

Deconstructing Gao Minglu: critical reflections on contemporaneity and associated exceptionalist readings of contemporary Chinese art

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Introduction

The term 'contemporary Chinese art' is now used widely in Anglophone contexts to denote various forms of avant-garde, experimental and museum-based visual art produced as part of the liberalization of culture that has taken place within the People's Republic of China (PRC) following the ending of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the subsequent confirmation of Deng Xiaoping's programme of economic and social reforms at the XI Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in December 1978. Since its inception during the late 1970s, contemporary Chinese art has been characterized by an often conspicuous combining of images, attitudes and techniques appropriated from western(ized) modernist and international postmodernist art with aspects of autochthonous Chinese cultural thought and practice. Within the context of an international art world still informed strongly by poststructuralist thinking and practice, contemporary Chinese art is consequently considered to be a localized variant of postmodernism whose hybridizing of differing cultural outlooks/modes of production has the potential to act as a locus for the critical deconstruction of supposedly authoritative meanings—not least, essentialist conceptualizations of national-cultural identity used to underpin colonialist-imperialist relations of dominance. In stark contrast, within mainland China there is a widely held and durable belief in the existence of an essential, spatially bounded, Chinese national-cultural identity as well as in the potential manifestation of that identity through indigenous cultural practices including those associated with contemporary Chinese art.

It is important to note that the dominant, starkly exceptionalist view of culture within mainland China does not extend authoritatively to Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Because of, in the case of Hong Kong/Macau, the legacy of European colonialism and, in the case of Taiwan, political independence and strong US political influence, there has been within those spaces since the 1990s sustained support for the pluralistic values of contemporary liberal democracy. Consider, for example, Taiwan's adoption of multi-culturalism as a dominant state discourse

following the lifting of martial law and the advent of democracy there in 1987.¹ The critique of Chinese exceptionalism advanced here should therefore not be interpreted as one informed by a generalizing/stereotyping view of Chinese cultural attitudes, but instead as one focused on particular discursive conditions prevalent within mainland China.

These diverse qualifications notwithstanding, contemporary Chinese art must be seen as a strongly contested term whose possible significance varies between two mutually resistant points of view: one that upholds a continuing belief in the existence of an essential, spatially bounded, Chinese national cultural identity as well as in the potential manifestation of that identity through indigenous cultural practices; and another that has suspended belief in the existence of essential states of being in light of the pervasively unsettling vision of linguistic signification opened up by the theory and practice of deconstruction. Any searching attempt to interpret contemporary Chinese art therefore raises serious ethical/political questions that, on the face of it, press us to make a choice between what might be termed authoritarian and counter-authoritarian perspectives. From an established poststructuralist-postmodernist point of view, this choice would appear to be, in principle at least, a relatively simple one to make. If we wish to remain consistent with a critical postmodernist/post-colonialist standpoint then we must continue to align ourselves with deconstructivism and its immanent critique of authoritarianism. On closer inspection, however, that choice is not so clear-cut. As Craig Clunas has argued, writing with reference to the work of the Chinese film and video installation artist Yang Fudong, the question of whether we choose to emphasize the 'Chineseness' or the globalized nature of contemporary Chinese art is a 'fundamentally political' one that 'has no easy or definitive answer'.² Although Clunas does not choose to elaborate further upon this statement, he can be understood to imply that while Chinese national-cultural exceptionalism remains anathema in relation to internationally dominant post-colonialist attitudes towards the critical standing of contemporary art, any move to dismiss that exceptionalism outright stands in danger of a return to colonialist relations of dominance. Put in more general terms, we cannot choose to align ourselves resolutely with an established international post-modernist perspective against differing localized points of view without what would appear to be a self-contradictory denial of difference.

In recent years, there has been an attempt to overcome this aporia in established postmodernist thinking through debates relating to the concept of contemporaneity. These debates have become increasingly influential in providing an intellectual framework for the diversified analysis of contemporary art within differing local and international settings. As a result, where there was once a tendency to interpret contemporary art either from the totalizing perspectives of a modernist world view or in light of the pervasive relativism of postmodernist theory and practice there is now a third position that embraces the simultaneity of widely differing approaches toward the interpretation of contemporary art, 'grounding' those differing approaches in relation to geographically distinct experiences and representations of what Terry

¹ Paul-François Tremlett, 'Introduction: re-writing culture on Taiwan', in Fang-long Shih, Stuart Thompson and Paul-François Tremlett, eds, *Re-Writing Culture in Taiwan*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009, 1-14.

² Craig Clunas, *Art in China* 2nd ed, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 235.

Smith, Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory at the University of Pittsburgh, has referred to as 'doubled' or 'para-modernities'.³

In this essay, I shall seek to address contestation of the term 'contemporary Chinese art' critically from the point of view of emerging debates relating to the concept of contemporaneity, and in doing so offer an ethically/politically focused critique of exceptionalist accounts of the development of contemporary Chinese art. In part one, I shall give a brief overview of thinking associated with the concept of contemporaneity as well as how that thinking can be understood to have supplemented pre-existing postmodernist readings of the experience and representation of modernity. I shall then go on to analyze critically an essay by the historian and curator Gao Minglu, which asserts that contemporary Chinese art has been shaped in relation to experiences and representations of modernity within the PRC that differ markedly from those associated with modernist and postmodernist art in the West and that contemporary Chinese art is, as a consequence, open to localized Chinese interpretative perspectives separate from those of internationally dominant postmodernist discourses. In analyzing this essay, I shall not only argue that Gao's exceptionalist account of the significance of contemporary Chinese art relies on highly selective readings of historical 'fact', but also that it is theoretically contradictory/inconsistent and therefore unsustainable as a categorical truth claim. I shall then conclude by examining in more detail the ethical/political implications of Gao's exceptionalist account of the significance of contemporary Chinese art as well as advancing some first thoughts towards a general critique of contemporaneity.

Contemporaneity

During the last decade, cultural theory has become increasingly enmeshed with critical discourses relating to the concept of contemporaneity. These discourses have emerged as part of a continuing internationalized critique of the underlying intellectual assumptions of western modernism—most notably, an orientalizing western belief both in the universal applicability of the values of western modernity (principally, the valorization of a secular-scientific rationalist world view) and in the moral authority of western modernism as a necessary and progressive negation of the supposedly backward-looking irrationalism of pre-modernist tradition and non-western otherness. As such, they persist in upholding the now well-established postmodernist view, put forward most emphatically in the writings of Bhabha, that there is no single totalizing meta-discourse that might be used to represent modernity, but, instead, differing, non-synchronous representations of modernity (some 'central' and some 'peripheral') each with its own socio-culturally inflected vision of the trajectory and significance of historical events.⁴

The most searching academic text on the subject of contemporaneity published so far in relation to the visual arts is an edited collection of essays entitled, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. This collection, which was published in 2008 following a symposium on the subject of contemporaneity at the University of Pittsburgh in

³ Terry Smith, 'Introduction' in Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008, 15.

⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.

2004 and which was edited by Terry Smith along with Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, contains essays that seek to address what it is to live within geographically disparate conditions of modernity that differ from but nevertheless continue to relate to those associated with western(ized) modernism and postmodernism. Among these essays are two that attempt to rethink the historical development of contemporary Chinese art in relation to a specifically Chinese vision of modernity: one by Wu Hung entitled 'A Case of Being "Contemporary": Conditions, Spheres and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art'; and another by Gao Minglu entitled "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth": Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art'.

As Smith indicates in the introduction to *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, contemporaneity can be understood to consist 'precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them'.⁵ Moreover, as Smith goes on to assert, under such conditions '[n]o longer does it feel like "our time," because "our" cannot stretch to encompass its contrariness. Nor, indeed, is it "a time," because if the modern was inclined above all to define itself as a period, and sort the past into periods, in contemporary conditions periodization is impossible'.⁶ On the face of it, contemporaneity (as described by Smith) would therefore appear to be little more than a rehashing of an established post-colonialist vision of the fragmented and shifting nature of cultural identity. However, unlike post-colonialism, with its pervasively deconstructive invocations of third space and cultural hybridity,⁷ discourses associated with the concept of contemporaneity have not—in spite of a continuing adherence to postmodernist/deconstructivist theory on the part of some of its leading advocates, including Smith⁸—sought to represent the current experience of (post-)modernity as a universally uncertain one. Rather, by rigorously pursuing the notion that modernity can be represented differently in relation to differing, geographically located social, economic, and cultural circumstances, discourses related to the concept of contemporaneity have extended critical legitimacy to local, spatially delineated experiences of modernity that not only diverge in their particular social, cultural, political and economic outlooks from those associated with western modernism, but that also, in some cases, explicitly resist the universal applicability of established postmodernist-deconstructivist theory and practice. Consider here, for example, essays by Okwui Enwezor, 'The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition', and Colin Richards, 'Aftermath: Value and Violence in Contemporary South African Art', included in *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, both of which point towards and support an active resistance among non-western artists, curators and critics to the imposition of both western modernist and postmodernist interpretative perspectives. As an intellectual framework for the interpretation of the experience and representation of modernity, the concept of contemporaneity can thus be understood to have overwritten an established postmodernist

⁵ Smith, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 8-9.

⁶ Smith, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 9.

⁷ See, for example, Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

⁸ Smith, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 9.

critique of the totalizing perspectives of western modernism by framing postmodernist/deconstructivist uncertainty—that is to say, a pervasive doubt with regard to all metaphysical conceptions of absolute totality and difference [i.e. Jean-François Lyotard's seminal conception of the 'post-modern sublime'⁹—not as a universal condition of present (post-)modernity but, instead, as one possible (and contestable) reading of the experience of modernity among others.

As such, thinking associated with the concept of contemporaneity can thus be understood to have added significantly to an existing postmodernist problematization of western modernism's Baudelairean vision of the experience of modernity as a series of successive and fleeting 'just nows' by upholding experiences and representations of modernity without the unfolding of dominant modernist/postmodernist discourses in the West. As Smith has argued in respect of contemporaneity, 'there is no longer any overarching explanatory totality that accurately accumulates and convincingly accounts for these proliferating differences. The particular, it seems, is now general, and, perhaps, forever shall be'.¹⁰ This perspective not only upholds an established postmodernist suspension of the apparent overcoming of western modernism by postmodernism—something to which, as Jean-François Lyotard has pointed out, the paradox of the prefix 'post' in relation to the use of the term 'post-modernism' performatively bears witness¹¹—but, in addition, the legitimacy of localized conceptions of time that are radically different from the rationalist-sequential conception of the 'just now' that has prevailed historically as part of modernism in the West. In the case of western(ized) postmodernism this non-sequential conception of time is strongly evinced, as Fredric Jameson makes clear, by postmodernist works of art, such as Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* series, that can be understood to foreclose any established modernist sense of spatial, expressive or historical depth while remaining open, in spite of their resistance to any satisfactory completion of 'the hermeneutic gesture', to any number of contextualizing associations (including, as Jameson himself suggests in the particular case of *Diamond Dust Shoes*, the horrors of Auschwitz).¹² And in the case of non-western(ized) forms of art contemporaneous with western(ized) postmodernism, the persistence of traditional aesthetic conceptions of space-time in which past, present and future are seen in some sense as endlessly concurrent; for example, as Mazhar Hussain and Robert Wilkinson have indicated, the classical Indian poetic conception of *dhvani* and the classical Chinese literary paring of 'latent' (*yin*) and 'out-standing' (*hsiu*), both of which conceive of the experience of the work of art as one which 'resonates endlessly in the imagination' and 'whose significance is unfathomable'.¹³

Crucially in this regard, poststructuralist-postmodernist discourses prior to the emergence of those associated with contemporaneity should not be seen as starkly antipathetic to cultural essentialism. Poststructuralist postmodernism is strongly informed by performative

⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 71-82.

¹⁰ Smith, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 9.

¹¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 71-82.

¹² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991, 8-10.

¹³ Mazhar Hussain and Robert Wilkinson, eds, *The Pursuit of Comparative Aesthetics: An Interface between the East and West*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, 5-7.

conceptions of signified meaning that conceive of identity as a shifting, uncertainly bounded and internally fractured construct against the grain of the starkly asymmetrical essentialist relations of dominance underpinning modernist discourses. However, poststructuralist-postmodernism has also embraced conceptions of strategic essentialism where shared cultural identity is upheld as a locus of resistance to continuing colonialist-imperialist relations of dominance; for example, Paul Gilroy's critical overwriting of colonialist-imperialist relations of dominance through the counter-mapping of a 'Black Atlantic'.¹⁴ Such a position does not seek to eschew the performativity of identity, but instead to foreground the existential sense of collectivity/community that derives from the shared construction of cultural meaning and the way in which discourse can be understood, following Michel Foucault, to both limit and enable social agency.¹⁵ Poststructuralist postmodernism can thus be understood not to stand in direct opposition to essentialist conceptions of identity (a position which would in any case simply repeat and reinforce the dialectical order underpinning the latter), but instead to shuttle deconstructively between performative and essentialist conceptions of identity; an indeterminate positioning described by Gilroy with reference to Du Bois as 'double modernity'. By asserting the contingency of poststructuralist postmodernism, discourses associated with contemporaneity can thus be understood to act as a problematizing extension not only of poststructuralist postmodernist conceptions of difference, but also associated pragmatic-essentialist resistances to power.

As discourses on the subject of modernity since the emergence of the May 4th and New Culture movements in China during the early twentieth century readily attest, within a Chinese socio-cultural context arguments for the validity/legitimacy of specifically Chinese experiences and representations of modernity are of long-standing relevance. Partly because of a persistent sense of the historical particularity of Chinese cultural identity, and partly because of a desire to resist a straightforward assimilation of western modernity for fear of what the historian Michael Clarke has referred to as a 'felt deracination',¹⁶ Chinese artists and intellectuals have argued consistently for a localized Chinese sense of modernity consonant with the distinctive horizons and developmental trajectory of Chinese history. Consider here, for example, the Chinese critic Fou Lei's valorization of the work of the painter Huang Binhong during the early part of the twentieth century, which, as Claire Roberts indicates, involves a belief on Fou's part that western modernism's tendency towards subjectivist abstraction had been foreshadowed by traditional Chinese painting and that Huang's work is, as an exemplary modern-day manifestation of traditional Chinese painting, more than equal to that of western modernists such as Paul Cézanne.¹⁷ It is, therefore, unsurprising to find Chinese writers associated with the

¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

¹⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, Paul Rabinow, ed, London: Penguin, 1991.

¹⁶ Michael Clarke, 2008, 'Revolutions in Vision: Chinese Art and the Experience of Modernity' in Kam Louie, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 274.

¹⁷ Claire Roberts, *Friendship in Art: Fou Lei and Huang Binhong*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010, 86-88, 118, 195 and 201.

theorization and historicization of contemporary Chinese art, such as Wu Hung and Gao Minglu, contributing strongly to emerging debates on the subject of contemporaneity given that they too have sought to legitimize conceptualizations of modernity that differ from those associated with modernism and postmodernism in the West and internationally.

In the next section of this article I shall analyze critically Gao Minglu's essay "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth" which asserts that contemporary Chinese art has been shaped in relation to experiences and representations of modernity within the PRC that differ markedly from those associated with modernist and postmodernist art in the West and that contemporary Chinese art is, as a consequence, open to localized Chinese interpretative perspectives excepted from those of internationally dominant postmodernist discourses.

Gao Minglu—"Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art"

In his essay, "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth": Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art', Gao Minglu begins by stating that within China since the early twentieth century modernity has meant 'a new nation rather than a new epoch' and that, as a consequence, Chinese modernity is a 'consciousness of both transcendent time and reconstructed space with a clear national cultural and political territorial boundary'.¹⁸ Gao then proceeds on the basis of this opening statement to argue that China's geographically bounded conceptualization of modernity is markedly different from that associated with the development of modernist and postmodernist art in Europe and North America. As Gao would have it, the western (that is to say, European and North American) conception of cultural modernity is based on two guiding principles set out in the writings of the German critical theorist (and critic of postmodernism) Jürgen Habermas: first, that human history can be articulated according to a sequential unfolding of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern epochs, and that each of these epochs constitutes an advance on that or those that came before it; and second, that modernity can be divided—in light of the European Enlightenment's instituting of science, morality, and art as autonomous spheres of human activity—into the materialistic modernity of bourgeois capitalist society on the one hand and an aesthetic modernity critical of materialistic modernity on the other.¹⁹ Gao also asserts that within the context of western modernity aesthetic modernity has itself taken two distinct forms: an autonomous (socially disengaged) aesthetic often identified with the writings of Clement Greenberg and modernist abstraction; and a critical (socially engaged) aesthetic embodied by the work of Marcel Duchamp and the western postmodernist conceptualism of the 1970s and 1980s. In Gao's estimation, these sequential articulations and categorical divisions have effectively shaped western art history by framing the historical development of modernist and postmodernist art in the West as 'a logical process' coinciding with the 'socioeconomic contexts

¹⁸ Gao Minglu, "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth": Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art', in Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008, 134.

¹⁹ Gao, "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth", 134-135.

of the transitional age from the early to late modern period' (in other words, the transition from modernity to postmodernity).²⁰

In Gao's view, a Chinese conceptualization of modernity differs from that associated with the development of modernist and postmodernist art in Europe and North America in three significant ways. First, Gao argues that while China has been obliged to assimilate values and practices associated with the western conception of modernity—thereby binding western and Chinese conceptions of modernity 'in a relationship of inseparability'—the bringing together of western values and practices with local Chinese priorities and points of view has involved a departure from any 'clear historical line of progression from premodern to modern then postmodern', and that this has taken place as a result of the merging of 'characteristics of all these periods [...] in hybrid forms [...] often using incompatible elements at the same time'.²¹ What is more, argues Gao, this departure has led in some instances to an apparent reversal—when seen from a western(ized) perspective—of the order of the 'Euro-American epochal sequence'.²² A key example of which, argues Gao, is the widespread debating of postmodernist architectural theories within the PRC during the 1980s and 1990s in advance of a move towards an engagement with modernist theories and controversies in more recent years—with postmodernity being 'considered mostly as a set of concepts which served as the first step in a search for modernity' and modernity 'being specified and merged into a true condition of Chinese urban construction in the current booming, globalized society'.

Gao's then goes on to argue that 'the mainstream of Chinese intellectual thinking in the modern and contemporary periods' contrasts with a western conceptualization of modernity by continually trying 'to close the gap between different fields as well as between past and present'.²³ In support of his argument Gao makes reference to a lecture given by the influential philosopher of modern Chinese history, Cai Yuanpei in 1917, in which Cai asserts that 'aesthetics and art practice [are] equal in social importance to religion and commitment to morality'. As a consequence of this persistent desire to close gaps between different fields, argues Gao, 'Chinese modern and contemporary art [has been] fundamentally concerned with how to integrate art and social projects, and how to fuse the benefits of a modern environment with a deeper understanding of current living space, in order to create a totality'. For Gao, in the West the opposite is the case with both modernist and postmodernist art having maintained a persistent sense of critical difference from society.²⁴

Gao then goes on to argue that the Chinese conception of modernity also differs from that of the West because it has, since the very beginnings of China's entry into modernity during the early twentieth century, involved the combining of certain non-absolutist/relativist aspects of western modernity—including social Darwinism and North American pragmatism—with the pragmatism of traditional Chinese Confucianism. Here, Gao refers to a localized view of Chinese modernity put forward by Hu Shi, a leading figure in China's New Culture movement of the early twentieth century, whom Gao quotes as saying:

²⁰ Gao, "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth", 135.

²¹ Gao, "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth", 134-135.

²² Gao, "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth", 136.

²³ Gao, "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth", 136.

²⁴ Gao, "Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth", 136.

[...] the truth is nothing more than a tool for dealing with the environment. As the environment changes the truth changes with it. The real knowledge needed by humanity is not absolute principle and reason, but rather particular time, specific space, my truth.²⁵

As a consequence of this combining of western and Chinese pragmatic outlooks, contends Gao, the Chinese conception of modernity has diverged from the sequential logic of western modernity (with its categorical division between materialistic modernity and aesthetic modernity) through a continual subverting of 'dichotomous thought patterns such as subject versus object, and time versus space'.²⁶ And that this subverting has not only placed modern Chinese art of the last ninety years or so in an invariably close relationship to the material conditions of its immediate production and reception, but in a manner that also allows for the continuation of a specifically Chinese view of history as a decidedly non-linear 'network of forever changing relations among human subjectivity, living space and experience' whose space is 'always ongoing, mutable, and actual'. As Gao sees it, this 'pragmatic principle of daily experience' relates both to the early twentieth century thinking of Hu Shi and to famous sayings attributed to Deng Xiaoping, such as 'Cross the river by jumping from stone to stone on the riverbed' (*mozhe shitou guohe*), and 'White cat, black cat, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat', which Gao contends are 'metaphors of "socialism with Chinese characteristics"' as the 'guiding principle of economic reform initiated [within the PRC] in 1978'.²⁷

In Gao's view, the upholding of a specifically Chinese-pragmatic conception of modernity has resulted in the establishing of a 'permanent condition of "contemporaneity"' as the Chinese model of "modernity" – which Gao refers to as 'total modernity' – and, what is more, to contemporary Chinese art 'being overwhelmingly concerned with space and environment during the last three decades'.²⁸ Gao elaborates on this point by making two further assertions: first, that 'the nature of "contemporaneity" in the twenty-first century, worldwide, is also more about space than time, because it has been shaped during the last two decades by globalization and postcolonial cultural theory'; and second, that the 'consciousness of space in Chinese contemporary art [...] has been driven by a kind of empiricism embedded in the experiences of location and dislocation, the placement and displacement of various spatial references, rather than simply by dichotomies such as internal versus external, local versus international, import versus export, and so forth'.²⁹

Gao's assertion that the Chinese conception of modernity has been a chronically pragmatic one suggests an affinity with the anti-foundationalism of western postmodernism – that is to say, the tendency as part of postmodernist thought and practice to deconstruct and therefore relativize categorical conceptual differences and their associated value structures (e.g. post-colonialism's critical problematization of East-West relations of dominance as part of the unfolding project of western(ized) modernity). Gao is, however, at pains to dismiss the possibility of such a connection on the grounds that deconstructivism's vision of everything as

²⁵ Gao, "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth'", 137.

²⁶ Gao, "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth'", 137.

²⁷ Gao, "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth'", 137.

²⁸ Gao, "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth'", 137.

²⁹ Gao, "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth'", 137-138.

‘contingent, transient, and [lacking] in historical logic’ is very much at odds with a durable Chinese belief in the importance of establishing a ‘historical view’ where the past and the present can be seen to meet constantly in the creation of new cultural perspectives.³⁰ In Gao’s view, this specifically Chinese bringing together of past and present into a combinatory historical point of view is evinced by a tendency among contemporary Chinese artists of the last three decades to ‘turn historical sites into a symbolic medium to express modern Chinese identity’; key examples of which include, he suggests, Kang Mu, Zhao Jianhai and Sheng Qi’s staging of a performance at the Summer Palace in Beijing in 1985 and Zheng Lianjie’s performance *Great Exploration* on the Great Wall in 1993.³¹

On the basis of this assessment of the differences between Chinese and western conceptions of modernity, Gao then proceeds to develop an extended analysis of contemporary Chinese art involving readings of a formally diverse range of artworks considered in relation to the reshaping of urban space that has taken place as a consequence of Deng’s reforms.³² Gao’s stated purpose in presenting this detailed analysis is to show how contemporary Chinese artists make use of techniques characteristic of western modernism and postmodernism as a way of engaging closely with issues specific to localized Chinese contexts, and in doing how they undermine the postmodernist notion of an increasingly non-specific trans-nationalism as part of the development of contemporary culture. Artworks cited by Gao include Zhang Dali’s graffiti work, *Self-Portrait, Jinmao Tower, Shanghai* (1995-2003), which Gao interprets, in somewhat humanistic terms (and in contrast to Wu’s rather more deconstructivist reading of Zhang’s work), as a bodily resistance to the effects of encroaching modernization.³³ Also cited by Gao are “‘Maximalist’ abstract paintings by Xing Danwen and Li Huasheng, which, Gao argues, make use of ‘modernist modes, especially Minimalist-like forms [...] to unify the process of making art with daily life, in the manner of traditional Chan meditation’.

Gao then adds to this extended analysis by presenting a separate discussion of contemporary Chinese art produced by women artists, focusing in particular on a performance work by Chen Qiulin entitled, *I Exist, I Consume and I Am Happy* (2003). Here Gao argues that established western feminist discourse, with its tendency (as he sees it) to frame Chinese women’s art either ‘as part of the international feminist community’ or as one ‘based on purely personal experience’ differing from that which informs Chinese men’s art, pays ‘insufficiently close attention to the local context of Chinese women’s art’.³⁴ In Gao’s view, Chinese women’s art cannot be distinguished categorically from that of Chinese men for two reasons: first, because neither Chinese men nor Chinese women have gained independence as autonomous subjects (although Gao does not say so, presumably as a consequence of the continuing patriarchal authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party); and second, because both ‘face the same crisis as the Chinese people move into a process of reconfiguring social rank and class’ (although Gao does not say so, presumably as a consequence of the unsettling social effects of Deng’s reforms), with ‘[f]amily, rather than the individual’ bearing the ‘main brunt of this

³⁰ Gao, “‘Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth’”, 145.

³¹ Gao, “‘Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth’”, 145.

³² Gao, “‘Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth’”, 148-158.

³³ Gao, “‘Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth’”, 152-153.

³⁴ Gao, “‘Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth’”, 158.

transition'. This leads Gao to argue that '[g]ender unification rather than gender split is what is most needed in this historical moment' as part of a wider goal within third world countries of arriving at 'sexual harmony rather than gender conflict and splitting' associated with Alice Walker's use of the term 'Womanism'.³⁵ Gao then seeks to bolster this line of argument by asserting that the use of 'everyday household materials including thread, yarn, cotton, cloth, quilts [and] clothing' by Chinese women artists 'may effectively demonstrate an individual woman's particular emotions and interests' as well as 'an awareness of the intimacy of family relations'.³⁶

Gao concludes by repeating his initial assertion of the spatially defined separateness of Chinese cultural modernity, stating that, 'modernity in art in China throughout the twentieth century seems to remain steadily committed to the principle of transcending time and reconstructing space' and that it is 'this intrinsic, self-defined, "total modernity", following its own historical logic, that has, I believe, established the permanent condition of contemporaneity in Chinese contemporary art'.³⁷

Gao's assessment of the differences between western and Chinese conceptions of modernity and between international postmodernist art and contemporary Chinese art is, to some extent, persuasive. Through his assessment, Gao draws our attention to undeniable differences in the perceived significance and stylistic/formal development of western(ized) modernist/postmodernist art and contemporary Chinese art that have come about as a result of their respective interrelationships with very different social, cultural, economic, and political settings. As Gao indicates, while contemporary Chinese art is still widely perceived within a western(ized) international context to be a variant of trans-national deconstructivist postmodernism, within the PRC dominant discourses uphold that art as an expression of a spatially defined modern national-cultural Chinese identity with its own particular sequential development and relationship to society. Such discourses are commensurate with continuing governmental assertions within mainland China of the fundamental integrity of the Chinese nation-state as an appeal to what Benedict Anderson has referred to as an 'imagined community' of nationhood exclusive of others opposed to its shared purposes and discursive manifestations of power.³⁸ They are also commensurate with a revisiting of Confucian notions of moral social order in mainland China since the mid-1990s as part of the rethinking of Chinese socio-cultural identity in the context of post-Maoist reform; a revisiting which may be interpreted from the perspective of Zygmunt Baumann's analysis of the combined role of social identity and state institutions in the context of modernity as a disciplining focus for the assertion of dominant discursive truths and norms.³⁹ What is more, as Gao also indicates, within the PRC the conception of a spatially defined modern national-cultural Chinese identity, with its pragmatic non-absolutist sense of spatial and temporal difference, has been strongly informed not only by the influence of western relativist thought, but also by the persistence of

³⁵ Gao, "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth'", 159.

³⁶ Gao, "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth'", 159.

³⁷ Gao, "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth'", 162.

³⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edn. London: Verso, 2006.

³⁹ Zygmunt Baumann, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

traditional Chinese non-absolutist-pragmatic thought (not least that associated historically with Confucianism).

What is less convincing, however, is Gao's claim that these differences in cultural outlook and influence mark out the Chinese conception of modernity as categorically different from that of the West. One notable feature of the argument set out by Gao in "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth'" is the absence of any detailed critical assessment of the relationship between western modernism and postmodernism. Crucially, Gao overlooks the ways in which postmodernist thought and practice can be understood to have deconstructed modernist assumptions of categorical spatial difference and sequential historical development. Consider here, for example, (as previously discussed) works of postmodernist art, such as Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* series, which can be understood to stand in an uncertain (resistant/complicit) position in relation to mainstream society while at the same time suspending any sense that they can be located categorically within an unfolding sequence of historical epochs. As a consequence, Gao makes the mistake of upholding as his main point of critical reference a staunchly modernist view of the historical relationship between art and modernity that, while still residually influential on western(ized) thought and practice, is now widely seen in an international context to have been overwritten by an immanent postmodernist sense of historical uncertainty and discontinuity. Gao's assertion that the pragmatic relativism of the Chinese conceptualization of modernity contrasts strongly with the continuing absolutism of a western(ized) conceptualization of modernity is therefore very much open to question.

It is also possible to question Gao's view of deconstruction as a profoundly ahistorical form of analysis. As the literary critic Terry Eagleton has indicated, while deconstruction can be used somewhat absurdly to 'deny the existence of relatively determinate truths, meanings, identities, intentions, [and] historical continuities', it also has the potential to act as a 'political' means of dismantling 'the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force', and, thereby, of revealing how presently signified meanings operate as 'effects of a wider and deeper history — of language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices'.⁴⁰ In other words, it is possible to think of deconstruction not just as a means of persistently negating the significance of established historical narratives, but also of developing counter-narratives that pay close analytical attention to the unfolding complexity and mutability of historical meanings. Gao's assertion that deconstruction diverges from a durable Chinese belief in the importance of taking a 'historical view' would therefore appear to be somewhat misplaced, especially when considered in relation to his stated view that the Chinese-pragmatic conceptualization of modernity has not only tended towards a continual subverting of dichotomous thought patterns, but also a view of historical truth as something that is always provisional and open to revision—a position that has a distinct and undeniable affinity with a deconstructivist view of 'history'.

In addition to all of which, it is by no means clear that the prevailing Chinese conception of modernity is as non-absolutist as Gao would have us believe. While art history writing

⁴⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1983, 148.

within China since antiquity has exhibited a continuing indebtedness to the relativism of traditional Chinese Daoist and Confucian thought, it has also been informed by a persistent tendency towards the precise classification of historical objects of study and to view history (according to dynastic succession) as a sequential unfolding of distinct periods and epochs. This classificatory and sequential view of history is not only to be found in relation to the work of classical Chinese art historians such as Xie He (c. 500-35) (best known for his work *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters*), it also features strongly in relation to the work of modern Chinese art historians and theorists. Indeed, historical sequence and classification are very much to the fore in Gao's own writing. Consider here, for example Gao's monumental survey *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* which seeks to frame the development of contemporary Chinese art over the last three decades in terms of a sequential unfolding of avant-garde, experimental and museum-based forms and to classify that sequential development according to a series of categories, including social realism, conceptual art, performance art and women's art.⁴¹ What is more, while Gao argues that the Chinese-pragmatic conception of modernity continually seeks to subvert categorical difference and sequential order (especially with regard to what he sees as the absolutism of a western conceptualization of modernity), the overall trajectory of his argument moves constantly towards the identification of historical totalities—namely, the integration of art and social projects, the 'total modernity' of contemporary Chinese art as an expression of a spatially defined national-cultural Chinese identity and the harmonization of male and female cultural perspectives. It is therefore possible to question Gao's assertion that the Chinese conception of modernity is definitively pragmatic/non-absolutist in its outlook.

Added to which, it is also important to question Gao's assertion that there should be little or no distinction made between Chinese women's art and that of Chinese men. This position is very much open to criticism on the grounds that Gao can be seen to impose a reading that is wholly insensitive to the persistence of a historically ingrained patriarchal order within the PRC, where, despite CCP protestations to the contrary, men remain very much in a position of social dominance over women. Gao's assertion of gender equality within the PRC can therefore be understood to mask male-female relations of dominance rather than pointing in the direction of their dissolution through operative effects of class.

Consider in this regard attitudes towards women associated with the term 'leftover women' (*shengnu*) widely in use within the PRC and other parts of East-Asia since 2006. In 2007 the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China issued an official statement using the term 'leftover women' to describe women who remained unmarried at the age of 27 and criticizing such women as having 'overly high expectations for marriage partners'. In 2011 the All-China Women's Federation posted an article on its official website titled 'Leftover Women do not Deserve our Sympathy' which criticized unmarried women of 27 and over for pursuing education and career over marriage within a highly competitive marriage market ; one now characterized by a large surfeit of marriageable men as a result of the PRC's one-child policy, a cultural privileging of male offspring and significant social and economic disparities brought

⁴¹ Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Chinese Contemporary Art*, Beijing: The Today Art Museum, 2005.

about by opening and reform.⁴² As a Cambridge University research project conducted between 2008-2012 shows, this official government line, which has stressed women's youthful appearance as an important aspect of their attractiveness to potential marriage partners, reflects durable patriarchal attitudes within the PRC towards the role of women in society rather than a lack of aspiration towards marriage among well-educated Chinese women.⁴³ Pragmatic non-absolutist ways of thinking have persisted not only as part of Chinese modernity but throughout Chinese history. What is more, these ways of thinking have tended towards the promotion of harmonious reciprocation between otherwise differing states of being. Exemplary of this tendency is the non-rationalist dialectical concept of *yin-yang*, which has persistently informed the development of the Chinese intellectual tradition. According to the concept of *yin-yang*, seemingly opposing forces in nature are in actuality both interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, all oppositions can be seen as relative as well as open to the possibility of harmonious reciprocation. Examples of Chinese thought that have been influenced by the concept of *yin-yang* include a traditional Daoist-Confucian desire to live in close accordance with nature as well as the Confucian vision of a harmonious, hierarchically ordered society. From the point of view of established Chinese discourse, Gao's assertion that the Chinese conception of modernity has supported a close reciprocal interaction between art and society, therefore presents itself almost automatically as a positive one. From a western(ized) discursive perspective strongly informed by postmodernist scepticism, however, assertions of this kind invite a rather more critical reception.⁴⁴ Seen from a critical postmodernist point of view, Gao's claim that the Chinese conception of modernity has supported a totalizing engagement between contemporary Chinese art and Chinese society can be interpreted as a highly questionable attempt to establish cultural difference at the expense of the glossing over of pronounced tensions that clearly exist between contemporary Chinese art and the PRC's prevailing socio-political order; including, among other things, the persistence of strong governmental controls on freedom of public expression that severely curtail the critical agency of all contemporary Chinese artists, and, as previously discussed, the persistence of a patriarchal order that continues to overwrite the identities and experiences of Chinese women artists. Although Gao may not have intended it, he can therefore be understood to have effectively aligned himself with the dominant ideological authoritarianism of the CCP.

Of significance here are similarities between Gao's thinking on the social status of women within the PRC and that of the Beijing-based scholars Tu Weiming and Mu Zhongjian; both of whom have argued that Chinese culture has always upheld the equality of men and women in support of a present day neo-Confucian order within the PRC. In both cases these scholars have appealed abstractly to traditional Chinese thinking associated with harmonious

⁴² Mary Kay Magistad, 'China's "Leftover Women"', Unmarried at 27', 20 February 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21320560> (first accessed 1 April 2014).

⁴³ Sandy To, 'China's "Leftovers" are Rejects in a Man's World', 28 February 2013, <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/chinas-leftovers-are-rejects-in-a-mans-world> (first accessed 1 April 2014).

⁴⁴ Donald Wesling, 'Methodological implications of the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida for Comparative Literature: The Opposition East-West and Several Other Observations', in Deeney, J. J., ed, *Chinese-Western Comparative Literature Theory and Strategy*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1980, 79-111.

interaction between the otherwise opposing states of *yin* and *yang* rather than argument grounded in historical fact.⁴⁵ As historical fact indicates, as part of a dominant Confucian order within China prior to the founding of New China in 1949, the vast majority of women were subjected to profound social prejudices, often being regarded as less than human compared to men.

Conclusion

In “‘Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth’” Gao makes the claim that contemporary Chinese art has been shaped in relation to experiences and representations of modernity within the PRC that differ markedly from those associated with modernist and postmodernist art in the West and that, as a consequence, contemporary Chinese art is open to localized Chinese interpretative perspectives separate from those of a now internationally dominant postmodernism. In deconstructively analyzing his essay, I have attempted to demonstrate not only that Gao’s exceptionalist vision of the significance of contemporary Chinese art relies on highly selective readings of historical ‘fact’, but also that it seeks to uphold theoretical arguments that are contradictory and/or inconsistent and therefore unsustainable as truth claims.

What is at stake here, however, is not simply the theoretical validity of differing interpretative perspectives. It is also important to take into account the political/ethical implications of Gao’s essay. The first thing that might be said here is that while Gao’s exceptionalist vision of the significance of contemporary Chinese art is understandable as a resistance to continuing western(ized) colonialist/imperialist relations of dominance as part of globalization, that does not in itself override their lack of sustainability on historical and theoretical grounds. In short, the ends here do not justify the means. The second thing that might be said is that Gao’s upholding of a separate and resistant Chinese cultural outlook involves an inversion of the binary logic of western colonialism-imperialism rather than the more telling ‘deconstructive’ subversion of that logic (as inscribed in the notion of local/global dichotomies as part of contemporary globalization) which Gao otherwise advocates. Consequently, Gao can be understood to effectively reinstate the underlying binary order of that which he otherwise seeks to ‘deconstructively’ suspend. The third thing that might be said is that in upholding a spatially circumscribed conception of Chinese cultural production and reception Gao (given his strong sense of Chinese modernity as a nationalistic project) effectively aligns himself with the authoritarian one-nation state politics of the CCP. Indeed, this alignment with one-nation authoritarian politics can be understood to extend to a highly questionable patriarchal refusal of women’s difference within the PRC. As previously indicated such patriarchal thinking is not shared universally within the PRC. During a recent lecture at the Chinese University in Hong Kong, Tu Weiming, the previously discussed Beijing-based scholar

⁴⁵ See, for example, Tu, Weiming, ed, *Confucian Traditions in East-Asian Modernity*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

who has asserted the historical equality of women within China in support of a present-day neo-Confucian order within PRC, was, for example, roundly jeered by women students.⁴⁶

To subject Gao's writing to a pervasively deconstructivist analysis should therefore be viewed not just as a technical matter of theoretical interpretation. Rather, it is also an attempt to sustain a more incisive critique of political authoritarianism beyond the narrowing partisan revisionism of Gao. This is not to deny the existence and importance of differing cultural perspectives as well as the need for a close attention to the localized conditions to which those perspectives relate. Such a denial would contradict the critical trajectory of deconstructivism as a counter-totalitarian upholder of difference. Instead, it is to maintain the continuing importance of a pervasive deconstructive reflexivity as a counterweight to the persistence of a coercive and dissembling authoritarianism not just within the PRC but globally.

In conclusion, I would like to add some further thoughts toward a more general critique of contemporaneity based on the critical reading of Gao put forward here. The current debate surrounding contemporaneity is undoubtedly a useful one insofar as it seeks to undercut the potential for interpretive abstraction that arises as part of western deconstructivist postmodernism and in particular the application of deconstructive thought and practice, not least through postcolonialist discourse, as a means of promoting what is arguably a vague totalizing, anti-foundational vision of modernity. However, when considering conceptions of modernity different from those associated with western modernism and postmodernism (which are only notionally 'western' given their persistent entanglement with non-western cultural influences) we should be careful not to accept those differing conceptions at face value without consideration of their wider ethical and political implications. The alternative is perhaps something close to the world-view presented by Leni Riefenstahl's cinematic work of Nazi propaganda *Olympia*, in which the diversity of participants at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin is seen not only as irrevocably tied to the superficialities of racial difference and the artificially constructed limitations of the modern nation-state, but also as open to worrying assertions of national cultural superiority.

The difficulty with discourses surrounding contemporaneity as they currently stand is that they can be seen, on the evidence of a number of the essays contained in *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, to support the upholding of decidedly questionable views of modernity without any clearly articulated means of holding those views to ethical or political account. As Smith readily acknowledges, the spatially fractured world view supported by the concept of contemporaneity is a 'dangerous' one whose lack of commonality of vision directly challenges 'appeals to universal rights that have been for decades an available language for negotiation between competing interests' and that, as a consequence, 'new forms of translation need to be found for channelling the world's friction'.⁴⁷ A major part of that channelling must surely be a refocusing on questions of interactive criticality as well as the legitimation of difference. One might draw short of asserting the absolute legitimacy of deconstructive analysis as a means of pursuing such a double-edged approach given its undeniable association with western post-Enlightenment criticality. Nevertheless deconstruction's simultaneous upholding of difference

⁴⁶ As described to the present author by Frank Vigneron, a professor at the Chinese university of Hong Kong.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 11.

and strategic resistance as part of poststructuralist postmodernism as well as a potentially pervasive reflexivity beyond the rather more laissez-faire positioning adopted currently by contemporaneity - including its own deconstruction as an authoritative discourse - nevertheless mark it out as a provisionally suitable candidate.

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