confronting our own lack of knowledge about our histories, and uncovering possible openings and paths for future researches and practices.

My paper wishes to reflect critically on the current crisis of a singular art history discourse in China, driven by specific agendas to promote certain art movements, a selected range of heroic

and dominant figures and above all, a singular value based on success and power. This kind of history asserts its concreteness and authority by emphasising the objectiveness of history, its rationality and thus its undisputable nature. Instead, I propose a model of art history writing and practice as a complex humane process that takes emotions, anxiety, setbacks, and failures into consideration and constantly unfolds and recognises its own uncertainty and complexity.

10. Paul Gladston, Associate Professor of Culture, Film and Media and director of the Centre for Contemporary East-Asian Cultural Studies at the University of Nottingham
Somewhere (and Nowhere) Between Modernity and Tradition: Towards a Discursive Polylogue between Differing Interpretative Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese Art

China's relationship with modernity has always been a complex and conflicting one. Since the late nineteenth century, China has actively embraced modernising influences from outside while constantly fearing an uprooting of its own long established civilisation-specific identity/identities. As a consequence, progressive forms of Chinese art have shuttled inconclusively between an open pursuit of modernity and a resistant adherence to tradition. In the case of contemporary Chinese art produced since the late 1970s this inconclusive shuttling has resulted in often conspicuous hybridisations of images, attitudes and practices appropriated from Western(ised) modernist and postmodernist art with aspects of traditional Chinese cultural thought and practice. Within the context of the international art world, contemporary Chinese art's conspicuous cultural hybridity has been interpreted widely as a locus for the deconstruction of supposedly authoritative meanings; not least those associated with orientalist conceptions of cultural difference and associated colonialist/imperialist relations of dominance. In contrast, within the People's Republic of China (PRC) dominant discourses have tended to emphasise the essential 'Chineseness' of contemporary Chinese art as a resistance to the perceived dominance of Westernised modes of cultural thinking and practice.

As Craig Clunas has indicated with reference to the work of the film and video installation artist Yang Fudong, the question of whether we choose to emphasise the 'Chineseness' or the uncertainly hybrid nature of contemporary Chinese art is a 'fundamentally political' one that 'has no easy or definitive answer'. Although Clunas does not choose to elaborate further upon this statement, he can be understood to imply that while Chinese national-cultural exceptionalism and its essentialising adherence to tradition flies in the face of a now internationally dominant deconstructive postcolonialism, we cannot choose to align ourselves resolutely with the latter without what would appear to be a self-contradictory denial of difference.

In this paper I shall argue with reference to art works by, among others, Huang Yongping and Yang Fudong that the job of interpreting contemporary Chinese art is a profoundly challenging one that points towards the critical necessity of new theoretical paradigms beyond those currently envisaged. One possible way forward, I shall go on to aver, is the use of polylogues (inter-textual multi-voiced discourses exemplified by Jacques Derrida's *Glas* (1974)) as a means of opening up differing interpretative perspectives on contemporary Chinese art to one another while at the same time internally dividing and questioning their individual authorities.

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