

Officializing the Unofficial: Presenting New Chinese Art to the World

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Introduction

¹ The Venice Biennale, a major contemporary art exhibition that runs every other year, was founded in 1895 as an international exhibition that represented artists from sixteen nations. In the early twentieth century, several countries started to install national pavilions at the Venice Biennale, and by 2003, there were some twenty-six national pavilions there. In these pavilions, individual nations were responsible for choosing their own artists and for deciding what and how to present art from their countries. Also, many other countries sent their art to the exhibition on a temporary basis. The Biennale has also established a separate section dedicated to young artists from around the world; this section is fully controlled by whoever is appointed as the Biennale's director for choosing participants. It has been in this section that one expects to see new

The year 2003 was an important year for Chinese artists, critics, and curators engaged in contemporary art: in that year, the Ministry of Culture in China endeavored to assemble the first national pavilion for the Venice Biennale, the oldest international art exhibition and one known for showcasing cutting-edge contemporary art from around the world.¹ For this first Chinese Pavilion, the authorities chose five mainland Chinese artists to exhibit their works—four installations and a piece of video art—as official representations of contemporary Chinese art. The significance of this event lies not only in founding a national pavilion for the Venice Biennale, but also in the noticeable shifts in the scope of official art, including content, style, medium, and curatorial method.

The Chinese government had participated in the Venice Biennale three times in the past. In 1980 and 1982, China sent traditional embroideries and paper-cuts to the show; in 1997, the government sent paintings executed largely in the academic style.² Three cultural officials (not art curators) were appointed by the Ministry of Culture to supervise each

year's participation. The works chosen for these three occasions had little relation with contemporary art and did not generate any positive reviews concerning the status of Chinese art in the international art world, nor did they spark any discussion back in China.³

In contrast to past involvement with the Venice Biennale, the preparation and establishment of the 2003 Chinese Pavilion brought enthusiastic media coverage and comments. Many people acknowledged it as a formal official sanction of contemporary Chinese art, because it featured exclusively contemporary media. Because of the sudden breakout of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in the summer of 2003, the Chinese government canceled the installation of the pavilion in Venice and decided instead to relocate it to an alternate site—Guangdong Museum of Art (Guangzhou)—but a section on the pavilion was included in the Fiftieth Venice Biennale exhibition catalogue.⁴ In China, the 2003 Chinese Pavilion is generally referred to as the “first” national pavilion, even though it was never installed in Venice.⁵

In this essay, I explore the artistic, historical, and political significance of the 2003 Chinese Pavilion. I analyze the curatorial process and the content of the exhibition, the significance and complexity of the inclusion of contemporary media for such a national project in the context of contemporary Chinese art history, and the political motivations behind this attempt to affirm contemporary art and secure an international venue to showcase it in the future.

The First Chinese Pavilion

China's governmental interest in becoming an active part of the contemporary international art community became self-evident with its work to found the first national pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2003. In August 2002, the Ministry of Culture authorized the China International Exhibition Agency to initiate the procedure of establishing the first Chinese Pavilion. Feng Yuan, the director of the Art Bureau at the Ministry of

directions in contemporary art practice. The Venice Biennale had been a platform for presenting art from Euro-American countries. In the past two decades, however, under the leadership of a few innovative curators, the Venice Biennale has actively brought underrepresented artists from Asia and Eastern Europe to the forefront of international attention and has contributed to the breakdown of the old West-centered international art world. For a detailed history of the Venice Biennale, see its official website: <http://www.labiennale.org/en/biennale/history>.

² For more discussion about Chinese participation in the Venice Biennale in 1980 and 1982, see Dematté 2001; for the participation in 1997, see Dal Lago 1999 and Dematté 2001.

³ In China, the participation in 1980 and 1982 was mentioned briefly by art historian and critic Shui Tianzhong, while he was interviewed for the Beijing Biennale and the Chinese Pavilion in 2003. I have not found anything published in Chinese on the 1997 participation.

⁴ See *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer* (Venice: La Biennale de Venezia, 2003), 582–583.

⁵ Internationally, the 2005 Chinese Pavilion is usually referred to as the “first,” because this is the first time the Chinese Pavilion was actually exhibited in Venice. For the same reason, there are also people in China who refer to the 2005 Pavilion as the “first” national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It was, however, because of the groundbreaking and historic contributions of the 2003 pavilion that the future 2005 Chinese Pavilion was made possible.

Culture, formed and headed the Expert Committee of senior art historians and critics. The other members were Liu Xilin (art critic and research fellow at the China National Museum of Fine Arts), Liu Xiaochun (curator, art historian, and research fellow at the Research Institute of Fine Arts, China Academy of Arts), Shao Dazhen (art historian, critic, and the editor-in-chief of a mainstream art journal, *Fine Arts Research*), Shui Tianzhong (art historian, critic, and research fellow in the Research Institute of Fine Arts, China Academy of Arts), and Wang Yong (art historian, critic, and the deputy director of the Research Institute of Fine Arts, China Academy of Arts). Their responsibility was to screen proposals for the Pavilion. To be seen as open and democratic, and of course to best represent the country, the Committee issued a call for proposals, though the call was restricted to certain designated critics and curators. The Committee chose a collaborative proposal submitted by Fan Di'an (then a vice president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts) and Huang Du (then a Ph.D. student); Wang Yong, who had himself submitted a proposal, was later asked to join Fan and Huang's team.⁶ Fan Di'an and Wang Yong were then appointed as head curators of the pavilion, with Huang Du as assistant curator.

⁶ The proposal submitted by Fan Di'an and his student, Huang Du, was titled "Reorientation." The Committee was not very satisfied with it, even though it seemed to be the best among all submissions. Consequently, Wang Yong, a member of the Expert Committee, contributed his own proposal for the pavilion, titled "New Home," and the Committee accepted it. Then Wang Yong was asked to work with Fan Di'an on the final proposal, which was given a different title.

Here we see an obvious shift from the conventional practice of major official art exhibitions in which a large committee, headed by high-ranking officials and composed of art experts, would supervise the process. The first Chinese pavilion, obviously an important international project, was left in the hands of three curators, all art experts (though Wang Yong and Fan Di'an are also officials). In this respect, the official art establishment was adopting the standard practice in recent international art exhibitions of having an individual curator or a few curators who have relatively autonomous power in deciding the overall direction, agenda, participation of artists, and layout of the art.

Following Wang Yong's original proposal, the committee adopted "new home" as its basic theme, and the pavilion was to create a sense of "new home" in Venice. A coined noun was given as the title of the

Pavilion, “Synthi-Scapes” (*zaojing*), literally meaning the creation of an environment or atmosphere. To be seen as contemporary and to prove to the international art community that realistic art in the forms of painting and sculpture was not the only officially accepted artistic expression in China, the curators decided to show installation and video art. In terms of content, they focused on issues relating to contemporary sensibility and mentalities. The curators aimed to present the kind of art that addressed the impact of profound social transformations, rapid urbanization, and globalization on the Chinese people and their thoughts (Fan 2003a: 582).

After deciding the theme for the pavilion, the curators called for proposals of art works from among a small group of artists who had more or less made their names in China. They finally selected Liu Jianhua, an associate professor from the Yunnan Art Academy in Kunming; Lu Shengzhong, a senior professor from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing; Yang Fudong, an independent artist based in Shanghai; Zhan Wang, a teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Arts; and Wang Shu, an architect and associate professor at the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou.

The plan for the exhibition was to rent a two-story building at the corner of Piazza San Marco in Venice to house the Chinese Pavilion, with Wang Shu and Zhan Wang’s works displayed on the first floor and the rest on the second floor (Wang 2003: 121). As already mentioned, the mounting of the exhibition in Venice was canceled because of the SARS crisis. The alternative exhibition at the Guangdong Museum of Art (on view from July 25 to August 31, 2003) largely carried out the original concept as it would have been done in Venice, and all individual works were created as planned. Adjustments had to be made, however, because of the different size and layout of the small Venice building and the large Guangdong museum. First, instead of occupying two floors, the art works were displayed only in a section of the first floor of the museum.

Second, Wang Shu's work, *Between Demolition and Construction* (Chai zhu jian) (fig. 1), which would have transformed the entrance of the Venice building into a stylized doorway characteristic of classical Chinese gardens, was relocated to an existing corridor in the museum leading to the exhibition spaces. Despite these spatial rearrangements, the concept of "new home" of the Chinese Pavilion remained intact. Therefore, in my following discussion, I look first into the architect Wang Shu's work, followed by Zhan Wang's and then the other three works that would have occupied the second floor in the original design.

Wang Shu's architectural installation work, *Between Demolition and Construction* (fig. 1) transformed the corridor into a space marked by perforated walls, which are commonly found in classical Chinese gardens

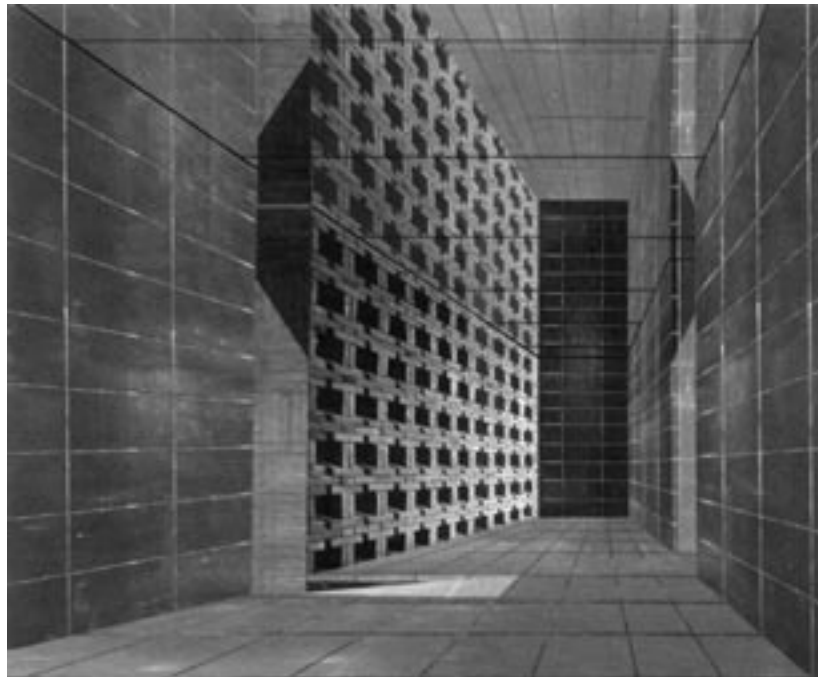


Figure 1: Wang Shu, *Between Dismantle and Construct* (2003). Installation. Collection of the artist.

to introduce natural light and afford views of the surroundings.⁷ A mirror was installed on the ceiling to reflect everything underneath. Walking in this corridor, the audience would not only experience Wang Shu's artistically shaped space, but also would see, through the holes in the walls, structures in other parts of the museum. The materials he used for his reconstruction were both traditional and modern: gray bricks, material largely used in traditional southern houses and gardens in China, and steel and glass, very modern construction materials. In this installation, Wang altered the appearance of the museum corridor by adding new structures, thus symbolically demolishing the original architectural forms. In doing so, he demonstrated the transformable relationship between "demolition" and "construction."

After passing through Wang Shu's architectural installation, the viewer would come to a space that could be seen as a conceptual kitchen. Here, Zhan Wang displayed his installation work, *Urban Landscape* (Chengshi shanshui) (fig. 2). Dealing with traditional concepts and modern materials,

⁷ This is a common method used in traditional Chinese gardens, which is called "jiejing" (borrowing view), meaning to consider the visual effect of the existing environment and objects and consciously incorporate them as organic components for the plan of a new construction.



Figure 2: Zhan Wang, *Urban Landscape* (2003). Installation. Collection of the artist.

he used stainless steel to replicate scholar rocks, important objects in Chinese literati culture and often found in classical gardens. In two separate rooms, the artist installed rock formations that he himself made with stainless steel, mixing them with brand-new metal cooking utensils and tableware such as plates, bowls, and spoons that were bought from the market. The entire composition imitated the mountains and rivers and trees often seen in traditional landscape painting. A big glass wall was installed to increase the dazzling effect of those sparkling objects. Dry ice created the visual effect of mist and fog, representing another significant element in landscape painting. Substituting modern material for traditional rock formations and other elements from landscape painting reflected both the transformation of cultural symbols in China and the physical changes visible in China's rapidly developing cities.

Next, viewers were guided to the conceptual living room of the "new home." Here they encountered a video work entitled *Heaven Heaven, Jasmine Jasmine* (Tianshang tianshang, moli moli) (fig. 3), by Yang



Figure 3: Yang Fudong, *Heaven Heaven, Jasmine Jasmine* (2002). Video. Collection of the artist.

Fudong. The video presented the lifestyle and love of young urbanites in Shanghai. In a very poetic and melancholic manner, the story of a young man and woman unfolded on three video screens running simultaneously. Their sometimes engaged and sometimes unfocused conversations were interspersed with silences, in which sentimental background music would swell to reveal the couple's shifting psychological and emotional status. Combining the technique of documentary and fiction, Yang arranged the two characters and city buildings into a certain kind of abstract and ethereal space that resonated with the title "heaven." The city landscape—presented with long shots of distant high-rise buildings and close-ups of concrete terraces and steel railings—was at once realistic and abstract. The two lovers' facial expressions and their surroundings offered no hint of the possibility for a fruitful future; rather, the video was dominated by sense of alienation and strangeness.

Lu Shengzhong's work, *Landscape Study* (Shanshui shufang) (fig. 4), created a space full of the atmosphere of a traditional literati studio. Big bookshelves were installed on three sides of the room, functioning as the

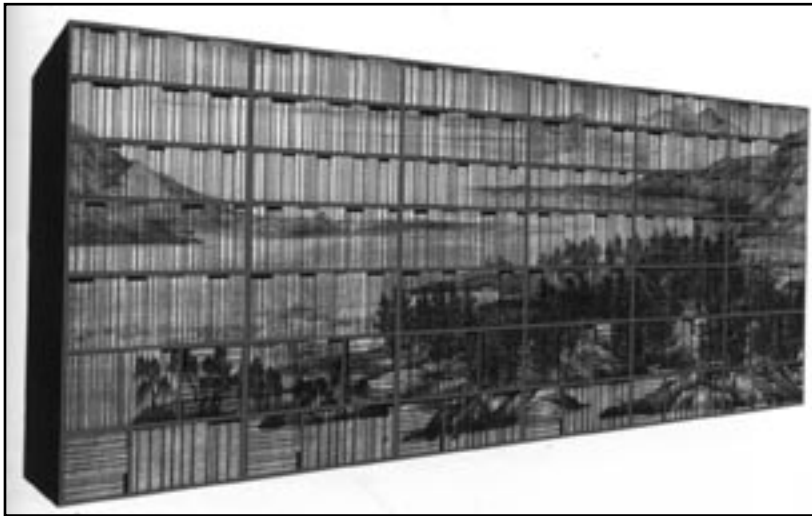


Figure 4: Lu Shengzhong, *Landscape Study* (2003). Installation. Collection of the artist.

⁸ Certainly this dimension would be better justified if the work had been shown in Venice as planned, where the cultural background of the audience tends to be extremely diverse.

⁹ Jingdezhen is the name of a well-known ceramic from the city Jingdezhen, located in Jiangxi province. The history of Jingdezhen dates back to the middle of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127).

walls of the study. All the books were wrapped with a cover bearing a portion of an image from a classical Chinese landscape painting in print. Lu carefully arranged these wrapped books so that their spines connected together to form an enlarged landscape painting on the surface of the bookshelves. Landscape painting, which both depicts nature and serves as a conceptual space for intellectual contemplation, is of course an important part of the Chinese cultural and art tradition. This carefully constructed piece suggests a confrontation between a traditional cultural ambience of literati leisure and contemplation and contemporary audiences, who in their modern hurried lives are far removed from that premodern world.⁸ Audiences were invited to pick up books and put them back on the bookshelves wherever they wished, eventually dismantling the landscape image into unrelated fragments. Thus, the artist's careful reconstruction of the traditional literati studio was disarranged and ultimately disappeared.

The last piece of the Chinese Pavilion indicated a conceptual bedroom. Liu Jianhua's *Daily-Fragile* (Richang-yisui) (fig. 5) was composed of various everyday objects in white ceramic that he made himself by applying the famous traditional Jingdezhen porcelain technique.⁹ Telephones, bags, bulbs, toys, shoes, and hats are spread randomly from the floor to the ceiling and all over the walls. In the middle of the room, a big pillow hung from the ceiling, giving the space the flavor of a bedroom. Many of these objects appeared broken or unfinished. The artist seemed to compare the fragile nature of those porcelains to many aspects of life that might seem solid but are actually easily shattered. With their monochromatic whiteness and out of their normal context, these objects created a dreamlike world, evoking conflicting feelings between familiarity and alienation, concreteness and abstractness. What the artist intended was to evoke personal psychological experiences and private memories that might be associated with these ordinary things (Liu 2003).

Overall, the Pavilion conveyed the themes of uncertainty, alienation,



Figure 5: Liu Jianhua, *Daily-Fragile* (2003). Installation. Collection of the artist.

and fragmentation, feelings that correspond to what Chinese people are perhaps experiencing in their rapidly transforming society. What differentiates this exhibition from most other major official exhibitions in the past is the emphasis on individual mentalities that are personal, psychological, and sometimes negative. Instead of focusing on positive and grand social narratives, we see an interest on the individual psyche and experience that suggest futile efforts, lost traditions, and a lack of confidence in the future. In terms of artistic language, there are no recognizable styles that can be used to define these pieces. They are conceptually charged experimental works that resist clear labels and conventional readings, a quality that is one of the characteristics of contemporary art at the global level. That may have been the exact intention for this Pavilion, which was meant to reach an international audience.

¹⁰ They included articles published by China's mainstream newspapers such as *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), *Nanfang dushi bao* (Southern Metropolis Daily), and *Wenyi bao* (Newspaper of Literature and Art), and in two major websites on art in China: <http://arts.tom.com> and <http://cn.cl2000.com>.

¹¹ The authorities' hostile attitude toward contemporary art was largely a reaction against the avant-garde art movements in the 1980s and the resulting *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* in 1989.

¹² The Third Shanghai Biennale in 2000, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and the Shanghai Municipal Government, was the first exhibition after 1989 to present contemporary art. The range of exhibited works included photography, video works, and installation works, as well as conventional art forms such as painting and sculpture. In 2001, the Ministry of Culture assembled an exhibition of Chinese contemporary art entitled "Living in Time," curated by Fan Di'an, German curator Gabriele Knapstein, and the Chinese-born but internationally active curator Hou Hanru, as part of the China Festival in Berlin, Germany, during the Berlin Asia-Pacific Week. This was the first time that the authorities organized an overseas exhibition that included contemporary media, together with conventional ones.

Although it was not shown in Venice, the pavilion drew much attention in China and was discussed extensively. A large number of press releases were issued, and many reviews and commentaries were published.¹⁰ It was one of the hottest topics in the Chinese art world that year. Not only was it listed as one of the top ten items of domestic art news for 2003, it was ranked fifth in the top ten pieces of cultural news for the same year (Anon. 2004; Huang 2003). Many people associated it with an ongoing change in the government's once-hostile attitude toward contemporary art, the victory of contemporary art in achieving a legitimate status in China and being accepted into the "mainstream," and the state's openness toward the international art system. For them, the founding of the Chinese Pavilion was a significant symbol indicating the full-scale official acceptance of contemporary art, which was largely underground in the 1990s.

The Officialization of Contemporary Art

The selection of installation and video art for the pavilion, the practice of the individual curatorial approach, and the showcase of art whose meaning is open to interpretations indeed suggest a significant change in the official imagination about contemporary art in China. Since 1989, when it was labeled harmful to Socialist China and incompatible with established social and aesthetic values, contemporary art had been banned from public exhibition spaces.¹¹ Now in 2003, for the national pavilion that was charged with the responsibility of presenting to the world the newest developments in art from China, the state permitted the exclusive display for media and styles formerly prohibited. Though this was not the first time that art works in contemporary media made their appearance in Chinese official exhibitions after 1989, the Chinese Pavilion was the first to make exclusive use of contemporary media without the accompaniment of any conventional forms such as painting and sculpture.¹² This was a noteworthy move. Of course, in the global art world, video and

installation had long been at the forefront of artistic creativity. In the specific context of China, however, this did not come automatically as a result of the internal development of art. Rather, the full official approval of video and installation was a product of interactions among a series of forces, including the dynamic development of contemporary Chinese art, the increasing impact of globalization on Chinese society, and the intervention of the international art market.

On the one hand, immediately following the 1989 Tiananmen incident, the Chinese state tightened its control over the intellectual world and its collective activities. It launched large-scale ideological campaigns that aimed to eliminate the so-called spiritual contamination—a euphemism for Western capitalist ideology and culture—which had flooded into China since the country initiated the “reform and opening up” policy (*gaige kaifang*) in 1978. In direct response to the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* Exhibition, whose most controversial and troublemaking pieces were in the form of installation and performance art, the Ministry of Culture made an effort to regulate future exhibitions. It required all organizers of exhibitions to apply for a license in advance or the exhibitions would be considered illegal and closed by the police.¹³ At the same time, in the few years following 1989, official art journals and newspapers were filled with all kinds of critiques and condemnations of contemporary art. Suppressed by cultural bureaucracy and attacked by public media, contemporary art had no recourse to state-run exhibition space or support from the media and was therefore pushed underground.

On the other hand, at the same time the state was exerting rigid ideological control over the cultural field, Chinese society was becoming more open and susceptible to influences from the rest of the world. Many governmental policies showed that the state was eager to integrate itself into the international economic system and to perform an active role in the increasingly globalized world. In 1992, after Deng Xiaoping’s renowned “southern tour,” the Chinese government formally launched

¹³ For detailed discussion about the process, structure, organizers, participating artists, and main art works of the *China/Avant-Garde* Exhibition, see Gao 2000. For the role the Ministry of Culture played in the Chinese art world right after the *China/Avant-Garde* show, see Van Dijk 1992.

market reforms on a national scale. These reforms soon had a great impact on the production and reception of art, as well as on other cultural fields and on the social psychology as a whole. They facilitated the practice of contemporary art in a number of ways that mixed with local and transnational operations. First, private art galleries, a very new form of commercial cultural institution, began to prosper in big cities, offering alternative spaces and opportunities for artists. Some of them, especially those funded by art dealers and businessmen abroad such as the Red Gate Gallery and the Courtyard Gallery in Beijing and the ShanghArt Gallery in Shanghai, have become important sites for exhibitions of contemporary art. Second, more and more international curators and dealers visited China and introduced artists and their works to international exhibitions, collectors, and art galleries. In doing so, they offered new opportunities for domestic artists who wished to work with contemporary media, because there was a much bigger market for contemporary art outside of China. Last, but not least, many official, state-sponsored art museums had their subsidies reduced or removed, thus forcing them to gradually finance their own operations. Some of them responded by developing new programs to support contemporary art in order to make their image more contemporary and open-minded (Wu 2001: 21).

With the continuing process of “opening” in the 1990s, communication and information exchange between China and the rest of the world were deeply enhanced. Transnational travel and migration have become common among certain social groups in Chinese cities. Among these groups, contemporary artists have become particularly active border-crossers, often traveling abroad to show their work in international exhibitions. A case in point is the 1993 Venice Biennale: for the first time, Chinese artists were chosen to present their works at this prestigious exhibition.¹⁴ Fourteen artists—an impressive number—exhibited a kind of art that was strikingly different from the familiar face of official Chinese art, which was based on social realism. Among the works shown, the best known were those

¹⁴ Chinese participation in the 1993 Venice Biennale was made possible through the collaboration of Li Xianting, a renowned Chinese art critic and ardent advocate of Chinese unofficial art; Francesca Dal Lago, then an art history doctoral student at New York University; and Achille Bonito Oliva, an Italian curator and the director of that year's Venice Biennale.

bearing a strong sense of absurdity, satire, indifference, and self-denial, works that were broadly defined under two rubrics: Political Pop and Cynical Realism.¹⁵

For example, Wang Guangyi showed paintings that imitated the solemn images of workers, peasants, and soldiers from the political propaganda posters of the past, and put them in random juxtaposition with contemporary commercial icons, such as Coca-Cola (fig. 6). Yu Youhan used the image of Mao Zedong, the sacred symbol of Chinese Communism and its revolution, in a very rustic and playful environment (fig 7). Another group of artists grounded their work in the realistic techniques that they

¹⁵ The two terms were coined by Li Xianting. For more discussion about Political Pop and Cynical Realism, see Li 1993.



Figure 6: Wang Guangyi, *Great Castigation Series: Coca-Cola* (1993). Oil on canvas. Collection of the artist.



Figure 7: Yu Youhan, *Chairman Mao in Discussion with the Peasants of Shao Shan* (1991). Acrylic on canvas. The Sigg Collection.

learned in art academies in China, but they applied them for the purpose of expressing a sense of self-denial, indifference, and cynicism. In his *Series II*, Fang Lijun repeated paintings of big bald heads yawning or showing boredom as a means of expressing indifference and meaninglessness (fig. 8). Liu Wei presented the distorted images of army cadres in pretentious poses in his *The Revolutionary Family* series (fig. 9). Together, these Chinese artists were a sensation at the Venice Biennale, not only because of their impressive quantity but also in the content and style of the art they presented. Their presence provoked great interest in contemporary Chinese art in international art communities (Dematté 2001). Since this début in 1993, individual Chinese artists, based both in and outside China, have been invited to participate in every Venice Biennale and many other



Figure 8: Fang Lijun, *Series II*, No. 2 (1992). Oil on canvas. Ludwig Museum, Cologne.



Figure 9: Liu Wei, *The Revolutionary Family: Dad in front of A Poster of Zhu De* (1990). Oil on canvas. Hanart TZ Gallery.

important international exhibitions, such as the Johannesburg Biennale, Documenta, and the Sao Paulo Biennial. They have also appeared in major Western art magazines and newspapers, and some of them have even received prestigious awards from renowned international exhibitions and cultural institutions. In other words, they have become active players in the international art world.

People on the mainland were largely unaware of the international successes of Chinese artists until 1999, when a copyright controversy arose

around expatriate Chinese artist Cai Guoqiang's *Rent Collection Courtyard* (fig. 10), which won him one of the three International Awards at that year's Venice Biennale. Cai's work was a reproduction of one of the iconic group sculptures from the 1960s that aimed to expose the egregious exploitation Chinese peasants had suffered before the founding of the PRC.¹⁶ His purpose was "not only to emphasize how much Chinese art has changed [since the Cultural Revolution] but also [to] underline how the temporal and physical displacement of a work changes its meaning" (Lago 1999). With Cai's award-winning work, the domestic media in China began to buzz about the big splash that contemporary Chinese art was making in the international art world. People came to realize the wide discrepancy between the reception of contemporary art outside China and within China. In its native land, this art, created by both expatriate artists and local underground artists, was largely disqualified from state-run exhibition spaces and was discredited

¹⁶ The original sculpture, a collaborative work by professors and students from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, was regarded as a masterpiece of Chinese socialist realism during the Cultural Revolution and was frequently reproduced to circulate nationwide and even as diplomatic gifts for other socialist countries.



Figure 10: Cai Guoqiang, *Rent Collection Courtyard* (1999). Installation. Collection of the artist.

by the mainstream media. Outside of China, it was well received in the international art world and seen as representative of new developments in art from China. The awareness of this gap in turn raised debates in Chinese art and cultural circles concerning the representation of Chinese cultural images internationally and the problem of cross-cultural interpretation.

Some Chinese critics argued that the meaning of certain types of art, such as Political Pop and Cynical Realism, the most internationally well known contemporary Chinese art styles, had been over-politicized by Western curators and critics according to their ideological preference. The acclaimed Chinese art critic Gao Minglu, who is not only influential in China but also has been very active in the international art world, stated:

Political Pop and Cynicism [Cynical Realism] are nothing more than a combination of ideological and commercial practices. . . . They glorify the persuasive power and unique aesthetic of Mao's ideology. . . . Although Political Pop allegorizes the Mao myth and Mao's utopia, the artists by no means criticize the discourse of power in Mao's communist ideology and propagandist art, as many Western critics have pointed out. Rather the artists still worship and desire to gain this power. (Gao 1998: 29)

This kind of contextualized understanding was often missing when the two types of art were discussed in the international art world. Contemporary Chinese artists were generally pictured as avant-garde and dissident, using their art to express their political views against the Chinese government and fighting for freedom. The most noticeable example is a review on Fang Lijun's work in *The New York Times Magazine*. His *Series II* (fig. 8) was used on the magazine's cover with a title that read "The Howl That Could Free China" (Solomon 1993). The article exaggerated the political and ideological dissidence in Fang's art simply because Fang was from Socialist China and his art did not conform to mainstream styles. In practice, what the majority of contemporary Chinese artists in the 1990s, including Fang himself, were seeking was a kind of individual and personal artistic language different

from that of the art establishment. Their art was far from the politically rebellious expression of ideological struggle that has been portrayed in the West. Many of these artists were actually the beneficiaries of both the state's rapid economic reform and new international relationships, and are currently enjoying the fruits of the successful marketing of their art.

Additionally, many scholars began talking about the negative impact of this international success, especially market success, on the domestic art world. They pointed out that many young Chinese artists saw getting exposed in the West as a shortcut to personal fame and financial success. As a result, they tended to speculate about the interest for Chinese art in the international art world and created works that met Western expectations about Chinese culture and art. To gain the attention of international curators and dealers, artists often incorporated into their works stereotypical cultural signs or icons from China's cultural traditions or most recent revolutionary heritage. Still others who appreciated contemporary art practice expressed regret that domestic audiences had no chance to experience the artistic creativity and innovations by a few highly talented Chinese artists. They called this phenomenon "flowers blossoming beyond the wall where the fragrance is appreciated only by outsiders" (*qiangwai kaihua qiangwai xiang*), which refers to the peculiar condition of contemporary Chinese art being exhibited exclusively outside of China and important works ending up in overseas museum collections.¹⁷ No matter what else critics might have said, they unanimously agreed that the primary responsibility for the poor state of contemporary art in China should be attributed to the authorities' hostile attitude toward it and to the lack of public support. For years, this kind of critique has become commonplace when contemporary art in China is discussed.

Against all these discussions, debates, and concerns, the founding of the first Chinese pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2003 was warmly received. Many people saw the investment in the Chinese pavilion as a state response to the criticism it had received from critics and artists, as well as an

¹⁷ See Liu 2000. Some critics use the phrase "flowers blossoming inside the wall but the scent is appreciated by the outside" (*qiangnei kaihua qiangwai xiang*). Both phrases express the dissimilar status of Chinese contemporary art in and outside of China.

effort to shrink the gap between the reception of contemporary Chinese art in China and outside. The Pavilion was highly prized in the Chinese art world, especially among those who were sympathetic to contemporary artistic practices. Some critics marked 2003 as the year of the “victory” of contemporary art in China (Pi 2004). In other words, by 2003, the once-banned art had finally gained a legitimate status for entering into official exhibition spaces, as well as a conceptual acceptance. The state favor for contemporary art for an international showcase suggests the possibility of incorporating contemporary art into its national cultural programs and of transforming the look of Chinese official art as a whole. This cooperation between the cultural authorities and the contemporary art world can be called the officialization of contemporary art. Many critics predicted that this would fundamentally improve the social conditions for development of contemporary art, in terms of open circulation, normal viewing, and public education. In return, the Ministry of Culture, the state cultural administrator that authorized the Pavilion, has come to appear more open and tolerant.

Particularly, many contemporary artists and reporters gave high praise to a few cultural officials who were involved in bestowing a new official status on contemporary art. For example, they have regarded Fan Di’an, the executive curator of the Pavilion, as the representative figure of contemporary art. To be sure, the Chinese Pavilion was not the only exhibition of contemporary art that he has been involved with, but it certainly contributed significantly to his personal reputation in the contemporary art world. Indeed, more than anyone else, Fan was the winner in this officialization of contemporary Chinese art: on the one hand, he became known as the most crucial supporter of contemporary art in avant-garde and independent art communities, one who has worked enthusiastically for the cause, but on the other hand, Fan also gained governmental authorization as the official spokesman for contemporary Chinese art, and he has used his newly gained status internationally. Rising

rapidly as a star curator, Fan is now seen by some as more influential than Li Xianting, who was one of the most renowned unofficial critics and advocates of avant-garde art in the 1980s and 1990s and was involved in curating the earliest exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art overseas.¹⁸ Li Xianting, who lost his official position as an editor of the *Zhongguo meishu bao* (Fine arts in China) in Beijing because of his involvement with avant-garde art in the 1980s, has been known for his continuous support, both theoretical and practical, for young avant-garde artists. This passing of the mantle of the most influential supporter of contemporary art from an unofficial critic (Li) to an art official (Fan) seems to strengthen the sense of the officialization of contemporary art in China.

The New Cultural Arena

Although I am aware of its significance for the development of contemporary art in China, I intend to evaluate the Pavilion from another perspective. Considering the officially designated function of art in China, I argue that the establishment of the Pavilion is not so much a reflection of the increasing official support for contemporary art, as many have considered, but is an active political and cultural strategy based on careful manipulation of the production and presentation of contemporary art. In other words, the Pavilion is a product of the modified strategy of control that the Chinese state has adopted to extend its authority in the contemporary art sphere and to improve its international profile. This new strategy in art is in line with the overall national diplomatic policy, since the beginning of the new century, of asserting “cultural soft power”: using culture to boost China’s international reputation and enhance its power.¹⁹ In case of the Chinese Pavilion, showing contemporary art at the Venice Biennale at the same time promotes official Chinese culture and makes China look tolerant and in tune with the rest of the world.

Art, like other cultural sectors, has been under the direct supervision of the state in China since 1949. The close tie between art and politics,

¹⁸ Li Xianting’s contribution to Chinese contemporary art after 1989 was crucial for its current status in the international art world. The best-known exhibitions that he has been closely involved with are Chinese participation in the 1993 Venice Biennale and the *China’s New Art, Post-1989*.

¹⁹ Although the term “cultural soft power” first appeared in Chinese President Hu Jintao’s official speech at the 17th Communist Party Congress in 2007, discussions about developing culture as a way to improve China’s national power and to exert better international influence have been widely circulating in China since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

²⁰ For more on this issue, see Sullivan 1996: 5–80 and Andrews/Shen 1998: 146–213.

²¹ The “two-hand theory” was one of the characteristics of Deng Xiaoping’s political ideology. The idea of Socialist spiritual civilization emerged as early as 1979 and has been continuously addressed by different communist leaders in their public speeches ever since. Deng Xiaoping then theorized the concept of Socialist spiritual civilization and established it, in relationship to Socialist material civilization, as one of the fundamental principles for Socialist construction. His theory was formally emphasized and elaborated by the Sixth Meeting of the 14th Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1996. For Deng’s theory on Socialist spiritual civilization, see Deng (1994: 27–28).

however, is not itself a new invention—in China’s dynastic past, court artists produced art following the political dictates of the emperors. This intertwined relationship between art and politics developed to a new level and scale in China in the modern era. In the beginning of the twentieth century, progressive intellectuals urged artists to use their art for the purpose of social transformation and revolution and to attack the then mainstream tradition of art as an embodiment of an elitist cultural refinement reserved for scholars. Many artists voluntarily responded to the call while others were dragged along less willingly.²⁰ With the founding of the People’s Republic of China, this political function of art was strengthened and institutionalized: under the aegis of Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature,” art was made subservient to politics, and artists had to conform to prescriptions about style and content. Even in the more liberal atmosphere of market-economy China, state administrators largely inherit this Maoist tradition and see art in socialist terms. Although strategies about how to implement cultural policy have varied greatly in different historical contexts, the function of art, indeed of all cultural forms, has always been to “serve the people, serve Socialism.”

Like other communist regimes, the Chinese Communist Party sees the cultural field as an important domain where its preferred ideologies can be disseminated, conveyed, and received. Politics needs the coat of culture to be made accessible and legible to the masses. The cultural field has therefore been closely supervised to guarantee that correct political messages are propagated. The idea of “two hands work together, one on Socialist material civilization and the other on Socialist spiritual civilization,” conveys the Chinese government’s desire to keep the cultural domain under proper control in an era when economic development seems to be the focus of the overall national plan.²¹ Chinese Communist leaders have constantly emphasized that the right ideology is a guarantee of economic development and societal stability. Culture can serve an important role in the propagation of the right ideology, and art, because it is a visual medium

with broad accessibility, has been seen as an important form through which to reach the masses.

Despite the cultural liberalization that has taken place since the late 1970s and China's changing role globally since the 1990s, the Chinese state is far from ready to give up its control over the art field. With the introduction of the market economy and the emergence of a commercial culture industry, the state has had to relax its previous firm control over the cultural field, but only to the degree that it is deemed beneficial to economic development. In a sense, this cultural loosening is more like an adaptive flexibility than a real letting go: the state becomes flexible in how it carries out its art and cultural policies and opens space to accommodate new strategies toward new cultural phenomena that are motivated by new economic and social situations. The construction of the Chinese Pavilion is but one example of how the cultural authorities appropriate unofficial art/alternative culture for the representation of a more open and democratic image of China and its government. In the 1990s, when contemporary art was excluded from state sanction, it was at the same time freed from the strictures of state ideology. This can be clearly seen in the art produced by contemporary artists for showing in exhibitions outside of China or circulating underground in China. With the lifting of the state ban on art in contemporary media, cultural officials can once again impose new kinds of ideological concerns on the production and exhibition of contemporary art. In the case of the Chinese Pavilion, these ideological concerns were carried out by the cultural officials in charge of the project.

Yan Dong, the vice director of the International Exhibition Agency and chief coordinator of the Pavilion, describes the complex motivations behind the Ministry of Culture's involvement with the Chinese Pavilion:

Considering the status that contemporary Chinese art should possess in the international art world, the negative international

influence that has resulted from the uneven qualities of art works by Chinese artists who participated in the Biennale on an individual basis, and the fact that Taiwan established a regional pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the Chinese Ministry of Culture has decided to establish a national pavilion. (Zhang 2003)

The statement reveals a lot about the logic behind this governmental establishment of an official platform for contemporary Chinese art. It is politically charged and rife with nationalistic sentiments. First, the Ministry of Culture called on nationalistic sentiment to increase the significance of the Pavilion. With the rising status of China in the global economy, state authorities sought to exert more influence in the international cultural field. Because the Venice Biennale is such an important international event, the official presence of China became meaningful and necessary for those who believed that China was ready for international cultural competitions after two decades of stunning economic development. Second, Yan Dong also refers to the undesirable presence of art of “uneven quality” (here referring to art not officially sanctioned by the Chinese government) by individual Chinese artists at previous Venice Biennales. Several leading Chinese scholars writing on contemporary art have argued that the small category of contemporary Chinese art circulating in the international world had caused a biased understanding about contemporary art in China as a whole. Third, the sensitive Taiwan issue is also called into play. The PRC government, of course, adheres inflexibly, particularly when it concerns international affairs, to the One China policy and sees Taiwan as a region of China. According to this policy, Taiwan does not have the right to establish a “national pavilion” at the Venice Biennale (which is why Yan Dong refers to it as a “regional pavilion”). The establishment of a Chinese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale is, therefore, one way of expressing China’s sense of territorial integrity and preempting any assertions by Taiwan of its national aspirations. On three levels, establishing a Chinese Pavilion was an answer to many politically related concerns.

In an interview about the Chinese Pavilion, the curator Fan Di'an states:

From the perspective of Chinese art, the establishment of the Chinese Pavilion is beneficial for China to promote its native artists independently and to change the previous situation of "being chosen." I believe that the long history of "being chosen" in the past has caused limited understanding and misunderstanding of contemporary Chinese art in the world. "Reorientation" [*zai dingwei*, the title of an earlier version of the selected proposal for the Pavilion] will bring a total new recognition of contemporary Chinese art through Chinese people's involvement in the international biennale on its own initiative. (Zhang 2003)

Fan's remarks imply a clear-cut division between active and passive involvement (choosing and being chosen) in exhibiting contemporary Chinese art on the international scene. This distinction between "Chinese" and "International," however, might not be entirely valid if we consider the collaborations between a few Chinese curators (active in or outside of China) and certain Western institutions, which have been crucial for the international visibility that contemporary Chinese art has achieved.²² Nonetheless, what is really at stake in Fan's statement is who has the right to represent Chinese art. The "Chinese people" in his statement does not literally mean every Chinese, especially because Chinese curators were involved in sending works to international exhibitions. However, many of these curators worked independently without the sanction of the Chinese government. Therefore, Fan's perspective seems to imply that only officially authorized artists can represent the right image of Chinese art; art works that have been exhibited by artists chosen by various Western curators or Chinese curators working with Western institutions in the past should not count. By setting up a national pavilion, cultural authorities can usurp the power to choose the representative artists and present the kind of art it wants. Thus the establishment of the Chinese Pavilion becomes a manifestation of the authorities' tolerance toward

²² A good case in point is *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art*, an important exhibition of Chinese contemporary art in 1998 that brought the newest Chinese contemporary art directly into contact with the international art community. It was curated by Gao Minglu in collaboration with the Asia Society in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. A number of exhibitions curated by Hou Hanru and Li Xianting share a similar approach.

contemporary art and of the intention to correct “the misunderstanding of contemporary Chinese art” because of the unauthorized participations of Chinese artists at previous Venice Biennales.

This tolerance, however, is limited and firmly controlled by cultural officials who are keenly aware of the political significance of the Biennale as an international platform for China. State ideology was taken into account from the very beginning of the process—the selection of the proposals. In addition to the eventual winner, “Synthi-Scapes,” which focuses on urbanized life and social psychology in China, there were the following proposals: Zhang Xiaoling’s proposal for a live show of ordinary people; Wang Huangsheng’s proposal to record the hardship of handicapped people and their struggles for personal achievement; and Chen Lusheng’s idea of presenting a Cultural Revolution–related theme.²³ These other proposals were each denied: it was difficult to control and manipulate the result of the live show proposal; the representation of handicapped people did not present the best image of China; and the Cultural Revolution theme could create controversy.²⁴ The “Synthi-Scapes” proposal was accepted because it had the potential to present China in a promising and desirable way, and it focused on China’s current modernization and urbanization. In screening the proposals, the Expert Committee seems to have unconsciously functioned as state censors and bore in mind the goal of presenting a proper image of China to international communities. Equally serious criteria were applied to the selection of artists for this prestigious national project. Only a limited number of artists were asked to submit proposals. Among the five chosen participants, Liu Jianhua, Lu Shengzhong, Wang Su, and Zhan Wang all had official posts in art academies. Yang Fudong was the only independent artist, though he graduated from a prestigious art school and has maintained a close connection with the official world.

The curator, Fan Di’an, offered a reason for choosing these artists: “The common point they share is that they all apply elements or the spirit

²³ Zhang Xiaoling is an art critic, and one of the vice directors of the Institute of Fine Arts at China Academy of Arts; Wang Huangsheng is the director of the Guangdong Museum of Art; Chen Lusheng is an artist and critic from China National Museum of Fine Arts.

²⁴ There was no published material available about these other proposals. What I know about the other proposals came from my personal interviews with a few members of the Expert Committee in the summer of 2004 and 2005.

of traditional Chinese culture into their experiments of contemporary art” (Zhang 2003). Because the Pavilion aimed to show an “authentic” China, the presence of traditional culture was deemed an important criterion. The four installations were all more or less associated with traditional culture, either traditional materials, such as gray brick and porcelain, or concepts related with classical landscape painting or the Chinese garden. Merely interpreting traditional culture, however, was not enough; the selected works were also to have a contemporary motif because the curators were eager to show that China was a rapidly developing modern nation. The dominant task of the Pavilion itself was to demonstrate a “real” contemporary version of Chinese art to the international community. Most of the pieces selected for the Pavilion treated contemporary issues such as industrialization, urbanization, and city reconstruction and the problems associated with them. Modern building materials such as steel and glass, or concepts such as alienation and psychic perplexity, which one associates with modern life, played major roles in those works. In other words, the combination of Chinese tradition (highly valued cultural quintessence) and contemporaneity (either materials or concepts suggesting modern life) was thought to best represent the new image of official contemporary Chinese art.

Beyond the guidelines for selecting an artist, the individual artwork included was also carefully screened so it would not be in conflict with the overall political agenda of the Pavilion. The curators clearly bore in mind that this international venue carried another important goal in addition to presenting a few Chinese artists: to break through the internationally recognized stereotypes of contemporary Chinese art. Artist Lu Shengzhong’s involvement with the Chinese Pavilion best illustrates this point. The curators asked him to submit a proposal based on a term they provided—“ink installation.” Just as the name implies, “ink installation” means the combination of installation, a contemporary art format, and ink painting, a classical Chinese art. According to Lu

Shengzhong, he at first did not feel comfortable with the idea of making an “ink installation” (Lu 2003). Instead, he submitted a complete proposal entitled *Propitious Omen Descending* (fig. 11), which he declared to be very well thought out and something he had been working on for years, along with a cursory proposal on ink installation, the given theme. The *Propitious Omen Descending* was to be a large installation composed of 500,000 paper “little red men” (*xiao hong ren*), an artistic creation largely inspired by the folk craft of paper cutting and by funeral ritual practice. He believed that his “little red men,” which because of their red color suggest good fortune, would pass on warm and auspicious feelings to spectators, who were supposed to pick one out and take it home if they so desired. In his proposal, Lu stressed his preference for *Propitious Omen Descending*, which he hoped to develop for the Biennale (Lu 2003). To his disappointment, however, he was asked to work on the ink installation, which he finally completed and named *Landscape Study*.

The reason that his “little red men” proposal was not accepted has nothing to do with any lack of artistic creativity or inspiration; Lu Shengzhong has been one of the most innovative artists in China since the late 1980s. His “little red men,” small human figures made of red paper cuttings, had been well known since the first time he showed them at the National Museum of Fine Arts in 1990. With their complex traces of Chinese folk art, traditional spirit, and contemporary cultural sentiment and artistic creativity, his “little red men” have been highly praised, and Lu has been seen as an artist who has carried Chinese folk culture into the field of contemporary art. In this sense, he stands out against the heady trend in contemporary Chinese art of referring to or directly imitating Western modern and contemporary styles. His “little red men” are a good example of a contemporary artistic innovation firmly based on Chinese sources, just the kind of work the curators were looking to exhibit at the Venice Biennale. Lu put it this way:



Figure 11: Lu Shengzhong, *Propitious Omen Descending*. Installation. Collection of the artist.

I feel *Propitious Omen Descending* is very suitable to show at Venice. The red paper-men are descending from the sky. Audiences pick up one and take it with them. They will have a stronger impression about this exhibition from China: red China, red men, very fitting! (Lu 2003)

But it was exactly the red color and its association with the idea of “red China” that made Lu’s proposal problematic with respect to the original intention of the Chinese Pavilion. As already mentioned, one purpose of the Pavilion was to correct or break through the stereotyped representations of contemporary Chinese art in the international art world. The stereotype that the authorities wanted to confront was the kind of art works that make extensive use of Chinese Communist icons such as Chairman Mao, workers, peasants, and soldiers in revolutionary fashion, and, of course, the concept of red China. This type of art, introduced by a few curators and rampantly circulated in the international art world beginning in the early 1990s, was labeled the most avant-garde part of contemporary Chinese art and has become a popular category in the international art market ever since. Back in China, scholars have criticized this type of art as a product of self-orientalism or self-colonization. Curators of the Chinese Pavilion were certainly very aware of this controversial art trend that originated in China but became popular only overseas, and they therefore aimed to mobilize a different and more “authentic” representation of contemporary Chinese art. Lu Shengzhong’s “little red men” proposal was thus caught up in this sensitivity of denying previous imagery of contemporary Chinese art. Fan Di’an’s address at the two-day symposium accompanying the opening of the Chinese Pavilion in Guangzhou clearly demonstrated his dislike of the association of red with China, which he believed to be very superficial and stereotyped. Recalling his experience of curating Chinese exhibitions overseas, he said:

For a long time, the design for [exhibition-related publications of] Chinese art in the West has been always red. Red equals China,

China equals red. . . . It is like Chinese restaurants in other countries: there are always red lanterns, which can be seen from far away. The same rule has been applied to exhibition of Chinese art [mounted outside of China]. In the past few years, I have paid particular attention to not using red too much in the exhibitions that I curate. . . . On this issue, the cooperating museum directors or curators often have difficulty understanding or accepting. They have prefabricated expectation and imagination about China. (Zaojing 2003)

Fan was not alone in seeing the endless use of red for things related with China as problematic. Other symposium participants such as Gu Zhenqing, an established curator of contemporary art, expressed a similar point of view (Zaojing 2003). Lu Shengzhong himself attended the symposium, and he must have come to understand the reason his *Propitious Omen Descending*, with its overwhelming red tone, was rejected. In contrast, his *Landscape Study*, drawing from traditional intellectual practice, the classical art tradition, contemporary deconstructive approaches, and nationalistic sentiments, was a more preferable work for the Chinese Pavilion.²⁵

Lu Shengdong's case illustrates how works were carefully chosen to meet the two-pronged criteria for representing contemporary Chinese art at the Pavilion. It is reasonable to argue that the founding of the Pavilion and its exhibition of contemporary art did not constitute a retreat of the state's control of the art field; rather, the whole process shows us that the state sought to better put that field under its regulation. In providing an official platform, the cultural authority secures a space to present the type of contemporary Chinese art that it wants to present, thus controlling the origin of the meaning. It tolerates the use of contemporary media with the reward of being able to extend its authority over the contemporary art world, an area that was not under its control before. In other words, contemporary art becomes a new arena in which the state asserts its ideology.

²⁵ In this work, audiences are invited to pick up books and read them. In doing so, they will find all kinds of diverse content in those books and in different languages. The artist actually implies that the concept of Chinese landscape painting can contain various human civilizations—the world—as represented by books in all kinds of subjects and languages.

Conclusion

By choosing contemporary media for the Venice Biennale, the Chinese cultural authorities not only showed their interest in following the custom of this renowned international art institution, but also countered their past image as a suppressor of contemporary art. The Chinese Pavilion conveyed a message that the government did not promote only social realist art, but contemporary avant-garde art as well, and that Chinese artists enjoyed a new freedom, bestowed on them by the state, in their creative activities. In doing this, the authorities presented a tolerant and hip image of China to the art world. Without a doubt, their support of contemporary art has been received positively among the majority of contemporary artists. Many of them believed that the emerging official institutional support of contemporary art marked significant progress and would greatly facilitate the further development of contemporary Chinese art.

The first Chinese Pavilion was successful in achieving its goals and conveying positive messages to Chinese art communities. In establishing a national pavilion, cultural officials got to exercise the power of choosing artists and art works that they claimed to be based on “real” Chinese aesthetic values and cultural standards. With the Pavilion, some said, China was able to promote its native artists based on its own standards rather than on the political biases and cultural expectations of a few individual international curators whose understanding of the contemporary Chinese art world was shallow at best.²⁶ The project was well received by the participating artists, as well as by a majority of contemporary artists and critics, who seem to buy into the idea of the government’s positive attitude toward contemporary art. In a sense, it did not matter much that the Pavilion never materialized in Venice because it signified a shift that was most meaningful to the Chinese art world.

Lu Shengzhong, for example, writes cheerfully in his personal diary of the moment he was notified of his participation in the Biennale: “I am willing to participate in this exhibition, but this ‘willingness’ does not

²⁶ Fan 2003b. This accusation certainly does not fit a few Chinese-born curators who are active in the international world.

come from the longing for Venice; rather, it comes because this time it is a 'choice' of Chinese themselves" (Lu 2003). The artist continues in his diary that he is upset that contemporary Chinese artists have been plunged into the shadow of "being chosen" (according to Western standards) and have been calling for the arrival of the day when the Chinese's own standards for art will be acknowledged and practiced in the international art world. Another participant, Liu Jianhua, made a similar statement: "The founding of the Chinese Pavilion will help to establish the image of contemporary Chinese art and back up the presence of individual artists with a national background" (Jiang 2003).

Another artist, Zhang Wang, is reported saying:

In the past, Chinese artists were able to attend important international exhibitions only through the selection of Western curators, so their art often catered to those curators' mind-set. This time the government's formal involvement helps to offer another aspect of contemporary Chinese art [in addition to the one already known and accepted in the West]. (Jiang 2003)

As participating artists, it is no surprise that they tended to be supportive of the exhibition; nonetheless, they expressed a focused interest, which was to establish an autonomous platform for presenting Chinese art at major international art exhibitions that was free from Western ideology. In this sense, the undertaking of the Chinese Pavilion was a mix of nationalistic sentiment and global desire.

In addition, as China has accelerated the speed of its economic development and its integration into the international community over the past two decades, the state is eager to participate in international programs and make its presence felt in as many fields as possible; the tremendous effort to gain entry into the WTO, holding the 2008 Olympic Games, and the 2010 World Expo are good examples. Also, the state's strong support can be seen in Chinese participation in world-class athletic games and international programs for music and performance. In terms

of contemporary Chinese art, the state has delayed incorporating it into the overall national project, probably because of its previous reliance on rather conservative art experts for art policies and projects. Since the beginning of the new century, however, cultural administrators have become more aware of the popularity and reputation of contemporary Chinese art in the international art world. Thus the construction of the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale was, to a certain extent, a convenient appropriation of the reputation that had been established by the individual Chinese artists who attended the Biennale before 2003, and the Pavilion itself was a ready-made platform for China's participation in many other international cultural competitions.

Glossary

Cai Guoqiang	蔡国强
<i>Chai zhu jian</i>	拆筑间
Chen Lusheng	陈履生
<i>Chengshi shanshui</i>	城市山水
Fan Di'an	范迪安
Fang Lijun	方力钧
Feng Yuan	冯远
gaige kaifang	改革开放
Huang Du	黄笃
jiejing	借景
Li Xianting	栗宪庭
Liu Jianhua	刘建华
Liu Wei	刘炜
Liu Xilin	刘曦林
Lü Shengzhong	吕胜中
<i>Meishu bao</i>	美术报
<i>Nanfang dushi bao</i>	南方都市报
Qiangnei kaihua qiangwai xiang	墙内开花墙外香
Qiangwai kaihua qiangwai xiang	墙外开花墙外香
<i>Renmin ribao</i>	人民日报
<i>Richang-yisui</i>	日常·易碎
<i>Shangshui shufang</i>	山水书房
Shao Dazhen	邵大箴
Shui Tianzhong	水天中
<i>Tianshang tianshang moli moli</i>	天上天上茉莉茉莉
Wang Guangyi	王广义
Wang Huangsheng	王璜生
Wang Shu	王澍
Wang Yong	王镛
<i>Wenyi bao</i>	文艺报
xiao hong ren	小红人
Yan Dong	阎东
Yang Fudong	杨福东
Yu Youhan	余友涵
zai dingwei	再定位
zaojing	造境
Zhan Wang	展望
Zhang Xiaoling	张晓凌
<i>Zhongguo meishu bao</i>	中国美术报

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