

## **The New Generation: Contemporary Chinese Art in the Diaspora**

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### **Abstract:**

This Special Issue of *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* focuses on the social significance and political relevance of diaspora Chinese art in the contemporary era. Although artists and authors may hold different stances towards Chinese and diaspora identities, their works and discussions showcase the importance of identity and identity-inflected art in contemporary times; they also demonstrate the productivity of treating Chinese diaspora art as a valuable subject of study in researching contemporary Chinese art. This editorial essay outlines the social and scholarly contexts related to a new generation of contemporary Chinese diaspora art and artists; it also introduces the structure and content of the Special Issue. This text is arranged in the following way: it first clarifies key words such as ‘diaspora’ and ‘Chinese diaspora’ and introduces scholarly debates surrounding these terms; it then briefly maps the study of contemporary Chinese art in the transnational and diasporic context to articulate the significance and scholarly contribution of the current issue. The essay ends with a mapping of the key topics and themes covered in this issue – which have implications for the study of Chinese diaspora art overall – and a brief outline of the key content and argument of each article.

### **Keywords:**

China, contemporary art, diaspora, new generation, artists, identity, cultural politics

This special issue was born in the middle of a global pandemic. Since the end of 2019, a coronavirus that was first reported in China and later named COVID-19 has taken the world by surprise. The pandemic has not only changed people's everyday life but also reshaped world geopolitics (Jiang 2021a, 2021b). It also had a profound impact on how Chinese identity is perceived, expressed and felt worldwide (Bao 2021b; Wielander and Bao 2022). Amongst the affected groups are artists of Chinese ancestry living outside the PRC. Regardless of their diverse ethnic origin, cultural background, socioeconomic status, migratory experience, religious and political leaning, they are invariably labelled as 'Chinese', seen and treated in a homogenous manner. Many people in the Chinese diaspora have experienced implicit and explicit forms of racism, combined with Sinophobia, orientalism and Cold War antagonism. The accentuation of the Chinese identity in the global pandemic has given rise to various forms of Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism; it has also inspired waves of social movements around the world represented by the Stop Asian Hate movement.

Contemporary art is an integral part of this picture. A generation of artists who self-identify as Chinese or Chinese diaspora have used various artistic, creative and critical strategies to respond to urgent social and political issues. They form creative, critical and political communities and forge alliances with other marginalised social groups. They celebrate a transnational Chinese identity but without essentialising or privileging it; they fight Sinophobia without losing their critical stance against the wrongdoings of the Chinese government. This special issue aims to capture some of these creative expressions to address the bigger question of how art can relate to the contemporary world and what is the value of art in tumultuous times. This issue takes the following questions as a starting point: how does the COVID-19 pandemic impact on Chinese artists and art production in the Chinese diaspora? What does the art of the Chinese diaspora look like at this new historical juncture?

How does it relate to the Chinese diaspora art of an earlier era, Chinese art inside China and also global art in general? How does Chinese diaspora art engage with issues of identity, aesthetics and politics in the contemporary world?

This editorial essay outlines some critical and scholarly contexts related to contemporary Chinese diaspora art and introduces the structure and content of the special issue. This text is arranged in the following order: first, I clarify key words such as ‘diaspora’ and ‘Chinese diaspora’, introducing key scholarly debates surrounding these terms. I then briefly map the study of contemporary Chinese art in the transnational and diasporic context to articulate the significance and scholarly contribution of the current issue. This essay ends with a mapping of the key topics and themes covered in this issue—which I hope will have implications for the study of Chinese diaspora art overall—and a brief outline of the key content and argument of each article narrated from an editor’s perspective.

### **Diaspora as a Subject Position**

The term ‘diaspora’ is derived from the Greek term *diaspeirein*, a compound of *dia* (over or through) and *speirein* (to scatter or sow) (Kenny 2013: 3). This etymology points to the term’s frequent association with the experience of human migration and geographical dislocation. Although the term was historically used to specifically describe the Jewish experience of dislocation and dispersion, it has now been used to encompass a wide range of ethnic, cultural and migratory experiences. We can therefore use the term ‘Chinese diaspora’ (Ma and Cartier 2002; Tan 2017; Zhou 2017; Miles 2020) to refer to people of Chinese ancestry living outside China, regardless of their birthplace, linguistic competence and national citizenship. The English word ‘diaspora’ is often translated as *lisan* (departing and scattering) or *liusan* (flowing and scattering) in Mandarin Chinese, and sometimes used in

tandem or interchangeably with *haiwai* (overseas). Although terms such as *haiwai huaren* (overseas Chinese) or *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese resident) have become part of the mainstream, popular and even official Chinese language, *lisan* and *liusan* largely remain scholarly and critical terms with a small range of circulation. *Lisan* and *liusan* are often used to articulate the feelings and experiences of displacement and the politics of dissidence—an critical association that renders the two terms particularly useful for this special issue.

This issue sees ‘diaspora’ not as a homogenous group of people or an intrinsic quality shared among a group of people, but as a historical and social experience, a subject position and a political stance. The term does not point to the permanent longing of a ‘homeland’ to which one wishes to but can never return. It is, rather, a subject position that one can take up, occupy and even quit based on specific historical contexts and social circumstances. One does not have to be a member of the diaspora all the time. They can call more than one country or culture home. Their other intersectional identities—including gender, sexuality, class, geographical location and migratory experience—may sometimes mediate, overtake and even eclipse their diaspora identity (Bao 2013). It is perhaps more appropriate to see ‘diaspora’ as a subject position that one can strategically occupy, or be asked to occupy, in contingent historical moments and shifting life stages. In this special issue, therefore, we embrace a non-essentialised, non-teleological and more capacious understanding of the concept of diaspora.

In recent years, the term ‘Chinese diaspora’ has been under critique and sometimes replaced with terms such as ‘transnational Chinese’, ‘global Chinese’ or the ‘Sinophone’. ‘Transnational Chinese’ and ‘global Chinese’ often have an emphasis on similitude, while ‘Chinese diaspora’ places difference and dissidence at its core. Sinophone scholar Shu-mei Shih (2010) suggests using the term ‘Sinophone’ to replace ‘Chinese diaspora’; she strongly advocates the political stance of ‘against diaspora’ or ‘anti-diaspora’. The Sinophone,

according to Shih, refers to ‘a network of places of cultural production outside of China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenising and localising of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries’ (2007: 4). In Shih’s theorisation, the PRC is naturally excluded from the Sinophone as if everything happening within the PRC borders and within the Han-ethnicity is immediately hegemonic and automatically uncritical. In response to Shih’s argument, David Der Wei Wang (2015) calls for a historicisation of the term Sinophone to understand the history and context of its emergence; he also proposes postloyalism as an alternative framework to address the temporal dimension of the Sinophone and suggests including China in the theorisation of the Sinophone. Flair Donglai Shi (2021) points out that the term Sinophone has a historical and ideological baggage of US imperialism, Taiwan-centrism and the Cold War logic of Sinophobia; he warns against ‘an overly agenda-driven theoretical generalisation that confines memories, imaginations, knowledges, and narratives of lived experiences in a singular, moralist, and hierarchical mode of reading’ (p. 336).

There is more than one version and understanding of China. Besides a mainstream, hegemonic and authoritarian construction of China and Chineseness, many scholars have observed the existence of a desiring China, a subaltern China, a queer China, the other digital China, and a China that is not one but many things at the same time (Rofel 2007, Sun 2014; Zhang and Zito 2015; Wang 2019; Bao 2020; Veg 2021). For example, feminist and queer activists are marginalised in contemporary China, and they should be seen as part of a ‘minor China’ (Yapp 2021), which defies normative understandings of a major, hegemonic and authoritarian China. In the context of queer Chinese studies, Shi-Yan Chao insists on using the term ‘diaspora’ to describe a Chinese queer experience that ‘has been rendered through a certain historical experience (though this historical experience is never fixed) and, crucially, a discursive practice that directly depicts *lisan* (“diaspora”) and metaphorically *lifang* (“exile”)

(2020: 46). In other words, diaspora as a non-fixed and non-essentialised historical and personal experience still holds value and resonance today for minority subjects who have been historically rejected or marginalised by the mainstream. Feeling oneself being part of the diaspora can signify feelings of exile, dissidence and resistance. These negative affects can be used strategically and productively by minority subjects to construct dissident identities and communities and to articulate cultural resistance to nationalist and neoliberal assimilation.

The Sinophone can also be a problematic term outside the PRC and in a transnational context. In analysing British Chinese cinema, Felicia Chan and Andy Willis (2014) have expressed concerns about using the term Sinophone uncritically to encompass all Chinese migratory experiences regardless of historical conditions and social contexts. They emphasise that in the UK, most British Chinese filmmakers use English (instead of a Sinitic language, the emphasis of which is at the core of the Sinophone definition) as their working language. As a result, their works ‘may indeed be seen as “British” and not necessarily “Sinophone”, but it would be inaccurate to say they are “not Chinese”’ (Chan and Willis 2014: 173). In other words, experiences and identities derive from ‘specific histories and geographies of migration’ (p. 173) and cannot be erased or rendered homogenous. What may work in the North American context may not map neatly onto other contexts. As Shi (2021) points out, the term Sinophone risks reproducing the hegemony of US based knowledge, geopolitical and cultural politics. Contexts matter when it comes to migratory experiences. In the UK, many Chinese migrants may not have already developed a Sinophone consciousness due to their disparate migration histories, dispersed geographical locations and the lack of political mobilisation within the British Chinese communities for decades. Also, there tends to be a wider acceptance of migrants’ multiple nationalities and ethnic origins in the UK so one identity does not have to completely replace another.

It is therefore useful to see both ‘Sinophone’ and ‘Chinese diaspora’ as distinct subject positions that have been developed in historically specific contexts, material conditions and political economies; subject positions that one can develop, occupy or quit under contingent social circumstances and in various life stages. Neither should be used to encompass or dominate all migratory experiences. They are historically contingent ‘articulations’ (Hall 1986) rather than universal truths or essentialised identities. It is in this sense that I use the term ‘Chinese diaspora’ for this editorial. In this special issue, different contributing authors have opted to use the terms most appropriate to their respective contexts and object of study. Together, they represent what Wang (2006) describes as *zhongsheng xuan ‘hua’*, a heteroglossia of voices contending a hegemonic and monolithic construction of China and Chineseness.

### **Contemporary Chinese Art as Saturation**

Identity is sometimes seen as fixed, inherent and outdated in contemporary social and cultural theories. In much of the twentieth century, identity was seen in rivalry with capitalist globalisation and antithesis to a global citizenship with a cosmopolitan outlook. At the same time, with the developments of new social movements, identity has also become key sites of anti-hegemonic struggles and processes of cultural democratisation. In an age of intertwined globalisation and de-globalisation, we are seeing a resurgence of identities and differences, both in progressive and regressive ways. For example, Chinese identity outside China has traditionally been seen as a form of racialised and ethnic identity, often associated with outdated clichés and harmful stereotypes (Frayling 2014). In recent years, Chinese communities living globally have given new meanings to Chinese identity through appropriation, hybridisation and innovation (Metzger 2020). Perhaps we should be talking

about Chineseness that is not one; Chineseness that is situational and contingent; Chineseness that is both ‘major’ and ‘minor’, both hegemonic and anti-hegemonic (Yapp 2021).

To think about identity differently—as not intrinsically good or bad but as an irreducible and non-essentialist mode of difference—helps us reconceptualise the meanings and significance of contemporary Chinese art. C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp (2020) suggest seeing identity-inflected art as a form of ‘saturation’—a word which describes the intensity of colour and the degree to which it differs from white (here understood both literally and metaphorically, also pointing to racial, ethnic and cultural differences). ‘Saturation’ is not intrinsically good or bad, positive or negative; it is a form of sensation, experience and affect that impress, surprise and reorient bodies, perceptions and senses. It compels people to see, feel and comprehend the world in different ways, often outside their own comfort zones, outside their acculturated habitus. Its intensity breaks the Western, middle-class moderation and monotony and brings one into a world full of colour, vitality and dynamism. It challenges the Eurocentric, universalist and colonialist construction of art history and visual culture. It also points to difference, diversity, singularity and multiplicity in sensation, movement and affect beyond the visual. Seen as a form of saturation, contemporary Chinese art opens up a range of embodied, sensorial and affective experiences; it creates a world and expands imaginations of the world. In this sense, contemporary Chinese art creates a ‘worlding’ experience; it is always already in the world, in and for itself.

### **Contemporary Art in the Chinese Diaspora**

Melissa Chiu (2006: 7) identifies the existence of ‘two worlds of Chinese art’: one inside China and the other outside China. The similarities and differences between the two worlds continue to fascinate art historians and critical scholars. Most of the scholarly writings on



contemporary Chinese art to date have focused on the art produced inside the PRC (e.g. Gao 2011; Gladston 2014; Wu 2014; Wang 2015; Boden 2016; Lü 2018; Welland 2018; Zhou 2020; Jiang 2021c; Wang 2021; Archer 2022). Writings specifically focusing on contemporary art produced by Chinese artists outside the PRC remain limited (e.g. Gao 1998; Wu 2001; Chiu 2006; Kuehn, Louie and Pomfret 2013; Leduc 2018; Davidson 2019). This imbalance can be attributed to many factors, one of which is the political economy of the international art market. The increasing attention to contemporary Chinese art had coincided with the rising price of artworks from the PRC in the international art market in the context of a globalising China since the 1980s. There has also been an underlying political and cultural unconscious that artworks produced inside China is more politically subversive, socially significant and artistically sophisticated, because they represent cultural authenticity and embody the ‘true spirit’ of Chineseness. In comparison, artworks produced by Chinese diaspora outside the PRC and in the liberal, free world are inferior derivatives of Western art and thus lack political and artistic value. This belief draws on longstanding orientalist fantasies and the post-Cold-War imaginations of China as an authoritarian state and Chinese artists as lonely, authentic and freedom-pursuing individuals courageously creating works to rebel against an all-too-powerful communist state.

What is authenticity and who owns Chineseness? Can diaspora Chinese art also represent contemporary Chinese art? Are they sufficiently ‘Chinese’ to merit critical and curatorial attention? These questions have haunted contemporary Chinese art creators, curators, collectors and critics for several decades. To better appreciate Chinese art outside China, it is necessary to deconstruct Chineseness and question the notion of cultural authenticity—a mission many art historians and critical scholars have taken to task.

In the aftermath of Chinese artists mass exodus overseas around 1989 and at the turn of the century, two prominent art historians Gao Minglu (1998) and Wu Hong (2001)

observed striking differences between contemporary art produced in and outside China; that is, artworks produced outside China seem obsessed with the issue of Chineseness; that is, the use of recognisably ‘Chinese’ signs, symbols and motifs such as traditional Chinese iconography and the image of Mao. This may have to do with the imagined target audience: in order to gain a niche in a competitive international art market, diaspora Chinese artists may consciously or unconsciously speak to the Western, orientalist gaze of what Chinese art may look like. Drawing on the late Chinese artist Chen Zhen’s term *rongchao jingyan*, Chiu (2006) develops the critical concept of ‘transexperience’, through which to understand the impact of the artists’ transnational experience on the cultural identity of their artworks. Chiu points out that even if Chinese symbols and icons are used by these artists, their forms and meanings are never the same, because ‘Chineseness is altered irrevocably by migration and the adoption of other sources of inspiration’ (p. 53). In other words, it is the added meanings and new experiences that matter more to the contemporary viewer. This insight is useful, as it brings Chinese diaspora art out of the constraints of Chineseness and encourages people to view them on their own terms and in their new contexts, instead of comparing them with the artworks produced inside China.

Based on the study of nine Chinese artists who migrated to Paris around and after 1989, Marie Leduc (2018) identifies dissidence—both artistically and politically—as the hallmark of these artists’ works. Leduc remarks that contemporary Chinese art is often perceived in the West in the normative framework of liberal democracy; she also observes that all these diaspora artists respond to such a normative interpretive framework in their own ways and sometimes ‘speaks back’ with aesthetic innovations which may defy conventional understandings of Chineseness.

Notably, both Chiu and Leduc focus on established diaspora Chinese artists including Cai Guo-Qiang, Chen Zhen, Huang Yong Ping, Xu Bing and Yang Jiechang, who had art

school training in China before emigrating overseas in the 1980s and 90s. Because of the similarities in their art education, life trajectory and migratory experience, their artworks tend to manifest features that are often labelled as Chineseness. It is important to note that most of these artists are male, heterosexual and cisgender identified, because this socially privileged group had the symbolic and cultural capital needed at the time for art education, exhibition opportunity and transnational mobility. Jane Chin Davidson's (2019) study recovers the hidden voices of Chinese women diaspora artists including Patty Chang, Cai Fei, Wu Mali and Yu King Tan. In their artworks, Chineseness remains a recurring theme; but there are also other themes such as ecofeminism in these artists' performance and video works.

What if we stop seeing Chineseness as an overarching, a default and the only analytical lens for diaspora Chinese artists and artworks? If these artists' identities are multiple, fluid and contingent, so are the forms, aesthetics and content of their artworks. Apart from issues of ethnic and cultural identity, what do these artists have to say about gender, sexuality, class, migration, globalisation, environment, ecology, pandemic, war, among other things? What new analytical frameworks and critical vocabulary can we develop if we view these artists and artworks from multiple, intersectional perspectives? If the question of generation stops people from viewing Chinese diaspora art from new perspectives, what will happen if we turn our attention to a new and younger generation of Chinese diaspora artists and their artworks?

### **The New Generation**

In *Brand New Art from China*, Barbara Pollack (2018) notes the emergence of a young generation of artists in China. They are mostly millennials, born in the 1980s and 90s that witnessed the rapid development of China's market economy in the context of globalisation.

Because of their coming-of-age experience and their unprecedented exposure to latest trends in international art and global culture, their artworks display a sense of cosmopolitan ‘worldliness’ (p.5). Different from their predecessors who were mostly born in the shadows of the Cultural Revolution and who identified themselves primarily as ‘Chinese artists’, the younger generation of artists identifies themselves as ‘global artists’ and even ‘world citizens’. Pollack coins the term ‘post-passport identity’ to describe the identity of these artists and the international art style that their works espouse:

The artworks by this new generation of Chinese artists are products of the twenty-first century China, the epicenter of globalization, where remnants of local culture are rapidly evaporating. Their artworks are refreshingly original and free from the nagging stereotypes and iconography that dogged earlier periods of contemporary art from China. There are no depictions of Mao, no more references to imperial China or acknowledgment of the Cultural Revolution. (p. 6)

Pollack may risk overstating the differences between the ‘new generation’ and the ‘old generation’, as the ‘new generation’ can still turn to recurring cultural themes and motifs that are recognisably ‘Chinese’. But her observation points to emerging features, styles and aesthetics of contemporary Chinese art in the twenty-first century as a result of the changing social contexts and artists’ lived experiences. Pollack’s book focuses on what is happening in China and does not address the situation outside China, but we can observe a similar trend happening to contemporary Chinese art in a global and diasporic context. As an increasing number of young people go abroad to study in art schools and some choose to live, work and make their career in the West, what are their artworks like? Are they equally burdened by the

question of Chineseness as their predecessors? If not, are we seeing the emergence of a new generation of Chinese diaspora artists?

In the past two decades, a new generation of diaspora artists have made their marks in the world of contemporary Chinese art. Many of them have attended colleges and art schools outside China and are pursuing their careers overseas. Well informed of international art trends and practices, they often strategically make use of a wide range of art vocabulary, some of which are not distinctively perceived as 'Chinese'. Speaking to a multiplicity of social and political issues not exclusively limited to those in China, these diaspora artists have developed divergent cultural identities and identifications: instead of seeing themselves solely as Chinese, some prefer being identified as Asian, Asian American, Eurasian, British East Asian, international, global, cosmopolitan, Londoner, New Yorker, feminist, queer, trans, migrant, alien and so on. For many, an ethnic signifier such as 'Chinese' should not be the overarching or the only category to designate their identity; nor should it be the most distinctive feature that describes their artworks and art practices. More importantly, these artworks and aesthetics challenge a conventional understanding of Chinese culture in the West, as well as its associated imaginaries of orientalism, exoticisation and isolation.

In this context, we can ask a number of interrelated critical questions pertinent to our times: Are we witnessing the emergence and development of a new generation of diasporic Chinese art and artists? Is there a generational difference between an older and a younger generation? If so, how are these differences manifested in artworks and art practices, and played out in the processes of art production, curation, and dissemination? What are the political, economic, and cultural factors associated with these practices? How do these artists and artworks engage with contemporary issues such as globalisation, the rise of China's power, Brexit, Trump, the war in Ukraine, as well as the augmenting nationalism, anti-immigration and Sinophobia sentiments around the world? How can we construct innovative

perspectives and critical vocabulary to explore, address, and analyse these artworks and artists? This special issue makes a modest effort to answer these questions.

The remaining five sections of this essay present an incomprehensive list of the key topics and themes covered in this issue. Each section focuses on a key theme and introduces two or three articles. They can be seen to offer a schematic mapping of the field and point to some directions for future research.

### **Generations and Genealogies**

This issue starts with the question of ‘generation’: If we are seeing a new generation of Chinese diaspora artists, who are the ‘old generation’? What is the relationship between diaspora artists of different generations? Do they share things in common? Is there a possibility for intergenerational dialogue?

Alex Burchmore’s article examines the art practices of three renowned Chinese diaspora artists: Huang Yong Ping; Ni Haifeng and Cai Guo-Qiang. All three artists left China in the 1980s; they have now settled down in Europe and North America and have made their names internationally. Their art practice can be best understood as the ‘aesthetics of export’, according to Burchmore, which can be political (in the case of Huang), social (in the case of Ni) and affective (in the case of Cai). While these artists acknowledge colonial power relations and capitalist world orders, their artworks constantly wrestle with essentialising impulses underlying chinoiserie and Pan-Asianism—a theme with which a new generation of artists continue to grapple, often in diverse ways and with varying attitudes.

Pan Gaojie takes a different approach to the issue of generation. Instead of examining three artists of the same era, Pan examines three Chinese diaspora women artists from different historical eras and generations: Pan Yuliang, Shen Yuan and Pixy Liao. Such a

diachronic, comparative and biographic approach is fruitful, as it demonstrates the central role of gender in shaping these women artists' experiences in the context of the continuing patriarchy that women artists must always face. Pan also demonstrates how these women artists pursue independence, self-awakening and broader worldviews despite structural constraints. The intersectionality of gender and race identities is both a source of double marginalisation in a transnational, patriarchal art world, and an opportunity to pursue alternative modes of artistic expressions to their male counterparts.

The focus on generations and genealogies point to continuities and ruptures in history, culture and aesthetic style. Chineseness is both a lingering motif and a point of departure, opening up a multiplicity of identities, styles and politics. When they are located in specific geographical contexts, they also take on variegated meanings.

### **Geographies and Cartographies**

If the term diaspora signifies a form of dislocation and displacement in terms of geography, body and experience, what is its geographical implication? Does it suggest the mourning of a lost 'homeland', or does it open up different modes of relations, connections and social imaginaries? The next set of articles (Mo and Wang) address the issue of geography and cartography.

Lou Mo's article introduces three artists of Chinese ancestry, Pu Yingwei, Musquiqui Chihying and Enoch Cheng, who use their artworks to represent Africa and to connect China with Africa. Their connections to Africa started from family, professional and personal ties, and these ties have become more personal, intimate and affective over time. This China-Africa connection not only rewrites the Global North-centric art historical narrative; it also offers an alternative narrative of China-Africa relations, not led by nation states but initiated

by individual citizens; it indexes a form of ‘minor transnationalism’ based on the political and cultural imaginary of the Global South (Bao 2020).

Xueli Wang’s article introduces the works of the Asian American artist Patty Chang. Wang divides Chang’s works into two stages. Chang’s early-career works are ‘body art’ designed to deconstruct her own gender and racial identities. Chang’s mid-career works, represented by *Shangri-La* (2005), changes its focus from identity to relation and from deconstruction to what Wang calls ‘diasporic cartography’. Through ‘diasporic cartography’, Chang uses her body to explore alternative modes of mapping and world-making, thus offering an experience of the world that is embodied and anti-systematic in nature. This rewrites the conventional understanding of the diaspora and sees it as a relation instead of an identity or an origin.

Both Mo’s and Wang’s articles point to the centrality of location for Chinese diaspora artists. But they also suggest that such locations are never static or unproblematic. In paying meticulous attention to new forms of social relations and affective connections, these artists imagine and map the world in a non-hegemonic way. In this sense, Chinese diaspora artists not only rewrite what Chineseness and diaspora may mean; they also create new spaces, places and political imaginaries.

### **Forms, Materials and Mediums**

After reviewing the temporal and spatial dimensions of transnational migration and global diaspora, the third group of essays examines the forms, materials and mediums used by the new generation of Chinese diaspora artists. The authors (Zhao, Pedone, Picerni and Kyan) draw on a variety of methods, including semiotics, new materialism and actor network theory to reveal formalist and aesthetic interventions as well as the social and political significance



of Chinese diaspora art. They also explore whether there a distinct ‘diasporic aesthetics’ (Mercer 1994) or ‘migratory aesthetics’ (Bal 2007) emerging from these artworks.

Xing Zhao examines Chinese American artist Liu Beili’s artworks. Using the traditionally feminine form of sewing, Liu explores her intersectional identity as a woman, a Chinese migrant and a member of the racial and ethnic minority living in the United States. All these intersectional identities are ‘woven’ into her artworks. Comparing femininity to water, Liu highlights the resilience of the Chinese woman diaspora under crisscrossing structures of oppression such as patriarchy and racism. Her use of textile material manifests the gendered agency of the Chinese diaspora subject.

Valentina Pedone and Federico Picerni continue the discussion of diaspora language, subjectivity and agency. They focus on two Chinese artists—Musk Ming and Tony Cheung, who live and work across China and Europe—to reflect on how both artists’ transnational experiences find expression in their transcultural works. Pedone and Picerni identify transculturalism as a useful conceptual framework to disrupt rigid identity categories. They also give agency to body and language, both of which serve as conduits through which identities are constructed, negotiated and subverted. Not coincidentally, both Ming and Cheung are queer identified artists, and their works challenge the heteronormative mappings of national, cultural and sexual identities.

Carrying on with the queer theme, Winston Kyan examines the multimedia art practice of the American Chinese artist Yan Xing. Refusing the ‘repressive hypothesis’ expected of the queer Chinese diaspora subject in the West, Yan Xing expresses his queerness not through an emphasis on identity but on desire. In his works, desire becomes unbound; it flows and overflows beyond rigid identity lines; its meanings refuse to be pinned down. Addressing multiple themes and using flexible medium and artistic language, Yan

Xing's works defy rules and expectations of what a Chinese artist in the US should and should not do.

Together, the artists studied in this section (Liu Beili, Musk Ming, Tony Cheung and Yan Xing) demonstrate a myriad of ways in which a new generation of Chinese diaspora artists deal with the issue of identity. It is important to note that gender and sexual identities have become very pronounced for these artists. Unlike the older generation of artists who refuse to take on a marginalised position by emphasising their gender and sexuality, the new generation has taken a different approach by celebrating their differences in gender, sexuality and desire. This can, on the one hand, be attributed to structural reasons: women and queer artists are more likely to excel in diaspora contexts than in China where gender equality and sexual diversity are not yet institutionalised. On the other, identity becomes more important for a younger generation of artists, and this chimes with the new international trend for equality, diversity and inclusion in creative arts. It is perhaps no surprise that a large percentage of the young generation of Chinese diaspora artists are women and LGBTQ identified and that they are not shy of making a statement about their politics. All these artists and artworks express their feminist and queer politics through the manipulation of forms, materials and mediums. They engender and queer—used as a verb to suggest the subversion of gender, sexual and social norms—a patrilineal and heteronormative imagination of the Chinese diaspora.

### **Diaspora Art and Activism in Turbulent Times**

The next set of articles deal with the social and political use of visual art in the COVID-19 pandemic. Continuing the discussions in *The World, Two Metres Away: Arts and Cultural during the Pandemic* (Jiang 2021a) and *The Otherness of the Everyday: Twelve*

*Conversations from the Chinese Art World During the Covid-19 Pandemic* (Jiang 2021b), we interrogate: What is the use of contemporary art in uncertain times? In tumultuous historical moments such as the Hong Kong protests and #StopAsianHate, what role can art play in social change? Can art become political, and, if yes, how?

Here we are presented with [two case studies](#) of the political use of art in the COVID-19 pandemic. Delany Holton examines Hong Kong diaspora filmmaker Simon Liu's protest trilogy—*Signal 8*, *Happy Valley* and *Devil's Peak*, three documentaries made during the political upheavals in Hong Kong. In all these films, Liu uses the film language of abstraction to document the cityscape and the unfolding events. Here abstraction serves as a form of diasporic aesthetics and politics, both to underpin the intelligibility of the filmmaker's identity and to capture Hong Kong's cultural liminality. The political unconscious of diasporic aesthetics and the aestheticisation of diaspora politics are both played out in visual forms. As their personal and political trauma defies representation, we are therefore left with non-representable visual forms.

[Writing in the aftermath of the Atlanta shooting of Asian Americans in March 2021](#), Feng Chen examines how a group of Chinese visual artists in New York responded to the anti-Asian racial injustice during the pandemic by performing and remaking their Asian identity on social media. Through creating and posting rebellious artworks on social media, these artists spoke against anti-Asian racism, challenged racial stereotypes and created a space for interracial interactions. Their voluntary adoption of Asian identity not only situates their Chinese diaspora identity in the context of American immigration history; it also imagines interracial and interethnic solidarity. This case study demonstrates that, like Chinese diaspora artists in the UK (Bao 2021a, 2021b), these US-based Chinese diaspora artists have turned to pan-Asian identity categories to articulate social justice and minority solidarity.

### **‘Speaking Nearby’: Artists in Conversation**

A special issue about Chinese diaspora art is not complete without the voices of Chinese diaspora artists. We have therefore invited our contributors, Lenette Lua, Huanzhi Zhang and Gao Shiyu, to interview two UK-based artists, Erika Tan and Lisa Chang Lee. These lively scholar-artist conversations trigger many brilliant ideas; they also bring together some of the recurring themes in this special issue.

This conversation between researchers Lenette Lua and Huanzhi Zhang reflects upon their discussions with Erika Tan, a Singaporean artist and curator based in London, and unveils the struggle to grasp the exponentiality of Chineseness. The two contributors have adopted a ‘speaking nearby’ position as an ethical, intersubjective position to engage with diaspora artists and their works. They consider Chineseness as ‘an imagined archipelago of one’s mind, a fractured photograph of generations’ memories and amnesia, and a fluctuating silhouette of continuous constructions and deconstructions that defies definition’. These beautifully written words underpin a non-essentialised, affective understanding of the diaspora identity, which lies at the heart of this special issue.

The conversation between scholar Gao Shiyu and the London-based multimedia artist Lisa Chang Lee focuses on the artist’s experiments with algorithms and digital technologies to transcend established norms of Chineseness culturally and artistically. Her works question the binary distinctions between humans and non-human, nature and culture, the East and the West. This conversation crystallises the political and ethical commitment of diaspora art. It starts with identity and ends up deconstructing identities in an ecological and non-anthropocentric way. This marks a nice conclusion to this issue.

Overall, all these essays and conversations highlight the social significance and political relevance of diaspora Chinese art in the contemporary era. Although these artists and authors hold different stances towards Chinese and diaspora identities, their works and discussions showcase the importance of identity and identity-inflected art in contemporary times; they also demonstrate the productivity of treating Chinese diaspora art as a valuable subject of study in researching contemporary Chinese art.

## **Glossary**

*Haiwai* (overseas) 海外

*Haiwai huaren* (overseas Chinese) 海外华人

*Huaqiao* (overseas Chinese resident) 华侨

*Lisan* (diaspora lit. departing and scattering) 离散

*Liufang* (exile) 流放

*Liusan* (diaspora lit. flowing and scattering) 流散

*Rongchao jingyan* (transexperience) 融超经验

*hongsheng xuan 'hua'* (a heteroglossia of Chinese voices) 众声喧‘华’

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