

Repositioning Contemporary
Chinese-Ink Medium Art, 1978-2018:
Zheng Chongbin – Migration,
Internationalisation, Digitisation

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Abstract

Art that utilises soot-based ink, namely the centuries-old pictorial medium that originated in China, has conventionally been viewed in the Western North American and European art world as deeply Asian, having little or no applicability to the Western art discourse. Significantly, this culturally stereotyped viewpoint began to be constructively challenged in the run up and after the turn of the twenty-first century by institutions, whether museums or private commercial galleries, that started paying more attention to the genre of contemporary Chinese-ink art, as well as by artists, who constantly find new means to reinvigorate this historically traditional art form. Although a lot of research has been undertaken on the positioning of art by Chinese-born artists on the Western art scene, it mainly considers oil painting, particularly in styles of Cynical Realism and Political Pop, or installation and performance art, largely omitting a dedicated focus on specifically ink art. This thesis aims to contribute a more specialised discussion on the latter from the perspective of its correlation with and reception by the wider international art world, starting in the post-Mao period at the turn of the 1980s and continuing up until the present day.

Particularly, this thesis illuminates five milestones encountered by numerous contemporary ink artists on their way to help ink art entre a more meaningful and less compartmentalising dialogue with international art and its audiences. The first milestone relates to the rediscovery of Western art in 1980s post-Mao China, which was accompanied by the previously unprecedented presence of foreigners at various Chinese academies, with whom ink artists eagerly interacted. The second and third milestones are linked with the widespread phenomenon of migration from China at the turn of the 1990s, whereby ink artists initially encountered cultural shock, questioning the applicability of ink art to local Western audiences, and then started to forge new approaches to this culturally particular art genre, demonstrating how it could meaningfully apply to art scenes of their new places of residence. The final two milestones touch upon the very recent international boom of Chinese-ink medium-based art, specifically paintings or painting-based installations as well as digital works.

Crucially and quite exceptionally, all these five milestones were directly experienced by Zheng Chongbin (born 1961) – a globally recognised American artist, based in San Francisco, who was born and raised in Shanghai and then lived in Hangzhou, studying and working at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts until 1988, when he had a life-changing trip to California. Therefore, the thesis elucidates the question of contemporary ink art's correlation with and reception by the wider international art world through the lens of a concrete case-study example of Zheng's artistic career. In this respect, the thesis also aims to contribute a comprehensive monograph on this internationally acclaimed contemporary ink artist, whose artistic development pertinently illustrates an important part of the journey that contemporary ink art has thus far undertaken to challenge culturally compartmentalising responses to it by non-Asian viewers. Ultimately, the thesis's overarching goal is to demonstrate that soot-based ink, despite its embedded cultural specificity, can be the broadly applicable medium and concept, regardless of the viewer's background.

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Figure 61: Byron Kim, *Synecdoche*, 1991-1992, oil and wax on lauan plywood, birch plywood and plywood, variable dimensions, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Source: Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/byron-kim-synecdoche> (accessed 19 March 2019).

Figure 62: Liu Hung, *Resident Alien*, 1988, oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose. Source: Liu Hung, <http://www.hungliu.com/resident-alien.html> (accessed 22 March 2019).

Figure 63: Tom Marioni, full view and cropped detail of *From China to Czechoslovakia – A World Map of Beer Bottles*, 1976, beer bottles and shelf, variable dimensions, Private Collection. Source: Tom Marioni, <https://i2.wp.com/tommarioni.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Tom-Marioni-4.jpg> (accessed 27 November 2020).

Figure 64: Tony Labat, excerpt from *Room Service*, 1980, video, 7 minutes and 37 seconds, Private Collection. Source: Electronic Arts Intermix, <https://www.eai.org/titles/room-service> (accessed 28 November 2020).

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Figure 66: Zheng Chongbin, excerpt from a performance piece at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, San Francisco, 1993. Source: Zheng Chongbin, emailed to the author on 21 January 2020.

Figure 67: Zheng Chongbin, excerpt from a performance piece at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, San Francisco, 1993. Source: Zheng Chongbin, emailed to the author on 21 January 2020.

Figure 68: invitation leaflet (both sides) for a private view of the *Asian/American American/Asian* exhibition, 8 June 1994, Belcher Studios Gallery, San Francisco. Source: Zheng Chongbin, sent to the author on WhatsApp on 18 February 2019.

Figure 69: Zheng Chongbin, *Dual Heads*, 1994, steel plates, leather, plaster stands, variable dimensions, Belcher Studios Gallery, San Francisco, 1994. Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/dual-heads/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin> (accessed 6 December 2018).

Figure 70: detail of *Dual Heads* (Figure 69). Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/dual-heads-detail/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin> (accessed 6 December 2018).

Figure 71: detail of *Dual Heads* (Figure 69). Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/dual-heads-detail-18549/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin> (accessed 6 December 2018).

Figure 72: Goto Reiko, *Accidentals*, tape-recordings, photograph, wood, sugar cubes, glass, hair, wood and saw blade, variable dimensions, Belcher Studios Gallery, San Francisco, 1994. Source: Goto Reiko, emailed to the author on 20 March 2019.

Figure 73: page from *The Bay Area Reporter's* article 'This Week', published on 9 June 1994, mentioning Zheng Chongbin's self-curated *Asian/American American/Asian* exhibition (highlighted in yellow by the author). Source: Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/BAR_19940609/page/n41/mode/2up?q=chongbin (accessed 25 November 2020).

Figure 74: exhibition leaflet (both sides) for *Cultural Identities and Immigration: Changing Images of America in the 90s*, Oliver Art Centre, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, 1994. Source: Courtesy of the CCA/C Archives at California College of the Arts Libraries, San Francisco, California, <https://vault.cca.edu/file/d018458a-aa2e-44ff-8936-1f74023bb713/1/180713001.pdf> (accessed 20 December 2018).

Figure 75: Zheng Chongbin, preparatory drawing for an installation to be exhibited as part of *Cultural Identities and Immigration: Changing Images of America in the 90s* at the Oliver Art Centre at the California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, 1994 (the final installation did not incorporate the illustrated here band of text). Source: Zheng Chongbin, sent to the author on WhatsApp on 18 February 2019.

Figure 76: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Passport)*, 1991, white paper, variable dimensions, Centre for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Source: Guggenheim Museum, http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/singular_forms/highlights_13a.html (accessed 16 March 2019).

Figure 77: Tunga, *Palindrome Incest*, 1992, magnets, copper, steel, iron and thermometers, overall approximately 850 x 500 cm, National Jeu de Paume Gallery, Paris, 1992. Source: Waldo Rasmussen, ed., *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century: A Selection from the Exhibition* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), page 52.

Figure 78: exhibition leaflet (both sides) for a private view of the *Perception, Reflection: Asian American Identity* exhibition, 13 January 1995, Gallery Concord, Concord. Source: Zheng Chongbin, Zheng Chongbin, sent to the author on WhatsApp on 18 February 2019.

Figure 79: Gigi Janchang, *Come and Go*, 1994, photograph, 487.7 x 670.5 cm, Private Collection. Source: Gigi Janchang, http://janchang.freeshell.org/Come_and_Go/2844231-R01-034.html (accessed 30 November 2020).

Figure 80: detail of *Come and Go* (Figure 79). Source: Gigi Janchang, http://janchang.freeshell.org/Come_and_Go/2844231-R01-035.html (accessed 30 November 2020).

Figure 81: Kim Ho-Suk, *History of Korea's Resistance against Japanese Colonialism: Armed Uprising*, 1991, ink on paper, 183 x 183 cm, Private Collection. Source: Apinan Poshyananda, ed., *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), page 164.

Figure 82: Shitao, *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots* (from right to left, top to bottom), 1685, ink on paper, 25.6 x 227 cm, Suzhou Museum, Suzhou. Source: Britta Erickson, ed., *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form* (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), Figure 57, page 59.

Figure 83: Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting No. 5*, 1962, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm, Tate, London. Source: Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/reinhardt-abstract-painting-no-5-t01582> (accessed 12 July 2019).

Figure 84: Zheng Chongbin, *Blot No. 1*, 1997, ink and acrylic on paper, 66 x 43.2 cm, Private Collection. Source: Meridian Gallery Collection, Box 12, Folder 11, Courtesy of the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

Figure 85: Robert Smithson, *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors)*, 1969, soil and 12 mirrors, 91.4 x 182.9 x 182.9 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco. Source: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2000.572.A-P/> (accessed 14 July 2019).

Figure 86: Fan Kuan, *Travellers among Mountains and Streams*, undated, ink and colour on silk, 206.3 x 103.3 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei. Source: China Online Museum, <https://www.comuseum.com/painting/masters/fan-kuan/travelers-among-mountains-and-streams/> (accessed 15 March 2018).

Figure 87: Zheng Chongbin, *Ink Series*, 2006, ink and acrylic on paper, 160 x 160 cm, Private Collection. Source: Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi, ed., *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), page 53.

Figure 88: invitation leaflet (both sides) for a private view of the *East Meets East in the West – Part One: Brush Painting* exhibition, 6 November 1997, Limn Gallery, San Francisco. Source: Zheng Chongbin, sent to the author on WhatsApp on 18 February 2019.

Figure 89: Amanda Hughen, *Cathedral*, 2003, ink on translucent rubber, 91.4 x 60.9 cm, Private Collection. Source: Amanda Hughen, <http://www.amandahughen.com/linescapes-wood-rubber> (accessed 21 April 2020).

Figure 90: Zheng Chongbin, *Enigma of the Day*, 1995, ink and colour on paper, 88.9 x 61.6 cm, Private Collection. Source: Richard Vinograd and Ellen Huang, ed., *Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), page 9.

Figure 91: Liu Dan, *Splendour of Heaven and Earth*, 1994-1995, ink on paper, 190 x 500 cm, Guggenheim Museum, New York. Source: Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/liu-dan-splendor-of-heaven-and-earth> (accessed 15 March 2018).

Figure 92: detail of Wu Bin's *Ten Views of Lingbi Stone*, 1610, ink on paper, 55.5 x 945.8 cm, Private Collection. Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, <https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/wu-bin-ten-views-lingbi-stone> (accessed 15 March 2018).

Figure 93: Jackson Pollock, *There Were Seven in Eight*, c. 1945, oil, enamel and casein on canvas, 109.2 x 259.1 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Source: Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79690> (accessed 15 March 2018).

Figure 94: Li Huasheng, *Beginning of Spring*, 2003, ink on paper, 144 x 363 cm, Private Collection. Source: Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi, ed., *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), page 29.

Figure 95: Lin Yan, *Stele – 1*, 2007, rice paper, 76 x 67 x 6 cm, Private Collection. Source: Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi, ed., *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), page 32.

Figure 96: Zhang Chunhong, *Spirit – Left*, 2007, ink on paper, 91 x 63 cm, Private Collection. Source: Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi, ed., *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), page 46.

Figure 97: Tang Yunming, *Flying Waterfall*, 2005, ink on paper, 68 x 68 cm, Private Collection. Source: Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi, ed., *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), page 128.

Figure 98: Qiu Shihua, *Untitled*, 1999, mixed media on canvas, 180 x 360 cm, Private Collection. Source: Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi, ed., *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), page 127.

Figure 99: Li Huayi, *Landscape*, 2005, ink on paper, 182 x 92 cm, Private Collection. Source: Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi, ed., *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), page 111.

Figure 100: Zhang Hongtu, *Shitao (Variations of Ten Thousand Ugly Dots) – Van Gogh* (from left to right, top to bottom), 2006-2007, oil on canvas, 135 x 610 cm, Private Collection. Source: Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi, ed., *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), pages 140-141.

Figure 101: Michael Cherney, *Bounded by Mountains – Northern Song Spirit Road, S2*, 2005, photographs printed on both sides of rice paper folding album, 26 x 415.8 cm, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton. Source: Princeton University, <https://tang.princeton.edu/art-acquisitions/michael-cherney-northern-song-spirit-road-s2-series-bounded-mountains> (accessed 8 December 2020).

Figure 102: Robert Irwin, *1^o 2^o 3^o 4^o*, 1997, room installation with apertures cut into existing windows, left and right apertures: 61 x 76.2 cm, centre aperture: 61 x 66 cm, room overall: 292.1 x 812.8 x 561.3 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, La Jolla. Source: Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/robert-irwin-1o-2-o-3-o-4o> (accessed 27 July 2019).

Figure 103: David Ireland, *65 Capp Street*, 1981-1982, art-installation house, exterior, San Francisco. Source: Karen Tsujimoto and Jennifer R. Gross, ed., *The Way Things Are: The Art of David Ireland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), Plate 37, page 60.

Figure 104: David Ireland, *65 Capp Street*, 1981-1982, art-installation house, interior, San Francisco. Source: Karen Tsujimoto and Jennifer R. Gross, ed., *The Way Things Are: The Art of David Ireland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), Plate 36, page 61.

Figure 105: Zheng Chongbin, *Distanced Light*, 2012, ink and acrylic on paper, 179 x 160 cm, Private Collection. Source: Asia Art Centre, <http://www.asiaartcenter.org/asia/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Distanced-Light%E3%80%802012%E3%80%80Ink-Acrylic-on-Paper%E3%80%80179x160cm%E3%80%80.jpg> (accessed 10 July 2018).

Figure 106: installation view of *Distanced Light* (Figure 105), as shown at the Asia Art Centre, Beijing, as part of Zheng Chongbin's solo exhibition there in 2012. Source: Asia Art Centre, http://www.asiaartcenter.org/asia/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/20121124_-10.jpg (accessed 10 July 2018).

Figure 107: illustration of Zheng Chongbin's painting process, whereby he uses a flat *paibi* brush for applying rectangular washes and a wooden stick for aligning the latter, filmed at the artist's studio,

San Rafael. Source: Britta Erickson, *The Enduring Passion for Ink – A Project on Contemporary Ink Painters: Zheng Chongbin's Process*, Kanopy, 2016, <https://ed.kanopy.com/video/enduring-passion-ink> (accessed 25 May 2018).

Figure 108: illustration of Zheng Chongbin's painting process, whereby he uses a wooden scraper for smudging and jumbling ink and acrylic paint on paper, filmed at the artist's studio, San Rafael. Source: Britta Erickson, *The Enduring Passion for Ink – A Project on Contemporary Ink Painters: Zheng Chongbin's Process*, Kanopy, 2016, <https://ed.kanopy.com/video/enduring-passion-ink> (accessed 25 May 2018).

Figure 109: Zheng Chongbin, *Eroded White*, 2012, ink and acrylic on paper, 97 x 139 cm, British Museum, London. Source: author's photo taken during a private view at the British Museum on 10 November 2016.

Figure 110: detail of *Eroded White* (Figure 109). Source: author's photo taken during a private view at the British Museum on 10 November 2016.

Figure 111: illustration of Zheng Chongbin's painting process, whereby he lets ink, acrylic and water freely flow on paper, creating moment-unique fractal imagery via this organic liquid interaction, filmed at the artist's studio, San Rafael. Source: Britta Erickson, *The Enduring Passion for Ink – A Project on Contemporary Ink Painters: Zheng Chongbin's Process*, Kanopy, 2016, <https://ed.kanopy.com/video/enduring-passion-ink> (accessed 25 May 2018).

Figure 112: Zheng Chongbin, *Wall of Skies*, 2015, 23 pieces of ink on paper paintings, steel structure, variable dimensions, Power Station of Art for the Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai, 2016. Source: Zheng Chongbin, <http://zhengchongbin.com/wall-of-skies.html> (accessed 1 August 2019).

Figure 113: photograph showing the process of building a special reflective floor for Zheng Chongbin's *Wall of Skies* (Figure 112). Source: Ink Studio, <https://www.instagram.com/p/3PDmSAi4n8/?igshid=z821kzjn1tu5> (accessed 14 August 2019).

Figure 114: photograph showing the installation of LED-lights for Zheng Chongbin's *Wall of Skies* (Figure 112). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <http://zhengchongbin.com/wall-of-skies.html> (accessed 1 August 2019).

Figure 115: Li Huayi, *Dragon amidst Mountain Ridge*, 2009, ink and colour on paper, screen with projected hanging scroll, 185.2 x 205.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Source: Li Huayi, emailed to the author in March 2014.

Figure 116: Tomas Saraceno, *Sonic Cosmic Webs*, as shown illustrated (on the left) right next to Zheng Chongbin's *Wall of Skies* (on the right) in Frances Arnold's 2016 Artsy review, 'Rags Media Collective's Shanghai Biennale Finally Ditches the Overdone Dichotomy between East and West', 2016, spider silk, cosmic dust, stellar wind and projection, variable dimensions, Power Station of Art for the Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai, 2016. Source: Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-the-shanghai-biennale-finally-ditches-the-overdone-dichotomy-between-east-and-west> (accessed 6 December 2020).

Figure 117: Zheng Chongbin, *Unfolding Landscape*, 2015, ink and acrylic on paper, 168 x 268.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/712209> (accessed 24 July 2019).

Figure 118: Zheng Chongbin, *Slanted Light*, 2011-2012, ink and acrylic on paper, 355 x 194 cm, Private Collection. Source: Asia Art Centre, <http://www.asiaartcenter.org/asia/portfolio/negotiating-between-light-and-ink-zheng-chongbin-solo-exhibition/?lang=en> (accessed 15 July 2020).

Figure 119: installation view of Zheng Chongbin's *White Reflection*, 2012, ink and acrylic on paper, 272 x 68.5 cm, Daimler Art Collection, Berlin. Source: Daimler Contemporary, <http://art.daimler.com/en/from-a-poem-to-the-sunset/> (accessed 24 July 2019).

Figure 120: Philippe Parreno, *6:00 P.M., 2001*, 2001, chromojet print on carpet, variable dimensions, Daimler Art Collection, Berlin. Source: Daimler Contemporary, <https://art.daimler.com/en/artwork/600-p-m-philippe-parreno-2001-2/> (accessed 11 December 2020).

Figure 121: Max Uhlig, *Large Brush Formation*, 1993, ink on paper, 107 x 305.5 cm, Daimler Art Collection, Berlin. Source: Daimler Contemporary, <https://art.daimler.com/en/artwork/max-uhlig-grosse-buschformation-bewegt-1993/> (accessed 10 June 2020).

Figure 122: Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: Three Comrades*, 1994, oil on canvas, 150 x 180 cm, Private Collection. Source: Sotheby's, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2007/contemporary-art-asia-n08298/lot.21.html> (accessed 20 July 2020).

Figure 123: Wang Dongling, *Untitled*, 2000-2001, ink on paper, 81.2 x 70.5 cm, Private Collection. Source: Sotheby's, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2007/contemporary-art-asia-n08298/lot.190.html> (accessed 20 July 2020).

Figure 124: Liu Dan, *Poppy*, 2008, ink on paper, 212 x 148 cm, Private Collection. Source: Sotheby's, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/origo-collection-hk0684/lot.508.html> (accessed 1 June 2020).

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Figure 126: Qin Feng, *Desire Landscape Series*, 2008, ink and colour on linen paper, 199 x 123.2 cm, Private Collection. Source: Sotheby's, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/contemporary-ink-art-hk0585/lot.2820.html> (accessed 2 June 2020).

Figure 127: Qin Feng, *Civilisation Landscape I*, 2007, coffee and ink on silk and cotton paper, 299 x 122 cm, Private Collection. Source: Sotheby's, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/origo-collection-hk0684/lot.519.html> (accessed 2 June 2020).

Figure 128: Zheng Chongbin, *Four Definitions 001*, 2011, ink and acrylic on paper, 175.3 x 191.5 cm, Private Collection. Source: Sotheby's, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/origo-collection-hk0684/lot.517.html> (accessed 14 April 2019).

Figure 129: installation view of Zheng Chongbin's *Stained No. 1* (hung on the left wall), 2009, ink and acrylic on paper, 368 x 289 cm, DSLCollection, Paris. Source: DSLCollection, <http://www.g1expo.com/v3/dslcollection/project/zheng-chongbin/> (accessed 24 July 2019).

Figure 130: Olafur Eliasson, *Dark Ecology*, 2016, ink, melted ancient ice water and pencil on paper, 154 x 113.5 x 8 cm, Private Collection. Source: <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK110441/dark-ecology> (accessed 15 June 2021).

Figure 131: installation view of *20th Century & Contemporary Art Evening Sale* at Phillips, London, 2017, showing Ai Weiwei's *Coca-Cola* (2012) in the foreground and Ai Jing's *I Love Colour #11* (2015) on the right, exhibited next to Sarah Lucas's *Supersensible* (1994-1995) in the background. Source: author's photo taken on 4 October 2017.

Figure 132: Gabriel Dunne and Vishal K. Dar, *NAAG XY*, 2015, foam, plaster, custom software, multiple projectors, computer, Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, 2015. Source: Gabriel Dunne, <http://gabrieldunne.com/naagxy/> (accessed 15 September 2019).

Figure 133: excerpt from Shen Wei's *Scroll*, shown during an opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, 8 August 2008, Beijing. Source: Olympic Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bufV3EgyPGU> (accessed 19 October 2019).

Figure 134: Moon Joon Y., *Augmented Shadow*, 2010, installation with aluminium, MDF, acrylic, mirror, rear-projection screen, computer, projector, IR LED, IR camera, fan, power supply and C++, OpenGL, openFrameworks and ARToolKit software, 107 x 107 x 96 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2011. Source: Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/talktome/objects/146225/> (accessed 3 July 2020).

Figure 135: Zheng Chongbin, installation view of *Chimeric Landscape*, 2015, digital video installation, 16 minutes and 49 seconds, Pallazzo Bembo, Venice, 2015. Source: Zheng Chongbin, <http://zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape.html> (accessed 7 August 2019).

Figure 136: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 137: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 138: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 139: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Richard Vinograd and Ellen Huang, ed., *Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), Figure 21, page 66.

Figure 140: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 141: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 142: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

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Figure 144: installation view of *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <http://zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape.html> (accessed 7 August 2019).

Figure 145: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 146: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 147: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135), the framing black line is added by the author to delineate the image's white-hue borders. Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 148: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 149: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 150: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 151: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 152: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 153: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 154: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 155: excerpt from *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <https://www.zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Figure 156: installation view of *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Zheng Chongbin, <http://zhengchongbin.com/chimeric-landscape.html> (accessed 7 August 2019).

Figure 157: installation view of *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135). Source: Ink Studio, <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/news/24-exhibition-zheng-chongbin-s-chimeric-landscape-at-european/> (accessed 7 August 2019).

Figure 158: Olafur Eliasson, *Reality Projector*, 2018, colour filter foil (cyan, magenta, yellow), projection screen, spotlights, audio, Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles, 2018. Source: Olafur Eliasson, <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK110742/reality-projector#slideshow> (accessed 29 September 2021).

Figure 159: adapted projection of *Chimeric Landscape* (Figure 135) for *Art on theMART*, organised by the City of Chicago and theMART, Chicago, 2018. Source: theMART, <https://www.artonthemart.com/zheng-chongbin> (accessed 4 December 2018).

Figure 160: Fiona Tan, *AI Transformation*, 2018, VR sculpture, If So, What?, San Francisco, 2018. Source: Lynchini, <http://lynchini.com/content> (accessed 10 October 2019).

Figure 161: excerpt from Nikita Shalenny's *Bridge*, 2017, virtual reality installation, If So, What?, San Francisco, 2018. Source: Khora Contemporary, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LHCSwS3L8c> (accessed 11 October 2019).

Figure 162: Harvey Moon, *Drawing Machine*, 2018, Artificial Intelligence, drawing, If So, What?, San Francisco, 2018. Source: If So, What?, <https://www.ifsowhat.com/exhibitor/exhibitors/nick-lynch> (accessed 11 October 2019).

Figure 163: Tong Yang-Tze, *The Realm of Feelings: A Dialogue of Calligraphy and Space*, 2004, digital installation, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, 2004. Source: Yang Chia-Ling, 'Never Mind the Translation: Tong Yang-tze's Art of Writing in Dialogical Perspective', *Art in Translation*, 11 (2019), Figure 9, page 111.

Figure 164: Lee Lee-Nam, *Digital Eight-Fold Screen* (from top to bottom, left to right), 2006, digital video, 8 LCD TVs, endless, Private Collection. Source: Korean Artist Project, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bufV3EgyPGU> (accessed 14 July 2020).

Figure 165: installation view of teamLab's *100 Years Sea*, 2009, digital installation, 10 minutes, Kaikai Kiki Gallery, Taipei, 2011. Source: teamLab, <https://www.teamlab.art/w/100yearssea-2/> (accessed 25 June 2020).

Figure 166: Sotatsu Tawaraya, *Waves at Matsushima* (from top to bottom, left to right), undated (first half of the seventeenth century), ink, colour, gold and silver on paper, pair of six-panel folding screens, each 166 x 369.9 cm, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, D.C. Source: Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1906.231-232/> (accessed 25 June 2020).

Figure 167: excerpt from *100 Years Sea* (Figure 165). Source: teamLab, <https://www.teamlab.art/w/100yearssea-2/> (accessed 25 June 2020).

Figure 168: excerpt from *100 Years Sea* (Figure 165). Source: teamLab, <https://www.teamlab.art/w/100yearssea-2/> (accessed 25 June 2020).

Figure 169: installation view of Xu Bing's *The Character of Characters*, 2012, five-channel digital animation installation with sound, 17 minutes and 30 seconds, SCAD Museum of Art Savannah, Savannah, 2015. Source: Xu Bing, <http://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/175?classID=10&type=class> (accessed 27 July 2020).

Figure 170: excerpt from *The Character of Characters* (Figure 169). Source: Richard Vinograd and Ellen Huang, ed., *Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), pages 166-167.

Figure 171: installation view of Jin Jiangbo's *Poetic Writing for Nature*, 2013, interactive digital installation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, 2016. Source: author's photo taken at *Chinese Whispers: Recent Art from the Sigg and M+ Sigg Collections* at Bern's Museum of Fine Arts on 17 June 2016.

Figure 172: Victor Wong, *Escapism 0018*, 2018, Artificial Intelligence, ink on paper, 46 x 118 cm, 3812 Gallery, London. Source: 3812 Gallery, <https://www.3812gallery.com/artists/52-victor-wong/works/971-victor-wong-escapism-0018-0018-2018/> (accessed 1 August 2020).

Figure 173: photograph of Victor Wong's Artificial Intelligence ink painting machine, A.I. Gemini. Source: Cathay Pacific, <http://discovery.cathaypacific.com/stroke-genius-ai-takes-ink-painting/> (accessed 1 August 2020).

Chapter 1

Introduction – Positioning Contemporary Ink Art in the (Art) World

In an introduction to the 2001 book *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* Steve Louie, reflecting on his positioning in the US society of the 1960s-1980s, wrote the following lines: ‘For myself personally, I don’t think there was ever a time when I didn’t know I was Chinese – or, to put it a different way, when I wasn’t *reminded* I was Oriental’.¹ Echoingly, this applies to the positioning of ink-based art in the wider socio-cultural world. As part of it, up until recently, there were few instances when it was not reminded that the ink medium is “Oriental”, meaning the estranged art form that has little, if any, applicability to viewers, who are not Chinese or Asian. Hence, so often ink works would be exhibited or written about alongside other ink works, whether old-master, modern or contemporary, grouped together for the convenience of the conventional label – Chinese or Asian ink art.²

Comprising soot from burnt pine trees or oils, ink originated in China, quickly spreading to neighbouring East Asian and Sinophone Southeast Asian countries.³ Because it has been utilised there for centuries in painting and calligraphy on rice paper or silk, it has the historically embedded association with Asian and, particularly, Chinese cultures. In this respect, despite being adapted to different uses in different periods within the Asian region, overall, ink acquired the status of Asia’s centuries-old national medium, variously called as *guohua* (national painting) in China, *han’gukhwa* (Korean painting) in Korea, *nihonga* (Japanese painting) in Japan or *guocuihua* (national-essence painting) in Singapore amongst others.⁴

For example, within the context of the mid-twentieth century alone, ink painting was reinterpreted as political propaganda art representing rural life and landscape scenery in Mao Zedong’s China, as semi-abstract and abstract art engaging with metaphysical ideas of being by Chinese immigrant artists behind Taiwan’s Fifth Moon Group as well as by Japan’s Bokujin-Kai (People of the Ink) Calligraphy Society and South Korea’s Mungnimhoe (Ink Forest Society) or as a means to capture

¹ Steve Louie, ‘When We Wanted It Done, We Did It Ourselves’, in *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment*, ed. Steve Louie and Glenn K. Omatsu (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Centre Press, 2006), xx.

² Within the context of this thesis, when the term Asian is used in relation to ink art, it predominantly implies the East Asian countries of China, Japan and Korea, as well as such Sinophone Southeast Asian countries as Singapore. However, in other contexts, when speaking about broader non-ink contemporary art by, for example, Asian American artists, the term Asian has much broader implications, including countries like India and Thailand amongst others.

³ James Cahill, ‘Approaches to Chinese Painting: Part II’, in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, ed. Richard Barnhart, Yang Xin, Nie Chongzheng, James Cahill, Lang Shaojun and Wu Hung (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 9.

⁴ Joan Kee, ‘The Curious Case of Contemporary Ink Painting’, *Art Journal*, 69 (2010), 101; Cai Heng, ‘Tradition Unfettered: The Story of Singapore Ink’, in *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century*, ed. Low Sze Wee (Singapore: National Art Gallery, 2015), 68.

local Malayan life by Singapore's Nanyang School.⁵ However, in all the cases, since these divergent art movements incorporated ink as their core medium, each fell into the nationally coloured rhetoric of the above-mentioned terminology. Consequently, as Julia Andrews outlined, writing about specifically Chinese *guohua*, the key point of such terms was not to designate a certain technique or a subject-matter, but to generally place ink painting in contrast to any form of Western painting, known as *xihua*.⁶

Nevertheless, despite this nationalist rhetoric around ink painting – the rhetoric that historically made it synonymous with that which is not Western both within Asia and the West – since at least the turn of the twentieth century, with an increase in travelling, Asian artists questioned how to make ink appear as more than just the stereotypically localised past-centric cultural symbol that could be integrated into the wider Western art world.⁷ Hence, although ink art styles, expounded by Chinese artist Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) or South Korean Mungnimhoe artist Suh Se-Ok (1929-2020), can be respectively called as *guohua* and *han'gukhwa*, based on their material uses of ink, they are not actually the opposite of European modern art, such as Post-Impressionism or Art Informel, which provided important sources of inspiration to these artists.⁸ Indeed, as David Joselit argued, the employment of cultural heritage elements in art does not automatically eschew that art's internationalism.⁹

As Joselit further suggested, such juxtaposing notions as local heritage and global culture, or tradition and contemporaneity, 'must always be understood as co-constitutive rather than in opposition to one another'.¹⁰ Hence, ink painting, that is the local cultural heritage form of the Asian region, can be both national and global, without creating any contradictions between these two positions and without necessarily becoming overly essentialising or universalising. Significantly, this idea was echoed in an important recent exhibition on present-day uses of the Chinese-ink

⁵ Julia F. Andrews, 'Traditional Painting in New China: *Guohua* and the Anti-Rightist Campaign', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 49 (1990), 565; Alexandra Munroe, 'With the Suddenness of Creation: Trends of Abstract Painting in Japan and China, 1945-1970', in *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945-1970*, ed. Jeffrey Wechsler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 34-35, 39-41; Chung Hyung-Min, *Modern Korean Ink Painting* (Elizabeth: Hollym, 2006), 121; Heng, 'Tradition Unfettered', 76-77.

⁶ Andrews, 'Traditional Painting in New China', 557.

⁷ The West covers the geographic regions of the USA, Canada, Europe (comprising all the European Union and European Free Trade Association member countries, including the European microstates as well as the UK), Australia and New Zealand, but within the context of this thesis this term is used as a synonym for North America and Europe – the geographic regions that provide the focus for this study.

⁸ More detailed discussions on these two artists' ink artworks are respectively provided in Kao Mayching, 'The Art of Wu Guanzhong', in *Wu Guanzhong: A Twentieth-Century Chinese Painter*, ed. Anne Farrer (London: British Museum Press, 1992), 24-37 and in Chung, *Modern Korean Ink Painting*, 118-130.

⁹ David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 225.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

medium – *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) in New York in 2013, as part of which curator Maxwell Hearn addressed this paradoxical double-sidedness of ink art, revolving between traditional and global as well as past and present, demonstrating what creative uses these seeming oppositions can be put to by artists.¹¹

Already in a foreword to the exhibition catalogue, the museum's director Thomas Campbell wrote that contemporary Chinese-ink works 'may also be appreciated from the perspective of global contemporary art', just as they can be seen 'through the lens of China's historical artistic paradigms'.¹² Therefore, today's ink art has the capacity to 'complement meaningfully [the museum's] holdings of both traditional and global art'.¹³ By not restricting the understanding of the Chinese-ink medium to the *guohua* status alone and by openly stating the ability of this heritage-rooted art form to be a part of the international contemporary art discourse, the exhibition called for a critical redefinition of what ink might mean in the twenty-first century.

As curator Hearn proposed in his introduction to the catalogue, a 'more inclusive definition of ink art' was needed, because of truly diverse experimental approaches adopted by ink artists nowadays.¹⁴ Precisely, to allow for the more expanded globalising discourse around their works, many artists not only physically use ink as their medium, but also solely conceptually evoke the 'ink aesthetic' – be that the metaphysical aesthetic of *shanshui* (mountain-water) old-master ink painting or the linguistic aesthetic of ink calligraphy.¹⁵ Thus, Hearn titled the exhibition as 'ink art' – the term that encompasses both painting and photography, video and performance, installation and sculpture and any other type of visual expression with the ink aesthetic, whether material or conceptual.¹⁶

This definition of ink art, proposed by the Met's pivotal exhibition, is adopted in this thesis alike for two reasons. Foremost, unlike terms, such as *guohua*, it does not emphasise the ink art's inherent Asian cultural factor over the potential to be made internationally applicable, or the other way round. Secondly, it gives space to more experimental visions of ink, but, unlike the term *shiyanshuimo* (experimental ink painting), it does so without ruling out the relevance of more traditional

¹¹ In this thesis 'Chinese-ink' is purposefully written via a hyphen in order to underline that the adjective Chinese refers to the type of ink used in artworks, but not necessarily and always to artworks themselves, many of which put the Chinese-ink medium to much more broadly resonating uses.

¹² Thomas P. Campbell, 'Director's Foreword', in *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 7.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Maxwell K. Hearn, 'Ink Art: An Introduction', in *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 14.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

interpretations. In other words, this definition allows to reflect on an increase in the diversity of contemporary artistic approaches to one of the ink art's underlining issues, that is how to facilitate the positioning of this centuries-old Asian art form as relevant to the present-day increasingly globalising society – the question that is at the heart of this thesis.

Specifically, on the example of Zheng Chongbin (born 1961) this thesis focuses on illuminating one of the latest episodes on this question. It starts by covering the widespread phenomenon of Chinese artists' emigration in the 1980s-1990s, moving onto how Chinese-ink art's internationalisation is negotiated nowadays and finishing with digitisation as a further recent means to make ink art, whether Chinese or broadly Asian, more critically popular internationally.¹⁷ In this respect, the thesis's overarching goal is to precisely elucidate by what means, in the light of which factors and with what outcomes the culturally particular form of ink art is made resonant with not just the Chinese or Asian but also multinational viewership, starting in the 1980s and continuing up until 2018.

Naturally, making the ink medium more internationally applicable presents only one of the many divergent goals, pursued in the field of Chinese and wider ink art. Thereby, this thesis in no way suggests that paving the more international profile for today's ink art presents the concern of every ink artist, working in the 1980s up until now. Nevertheless, it is the predominant issue that the majority of acclaimed contemporary ink artists, especially those that had experience of living abroad, preoccupied themselves with and, crucially, continue readdressing anew in the present-day context of rising technological globalisation, whether they are based in the West or in Asia.

Significantly, between the 1980s and nowadays there were numerous milestones on this journey to establish the ink art's international position, conveying all of which is beyond this thesis's scope. Hence, the discussion here focuses on five dominant milestones in relation to this topic, which affected many Chinese and broadly Asian artists in this period. The first three milestones touch upon the question of negotiating ink painting within the field of Western art in the 1980s through to the early 2000s, whereby ink artists dived into creating dialogues with American and European cultural forms and art institutions in post-Cultural Revolution China, followed by the second wave of the post-Tiananmen Incident migration at the turn of the 1990s that made these artists question

¹⁷ In this thesis the terms 'international' and 'global' are used almost interchangeably, since on the practical non-theoretical level both broadly imply being relatable to multiple geo-cultural contexts simultaneously, predominantly focusing here on the geographic regions of North America and Europe. Since the term 'global', once again practically and not theoretically, often tends to imply the much wider geo-cultural context of the globe and is often used in relation to digital technologies, the preference for this term is given in the sixth chapter on the use of digital technologies in ink art, although the predominant focus in this chapter still stays on the case-study regions of North America and Europe.

the ink medium's applicability abroad, leading to more thought-through attempts to integrate ink art at their new places of residence.

The final two milestones relate to the latest ways of popularising ink art in the current century, which are connected, firstly, with China's investment into promoting its contemporary visual culture as the international-level art form in the light of the country's economic boom and, secondly, with the global rise of digital culture that presents a fresh opportunity to make ink works more germane to multinational and younger audiences. Since Zheng illuminates all these five milestones, his ink works serve as the thesis's main case-studies, offering the concrete lens of the individual artist's career trajectory via which the chosen here five-episode story about the contemporary ink art's positioning on the international art scene is unfolded. What further makes Zheng's art the fitting case-study for the thesis is the fact that most acclaimed ink artists relate to only a selection of the above-mentioned milestones, due to a combination of personal and professional circumstances.

For example, Li Huayi (born 1948) and Liu Dan (born 1953) migrated to the USA in the early 1980s, hence, they were not part of mainland Chinese-ink art developments in that decade. Moreover, although both Li and Liu explore ways to endue their works with international cultural elements, they only implement these via a pictorial means without employing digital technologies. As an additional example, whereas Jin Jiangbo (born 1972) does utilise digitisation in his ink art, as the later generation artist he did not participate in the 1980s Chinese mainland ink painting experimentation and neither did he settle outside Asia.

By contrast, having begun his career as the experimental ink artist in 1980s China, Zheng continued his art practice abroad, following his move to San Francisco in 1988, where he briefly paused ink painting before returning to it in the later 1990s with a new approach, acclimatised to his life in the USA. Going into the post-2000s, the artist swiftly gained international recognition, resulting in collaborations with multiple institutions across the USA, China as well as the wider Asian and European art worlds, including New York's Met, London's British Museum or Hong Kong's M+ Museum. Firmly believing in the potential of ink to be the globally applicable artistic tool, Zheng is now famous for his environmental ink paintings and digital installations, where he positions ink as the physical material, emphasising its universal bio-chemical processes as well as phenomenological interactions with light and other spatial conditions.

Consequently, this thesis's objective is twofold. Firstly, it aims to explicate the important part of the journey that contemporary ink art has thus far undertaken in relation to its correlation with and

reception by the Western art world. Concurrently, taking Zheng as the main case-study also makes for the first-time in-depth analysis of the artist's up-to-date career, taken in its entirety and contextualised along the way within the broader fields of 1980s Chinese experimental ink painting, Californian contemporary art and its multicultural politics in the 1990s, China's changing international image in the run up to Beijing's 2008 Olympic Games, and digitisation as the new global cultural current. Hence, the second objective of the thesis is to contribute the comprehensive monograph on this internationally acclaimed contemporary ink artist, whose artistic development pertinently overlaps with the under-researched fragment of the internationally oriented contemporary ink art story, set to be unfolded here.

Literature Overview

Significantly, whereas a substantial amount of scholarship exists on twentieth-century ink art from the perspective of its integration with Western art forms as well as reception in the West, these same issues are still being actively studied in relation to ink art in the 1980s-1990s and especially the post-2000s – the periods that are otherwise dominated by Asian non-ink art scholarship on this topic. One of the pioneering books on broader cultural exchanges between Asian ink artists and Western painters is Michael Sullivan's *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art*, originally published in 1973. As Sullivan stated in the introduction, the book's purpose was to 'sum up the effects of East and West on each other's art', explaining along the way how their respective arts were received by each other and what kind of 'influence' this exerted on the shaping of the two civilisations' visual cultures.¹⁸

To give a well-rounded answer to these questions, Sullivan moved far back beyond the twentieth century, tracing the earliest contacts between China and Japan, on one side, as well as Europe and later America, on the other side, starting in as early as the sixteenth century. The book, thereby, became a classic study-guide to East Asian art in relation to the Western cultural world, registering the European influence on Japanese *nanga* ink painting in the Edo period (1603-1868) or the reception of Chinese painters, such as Wu Guanzhong or Yang Yanping (born 1934), on the post-war international art scene. In the light of this pivotal encyclopaedic book, there has been a rise in case-study research on various artists, periods and regions, discussed by Sullivan.

Particularly, Kao Mayching, after completing her doctoral thesis *China's Response to the West in Art: 1898-1937* under the supervision of Sullivan at the Stanford University in 1972, became

¹⁸ Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 5.

another important scholar on the Western cultural factor in Chinese modern ink art. As part of this, she wrote numerous papers on Chinese-ink artists that lived abroad, like Wu Guanzhong, who studied in 1940s Paris, or Zhang Daqian (1899-1983), who travelled through Europe and lived in California amongst other places. For example, in ‘Searching East and West, Holding the Middle Way: On Paintings by Wu Guanzhong’, published in 1989 *Wu Guanzhong: Kaleidoscope*, or ‘The Paintings of Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-Chien): Tradition and Modernity,’ printed in the 1994 issue of *Arts of Asia*, Kao illuminated how China’s modern ink artists utilised elements of abstraction as a way to internationalise Chinese centuries-old tradition of ink painting.¹⁹

Since such artists, especially those that permanently settled in the West, freely moved between their innate cultural traditions and artistic developments of places where they travelled, Kao posed a critical question in her more recent 2008-published essay ‘Chinese Artists in the United States: A Chinese Perspective’ as to whether these modern artists fit into Chinese or Western and, specifically in the paper’s context, American art histories.²⁰ Using New York-based C.C. Wang (1907-2003) or Honolulu-based Tseng Yuho (1924-2017) as examples, she argued that the close link with American Abstract Expressionism made these artists’ ink paintings function as ‘bridges between China and the West’.²¹ Nevertheless, because of American institutional prejudices, which predominantly stayed intact until the later 1980s spike in the multicultural politics, instead of being perceived as belonging to equally local American and Asian art canons, they were often seen in relation to only the latter.²²

A similar idea was echoed across other essays, included in the same 2008 Stanford University Press’s book, *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970*. Recounting the reception of Asian modern artists in Seattle, San Francisco, New York and Honolulu amongst others, authors traced and deconstructed various stereotypes towards artworks by ethnically different Asian artists, whose works, as Mark Dean Johnson outlined, were often viewed as imitations of Western art, especially if the latter was integrated with the convention of ink painting.²³ It seemed as if in the eyes of American institutions the two culturally distinct directions of art could not coexist together, with

¹⁹ Kao Mayching, *Wu Guanzhong: Kaleidoscope* (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms, 1989); Kao Mayching, ‘The Paintings of Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-Chien): Tradition and Modernity’, *Arts of Asia*, 24 (1994).

²⁰ Kao Mayching, ‘Chinese Artists in the United States: A Chinese Perspective’, in *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970*, ed. Gordon H. Chang, Mark Dean Johnson and Paul J. Karlstrom (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 202.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

²² *Ibid.*, 227.

²³ Mark Dean Johnson, ‘Uncovering Asian American Art in San Francisco, 1850-1940’, in *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970*, ed. Gordon H. Chang, Mark Dean Johnson and Paul J. Karlstrom (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 20, 24.

works having to be either strictly traditionally Asian or Western in style without references to external cultural sources.

In the light of this discrimination, as Margo Machida wrote, upon the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Asian artists started campaigning against such the narrow categorisation of their art, gradually attracting more representation opportunities through, for example, the first-time opening of such dedicated art institutions as the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in 1966.²⁴ Nevertheless, although more knowledge started to be circulated about Asian and Asian American artists in the USA, ink works were still largely separated out and compartmentalised within the context of such specialised organisations that stood in contrast to American modern art institutions, like the Guggenheim Museum in New York. To help reverse these stereotypes of perception, in 1997 Jeffrey Wechsler oversaw a ground-breaking publication in conjunction with the same-named exhibition *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945-1970*.

Inaugurated at the more mainstream Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum in New Jersey, the purpose of the exhibition and its scholarly book was to show how twentieth-century abstract and semi-abstract ink paintings, whether by Asia-based or Asian American artists, formed an active part of the wider American abstract expressionist movement rather than functioning as imitations of the latter. Since Wechsler's show played a pivotal role in challenging the prejudiced perception of ink painting in the USA at the turn of the current century, making an impact on the contemporary US-based ink painting field alike, it is discussed at a greater length in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Similarly, another exhibition-related publication, which made a noteworthy contribution to challenging stereotypical perceptions of modern Asian art in the USA, was Alexandra Munroe's 2009 *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*, organised by the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Its compilation of essays, referenced throughout this thesis's fourth chapter, focused on comprehensively shaking the conventional idea that American Abstract Expressionism amongst other modern art forms in the USA was an exclusively American invention. By explicating 'how the art, literature, and philosophy of Asia were transmitted, received, and transformed within American cultural and intellectual currents, influencing the articulation of new visual and conceptual languages' there, the status of culturally specific artworks by Chinese, Japanese or Korean modern

²⁴ Margo Machida, 'Art and Social Consciousness: Asian American and Pacific Islander Artists in San Francisco, 1965-1980', in *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970*, ed. Gordon H. Chang, Mark Dean Johnson and Paul J. Karlstrom (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 259, 262.

artists was substantially elevated.²⁵ Echoing Sullivan's argument that not only Eastern but also Western artists borrowed from each other various elements, Asian philosophical and visual culture was positioned as one of the prime sources of inspiration for American artists, undermining the predominant US-wide reception of Asian art as the external cultural form that had no or little relevance to America's own art evolution.

Addressing the same issue of how culturally distinct artists get 'left out of the dominant narrative', but placing it in a broader context of the Western modern art history, Kobena Mercer edited a series of books as part of the Iniva and MIT Press's Annotating Art's Histories project, which goal was to contribute 'a holistic practice of rewriting that adjusts the bigger picture of twentieth-century art'.²⁶ Amongst essays on Middle Eastern, Black, Caribbean or Aboriginal Australian artists, there was also an essay on modern Chinese art by David Clarke, published in 2006 in *Discrepant Abstraction*. By examining abstract ink paintings by twentieth-century Chinese artists, predominantly living outside Mao's China, such as Liu Guosong (born 1932) in Taiwan or Zao Wou-Ki (1921-2013) in France, Clarke showed how they formed an active part of the European and US abstract art worlds, which artists, in turn, showed interest in Asian metaphysical approaches to painting.²⁷

In addition to the revaluation of the Asian modern ink art's relationship with Western art and its positioning in the Western cultural discourse, contemporary-period Asian art (majorly focusing on non-ink media) also appeared as the specialised subject-matter in relation to these issues in scholarship. An important scholar in this field is Machida, who, as curator, made a hands-on contribution to the early development of the multicultural politics in the 1980s-1990s USA by campaigning for the unprejudiced reception of contemporary Asian American artists, as detailed in the thesis's third and fourth chapters. After defending her doctoral dissertation *The Poetics of Positionality: Art, Identity, and Communities of Imagination in Asian America* in 2002 at Buffalo's State University of New York, Machida continued disseminating a wealth of her insider knowledge on how recent Asian artists took control of the positioning of their ethnic identity and culture in the USA.

²⁵ Alexandra Munroe, 'Reflections on *The Third Mind*', in *East-West Interchanges in American Art: A Long and Tumultuous Relationship*, ed. Cynthia Mills, Lee Glazer and Amelia A. Goerlitz (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2012), 258.

²⁶ Kobena Mercer, 'Introduction', in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London and Cambridge: Iniva and MIT Press, 2008), 20.

²⁷ David Clarke, 'Abstraction and Modern Chinese Art', in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London and Cambridge: Iniva and MIT Press, 2006), 75-93.

For instance, in 'Reframing Asian America', published in the 2006 Yale University Press's book *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, accompanied by the same-named exhibition at the Asia Society in New York, Machida showed how artists, like Liu Hung (born 1948), discussed in the fourth chapter, underlined and satirised in their artworks limitations of the stereotypical attitude towards the cultural difference. Rather than narrowing any work with Asian cultural references or by Asian artists to the status of outsider art, Machida argued for 'the refusal to be named', encouraging the native American public to view artworks on the individual basis and to let artists speak for themselves.²⁸ Thereby, as Machida further stated in her 2012 paper 'New Critical Directions: Transnationalism and Diaspora in Asian American Art', 'the critical task at hand is to open up the discourse by allowing for multiple framings of art by Asians in America'.²⁹

Similarly, Hou Hanru also extensively wrote on the integration of Chinese contemporary art in the West, particularly Europe, based on his hands-on curatorial involvement with artists. In his 1994 article 'Entropy, Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions', printed in numerous sources, including Jean Fisher's 1994 *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, he scrutinised 'a certain ideological superiority on the part of the West' that made it unnecessarily difficult for Chinese overseas artists to enter the Western art scene in the light of the criticism of being either too Chinese or too copyist when 'accepting influences from other cultures'.³⁰ Hence, in the 1999 paper 'On the Mid-Ground: Chinese Artists, Diaspora and Global Art' Hou expounded mid-ground internationalism, where the perception of culturally different art would be 'no longer West-centric but a multicultural one', meaning it would be recognised for being as 'personal and unique' as 'globally significant'.³¹

Another important scholar, whose substantial part of research focuses on Chinese overseas contemporary art and its engagement with the Western art world, is Britta Erickson. In 2005 she released a specialised book on this topic – *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West* – in conjunction with the same-named travelling exhibition at the Stanford University's Cantor Arts Centre amongst other places. One of the questions that Erickson raised there is how Chinese artists, especially those living abroad, could 'achieve parity while avoiding the commodification of

²⁸ Margo Machida, 'Reframing Asian America', in *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, ed. Melissa Chiu, Karin Higa and Susette S. Min (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 17, 19.

²⁹ Margo Machida, 'New Critical Directions: Transnationalism and Diaspora in Asian American Art', *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, 31 (2012), 24.

³⁰ Hou Hanru, 'Entropy, Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions: A New Internationalism', in *On the Mid-Ground: Selected Texts*, ed. Yu Hsiao-Hwei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), 56-57, 59, 61.

³¹ Hou Hanru, 'On the Mid-Ground: Chinese Artists, Diaspora and Global Art', in *On the Mid-Ground: Selected Texts*, ed. Yu Hsiao-Hwei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), 75, 78.

difference' when positioned on the international American and European art scenes.³² Looking at such artists as Cai Guo-Qiang (born 1957) in the USA, who employed Chinese-invented gunpowder in his works, or France-based ink artist Yang Jiechang (born 1956), Erickson elucidated the problematics of referencing the artists' innate Chinese cultural background because of the Western tendency to 'appreciate Chinese art primarily for its exoticism'.³³

An additional influential book that traced by what means and against which obstacles contemporary Chinese overseas artists integrated in the West is Melissa Chiu's 2006 *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, based on her doctoral thesis *Transexperience and Chinese Experimental Art, 1990–2000*, defended at the University of Western Sydney in 2003. By focusing on three countries, Chiu showed how Chinese artists took the in-between position by respectively internationalising their works through local art elements in the USA, addressing the question of the Eastern-Western discourse in France, and underlining the so-called migration-driven Asianisation in the Asia-Pacific region in Australia.³⁴ Featuring examples of ink paintings by Yang Jiechang and USA-based Ji Yun-Fei (born 1963) alongside predominantly performance and installation art of Cai Guo-Qiang or France-based Chen Zhen (1955-2000), the book provided a pioneering in-depth social study on Chinese contemporary overseas artists, articulating how the factor of living abroad repeatedly affected their art.

From the more focused publications on contemporary ink art on the topic of its positioning in the West, *Zhongguo Shuimo Hua zai Meiguo (Chinese Ink Painting in the United States)* merits mentioning, published in 2013 in conjunction with the same-named exhibition at the Zhejiang Art Museum in Hangzhou.³⁵ Having the exhibition equally divided between modern and contemporary pieces by the US-based artists, who employed ink, curators Johnson, Abby Chen, Joseph Chang and Shu Jianhua once again raised the classical question as to why 'this ubiquitous material, when used as an artistic medium, immediately conjures up images of traditional Chinese art'.³⁶ Featuring works by Zheng Chongbin and Li Huayi, discussed in this thesis, amongst others, this large-scale multi-institutional curatorial project underlined the significance to 'open up the dialogue on ink as a non-

³² Britta Erickson, *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2005), 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 32, 39.

³⁴ Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (Milan: Charta Editions, 2006), 56, 120, 163.

³⁵ The exhibition is related to the accompanying series of exhibitions, titled *The Moment for Ink*, also shown in 2013 at the San Francisco State University's Fine Arts Gallery, the Chinese Cultural Centre of San Francisco, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and the Silicon Valley Asian Art Centre in Santa Clara.

³⁶ Abby Chen in Jenny Leung, 'Moment for Ink: February 23 – May 18', Chinese Culture Centre of San Francisco, 2013, <http://www.cccgallery.org/events/momentforink> (accessed 15 March 2018).

ethnic medium’ in order to ‘break the cycle’ of this art genre’s stereotypical positioning on the international art scene.³⁷

Echoingly, a year later in 2014 another major publication appeared that devoted a more expanded discussion to the question of integration and reception of specifically contemporary Chinese-ink art in the West, namely Wu Hung’s *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s-2000s*. Across the book’s two chapters – ‘Contemporary Chinese Art beyond China’ and ‘Conversation with Tradition’ – Wu illuminated on the example of numerous ink artists, such as Zheng Chongbin, Liu Dan or Zhang Jian-Jun (born 1955), how they ‘[developed] dialogues with their native and adopted countries based on their specific situations and artistic aspirations’.³⁸ As Wu showed, ‘in their effort to refashion Chinese art under the umbrella of international contemporary art’, these artists have boldly experimented with both techniques and themes, increasingly moving towards multimedia ink art forms in order to position themselves as ‘artists without borders’ and their works as internationally applicable.³⁹

In 2014 there was also the publication of an article – ‘The “Global” Contemporary Art Canon and the Case of China’ – by Francesca Dal Lago in *ARTMargins*, which she entirely dedicated to the overarching positioning of Chinese-ink art as anti-international and anti-contemporary. There Dal Lago critically underlined that the greater authority to decide on what makes art contemporary is still in the hands of international (implying White Western) art mediators that are ‘generally trained only in art historical and cultural practices founded and focused on the art of Euro-America’.⁴⁰ Because of this ‘monocultural interpretation of the contemporary’, Australian art historian Terry Smith, for example, in his 2011 book *Contemporary Art: World Currents* mentioned Chinese-ink painting within the context of how ‘not all art being made today is contemporary’, suggesting that since ink is the centuries-long traditional medium it might not be classified as the globally relevant contemporary art direction.⁴¹

As Dal Lago argued, such statements reveal that the continued problem of the ink art’s exclusion from the international contemporary art discourse is the lack of a deeper engagement with what present-day ink art actually is.⁴² This echoes Joan Kee’s argument made in her 2010 paper ‘The Curious Case of Contemporary Ink Painting’, published in *Art Journal*, as part of which she discussed

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s-2000s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014), 278-279.

³⁹ Ibid., 279-280, 331.

⁴⁰ Francesca Dal Lago, ‘The “Global” Contemporary Art Canon and the Case of China’, in *ARTMargins*, 3 (2014), 88.

⁴¹ Ibid., 94.

⁴² Ibid.

contemporary ink artists, like Ji Yun-Fei or South Korean Lee So-Jung (born 1979). As Kee wrote, even when it is recognised that these artists' subject-matters have broader international resonance – for example, when Ji's anti-imperialist ink paintings were featured in New York's 2002 Whitney Biennial – their 'choice of medium is almost exclusively discussed as a sign of tradition', which is not contemporary and not internationally applicable.⁴³ Thereby, within that broader global contemporary art canon, ink works are predominantly 'recognized as instances, albeit not as exemplars, of contemporary art'.⁴⁴

In the most recently published 2020 book *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization*, Joselit also indicated how present-day Chinese-ink art 'has been confined within the category of the traditional'.⁴⁵ According to him, this largely stems from the history of Western imperialism that tended 'to suppress or invalidate local or indigenous traditions'.⁴⁶ Significantly, to counter this narrow definition of the global contemporary art canon, amongst numerous visual analyses of today's heritage-based art, Joselit also illustrated one Chinese-ink work, namely Qiu Zhijie's (born 1969) 1990-1995 *Copying the "Preface to Orchid Pavilion" One Thousand Times*, which is the all-black ink painting due to Qiu's transcribing of the ancient text's calligraphy numerous times on the same paper sheet. By theorising it as 'a conceptual performance' that explores global capitalist ideas of originality, seriality and mass production, Joselit showed how, via this deeper and non-stereotypical interpretation approach, ink art 'qualifies [...] as *global*'.⁴⁷

Drawing inspiration from this ground-breaking scholarship on the place of past and present-day art by Asian-born artists on the Western art scene – which is by no means exhaustive, but, nevertheless, representative, having been written by some of the most prominent scholars in the field – this thesis proposes to build on top of the discussion on the positioning of specifically contemporary ink art within the context of international visual culture. As demonstrated above, thus far this particular issue has mainly been discussed in supplement to earlier Asian modern ink works or non-ink contemporary art pieces. This means that contemporary ink art still awaits a more in-depth examination in relation to the issue of its interrelationship with the West, offering an important new research opportunity, which this thesis aims to utilise on the case-study example of Zheng's art.

⁴³ Kee, 'The Curious Case of Contemporary Ink Painting', 92.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁵ Joselit, *Heritage and Debt*, 143.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 143, 147.

In terms of the scholarly writing on Zheng, the correlation of his ink works with the Western and, particularly, American art worlds has been likewise briefly considered in the up-to-date literature, leaving space for its more extended analysis. For example, as mentioned above, Zheng was discussed in the 2013 *Chinese Ink Painting in the United States* and 2014 *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History* publications, where Shu Jianhua and Wu Hung respectively emphasised his paintings' international applicability, based on their visual language of open-ended abstraction.⁴⁸ In 2014 Ink Studio also published a monograph *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, focused on Zheng's latest ink works and referenced throughout this thesis, as part of which Erickson, Kenneth Wayne, Craig Yee and Amjad Majid contributed papers on how the artist drew inspiration from, for instance, Abstract Expressionism and how that helped integrate his works on the local American art scene.

Similarly, in 'Zheng Chongbin: Ten Metaphors with Which to Experience His Paintings', published in *Yishu* in 2011, Tony Godfrey expounded on the broad appeal of Zheng's works that engage with such widely resonating ideas as 'nature's flow and erosion' and 'skin or body'.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, there is still a wealth of unresearched primary materials on Zheng's ink works in the context of wider international art, such as short newspaper articles, dating back to the 1980s, or archival documentation of the artist's 1990s works and writing on the cultural difference, which have not been fully studied yet altogether or separately. As detailed below, combining these primary resources with relevant elements from the existing literature helps illuminate the artist's up-to-date career as a whole, viewed from this important under-researched angle of the contemporary ink art's relationship with the American and European art scenes.

Methodology

In order to trace the positioning of contemporary ink art on Zheng's overarching example within the context of the wider international art world, this thesis relies on, as Machida once put it, a 'pragmatic and interdisciplinary' method of research that consists of three directions.⁵⁰ Firstly, since the thesis centres on issues of the cultural difference – related to Chinese-ink art and Chinese-born artists in the Western art context – a preference is given to a type of enquiry that is pursued in the field of cultural studies and postcolonial theory. As Homi Bhabha wrote in *The Location of Culture*,

⁴⁸ Shu Jianhua, 'Part Five', in *Zhongguo Shuimo Hua zai Meiguo* [*Chinese Ink Painting in the United States*], ed. Shu Jianhua (Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2013), 137; Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 324.

⁴⁹ Tony Godfrey, 'Zheng Chongbin: Ten Metaphors with Which to Experience His Paintings', *Yishu*, 10 (2011), 33-34.

⁵⁰ Margo Machida, *The Poetics of Positionality: Art, Identity, and Communities of Imagination in Asian America*, PhD diss., University of New York, Buffalo, 2002, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 15.

the understanding of one culture by another culture is generated in the in-between third space, which is ‘the cutting edge of translation and negotiation’.⁵¹ Thereby, how one culture gets interpreted by another culture should be taken critically as it does not necessarily give a true representation of it.

Indeed, the “interpretee” culture’s image often gets skewed in the light of the “interpreter” culture’s own values, prejudices or vested interests. This inevitably subjective act of locating one culture by another culture means that there is always at least some extent of ‘an ambivalence in the act of interpretation’.⁵² Tracing and deconstructing this ambivalence, embedded in the production of cultural knowledge, is one of the core goals of the cultural studies and postcolonial researchers, such as Bhabha, Edward Said or Stuart Hall amongst many others, who enquired into how various non-Western cultures were positioned in the West. Similarly, this thesis focuses on critically reflecting on the act of translation – that third space, where cultural meaning is produced – which accompanies the formulation of Western attitudes towards contemporary Chinese-ink art.

Secondly, in order to pursue this enquiry into the cultural difference, the thesis selectively employs elements of the social art historical method. As Howard Becker wrote: ‘All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people’.⁵³ From art suppliers to artists, from museums to art dealers and from people that view art to people that can afford to buy it, there are many players in the art world that collectively determine what kind of visual culture is produced, where it is presented and how it is received.⁵⁴ To understand one artist’s art then, it is necessary to simultaneously understand a social environment in which that artist worked and exhibited, including what information he/she received and, crucially, how he/she chose to individually interpret it under specific socially conditioned circumstances at the time.⁵⁵

Moreover, as Vera Zolberg pointed out, artistic visions are not made just once, but are also constantly remade in the light of artists’ changing living environments, meaning that ‘the arts are social constructs emergent from processes of negotiation rather than fixed entities’.⁵⁶ This idea is particularly important for the purposes of this thesis since it examines the positioning of contemporary ink art in the contrasting socio-cultural environments, such as politically reforming China in the 1980s decade under Deng Xiaoping or 1990s California under the wave of the ongoing

⁵¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 38.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵³ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁵ Janet Wolf, *The Social Production of Art* (London: MacMillan Press, 1993), 20.

⁵⁶ Vera L. Zolberg, *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 107, 165.

multicultural politics. Studying these contexts helps more profoundly comprehend changes in Zheng and comparable artists' practices, who shared similar socially conditioned experiences.

Thirdly, when it comes to writing contemporary art history, there is also a unique opportunity to supplement a study of artists' art and its reception with first-hand conversations with artists about those. As Machida wrote, 'jointly generating knowledge with producers of art' leads to a deeper level of understanding about their works and contexts in which they were created.⁵⁷ This biography-oriented art historical method stems from the field of oral history that employs 'communicative acts to explore how living individuals [...] look upon their experience to construct a sense of history'.⁵⁸ When this primary information is then crossmatched with a study of broader social conditions, it is possible to generate more specific historical interpretations and to avoid generalisations. Ultimately, even sociologists acknowledge that although people are social constructs, they are such in their own individual ways, thereby making studies of artists' interviews and biographies equally significant.⁵⁹

This approach is especially important for this thesis that deals with the very personal matter of cultural identity difference. As Machida mentioned and as already quoted above, so often culturally distinct artists get written about without being consulted first, which often results in imposed meanings and misinterpretations of their artworks, making it important to let artists speak for themselves.⁶⁰ This motivated this thesis's case-study approach that focuses the broader issues of the contemporary ink art's positioning in the Western art world on the concrete example of Zheng's personal as well as artistic journeys. Directly collaborating with Zheng on this research project enabled to test and to validate many of the thesis's interpretations of his artworks as well as to expand the direction of research in the light of previously unspecified information that arose during the author's interviews with the artist.

Despite its merits, the interview-based biographic art historical approach also comes with its own challenges. As Paul Gladston outlined – who, similarly, collaborated with the artist when writing a monograph on Yu Youhan (born 1943) – analysing information from interviews poses the challenge of "reconstructive memory", which recounts events from the past via the lens of the speaker's 'individual perceptions, imagination, semantic memory and cultural beliefs'.⁶¹ That is why, this thesis also utilises practical elements of the social art historical method, supporting Zheng's

⁵⁷ Machida, *The Poetics of Positionality*, 20.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 436.

⁵⁹ Wolf, *The Social Production of Art*, 102.

⁶⁰ Machida, 'Reframing Asian America', 17, 19.

⁶¹ Paul Gladston, *Yu Youhan* (Hong Kong: 3030Press, 2015), 21.

answers with the study of the broader social context. The other challenge of conducting interviews is the so-called “interview effect” that is, as Gladston pertinently put it, ‘a tendency on the part of those interviewed [...] to supply answers in accordance with the perceived desires and preconceptions of the interviewer’.⁶²

To address this additional challenge, the thesis focused on numerous other interviews, given by Zheng in different years and to different sources, which reflect the nature of the views that the artist expressed in the author’s interviews alike. Moreover, Zheng’s views on the non-prejudiced positioning of Chinese-ink art in the wider international art world, stated in this thesis, align with the author’s own views on this subject. This is important as it enabled to avoid the third possible challenge of collaborating with artists on research projects that is the difference in opinions. Hence, utilising the interview-based biographic art historical approach productively enriched the thesis’s multidimensional study that also draws from the field of the cultural studies and postcolonial theory as well as from the basic non-ideological aspects of social art history, which interprets artists in relation to societies, in which their art is produced and received.

In terms of specific materials that this thesis utilises to implement its research methods, a substantial amount of archival art historical resources comes from Hong Kong’s Asia Art Archive. They predominantly comprise original exhibition catalogues, letter correspondences, photographic documentation of events as well as interviews with key insider cultural practitioners, conducted as part of the archive’s special project *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*. An additional type of original social context resource that this thesis frequently resorts to comes in the form of press articles and art critics’ exhibition reviews, published in such reputable media editions as *The New York Times*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, *The Financial Times* or *Yishu* amongst others.

Other primary art historical materials that are referenced here include various exhibition catalogues related to the American and European post-1980s politics of multiculturalism, which ways of writing are treated as independent subjects of study. For the art market analysis, which forms an important part of the fifth chapter, original sales data is sourced from Artnet that provides the most extensive price database on artworks’ auction market performance. These types of original primary materials are then integrated with the relevant existing secondary literature that enables to build a well-

⁶² Ibid.

rounded insight into the social contexts behind the contemporary ink art's interrelationship with American and European art from the 1980s up until 2018.

Regarding the designated research on Zheng – the thesis's key case-study artist – three types of resources are employed. Firstly, as touched upon above, the thesis contributes a series of interviews with Zheng – eight in total – presented in Appendix A, where questions were primarily designed to obtain fact-driven information on the artist's personal experience of negotiating and helping critically popularise the status of ink art in the Western art world. Secondly, the thesis also gathers comprehensive data on Zheng's exhibition history, derived for consistency and accuracy from multiple versions of the artist's CV, available on his official website as well as via his representative galleries and via archives that feature earlier versions of Zheng's CV. This primary data is presented in Appendix B, where it is further evaluated in the form of graphs, referenced in the thesis as evidence in support of its arguments.

Thirdly, the thesis additionally consolidates information available on Zheng through various archives around the world, which has not yet been fully analysed in literature either partially or altogether. Ranging from the Asia Art Archive to the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound at Stanford University Libraries as well as including the artist's own holdings of personal archival information, the thesis zooms in the focus on multiple details of Zheng's artistic evolution. Specifically, since the artist's numerous works from his early time in California have largely not been previously analysed, they are featured in additional Appendix C, which extends the artworks' appraisal in the third and fourth chapters. Careful attention is also paid to the interpretation of other artists' artworks that were represented alongside Zheng's pieces at various exhibitions between the 1980s and the later 2010s, allowing for the more scrupulous comparative explication of the artist's reception on the wider art scene.

In addition, the thesis also references other parallel ink artists throughout the chapters in order to underline in what ways Zheng's case-study example illuminates some of the broader happenings on the question of the ink art's correlation with the Western art world. Importantly, the chapters have varying selection criteria for such sub-case-studies. The second chapter predominantly focuses on the group of ink artists that worked alongside Zheng at Hangzhou's Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now known as the China Academy of Art), supplemented by cross-comparisons with other formidable ink artists at the time across China. The third and fourth chapters majorly centre on the internationally recognised ink artists, who lived in the 1990s USA, primarily in San Francisco or New

York, having first arrived there either in the 1980s or the 1990s, and thereby having comparative with Zheng's case experiences of integrating onto the local American art scenes.

Since the more recent period between the mid-2000s and the 2010s, analysed between the fifth and sixth chapters, is not so comprehensively covered in the ink art literature as the 1980s-1990s period, here the selection criteria for ink artists becomes more expansive. With Zheng still being the prevalent focus, these final two chapters start paralleling mainland Chinese artists with their migrant colleagues as well as Chinese-born ink artists with other Asian-born artists, all united by the common vision to help internationalise and globally popularise contemporary ink art. Particularly, the fifth chapter explores Chinese-born ink artists, who pursue this goal via a pictorial means, whereas the sixth chapter examines ink artists that employ digital technologies, and because the latter is especially on the rise at the moment across the contemporary ink art field, leading ink artists from Greater China, Japan and South Korea are also considered here.

In terms of terminology, a few terms used throughout this thesis merit definitions, due to their tendency to be variously interpreted in literature. Foremost, since this thesis enquires into the positioning of culturally inscribed Chinese-ink art in the West, references to multiculturalism and globalisation frequently appear here – both being the especially contested theory-heavy terms. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, multiculturalism is understood as foremost the process of integrating culturally different art by diaspora artists on their respective local Western art scenes on par with the latter's mainstream artworks, focusing here on the USA's California and New York.⁶³ In turn, globalisation – also interchangeably used with internationalisation here, once again, only for this thesis's purposes – is interpreted as the process of culturally translating culturally particular art into forms and ideas that have resonance across broader geographic contexts, appealing to multinational audiences, focusing here on North America and Europe.⁶⁴

Significantly, since the selective use of the implications behind the terms 'multiculturalism' and 'globalisation' in this thesis serves the sole purpose of helping underscore its proposed arguments, the chapters here do not delve into and do not debate deeper theoretical significations of these two terms in relation to contemporary ink art, the rigorous engagement with which is beyond this thesis's scope. With the predominant emphasis on the archival materials and the artists' interviews, this thesis's aim is above all to tell the story of the contemporary ink art's positioning amidst North

⁶³ Based on Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), amongst similar publications, referenced in this thesis.

⁶⁴ As summarised in Niru Ratnam, 'Art and Globalisation', in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, ed. Gill Perry and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 303-305.

American and wider European art forms from the more practical socio-cultural perspective. By doing this, the thesis hopes to expand the enquiry into what kind of, once again practically speaking, future work can be undertaken by curators, art critics and, ultimately, art historians to ensure the more inclusive representation of today's ink art in the global (art) world.

In addition to 'multiculturalism' and 'globalisation', the thesis also refers to such terms as 'native' and 'ethnic', when speaking about Chinese or broader Asian ink art. Without intending any overly essentialising connotations, this is done only to underscore the fact that due to its centuries-long history within the Asian region, as outlined above, the ink medium has its own unique cultural identity, specific in various ways to the Chinese (largely meaning the Han ethnic majority population), Japanese or Korean people amongst others from the region. At the same time, as this thesis argues, just because the art form is culturally inscribed, it does not mean its material and conceptual qualities cannot have wider critical resonance with multinational audiences. In this respect, ink art is also described here as internationally or globally applicable, without intending any overly, in this case, universalising connotations.

As this thesis argues, there is no contradiction between being culturally particular and globally resonating. Contemporary ink art has the potential to be both at once, and many contemporary artists effectively utilise this potential, as evidenced here on the examples of Zheng and other artists' ink works. The issue then is that, within the context of the Western art discourse – that is this thesis's main focus – too much emphasis has been put on the contemporary ink art's culturally particular side, largely pushing into the background the side that would underscore its multiple globally relevant dimensions. In its turn, through the term 'Western' the thesis refers to predominantly the native White majority population of Europe and North America, but also implying any other ethnicities residing there, whether White or not, who either partially or wholly view themselves as natives of the European or North American regions of their residence.

Speaking about stylistic aspects of writing, the following remarks apply to this thesis. For the spelling of Chinese names and words, the Pinyin romanisation system is used throughout the thesis, except for titles of older books that followed the previously established Wade-Giles system. In addition, Asian names are mainly written in accordance with the Asian system of name ordering, whereby last name precedes first name, with exceptions made for instances when a person's first name is English. Chinese first names are also written without hyphens, except for instances, where artists prefer to have their first name hyphenated. In terms of years of birth, this information is specified here only in relation to mentioned artists. This thesis also follows the British spelling

system throughout, including for names of American organisations, but making an exception for book titles and quotations that originally used the American way of spelling.

Chapters Outline

To unfold the story on the question of the contemporary ink art's correlation with the Western art world and Zheng's manifesting approach to answering it, this thesis is divided into two parts, summarised under the interrelated themes of negotiation and popularisation of this culturally particular art form. The first part, comprising three chapters, focuses on the period in the run up to the current century, when, following the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Chinese mainland artists started actively renegotiating the position of ink painting in relation to European and American modern as well as contemporary art forms, initially in China and then abroad. Specifically, the second chapter focuses on Deng Xiaoping's reforming China in the 1980s, when the euphoria around the just unlocked information on Western visual culture, previously forbidden under Mao, escalated in experimental art circles.

This was accompanied by the flourishing experimentation, during which culturally hungry artists, who experienced the Cultural Revolution, dived into testing out as many Western art styles and ideas as possible. This period coincided with Zheng's years as the student and then the faculty member at the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou. Having immersed himself in Western art knowledge from a variety of sources, such as catalogue reproductions or occasional Western art exhibitions in China, the artist became eager to reinterpret ink painting from perspectives of Surrealism, European Expressionism, American Abstract Expressionism and Robert Rauschenberg's (1925-2008) notion of the multimedia pictorial combine. Significantly, Zheng had opportunities to showcase his experimental ink art to foreign audiences both abroad and in China at certain closed exhibitions or under the protection of senior cultural officials.

Since there were better educational prospects to pursue Western-inspired art directions directly in the West, as discussed in the third chapter, in 1988 Zheng took a chance to pursue further art studies in the USA. While preparing to commence his postgraduate programme at the San Francisco Art Institute, the artist started feeling shock of moving into the profoundly contrasting cultural context, where ink painting was viewed as the culturally foreign art form. Amidst the proliferation of installation art forms there Zheng questioned how he could negotiate the integration of his ink paintings on the local art scene. To find the right answer for himself to this question, the artist was compelled to temporarily pause actively working on and exhibiting ink

painting in the early 1990s, focusing on learning about and creating multimedia non-ink art pieces that he showed at local public exhibitions.

Having spent almost half a decade living in the USA, Zheng's attention gradually shifted to his changing sense of cultural identification, which is explored in the fourth chapter. In later 1993 the artist started preparations for his first return trip to China since emigrating in 1988. Right before and after reengaging with China's cultural world as part of that trip, which boosted his innate Chinese self alongside his newly forged socio-cultural assimilation in San Francisco, Zheng commenced a series of installation projects that illuminated his bicultural identity. There the artist also started employing the ink medium as the culturally symbolic agent and, crucially, at the turn of 1997 he arrived at his official public return as the California-based ink painter, whereby he accommodated ink painting to the local art context by cross-examining on a deeper conceptual level the interrelationship between Chinese old-master and American modern directions of painting.

Going into the current century, which is the focus of the thesis's second part, with the rising investment into contemporary ink art initially within China and wider Asia and then in the West, ink artists no longer had the necessity to negotiate an ink art's way into the Western art world per se, but to strengthen its position there by helping popularise it on par with other international contemporary art forms. The fifth chapter traces precisely what kind of new international opportunities appeared for present-day ink painting in the post-2000s, how they were made possible and in what ways artists responded to them. Importantly, with China's emergence as the global economic power, the country's museum as well as art market sectors started increasingly emphasising contemporary ink painting's internationalism alongside its cultural uniqueness. This stirred a new wave of interest in the latter from Western non-profit and commercial institutions alike.

In the light of this, Chinese-born ink artists, whether overseas or mainland, started exhibiting more frequently internationally, presenting works that had broader cultural appeal. Zheng himself, initially having exhibited primarily in California, began gaining exposure in wider North America, Europe and Asia. Hence, in this period his ink art naturally went through another transformation, whereby the artist started engaging with international classical and contemporary philosophies in the fields of phenomenology and object-oriented new materialism, which he interprets on the example of Chinese ink's own bio-physical materiality, set within the context of specific spatial and lighting conditions, which simultaneously resonate with Californian Light and Space Art. Eventually,

the artist, akin to his colleagues of the echoing international standing, started presenting ink paintings as sculptural installations, moving towards the increasingly multimedia approach to ink art.

In this respect, as elucidated in the sixth chapter, many internationally minded ink artists found themselves exploring digitisation as the particularly globally resonating medium of visual expression. The use of digital technologies has been on the rise throughout the 2000s and the 2010s across the wider contemporary art world, inevitably reaching ink art alike. As shown on the example of Zheng's internationally acclaimed *Chimeric Landscape*, premiered in 2015 at the Venice Biennale, and further expanded on the example of numerous other ink artists from China and broader Asia, turning ink-medium or ink-concept works into digital installations of a certain kind offered an effective means to translate this culturally particular genre into more globally comprehensible experience. This also helped expand a range of exhibition opportunities for such type of ink art, allowing it to be seen by more diverse audiences, coming from different cultural and generational backgrounds.

The final seventh chapter summarises the thesis's main ideas as to why contemporary ink art, studied here, should be positioned as the art form that is for everyone, regardless of ethnic origin, geographic location, age category or any other dividing factors. Because ink art is the centuries-old type of visual culture that is historically firmly associated with China and broader Asia, deconstructing the stereotypical Western vision of it as being anti-contemporary and anti-international poses profound challenges. Nevertheless, artists, such as Zheng, find ways to translate ink into artworks that have the capacity to unite diverse viewers around them, explicating globally significant themes in broadly accessible ways, without losing touch with the medium's rich cultural legacy. Consequently, it is important for art institutions to continue improving global exhibition opportunities for such contemporary ink art to ensure the latter's as wide-ranging and as unprejudiced reception as possible.

Chapter 2

Western Cultural Euphoria and Ink Painting in Post-Mao China

The 1980s marked a new phase of Chinese art, described by Gao Minglu as the ‘second cultural fever’ for European and American visual culture that was enabled by Deng Xiaoping’s marked socio-economic restructuring upon his accession to power in 1978.⁶⁵ Akin to the period from the 1920s until Mao Zedong’s establishment of communism in China in 1949, it was once again possible under comparatively eased 1980s regulations to pursue art in the name of art rather than solely for political propaganda purposes in the style of Socialist Realism.⁶⁶ This impelled many artists to eagerly turn to previously forbidden under Mao Western art forms.⁶⁷ Zheng was part of this group of experimental artists, focusing on ink painting, who were amongst the first ones within post-Mao China to suggest ways in which this centuries-old Chinese pictorial tradition could be reinvigorated in the light of the wider modern and contemporary Western art world.

This chapter proceeds to illuminate precisely how living in opening to the West China affected Zheng’s early vision of the ink medium as well as the contribution that this made to the 1980s ink painting field. As the student, Zheng faced fixed training standards, simultaneously focused on Chinese conventional brushwork styles and Socialist Realism, which he longed to break away from. Having joined the faculty staff at the Zhejiang Academy in 1984, akin to his ink-media colleagues – namely Wang Dongling (born 1945), Liang Quan (born 1948), Gu Wenda (born 1955) and Guo Zhen (born 1955) – the artist especially focused on Surrealism, European Expressionism and American Abstract Expressionism alongside Robert Rauschenberg’s combine works. The resulting mixed-media semi-abstract and fully abstract paintings by Zheng attracted attention from both independent and official art circles as well as visiting Western cultural representatives, demonstrating the ambivalence of attitudes towards Western culture at the time.

I. Between the Old and the Forbidden: Unlocking of Western Art Information

Zheng’s early ink art training coincided with the Cultural Revolution, initiated as the radical socialist education movement, aimed at eliminating politically “wrong” past Chinese visual culture in favour of socialist realist art that glorified the proletarian revolution in the ‘red, smooth and shining’

⁶⁵ Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 33.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁷ Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s-2000s*, 31-33.

style.⁶⁸ In spite of this, the artist's parents ensured that he still learnt the censored at the time classical foundation of ink painting. Hence, in 1974 Zheng started privately studying under artist Mu Yilin (born 1944), who graduated from the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts in 1966 and learnt from such important traditionally trained ink painters as Xie Zhiliu (1910-1977) and Cheng Shifa (1921-2007).⁶⁹ Hence, for two years the artist was taught traditional ink brushwork techniques, grinding ink stones and occasionally reproducing his teachers' copies after old masters, like Wu Daozi's (680-740) *Eighty-Seven Immortals* with its characteristic sweeping lines.⁷⁰

In 1976 Mu Yilin passed on his student to another traditionally trained ink painter Chen Jialing (born 1937), who studied under Pan Tianshou (1897-1971), but who also officially worked at the Shanghai Academy and, thus, could additionally teach Zheng realist painting techniques, which were necessary for his upcoming admission examination.⁷¹ On one hand, Chen had his student copy Wang Xizhi's (303-361) *Orchid Pavilion Preface* – the classical text of meticulous calligraphy, transcribing which enabled Zheng to improve his handling of a round-tipped *maobi* brush – and, concurrently, he also taught him life drawing from plaster models.⁷² To advance his skills in socialist realist painting, Zheng further attended the state-run Hongkou District Culture Club and then the Shanghai Youth Art Club in 1976-1977.⁷³ Thereby, despite the political turbulences, the artist received the profound introduction to Chinese scholar ink art, securing his passion for ink, while also learning the state-approved socialist realist style.⁷⁴

A similar balance between the Chinese traditional and propaganda art forms predominantly characterised Zheng's subsequent training at the Chinese painting department at the Zhejiang Academy between 1980 and 1984. Importantly, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, the state reinstated the study of China's old masters, whose works had been confiscated and destroyed

⁶⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁹ Britta Erickson, 'Timeline', in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, ed. Britta Erickson (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 106; Artron, 'Mu Yilin: About', <https://muyilin.artron.net/about> (accessed 25 October 2020); Britta Erickson, 'Innovations in Space: Ink Paintings by Zheng Chongbin', in *Zheng Chongbin: Emergent*, ed. Valentine Willie Fine Art (Singapore: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 2010), unnumbered.

⁷⁰ Zheng Chongbin, 'Selection from Artist Interviews', in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, ed. Britta Erickson (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 94; Zheng Chongbin, 'Zheng Chongbin's Process', in *The Enduring Passion for Ink – A Project on Contemporary Ink Painters*, ed. Britta Erickson, Kanopy, <https://ed.kanopy.com/video/enduring-passion-ink> (accessed 25 May 2018).

⁷¹ Zheng Chongbin in an interview with the author, 9 September 2018, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 26; Erickson, 'Timeline', 106; Britta Erickson, 'Establishing Spirit in the Sea of Ink: Zheng Chongbin from Impulse to Form', in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, ed. Britta Erickson (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 17.

⁷² Zheng, 'Zheng Chongbin's Process'; Erickson, 'Establishing Spirit in the Sea of Ink', 8; Lisa Claypool, 'Architectonic Ink: Zheng Chongbin in Conversation with Lisa Claypool', *Yishu*, 10 (2011), 44.

⁷³ Claypool, 'Architectonic Ink', 44; Erickson, 'Timeline', 106.

⁷⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 26.

during Red Guards' raids.⁷⁵ Hence, as part of his painting classes at the academy, the artist could now freely view original and attributed ink paintings from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) periods, such as by the eighteenth-century Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou or the Shanghai School painters, featuring Ren Bonian (1840-1896) and Wu Changshi (1844-1927).⁷⁶ As of 1979 ink painting and calligraphy albums also started to be published by the Duoyunxuan Painting and Calligraphy Society amongst others, providing Zheng with an even broader selection of China's past scholar art to examine in the form of reproductions.⁷⁷

The artist's study of Chinese-ink painting was strengthened by studio practices, led by painter Lu Yanshao (1909-1993) with demonstrations by Ye Qianyu (1907-1995) and Fang Zengxian (born 1931-2019), who were assigned to teach students historical ink brushstrokes, the majority of which, like 'spread-out hemp fibres' or 'veins of a lotus leaf', was taken from the classical treatise *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (1679-1701).⁷⁸ Apart from memorising the manual's techniques, Zheng also copied paintings by later artists, such as a piece after Ren Bonian, depicting a Chinese mythological immortal in rat-tail elongated lines (Figure 1, 1981), as well as ancient mural art that he viewed first-hand at temples like Yongle Gong in the Shanxi province in 1981.⁷⁹ Although it was beneficial for the artist's practice to absorb the old foundations of ink painting, during studio practices, as he recalled, 'there was not much choice' but 'formulas' to obey.⁸⁰

On top of that, since post-Mao China remained the communist state, the official art style in this early reforming period was still Socialist Realism, to the standards of which the academy's teachers had to continue conforming. Consequently, once every few months short trips were also organised to the countryside to 'experience life' of peasants as lessons in pictorial content.⁸¹ As Zheng Shengtian, Professor of Oil Painting at the Zhejiang Academy at the time, admitted, the administration 'wanted students to only paint exactly what [they] saw', following the representational style based on accurate observation from life, and, naturally, such 'restrictions and

⁷⁵ Richard Curt Kraus, *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 97.

⁷⁶ Claypool, 'Architectonic Ink', 44; Du Bojun and Weng Zijian, 'Zheng Chongbin Fangtan Lu' ['Interview with Zheng Chongbin'], Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 7 April 2011, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=102 (accessed 22 July 2018).

⁷⁷ Du and Weng, 'Zheng Chongbin Fangtan Lu'.

⁷⁸ Jane DeBevoise, 'Interview with Leah L. Wong', Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 21 June 2011, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=103 (accessed 18 November 2019); Claypool, 'Architectonic Ink', 44; Erickson, 'Timeline', 107; Wang Gai, Wang Shi, Wang Nie and Zhu Sheng, *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, ed. Sze Mai-Mai (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 27.

⁷⁹ Claypool, 'Architectonic Ink', 44, 46; Erickson, 'Timeline', 107.

⁸⁰ Erickson, 'Innovations in Space', unnumbered.

⁸¹ DeBevoise, 'Interview with Leah L. Wong'.

requests upon the students killed a lot of new ideas'.⁸² That is why, for their graduation work, students from the Chinese painting department, similar to their oil painting major classmates, had to base themselves either at agricultural or factory work places, where they would naturalistically portray labour life.⁸³

In Zheng Chongbin's case, he was allocated a three-month fieldtrip to rural Tibet in 1983.⁸⁴ His sketches from the journey vividly captured the Tibetans' facial appearance and clothing features, focusing on, for example, physical manifestations of ageing or of turban hats (Figures 2-3), whereas his photographs transmitted wider background scenes of Tibetan life, such as its mountain-dominated steppes with grazing buffalos (Figure 4). The artist then used these materials as reference points for his graduation ink paintings, such as a piece representing the nomad work lifestyle of the local people (Figure 5). Executed with the naturalistic precision of a *gongbi* (refined brushwork) technique, the juxtaposition between two men and a mother with her child, facing forwards and backwards respectively, set two opposing directional vectors, which effectively reiterated the back-and-forth nature of Tibetan countryside life, thereby meeting the academy's stylistic requirements for the naturalistic execution and labour subject-matter standards.

It is important to note that Zheng's graduation art project shared affinity with Luo Zhongli's (born 1948) *Father* (Figure 6, 1980), which was officially deemed to be an exemplary artwork in the early 1980s and for the rest of the decade, once it was awarded the statement first prize at the 1980 National Youth Arts Exhibition.⁸⁵ As the monumental hyper-realist oil painting of the artist's father in his role of the agricultural labourer, this state-recognised piece had two key features, expected to be observed, namely its realist appearance and sympathetic labour representation. In tune with these wider standards set by *Father*, Zheng's Tibetan paintings minimised the appearance of expressive ink brushwork smudges in favour of the naturalistic figure rendering and prioritised the theme of peasants' agricultural life. This was the only way to defend his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and to apply for a faculty job at the academy.

In the light of this, it can be seen that Zheng's ink painting training both in Shanghai and later in Hangzhou was largely rule-inscribed, tailored at standardisation rather than fresh breakthroughs. From the artist's recollection, the most advanced divergence from the painterly rules that was

⁸² Jane DeBevoise, 'Interview with Zheng Shengtian', Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 31 October 2009, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=45 (accessed 22 July 2018).

⁸³ DeBevoise, 'Interview with Leah L. Wong'.

⁸⁴ Erickson, 'Timeline', 107.

⁸⁵ Richard Vine, *New China, New Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2008), 23.

permitted at the time was related to a minor change in the display format of paintings, whereby aluminium from windows could be used as an alternative framing material.⁸⁶ As Zheng said, the academy's administration believed this to be 'really new' and 'that was as far as they would go' with the students' experimentation.⁸⁷ With such strict teaching regulations in place, Zheng's brightest memory from his classes was an accidental instance when Lu Yanshao unintentionally let an ink-loaded brush touch a paper surface for longer than necessary, resulting in a large abstract ink blot overtaking precise contours of the figurative representation around it.⁸⁸

Zheng considered this accident to be a 'breakthrough', inspiring him to think more about ink's aesthetic and material qualities.⁸⁹ Instead of copying old-master paintings or portraying true-to-life proletarian scenes, as the young student, he started wondering 'why not show just the beauty of the ink itself' by following forbidden under Mao representationally looser styles of execution, tending towards abstraction.⁹⁰ Crucially, these thoughts to pursue bolder art forms were additionally nurtured by newly incoming information about echoing examples of Western modern painting and philosophies behind them, to which Zheng had access via the academy's library, as detailed below. Indeed, with the change of power under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, knowledge of alternative to Socialist Realism art was officially unlocked, which naturally encouraged artists to question why amidst this profusion of styles they were still expected to adhere to the painterly standards behind Luo Zhongli's *Father*.

The problem was that although knowing about previously forbidden art was no longer censored, practising it was still a sensitive topic for the country's communist credo. To illuminate the political context behind this point, in 1978 the Third Plenum of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party endorsed the new political strategy for China under Deng Xiaoping, who set to undo the economic consequences of the Cultural Revolution by actively developing four areas of agriculture, industry, defence and science.⁹¹ To be able to achieve this, China required support from advanced capitalist nation-states and Chinese intellectuals that were condemned during the Cultural Revolution.⁹² Hence, in 1978 the country opened its door to collaborations with Western

⁸⁶ Claypool, 'Architectonic Ink', 45.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Amjad Majid, 'Contemporising Tradition: The "Ink Language System" of Zheng Chongbin', in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, ed. Britta Erickson (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 59.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Iain Robertson Scott, *The Creation of Modern China, 1894-2008: The Rise of a World Power* (London: Anthem Press, 2016), 244.

⁹² Deng Xiaoping, 'Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Conference on Science' (1978), in *Deng Xiaoping: Speeches and Writings*, ed. Robert Maxwell (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1984), 41.

states, and in 1979 the Ministry of Security cleared reputation of nearly 100,000 purged Chinese intellectuals.⁹³

Significantly, this transformed official orientation got partially translated into the cultural field alike. Already in 1979 Deng Xiaoping proclaimed at the Fourth Congress of Artists and Writers that now the state would ‘encourage the unhampered development of different forms and styles in literature and art’ as well as would ‘legally defend the artist’s right to individual expression’.⁹⁴ The use of the words ‘different’ and ‘individual’ had bold implications in the Cultural Revolution aftermath, when only the singular style of Socialist Realism and collective cultural work were permitted. This meant that in that same 1979 year the Cultural Ministry had grounds to allow the circulation of hundreds of different Western books about modern art, philosophy and theory for artists’ private studies.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, despite the wave of economically driven relaxations in politics and the cultural sphere in 1978-1979, on the official level Chinese culture was slower to transform. While China’s economy began to bounce up, with exports escalating from 2.98% in 1978 to almost 5% in 1981, cultural practitioners were held in ambiguity.⁹⁶ Although it was allowed to theoretically explore all the forms of Western art and philosophy, the state kept issuing cautious reservations that it would not welcome ‘decadent ideas from abroad’ and would, moreover, ‘never permit the bourgeois way of life to spread’.⁹⁷ As Deng Xiaoping added at the above-mentioned 1979 Congress of Artists and Writers, individual expression was allowed ‘as long as the artist [did] not subvert the goals of the communist party’.⁹⁸

Amidst this cautious but still hopeful political climate, the Zhejiang Academy was amongst the first educational establishments to utilise the presented opportunity to amass a large-scale collection of previously censored books. In 1979 its Vice President Wang Dewei collaborated with an international bookstore to enrich the library’s holdings, which now boasted of Herbert Read’s *Concise History of Modern Painting*, discussing previously unfavoured Impressionism and Cubism, or

⁹³ Huang Ko-Hsing, *The Problem of the Intellectuals in the People’s Republic of China from 1949 to 1989*, PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1993, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 142, 157.

⁹⁴ Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting, 1949-1986* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 23; John Clark, ‘Modernity in Chinese Art, 1850s-1990s: Some Chronological Materials’, *The Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, 29 (1997), 137.

⁹⁵ Jane DeBevoise and Phoebe Wong, ‘Interview with Shen Kuiyi’, Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 23 July 2007, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=99 (accessed 22 July 2018).

⁹⁶ Hsueh Tien-Tung and Woo Tun-Oy, ‘Reforms of the Economic Structure in the People’s Republic of China’, in *China: Modernization in the 1980s*, ed. Joseph Y.S. Cheng (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1989), 239.

⁹⁷ Leslie N.K. Lo, ‘Chinese Education in the 1980s: A Survey of Achievements and Problems’, in *China: Modernization in the 1980s*, ed. Joseph Y.S. Cheng (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1989), 565.

⁹⁸ Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting*, 23.

Western Philosophy Series, comprising translated writings by Jean-Paul Sartre on existentialism, Sigmund Freud on psychoanalysis, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche on individualism or Jean-Jacques Rousseau on social liberalism, alongside magazines, like American *Art News* and British *Apollo*.⁹⁹ Many of these readings could be accessed by students, which showed to young artists like Zheng that art was not about certain brushwork techniques and politically approved subject-matters, as officially expounded, but about artist's individual expression that could touch upon multiple stylistic and thematic angles.¹⁰⁰

Zheng's intellectual exposure to alternative art forms as the student was also expanded through a unique photographic collection of Western artworks, assembled by Zheng Shengtian, who was the first cultural representative across China to get a government scholarship to explore the West in 1981.¹⁰¹ For two years until 1983 he visited museums in the USA, Canada and 13 countries in Europe, including such places as the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.¹⁰² There Zheng Shengtian took thousands of photographs, which upon his return became the largest amalgamation of photo-illustrations of Western art in China that he was invited to lecture on at almost every art academy.¹⁰³ He also showed the photo-slides on numerous occasions at his workplace at the Zhejiang Academy. Significantly, those were not official classes, but additional private gatherings that generated unprecedented enthusiasm amongst students, like Zheng Chongbin, encouraging them to be experimental beyond their degrees' regulations.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, having been studying old Chinese classical art and the good old communist style of Socialist Realism since the age of 13, Zheng knew by heart where to begin and to end his paintings.¹⁰⁵ Although this benefited his broader understanding of historical possibilities around ink painting, such curriculum felt restrictive, which was intensified by the euphoria around circulating information on Western semi-abstract and abstract art that Zheng could privately access at the academy. This served only to boost the artist's desire 'to take some liberties and find freer ways of expression' in ink painting.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, once Zheng became a teacher in figurative ink painting

⁹⁹ DeBevoise, 'Interview with Zheng Shengtian'; DeBevoise and Wong, 'Interview with Shen Kuiyi'; Erickson, 'Timeline', 106; Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, 'Library Inventory of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts', Zheng Shengtian Archive, Asia Art Archive, https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/source/digital_collection/fedora_extracted/33979.pdf (accessed 25 October 2020).

¹⁰⁰ Jane DeBevoise and Anthony Yung, 'Interview with Andreas Schmid', Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 27 April 2008, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=87 (accessed 22 July 2018).

¹⁰¹ DeBevoise, 'Interview with Zheng Shengtian'.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Zheng, 'Zheng Chongbin's Process'.

¹⁰⁶ Zheng Chongbin in an interview with the author, 25 July 2017, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 1.

at the Zhejiang Academy in 1984, he rushed to put to practice his evolving knowledge about such Western art directions as Surrealism or European Expressionism amongst others as part of his private art experimentation.¹⁰⁷

Significantly, as the artist explained, the administration of the Zhejiang Academy did not mind what kind of art its teachers pursued in their own time as long as they taught students the naturalistic technique of painting alongside the labour life subject-matter.¹⁰⁸ Zheng fulfilled all of his teaching duties accordingly, such as running a series of *gongbi* visiting masterclasses at the provincial culture club in Hunan for a few weeks in 1986, or joining his students on conventional fieldtrips to the countryside and to Buddhist or Daoist temples, where he would oversee their exercises in life drawing of peasants or in copying ancient mural figure paintings.¹⁰⁹ Occasionally, the academy also expected its artists to exhibit state-approved works at official national exhibitions. In Zheng's case, there were only a few instances, when he was asked to produce such works, mainly at the very beginning of his teaching career.

For example, in 1985, in conjunction with the academy's debuting of its recently joined faculty members, Zheng was tasked with making a *gongbi*-style countryside-focused painting, similar to his Tibetan graduation works, representing two figures in a field, which was displayed at annual *National Young Artists' Exhibition* at Beijing's National Art Museum of China, and then a further echoing painting, titled *Pasture* (Figure 7, 1985), depicting two peasants amidst grazing buffalos, for the academy's own official faculty show.¹¹⁰ Apart from these exceptional occasions, with teaching being Zheng's primary duty, his art was more of a personal endeavour that only concerned the academy's administration if it was to be officially exhibited. Hence, unlike his student years, now as the academy's faculty member Zheng had the opportunity to embark on a much more flexible development of his personal artworks outside the confines of the academy's official requirements.

As elucidated above, with its vast library resources on Western culture, all of which (without restrictions applied to students) could be accessed by teachers, the Zhejiang Academy presented the stimulating environment to dive into experimenting with Western art.¹¹¹ Crucially, what

¹⁰⁷ Erickson, 'Timeline', 107.

¹⁰⁸ Du and Weng, 'Zheng Chongbin Fangtan Lu'.

¹⁰⁹ Zheng Chongbin in an interview with the author, 30 November 2019, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 4; Erickson, 'Timeline', 108.

¹¹⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 8; Fan Jingzhong, 'Yishu Tansuo he Yishu Wenti – Zhejiang Mei Yuan Zhong Qingnian Jiaoshi Meizhan (Guohua Bufen) Guangan' ['Art Exploration and Art Issues – Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts' Young and Middle-Aged Teachers' Art Exhibition'], *Xin Meishu [New Art]*, 7 (1985), 20.

¹¹¹ DeBevoise and Yung, 'Interview with Andreas Schmid'.

enabled this even further was the phenomenal presence of Western artists and scholars there, which was unthinkable before the Open Door policy and which provided a very direct impact on knowledge-hungry artists. Precisely, from approximately the mid-1980s the Zhejiang Academy welcomed numerous students from Europe and North America, studying Chinese painting and calligraphy.¹¹² Zheng himself taught various German, Greek and Cypriot students on his courses, who brought with them books on their local art forms, such as Orthodox icons.¹¹³ Therefore, as Zheng reiterated, the academy's working atmosphere was especially culturally diverse, characterised by 'constantly comparing Chinese art with Western art', amidst which 'the influence of foreign students was very profound'.¹¹⁴

Three visiting students, who played the most pronounced role in Zheng's development of his 1980s approach to Western art as the teacher, were German artist Andreas Schmid (born 1967), French artist Catherine Denis (born 1954) and Dutch artist turned art historian Hans van Dijk (1946-2002).¹¹⁵ Schmid and Denis studied calligraphy under Wang Dongling at the Zhejiang Academy in 1984-1986 and 1986-1989 respectively, whereas van Dijk studied Chinese language and calligraphy at the Nanjing University in 1986-1989, but as of 1987 he started travelling to Hangzhou, where he made friends at the Zhejiang Academy, including with Zheng and his student-friend Tang Song (born 1960).¹¹⁶ The biggest impact on Zheng's art from those friendships came in a form of dozens of conversations about Western culture at large, during which Schmid, Denis and van Dijk shared, as Zheng said, 'a different way of looking at art because of their different exposure'.¹¹⁷

Moreover, since back then in China most Western art images circulated as small-scale black-and-white copies, without direct exposure to Western art or to people that viewed it first-hand, it was difficult for young Chinese artists to understand nuances of scale, composition and palette as well as deeper meanings behind reproduced works.¹¹⁸ Consequently, the most valuable outcome of those interactions with foreigners like Schmid, Denis and van Dijk was, as Zheng underlined, 'their feedback because they had this other side of the lens to look' at Western and Chinese cultural

¹¹² Zheng Chongbin in an interview with the author, 18 October 2020, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 1.

¹¹⁶ Andreas Schmid, 'Biography', <http://www.andreasschmid.info/index.php?!=la&w=b> (accessed 25 October 2020); Fata Morgana, *Catherine Denis: Journal d'une Calligraphe [Catherine Denis: Journal of a Calligrapher]* (Saint-Clement-de-Riviere: Editions Fata Morgana, 2013); Marianne Brouwer, *Hans van Dijk, Dai Hanzhi: A Life with Art in China, 1986-2002* (Beijing and Rotterdam: Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art and Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, 2018), 30, 35, 73; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 1.

¹¹⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

¹¹⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 2.

forms.¹¹⁹ As Zheng additionally recalled, this feedback provided the much needed ‘validation’ for Chinese artists’ self-education in Western art, which helped them structuralise, concretise and, ultimately, ‘extend [their] understanding about [it]’.¹²⁰

For example, when van Dijk came to document Zheng’s art at his studio, the two exchanged conversations about Dutch modern artists, like Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), and with Denis most discussions unfolded about calligraphy and how it was reminiscent of Western abstraction to audiences, who did not speak Chinese.¹²¹ However, it was with Schmid that Zheng had the majority of his art conversations, resulting in the most direct impact on his artistic involvement in the 1980s. Specifically, in 1985 after a vacation in Germany, Schmid brought with him a high-quality colour catalogue from a major retrospective exhibition of Francis Bacon’s (1909-1992) paintings that he had just attended.¹²² As outlined below, seeing the catalogue and discussing it with Schmid changed Zheng’s direction in ink painting, making him lean towards Bacon’s style of figurative deconstruction.¹²³

Indeed, as Zheng recalled, it made him realise ‘how important [Bacon’s] techniques were for expressing his [Bacon’s] ideas’, which the British artist used as ‘the expressive language that had this more visceral and tangible impact’.¹²⁴ Since there were no exhibitions or high-quality reproductions of Bacon’s paintings available in China at the time, Zheng underlined that he ‘would not have been able to learn all that without Schmid’, emphasising the vital role that friendships with visiting Western students played in shaping new directions in 1980s Chinese art.¹²⁵ When, more as a matter of exception, Western artists’ works were exhibited in China, once again it was seeing and discussing such shows with Western friends that made that experience more enriching for Chinese young artists. This is what happened, in Zheng’s case, with Rauschenberg’s self-curated *Rauschenberg’s Overseas Cultural Interchange* in 1985 at Beijing’s National Art Museum of China, which he saw with Schmid.¹²⁶

Importantly, since the exhibition received no funding from the Chinese government, it comprised an unprecedented quantity of abstract works showcased at once.¹²⁷ This was accordingly described

¹¹⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

¹²⁰ Ibid.; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 2.

¹²¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

¹²² DeBevoise and Yung, ‘Interview with Andreas Schmid’.

¹²³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 2.

¹²⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Clark, ‘Modernity in Chinese Art’, 160.

by Li Xiaoshan as China's cultural 'miracle' at the time, thereby attracting more than 300,000 visitors during the three-week opening period.¹²⁸ Seeing such the noteworthy amalgamation of Rauschenberg's works stirred a discussion between Zheng and Schmid on 'how [the artist] broke the rules' and 'used all kinds of different materials' to suggest deeper 'cultural and psychological meanings'.¹²⁹ In other words, as Zheng further pointed out, 'Rauschenberg made his choices very freely', which was 'an example of how there are no boundaries' in art – the idea that, significantly, 'really opened [artists'] minds back then in China', making Zheng more eclectic with his own painting techniques, as argued below.¹³⁰

It was also beneficial for the artist to observe how Schmid himself approached ink painting, based on his training and first-hand studies of Western art. Prior to coming to China, Schmid studied Western modern oil painting at the State Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart between 1974 and 1981, focusing on making abstract oil paintings.¹³¹ For instance, in his 1982 *Movement IA* (Figure 8) the artist deconstructed his pictorial elements to basic loosely executed geometric forms, resulting in a profusion of overlapping and variously twisted rectangles. Rendered in vibrant colours, altogether the painting resembled pictographic writing scribbles, vaguely and yet suggestively evoking a black crown in the middle register or a red half-hollow heart on the top left. Since the pictorial surface was densely packed, visually discerning such hints of familiar shapes invited a constant movement of the eye across the non-representational imagery that made the viewing experience more animated.

Likewise, in his China-phase ink works Schmid preserved the effect of this rhythmically portrayed deconstructed form that he now integrated with the visual imagery of calligraphy, as in *Resolution* (Figure 9, 1983). Thus, here a large-scale ink-executed quasi-character, resembling a reversed Latin 'E' letter, served as the backdrop to multi-hued oil-chalk scribbles, chaotically arranged to evoke various shape formations, such as rectangles, triangles and ovals, akin to *Movement IA*. Significantly, the background ink character was based on the calligraphy practice that Schmid was about to start undertaking at the academy, illustrated by his later 1985 *Quietness (Jing)* painting (Figure 10), where the artist enlarged a single character of *jing* to an anthropomorphic size.

¹²⁸ Weng Zijian, 'Li Xiaoshan Fangtan Lu' ['Interview with Li Xiaoshan'], Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 4 March 2009, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=63 (accessed 22 July 2018); Gladston, *Yu Youhan*, 34.

¹²⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

¹³⁰ Ibid.; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 2.

¹³¹ Hertel Shao-Lan, 'Lines in Translation: Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modernist Calligraphy, Early 1980s – Early 1990s', *Yishu*, 15 (2016), 18.

Combining this reference to calligraphy painting with the disintegrative scribbling type of abstraction in *Resolution* manifested the artist's desire, as Zheng put it, 'to breach the tradition of calligraphy', 'to deconstruct and to rearrange it'.¹³² As Zheng further pointed out, Schmid 'injected into calligraphy layers of different languages that he was familiar with', making his calligraphic pieces come across as 'more of abstract paintings'.¹³³ This boldly eclectic way of looking at traditional art and the fact that Schmid 'really experimented with it' proved to be especially inspirational to Zheng, which validated his personal intention to '[break] the traditional cultural dogma' and 'to embrace contemporary art from the West'.¹³⁴

Precisely, amidst so many Western art sources circulating around in the form of books, catalogues, occasional exhibitions or workshops and direct close encounters with foreign friends, all of which provided diverging visual and intellectual stimuluses, the 1980s ink painting field was like a testing ground for artists to try out different new for them styles either singularly or by variously combining them, which led to multiple manifestations of what Chinese contemporary ink art could be.¹³⁵ As Erickson put it, at the centre of this experimentation was 'the exhortation to question everything' from the past and to adopt art forms that had not been previously promoted or allowed within China.¹³⁶ Thereby, in Zheng's own words, once 'so many forms of art and new ways of looking at things appeared' in China, he 'started feeling the importance of breaking away from the representational and looking towards abstract art'.¹³⁷

II. Diving into the Experiment: Ink Painting as Surrealism, Expressionism, Abstraction and Combine

In this respect, Zheng, just like his Hangzhou-based colleagues, wanted to forge his own approach that would 'liberate' the ink medium from its conventional understanding.¹³⁸ Together, in the mid-1980s they formed the Elders and Youth Art Group at the Zhejiang Academy, comprising such older-generation ink painters as Wang Dongling and Liang Quan as well as younger-generation artists, like Gu Wenda and Guo Zhen, with Zheng being the youngest faculty member in this ink medium

¹³² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Lü Peng, 'Shiyan Shuimo' ['Experimental Ink and Wash'], in *Shiyan Shuimo Huigu, 1985-2000 [A Retrospective of Experimental Ink and Wash, 1985-2000]*, ed. Dong Xiaoming (Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2005), 22.

¹³⁶ Britta Erickson, 'Post-Cultural Revolutionary Artists: Xu Bing, Yueying Zhong, Zhi Lin, Zheng Chongbin, Li Huayi, Yunfei Ji', in *The Moment for Ink*, ed. Mark Dean Johnson (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 2013), 104.

¹³⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 1.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

circle.¹³⁹ This group helped put in touch two different generations of artists, all united by the shared vision to experiment with Western art as the key to advancing China's visual culture towards new international frontiers. Significantly, as Zheng recalled, this established a positive working environment within the academy, pushing the latter's administration to become more tolerant towards neoteric art creations as well as enabling artists to feel more secure and free about making such art.¹⁴⁰

Working from his Hangzhou studio and, occasionally, more expansive spaces at Buddhist temples, Zheng personally went through four stages of the experimentation, revolving around the styles of Surrealism, Expressionism and American Abstract Expressionism as well as around Rauschenberg's combines, which got translated into his mixed-media technique in all the above-mentioned stylistic stages of the experiment. At the beginning, in 1985-1986 Zheng's early works were characterised by the pronounced surrealist touch that he developed as a result of his private readings at the academy. Between Freud's writing and Salvador Dali's (1904-1989) art, which, importantly, was influenced by the former, Zheng's first Western modern art experiment with ink painting incorporated elements of psychoanalysis, focusing on human subconsciousness and various fantasy ideas that it can generate, especially, during night dreams.¹⁴¹

This can be exemplified by *Seduction* (Figure 11, 1985), which embraced the surrealist Freud-inspired exploration of subconsciousness. The ink painting amalgamated human and animal shapes that were distorted to such an extent that their appearance became more surreal rather than real. From the left to the right, Zheng depicted a snake, also looking like a tree trunk, a single-eyed voluptuous female torso that extended into an elongated trunk, positioned right next to the snake, and what appeared to be a male body, diminished to a primitive form of a monkey. Taken together with this imagery of the snake, the trees and the two anthropomorphic primitivised figures, the work's title alluded to a biblical story of the first human seduction, whereby Eve was tempted by the snake to eat the forbidden fruit, bringing with it the fall of the paradise, where she lived with her male counterpart Adam.

Zheng chose to endue his portrayal of this canonical moment of the human fall to seduction with profuse surreal symbolism. For instance, the snake's body was unnaturally represented with a mammalian tail that reptiles cannot have, alluding to its hybrid nature of being both the animal and the devil. This tail was further shown to be connected to a double heart-shaped hollow apple,

¹³⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 3.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Erickson, 'Innovations in Space', unnumbered.

looking like a socket, which implicitly connoted the electrifying destructive power of the snake's seduction. In turn, the humankind's moral collapse, as a result of giving in to being seduced, was vividly transmitted via the disintegrated body of the man, as implied by a pair of fallen off hands, unsettlingly lying on the ground. Moreover, Zheng's choice to render the snake's red tongue as touching the female form's eye additionally underlined the obscurity of humankind's vision when engulfed by objects of seduction.

In the light of this exaggerated and fantasy-induced selection of the painting's elements, the pictorial narration of the biblical story came across as taken from imaginative workings of human subconsciousness during a night dream rather than the artist's attempt to realistically recreate the episode from the biblical history. As Zheng elucidated in his recent interview, in works like *Seduction* what he intently aimed to generate was 'spaces of fantasy, memory and metaphysics', that is the otherworldly atmosphere that can exist in the psychic realm of human thoughts and dreams.¹⁴² As art critic Lang Shaojun further reflected on Zheng's early works of this category in his 1988 article for *Zhongguo Meishubao* (*Chinese Art Newspaper*), he purposefully blurred the boundary between animal and human as well as illusive and actual in order to grasp that surrealist atmosphere that he admired about Dali's paintings, such as *Persistence of Memory* (Figure 12, 1931).¹⁴³

In this painting Dali demonstrated his way, as he put it, 'to systematise confusion and thus help to discredit completely the world of reality'.¹⁴⁴ Thus, *Persistence of Memory* showed an episode of human imagination, based on the accumulation of memories, which get jumbled and abnormally revoked by subconsciousness, especially during night dreams. For example, surreally shaped clocks, scattered across the landscape, were in fact Dali's vision of camembert cheese that he ate before sleep and which softness and viscosity got transmitted in his dream into those equally elastic fantastical time devices or, in other words, the 'camembert of time'.¹⁴⁵ Likewise, Zheng's portrayed objects in *Seduction* were based on this crossover between dream and reality, namely 'surreality', such as with the apple that was the confusing blurring of such real elements as fruit, heart picture and quasi-socket, thereby removing them from their association with true-to-life contexts.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Zheng, 'Selection from Artist Interviews', 97.

¹⁴³ Lang Shaojun, 'Chouxiang Yuhui de Xunzhao – Zheng Chongbin Shuimohua de Qishi' ['In Search of an Abstract Vocabulary: On Zheng Chongbin's Ink Paintings'], *Zhongguo Meishubao* [*Chinese Art Newspaper*], 21 (1988), 2.

¹⁴⁴ Janet Sayers, *Freud's Art: Psychoanalysis Retold* (London: Routledge, 2007), 83.

¹⁴⁵ Tim McNeese, *The Great Hispanic Heritage: Salvador Dali* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006), 70.

¹⁴⁶ Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, ed. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 14.

Furthermore, the interest in mind's hallucinations was imparted in Dali's painting via the inclusion of a semi-animalistic and semi-anthropomorphic creature, lying on the ground – the surreal figurative component that Zheng similarly applied to his representation of the snake, Eve and Adam, additionally making the former two appear as the tree plantations. Consequently, inspired by Dali's exploration of Freud's psychoanalytic notion of uncanny, whereby familiar objects and happenings get reworked into strange, confusing and, ultimately, supernaturally unfamiliar ideas by subconsciousness, Zheng's *Seduction* epitomised the artist's dive into the world of Surrealism – the very opposite of naturalistic daily-life labour scenes that he was trained to paint.¹⁴⁷ Instead of portraying that 'external world', the artist was interested in the surrealist 'internal representation' and in making this visually indiscernible human mentality pictorially visible on paper.¹⁴⁸

Importantly, another ink artist in Zheng's Hangzhou-based circle, who was also particularly interested in the surrealist engagement with uncanny, was Gu Wenda. Although he was in a different sub-division of the ink painting department, focusing on landscape rather than figurative art, his and Zheng's studios were located on the same floor next to each other, enabling the artists to exchange their diverging takes on Surrealism.¹⁴⁹ Hence, by contrast with Zheng, Gu's experimentation with surrealist features focused on landscapes and calligraphy rather than figures. This can be illustrated by *Mythos of Lost Dynasties Series – Tranquillity Comes from Meditation (Synthesised Words)* (Figures 13-14, 1986). Here the artist disturbed what could be an all-familiar nature's scene of mountains and rivers by the incorporation of a character in it.

Although it was a common feature of Chinese old-master ink painting to include calligraphic inscriptions next to pictorial renderings, in Gu's case the character was presented as the landscape's anthropomorphic inhabitant. Covering a larger span of the sky backdrop, the giant strokes were fused with blackened stormy clouds as if stepping out from them and seeming to overpoweringly hang over a mountain stream underneath them. The surreally placed character was made even more unfamiliar by its lack of linguistic meaning, being invented by Gu himself, based on his play with features from characters *chang* (unobstructed) and *shen* (spirit).¹⁵⁰ Hence, the painting appeared as a kind of a strange dream, where the peaceful landscape was juxtaposed with the stormy clouds and the alien monumental character-creature above it, the fear-instilling appearance

¹⁴⁷ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁴⁸ Silvano Levy, 'Introduction', in *Surrealism: Surrealist Visuality*, ed. Silvano Levy (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997), 7.

¹⁴⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 3.

¹⁵⁰ Wu Hung, 'Transcending the East/West Dichotomy: A Short History of Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting', in *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 22-23.

of which was symbolically softened by the faint glimpse of its linguistic association with strong human spirit.

What united the two different takes on Surrealism by Gu and Zheng was their mutual interest in turning familiar elements into unfamiliar manifestations in order to speak to some deeper psychic worries of human mind. Just as Zheng's switching of the established biblical protagonists into the abominable figures reflected the anxiety around committing sin in *Seduction*, Gu's undoing of the naturalistic landscape with the introduction of the oversized character connoted the fear and the thrill in the face of supernatural forces, meaning the unknown.¹⁵¹ Via an extension, this pointed back to such surrealist works as Dali's *Persistence of Memory* that captured the feeling of paranoia when human subconsciousness went into overanalytically contrasting unrelated memories simultaneously.¹⁵²

Indeed, a year later after painting *Seduction*, in 1986 Zheng expounded in more detail his attraction to specifically the psychoanalytic aspect of Surrealism in his essay 'Ink as a Symbolic Language', published in *Huajia (Painter)*. There the artist talked about how in his pro-surrealist deformed figurative ink paintings he went for the expression of human subconsciousness and its intuitive reflexes as well as the latter's more profound psychic underpinnings.¹⁵³ Gradually, this interest in expressing human mind's subconscious reflexes via the figurative deformation brought Zheng's interest towards semi-abstraction of European Expressionism, which marked his second stage of experimentation with Western art. Specifically, the artist's knowledge of the expressionist deconstruction of human form began shaping with his study of German artists, such as Max Beckmann (1884-1950), whom he discussed with Schmid and whose works were also published in the September 1986 issue of *Huajia*, for which Zheng wrote the aforementioned article.¹⁵⁴

However, it was after pondering on the above-discussed rare colour catalogue of paintings by expressionist-like but also distinctly unique British artist Bacon, which Schmid gave to him in 1985, that Zheng's decision to move from the exploration of Surrealism towards the field of figurative Expressionism was sealed.¹⁵⁵ If surrealist artists tended to focus on psychoanalytic content of their

¹⁵¹ Gao Minglu, 'From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-Garde in Mainland China', in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 157.

¹⁵² Sayers, *Freud's Art*, 83.

¹⁵³ Zheng Chongbin, 'Shuimo – Zuowei Xiangzheng Yiwei de Yuyan' ['Ink as a Symbolic Language'], *Huajia [Painter]*, 9 (1986), unnumbered; available via Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/ink-as-a-symbolic-language> (accessed 6 December 2018).

¹⁵⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1; *Huajia [Painter]*, 'The Works of Max Beckmann', 9 (1986), 24-25.

¹⁵⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 2; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

works without obviously changing the academic pro-realist technical style of painting, then expressionist artists moved towards the two-dimensional less naturalistic execution technique, which during the war period served to underscore the theme of human corporeal and mental disintegration.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, Zheng became interested in utilising advanced pictorial-form simplification when portraying human subjects as a means to explore such ideas as bodily deformation and mental confusion side by side.

Significantly, this shift enabled a more explicit breaking away from the representational style that was expounded under Mao and by the official educational curriculum, which was important to Zheng and his circle of like-minded artists, looking to undo ideological limitations imposed on the ink art development.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, in the case of Zheng, this also helped endue his art with the greater dramatic effect that reflected turbulences and variabilities of the rapidly changing Chinese society. As the artist said, the 1980s decade in China '[had] certain anxieties' and was 'very emotional' as the country was recovering from the Cultural Revolution and adjusting to the new political direction.¹⁵⁸ In this respect, his new series of ink paintings, titled *Type of Facial Make-Up*, incorporated chiefly Bacon-inspired pictorial elements to symbolically comment on how the transforming Chinese society was experienced at the time on the more personal human level.

To illustrate this, *Type of Facial Make-Up No. 5* (Figure 15, 1987) depicted a close-up human face in the process of getting altered with excessive theatrical make-up, similar to how Chinese opera actors visually metamorphose into other personalities for their roles after putting on masks and costumes.¹⁵⁹ The face was portrayed against the background of splashing lines, which seemed to be the cause of the physiological modification in the painting, suggesting a kind of an allegorical outburst, coming out of which the figure started taking on the new appearance. The latter's features were also all expressively skewed with broad and quickly applied brushwork, unrealistically flattening out and smudging areas that were supposed to delineate a nose, a mouth or hair. This left visible only a pair of eyes that were executed with a staring gaze, aimed directly at the viewer for the heightened dramatic effect.

Importantly, the clear-cut piercing gaze amidst the chaos of the facial transformation metaphorically pointed out mental difficulties accompanying processes of change and adjustment

¹⁵⁶ Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany, 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 9.

¹⁵⁷ Chen Xiaoxing, 'Lun Shuimo Yishu Lingyu Nei de Shehui Xue Zhuanxing' ['On Sociological Transformation in Ink and Wash Paintings'], *Pipingjia [The Critic]*, 8 (2008), 41-42.

¹⁵⁸ Zheng, 'Selection from Artist Interviews', 102.

¹⁵⁹ Zheng Chongbin in an interview with the author, 10 February 2019, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 6.

to it, whether personal or social. This symbolic parallel between physical disintegration and emotional strain, running throughout Zheng's *Type of Facial Make-Up No. 5*, was inspired by Bacon's signature-style twisted and angulated bodily shapes that he developed in the 1940s to symbolically capture the grotesque corporeal and mental disintegration of people during the war period.¹⁶⁰ This can be inferred from the artist's *Three Figures and Portrait* (Figure 16, 1975), where he depicted three disfigured bodies against the background of an equally disfigured human portrait.

In particular, the trio of the centrally positioned human forms appeared to be in the process of getting tortured, suggested by the inclusion of circular spheres, inside which heads of the two upper-register figures were trapped, or by the inclusion of a square box, where the body of the remaining third figure was forced into. As a result of these imposed alien conditions, the bodies were shown to undergo a vividly painful readjustment that was characterised by breaking of a sticking-out spine of the upper-left figure or compressed limbs of the bottom-foreground body. Similarly employed in Zheng's *Type of Facial Make-Up No. 5*, such the pronounced physical deformation blurred the overall distinctness of the human form, pushing it towards evocative animalistic abstract shapes. In both cases, this expressive figurative exaggeration served to foremost underline the agony of human physical and emotional transformations during times of radical change.

The disjunction between the apparent believability of conveyed emotions and the non-naturalism of their expressionist portrayals was at the heart of Bacon's art, summarised by the artist in his famous remark: 'You want accuracy, but not representation. If you know how to make the figuration, it does not work'.¹⁶¹ This idea that true-to-life representations did not necessarily equal truthful messages strongly resonated with Zheng, who was partially trained in the style of Socialist Realism, where it was customary to represent fake political propaganda themes in the manner of utmost visual believability. In this respect, Bacon's expressively exaggerated style, which symbolically captured the rawness and the immediacy of human emotions, seemed more genuine than works that followed clear-cut standardised formulas of naturalist figure painting.

This was reiterated in Zheng's 1986 essay 'Thoughts on Painting', published in *Huajia*, that expounded against any 'fixed programme' of representation as in order to accurately transmit emotion-charged themes artists had to find an individual way that would most fittingly express a

¹⁶⁰ Luigi Ficacci, *Francis Bacon* (Koln: Taschen, 2003), 10.

¹⁶¹ Donald Hall and Pat Corrington Wykes, *Anecdotes of Modern Art: From Rousseau to Warhol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 320.

certain emotion's underlining quality.¹⁶² Likewise, in 1986 'Ink as a Symbolic Language', the artist stressed the significance of capturing 'trueness of inner emotions' in art, which could not be empirically seen but only internally felt, thereby their visual portrayal necessitated not strict observation of true-to-life forms, but forging a symbolic pictorial language that would be expressively particular to a feeling, which artists wished to grasp in a single painting.¹⁶³ Pursuing this eloquently distorted 'accuracy' of emotions, which was the basis of Bacon's works, was taken even further in Zheng's next series of ink paintings, *Another State of Man*.

As exemplified by *Another State of Man No. 19* (Figure 17, 1988), in this series the artist went for a full-height portrayal of human body, measuring around 260 centimetres in the scroll's length, which also made this series his most monumental pieces from the 1980s. Instead of only focusing on face as in *Type of Facial Make-Up*, here Zheng put into juxtaposition all bodily parts simultaneously, starting with an oval-shaped cut-through circle of a head and finishing with a cluster of lighter and darker black elongated linear brushstrokes that stood for legs. What remained the same in this series is the artist's interest in Bacon-like figurative distortion, based on brushwork's twisting and smudging or, as Lang Shaojun put it, furthering pictorial simplification that only faintly hinted at human form, drawing attention to its symbolic associations with tense emotional states.¹⁶⁴

In specifically *Another State of Man No. 19* two emotional states that Zheng expressively evoked were the contrasting feelings of falling apart and coming back together. This can be inferred from the human figure's suggestive appearance of being turned upside down as at the top, right below the cut-through miniature circle of the head, the artist depicted two parallel thick lines, strongly reminiscent of legs, whereas at the very bottom underneath what should be and seemed to be the legs, there was a fringed black blot, resembling another, this time hair-embellished, head.

Nevertheless, despite this obvious disintegration and visual befuddlement, the body was made to come across as whole and firmly holding together. For instance, Zheng did not incorporate any obvious empty gaps amongst the figure's adjoining limbs, with all the painterly lines seeming to harmoniously flow from one to another.

This sense of powerfulness about disintegrating bodies could also be traced about Bacon's figures, which Zheng interpreted as being concurrently disabled and yet 'beautiful and powerful'.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, the protagonists in *Three Figures and Portrait* were given muscular voluminous forms, appearing to

¹⁶² Zheng Chongbin, 'You Zuohua suo Xiangdao de' ['Thoughts on Painting'], *Huajia [Painter]*, 9 (1986), 31.

¹⁶³ Zheng, 'Shuimo – Zuowei Xiangzheng Yiwei de Yuyan', unnumbered.

¹⁶⁴ Lang, 'Chouxiang Yuhui de Xunzhao', 2.

¹⁶⁵ Zheng, 'Selection from Artist Interviews', 97.

retain physical strength in the face of pressure to deform. This also reminded Zheng of his sister, who could not walk and had to use her arms to help move her body, resulting in various twisted and deformed postures, which, nevertheless, showed her ability to gather strength and master her restricted movements.¹⁶⁶ Thus, in *Another State of Man No. 19*, by utilising the expressive and metaphorically rich double imagery of distortion and wholeness, the artist transferred a sense of physical and, via an extension, mental resilience in the face of difficulties.

Crucially, the use of Expressionism-inspired distortion was also utilised in Guo Zhen's experimentation between Western modern art and the ink medium, making for another example of pro-expressionist ink painting at the Zhejiang Academy. Unlike Zheng's Bacon-inspired explicitly deformed figures, she opted for early twentieth-century German Expressionism, pursued by such artists as Beckmann, which was characterised by milder simplification of bodily features with the hint of deviation from true-to-life forms. This can be observed in Guo's *A Child's View* (Figure 18, 1984), where bodily torsos were portrayed as overstretched cylindrical shapes. Even though basic physical features of the represented adults and the child were clearly visible, the emphasis on geometric linearity, exaggerated volume and disproportional sizes added the vivid degree of expressive non-naturalism.

This differed from Zheng's figures, which parts were shuffled to the extent that it was no longer clear which limb a certain brushstroke embodied, but, similarly, Guo's pictorial protagonists were far from the accepted representational standard of socialist realist painting. The resulting cartoon-appearance of the figures reiterated the painting's thematic playfulness, focused on comically capturing the female child's optical perception of the taller adults around her, appearing as fairy giants from her lower vantage viewpoint. Despite the conventional agricultural setting, evoked via the inclusion of a buffalo or a plant, the work was not about proletarian labour but the child's whimsical imagination, suitably transmitted via the expressively manipulated brushwork. Thus, with the contrasting artistic effect but for the echoing reason, Guo's bringing of the expressionist style into ink painting aimed at undoing the latter's social realist conventions and putting it in dialogue with the previously forbidden form of German Expressionism.

European Expressionism and its echoing artistic styles played the substantial role in the reinterpretation of the ink medium by Zheng and his colleagues, like Guo Zhen, but it was abstraction that enabled experimental artists to fully remove their paintings from empiric representation, becoming, in Zheng's case, the culmination third Western art form, which themes

¹⁶⁶ Claypool, 'Architectonic Ink', 46.

he explored in his *Ink Colour* series. Since abstract painting did not have a historical precedence in China, the local word for abstraction, namely *chouxiang* (literally, removing appearance), was a relatively recent addition to the vocabulary that appeared in the 1936 dictionary *Cihai*, defined as ‘to extract essential elements from objects and eliminate non-fundamental things’, that is to create the ‘opposite to “concreteness”’.¹⁶⁷ Because of this open-ended translation, as Zheng recalled, Chinese art circles often considered figurative Expressionism and even less semi-abstract art by Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) or Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) to exemplify cutting-edge *chouxiang*.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, it was only occasionally that Chinese cultural practitioners, such as Wu Guanzhong – who pioneered the debate on abstract art, as detailed below – or Yang Aiqi, differentiated between various degrees of semi-abstraction and complete abstraction.¹⁶⁹ This more accurate understanding of *chouxiang* was also referred to as *chouxiang zhuyi* or *chouxiang pai*, where *zhuyi* and *pai* designate doctrine or school respectively, altogether implying abstractionism rather than representational art with abstract elements, as expounded by Jin Ye amongst others.¹⁷⁰ Otherwise, in the majority of the Chinese 1980s writing on abstraction, authors like Liu Gangji or Xu Shucheng interpreted it as simply minimising empiric accuracy of real-life objects, which to them was already avant-garde enough as it departed from technical naturalism of state-endorsed Socialist Realism.¹⁷¹ Consequently, since totally abstract works were the most pronounced opposite of the latter, they were perceived as entirely sensational models for advancing Chinese painting at the time.

What made abstract works even more sensational was that they additionally differed from traditional Chinese-ink art. As mentioned above, absolute *chouxiang* had no precedence in the latter’s history, unlike semi-abstraction that was often pointed out by Chinese journal authors, like Li Xianting, to resemble Chinese scholar *xieyi* (idea-writing) art (which, similarly, prioritised expressive brushwork over precise figurative outlining) or Chinese swiftly executed calligraphy (where certain characters were distorted to such an extent that they looked like pictorial abstract lines rather than linguistically meaningful signs).¹⁷² Since for the Chinese semi-abstraction was

¹⁶⁷ Clarke, *Chinese Art and Its Encounter with the World*, 135-136; Yang Aiqi, ‘Zatan Huihua Zhong de Chouxiang’ [‘About Abstraction in Painting’], *Meishu [Fine Arts]*, 1 (1983), 19; Jung Ha Yoon, *Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai*, PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2014, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 71.

¹⁶⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 2.

¹⁶⁹ Wu Guanzhong, ‘Guanyu Chouxiang Mei’ [‘On Abstract Beauty’], *Meishu [Fine Arts]*, 10 (1980), 39; [37-39] Yang, ‘Zatan Huihua Zhong de Chouxiang’, 20.

¹⁷⁰ Jung, *Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai*, 75; Jin Ye, ‘Guanyu Huihua Zhong de Chouxiang Zhuyi’ [‘Concerning Abstractionism in Art’], *Xinmeishu [New Art]*, 1 (1986), 26.

¹⁷¹ Liu Gangji, ‘Lüe Tan “Chouxiang”’ [‘A Brief Discussion on “Abstraction”’], *Meishu [Fine Arts]*, 11 (1980), 12-13; Xu Shucheng, ‘Ye Tan Chouxiang Mei’ [‘To Discuss Abstract Beauty Again’], *Meishu [Fine Arts]*, 1 (1983), 10-13.

¹⁷² Li Xianting, ‘Shi Lun Zhongguo Gudian Huihua de Chouxiang Shenmei Yishi’ [‘Discussing Abstract Aesthetics in Chinese Classical Paintings’], *Meishu [Fine Arts]*, 5 (1983), 16. A more expanded discussion on the link between *xieyi* art and Western semi-abstraction is available in Eugene Wang, ‘Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency’, in

easier to comprehend via the lens of this expressive old-master ink painting, it was often preferred to complete abstraction – for example, by Yang Aiqi.¹⁷³ This added to the sensationalism around using actual *chouxiang*, which was perceived as not only anti-socialist, but also anti-traditional (*fan-chuantong*), making it the brand new art direction to follow in mainland China.¹⁷⁴

It is this newness of complete abstraction that attracted experimental artists, like Zheng, who, as shown above, longed to constantly learn new ways to move beyond both Socialist Realism and the dogma of traditional ink painting. Since abstraction was fully divorced from empiric representation, it allowed artists to express their individualism to the utmost – with no forms to draw from the outside world, they were free to invent their own form and colour combinations as a means of abstractly evoking certain moods and feelings.¹⁷⁵ The creative potential of abstraction was also manifested to Chinese artists by the fact that there were multiple approaches to it, developed internationally throughout the twentieth century, whether by Russian suprematist, Dutch neoplasticist or American abstract expressionist artists.¹⁷⁶ In the case of Zheng, it was Franz Kline's (1910-1962) art that became his personal model of inspiration, which stimulated the artist's experimentation with American Abstract Expressionism.¹⁷⁷

Indeed, there is a vivid resemblance between Zheng's *Ink Colour No. 18* (Figure 19, 1988) and colour-field paintings by Kline, such as *Red Painting* (Figure 20, 1961). In both pieces the artists represented a dark rectilinear block, floating against the background of red densely applied brushwork. The two blocks were fully divorced from any mimetic connotations, comprising loosely painted geometric forms, such as triangles, circles or squares, which altogether heightened the abstractness of the portrayed visual imageries. Moreover, situating the geometric shapes in the non-concrete colour-field spaces, made of different shades of red with pink and orange, or grey and black undertones, utilised respectively in Kline and Zheng's works, additionally pushed the latter away from real-world naturalism towards imagined-world pictorialism.

Chinese Art: Modern Expressions, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith Smith (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 103-161.

¹⁷³ Yang, 'Zatan Huihua Zhong de Chouxiang', 20-21.

¹⁷⁴ Lü Peng, *A History of Art in 20th-Century China* (Milan: Charta Editions, 2010), 1031.

¹⁷⁵ Gladston, *Yu Youhan*, 33; Liu Shaohui, 'Ganqing, Gexing, Xingshi Mei' ['Emotion, Individuality, Formal Aesthetics'], *Meishu [Fine Arts]*, 1 (1979), 9-10; Yang, 'Zatan Huihua Zhong de Chouxiang', 20.

¹⁷⁶ There was a substantial amount of writing on various forms of full abstraction in Chinese art magazines, such as in *Zhongguo Meishubao [Chinese Art Newspaper]*, 'Leng Re Chouxiang Huihua' ['Cold and Warm Abstraction'], 6 (1985), 1 or *Zhongguo Meishubao [Chinese Art Newspaper]*, 'Biaoxian Zhuyi he Chouxiang Biaoxian Zhuyi' ['Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism'], 7 (1986), 4, as discussed in Jung, *Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai*, 120-121; Kobena Mercer, 'Introduction', in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London and Cambridge: Iniva and MIT Press, 2006), 10-11.

¹⁷⁷ Kevin Starr, 'A Dream Deferred', *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 September 1989, 44.

By employing this degree of abstraction, revolving around geometric figures and non-representational colours, Zheng left behind his emphasis on physical bodies for the sole focus on mental states of being, as pointed out by Collette Chattopadhyay.¹⁷⁸ This was one of the defining features of American Abstract Expressionism that interpreted abstraction as a means to articulate various internal mental conditions of human existence in direct juxtaposition to the material object-oriented world.¹⁷⁹ As Barnett Newman (1905-1970) wrote, what artists like himself, Kline and others from the American abstract expressionist movement aspired to evoke was precisely this invisible psychic realm of people's 'own feelings'.¹⁸⁰ Hence, Kline's *Red Painting*, with its fluid pictorial space, seeming to continue beyond the picture frame while engulfing the alien block in its centre, was meant above all to connote emotions, such as awe or uplift, and to ignite those in the viewer during the visual encounter.¹⁸¹

Similarly, Zheng's *Ink Colour No. 18* epitomised the emotively pertaining mental state, where the sharp contrasts between bright red and dark black, or between the monumental central block and the adjacent miniature dot-shapes, stimulated the variety of conflicting feelings, based on their atmospheric suggestions of simultaneously illumination and gloom, or power and inferiority. Unlike Kline's unified middle-register block, Zheng's version of the latter was rendered in the disintegrative manner, appearing to be torn apart as implied by the two disjoint triangles on the left and the bottom right, abruptly protruding from the block. This added to the painting's wider effect of tension, underlining the certain climatic clash between the two opposing forces. As a result, although visually reminiscent of Kline's *Red Painting*, in his work Zheng transmitted the different set of contrast-threaded emotions, characterised by mental strain.

This turn to complete Western abstraction as the visual language for communicating internal emotional states was comparatively applied to ink painting by Zheng's colleague Wang Dongling. He was also close with Schmid, whom he taught calligraphy at the Zhejiang Academy alongside other foreign students, which exposed the artist to the echoing ideas about non-representational art that Zheng discussed with Schmid in the academy's Western circle.¹⁸² This encouraged Wang to consider the concept of emotion-charged absolute *chouxiang* in relation to ink calligraphy so that, akin to

¹⁷⁸ Collette Chattopadhyay, 'Zheng Chongbin: Defining His Own Terrain', *Yishu*, 10 (2011), 22.

¹⁷⁹ Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, 'Statement', in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 568.

¹⁸⁰ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime Is Now', in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 582.

¹⁸¹ Robert Rosenblum, 'The Abstract Sublime', in *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Morley (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 109.

¹⁸² Hertel, 'Lines in Translation', 6-7.

how it was perceived by foreigners that were unable to read Mandarin, the native viewer could also look at character-writing as non-linguistic abstraction or textless art.¹⁸³ This can be illustrated by the artist's *Expression of Yellow* (Figure 21), created in the later 1980s, which, unlike Zheng's abstract works that utilised the actual red colour to counterbalance ink's blackness, relied solely on the monochrome palette.

In this respect, in order to transmit feelings embodied by yellow without the colour application, Wang emphasised the calligraphy-inspired movement of brushstrokes, narrating his impression of the hue, but not in the linguistically meaningful, despite looking like an inscription, but pictorially expressive way. Consequently, a series of parallel broad and swiftly executed horizontal lines did not comprise a certain character, but set the metaphoric mood, suggesting vivaciousness and magnitude, associated with yellow as the prime colour of the sun. In addition, the background splatter of dots, which also appeared in Zheng's *Ink Colour No. 18*, here served as the further non-pictographic element to abstractly underscore the feeling of vibrancy, instilled by yellowness. The overall animated blending of softer beats of the dots and prominent notes of the painted-over lines was meant to resemble 'a frozen piece of music', manifesting the painting's melodiously abstract non-verbal expression of yellow hue-inspired feelings.¹⁸⁴

The marriage between abstraction and ink painting was, indeed, very popular amongst experimental ink artists across China, enabling them to radically for the time break away from the officially imposed socialist realist style and to focus on their emotional expression. Amongst many examples, Beijing-based Wu Guanzhong set the early precedence for this, as mentioned above, having published such pivotal essays on the broader topic of abstraction as 'Formalist Aesthetics in Painting' and 'About Abstraction' that appeared in *Meishu (Fine Arts)* in 1979 and 1980 respectively. Ultimately, Wu advocated abstraction's 'misconception', where painted form '[exceeded] the limits of objective observation' in order to enhance its intrinsic atmospheric, as opposed to physical, qualities.¹⁸⁵

Although in his personal case the artist did not fully extract visual empiric content from his paintings, as he was interested in representing landscape scenes, he only used the latter as a

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸⁴ Frederick Spratt and Charles Liu, *A Tradition on the Leading Edge: Chinese Calligraphic Painting* (San Jose: D.P. Fong Galleries, 1990), 7; available via Zheng Shengtian Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/zheng-shengtian-archive-wang-dongling/sort/title-asc/object/exhibition-booklet-for-a-tradition-on-the-leading-edge-chinese-calligraphic-painting-solo-exhibitions-by-gu-wenda-lee-wen-han-and-wang-dong-ling> (accessed 11 December 2019).

¹⁸⁵ Wu Guanzhong, 'Formalist Aesthetics in Painting', in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 15.

pretext to painting process, deconstructing them into vividly abstract shapes that he spontaneously ‘synthesised’ to underscore his personal emotive response to observed nature.¹⁸⁶ Hence, despite showing occasional distorted representational features, like trees, Wu’s landscape art tended more towards full abstraction. This accentuation of abstracted pictorial features served as an expressive means of adding, in Wu’s own words, ‘abstract beauty’ to ordinary visual encounters with nature, as it can be seen in *Lion Woods* (Figure 22, 1983).¹⁸⁷

Here the original forms of hills and a river were significantly reduced in order to portray the scenic encounter as a series of freely drawn lines and washes, appearing as floating clusters of various geometric shapes, organically metamorphosing from circles into rectangles and back. Significantly, Wu did not utilise any codified texture strokes in the painting either, pointing to the artist’s deliberate rejection of representational brushwork in favour of loose execution techniques, similarly employed by American abstract expressionist painters. Tired of Socialist Realism, enforced upon him for almost three decades, the artist aspired towards the much freer and more imaginative approach to ink painting that he found in abstraction. Therefore, to Chinese 1980s artists – from Wu Guanzhong to Wang Dongling and Zheng Chongbin – abstraction was foremost a way to underscore their individualism away from any political or historical restraints to their freedom of expression.

Apart from the thematic updating of ink art, which, in the case of Zheng, started with Surrealism, progressed towards figurative Expressionism and culminated with full-on abstraction, ink techniques were also boldly questioned in this period, with the artist’s works being no exception to that. It was also this technical reinterpretation of the ink medium that was the fourth component of the artist’s experimentation with Western art in this period, affecting all the above-mentioned works from the previous three stages, which incorporated acrylic or pigmented colour alongside ink, applied with an unconventional flat and wide *paibi* brush. Zheng’s turn to these experimental pictorial tools in as early as 1985 was prompted by his feeling that standard ink painting materials ‘physically did not have enough impact’, whereas adding additional paints and substituting classic slender brushes would ‘add more textures as well as other layers beyond pure water and ink wash’.¹⁸⁸

Precisely, this mixed-media approach enabled the artist to achieve textural contrasting of the certain sculptural effect due to the bold combination of acrylic’s luminosity and thickness with ink’s

¹⁸⁶ Kao, ‘The Art of Wu Guanzhong’, 26.

¹⁸⁷ Wu, ‘Guanyu Chouxiang Mei’, 37-39.

¹⁸⁸ Erickson, ‘Innovations in Space’, unnumbered.

subtleness and absorbency. Hence, in Zheng's pieces, like *Another State of Man*, the shimmering white acrylic paint attracted light reflections akin to metallic surfaces, while its physical thickness allowed to visually pronounce the three-dimensional textures, sitting more obviously on top of the pictorial plane, unlike the liquid ink paint that immediately melted into the paper sheets. In the case of the *Ink Colour* series, the artist evoked acrylic's effects with the substitute material of dry pigmented-colour powder, which was insoluble and, when combined with adhesive binder, also gave brushwork the more voluminous appearance. Altogether, this fusion of ink with such alternative materials allowed Zheng to 'build' his forms layer by layer, thereby creating the unconventional degree of collage-like 'physicality'.¹⁸⁹

In this pursuit of the more physical brushwork application, it was also important for Zheng to drop the traditional calligraphic *maobi* brush, which was thinly cut with rounded tip to allow for executing slender calligraphic lines. The employment of the alternative wide and flatly spread *paibi* brush, used for mounting finished ink paintings but not painting itself, aided the artist in achieving that impression of 'bold and direct rawness' for his mixed-media ink brushwork.¹⁹⁰ As Zheng recalled, the change in the brush also changed his movements during the painting process, making him leave behind conventional old master brushstrokes in favour of physically vibrant, broad and sweeping smudges that would emphasise his paintings' acrylic or pigmented reliefs.¹⁹¹ Thus, the *paibi* brush presented an articulate means for Zheng's technical reinterpretation of ink painting, which he envisioned as materially bolder and more eclectic.

Significantly, the inspiration for adopting this expressive mixed-media technique came to Zheng from Rauschenberg's above-mentioned legendary 1985 exhibition in Beijing that he saw with Schmid. There he viewed first-hand the American artist's combine-paintings, like *Canyon* (Figure 23, 1959), which amalgamated pictorial materials of oil, canvas, pencil and paper with daily-life objects, such as buttons, a mirror, a taxidermied eagle and even a pillow, suspended from the painting by a string. Via this radical fusion of the three-dimensional materials and the orthodox painterly elements, Rauschenberg transformed his work into a 'flatbed picture', alluding to 1950s television screens that juxtaposed news, advertising and entertainment shows.¹⁹² The artist was interested in this chaotic nature of television programmes' arrangements, whereby episodes of Vietnam War could be illogically interrupted by luxury product adverts, and in order to underscore this

¹⁸⁹ Claypool, 'Architectonic Ink', 45.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁹¹ Erickson, 'Innovations in Space', unnumbered; Lang, 'Chouxiang Yuhui de Xunzhao', 2.

¹⁹² Leo Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg: A Lavishly Illustrated Lecture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 33.

information flood he resorted to excessive combining of contrasting visual elements, challenging the viewer's orientation.¹⁹³

For Chinese-ink artists learning about this free crossing of boundaries between the pictorial and sculptural genres as well as between traditional and unconventional materials was the eye-opening motivation to experiment with techniques as opposed to only themes of ink art. Hence, Rauschenberg's exhibition was the important trigger in Chinese cultural circles to focus more on painting's material aspects and to explore new ways of their application with 'a great deal of freedom'.¹⁹⁴ In addition to Zheng, who adopted this Rauschenberg-inspired mixed-media approach to the making of his ink works, another artist in Hangzhou to have been prompted by this 1985 exhibition to forge new fusion-style ink techniques was Liang Quan. Comparatively with Zheng, what impacted him the most was the American artist's bold combinations of the seemingly unmergeable elements, which got translated into his collage ink paintings, such as *Untitled* (Figure 24, 1988).¹⁹⁵

Comprising cut and pasted pieces of coloured paper, woodblock text attachments as well as painted-over ink scribbles, arrows and a hand imprint, the work was dispossessed of conventional ink painting's plain paper background and calligraphic brushstrokes, being instead turned into a cross-genre collage.¹⁹⁶ Importantly, Liang did not conceal traces of the latter's messy production process, leaving intact unevenly cut edges of the paper pieces and layering them over without geometric precision. Akin to Rauschenberg's crudely combined *Canyon*, the resulting imagery of patchy tears, skewed angles and haphazard sketches made the painting seem as falling apart, which symbolically epitomised the critical deconstruction of the Chinese painterly tradition, but also its coming back anew in the mended state.¹⁹⁷ Thus, similar to Zheng's hybridising of ink with the alternative materials and brushwork methods, Liang technically reinvigorated his ink art by utilising mixed-media randomness, as set by the example of Rauschenberg's combines.

Within the wider Chinese context of the ink art experimentation, this draws a pertaining parallel to Shanghai-based artist Zhang Jian-Jun. Like Zheng and Liang, in his works, manifested by *Noumenon (Existence) Series* (Figure 25, 1987), ink was only one of the accompanying materials, the primacy of which was counteracted by coalescing pulped rice paper, wood, oil paint, a stone and a string, all

¹⁹³ Robert S. Mattison, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 32.

¹⁹⁴ Zhu Ye, 'Beijing Theorists' Reactions to the Art of Robert Rauschenberg', in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 42-44.

¹⁹⁵ Chia Chi Jason Wang, 'Amassing the Essence: A Preliminary Look at Liang Quan's Thirty Years of Painting', *Yishu*, 14 (2015), 91.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

attached to a canvas. This diverse juxtaposition of the durable materials, such as stone, with the softer elements of paint or paper, effectively expressed the idea of nature's permanency and humankind's temporariness, underlining the wider idea of how counterbalancing opposites govern the life's realm.¹⁹⁸ The suspension of the voluminous stone from the painting, hung by the string as the pillow did in Rauschenberg's *Canyon*, enabled Zhang to further emphasise this theme of existential oppositionality, whereby not only the varying materials but also the two and three dimensions were cross-matched.

In addition, the sculptural quality of the painting was accentuated even more by the inclusion of projecting wooden poles along the canvas's borders, protruding ahead into the viewer's space just as the stone. This heightened the contrast with the flat two-dimensional ink and oil paint applications in the middle of the canvas surface, in parallel with Rauschenberg's combining of the painterly and sculptural components simultaneously. In this respect, the American artist's 1985 exhibition presented the crucial impetus for Chinese artists across China to shake up ink techniques in their own ways, with Zhang incorporating physical objects, Liang doing paper collages and Zheng adding new materials, all in order to help diversify 1980s ink art's painterly methods. Ultimately, pulling various threads from umpteen European as well as American art examples that circulated around China in this period was regarded as a cutting-edge means to contemporise as well as to internationalise ink painting.

This was precisely what Zheng focused on doing between 1985 and 1988, managing within this short period of time to experiment with diverging ideas, inferred from works by Dali, Bacon, Kline and Rauschenberg. In this, the artist shared the similar creative mindset with his colleagues at the Zhejiang Academy and other ink artists across China, who believed in the value of learning from previously forbidden Western art in order to help ink painting catch up with international modern and contemporary visual culture, to which China did not have access for almost three decades. Significantly, Zheng's contribution to 1980s ink art gained exposure both domestically and internationally, receiving enthusiastic support from the avant-garde art circles, but a more cautious response from the officials, as detailed below.

III. (Dis)Encouraged: Responses to Experimental Ink Painting

Indeed, unlike the resolutely encouraging reception of Zheng's ink paintings in the international as well as Chinese non-official art circles, official institutions responded more carefully to semi-

¹⁹⁸ Zhou Yan, 'Zhang Jian-Jun: Visual Enquiry into Existence and Temporality', in *Zhang Jian-Jun*, ed. Ren Chun (Shanghai: Shanghai Brilliant Publishing, 2012), 15.

abstract and abstract works that created less predictable prospects for advancing experimental artists' careers within 1980s China. This can be illustrated by the organisation behind Zheng's participation in 1987 *Contemporary Chinese Painting Exhibition* at a Japanese art gallery, based in Osaka, alongside his teacher Mu Yilin.¹⁹⁹ Mu had been involved in the exhibition's planning for a few years, planning to show his colour ink-on-silk paintings, portraying such traditional motifs as cranes, symbolising peace and longevity.²⁰⁰ Despite being more conventional, his works gave a hint of semi-abstractness due to the artist's use of silk layering that upon lightly smudging already applied brushstrokes created haziness – the effect, which characterised Mu's later colour works alike, illustrated here by *Soaring over the World* (Figure 26, 1994).²⁰¹

In this respect, when the question appeared about bringing in another artist to exemplify the more experimental new-generation side of the Chinese contemporary ink art development to local Japanese audiences, the teacher proposed his former student's *Ink Colour* series, analysed above, where the employment of colour was given the fully abstract interpretation in the manner of colour-field American Abstract Expressionism.²⁰² As Schmid recalled, this exhibition at the gallery in Osaka – the city famous for presenting contemporary art forms across Asia and the wider Western world via such specialised institutions as the Osaka Contemporary Art Centre – generated excitement at the Zhejiang Academy.²⁰³ The faculty members were, thus, eager to support Zheng's participation in the show as 'they wanted to make an international fame', and this exhibition was going to give to their circle more of that international recognition, manifesting its artistic staff's association with forward-looking modern art forms.²⁰⁴

Precisely, the abstract subject-matter and the mixed-media technique of the *Ink Colour* series quintessentially exemplified the latter, paving for Zheng his entry onto the Asian experimental contemporary art scene. Nevertheless, from the official side there was less enthusiasm about this. As Schmid further recalled about Zheng's participation in the exhibition in Osaka, the issue was that 'the police did not like it'.²⁰⁵ This was shown very implicitly, whereby the artist was asked to bring a document after a document to process his travel application, and, according to Schmid, they 'went on with this method for a long time' until the point, when 'it was just too late' and Zheng missed

¹⁹⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 8; Artron, 'Mu Yilin'.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Zhu Ying, 'Artist Who Grew Up amid Mulberry Preserves: Ancient Silk Painting Style', *SHINE News*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.shine.cn/feature/art-culture/2010308745/> (accessed 30 October 2020).

²⁰² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 8.

²⁰³ DeBevoise and Yung, 'Interview with Andreas Schmid'.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

the opening.²⁰⁶ Thus, based on Schmid's recollection, providing limited or no assistance with processing administrative matters like travel applications for artists' shows abroad was a subtle way to discourage them from practising Western abstract and other modern art forms.

This markedly differed from the situation, as Zheng Shengtian put it, 'within the ivory towers of the academy', where Chinese experimental artists were privately actively encouraged to engage with foreign art forms and foreign art institutions.²⁰⁷ 1988 *Chinese Painting Exhibition*, this time all the way in Germany at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg, in which Zheng participated, illustratively manifested the Zhejiang Academy's willingness to promote their artists to international audiences. Indeed, the academy forged an established connection with Hamburg's university that, for example, in 1988 admitted the academy's oil painter Xu Jiang (born 1955) to study on their postgraduate programme for one year, also giving the artist a solo show there.²⁰⁸ As part of this exchange programme collaboration, *Chinese Painting Exhibition* was organised by the university, for which its academic staff travelled to Hangzhou to select first-hand experimental ink paintings by the academy's artists.²⁰⁹

In the case of Zheng, the artist's Bacon-inspired paintings from the aforementioned *Another State of Man* series were selected for the exhibition, together with works by other Hangzhou-based experimental ink painters, such as Gu Wenda, whose paintings from *Mythos of Lost Dynasties Series*, discussed above, were chosen.²¹⁰ Furthermore, in 1988 there was an additional opportunity to exhibit in Europe, which Zheng embraced by sending more examples from the *Another State of Man* series this time to the University of Paris VIII in France.²¹¹ The exhibition was organised by Boriana Song – the daughter of Zhejiang Academy-based tapestry artist Maryn Varbanov (1932-1989) and Song Huaikuei.

Significantly, in 1975 Varbanov, Song and their two children Boriana Song and artist Phenix Varbanov (born 1962) moved from Maryn's native Bulgaria to Paris, where Song Huaikuei started working with French fashion designer Pierre Cardin.²¹² This collaboration brought the family back to

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Zheng Shengtian, 'Modern Chinese Art and the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou', in *China Avant-Garde*, ed. Jochen Noth, Isabel Pohlmann and Kai Reschke (Berlin: House of World Cultures, 1993), 58.

²⁰⁸ Tina Keng Gallery, 'Xu Jiang', https://www.tinakenggallery.com/usr/library/documents/main/39/xu-jiang_cv_20191020.pdf (accessed 9 November 2020).

²⁰⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 8.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Boriana Song, *Phoenix* (Paris: Université Paris VIII, 1988), unnumbered; available via Li Xianting Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/li-xianting-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/phoenix-exhibition-leaflet> (accessed 8 July 2021).

²¹² Madeleine O'Dea, 'Perpetual Motion: The Life and Art of Maryn Varbanov', *LEAP*, 1 August 2010, <http://www.leapleap.com/2010/08/maryn-varbanov/> (accessed 8 July 2021).

China in the early 1980s as Song Huaikuei became Cardin's official business representative in Beijing as well as assisted him with designing and opening his French-cuisine restaurant Maxim's de Paris à Pékin in 1983.²¹³ Thus, the Varbanov family had strong connections with the French cultural world, which enabled the organisation of the University of Paris VIII's exhibition by Boriana Song.

In addition to Zheng's ink paintings, the show also included works by Phenix Varbanov, already based in Paris at the time, as well as by two more artists from Hangzhou, namely Zheng's student Tang Song and Zhang Jie (born 1963).²¹⁴ Hence, the group exhibition was not ink painting-focused, but included multimedia artworks alike, such as Tang's installation of deconstructed wooden sticks and buttons that interrupted and tore apart the flow of printed calligraphic characters on paper.²¹⁵ Titled *Phoenix*, the exhibition alluded to how contemporary Chinese art, whether ink painting or installation art, was getting reborn from the "ashes" left by the Cultural-Revolution period. In this respect, similar to *Chinese Painting Exhibition* in Germany, the University of Paris VIII supported recently initiated experimental art from China, promoting it as a new subject of enquiry amongst European academic communities.²¹⁶

To be exhibited at university-level Western art galleries at the time, when broader Chinese contemporary art had only started coming into contact with the art world in the West, was an important boost to young Chinese experimental ink artists. Specifically, it served as the verification to them that their experiments between ink painting and Western forms of modern art were found meaningful and interesting enough to be shown in the West, which, in turn, ignited their enthusiasm to continue exploring those and getting more of their works shown to international audiences, whether directly abroad or within China. A further source of such encouragement for Zheng to pursue the multicultural direction of his art's development came from the invitation to have his semi-abstract and abstract ink paintings viewed by Jean-Hubert Martin – the highly acclaimed curator at the world's renowned Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Martin visited Zheng's studio during his 1988 trip across China upon the recommendation of France-based Chinese critic Fei Dawei (Figure 27) in order to get insight information about new

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Song, *Phoenix*, unnumbered.

²¹⁵ Ibid., unnumbered.

²¹⁶ The interest that Western universities showed in Chinese experimental ink art was similar to the interest that China-based foreign exchange students showed towards the latter. As demonstrated here by the examples of Schmid, van Dijk and Denis, they were eager to meaningfully engage with new art developments in China and to help artists advance their engagement with the Western art world that those artists actively sought. However, this Western academic communities' interaction with Chinese experimental ink art did not automatically extend to the broader art institutional context and its audiences in the West at the time. This forms the subject of the following third chapter, where, through the example of the US art scene, various Western wider prejudices towards contemporary Chinese-ink art are explored.

Chinese contemporary art for his ground-breaking *Magiciens de la Terre* (*Magicians of the World*) exhibition, due to open in 1989.²¹⁷ For this exhibition Martin envisioned, in the curator's own words, 'to reflect on contemporary art production on a global, worldwide scale', featuring latest art pieces by international artists from such wide-ranging locations as China, Africa or the Oceanic islands on par with Western contemporary art.²¹⁸ Since he wanted to underscore individualism behind artists' creative approaches rather than to generalise them around their native countries, he took time talking with Zheng, via the aid of Fei's translation, and, as the artist recalled, asked him questions to fully understand his ink works and reasons behind the Western art influences on them.²¹⁹

Having the meaningful interaction with Zheng, rather than simply previewing his works, underscored Martin's note of the importance of ink painting for the reformulation of China's contemporary visual culture in the 1980s. What made the curator's inclusion of Zheng's ink paintings into his list of Chinese artworks to see even more significant was the fact that he focused on predominantly non-ink-media-specific artists, such as Huang Yongping (1954-2019).²²⁰ As detailed in the following chapter, shortly after this in August 1988 Zheng would move to San Francisco, thereby losing contact with Martin, but, nevertheless, the curator ensured to represent contemporary Chinese-ink art at *Magiciens de la Terre* by collaborating with Paris-based ink painter Yang Jiechang. At the time, this interest alone to include ink art at such the renowned international exhibition provided stimulus to China-based experimental ink artists to further expand their multicultural reinterpretation of the ink medium.²²¹

Alongside this growing international support, Zheng also received encouragement for his pro-Western ink painting within the local avant-garde art circle in China. Indeed, his works were

²¹⁷ Du Bozhen and Weng Zijian, 'Fei Dawei Fangtan Lu' ['Interview with Fei Dawei'], Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 18 March 2009, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=28 (accessed 22 July 2018).

²¹⁸ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Jean-Hubert Martin, 'Interview', *Third Text*, 3 (1989), 19.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24; Du and Weng, 'Fei Dawei Fangtan Lu'.

²²⁰ Weng Zijian, 'Huang Yongping Fangtan Lu' ['Interview with Huang Yongping'], Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 3 March 2008, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=104 (accessed 22 July 2018).

²²¹ At the same time, Martin's choice to feature heritage-inspired contemporary art forms from non-Western countries, like Chinese-ink painting, was widely criticised in the West for supposedly "exoticising" these non-Western countries' visual cultures. Although the deeper engagement with the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to point out that a predominant part of this criticism came from Western critics' prejudices towards what constitutes global contemporary art, which they equated with predominantly Western art forms, excluding heritage-inspired elements. As shown in the following two chapters, the popularity of this West-centric understanding of contemporary art posed a profound challenge to migrant Chinese-ink artists in the 1990s USA, who wished to prove that rather than being the "exotic" art form, Chinese-ink painting could be a locally relevant and meaningfully contemporary art direction.

frequently illustrated in leading 1980s art magazines, dedicated to highlighting advanced directions of Chinese contemporary art. For example, the second 1987 issue of *Meishu* – the magazine, where such principal art critics worked as Gao Minglu or Li Xianting – printed the artist's Surrealism-inspired *Bird* series next to images of Taiwanese abstract street sculpture from the 1970s-1980s, shown on the adjacent page (Figure 28). The geometric sharpness of those cutting-edge sculptural installations, located outside Taipei's skyscrapers, visually reinforced the echoing geometricisation of the bird form in Zheng's painting. Such placement of the high-tech architectural section next to the page with the *Bird* series invited an implicit visual cross-matching of the two, serving to reiterate the contemporaneity of the illustrated ink art example.

Similarly, another prominent art publication, *Zhongguo Meishubao*, in its 1988 twenty-first issue underlined the artist's advancement of ink painting by publishing his *Type of Facial Make-Up* series next to Ren Jian's (born 1955) *Primeval Chaos*, dated to 1987-1988, which became famous for its monumental-scale exploration of the primordial life theme, measuring 30 metres in width (Figure 29).²²² Whereas Ren's ink handscroll focused on the graphic representation, emphasising foreshortening and chiaroscuro, Zheng's pieces showed the different direction of the ink painting development, investigating the alternative pictorial effect of semi-abstractness. At the same time, Zheng and Ren mirrored each other in their unprecedented uses of industrial materials alongside ink, namely acrylic and polyester fabric respectively. Hence, *Zhongguo Meishubao* epitomised the parallels and the diversions within the reinterpretation of ink painting by the time's experimental artists, whose works were indicatively featured on the issue's front page.

In addition to getting published in China's art magazines, dedicated to promoting the cutting-edge developments in Chinese visual culture, Zheng also received opportunities to exhibit his ink paintings at unofficial local venues, supporting experimental art. The important example of this category was the artist's 1987 private solo show at the Zhejiang Academy. There Zheng showed a selection of his paintings from the *Another State of Man* series, which were displayed as scrolls, hung on walls or on free-standing panels, and as album leaves, placed in the unconventional manner on a floor, thereby forming a visual carpet vertically leading towards the selected vertical pieces (Figure 30). This unusual display, requiring the viewer's active physical response to the exhibited paintings, pertinently underscored the latter's body-focused subject-matter, representing Bacon-inspired deformed human figures.

²²² Gao, 'From Elite to Small Man', 153.

Crucially, this unofficial exhibition of Zheng's works was attended not only by the internal circle of the academy's like-minded artists but also this period's prominent China-based Dutch art historian, namely van Dijk, who recorded it via his photographs as the example of the country's ongoing 'vigorous independent art movement', manifesting 'new techniques', 'new [style]' and, ultimately, the artist's 'individual status'.²²³ As mentioned above, while studying Chinese in Nanjing, in 1987 van Dijk undertook trips to Hangzhou as well as Shanghai and Beijing, developing companionships with local avant-garde artists, including non-ink-media practitioners, such as Huang Yongping, Geng Jianyi (1962-2017) or Ding Yi (born 1962).²²⁴ Alongside this focus on cutting-edge Chinese contemporary art across various genres, van Dijk's viewing and documentation of the ink painting exhibition reiterated to Chinese artists that ink works could make for a cultural event of the avant-garde standing.

Apart from this encouragingly welcoming reception of Zheng's ink paintings amongst the international and local private art circles, as an exceptional happening and contrary to the predominant hesitation towards Western modern art, in 1988 the artist's works were also embraced on the more official level. Significantly, 1988 was the increasingly politically relaxed year, contributing to the greater flexibility around cultural regulations.²²⁵ Therefore, despite the fact that Zheng's semi-abstract and abstract works were not the formally endorsed example of ink art – for example, 1986 *United Exhibition of All Groups of Hunan Young Artists* at Beijing's National Art Museum of China continued advocating naturalistically executed ink paintings, such as Chang Jin's (born 1951) landscape *Silent Water in Autumn* (Figure 31, 1984) – it was not totally impossible to land a solo show at an official art institution outside the capital city of Beijing.²²⁶

For this to happen, it was vital to have support from senior cultural affiliates, who, in Zheng's case, was Fang Zengxian – his former teacher at the Zhejiang Academy and in 1988 an official at the state-run Shanghai Art Museum.²²⁷ This very contact enabled Zheng to negotiate his solo exhibition there in the politically relaxed 1988 year, bypassing sensitive questions about his works' abstract

²²³ Hans van Dijk, 'Zheng Chongbin', Hans van Dijk Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/hans-van-dijk-archive-works-5982/object/paintings-by-zheng-chongbin-18610> (accessed 6 December 2018); Hans van Dijk, 'Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates: Part II: 1985-1991', in *Hans van Dijk, Dai Hanzhi: A Life with Art in China, 1986-2002*, ed. Marianne Brouwer (Beijing and Rotterdam: Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art and Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, 2018), 304.

²²⁴ Brouwer, *Hans van Dijk, Dai Hanzhi*, 31, 35, 38, 40, 42.

²²⁵ Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

²²⁶ Lü, *A History of Art in 20th-Century China*, 1017; Gao, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, 122.

²²⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 4.

influences that could have gotten the show cancelled.²²⁸ Naturally, in order to get the show outside the popular norms approved, there were concessions to settle for. Firstly, the exhibition was allocated an upper-level floor away from a statement ground floor, reserved for more conservative shows.²²⁹ Secondly, no official funding was provided for such cost-involving matters, like advertising, to arrange which Zheng had to resort to his father's support, who printed promotional materials (Figure 32) at his workplace at a medical factory.²³⁰

Regardless of the concessions, what mattered was that with Fang's support Zheng got his solo exhibition approved, and this alone was a marked achievement, given the Shanghai Art Museum's status. Founded in 1956, it was one of the earliest newly established museums in communist China, set up in a former restaurant building and refurbished in 1986.²³¹ As the officially run institution, it had a history of exhibiting political propaganda art under Mao, and although during the reform period it started hosting solo exhibitions of such previously censored senior artists as Lin Fengmian (1900-1991) in 1988, or occasional group shows of younger experimental artists, like *Exhibition of Today's Art* also in 1988, featuring, for example, Ding Yi's abstract cross-motif paintings, it still remained the conservatively aligned establishment.²³² Thereby, its staging of Zheng's works on the solo basis, which were, furthermore, displayed in the ground-breaking for the time in China way, was both momentous and encouraging.

Precisely, instead of being presented solely in the conventional manner of hanging scrolls on walls or handscrolls on tables, a selection of Zheng's album-size works from the *Ink Colour* series was put flat on a floor, obstructing the space around the *Another State of Man* paintings, mounted on free-standing folding screens, altogether separated from the viewer by a string, thereby creating an installation-like display to be observed from afar (Figure 33). What made this installation presentation even more ground-breaking was its inclusion of a live female model (Figure 34). Dressed in a ripped black-and-white outfit with a print of Zheng's painting and accompanied by an oversized hat-mask that obscured her head's shape, the model echoed the deconstructive brushwork of the adjacent works. This performative element effectively reiterated the latter's emphasis on physical body and its deformation, while simultaneously undoing the taboo of having performance art within the official museum setting.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Du and Weng, 'Zheng Chongbin Fangtan Lu'.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ China Art Museum, 'History', <https://www.artmuseumonline.org/art/art/gywm/lsyg/index.html?tm=1577785566917> (accessed 2 January 2020).

²³² Du and Weng, 'Zheng Chongbin Fangtan Lu'; Brouwer, *Hans van Dijk, Dai Hanzhi*, 53.

Based on this experimental means of presenting the artworks as well as their surrealist, expressionist and abstract subject-matters, combined with the mixed-media technique, analysed above, Lang Shaojun stated in the foreword to the exhibition – printed as leaflets and as an entrance wall label – that Zheng’s solo show epitomised a new path for the development of ink painting, praising the artist’s inventive utilisation of Western modern art.²³³ What is more, the exhibition was also well received by Shanghai’s cultural representatives, manifesting the relative relaxation of cultural regulations in 1988. Hence, apart from the attendance of his students, like Wang Jinsong (born 1963), colleagues, like Wang Guangyi (born 1957) from the oil painting department, and other close associates from the academy, such as Denis, as well as his teachers Mu Yilin and Chen Jialing, Zheng’s show was attended by official press reporters and the Shanghai Art Association’s representative (Figures 35-39).²³⁴

The fact that the Shanghai Art Association’s member was present at the exhibition’s opening was the important sign of its acceptance on the official regional level. This meant that it was not the totally concealed show, pushed behind the scenes of the state museum for the private circle of like-minded colleagues and friends, but the publicly acknowledged cultural happening in the city of Shanghai. What additionally demonstrated this was the streaming of the exhibition’s opening, including the part with the live model’s performance, on Shanghai’s local TV channel that was part of the China Central Television (CCTV) network of channels.²³⁵ Furthermore, as Zheng recalled, to his surprise, it was broadcasted during the prime-time news from seven until half past seven in the evening when only official political events – and very rarely cultural events – were discussed.²³⁶

Crucially, this exceptional appearance of Zheng’s experimental art on the regional television was precisely due to that hope-instilling relaxation of cultural regulations in 1988 that enabled the exhibition’s orchestration in the first place at the state-run regional museum. Since CCTV’s Shanghai-based producers came from the younger generation, being eager to promote alternative art forms, as the artist recalled, they pursued this opportunity to inform about his show on the prime-time news.²³⁷ Consequently, despite the uncustomary selection of the ink paintings and their even more unorthodox display format, which altogether broke multiple official art museum codes,

²³³ Lang Shaojun, ‘Zheng Chongbin Huazhan (Zhanlan Qianyan)’ [‘Foreword to Zheng Chongbin’s Art Exhibition’], Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/foreword-of-zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition> (accessed 6 December 2018).

²³⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 1.

²³⁵ Starr, ‘A Dream Deferred’, 46.

²³⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 4.

²³⁷ Ibid.

the artist's exhibition was not simply allowed at the Shanghai Art Museum, but became the matter of Shanghai's public affair.

However, the exceptional appearance of Zheng's experimental solo show at the official cultural establishment did not undo the fact that expressively distorted, abstract or mixed-media ink art, which connoted individualism and freedom of personal expression, was uncomfortably different from naturalistically executed artworks of workers or of landscapes that were more aligned with the 1980s extant communist ideology.²³⁸ That is why, while officials were debating the future strategy for the country's cultural field, the latter was governed by, as Richard Baum called it, the *fang-shou* system, meaning the shifting between loosening and tightening of regulations.²³⁹ Hence, during the *fang* (loosening) periods, regulations were largely flexible, but during the *shou* (tightening) years (specifically, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1987 and 1989) Socialist Realism was more firmly endorsed, suggesting that any forms of Western abstract or semi-abstract art – or, as they were also called, forms of 'spiritual [implying ideological] pollution' – were meant for artists' strictly private pursuit.²⁴⁰

For example, when Wu Guanzhong published his above-mentioned two articles about abstraction, they were renounced in the official writing. In the 1980 issue of *Shijie Zhishi* (*World Affairs*), Shao Dazhen dismissed abstraction because of its concealment of original subject-matter behind its formal exaggerations that made it difficult to comprehend empiric content and that conflicted with straightforward socialist realist painting.²⁴¹ Ultimately, as Zheng pointed out, what made expressive ink paintings, emphasising form distortion, controversial was their lack of order and clarity, perceived as politically anti-aesthetic as it failed to serve the agenda of making Chinese art look 'pretty and great', similar to the requirement for 'red, smooth and shining' works in the 1950s-1970s.²⁴² Hence, the Study Group at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts described abstracted paintings as 'merely an assembly of color chunks and several lines that only generated poor aesthetic feelings'.²⁴³

These comments echoed Jiang Feng's reproof of Wu Guanzhong's advancement of abstraction, which he described as 'idealistic', far from reality, and, thus, 'decadent [Westernisation]', evoking

²³⁸ Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China, 1949-1984* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998), 41.

²³⁹ Baum, *Burying Mao*, 5.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6; Taru Salmenkari, 'Implementing and Avoiding Control: Contemporary Art and the Chinese State', *China: An International Journal*, 2 (2004), 237.

²⁴¹ Shao Dazhen, 'Chouxiang he Juxiang' ['Abstract and Figurative'], *Shijie Zhishi* [*World Affairs*], 15 (1980), 28.

²⁴² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 6.

²⁴³ The Study Group at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, 'Xingshi Mei ji qi zai Meishu Zhong di Diwei' ['Formal Beauty and Its Position in Fine Arts'], *Meishu* [*Fine Arts*], 4 (1981), 43; Jung, *Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai*, 77-78.

the 1961 satirical definition of abstraction as the art direction that was about just ‘nothing’.²⁴⁴ Abstract and semi-abstract art forms were also criticised in the 1980s Chinese official writing for prioritising artists’ individual feelings and creative vision over straightforwardly representing universally understood amongst the masses subject-matters, related to labour life or landscape scenery. This was mentioned by, for example, Hong Yiran, to whom the use of abstract art elements meant ‘an exclusive pursuit of self-expression’.²⁴⁵ The choice of the word ‘exclusive’ next to ‘self-expression’ additionally suggested the degree of egoism on the part of pro-abstraction artists, which was an especially negative implication to make in the communist context, where the collective ‘we’ always came before the individual ‘I’.

Similarly, in the 1983 nation-wide *shou* year Zhang Jian-Jun’s abstract mixed-media works, discussed above, were subject to censorship when shown at Shanghai’s Fudan University gallery at the *83-Stage Painting Experiment* exhibition.²⁴⁶ Within four hours of an opening, a car with the city’s official cultural delegation arrived to cancel the show, featuring abstract ink and oil art.²⁴⁷ Within this context, Zhang’s works were categorised as the non-practical aesthetic indulgence and the ‘imitations of capitalism’, receiving criticism in the 1983 *Jiefang Ribao* (*Liberation Daily*) newspaper issue.²⁴⁸ What made them even more controversial was their mixed-media ink technique, which was similarly considered to be anti-aesthetic, supposedly making ink, traditionally meant to be applied purely without extra materials, ‘dirty’.²⁴⁹ In the light of this, the artist was ordered to write confession self-criticism and was temporarily removed from his Research Assistant position at the Shanghai Art Museum to work as the museum’s Doorman.²⁵⁰

An echoing incident happened to Gu Wenda, when he participated with his above-mentioned surrealist pieces in 1985 *Hubei Chinese Painting Invitational Exhibition* in Wuhan, dedicated exclusively to experimental ink paintings, featuring works by such senior artists as Wu

²⁴⁴ Hans van Dijk and Andreas Schmid, ‘The Fine Arts after the Cultural Revolution – Stylistic Development and Theoretical Debate’, in *China Avant-Garde*, ed. Jochen Noth, Isabel Pohlmann and Kai Reschke (Berlin: House of World Cultures, 1993), 25; The Chinese Artists’ Association, ‘Wuxing Huihua’ [‘Nonfigurative Painting’], *Meishu* [Fine Arts], 4 (1961), 73; Jung, *Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai*, 34-35.

²⁴⁵ Hong Yiran, ‘Guanyu Mei he Yishu Zhong de Chouxiang Zhuyi’ [‘Regarding Abstractionism in Beauty and Art’], *Xin Meishu* [New Art], 2 (1984), 62; Jung, *Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai*, 80.

²⁴⁶ Weng Zijian, ‘Zhang Jian-Jun Fangtan Lu’ [‘Interview with Zhang Jian-Jun’], Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 3 March 2009, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=54 (accessed 1 May 2018).

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting*, 85; John Clark, *Modernities of Chinese Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 284.

²⁴⁹ Kenneth Wayne, ‘Zheng and Abstract Expressionism: An Introduction’, in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, ed. Britta Erickson (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 21.

²⁵⁰ Maxwell K. Hearn, ‘Past as Present in Contemporary Chinese Art: Beyond the Brush’, in *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 174; Vine, *New China, New Art*, 194.

Guanzhong.²⁵¹ As foreboded by the participating artists, the exhibition did not manage to bypass the negative official and public reception, gathering critical comments in its feedback book that shamed the artists for holding teaching positions whilst practising the misunderstood art form, tending towards abstractness.²⁵² Gu's solo show at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, also held in 1985, was altogether closed, in response to which his students in Hangzhou were to write criticisms of their teacher's abstracted surreal ink landscapes.²⁵³ Therefore, on several occasions Gu was penalised by the Zhejiang Academy's administration, as in 1985 when he was sent to Shaoxing to reconsider his art approach.²⁵⁴

These experimental ink art regulation incidents, which kept on happening throughout the 1980s, made it uncertain as to how China's domestic cultural infrastructure was going to develop. Some artists, like Zheng, could pull off their solo retrospective shows at regional official art establishments during the more politically loosened periods, whereas other artists were openly criticised and fined for their experiments with Western modern and contemporary art forms. Significantly, at any moment it could have been any experimental artist facing such criticism. After all, Socialist Realism never stopped being the officially preferred art language in the 1980s, together with its politically analogous form of landscape painting, showing, as van Dijk wrote, 'mountains, waterfalls and clouds, or grass with bamboo' that praised China's natural resources and prioritised patriotic appeal over critical content.²⁵⁵

This can be evidenced by the very type of ink painting exhibitions that were staged at the centrally located National Art Museum of China in Beijing: between 1979 and 1989 it showed predominantly realist examples, depicting either socialist or neutral landscape subject-matters, in both instances appealing to patriotism.²⁵⁶ In order to help counterbalance the impact of experimental pro-Western art or, as it was also termed, 'the anti-traditionalism of recent years', starting in 1987, the production of selected avant-garde art magazines was paused or stopped altogether, as it was the case with *Meishu Sichao (Fine Art Trends)* or *Zhongguo Meishubao*, the latter of which in 1988 still published Zheng's ink art.²⁵⁷ In their place, such new official art magazines were established as *Dazhong Meishubao (Popular Art News)* in 1987, making it widely available in the public circulation

²⁵¹ Guo Yaxi, 'Zhongguo Shiyuan Shuimo Fazhan Kaocha Baogao' ['Analytical Report on the Development of Chinese Experimental Ink and Wash'], in *Shiyuan Shuimo Huigu, 1985-2000 [A Retrospective of Experimental Ink and Wash, 1985-2000]*, ed. Dong Xiaoming (Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2005), 236.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ Clark, 'Modernity in Chinese Art', 148; Zheng, 'Modern Chinese Art and the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou', 58.

²⁵⁴ DeBevoise and Yung, 'Interview with Andreas Schmid'.

²⁵⁵ Brouwer, *Hans van Dijk, Dai Hanzhi*, 35.

²⁵⁶ Jane DeBevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 19.

²⁵⁷ Van Dijk, 'Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution', 313-314.

and summoning cultural practitioners in its issues to revive ‘healthy Chinese art with national characteristics’.²⁵⁸

As Zheng additionally recalled on the cultural regulations at the time, and as touched upon above, the use of Western modern art forms, such as abstraction, was not just ‘a political disagreement, but also an academic disagreement’.²⁵⁹ It was primarily related to a segment of academics from the older generation, who, akin to the officials, were not eager to welcome any Western modern art influences in the Chinese national form of ink painting as it was just ‘not that traditional [Chinese] art that you were supposed to learn’.²⁶⁰ They found such external references to be offensive, meaning that, as Zheng underlined, ‘almost anything [done] differently [...] back then caused a big stir’.²⁶¹ Between the ongoing endorsement of naturalistic techniques and socialist themes as well as such conservatism of orthodox academics, avant-garde artists lacked the properly fruitful future foundation for advancing their art experiments.

In this respect, the 1980s Chinese contemporary art scene was characterised by contradictions. On one hand, the Open Door policy enabled the influx of previously forbidden Western cultural information, which encouraged artists to experiment with it, as illustrated by the examples of Zheng and his fellow colleagues. Moreover, during the politically relaxed years there were even possibilities to get experimental works officially exhibited. On the other hand, the domestic cultural infrastructure was still very cautious towards experimental art forms, affecting artists’ prospects of creative expression without any limits. Amidst these uncertainties in the transitional 1980s decade, which impacted the artists’ drive to freely experiment with Western art forms, many of them, including Zheng, were drawn to the popular at the time idea of going ‘to the outside world, to the modernisation and to the variety’, as explored in the following chapter.²⁶²

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 4.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Zhou Shaohua, ‘Zou Xiang Kaifang, Zou Xiang Xiandai, Zou Xiang Duoyuan’ [‘Go to the Outside World, to the Modernisation and to the Variety’], *Meishu [Fine Arts]*, 2 (1988), 11-12.

Chapter 3

Migration and Cultural Assimilation in Late 1980s through to Early 1990s California

Amidst the euphoria for Western culture in 1980s China, going to the West to experience first-hand local art forms was literally a ‘dream’, as Zheng recalled.²⁶³ To make this dream come true the artist started looking for opportunities to go abroad in as early as 1986, finally being able to travel in August 1988 for his postgraduate studies in San Francisco, initially at the Academy of Art College and then at the San Francisco Art Institute. Moving from his professional success in China, sealed by the solo exhibition a few months earlier at the Shanghai Art Museum, straight into the unknown terrain of the foreign country, which language he did not speak at that point, was a notable career twist to make. This chapter proceeds to elucidate why Zheng took this critical decision to come and to subsequently settle in California, and how he approached his initial cultural assimilation there.

The first section of this chapter considers specific reasons that impelled Zheng to leave for California, despite the relative financial security of employment in China. The second section explores various challenges that the artist had to address upon his move abroad, including the impact of first-time cultural shock, which made him determined to find a way to assimilate on the American socio-cultural scene. Against the backdrop of this self-questioning, whilst the student, the artist proceeded to embrace another big move since his arrival in San Francisco, that is to temporarily set ink painting aside, only occasionally returning to it as part of his private practice to retain skilfulness.²⁶⁴ Consequently, as detailed in the third section, during this time Zheng created a turning-point culturally impartial corpus of conceptual works, surviving in the form of archival documentation, which is illuminated in this thesis between this chapter and special Appendix C.

I. Making the Decision: Pausing the Career in China for Studying in the USA

Amidst the escalating fascination for Western modern and contemporary visual culture throughout the 1980s, it was almost inevitable that the craze for cultural Westernisation would gradually flow into the echoing craze for going abroad, termed amongst the locals as *chuguo re*.²⁶⁵ As Fan

²⁶³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 1.

²⁶⁴ Zheng Chongbin in an interview with the author, 12 January 2020, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 10; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 1. Those practice works, or ‘random sketches’, as Zheng also described them, such as 1995 *Enigma of the Day*, mentioned in the fourth chapter, closely resembled the artist’s *Ink Colour* series that he produced back in China in the 1980s, where he employed abstraction as a means of conveying immaterial emotional states, focusing on the use of bright colours, like red, alongside black ink.

²⁶⁵ Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 13.

Jingzhong wrote in 1986, once the door to the West was opened in the vacuum of the Cultural Revolution aftermath, it felt like there was the whole ‘world beyond [the] wall’ of China to be explored, envisioned to be ‘unrestricted and limitless’.²⁶⁶ As argued in the preceding chapter, the unpredictable cultural regulations in the run up to 1988 visibly impacted artists’ attempts to explore this new world of cultural knowledge. Thereby, although there were windows of possibilities to access Western art information and to even land official experimental art exhibitions, the time’s cultural infrastructure set-up lacked stable prospects for the development of the experimental art field.

Precisely, since abstract and semi-abstract forms of ink art amongst others often happened to cross the still predominantly conservative understanding of visual culture on the official level in the 1980s, at any point experimental ink artists could face obstacles to promoting or exhibiting their works. Moreover, towards the end of the 1980s there were declining educational opportunities within China to progress the embarked-upon study of Western modern and contemporary art, with few new foreign art exhibitions appearing in the country, as Zheng recalled, and only repetitive reproductions of art examples available in the circulation, with which artists had already been acquainted.²⁶⁷ In a 1987 letter van Dijk also remarked on the ‘low’ standard of still developing Chinese 1980s educational platforms, the knowledge output of which could ‘not [be] taken seriously’, suggesting this difference between progressive art learning options abroad and China’s more restraining then system of art education.²⁶⁸

Echoingly, based on his direct experience of seeing ‘how the art school worked’ and ‘how it limited artists’ in 1980s China, Zheng thought that ‘staying there to teach or to work was restrictive’.²⁶⁹ As the artist further underlined: ‘I had certain fears when I was there, not that I ran into difficult situations, but I thought that I could have been stuck doing the same thing all over again, and I just fear that kind of stability, where there is no evolvment’.²⁷⁰ Consequently, unlike artists, who left after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident on political grounds, Zheng’s move abroad in 1988 was primarily culturally motivated. He was driven by the decade’s euphoria for Western modern and contemporary art in China, but the latter’s largely conservative 1980s cultural infrastructure or, in

²⁶⁶ Liu Weijian, ‘The Dao in Modern Chinese Art’, in *China Avant-Garde*, ed. Jochen Noth, Isabel Pohlmann and Kai Reschke (Berlin: House of World Cultures, 1993), 59.

²⁶⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 1.

²⁶⁸ Brouwer, *Hans van Dijk, Dai Hanzhi*, 36.

²⁶⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 22.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Hou Hanru's words, the 'unsustainable culture of the nation-state', could have undermined the goal to dive deeper into this field.²⁷¹

Therefore, when considering moving abroad, the main reason to stay in China was a certain degree of financial security. Unlike the 1990s, when the state support for artists was overtaken by rising market opportunities, in the 1980s it was vice versa: with no developed art market in mainland China and a still largely restricted access to Taiwan and Hong Kong's art markets, only souvenir-type ink paintings after old masters or Socialist Realism could predominantly be sold to Western tourists.²⁷² Indeed, it was after 1990 that the Chinese mainland art market began to be developed, accompanied by the opening of a first commercial contemporary art gallery – Red Gate – in Beijing, the appearance of a specialised journal, *Yishu & Shichang (Art & Market)*, both in 1991, and the organisation of China's First Biennial Art Fair in Guangzhou in 1992, focused on oil paintings in the styles of Cynical Realism and Political Pop.²⁷³

However, with the still intact 1980s state support system, there was no need for academy-employed artists, like Zheng, to have art sales to be able to earn their living.²⁷⁴ Precisely, Zheng's salary was over 100 yuan a month, compared with the average salary of 45 yuan.²⁷⁵ The reason for this high pay was the fact that the Zhejiang Academy fell under the jurisdiction of Beijing's central cultural department as opposed to provincial departments.²⁷⁶ Hence, Zheng's job title, as the artist recalled, had an official affiliation, which came with the substantially higher salary. Moreover, as the faculty member, the artist also received rent-cost-free accommodation, had a discount on painting materials and at the end of every semester received bonuses in the form of seasonal necessities, such as boxes of fruits during summer or coats during winter.²⁷⁷ Additionally, his studio within the academy was provided free of charge alike.²⁷⁸

²⁷¹ Hou Hanru, 'A Certain Necessary Perversion', in *On the Mid-Ground: Selected Texts*, ed. Yu Hsiao-Hwei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), 111.

²⁷² Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, 'Extrinsic Perspectives', in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010), 288; Lü Peng, 'Zouxiang Shichang' ['Heading toward the Market'], *Jiangsu Huakan [Jiangsu Pictorial]*, 142 (1992), 4; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 3. As Zheng further recollected from his personal experience, the idea of having the developed art market in 1980s China was so alien that even his teachers at the academy explicitly taught against it, making it 'sound really corrupt' and posing art sales as something 'bad' as well as 'taboo' for the serious ink painter to get involved into, as discussed in Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 3.

²⁷³ Chiu, *Breakout*, 207; Lü, *A History of Art in 20th-Century China*, 995, 998.

²⁷⁴ Eduardo Welsh, *Negotiating Culture: The Discourse of Art and the Position of the Artist in 1980s China*, PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, 1999, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 23.

²⁷⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 7.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.; China Academy of Art, 'History', <https://en.caa.edu.cn/about/history/index.html> (accessed 15 October 2020).

²⁷⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 7.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

In 1988 Zheng also got promoted to a more academically prestigious post of Assistant Professor at the academy, which promised the ongoing relative financial security in China.²⁷⁹ With this kind of the state social support system, as Hou Hanru pertinently commented on the economic side of living in 1980s China, ‘life was simple but secure’, and people ‘did not have to worry much about daily life’.²⁸⁰ Provided that there were no registered instances of crossing the official cultural regulations – in cases of which there was a risk of being temporarily suspended from work, as evidenced by the examples of Zhang Jian-Jun and Gu Wenda in the preceding chapter – artists were economically free there. In this respect, what artists mainly lacked in 1980s China was intellectual freedom, that is unrestrained access to and application of Western cultural knowledge.

Significantly, upon moving to Western countries, Chinese artists could obtain this more unlimited intellectual freedom that they could not fully have back home, but at a reverse cost of facing economic hardships since, as immigrants, they had limited access to employment or social benefits, and neither there was a guarantee of earning a living from art sales on the highly competitive Western art market.²⁸¹ Hence, as Ethan Cohen summarised, ‘where they were free intellectually, they were slaves economically’.²⁸² Nevertheless, experimental artists, like Zheng, were happy to swap their relatively financially secure high positions at Chinese academies for an uncertain immigrant status with its accompanying lack of economic stability in order to ‘be [intellectually] free and [to] just let [...] creative energies go’ with Western art experimenting, into which they eagerly dived in the early 1980s.²⁸³

For such artists staying in China would have meant missing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience the Western art world in person. That is why, since the doors to the West were open, with little hesitation, many of them started seeking routes to go abroad as visiting teachers or, as it was the case with the majority, as postgraduate students. To illustrate this, from Zheng’s ink painting colleagues at the Zhejiang Academy alone, each ended up travelling to the USA in the 1980s: Liang Quan was the first one to study at San Francisco’s Academy of Art College in 1981-1983, Gu Wenda and Guo Zhen went as students to the San Francisco Art Institute in 1987 and 1988 respectively, having then both settled in New York in 1988, whereas Wang Dongling came to

²⁷⁹ Wayne, ‘Zheng and Abstract Expressionism’, 22.

²⁸⁰ Huang Xiaoyan, ‘Hou Hanru Fangtan Lu’ [‘Interview with Hou Hanru’], Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 9 January 2008, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=35 (accessed 15 October 2020).

²⁸¹ Jane DeBevoise, ‘Interview with Ethan Cohen’, Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 15 October 2009, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=22 (accessed 22 July 2018).

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

the University of California in Santa Cruz and the University of Minnesota in 1988-1992 as a calligraphy professor.²⁸⁴

Similar to his Hangzhou-based colleagues, it was vital for Zheng to encounter a Western country and its culture, that is, in Fan Jingzhong's words, the recently discovered 'unrestricted and limitless' world for himself. With his latest move towards American Abstract Expressionism, the USA was a particularly fitting choice to do this. There the artist could view in person expansive collections of local abstract expressionist art alongside numerous European modern art examples, which he studied mainly via reproductions in China. Concurrently, he was also eager to explore non-pictorial forms of minimal and conceptual art, the development of which also had a special association with the USA of the 1960s-1970s.²⁸⁵ In other words, for Zheng the USA presented a kind of the intellectually free centre of international world art – the eclectic cultural 'dream', which various shades he longed to live in person in order to help reinvigorate his own practice.²⁸⁶

In this respect, the artist started looking for chances to study abroad as a means of educating himself further in the field of Western twentieth-century art as well as giving his works a critically fresh start in the socially freer cultural climate. Once Zheng Shengtian started hosting students and teachers from San Francisco's art schools in 1985 at the Zhejiang Academy, opportunities to go to California were plentiful and directly accessible to Hangzhou-based artists.²⁸⁷ Hence, one option for Zheng Chongbin to go abroad was via a state-funded exchange programme as a visiting student or a visiting teacher. However, despite the advantage of having assistance with processing admission and visa paperwork, this type of state-funded exchange was attached to a condition that candidates would have to immediately return to China.²⁸⁸

Since the artist wanted to travel to California under more flexible conditions without a pre-fixed timeframe for staying there, he chose to self-organise his study trip.²⁸⁹ Crucially, this meant that Zheng also had to self-sponsor it. That is why, the artist decided to apply to San Francisco's Academy of Art College, where in 1988 the semester cost was at a more affordable rate of 6,000

²⁸⁴ Wang, 'Amassing the Essence', 89; Vine, *New China, New Art*, 55; Du Bojun, 'Guo Zhen Fangtan Lu' ['Interview with Guo Zhen'], Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 2 September 2010, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=42 (accessed 15 November 2019); Hertel, 'Lines in Translation', 11.

²⁸⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 1.

²⁸⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 1.

²⁸⁷ Jane DeBevoise, 'Interview with Gu Wenda', Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, 4 November 2009, http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=39 (accessed 1 May 2018).

²⁸⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 7.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

USD.²⁹⁰ To gather the necessary sum, Zheng had to use his family's savings and to borrow additional money.²⁹¹ Under such circumstances it was particularly difficult to go abroad, having not just to leave behind his status and financial security in China, but also to embrace the risks of spending his savings and accumulating debt while being a foreign student. Furthermore, even the very process of self-arranging such a trip was legally complex.

Firstly, Zheng had issues obtaining a special type of Chinese passport, required for travelling abroad.²⁹² As Schmid recalled, with so many Chinese leaving China, the officials tried to cut back on the amount of outbound trips by limiting the release of those travel passports, but in 1986 during the socio-politically relaxed period there was a window to acquire this document, which Zheng utilised.²⁹³ Secondly, once the artist finalised his Chinese documents and got permissions from the Zhejiang Academy and the cultural officials to resign to go abroad, the US consulate rejected his student visa application without a scholarship backing in 1987.²⁹⁴ Zheng had to wait another year to resubmit his application, and, following his exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum, it was finally approved with the requirement that, before commencing his studies, the artist would undertake an intensive six-month course of English that he did not speak yet.²⁹⁵

Thus, as Kevin Starr wrote in 1989 for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, '[in] April 1988 the Shanghai Art Museum gave Zheng an exhibit that received national radio, TV and print media attention', but already '[five] months later the young artist was enroute to San Francisco to pursue the Western axis of his development'.²⁹⁶ As emphasised in these lines, having landed the solo exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum, Zheng achieved one peak of his career under the cultural development possibilities that he managed to grasp in China in the 1980s. Going to California was meant to help the artist reach out for a new peak of his career trajectory under the socially freer and more culturally opportune circumstances. However, once in San Francisco, traversing the American art scene turned out to push the artist into the much deeper reconsideration of his art practice than he had expected.

II. Californian Settling Down: Reconsidering Ink Painting and Grasping Cultural Shock

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² DeBevoise and Yung, 'Interview with Andreas Schmid'.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 6.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Starr, 'A Dream Deferred', 46.

Indeed, Zheng's first year spent in California already marked the turning point in his artistic vision as he was looking to decide on his art evolution, while preparing to embark on his postgraduate degree. While undertaking the required English language course in San Francisco and having not commenced yet his art studies at the Academy of Art College, as the newly arrived Chinese-ink painter with the established reputation back home, the starting undertaking that Zheng was naturally eager to pursue was trying to show his 1980s ink works.²⁹⁷ This way the artist could test out local audiences' reactions to ink painting, which he could then utilise as feedback for his new artworks.

The opportunity for this presented itself shortly, when Zheng ran into Jerry Kilbride – a Japanese-Haiku poet pursuing Asian cultural studies.²⁹⁸ Since Kilbride got interested in Zheng's Chinese-ink paintings, he introduced him to his friend Harrison Sheppard, a lawyer turned art dealer.²⁹⁹ From that point, as Starr wrote, 'the painter's prospects turned from bleak to hopeful'.³⁰⁰ Precisely, due to his connections, Sheppard swiftly secured for Zheng a dedicated solo show in May 1989 at a reputable contemporary art gallery in San Francisco, run by Bruce Velick, who previously staged such critically charged exhibitions as *Faith and Cynicism* in 1987, featuring works by famous American cartoonist David Berg (1920-2002) or sculptor Scott Donahue (born 1951).³⁰¹ Hence, located in the industrially developing South of Market area, the gallery played an important role on the city's art scene, ending up having a dedicated archival holding (covering mainly the 1983-1986 period) at the SFMOMA Library.³⁰²

With the assistance from author Roger Verran, curator Elsa Cameron and San Francisco's entrepreneur Dorrwin Buck Jones amongst others, Sheppard ensured that the Bruce Velick Gallery would also give a try to exhibiting Chinese-ink paintings by Zheng as part of the artist's solo *Introduction Show*.³⁰³ In this respect, as Zheng recalled, it was 'a joint venture to introduce [him] to San Francisco's art scene', presenting a survey of his China-produced works, analysed in the preceding chapter.³⁰⁴ For example, Sheppard featured a painting, retitled in English as *Face versus Figure (Fourth Series)*, from the *Another State of Man* series, also illustrating it on a private view invitation leaflet (Figures 40-41). This piece was important as it was exhibited at Zheng's two solo

²⁹⁷ Frank Viviano, 'Abstract Meeting of East and West', *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 July 1989, E1.

²⁹⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 4; Starr, 'A Dream Deferred', 46.

²⁹⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 4.

³⁰⁰ Starr, 'A Dream Deferred', 46.

³⁰¹ Bruce Velick Gallery, *Faith and Cynicism* (San Francisco: Bruce Velick Gallery, 1987).

³⁰² Starr, 'A Dream Deferred', 46; Brian Lucas from SFMOMA Library in an email to the author on 16 January 2019.

³⁰³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 4; Starr, 'A Dream Deferred', 46.

³⁰⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 4.

exhibitions in China, namely at the Zhejiang Academy in 1987, attended by van Dijk, and at the Shanghai Art Museum in 1988 (Figures 30, 35).

Additionally, *Introduction Show* showcased Zheng's earlier Expressionism-inspired works, such as a *Type of Facial Make-Up* version that was printed on the poster to the artist's 1988 exhibition in Shanghai, where it was also exhibited (Figures 42-43). As it can be seen, a criterion for selecting the featured pieces was primarily based on their exhibition history. This was necessary for marketing the locally unknown yet artist as the proof of his 'critical notice', which was also the reason why the invitation leaflet listed leading Chinese magazines, like *Fine Arts in China*, that published Zheng's ink works.³⁰⁵ To further underline the latter's value, they were labelled as the 'shattering of visual traditions in the interest of form', manifesting 'originality' of the artist's 'brush techniques and use of media'.³⁰⁶ Thus, Sheppard emphasised the importance of Zheng's experimental stance for the development of 1980s Chinese contemporary ink painting, explaining the value of the represented pieces.

Crucially, under Sheppard's management the Bruce Velick Gallery's show turned out a success. It was at this exhibition that Zheng had his highlight and also his first sale in this period, which was Lydia Titcomb's purchase of the *Type of Facial Make-Up* ink painting from the Shanghai Art Museum's poster.³⁰⁷ Its fetched price of 2,000 USD was a promising result, given that there was no developed contemporary ink art market in San Francisco and that the artist had neither prior history in the USA nor prior sales back in China.³⁰⁸ What further made Zheng's first-time sale special was the very fact that it landed in Titcomb's locally renowned art collection alongside examples of American modern and contemporary art that she supported, being, as Zheng recalled, a serving board member at such major art institutions as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the city's prestigious San Francisco Art Institute.³⁰⁹

Significantly, this commercial success enabled the artist to shortly land a further dedicated show, *New Stone Colour Ink Paintings*, at the Riskin-Sinow Gallery in 1989, once again organised by Sheppard, who knew the gallery's managing director Jeff Levy, stirring this time the interest in Zheng's *Ink Colour* series.³¹⁰ Amongst the buyers, as Zheng recalled, there were numerous friends

³⁰⁵ Bruce Velick Gallery, invitation to a private view of Zheng Chongbin's *Introduction Show*, 21 May 1989. By *Fine Arts in China*, *Zhongguo Meishubao* was meant, which is also translated as *Chinese Art Newspaper*.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 4.

³⁰⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 7.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 19.

of Sheppard, ranging from filmmakers to lawyers.³¹¹ The sales there fetched prices in the range of 1,000 reaching up to 3,000 USD, which were again important results considering that the pieces were of a moderate album-leaf size.³¹² By comparison, in New York ink paintings by recently arrived Chinese artists were similarly sold in the 1980s in the range of 1,000-3,000 USD, as evidenced by Cohen's sale of Yuan Yunsheng's (born 1937) ink works at 3,000 USD per piece in the mid-1980s.³¹³ Going into 1990 Sheppard continued organising additional solo shows of the artist's ink pieces from China, like *Humanism in the Arts* at San Francisco's Montgomery Gallery.³¹⁴ Run by Peter Fairbanks, who previously worked as Senior Vice President at Bonhams and then at Phillips in New York, the gallery was primarily known for representing blue-chip modern art, like by Claude Monet (1840-1926), alongside American contemporary painting.³¹⁵ Consequently, the gallery attracted a particularly important circle of Bay Area collectors, who regularly acquired works by such leading American painters as David Salle (born 1952), Eric Fischl (born 1948) or Donald Sultan (born 1951), as Zheng recalled, and who also ended up purchasing Zheng's pieces at the show.³¹⁶ The latter happened to be one of the series of exhibitions on Chinese mainland art that the Montgomery Gallery had occasionally been arranging since the 1980s in collaboration with James Cahill, Professor at Berkeley's University of California.³¹⁷

Altogether, Sheppard's own interest in Zheng's works and the demand for them that he was able to swiftly generate seemed to present a strong incentive to continue working with the Chinese-ink medium. However, it is important to reiterate that the core reason for the commercial success of those pieces within the context of the early 1990s USA was the fact that they were made in the socio-political context of 1980s China, as evidenced by the aforementioned marketing materials, which emphasised at that stage Zheng's position as the leading Chinese, not yet Californian, experimental artist. This idea was explored in an article by Frank Viviano for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, written on the occasion of a private event, showing Zheng's abstract ink paintings from China, which took place at the Duboce loft in July 1989.³¹⁸

³¹¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 7.

³¹² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 19.

³¹³ DeBevoise, 'Interview with Ethan Cohen'. As Cohen further recalled, even though Yuan asked him to push the prices up to 6,000 USD, which 'was a lot of money at that time', he could not go beyond 3,000 USD for a contemporary Chinese-ink painting, unless it was by one of the older generation ink artists, associated with modern art, such as Zhang Daqian or Wu Guanzhong.

³¹⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 20.

³¹⁵ Montgomery Gallery, 'Team' and 'Notable Sales', <https://montgomerygallery.com/team/> and <https://montgomerygallery.com/notable-sales/> (accessed 4 July 2018).

³¹⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 4.

³¹⁷ Peter Fairbanks in an email to the author on 14 July 2018.

³¹⁸ Viviano, 'Abstract Meeting of East and West', E1.

As the author argued, although ‘the expressive freedom of his forms’ made Zheng’s works visually resemble the ‘Western’ use of ‘brushes’, being ‘a debt’ to such canonical painters as Bacon or Kline – thereby, commenting on the works’ visual references to the newly incoming in China Western art information – it was their cultural distinctness that attracted the local American viewer.³¹⁹ Indeed, the article emphasised the ink paintings’ particularism to China’s art context, mentioning how they represented a primary exemplar of art ‘on Chinese paper in traditional ink’ by the country’s ‘best known avant-garde artist’, whose latest 1988 exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum – where, importantly, the majority of the sold pieces came from – was the ‘full-fledged national sensation’.³²⁰ Hence, new ink paintings that Zheng was going to produce in California might not have immediately had that automatic reception success of his China-phase ink works.

Moreover, the commercial factor was only half the problem, as the artist could still potentially attract interest from local Californian Chinese diaspora and from remote ink art collectors in Taiwan or Hong Kong.³²¹ The core issue then was that local non-profit galleries and major museums were substantially more reluctant to recognise ink painting as the contemporary art form on par with American oil paintings or installation pieces. That is why, during his show at the Bruce Velick Gallery, Zheng was advised by visitors from the San Francisco Art Institute that ink painting was received on the US museum level as the type of drawing rather than fine art per se.³²² This diminished mainstream institutional vision of contemporary ink art was primarily caused by the inherent understanding of ink as China’s historic medium, namely the non-contemporary traditional type of “other” Chinatown art, always set in opposition to local “insider” art.

Developing this line of thinking, as Machida underlined, Asian migrants in the USA were already stereotypically perceived as ‘perpetual guests’.³²³ Because of the ethnic difference, this vision of the Asians as perpetual foreigners made it substantially harder for them to assimilate into the local society.³²⁴ Moreover, another prevailing image of the Asian Americans as the model minority, expected to be good at Sciences and to succeed in the USA as mathematicians or engineers, also

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Indeed, San Francisco has traditionally held the largest Asian population across the USA and a disproportionately smaller population of other ethnicities, as discussed in Birgit Zinzius, *Chinese America: Stereotype and Reality – History, Present, and Future of the Chinese Americans* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 101. This made San Francisco more culturally dualistic rather than pluralistic, verging between its migrant Asian and local American sides. Hence, for newly arrived Chinese migrant artists in San Francisco, within the context of the early 1990s, it was more of the coin-flipping question of either integrating onto the American art scene or onto the Asian diasporic art scene, which coexisted side by side with little overlapping.

³²² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 2.

³²³ Machida, *The Poetics of Positionality*, 60.

³²⁴ Kevin R. Johnson, ‘Racial Hierarchy, Asian Americans and Latinos as “Foreigners”, and Social Change: Is Law the Way to Go?’, *Oregon Law Review*, 76 (1997), 349-350.

meant that it was more challenging for them to enter the cultural industries, where they were still substantially underrepresented throughout the 1980s.³²⁵ Hence, practising Chinese ink, which was, as Lucy Lippard put it, that ‘prevailing image of Asian art in the United States [...] derived from the great classical – and aristocratic – traditions of brush paintings’, was only going to make it harder to integrate into the US art world, reminding of the Asian artist’s “guest” status.³²⁶

Similarly, Fei Dawei in his 1993 essay about overseas Chinese artists also emphasised that it was this commonplace attitude towards the latter as outsiders that made their works ‘readily comprehensible by Western viewers’ as Chinese, seen as “typical” in a certain way examples of China’s traditional culture with ‘a strong oriental flavour’.³²⁷ Chang Ningsheng, writing for the 1990s directory of North American Chinese artists, additionally expounded on this prejudice against accepting China’s conventional visual culture, like ink painting, as the non-other art variation in the USA. The author argued that it was ‘still very foreign to Westerners’ because of the solid belief that ink could only embody ‘the unique aesthetic taste and philosophy of Chinese people’, thereby making it the antithesis of Western contemporaneity – the factors, which are ‘detrimental to the promotion of Chinese painting’ in North America.³²⁸

These comments reveal that US-based Chinese artists had to foremost face the so-called ethnic challenge, immediately attached to them and, via an extension, their works. Cohen also admitted that indeed the most frequent question he was asked even about non-ink Chinese contemporary art was: ‘What’s Chinese about it?’ – it would just not occur to many of his American clients that those could be “regular” contemporary artworks, where “Chineseness” was not necessarily the point.³²⁹ If such an additional cultural identifier, like ink, was to be used on top of this already extant stereotype around Chinese artists, it was going to further narrow down that art to its ‘cultural difference’, only serving ‘to reduce [it] to a spectacle of essential racial or ethnic typology’, as

³²⁵ Keith Osajina, ‘Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s’, in *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, ed. Kent A. Ono (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 219, 221-222; Elizabeth Lu, ‘1990s: The Golden Decade: In Pursuit of a Better Way of Life’, *The Los Angeles Times*, 15 January 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-01-15-ss-95-story.html> (accessed 17 May 2021).

³²⁶ Lippard, *Mixed Blessings*, 142.

³²⁷ Fei Dawei, ‘The Problems of Chinese Artists Working Overseas’, in *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart T.Z. Gallery, 1993), LXI.

³²⁸ Chang Ningsheng, ‘The Choices and Positionings for Artists of Chinese Origin in North America’, in *Artists of Chinese Origin in North America Directory*, ed. Liu Charles, Zheng Shengtian and Lian Cheng (Westmont: Point Gallery, 1995), 9-10.

³²⁹ DeBevoise, ‘Interview with Ethan Cohen’.

argued by Fisher.³³⁰ Thus, in the USA works with culturally distinct elements were conventionally perceived as from somewhere “over there”, but only not from “here”.³³¹

In the light of this status of cultural “otherness” and of the inapplicable companion to American visual culture, pursuing ink painting in California – in a way that would make it fully compatible with the local art production as well as would make it escape this cycle of the cliché reception on the institutional level – required a profound reconsideration of its techniques and themes. Moreover, against the backdrop of predominantly non-painterly installation art forms on the American cultural scene, Zheng’s abstract ink paintings without a novel layer of rigorous reinterpretation could appear as out of touch. Because of this, the artist started feeling that pursuing ink painting without reevaluating it first would make it prone to being perceived in California as solely ‘profoundly Chinese’ and unlike the recent developments in local contemporary art.³³²

This juxtaposition that Zheng felt between ink painting and surrounding installation art was vividly captured in the artist’s following words: ‘I felt that what I did in China was over. I was dropped into a whole new way of thinking – students at the Art Institute were discussing art as public or as conceptual. I paused. I didn’t know if I could continue to paint’.³³³ In another interview Zheng further elaborated on his reconsideration of ink painting: ‘[When] I moved to the West, everything has changed: my experience, identity, the feeling about culture. When I came there, I was not interested in [ink] painting. I didn’t know why I had to continue painting, or what I should be painting for’.³³⁴ The artist’s lack of knowing why and specifically for what ink needed to be employed in the USA underscored the ink art’s above-discussed status of “otherness” on the 1990s American cultural scene.

Amidst this cultural shock and the accompanying feeling of cultural alienation, the artist ‘lost himself’ and a sense of the ink painting’s local applicability in California.³³⁵ This was the hardest

³³⁰ Jean Fisher, ‘The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism’, in *New Histories: The Institute of Contemporary Art*, ed. Milena Kalinovska, Lia Gangitano and Steven Nelson (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), 34.

³³¹ Steven Nelson, ‘Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews’, in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 300.

³³² Starr, ‘A Dream Deferred’, 46.

³³³ Claypool, ‘Architectonic Ink’, 47-49.

³³⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 1.

³³⁵ This is based on a story that happened to the artist during his first year in San Francisco, when he got lost on his way home and handed in a card with his American friend’s phone number to a receptionist in a nearby building, saying ‘I lost myself’. When on the phone with his friend, the receptionist jokingly proclaimed: ‘Your friend lost himself’. Following up on that joke, his friend explained to him the meaning of the phrase ‘to lose oneself’, with which Zheng deeply identified, realising that what he happened to have said by chance was actually true: he indeed lost himself amidst cultural shock in California in 1989. The recording of the talk is available via Asia Contemporary Art Week, ‘Field Meeting: Critical of the Future – Part 7’, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afGkl-Gt2sw&t=1138s> (accessed 15 July 2017).

dilemma for Zheng to tackle, namely, rediscovering himself and his ink art approach anew in order to ‘find [his] place in the art circle, to have [his] voice expressed through art, to be more integrated into the society, [and] not to be pigeonholed’, while practising the medium that he was passionate about.³³⁶ To understand how to achieve this kind of “local” status for ink painting, the artist first needed to pause it and to learn from the inside out about American contemporary art. From this critical distance he could then untangle the answer as to how to effectively tackle the issue of cultural stereotyping around the ink medium and to pertinently demonstrate that there was more to it than “drawing” or traditionalism.

Thereby, Zheng opted to temporarily divorce his art from ink painting and to study American criteria for art’s contemporaneity, increasingly revolving around multimedia art.³³⁷ The incentive for this was additionally sparked by a newly presented opportunity to study the latter at the San Francisco Art Institute, which was California’s leading educational establishment for alternative media arts, taught by such famous Californian conceptual artists as David Ireland (1930-2009) or Tom Marioni (born 1937).³³⁸ That opportunity came around at the Bruce Velick Gallery’s exhibition, where Zheng ran into the institute’s dean Fred Martin that he had met in Hangzhou.³³⁹ Significantly, Martin was in the process of recruiting a foreign artist for the institute’s just launched scholarship-covered international fellowship programme, with the prospect of extending it for an additional year to complete Master of Fine Arts (MFA).³⁴⁰ Zheng accepted both of these prestigious offers, terminating the enrolment at the Academy of Art College.³⁴¹

In the mid-1989 there was a new unforeseen reason for the artist to focus on contemporary American art in order to assimilate on the regional cultural scene, namely the inability to immediately return to China, following the June 1989 Tiananmen Incident in Beijing, which happened in response to student protests for greater social freedom.³⁴² From that point for an indefinite period art was going to be regulated more than it was in the 1980s, leaving experimental artists with two options: either to pursue their art experiments more privately with limited access to information about the latest forms of Western art or to settle in the West.³⁴³ Thus, towards the

³³⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 7.

³³⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 2.

³³⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 6; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 11; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 11.

³³⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 6.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 13.

³⁴¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 6.

³⁴² Wilson Centre, ‘China, 1989’, *Digital Archive: International History Declassified*, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/180/china-1989> (accessed 16 February 2018).

³⁴³ Richard Curt Kraus, *The Party and the Art in China: The New Politics of Culture* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 120.

end of 1989 the artist's wife Xu Sha, who majored in Japanese studies, left her job at a travel agency in China and joined Zheng in California to settle there together.³⁴⁴

As Zheng reflected, settling in California felt like 'building [their] life from zero'.³⁴⁵ Neither spoke English well then, and, since Zheng chose to pause ink painting in favour of conceptual art, he did not have any more sales exhibitions as a source of income until almost 1995.³⁴⁶ The two had to find a way to integrate into the local society and to provide for themselves – in other words, 'it was about survival' as 'nothing was really stable' then.³⁴⁷ Therefore, both dived into polishing their English and grasping various job opportunities: in the early 1990s, without additional side commitments, Xu was able to have a more stable income, whereas Zheng, being the full-time artist, changed a series of part-time jobs, ranging from Teaching Assistant at Sam Tchakalian's (1929-2004) classes at the San Francisco Art Institute to Set Designer at local theatres or Art Installer at the San Francisco International Airport amongst others.³⁴⁸

The decision to settle in California was really the moment for Zheng to also start grasping the local contemporary art world.³⁴⁹ This was going to be no longer just for his personal knowledge enrichment, but as a matter of necessity to make California his family's home so that he and Xu could fully belong to the place, where they were going to live and work long-term. Importantly, as Fei Dawei wrote, overseas Chinese artists in the 1990s could only start genuinely belonging to a socio-cultural environment abroad if they got themselves 'involved in common issues' of their new residential place and expressed them in ways that were going to 'transcend cultures' of their native home and to 'possess a certain universalism'.³⁵⁰

As Carol Yinghua Lu elucidated, Fei ultimately implied that 'only when the artists were able to surpass their given cultural and social contexts would they be able to truly succeed internationally'.³⁵¹ Hou Hanru further explained that, via this surpassing of their native cultures, artists aspired above all 'to establish positive dialogues with Western art', whereby their works

³⁴⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 3.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 4.

³⁴⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 3.

³⁴⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 12; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 14.

³⁴⁹ Paul Liberatore, 'Marin's Zheng Chongbin Defines the Chinese Artist in America', *Marin Independent Journal*, 12 May 2011, <http://www.marinij.com/article/ZZ/20110512/NEWS/110518856> (accessed 15 July 2017).

³⁵⁰ Fei Dawei, 'Does a Culture in Exile Necessarily Wither? – A Letter to Li Xianting', in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010), 253.

³⁵¹ Carol Yinghua Lu, 'Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds', in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 115.

would be seen on par with the latter and not in opposition to it as “other” art from abroad.³⁵² As Gao Minglu additionally pointed out, for US-based Chinese immigrant artists it was utilising installation art forms that was going to enable them to communicate with American audiences in that more positive and, hence, ‘more natural way’ for the local art context.³⁵³

To clarify all the above-mentioned critical points, a linguistic analogy can be drawn: practising minimal, conceptual, performative and echoing art was like speaking English in the USA – if Chinese artists wanted to be understood by locals, naturally they would have to speak English and not Mandarin. Significantly, producing ink painting within the early 1990s American art context was still like talking in Mandarin with the English-speaking Americans – the act, which was bound to generate misunderstanding and alienation of the Chinese speaker. Since Zheng ‘wanted to get assimilated into the [Californian] society from every aspect, related to culture, language’ and network as this was now his residential home, it was important for him to first learn the local art language, just as he was learning to speak English at the time.³⁵⁴ Thereby, Zheng’s decision in 1989 to initially proceed with conceptual art over ink painting was the strategy of assimilation.

As Wang L. Ling-Chi explained, to assimilate for the Chinese in the USA equalled social ‘survival’, enabling them to attain the degree of ‘acceptance’ by the Americans and to reduce the extent of compartmentalisation as the “other”.³⁵⁵ This strategy partially meant ‘denying one’s racial and cultural identity’ – the so-called process of deculturation or ‘de-identity’, as termed by Hou Hanru, which in Zheng’s case was embraced through temporarily dropping the use of ink and any other direct references to China.³⁵⁶ This way he could undo that automatic link between his art and “Chineseness” as ‘the ultimate signified’ about Chinese-American artists before he could understand how to return to ink art in such a format that would still strike the meaningful chord with local audiences.³⁵⁷ Therefore, to learn to become the Californian artist Zheng had to first “unlearn” being the stereotypical Chinese artist, which he began in September 1989.³⁵⁸

³⁵² Hou Hanru, ‘Departure Lounge Art’, *ArtAsiaPacific*, 1 (1994), 36.

³⁵³ Gao Minglu, ‘What Is the Chinese Avant-Garde?’, in *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile*, ed. Sarah J. Rogers (Columbus: Wexner Centre for Arts, Ohio State University, 1993), 5.

³⁵⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 6.

³⁵⁵ Wang L. Ling-Chi, ‘Roots and the Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States’, in *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, ed. Tu Wei-Ming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 202.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 203; Hou, ‘Departure Lounge Art’, 36.

³⁵⁷ Ien Ang (based on Rey Chow), ‘Can One Say No to Chineseness?: Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm’, in *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*, ed. Rey Chow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 297.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

III. Assimilation in Action: Multimedia Non-Ink Art and Debuting on the Californian Art Scene

By September 1989 the artist had already settled in San Francisco's more affordable Tenderloin area, ready to commence his studies at the San Francisco Art Institute.³⁵⁹ Significantly, he had two close friends in the city, artists Spaulding Taylor (born 1934) and Anthony Manglicmot (born 1964), whom he had met upon the introduction of Denis in Hangzhou.³⁶⁰ Taylor was fully based in San Francisco as the co-owner of the city's leading kitchen furnishing company Taylor & Ng, whereas Manglicmot spent most of his time in New York as he was completing his MFA at the Pratt Institute in 1989-1991 and then his doctoral studies at the New York University in 1991-1995.³⁶¹ Consequently, having lost touch with his Hangzhou-based friends, Zheng found himself surrounded with the new native American circle, who supported him practically and also helped him access contemporary art shows in both San Francisco and New York, as detailed below.³⁶²

This native American circle expanded even more between autumn 1989 and summer 1991 when Zheng studied on the first international fellowship and then MFA degree programmes at the San Francisco Art Institute, which presented to the artist 'the right environment to learn and absorb' information about installation art.³⁶³ There the artist immersed himself in courses on minimal and conceptual art as well as performance and video, which were taught via lectures, tutorial discussions and studio practices, led by such prominent faculty members at the institute as multimedia artists Doug Hall (born 1944) and Tony Labat (born 1951), painters Tchakalian and Pegan Brooke (born 1950) or art critics Bill Berkson and Mark van Proyen.³⁶⁴ Altogether, conversations at the institute ranged from the Californian Light and Space movement to New York's Minimalism amongst other subjects, which, as Zheng recalled, markedly 'provoked and challenged' him to rethink his art's approach, illustrated below.³⁶⁵

Additionally, classes at the institute were also run by invited guest speakers, who were mainly local art critics and artists from the Bay area, talking to students about the latest happenings on the American art scene and further pushing them to reconsider various "whys" of the art making

³⁵⁹ Starr, 'A Dream Deferred', 44.

³⁶⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 6, Question 1; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

³⁶¹ Ibid.; Martha Drexler Lynn, *American Studio Ceramics: Innovation & Identity, 1940 to 1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 252; San Francisco Art Institute, 'Alumni: Anthony Manglicmot', <https://alumnius.net/san-francisco-art-in-7907-7#id35716802> (accessed 15 October 2020).

³⁶² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

³⁶³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 10.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 11.

³⁶⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 11.

process.³⁶⁶ Engaging with such visiting art practitioners came across to Zheng as ‘very direct’ and ‘inspirational’, encouraging him to interact with them even more outside the institute at their studios or art show openings.³⁶⁷ It was also two of such visiting teachers, namely conceptual artists Ireland and Marioni, that made the most discernible impact on Zheng’s art practice in the 1990s and beyond.³⁶⁸ As the Italian-American artist dealing with the cultural difference issue, Marioni’s influence was more evident in Zheng’s second-phase 1990s installation works, focused on biculturalism, which are explored in the following fourth chapter.³⁶⁹

In Ireland’s turn, the artist is considered by Zheng to be his most important mentor since he influenced not only his first-phase installation artworks in California, discussed here, but his later ink paintings alike, analysed in the fifth chapter.³⁷⁰ Ireland was known for his motto ‘you can’t make art by making art’, which reflected his desire to bring art closer to materials and spaces of everyday life.³⁷¹ One of the ways in which the artist achieved this was by employing industrial non-pictorial materials, which aesthetically contrasted with organic natural shapes that they represented. For instance, in his 1990s *Untitled (Orange Foam) II* (Figure 44) he utilised insulation foam, wire and cement to suggest a flower silhouette.

Ireland further merged art with life in his *Smithsonian Falls, Descending Staircase for P.K.* (Figure 45), originally installed at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1987, which was a waterfall, visualised as cement pouring down a staircase, at the same time paying tribute to Robert Smithson’s (1938-1973) environmental works that, similarly, brought art into contexts of real life.³⁷² This seamless employment of mundane materials and spaces as well as the more interdisciplinary logic behind the art making process fascinated Zheng as the student. On Ireland’s direct example he learnt not to differentiate physical space or found objects from artistic tools. This was a big change for Zheng’s understanding of art that he previously practised in the more conventional manner of painting.

Combined with other tutorials, studying at the institute pushed the artist to consider art as anything that he needed it to be, which was a strongly liberating idea. Longing for a reboot that would bring him into synch with local contemporary artists, like Ireland, Zheng increasingly started seeing art ‘as a kind of an event’ that would make people engaged both physically and conceptually and would be

³⁶⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 10.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 11.

³⁶⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 11; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 11.

³⁶⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 11.

³⁷⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 11.

³⁷¹ Karen Tsujimoto, ‘Being in the World’, in *The Art of David Ireland: The Way Things Are*, ed. Karen Tsujimoto and Jennifer R. Gross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 35.

³⁷² Ibid., 70-71.

relevant to them, regardless of their nationality or background.³⁷³ Therefore, the artist decided to focus on ideas around spatial installations and everyday objects, testing out which got materialised in his 1991 *Untitled* tension-themed work for the institute's MFA graduation show (Figure 46).

Based on the use of steel metal sheets, Zheng's graduation installation (Figure 47) comprised two parts. On the left, positioned against a wall, the combined objects created a sequence of shifting shapes, starting with a square panel, which two extending "arms" were attached to the very top of the wall, moving onto a shorter curved panel, positioned at the wall's foot and contrasted with six unevenly placed oxygen tanks next to it, visually overtaken by the assemblage's final object that was a long curved panel, stretching alongside the entire wall surface well into the floor's space. On the right the installation's second part consisted of small horizontally expanded panels, arranged into a circle and attached by a string. The panels' sides, facing the inside of the circle, had plastic bottles fixed onto them, punctuated by a brick cube with wires (Figure 48), placed next to one of the panels.

In addition to the inspiration taken from Ireland's seamless mixing of art materials with daily objects – in Zheng's case being the oxygen tanks or the plastic bottles – thematically speaking, the work also drew from San Francisco-born Richard Serra's (born 1938) "prop" installations that explored spatial tensions through unstable positioning of objects, as in *2-2-1: To Dickie and Tina* (Figure 49, 1969).³⁷⁴ Here thin freestanding metal plates appeared prone to falling under the weight of a long tube, uneasily placed on top of them, suggesting the fragility of the objects' equilibrium. The thinness of the plates, which threatened to destabilise their balancing on the ground, added to the vulnerability of the installation's assemblage. Overall, through such the forced spatial arrangement, whereby the objects were on the verge of lapsing, Serra established a sense of visual strain.³⁷⁵ Similarly, Zheng's *Untitled* explored the concept of tension through the objects' uneasy occupation of space.³⁷⁶

Indeed, the wall's metal plates had no visible supports, creating the impression that at any point they could slide down. The oxygen tank, attached to the wall's hanging panel on the very left (Figure 50), appeared too heavy for the latter's thin structure, further alluding to the potential collapse of the entire object. Moreover, since the freestanding panels on the right were joined by the string, the fall of one of them threatened to undermine the stability of the rest. The inclusion of

³⁷³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 19.

³⁷⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 3.

³⁷⁵ Richard Serra, *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 114.

³⁷⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 3.

chains, which tied together a cluster of the standing oxygen tanks (Figure 46), further reiterated the installation's sense of unease. This was mirrored in the block of bricks, standing inside the right-hand-side circle of the panels, which was restrained by the wires, wrapped around it. Additionally, Zheng's choice to attach the bottles with internally compressed air to the circle's panels also emanated that feeling of constraint.³⁷⁷

In this respect, the installation's spatial orchestration described a situation, where its constituent elements exerted force upon each other while themselves appearing to lack any firm fixedness in relation to the ground. This echoed Serra's interest in visual tensions, communicated through the large-scale juxtaposition of various cross-comparable angles, uncomfortably 'placed not just in [the viewers'] space but in [their] way' too.³⁷⁸ In Zheng's case, this object-rooted spatial manifestation of strain also had a personal psychological signification, which stood for difficulties that he had been going through at the time.³⁷⁹ Amidst grasping cultural shock, leaving behind the well familiar to him genre of ink painting and trying to earn his living through part-time jobs, this was the period of Zheng's tense artistic and personal transformation. This made him often feel insecure, and this experience of insecurity was visually translated into spatial instability, tension and compression in his Minimalism-inspired graduation piece.

Zheng was well experienced in handling space as the visual tool to express certain emotive atmospheres as, on the side of his postgraduate education, he also worked in 1990 as part-time Set Designer for theatre groups, such as Berkeley's Pacific Jewish Theatre.³⁸⁰ For instance, for the latter's 1990 production of *Beijing Legends* (Figure 51) – a double story about China's Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976 and the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 – the artist effectively transmitted a scene of political propaganda during the Cultural Revolution by utilising the stage's hollow space as a visual device (Figure 52). By placing a young man, in the process of being persuaded into joining Red Guards, inside that opening, he dramatically emphasised the character's vulnerability, whose body, only partially visible, was marginalised in relation to a Red Guard leader on his right and a monumental propaganda big-character poster behind him, both positioned atop the stage.

This practical exposure to the theatrical organisation of space was useful for Zheng's study of installation art, which, similar to theatre, treats spatial arrangements in relation to the viewer as an

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 153-154.

³⁷⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Questions 2-3.

³⁸⁰ Erickson, 'Timeline', 109.

integral means to embody messages.³⁸¹ Hence, the artist's command of set design was directly applicable to the interpretation of Serra's minimalist art for his graduation work. Precisely, Zheng aspired to visualise the story of physical and psychological tension via the theatrically confrontational spatial positioning of the installation's objects, intending them to appear as pressuring each other, thereby threatening the assemblage's overall stability.³⁸² This way the artist could dramatically visualise his personal feeling of discomfort as the commentary on his artistic and personal involvement abroad, while also keeping the work free from any distinct autobiographical attributes so that its symbolic optical tensions could be related to the viewer's own individual unsettling experiences.

Significantly, the employment of the culturally neutral spatial language to communicate the theme of physical and psychological strain as well as the installation art mode with its minimalist references helped Zheng's graduation piece blend in with echoing recent and concurrent local art forms in California and New York, as illustrated above, that he studied at the institute. Having successfully graduated with the MFA degree in 1991, the artist continued for a few more years with this predominantly culturally neutral approach to his art that refrained from addressing either his ethnic identity or his cultural traditions. This coincided with the period, when Zheng was preparing to submit his green card application, evidencing his determination to not simply settle down in California, but also to become fully assimilated onto the American art scene.

Law-wise, the artist was able to apply for his settlement via a special first-preference green-card category, based on exceptional ability, which was the fastest way to legalise the residential status in the USA.³⁸³ This category required Zheng to have three exhibitions, which he did due to his solo show at the Shanghai Art Museum, the exhibition of his Chinese-ink paintings at Hamburg's University of Fine Arts in Germany, both held in 1988, and *Introduction Show* at the Bruce Velick Gallery in San Francisco in 1989 amongst others.³⁸⁴ In addition, the first-preference settlement application also necessitated having a postgraduate degree of an international standard in Fine Arts, which Zheng had just defended in 1991.³⁸⁵

Another requirement was to get recommendation letters from local art professionals, justifying merits behind the artist's stay in the USA.³⁸⁶ This was achieved with the support from Sheppard,

³⁸¹ Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 155.

³⁸² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 3.

³⁸³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 4.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

who early on in 1989 introduced Zheng to prominent members of California's art scene. Conveniently, in 1991 after finishing his MFA studies Zheng moved to a new private studio on Belcher Street, which belonged to his friend Taylor, situated next to other artists' studios and a shared gallery space.³⁸⁷ This private studio with the gallery room enabled Sheppard to organise informal showings of Zheng's works, which were attended by such art professionals as Jack Lane, Director of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, or Rand Castile, Director of the city's Asian Art Museum, who then wrote their letters of recommendation to support the artist's settlement application.³⁸⁸

In November 1990 – just about a year before the end of the artist's student visa – there was also a major revision to the US immigration law, which made it easier to settle down in the country.³⁸⁹ Already in 1992 Zheng had a green card, but, as Machida outlined, possessing legal settlement did not mean that foreign-born artists would automatically be perceived as insiders of the US art world.³⁹⁰ Thus, in order to verify his Californian 'cultural citizenship', after the graduation the artist continued focusing on making locally applicable installation pieces to be exhibited at Californian galleries alongside contemporary American art.³⁹¹ Importantly, the artist's first major post-graduation work was produced for an explicitly US-focused exhibition, *A Grave Silence: From Hitler to Helms*, held from November to December 1991 at San Francisco's Ghia Gallery, curated by its director Ronda Smith.³⁹²

The exhibition primarily investigated the theme of cultural regulations in the American society by comparing conservative senator Jesse Helms's stance on art with Adolph Hitler's belief that a 'work which is deemed "offensive" or "obscene" should not be supported by the government'.³⁹³ Zheng had not previously tackled such directly political subject-matters, thereby, as he recalled, working on *Untitled* (Figure 53) for this exhibition constructively 'pushed [his] work in a way that [he] did not expect'.³⁹⁴ Visually speaking, the artist's response to the problem of censorship over the cultural sphere consisted of dozens of beeswax-cast ears, each represented with an earplug, scattered across the entire parameter of the wall's left hand-side, and some put on top of books or next to

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Robert Barde, Susan B. Carter and Richard Sutch, 'International Migration', in *Historical Statistics of the United States*, ed. Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 528.

³⁹⁰ Erickson, 'Timeline', 110; Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 273.

³⁹¹ Machida, *Unsettled Visions*, 273.

³⁹² *Artweek*, 'Artweek Calendar', November 1991, 4.

³⁹³ Terri Cohn, 'Counterattacks: *A Grave Silence: From Hitler to Helms* at Ghia Gallery', *Artweek*, 12 December 1991, 8.

³⁹⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 13.

earphones. Theme-wise, the plugged ears were the metaphor for ‘a rejection of any imposed information’, meant to encourage viewers ‘to rethink information that [they] receive in the society’.³⁹⁵

Thereby, the work effectively embodied the idea of critically filtering propaganda information, as underlined in Terri Cohn’s *Artweek* review. As she wrote: ‘Like relics in a Third Reich museum, Chongbin Zheng’s series of beeswax ear sculptures have an unnerving “specimen” quality, while others, paired with books, earphones and earplugs, make more metaphorical allusions to blocking out sound.’³⁹⁶ By comparing the scattered ears with the Nazi display of Jewish body parts during the Holocaust, Cohn pointed out Zheng’s fitting reference to the exhibition’s title that addressed Hitler’s extreme cultural conservatism and its echoes in contemporary politics. This parallel also implied that the ears evoked people, purposefully indoctrinated with deceiving propaganda messages. Rather than blindly accepting them, as further suggested in Cohn’s review, the allegorical ears emanated the act of reverse “censorship”, through their ‘blocking out’ of this information waste and taking control of what kind of messages to receive.³⁹⁷

In addition, the art critic did not narrow the interpretation of Zheng’s *Untitled* in relation to China. Although the installation did not have any direct references to the latter, its absence of explicit signifiers citing concrete national contexts meant that there was room for this interpretation. Moreover, Zheng was well familiar with how it is to be surrounded by mass information of the politically propagandist nature, having lived in Cultural Revolution China. However, as the artist pointed out, his intention with the 1990s politically charged pieces was to translate any social experiences that he encountered, either personally or on the news, into broader political ideas that resonated with local social happenings in the USA alike.³⁹⁸ Significantly, *Untitled* managed to attract this intended kind of unprejudiced reception that can be further evidenced by Cohn’s review of other works at the exhibition, echoing her review of Zheng’s piece.

Precisely, the art critic directly compared the latter with Sarah Lewison (born 1956) and Janet Silk’s (born 1950s) installation, calling these pieces as ‘some of the most powerful work’ at *A Grave Silence*.³⁹⁹ Specifically, Lewison and Silk showed a readymade toilet alongside a text inscription, criticising the lack of complete institutional representation of people’s ideas and the resulting

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Cohn, ‘Counterattacks’, 8.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 4.

³⁹⁹ Cohn, ‘Counterattacks’, 8.

‘elimination of [people’s] desire to communicate’ that equalled the ‘censorship’s final triumph’.⁴⁰⁰ The employment of, as Cohn wrote, the repulsively ‘disturbing’ toilet imagery – akin to ‘an unnerving “specimen” quality’ in Zheng’s *Untitled* – endued the installation with the additional critical undertone, having a double implication that people were pushed to question their ideas as waste, but also that the institutional orchestration of this literally wasted many bright ideas.⁴⁰¹ Therefore, without any culturally compartmentalising rhetoric, Cohn received Zheng’s piece on par with the American artists’ conceptual works that treated ‘art as a [political] intervention’.⁴⁰²

What makes Cohn’s choice to omit any culturally inscribing language in relation to Zheng’s participation in the Ghia Gallery’s exhibition even more important is the fact that doing the opposite, that is emphasising Chinese references in Chinese artists’ works, was the standard practice in the USA at the turn of the 1990s, as detailed above. This point can be further illustrated by a 1992 article about five New York-based Chinese artists, ranging from Gu Wenda to Hou Wenyi (born 1957), written by Jonathan Hay for *Orientalism*. There Hay discussed such works as Hou’s *Burning Change* (Figure 54, 1990) that interpreted cosmological symbols from China’s ancient *Book of Changes* into a Minimalism-inspired assemblage of paper rectangles, portrayed as burnt around their edges, thereby evoking the universal idea of physical life’s impermanence.⁴⁰³

Although Hay acknowledged that the discussed artists ‘produce artworks which seem to belong to a Western context’, he reiterated that their ‘Chinese cultural references, however, are too strong to allow the works to sit neatly in this context for very long’.⁴⁰⁴ Thus, Hay concluded that the artists ‘transpose an attachment to China to a level which no manner of material or linguistic disruption can shake’.⁴⁰⁵ Whereas this comment is appropriate to works, like Zhang Hongtu’s (born 1943) *Concrete Mao B* (1992), depicting Mao’s silhouette, also discussed by Hay, nevertheless, it did not fully describe works, like Hou’s *Burning Change*, where there were numerous American and non-culturally specific visual as well as thematic elements.

This predominant vision of Chinese-American art as primarily Chinese, no matter how much it drew from the American art scene, was also the reason why it was more customary to see it exhibited at Asia-focused cultural institutions alongside other Asian artists. For example, this was the case with the 1991 *From ‘Star Star’ to Avant Garde — Nine Artists from China* exhibition at New York’s Asian

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art: Themes and Movements* (London: Phaidon, 2005), 148.

⁴⁰³ Jonathan Hay, ‘Ambivalent Icons: Works by Five Chinese Artists Based in the United States’, *Orientalism*, 23 (1992), 41.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 43.

American Art Centre, which selected artists Hay discussed in his aforementioned article. Consequently, within the context of the 1990s US art scene, to have Chinese artists described without references to China and, furthermore, to have their art featured in thematically appropriate non-culturally defined exhibitions alongside local American artists alike, made for significant actions on the part of art critics and curators. Such actions enabled artists, like Zheng, to engage in a direct dialogue with American art, encouraging them to continue exploring the latter.

The continued self-study of the surrounding American art scene, the motivation for which was boosted by the participation in the Ghia Gallery's exhibition, was indeed the strongest source of inspiration for Zheng in this green-card application phase. As the artist said, it was 'a pattern' for him then 'to see a lot of shows', to 'interact with others', as his English was steadily improving, and to 'keep up-to-date with what was going on'.⁴⁰⁶ He supplemented this with regularly reading artists' interviews, published in contemporary art journals, like *October*.⁴⁰⁷ Amidst this ongoing art study, another artist that became Zheng's role model in the early 1990s was Bruce Nauman (born 1941), who in the 1960s also taught at the San Francisco Art Institute.⁴⁰⁸ Zheng saw his conceptual artworks particularly often in New York, where he travelled on a regular basis, exploring the east-coast art scene while visiting his aforementioned friend Manglicmot.⁴⁰⁹

Importantly, Nauman's conceptual installations epitomised for Zheng the essence of the contemporary art language in the USA, particularly in how he fused together a three-dimensional means of art production with expressively direct social content.⁴¹⁰ This could be observed in Nauman's *Eat War* (Figure 55, 1986), where he juxtaposed the word 'eat', connoting a mundane daily-life activity and presented in an organic grass-green neon-light colour, with the blood-red word 'war', describing an extreme act of violence. The resulting phrase summoned to 'eat war', ambivalently verging between the sarcastic implication to "nourish" oneself on outcomes of war, such as the spectacle around military news reportage, or the activist call to "eat up" war and to have it eliminated on the geo-political arena. Hence, the simple combination of the neon-light text signs communicated the boldly critical message, ranging from the criticism of war to the rallying to take action about it.

⁴⁰⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 12.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 6; San Francisco Art Institute, 'History', <https://www.sfai.edu/about-sfai/sfai-history> (accessed 25 February 2020).

⁴⁰⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

⁴¹⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 6.

The stimulus to adopt this art approach that combined visual impactfulness with stark social critique also came to Zheng from the Californian contemporary art scene and, especially, the 1992 *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* exhibition, curated by Paul Schimmel at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art.⁴¹¹ The show's mission was to '[portray] the darker sides of contemporary life' through the interdisciplinary works of 16 artists from Los Angeles.⁴¹² Thus, the exhibition's installations, displays of written fiction and poetry, music concerts and a few paintings were 'raucous, loud, and aggressive' in order to 'shock and disorient the viewer into another state of mind'.⁴¹³ The goal behind such critically charged artworks was to most poignantly transmit the helter-skelter of the American society, caused by AIDS, homelessness, criminal violence and racism amongst other issues.⁴¹⁴

This can be exemplified by a 1991 installation, *Mike Kelley's Proposal for Decoration of Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) for Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry*, by Mike Kelley (1954-2012) – the artist that especially stood out to Zheng, when he saw the exhibition.⁴¹⁵ By presenting his own version of interior design for a series of office rooms for an advertising agency, Kelley elucidated the sharp social contrast between wealth of the economically privileged class and wider poverty in the rest of the society. This was achieved by the juxtaposition of expensive office furniture pieces, which would be found at advertising agencies, designed by such high-profile architects as Frank Gehry, with critical text inscriptions, painted directly onto walls that would surround those typical business spaces.

To illustrate this, one mural (Figure 56) had a picture of a disabled dog, accompanied by the text inscription vividly describing its physical misfortunes and its outcast status in the society, cynically adding at the end that, despite all those hardships, the dog would still answer to the name of Lucky. In the light of such direct politically critical wall decorations, the otherwise regular office rooms, assembled at the gallery, were transformed into spaces of social activism, conveying messages about the wealth-distribution inequality in the 1990s American society. Thus, Kelley's installation effectively captured Schimmel's core aspiration behind the exhibition, that was to reveal, utilising an interdisciplinary visual means, various disruptive social realities in the USA.

⁴¹¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 12.

⁴¹² Paul Schimmel, 'Acknowledgements', in *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, ed. Paul Schimmel, Norman M. Klein and Lane Relyea (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 17.

⁴¹³ Paul Schimmel, 'Into the Maelstrom: L.A. Art at the End of the Century', in *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, ed. Paul Schimmel, Norman M. Klein and Lane Relyea (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 20.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴¹⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 12; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 4.

Altogether, between the experience of exhibiting at the Ghia Gallery as well as seeing art by Nauman and from the *Helter Skelter* exhibition, each of which utilised contemporary culture as the multifaceted platform for social activism, Zheng was stimulated to continue expanding in this more politically inscribed direction. This can be manifested by the artist's 1992 *Untitled* (Figure 57), displayed in the same year at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery's exhibition in San Francisco, *The Object is Bound (The Book as Metaphor)*. Just as for the Ghia Gallery's show a year earlier, Zheng employed the metaphor of plugged ears, shown here as a tied pair and placed next to a blank label on top of an echoing tied stack of the artist's books, which had been shipped to him from China, but which he had not unpacked since the delivery, making this artwork commission an opportunity to utilise this unopened stack.⁴¹⁶

Hence, unlike his previous 1991 plugged-ears installation, the emphasis was now put on books to elucidate how the latter – 'the original idea-containing object' – could be metaphorically turned into various artistic ways for 'addressing the problems of the world'.⁴¹⁷ Because of the incorporation of the additional elements in the installation, namely the two strings and the textless label, Zheng's 1992 *Untitled* expanded on the issue of censorship, more sharply pronouncing it here as the inability to receive unbiased knowledge – symbolised by the profusion of the books – whether it was the result of a voluntary act of either self-censorship or personal ignorance, or forced-upon censorship. Specifically, the inclusion of the deliberately textless label and the string-tied ears indicated the denial of new knowledge reception that was further heightened by the string-bounded books, which made their information come across as inaccessible or censored.

In this respect, Zheng touched upon one of the widely applicable 'problems of the world' and, significantly, as shown on the example of the aforementioned exhibitions, of the USA alike, revolving around the impact of conservative state policies on the society. As David Bonetti underlined in the Stephen Wirtz Gallery's exhibition review for *The San Francisco Examiner*, Zheng's visual interpretation of the book metaphor germanely suggested that 'there are those who will refuse to listen to reason just as there are those who will seek to prevent others from listening'.⁴¹⁸ Therefore, despite the fact that Zheng reused the stack of his 'Chinese books', as acknowledged by Bonetti, for practical reasons, with Chinese titles being visible on some of the books' spines, the art

⁴¹⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 8.

⁴¹⁷ David Bonetti, 'Conceptual Art by the Book: Group Exhibit Speaks Volumes about the Form', *The San Francisco Examiner*, 24 April 1992, D2.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

critic – just as Cohn in the review of the artist’s 1991 *Untitled* – did not limit the interpretation of the installation to China’s political context.⁴¹⁹

Discussed alongside similar works by American artists that examined social information inaccessibility in the light of political censorship or class inequality amongst other causes, Bonetti showed how Zheng’s installation was an integral part of ‘the dominant art movement of the last five years’, that is ‘a new conceptual art that presents objects as the carrier of ideas’.⁴²⁰ For example, Zheng’s bounded books and beeswax ears echoed Donald Lipski’s (born 1947) exhibited *Untitled* (1991), comprising a copy of encyclopaedic *Book of Knowledge*, which text was “bounded” by a ‘cloudy glass’ sheet, obscuring words and making its content ‘out-of-reach’.⁴²¹ Akin to Lipski’s work or art by Nauman and Kelley, as evinced by Bonetti’s review, Zheng’s 1992 *Untitled* thematically resonated with the wider US social opposition to the civil rights infringement. Consequently, the second public exhibition of the artist’s installation art in California was also received on par with local artists’ art.

Motivated to embrace broadly applicable to the American audience political content in his art, Zheng also joined a special artistic group with his friends from the institute, known as Group Six.⁴²² Ultimately, it was ‘a San Francisco-based multidisciplinary collective’, including Zheng, two American artists Mark Brest van Kempen (born 1962) and Billie Lynn (born 1961), two German artists Hedwig Rogge (born 1965) and John Reily (born 1961), and one artist from Taiwan, who previously lived in France and Germany, Gigi Janchang (born 1947).⁴²³ Together they organised their own shows and talks at the exhibition space, attached to Taylor’s studio that Zheng used, located next to the other small artist-run studios on Belcher Street, resulting in ‘a very supportive system’ for the artistic development.⁴²⁴

Crucially, as Zheng reflected, the Group Six circle ‘did not have any specific ethnic background’ and exchanged ideas addressing wider social issues around.⁴²⁵ For example, Brest van Kempen created a political-slogan outdoor sculpture (Figure 58) for the University of California in Berkeley in 1991, which encompassed a granite earth-filled slab with a circular inscription, saying ‘this soil and the air space extending above it shall not be a part of any nation and shall not be subject to any entity’s

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 6.

⁴²³ *Artweek*, ‘Group 6 Goes to China’, 25 (1994), 2.

⁴²⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 4.

⁴²⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 6.

jurisdiction'.⁴²⁶ On one hand, this public installation, named *Column of Earth and Air (Free Speech Monument)*, reflected on the history of its location – the place, where numerous free speech movement rallies happened – but, at the same time, it also looked forward to the future by calling for ultimate freedom of expression within the university circle and beyond, presenting this idea as natural and vital as soil or air.⁴²⁷

Zheng's stand to first assimilate on the local art scene on the culturally neutral basis can be illustrated by a further artwork example, that is *Homeless Project* (no surviving photographic record), commissioned for the 1993 *Beyond the Written Word* exhibition at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, curated by Cohn – the art critic that reviewed Zheng's first post-graduation exhibition participation at the Ghia Gallery in 1991. Similar to the Stephen Wirtz Gallery's show, Cohn aimed to test the conceptual potential of books in art by inviting artists to 'take books beyond their original form, purpose or content by manipulating their physical or conceptual aspects – or both – creating new definitions with and for them'.⁴²⁸ Overall, the exhibition embodied the idea that books are the embodiment of 'knowledge in all its forms', and that their contents comment on knowledge's 'mutability, veiling, limits, uneven dissemination, politics, and elevating nature'.⁴²⁹

Zheng's interpretation of the book metaphor this time considered uneven knowledge dissemination amongst the homeless citizens. The impetus for this came directly from the streets of San Francisco that is known for its profound homelessness problem, affecting all the races, which is, as Barnini Chakraborty summarised, 'so severe that it rivals some third-world nations', despite the fact that '[San Francisco] has more billionaires per capita than anywhere else in the world'.⁴³⁰ Zheng especially remembered one conversation with a homeless Black person about a classical literature novel that he saw him read.⁴³¹ During this interaction Zheng sensed the contrasting smells of the book's old paper pages and an alcohol drink that the man had, which was translated into *Homeless Project*, comprising a baking tray inside which a book was soaked in alcohol.⁴³² Due to the contact

⁴²⁶ Peter Selz, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 102.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Terri Cohn, 'Beyond the Written Word', unpublished essay for the same-named exhibition held at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art from October 1993 until January 1994. Courtesy of the Archive of the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Barnini Chakraborty, 'San Francisco Homeless Stats Soar: City Blames Big Business, Residents Blame Officials', *Fox News*, 20 August 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/san-francisco-homeless-stats-city-blames-big-business-residents-officials> (accessed 22 November 2020).

⁴³¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 21.

⁴³² Ibid.

with moisture, the book's letters got blurred, turning the alcohol smell into the installation's most discernible aspect.⁴³³

In this respect, as Cohn wrote, the book was turned into 'a symbolic component of [Zheng's] commentary on the politics of information and its promulgation'.⁴³⁴ Precisely, via this visual and sensory means Zheng commented on how knowledge could not be fully utilised by the society's underprivileged homeless segment due to a series of socially sustained welfare issues, such as the decline in employment opportunities and the lack of mental health support provided by local officials to homeless people. The latter could still get access to knowledge through reading "unwanted" books, given to them by passers-by. However, because of the absence of effective welfare support structures, this knowledge was of little practical value to them – suggested by the book's barely readable and alcohol-scented pages – turning reading into the act of passing time.

Consequently, via *Homeless Project* Zheng provided the exposure to the wider San Franciscan problem of living in the streets, which ended up generating particular attention to the work at the exhibition. As mentioned above, homelessness has been the city's overarching issue for many decades, affecting all of the city's races. Thus, it was almost inevitable that the installation was going to trigger sensitive discussions amongst local audiences. Indeed, at the exhibition opening the artist had a conversation with one African-American woman, who asked him numerous questions about the installation and shared with him her thoughts on San Franciscan homelessness.⁴³⁵ As the artist recalled, the woman argued that all of the homeless were an integral part of the society, and that the segregation between the employed and the unemployed had to be critically addressed to make the homeless citizens feel integrated and supported within their local communities.⁴³⁶

Importantly, *Homeless Project's* focus on San Francisco's distinct social problem differentiated Zheng from other migrant American artists participating in the *Beyond the Written Word* exhibition, such as Iranian-born California-based Taraneh Hemami (born 1960). To illustrate this, Hemami showed her *Divan-e-Hafiz* (Figure 59, c. 1993) conceptual piece, which utilised a distinctly Iranian literary metaphor.⁴³⁷ Specifically, Hemami took an untranslated book of poems by medieval Persian poet Khaja Hafez, presenting its calligraphy inscribed pages as burnt and deteriorated, thereby commenting on the challenge of preserving cultural heritage in the light of various socio-political

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Terri Cohn, 'Exhibition Sketch', unpublished outline for the *Beyond the Written Word* exhibition held at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art from October 1993 until January 1994. Courtesy of the Archive of the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

⁴³⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 21.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Terri Cohn, *Beyond the Written Word* (San Jose: San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, 1993), unnumbered.

conflicts.⁴³⁸ Hence, the fact that in this culturally diverse exhibition context, also featuring works by Canadian-born Janet Bogardus (born 1940s) or Mexican-born Victor-Mario Zaballa (born 1954), Zheng chose to exhibit the piece that tackled the very particular to San Francisco problem underscored the artist's motivation in this early period to enter the US art scene on the more culturally impartial basis.⁴³⁹

Significantly, the issue of being pigeonholed upon their arrival in the USA also concerned other Chinese artists from Zheng's generation, who settled there at the turn of the 1990s. This can be most pertinently elucidated by the example of New York-based Gu Wenda and his installation *Enigma of Blood (Oedipus Refound)*. Similar to Zheng, as discussed in the previous chapter, Gu practised ink painting back in China, but upon his migration to the USA he temporarily left it behind and adopted the more locally applicable installation art format. *Enigma of Blood (Oedipus Refound)* was one of Gu's earliest works, produced and exhibited in the USA. Begun in 1988 and continued as a series until 1996, the installation's main features comprised used female hygiene products, collected from 60 women across 16 countries, accompanied by those women's letters on the topic of the biological material of blood.⁴⁴⁰

Taken together, the work was meant to reiterate human connectedness, based on universal bodily commonalities, as well as deeper philosophical elucidations on processes of birth, evoked by the reference to menstrual cycle.⁴⁴¹ Different versions of this installation were exhibited at various venues across the USA, such as at San Francisco's Hatley Martin Gallery in 1990 or New York's Khan Gallery in 1995-1996, where the women's personal hygiene items were displayed as framed by white sheets, as lying on metal beds or next to bibles (Figure 60) – all serving as additional elements to allegorically underline the theme of life's origin.⁴⁴² Crucially, this controversial assemblage was stirred by Gu's desire to create the work that was going to be relevant to the American cultural context on two levels.

Firstly, during his early time in the USA in the late 1980s the artist came across numerous conversations about genetic sciences, which impelled him to employ biological materials in his

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Kathryn Funk, press release for the *Beyond the Written Word* exhibition at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art from October 1993 until January 1994. Courtesy of the Archive of the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

⁴⁴⁰ DeBevoise, 'Interview with Gu Wenda'.

⁴⁴¹ Shao Yiyang, *Chinese Modern Art and the Academy, 1980-1990*, PhD diss., University of Sydney, Sydney, 2003, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 192.

⁴⁴² Ethan Cohen Gallery, 'Gu Wenda: CV', https://13251b7d-9fc2-b528-a382-5ad81bf1a0b3.filesusr.com/ugd/d2437b_1c8944b30cc349698281a7cc1a4a78d1.pdf (accessed 22 November 2020).

art.⁴⁴³ Secondly, upon his arrival he considered American culture to be ‘totally free’, meaning that in order to assimilate on the local art scene he should be ‘totally wild’.⁴⁴⁴ As a result, the use of blood in the installation series enabled Gu to touch upon the bio-scientific field as well as epitomised that free act of artistic “wildness” that he associated with the USA. However, Gu did not anticipate the sharply negative feminist response to the work. Indeed, *Enigma of Blood (Oedipus Refound)* was flooded by criticism from not only art critics, but also the public.

For example, in her 1996 *The New York Times* review of the Khan Gallery’s version of the installation, Roberta Smith called the latter as ‘mindless and rudimentary, almost completely lacking in ideas that are not sensationalistic or derivative’.⁴⁴⁵ Smith also reiterated that Gu was originally from Shanghai – as it was customary to underline the Chinese artists’ Asian origin in reviews at the time – distancing him from local American New York-based artists and also implying that the work’s controversiality might be linked to the artist’s cultural difference.⁴⁴⁶ In addition, as Eleanor Heartney pointed out in her essay for the Khan Gallery’s exhibition leaflet, during the time when the work’s different versions were exhibited, the American public renounced them as ‘disgusting’, ‘anti-art’ or ‘degrading’.⁴⁴⁷ Therefore, the work’s final display at the Khan Gallery also included letters of its criticism upon Gu’s request to show the public misunderstanding of the artist’s intentions.⁴⁴⁸

Originally created by the just arrived artist from China, eager to assimilate on the local art scene, *Enigma of Blood (Oedipus Refound)* was not intended to offend the public, but to touch upon the concepts that would be, vice versa, interesting to the Americans. Instead, the work was received as profoundly anti-feminist and “anti-American”. Importantly, this negative reception was conditioned by not only the fact that Gu was the male artist employing women’s biological materials, but also by the fact that ‘as a Chinese-foreigner, [he] was supposed to represent China, not American culture’.⁴⁴⁹ This can also be inferred from Smith’s aforementioned review, where she acknowledged that, potentially, ‘interesting art could be made from the detritus of menstruation’, but ‘Mr. Gu

⁴⁴³ DeBevoise, ‘Interview with Gu Wenda’.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Roberta Smith, ‘Art in Review’, *The New York Times*, 19 January 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/19/arts/art-in-review-082520.html> (accessed 22 November 2020).

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Eleanor Heartney, ‘Blood Simple’, in *Wenda Gu: Oedipus Refound No. 1: The Enigma of Blood, 1988-1995 (The Human Body Shop No. 1)* (New York: Khan Gallery, 1995), unnumbered; available via Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/library/wenda-gu-oedipus-refound-no-1-the-enigma-of-blood-1988-1995-the-human-body-shop-1> (accessed 22 November 2020).

⁴⁴⁸ DeBevoise, ‘Interview with Gu Wenda’.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

doesn't seem to be the man for the job'.⁴⁵⁰ Hence, as Gu commented, 'this piece could be a part of American art history' should he have been 'an American-born-white artist'.⁴⁵¹

In this respect, the 1990s controversy behind *Enigma of Blood (Oedipus Refound)* illustratively demonstrates how at the time American audiences were largely prejudiced towards Chinese migrant artists and, concurrently, how far the latter's aspiration could stretch in order to blend in with local US artists. Looking at it in retrospective, Gu himself wondered 'how [he could] have done this work' that touched upon the sensitive feminist issue of women's biology.⁴⁵² Nevertheless, within the context of the late 1980s and the early 1990s, it made sense for Gu to have this boundary-crossing art project in the US: he was driven by his conception of American artists as limitlessly 'wild', as mentioned above, believing that freely crossing boundaries was going to help him assimilate on the local art scene and not to be pigeonholed.

As argued throughout this chapter, the desire to eschew cultural compartmentalisation was equally vital for Zheng. Both in terms of his chosen presentation means and conceptual content, in one way or another, his 1991-1993 works were directed at the local Americans. The only element that was openly Chinese about his art was the accompanying gallery label stating the artist's name. Although this could invite an interpretation of the censorship-themed installations solely in relation to China's situation, it is crucial that without knowing that they were made by the Chinese-born artist, there were no direct grounds to see them through the Chinese political lens, as supported by the aforementioned reviews. Even the installation for the Stephen Wirtz Gallery, for which Zheng reused for practical convenience the unopened stack of his Chinese books, did not attract this compartmentalising reception.

Moreover, neither exhibition, in which the artist participated in this period, was dedicated to exclusively Chinese or Asian thematic strands, reiterating the applicability of Zheng's art to the local artists' featured works. Additionally, Zheng's group exhibitions in 1991-1993 were all orchestrated by the mainstream American organisations (not Chinese or Asian cultural centres), run by local American art professionals, who promoted the overall Californian contemporary art scene rather than a niche segment of it. In particular, the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art was supported by the American government's affiliated organisations, such as the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council or the State Agency, highlighting Zheng's assimilation into the wider

⁴⁵⁰ Smith, 'Art in Review'.

⁴⁵¹ DeBevoise, 'Interview with Gu Wenda'.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

American art world.⁴⁵³ Such was the artist's aspiration – to be seen as just one of the Californian artists and not to be treated any differently from them because of his race.

Zheng further elaborated on the impetus behind this motivation in a short statement, written in 1992. There he said that since American 'venues of main-stream art have difficulty explaining the integration of ethnic cultural ideas', racially different artists had 'the need to shed their own ethnic clothing in the attempt to acclimate to the main-stream'.⁴⁵⁴ Consequently, in his art he initially adopted 'the state of non-identity', avoiding any specific Chinese cultural references in an 'attempt to become one with the "global society"' of the USA.⁴⁵⁵ As Zheng further elucidated, through that 'cultural threshold' he was 'attempting to reach a new place' with his art.⁴⁵⁶ Ultimately, via this process of identity questioning, the artist was actively seeking ideas as to how best to embrace the Chinese part of his cultural self and, eventually, to return to ink painting without jeopardising his Californian cultural assimilation.⁴⁵⁷

In other words, divorcing ink painting in the early 1990s was the critical pause, which gave Zheng time and creative distance to practice profoundly new art forms in the context of his then career. Crucially, having secured his assimilation on the local Californian art scene, closer to the mid-1990s Zheng felt ready to make a shift in his installation art, whereby he directly addressed his special cultural position in the USA. This happened in the light of his preparations to visit China in 1994 after a long break since his departure in 1988, which made him ponder even more on being the Chinese-born and, by then, San Francisco-established artist. As discussed in the following chapter, this proved to be central to Zheng's soon approaching realisation as to how he could publicly go back to ink painting in California, following the brief episode of the break from it.

⁴⁵³ Terri Cohn, unpublished letter to Zheng Chongbin, 18 August 1993; Funk, 'Beyond the Written Word'.

⁴⁵⁴ Zheng Chongbin, 'Statement', Zheng Shengtian Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/zheng-shengtian-archive-zheng-chongbin/tab/items> (accessed 6 December 2018).

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 2.

Chapter 4

Embracing Bicultural Identity and Returning to Ink Painting at the Turn of the 2000s

‘Going back to the ink medium was like finding my own clothes – it felt so comfortable, like an extension of my skin’ – this is how Zheng summarised his decision to focus on ink painting again for his artistic advancement in California at the turn of 1997.⁴⁵⁸ This chapter sets to shed light on this yet another critical turning point in the artist’s career, whereby he started working with Chinese ink in a new bicultural way. In the light of his first return trip to China, between 1993 and 1994, and up until 1997, Zheng’s installation art started actively addressing his newly forged Chinese-American identity, as outlined between this chapter’s first section and Appendix C. Further inspired by artists with culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly his California-based teachers Marioni and Labat as well as New York-based Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996) and Brazil-based Tunga (1952-2016), Zheng, on his personal example, critically engaged with the American politics of multiculturalism. Crucially, this embrace of his bicultural position set the artist’s direction back to ink painting. However, as explored in the second section of this chapter, given his new status as the California-resident artist, it was also important for Zheng to make his Chinese-ink paintings express the other part of his identity alike, resonating with the Californian socio-cultural landscape. Therefore, Zheng’s first phase of the revived ink painting practice, which lasted up until around the mid-2000s, focused on uncovering and putting into dialogue connections between Chinese old-master works, particularly from the Qing dynasty period, and American twentieth-century art by such artists as Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967). Via this binary cultural approach, the artist ensured that, just as his earlier 1990s installation art, his new ink works stayed relevant and critically compelling to local American audiences.

I. Identity Metamorphosis: Addressing Biculturalism in Installation Art

For the first time thematic underpinnings of biculturalism started appearing in Zheng’s art in later 1993 as he started preparing to undertake his first return trip to China. While waiting to have his legal status finalised in the USA, the artist was necessitated to stay in the country without leaving to avoid the risk of not being able to return. ‘It was like being trapped’, as Zheng recalled – even though he consciously chose to live in San Francisco, he naturally longed to visit his family and

⁴⁵⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 16.

friends in China.⁴⁵⁹ It was only in 1994 that the artist could undertake his return visit to China, which he began planning the year before together with Sheppard and the Group Six colleagues, intending to present their works there and to exchange ideas with local Chinese artists.⁴⁶⁰

As Lynn said to *Artweek* before the departure, the trip aimed to promote the idea that ‘really rich cultural exchange’ amongst artists in different countries could be organised by artists themselves.⁴⁶¹ Significantly, this exchange project also attracted funding, making it easier for Zheng and all the participants to finance their travel expenses. For example, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded them a special travel grant, while Rene di Rosa, the Northern Californian art patron, hosted a special fundraiser that allowed the artists to receive extra 7,000 USD in sponsorship, and, in its turn, San Francisco-based Secession Gallery set up a donation point at its premises to help additionally fund the trip.⁴⁶² Thus, Zheng was able to start coordinating preparations for this important exchange visit, considering which artworks to take, where to organise their showings in China and what sightseeing activities to feature for his American friends.

As detailed below, the anticipation impact of this approaching journey, set for November 1994, could already be sensed in Zheng’s art, starting in 1993.⁴⁶³ Specifically, the matter of the artist’s Chinese identity, combined with the newly evolved socio-cultural belonging to California, reconfigured more prominently in his installations. As Hall wrote, cultural identity is the question of never a given “being” but an interchangeable “becoming” that gets constantly reproduced against specific social circumstances.⁴⁶⁴ Having paved his entry into the American art world and while preparing for the major return visit to China, Zheng particularly felt how his once fixed being Chinese went through becoming the new metamorphosed identity of belonging to the two places simultaneously. Therefore, he started thinking about his changed sense of identity after living in the States for over five years straight and about that ‘cultural middle space’, which was available to him as the Chinese-born California-resident artist.⁴⁶⁵

Crucially, Zheng’s growing attention to the ‘cultural middle space’ in 1993 echoed the wider discourse around hybrid identity, which characterised the 1990s US cultural scene and which was initially summarised in Bhabha’s influential 1994 book *The Location of Culture*. According to Bhabha,

⁴⁵⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 5.

⁴⁶⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 14.

⁴⁶¹ *Artweek*, ‘Group 6 Goes to China’, 2.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 224-226.

⁴⁶⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 7.

this hybrid identity, located in-between Western and non-Western cultural elements, contributed to the undoing of a ‘sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing unifying force’.⁴⁶⁶ As Rasheed Araeen commented, Bhabha’s notion of hybrid is ‘a specific form of the syncretic whose premises are predetermined and are fixed by racial and cultural differences’ and, thereby, it emerges ‘only when a non-western culture enters western culture’.⁴⁶⁷ Critically addressing this dualistic nature of hybrid, instead of only emphasising its difference, was considered important as part of the 1990s attempt to ‘elude the politics of polarity’, which led to the proliferation of cultural identity-focused exhibitions in the West.⁴⁶⁸

Following Zheng’s arrival in California, three crucial exhibitions on this subject took place on the broader American art scene, where, as the artist said, ‘there’s been the rising recognition of multiculturalism’ and against the backdrop of which he developed his own ideas on cultural hybridity.⁴⁶⁹ The first one was *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, organised in 1990 by the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Opening the 1990s, *The Decade Show* was the groundbreaking exhibition, tackling issues of not only ethnic but also sexual and gender discrimination by notoriously including artworks by Latinx, Black, Asian, LGBTQ+ or women artists.

With this inclusive selection criterion, the exhibition made a powerful statement about how mainstream museums in the USA were prejudiced against art by non-white, non-straight and non-male US-resident artists, resulting in either the latter’s exclusion altogether or the ‘patronising’ inclusion, whereby their art was treated as “exotica” rather than actual contemporary art.⁴⁷⁰ In this respect, *The Decade Show* brought together artists, who were prone to identity discrimination, to help generate more visibility around this problem and to re-raise for the new decade the still critical question of how cultural institutions could ‘deconstruct and dismantle strategies that forever name [artists] the homosexual, the ethnic, the female’.⁴⁷¹ As Machida pointed out in her essay for an

⁴⁶⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 37.

⁴⁶⁷ Rasheed Araeen, ‘A New Beginning’, *Third Text*, 14 (2008), 9.

⁴⁶⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 39. Importantly, the 1990s decade’s critical reflection on the multicultural discourse in the USA was the continuation of the initial widespread civil rights movement in the country, initiated in the mid-1950s and the 1960s, with many protests taking place in the state of California alike, particularly at the University of California in Berkeley.

⁴⁶⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 6.

⁴⁷⁰ Eunice Lipton, ‘Here Today. Gone Tomorrow? Some Plots for a Dismantling’, in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, 1990), 20.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

exhibition catalogue, referring to a quotation by curator Robert Storr, it was really ‘time to stop speaking for or about the “Other” and listen to what the “others” have to say’.⁴⁷²

Significantly, by showcasing what the “other” artists had to say about their identities, ranging from Korean-American woman artist Min Yong Soon (born 1953), who explored discrimination of the Asians in the USA, to Puerto Rico-born Nestor Millan (born 1960), who addressed the topic of gay identity censorship, focusing on male nudity and the AIDS epidemic, *The Decade Show* encouraged the viewer to recognise participating artists as individuals, who were not generalised and dismissed as being simply immigrants or second-generation Americans, heterosexual or homosexual, women or men. This way *The Decade Show* articulately manifested what ‘a multivocal art world’ could be like, namely the all-inclusive platform for showcasing cultural diversity with an open mind, which would enable American audiences to comprehend identity-related social issues as they were directly experienced by artists without prejudices.⁴⁷³

A similar nation-wide call to give competent representation to marginalised artists was raised in 1993 by the second key exhibition on this matter in the 1990s, namely the Whitney Biennial – the leading exhibition of contemporary American art, held at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art. That year’s decision to feature, culturally speaking, “non-mainstream” artists came under the pressure put by the Godzilla Asian American group, led by Chu Ken, Lee Bing and Machida.⁴⁷⁴ In 1991 they wrote to the museum’s Director David Ross about their disappointment with the year’s biennial that failed to feature ‘the rapidly expanding population of Asians and Asian Americans whose artistic vitality [was] reshaping American culture’, which made the organisation’s ‘claims to diversity and inclusivity ring hollow’.⁴⁷⁵ In response to this criticism, Ross collaborated with Godzilla on selecting 12 Asian American artists for the 1993 biennial, while also expanding the representation of artists from other cultural backgrounds.⁴⁷⁶

As Ross acknowledged in the opening essay of the 1993 biennial’s catalogue, ‘issues of nation and nationality, ethnic essentialism, cultural diversity, dissolution, and the *politics* of identity hang heavy in the air’.⁴⁷⁷ Thereby, the unprecedented culturally diverse selection of artists at the mainstream

⁴⁷² Margo Machida, ‘Seeing “Yellow”: Asians and the American Mirror’, in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, 1990), 114.

⁴⁷³ Lipton, ‘Here Today. Gone Tomorrow?’, 20.

⁴⁷⁴ Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives from Godzilla, Godzookie to the Barnstormers* (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2008), 35-36.

⁴⁷⁵ Godzilla quoted in Alice Yang, ‘Godzilla: The Anarchistic Lizard’, in *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, ed. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 91.

⁴⁷⁶ Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, 39.

⁴⁷⁷ David Ross, ‘Preface: Know Thy Self (Know Your Place)’, in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman, Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt and Lisa Phillips (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 9.

American exhibition was a move ‘to deconstruct and de-center the politically constructed site of whiteness and its relation to the ever changing definition of Americanness’.⁴⁷⁸ This was particularly effectively visualised in Byron Kim’s (born 1961) *Synecdoche* (Figure 61, 1991-1992) that combined 200 monochrome shades of skin colour into a single painting.⁴⁷⁹ Since every “ethnic” rectangle was positioned in harmony with the rest of the composition, there was no element in the painting that would dominate or be marginalised. Therefore, Kim set an example of how ‘to expand and enrich the larger culture’ in the USA, where races were ideally envisioned to have an equal and peaceful coexistence.⁴⁸⁰

Importantly, the 1993 Whitney Biennial coincided with the year when Bill Clinton assumed presidency after his 1992 election victory. As the Liberal Democrat, Clinton started his term with the appointment of women and ethnic minority candidates to his cabinet, public visits to LGBTQ+ communities and participations in Television debates on how to improve inter-racial relations in the country.⁴⁸¹ The Whitney Biennial recognised the wider political attempt to re-address the long-term issue of the civil rights infringement and the significance to mirror this in the mainstream cultural sector. To counter the historic American institutional inclination towards white artists, visitors at the biennial were even handed out activist buttons, designed by Daniel Martinez (born 1957), with the politically charged slogan: ‘I can’t imagine ever wanting to be white’.⁴⁸² This phrase was the exposition’s credo, implying its hope for a political shift in the 1990s towards the greater integration of conventionally marginalised ethnic groups.

The third key show in the early 1990s dedicated, in its case, to specifically Asian cultural identity was *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, inaugurated at the Asia Society Galleries in New York in 1994, and then shown across the USA for the next two years, including San Francisco’s Centre for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens in 1995. Significantly, it was curated by Machida, whom Zheng first met when studying at the Institute, where she gave a talk on the US multicultural art politics.⁴⁸³ Thus, the exhibition was an extension of the curator’s long-term

⁴⁷⁸ Thelma Golden, ‘What’s White...?’, in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman, Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt and Lisa Phillips (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 27.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 28; Pepe Karmel, ‘Art; Expressing the Hyphen in “Asian-American”’, *The New York Times*, 23 April 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/23/arts/art-expressing-the-hyphen-in-asian-american.html> (accessed 19 November 2018).

⁴⁸⁰ Lisa Phillips, ‘No Man’s Land: At the Threshold of a Millennium’, in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman, Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt and Lisa Phillips (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 61.

⁴⁸¹ Lisa Phillips, *The American Century: Art & Culture 1950-2000* (New York: Museum of American Art, 1999), 335.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 337.

⁴⁸³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 6.

research in this field, exploring Asian American artists' critical responses to their links with Asian culture, which resonated with Zheng's below-mentioned post-1992 art.⁴⁸⁴

For example, one of the exhibition's participating artists Liu Hung elucidated the issue of cultural stereotyping around the Asians in the USA in her painting *Resident Alien* (Figure 62, 1988). There she focused on showing what kind of "cultural heritage" she did not want to be associated with in the eyes of her American counterparts. The painting represented Liu's personal green card, where she critically changed her name to 'Cookie, Fortune'. The artist deliberately referenced the type of "alien" biscuit with fortune-telling message, traditionally given at Chinatown restaurants, since it was a derogative term amongst the Americans to call Chinese women, diminishing their identity to the culturally cliché sweet treat.⁴⁸⁵ By illuminating the obstructive side of stereotyping around Asian migrants in the USA, Liu presented it as the pressing necessity for the Asians to socially define their own cultural identification in order to counteract being narrowly compartmentalised.

As the *Asia/America* exhibition manifested, locating the innate cultural identity upon migrating to the States was not a straightforward process for Asian artists and, broadly speaking, the Asians. Precisely, the latter were confronted with various issues abroad, ranging from being distanced away within the socio-cultural context of their new home due to local cultural stereotypes, as underlined by Liu, to getting distanced from their native traditions. This made it even more important for Asian artists to take control of how to formulate and to treat their hybrid cultural self-identification in the American socio-cultural sphere, and, as Machida emphasised in her exhibition catalogue's essay, these 'many ways Asian American artists manifest their identity' had to be both 'recognised and accommodated' on the mainstream US art scene.⁴⁸⁶

This underlining curatorial call to recognise and to accommodate Asian American artists in the USA without any culturally compartmentalising rhetoric – that would, for example, confuse Chinese-born artist Zhang Baochi's (born 1956) 1989 metal bed sculpture *A Thousand and One Restless Nights* about his experience of exile in the USA with his supposed comment on serving in China's communist army – was reiterated in Chen Suni's review of the exhibition.⁴⁸⁷ Chen described the latter as a critical call for 'a future in which the fact that Hung Liu was a "first generation Chinese American" would not seem any more worthy of explanation than if she were from "Gary,

⁴⁸⁴ Margo Machida, 'Out of Asia: Negotiating Asian Identities in America', in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, ed. Margo Machida (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1994), 68.

⁴⁸⁵ Liu Hung, 'About *Resident Alien*', in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 269.

⁴⁸⁶ Machida, 'Out of Asia', 109.

⁴⁸⁷ Chen Suni, 'Us Others in the Global Village', *Colors*, 4 (1995), 56.

Indiana”⁴⁸⁸ Printed next to adverts that promoted housing ‘where cultural diversity is encouraged, respected and valued’ or videotapes on ‘challenging cultural bias when working with people’, this review further integrated Machida’s exhibition into the wider socio-political agenda of addressing America’s cultural discrimination issue.⁴⁸⁹

The *Asia/America* exhibition as well as *The Decade Show* and the 1993 Whitney Biennial were the crucial cultural happenings amongst many in the 1990s USA that contributed, in their own ways, to counteracting the marginalisation of non-mainstream artists in the American art world, whose identities differed from the commonplace identity standards. In turn, these exhibitions also served as the explicit call for artists to engage more with their alternative to the American mainstream identities. Ultimately, this was the essence of the influential wider postmodern identity politics, spanning across the predominant portion of the American society, which strove to deconstruct the notion of “otherness” and to promote, as McEvelley wrote, an ‘array of voices and visions’ in its ‘project of cultural balancing’.⁴⁹⁰

Importantly, in addition to this expounding of the cultural identity politics on the wider American art scene, Zheng also had a chance to more directly observe and to draw inspiration from echoing works by his fellow California-based artists, especially his teachers Marioni and Labat, who taught classes during his studies at the San Francisco Art Institute. Although born in Cincinnati in the state of Ohio, Marioni’s background is particularly culturally eclectic as he spent his childhood ‘growing up in the Midwest, in a German beer town, being a Catholic and the son of Italian immigrants’.⁴⁹¹ Therefore, the artist’s works were predominantly characterised by the use of, in Marioni’s own words, ‘things from my childhood, my background, my ethnicity, my upbringing’, manifesting his core belief that ‘if an artist takes from their own personal experience, they’re going to make original art’.⁴⁹²

This personal experience of and longing for the culturally diverse environment is manifested by Marioni’s 1976 piece *From China to Czechoslovakia – A World Map of Beer Bottles* (Figure 63). The installation comprised a shelf, measuring over three and a half metres in length, onto which a series of beer bottles was placed, collected by the artist from various countries across the world, including China and Czechoslovakia, as referenced in the title.⁴⁹³ Despite bearing various label designs,

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 56, 58.

⁴⁹⁰ Thomas McEvelley, *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity* (New York: McPherson & Company, 1996), 11.

⁴⁹¹ Terri Cohn, ‘Interview with Tom Marioni’, *Art Practical*, 17 October 2017, <https://www.artpractical.com/column/interview-with-tom-marioni/> (accessed 27 November 2020).

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Tom Marioni, *Beer, Art, and Philosophy: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Crown Point Press, 2003), 110.

showing words in various languages and having various heights, all the bottles were positioned in a straight uniform line. Thus, Marioni's world map presented the symbolically evoked countries as united by the shared gastronomical custom of drinking beer, avoiding any suggestions of a certain country being more superior or inferior.

Significantly, this echoed the artist's first beer-bottle performance, *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*, shown in 1970 at the Oakland Museum of California, as part of which he installed a beer bar, inviting his friends to drink beer together in the museum.⁴⁹⁴ This manifested, as Corrina Peipon wrote, the artist's 'desire to unite people and ideas', coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds over the ubiquitous custom of drinking beer.⁴⁹⁵ Since then Marioni had continuously organised his signature-style performative beer gatherings at various US venues and in various countries, a few of which Zheng also attended in the early 1990s at the artist's San Francisco-based studio.⁴⁹⁶ The 1976 piece *From China to Czechoslovakia* pertinently visualised this wider drive in the artist's beer-bottle works to emphasise people's commonalities rather than differences, which was a way of reconciling the eclecticism of his own Italian-American-German background.

Similarly, Havana-born Labat, who left Cuba as a teenager, initially coming to Miami and then to San Francisco, where he settled in 1976, addressed the ethnic identity difference in his works, exploring his personal experience of cultural acclimatising in Florida and California.⁴⁹⁷ Unlike Marioni, who was the second-generation Western Italian immigrant, Labat was an absolute newcomer in the USA, who, akin to Zheng, more acutely faced both cultural shock and social alienation, complicated by his non-Western origin. Interested in 'putting it in the face of the viewer to understand issues of the other', the artist openly embraced and mocked difficulties that he went through while learning English and getting to know American culture, as captured in a 1980 video, titled *Room Service*.⁴⁹⁸ There Labat portrayed a just arrived in the USA Latinx immigrant, performed by himself, practising a few English phrases for ordering food in a hotel room.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁴ Mija Riedel, 'Oral History Interview with Tom Marioni', Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 21-22 December 2017, https://www.aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_id=edanmdm-AAADCD_oh_392052 (accessed 27 November 2020).

⁴⁹⁵ Corrina Peipon, 'Hammer Projects: Tom Marioni', Hammer Museum, August 2010, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2010/hammer-projects-tom-marioni> (accessed 27 November 2020).

⁴⁹⁶ Riedel, 'Oral History Interview with Tom Marioni'; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 11.

⁴⁹⁷ Julio Cesar Morales, 'Tony Labat', *San Francisco Arts Quarterly*, 8 (2012), 28.

⁴⁹⁸ Nick Kaye, 'Tony Labat', *SiteWorks: San Francisco Performance 1969-85*, University of Exeter, 20 May 2016, <http://siteworks.exeter.ac.uk/interviews/tonylabat> (accessed 28 November 2020).

⁴⁹⁹ Steve Seid, 'I Ain't Cuba: The Early Video Works of Tony Labat', in *California Video: Artists and Histories*, ed. Glenn Phillips (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute and J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008), 293.

Following this, the Latinx migrant was shown to successfully order an apple pie and coffee, but when he decided to have a more substantial meal – which Steve Seid described as that critical moment when ‘the immigrant’s ambitions grow’ – he was immediately challenged by the waiter’s question as to which bread he wanted in his ham sandwich, white or rye, to which the migrant helplessly answered: ‘Apple pie and coffee, please’.⁵⁰⁰ The specific reference to race-denoting words ‘white’ and ‘rye’, implying the American mainstream White race as opposed to the Latinx character’s Brown skin colour, foreshadowed the socio-cultural exclusion of Labat’s biographic protagonist in the USA, based on his culturally different identity. To intensify the migrant’s sense of unease about being abroad, the artist additionally included a comedian in his video, once again played by himself.

Significantly, this added to the viewer’s own confusion as this physical echo of the immigrant constantly interrupted him to make reflective mocking jokes on the awkwardness of his experience of assimilation, such as mispronouncing English words.⁵⁰¹ The resulting fragmentation of the video’s scene sequence stood for the wider cultural idea of being ‘lost in translation’ – the phrase that Labat commonly applied to his art – whereby immigrants get culturally misunderstood and socially marginalised while settling abroad.⁵⁰² The frustration that accompanies such processes of cultural acclimatisation was effectively captured in the video’s final scene, where the artist performed sporadic jumps on the hotel room’s bed to imply his character’s disappointment with the meal order (Figure 64), suggesting on the deeper level that, at least for some time, the USA, just as the jumbled bed, would be ‘no longer a comforting place’ for him to stay.⁵⁰³

In the light of his upcoming return trip to China in the status of the San Francisco-settled artist for the first time, Zheng started more vividly personally experiencing various issues around cultural hybridity, the exploration of which he had been observing on both the Californian and broader US art scenes since his immigration in 1988. The growing recognition of this binary state, whereby he both belonged and non-fully belonged to where he came from and to where he decided to settle down, provided a fruitful new subject-matter for the artist.⁵⁰⁴ The early manifestation of this was the performance piece that Zheng organised for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (S.P.C.A.) in San Francisco in 1993.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Kaye, ‘Tony Labat’.

⁵⁰³ Seid, ‘I Ain’t Cuba’, 293.

⁵⁰⁴ Vishakha N. Desai, ‘Whither Home? The Predicament of a Bicultural Existence’, in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, ed. Margo Machida (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1994), 32.

For this performance, the artist placed himself in a cage (Figures 65-66), where stray dogs and other animals would normally be kept for adoption, staying there for a full working day during the course of one week.⁵⁰⁵ As Zheng recalled, the society's visitors, who did not come by invitation to the performance but just to adopt animals, were immediately struck that there was the human of the Asian ethnicity inside one cage, asking to be "adopted" by a local American.⁵⁰⁶ Hence, the public reception of the work consisted of numerous dialogues between Zheng and those surprised visitors.⁵⁰⁷ As the artist further recalled: 'They were actually talking to me. [...] I remember someone asked me where I came from and what I was doing'.⁵⁰⁸

The performance's key outcome was, thus, the very act of communication between Zheng and the native Americans, like the two young women, with one captured as perplexedly smiling while reading the cage's label that, instead of providing information about stray dogs, talked about the Asian man, who was actually inside that cage (Figure 67).⁵⁰⁹ Significantly, this challenged the visitors to question why US immigrants felt like stray dogs and what could be done to help them be more included or, allegorically speaking, adopted as opposed to outcasted, in the society. The fact that, regardless of the cage lattice, symbolising cultural communication obstacles, the conversations between those native American visitors and Zheng did unfold positively implied that cultural barriers could be lifted if the two sides were willing to listen to each other.

On a more personal level, the performance at the S.P.C.A. also spoke about Zheng's journey of assimilation in the American social and art worlds, which initially stimulated his more culturally neutral installation pieces, begun during the studies at the San Francisco Art Institute. That early period of the artist's residency in the USA was characterised by the simultaneously cultural and legal quest for "adoption" as he was looking to secure a series of culturally impartial shows at American art institutions as well as his green card, as detailed in the previous chapter. The resulting experience was psychologically akin to being a stray dog, which found itself in the locked state at the S.P.C.A., hoping to find its home and rightful place of belonging amongst the locals. This is expanded in the accompanying statement that the artist wrote for this performance, which had a vivid autobiographic touch to it.

⁵⁰⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 11.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

There Zheng acknowledged that migrating to the USA created the need ‘to quickly fit into society by an adjustment of [his] acting, talking and viewing’.⁵¹⁰ Thereby, he hoped to find local “adoption” for himself, which he defined as to ‘take legally into one’s family’, referring to his settlement application, or to ‘take as one’s own’, to ‘choose or accept’, alluding to his desire for the undiscriminating representation at regional galleries.⁵¹¹ In this process Zheng noticed that ‘maintaining [his] own existence based on [his] cultural roots [was] so difficult’ – ‘cultural transformation [...] automatically becomes a mixture, deteriorating in its own function in order to be reborn’, which ultimately contributed to ‘changing the origin of [his] identity’.⁵¹² Consequently, at the S.P.C.A. Zheng publicly opened up about the difficulties that he encountered while assimilating in California as the culturally hybrid artist, who came from the non-Western country to live in California’s Western context.

Significantly, the performance piece at the S.P.C.A. foreshadowed Zheng’s forthcoming projects that continued expressing the changing sense of his cultural identity. One of such projects was an exhibition of its own, titled *Asian/American American/Asian*, which Zheng self-curated at the Belcher Studios Gallery in 1994 (Figure 68), inviting Gu Wenda from New York and San Francisco-based Japanese-born artist Goto Reiko (born 1950s) to contribute their works on the theme of hybrid cultural identity. One of Zheng’s own contributing pieces was *Dual Heads* (Figure 69, 1994) that visually summarised the exhibition’s key curatorial message, namely doubling of individual identification. Based on a pairing of all its constituent parts, that is two panels, two poles that supported them and two plaster forms, attached to two leather strings, hanging alongside both sides of the two panels (Figure 70), the installation symbolically epitomised the divided self.

Precisely, the anthropomorphic reference in the title was translated into the freestanding panels, representing the body in space, with the hanging over objects embodying its head. Importantly, such the metaphorical human was depicted as having two different forces, exerted upon it, suggested by the two supporting poles, positioned on the two different sides from each of the two versions of this “human”. Hence, even though the doubled body appeared whole, it was made clear that it simultaneously related to the two juxtaposing realms. The nature of those opposing realms of influence could be inferred from the inscriptions on the hanging “heads” (Figure 71), implying their thoughts, which shifted between contrasting words of ‘Asian’ and ‘American’, or ‘Asia’ and

⁵¹⁰ Zheng Chongbin, ‘Performance at the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’, 1993, Meridian Gallery Collection, Box 12, Folder 11. Courtesy of the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Ibid.

'USA'. Thus, Zheng demonstrated how the same human could feel like concurrently being two different people, based on the twofold experience of coming from one country but living in another culture.

Adding to Zheng's works, the other two artists in the exhibition also illuminated this overarching theme of cultural identity doubling. Gu expressed this state of being caught between two distinct cultural contexts by utilising a biological element of hair, which he started using in 1992 for his *United Nations* series.⁵¹³ By gluing together into various shapes anonymously donated hair from the Americans and the Asians, the artist suggested how two distinct cultural selves could co-exist within a single body.⁵¹⁴ Nevertheless, the hue contrast between darker Asian hair and lighter colours of American hair heightened the difference between coming from Asia and residing in the USA. Thus, despite being glued together, suggesting the mutual co-existence of the two identities within the same individual, Gu also underlined the split between them, conditioned by the profound cultural difference between the Asian and Western American contexts.

In her turn, Goto contributed to Zheng's exhibition a music-based installation piece, *Accidentals* (Figure 72, 1994), which consisted of 12 tape-recordings of accordion songs and stories about this musical instrument as well as three pictures and one sculpture, which visualised the latter's history and technical musical aspects.⁵¹⁵ Accordion, as the musical instrument associated with immigrants, has traditionally been used by them to perform songs about their hardships in foreign countries, related to issues, such as cultural shock, social integration and financial survival.⁵¹⁶ Therefore, the employment of accordion as the focus-element for *Accidentals* musically and visually embodied and resonated with life of an average Asian migrant in the USA with its multifaceted challenges, revolving around the clash between the native and the foreign on the cultural, social and economic levels. Thereby, akin to Zheng and Gu's pieces, *Accidentals* evidenced the conflicting identity experience of being the overseas-born American resident.

The significance of this exploration of the Asian American identity throughout Zheng's exhibition can be illustrated by its coverage by politically charged *The Bay Area Reporter* – San Francisco's LGBTQ+ weekly newspaper, established in 1971 to promote social inclusiveness.⁵¹⁷ Indeed, the exhibition's mention was placed on the page (Figure 73) featuring news about numerous other

⁵¹³ Goto Reiko in an email to the author on 20 March 2019; Gu Wenda and Mark Bessire, *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 30.

⁵¹⁴ Silvia Fok, *Life and Death: Art and the Body in Contemporary China* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 171-172.

⁵¹⁵ Goto Reiko, unpublished statement on *Accidentals*, emailed by the artist to the author on 20 March 2019.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ *The Bay Area Reporter*, '1971-2005 Archives', https://www.ebar.com/index.php?ch=1971-2005_archives&screenID=18206 (accessed 25 November 2020).

identity-focused events, ranging from the *Afro Solo* African American Solo Performance Festival at the Diego Rivera Theatre to the *Moral History* exhibition of Karen Finley's (born 1956) installation at the Walter/McBean Gallery, 'examining male domination of art world and the marginalization of women'.⁵¹⁸ Thus, *The Bay Area Reporter* positioned Zheng's exhibition as part of the wider spectrum of San Francisco's 1990s culturally activist events, addressing the identity politics, related to race, gender or sexual orientation.

Following the *Asian/American American/Asian* exhibition, Zheng continued to visually articulate this important for the time topic of his changing sense of cultural identity, split between the memories of China, revived by the upcoming trip there, and feeling growingly comfortable in the USA, where he was now settled. This personal inability to position himself in the fixed cultural context is additionally reflected in his later 1994 work, produced for *Cultural Identities and Immigration: Changing Images of America in the 90s* – the 1994 exhibition at the Oliver Art Centre at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland (Figure 74). As written in the review by the college's students, the show was dedicated to 'contemporary photographers', who dealt with 'issues of immigration documenting their changing cultural identities' while being caught between memories of their old homes and realities of their new resident-place cultures.⁵¹⁹

To describe the lack of his clear-cut cultural identity, Zheng created an installation, where a core component was a collaged photograph, hung on a wall above a black-and-white rice carpet, as shown in the surviving preparatory drawing (Figure 75). The wall component portrayed the artist three times, in all the cases lying on a floor. Moving from the right to the left, his legs were shown inside a cylinder, which also covered his legs on the second middle-register photograph, where his head was portrayed inside the second cylinder, covering his head on the third photograph. The resulting composition gave the impression of stretching out, whereby the single human comprised three bodies at once, extending one into another via the connecting cylinders.

The employment of the connecting cylinders provided a pertinent visual summary of how Zheng felt about his metamorphosing identity at the time. As the artist said: 'When you come from a different culture, there is nothing stable or settled, you feel like you always float on the surface. It is more psychological. While holding on to what you have, you try to figure out the next step to ground yourself'.⁵²⁰ Hence, the cylinders epitomised the idea of transitional space through which the

⁵¹⁸ *The Bay Area Reporter*, 'This Week', 24 (9 June 1994), 43.

⁵¹⁹ California College of Arts and Crafts, 'Calendar of Upcoming Events', *CCAC News*, 4 (1994), unknown page number. Courtesy of the CCA/C Archives at California College of the Arts Libraries, San Francisco, California.

⁵²⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 7.

tripled photographic self-portrait of the artist floated through, partially entering the new cylinders without fully leaving the previous ones. This way Zheng demonstrated how his own self got, as he said, '[stretched out] into different personalities' at once.⁵²¹

This idea of simultaneously embracing several identity manifestations was further underlined by the installation's floor component, comprising the two-sided rice carpet. The latter's left side consisted of rice grains, which, crucially, were soaked in Chinese ink, giving them their nocturnal shade, whereas the right side incorporated plain rice grains.⁵²² In this respect, Zheng visualised his divided self, implying that one half was American, while the other half was Chinese, evoked by the characteristic smell of ink and its black hue. Although those two components were visually different and symbolised the contrasting cultural identifications, they were ultimately the same material of rice, which is the food common in the national cuisines of both China and the USA. Consequently, in addition to demonstrating how he was stretched out into the opposing cultural selves, Zheng also foreshadowed the prospect or, at least, the hope of reconciling the two within himself.

What is also noteworthy about this installation is the fact that for the first time since his migration to California the artist utilised ink in his institutionally displayed artwork, produced in the USA. This revealed Zheng's longing to publicly return to the ink medium and, subsequently, ink painting. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the artist continued practising ink painting throughout the 1990s as part of his private practice to maintain skilfulness in handling ink-loaded brush on paper. Nevertheless, he did not feature ink in his installations for local institutions. However, now that Zheng started reflecting more upon his metamorphosed sense of identity, he felt that he was ready to transform that initially perceived, as Gao Minglu phrased it using Bhabha's rhetoric, 'opposition between the East and the West into a kind of interactive "in-betweenness"', or hybridity that would speak to his Chinese cultural self, while evoking his acquired American Californian self-identification.⁵²³

Significantly, Zheng's engagement with the themes of identity metamorphosis and cultural hybridity in the installation for the Oliver Art Centre echoed works by two Latinx artists – Gonzalez-Torres and Tunga, who especially inspired Zheng during this new phase of his installation art in the USA.⁵²⁴ As the artist underlined, when he started looking more into how to visually address the changing

⁵²¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 22.

⁵²² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 12.

⁵²³ Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu, 'Strategies of Survival in the Third Space: A Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s', in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 184.

⁵²⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 16.

sense of his cultural identity, he felt a parallel connection with these Latinx artists, who also came from a different cultural background, but who, likewise, searched for ways to negotiate their special cultural position on the Western art scene.⁵²⁵ In the case of Gonzalez-Torres, as the Cuban-born New York-based homosexual artist, he famously rejected social stereotypes imposed upon people in the USA, who had non-conventional cultural or sexual identities.

As Russell Ferguson expanded on this point, Gonzalez-Torres openly embraced being the Cuban-American homosexual man, but, crucially, he also refused 'to play up to external (reductive, and hence diminished) expectations' about what that might mean.⁵²⁶ In the artist's opinion, identity was a fluid construct that was subject to constant reshaping, and it was up to the individual to choose a direction for his/her identity evolution. This idea was captured in his *Untitled (Passport)* (Figure 76, 1991), which was a stack of literally plain paper, sheets of which could be taken home. This unusual ID document was deliberately free from preconceived statements about nationality or gender, leaving it to the viewer to choose what to input on it and, ultimately, to decide upon his/her identity, whether cultural or sexual, without societal restrictions.⁵²⁷

This call to embrace the ambiguity of self's difference and to personally determine one's identity was stimulating for Zheng. Similar to Gonzalez-Torres's open-ended *Untitled (Passport)*, which promoted the notion of nonprescriptive fluid identities, the artist's 1994 work at the Oliver Art Centre also suggested this non-determinedness of the cultural identification that a single person could experience in the light of a changed residential environment. Since the work cross-matched various elements, such as the three bodies, the three cylinders or the two differently coloured sides of the rice carpet, it instilled this sensation of constantly flowing from one state into another and back, suggestive of how the artist's own identity constantly transited amongst the categories of Chinese, American and Chinese-American. Hence, Zheng transmitted his open-ended cultural positioning, which could be either-or, both and even neither. As *Untitled (Passport)*, the installation did not provide any clear-cut answers to the identity positioning question.

If Gonzalez-Torres's installations encouraged Zheng to convey his metamorphosing cultural identification in his art, then Brazilian Tunga, based in Rio de Janeiro, but having his works frequently exhibited in the West, impelled the artist to go even further and to re-embrace the culturally specific medium of ink at the exhibition in the USA. Zheng first saw Tunga's work towards the end of 1993 at the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth*

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Russell Ferguson, 'Authority Figure', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Gottingen: Steidl Publishers, 2006), 91.

⁵²⁷ Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995), 55.

Century in New York, where *Palindrome Incest* (Figure 77, 1992) was displayed.⁵²⁸ Comprising his signature-style metal wires, resembling long tribal hair, attached to magnetic metal surfaces of, in this case, monumental conical jars and rings, the installation eclectically resembled the Amazonian jungle terrain and, at the same time, as Elaine Barella called it, the disordered ‘violent industrial landscape’.⁵²⁹

What Zheng pointed out as the most fascinating element about this work was precisely this, namely how Tunga incorporated references to his own culture while keeping the installation look contemporary and relevant to audiences from different cultural backgrounds.⁵³⁰ To discover more about Tunga, the artist purchased a book featuring his art, published in conjunction with *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists* – the UK-based exhibition that took place in 1990 at Birmingham’s Ikon Gallery and Manchester’s Cornerhouse.⁵³¹ Writing about Tunga, curator Guy Brett reiterated how the latter’s metal installations were rooted in the artist’s native tropical surroundings and indigenous cultures, mimicking lavish vegetation, tribal hair or snake motifs amongst others, but, nevertheless, how they also captured the universal idea of the ‘continuum’, whereby ‘one body is immersed in another’.⁵³²

In *Palindrome Incest*, for example, this could be inferred from the layering of the metallic hair locks with the other objects, like the jars, or of the two types of the natural and industrial imageries, which all appeared as infinitely interlocked, forming this back-and-forth sequence of repetitive continuations. In this respect, Tunga illustrated Brett’s core aspiration behind the exhibition, which was to underline how ‘the combinations of localised and non-localised materials and references’ in art could be fused in a way that would ‘signal across continental borders and across national borders’, having a cross-culturally applicable ‘multiplicity of meanings’.⁵³³ Coming across these ideas stimulated Zheng to explore for the first time via his half-linked rice carpet at the Oliver Art Centre how culturally specific elements could be utilised to ‘[change] the form of contemporary art’, making the latter more refreshing and also hard to place into a single cultural category.⁵³⁴

⁵²⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 16.

⁵²⁹ Edward J. Sullivan, ‘Latin American Artists in Latin America: A View from the End of the Century’ and Elaine Barella, ‘Biographies: Tunga’, both in *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Waldo Rasmussen and Edward J. Sullivan (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 130 and 325 respectively.

⁵³⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 16.

⁵³¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 5.

⁵³² Guy Brett, ‘Material Poetics’, in *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists*, ed. Guy Brett (London: Verso, 1990), 54-55.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵³⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 16.

It was also not by coincidence that Zheng's first post-graduation public use of ink at the Oliver Art Centre's 1994 exhibition, which opened in November, happened right before his first return visit to China, the anticipation of which, mixed with the growing awareness of the surrounding identity discourse, could have already been visually traced in the artist's works from later 1993. This pivotal for Zheng trip, both on the personal and professional levels, started on 22 November 1994, when he, together with Sheppard, van Kempen, Lynn, Gigi Janchang and Rogge, left for China for about three weeks 'to participate in what they [hoped] [would] become the first in a series of collaborative exchange opportunities between artists in the two countries'.⁵³⁵ There Zheng organised collaborations with the Zhejiang and Xi'an Academies of Fine Arts in Hangzhou and Xi'an respectively amongst others, where Group Six showcased and discussed their artworks during workshops.⁵³⁶

As part of those workshops, the artists shared with local Chinese art professionals and their students how they personally utilised installation art, both thematically and technically, back in the USA. For example, van Kempen brought with him an installation that narrated stories about economic and social difficulties of fishermen, who lived along China's Yangtze River and California's Sacramento River.⁵³⁷ This way he established an indirect dialogue amongst members of the same social segment, based in the two different countries. In her turn, Lynn inflated an oversized balloon in a shape of a female foetus to critically comment on China's one-child policy.⁵³⁸ At the same time, Zheng brought with him an example of his latest art direction that addressed his dual cultural identity, this time expressed via a zodiac-focused installation that grouped together signs of the Eastern animal-based zodiac and the popular in the West astrological zodiac.⁵³⁹

Concurrently, although Group Six did not have a chance to see many regional art exhibitions or examples of contemporary museum-quality ink painting, as Zheng recalled, he organised private gatherings with a few of his artist-friends from the Zhejiang Academy, by then based in Beijing, such as Political Pop artist Wang Guangyi and photographer Wang Jinsong, with whom they exchanged comments about Group Six's installations or recent Chinese oil painting and photography developments.⁵⁴⁰ In free from the workshops time, Zheng also took his American friends sightseeing, such as to the Yangtze River in Chongqing or to the Mount Huang in the Anhui

⁵³⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 2; *Artweek*, 'Group 6 Goes to China', 2.

⁵³⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 15.

⁵³⁷ *Artweek*, 'Group 6 Goes to China', 2.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 15.

province.⁵⁴¹ Importantly, re-immersing himself into the Chinese surrounding environment brought back to the artist memories of his life in 1980s China, when he used to practise ink painting.⁵⁴² This cultural exposure, combined with the emotional reconciliation with his family, helped Zheng feel more reconnected to his native culture.⁵⁴³

Therefore, upon his return from China, Zheng felt even more ready to make the first steps towards engaging with Chinese cultural traditions through his art in the USA. One of these steps was not directly about his art yet, but it, nevertheless, provided an additional stimulus to the artist to fully focus on ink painting very shortly. That step was joining his wife Xu Sha in her initiative to start a company in San Francisco with specialism in Chinese tea pottery, which in December 1994 led to the establishment of Red & Green Co., operating for the following 12 years.⁵⁴⁴ This business idea was developed during the trip to China, as part of which Zheng bought local tradition-inspired pottery in Yixing, which together with Xu they decided to resell in the range of 30-300 USD to Californian private buyers or museum shops and department stores.⁵⁴⁵

Since what particularly interested Zheng about this business was how to turn traditional into modern and to avoid, as Zahid Sardar wrote for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, ‘a purely ethnic look’, he additionally established a design studio, where he remodelled the ‘classical elegance’ of Yixing pottery pieces by adding his own ‘minimal and contemporary designs’ onto them.⁵⁴⁶ This made two marked contributions to Zheng’s main occupation of being the artist. Firstly, thinking about how to give Chinese traditional forms in pottery a more cutting-edge and up-to-date look helped the artist, as he underlined, ponder on how he could achieve a similar outcome for ink painting in California.⁵⁴⁷ Secondly and essentially, with Xu managing the company, Zheng also had more spare time and financial freedom to focus on experimenting with ink painting, without the pressure to earn a living from exhibiting or selling those works.⁵⁴⁸

If before the turn of 1994, in the light of cultural shock, Zheng wanted to assimilate into the American art world on the more culturally neutral basis, what the artist wanted after was,

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Questions 14-15.

⁵⁴⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 3; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 16.

⁵⁴⁵ Zahid Sardar, ‘Form and Function’, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 September 2001, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/magazine/article/Form-and-Function-2879050.php> (accessed 17 December 2018); Kathryn Loosli Pritchett, ‘Were to Find Yixing Teapots’, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 June 1997, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/realestate/article/Where-to-find-Yixing-teapots-3114528.php> (accessed 17 December 2018).

⁵⁴⁶ Sardar, ‘Form and Function’.

⁵⁴⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 16.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

ultimately, to accommodate the Chinese part of his identity to his place of residence, the belonging to which was reiterated in 1996 when he naturalised as a US citizen.⁵⁴⁹ As Wang argued, accommodation was more hybrid than assimilation: if the latter meant deemphasising one's cultural identity, then the former involved more explicitly maintaining it, but with an important remark of adjusting it in accordance with socio-cultural practices of a new home country.⁵⁵⁰ Significantly, in order to reunite his two senses of identity, by 1997 Zheng had fully reconciled his creative practice with the centuries-old Chinese tradition of ink painting, accommodating it to the context of his new Western American home.⁵⁵¹

II. Accommodating Native Culture: Chinese-Ink Painting for the Californian Context

In this respect, by 1997 Zheng had entered the next phase of his art, which was marked by the reconciliation with ink painting and the opening of the designated studio for it in San Raphael in the Californian Bay Area, where he started working on his *Blot* series.⁵⁵² Zheng considers this to be his finalised return as the ink artist, whereby he delved into synthesising deeper underpinnings of history and theory behind Chinese and American painterly elements.⁵⁵³ Nevertheless, the first step towards this happened for Zheng at the turn of 1995, when upon his return from China he created a series of ink paintings (no known photographic record available) that were no longer just for practising his handling of brush on paper.⁵⁵⁴ Instead, those works were part of his affirmed decision to start looking for ways to completely reengage with Chinese-ink painting, without losing touch with the local American art scene.

These test-run paintings, serving as the precursor to the *Blot* series, comprised a group of small pieces, experimenting with meshed circular shapes, executed in loosely applied ink brushwork on rice paper.⁵⁵⁵ Significantly, in 1995 they were already consigned by the Michael Martin Galleries, whose owner Michael Martin ended up exhibiting them at the same-year exhibition *Perception, Reflection: Asian American Identity* (Figure 78), held at the Gallery Concord in California's Concord,

⁵⁴⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 4.

⁵⁵⁰ Wang, 'Roots and the Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States', 205.

⁵⁵¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 10.

⁵⁵² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 16; Tiffany Wai-Ying Beres, 'Zheng Chongbin: Boundless Ink', *ArtAsiaPacific*, 97 (2016), 125.

⁵⁵³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 10.

⁵⁵⁴ Between these preliminary ink paintings, produced in 1995, and the 1997 *Blot* series, in 1996 Zheng produced what can be considered his final installation work from the aforementioned 1990s American settlement phase, shown at the 1996 *Rice/Snails/Pigeons* exhibition at the Meridian Gallery, analysed in further details in Appendix C.

⁵⁵⁵ Zheng Chongbin in an interview with the author, 10 May 2019, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 6.

with which her gallery had a collaboration, thereby signalling her confidence in Zheng's progression as the ink painter.⁵⁵⁶ What is also notable about Zheng's participation in *Perception, Reflection* – the theme of which was exploring the participating artists' dual cultural belonging and their artistic means of reconciling the two – was that it was the first time he gave the public preview to his evolving ink works, produced in the USA, alongside examples of the other artists' installation, photography or performance art.

For example, Gigi Janchang displayed her photography piece *Come and Go* (Figures 79-80, 1994), showing her double portrait in profile at the opposite ends of a far-stretching ocean horizon.⁵⁵⁷ To emphasise the contrast between the two shots of her face, the artist represented them in different styles of straight and permed hair. Nevertheless, the opposing self-portraits were also shown to form a unified whole as they both stretched into the ocean, becoming the one with this natural expanse of water. Similar to this thematic underpinning in Gigi Janchang's *Come and Go*, Zheng was looking to unify elements of the two culturally distinct pictorial traditions of Chinese ink and American abstract art into a harmonising whole. His ink paintings of circular shapes, featured at the exhibition, foreshadowed the artist's endeavour to do that by '[breaking] the cultural barrier' around ink through the revised employment of the Western pictorial language of abstraction.⁵⁵⁸

Significantly, compared with the earlier period, in the second half of the 1990s the American mainstream art scene offered a more readily accessible and, to a certain extent, more inclusive – if only, once again, compared with the earlier period – platform to stage art that was directly inspired by migrant artists' native visual cultures. This was largely made possible by the recent escalation of exhibitions, starting with aforementioned 1990 *The Decade Show*, which more rigorously advocated the rights of marginalised artists. As detailed above, such exhibitions primarily focused on artworks that explicated their makers' identity difference and articulated issues of discrimination against it in the American society. Towards the decade's end a further shift started happening on the US museum scene, whereby it was more openly acknowledged that those artists' native cultures themselves made a vital contribution to the very historic development of American art.

In the case of the Asian cultural legacy, it was the latter's role in formulating American Abstract Expressionism that presented a major art historical omission, comprehensively challenged for the first time in 1997 by the statement exhibition, *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions: Asian*

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 10; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 6. As shown below, Martin would become an important supporter of Zheng's subsequent ink works in the early 2000s.

⁵⁵⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 6.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

American Artists and Abstraction. Held across three mainstream art institutions, namely New York's Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, the Chicago Cultural Centre and Los Angeles's Fisher Gallery at the University of California, its curator Jeffrey Wechsler aimed to illuminate this overshadowed element of influence within American modern art history and to evidence how native cultures of Asian American and visiting Asian artists actively co-shaped Abstract Expressionism.⁵⁵⁹ The latter was shown as the product of, ultimately, 'a developing international synthesis of Eastern and Western traditions'.⁵⁶⁰

Indeed, information about Asian philosophies and art was widely available in the mid-twentieth-century USA, ranging from the organisation of talks about Suzuki Daisetsu Teitaro's explanation of Eastern metaphysics at New York's The Club – the meeting point of abstract expressionist artists, including Reinhardt – to the circulation of popular books like George Rowley's 1947 *Principles of Chinese Painting* or Alan Watts's 1957 *The Way of Zen*.⁵⁶¹ Furthermore, American modern artists also closely interacted with local Asian-born painters, such as New York-based Japanese-born Okada Kenzo (1902-1982), who utilised the seventeenth-century flat style of Japanese Kano School screen painting in his portrayal of space-floating geometric figures.⁵⁶² Altogether these artists shared affinity in their uses of the abstract vocabulary, and, thereby, were often jointly exhibited at places like the Betty Parsons Gallery or the Marian Willard Gallery, both in New York, which gave them an additional platform to communicate and to exchange ideas.⁵⁶³

Nevertheless, the interrelationship between American modern art and Asian traditional culture was largely denied by the time's local critics, primarily due to the prevailing anti-Asian bias, stirred by the US military action against the region's communist Korea or Vietnam.⁵⁶⁴ Thus, Clement Greenberg famously insisted that American abstraction had no 'more than a cursory interest in Oriental art' – the viewpoint that determinedly lasted well into the remainder of the century on the

⁵⁵⁹ Jeffrey Wechsler, 'Introduction: Finding the Middle Path', in *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945-1970*, ed. Jeffrey Wechsler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 10-11.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁶¹ Theresa Papanikolas, 'Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West', in *Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West*, ed. Theresa Papanikolas (Honolulu: Honolulu Museum of Art, 2017), 21-22; Bert Winther-Tamaki, 'The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics', in *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 146; Alexandra Munroe, 'Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Cage Zen, Beat Zen, and Zen', in *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 199.

⁵⁶² Alexandra Munroe, 'Japanese Artists in the American Avant-Garde 1945-1970', in *Contemporary Japanese Art in America: Arita, Nakagawa, Sugimoto*, ed. Patterson Sims and Alexandra Munroe (New York: Japan Society Gallery, 1987), 15-16.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 15; Winther-Tamaki, 'The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art', 146-147.

⁵⁶⁴ Harry Harootunian, 'Postwar America and the Aura of Asia', in *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 55.

US mainstream art scene.⁵⁶⁵ Consequently, to challenge this viewpoint in the *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions* exhibition Wechsler put the spotlight on such overlooked modern artists of Asian origin, like Okada or Chinese-born Zhang Daqian, who practised *pomo* (splashed ink) abstraction during his residency in California in the mid-twentieth century.

As it was summarised by Holland Cotter in his review for *The New York Times*, Wechsler's exhibition served as the testimony to the fact that 'Asian art is a growing presence in America', contributing 'the cosmopolitan flavour [to its] modern and contemporary art'.⁵⁶⁶ As Cotter further outlined, the rising institutional exposure of the Asian historical input into the development of American modern art served as the important source of inspiration to contemporary US-based Asian artists alike.⁵⁶⁷ Specifically, this gave to them an impetus to revisit both their cultural heritage and this art historical episode of the mid-twentieth century, when American modern artists themselves looked towards the East and their Asian-born colleagues in order to formulate their abstract visual languages.

In addition to this, towards the end of the 1990s decade there was also a climb in shows that promoted the employment of Asian cultural references in contemporary art by artists from the USA and beyond, evidencing that, just as Asia's cultural legacy inspired American modern art, it could also effectively inspire contemporary art forms. One of such exhibitions, which made a splash on the wider American art scene as it was the first one to promote contemporary tradition-inspired Asian art, was *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, guest-curated by Apinan Poshyananda and inaugurated at New York's Asia Society Galleries in 1996.⁵⁶⁸ By demonstrating works from five Asian countries, ranging from South Korea to Thailand, Poshyananda aimed to evince that Asian visual traditions could make for resolutely contemporary art that surpassed the stereotypical association with historical backwardness.⁵⁶⁹

As Gennifer Weisenfeld noted, the exhibition pronounced to the American art world that Asia's cultural forms, including those of China that were discussed in the catalogue, could form an effective tool for expressing present-day concerns.⁵⁷⁰ For example, South Korean artist Kim Ho-Suk (born 1957) showed Korea's contemporary response to grasping its twentieth-century history

⁵⁶⁵ Papanikolas, 'Abstract Expressionism', 15.

⁵⁶⁶ Holland Cotter, 'Of Asians among the Abstractionists', *The New York Times*, 4 April 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/04/arts/of-asians-among-the-abstractionists.html> (accessed 20 February 2020).

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Gennifer Weisenfeld, 'Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World', in *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*, ed. Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 373.

⁵⁶⁹ Apinan Poshyananda, 'Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition', in *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, ed. Apinan Poshyananda (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 49.

⁵⁷⁰ Weisenfeld, 'Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World', 373.

under Japan's occupation, pertinently using ink and Buddhist art forms. To illustrate this, in *History of Korea's Resistance against Japanese Colonialism: Armed Uprising* (Figure 81, 1991) Kim depicted a group of anti-Japanese protesters in transparent vanishing hues, created due to his use of heavily watered ink, which spoke to those people's physical elimination and death fatalities during armed uprisings.

In addition to utilising the tradition-loaded format of ink painting, the artist also resorted to the compositional arrangement that was inspired by Goryeo-dynasty (918-1392) Buddhist painting, whereby figures were frontally positioned in parallel horizontal bands.⁵⁷¹ The omission of a concrete spatial contextualisation, akin to ancient religious art, made the protesters appear outside the worldly domain, which showed their posthumous elevation in contemporary South Korea to a deity-like status in praise of their dedication to the country's independence. Thus, Kim's use of the traditional Asian pictorial forms, far from diminishing the work's criticality, provided the artist with the effective visual tools to heighten the present-day reflection on Korea's recent history.

Another exhibition, dated to 1996, which investigated the use of Asian cultural forms in contemporary art, was *Returning to Homeland: A Contemporary Exhibit of Chinese Experimental Ink Work* at the Gallery on the Rim in San Francisco. Although it was of a smaller scale than *Traditions/Tensions*, what made it important, as Wu Hung noted, is the fact that it was one of the earliest institutional attempts in the USA to promote specifically contemporary ink painting.⁵⁷² In the exhibition's catalogue, Luo Dan acknowledged that the medium's inherent historicism and association with the Chinese souvenir industry for foreign consumption 'heavily polluted and nearly dissolved the original profound significance [of] Chinese traditional art' abroad.⁵⁷³ By bringing together a group of active ink artists from China, like Liu Zijian's (born 1956), *Returning to Homeland* set to exemplify how ink painting could be reinvigorated to be taken more seriously within the Western contemporary art discourse.

As McEvelley indicated in his essay for the *Traditions/Tensions* catalogue, showcasing more of contemporary art that resorted to Asian visual culture was aimed at helping deconstruct the West-centrism of American cultural institutions as they were called upon to be more receptive towards 'the independent self-definition of other cultures'.⁵⁷⁴ In the light of this, the Asian American artists'

⁵⁷¹ Poshyananda, 'Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition', 37.

⁵⁷² Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 316.

⁵⁷³ Luo Dan, 'Returning to Homeland: A Crucial Journey towards the Fundamental Metaphysical Idealism', in *Returning to Homeland: A Contemporary Exhibit of Chinese Experimental Ink Work*, ed. Huang Zhuan, Luo Dan and Zhang Xiaofeng (San Francisco: Gallery on the Rim, 1996), 9.

⁵⁷⁴ Thomas McEvelley, 'Exhibition Strategies in the Postcolonial Era', in *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, ed. Apinan Poshyananda (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 58.

engagement with their native traditions was to be considered as the legible manifestation of American contemporary art, without being pigeonholed for its perceived cultural “otherness” and without necessitating such artists to only resort to so-called mainstream Western art forms. Thus, the key point of the above-mentioned exhibitions was to help create within the American art world what David Hollinger termed in 1995 as ‘postethnic America’, where it would be ideally acknowledged that a US citizen’s ‘individual life entails a shifting division of labour between the several “we’s” of which the individual is a part’.⁵⁷⁵

Foremost, Hollinger expounded the notion of postethnic as a liberating perspective that could enable American individuals ‘to affiliate or disaffiliate with their own communities of descent to an extent that they choose, while affiliating with whatever nondescent communities are available and appealing to them’.⁵⁷⁶ As Hans Belting elaborated on the term, it positioned the racial or cultural difference in a positive light, encouraging an expression of multiple identities that come as a result of a person’s own definition of his/her cultural outlook – hence, instead of “suffering” from being different, that person could embrace it as a constructive means of enriching societal culture.⁵⁷⁷ In his turn, Arjun Appadurai, writing in 1996, emphasised the vital role that specifically diasporic communities could play in bringing about this postethnic or, as he termed it, postnational space, where a nation-state’s cultural monopoly would be removed in favour of a polysemous cultural existence within its society.⁵⁷⁸

This vision of the culturally diverse art world was meant to enable US-based Chinese artists to stop having to constantly choose between, as Aihwa Ong put it, either embracing ‘the “authenticity” of the modern artist’ or being ‘an “authentic” Chinese subject’.⁵⁷⁹ As shown in the previous chapter, due to the predominant stereotyping around Chinese migrant artists, associating one’s work with “Chineseness” was automatically perceived as being anti-modern, to use Ong’s terminology, that is outside the framework of Western art standards.⁵⁸⁰ What artists strove for instead, as Ong further elaborated, was to be seen as just ‘normal’ people, who could simultaneously align themselves with the US socio-cultural world and be free ‘to play the [so-called] Chinese card’ as they saw it fit for

⁵⁷⁵ David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 106.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁷⁷ Hans Belting, ‘Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate’, in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, ed. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 57-58.

⁵⁷⁸ Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 177.

⁵⁷⁹ Aihwa Ong, ‘“What Marco Polo Forgot”: Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global’, *Current Anthropology*, 53 (2012), 482.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

purposes of their artworks, without having their “normality” questioned because of this in the USA.⁵⁸¹

As the American art institutions came under the increased pressure to address this cultural discrimination of artists in the 1990s, the decade’s new political orientation swiftly became aligned with the goal, as Cornel West wrote, ‘to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity’.⁵⁸² However, as Araeen pointed out, promoting multiculturalism does not automatically connote ‘a society in which all its culturally different components are considered equal’.⁵⁸³ As he continued, multiculturalism could also be manipulated to ensure that ‘the dominant culture can accommodate those who have no power in such a way that the power of the dominant is preserved’.⁵⁸⁴ Hence, instead of straightforwardly erasing the division between the American and the “other”, the 1990s multicultural politics was capable of sustaining ‘a separation of the dominant majority culture from the cultures of the minority population’.⁵⁸⁵

This was achieved by, for example, the tendency to group culturally distinct artworks together and, hence, separately from the so-called “just” artworks by Western artists. This categorisation was originally often meant to help draw attention to previously marginalised artforms and artists, but, as it is explored in the following chapter, this approach is problematic when used consistently, as it reiterates divisions amongst cultures. Thus, on one hand, as Alexandra Chang pointed out, against the background of the multicultural politics, for non-Western-born artists the once vital goal of ‘claiming America’ and the question of whether or not their works were going to gain entry into mainstream art institutions were less critical than before.⁵⁸⁶ On the other hand, the new issue was now the question of precisely how their works’ sought-after cultural difference was going to be given institutional exposure in the USA – on a more inclusive or still compartmentalising basis.

Moreover, placed retrospectively within the broader social context, it is also important to note that the promotion of the multicultural ideology under Clinton’s presidency had another reverse effect that led to a new form of widespread social racism, termed as colour-blindness, that is ‘the idea of

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Araeen, ‘A New Beginning’, 8; Cornel West, ‘The New Cultural Politics of Difference’, in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Cornel West (New York and Cambridge: New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1990), 19.

⁵⁸³ Araeen, ‘A New Beginning’, 16.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁶ Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, 113, 162.

solving the race problem by ignoring it'.⁵⁸⁷ As civil rights advocate Michelle Alexander recently wrote, this side-effect of colour-blindness behind the ideological propagation of “inclusive” multiculturalism created the less visible, but still impactful, ‘larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs’ that generated ‘a hidden underworld of legalised discrimination’ of selective racially different US citizens.⁵⁸⁸ Thereby, up until today the optimistic 1990s pro-diversity rhetoric remains the ideal to aspire towards rather than the established reality to witness.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that within the context of the 1990s there was a certain degree of transformation towards the greater cultural inclusiveness on the American art institutional scene, which also led to the development of new critical forms of contemporary art as well as of the latter’s representation. As elucidated above, due to the work of activist curators, critics and artists, the 1990s US museum scene started to expose more actively and more rigorously than before race-driven cultural prejudices or the marginalisation of culturally different contemporary art forms. In turn, this led to the more frequent and meaningful staging of such exhibitions, mentioned above, as *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions*, *Traditions/Tensions* and *Returning to Homeland*, which shed light on either the historical contribution to American twentieth-century art, made by Asian cultural forms, or the latter’s ongoing value for expanding the contemporary art field.

Crucially, this increase in the exposure and the production of heritage-inspired art in the 1990s enabled, as Joselit pointed out, to begin “cancelling” the supposed debt of non-Western art to the West and ‘to assert alternate experiences of modernity’, which the Western modern art world itself drew inspiration from.⁵⁸⁹ In other words, as explored in more detail in the following chapter, the politics of multiculturalism gave an important start to, as Gladston phrased it, ‘a deconstructive reorientation of “Western expectations of the oriental”’.⁵⁹⁰ Against this socio-cultural background, in the later 1990s Zheng started working on the new series of ink paintings at the heart of which was shedding critical light on that historically overseen in the West correlation between the Chinese-ink medium’s ‘cultural properties’ and American Abstract Expressionism.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁷ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 467-469.

⁵⁸⁸ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012), 11-13.

⁵⁸⁹ Joselit, *Heritage and Debt*, 33.

⁵⁹⁰ Paul Gladston, ‘Locating Displacement: Envisioning the Complex “Diasporization” of Contemporary Chinese Art’, in *Negotiating Difference: Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Context*, ed. Birgit Hopfener, Franziska Koch, Jeong-Hee Lee-Kalisch and Juliane Noth (Weimar: VDG, 2012), 247.

⁵⁹¹ Zheng Chongbin, ‘My Reading of Shitao’s *Remarks on Painting*’, in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, ed. Britta Erickson (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 76; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 3, Question 17.

Specifically, it was the parallel between Qing-dynasty ink master Shitao (1642-1707) and Reinhardt's works, which he observed during his frequent museum trips to New York, that first grasped the artist's interest, inspiring his *Blot* series at the turn of 1997 and, with it, his full return as the ink painter.⁵⁹² Based on their echoing elemental geometric languages, as Zheng reflected, Shitao's dot-based ink paintings as well as Reinhardt's black-square oil paintings similarly underscored the metaphysical notion of infinity, despite the historic and geographic gaps between the artists.⁵⁹³ In the case of Shitao, Zheng focused on *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots* (Figure 82, 1685) – painted at the Five Clouds Temple in Nanjing while the artist practised Chan Buddhism – that verged between the portrayal of a natural landscape and the allusion to a cosmic imagery of 'primordial ink blots', as Hay wrote.⁵⁹⁴

Precisely, throughout the handscroll the plantation scenery was decomposed into an array of densely applied stars of ink drops. From slender lines of unfilled circles – Shitao's so-called 'translucent dots' – to messy pools of all-black thickly painted marks – 'smoky dots' – the work attested how the same touch of ink could be manoeuvred to create an infinite profusion of pictorial forms.⁵⁹⁵ Taken together, they seemed to flow into each other, suggesting an overarching inexhaustible loose circular shape that symbolised the invisible force of constant growth and expansion – in other words, the governing dot that comprises all the ten thousand dots. As Shitao explained in his painting's inscription, the landscape's empiric 'details [were] confused' with the prime intention of enabling the viewer to 'cut off the "mind's eye" from conventional moulds', akin to how a deity 'has freed his spirit from the bounds of flesh and bones'.⁵⁹⁶

This movement away from concrete physical form to depict another kind of formless – in a sense of being ever-changing – form, captured with the single type of loosely applied brushwork, was proclaimed by Shitao as his one-stroke method, which embodied the 'cosmic unifying principle' or, in the artist's own words, the infinite 'Dao [that] employs oneness to string everything together'.⁵⁹⁷ Importantly, this exploration of metaphysical infinity via geometrically reduced pictorial imagery

⁵⁹² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 1.

⁵⁹³ Zheng, 'My Reading of Shitao's *Remarks on Painting*', 77.

⁵⁹⁴ Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 239, 250. There are two versions of the English title of this painting by Shitao: *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots* and *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Dots*, sometimes written as simply *Ten Thousand Ugly Dots* – the thesis uses the first version, which is also used by Jonathan Hay, but in the thesis's fifth chapter, when discussing Zhang Hongtu's painting, shown at the 2007 Third Chengdu Biennale, the alternative version appears since it was originally used in relation to the artist's work in the biennale's catalogue.

⁵⁹⁵ Zheng, 'My Reading of Shitao's *Remarks on Painting*', 78.

⁵⁹⁶ Hay, *Shitao*, 251.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 272; Shitao, 'An Expressionist Credo', in *The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art*, ed. Lin Yutang (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 141-142.

was also at the heart of Reinhardt's painting process, manifested by such works as *Abstract Painting No. 5* (Figure 83, 1962), where, as Stephanie Rosenthal wrote, 'all difference [and] all separation is abolished [for] an expression of "oneness"'.⁵⁹⁸ Indeed, although the piece comprised nine individual dark squares, Reinhardt articulated them via barely perceptible modulations in the brushwork application and almost indistinguishable navy and black hues in the oil paint mixture.

Consequently, on one hand, upon a closer look, the unique appearance of each of the nine squares could be noticed, encompassing minute traces of contrasting brushwork sweeps and pigment fusion transitions. On the other hand, just as Shitao's ink circles, the squares visually melted into a single overarching square shape, appearing as borderless and ever-expanding beyond the picture frame, which enabled the artist, as he underlined, to 'advance toward the formless' and to 'encounter nothingness' of Dao as the everything's underlining principle in the metaphysical realm of being.⁵⁹⁹ These conceptual and visual parallels with Shitao were not by coincidence as Reinhardt saw the Chinese old master's dotted ink paintings at the 1954 *Chinese Landscape Painting* exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art, which curator Sherman Lee especially praised Shitao's 'pictorially' emphatic use of brush, which negated 'precision and accuracy' in favour of the conceptually rich 'primordial stroke of creation'.⁶⁰⁰

In his review of the exhibition for *Art News* Reinhardt shared Lee's view that Shitao's ink works epitomised temporal and cultural 'universality', acknowledging that this expressive approach by Chinese old masters was capable to 'warm the cockles of the heart of the coolest contemporary Abstract-Expressionist enthusiast'.⁶⁰¹ Particularly, the artist highlighted the exhibited works' 'formless washes and dissolved spaces', which appeared as 'boundless and infinite', pertinently representing 'the vastness and majesty of nature and the universe'.⁶⁰² Based on this, he proclaimed Chinese traditional ink painting to be 'one of the greatest achievements in art and human history'.⁶⁰³ It was under the impression of this Chinese art exhibition, featuring Shitao's works, that

⁵⁹⁸ Stephanie Rosenthal, *Black Paintings: Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 41-42.

⁵⁹⁹ Alexandra Munroe, 'Art of Perceptual Experience: Pure Abstraction and Ecstatic Minimalism', in *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 290.

⁶⁰⁰ Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1954), 120-122 (illustrations of a selection of Shitao's exhibited paintings), 119, 121-122.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 119; Ad Reinhardt, 'Cycles through the Chinese Landscape: A Modern Look at Oriental Antiquity in the Cleveland Museum's Huge Show of Chinese Landscape Painting', *Art News*, December 1954, 26.

⁶⁰² Reinhardt, 'Cycles through the Chinese Landscape', 27.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.*, 24.

Reinhardt started deepening his interest in Asian visual culture and philosophy, which shortly in the 1960s resulted in his own aforementioned metaphysical black-square paintings.⁶⁰⁴

In this respect, although visual parallels can be found between Reinhardt's works and earlier examples of European abstraction, particularly Russian Constructivism of Kazimir Malevich's (1879-1935) geometric paintings, for the American abstract expressionist artist Chinese old-master ink painting as well as Asian metaphysical visual culture and philosophy were the crucial sources of inspiration.⁶⁰⁵ Having noted this profound link between Shitao and American Abstract Expressionism of Reinhardt, Zheng got impelled to put the two artists' art approaches into a mutually enhancing dialogue in his own works. Their echoing ideas that a single dot or a square respectively could embody the myriad of forms with their accompanying metaphysical connotations prompted Zheng to consider expressing the broadest ideas via the most minimal and basic imagery in his *Blot* series, derived from 'the independence and uniqueness of ink' and its manifold material possibilities of being handled on paper.⁶⁰⁶

For example, in *Blot No. 1* (Figure 84, 1997) Zheng represented a wide rectangle in broad brush sweeps, which consisted of a smaller blot with an inner grid outline, additionally punctuated with miniature dots. This smaller gridded blot was characterised by textural softness, manifested by smudges around its constituent parts, created as a result of the ink medium's quick dissolution properties. By contrast, the surrounding protagonist blot, created with acrylic, had a more rigid thickly pronounced structure, sitting on top of the paper surface. Consequently, by juxtaposing ink with acrylic – Zheng's signature combination from the 1980s – a greater number of pictorial nuances could be suggested about the single blot form, based on the two paints' material deviations. Thereby, Zheng showed how the inherently simple blot shape could create a profusion of structurally distinct elements, concurrently echoing Shitao's fluid circular forms and Reinhardt's brushwork-differentiated square agglomerates.

Significantly, reengaging once again with ink and brush tools 'felt very transparent' and natural to Zheng, who was raised and educated in the culture of ink art.⁶⁰⁷ As Chiu underlined, for migrant artists one of the stimuluses to reunite with Chinese cultural traditions once abroad was the very 'physical distance' from their native China, which, in its turn, contributed to the 'psychological connection' with their innate culture.⁶⁰⁸ In Zheng's case, it was not only the physical distance that

⁶⁰⁴ Munroe, 'Art of Perceptual Experience', 287, 290; Papanikolas, 'Abstract Expressionism', 22-23.

⁶⁰⁵ Rosenthal, *Black Paintings*, 36.

⁶⁰⁶ Zheng, 'My Reading of Shitao's *Remarks on Painting*', 76-78.

⁶⁰⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 16.

⁶⁰⁸ Chiu, *Breakout*, 52, 211.

stimulated his longing to embrace the Chinese side of his identity via the visual language of ink art, but also the temporal distance, conditioned by his nearly seven-year gap in creating publicly exhibited pictorial ink works.

However, after striving for nearly a decade to assimilate into the American art world, being generalised as the Chinese artist, who just happened to work in the USA, was also contrary to Zheng's intention behind going back to the ink medium. In this respect, in the *Blot* series Zheng posed as a bicultural interpreter, who utilised the imbedded cultural hybridity of American modern abstract art as a means to illuminate the Chinese painterly genre. Ultimately, the historical connection between the two functioned as a common denominator, which enabled the artist to meaningfully integrate cultural elements that spoke to both the Chinese and American sides of his identity.

Zheng continued exploring this bicultural approach to ink art through to the mid-2000s. At that time he also read Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's influential 1997 book *Formless: A User's Guide*, which further stimulated him to compare theoretical echoes between Chinese old-master ink painting and Western twentieth-century art.⁶⁰⁹ Published in conjunction with the same-named 1996 exhibition at Paris's Centre Pompidou, the book applied Georges Bataille's philosophical interpretation of *informe* (formless) to analysing anti-modern American and European artworks. Similar to Bataille's opposition to the modern capitalist world's rigid institutionalism, driven to contain and to give specific order to societal structures, anti-modern art – like Smithson's *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors)* (Figure 85, 1969), analysed below – took formlessness as a means of counteracting the modern art's preoccupation with form and materialism – such as in minimalist factory-produced installations of clear-cut geometric figures – that was seen to endorse the aforementioned logic of twentieth-century capitalism.

Specifically, Bois and Krauss outlined four aspects of formlessness, three of which were discussed by Bataille, that were employed by the exhibited artists, namely base materialism, horizontality, pulse and entropy. The first aspect of base materialism, which connoted dematerialisation or that lack of fixed form, had a political connotation of 'de-classing matter' and 'refusing to let itself be assimilated to any concept whatever'.⁶¹⁰ In other words, it expressed the opposition to institutional structures that aimed to organise society into imposed categories, based on income, race, or gender amongst others. This resistance to institutional powers continued in the ideological

⁶⁰⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 12.

⁶¹⁰ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 53.

implications of the second aspect of horizontality, which is the reverse of verticality, associated with modern bourgeois painters' vertical easels or modern museums' vertical display walls.⁶¹¹

Similarly, the third aspect of pulse, suggesting being ever-changing – the only term, which is not directly discussed by Bataille – referred to the state of being 'against the stable image of the human body' and of the wider social realm, reiterating that there is no single fixed perspective that could be institutionally imposed upon people.⁶¹² Lastly, the formlessness's fourth aspect of entropy was defined as 'the constant and irreversible degradation of energy in every system'.⁶¹³ Within the exhibition's ideological context, this implied the degradation of modern capitalism that prioritised excessive machine-facilitated production over the negative impact of wastefulness on the environment, or getting a certain class of people richer at the expense of getting another class poorer. This industrially powered system was believed, as Smithson put it, to be 'not built for the ages, but rather against the ages', making it 'primed for imminent collapse into entropy', or, in other words, into chaos.⁶¹⁴

At the same time, in addition to these political connotations, with which Zheng has been selectively engaging since his early 1990s politically charged installation works, analysed in the previous chapter, Bataille's notion of formlessness also echoed Asian metaphysical philosophies. This was partially touched upon in Bois and Krauss's book through their discussion of ever-changing chaotic matter that conceptually evoked the Asian theorisation of the universe as 'uniquely vague, uniquely elusive'.⁶¹⁵ In this respect, the anti-modern artists' interest in portraying disintegrated or non-delineated forms had a further layer of interpretation, related to the Asian-rooted metaphysical vision of the cosmos as unfathomable flux. Significantly, this could be directly inferred from Bois and Krauss's explication of each of the four above-mentioned aspects of formlessness.

Indeed, base materialism, ultimately, referred to the state of limitlessness – that basic condition of the fluctuating universe – while entropy emphasised the process of disintegrating into that limitless and ungraspable state, both of which stood for 'a continually increasing state of disorder and of nondifferentiation within matter'.⁶¹⁶ In turn, the step of bringing art action down to horizontal grounds – utilised by such painters as Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), who produced his abstract line-splatter paintings on a floor – enabled to create more spontaneous interactions amongst pictorial

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, 31, 135.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶¹⁴ Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 311.

⁶¹⁵ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 5; Laozi, *Daodejing*, ed. Edmund Ryden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45.

⁶¹⁶ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 29, 34.

materials beyond artists' immediate control, aligning the painting process more closely with the universe's chaotic condition.⁶¹⁷ Echoingly, pulse – evoked in art through the use of multiple visual perspectives, due to repetition, layering or surface reflections – transmitted a sense of movement that underscored the fluctuating motion of the cosmos.⁶¹⁸

These ideas can also be inferred from Smithson's *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors)*. This *Nonsite* series of works was inspired by the artist's observation of slate quarries in Pennsylvania, which he compared with the ocean, where 'all boundaries and distinctions lost their meaning [...] and collapsed all notions of gestalt unity'.⁶¹⁹ The inability to visually grasp or, as Smithson wrote, to 'contain this "oceanic" site' made him experience 'a sense of displacement', where, akin to the boundless universe, there were 'no traces of an end or a beginning'.⁶²⁰ To suggest the fathomlessness of this natural state, Smithson presented his *Nonsite* installations 'as a fragment of a greater fragmentation'.⁶²¹ In the case of *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors)*, this was achieved due to the employment of eight freestanding and four horizontal mirrors, placed on a floor, across which dilapidated soil heaps were loosely scattered.

The combined reflectiveness, generated by the vertical and horizontal mirror axes, further non-concretised the installation's imagery, animating it with flashes of reflections' 'fleeting instances that evade measure'.⁶²² This way the viewer could experience that sense of spatial disorientation that Smithson felt at the site of the slate quarries. The inclusion of the heaps of actual soil, prone to minute changes in the light of the viewer's steps or other physical movements, also made the installation undergo live processes of entropic disintegration, reiterating how the universe's constituent parts – from 'one's mind' to 'the earth' – are subject to 'a constant state of erosion', out of which new processes of growth emerge.⁶²³ Thus, in addition to providing the critique of modern art and capitalism's preoccupation with precision and containment, in *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors)* Smithson also manifested how he, in his own words, 'was always interested in origins and primordial beginnings'.⁶²⁴

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 135.

⁶¹⁹ Robert Smithson, 'A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects', in *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 89.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² Robert Smithson, 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan', in *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 96.

⁶²³ Smithson, 'A Sedimentation of the Mind', 82.

⁶²⁴ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 281.

Viewed from this angle, as Zheng observed, the metaphysical undertones of Bois and Krauss's elucidations of base materialism, entropy, horizontality and pulse could also be related to the principles of Chinese scholar ink painting by Shitao or Northern Song (960-1127) landscape artists, like Fan Kuan (c. 990-1030).⁶²⁵ For example, in Shitao's *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Blots* and Fan's *Travellers among Mountains and Streams* (Figure 86, undated), the artists explored the repetition of the circular dots and serpentine lines respectively as a means of portraying the universe's formless state, engulfed in this ever-expanding action of fluctuating, which resonated with the aforementioned implications behind base materialism and entropy. Additionally, the paintings were also largely executed horizontally, in line with the Chinese convention of painting on tabletops or floors to allow greater brushwork spontaneity, especially when applying splashed ink – the technique frequently adopted by old masters like Wang Mo (active mid-ninth century).⁶²⁶

In relation to pulse, this is historically the most paramount feature of Chinese traditional ink painting, formulated by Xie He back in the sixth century and Jing Hao at the turn of the tenth century, who termed it as *qi*, meaning pulsating energy.⁶²⁷ In Shitao's painting the latter could be inferred from his swift brush movements, setting the interchangeably circular and linear rhythms, while Fan transmitted a sense of motion about his monumental landscape by splitting it into three perspectival distances, moving the viewer's gaze amongst foreground rocks, a middle-register ravine and background towering mountains. Having noted this suggestive conceptual overlap between Chinese scholar ink painting and the selected metaphysical implications behind base materialism, entropy, horizontality and pulse, discussed in *Formless*, Zheng looked for a way to synthesise the two in his early 2000s works, resulting in a new series of ink paintings.⁶²⁸

For example, in *Ink Series* (Figure 87, 2006), compared with the earlier *Blot* series, the artist embraced the greater degree of compositional formlessness by depicting an interlocked mesh of circular and linear swirls of smudged paint. Specifically, a central cluster of acrylic blots was positioned between two elongated rectilinear ink washes, making the entire composition appear as a single continuous spritz of abstract lines, piled up together without any clearly delineated borders, thereby suggesting spatial limitlessness, implied by Bois and Krauss's base materialism amongst its other aforementioned political implications. In turn, a series of progressively fading

⁶²⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 1.

⁶²⁶ James Cahill, *Three Alternative Histories of Chinese Painting* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 79.

⁶²⁷ Hsieh Ho (Xie He), 'The Six Techniques of Painting', in *Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art*, ed. Lin Yutang (London: Heinemann, 1967), 36; Stephen Owen, 'Bi Fa Ji', in *Ways with Words: Writing about Reading Texts from Early China*, ed. Pauline Yu, Peter Bol, Stephen Owen and Willard Peterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 216-217.

⁶²⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Questions 2, 4.

touches of ink and acrylic in the painting's lower section gave the impression of active dissolution, or that entropic process of disintegration of form into formless matter.

Moreover, since Zheng executed his work horizontally on the floor, he was also able to pour water on top of his paint on paper, letting its flows freely crease through the brushwork, further fragmenting the fading smudges.⁶²⁹ A resulting sense of fluctuating motion in this painting epitomised the idea of ever-changing matter, which was ungraspable and unmeasurable due to its constant immersion in flux. This visually echoed Smithson's departure from concrete forms in *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors)*, where the minute-changing reflectiveness of the mirrors was additionally destabilised by the crumbly heaps of soil. At the same time, Zheng's *Ink Series* also had the visual resemblance to, as Erickson noted, 'interlocking, curving forms' and 'the cycling of the life force' in Northern Song landscape ink painting, discussed above.⁶³⁰

In this respect, from the *Blot* works to *Ink Series*, Zheng's reflection on the overlapping underpinnings behind the American twentieth-century and Chinese old-master art approaches presented the case for helping advance the non-compartmentalising integration of cultural heritage-inspired art on the wider Californian contemporary art scene. Just as in New York at the turn of the century, in California there were vital attempts to address the ongoing issue of cultural and racial discrimination that led to, for example, the 1996 historical election of Willie Brown as San Francisco's first African American mayor.⁶³¹ As part of this broader socio-political campaign, selected Californian art institutions started giving a greater consideration, with varying degrees of success, to representing art with culturally distinct elements that were conventionally dismissed as the opposite of contemporary and, specifically, Western American contemporary art. One of such institutions was San Francisco's Limn Gallery that in 1997 premiered Zheng's *Blot* series.⁶³²

The exhibition was from a series of shows that the gallery's owner Dan Friedlander staged in 1997-1998 under a common title, *East Meets East in the West*, simultaneously showing works by contemporary Chinese-born Bay Area and overseas China-based artists.⁶³³ Thus, Zheng's *Blot* works were presented alongside a joint solo show of China-based Jiang Jing's (born 1975) abstract ink paintings (Figure 88), after which the exhibition series continued in 1998 with pieces in other media

⁶²⁹ Zheng, 'Selection from Artist Interviews', 99.

⁶³⁰ Britta Erickson, 'Innovations in Space and Painting Philosophy – Paintings by Zheng Chongbin and Qiu Shihua', in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale – The International Symposium in Conjunction with Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Shen Kuiyi and Feng Bin (Chengdu: Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum, 2007), 81.

⁶³¹ James Richardson, *Willie Brown: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 389.

⁶³² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 5.

⁶³³ ArtSlant, 'Limn Art Gallery', <https://www.artslant.com/sf/venues/show/2052-limn-art-gallery?tab=VENUE> (accessed 23 April 2020).

by, for example, oil painter Liu Xiaodong (born 1963).⁶³⁴ As Friedlander recalled in a 2006 interview with Erickson, when he ‘started hearing there were some Chinese artists in the Bay Area’, he became interested to promote their works alongside mainland Chinese art, starting in 1997, with many of those artists being unknown at the time not just on the west coast, but in the wider USA.⁶³⁵ Indeed, the Limn Gallery’s wider goal was to help contemporary art with Chinese elements ‘join the post-modern [Western American] world’ and to manifest this art’s ‘highly intellectualised cultural discourse’, critically navigating between native cultural-heritage elements and ‘the mainstream art current’.⁶³⁶ Hence, in his review of the broader exhibition series for *The San Francisco Examiner*, Bonetti compared the Limn Gallery’s local initiative with a 1998 large-scale show, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*, at the US leading mainstream Guggenheim Museum in New York.⁶³⁷ Similarly, the latter devoted special attention to US-based and overseas Chinese-born contemporary ink artists, grouped into a dedicated section, which altogether demonstrated the early rise in the widespread American institutional acknowledgment of Chinese contemporary art rather than only ancient painting or antique artworks.⁶³⁸

As Bonetti further underlined in his review, the exhibition’s curatorial argument that ‘Chinese contemporary art is becoming part of our world’ was successfully made, inviting ‘no disputing’.⁶³⁹ In another review of the broader exhibition series for *SF Weekly*, Marcy Freedman echoingly suggested that the works at *East Meets East in the West* showed ‘interesting new ways’ of making art without, at the same time, locking them into ‘traditional Chinese ties’, which would make them ‘look much different’ and alienated from local American art forms.⁶⁴⁰ On the other hand, the gallery’s decision to exhibit American Chinese-born artists alongside China-based rather than native American artists did invite disputing whether or not Chinese contemporary art was still perceived as being ‘much different’ within the context of the Western American cultural world.

⁶³⁴ Sotheby’s, ‘Lot 113’, in ‘Past Auctions: *Contemporary Asian Art*’, 20 September 2006, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.113.html/2006/contemporary-asian-art-n08242> (accessed 3 December 2020).

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ James Cahill and Tsao Hsingyuan, ‘Preface’, in *East Meets East in the West*, ed. James Cahill and Tsao Hsingyuan (San Francisco: Limn Gallery, 1998), unnumbered.

⁶³⁷ David Bonetti, ‘“East Meets East” on Townsend Street’, *The San Francisco Examiner*, 12 May 1998, 54.

⁶³⁸ Melissa Chiu, Miwako Tezuka and Linda J. Park, ‘Asian Contemporary Art: The Last Decade 1992-2002 – A Preliminary Study of Contemporary Art Trends in New York’, Asia Society, 2002, <http://acaw.info/ACAW/pastprograms/2003program/acaw03/trends.htm> (accessed 15 October 2020).

⁶³⁹ Bonetti, ‘“East Meets East” on Townsend Street’, 54.

⁶⁴⁰ Marcy Freedman, ‘First Thursday Report’, *SF Weekly*, 4 January 1998, <https://www.sfweekly.com/calendar/first-thursday-report-5/amp/> (accessed 3 December 2020).

Therefore, the curatorial tactic behind the Limn Gallery or Guggenheim Museum's exhibitions, as mentioned above, only gave the institutional acknowledgment of the idea that art with Chinese elements could belong to the mainstream institutional American art scene. At the same time, this alone was very important within the context of the turn of and the beginning of the twenty-first century – as argued in the following chapter, this emphasising of the contemporary Chinese art category in the West helped draw attention to the very presence of such art, given that previously it had almost no mainstream recognition. Nevertheless, the ongoing tendency to exhibit American Chinese-born ink artists solely next to China-based ink artists remains to be problematic as the more it is employed, the more it adds to the compartmentalising rhetoric that diminishes the positioning of the USA's culturally diverse art on par with Western American art.

In the light of this, the Michael Martin Galleries' representation of Zheng's paintings from 2001 up until the mid-2000s alongside American artists can be argued to have more forcefully made the statement for the integration of bicultural art in the USA. The gallery's owner Martin was primarily known for promoting 'new Californian abstract art', as Zheng recalled, donating a portion of her earnings to fund regional Bay Area children's art classes.⁶⁴¹ Specifically, in 2002 Martin showed Zheng's latest ink works at the San Francisco International Art Exposition, envisioned since 1998 by Thomas Blackman to offer works by American and international museum-level artists.⁶⁴² Getting exposure at this high-profile California-based exposition – which in 2002 was attended by Mayor Brown and which raised gala funds were donated to the San Francisco Art Institute – through the gallery specialising in Bay Area art, helped underscore the link of Zheng's ink paintings with the Californian cultural scene.⁶⁴³

Moreover, throughout Michael Martin's curated exhibitions, Zheng's abstract works in the styles of the *Blot* series or *Ink Series* were exhibited alongside prominent American artists from amply wide-ranging backgrounds, such as in 2001 next to Mexican-born Ricardo Mazal (born 1950), native American London-based Linda Karshan (born 1947) or Texas-born Rocky Schenck (born 1955) amongst others.⁶⁴⁴ In 2003 for the *Subtil(e)* exhibition the gallery also placed Zheng into a group of

⁶⁴¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 7; Paragon Real Estate Group, 'The Arts: Michael Martin, Champion of Arts Curriculum for Local Kids', *Place Magazine*, 15 March 2017, <https://medium.com/placemagazine/the-arts-michael-martin-champion-of-arts-curriculum-for-local-kids-9806d3445da2> (accessed 20 April 2020).

⁶⁴² Zheng Chongbin, 'Biography', <http://zhengchongbin.com/biography.html> (accessed 6 December 2018); Jesse Hamlin, 'Brushes with Greatness / Art Novices Can Shop for Giants like Miro, O'Keeffe or Local Talent at S.F. International Art Exposition', *SF Gate*, 30 September 1999, <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Brushes-With-Greatness-Art-novices-can-shop-for-2906117.php> (accessed 21 April 2020).

⁶⁴³ Alan Bamberger, 'San Francisco International Art Exposition 4, Opening Night', *Art Business*, 18 January 2002, <https://www.artbusiness.com/sf4a.html> (accessed 21 April 2020).

⁶⁴⁴ Michael Martin, *Michael Martin Galleries: Contemporary Fine Art* (San Francisco: Michael Martin Galleries, 2001).

local abstract artists, shown together with a selection of international artists, such as Philippe Jestin (born 1964) from France, whose works collectively focused on the deeper self and surrounding space exploration, suggestively countering ‘today’s info-glutted world’.⁶⁴⁵ Precisely, in the catalogue description Zheng was directly stated to represent San Francisco, explaining how his paintings synthesised together ‘the Western art-historical sense’ of abstraction with ‘traditional Chinese ink techniques’ as a way of addressing the metaphysical landscape of intrinsic formlessness.⁶⁴⁶

Importantly, this linked Zheng with other American Californian artists in the exhibition, such as Amanda Huguen (born 1970). Her *Linescapes* series, exemplified here by *Cathedral* (Figure 89, 2003), was pointed out to underscore an echoing kind of intrinsic landscapes, utilising synthetic ink on rubber or wood, in order to expose minute compositional details, in her case, about ‘the essence of surface and structure’, found in natural or urban settings.⁶⁴⁷ In this respect, instead of categorising Zheng as the exclusionary Chinese-ink painter, he was posed as the local, whose art’s multicultural aspect, while standing out, also served the wider thematic purpose of the exhibition and, thereby meaningfully blended in with the displayed regional abstract art forms in the divergent media.

Consequently, via the Michael Martin Galleries and, specifically, the latter’s network of artists, collaborators and corresponding audiences, Zheng was able to largely maintain the kind of the outreach platform that he secured for his non-culturally specific installations in the first half of the 1990s. Just as it was the case with his earlier works’ representation and reception at the mainstream regional art institutions, like the Stephen Wirtz Gallery in 1992 or the Meridian Gallery in 1996, his ink paintings were predominantly shown to have relevance to the broader art context of California. With fetched sales figures ranging from approximately 8,000 to 10,000 USD per piece, the artist’s new collectors also principally included native American Bay Area residents, who were Martin’s key clients.⁶⁴⁸

Specifically, Bay Area entrepreneur Fred Gordon became Zheng’s chief supporter, acquiring examples of the *Blot* series from the Michael Martin Galleries, which made him one of the region’s first serious Western collectors of contemporary ink art, as Zheng recalled.⁶⁴⁹ Gordon initially met the artist in 1995 at his studio, where the collector showed interest in his 1980s China-produced

⁶⁴⁵ Michael Martin Galleries, ‘Past Exhibitions Summary’, http://www.mmgalleries.com/exhibitions/past_exhibits.html#subtile (accessed 20 April 2020).

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 7.

⁶⁴⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 6.

pieces, ending up purchasing for around 5,500 USD one of Surrealism-inspired works that anthropomorphically represented a musical instrument.⁶⁵⁰ Once Zheng fully returned to ink painting, Gordon continued supporting the artist, building a comprehensive collection of his works, eventually acquiring examples of his early “practice” ink paintings from the first half of the 1990s alike, such as *Enigma of the Day* (Figure 90, 1995) that, as discussed earlier, Zheng produced as part of his private pursuit to keep practising ink brush handling, alluding to his 1980s *Ink Colour* series.⁶⁵¹

Significantly, the fact that Zheng’s new ink works resonated with the American cultural scene was also reiterated by local Californian Chinese organisations, which, akin to New York’s Asia Society Galleries, advocated the non-discriminating integration of art by Asian-born artists in the USA. For example, at the 1999 *From Chinese Ink to Abstraction* exhibition, featuring Zheng’s *Blot* series, the Chinese Culture Centre of San Francisco underlined that the latter belonged to the ‘realm where Eastern and Western traditions coexist’ due to the ‘[use of] Western art concepts as [ink’s] reference points’.⁶⁵² This underscored how selected US art institutions at the turn of the century attempted, in their own ways, to help generate the new status for culturally diverse contemporary art, like ink painting, positioning it as more of the local art dialect variation rather than the completely foreign language of visual expression, reminding how American twentieth-century artists themselves looked towards Asia.

This can be further illustrated by various examples of other Chinese-born US-based contemporary ink painters and US art institutions that supported them, who promoted the echoing vision of ink art as the culturally fluid construct, relatable to their residential local art contexts alike. Similar to Zheng, the historical interconnectedness between the American modern and Chinese classical forms of painting provided to these artists that vital balancing perspective from which the genre of Chinese-ink painting could be more applicably presented in the USA at the turn of the century. This can be exemplified by Liu Dan’s *Splendour of Heaven and Earth* (Figure 91, 1994-1995), produced during the artist’s residency in New York.

By utilising the tradition-rooted *zhongfeng* (seal script) type of brushwork, which required brush to be held upright above paper surface so that ink from centred brush-tip could be evenly distributed, Liu closely evoked Wu Bin’s (1573-1620) Ming-period graphically detailed pictorial articulation, such

⁶⁵⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 4.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² Chinese Culture Centre of San Francisco, ‘Works by Lampo Leong, Binghui Yan, Yu Zhang, and Chongbin Zheng’, November 1999, <https://www.cccsf.us/from-chinese-ink-to-abstraction/> (accessed 15 December 2018).

as in his multi-angled portrait of a scholar rock in *Ten Views of Lingbi Stone* (Figure 92, 1610).⁶⁵³ In both instances, the respective imageries comprised the replication of ultimately the same rectilinear stroke in a multiplicity of ways, appearing as the ever-transforming chain of forms, analogously modelled, but also minutely differentiated.⁶⁵⁴ At the same time, having recently moved to New York in the early 1990s, Liu was also inspired by Pollock's art, widely exhibited at local museums like the Museum of Modern Art.⁶⁵⁵

The artist particularly took note of Pollocks' intricate rectilinear brushwork, illustrated here by *There Were Seven in Eight* (Figure 93, c. 1945), where depicted lines, akin to Wu Bin's multivariate texturing strokes, but with the greater visual intensity, repeatedly intersected with no straightforward indication of a beginning or an ending.⁶⁵⁶ Thus, in *Splendour of Heaven and Earth* Liu also densely filled in his pictorial surface, creating a continuous band of chaotically swirling lines, which obscured mountain forms, enduing them with geometric abstractness. Consequently, by utilising the *zhongfeng* texturing technique alongside Pollock's swirling brushwork typology the artist underlined the similarities and the divergences in the compositional arrangements, employed by the Chinese old-master and American modern artists.

Importantly, this type of Liu's signature ink painting style was represented in 2001 *China without Borders – An Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art*, collaboratively organised by Sotheby's and Goedhuis Contemporary in New York as one of the earliest attempts to introduce contemporary Chinese mainland alongside overseas ink painters to the city's art collectors. In a catalogue's essay, 'Adventures in Chinaspace and Transnationalism', where Liu's ink paintings were discussed, Hay argued that focusing on solely the Chinese side of overseas ink painting was limiting and it was vital to see it as 'at once Chinese [and] cosmopolitan'.⁶⁵⁷ The very title of the exhibition was specially coined to suggest how in the hands of particularly the exhibited US-resident artists ink painting had the ability to transcend borders and to embrace cultural binarism that made it meaningful to both Chinese and American audiences.

⁶⁵³ Jerome Silbergeld, 'What Realism, Which Beauty?', in *Outside In: Chinese x American x Contemporary Art*, ed. Jerome Silbergeld (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), 244; Wu, 'Transcending the East/West Dichotomy', 30.

⁶⁵⁴ Shelagh Vainker, *Liu Dan: New Landscapes and Old Masters* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, 2016), 26.

⁶⁵⁵ Caron Smith, 'Liu Dan's Ink Handscroll at the San Diego Museum of Art', *Orientations*, 30 (1999), 58.

⁶⁵⁶ Sotheby's, *Liu Dan: Splendour of Heaven and Earth* (Hong Kong: Sotheby's, 2015), 3.

⁶⁵⁷ Jonathan Hay, 'Adventures in Chinaspace and Transnationalism: The Chinese Artist Outside China', in *China without Borders: An Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Michael Goedhuis (New York: Goedhuis Contemporary, 2001), 23.

This more ‘cosmopolitan’ institutional reception of Liu’s works was also conveyed in an earlier 1997 exhibition, *Sensuality in the Abstract*, organised by the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, where the artist’s ink landscape art of open-endedly deconstructed rectangles was showcased alongside works by Sam Francis (1923-1994) or Craig Kauffman (1932-2010).⁶⁵⁸ Curated by Josine Ianco-Starrels, the exhibition explored the potential of abstraction to evoke various emotions.⁶⁵⁹ Hence, Ianco-Starrels’s choice to represent Liu’s ink handscroll within this widely resonating thematic framing showed how culturally diverse art could be non-stereotypically integrated alongside broader Western art examples – an important move to make by the US curator originally from Romania, often perceived in the West as the peripheral Eastern European country. Nevertheless, when reviewing Liu’s exhibited work, William Wilson, despite acknowledging that it alluded to ‘something inspired by Leonardo’s late apocalyptic “Deluge” drawings’, also made a stereotype-charged comparison with ‘a mad battle scene from a Kurosawa samurai film’.⁶⁶⁰

It can be seen that at the time when the multicultural politics had started with varying degrees of success reaching its new peak of advancement on the American art scene, Zheng and comparable US-based ink painters, like Liu Dan, in their own unique ways resorted to the historical link between China’s pictorial conventions and American twentieth-century art. Striking this balance between the two visual cultures’ individual and overlapping elements became the starting point for such painters to get their personal answers to the question they all faced upon settling in the US, that is how to simultaneously demonstrate the ‘awareness of their cultural origin as well as their transnational identity’, as Wu Hung wrote.⁶⁶¹ Significantly, their works’ constructive cultural binarism attracted to them attention from selected American institutions that with certain achievements and limitations strove to give the more inclusive representation to art with culturally diverse motifs.

Overall, this showed an important divergence from the public reception of Zheng’s 1980s ink paintings from China, which generated interest in San Francisco around 1989 primarily because they were seen as the exemplars of Chinese mainland contemporary art that was different from local oil painting or installation art.⁶⁶² As argued above, the 1990s broader engagement with issues of multiculturalism enabled the facilitation of the more apparent step towards helping diminish (but far from fully overcoming) the extent of cultural prejudices towards Chinese-ink art in the USA.

⁶⁵⁸ William Wilson, ‘“Sensuality” Invites Tickle of Tactility’, *The Los Angeles Times*, 26 March 1997, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-03-26-ca-42102-story.html> (accessed 17 April 2020).

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 286.

⁶⁶² As discussed in the third chapter, in the case of ink painting, it was perceived as drawing, which was pointed out to Zheng at his 1989 exhibition opening at the Bruce Velick Gallery.

Overall, this provided the more conducive stage for contemporary Chinese-American ink artists to navigate between the two sides of their cultural identification in the American socio-cultural world. Significantly, as China's economy boomed in the twenty-first century, a more global outreach platform for ink art started to unfold, presenting both opportunities and limitations for the reception of Chinese ink, as explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 5

Chinese Cultural Boom and New International Opportunities for Twenty-First Century Ink Painting

Fuelled by China's booming economy, a new type of Chinese cultural infrastructure emerged in the new century, creating numerous opportunities with an international outreach for exhibiting contemporary ink art in China. The first event of this standing to be exclusively dedicated to contemporary ink art was the 2007 Third Chengdu Biennale in Chengdu, curated by California-based Shen Kuiyi and Erickson alongside China-based curators Lu Hong and Feng Bin. Numerous overseas ink artists, including Zheng, were invited to participate in this pioneering exhibition that addressed the double-sided question of ink art's applicability to both the present day and the international world. Significantly, this boost in the development of the Chinese domestic contemporary ink painting industry was shortly accompanied by attention from major Western non-profit and commercial institutions alike, which led to the establishment of Chinese Contemporary Ink as the new global art market category at the turn of the 2010s.

This chapter proceeds to trace precisely how contemporary ink works found themselves in this geographically diverse spotlight of attention in the new century as well as to reflect on ways in which this impacted the ink art's subsequent development and its wider reception. As the chapter's first section argues, the 2007 Chengdu Biennale was a major catalyst for encouraging the exploration of the contemporary ink art's potential to gain international outreach. Hence, a growing number of ink painters, ranging from Zheng to Li Huayi, directed their ink practices towards themes and techniques that resonated with their works' expanding multinational audiences. Indeed, as the chapter's final second section shows, the rising representation of such contemporary ink art by internationally oriented cultural institutions – spread across China and the broader Western art world – gave rise to the international rhetoric around the current-century reception of Chinese ink, registering both achievements and limitations along its way.

I. Advancing Contemporary Ink Painting as the International-Level Art Form: The Third Chengdu Biennale and Artists' Responses

Importantly, the broader institutional popularisation of Chinese contemporary ink painting in the new century started emerging against the background of China's booming economy. Between 1992 and 1997 the country maintained the unprecedented 11 percent of its annual average rate of the

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth.⁶⁶³ These swift economic changes were soon recognised internationally, particularly in 2001, when the country was admitted to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), while also winning a bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games.⁶⁶⁴ In 2002 the country won another bid to host the 2010 World Expo, which was alone reported ‘to generate millions of dollars of investment’ for China.⁶⁶⁵ With the influx of these financial opportunities and in preparation for hosting the two major global events, the state focused increasingly more on developing China’s cultural sphere.

Indeed, already in 2002 the government unveiled its plan to build 100 new museums for the 2010 World Expo, and 30 new museums were opened especially for the 2008 Olympic Games, in addition to numerous more privately funded non-profit cultural institutions.⁶⁶⁶ Importantly, many of these newly founded museums were dedicated to fostering the growth of Chinese contemporary art, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai, opened in 2005, or the Today Art Museum in Beijing, established in 2006.⁶⁶⁷ Accumulatively, this cultural art sector boom, sustained domestically by the state itself and private businesses, meant that the latter, on the investment-holding grounds, could now actively co-shape trends for Chinese contemporary art, and their taste predominantly lay with China’s art traditions.⁶⁶⁸

Precisely, the rising economic power of China since the turn of the 2000s became, as Simon Castets put it, ‘a source of national pride’.⁶⁶⁹ Now that China had started climbing up the world ladder of GDP results with unprecedented speed, becoming the fourth largest economy globally already in 2006, Chinese official and private art investors wanted to reiterate their country’s self-sufficiency in the cultural field alike.⁶⁷⁰ As Chinese politician Liu Mingfu reflected in his book *The China Dream*, alongside its rapid economic development in the 2000s, China wanted ‘the world [to] see that [Chinese] civilization has more charm, more vitality, and more creativity than it is credited with’.⁶⁷¹ The pride in economic achievements naturally streamed into the ‘cultural pride’ and the desire to

⁶⁶³ Ma Jun, *The Chinese Economy in the 1990s* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000), 2.

⁶⁶⁴ Dali L. Young, ‘China in 2001: Economic Liberalisation and Its Political Discontents’, *Asian Survey*, 42 (2002), 18.

⁶⁶⁵ BBC, ‘China to Host Expo 2010’, 3 December 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2540585.stm> (accessed 21 July 2019).

⁶⁶⁶ Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, ‘Government, Business, and People: Museum Development in Asia’, in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, ed. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 266.

⁶⁶⁷ Chiu, *Breakout*, 209.

⁶⁶⁸ Iain Robertson, *Understanding Art Markets: Inside the World of Art and Business* (London: Routledge, 2016), 25.

⁶⁶⁹ Simon Castets, ‘Everyday Miracles: National Pride and Chinese Collectors of Contemporary Art’, *Yishu*, 6 (2007), 53.

⁶⁷⁰ Keith Bradsher, ‘Chinese Economy Grows to 4th Largest in the World’, *The New York Times*, 25 January 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/business/worldbusiness/chinese-economy-grows-to-4th-largest-in-the-world.html> (accessed 21 July 2019).

⁶⁷¹ Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking & Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era* (New York: CN Times Books, 2015), 17.

demonstrate to the world that ‘China has the most excellent cultural gene’, worthy of being recognised as the international-level high-end art form.⁶⁷²

In the light of this, already in the 2001 ‘Manifesto of Chinese Cultural Renaissance’ the state-run Chinese Academy of Social Sciences patriotically proclaimed the ‘twenty-first century [as the] century for Chinese culture’, which was supplemented by a nation-wide programme of education in nationalism, with Chinese indigenous cultural traditions, such as Peking opera or Confucian literature, being one of its core strands.⁶⁷³ Similarly, in the field of contemporary fine arts, various exhibitions followed that championed particular to China’s cultural context artistic experiments – especially those with ink painting since ink, as China’s longest surviving pictorial art form, was that characteristic ‘matter for the Chinese’.⁶⁷⁴ As Pan Xinglei explained, emphasising Chinese cultural elements in contemporary art was crucial since this alone could enable China’s art professionals to express their ‘independent thinking, self-integrity and uniqueness’, and to withstand losing their identity in the face of the Western cultural hegemony.⁶⁷⁵

For these reasons amongst others, the accelerating Chinese phenomenon of the so-called ‘cultural protectionism’ became the utmost declaration of the nation’s lately earned financial prosperity.⁶⁷⁶ However, it is important to note that this rising nationalist rhetoric within China was not characterised by straightforward absolutism and, when it came to the cultural field, it was translated into a more sophisticated oxymoronic direction. This direction was at once, as Ong wrote, ‘patriotic Chinese’ and ‘[internationally] avant-garde’, offering ‘a reimagination of the global’ via this adapted nationalist framework.⁶⁷⁷ After all, as Wang Cangbai pointed out, China’s acceptance to host the 2008 Olympic Games spoke to the country’s ‘attempt to integrate with the international community’.⁶⁷⁸ Thereby, an “old-fashioned” kind of cultural nationalism evolved into the “double-rooted” one, ‘belonging simultaneously to China and to the world’.⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷² Ibid., 66.

⁶⁷³ Yu Keping, ‘The Developmental Logic of Chinese Culture under Modernisation and Globalisation’, *Boundary*, 2 (2008), 163-164; Zhao Suisheng, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 9.

⁶⁷⁴ Pi Daojian, ‘20 Years of Ink Experiment: A Spiritual Journey of Unconventional Beginning and Reassuring Juxtaposition’, in *China: 20 Years of Ink Experiment*, ed. Pi Daojian and Wang Huangsheng (Harbin: Heilongjiang Fine Arts Publishing House, 2001), 14-15.

⁶⁷⁵ Pan Xinglei, *New Chinese Occidentalism: Chinese Contemporary Art in Beijing* (Beijing: 800 Culture Development, 2007), 43.

⁶⁷⁶ Iain Robertson, *A New Art from Emerging Markets* (Surrey: Lund Humphries, 2011), 14-15.

⁶⁷⁷ Ong, “‘What Marco Polo Forgot’”, 482.

⁶⁷⁸ Wang Cangbai, *Museum Representations of Chinese Diasporas: Migration Histories and the Cultural Heritage of the Homeland* (London: Routledge, 2021), 31.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 38-39.

One of the particularly effective ways to create this oxymoronic hybrid image for China's art scene, which was at once Chinese and internationally applicable, was by attracting to it recognised overseas Chinese-born artists – especially those with established reputations for working with Chinese cultural elements, such as the ink medium. In 2000 the government even passed a bill to make it easier for the overseas Chinese to either partially or permanently return to China for work opportunities.⁶⁸⁰ For example, Li Huayi started exhibiting in China in as early as 2001, setting up his studio in Beijing in 2012, whereas Liu Dan permanently settled in Beijing in 2006.⁶⁸¹ Similarly, Xu Bing (born 1955), who turned to character-brushstroke landscape ink painting in the 2000s after specialising in calligraphy woodblock installations, moved to Beijing in 2008 to work as Vice President for International Relations at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.⁶⁸²

Amidst such growingly favourable investment and legal circumstances, the Third Chengdu Biennale was organised in 2007, pertinently illustrating China's attempt around the time of the Beijing Olympic Games to advance its double-sided nationalist-and-internationalist framework of the cultural development. Titled *Reboot*, the biennale was sponsored by Chinese real-estate developer Deng Hong in the run up to the opening of his private Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art.⁶⁸³ Significantly, it became the first large-scale exhibition of the international standing to present an array of present-day Chinese-ink works, bringing together China-based and numerous overseas Chinese artists, including Zheng, in whose personal case this biennale marked the beginning of collaborations with the country's local cultural institutions in the new century.

On one hand, the biennale had vivid nationalist underpinnings. From the turn of the 2000s, in his interviews Deng mentioned that 'foreign influence on Chinese art [was] too great', and, therefore, it was vital to curate large-scale exhibitions that reflected 'Chinese standards'.⁶⁸⁴ Consequently, 'the rise of Chinese culture', as Deng described it in a preface to the 2007 biennale catalogue, was the

⁶⁸⁰ Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 'Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on Amending the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Returned Overseas Chinese and the Family Members of Overseas Chinese', *Law Info China*, 31 October 2000, <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=18829&lib=law#> (accessed 16 November 2018).

⁶⁸¹ Li Huayi, 'Group Exhibitions', <https://lihuayiarts.com/exhibitions/12-group-exhibitions/overview/> (accessed 21 May 2020); Kate Whitehead, 'Chinese Artist Li Huayi, in Hong Kong for Show, Describes His Lucky Life', *SCMP Post Magazine*, 26 March 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/arts-entertainment/article/1929968/chinese-artist-li-huayi-hong-kong-show> (accessed 15 July 2018); Claire Wilson, 'Contemporary Ink Art "Unbound": Chinese Artist Liu Dan – Artist Profile', *Art Radar*, 2 October 2016, <https://artradarjournal.com/2016/10/02/chinese-artist-liu-dan-at-the-minneapolis-institute-of-art/> (accessed 15 July 2018).

⁶⁸² Joyce Lau, 'Xu Bing: An Artist Who Bridges East and West', *The New York Times*, 19 May 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/arts/20iht-Xu20.html> (accessed 21 May 2020).

⁶⁸³ Richard Vine, 'Report from Chengdu: Committed to Ink', *Art in America*, 96 (2008), 67.

⁶⁸⁴ Sheila Melvin, 'China for the Chinese: Battling Western Artistic Influence in the Middle Kingdom', *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, 8 February 2002, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/315441631?accountid=10673> (accessed 16 November 2018).

central goal behind his choice to promote China's historic form of ink painting.⁶⁸⁵ These nationalist implications were also widely emphasised in the criticism of the biennale. For example, in her article 'China for the Chinese' Sheila Melvin criticised the biennale's 'indigenization' of contemporary Chinese art, suggesting that this strategy was aimed at erasing any Western cultural influences within the latter.⁶⁸⁶ Echoingly, Paris-based Fei Dawei saw the biennale's focus on works 'with Chinese characters and symbols' as the exclusively "'local"' type of Chinese contemporary art', lacking 'universal meaning'.⁶⁸⁷

On the other hand, while being nationalistically framed, the biennale pursued the more sophisticated agenda, which cannot be described as solely local or for the Chinese. As argued above, China was emerging as the progressive world-economy player – thus, its culture also had to show this advancement further towards being as 'cosmopolitan [as] contemporary' when paying respect to its past conventions.⁶⁸⁸ In this respect, the biennale was simultaneously aimed at demonstrating how the tradition-threaded and historically Chinese art genre of ink painting could be rebooted as the international-level contemporary art form in the new century. This could be immediately inferred from Feng's opening essay in the exhibition catalogue, where the curator directly stated that '*guohua* cannot be simply called "painting of China"' and, thereby, posed the critical question as to 'how *guohua* can transform itself in today's international discourse'.⁶⁸⁹

This line of thinking continued in Shen's catalogue essay, where he underlined that the biennale's core goals were 'to increase people's understanding of the interaction between Chinese culture's unique aspects and internationalism and to encourage dialogue between the art and culture of China and that elsewhere'.⁶⁹⁰ Ultimately, the biennale was meant to show how, 'given China's expanding influence in the world, Chinese culture itself has become a part of the process of building a global cultural and artistic structure'.⁶⁹¹ As Lu clarified, this '[did] not imply the use of Western standards' per se, but noting wider contemporary issues and expressing those in the ink language

⁶⁸⁵ Deng Hong, 'Preface', in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), 2.

⁶⁸⁶ Melvin, 'China for the Chinese'.

⁶⁸⁷ Yang Yingshi, 'Controversial but Spectacular Chengdu Biennale: A New Stage to Introduce Chinese Contemporary Art to the World', in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale – The International Symposium in Conjunction with Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Shen Kuiyi and Feng Bin (Chengdu: Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum, 2007), 145.

⁶⁸⁸ Philip Tinari, 'Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of "Chinese Contemporary Art"', in *Art and China after 1989: Theatre of the World*, ed. Alexandra Munroe, Philip Tinari and Hou Hanru (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2017), 64.

⁶⁸⁹ Feng Bin, 'The Problem of *Guohua*', in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), 4.

⁶⁹⁰ Shen Kuiyi, 'Construction and Expansion of Contemporary Art', in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), 6.

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*

with selective borrowings of ‘beneficial elements’ from ‘all cultures of the world’.⁶⁹² This point was further reiterated in Erickson’s essay, calling for the importance ‘to eschew the easy or dogmatic answers’ to this art form, conventionally understood via a narrow lens of being exclusively Chinese.⁶⁹³

Following from this, the biennale, as Richard Vine pertinently reviewed it, was ‘at once an act of nativism and, paradoxically, of savvy internationalism’.⁶⁹⁴ This means that, on one level, the biennale can be argued to have politicised ink art, using it as a mirror to reflect China’s pride in its native historically rooted cultural forms. Nevertheless, on another level – which constitutes the predominant part of the exhibition, as this chapter argues – it also initiated a critical discourse on the international positioning of present-day Chinese-ink works. What makes this discourse important or, in other words, the reason why it matters to make ink art more internationally accessible, is the fact that it prompts a critical reevaluation of cultural heritage-inspired art forms in the Western art world – the place that conventionally viewed them as the exotic “other” in the light of and in the aftermath of its colonial power, as expanded in the second section.

As Dal Lago indicated, once contemporary Chinese art emerged in the West, ‘little attention [had been] dedicated to the brush and ink tradition by the international art world’.⁶⁹⁵ Instead, in pursuit of their own political agendas, Western countries focused on such Chinese art directions as Political Pop and Cynical Realism that scrutinised China’s past and present, in comparison with which Western societies could appear as more “progressive” and “liberal”.⁶⁹⁶ Moreover, as underlined throughout this thesis, another key reason for the ink art’s predominant exclusion from the international art discourse is the latter’s tendency to assess art by exclusively Western standards with little accountability for non-Western cultural elements. Against the background of this, as Shen wrote in another essay for the biennale, while broader ‘Chinese art more often appears in the international art scene’, ‘the artists who practice in this traditional medium [of ink] feel that they have become outsiders’.⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹² Lu Hong, ‘Only That Which Is the World’s, Then Will It Be the Nation’s’, in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), 10.

⁶⁹³ Britta Erickson, ‘Do We Have Time for the Subtleties of *Guohua*?’, in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), 8.

⁶⁹⁴ Vine, ‘Report from Chengdu’, 67.

⁶⁹⁵ Francesca Dal Lago, ‘Forward to the Past – How Traditional Aesthetics Are Infiltrating Contemporary Art’, in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale – The International Symposium in Conjunction with Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Shen Kuiyi and Feng Bin (Chengdu: Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum, 2007), 34.

⁶⁹⁶ Hou, ‘Entropy, Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions’, 57; Araeen, ‘A New Beginning’, 17.

⁶⁹⁷ Shen Kuiyi, ‘The Practice of Ink and Its Dilemma in the Contemporary Art World’, in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale – The International Symposium in Conjunction with Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Shen Kuiyi and Feng Bin (Chengdu: Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum, 2007), 40.

In order to position Chinese contemporary ink painting as the art form worthy of not just domestic, but international recognition alike, the biennale hired two curators from the USA – consequently, as mentioned above, in addition to China-based Lu Hong and Feng Bin, the chief curatorial committee also consisted of California-based Shen Kuiyi and Erickson. Significantly, both Shen and Erickson were well-connected with Chinese-American artists across the USA. With their assistance ink works by numerous US-resident painters were brought into the biennale, ranging from Zheng and Li Huayi in San Francisco to Lin Yan (born 1961) and Zhang Hongtu in New York, and including younger artist Zhang Chunhong (born 1971) in Kansas’s Lawrence, amongst many other prominent artists, such as New York-based artist, curator and art historian Arnold Chang (born 1954).⁶⁹⁸

The selected overseas ink artists, associated with international-level American cultural institutions, were then systematically integrated with mainland Chinese painters, who also gained international exposure of their own by collaborating with museums abroad. For example, amongst the featured in the biennale China-based artists, there was Li Huasheng (1944-2018), whose ink works were shown at London’s British Museum and Koln’s Museum for East Asian Arts as part of the 1995 *Tradition and Innovation* travelling exhibition.⁶⁹⁹ Additionally, there were such other established artists, working from China, as Tang Yunming (born 1953), whose 1993 *Old Bridge* was acquired by the British Museum just a few years later in 1996, or Qiu Shihua (born 1940), who landed show participations in Switzerland, specifically at Bern’s Museum of Fine Arts in 2005 or Burgdorf’s Museum Franz Gertsch in 2006.⁷⁰⁰

To blur distinctions amongst such wide-ranging artists, coming from China and abroad, the exhibition’s main part was divided primarily stylistically around all-encompassing visual categories of abstract, figure and landscape paintings, respectively titled ‘Humanity and Spirit’, ‘Society’ and ‘Nature’.⁷⁰¹ In this respect, Li Huasheng’s *Beginning of Spring* (Figure 94, 2003) was exhibited in ‘Humanity and Spirit’ together with Zheng’s *Ink Series* (Figure 87, 2006), Lin Yan’s *Stele – 1* (Figure 95, 2007) and Zhang Chunhong’s *Spirit – Left* (Figure 96, 2007). In turn, as additional examples, in ‘Nature’ Tang Yunming’s *Flying Waterfall* (Figure 97, 2005) and Qiu Shihua’s *Untitled* (Figure 98,

⁶⁹⁸ Yang, ‘Controversial but Spectacular Chengdu Biennale’, 144. In Zheng’s case it was specifically Erickson, who, while visiting his studio in the mid-2000s, invited the artist to participate in this international China-based biennale and to reengage with the swiftly developing Chinese art world, as discussed in Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 8.

⁶⁹⁹ Ink Studio, ‘Li Huasheng: Biography’, <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/70-li-huasheng/overview/> (accessed 4 May 2020).

⁷⁰⁰ British Museum, ‘Collection: Tang Yunming’s *The Old Bridge*’, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1997-0304-0-26 (accessed 4 May 2020); Galerie Karsten Greve, ‘Exhibitions – Qiu Shihua’, <https://galerie-karsten-greve.com/en/exhibition/qiu-shihua/impressions-september-1-october-6-2018/en> (accessed 8 May 2020).

⁷⁰¹ Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi, ‘Biennale Exhibition’, in *Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale*, ed. Feng Bin and Shen Kuiyi (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), 15, 59, 97.

1999) were placed alongside Li Huayi's *Landscape* (Figure 99, 2005) and Zhang Hongtu's *Shitao* (*Variations of Ten Thousand Ugly Dots*) – *Van Gogh* (Figure 100, 2006-2007). Significantly, what united all these profoundly distinct works was their mixing, to varying extents, of internal and external to ink painting elements.

Hence, although ink techniques and concepts figured throughout the biennale, the displayed pieces were suggested to move beyond them towards more widely applicable forms and ideas. For instance, the 'Nature' category's works were argued to help 'interpret the relationships of the human realm' that surpassed the sole specificity to China's socio-cultural situation.⁷⁰² This could be observed about Tang Yunming and Li Huayi's remote mountain landscapes that ignited the viewer to temporarily detach from any social domain for inner reflection. In turn, Zhang Hongtu's oil-executed Chinese-style painting raised the issue of cross-cultural and cross-period borrowings, especially van Gogh's inspiration from Eastern art and the Chinese principle of copying old masters' works.⁷⁰³ By contrast, Qiu Shihua's *Untitled* offered a monochrome landscape of blue, yellow, red and white hues, altogether evoking the sky, which neutral imagery alluded to 'something that is not Eastern or Western', as the artist said, but 'just human'.⁷⁰⁴

Likewise, 'Humanity and Spirit' was summarised as touching upon that all-human 'wandering of the subconscious' or 'the realm of the spirit', expressed through the language of abstraction.⁷⁰⁵ This could be inferred from, as noted in Michael Hatch's review, the 'minimalist direction' of Li Huasheng's abstract grids of intersecting lines, applying which the artist took as a form of meditation.⁷⁰⁶ Executed in ink, which swift absorbency requires meditative concentration on brushwork movements to prevent thin rice paper from creasing, *Beginning of Spring* captured Li's pondering on the temporal arrival of the blossom season and its metaphorical culturally transcendent evocation of the state of human spiritual revival. Zhang Chunhong also ended her *Spirit – Left* with 'a more universal exploration' of the theme of identity, where the disembodied depiction of, as mentioned in Vine's review, unspecified woman's dark thick hair alluded to Asian, Latin American and Middle Eastern ethnic backgrounds simultaneously.⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰² Ibid., 97.

⁷⁰³ Dal Lago, 'Forward to the Past', 34-35.

⁷⁰⁴ Erickson, 'Innovations in Space and Painting Philosophy', 82.

⁷⁰⁵ Feng and Shen, 'Biennale Exhibition', 15.

⁷⁰⁶ Michael Hatch, 'Reboot – The Third Chengdu Biennale: A Review', *Yishu*, 7 (2008), 64; Britta Erickson, 'Exhibitions – Li Huasheng: Process, Mind, and Landscape', *Ran Dian*, November 2014, http://www.randian-online.com/np_event/li-huasheng-process-mind-and-landscape/ (accessed 7 May 2020).

⁷⁰⁷ *Arts Observer*, 'Zhang Chun Hong Explores Identity through Her Long, Straight, Black Hair', 28 December 2011, <http://www.artsofobserver.com/2011/12/28/zhang-chun-hong-explores-identity-through-her-long-straight-black-hair/> (accessed 11 May 2020); Vine, 'Report from Chengdu', 68.

Similarly, Lin Yan's *Stele – 1*, encompassing, as she called it, 'two-and-a-half dimensions' of crumpled pictorial paper sheets, sculpturally overlaid on the sides and punctuated in the middle with a volumetric brick-wall paper cast, also stroke that balance between Chinese conventional strands and the artist's all-applicable so-called 'wandering of the subconscious'.⁷⁰⁸ Hence, the material use of rice paper acted as the visual reminder of China's 'cultural vibrancy and history', as Lin pointed out, while resorting to the more broadly applicable construction object of brick drove towards contemplating the idea of building and rebuilding cultural and wider social environments.⁷⁰⁹ Consequently, despite using the culturally rooted rice paper, *Stele – 1*, both in its minimalist industrial form and accompanying subject-matter of socio-cultural construction, went beyond the ink painting's cultural particularism.

The same interpretation, balancing between Chinese and beyond-Chinese elements, applied to Zheng's revived ink painting practice that he began in the later 1990s by cross-matching Chinese old masters and American modern artists' historic approaches to the metaphysical notion of formlessness. In this respect, *Ink Series*, analysed in the previous chapter, effectively served the biennale's goal to demonstrate that, while referencing China's pictorial history, contemporary ink painting could also reach out to the wider world, reflecting on ideas that transcended cultural or temporal differences. Moreover, Zheng's works technically leaned towards the interdisciplinary dimension since he combined ink with acrylic, just as Qiu Shihua fused it with oil, or Zhang Hongtu used only oil. Thus, *Ink Series* was additionally aligned with the biennale's special selection of artists that embraced alternative media as a means of making ink painting more cross-cultural.

According to Erickson, such works by Zheng, Qiu and echoing artists 'connect with the *guohua* tradition' and equally 'move beyond in search of a powerful universalist language' on not only thematic, but also technical levels.⁷¹⁰ This idea was reiterated throughout the biennale's contributed essays. For example, Shen wrote that '[o]ne solution to the problem of how to join the international artistic community seems to be to use a format and approach that is completely new to ink painters' and that can offer elements that are 'beyond the horizon of national, or Chinese, context, logic and history'.⁷¹¹ Similarly, Dal Lago mentioned that the use of 'other artistic media', specifically the ones that are 'now considered at the cutting edge of contemporary production', can

⁷⁰⁸ Jonathan Goodman, 'Lin Yan: The Next Step Forward', *Sculpture*, 33 (2014), 56.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

⁷¹⁰ Erickson, 'Innovations in Space and Painting Philosophy', 83.

⁷¹¹ Shen, 'The Practice of Ink and Its Dilemma in the Contemporary Art World', 41.

help ‘traditional Chinese aesthetics’ to find its place in the international art world, which may not otherwise pay attention to “pure” ink painting.⁷¹²

Likewise, in his review Hatch also noted that ‘it is the mixed media artists whose works somehow relate to ink materials or ideas that are receiving the most international attention’ at the biennale, making such artists ‘the natural ambassadors between the larger world of contemporary art and those committed to ink painting’.⁷¹³ To further emphasise the importance of this mixed-media approach as a means of internationalising ink painting, the biennale also featured one non-Chinese-born artist, Michael Cherney (born 1969), who reimagines ink art in the photographic medium. Hence, his biennale-exhibited photographs, like *Bounded by Mountains* (Figure 101, 2005) that recorded the journey through a landscape of Chinese tomb figures, were manipulated to resemble ink painting’s shady washes, additionally printed on traditional rice paper and conventionally displayed as folding album leaves.⁷¹⁴

Significantly, presenting such heterogeneous mixed-media artists alongside solely ink-on-paper painters as well as paralleling China-based alongside overseas ink artists were the biennale’s two key achievements. Accumulatively, they contributed to the degree of the critical diversity that had not hitherto been explored by ink art exhibitions, which often resulted in the latter being dismissed as ‘self-reinforcing clusters of work by like-minded artists’, as outlined in Vine’s review.⁷¹⁵ Hatch also suggested that this very manifoldness of the biennale made the successful case as to why there should be ‘the international interest towards ink’ that would recognise its capability to be ‘part of a contemporary discourse’.⁷¹⁶ To its advantage, the biennale already ‘boasted an international presence’, as further reported by Hatch, which was substantially higher, compared with the majority of ink painting exhibitions that were conventionally ‘not fully respected by international media and curators’.⁷¹⁷

As Zheng reflected on his own experience of the biennale, because of its outreach that allowed contemporary ink art to have a more ‘immediate access to a large international audience’, it ‘certainly opened [many] people’s eyes’ to the idea that ink, despite its inherent connection with China’s cultural history, ‘could have broader meanings’.⁷¹⁸ Undoubtedly, up until now there are many milestones yet to be reached in order to more widely instil that critical ability amongst West-

⁷¹² Dal Lago, ‘Forward to the Past’, 34.

⁷¹³ Hatch, ‘Reboot’, 64.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid., 65; Vine, ‘Report from Chengdu’, 68.

⁷¹⁵ Vine, ‘Report from Chengdu’, 69.

⁷¹⁶ Hatch, ‘Reboot’, 60, 65-66.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., 60, 66.

⁷¹⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 8.

based audiences and cultural institutions to fully appreciate contemporary ink works on par with mainstream Western contemporary art. Indeed, as shown between this chapter and the following sixth chapter, throughout the 2010s there continued to be international ignorance towards contemporary ink works. However, as concurrently argued below, due to the Third Chengdu Biennale, that ignorance started to be gradually shaken, and that alone was crucial.

Precisely, it was crucial because it facilitated the beginning of a far-expanding dialogue that had not existed before, involving artists, curators and art critics, on how to make contemporary ink art meaningful to broader international audiences and to teach them to appreciate ink not only for being different, but for its broadly resonating technical and thematic potential alike. The biennale certainly played a very important role in Zheng's own consideration of the latter points, encouraging him to start engaging with the wider international art world, reaching out also beyond the Bay Area, where the majority of the artist's exhibitions took place in the 1990s and the early 2000s.⁷¹⁹ Significantly, now that Zheng started thinking more about how to accommodate ink art to not only his US-based but also multinational audiences, his approach to the ink medium evolved accordingly.

Indeed, at the turn of the 2010s the artist started incorporating additional elements that endowed his works with the broader resonance, but, nonetheless, without losing that particular cultural touch with his home place in California as well as his Chinese cultural background. As Zheng said, 'there are many layers to understanding the ink medium', which can be uncovered, be meaningfully integrated together and, with it, make ink art relevant to more internationally diverse audiences.⁷²⁰ To achieve this, the artist started exploring phenomenological dimensions of light and space, specifically associated with Californian nature and art, while delving into classical and contemporary continental philosophy of phenomenology and new materialism, which respective materially conditioned ideas he interpreted via the lens of Chinese ink, acrylic and rice paper.

California's distinct surroundings, offering, as Zheng said, 'the unique experience' of natural light and space, provided a pivotal source of inspiration to rethinking his approach to ink painting at the turn of the 2010s.⁷²¹ This attentiveness to local nature's phenomenological manifestations brought the artist's attention to California Light and Space art, which first developed in the 1960s in response to this recognisable Californian landscape. Unlike New York's Minimalism that experimented with object-oriented forms, this Californian art direction delved into the immaterial

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 8.

⁷²⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 20.

⁷²¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 8.

realm of sensorial phenomena, conditioned by the pronounced interaction between light and space in the region.⁷²² Amongst various artists associated with it, it is Robert Irwin (born 1928), whose presentation of natural – as opposed to artificial – light’s properties under specific environmental conditions impressed Zheng the most.⁷²³

Specifically, Irwin’s *1^o 2^o 3^o 4^o* (Figure 102, 1997), comprising an empty room with three panoramic windows, is the work that Zheng keeps on returning to see at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla.⁷²⁴ To enhance the performative aspect of the local sunlight in the room, Irwin cut three square apertures into the windows: two across the adjoining corners and one flatly in the frontal middle. The result was the orchestra of beams that originated from the blueness of the sky and the sea as well as from the emerald shine of palm leaves outside, which then filtered through multiple angles of the hollow apertures and the remaining glass, and, eventually, melted across reflective surfaces of the crystal-white room. Hence, although the latter appeared as empty at first, it was in fact unconventionally furnished with metamorphosing images of light’s ephemeral forms.

In this respect, Irwin’s installation utilised natural light as both medium and subject-matter of this immersive atmospheric space.⁷²⁵ By taking the actual room for the setting, the artist maintained the link with the framework of daily-life spaces, but by eliminating any usual inhabiting objects there, emphasising only the immaterial sunray reflections, he presented light as the sole tool behind the space’s definition. This thematically posed light as creator of shapes, illuminator of surfaces and trigger of vision, turning it into a philosophical rather than simply physical concept, which Zheng found particularly special about *1^o 2^o 3^o 4^o*.⁷²⁶ As Irwin said, it is under light’s ever-changing movements that spaces, objects and information are either revealed or obscured.⁷²⁷ Thereby, *1^o 2^o 3^o 4^o* suggested light’s potential to be not only the phenomenological indicator of brightness and darkness, but the means with which to metaphorically comprehend life around.

Importantly, this understanding of light as the perspective through which to experience the world was also used by Ireland – Zheng’s influential teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute, discussed in the third chapter – who established an additional link between the artist and California Light and

⁷²² Melissa E. Feldman, *Another Minimalism: Art After California Light and Space* (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2015), 21.

⁷²³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 5.

⁷²⁴ Ibid.

⁷²⁵ Feldman, *Another Minimalism*, 62.

⁷²⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 5.

⁷²⁷ Carol Diehl, ‘Robert Irwin: Doors of Perception’, *Art in America*, 87 (1999); available via Carol Diehl, http://www.caroldiehl.com/WRITINGS/Writing_features/7.htm (accessed 27 July 2019).

Space art, having been himself influenced by Irwin, whom he also knew personally.⁷²⁸ Similarly, Ireland was interested in investigating light's potential to literally '[make] things happen' through 'its visual and mind-altering effects'.⁷²⁹ For example, his art project on 65 Capp Street in San Francisco (Figures 103-104, 1981-1982), comprised an actual house, which sole subject-matter and tool was light. Structured around the sun's passage, the building's exterior metal sheets and interior white panels, selectively curved and punctuated by columns, were positioned in a way that created the pronounced spatial dialogue with incoming Californian sunrays, dramatically transforming the surrounding space with the ephemeral light-painted abstract imagery.⁷³⁰

At the same time, investigating artists, like Irwin and Ireland, who treated light and space of the Californian landscape as the active phenomenological agents in their art making processes, got Zheng interested in international philosophy in the fields of phenomenology and new materialism. This brought Zheng's attention to three canonical European phenomenological philosophers, namely Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who also co-influenced Californian conceptual art.⁷³¹ Husserl was the first one to propose the idea that human experiences and judgements are a matter of 'perception' – thereby, they are 'phenomenologically conditioned' and should be studied via the prism of specific circumstances of their formation, as summarised in his 1939-published book *Experience and Judgment*.⁷³² Then Heidegger gave Husserl's thought an ontological interpretation, summarised in his 1927 book *Being and Time*, arguing that concepts of wider life and existence can also be deconstructed into concrete temporally unfolding phenomena.⁷³³

In his turn, Merleau-Ponty expanded phenomenological philosophy by focusing on the role of human physicality in forming perceptions: as he wrote in 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*, body is not just 'one of the objects of [the] world', but a 'point of view upon [that] world'.⁷³⁴ The book's key conclusion was that body, with its spatially conditioned movements, should also be considered as a type of consciousness, rather than only mind, as expounded by Husserl and Heidegger.⁷³⁵ This notion contributed to the so-called 'sculptural mode of viewing' in Minimalism, whereby artworks

⁷²⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 11; Tsujimoto, 'Being in the World', 56.

⁷²⁹ Tsujimoto, 'Being in the World', 55.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷³¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 2; Munroe, 'Art of Perceptual Experience', 297.

⁷³² Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 27, 67.

⁷³³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 23-24, 31, 35.

⁷³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2014), 73.

⁷³⁵ Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2011), 62.

are experienced as physically as mentally, based on specific angles of a certain body's spatio-temporal location.⁷³⁶ Significantly, this interest in spatio-temporal phenomenology directed Zheng towards another philosophical study revolving around new materialism, which treats individual objects as separate phenomenological matters with their own intrinsic spatio-temporal happenings.⁷³⁷

Central to this new materialist school of philosophy is the term of 'intra-action', coined by Karen Barad in her 2007 book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, which she defined as 'the mutual constitution of entangled agencies'.⁷³⁸ As Barad explained, it is the 'performativity' of such ever-changing intra-acting physical elements that makes phenomena happen, thereby, no single phenomenon is pre-existent, but transpires because of intra-actions.⁷³⁹ Precisely, as further elaborated in *New Materialisms*, phenomena are 'caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces' that, to be understood, require 'detailed analyses of [human] daily interactions with material objects and the natural environment'.⁷⁴⁰ Consequently, from the materialist perspective, human reality is seen as a complex 'mesh' of unrelated but mutually impactful happenings – 'a multitude of entangled strange strangers', as Timothy Morton wrote – which outcomes can be by-products of least expected interactions.⁷⁴¹

The essence of object-oriented ontology can further be understood via a 2007-coined term of 'speculative realism'.⁷⁴² It derives from Quentin Meillassoux's idea of 'speculative materialism', implying that, because of the constant flux of intra-acting constituent parts of matter and phenomena, 'anything could happen at any time without reason'.⁷⁴³ This view rejects the traditional philosophical understanding that only human subjects shape the world's reality.⁷⁴⁴ Instead, as emphasised by Manuel de Landa and Graham Harman, apart from humans, there are multiple material agents that have realities of their own and can at random impact the course of the world's

⁷³⁶ Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 214.

⁷³⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 2; Zeng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 7.

⁷³⁸ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 33.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁴⁰ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 9, 3-4.

⁷⁴¹ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 15.

⁷⁴² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 2; Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (Medford: Polity, 2018), 168.

⁷⁴³ Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 80, 96.

⁷⁴⁴ Graham Harman, 'The Current State of Speculative Realism', in *Speculations IV: Speculative Realism*, ed. Michael Austin, Paul J. Ennis, Fabio Gironi, Thomas Gokey and Robert Jackson (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2013), 23.

unfolding.⁷⁴⁵ Specifically, as Morton wrote, ‘lifeforms are made of other lifeforms’, which comprise additional ‘non-living entities, all the way down to the DNA and beyond’.⁷⁴⁶ Therefore, this multi-layered reality, inhabited ‘by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman’, as Jane Bennett wrote, cannot be predicted, but can only be speculated about.⁷⁴⁷

After observing the local Californian artists’ responses to the region’s unique landscape properties as well as cross-matching them with continental philosophical thoughts in the fields of phenomenology and materialism, Zheng felt inspired to utilise the elements of light and space in relation to the materials of ink, acrylic and paper as a means of arriving at the new approach to his ink painting.⁷⁴⁸ Thereby, the artist’s environmental ink works emerged at the turn of the 2010s, giving a profound consideration to such qualities as reflection, luminosity, scale, mass and material correlations. This can be exemplified by *Distanced Light* (Figure 105, 2012), premiered at Beijing’s Asia Art Centre in the same year, which comprised two parallel paper sheets, representing lighter and darker tonalities on their respective sides.

Significantly, in order to give the painting a more pronounced structural definition, Zheng had the already painted paper mounted on a thick aluminium panel, which was custom-ordered to have a large slanted hollow opening on its right hand-side.⁷⁴⁹ This three-dimensional sculpted cut substantially transformed the spatial delineation of pictorial surface washes, skewing their symmetrical visual angles and, consequently, as Mary Agnew wrote, ‘[keeping] the viewpoint constantly rotating and shifting’.⁷⁵⁰ This way the painting could actively interact with the exhibiting room’s lighting by more vividly catching glints and shadows on its various constituent angles as well as on the hollow opening that revealed contrasting reflective properties of the grey-painted wall surface (Figure 106).

Particularly, the precise ruler-contoured edges of the square, framing the cut on the right, were blackened with the heavy layering of ink, applied with the flat and wide *paibi* brush (Figure 107), which enabled this area to concentrate the largest amount of light due to its nocturnal shimmer and clear-cut geometry. Similarly, the pure white acrylic washes on the left hand-side, stepping out

⁷⁴⁵ Manuel de Landa and Graham Harman, *The Rise of Realism* (Malden: Polity, 2017), 25.

⁷⁴⁶ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 29.

⁷⁴⁷ Jane Bennett, ‘Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy’, in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 224.

⁷⁴⁸ Zheng Chongbin, ‘Expressions in Ink: The Contemporary Language of Ink Painting’, in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, ed. Britta Erickson (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 69-70.

⁷⁴⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 3.

⁷⁵⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 3; Mary Agnew, ‘Medium above All: Examining the Work of Zheng Chongbin’, in *Negotiating between Light and Ink*, ed. Lee Lynn, Xu Erick and Zhao Sunny (Beijing: Asia Art Centre, 2013), 17.

from the tonally subdued neighbouring washes, also glowed with the heightened degree of light, reflected onto them. By contrast, the remaining ink-infused acrylic smudges, achieved by the movement of the wooden scrapper that jumbled them together (Figure 108), emanated the stainless-steel shine and, thereby, appeared as shadowed, balancing out the luminous play on the rest of the pictorial assemblage.

Following from this, comparably with Irwin and Ireland's art, *Distanced Light* functioned as not just the painting, but, as Zheng said, 'like an environment', leaning towards the sculptural dimension.⁷⁵¹ Although it did not comprise an actual physical environment of room or building, akin to *1^o 2^o 3^o 4^o* or *65 Capp Street*, the core attribute of Zheng's work revolved around light's spatial wanderings, where, instead of the wider interior space, they were focused on the ink-acrylic paint surfaces. Since *Distanced Light* was not flat, but enriched with the combination of protrusions, curves, angles, shadows and reflections, it became subject to minute changes in both viewing positions and lighting conditions, manifesting the artist's tribute to California Light and Space.⁷⁵² Thereby, Zheng established the concrete link between his work and his residential Californian cultural context, rooted in the region's distinct landscape phenomenology.

In turn, having become engaged with the international literature on phenomenological philosophy, which was central to Californian conceptual art alike, Zheng also made *Distanced Light* explicitly speak to such readings' selected ideas. For instance, by making light plays the centrepiece of the painting, which movements altered its appearance, the artist touched upon Husserl's idea of the phenomenologically conditioned perception that changes with shifts in its contextual environment. Additionally, the division of the painting into two physically contrasting parts invited the more prolonged exploration of the work, drawing the viewer to move along it in order to encounter the pictorial nuances of the silver-white left panel and the spatial nuances of the black-framed window on the right. This evoked Heidegger's definition of life's experience as a temporally unfolding series of phenomena, where, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's thought, human body's specific positionings in time set viewpoints upon those phenomena.

Complimentarily to the phenomenological approach to his paintings as spatial objects, Zheng further contemplated his pictorial surface as the arena with its own spatio-temporal happenings, based on the new materialist developments in international philosophy. Thus, the artist began seeing his materials' interactions as manifestations of living matter: ink, acrylic, water, paper all

⁷⁵¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 3.

⁷⁵² Ibid.

consist of contrasting molecular substances that produce their independent internal phenomenological exchanges once they are mixed on floor and are left to produce their own processes of ‘floating’ under the gravity force.⁷⁵³ Moreover, to enable his materials to fully self-interact, Zheng does not apply texturing brushstrokes, but only broad paint washes, which he overlays and smudges with the scraper. This means that the multitude of minutely shaped dots and lines in *Distanced Light* or, as an additional example, *Eroded White* (Figures 109-110, 2012) were not the artist’s inventions, but the independent outcomes of his materials’ moment-unique interactions.

Indeed, Zheng treats his painting process as outcomes of bio-chemistry, during which fractal imagery emerges by itself due to this intrinsic behavioural interchange of ink, acrylic, water and paper (Figure 111).⁷⁵⁴ This evokes organic processes of other natural elements’ formations, which are composed of unrepeatably complex fractal shapes, whether it is a visible structure of leaves or an invisible system of atoms.⁷⁵⁵ The only aspect that the artist controls is spatial arrangement of his broader pictorial forms, such as the inclined cut-framing square on the right panel of *Distanced Light*. However, their actual surface articulations are consequences of those dynamic ‘intra-actions’ that are speculatively generated beyond Zheng’s immediate control.⁷⁵⁶ This organically produced array of ever-changing forms, meaning biological fractals of the artist’s painterly materials, phenomenologically receptive to each other’s chemical properties or forces of gravity, illustratively embodies Zheng’s interest in continental new materialist philosophy.

Crucially, the combination of ink, acrylic, water and rice paper presents a particularly effective set of materials to use for the investigation of intra-acting bio-chemical properties in the pictorial field. Ink, which Zheng purchases already soluble in bottles, prepared by the Cao Sugong ink production company, is highly liquid and has that extra receptiveness to interactions with other materials.⁷⁵⁷ Produced since 1667, Cao Sugong ink is also known for its special glossy finish, which aids in giving Zheng’s paintings their characteristic reflective properties, further showing how physical ink reacts with immaterial light.⁷⁵⁸ In its turn, acrylic is the most flexible material from the artist’s set, as it can

⁷⁵³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 3; Zheng Shengtian, ‘Know the White but Keep the Black’, in *Negotiating between Light and Ink*, ed. Lee Lynn, Xu Erick and Zhao Sunny (Beijing: Asia Art Centre, 2013), 5.

⁷⁵⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 5.

⁷⁵⁵ Julius Ruis, ‘Fractalary: Fractals from Planets to Atoms’, *Fractal*, 29 December 2006, <http://www.fractal.org/Fractalary/Fractalary.htm> (accessed 2 January 2019).

⁷⁵⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 7.

⁷⁵⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 3.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid.; Wei Zhang, *The Four Treasures: Inside the Scholar’s Studio* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2004), 24-25; *China Daily*, ‘Cao Su Gong Ink Shop’, 1 December 2017 <http://govt.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201712/01/WS5b77e8e2498e855160e88d0b.html> (accessed 16 May 2019).

be thinned with water, functioning as white ink, or left in its thicker state, resembling oil paint.⁷⁵⁹ Hence, Zheng can cross-examine the ink's bio-chemical interchange with the two materially different acrylic types.

Speaking about rice paper, its enhanced absorbency creates an additional pictorial layer, which minute material changes can be visually registered. For example, unlike the thick surface of canvas, which does not interact with applied paint and lets it sit on top, paper naturally responds to every paint application and marks this interaction by revealing its fibre structures or by producing creases. To ensure this level of paper's material sensitivity, Zheng obtains it from trusted artisanal papersmiths in Anhui – China's most famous region for rice paper manufacturing.⁷⁶⁰ Their rice paper is also characterised by unusual radiance, which is central to Zheng's focus on his paintings' bio-chemical interactions. As the artist explained, paper is like skin: if it is dull, it would not react healthily to external materials and environmental conditions, whereas when it is radiant, it helps accentuate the latter's intrinsic qualities, such as ink's shimmer or light's translucency.⁷⁶¹

In this respect, Zheng's post-2010s ink paintings, as detailed on the example of *Distanced Light*, started applying the principle of 'cross-paralleling', whereby he incorporates elements, particular to the Chinese-ink pictorial context, California's art scene as well as the international field of phenomenological and new materialist philosophies.⁷⁶² This appeal to simultaneously the Chinese, Californian American and broader international cultural fields also gives Zheng's ink works the potential to surpass fixed geographically inscribed institutional positionings. Because the artist's ink art comprises the intercultural flow of ideas, as Appadurai pointed out, it helps move beyond the fixedness of nation-state identities and opens space for more fluid cultural multiplicities.⁷⁶³ In the artist's own words, this encourages 'people to start looking at ink as more universal, and in a broader context', which, via an extension, helps ink art 'find its place internationally' – the ideas that are explored in more detail in this chapter's second section.⁷⁶⁴

In order to further advance contemporary ink works' position as the international-level art form, Zheng also started focusing increasingly more on the format, in which he frames ink. As mentioned above, the more mixed-media approach to contemporary ink painting was already promoted at the

⁷⁵⁹ Craig Yee, 'The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction', in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, ed. Britta Erickson (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 38.

⁷⁶⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 3.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid.

⁷⁶² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 4, Question 2.

⁷⁶³ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 11.

⁷⁶⁴ *South China Morning Post*, 'King of Ink', 8 May 2011, <https://www.scmp.com/article/967145/king-ink> (accessed 10 July 2018); Zheng, 'Expressions in Ink', 72.

2007 Chengdu Biennale, which potential to boost the international profile of contemporary ink art was also noted in the art critics' reviews. Importantly, a few years later, Hearn also suggested in the very title of his ground-breaking 2013 exhibition *Ink Art* at New York's Met, discussed in more detail in the second section, that one of the very effective ways to broadly contemporise ink works is to shift the emphasis from the purely pictorial genre to multimedia.

Consequently, instead of being ink painting, ink works could be ink art, where there is an 'ink aesthetic', expressed either materially or conceptually, but, otherwise, where there are also other elements prominently figuring, making such works resonate with less culturally particular multimedia art.⁷⁶⁵ Focusing more on the means of framing ink medium-based pieces also promised to help generate more attention from non-specialist ink art audiences, who, as Hatch pertinently pointed out in his aforementioned review of the Chengdu Biennale, cannot always fully appreciate ink painting's brushwork and conceptual nuances due to their lack of knowledge, and who, thereby, often leave viewing ink paintings with a feeling that they just 'want to be more impressed'.⁷⁶⁶ Hence, turning towards the more interdisciplinary category of multimedia ink art established itself at the turn of the 2010s as one of the ways to make Chinese ink more accessible and familiar to international audiences.

In Zheng's case, the artist started contemplating how this more culturally transcendent multimedia format could enhance the core ideas behind his latest ink paintings, discussed above, namely the phenomenological interplay between light and space as well as the bio-chemical interaction amongst his chosen materials of ink, acrylic, water and paper. Specifically, he pondered on how to make his ink works come across as not ink paintings per se, alluding to the more conventional type of China's historic pictorial format, but as visually engaging architectural structures in physically concrete spaces, put away from two-dimensional flat surfaces.⁷⁶⁷ Zheng's experiment with this idea led him to the creation of his 2015 room-expansive installation *Wall of Skies* (Figure 112, 2015).

Chosen for the 2016 Shanghai Biennale, the room-sized installation constituted a specially built reflective floor (Figure 113) and a wall of nine horizontal bands of variously sized and inclined rectilinear panels, adorned with Zheng's signature ink-acrylic paintings.⁷⁶⁸ The installation's pinnacle was a light arrangement, for which the artist had a noteworthy collaboration with Darrell Hawthorne behind California's Sora – the leading lighting company founded by winner of Nobel

⁷⁶⁵ Hearn, 'Ink Art', 14.

⁷⁶⁶ Hatch, 'Reboot', 69.

⁷⁶⁷ Godfrey, 'Zheng Chongbin', 30.

⁷⁶⁸ Britta Erickson, *Zheng Chongbin: Wall of Skies* (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2015), unnumbered.

Prize in Physics Nakamura Shuji.⁷⁶⁹ In order to ensure that *Wall of Skies* ‘activates and holds the entire space’ while viscerally ‘enveloping the viewer’, Hawthorne utilised Soraa VIVID™ AR111 and PAR30 LED lamps, hidden inside a gap between the wall and the ceiling (Figure 114), which ‘high CRI and white quality across the spectrum’ reconditioned the installation’s appearance via their animated glistening.⁷⁷⁰

Indeed, combined with the specular floor, the resulting cutting-edge light orchestration generated the ephemeral play of multiple illuminations, namely shimmering waves of bright and dark shadows, cast on the floor by the wall sculpture, or the latter’s own monumental interplay of contrasting reflections, set by darker ink and brighter acrylic tonalities of the panels. These illuminations were additionally subject to the viewer’s time-unique angle of vision and positioning of body, which movements were additionally mirrored on the floor, blending together with the already extant light silhouettes there. Through this Zheng reached the optimally ‘dynamic way’ of presenting his ink art, whereby it became ‘a living experience’, as described by the artist, fully engaging the viewer’s proprioceptive senses.⁷⁷¹ Consequently, as Zheng further underlined, ‘the standard gallery box-space’ was metamorphosed into the vivacious ‘movement of geometries’, where ‘light [was] turned into particles’ of perceptible forms, and space was personified into an organism of enlivened ink-acrylic structures.⁷⁷²

Moreover, by emphasising the ink paint’s phenomenologically conditioned materiality through the three-dimensionality of installation art, it was treated as any other physical material in the wider space rather than painting in the conventional sense. No longer meant to be viewed as the pictorial imagery, the ink-acrylic panels were posed as the active material agents to be experienced live, which appearance underwent minute changes, being submerged into the flood of light reflections, interacting with the other materials and constantly changing with the viewer’s every step. Therefore, removing the ink medium from the customary pictorial context and making it part of the live spatio-temporal chemistry enabled Zheng to advance the idea that ink, regardless of its cultural association, is above all the technically rich material, capable of activating the viewer’s critical phenomenological awareness.

⁷⁶⁹ Soraa, ‘Masters of Light: Darrell Hawthorne’, May 2018, <https://www.soraa.com/learn/beautiful/masters-light-darrell-hawthorne.php> (accessed 6 December 2020); Soraa, ‘About’, <https://www.soraa.com/about.php> (accessed 6 December 2020).

⁷⁷⁰ Soraa, ‘Masters of Light’.

⁷⁷¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 3.

⁷⁷² Ibid.

Significantly, following the trend-shaping 2007 Chengdu Biennale, which advocated the greater focus on internationalising ink art, framing Chinese ink in the multimedia format can be traced about other contemporary ink artists alike, who variously and to differing extents pursue the goal to emphasise ink art's broader intercultural applicability. This can be illustrated by Li Huayi's *Dragon amidst Mountain Ridge* (Figure 115, 2009), commissioned for the Museum of Fine Arts's 2010 *Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition* exhibition in Boston. For this work Li stepped away from his usual pictorial format towards a more spatially engaging composition by dividing the piece into six screens with a superimposed middle-register scroll extending onto a floor. Thus, the screens' abstract-wash landscape features were contrasted with the scroll's detailed mimetic representation of a mountain scene, the joint monumental scale of which opened the 'potential of physical space', as Shen Kuiyi outlined, to catch the viewer's attention.⁷⁷³

This physical scale was aimed to foremost make an immediate impact, encouraging the viewer to first explore the installation's overall appearance.⁷⁷⁴ Against the screens' expansive background, the spatially distinguished and finely delineated central scroll was in turn meant to offer the optical focus, compelling the viewer to pause walking alongside the installation and to meditate upon the scroll's brushwork details.⁷⁷⁵ Hence, Li's intention behind the employment of the physically dynamic three- and two-dimensional constituent parts in *Dragon amidst Mountain Ridge* was to establish a stronger connection between his ink work and its intended audience in Boston that would not have necessarily been familiar with the ink painting genre.⁷⁷⁶ In this respect, from the later 2000s the artistic responses to ink painting began to be increasingly focused on the genre's cross-cultural outreach, which, importantly, helped expand the international reception of present-day ink art.

II. Chinese Ink as the International Phenomenon: Contemporary Ink Painting's Expanding Museum and Market Representation

Indeed, after the pioneering 2007 Chengdu Biennale, China's cultural mission to raise the international profile of ink art was consistently implemented across its non-profit and commercial art institutions, directed at not just local but also international audiences, which was shortly carried onto the European as well as North American museum and market scenes, registering the new surge of international attraction to this pictorial genre. This resulted in Zheng's increased

⁷⁷³ Shen Kuiyi, 'Representation & Reconstruction: Li Huayi's Recent Landscape', in *Li Huayi*, ed. Weng Ling and Shen Kuiyi (Beijing: Beijing Centre for Arts Publishing House, 2011), 124.

⁷⁷⁴ Li Huayi in an interview with the author, 4 March 2014.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid.

participation in international art exhibitions outside his base in California. If since his move to the USA in 1988 the artist had only taken part in local art exhibitions, then from 2007 onwards the geographic spread and the frequency of his shows notably expanded.

Specifically, as recorded in Appendix B's Graph 1, compared with 18 American, predominantly California-based, exhibitions between 1989 and 2006, totalling 17 years, and one exceptional 1992 participation in the German exhibition *Art from Hangzhou, China*, organised by Hamburg's University of Fine Arts, where Zheng's 1980s ink paintings from the Zhejiang Academy were displayed for the second time, in 2007-2018 the artist's number of shows in just 11 years escalated to 63, from which only nine were in his resident California. From the remaining 54 exhibitions, as illustrated by Graph 2, 32 of them took place in Greater China, three in Asian countries of Singapore and South Korea, 10 in Canada and the wider USA, covering such diverse states as New York, Kentucky, Texas or Illinois, as well as eight in Europe, location-wise ranging from the UK and Sweden to Spain and Italy.

What is also noteworthy about this post-Chengdu Biennale geographic exhibition distribution is that after 2006 the display of Zheng's ink works in the Asian region almost equalled their representation on the broader Western art scene, as visualised by Graph 3, where 35 of the artist's Asia-based shows exceeded those in the West, numbering 27, by only eight. This testifies to the overall increase in this wider international interest in contemporary ink art. Nevertheless, as suggested by these numbers and as argued above, the original source of this initiative for promoting the latter as the more internationally applicable art form was Greater China, where against the background of its ever-strengthening economy in the run up to and after the Beijing Olympic Games the country had the wealth of public engagement opportunities for ink painters.

Therefore, the emphasis on the potential of ink to turn its historic themes and techniques into contemporary and internationally worthy artworks, first explored on the large scale at the Third Chengdu Biennale, continued to be the focus of numerous China-based exhibitions, increasingly focused on representing overseas ink artists. Precisely, from 2007 Zheng started receiving invitations to exhibit in China on an annual basis and often on multiple occasions within a single year. Although, as the American citizen, the artist has to apply for a visa each time he visits China, due to the frequency of his professional trips there, for practical reasons he shortly decided to

obtain a second studio in Shanghai, in addition to his main studio in California, so that he could continue working on his new pieces while staying in China to oversee installation of his shows.⁷⁷⁷

As a result, in the light of the booming Chinese cultural infrastructure, already in 2008 Zheng had a chance to display his ink paintings, analysed in detail in the previous section, at such non-profit museum-level exhibitions as *Twenty-First-Century Contemporary Ink* at Beijing's state-run China National Art Institute, or *Contemporary Brush and Ink* at Shanghai's Mingyuan Art Centre – the privately owned museum with a mission to promote art forms at the intersection between Chinese traditional and international cultural elements.⁷⁷⁸ As an additional example, in 2009 Zheng exhibited at another prominent institution in China, Shanghai's state-owned Duolun Museum of Modern Art, as part of its *Contemporary Ink Painting* exhibition, also featuring Los Angeles-born Barbara Edelstein (born 1950s), whose works, similarly, adhered to the mixed-media approach, utilising ink alongside photographs to represent primaeva leaf shapes.⁷⁷⁹

In addition to California-connected Zheng and Edelstein, the exhibition also included Japanese artist Ajioka Shintaro (born 1949), who combined ink with charcoal in his big-character over small-character calligraphy, and German Rolf Klunter (born 1956), whose abstract megapolis-inspired paintings incorporated ink with oil, acrylic, paper or silkscreen amongst other materials to evoke geometric silhouettes of skyscrapers.⁷⁸⁰ Such international selection of artists alongside China-based painters, like Li Huasheng or Liang Quan, reflected the underlining goal of the Duolun Museum to support 'the development of Chinese contemporary art', while also functioning as 'a platform for the international exchange of contemporary art'.⁷⁸¹ By focusing on ink, which ultimately united the exhibition's Chinese and international artists, it was, thereby, shown how this medium attracted artistic interest regardless of cultural or residential associations, letting itself be innovatively applied in a multiplicity of ways.

Likewise, the *Chinese Ink Painting in the United States* exhibition, organised in 2013 by the Zhejiang Art Museum in Hangzhou in association with the Silicon Valley Asian Art Centre and the San

⁷⁷⁷ Christie's, 'Artist Interview: Zheng Chongbin', 11 September 2013, <https://www.christies.com/features/artist-interview-zheng-chongbin-3969-3.aspx> (accessed 15 July 2017).

⁷⁷⁸ Mingyuan Art Museum, 'About', <http://mingyuanartmuseum.com/page/html/> (accessed 4 July 2018).

⁷⁷⁹ ArtLinkArt, 'Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art: *Contemporary Ink Painting – Shanghai New Ink Painting Art Exhibition*', http://www.artlinkart.com/en/space/exh_yr/093dyx/406atynk (accessed 4 July 2018); Cao Chen, 'The Foreigner Who Champions Chinese Art', *China Daily*, 20 October 2017, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2017-10/20/content_33508181.htm (accessed 15 May 2018); Jonathan Goodman, 'New York: *Barbara Edelstein*, Christian Duvernois Landscape/Gallery', *Sculpture*, 34 (2015), 75.

⁷⁸⁰ ArtLinkArt, 'Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art'.

⁷⁸¹ Saatchi Gallery, 'Museum Profile: Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art', <https://www.saatchigallery.com/museums-profile/Shanghai+Duolun+Museum+Of+Modern+Art/2700.html> (accessed 4 July 2018).

Francisco Chinese Culture Centre amongst others, also promoted the international outlook on Chinese-ink painting. As the museum's director Ma Fenghui reiterated, looking towards artistic forms that went beyond the socio-cultural particularism to China was vital in helping popularise ink art amongst audiences from different national backgrounds.⁷⁸² Hence, throughout the exhibition catalogue essays, it was repeatedly emphasised how important it was that the featured artists, such as Zheng or Li Huayi, attracted attention from international communities.⁷⁸³ The balancing out between traditional and broader contemporary elements in their ink-based paintings was suggested to play a core role in drawing interest from the Western art world, and was argued to '[help] Chinese ink painting to prosper in Mainland China' alike.⁷⁸⁴

The list of such internationally oriented contemporary ink art exhibitions at China-based non-profit cultural institutions, where Zheng's works were represented, continued, including in the recent years more of formidable organisations, like Shanghai's Museum of Contemporary Art and Hong Kong's newly established M+ Museum, dedicated to contemporary art, where the artist respectively exhibited at the latter's 2016 *Shan Shui within* and 2017 *Weight of Lightness: Ink Art at M+* exhibitions. As Hong Kong-based art critic Olivia Wang wrote in her 2015 article on Zheng for *The Wall Street Journal*, his ink works illustratively manifested that the medium of ink can be more than just about Asian cultural particularism – the idea that was at the centre of the aforementioned exhibitions' curatorial strategies, eager to demonstrate that China's historic pictorial form could be as advanced and impactful on the wider world as the country's booming economy.⁷⁸⁵

In this respect, to use Wang's words, Zheng's 'increasingly innovative use of light', his treatment of 'ink not as a medium but as physical matter' and the fact that his art's 'connection to the East may not always be palpable' explain why Chinese and, as elucidated below, broadly international art institutions started to increasingly shed public light on the artist's distinctive vision of ink.⁷⁸⁶ For these reasons another crucial internationally oriented art event in China – that is the 2016 Eleventh Shanghai Biennale, curated by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta from Raqs Media Collective – had Zheng's *Wall of Skies* selected as one of its 11 highlight works.⁷⁸⁷ As

⁷⁸² Ma Fenghui, 'Qianyan' ['Foreword'], in *Zhongguo Shuimo Hua zai Meiguo [Chinese Ink Painting in the United States]*, ed. Shu Jianhua (Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2013), 5.

⁷⁸³ Shu, 'Part Five', 137.

⁷⁸⁴ Zhejiang Art Museum, 'Exhibition Detail: *Chinese Ink Painting in the United States*', undated, <http://zjam.org.cn/Site/En/ExhibitionDetail.aspx?etid=2334> (accessed 10 July 2018).

⁷⁸⁵ Olivia Wang, 'A Spirit in the Dark', *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 March 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/olivia-wang-a-spirit-in-the-dark-1426094605> (accessed 15 July 2017).

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁷ Ink Studio, 'Zheng Chongbin: Overview', <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/55-zheng-chongbin/overview/> (accessed 9 December 2020).

analysed above, *Wall of Skies* expressed this characteristic for Zheng phenomenological and new materialist approach to ink through the technically advanced multimedia format, which prioritised the viewer's individual moment-unique and, thus, continuously shifting culturally transcendent perceptions of the constructed environment.

This state of viewing, which urged to constantly reconsider the surrounding space and to explore its multivariate dimensions from various angles of fugacious light reflections, made the pertinent contribution to the biennale's wider theme of questioning preconceived social constructs, captured in its very title, *Why Not Ask Again: Arguments, Counter-Arguments and Stories*. Hence, Zheng's *Wall of Skies* formed a meaningful dialogue with the other 10 highlight predominantly non-ink works, such as *Sonic Cosmic Webs* (Figure 116, 2016) by Argentinian-born Berlin-based artist Tomas Saraceno (born 1973), the two of which were directly compared in Frances Arnold's review on Artsy.⁷⁸⁸ Similar to *Wall of Skies*, Saraceno's installation posed the question as to 'what worlds and what knowledge are hiding in plain sight' by directing the viewer's attention at spider webs, minute details of which entangled structures – in turn, symbolising the equally entangled composition of cosmic galaxies – were illuminated by a light projection.⁷⁸⁹

This seamless integration of the ink medium-based work into the international contemporary art biennale spoke to the latter's wider curatorial achievement of dropping, as Arnold pointed out, 'the oft-analyzed dialogue between East and West' and instead demonstrating that China is 'increasingly cognizant of its own potential as a driving global force' not just economically, but also when it comes to the country's cultural sector and its own visual-culture conventions.⁷⁹⁰ This was echoingly emphasised in Francesca Tarocco's *Frieze Magazine* review, saying that the biennale's curators 'have determinedly resisted ethnocentric perspectives', revolving around 'Orientalist discourses about Asia'.⁷⁹¹ Consequently, having Zheng's *Wall of Skies* exhibited at the Eleventh Shanghai Biennale, which did not have specialisation in ink art, made an important call to eliminate automatic cultural stereotyping and institutional compartmentalisation of contemporary ink works and to focus more on what kind of intrinsic more broadly resonating content they may have.

It can, thereby, be seen that China's non-profit cultural establishments played the pivotal role in accentuating the international profile of ink art. Foremost, they manifested that the employment of

⁷⁸⁸ Frances Arnold, 'Raqs Media Collective's Shanghai Biennale Finally Ditches the Overdone Dichotomy between East and West', *Artsy News*, 14 November 2016, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-the-shanghai-biennale-finally-ditches-the-overdone-dichotomy-between-east-and-west> (accessed 6 December 2020).

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁹¹ Francesca Tarocco, '11th Shanghai Biennale: Power Station of Art, Shanghai, China', *Frieze Magazine*, 2 December 2016, <https://www.frieze.com/article/11th-shanghai-biennale-0> (accessed 6 December 2020).

the culturally loaded medium in contemporary works does not automatically extract ideas from them that would be beyond that medium's cultural particularism. As argued above regarding the Third Chengdu Biennale, this positioning of ink as the international-level art form by Chinese art institutions had its obvious nationalist political agendas. Suggesting that the specific to China's culture element could be of value to broader non-Asian audiences was the expression of the country's cultural pride and its power, both cultural and, via an extension, economic. However, this politicisation of ink within China was only one side of the coin as, on the other hand, it also helped initiate the more critical repositioning of contemporary ink art in relation to mainstream Western art.

Precisely, it was against the background of this increased Chinese institutional promotion of contemporary ink art as the more widely resonating art form that museums in the West also started dedicating more attention to present-day works in this pictorial genre, which had not been the case before. As shown in the previous chapters, from the 1980s well into the 1990s Western art institutions mostly positioned contemporary ink painting as the culturally alien and often also inferior art direction since it was perceived by them as the type of traditionalist drawing rather than up-to-date fine art. In this respect, if there were any exhibitions, devoted to contemporary ink pieces, they would usually take place on a small scale at less mainstream university-run galleries, such as at Hamburg's University of Fine Arts, discussed in the second chapter.

As further outlined in the third chapter, any representation of contemporary ink paintings by more mainstream, predominantly commercial galleries, which had a broader public outreach, was largely based on the appeal generated to such pieces by their perceived cultural difference, exemplifying the foreign art form from new post-Mao China. However, as Shao Daxian predicted in 1989, 'the more powerful China becomes', 'the easier it would be for the foreigners to appreciate our art'.⁷⁹² This comment underlines that culturally different art forms tend to be taken more seriously in the West only when their representative countries have economic power. In the postcolonial era, as the West was confronted with booming economies of multiple "other" countries – both previously colonised, such as Brazil, and non-colonised but still peripherally perceived, such as Russia or mainland China – the need to reconsider its political and cultural stance towards the reshaping phenomenon of the non-West has become even more urgent.

⁷⁹² Hua Shuo, 'Positioning of Experimental Chinese Ink Art through Art Writing (1989-1996)', European Association of Chinese Studies Conference, Glasgow, 30 August 2018.

Seen in the context of this broader decolonial agenda, promoting the international integration of contemporary Chinese-ink art serves the critical function of, as Joselit put it, ‘reclaiming local dormancies and redressing global aesthetic hierarchies’.⁷⁹³ As Joselit further expanded, since ‘heritage can function as a living resource for representing diverse experiences of contemporaneity’, ‘the reactivation of heritage can cancel a perceived *debt* to a Euro-American canon’.⁷⁹⁴ In other words, promoting cultural heritage-inspired works as the international-level art form deconstructs the West’s historically formulated conception that non-Western artists must necessarily “borrow” Western art standards to make meaningful and broadly applicable global contemporary art. It also contributes to the development of more critically pluralistic global art infrastructures, where contemporary art with certain local cultural traditions stops being either altogether excluded or patronisingly included as spectacle of “other cultures” in the West.

It is this critical reengineering of the global as more than just the Western, and the “normalisation” as opposed to the spectacularisation of the cultural difference that makes China’s move to internationally popularise ink art important, beyond nationalist implications that are irrevocably attached to such moves. As Ong wrote, Chinese artists’ ‘novel reassemblages of disparate cultural elements’, pertaining to both Chinese and Western visual idioms, add to the postcolonial ‘interrogation of received categories that have long frozen our picture of the world’.⁷⁹⁵ This idea was also raised by Dal Lago in relation to Chinese contemporary art, suggesting how specifically ink painting, ‘not generically validated by a [Western] modernist genealogy’, has the potential to ‘help break through a monocultural idea of the contemporary’.⁷⁹⁶ Therefore, it was the historically impactful moment when, following China’s art institutional example, Western museums turned to collecting and exhibiting present-day Chinese-ink art, including Zheng’s works.

To illustrate this, in 2012 London’s British Museum acquired Zheng’s *Eroded White*, as part of its mission to collect twenty-first-century ink works, which comprised a special section in the museum’s same-year exhibition *Modern Chinese Ink Paintings: A Century of New Directions*.⁷⁹⁷ Following this, in 2013 the artist’s ink works were included in *Culture-Mind-Becoming* during the Venice Biennale. Commissioned by the Global Art Centre Foundation, it was staged alongside its

⁷⁹³ Joselit, *Heritage and Debt*, 134-135.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151, 225.

⁷⁹⁵ Ong, “‘What Marco Polo Forgot’”, 483.

⁷⁹⁶ Dal Lago, ‘The “Global” Contemporary Art Canon and the Case of China’, 97.

⁷⁹⁷ British Museum, ‘Collection: Zheng Chongbin’s *Eroded White*’, https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3443552&partId=1&searchText=zheng+chongbin&page=1 (accessed 24 July 2019); Neil MacGregor, ‘Director’s Foreword’, in *Modern Chinese Ink Paintings: A Century of New Directions*, ed. Clarissa von Spee (London: British Museum Press, 2012), 7.

accompanying exhibition *Personal Structures*, showcasing international multimedia artists, such as Ukraine's Vitaly and Elena Vasieliev (both born 1975). The purpose behind such the geographically blurred curatorial approach was to let contemporary works, incorporating China's cultural elements, be viewed 'through the lens of globalisation'.⁷⁹⁸ Thus, the selected artists, ranging from Zheng to Xu Bing, were positioned as the internationally involved rather than isolated cultural figures, whose cultural heritage-inspired pieces were presented as the embodiment of the critical 'dialogue between globalisation and localisation'.⁷⁹⁹

This expanding articulation of contemporary ink art as the more international-level art form by Western non-profit art institutions reached its pinnacle with the aforementioned 2013 seminal exhibition *Ink Art* at New York's Met – which later in 2016 also purchased Zheng's *Unfolding Landscape* (Figure 117, 2015).⁸⁰⁰ Significantly, the focus on raising the international profile of present-day Chinese-ink works has been on the noticeable rise in the USA since at least the turn of 2010. For example, at the Princeton University Art Museum's 2009 exhibition *Outside In: Chinese x American x Contemporary Art*, six participating artists, including Arnold Chang, Michael Cherney or Liu Dan, are recognised as practitioners of either ink per se or its conceptual and historic underpinnings. As curator Jerome Silbergeld noted, the purpose of this selection was to focus public attention on ink painting, and to promote its image as contemporary and internationally relevant art.⁸⁰¹

Similarly, the Boston-based Museum of Fine Arts's 2010 exhibition *Fresh Ink*, mentioned above, aimed at showing how contemporary ink paintings, despite drawing inspiration from specific Chinese old masters, could meaningfully and widely applicably reinvigorate China's centuries-old pictorial convention.⁸⁰² Compared with these early exhibitions of contemporary ink works, what makes the Met's *Ink Art* unique is that it became the first exhibition of the large scale by the major Western museum to be dedicated to exclusively contemporary Chinese-ink uses. As Hearn explained his wider curatorial mission behind this statement-making exhibition, ink is the

⁷⁹⁸ Karlyn De Jongh, Danilo Eccher, Huang Du and Yang Shin-Yi, 'Culture-Mind-Becoming', in *Personal Structures, Culture-Mind-Becoming*, ed. Global Art Affairs Foundation (Venice: Global Art Affairs Foundation and Global Art Centre Foundation, 2013), 246.

⁷⁹⁹ Karlyn De Jongh, 'Culture-Mind-Becoming: Re-Discover', in *Personal Structures, Culture-Mind-Becoming*, ed. Global Art Affairs Foundation (Venice: Global Art Affairs Foundation and Global Art Centre Foundation, 2013), 250.

⁸⁰⁰ Metropolitan Museum of Art, 'Collection: Zheng Chongbin's *Unfolding Landscape*', <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/712209> (accessed 24 July 2019).

⁸⁰¹ Jerome Silbergeld, 'Chinese Art, Made-In-America: An Encounter with Geography, Ethnicity, Contemporaneity, and Cultural Chineseness', in *Outside In: Chinese x American x Contemporary Art*, ed. Jerome Silbergeld (Princeton and New Haven: Princeton University Art Museum and Yale University Press, 2009), 128.

⁸⁰² Hao Sheng, 'Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition', in *Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition*, ed. Hao Sheng (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2010), 11.

‘globalised’ medium that comprises a new forward-looking pathway for contemporary art, capable of surpassing the sole applicability to China’s art context.⁸⁰³ Nevertheless, as the curator additionally pointed out, since aspects of Chinese traditional cultural forms are conventionally ‘less accessible to Western critics and collectors’, ‘it has been harder to integrate their production into exhibitions of global contemporary art’.⁸⁰⁴

In this respect, *Ink Art* was also the pioneering exhibition of the experimental nature that tested out on this larger scale how the Western American understanding of what gives art “contemporaneity” and broader relevance could be expanded.⁸⁰⁵ Divided into four sections, focusing on calligraphy-based, landscape, abstract and multimedia art, the exhibition featured 35 artists and 70 works.⁸⁰⁶ Amongst others, the list included Li Huasheng and Liu Dan, whose paintings rely on the physical brushwork application, as well as Yang Yongliang (born 1980) and Chen Shaoxiong (1962-2016), who resorted to photographic and video tools to change *shanshui* ink landscapes into dystopian portrayals of urbanisation’s socio-environmental impact. As Hearn argued, these contemporary ink artists ‘cannot be fully explained or understood by a single set of criteria’, such as their works’ association with Chinese traditional cultural forms.⁸⁰⁷ Instead, they invite the positioning ‘with equal validity as “ink art” innovators and as international artists’.⁸⁰⁸

To reiterate this point, the list of the exhibited artists was expanded even further in the exhibition’s catalogue, which was by itself ground-breaking, presenting the first major English-language publication to devote such an in-depth scholarly discussion to the contemporary Chinese-ink art topic. Hence, in his critically titled essay ‘Transcending the East/West Dichotomy’ Wu Hung supplemented displayed artworks with numerous more examples, like Zheng’s *Slanted Light* (Figure 118, 2011-2012), contextualising them as the manifestation of how ‘the tradition of two-dimensional ink painting’ can be handled in ‘markedly different ways’, capable of inviting appreciation from today’s audiences as in China as in the West.⁸⁰⁹ This underlined that, far from being culturally limiting, the ink medium holds a significant potential for its future development on the wider global contemporary art scene.

⁸⁰³ Hearn, ‘Ink Art’, 13, 15.

⁸⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸⁰⁵ Based on a conversation between the author and Wu Hung during the Q&A part of the online symposium ‘Exhibiting East Asian Art in the West’, Centre for the Art of East Asia, University of Chicago, 5 June 2021.

⁸⁰⁶ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Annual Report for the Year 2013-2014* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014), 7; available via Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/-/media/files/about-the-met/annual-reports/2013-2014/2014-entire-file.pdf> (accessed 15 September 2021).

⁸⁰⁷ Hearn, ‘Ink Art’, 16.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰⁹ Wu Hung, ‘Transcending the East/West Dichotomy’, 29.

The contribution that *Ink Art* made to helping forge the deeper Western public understanding of contemporary ink works was also noted in critical reviews. For example, Vine pointed out Hearn's goal 'to overcome this Great Wall of cultural difference' around the ink medium by selecting ink artists, who consciously 'aim to connect with the larger contemporary world'.⁸¹⁰ In another review Smith echoingly acknowledged that the exhibition was 'something of a landmark' by framing ink art in relation to 'a universal problem' of 'how artists find their voices by working with, and against, the art that precedes them'.⁸¹¹ In his turn, the Columbia University's Professor Robert Harrist also reiterated Hearn's focus on 'the practice of contemporary artists participating in a global network of art production', whose use of the historically specific Chinese medium raised the broader question of how 'all art, in myriad ways, is engaged with the past'.⁸¹²

Nevertheless, when it came to Hearn's curatorial strategy of staging the exhibition's present-day works alongside the Asian galleries' historic pieces, this was largely criticised in reviews, which merits further discussion. Foremost, this display method was interpreted as the museum's own hint that Chinese-ink art might actually be 'insufficiently "contemporary" by cutting-edge international standards', undoing the exhibition's intentions to demonstrate the opposite.⁸¹³ However, when placed into the wider Western art institutional context, where it is commonplace to find the so-called "cutting-edge" international artists exhibited next to old masters, it becomes clearer that the objective of this display means was not to put into question Chinese-ink art's international or contemporary applicability. Contrary to this, on one level, it was a matter of practical consideration, particular to encyclopaedic art museums, which exhibitions and acquisitions always come as extensions of their historic collections.

Indeed, since the Met holds a major collection of Asian historic artworks, its engagement with contemporary art must additionally be seen in relation to the latter. When Hearn was appointed as the head of the museum's Asian art department in 2011, its collection did not have a strong presence of contemporary works – the gap that he pursued to address in order to make the Asian chronological-survey art collection up-to-date and, concurrently, to reactivate public interest in

⁸¹⁰ Richard Vine, 'Invisible Ink', *Art in America*, 3 March 2014, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/invisible-ink-63005/> (accessed 10 December 2020).

⁸¹¹ Roberta Smith, 'A Magical Well That Never Runs Dry', *The New York Times*, 12 December 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/13/arts/design/ink-art-the-mets-first-big-contemporary-chinese-show.html> (accessed 10 December 2020).

⁸¹² Robert E. Harrist, Jr., 'Review – Maxwell K. Hearn, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*', *CAA Reviews*, 7 August 2014, <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/2242#.X9Nq0tj7Syk> (accessed 10 December 2020).

⁸¹³ Vine, 'Invisible Ink'; Smith, 'A Magical Well That Never Runs Dry'; Marie Martraire, 'The Inaccessible Other: The Inside-Out Approach as Curatorial Framework', *SFAQ*, 17 September 2014, <https://www.sfaq.us/2014/09/the-inaccessible-other-the-inside-out-approach-as-curatorial-framework/> (accessed 10 December 2020).

ancient and old-master art.⁸¹⁴ This can directly be inferred from Hearn’s interview for Artsy, where he underlined that the institution was ‘missing a whole array of museum visitors who habitually don’t find the Asian galleries’.⁸¹⁵ Hence, via analogies with global contemporary ink art – which is easier, in most cases, for audiences to understand, compared with historic works – Hearn hoped to ‘teach them something about how to appreciate [past] Chinese art’.⁸¹⁶

In the light of this, the choice to have contemporary ink pieces shown at *Ink Art* next to Chinese historic artworks was partially motivated by the public neglect of the Met’s broader Asian collection. Significantly, as mentioned above, this is the strategy that is commonly pursued by North American and European art institutions in relation to Western historic art forms alike. This can be illustrated by such exhibitions as 2012 *Metamorphosis: Titian 2012* at London’s National Gallery, for which contemporary artists were invited to contribute works inspired by Venetian sixteenth-century painter Titian. As part of 2008-2009 *Statuephilia: Contemporary Artists at the British Museum*, Antony Gormley (born 1950) or Damien Hirst (born 1965) amongst others were also commissioned to make art pieces that directly responded to the British Museum’s historic sculptures.

Echoingly, shortly after the *Ink Art* exhibition, in 2016 the Met Breuer (the Met’s branch) contrasted works by Titian and seventeenth-century Dutch old master Rembrandt with those by Brice Marden (born 1938) and Kerry James Marshall (born 1965).⁸¹⁷ As Griselda Murray Brown commented, this way institutions ‘lure visitors with contemporary pieces’ and, once they are in a gallery room, they inevitably come across old-master works that they may have otherwise omitted viewing.⁸¹⁸ In a similar vein, Robin Pogrebin explained this curatorial strategy as the institutional response to the growing social fascination for modern and contemporary art, so prominently covered by today’s media, which comes at the expense of the decline of attention towards ancient or old-master art.⁸¹⁹ Altogether, this broader institutional context pertinently evidences that mixing old and new Chinese

⁸¹⁴ Holland Cotter, ‘At Met, New Leadership (and Direction) for Asian Art’, *The New York Times*, 16 March 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/arts/design/at-met-new-leadership-and-direction-for-asian-art.html> (accessed 1 May 2021).

⁸¹⁵ Christine Kuan, ‘In Conversation with Met Curator of Asian Art, Maxwell K. Hearn’, Artsy, 11 March 2014, <https://www.artsy.net/article/christine-in-conversation-with-met-curator-of-asian> (accessed 1 May 2021).

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸¹⁷ Robin Pogrebin, ‘Can the Old Masters Be Relevant Again?’, *The New York Times*, 28 August 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/arts/design/can-the-old-masters-be-relevant-again.html> (accessed 1 May 2021).

⁸¹⁸ Griselda Murray Brown, ‘The Old-New Thing’, *The Financial Times*, 14 December 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/4b3a4904-4487-11e2-932a-00144feabdc0> (accessed 1 May 2021).

⁸¹⁹ Pogrebin, ‘Can the Old Masters Be Relevant Again?’.

works at *Ink Art* was not about undoing the ink medium's international applicability and contemporaneity.

Moreover, in addition to being the matter of practical consideration, characteristic of encyclopaedic museums, this thesis would further argue that, on another level, displaying contemporary pieces in the galleries with historic Chinese works was also a way to address one of the most common Western prejudices against ink art that sees it as historically backward. By having the opportunity to directly cross-compare present-day ink pieces and Chinese past traditional art forms, audiences could appreciate for themselves how the two contrasted, and that any continuities between them were critically reinterpreted by the exhibited contemporary artists. Consequently, staging this direct visual juxtaposition between historic Chinese and today's ink art was meant to underline that no matter to what, if any, degrees ink artists choose to engage with the past, their works go beyond it and possess contemporary applicability as well as broader cross-cultural resonance.

Advancing this idea by the Met via its large-scale *Ink Art* exhibition was of the paramount significance in helping forge the international profile of Chinese-ink art for yet another reason, that is the museum's exceptional global outreach. Precisely, compared with other major encyclopaedic museums in the West, what makes the Met brand unique in terms of its far-reaching public popularity is the fact that that it annually hosts the Met Gala – the celebrity-attended fundraising ball for the museum's Costume Institute, currently co-organised by Anna Wintour behind Conde Nast's globally influential fashion magazine *Vogue*. Since on an annual basis the Met Gala is widely covered by the media all over the world, it puts not only the Costume Institute, but the wider museum into the global spotlight.

To numerically illustrate this, in 2013-2014 – the period when the *Ink Art* exhibition was staged – the Met welcomed more than 6 million American and international visitors, many of whom would have come across the notion of Chinese-ink art as the contemporary art form via multiple banners and posters around the museum advertising the exhibition.⁸²⁰ The latter alone registered the substantial attendance of 151,154 visitors.⁸²¹ This reiterates the significance of the contribution that the Met played in raising the broader international public awareness of present-day Chinese-ink works and their conceptual underpinnings. What is also important is that, following this groundbreaking US exhibition, the category of contemporary ink art started more frequently appearing on the North American and European museum scenes alike.

⁸²⁰ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 8.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*

For example, in 2014 the Vancouver Art Gallery in Canada staged *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, which included various ink works, such as Jennifer Wen Ma's (born 1973) ink-coloured live plants. As Thomas Berghuis wrote in the exhibition catalogue, Chinese, like any other, traditional forms, especially when layered with additional media, provide an effective means 'to reveal significant cultural and universal elements and ideas that are still relevant today'.⁸²² In order to underscore this international applicability of contemporary ink and other tradition-inspired works, the exhibition focused on contextualising their artists' 'education, upbringing and individual practices', as '[it] is no longer acceptable to define contemporary ink art in isolation as a linear extension of traditional ink aesthetics'.⁸²³

This viewpoint on tradition-inspired Chinese-ink art was also expressed in 2015 *China 8: Contemporary Art from China at Rhine and Ruhr* – Germany's largest exhibition of contemporary Chinese art that was collaboratively organised by nine German museums across various cities, featuring more than 500 works and a dedicated section to ink painting.⁸²⁴ Titled 'Tradition Today – Ink Painting and Calligraphy' and displayed at Gelsenkirchen's Museum of Fine Arts, this specialised sub-exhibition, representing Xu Bing and Wang Dongling amongst others, was meant to convey how 'the preoccupation with the tradition opens new, fruitful paths', in line with the wider exhibition's mission to '[demonstrate] that the new Chinese aesthetic is on equal footing with the discourse taking place in the rest of the world', as put by co-curator Walter Smerling.⁸²⁵

The exhibition vividly helped boost German interest in quality examples of contemporary ink art by established artists, which, significantly, were reviewed within the context of the *China 8* exhibition as 'a treat for the viewers' senses', making 'one's visit to Gelsenkirchen worthwhile'.⁸²⁶ Following it, in 2015 Daimler Contemporary – the art foundation behind Germany's Daimler specialising in automobile manufacturing – included Zheng's *White Reflection* (Figure 119, 2012), which the foundation acquired in 2013, into its collection-based exhibition *From a Poem to the Sunset*:

⁸²² Thomas J. Berghuis, 'Traditions without Tensions: Medium and Form in Contemporary Chinese Art', in *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art* (Vancouver and London: Vancouver Art Gallery and Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 33, 35.

⁸²³ Wu Hung in Diana Freundl, 'Reframing Tradition: Unloading the Lexicon of China's Cultural Past in Chinese Contemporary Art', in *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art* (Vancouver and London: Vancouver Art Gallery and Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 24.

⁸²⁴ C.A. Xuan Mai Ardia, "'China 8": Germany's Largest Show of Contemporary Chinese Art', *Art Radar*, 5 June 2015, <https://artradarjournal.com/2015/06/05/china-8-germany/> (accessed 11 December 2020).

⁸²⁵ Ibid.; Xu Dan, 'Tradition Today: Chinese Ink Painting and Calligraphy', in *China 8: Contemporary Art from China at Rhine and Ruhr*, ed. Walter Smerling, Tobia Bezzola and Ferdinand Ullrich (Cologne: Wienand Verlag, 2015), 277.

⁸²⁶ Clara Tang, 'Exhibition Roundup: "China 8"', *ArtAsiaPacific*, 7 August 2015, <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/ExhibitionRoundupChina8> (accessed 11 December 2020).

Daimler Art Collection at Daimler Contemporary Berlin.⁸²⁷ In the mid-2010s the foundation was just in the process of expanding its collection with examples of international (including Chinese) art, in the light of which its curatorial advisor Andreas Schmid proposed to view Zheng's ink paintings, also leading to the reconnection between Schmid and the artist since their friendship at the Zhejiang Academy in the 1980s.⁸²⁸

A part of the Daimler Contemporary Berlin's 2015 exhibition was devoted to their latest acquisitions, related to Chinese contemporary works, which, instead of being grouped into a separate section, were threaded throughout display rooms alongside examples of the foundation's larger global art collection, united by the interest in abstract and minimalist forms.⁸²⁹ Hence, *From a Poem to the Sunset* featured Irish artist Sarah Browne (born 1981), British Katja Davar (born 1968) or Algerian-born French Philippe Parreno (born 1964).⁸³⁰ This curatorial strategy of putting such internationally diverse works into visual dialogues was envisioned to 'bring out parallels and relationships in the form of shared artistic concerns' and to demonstrate that the Chinese art acquisitions, despite having some 'unique qualities', like the use of the ink medium, were an integral part of wider global contemporary art.⁸³¹

In this respect, Zheng's *White Reflection*, epitomising the artist's above-analysed exploration of phenomenological and philosophical dimensions of spatio-lighting conditions and, thereby, accordingly displayed at Daimler Contemporary Berlin next to a large window emanating natural daylight, made a particularly fitting parallel with Parreno's adjacently exhibited *6:00 P.M., 2001* (Figure 120, 2001).⁸³² Indeed, the latter's chromojet-imprinted carpet, which froze in time one unique sun-reflection imagery that Parreno observed in a certain space during a certain 2001 evening, similarly focused the viewer's attention on the fleetness of momentary spatio-lighting conditions, which define the human engagement with the physical world.⁸³³ In addition, to reiterate the relevance of *White Reflection* to specifically the local German audience, curators Renate Wiehager and Christian Ganzenberg also cross-referenced it in the catalogue with German artist

⁸²⁷ Daimler Contemporary, 'Collection: Zheng Chongbin's *White Reflection*', <http://art.daimler.com/en/artwork/white-reflection-2012-zheng-chongbin/> (accessed 24 July 2019).

⁸²⁸ Daimler Contemporary, 'From a Poem to the Sunset: First Part of an Exhibition Series with New Acquisitions of Contemporary Chinese and International Art', 2015, <https://art.daimler.com/en/from-a-poem-to-the-sunset/> (accessed 24 July 2019); Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 1.

⁸²⁹ Daimler Contemporary, 'From a Poem to the Sunset'.

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

⁸³¹ Ibid.

⁸³² Ibid.

⁸³³ Olga Smith, 'Philippe Parreno: *6.00 PM*', Tate, January 2014, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/parreno-6-00-pm-t12411> (accessed 11 December 2020).

Max Uhlig's (born 1937) paintings, like *Large Brush Formation* (Figure 121, 1993), which also utilised ink to evoke 'gestures with a pronounced actional character'.⁸³⁴

Pertinently to this growing institutional emphasis on the ink art's applicability in the international art world, in 2015 London's Thames and Hudson published its globally distributed art manual *Drawing and Painting: Materials and Techniques for Contemporary Artists*, where author Kate Wilson had a dedicated section on ink, illustrated by Zheng's works. Rather than emphasising the exclusiveness of ink to either the Chinese or Asian art contexts, Wilson focused on discussing ink as above all the material, which, for example, was 'unforgiving of mistakes' due to its heightened liquidity, that any contemporary artist could utilise.⁸³⁵ Hence, it was presented as the internationally applicable medium with a multivariate technical potential to metaphorically evoke broader philosophical and cosmological ideas amongst other themes.⁸³⁶

Importantly, the Chinese and Western non-profit cultural investment into projects, focusing on present-day ink works, was swiftly transmitted into the art market sector, which made its own contribution to the ink art's popularisation as the contemporary and international-level art form. Starting with China, the country's economic boom led to the proliferation of commercial art galleries, grouped into separate art districts, like 798 in Beijing and M50 in Shanghai.⁸³⁷ As a result, Zheng's ink paintings were recurrently featured at sales exhibitions in, for example, Shanghai's M50, manifested by Poju (*Breaking*)/*Catastrophe* at the Sunbow Gallery in 2008 or *Ink Limit* at the DADE Art Centre in 2012. Amongst the galleries in Beijing's 798 district Zheng was invited to collaborate with the Taiwan-founded Asia Art Centre, to which he was introduced by Zheng Shengtian, who, like Erickson, helped him get to know local art institutions.⁸³⁸

Hence, in 2012 Zheng landed there the solo exhibition *Negotiating between Light and Ink*, thereby introducing his artworks, like above-analysed *Distanced Light*, on the 798 art scene. In 2013 the artist had another solo exhibition in the region, *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form*, organised by Ink Studio, which also marked the gallery's opening. Significantly, founded by three Americans and Stanford University alumni Craig Yee, Christopher Reynolds and Erickson, Ink Studio was amongst the first commercial galleries to specialise in contemporary ink art, bringing together the

⁸³⁴ Christian Ganzenberg and Renate Wiehager, 'Introduction', in *From a Poem to the Sunset: First Part of an Exhibition Series with New Acquisitions of Contemporary Chinese and International Art*, ed. Renate Wiehager and Christian Ganzenberg (Berlin: Daimler Contemporary, 2015), 11.

⁸³⁵ Kate Wilson, *Drawing and Painting: Materials and Techniques for Contemporary Artists* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 35.

⁸³⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸³⁷ Chiu, *Breakout*, 207.

⁸³⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 7, Question 8.

field's leading artists across the world and China, such as USA-resident Zheng and Europe-based Yang Jiechang, or Chinese mainland artists Li Huasheng and Wang Dongling.⁸³⁹

Becoming Zheng's main representative gallery in China, Ink Studio also arranged a significant loan of the artist's paintings to the Microsoft China Centre One, which were displayed there in 2014 to mark the centre's opening, attended by the company's co-founder Bill Gates.⁸⁴⁰ As the world's leading American multinational technology corporation, it was a fitting choice to display at its Beijing branch ink works that spoke to the country's cultural heritage without losing touch with internationally applicable themes, while also having a particular relation to the USA, being created in San Francisco by the California-based artist. The interest in Zheng's ink paintings by the Chinese subsidiary of such the noteworthy US-based global company as Microsoft Corporation testified to not only the ink art's rising position on China's art market, but also its broader international representation by private commercial art institutions.

Indeed, between the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013 contemporary ink art started to be vividly popularised by the Western commercial art institutional sector. It was at that moment that the Contemporary Ink Art sales category was officially pioneered on the global art market after the world's two auction house giants Christie's and Sotheby's organised their inaugural sales in simultaneously Hong Kong and New York.⁸⁴¹ Significantly, this helped reshape the appearance of the Chinese contemporary art market abroad, which in the 1990s and for the majority of the 2000s predominantly focused on oil paintings in the styles of Cynical Realism and Political Pop with little regard for ink works.⁸⁴² This can be illustrated by the biggest two auctions, featuring Chinese contemporary art in 2006 and 2007, namely *Contemporary Art Asia: China, Japan, Korea*, held at Sotheby's New York office, which were dominated by precisely this kind of works.⁸⁴³

For instance, from the March 2007 sale Zhang Xiaogang's (born 1958) *Bloodline: Three Comrades* (Figure 122, 1994), underlining China's prejudice against the female gender in the light of the one-child policy, was estimated within a remarkable range of 1,5-2 million USD, and was sold above the

⁸³⁹ Martin J. Smith, 'When Art Is Your Business, Treat Your Business Like Art', *Stanford Business*, 30 August 2016, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/when-art-your-business-treat-your-business-art> (accessed 18 May 2020).

⁸⁴⁰ Zheng Chongbin in an interview with the author, 17 August 2019, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 5.

⁸⁴¹ Christie's, 'Press Release – *Beyond Tradition: Chinese Contemporary Ink at Christie's*', 6 February 2013, <http://www.christies.com/about/press-center/releases/pressrelease.aspx?pressreleaseid=6153> (accessed 1 October 2013); Ma Rufeng, 'Chinese Ink Now', Sotheby's, 28 February 2014, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/blogs/all-blogs/sothebys-at-auction/2014/02/chinese-ink-now.html> (accessed 26 March 2014).

⁸⁴² Lü, *A History of Art in 20th-Century China*, 1009, 1162.

⁸⁴³ The following fetched auction results in this chapter include premium charges added to hammer prices.

estimate for 2,112,000 USD.⁸⁴⁴ This substantially contrasted with ink paintings, presented at the same auction, which were very few and grouped at the end of the sale. Their average estimate ranged between 5,000 and 10,000 USD, reiterating their marginal market appreciation.⁸⁴⁵ The exception went only for a few ink paintings by artists, who managed to make a splash with their conceptual non-ink art on the Western art scene early on in the 1980s-1990s, such as Gu Wenda, famous for his hair-based *United Nations* installation, discussed in the previous chapter.

As a result, Gu's 1998 large-scale ink painting *Mythos of Lost Dynasties: Flying Pseudo-Seal Scripture in Landscape*, coming from the 1980s series that he started back in Hangzhou, analysed in the second chapter, was estimated within a higher range of 120,000-180,000 USD.⁸⁴⁶ Significantly, this was primarily related to the artist's fame as the non-ink experimental artist rather than the work's ink medium per se. Indeed, *Untitled* (Figure 123, 2000-2001) by important but lesser known than ink painter Wang Dongling was priced at just 10,000-12,000 USD.⁸⁴⁷ This period's commercial underappreciation of ink paintings can also be elucidated by comparable sales of oil and ink works by more senior artists. For example, from the two earlier November 1998 Christie's Chinese art auctions in Hong Kong, Wu Guanzhong's *Shrubalthea* oil painting fetched 286,674 USD by contrast with the same-day sale of his *Boat by Riverside* ink painting at 12,623 USD.⁸⁴⁸

Nevertheless, with the growing popularisation of contemporary ink art by Chinese and Western non-profit institutions, ink works started forming an independent trend on the international art market rather than a marginalised subsection of Chinese oil painting sales. As Ben Kong explained about Christie's 2013 private sale of contemporary ink paintings, the selection of 'nine of the most prominent artists in the field', including Zheng, Li Huayi or Liu Dan amongst others, was precisely 'in response to rising interest and global demand' on ink works across Europe, America and Asia.⁸⁴⁹ The scale of this demand could soon be seen translated into spiking publicly available auction

⁸⁴⁴ Sotheby's, 'Lot 21', in 'Past Auctions: *Contemporary Art Asia*', 21 March 2007, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2007/contemporary-art-asia-n08298/lot.21.html> (accessed 22 July 2019).

⁸⁴⁵ Most of the ink paintings are illustrated on pages 230-243, in Sotheby's, *Contemporary Art Asia: China, Japan, Korea* (New York: Sotheby's, 2007).

⁸⁴⁶ Sotheby's, 'Lot 155', in 'Past Auctions: *Contemporary Art Asia*', 21 March 2007, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2007/contemporary-art-asia-n08298/lot.155.html> (accessed 23 July 2019).

⁸⁴⁷ Sotheby's, 'Lot 190', in 'Past Auctions: *Contemporary Art Asia*', 21 March 2007, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2007/contemporary-art-asia-n08298/lot.190.html> (accessed 23 July 2019).

⁸⁴⁸ Christie's, 'Lot 318', in 'Past Auctions: *Contemporary Chinese Oil Paintings*', 2 November 1998, https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/print_sale.aspx?saleid=8674&lid=1 (accessed 15 October 2020); Christie's, 'Lot 62', in 'Past Auctions: *Fine Modern and Contemporary Chinese Paintings*', 2 November 1998, https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/print_sale.aspx?saleid=8672&lid=1 (accessed 15 October 2020).

⁸⁴⁹ Christie's, 'Press Release – *Beyond Tradition*'.

results. For example, over at Sotheby's in 2016 a record was set for Liu Dan's *Poppy* (Figure 124, 2008), sold for 892,403 USD, which became the most expensive contemporary Chinese-ink work ever sold at auction.⁸⁵⁰

Similarly, Wang Dongling's abstract calligraphic piece *Harmonious Opposition* (Figure 125, 2006) in 2016 fetched 112,840 USD at Sotheby's, outperforming its highest estimate of 45,136 USD as well as the above-mentioned top estimate of only 12,000 USD for the artist's echoing work, offered back in 2007 again at Sotheby's.⁸⁵¹ Later-generation ink artists also saw the growing demand for their ink paintings. For instance, from 2015 to 2016 Qin Feng's single-scroll works saw an increase of 25,162 USD, going from 32,258 USD for *Desire Landscape Series* (Figure 126, 2008) in 2015 up to 56,420 USD for *Civilisation Landscape I* (Figure 127, 2007) in 2016, both auctioned by Sotheby's.⁸⁵² Through Christie's and Sotheby's representation, Zheng's auction market performance also spiked up, manifesting growing international attention towards the category of contemporary Chinese-ink art. Overall, from 2015 to 2018 the artist's ink paintings were annually represented at either of these auction houses, totalling nine lots altogether.⁸⁵³

Specifically, the realised prices on Zheng's ink works stayed within the mean of 29,302 USD, excluding the record-breaking for Zheng sale of *Four Definitions 001* (Figure 128, 2011) in April 2016 by Sotheby's for 88,659 USD, that is 37,076 USD above its highest estimate of 51,583 USD.⁸⁵⁴ Placed in the auction's context, the work fell into the category of 17 out of 65 lots, sold above 65,000 USD.⁸⁵⁵ Moreover, out of the artist's eight sold works in 2015-2018, four were sold within the estimates, while the other three, offered in April and October 2016 by Sotheby's and in November 2018 by Christie's, respectively fetched an excess of 37,076 USD, 12,892 USD and 1,598 USD over their highest estimates.⁸⁵⁶ Thus, as summarised by Graph 4, Zheng's auction market performance

⁸⁵⁰ Sotheby's, 'Lot 508', in 'Past Auctions: *The Origo Collection*', 4 April 2016, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/origo-collection-hk0684/lot.508.html> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁸⁵¹ Sotheby's, 'Lot 507', in 'Past Auctions: *The Origo Collection*', 4 April 2016, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/origo-collection-hk0684/lot.507.html> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁸⁵² Sotheby's, 'Lot 2820', in 'Past Auctions: *Contemporary Ink Art*', 5 October 2015, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/contemporary-ink-art-hk0585/lot.2820.html> (accessed 2 June 2020); Sotheby's, 'Lot 519', in 'Past Auctions: *The Origo Collection*', 4 April 2016, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/origo-collection-hk0684/lot.519.html> (accessed 2 June 2020).

⁸⁵³ Artnet Price Database, 'Zheng Chongbin', <http://www.artnet.com/artists/zheng-chongbin/> (accessed 13 May 2019).

⁸⁵⁴ Ibid.; Emma Crichton-Miller, 'The Market Is Hot for Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting', *Apollo*, 30 August 2016, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/the-market-is-hot-for-contemporary-chinese-ink-painting/> (accessed 25 April 2017).

⁸⁵⁵ This analysis is based on the data provided by Sotheby's, 'Past Auctions: *The Origo Collection*', 4 April 2016, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/2016/origo-collection-hk0684.html> (accessed 25 July 2017).

⁸⁵⁶ Ibid.

was dominated by the sold lots that met or exceeded the estimates, underlining the growing international demand for present-day Chinese-ink art.

In addition to auctions, Zheng's ink paintings were also increasingly featured in Christie's and Sotheby's private sales, offered to the auction houses' specially selected global clientele. As shown by Table 1 in Appendix B, between 2013 and 2017, the artist was represented in five such blue-chip veiled sales across New York and Hong Kong, including an exclusive solo commercial show in 2016 at Sotheby's S|2 Gallery in Hong Kong. Titled *Zheng Chongbin: Structures*, the exhibition offered 35 pieces, all of which were executed between 2015 and 2016, coming straight from the artist's studio to the auction house's private sale with a gap of a year or less.⁸⁵⁷ This signalled Sotheby's confidence in the demand for contemporary ink paintings and in the potential of the latter's commercial performance. Indeed, as Sotheby's specialist Katherine Don commented, these private sales registered much higher results, 'sometimes double than the records achieved at auction'.⁸⁵⁸

Importantly, this confidence in contemporary ink art was echoed across the international commercial gallery sector alike. For example, in 2012 Hamburg's Flo Peters Gallery invited Zheng to launch a sales exhibition of his ink paintings in Germany. What is noteworthy is that the gallery specialised in photography, and the exhibition's 2012 press release itself acknowledged that the 'Flo Peters Gallery [would] leave its usual path of being an exclusive photography gallery and [would] be presenting the latest works by internationally renowned, Chinese contemporary artist Zheng Chongbin', and, concurrently, '[would] proudly open [the artist's] first solo show in Europe'.⁸⁵⁹ Agnew's concluding sentence in the catalogue reiterated the exhibition's enthusiasm to sell Zheng's series to various European and international clients by suggesting that its representative pieces 'would still be in conversation with each other', despite promising to get 'separated and scattered throughout the globe'.⁸⁶⁰

Echoingly, in 2012 London-based art dealer Michael Goedhuis, in partnership with the city's flagship Saatchi Gallery, organised *Ink: The Art of China* – the extensive exhibition, dedicated to

⁸⁵⁷ Sotheby's, *Zheng Chongbin: Structures*, 22 April 2016, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/2016/zheng-chongbin-structures-hk0688.html#&page=all&sort=lotSortNum-asc&viewMode=list&lot=35&scroll=9451.19921875> (accessed 26 July 2019).

⁸⁵⁸ Katherine Don, 'Conversation: Katherine Don', *Collect: An Art Journal*, June 2017, 25; available via 3812 Gallery, <https://www.3812gallery.com/usr/library/documents/main/collect-art-journal-issue-1-june-2017-.pdf> (accessed 15 November 2020).

⁸⁵⁹ Flo Peters Gallery, 'Exhibitions: *Ink Phenomenon – Objects of Perception*', 12 May 2012, <http://www.flopetersgallery.com/exhibitions/zheng-chongbin-ink-phenomenon-objects-perception> (accessed 10 July 2018).

⁸⁶⁰ Mary Agnew, *Zheng Chongbin: Ink Phenomenon – Objects of Perception* (Hamburg: Flo Peters Gallery, 2012), unnumbered.

contemporary ink painting. Gathering artists as diverse, in terms of location and generation, as Zheng, based in California, and Liu Guosong, based in Taiwan, Goedhuis reiterated in the accompanying catalogue that ‘this first comprehensive study of the New Ink Art in an institution of international stature [was] exceptionally timely’ as it corresponded to ‘the growing awareness of this vital contribution to contemporary Chinese culture’.⁸⁶¹ Precisely, it was not by coincidence that this show, just as the one at the Flo Peters Gallery, happened in 2012. As mentioned above, 2012 was the year when the dedicated contemporary ink art auctions started taking place, thereby, these exhibitions were amongst the first gallery ventures into promoting ink works on the European art market.

With the similar drive the Poligono Gallery, strategically located in Marbella – famous for its real estate, purchased as summer houses by potential collectors across Europe – in 2013 mounted its own dedicated ink art exhibition, *Beyond Abstraction: Explorations in Contemporary Chinese Ink*. Featuring works by Zheng and such China-based artists as Liang Quan or Qin Feng, this was the gallery’s first show to focus on contemporary ink art, having previously presented Chinese artists that specialised in oil painting and photography.⁸⁶² The show was organised with the support from Don, who at the time owned the RedBox Studio art advisory, becoming shortly in 2014 Sotheby’s Asian Head of Contemporary Ink Art.⁸⁶³ As Don wrote for the exhibition’s catalogue, seeing such the diversification in Chinese-ink sales exhibitions across Europe and beyond was the indication of ‘optimism for the future of a distinct medium’.⁸⁶⁴

In other words, the emergence of these blue-chip European private sales manifested the contemporary ink art’s instantly expanding network of dealers and collectors, moving well beyond China. For this reason, in 2013 Zheng’s ink works were also consigned by MABSOCIETY – the international Shanghai-based curatorial and consultancy firm, founded by American Mathieu Borysevich in 2012.⁸⁶⁵ Positioning itself as ‘a hybrid organisation that acts as a cultural conduit between China and the rest of the world’, MABSOCIETY’s very mission was said to ‘[represent] artists and their interests in the globalised marketplace as well as [to collaborate] with international galleries and organisations’. Consequently, just as the above-mentioned galleries, the firm

⁸⁶¹ Michael Goedhuis, ‘Foreword’, in *Ink: The Art of China* (London: Saatchi Gallery, 2012), 8.

⁸⁶² ArtFacts, ‘Poligono Gallery’, <https://artfacts.net/institution/poligono-gallery/31201> (accessed 24 July 2019).

⁸⁶³ Katherine Don, *Beyond Abstraction: Explorations in Contemporary Chinese Ink* (Marbella: Poligono Gallery, 2013), 13; Katherine Don’s LinkedIn profile, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/katherinedon/?originalSubdomain=hk> (accessed 24 July 2019).

⁸⁶⁴ Don, *Beyond Abstraction*, 14.

⁸⁶⁵ MABSOCIETY, ‘Statement’, www.mabsociety.com/statement--3847236848.html (accessed 22 April 2020); MABSOCIETY, ‘Artists: Zheng Chongbin’, <http://www.mabsociety.com/zcb.html> (accessed 22 April 2020).

responded to this rising international attention to contemporary ink art, differentiating itself as the insider via which Western institutions or collectors and ink artists could be brought together.

In this respect, as Graph 5 illustrates, in 2012-2018 the number of Zheng's European and American commercial exhibitions almost equalled the number of the same-category shows in China and wider Asia, respectively counting four and six to 11 and one. Significantly, within the USA five out of the six sales shows took place outside Zheng's residential California, specifically in New York – one of the strategic international art market centres. From RH Contemporary Art there, which in 2014 showcased *Outside the Lines: New Art from China*, to CFHILL Art Space in Sweden's Stockholm that in 2018 organised *Mountains and Streams – Eight Chinese Artists in Stockholm*, Zheng's ink paintings witnessed the rising demand for them from the international art community. As Don suggested, giving an insight into the broader international ink art marketing strategy, 'ink as a medium transcends cultural boundaries' and, thereby, can 'relate to cultures around the world'.⁸⁶⁶

Indeed, the clientele at such specialised contemporary ink art sales started becoming growingly international, attracting collectors that had not had a prior interest in ink art, which created extra demand for offered works that, in turn, contributed to the latter's rising market performance.⁸⁶⁷

For example, American collector of Cuban art Howard Farber, who in 1995 turned to collecting examples of Chinese Political Pop and Cynical Realism, ended up acquiring ink paintings as well, such as Zheng's early work *Face versus Figure (Fourth Series)* (Figure 41), discussed in the third chapter.⁸⁶⁸ Another noteworthy private acquisition of Zheng's ink painting was by French Dominique and Sylvain Levy, who in the early 2010s purchased *Stained No. 1* (Figure 129, 2009) for their Paris-based DSLCollection of Chinese contemporary art – the primary collection of this kind in Paris.⁸⁶⁹

In their turn, Geneva-based Swiss collectors Gerard and Dora Cognie gathered not only numerous works by Zheng – like the *Ink Series* pieces, shown at the Third Chengdu Biennale, earlier works from the *Another State of Man* series or recent examples that they, for instance, saw exhibited at the United Nations event in Geneva in 2012 – but also amassed the largest private collection of

⁸⁶⁶ Don, 'Conversation', 26.

⁸⁶⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 8.

⁸⁶⁸ *The Art Collector*, 'Howard Farber: An Accidental Collector', 18 May 2018, <http://www.theartcollector.org/howard-farber-an-accidental-collector/> (accessed 18 February 2018).

⁸⁶⁹ *BMW Art Guide*, 'Interview with Dominique & Sylvain Levy', <https://www.bmw-art-guide.com/idx/collectors/interview-with-dominique-and-sylvain-levy> (accessed 24 July 2019).

‘global ink-related art’.⁸⁷⁰ Counting over 400 pieces by internationally widespread artists, such as Californian Zheng, China-based Wang Dongling or London-based British Idris Khan (born 1978), Gerard and Dora Cognie recently announced in 2018 that this unique collection was going to be donated to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).⁸⁷¹ As the collectors said, their hope behind this donation was to ‘spearhead an important new understanding of global ink art and ink aesthetic, as well as providing a model for other such initiatives throughout the world’.⁸⁷²

Further two leading collectors of contemporary ink art are California-based Asian American philanthropists Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang, who acquired approximately 12 pieces by Zheng alone, including earlier works, like *Enigma of the Day* (Figure 90, 1995), in order to build the well-rounded representation of the artist’s creative output.⁸⁷³ Their selection, alongside examples by numerous other ink artists, like Li Huayi or Liu Dan, were exhibited in 2018 at the Stanford University’s Cantor Arts Centre, as part of *Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang*. As underlined in Andrew Goldstein’s review, museum collaborations with such dedicated ink art collectors as Yamazaki and Yang had an important goal of elucidating to Western audiences that ink works, despite having their own unique features, also had the capacity to exert a broader global influence.⁸⁷⁴

Due to this growing exposure of contemporary ink works across various art institutional platforms throughout the 2010s, ink art appeared in the spotlight of geographically diverse attention. From dedicated exhibitions at mainstream Western art museums to the tailored representation by global auction houses, the outreach of contemporary ink art was noticeably expanded, attracting new audiences that may not have otherwise shown interest in the latter. As Zheng observed, this wider international institutional shift unfolded the vital process of ‘[educating] people, especially in the West, about what contemporary ink art is about’.⁸⁷⁵ In turn, as elucidated above, it also helped to

⁸⁷⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 9; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, ‘Gerard and Dora Cognie Announce Promised Gift of Global Contemporary Art Collection to LACMA’, 21 March 2018, <http://www.lacma.org/sites/default/files/Cognie-media%20advisory-3.21.18.pdf> (accessed 15 October 2020).

⁸⁷¹ Los Angeles County Museum of Art, ‘Gerard and Dora Cognie Announce Promised Gift of Global Contemporary Art Collection to LACMA’.

⁸⁷² Ibid.

⁸⁷³ Olivia Wang, ‘Understated Visionaries: Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang’, *ArtAsiaPacific*, November/December 2018, <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/111/UnderstatedVisionaries> (accessed 12 December 2020).

⁸⁷⁴ Jennifer Piejko, ‘Charting New Territory with Contemporary Ink Art’, *Sotheby’s Magazine*, 22 March 2018, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/charting-new-territory-with-contemporary-ink-art> (accessed 12 December 2020); Andrew Goldstein, ‘Jerry Yang on How Chinese Calligraphy Can Help Tie Together a World in Crisis’, *Artnet News*, 30 May 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/yahoo-co-founder-and-art-collector-jerry-yang-on-how-chinese-calligraphy-can-help-tie-together-a-world-in-crisis-1293179> (accessed 12 December 2020).

⁸⁷⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 8.

start challenging time-standing prejudices towards the Chinese-ink medium, based on its supposed cultural otherness.

As touched upon above and argued in more detail in the third chapter, the biggest challenge that ink art conventionally faced when placed on the Western art scene was the tendency to limit its interpretation to its inherent cultural association with China, perceiving it, as Johnson Chang put it, ‘as an ethnic identity marker’ alone, and, as Pauline Yao said, ‘at odd with the values of contemporary art practices’.⁸⁷⁶ In this respect, the fact that there has been an increase in international exhibitions that provided a more in-depth focus on ink art’s deeper underpinnings and artists’ individual takes on them should be recognised as the big milestone for the ink medium that for such a long time had not been even considered as worthy of the broader mainstream contemporary art discourse. Nevertheless, despite these promising positive shifts, obstacles to the culturally unprejudiced global reception of contemporary ink art still prevail.

As Zheng said, there continue to be audiences that would automatically have second thoughts about viewing contemporary ink art simply because they are not Asian.⁸⁷⁷ Crucially, this happens before they even see the work, which underscores their assumptive belief that only the Asians can appreciate ink art.⁸⁷⁸ At the same time, variations of the ink medium were and are used by numerous established Western artists, ranging from Sam Francis to Tracey Emin (born 1963), whose works, naturally, are not culturally compartmentalised.⁸⁷⁹ Another pertinent example is Icelandic-Danish Berlin-based artist Olafur Eliasson (born 1967), whose glacial ice watercolours, like *Dark Ecology* (Figure 130, 2016), utilised Indian ink. Titled after Morton’s term ‘dark ecology’, which describes the unpredictability of interactions in the living world, the work’s imagery was a result of ‘the spontaneous behaviour of natural phenomena’, that is an ancient ice block that was left to melt on top of inked paper.⁸⁸⁰

Similar to Zheng’s ink paintings that are also inspired by Morton’s philosophical ideas in the field of new materialism, Eliasson’s *Dark Ecology* employed ink for its natural material properties, using them as the example of the ecological world’s speculatively generated intra-actions. Nevertheless, in the case of Eliasson, Western art institutions would not classify it as the solely Asian artwork for

⁸⁷⁶ Crichton-Miller, ‘The Market Is Hot for Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting’; Christopher Dewolf, ‘The Rebirth of Chinese Ink’, CNN, 20 May 2011, <http://travel.cnn.com/hong-kong/play/rebirth-chinese-ink-painting-043589/> (accessed 25 April 2017).

⁸⁷⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 8.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁰ Anna Engberg-Pedersen, ‘Olafur Eliasson: Works 1990-2018’, in *Olafur Eliasson: Experience*, ed. Anna Engberg-Pedersen (London: Phaidon, 2018), 378; Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 16.

Asian viewers, and, indeed, it was exhibited at the artist's solo 2016 exhibition *The Presence of Absence* at Berlin's neugerriemschneider, the title of which drew attention to the exhibited works' broadly resonating philosophical and environmental ideas. However, in the case of Asian-born internationally oriented artists, curators and viewers subconsciously long to view their Asian ink pieces solely via the cultural lens, depriving them of the opportunity to be fully appreciated for other layers of interpretation that are equally important for these pieces' understanding.⁸⁸¹

This view was expanded in Qian Zhijian's 2009 essay 'Why Here? Why Now?', acknowledging that 'the Chinese identity' is still often 'imposed upon the artworks not by their makers but by art critics, art historians and curators', who do not stop dwelling on 'identity-centred discourses'.⁸⁸² From a broader perspective, this also applies to ground-breaking exhibitions, such as *Ink Art* at the Met, to China-themed art sales, like *Ink: The Art of China* at the Saatchi Gallery as well as to the fact that most of museum and private contemporary ink art collecting continues to happen under the banner of the Chinese or Asian categories. Hence, when the Met acquired Zheng's *Unfolding Landscape*, it was processed as part of the institution's Chinese art department and joined the display at the Chinese art galleries in the section titled *Streams and Mountains without End: Landscape Traditions of China*. Similarly, even though Cognie's collection of contemporary ink works at LACMA is set to be used by its multiple departments, the acquisition was processed through the Chinese art department.⁸⁸³

Critically, this is not the case with non-ink art by Chinese-born artists, who often get public exposure as part of broader contemporary art exhibitions, whether at non-profit or commercial institutions. This can be illustrated by October 2017 *20th Century & Contemporary Art Evening Sale* at Phillips in London that included into its focused selection of only 36 lots such works as Ai Weiwei's (born 1957) sculpture *Coca-Cola* (2012) or Ai Jing's (born 1969) oil painting *I Love Colour #11* (2015).⁸⁸⁴ The other lots were works by such canonical mainstream Western artists as Sarah Lucas (born 1962) – next to whose painting *Supersensible* (1994-1995) Ai Weiwei and Ai Jing's works were displayed (Figure 131) – Gerhard Richter (born 1932) or Andy Warhol (1928-1987).⁸⁸⁵ By comparison, when it came to the auction representation of Chinese-ink paintings, as discussed

⁸⁸¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 20.

⁸⁸² Qian Zhijian, 'Why Here? Why Now? Re-Viewing Chinese Artists in New York', in *Here + Now: Chinese Artists in New York*, ed. Qian Zhijian (New York: Museum of Chinese in America, 2009), 7.

⁸⁸³ Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 'Gerard and Dora Cognie Announce Promised Gift of Global Contemporary Art Collection to LACMA'.

⁸⁸⁴ Phillips, 'Past Auctions: *20th Century & Contemporary Art Evening Sale*', 6 October 2017, <https://www.phillips.com/auctions/auction/UK010617> (accessed 30 August 2021).

⁸⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

above, they were largely grouped into separate sales, accompanied by the nationally coloured adjective ‘Chinese’.

This thesis would argue that within the context of the later 2000s and the 2010s – that is following the period when contemporary ink art was largely invisible altogether on the broader international art scene – having this China-themed discourse around present-day uses of Chinese ink was beneficial for one pivotal reason, reiterated throughout this chapter: it helped boost the previously marginalised awareness of contemporary ink art. Furthermore, it additionally helped concentrate this also previously scattered awareness into more unified momentum that connected multiple non-profit and commercial institutions across the two continents. This very exposure that Chinese-ink medium-based contemporary art received in the past decade enabled it to appear in the spotlight of attention from numerous geographically widespread audiences, including international art critics, who started publicly talking about the phenomenon of contemporary ink art.

All this would not have happened without the tailored approach behind such institutional events as the Met’s *Ink Art* exhibition. What is also important is that, despite presenting ink works in the light of the Chinese national rhetoric, the above-discussed institutions prominently emphasised through their exhibition catalogue essays that the Chinese-ink medium concurrently presents the broadly resonating form of present-day visual culture. However, now that momentum for Chinese-ink art’s wider public attention has been generated, it is important to extend the discourse on ink works and to move it beyond its fixedness on cultural particularism. As mentioned above, overemphasising the latter also has the reverse effect of discouraging certain audiences from engaging with ink art, who may still hold on to the stereotypical belief that ink is only for the Asians.

If this nationally coloured institutional discourse unfolds without being properly balanced by alternative approaches to curating contemporary ink art – which, for example, would more often place it within non-ink and non-Chinese contexts of interpretation – this would just continue deepening that, as Donald Nonini and Ong wrote, ‘timeless, irreducible East-West divide’ in the global art sector.⁸⁸⁶ Importantly, the latter contradicts the very intentions behind the employment of ink by many internationally minded artists, like Zheng, who wishes for his ink pieces to be ‘looked at as just artwork by itself’ without any excessive culturally compartmentalising discourse that could prevent them from having ‘more open and wide access’.⁸⁸⁷ As Zheng further underlined, echoing

⁸⁸⁶ Donald M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong, ‘Chinese Transnationalism as an Alternative Modernity’, in *Underground Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini (New York: Routledge, 1997), 12.

⁸⁸⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 8.

this chapter's arguments, 'ink is for everyone' because, ultimately, 'ink is the medium that any artist can use', and it can be 'beyond any specific cultural references'.⁸⁸⁸

As analysed above, to achieve this goal of making ink art more broadly resonating, in his personal case, Zheng dived into the international philosophical fields of phenomenology and new materialism alongside California Light and Space art, filtering his interpretation of their selected ideas via the example of the ink's spatio-temporal materiality. The use of the interactive installation format allowed the artist to additionally accentuate his vision of ink as the living matter with its widely applicable bio-physical material properties, which further directed the viewer's attention away from stereotypical cultural interpretations of ink towards the latter's potential to be the medium for anyone. Crucially, in this ongoing undertaking to deconstruct cultural reception prejudices around ink art and to help more critically popularise this genre as the international-level art form, contemporary artists, including Zheng, have also turned to another feature of digitisation in their recent works, discussed in the following sixth chapter.

⁸⁸⁸ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 20.

Chapter 6

Digitising Ink Art in the Context of the Global Tech-Society

From Xu Bing to later-generation artist Jin Jiangbo and from Taiwanese artist Tong Yang-Tze (born 1942) to Japan's teamLab (founded 2001), since the mid-2000s the use of digital technologies in the wider field of contemporary ink art has vividly grown in magnitude. Likewise, Zheng contemplated new digital ways of making ink works, arriving in 2015 at his first major visually engulfing digital installation *Chimeric Landscape*. The artist's belief that 'ink is for everyone' and his aspiration to make it 'more international' provided the pivotal stimulus for this turning point in his artistic development.⁸⁸⁹ For a similar reason other ink artists, many of whom had previously lacked experience with digital technologies, turned to the latter in order to make ink art more meaningfully relatable to multinational and younger tech-savvy audiences, who, despite their cultural or generational differences, are predominantly united by the shared participation in tech-culture that defines the current century.

This chapter investigates how this embrace of the digital component within contemporary ink art was made possible as well as what its outcomes are in terms of both artistic production and public reception. Specifically, in the first section the chapter shows how the high-tech boom, clustered in California's Silicon Valley or Beijing's Zhongguancun amongst others, on a certain level prompted non-profit and commercial art institutions to facilitate the escalating proliferation of digital art, including its ink niche. Thereby, artists had a vital practical infrastructural platform that enabled them to critically experiment with ink art digitisation. As evidenced by examples of Zheng and the wider Asian ink art field in the second and third sections respectively, the use of digital technologies helped ink works reiterate even further their position as the international-level art form, which, despite its certain drawbacks, holds important new reception opportunities for the near future of this tradition-rooted historical medium.

I. The World's Digital Current, Contemporary Art and the Ink Medium

In the mid-2000s the society entered a new phase of its relationship with technologies, when Geoffrey Hinton managed to train computer neurons to understand and to differentiate complex information, leading to the beginning of the widespread integration of digitally powered Artificial Intelligence (AI) into daily life, ranging from Google's voice-recognition translation to Tesla's self-

⁸⁸⁹ Ibid.

operating car.⁸⁹⁰ Moreover, with Steve Jobs's 2007 invention of iPhone, and the accompanying influx of its analogues, the ground-breaking number of people globally gained access to Internet. Towards the 2020s human life in most of the world has become fully inseparable from digital technologies – as Lee Kai-Fu underlined, predominantly everything now gets arranged online, whether it is booking taxi via Didi Chuxing and Uber, or ordering food via Meituan Dianping and Deliveroo, which led to the new O2O (online-to-offline) lifestyle.⁸⁹¹ This unprecedented growth of social digitisation resulted in the equally unprecedented development of digital visual culture.

The core feature of digital art is the employment of numeric data, namely, 'a computer file that exists as a collection of ones and zeroes on digital storage media'.⁸⁹² Depending on the artist's intentions, this data can then be put to a variety of forms, such as image, sculpture, installation, performance, video or net amongst other options.⁸⁹³ The undercurrent that runs through these vividly contrasting digital art formats is that at least at one of the stages of their making computer programmes are utilised.⁸⁹⁴ In this respect, digital art differs from analogue art, that is standard photography, video or sound, primarily in its reliance on data digitisation and its manipulation via software as opposed to tape-based electronic tools, such as camcorders.

Altogether, this led to a new kind of 'intermediality' in art, which, as Kim Jihoon outlined, is characterised by the dissolution of single medium into 'its multiple components that are thrown into a range of relations to other arts'.⁸⁹⁵ This was made possible by specifically the rise of digital technologies, which can, in Peter Weibel's words, 'simulate' the representation of works in any medium, as mentioned above.⁸⁹⁶ Because of this very ability to 'transcode', to use Lev Manovich's term, meaning 'to translate [any visual or audio element] into [digital] format', digitally produced art epitomises the amalgamation of various media.⁸⁹⁷ This innovative intermediality and technical complexity of digitisation presented artists with opportunities to generate visual effects that are

⁸⁹⁰ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 10; Lee Kai-Fu, *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 9-10.

⁸⁹¹ Lee, *AI Superpowers*, 57, 68.

⁸⁹² Bruce Wands, *Art of the Digital Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), 14.

⁸⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁹⁵ Kim Jihoon, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: The Art of Hybrid Moving Images*, PhD diss., New York University, New York, 2011, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 34.

⁸⁹⁶ Peter Weibel, 'The Postmedia Condition' (2006), *Mute*, 19 March 2012, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/lab/post-media-condition> (accessed 30 June 2020).

⁸⁹⁷ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 47.

beyond the technical scope of conventional analogue art formats, setting an important direction to develop in the new century in the light of its continuously advancing technologies.⁸⁹⁸

Significantly, already back in 2001 the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art forecasted this important direction for the future of contemporary art via its *010101: Art in Technological Times* exhibition, set to capture ‘the new moment’ affecting visual arts, namely how the latter ‘have shifted from the analogue to the digital’, which had just started unfolding on the wide-spread level.⁸⁹⁹ Curated by head of the museum’s media arts Benjamin Weil, the exhibition made a splash in the Western press.⁹⁰⁰ Jason Spingarn-Koff in his review for *Wired* described it as ‘one of the most ambitious exhibitions’ in its acknowledgement of the major cultural transformation that had lately begun because of the rising high-tech boom, and, similarly, Jeffrey Kastner, writing for *The New York Times*, pointed out the exhibition’s novel experimental nature due to its bold embrace of ‘technologies and forms that are themselves still emergent’.⁹⁰¹

Indeed, as Barbara Pollack outlined in her *Artnet Magazine* article, the exhibition appeared to be an inaugural cultural happening that was instantaneously accompanied by numerous other digitally oriented art projects.⁹⁰² From the first-time exhibition of digital works at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art as part of *Bitstreams* to the one-million-dollar-worth virtual art display platform at the Guggenheim Museum, all launched in 2001, the American art institutional sector witnessed the unparalleled turn to digitisation.⁹⁰³ As Pollack further elucidated, quoting the Whitney Museum’s director Maxwell Anderson, this transformation was largely enabled by practical financial and technical support, offered by technological companies, eager to see more exhibitions with the focus on ‘demonstrating the leading edge of technology’.⁹⁰⁴ Thus, it is crucial that *010101* was sponsored by Silicon Valley’s Intel, specialising in AI production, which both contributed to covering the exhibition’s expenses and assisted with the engineering side of its orchestration.⁹⁰⁵

⁸⁹⁸ Wands, *Art of the Digital Age*, 212.

⁸⁹⁹ David Ross, ‘Foreword and Acknowledgments’, in *010101: Art in Technological Times*, ed. Benjamin Weil (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 11.

⁹⁰⁰ Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, ‘Art in the Age of Digital Distribution’, in *New Media Art*, ed. Uta Grosenick (Köln: Taschen, 2007), 22.

⁹⁰¹ Jason Spingarn-Koff, ‘010101: Art for Our Times’, *Wired*, 28 February 2001, <https://www.wired.com/2001/02/010101-art-for-our-times/> (accessed 14 August 2019); Jeffrey Kastner, ‘Art/Architecture; Bit by Bit, the Digital Age Comes into Artistic Focus’, *The New York Times*, 18 March 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/18/arts/art-architecture-bit-by-bit-the-digital-age-comes-into-artistic-focus.html> (accessed 14 August 2019).

⁹⁰² Barbara Pollack, ‘Mouse Traps’, *Artnet Magazine*, 7 May 2001, <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/reviews/pollack/pollack5-7-01.asp> (accessed 14 August 2019).

⁹⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁵ Ross, ‘Foreword and Acknowledgments’, 12.

It was also largely due to digital technology start-ups, many of which originated in Silicon Valley, that in the subsequent years California witnessed the heightened proliferation of high-tech collaborations in the cultural field. As Zheng observed, within San Francisco alone, since the early 2000s numerous small experimental digital studios have opened, becoming not only production centres, but also networking points that allow artists, working in all media, to meet and to learn from digital technicians as well as already experienced digital media artists.⁹⁰⁶ One such start-up that made the most perceptible practical impact on Zheng's move towards digitisation in his ink art is cFire – the experiential digital content production company, established in 2012 by Peter Sapienza and Nicholas Lynch amongst others, around which an important network of IT and artistic practitioners gathered, for whom later in 2018 Lynch set up a dedicated gallery, Lynchini.⁹⁰⁷

Importantly, both Sapienza and Lynch were associated with Obscura Digital – a San Francisco-based globally recognised company that since 2000 has been creating next-generation immersive multimedia experiences at such places as the Empire State Building in New York and St Peter's Basilica in Vatican amongst others.⁹⁰⁸ By developing a connection with Sapienza and Lynch, Zheng was able not only to utilise the state-of-the-art technical support of cFire and Obscura Digital, but also to get to know their circle of Californian digital media artists, like Gabriel Dunne (born 1981), who specialise in producing digital pieces.⁹⁰⁹ The latter can be exemplified by Dunne's *NAAG XY* (Figure 132), completed in 2015 in collaboration with Vishal K. Dar (born 1976).

Comprising foam and plaster, the sculptural formation of interwoven braids was illuminated with multiple projectors, connected to a computer software, specially programmed to generate unrepeatable and ever-evolving crystal shapes. The resulting visual transformation of the static three-dimensional braids into the spatially shifting virtual imagery allegorically epitomised cultural fluidity and adaptability to change that resonated with the social context of the American-Jewish community, represented by San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum, where the work was exhibited.⁹¹⁰ Through this unconventional juxtaposition of physical sculpture with intangible

⁹⁰⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Questions 2-3.

⁹⁰⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 2; cFire's LinkedIn profile, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/cfire/about/> (accessed 17 August 2019).

⁹⁰⁸ *GlobeNewswire*, 'The Madison Square Garden Company Announces Acquisition of Obscura Digital', 20 November 2017, <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2017/11/20/1197763/0/en/The-Madison-Square-Garden-Company-Announces-Acquisition-of-Obscura-Digital.html> (accessed 17 August 2019).

⁹⁰⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 2.

⁹¹⁰ Contemporary Jewish Museum, '*NEAT: New Experiments in Art and Technology* – Gabriel Dunne and Vishal K. Dar', 30 October 2015, <http://neat.thecjm.org/> (accessed 15 September 2019).

digitisation, *NAAG XY* illustrated how traditional and cutting-edge media could be effectively merged – the idea that, as elucidated below, became important to Zheng’s own ink art practice.

Moreover, in the light of California’s booming tech-culture, in 2014 LACMA introduced its own digital studio to support high-tech art projects.⁹¹¹ Backed by automotive corporation Hyundai, digital consulting company Accenture as well as Snapchat and Google amongst others, the resulting LACMA Art + Technology Lab refocused the museum’s strategy towards digital art.⁹¹² Hence, between 2014 and 2018 LACMA showcased tech-savvy artworks from across the world and the USA, representing such digital media artists as French Pierre Huyghe (born 1962) in 2014, German Thomas Demand (born 1964) in 2015 or Californian Diana Thater (born 1962) in 2016.⁹¹³ Thereby, from visual stimuluses to practical opportunities, living around Silicon Valley provided Zheng, as the artist underlined, with the freedom to delve into the digital experimentation.⁹¹⁴

Significantly, reinvigorating traditional art forms via the pursuit of innovative technological production techniques was encouraged within China alike by its official cultural institutions, supported technically and financially by local and international high-tech companies. As Jin Jiangbo outlined, embracing new technological innovations was an important part of the Chinese government’s long-term ‘national strategy’ to contribute to ‘accelerating the development of the creative and cultural industries’.⁹¹⁵ Consequently, towards the turn of the 2010s there has been an increase in a number of experimental media departments, set up at educational institutions, such as at Beijing’s Tsinghua University.⁹¹⁶ In addition, numerous specialised cultural events, devoted to tech-savvy art forms, were also introduced around that time in China, exemplified by *Synthetic Times – Media Art China 2008* – a large-scale exhibition of the international scope that was organised by the Beijing-based National Art Museum of China in June 2008.⁹¹⁷

As the National Art Museum of China underlined in the exhibition’s 2008 press release, *Media Art China* was envisioned ‘as a landmark event in the history of contemporary Chinese art’, ‘aspiring to foster and advance new modes of thinking and novel ways of artistic engagement in an increasingly

⁹¹¹ Lau Wanda, ‘LACMA Selects Five Recipients for Its Inaugural Art + Technology Lab Grant Awards’, *Architect*, 10 April 2014, https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/culture/lacma-selects-five-recipients-for-its-inaugural-art-technology-lab-grant-awards_o (accessed 15 October 2019).

⁹¹² Los Angeles County Museum of Art, ‘The Art + Technology Lab: Introduction’, <https://www.lacma.org/lab> (accessed 15 October 2019).

⁹¹³ Los Angeles County Museum of Art, ‘Past Exhibitions’, <https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibitions/past> (accessed 15 October 2019).

⁹¹⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 3.

⁹¹⁵ Fang Xiaofeng, Chen Anying, Zhao Wenbing and Jin Jiangbo, ‘The Modern Chinese Landscape in New Media Arts’, *Yishu*, 8 (2009), 68.

⁹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

technologically immersed society and global cultural landscape'.⁹¹⁸ Importantly, this resonated with the national image that China planned to project to the world during its August 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, which, with the technological support of such companies as China's Netcom, Japan's Panasonic or South Korea's Samsung, were branded as the 'Hi-Tech Olympics', emphasising the country's forward-looking outlook.⁹¹⁹ The latter was visualised in a particularly effective way during an opening ceremony, directed by acclaimed film director Zhang Yimou, where it was shown how the country's cultural forms, like ink painting, could be reinvigorated via new digital technologies.

For example, one of the ceremony's performance pieces revolved around 'mega *guohua*', that is monumental digital *Scroll* (Figure 133, 2008) by Shen Wei (born 1968) in the style of Chinese-ink painting, which was displayed on one of the world's largest LED screens at that time, measuring 22 and 147 metres in width and length respectively.⁹²⁰ The scroll's large scale allowed to articulate the diverse ever-changing animated imagery with minute details, switching amongst landscape, figure or calligraphy scenes, against the background of which live dance performances unfolded. As Ding Ning underlined, 'globalised in real time' of the Olympic Games, this technically cutting-edge remaking of traditional ink painting became China's 'new national icon', setting an example for numerous Chinese artists, whether working in the medium of ink or not.⁹²¹

Thereby, the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics and the accompanying *Media Art China* exhibition by the country's prime cultural institution presented for Chinese culture what the above-mentioned *010101* exhibition epitomised in 2001 for the Western art scene – namely, the verification of the shaping-up vision to critically adopt tech-driven art forms. In line with this, in 2011 *Media Art China* was relaunched as the Triennale, curated by Zhang Ga, Media Art Professor at the Tsinghua University and Associate Professor at the School of Art, Media and Technology at New York's Parsons School of Design.⁹²² Importantly, representing more than 80 tech-savvy artists globally, the newly inaugurated Triennale featured numerous Chinese works alike, such as Wu Juehui's (born 1980) *USB Organs* (2010), where viewers experienced via a special headset and

⁹¹⁸ National Art Museum of China, 'Exhibitions: *Synthetic Times – Media Art China 2008*', http://www.namoc.org/en/exhibitions/201305/t20130508_247640.htm (accessed 3 July 2020).

⁹¹⁹ Ibid.; David Owen, 'Beijing Olympics Heads for \$1bn from Sponsors', *The Financial Times*, 16 January 2005, <https://www.ft.com/content/b3a2c89a-67f9-11d9-a11e-00000e2511c8> (accessed 7 July 2020).

⁹²⁰ Ning Ding, 'Suddenly Modern: Traditional Chinese Aesthetics in Transformation at the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympic Games', in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 212, 215.

⁹²¹ Ibid., 217.

⁹²² Xiao An, 'A Taste of Beijing's Large New Media Art Triennial', *Hyperallergic*, 1 August 2011, <https://hyperallergic.com/30750/beijing-new-media-art-triennial-translife/> (accessed 3 July 2020).

inbuilt USB devices how the disjuncture between the digital and real worlds could affect human senses.⁹²³

To further encourage the embrace of cutting-edge technologies within the Chinese art field, at the end of 2011 the country's first digital art museum was opened in Beijing, named the China Millennium Monument Museum of Digital Arts. For its launch event, the museum invited UK-based digital production company onedotzero to curate the *AV@AR* exhibition, which comprised a series of Advanced Reality installations and live audio-visual performances.⁹²⁴ For example, *Augmented Shadow* (Figure 134, 2010) by Korean artist Moon Joon Y. (born 1982) featured an interactive tabletop interface, where the viewer could move blocks and oversee a variety of computer-generated appearances of artificial shadows, allegorised into shapes of humans, birds and trees in search of a light source.⁹²⁵ Following this, in 2013 the Chronus Art Centre was set up in Shanghai by China's digital media artist Hu Jieming (born 1957), becoming the city's own first exhibition space, dedicated to art digitisation.⁹²⁶

High-tech art continued to gain its momentum in China throughout the remainder of the 2010s, receiving another important state encouragement in September 2014, when Premier Li Keqiang proclaimed at the World Economic Forum that China's progress as the nation would rely on technological innovation, coining the 'mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation' slogan.⁹²⁷ This led to a further spike in investing into tech-savvy start-ups across the country, strengthening the profile of Beijing's Zhongguancun and its regional analogues.⁹²⁸ On the cultural level this nationwide focus on high-tech meant even more financial and technical support for merging digital technologies with Chinese contemporary art forms. This is illustratively manifested by China's choice to focus its pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale on digital animations, such as *What's the Sea* (2015), compiling more than 4,000 digitally edited ink paintings by Tang Nannan (born 1969) – Associate Professor in Inter-Media Art at Hangzhou's China Academy of Art.⁹²⁹

⁹²³ Ibid.; V2_, Lab for the Unstable Media, 'Works: *USB Organs*', <https://v2.nl/archive/works/usb-organs> (accessed 3 July 2020).

⁹²⁴ onedotzero, 'Projects: China Museum of Digital Art', 2011, <http://onedotzero.com/projects/8> (accessed 3 July 2020).

⁹²⁵ Ibid.

⁹²⁶ Johnny Magdaleno, 'An Immersive Look Inside Shanghai's First New Media Arts Centre', *VICE*, 31 July 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vyvx/an-immersive-look-inside-shanghais-first-new-media-arts-center (accessed 3 July 2020).

⁹²⁷ Lee, *AI Superpowers*, 62-63.

⁹²⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁹²⁹ These digital ink-painting animations and the other works at the pavilion attracted mixed reception with many critics pointing out their lack of critical thematic content, as summarised in Qiu Zhijie, 'How to Curate a National Pavilion in a Globalized World', *Artsy News*, 16 August 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-curate-national-pavilion-globalized> (accessed 16 December 2020). However, for the purposes of this thesis what is important is that Chinese

Therefore, from the USA to China, the merging of art and technologies gained prime momentum amongst various non-profit art institutions, encouraging and helping traditional media artists to embrace the high-tech potential in their works. What additionally provided the fruitful cultural infrastructure for this move is the growing support for digital art from commercial global art establishments alike, selling which as DVDs or USBs has an added benefit of lower shipping and insuring costs, as pointed out by Noah Horowitz.⁹³⁰ Hence, in 2013 Phillips with Tumblr's assistance inaugurated a new digital art sales category on the global art market by hosting *Paddles ON!* in New York – the first digital art auction, achieving 80% of the sell-through rate.⁹³¹ This ground-breaking event was envisaged as 'the start of a larger conversation on how the contemporary art world is adapting to and engaging with new technologies' both within the museum and commercial contexts.⁹³²

The sales focus on high-tech art was swiftly reinforced when, for example, David Gryn set up in 2015 Daata Editions as the first specialised online portal for selling digital artworks.⁹³³ Building upon this, in 2016 Pace also made headlines by opening the Pace Art and Technology Gallery in Menlo Park within the San Francisco Bay Area, inaugurated with the *Living Digital Space and Future Parks* exhibition, showing digital installations, such as by Random International, founded in 2005 by German artists Hannes Koch (born 1975) and Florian Ortkrass (born 1975).⁹³⁴ The opening night was attended by Silicon Valley's key figures, including Marc Andreessen – a co-author of Mosaic and Netscape web-browsers – and, importantly, a few not-for-sale digital pieces were shortly reported as sold.⁹³⁵ Hence, as Pace's President Marc Glimcher stated, Menlo Park presented 'an ideal venue in which to examine the new approach of the emerging art and technology collectives'.⁹³⁶

officials actively encouraged the incorporation of digital media alongside China's traditional art forms, which can be put to a variety of artistic uses, as illustrated in this chapter's second and third sections.

⁹³⁰ Noah Horowitz, *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 77.

⁹³¹ Astrid T. Hill, 'We Love Collecting... Digital Art: Is Digital Art the Next Big Thing in Contemporary Art?', *Artnet News*, 27 June 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/market/we-love-collecting-digital-art-49504> (accessed 15 October 2019).

⁹³² Paddles On!, 'About Us', <https://paddleson.tumblr.com/about> (accessed 15 October 2019).

⁹³³ Cait Munro, 'New Online Site Daata Editions Wants to Shake Up the Market for Digital Art', *Artnet News*, 13 May 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/market/daata-editions-wants-shake-digital-art-market-296769> (accessed 15 October 2019).

⁹³⁴ Nellie Bowles, 'The "Cultural Desert" of Silicon Valley Finally Gets Its First Serious Art Gallery', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/feb/06/silicon-valley-andreessen-art-pace-gallery-menlo-park> (accessed 16 October 2019).

⁹³⁵ Cait Munro, 'Pace Art and Technology Officially Opens as First Major Gallery in Silicon Valley', *Artnet News*, 10 February 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/market/pace-art-technology-silicon-valley-gallery-424178> (accessed 16 October 2019).

⁹³⁶ Artlyst, 'Pace Art & Technology Programme to Be Launched in 2016', 6 December 2015, <https://www.artlyst.com/news/pace-art-technology-program-to-be-launched-in-2016/> (accessed 25 July 2020).

Similarly, in the 2010s digital art was highlighted by international-level commercial art institutions within mainland and wider China alike. For example, in 2017, for its annual fair, Art Basel Hong Kong created a special exhibition of digital works, titled *Data, Algorithm and beyond*, through which curator Li Zhenhua wanted to shed light on, as he said, ‘the future of where the art market will be’.⁹³⁷ In the same year the Danish Faurischou Foundation opened *Virtual Reality Art* at its flagship gallery in Beijing’s 798 district, also focused on presenting in the commercial context high-tech pieces by international and Chinese artists, such as Yu Hong’s (born 1966) *She’s Already Gone* (2017), where via a VR headset viewers could immerse themselves into time-disrupted life of a female character from her birth in the modern times to her death back in history.⁹³⁸

The Faurischou Foundation explained its decision to dedicate almost half a year of its China’s annual exhibition programme to VR art by emphasising the latter’s ‘successful entry onto the global market at an unusually fast pace’.⁹³⁹ This way the gallery could attract the important swiftly emerging type of art collectors and art audiences, namely IT and AI entrepreneurs alongside the Y and Z generations, also named as Gen Tech.⁹⁴⁰ As Phillips’s director of digital strategy Megan Newcome stated, digital art sales are substantially driven by this global tech-savvy social segment and especially its younger representatives, who literally grew up with technologies and can ‘relate to [digital art] on a generational level’.⁹⁴¹

This overarching turn to digitisation in the field of Western and Chinese contemporary art, advanced by both non-profit and commercial art institutions is both politically driven and, yet, natural. On one hand, as shown above, behind almost every high-tech art exhibition there are certain high-tech companies that may either directly or indirectly financially benefit from the promotion of technologies in the cultural sector. Governments that support the advancement of the latest technologies have their own interests in those, related to such factors as, for example, economic gain. However, at the same time, from a broader perspective, technologies are essential and, by now, natural tools that predominantly make human life more efficient and offer formidable

⁹³⁷ Austin Considine, ‘Navigating the Fair: Highlights of Art Basel Hong Kong’, *The New York Times*, 22 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/22/arts/art-basel-hong-kong-highlights-2017.html> (accessed 15 October 2019).

⁹³⁸ Faurischou Foundation, ‘Press Release: *Virtual Reality Art*’, 2017, <https://www.faurischou.com/press-release/press-release-i-virtual-reality-art/> (accessed 10 July 2020).

⁹³⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁰ Artnet and China Association of Auctioneers, *Global Chinese Art Auction Market Report* (New York and Beijing: Artnet and China Association of Auctioneers, 2017), 21; Gu Wei, ‘China’s Young Art Collectors Come of Age’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 March 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-young-art-collectors-come-of-age-1425568327> (accessed 15 October 2019); Oliver Giles, ‘The New Generation of Chinese Collectors Shaking Up the Art World’, CNN, 6 October 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/chinas-young-art-collectors/index.html> (accessed 15 October 2019).

⁹⁴¹ Scott Reyburn, ‘On Screen and on the Block’, *The New York Times*, 30 May 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/02/arts/international/on-screen-and-on-the-block-digital-artwork.html> (accessed 15 October 2019).

practical value beyond any ideological implications, just as it was the case with the introduction of electricity in the eighteenth century.

As with any scientific invention, technologies can be both overused and misused, but, when employed ethically, they help substantially improve human life, as demonstrated by the development of cutting-edge medical scanning equipment to cure diseases or the wide-spread availability of communication applications, like Skype or WhatsApp, that connect people in no time across distance. Likewise, when it comes to the cultural field, technologies can be put to different uses, whether critical and ethical or not. One of the key issues with the artists' use of high-tech features is prioritising entertainment over critical content. As Carol Becker wrote, such "spectacular" artworks only 'absorb the attention' and 'do not necessarily help anyone to see and understand their situation in relationship to society with clarity'.⁹⁴² This was echoed in Donald Kuspit's statement, who criticised the spectacle-oriented form of visual culture that 'makes no pretence of addressing reality, offering instead psychotic entertainment'.⁹⁴³

Nevertheless, as Melissa Langdon wrote, high-tech digital art also has the 'ability to critically reflect upon social, political, and historical phenomena' and to 'generate new ways of seeing' – thereby, it is up to artists whether to employ technologies as the 'critical language' or the entertainment language.⁹⁴⁴ As underlined by Tiernan Morgan and Lauren Purje, this distinction between the effective and flat uses of technologies was also central to Guy Debord, whose canonical 1967 text *The Society of the Spectacle* objected to only "spectacular" types of tech-culture, put at the sole service of the capitalist profit-driven society and offering no actual value to viewers, making them understand less about their 'own existence' and 'own desires'.⁹⁴⁵ Consequently, depending on how individual artists approach it, the current infrastructural support for merging art with digital technologies can have significant potential to critically enrich contemporary art, including its Chinese-ink niche, as illustrated below.

II. Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* and Digital Ink Art Reception

⁹⁴² Carol Becker, *Surpassing the Spectacle: Global Transformations and the Changing Politics of Art* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 144.

⁹⁴³ Donald Kuspit, 'Secrets of Success: Paradoxes and Problems of the Reproduction and Commodification of Art in the Age of the Capitalist Spectacle', *Artnet Magazine*, 2010, <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/art-and-capitalist-spectacle2-8-11.asp> (accessed 28 September 2021).

⁹⁴⁴ Melissa Langdon, *The Work of Art in a Digital Age: Art, Technology and Globalisation* (New York: Springer, 2014), 7-8.

⁹⁴⁵ Tiernan Morgan and Lauren Purje, 'An Illustrated Guide to Guy Debord's "The Society of the Spectacle"', *Hyperallergic*, 10 August 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/313435/an-illustrated-guide-to-guy-debords-the-society-of-the-spectacle/> (accessed 28 September 2021); Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2020), unnumbered (thesis 30).

In the light of the artist's ongoing focus on developing new means to internationalise the ink medium, Zheng arrived at his first major digital ink installation *Chimeric Landscape* in 2015. Since the artist does not have a specialist IT background, when it comes to producing such technologically based works, he resorts to independent collaborations with digital production studios, specifically with like-minded digital producers behind Obscura Digital and, later on, cFire, where Zheng currently has the position of Artistic Director.⁹⁴⁶ This freedom to decide which companies suit Zheng ethically and on the level of creative partnership is crucial to him since, as the artist said, Silicon Valley's constant innovations can be overwhelming and not always applicable to individual artworks.⁹⁴⁷ Therefore, it is vital 'to really zoom in and focus on what exactly would be useful and would work for the core concept of the artwork in order not to lose it'.⁹⁴⁸

As the artist further added to this, '[the] effect of technologies only works if they can be appropriately translated into the language of the story you want to tell'.⁹⁴⁹ Moreover, since Zheng's employment of digital technologies is driven by the goal to enhance his art's critical content, when it comes to sponsoring digitally produced artworks, the artist is the one who arranges such financial matters. As Zheng explained, he often invests his own earnings into these projects, being charged a discounted artist fee for digital productions services.⁹⁵⁰ When the cost needs to be subsidised by external funding, the latter comes from budgets of cultural institutions or art foundations of his choice, and, although these budgets tend to be 'not too big', they can, nevertheless, be 'comfortably [managed] in order not to compromise on projects and to make them happen'.⁹⁵¹ Hence, Zheng's practical engagement with Silicon Valley's tech-world is critically selective.

Regarding the artistic interest in technologies, as the artist pointed out, 'every medium has its own encoded language' and, in the case of digital installations, what attracts him is the latter's potential to provide 'different experiences of engagement'.⁹⁵² Specifically, unlike statically positioned paintings that can only be visually activated by the movement of the viewer, perceiving temporally unfolding layers of moving images, which are further heightened by changing effects of sound, is an already activated process, automatically drawing in the viewer's senses and triggering them to

⁹⁴⁶ cFire, 'Chongbin Zheng is Now cFire Artistic Director', 15 September 2020, <https://www.c-fire.co/blog/2020/9/15/chongbin-zheng-is-now-cfire-artistic-director> (accessed 28 September 2021).

⁹⁴⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 3.

⁹⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 10.

⁹⁵¹ Ibid.

⁹⁵² Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 2; Katherine Don, 'From Surface to Structure: An Interview with Artist Zheng Chongbin', Sotheby's, 19 April 2016, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/from-surface-to-structure-an-interview-with-artist-zheng-chongbin> (accessed 15 July 2017).

interactively respond to the course of live action. Thus, fuelled by his belief that, regardless of the cultural background, ‘the viewer has to be a [full] part of [the work] to make it complete’, Zheng was prompted to investigate the potential of digitisation to make his various audiences, whether American, Chinese or, indeed, multinational, even more viscerally connected with his art.⁹⁵³

At the same time, Zheng’s experimentation with digital technologies is also driven by his additional interest in ‘computer-generated improvisation’, whereby he ‘[enters] into a collaboration with technologies’, ‘not always knowing what to expect’ from the latter’s commands or glitches.⁹⁵⁴

Consequently, in *Chimeric Landscape* Zheng embarked on making a type of improvisational digital installation art that was akin to ‘an experiential construct’, meaning a phenomenon of its own, directed at bodily participation and perceptual interpretation.⁹⁵⁵ With the technical assistance from San Francisco-based Obscura Digital as well as the production-related support from the artist’s representative gallery Ink Studio in Beijing, *Chimeric Landscape* was completed over the course of six months.⁹⁵⁶

Overall, the original installation design, premiered during the 2015 Venice Biennale, involved one big wall-size screen, framed by surrounding extra-reflective wall and floor surfaces that captured the screen-projected imagery and dispersed its light rays across an entire unfurnished room. Standing in this environment, the viewer’s body was fully enveloped by the monumental digital projection, the action of which unfolded both frontally across the higher than life-size band of the screen as well as from left, right and below through reflections on the crystal-like walls and floor (Figure 135). The sensation of being immersed into this spatial environment was additionally heightened by a sound transmission, reaching the viewer from the room’s different corners via speakers. At the centre of this sensorially engulfing digital experience was the ink medium, which Zheng personified into a living entity, making its various processes the very subject-matter of *Chimeric Landscape*.

Starting with the zoomed-in snapshot of flowing black liquid that emanated light reflections (Figure 136), in the surroundings of the dark room the viewer initially encountered sounds that soluble ink can generate, such as gurgling or splashing. After almost half a minute of listening to this without clearly seeing what it was, the viewer was then introduced to the first zoomed-out visual instant of ink (Figure 137), where it interacted with rice paper, freely tracing it with abstract patterns under

⁹⁵³ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 19.

⁹⁵⁴ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 2.

⁹⁵⁵ Langdon, *The Work of Art in a Digital Age*, 34.

⁹⁵⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 1.

the accompaniment of crispy sounds of ink-injected paper wrinkling. Out of this abstraction, interspersed with the few-second snapshot of the celestial navy-white colour imagery (Figure 138), a painting of reduced sky-high mountain peaks emerged, over which a human hand hovered (Figure 139), trying to replicate in the air the organic flow of the ink's pictorial brushwork.

After this short episode of the minimalist ink painting, the viewer's attention was taken back to the physical manifestations of ink sliding along the paper surface, which behaviour, visually speaking, started increasingly resembling the movement of natural rivers, viewed from above as if via an aerial satellite shot of the earth's topographies (Figure 140). Following this, the digital projection swiftly transferred the viewer into the new scene of the microscopic exploration of ink as a biological substance, showing a myriad of intra-acting red molecules (Figure 141). The subsequent zoom-out clarified that those were the constituent cells of another abstract painting, where pigmented ink progressively wrapped around the paper surface as if a red velvet mantle (Figure 142).

This visual instant alone captured a profusion of ink's physical states, which minute details were accentuated through the brightness of the red colour. Thus, the viewer's eye could trace the cream-texture silkiness of an ink splash sitting on top of the paper sheet, contrasted by the powdery matte appearance of another ink instant that had already sunk into paper, or the oyster-like contour of interchangeably hued and transparent areas of ink, bordering with the empty paper surface. Once again, here the ink's activity closely paralleled natural landscape processes, evoking, for example, the movement of creeks gliding down mountain hills (Figure 143). To further blur the distinction between the natural and ink phenomena, the following all-black scene immersed the viewer into total darkness, emphasising the already introduced sounds of ink's purling that were now more reminiscent of underwater vibrations, akin to those experienced during diving.

The performance of the digital installation progressed with an additional series of the comparative episodes, which juxtaposed invisible internal workings of ink with its physically perceptible external manifestations. In addition to this, at this point ink's material and phenomenological attributes began to be directly cross-compared with nature's other elements, removing the distinction between the two in order to emphasise the interconnectedness between ink and the wider natural realm on the levels of physics, biology and chemistry. Hence, rectilinear fractals of various microscopic organisms were gradually shown to comprise an abstract skeleton of trees (Figure 144). In turn, these geometric structures were comparable with abstract ridges, formed as a result

of ink and paper's intra-acting (Figure 145), as well as with echoing abstract ridges of the earth's land and sea topographical depictions (Figure 146).

By connecting these contrasting lenses through which nature can be observed, ranging from the nanoscopic molecular to expansive satellite views, the work alluded to the idea expounded by American theoretical physicist Brian Greene that, no matter how small or big it is, as Zheng summarised, 'everything breaks down to the material: to the atom', 'to the basic spinning of neutrons', 'to the cell'.⁹⁵⁷ This overarching viewpoint behind *Chimeric Landscape* that the world's material and phenomenal aspects are inherently interwoven was metaphorically underlined in the following intersperse scene, which portrayed a red rectangle on the left as melting into a white rectangle on the right. The consequent fusion of the colour hues undid the clear-cut distinction between redness and whiteness (Figure 147), concentrating attention onto miniature cell-like dots that corresponded to both the red and white rectangles.

To continue exemplifying this core theme of the bio-physical world's interconnectedness, this intersperse scene was changed to the tripartite illustration of the cosmos, comprising scattered stars, the gurgling ink imagery, which was visually almost indistinguishable from the background space's blackness, and an electrocardiogram, initially portraying an even line, denoting the absence of a heartbeat, and then a spiky line, representing the heart's aliveness (Figure 148). This juxtaposition between death and life underscored nature's cyclic rhythms and how the never-ending interchange of being non-existent, coming into existence and going back to the state of non-existence ties life's physical processes together. Adhering to the similar logic, the successive episode's zig-zag racing of multi-coloured lines (Figure 149) was repeatedly interchanged with the scenes of splashing streams (Figure 150), ink-painted waves (Figure 151) and boiling-up liquid ink (Figure 152), implying how these cell structures corresponded to all the four instances' invisible biochemical processes.

Before reaching its culmination, *Chimeric Landscape* offered one more of its punctuating colour covers, introduced at the beginning of the visual narrative (Figure 138), where the navy-white hues evoked the celestial scenery, allowing the viewer to contemplate a moment of quietness against the background of subdued white noise. After this serene retreat the story escalated in intensity, showing flashing video excerpts of ink blot shapes (Figure 153), appearing as forcefully splashed onto paper, immediately altering the latter's appearance. These smoky pictorial ink eruptions on

⁹⁵⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 4; Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (London: Vintage, 2000), 7-10.

the pictorial surface were then cross-matched with a thick cloud of actual smog, denoting a kind of a volcanic eruption (Figure 154), happening to a dramatic sound of heavy rain.

Paused just for a few seconds with a white-noise sound and a white colour cover, more interchangeable scenes of such metamorphosing erupting ink blots followed in the sequence, which were now also zoomed in to reveal the internal intra-acting of their molecular structures (Figure 155), and then zoomed out again. At this point the pace of the video started to slow down, occasionally freezing the ink-blot scenes, focusing the viewer's gaze on their appearances, which after all the preceding comparisons started being more and more reminiscent of other familiar natural phenomena, such as landscape ridges, wave structures or volcano eruptions. As the viewer recalled in memory these various associations drawn throughout the work, one of them reappeared with a new sky-blue filter (Figure 156), which posed the already introduced satellite shot of the land topographies as the zoom-in of flowing water or, indeed, blue-dyed splashed ink on creased paper.

The work's final episode took the viewer to another physical dimension of a turbine (Figure 157), which continuous rotation was portrayed initially alongside opera music – akin to the dramatic heavy rain sound during the episode showing the eruptions – and then the mechanism's own vibrating white noise. Here again the technique of evocative visual paralleling was applied as the imagery of the spinning turbine recalled the ongoing flow of the previous scenes' liquid ink, molecules, streams or electrocardiograms. This underscored the seamless blurring of boundaries across *Chimeric Landscape* amongst disparate elements, drawn from the fields of ink painting, biochemistry, geography, medicine, quantum physics or, in the case of the turbine, quantum mechanics. Consequently, the concluding episode effectively summarised the work's theme of the world's inherent material interconnectedness, underlining Morton's idea that '[the] more we know about life forms', 'the more entangled [we] realize [we] are, and the more open and ambiguous everything becomes'.⁹⁵⁸

In this respect, in this digital installation Zheng was able to transmit his core subject-matter in art, which formed the basis of his ongoing ink painting practice, as discussed in the previous chapter.⁹⁵⁹ Inspired by international philosophies in the fields of phenomenology and new materialism, Zheng aimed to emphasise the material qualities of ink and their intrinsic behaviour when combined with other physical substances and phenomena. Hence, his paintings presented the resulting record of those intra-actions, which happened amongst ink, acrylic, water and paper, inviting the viewer to

⁹⁵⁸ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 17.

⁹⁵⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 4.

explore them under various spatio-lighting conditions. Significantly, by employing the animated digital installation format, the artist was able to present the same idea about the ink medium in the much more physically engaging and sensorially appealing way, thereby establishing a stronger connection between *Chimeric Landscape* and its audience.

Indeed, the visual immersion, generated by the large-scale digital screening in the light-mirroring room, established a kind of a spatio-temporal dialogue with the viewer that would not be possible via pictorial or sculptural installation means. The swiftly changing moving imagery, the reflection of which was disseminated across the floor and wall surfaces in unpredictable guises, created the impression of fracturing space. Standing amidst this temporally metamorphosing environment, the viewer's awareness of the surroundings was profoundly destabilised, instilling the expressive physical sensation akin to floating. This was heightened by the sound projection of such abstract sounds as gurgling or white noise, which further intensified the disorientation in space. Via this engulfing installation, inviting to sensorially dissolve into its uncontrollable array of live action, Zheng strove to make his audiences pertinently feel how, in the artist's words, they may be 'changed by our phenomenological (perceptual) entanglement with the phenomena of the world'.⁹⁶⁰

By focusing on immersion that digital display can generate, Zheng made *Chimeric Landscape* function as a user platform, to use Kaija Kaitavuori's term, which revolved around the viewer, who was meant to sensorially interact with the orchestrated script of the performative narrative.⁹⁶¹ Moreover, when more than one user entered the installation platform at one time, multiple physical bodies could be perceived together in space, creating an additional sense of interconnectedness about the work.⁹⁶² Specifically, it implied that people, despite their cultural, social or generational differences amongst others, could mutually relate to, for example, molecular substances that were simultaneously projected onto their bodies, evoking their own intrinsic biochemical processes, while the latter's analogues were shown on the screen to suggestively describe the internal happenings of the ink material or the represented natural phenomena.

In the light of this, it can be seen that Zheng's use of the technology's performative element is critical as it was aimed at introducing the viewer in an appropriately engaging way to complex phenomenological ideas, actively explored by today's leading philosophers. Hence, the digital performance unfolded in *Chimeric Landscape* puts its viewers or spectators, to use Jacques

⁹⁶⁰ Britta Erickson, *Zheng Chongbin: Walking Penumbra* (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2018), 7.

⁹⁶¹ Kaija Kaitavuori, *The Participant in Contemporary Art: Art and Social Relationships* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 17.

⁹⁶² *Ibid.*, 150.

Ranciere’s analogy with theatre, into a state to ‘learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs’.⁹⁶³ As Ranciere further argued, through ‘the intelligence which constructs [...] performance, in the energy it generates’, theatre is capable of surpassing spectacle and turning the process of viewing into ‘an action’, whereby the spectator is invited to mentally act in the role of ‘scientific investigator or experimenter’, who ‘observes, selects, compares, interprets’.⁹⁶⁴

As evidenced above, this is precisely what the digital “theatre” behind *Chimeric Landscape* was aimed at, namely perceptually challenging the viewer to reflect, in the work’s case, on phenomenological and material aspects of existence that tend to go unnoticed. To reiterate this point, another parallel can be drawn with Eliasson’s art that also resorts to technology’s performative aspect to critically engage its viewers. This can be illustrated by the artist’s *Reality Projector* (Figure 158, 2018), set at the Marciano Art Foundation in Los Angeles. The installation revolved around the building’s girders, infused with coloured gel, and at which surfaces moving spotlights were pointed, casting animated colourful shadows that converged on a room’s expansive wall. The resulting architecturally inscribed interplay of colour blocks was meant to ‘[generate] an immersive abstract film’, set to piano’s sounds, recorded by the artist and remixed by musician Jonsi.⁹⁶⁵

As Madeleine Grynsztejn outlined, such performative elements in Eliasson’s works function as ‘an uncovering rather than a celebration of the commodity [system’s] [...] spectacle-oriented culture’, precisely because via their employment he activates the viewer’s perceptive apparatus, calling to take ‘conscious ownership of all manner of processes of cognition that tend to be standardized, automated, and otherwise impoverished by a mediating world’.⁹⁶⁶ Echoing Ranciere’s theorisation of the effective interrelationship between the theatre’s performance and its spectator, Grynsztejn additionally pointed out the ability of Eliasson’s works to make ‘perception as an action’.⁹⁶⁷ Thus, akin to *Chimeric Landscape*, works like *Reality Projector* turn proprioceptive engulfing experiences, created through technologies, into intelligent encounters with phenomenology-based ideas, aimed at enhancing the viewer’s perception of the wider social and natural realms around.

⁹⁶³ Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 4.

⁹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3–4, 13.

⁹⁶⁵ Olafur Eliasson, ‘*Reality Projector*, 2018’, <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK110742/reality-projector#slideshow> (accessed 29 September 2021).

⁹⁶⁶ Madeleine Grynsztejn, ‘(Y)our Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, the Museum, and Consumer Culture’, in *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson*, ed. Madeleine Grynsztejn (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 14.

⁹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

Further to the immersive potential that facilitates the greater critical inter-connectivity between the work and its audience, digitisation also helped emphasise Zheng's vision of ink as the material construct in *Chimeric Landscape*. Foremost, through the digital video format ink could be captured right in the midst of its often overlooked materially conditioned happenings. The flexibility of digital editing also enabled Zheng to incorporate the chimeric – that is otherwise impossible to see with the naked eye – scenes that proposed to visualise ink's microscopic molecular structures. Additionally, digitally overlaying the episodes of ink's behaviour on paper with the actual scenes taken from nature more explicitly underlined ink's status as the physical substance, which biochemical processes and phenomenological reactions were reminiscent of other natural elements in the environment. Consequently, the media combination of digitisation and ink, whereby the latter was referenced in the digital language, allowed to illustratively translate ink's spatio-material properties.⁹⁶⁸

Following from this, the digital production of *Chimeric Landscape* was of the instrumental importance to its resulting outcome. As mentioned above, for this Zheng closely collaborated with Obscura Digital that practically put together the work's content under the artist's direction, utilising Adobe Effect for specialised visual effects as well as Adobe Premier Pro for editing video footages.⁹⁶⁹ The filming of the ink paint's live activity was also undertaken by the digital studio, which further sourced the images of molecules online.⁹⁷⁰ In turn, Zheng supplied numerous video excerpts, which he had been gradually collecting on his smart phone whilst travelling around California and the world, and he also purchased the copyright to use NASA's topographical footage of the earth.⁹⁷¹ Altogether, digitally producing *Chimeric Landscape* decentred ink's conventional positioning as the solely Chinese medium and showed its potential to be the material, appreciated for its intrinsic traits.

Significantly, Zheng's extension of his ink practice into the digital realm received critical acclaim, resulting in new international reception opportunities for his art. For example, *Chimeric Landscape*, as the artist's first digital ink installation, was premiered during the Venice Biennale in 2015 as part of *Personal Structures: Crossing Borders* – the inaugural exhibition of the European Cultural Centre, established just the year before in 2014. Particularly, the show was organised in partnership with Leiden's Global Art Affairs Foundation that curated the earlier 2011 editions of *Personal Structures*

⁹⁶⁸ Irina O. Rajewsky, 'Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality', *Intermediality*, 6 (2005), 52-53.

⁹⁶⁹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 1; Wands, *Art of the Digital Age*, 143.

⁹⁷⁰ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 5, Question 1.

⁹⁷¹ Ibid.

exhibitions during the Venice Biennale, featuring Zheng's ink paintings.⁹⁷² As the major collaboration between the two international institutions, the 2015 version of the *Personal Structures* exhibition project was emphatically global in scope, bringing together over 100 artists from over 50 countries.⁹⁷³

In the light of this, the exhibition's core objective was to emphasise 'a global togetherness', namely 'a shared concern about time, space, existence' that 'goes beyond cultural background, age, race and sex'.⁹⁷⁴ This pertinently reflected the two institutions' echoing missions to 'present cultural togetherness' and to 'go beyond our geographic borders'.⁹⁷⁵ The works chosen for the display, ranging from the examples by such distinguished artists as Yoko Ono (born 1933), Daniel Buren (born 1938) and Joseph Kosuth (born 1945) to the selection of pieces by emerging international artists, such as British Walter Hugo (born 1980) and Zoniel Burton (born 1980) or German Annina Roescheisen (born 1982), all expressed individual viewpoints on human existence in the current globalising world, aiming to 'increase the awareness of [the viewer's] own personal existence as human beings' nowadays.⁹⁷⁶

In the context of this curatorial undercurrent, Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* made for a fitting choice of the featured artwork that critically added to the exhibition's theme of the 'global togetherness'. As it was stated in the exhibition catalogue, the digital installation dislocated the positioning of 'the watery medium of ink', conventionally seen as the Chinese cultural epitome, towards the manifestation of nature's 'processes of formation', encompassing such all-inclusive living happenings as 'absorption, confrontation, atomisation, blurring, and shape-shifting'.⁹⁷⁷ As the catalogue entry continued, the 'dynamic form-giving process that is expressed through the medium of ink' is 'the same form-giving process that animates the natural world'.⁹⁷⁸ Hence, by taking the example of the culturally loaded medium to explicate nature's bio-chemical materiality and phenomenological reactions, it was shown how ink could be broadly applied to formats and

⁹⁷² Karlyn de Jongh, Sarah Gold, Valeria Romagnini and Rene Rietmeyer, 'Introduction', in *Personal Structures: Crossing Borders*, ed. Karlyn de Jongh, Sarah Gold, Valeria Romagnini and Rene Rietmeyer (Leiden: Global Art Affairs Foundation, 2015), 10.

⁹⁷³ ArtFacts, 'Exhibition – *Personal Structures: Crossing Borders*', <https://artfacts.net/exhibition/personal-structures-crossing-borders/679169> (accessed 7 August 2019).

⁹⁷⁴ Jongh, Gold, Romagnini and Rietmeyer, 'Introduction', 10.

⁹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁷⁷ Karlyn de Jongh, Sarah Gold, Valeria Romagnini and Rene Rietmeyer, 'Zheng Chongbin', in *Personal Structures: Crossing Borders*, ed. Karlyn de Jongh, Sarah Gold, Valeria Romagnini and Rene Rietmeyer (Leiden: Global Art Affairs Foundation, 2015), 314.

⁹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

subject-matters that, in line with the exhibition's above-mentioned goal, 'go beyond our geographic borders'.

This echoed Tiffany Wai-Ying Beres's review of *Chimeric Landscape* in her article about Zheng for *ArtAsiaPacific*, which reiterated how the work managed 'to connect and meaningfully engage with audiences' due to its focus on ink art's 'fundamental materials' as well as on creating the 'immersive environment' that prioritised the viewer's proprioception.⁹⁷⁹ Similarly, Maya Kovskaya in her *Yishu* article on *Chimeric Landscape* also stressed how Zheng's framing of the ink medium there connected this centuries-old Chinese pictorial tradition with 'a more inclusive post-human way of thinking about the world' that 'requires no specialized cultural training to access and engage with because it speaks a language that spans the spatiotemporal boundaries of culture and history, rooted in materiality and agency itself'.⁹⁸⁰ In this respect, as Kovskaya summarised, the installation 'cannot be narrowly defined as "Chinese"' and should be understood as 'ecumenical and humanist rather than nationalist and essentialist'.⁹⁸¹

Against the background of this reception that positioned *Chimeric Landscape* within the wider global contemporary art discourse, it was fitting that a few years later in 2018 it was also selected for *Art on theMART* (Figure 159) – the cutting-edge next-generation exhibition in Chicago, projected onto the city's iconic theMART, that is the world's largest commercial building.⁹⁸² From its inception in 2018 the project is set to run for 30 years altogether, showcasing different artworks annually from March to December.⁹⁸³ Obscura Digital, involved in the production of *Chimeric Landscape*, was appointed to technically deliver the inaugural digital exhibition on the expansive riverfront exterior of theMART building, making it the world's largest permanent digital art projection.⁹⁸⁴ For this, the studio devised its own premier projection system, incorporating three 3D architectural mapping channels, comprising 18 projectors, and 34 state-of-the-art lumen projectors, allowing to generate over a million of lumens at once.⁹⁸⁵

⁹⁷⁹ Beres, 'Zheng Chongbin', 130.

⁹⁸⁰ Maya Kovskaya, 'Becoming Landscape: Diffractive Unfoldings of Light, Space, and Matter in the New Work of Zheng Chongbin', *Yishu*, 14 (2015), 13.

⁹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁹⁸² TheMART, 'History', <http://themart.com/about/history-and-future/> (accessed 11 October 2019).

⁹⁸³ *GlobeNewswire*, 'Obscura Digital, Globally-Recognized Leader in Experiential Technology, to Project Art on theMART', 26 September 2018, <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2018/09/26/1576670/0/en/Obscura-Digital-Globally-Recognized-Leader-in-Experiential-Technology-to-Project-Art-on-theMART-A-Digital-Display-That-Will-Light-Up-Chicago-s-Skyline-as-the-World-s-Largest-Perman.html> (accessed 15 September 2019).

⁹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; Jay Koziarz, 'Merchandise Mart Will Be Turned into the World's Largest Digital Art Display', *Curbed Chicago*, 26 February 2018, <https://chicago.curbed.com/2018/2/26/17053270/merchandise-mart-lighting-video-public-art> (accessed 17 December 2020).

⁹⁸⁵ *GlobeNewswire*, 'Obscura Digital, Globally-Recognized Leader in Experiential Technology, to Project Art on theMART'.

Overall, the launch of this high-tech exhibition was motivated by the vision to bring together Chicagoan, wider American and international artworks, united by the visual language of digitisation, to the open-access domain of Chicago's popular W Merchandise Mart Plaza.⁹⁸⁶ Significantly, *Chimeric Landscape* was selected as one of the four artworks by local American artists to inaugurate this cultural project alongside Thater's *True Life Adventures* (2018), touching upon the theme of wildlife extinction, Jason Salavon's (born 1970) *Homage in between* (2018), exploring Chicago's art and design history, and Jan Tichy's (born 1974) *Artes in Horto* (2018), illuminating the city's local landscape artists through history.⁹⁸⁷ The fact that Zheng's debut digital ink installation was included in such the internationally noteworthy art exhibition, taking one of just the four available display spots, reiterates the significance of the artist's turn to technologies in generating the greater public exposure for ink art.

Indeed, the unprecedented number of the Chicagoans as well as tourists from the USA and the wider world, saw the adapted version of *Chimeric Landscape*, counting over 32,000 viewers on the opening night alone.⁹⁸⁸ This secured the most far-reaching in-person international reception of Zheng's first digital ink artwork. Furthermore, thousands of other people viewed *Art on theMART* on the social media due to the exhibition's extensive publicity on such platforms as Instagram, where over 4,000 users shared photos and recordings of the digital art projections, including *Chimeric Landscape*.⁹⁸⁹ Importantly, in those posts Zheng's name, tagged alongside the other three artists' names, was followed by such broadly resonating hashtags as 'art is for everyone' or 'digital media'.⁹⁹⁰

This mirrored the way *Chimeric Landscape* was discussed by multiple news media sources, such as WFMT radio station, whose presenter Keegan Morris referred to it as one of the 'vibrant video works' on display, or *The Architect's Newspaper*, whose contributing author Elizabeth Blasius neutrally reported that 'Zheng Chongbin's work, *Chimeric Landscape*, will project expanding and contracting ink blots'.⁹⁹¹ If the artist was differentiated then it was mostly alongside Thater, who

⁹⁸⁶ Art on theMART, 'Project Summary', <https://www.artonthemart.com/project-summary> (accessed 11 October 2019).

⁹⁸⁷ Art on theMART, 'Art on theMART Announces Artists for First Iteration of the Largest Permanent Digital Art Projection in the World', 23 August 2018, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/454e3c_dff232d5380041888948677d20db1e6e.pdf (accessed 13 October 2019).

⁹⁸⁸ Art on theMART, 'Crowds of 32,000 Gathered to View the Launch of Art on theMART', 3 October 2018, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/454e3c_bd4abc0de21341f89e06c8e43f92159b.pdf (accessed 13 October 2019).

⁹⁸⁹ Instagram posts with the 'artonthemart' hashtag, <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/artonthemart/> (accessed 13 October 2019).

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁹¹ Keegan Morris, 'WFMT and Art on theMART Pair Classical Holiday Music with a Festive, 25-Story Art Installation on the Chicago River', WFMT, 19 December 2018, <https://www.wfmt.com/2018/12/19/wfmt-partners-with-art-on-the-mart-to-pair-classical-holiday-music-with-a-festive-25-story-art-installation-on-the-chicago-river/> (accessed 15 October 2020); Elizabeth Blasius, 'Art on theMART Turns Chicago's Merchandise Mart into an Architectural Canvas', *The*

was also the California-based artist, thereby, the two were occasionally grouped together to set them apart from the other two Chicago-based artists, Tichy and Salavon, as in Carrie Shepherd's news coverage for the Chicagoan WBEZ radio station.⁹⁹² Thus, the employment of the digital format enabled the artist to critically popularise the reception of his ink art in the context of the globally impactful, both offline and online, *Art on theMART* exhibition.

In addition to non-profit institutions, the private commercial sector on the global art market also actively responded to Zheng's ink digitisation. In 2016, just one year after *Chimeric Landscape* was produced, Sotheby's S|2 Gallery premiered in Hong Kong the third edition of the digital installation, available in the forms of one Beta-cam tape, one DVD and one USB flash-drive, marketing it as a highlight of the exclusive private sale *Zheng Chongbin: Structures*.⁹⁹³ As Samuel Spencer explained, this was primarily due to the work's digital production means that manifested how ink art 'fits into an increasingly digital world' and, via an extension, the art market's growing digital art segment.⁹⁹⁴ Moreover, a year later in 2017 *Chimeric Landscape* also got into the special edition of Art Basel's *Data, Algorithm and beyond* exhibition in Hong Kong, which aim was to embrace the rising public interest in high-tech artworks, as mentioned above.⁹⁹⁵

Pertinently, another edition of *Chimeric Landscape* was also acquired by Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang, to whom the work's digital medium made a special appeal, given Yang's background in the high-tech sector as a co-founder of Yahoo! – one of the pioneering global web-service providers.⁹⁹⁶ Following this, the situating of Zheng's digital ink installation on the Silicon Valley-based international art market was further advanced by its inclusion at San Francisco's If So, What? art fair in 2018, as part of Lynchini's booth, run by Lynch from the cFire digital production company.⁹⁹⁷

Architect's Newspaper, 17 October 2018, <https://www.archpaper.com/2018/10/art-on-the-mart-chicago/> (accessed 15 October 2020).

⁹⁹² Carrie Shepherd, 'Chicago's Public Art Landscape Gets New Work', WBEZ, 28 September 2018, <https://www.wbez.org/stories/chicagos-public-art-landscape-gets-new-work/28f2e28d-f31c-4506-bf38-e1364656e7a4> (accessed 15 October 2020).

⁹⁹³ Sotheby's, 'Lot 35', in 'Past Auctions: *Zheng Chongbin: Structures*', 22 April 2016, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.35.html/2016/zheng-chongbin-structures-hk0688> (accessed 15 October 2019); Sotheby's, 'Press Release: Sotheby's S|2 Presents *Zheng Chongbin: Structures*, A Selling Exhibition', 22 April 2016, <https://sothebys.gcs-web.com/static-files/05402524-795d-47eb-afa4-dc8374975b0e> (accessed 15 October 2019).

⁹⁹⁴ Samuel Spencer, 'New Ink Works from Zheng Chongbin at S2 Hong Kong', *Blouin Artinfo*, 14 April 2016, <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1378740/new-ink-works-from-zheng-chongbin-at-s2-hong-kong> (accessed 25 April 2017).

⁹⁹⁵ Ink Studio, 'Art Basel Hong Kong 2017: Zheng Chongbin', <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/art-fairs/13-art-basel-hong-kong-2017-zheng-chongbin/> (accessed 7 August 2019).

⁹⁹⁶ Michael Knight, 'A Conversation with Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang', in *Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang*, ed. Richard Vinograd and Ellen Huang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 6.

⁹⁹⁷ If So, What?, 'Exhibitors: Nick Lynch', 2018, <https://www.ifsowhat.com/exhibitor/exhibitors/nick-lynch> (accessed 11 October 2019).

Founded in the same year by Sho-Joung Kim-Wechsler, Artsy's former Head of Finance, and Linda Helen Gieseke, the Fortune 500 companies international senior strategy advisor, the fair aimed to create 'a new immersive event celebrating art, design, music, and innovation' in Silicon Valley, bringing together digital media artworks across the region and the globe.⁹⁹⁸

Hence, at If So, What? *Chimeric Landscape* was displayed alongside works, which did not simply surpass cultural boundaries, but epitomised the most cutting-edge developments in the global field of digital media art. For example, within the context of Lynchini's booth alone, Zheng's digital ink installation was surrounded by an augmented reality sculpture garden, featuring such works as Fiona Tan's (born 1966) *AI Transformation* (Figure 160, 2018). Comprising a cluster of rotating multi-coloured crystal plates, minute details of this Artificial Intelligence sculptural transformation, embedded into the open-ledger blockchain crypto technology, were possible to perceive only via Microsoft HoloLens and a smartphone app.⁹⁹⁹ At the same time, since the realistic spatial orchestration of the room was not altered by the augmented reality experience, digital objects came across as surreally hovering in the concrete physical environment, thereby adding to the tension between the real and simulated worlds.

In addition to Lynchini, the fair also presented a booth by Khora Contemporary, the world's first virtual reality art production company, which, for example, staged Ukrainian artist Nikita Shalenny's (born 1982) *Bridge* (2017), who won the Faurshou Foundation's Young Artist of the Year prize in 2017.¹⁰⁰⁰ Offering the cinema-akin experience, Shalenny's work took the viewer on a forty-thousand-kilometre journey through deserted spaces, taken from the artist's watercolours (Figure 161).¹⁰⁰¹ The use of cutting-edge virtual reality production techniques enabled the creation of hundreds of fully immersive pictorially derived digital scenes, which effectively transmitted the atmosphere of gloom and loss that Shalenny envisioned as the metaphor for human daily encounters with political unrests.¹⁰⁰² Between Khora Contemporary's virtual cinema and Lynchini's augmented reality garden amongst other digital art displays, Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* was presented as the high-tech artwork of the global significance at Silicon Valley's If So, What?.

⁹⁹⁸ If So, What?, 'Our Vision', 2018, <https://www.ifsowhat.com/vision> (accessed 8 August 2019).

⁹⁹⁹ *ArtfixDaily*, 'If So, What? Is an Innovative New Fair Bringing Art and Design to Silicon Valley', 26 April 2018, <http://www.artfixdaily.com/artwire/release/604-if-so-what-is-an-innovative-new-fair-bringing-art-and-design-to-si> (accessed 11 October 2019).

¹⁰⁰⁰ Khora Contemporary, 'Biography: Nikita Shalenny', <https://khoracontemporary.com/nikita-shalenny-biography/> (accessed 23 July 2020).

¹⁰⁰¹ If So, What?, 'Exhibitors: Khora Contemporary', 2018, <https://www.ifsowhat.com/exhibitor/2018/3/31/khora-contemporary> (accessed 11 October 2019).

¹⁰⁰² *Ibid.*

This is further evidenced by the media coverage of Zheng's participation at the fair. Particularly, its organisers chose to post about *Chimeric Landscape* on their social media as the exemplary illustration of digital art on offer, only mentioning hashtags, such as 'video mapping' or 'digital sculpture', which positioned the work in the wider context of high-tech art.¹⁰⁰³ This echoed Artsy's press coverage, which cross-compared Zheng's digital installation with Harvey Moon's (born 1988) *Drawing Machine* (Figure 162, 2018), also represented by Lynchini, which custom-made algorithm dictated the AI machine's live sketching process.¹⁰⁰⁴ Importantly, apart from Zheng and Moon, the article discussed only two more fair's participants, namely David Gryn's Daata Editions and Porsche's collaboration with the California Institute of the Arts.¹⁰⁰⁵ Hence, not only was Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* situated as the globally resonating digital artwork, but it was also represented as the archetypal example of the Silicon Valley's novel art fair.

Therefore, on the example of Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* it can be seen how the use of digital technologies enabled the artist to open new frontiers of reception opportunities for his ink-based art, further redefining it as the globally compatible and up-to-date art direction. As Zheng pointed out, because digitisation is so particular to the twenty-first century worldwide, also increasingly attracting younger tech-savvy audiences, it presents the tool to make ink pieces more relevant to today's global viewers, many of whom 'are waiting to see [that digital direction] develop in art'.¹⁰⁰⁶ In other words, as the artist added, 'the more inter-media approach' opens a 'tremendous potential' for contemporary ink art.¹⁰⁰⁷ This is the viewpoint that, crucially, has been gaining momentum amongst artists in the much broader field of ink art nowadays.

III. The Wider Turn to Digitisation in Current-Century Ink Art

Indeed, in the 2000s, and especially closer to the turn of the 2010s, numerous artists internationally started merging together ink painting concepts alongside digital technologies, which offered new critical ways of reinvigorating the centuries-old Chinese pictorial tradition. Outside mainland China, already in 2004 Taiwanese artist Tong Yang-Tze, who specialises in calligraphy ink painting, experimented with a digital component, resulting in her computer-powered installation *The Realm*

¹⁰⁰³ If So, What? (@isw_ifsowhat), Instagram post, 30 January 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BelPOS4IG13/> (accessed 8 August 2019); If So, What? (@isw_ifsowhat), Instagram post, 25 April 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BiAka3EgWr8/?igshid=15u0vyf4bqncn> (accessed 8 August 2019).

¹⁰⁰⁴ Artsy, "'If So, What?': A New Fair Pairing Art and Innovation Arrives in the Bay Area, Including the Silicon Valley', *Artsy News*, 26 February 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/article/if-so-what-if-what-new-fair-pairing-art-innovation-arrives-bay-area-including-silicon-valley> (accessed 11 October 2019).

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 14; Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 10.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 1, Question 12.

of *Feelings: A Dialogue of Calligraphy and Space* (Figure 163), produced in collaboration with architect Ray Chen for the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in Taipei. There the visual contemplation of Tong's invented calligraphy was transformed into the evocative physical experience, whereby the viewer's whole body got enveloped by digitally projected moving lines, originating from the bottom of surrounding walls, and shooting up as forest trees all the way up to a ceiling, occupying its entire surface.

Significantly, also in 2014 *Navigator – Digital Art in the Making* opened at Taichung's National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts – the pivotal exhibition aimed at boosting 'the merging of technology and art' in Taiwan.¹⁰⁰⁸ In the light of such exhibitions Taiwanese ink artists were further encouraged to respond to global technological means of art production. As Yang Chia-Ling wrote, Tong's embrace of the digital medium was precisely motivated by the artist's thinking how 'in this digital era' it would be best 'to sustain an art in danger' of extinction.¹⁰⁰⁹ Specifically, turning her unreadable and, consequently, linguistically accessible ink calligraphy into digitally generated experiential abstraction helped Tong reduce a sense of perceived estrangement, which Asian calligraphic painting may evoke in foreign or younger viewers.¹⁰¹⁰ This was also underlined in Diana Freundl's review for *The Taipei Times*, arguing how the digital format in *The Realm of Feelings* made a special appeal to 'a new and younger audience'.¹⁰¹¹

Outside the field of ink calligraphy, South Korean Lee Lee-Nam (born 1969) was amongst the first artists to digitise flower-and-bird ink painting in 2006 via his *Digital Eight-Fold Screen* (Figure 164). Just as it was the case with Tong, Lee's motivation to dive into digital animation of Korean-style ink painting of nature came from thinking about his contemporary viewers and, specifically, his questioning as to 'how [he could] make them stay in front of [his] work'.¹⁰¹² Thus, the artist took images of eight old-master and modern ink paintings from the period of the Korean Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) and computer-edited them into moving pixels on liquid crystal display (LCD) screens.¹⁰¹³ There birds were shown as surreally crossing borders from one LCD panel to the other,

¹⁰⁰⁸ Chen Chinan, 'Foreword', in *Navigator – Digital Art in the Making*, ed. Tilman Baumgartel, Dai Liqing, Dieter Daniels, Wang Junjeh and Peter Weibel (Taichung: National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 2004), 9.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Yang Chia-Ling, 'Never Mind the Translation: Tong Yang-tze's Art of Writing in Dialogical Perspective', *Art in Translation*, 11 (2019), 113.

¹⁰¹⁰ Yang, 'Never Mind the Translation', 112.

¹⁰¹¹ Diana Freundl, 'Calligraphy in the Digital Age', *The Taipei Times*, 10 October 2004, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/10/10/2003206385> (accessed 15 June 2020).

¹⁰¹² Korean Artist Project, 'Lee Nam Lee', 6 April 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fA8oDg3YJhc> (accessed 14 July 2020).

¹⁰¹³ Joanne Lim, *A Scene from a Memory* (Singapore and Seoul: Ode to Art and Art Space Ben, 2013), 13-14.

despite their contrasting seasonal and floral representations, and within each individual screen the imagery was characterised by maximal liveliness.

As outlined by Kim Hee-Rang, Lee's translation of traditional ink painting into this 'hyper-space-time continuum' established a profound connection between the latter and contemporary audiences.¹⁰¹⁴ The swiftness of the animation sequence's visual transformation perceptually challenged the viewer, whose eye had to continuously readjust to the unfolding live metamorphosis. Hence, putting Asian ink art to digitisation helped Lee reach his goal 'to convey atmosphere and surprise [central to Asian landscape painting] more readily than [it would be possible via the genre's] traditional art forms'.¹⁰¹⁵ What is also significant is that for implementing this technological reinterpretation of ink painting, where, for example, one LCD screen cost approximately 1,600 USD, Lee had Samsung's infrastructural support – a benefactor of Korean digital art that in 2015 also introduced Samsung Korean Digital Art Residency at London's Victoria and Albert Museum.¹⁰¹⁶ This manifests the importance of selected technological companies in practically helping merge art with global tech-science.

Another example of, this time, the collective, which both critically and visually effectively utilised the potential of digitisation in promoting Asian pictorial conventions, is Japan's teamLab. Founded in 2001 by Inoko Toshiyuki (born 1977), the collective is the 'interdisciplinary group of ultra-technologists', encompassing programmers, mathematicians, web designers and CGI animators amongst others, who draw from Japanese traditional art to create ultra-contemporary art experiences.¹⁰¹⁷ For example, in *100 Years Sea* (Figure 165, 2009) teamLab looked towards Japanese old-master ink paintings of waves, such as Sotatsu Tawaraya's (c. 1600-1643) *Waves at Matsushima* (Figure 166), which amalgamation of linear strokes they took as the basis for their digital sea depiction.¹⁰¹⁸ Just as in Sotatsu's work, the dominating wave imagery was punctuated by floating islands. However, unlike the Japanese traditional painting, *100 Years Sea* was threaded with

¹⁰¹⁴ Kim Hee-Rang, 'Lee Lee Nam: Critique – Revival of a Famous Picture in Cyberspace', Ode to Art, <https://www.odetoart.com/?p=artist&a=320,lee%20lee%20nam#section4,Exhibitions> (accessed 14 July 2020).

¹⁰¹⁵ Ode to Art, 'Lee Lee Nam: Biography', <https://www.odetoart.com/?p=artist&a=320,lee%20lee%20nam#section4,Exhibitions> (accessed 14 July 2020).

¹⁰¹⁶ Korean Artist Project, 'Lee Nam Lee'; Alex Flowers, 'Call for Applications: V&A Samsung Korean Digital Art Residency', Victoria and Albert Museum, 18 May 2015, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/call-for-applications-va-samsung-korean-digital-art-residency> (2 February 2020).

¹⁰¹⁷ *Business Wire*, 'teamLab Borderless Becomes the Most Visited Single-Artist Museum in the World', 8 August 2019, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20190808005373/en> (accessed 2 February 2020); *Aesthetica Magazine*, 'Multi-Sensory Perceptions – teamLab: Transcending Boundaries', 75 (2017), 21; Russell Kelty, 'The Realm of the Senses: The Artwork of teamLab in Australia and Japan', *Art Monthly Australasia*, 295 (2016/2017), 32.

¹⁰¹⁸ teamLab, '100 Years Sea: [Running Time: 100 Years]', https://www.teamlab.art/ew/asm_100yearssea_100years/ (accessed 25 June 2020).

today's globally impactful techniques and themes, projected onto U-shaped wall-expansive screens, framing an extra-reflective floor.

Standing in the midst of this installation, the viewer's own body got engulfed by the linearly unfolding sea water motion, which could be perceived from all the sides of the peripheral vision, akin to Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape*. As the sea level gradually rose, the meditative experience of being enveloped by the waves was overtaken by the contrasting dramatic experience of drowning together with the flooded islands (Figure 167), arriving at the apocalyptic scene of the sun-deprived no-land sea (Figure 168). Significantly, this progressive water increase foreshadowed the actual rise of the world's sea levels between 2009 and 2109, based on the scientific data from the World Wildlife Fund.¹⁰¹⁹ Therefore, the conventional brushwork linearity, found in Japanese traditional marine ink paintings, got transformed by teamLab into, as Russell Kelty wrote, 'an unmediated physical experience accessible to all', exploring the globally pressing theme of the climate change.¹⁰²⁰

Significantly, the reception of teamLab's digital tradition-inspired installations swiftly encompassed the widely international scope of interest. For instance, in 2015 their waterfall-themed works were projected onto a facade of the Grand Palais in Paris, akin to the public projection of Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* onto Chicago's theMart building.¹⁰²¹ In 2016 the collective's pieces were also incorporated into permanent displays at the Living Computer Museum in Seattle as well as the Art Science Museum in Singapore, the latter of which acquired enough of teamLab's installations to create an independent exhibition around them, sponsored by Panasonic Business.¹⁰²² In the same year the collective also caught attention of the Pace Art and Technology Gallery in Silicon Valley's Menlo Park, which represented them as part of their above-mentioned *Living Digital Space and Future Parks* exhibition. There teamLab's digital works were reportedly sold upon request, fetching figures around 450,000 USD per artwork.¹⁰²³

Moreover, the growing international demand for teamLab's digital installations resulted in the 2018 opening of their two single-artist museums in Tokyo, namely teamLab Borderless and teamLab Planets. Within just a year since their openings the two museums jointly witnessed 3.5 million visitors, with teamLab Borderless alone welcoming 2.3 million visitors, outperforming the popularity

¹⁰¹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁰ Kelty, 'The Realm of the Senses', 32.

¹⁰²¹ *Aesthetica Magazine*, 'Multi-Sensory Perceptions', 21.

¹⁰²² Ibid.; Art Science Museum, 'Exhibition: *Future World: Where Art Meets Science*'.

<https://www.marinabaysands.com/museum/exhibitions/future-world.html> (accessed 25 June 2020).

¹⁰²³ Munro, 'Pace Art and Technology Officially Opens as First Major Gallery in Silicon Valley'.

of the single-artist Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.¹⁰²⁴ Crucially, out of those 2.3 million viewers, 50% came from abroad, counting over 160 countries, including the USA, Australia, China or the UK amongst others.¹⁰²⁵ What is also noteworthy is that, based on the museum's survey, again 50% of the visitors, who attended teamLab Borderless within the first year of its opening, decided to travel to Tokyo specifically in order to experience teamLab's digital works.¹⁰²⁶ These figures quantitatively underline the effectiveness of digitisation in turning contemporary works with Asian cultural elements into more broadly accessible and internationally sought-after art.

In the light of this, more and more ink artists could be seen turning to the digital medium throughout the 2010s, including artists that, unlike Lee Lee-Nam or teamLab, had no prior technical education in computer sciences. This can be illustrated by Xu Bing, who in 2012 considered the evolution of China's written communication means through the digital video narration in *The Character of Characters* (Figure 169). Starting with the Chinese ancient way of transcribing characters in ink on paper, as in Zhao Mengfu's (1254-1322) *Sutra of the Lotus of the Sublime Dharma* (c. 1300), the artist ended his story with today's digital culture.¹⁰²⁷ The latter was primarily evoked through a cloud printer with paper sheets flying out from it, imprinted with Apple's logo, amidst Apple's physical products, like iPad, iPhone and MacBook (Figure 170), which are frequently used for communication nowadays internationally.

This digitally animated overview of the Chinese written exchange means unfolded over the course of almost 18 minutes, incorporating over a thousand of hand-drawn sketches.¹⁰²⁸ The sketches were then all digitally transferred and edited with such technical effects as blurring, overlaying or zooming, also employed in Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape*.¹⁰²⁹ These computer-generated techniques enabled the artist to make his ink paintings come alive, instilling discernibly rich motion into the narrative, which was additionally presented on a horizontally expansive screen. Hence, the viewer was encouraged to walk along the screen's band, deciding on the way which part of the animation to see up-close, or to sit at the back to experience the digital story more cinematically as the unified piece of action. *The Character of Characters*, thereby, offered a more culturally accessible mode of

¹⁰²⁴ *Business Wire*, 'teamLab Borderless Becomes the Most Visited Single-Artist Museum in the World'.

¹⁰²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰²⁷ Ellen Huang, 'Xu Bing: *The Character of Characters*', in *Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang*, ed. Richard Vinograd and Ellen Huang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 167.

¹⁰²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰²⁹ *Ibid.*

viewing the story about Chinese written communication, emphasising its historical uniqueness, while also showing its integration with common global technologies.

Importantly, the piece was originally commissioned by the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco for its large-scale exhibition in 2012, *Out of Character: Decoding Chinese Calligraphy*, which in 2014 travelled to the Met in New York, aiming to comprehensively explain China's ink calligraphy works through centuries.¹⁰³⁰ This was Xu's first experiment with digital media, via which his objective was to accessibly elucidate the evolution of Chinese calligraphy as the communication means, setting with this the wider exhibition into the historic and contemporary contexts.¹⁰³¹ Pertinently, the production organisation of Xu's digital-narration installation for the exhibition and its eventual acquisition by the Asian Art Museum were supported by the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation, which in 2007 established the Ho Tung Visualisation Laboratory at the Colgate University in Hamilton, manifesting its commitment to promoting both new media and Chinese culture.¹⁰³²

Furthermore, an edition of *The Character of Characters* was also acquired by Silicon Valley's technological entrepreneurs Jerry Yang and Akiko Yamazaki, who, as mentioned above, also bought the edition of Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape*, thereby, underlining their growing interest in ink works that united the high-tech aspect, associated with their professional life, with references to Asian pictorial traditions, which spoke to their innate cultural identity.¹⁰³³ Following this, Xu's first digital piece continued attracting tech-industry-related support that facilitated the organisation of cultural events around it. For example, in 2018 the artist's lecture about *The Character of Characters* for the Cornell Council for the Arts Biennial in New York's Ithaca was co-sponsored by the Milstein Programme for Technology and Humanities.¹⁰³⁴ This reiterates the significance of the role that digitisation in contemporary ink art plays in helping expand this art genre's reception, targeting the wider spectrum of tech-savvy sponsors, collectors and audiences.

As an additional illustration, Chinese artist Jin Jiangbo, who was from the beginning trained in computer-generated art, also recently turned to the fusion of ink concepts with digital technologies as a way of diversifying the reception of contemporary ink art. In the early 2000s Jin studied

¹⁰³⁰ Sue Wang, 'Exhibition *Out of Character: Decoding Chinese Calligraphy* on View at Asian Art Museum, San Francisco', *CAFA Art Info*, 9 October 2012, <http://www.cafa.com.cn/en/news/details/8321702> (accessed 28 July 2020).

¹⁰³¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰³² Asian Art Museum, 'Collection: Xu Bing's *The Character of Characters*', <http://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/search@/0?t:state:flow=b1eefbab-37af-440d-971f-1829a232a85d> (accessed 28 July 2020); Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation, 'About', <http://www.rhfamilyfoundation.org/#!/about/> (accessed 28 July 2020).

¹⁰³³ Huang, 'Xu Bing', 166.

¹⁰³⁴ Cornell University, 'Artist Talk – Xu Bing: *The Character of Characters*', 6 February 2019, <https://www.cornell.edu/video/xu-bing-artist-talk> (accessed 27 July 2020).

multimedia design management at Celsys software company in Tokyo alongside undertaking a specialised MA degree in Digital Art at the Shanghai University, which he completed in 2002.¹⁰³⁵ Shortly, the artist became Head of Digital Art Studio at the Shanghai University's Academy of Fine Arts, and between 2007 and 2012 he pursued his PhD in New Media Art and Design at Beijing's Tsinghua University.¹⁰³⁶ Drawing from his extensive educational background in digital technologies, Jin devised large-scale installations that relied on the interactive feature of computer software, transforming the mountain-water imagery after Chinese old-master ink paintings into digital pictures to literally walk into.

Precisely, due to embedded site-specific sensors in such works as *Poetic Writing for Nature* (Figure 171, 2013), viewers' physical movements could be recognised and transmitted live onto a monumental screen, showing the three-dimensional black-and-white projection of mountain tops and trees, stylistically resonant of the traditional landscape ink painting brushwork. This digitised pictorial scenery was then directly altered by moving viewers, who caused the portrayed mountains to vibrate on the screen when they visually overlapped with their bodily silhouette projections. The experience of virtually being present inside the installation was further heightened by the fact that the sensors also detected details of viewers' clothing and traces of facial appearance features. This made the digitally retouched old master ink painting pose as a true-to-life interactive platform, where audiences could realistically engage with its imagery as if it physically inhabited the gallery's room rather than illusively existed on the screen.

Portraying ink art as the meditative experience to be explored through the all-familiar language of digital technologies attracted attention of Uli Sigg, a prominent Chinese art collector from Switzerland, who acquired *Poetic Writing for Nature* to complement his expansive collection of predominantly oil paintings. The digital piece was then exhibited at 2016 *Chinese Whispers: Recent Art from the Sigg and M+ Sigg Collections* at Bern's Museum of Fine Arts. As curator Kathleen Bühler outlined, the selection of works from Sigg's collection was determined by the exhibition's undercurrent goal to manifest how present-century Chinese art became more global, that is 'open to all international art traditions' rather than just China's national cultural context alone.¹⁰³⁷ The inclusion of Jin's recently acquired installation indicatively met this curatorial goal, showing how the

¹⁰³⁵ Ocula, 'Biography: Jin Jiangbo', <https://ocula.com/artists/jin-jiangbo/> (accessed 20 October 2019).

¹⁰³⁶ Artnet, 'Biography: Jin Jiangbo', <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jin-jiangbo/biography> (accessed 1 August 2020).

¹⁰³⁷ Kathleen Bühler, 'Global Art from China', in *Chinese Whispers: Recent Art from the Sigg and M+ Sigg Collections*, ed. Kathleen Bühler and Uli Sigg (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2016), 16.

use of broadly applicable technologies could ‘creatively’ bring the experience of ink works ‘up to date’.¹⁰³⁸

Crucially, cross-referencing the technical potential of digitisation with the historic legacy of ink painting continues to be on the rise, attracting more and more artists from China, wider Asia and beyond. As a concluding example in this chapter, Hong Kongese Victor Wong (born 1966) in 2018 demonstrated via his *Escapism* series an additional digital art niche for contemporary ink works to follow, whereby this time AI was utilised to boldly reinterpret the tradition of ink art in the twenty-first century. In this respect, paintings, such as *Escapism 0018* (Figure 172, 2018), were created not precisely by Wong, but by his digital-technology invention – A.I. Gemini, that is ‘the world’s first artificial intelligence ink artist’.¹⁰³⁹ Drawing from his technological expertise, acquired at his visual effects production company vfxNova, the artist spent three years devising this cutting-edge machine (Figure 173).¹⁰⁴⁰

The resulting product was an artificially intelligent robot, capable of manoeuvring ink brushes on paper and of discerning digital data that pictured geographical erosions, tides or tectonic structures.¹⁰⁴¹ It then filtered this data through an algorithm that made haphazard combinations, based on a certain day’s weather and time.¹⁰⁴² Hence, the robotic arm randomly reproduced excerpts of land and sea formations, comprising the amalgamation of variously inclined horizontal lines and dots. Some areas were overfilled with ink, evoking clouds, as in the upper segment of *Escapism 0018*, whereas other areas were spaced out, mimicking clusters of mountain tops. This made such AI ink paintings verge between the digital imagery of geographical landscapes and the pictorial appearance of Chinese tradition-inspired mountain-water ink works. Importantly, the consequent contrast between the use of the latest AI technologies and the reference to centuries-old ink conventions directly spoke to as wider global as Asian audiences.

Indeed, having been presented by the 3812 Gallery in Hong Kong and London amongst other places, Wong’s AI-made works entered Sigg’s Switzerland-based private art collection and a corporate art collection of Cathay Pacific Airways in Hong Kong.¹⁰⁴³ Moreover, they also attracted

¹⁰³⁸ Kathleen Bühler, ‘On Dealing with Tradition’, in *Chinese Whispers: Recent Art from the Sigg and M+ Sigg Collections*, ed. Kathleen Bühler and Uli Sigg (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2016), 74.

¹⁰³⁹ 3812 Gallery, *Victor Wong x A.I. Gemini: Far Side of the Moon* (London: 3812 Gallery, 2019), 1.

¹⁰⁴⁰ 3812 Gallery, ‘Victor Wong’, <https://www.3812gallery.com/artists/52-victor-wong/> (accessed 1 August 2020); 3812 Gallery, ‘Collaboration | A.I. Gemini’s Fauvist Dream’, <https://www.3812gallery.com/news/18-collaboration-a.i.-gemini-s-fauvist-dream-victor-wong-x-samsung-the-frame-2020-x/> (accessed 1 August 2020).

¹⁰⁴¹ Mark Jones, ‘Stroke of Genius: AI Takes on Ink Painting’, *Discovery*, 8 January 2019, <http://discovery.cathaypacific.com/stroke-genius-ai-takes-ink-painting/> (3 August 2020).

¹⁰⁴² Ibid.; 3812 Gallery, ‘Collaboration | A.I. Gemini’s Fauvist Dream’.

¹⁰⁴³ 3812 Gallery, ‘Victor Wong’.

attention of Samsung that collaborated with the artist on having his paintings digitised for streaming on the company's latest invention – the Frame screen that utilises QLED 4K technology for the maximally life-like digital projection.¹⁰⁴⁴ As co-owner of the 3812 Gallery Calvin Hui said, digitisation offers a new dimension of imagination to artists that can be put to critical uses and can help break down territorial boundaries.¹⁰⁴⁵ Therefore, he underlined the importance that the recent 'beginning of the Tech Ink era' would play in showing that contemporary ink art, as Mark Jones put it, 'is not a "niche" market, nor a "regional" phenomenon', but the internationally resonant art happening.¹⁰⁴⁶

In this respect, from Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* through to Wong's A.I. Gemini, the recent turn to digitisation in ink art can be seen to hold prospects for the future development of the latter's rising international profile. Foremost, the use of up-to-date global technological production techniques endues ink works with the quality of fundamental border-crossing familiarity. As Marshall McLuhan and Bruce Powers outlined back in 1992 in their seminal book *The Global Village*, since technologies are 'available to everyone at the same time', they possess the 'decentralising' capacity that disintegrates any category of boundaries, whether related to class or culture.¹⁰⁴⁷ Hence, in the technological sphere hierarchies with governing centres are dissolved in favour of an all-encompassing net, connecting together multiple differentiated points.¹⁰⁴⁸

Crucially, this idea is still expounded by today's contemporary art historians and digital media theorists, such as Belting, who emphasised how from the beginning resorting to technologies in art offered an opportunity to articulate 'a global message as it removed not only geographical, but cultural distance between centre and periphery'.¹⁰⁴⁹ Precisely because technologies (comprising both more expensive products, such as by Apple, as well as their increasingly affordable analogues) are dominantly used across many parts of the world, they bring into art a special dimension that cannot always be generated by pictorial or sculptural methods alone, that is the dimension of broader accessibility, as initially theorised by McLuhan and Powers, which surpasses geographic, cultural and other dividing categorisations.¹⁰⁵⁰ Interpreted in this light, the employment of

¹⁰⁴⁴ 3812 Gallery, 'Collaboration | A.I. Gemini's *Fauvist Dream*'.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Calvin Hui during the online panel discussion 'Creating, Curating and Collecting Digital Art' with Yiyun Kang, Adrian Locke, Victor Wong and Malcolm McNeill, organised by SOAS Postgraduate Diploma in Asian Art, SOAS, London, 8 July 2021.

¹⁰⁴⁶ 3812 Gallery, *Victor Wong x A.I. Gemini*, unnumbered; Jones, 'Stroke of Genius'.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 92.

¹⁰⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴⁹ Belting, 'Contemporary Art as Global Art', 59.

¹⁰⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

digitisation can be seen to turn contemporary ink works into one of the unique points on the world's tech-net outside the frame of rigid cultural hierarchies.

Moreover, in an echoing manner, as Weibel indicated, translating conventional media of painting or sculpture into the digital mode also ensures that 'no single medium is dominant any longer', making 'the array of all media forms a universal medium' when digitised.¹⁰⁵¹ In other words, this inherent cross-mediality of digitisation effectively contributes to the non-hierarchical 'reentry of forgotten and unforeseen parts of geography and history', like ink painting, into global contemporary art.¹⁰⁵² Similarly, Manovich also outlined the potential of computer-generated production techniques to function as 'a *metalanguage* platform', 'where many cultural languages of the modern period come together and begin creating new hybrids'.¹⁰⁵³ Critically merging global technological and local cultural elements enables then to prioritise, as Manovich further wrote using Louis Menand's terms, relations over categories, transitions over boundaries and sequences over hierarchies.¹⁰⁵⁴

All these comments are not meant to idealise contemporary technologies – the latter pose their own challenges that artists have to work around. As argued above, one of the key challenges related to combining digital technologies with art is its tendency to fall into mere spectacle, associated with unethical modes of global capitalism and offering no critical value to viewers. As Krauss wrote, such flat uses of technologies turn art into a participator 'in the international fashion of installation and intermedia work', which makes it 'complicit with a globalization of the image in the service of capital'.¹⁰⁵⁵ As Jonathan Crary wrote, many other critics of technologies, like Jean-Francois Lyotard, emphasised how the latter is also prone to becoming 'a new master paradigm' that would homogenise the way knowledge is produced in contemporary societies.¹⁰⁵⁶

Nevertheless, despite these challenges amongst others, it cannot be overlooked that digital technologies can also offer the profound potential to enhance critical messages behind artworks and to help make certain culturally particular concepts more critically accessible. In addition, as Crary wrote and as elucidated above by the examples of such works as Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* or teamLab's *100 Years Sea*, technologies are also capable of 'expanding the limits and possibilities

¹⁰⁵¹ Peter Weibel, 'Globalization and Contemporary Art', in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, ed. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 26.

¹⁰⁵² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰⁵³ Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 244.

¹⁰⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Rosalind Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 56.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Jonathan Crary, 'Olafur Eliasson: Visionary Events', in *Moving Image: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 170.

of human perception', based on their ability to activate the viewer's sensorial apparatus more forcefully.¹⁰⁵⁷ In her turn, Langdon argued that this gives a chance to establish a stronger connection between the work and its audiences, which prioritises the viewer's 'individual experience and response' in relation to the work's critical messages.¹⁰⁵⁸ As this chapter suggested, it is ultimately up to artists to decide which aspects of digital media to engage with and to which uses to put the latter.

Following from this, digital ink art sets the important niche within the wider field of contemporary ink art. Foremost, this act of cultural heritage's 'translation into contemporary aesthetic idioms' (such as digitisation) enables heritage-inspired works to reinforce their position on the wider international art scene as broadly applicable art, as Joselit underlined.¹⁰⁵⁹ At the same time, as Joselit added to this, "globalising" such works does not necessarily mean homogenising them because 'the cultivation of local forms of heritage' is an integral part of these works, which counteracts any 'flattening effects of globalization'.¹⁰⁶⁰ Indeed, as illustrated above, digitising ink works does not prevent artists from continuing to engage with culturally particular aspects of the ink medium, which they all freely pursue to differing degrees.

Specifically, Tong Yang-Tze and Xu Bing emphasised the aesthetics of calligraphic brushwork in their digital calligraphy installations by evoking the ancient scripts' stylistic qualities. In turn, Lee Lee-Nam, teamLab, Jin Jiangbo and Victor Wong referenced traditions of Asian landscape ink art by respectively depicting elements of Korean four-season, Japanese marine and Chinese mountain-water paintings. In the case of Zheng, the artist redirected attention to ink and paper as the materials, reminding why on this widely applicable object-oriented level the two have been appreciated by Chinese and other Asian artists through centuries, and how the latter's properties relate to the recent phenomenological and new materialist philosophical thoughts. Consequently, as Sven Lütticken wrote, traditional forms of art are not just physical tools, but are also embodiments of concepts that can be communicated digitally as effectively as in their orthodox formats.¹⁰⁶¹

Indeed, ink painting brushwork texturing techniques could still be inferred from the digitally projected calligraphy and landscape works by the above-mentioned artists, but viewing those brushstrokes – some of which, as in the case of Xu Bing, were still hand-painted before being

¹⁰⁵⁷ Ibid., 169-170.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Langdon, *The Work of Art in a Digital Age*, 147.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Joselit, *Heritage and Debt*, 225.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶¹ Sven Lütticken, 'Undead Media', *Afterimage*, 31 (2004), 12.

scanned – now became the viscerally engulfing experience that transcended the cultural specificity due to the use of digital animation. Similarly, in Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* applying ink on paper was at the heart of the monumental digital installation, where the latter's technical potential to flexibly edit video footages enabled to closely examine as well as to cross-compare the external and internal processes of ink's material behaviours in relation to wider phenomenological and material happenings in nature.

Speaking about Wong, his ink works' pictorial end-format naturally placed ink brushwork into the epicentre of the viewer's attention, but choosing to create it with the digitally programmed machine rather than the human hand showed the tradition of ink painting from the cutting-edge angle of globally encompassing AI art, capable of devising its own ink texture-strokes and mountain-water compositions. Based on this, digitally produced ink art is still ink art in a sense that the latter's unique historical, cultural as well as material aspects, to varying extents, remain as the foundation of the artists' works. Perceived in this light, far from undermining the uniqueness of ink that originated in China and spread to wider Asia, digitisation helps to heighten, extend and, most importantly, accessibly translate it into the more broadly understood language of visual expression in the current century.

Thereby, the recent digital turn in the field of contemporary ink art does not only provide a fresh outlook on the culturally particular medium, but it also substantially helps widen its exposure. Digitisation functions as the uniting thread, which inherent familiarity encourages to see the often-overlooked global relevance of ink art's qualities and applications that, in turn, allows to attract new geographically dispersed tech-savvy viewers. The employment of digital technologies also helps ink artworks get into more internationally oriented exhibitions, where they get diffused across a bigger range of thematic categories alongside other digitally produced and globally divergent artworks. Being featured in such all-applicable border-crossing art exhibitions, illustrated above by the examples of Zheng's participation in the *Art on theMART* project or teamLab's representation at the Pace Art and Technology Gallery's show amongst others, enables to expand the ink art's reception even more.

Furthermore, when it comes to collecting digital ink works, there is also a tendency on the part of Western art institutions to accession them on more culturally neutral terms. For example, by contrast with Zheng's ink painting *Turbulence*, placed in the category of Chinese art by LACMA, when the same museum accessioned the artist's digital installation *Branches are Roots in the Sky* (2016) – that, akin to *Chimeric Landscape*, made references to the ink medium – it was not placed

within the curatorial area of Chinese art.¹⁰⁶² Instead, LACMA classified it using non-culturally specific and more broadly encompassing categories of ‘21st century’ and ‘time-based media’ art.¹⁰⁶³ This underscores that Chinese-ink works in the pictorial format are more prone to be allocated the more commonplace Asian cultural category in the West since ink art has conventionally comprised paintings rather than digital installations, the latter of which are particular to the current time’s technological globalisation.

As artist Raphael Lozano-Hemmer (born 1967) said, ‘technology is inevitable’ – the twenty-first-century socio-culture is firmly digital and this has become the quintessential language of global communication.¹⁰⁶⁴ Being translated into this more universally understood quintessential language is one of the very effective means to make the ink medium more accessible to a wider range of viewers, without undermining its various unique cultural traits, with which artists continue to selectively engage. Precisely, digital ink artists champion the more profound integration of contemporary ink art on the world stage, offering new up-to-date ways of experiencing ink and, with it, proving that ethnically rooted art can be relevant on the global level. However, although being represented in cross-cultural international exhibitions, which digital ink works attract, palpably helps popularise ink art amongst broader audiences, it is important to note that it does not guarantee that such works will always be automatically received as globally resonating.

Just as with the reception of non-digital ink paintings, analysed in the previous chapter, there would be audiences, who, upon finding out that a certain high-tech piece has references to non-Western cultures, will still be inclined to separate it out more than necessary and sometimes even to overlook its cross-culturally applicable themes and presentation means, especially when it is revealed that an artist behind such piece has an Asian name.¹⁰⁶⁵ Compared with ink paintings though, as evidenced in this chapter, digitisation certainly has an edge in helping more viewers to appreciate ink art on the less culturally stereotyping basis, thereby holding significant prospects for the future development of this media combination. Nevertheless, since the mainstream tendency to pigeonhole contemporary art with Asian traditional cultural elements, whether digitally or pictorially executed, persists, more needs to be done to secure the greater reception inclusivity for ink art, as expanded in the following concluding chapter.

¹⁰⁶² Los Angeles County Museum of Art, ‘Collections: Zheng Chongbin’, <https://collections.lacma.org/search/site/ZHENG%2520CHONGBIN> (accessed 17 August 2021).

¹⁰⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Cherie Federico, ‘Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’, *Aesthetica Magazine*, 2010, <https://aestheticamagazine.com/rafael-lozano-hemmer/> (accessed 6 August 2020).

¹⁰⁶⁵ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 7.

Chapter 7

Conclusion – ‘Ink Is for Everyone’

From the late twentieth century into the twenty-first century the question of contemporary ink art has been the question of belonging. Where does the ink medium belong: the Chinese and, at most, Asian cultural contexts or the wider international art scene, including the US and European regions? As it was argued throughout this thesis, the significant proportion of established ink artists, born in China and, as shown in the sixth chapter, from broader Asia, aspired and continue aspiring to make ink art as more than just the culturally particular pictorial form for Chinese or Asian viewers. As Zheng – this thesis’s key case-study artist – said, ‘ink is for everyone’.¹⁰⁶⁶ Starting in the 1980s and pausing in 2018, the core objective of this study was to elucidate precisely how it was possible to start achieving this kind of border-crossing applicability for ink art, and why it is important to pursue this in the first place.

Since on the material and conceptual levels the medium of ink offers flexibility to be put to a variety of uses, it also has the capacity to transcend cultural boundaries and to speak to multinational audiences. During the first decade of the post-Mao period Chinese artists approached this task by experimenting with as many Western art styles, which had previously been forbidden, as possible. Within a short time-span, between 1984, when Zheng graduated from the Zhejiang Academy, and 1988, when he left for California, the artist alone changed his ink painting style from Surrealism through Expressionism to Abstract Expressionism, while also taking note of the multimedia approach in Rauschenberg’s pictorial combines. The artists’ excitement of discovering the profusion of Western modern and contemporary art forms was driven by the accompanying desire to bring 1980s ink painting closer to European and American art.

After the three decades of solely propaganda Socialist Realism, blending Chinese ink with Western pictorial techniques and subject-matters was the underlining expression of being up-to-date and open-minded within the non-official ink art field. Hence, ink painters eagerly absorbed foreign cultural ideas that they had to assemble piece by piece from black-and-white mediocre-quality reproductions of paintings in catalogues, Western art historical and philosophical books with partial and not often reliable translations into Mandarin or, in luckier cases, directly from European and American exhibitions or visitors in China. They then hoped to apply fragments of this knowledge to ink art in ways that would enable them to access experimental contemporary art exhibitions in China and abroad, which in both instances created the opportunity for their ink works to be seen by

¹⁰⁶⁶ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 2, Question 20.

Western viewers. In other words, Chinese experimental ink painters longed to generate cross-cultural dialogues within and through their art.

That is why, in the light of newly incoming opportunities to go abroad on study or work programmes, many artists opted to move to the West and to have their own chance to experience modern and contemporary art works from Europe and the USA first-hand. Having landed there, such artists were presented with another challenge though – the local prejudice about the medium of ink, which was stereotypically believed to be the estranged art form, belonging to Chinese or Asian diaspora communities, but not native contemporary art scenes. When presented with this challenge in California in the early 1990s, Zheng decided to start by testing alternative art media for public exhibitions, such as installation art, where he made references to socio-political ideas that were more pertinent to the Californian context.

Once Zheng secured his assimilation on the local art scene and into the local society, he felt compelled to actively ponder ways through which he could express his newly forged cultural identity that revolved between his innate Chinese background and acquired American socio-cultural belonging. At first, the artist did it through installations that addressed this binary state of identification, then he gradually started incorporating ink in those publicly exhibited works and, eventually, he fully returned to ink painting. In this respect, in the later 1990s Zheng once again fully occupied himself with the question as to how to negotiate the place for the culturally specific genre of ink painting in the Western art world.

However, unlike his earlier approach to this question in the 1980s back in China, now the artist viewed this issue of integration from the new angle of the cultural polyglot – he was the local American artist of the Chinese descent, who experienced first-hand various pertinent to the local cultural context art forms while making his artistic debut in California. Hence, rather than just incorporating mutually differentiated Western subject-matters and techniques alongside the medium of ink, Zheng focused on illuminating inherent parallels on the deeper theoretical level between selected Chinese old-master and American modern pictorial directions, underlining the fact that Western modern painters themselves actively looked towards the tradition of Asian ink art.

Consequently, far from being the estranged art form, belonging to the Asian diaspora community in the USA, methods and philosophies behind ink art were shown to be one of the threads of the very American art, such as Abstract Expressionism. A similar way of integrating contemporary ink painting in the USA was also applied by other Chinese-born American ink artists, who wanted to

reveal commonalities between the two culturally distinct art forms by cross-referencing Chinese ancient ink features with all-familiar in the USA modern painting. Significantly, paving the greater acceptance of culturally different art on the American art scene was also facilitated in this period on the more widespread level by US art institutions through such notable exhibitions as *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, shown in 1995 at San Francisco's Centre for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens amongst other places.

During this moment, while migrant artists were settling down and negotiating the institutional status of contemporary ink art at their new residential homes, throughout the 1990s China was going through the tremendous economic growth, which became especially apparent in the early 2000s, when the country began preparing to host the 2008 Olympic Games. Against the background of its newly achieved economic power, Chinese official institutions became eager to promote local cultural art forms, like ink painting, on the international level. Positioning such the particular to China art genre on par with Western contemporary art was above all the statement of China's rising confidence as the new superpower, demonstrating to the world both its economic and cultural advancement. As a result, investment into exhibitions that promoted elements of China's traditional culture poured in, manifested by the benchmark 2007 Third Chengdu Biennale, exclusively focused on present-day ink paintings.

In the light of this, once underrepresented contemporary ink art, perceived as the matter just for the Chinese, received the far-reaching attention amongst non-profit and commercial art establishments in China, oriented at equally local and international audiences. Collectively, they promoted the idea that ink works, despite alluding to the centuries-old pictorial tradition, could have the more universal resonance in the contemporary society. As part of this undertaking and due to this thriving cultural infrastructure, Chinese art institutions also started actively inviting overseas ink artists with already established careers in the West to exhibit in China. Hence, Zheng as well as other Chinese-American ink painters had the opportunity to frequently show their works at newly set-up Chinese contemporary art museums or commercial galleries, which common mission was to underline ink art's internationalism and contemporaneity.

Crucially, China's heightened investment into contemporary ink art swiftly triggered the interest of Western art institutions: non-profit establishments, such as museums, wanted to play their own roles in documenting and illuminating the rise of contemporary ink art, whereas commercial galleries saw the new sales opportunity that they could develop, based on the ink art's expanding publicity on the global art market. Instantly, current-day ink works became the dedicated focus of

numerous exhibitions not only in Asia, but also in Europe and North America, which previously mainly showed the widespread interest only in Chinese contemporary oil paintings in the styles of socially critical Political Pop and Cynical Realism. This kind of newly fetched popularity of contemporary ink art in the 2000s markedly differed from its reception in the 1980s or for the most duration of the 1990s both within China and the Western art world.

Indeed, back then experimental ink paintings were largely promoted at closed exhibitions, hosted by China's art academies and directed at a limited number of viewers, comprising local artists and academics as well as a small group of then-present visiting foreigners. If ink paintings were occasionally shown abroad, then galleries that primarily accepted them were those that operated as part of specialised small cultural establishments, which audiences were also largely limited, such as the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg. Compared with this, in the 2000s the outreach of exhibitions, featuring contemporary ink works, was transformed by far as now they were represented during international biennales, like the Third Chengdu Biennale or the iconic Venice Biennale, by such world-class museums as London's British Museum or New York's Met and by wide-ranging top-tier art businesses, including global auction houses Sotheby's and Christie's or the Saatchi Gallery in London.

In the light of this growth of opportunities to exhibit ink art at internationally oriented exhibitions in China, wider Asia, Europe and the USA, migrant ink artists were presented with yet another question, that is how best to integrate their works no longer just on the local art scenes of their places of residence, but on the international art scene of the wider scope. Therefore, a predominant number of ink artists started focusing on themes and techniques that transcended cultural boundaries and appealed to multinational audiences. In Zheng's case, this question brought him to his latest direction in ink art, whereby in the pictorial or installation formats the ink medium is presented via the material lens of its phenomenological and object-oriented processes, emphasising the universal particularities of their internal molecular happenings or inherent external interactions with physical elements of light or gravity.

This same drive to help ink art pose as the more broadly understood art form also encouraged Zheng alongside various other Chinese and Asian artists to turn to digitisation. Since digital technologies present the most up-to-date widespread means of communication in the current century, translating ink works into the digital language enables to critically expand their outreach even further. As with internationally oriented non-digital ink art, this does not cancel out the latter's traditional roots since on the thematic and technical levels artists, to differing degrees,

continue engaging with them. However, on top of that, via digitisation they are capable of adding ideas and generating experiences that resolutely move beyond the cultural particularism and that pose as being highly more relatable to audiences from various cultural backgrounds.

As mentioned in the sixth chapter, the success behind the screening of Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape* at *Art on theMART* in Chicago, or behind the representation of teamLab's installations at their single-artist museums in Tokyo, proves that the digital production means rewards artists with the significantly far reaching exposure of their tradition-rooted works, attracting a phenomenal number of visitors globally, who all share the interest in digital technologies. With the spike in digital art funding, backed by thriving international high-tech companies, based in Silicon Valley or Zhongguancun amongst other places, digital ink art also currently has the effective practical infrastructural support for its ongoing development on the global scale. It is, thereby, expected that digital ink art will continue to be on the rise, making a special appeal not only to multinational audiences, who may otherwise not show interest in Asian-derived ink art forms, but also to the latest tech-savvy generations of younger viewers.

Certainly, digital ink art's potential does not imply that artists will stop pursuing painting – as Janet Bishop wrote, no technological innovation can completely '[quell] the centuries-old desire to manipulate wet pigment' since paintings refreshingly 'stand apart from the blur of images we see when we "surf"'.¹⁰⁶⁷ Indeed, numerous ink artists, including Zheng, freely move between the digital and pictorial media, depending on their individual artworks' intentions. Additionally, the digital ink art's recent success neither implies that every artist will opt for it – for example, Li Huayi or Liu Dan, whose priority is the monumental-scale hand-applied texturing ink brushwork, create exclusively paintings. However, the broader applicability of digitisation has the capacity to vividly prove that contemporary ink art is the international-level art form that belongs to the wider world. This does imply that digital ink works present the important sub-category of ink art to follow and to critically advance.

Overall, as this thesis showed, the accelerated popularisation of ink art by Chinese, Asian and Western art institutions throughout the 2000s and the 2010s enabled it to appear more on par with other international contemporary art forms. It was undoubtedly a big achievement when, for example, the Met started collecting contemporary ink art works and even staged the dedicated exhibition in 2013, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*. However, still a lot more can be

¹⁰⁶⁷ Janet Bishop, 'Old-Fashioned Forms in Newfangled Times or, Why Would Anybody in This Hip and Modern World Bother Making Paintings?', in *010101: Art in Technological Times*, ed. Benjamin Weil (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 73, 75.

done to further the inclusive and unprejudiced reception of contemporary ink art. After all, as Pedith Chan pointed out, the Met is not the Museum of Modern Art and the British Museum is not Tate Modern: the former two have historically collected Asian artefacts and paintings whereas the latter two are considered to be the more exclusive current-art institutions, following international art developments from the modern period up until today.¹⁰⁶⁸

Moreover, most of the time, with the exception made for predominantly digital ink works, contemporary ink art gets exhibited as part of Chinese-themed exhibitions only. Despite the early criticism that such exhibitions received for their supposed ethnicisation of the ink medium – that is ‘a strategy of particularisation’, as Weibel explained, whereby culturally distinct forms are isolated from mainstream art forms – as argued in this thesis, within the context of the later 2000s and the 2010s this was highly beneficial as it helped draw the more widespread attention to the genre of today’s ink art, which had not existed as such before.¹⁰⁶⁹ Consequently, the point of these seminal shows as *Ink Art* was not to compartmentalise ink works, but to help educate broader audiences about this medium, demonstrating that just because it is culturally inscribed does not mean that artists cannot put it to innovative and broadly resonating uses.

Nevertheless, now that contemporary ink art made its splash on the international art scene, overdwelling on the Chinese rhetoric when representing ink works can start having more of this side-effect of institutionally induced ethnicisation. It is already enough that generally Chinese artists often face cultural compartmentalisation based on their Asian name.¹⁰⁷⁰ When they additionally use ink, they automatically invite the second layer of compartmentalisation, based on the medium’s inherent association with China. This means that when such ink pieces by Asian-named artists get only exhibited as part of Asia-centred exhibitions, this adds the third layer to this already extant culturally compartmentalising barrier, which prevents certain audiences from appreciating the ink art’s potential to be internationally applicable. Naturally, this problem would not be faced in the Western art world by artists with Western names, which calls for the critical reconsideration of how contemporary ink art is communicated to Western and wider audiences.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Pedith Chan, ‘In the Name of Ink: The Discourse of Ink Art’, in *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2013*, ed. Tong Kam Tang (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013), 23; available via Academia, https://www.academia.edu/7828469/In_the_Name_of_Ink_The_Discourse_of_Ink_Art (accessed 15 May 2019).

¹⁰⁶⁹ Weibel, ‘Globalization and Contemporary Art’, 24.

¹⁰⁷⁰ To help partially address this issue, labels on American artists at US museums would mention their place of birth and their current US residential status side by side in order to draw attention to the role that immigrants play in the American society. In this respect, it is beneficial to illuminate artists’ native backgrounds, evoked by their last names, however, the latter should not be overemphasised as it is also vital to simultaneously shed concrete light on artists’ present situations and deeper intentions behind their works. As discussed in Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 9.

As Zheng said, ‘the medium itself doesn’t have any meaning unless the work has meaning’, thereby, ‘it is not just that you use ink, but how you use ink and how this makes ink art extend in many different ways in relation to art and culture at large’.¹⁰⁷¹ In order to help more effectively underline individual artists’ intentions behind their employments of ink, which gets reinterpreted by them in widely resonating ways, new curatorial strategies towards framing them in institutional contexts need to be developed, as it is largely agreed by Asian art curators.¹⁰⁷² Specifically, as suggested in this thesis, in the new 2020s decade the next goal to pursue in the area of the ink art’s stereotype-free global reception would be seeing more often ink-material or ink-concept internationally oriented works within the context of contemporary Western art museums and galleries, which historically had no direct association with Asian art forms.

Being integrated into collections and exhibitions of such institutions would mean that those ink works would be more dispersed across a variety of globally applicable categories that they pertinently belong to, inviting viewers to see ink art as the active contributor to international visual culture on world-relevant matters. Doing the opposite, that is putting ink works, which themes and techniques have the broad appeal, solely and constantly into the Chinese art category, automatically limits the range of audiences that will access these works and, thereby, does not help fully illuminate and spread their border-crossing messages. In this respect, the positioning of ink art on the global art scene should now be a matter of small actions, whereby curators around the world would start considering representing as part of their non-Asian-focused exhibitions thematically relevant selections of one or few ink works, which have culturally transcendent layers to their understanding.¹⁰⁷³

As Bhabha mentioned in a recent interview with Chiu, instead of over-dwelling on the segregation-tending discourse, it is important to prioritise people’s common interests.¹⁰⁷⁴ As Bhabha added, overemphasising the rhetoric of difference also means that in today’s art world there is ‘a great desire to discover every day some non-Western artist’, who will get the “twenty-four-hour”-spotlight only since then another culturally different kind of artist would be found to satisfy this

¹⁰⁷¹ Zheng, Appendix A, Interview 8, Question 8.

¹⁰⁷² Martraire, ‘The Inaccessible Other’.

¹⁰⁷³ As argued in this thesis, there are already effective examples of this curatorial approach of threading ink works throughout non-ink or non-Asian art exhibitions, as evidenced by the representation of Zheng’s *Wall of Skies* at the 2016 Shanghai Biennale, where the installation was reviewed in comparison with Argentinian-German artist Tomas Saraceno’s *Sonic Cosmic Webs*, or the representation of *Chimeric Landscape* at *Art on theMART*, where it was displayed alongside the other three American artists’ works. The fact that these exhibitions invited the more open-minded and culturally non-compartmentalising reception of Zheng’s ink art underlines the importance to start exhibiting applicable contemporary ink works more often as part of such beyond-cultural-specificity art shows.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Homi K. Bhabha during the online interview with Melissa Chiu ‘Keynote Conversation – Homi K. Bhabha’, organised by the Hawai’i Contemporary as part of the Hawai’i Contemporary Art Summit, Honolulu, 11 February 2021.

constant quest for new difference.¹⁰⁷⁵ This means that non-Western-born artists (and local heritage-inspired art forms) often struggle to receive proper sustained growth on the international art scene.¹⁰⁷⁶ However, if art institutions, in Bhabha's words, 'find interests rather than identities as a platform for progress in the twenty-first century', critical cultural convergences can happen, where this so-called cultural difference will be acknowledged not on the discriminating basis of being just different, but for its contribution to the elucidation of the world's common concerns.¹⁰⁷⁷

As further suggested in this thesis and touched upon above, developing the non-discriminating international image for ink art does not mean cancelling out the rich cultural history that stands behind ink. The Asian cultural component is so deeply imbedded within the ink medium that it will permanently be there, whether artists choose to accentuate it or to underplay it. For this same reason ink art will always strike the very special chord with Asian or Asian-related viewers. Nevertheless, the new culturally transcendent ways, in which multiple contemporary artists handle this medium, also mean that ink art can equally strike the meaningful chord with predominantly anyone else. That is why, it is so important to leave behind the commonplace institutional tendency, often coming as a subconscious habit, to classify any art piece with an ethnic element as the sole prerogative of a certain culture that it evokes.

Precisely, just because a particular element has a local cultural origin does not mean it cannot be applicably and meaningfully integrated into the broader global community. As Gao Shiming wrote back in 2009, in the current-century world, where 'culture and politics, power and capital, self and Other are intertwined', 'traditional dualist models', like the West and the East, 'no longer seem adequate', which 'requires the establishment of a new cultural subjectivity', that is a new 'system for reconfiguration of cultural identity and new mechanisms for knowledge production'.¹⁰⁷⁸ In relation to contemporary ink art, this means that rather than always categorising it as the exclusively Chinese or Asian art form, it is becoming more reasonable to describe it as foremost international contemporary art that, in turn, helps diversify the latter's profile, due to the ongoing contribution made by such artists as Zheng.

Ultimately, the point is to recognise that the culturally particular genre of ink art is currently evolving in a variety of global art directions, whereby ink artists translate it into broadly accessible techniques and ideas that can be appreciated by a much greater range of audiences. Positioning

¹⁰⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Gao Shiming, 'A Be-Coming Future: The Unweaving and Rebuilding of the Local', *Yishu*, 8 (2009), 31.

such ink art pieces as only and always Asian becomes problematic then since their non-culturally specific qualities get pushed to a secondary significance and miss a substantial proportion of attention from the global community that they merit. Importantly, forging the culturally unprejudiced reception for contemporary ink art on the international art scene is already underway with its own achievements and shortfalls, and it is vital for more of art mediators to continue eliminating stereotypical responses to ink works as widely as possible. To fully appreciate an artwork, it needs to be acknowledged for every element that it has to offer, including its cultural variable, but not only it.

Illustrations

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Appendix A: Interview Series between Zheng Chongbin and the Author, 2017-2020

This Appendix comprises eight interviews in total, which were conducted online via Skype or WhatsApp. All the eight interviews were recorded with the permission from the artist Zheng Chongbin. The recordings were then transcribed and edited by the author. Due to copyright restrictions and future publication plans, the transcriptions of the interviews are removed here, but the following list provides an overview of the interviews' questions and dates when they were conducted. The overall word count of the transcribed interviews is 51,391 words (99 pages).

Interview 1: 25 July 2017

1. You have been producing abstract ink paintings for the most part of your artistic career. What is it that makes you devoted to the pictorial language of abstraction?
2. In China the concept of abstraction, or *chouxiang*, is relatively new, having been popularised in the post-Mao period, probably in the late 1970s or early 1980s, when you were a student at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. Can you recall when you came across the term *chouxiang* for the first time in China, and perhaps you also know who coined it and what it meant for the Chinese artists during Deng Xiaoping's reform years?
3. What is the ultimate message that stands behind your abstract ink-acrylic works? What is it that you want to convey and communicate to your viewers through your art?
4. Does your use of abstraction in painting have any implicit political or social connotations?
5. In the recently published book, *Beyond Resemblance – Abstract Art in the Age of Global Conceptualism*, Robert Linsley suggested that abstract art provides a chance to distance from other people's 'political/ideological conflicts'. In this respect, abstract art is a political 'stance' of its own. Does your personal choice of abstraction have anything to do with the desire to avoid political commentary of any kind?
6. Would you describe your abstract ink and acrylic paintings more as aesthetic or ethical?
7. In the current post-truth age, where accuracy is overshadowed by biases, abstract painting may be regarded as the more truthful or honest form of our contemporary culture, especially in your case since you attempt to disconnect yourself from the act of painting and let ink and acrylic "take" their own shape on paper. The concept of truth, or *zhen*, has always been central to Chinese literati painting and has been emphasised in the ninth/tenth-century writings of Jing Hao. Does this idea of *zhen* in art, as opposed to the lack of it in the social realm, have any relevance to your practice of abstraction?
8. What is your opinion on the role of the artist in society?
9. You are represented by leading art sales galleries, such as Ink Studio in Beijing. Why do you think the customers of your art are so eager to have it? Would it be for aesthetic, spiritual, investment or any other specific reasons?

10. What is your opinion on the current situation in Chinese contemporary art – perhaps there are some big dilemmas or questions that artists are facing, and if so, how would you describe your contribution to them?
11. How would you forecast the nearest future of Chinese contemporary art? Would you say that ink abstraction is its future?
12. What are your plans for your personal artistic development? Will you continue painting abstract forms in ink and acrylic, or maybe you are thinking to shift more towards other types of art, such as digital production?

Interview 2: 9 September 2018

1. Why did you choose San Francisco? I know there was a delegation from San Francisco at the Zhejiang Academy in the 80s to facilitate exchange between the two cities – did this play any role in your choice of San Francisco?
2. You also went to Los Angeles in 1988 before permanently moving to San Francisco. How long did you stay there and what did you do?
3. Did you have any Western collectors in China before your migration to the US? Did they play any role in your decision to migrate?
4. What was your experience of getting immigration documents in the USA? When were you able to get a green card and through which circumstances?
5. Have you also applied for American passport?
6. Have you engaged with any older generation diaspora ink painters in the States? Have your conversations or studies of their work had any impact on your own art?
7. What was the hardest thing that you had to do as the Chinese diaspora artist in the US in this period?
8. And what was the easiest thing that you happened to do at that time, perhaps because there were many opportunities for it back then?
9. How often did you keep in touch with your friends/family back in China?
10. What were some of the courses that you took as part of your MFA degree at the San Francisco Art Institute?
11. Who were the most influential teachers/mentors that you encountered during the 90s in the US?
12. What were the most influential books (on art history, theories and similar) that you read as part of your education there or on your own?
13. Where have you mainly travelled between the 90s and early 2000s (both within the US and abroad)? Among these trips, which were the most memorable and influential ones for your artistic development and why?

14. You have first visited China again in 1994, about six or so years since your departure. What prompted that trip?
15. What impact did that first return trip to China make on you/your art?
16. What were the most memorable art exhibitions that you saw in the 90s – early 2000s in the USA?
17. In terms of the wider American popular culture in this period, were there any TV programmes and films that made a particular impact on you?
18. Did you have any favourite local cultural holidays in the USA that you would celebrate?
19. Postmodernism was a major cultural happening in the 80s-90s in the US. Do you feel like your art from the 90s – early 2000s shared any affinity with this postmodern movement?
20. When you chose to focus on the medium of ink, did you have any specific audience on your mind that you wanted to target? Perhaps Asian diaspora in San Francisco or the native American viewership?
21. Did you feel part of the wider Chinese artistic diaspora in the States, where there were artists like Gu Wenda or Xu Bing back in the 90s?
22. Had you stayed in China, what do you think you would have definitely not been able to do with your art, but were able to in the USA?
23. How has living in the US in the 90s – early 2000s triggered you to re-evaluate your artistic practice?
24. Just a few more questions to verify a few things about your art development in China before you moved to the States. Have you attended a masterclass by French-Chinese artist Zao Wou-Ki in 1985 at the Zhejiang Academy?
25. Have you also seen the earlier 1983 exhibition of another Chinese diaspora artist, Liu Guosong? If yes, did it leave any special impact on you?
26. Did your family impact your decision to become an artist in any way?

Interview 3: 10 February 2019

1. There are a few works from the late 1980s and early 1990s, which I wanted to discuss in more detail with you. Let's begin with *Untitled – Colour Series* (1989). First of all, I wanted to double check if you produced it in San Francisco and if it was included in the Riskin-Sinow Gallery's show, *New Stone Colour Ink Paintings*, held in 1989?

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Source: Britta Erickson, ed., *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form* (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), Plate 16.

2. What about the *Order* series works, specifically *Order No. 2* (1991), *Order No. 3* (1991) and *Order No. 1* (1993)? Do they have any political meaning intended behind them?

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Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/sort/title-asc/object/order-no-2-2>, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/sort/title-asc/object/order-no-3-3>, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/sort/title-asc/object/order-no-1-1> (all accessed 6 December 2018).

3. Can you please expand a little bit more on your MFA graduation show in 1991? The works there look very minimalist.

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Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/untitled-24397>, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/untitled-detail-19496> (all accessed 6 December 2018).

4. What about the *Amusement* piece (1993)?

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Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/amusement> (accessed 6 December 2018).

5. Does *Seductive Viewer* (1993) have a similar meaning? You also used biscuits in this installation that look like bones that dogs play with.

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Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/seductive-viewer> (accessed 6 December 2018).

6. Speaking about the mannequin doll works, *Hans Bellmer's Lover* (1993) and *Spinning Head* (1993), they were inspired by Hans Bellmer's art. Why did you decide to engage with his art in your own works?

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Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/hans-bellmers-lover>, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/spinning-head-exhibition-view> (all accessed 6 December 2018).

7. Regarding *Dual Heads* (1994), is it possible to read this work as the commentary on your dual identity as the Chinese-American artist?

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Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/dual-heads> (accessed 6 December 2018).

8. I also wanted to double check about the following statement that I found in Zheng Shengtian's Archive at the Asia Art Archive. It seems to be dated to 1992, so could have it been written in relation to your 1992 work for the same-year exhibition at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery – *The Object is Bound (The Book as Metaphor)*?

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Source: Zheng Shengtian Archive, Asia Art Archive, https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/source/digital_collection/windows/peggy/20131223_131926_0.pdf (accessed 6 December 2019).

Under Copyright

Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/untitled-11803> (accessed 6 December 2018).

9. [The following question was discussed separately via messages on WhatsApp on 6 March 2019 as a follow-up to this interview.] I also wanted to double check the intention behind making this work, *Transit* (1992). Would these white objects be cameras of a kind?

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Source: Kong Chang'an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/transit> (accessed 6 December 2018).

10. I came across this information that implied that you might have had a show in France in the early 1990s once you were already in the USA. Would this be true?

11. I also read in the 1989 article 'A Dream Deferred' by Kevin Starr that some show was being planned for you in New York in either 1989 or 1990.

12. I read in the same article that your wife initially had some difficulties with getting her US visa and she arrived later than you in San Francisco. So, in what year was she able to finally arrive there?

13. I also wanted to double check the exact month in 1989 when you started your MFA degree. Was it in September?
14. Remember, in the previous interview you mentioned about your early collector Lydia, who was the first one in San Francisco to buy your ink painting from China, when you had a show at the Bruce Velick Gallery in 1989. Do you remember what work it was exactly that she bought?
15. Apart from ink paintings, were there any other pieces that you sold in this early period in the 1990s? Maybe some of your installation works?
16. I also wanted to double check when exactly in 1994 you started the Red & Green company with your wife? Was it in December after your trip to China in November 1994?
17. What was the year in the 1990s when you started making ink paintings again to be shown at public exhibitions?
18. I actually had a question about the Limn Gallery now that you mention it. What kind of show did you have there?
19. What about the 1989 *New Stone Colour Ink Paintings* solo show at the Riskin-Sinow Gallery. How did that show come about? Was it organised by Jeff Levy, the gallery's manager?
20. I also wanted to check about the 1990 *Humanism in the Arts* show that you had at the Montgomery Gallery. I am currently in touch with Peter Montgomery and his colleague to follow up on it. They were in the process of moving to a new gallery space in the summer when I first got in touch with them. Could you give any extra background information about the show? How did you get introduced to Peter?
21. Regarding the 1993 *Beyond the Written Word* group exhibition, the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art sent to me all the information about the show that they have at their archive. It is very detailed and helpful, but the only thing is that they don't seem to have an illustration of your work that you showed there – *Homeless Project*. [There was also a follow-up discussion on this question via a WhatsApp call on 19 May 2021.]
22. Speaking about the 1994 *Cultural Identities and Immigration* exhibition, the Oliver Art Centre also sent to me information about the show. It says you exhibited there some photographs as it was the photography exhibition. What exactly was that piece about?
23. What about *Perception/Reflection of Asian American Identity*, 1995, the Gallery Concord?
24. Lastly for today's interview, what about the piece that you exhibited at the 1996 *Rice/Snails/Pigeons* exhibition at the Meridian Gallery?

Interview 4: 10 May 2019

1. You had a series of shows at the Michael Martin Galleries in the early 2000s. Would you have any materials left from one of those shows, like exhibition catalogues? I have tried getting in touch with the gallery, but so far with no luck.
2. Can you please give a few examples of specific literature that you read on new materialism and similar philosophical thoughts that inspired your latest works?

3. Excellent, so this is about the thematic underpinnings of your work. What about the actual technical materials, like brushes, ink, paper?
4. I also wanted to check with you about the book that you mentioned to me in one of the previous interviews, *Formless* by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. After you mentioned it, I read that book as well, and it is said there that it was based on the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1996, called *L'Informe*. Have you seen that exhibition?
5. You've also been very inspired by California Light and Space art, like by Robert Irwin. His name comes up very often in your interviews. I was wondering, has there been any specific exhibition on California Light and Space that you saw, just to use as an example when discussing this influence?
6. I am just going to jump to another question, going from this philosophical and very inspiring discussion to something a bit more factual that I wanted to check with you as well for this chapter that I am working on. Going a little back in time, when you returned to ink painting, do you remember when was your first sale of one of the new ink paintings, made in the later 1990s or early 2000s?
7. Another thing I wanted to check, in 2010 you participated in the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, and there you showed this ink performance, accompanied by jazz music, called *Jazz vs Ink*. I could not find any images or detailed description of that work, and was wondering whether you have any information about it?
8. And just one more thing, I've been working to source every single reading that is available on you and your art, but there is this one article that could not be sourced from any library. It is by Liu Lei, titled 'Zheng Chongbin: Wo de Zuopin Yizhi zai zuo Liangzhong Yuxi de Zhenghe' ['Zheng Chongbin: My Works are Constantly Working on Integrating Two Kinds of Language'], published in *Huakan: Jinri Zhongguo Meishu* [Art Semi-Monthly Chinese Art Today], no. 40, December 2012. It is very short, about two pages long. Would you have a copy of this article by any chance?

Interview 5: 17 August 2019

1. I would like to find out a little bit more about the technical side behind the production of your two recent digital video installations, *Chimeric Landscape* (2015) and *Branches are Roots in the Sky* (2016). Can you please provide more information about which digital production companies were involved? I found three names associated with the works: cFire, Lynchini and Obscura Digital.
2. What prompted you to turn to digital technologies in your art and, specifically, to make *Chimeric Landscape*? Maybe there was some exhibition or some conversation that you had with someone that inspired you?
3. Another thing I wanted to talk about, when I think of local influences on your art, California Light and Space art is definitely one of them, and I discuss it in the thesis in relation to your ink paintings and installations. For the discussion on specifically your digital works, would there be any additional influence coming from another local attribute of California, that is Silicon Valley? Did any source of inspiration for your digital works come from the region's thriving high-tech sphere? I know that Yahoo's Jerry Yang acquired an edition of *Chimeric Landscape*, and then last year a version of *Chimeric Landscape* was also shown at Silicon Valley's digital art fair If So, What?. So, you live next

to Silicon Valley, you interact with it in one way or another – do you think it played any role in your decision to turn to the digital medium?

4. Both your pictorial and digital works engage with the concept of ink in one way or another. For you personally, what is the key difference between making ink works in the pictorial format and producing them by employing digital technologies?

5. I only have one more question for you today in relation to two exhibitions, in which you participated. One is *N Minutes Video Art Festival: Urban Skin* (March Art Production, Shanghai, 2011) and the other one is *Reconstruction Zone* (Microsoft China Centre One, Beijing, 2014). I could not find any information online on what specific works you exhibited there. Would you be able to provide any details on those?

Interview 6: 30 November 2019

1. Today, first of all, I wanted to check with you about the opening of your solo exhibition in 1988 at the Shanghai Art Museum. I found some photographs from the opening (I've just sent them to you on WhatsApp) at the Asia Art Archive. I just wanted to find out more about the people, pictured there, who attended your big solo show opening. Who were they? Who were the most important guests there?

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[Figure 1] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/press-conference-of-zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34083> (accessed 6 December 2018).

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[Figure 2] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/press-conference-of-zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34082> (accessed 6 December 2018).

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[Figure 3] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34074> (accessed 6 December 2018).

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[Figure 4] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34094> (accessed 6 December 2018).

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[Figure 5] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34108> (accessed 6 December 2018).

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[Figure 6] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art->

[from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34100](https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34100) (accessed 6 December 2018).

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[Figure 7] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34078> (accessed 6 December 2018).

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[Figure 8] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34072> (accessed 6 December 2018).

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[Figure 9] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34109> (accessed 6 December 2018).

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[Figure 10] Source: Asia Art Archive, *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-zheng-chongbin/object/zheng-chongbin-art-exhibition-34096> (accessed 6 December 2018).

2. What kind of influence did Denis, Schmid and van Dijk make on you in terms of your art? Did they show to you any works?
3. Still speaking about your circle and, specifically, the faculty members at the academy, in 1984 you started teaching there alongside Gu Wenda, Liang Quan, Wang Dongling and Guo Zhen. How influential was the experience of working in that circle in relation to your art? Have you had any inspiring conversations with them?
4. In 1985 there was that controversial group exhibition [*Hubei Chinese Painting Invitational Exhibition*], in which Gu Wenda participated among others – have you participated in it as well?
5. Going back a little bit in time, I wanted to check whether you've seen the 81 exhibition *American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* at the National Gallery of Art in Beijing and the Shanghai Museum?
6. Now going forward in time to 1988, I wanted to find out a little bit more about the circumstances under which you went to San Francisco and started studying at the San Francisco Art Institute. I know that Gu Wenda went there in 1987 and then Guo Zhen went there too in 1988. Could you illuminate a little more these connections and how all that happened?
7. I remember you mentioned that there was no developed art market in China in the 80s, but I just wanted to double check whether you might have had any sales at all at the time or, generally speaking, how you earned your living back then. I am interested to illuminate a little more the economic aspect of your life in China. Did you make a living easily, what was the salary, did you sell paintings, was it difficult financially or not?
8. There is just one more thing I wanted to check regarding some of your exhibitions in this period. Remember that 1985 exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing – *National Young Artists Exhibition*? Which work did you exhibit there? Would it be from the Tibet series? It must have been something not too experimental, so I don't think it was something abstract. Then also what about the exhibition in Japan in 1987? And the final question for today, I promise. Speaking about all these exhibitions, do you remember what other artists exhibited there as well? Because those were group exhibitions, like in Japan, also in Germany.

Interview 7: 12 January 2020

1. Remember in one of the interviews, you mentioned to me one of your teachers at the San Francisco Art Institute. His first name is Richard. I tried to find his full name on Google and I found Richard Diebenkorn, who also taught at the institute. Would it be him?
2. Speaking about your return trip to China in 1994, as I was writing about it, I thought it would be interesting to expand a little more on any interactions that you had with specifically ink artists or ink art while there, because after that trip to China you started looking more into the Chinese identity and then you went back to ink painting. So, was there any ink painting exhibition that you saw during that trip to China, or anything similar that made an impact?

3. Speaking about that rice installation that you did at the Meridian Gallery, when we had an interview back in February, you mentioned to me there were rice bricks there and also some other elements with Chinese-style writing. I got in touch with the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound that has some files on the Meridian Gallery: they have lots of useful things on you, but they didn't have any images of the exhibition, so the only image of the installation that I have is the one that you sent to me. That part of the installation was also shown in 1997 at the Bronx Community College. So, I was wondering whether you have images of the other parts of the installation? You would probably be the only person to have any images of those since they are not in the Meridian Gallery's archival holding.

4. Another thing that I wanted to double check, I came across a few articles that mention that in 1996 you became a US citizen, but it was in 1992 that you got your green card, right?

5. For this other question, I am going to send you an image right now on WhatsApp, because you need to see it to answer the question... Remember, you mentioned to me that in the early 1990s you saw the Latin American art exhibition in New York, where you came across one work with magnets that looked like tribal hair. I checked what kind of exhibitions took place in the early 1990s in New York, and there was this big show at MoMA, *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*. I looked through the exhibition catalogue and found this piece, *Untitled* (1988, steel wire, plates, 300 x 200 x 200 cm), by Brazilian female contemporary artist Frida Baranek. Would it be the work that you saw?

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Source: Frida Baranek, <http://www.fridabaranek.com/portfolio/17139/> (accessed 16 March 2019).

6. Another thing I wanted to check, in 1995 an important exhibition, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, curated by Margo Machida, was shown at the Centre for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens. It was the travelling exhibition, first shown in 1994 at the Asia Society Galleries in New York. Have you seen that exhibition in either San Francisco or New York?

7. I was also thinking that it might be good to get a bit more information on the 90s art market. We talked about it briefly back in February. You had many sales of ink paintings that you made in China as soon as you arrived in San Francisco, and you mentioned to me Lydia Titcomb, who bought *Type of Facial Make-Up*. I was wondering whether you could mention any more information on this topic, maybe two more examples of sales that really stood out to you back then, any more names of the collectors from the early 90s apart from Titcomb, just to expand this section on the 90s art market a little bit. Anything you can think of?

8. Zheng Shengtian has a file on you at his personal archive at the Asia Art Archive, and when you came to San Francisco, he was also in New York for some time. And then I've read somewhere that he even came to San Francisco, where you met. I was just wondering whether I could expand a little

more on your connection with him, whether he gave you any advice, helped you in any way once you moved abroad?

9. I also wanted to double check regarding *Double Generation* – the work that we discussed back in February. I just wanted to elaborate a little bit more on its meaning and what specific elements within that installation mean, like mirrors, plungers, Chinese/English names etc.

10. Speaking about ink paintings, I checked that recent catalogue that was published in conjunction with the exhibition, *Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang* in 2018 at the Cantor Arts Centre at the Stanford University. They illustrated an ink painting by you, dated to 1995 [*Enigma of the Day*]. I've just sent it to you. So, was that something that you did before fully going back to making ink paintings at the turn of 1997? Also was this piece exhibited at the Gallery Concord?

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Source: Richard Vinograd and Ellen Huang, ed., *Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), page 9.

11. As I've just mentioned about the Archive of Recorded Sound at the Stanford University that holds information about the Meridian Gallery, there were quite a few things about you there, collected by the Meridian Gallery, and one of them is a statement, written by you for your performance piece at the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I was so excited when I found out about it because I haven't read about that performance piece anywhere. Then the statement is also so interesting because you talk about your nomadic experience, the idea of adoption and, I think, you also mention in that statement that you used a cage in which animals are kept as the metaphor for that idea of adoption and being transferred from one place to another. I think it would be really interesting to discuss this piece in my chapter, but the issue is that at the archive there is no additional information on this specific piece, like what year it was created in, how it looked like etc.

12. Still speaking about conceptual works, I am going to send you an image to ask this, just a very quick question to double check something. So, I am talking about this piece in the chapter, exhibited at the Oliver Art Centre in 1994. It's the photograph of you extended into another person, and then extended one more time. I marked a circle around the drawing underneath that photograph. The drawing says 'text' on it, and it looks like it denotes two carpets of something. I just wanted to get a little more information about what that part below was supposed to be, because it's not quite clear from the drawing.

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Source: Zheng Chongbin, sent on WhatsApp to the author on 18 February 2019 [the purple circle highlight is added by the author for the purpose of the interview question].

13. Remember that statement that I found in Zheng Shengtian’s Archive at the Asia Art Archive that we discussed in February. We didn’t relate it to any specific work when we talked about it, but then when I was writing about *Transit* (1992), I thought that maybe it could relate to specifically that work. Both the statement and the work seem to have some thematic overlaps and are dated to approximately the same time.

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Source: Zheng Shengtian Archive, Asia Art Archive, https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/source/digital_collection/windows/peggy/20131223_131926_0.pdf (accessed 6 December 2019).

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Source: Kong Chang’an Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/kong-changan-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/transit> (accessed 6 December 2018).

14. You mentioned to me that when you studied at the San Francisco Art Institute, you helped Sam Tchakalian with some drawing classes. Did this have anything to do with ink painting?

15. I have to send to you an image to ask this question as well. I came across this photo by chance on Instagram. It was posted by Ink Studio. They wrote there that you were an actor in a film in 1992, *Jimmy’s First Night Out*. It was so random that I found it and then I thought that maybe I could connect it somehow with what I am writing in this chapter about your identity and experience of migration, but I am not quite sure if this film had anything to do with that?

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Source: Ink Studio, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BW8Bfxlg94I/?igshid=5x97tnm8gcjn> (accessed 15 July 2019).

16. And the final question. So, in one of the chapters I talk about your Red & Green company that you set up in the 90s. Back in February we talked about how you designed some of the pieces yourself: you took old pieces and then added your own designs to them, and this was important because you started exploring this idea of taking something old and mixing it with something more modern, more cutting-edge. I just wanted to double check if you might have found any images of that ware that you designed yourself? I found some images of the ware that you generally sold. There is this video on YouTube, where you did tea tasting for a TV show, and then in the background there was all this ware, but I am not sure if some of the pieces there are your own designs.

Interview 8: 18 October 2020

- 1.** In my chapter on the 1980s I wrote about your friendships with Andreas Schmid, Catherine Denis and Hans van Dijk. It turned out to be a very insightful and important part of the chapter, so I just wanted to expand a little bit more on it. For example, have they mentioned to you anything about their art or specifically your art, or anything else about Western art in general?
- 2.** I also wanted to double check the name of one gallery where you had your show in the 80s. It was in Japan, together with Mu Yilin, in 1987. What was the original name of that Japanese gallery in Japanese?
- 3.** I talk about your wife a little bit in the thesis: how she came to join you in San Francisco, how she helped you run the Red & Green Company. Since I refer to her a few times, maybe it would be nice to mention her name if it's okay.
- 4.** We talked about Fred Gordon a few times, who is a very important collector of your ink works, starting in the 1990s, and contemporary ink art in general. I just wanted to double check how far back in the 90s he started collecting your works. For example, did Gordon get anything from the 1990 solo show that you had at the Montgomery Gallery?
- 5.** Another thing that I wanted to check was when you started selling your ink paintings that were made in the USA. So, in the early 90s you sold quite a few of your ink paintings that were originally made in China in the 80s, but then later in the 90s you went back to ink painting in the US, and I wanted to find out what was the earliest sale of one of those US-based ink pieces?

6. Speaking about 95, remember we talked about your exhibition at the Gallery Concord in that year. I noticed that the other artists, who exhibited there, showed some performance pieces, also some installation works, but you exhibited ink paintings, right?
7. Speaking about Michael Martin, she started representing you a lot more in the early 2000s, you had so many shows with her, back to back almost. Would you remember anything in terms of price ranges within which she sold your works? She must have sold many works by you to Fred Gordon and other collectors.
8. Another question related to the art market, in the later 2000s and the early 2010s when contemporary ink art has started booming and has even become more of a global trend – for example, Sotheby's and Christie's started having specialised sales of contemporary ink works – has anything changed about the cultural portrait of your average collector, especially in terms of where they normally come from? So, with the growing international exposure of contemporary ink art, have you started having more of international collectors from places like London, Europe and beyond?
9. Still speaking about collectors, I found out that Gerard and Dora Cognie collected your works, and they are also going to donate over 400 examples of ink art from their collection, including your works, to LACMA. Do you remember what kind of works they got from you, or from which series, just to mention as examples?
10. Another question that I wanted to ask is funding-related. Specifically, I wanted to check how it works with funding your digital installations, like *Chimeric Landscape*. Would any of it come from, for example, technological companies? So, how do you organise that more practical side of producing those works?
11. Jumping back to the 90s, when I reread my chapter on it, I thought it might be good to give a little more of names of your teachers and other people related to the San Francisco Art Institute. So, we talked about how you were introduced to the international fellowship programme by the institute's dean: I looked around to find out his name, and I wanted to double check that it was the right name that I found. Would it be Fred Martin?
12. Shortly after you graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute, you mentioned to me that you worked at the animation studio, and I was just wondering, before the Red & Green company, in that sort of period in the early 90s did you work anywhere else?
13. I promise the last question for today. I am thinking to talk a little bit more about *Branches are Roots in the Sky* – I am not sure yet whether I will have space in my chapter to fit it all there, but I am thinking about that. So, I wanted to double check a couple of points about the work. You know how at the end of the video there is a scene with people running and then they get flooded and they jump into the water, could you please clarify what that is about in terms of interpretation? I also found on Obscura Digital's Vimeo channel this video, I'll send you the link now (<https://vimeo.com/274981050>). It is an 8K shoot of the Californian forest, which looks very similar to the forest that appears in *Branches are Roots in the Sky*. Since they were involved in helping produce it, I was just wondering whether this filming of the forest might have been done for your video?
14. [The following question was discussed separately prior to this interview during a quick follow-up WhatsApp call on 29 June 2020. Therefore, the conversation was not recorded, hence, the answer

to the question is taken from the author's notes.] Have you noticed if the use of the digital media in your ink works helped you attract any more of younger tech-savvy audiences?

Appendix B: Table and Analysis Graphs on Zheng Chongbin's Exhibition Data

Table 1: Zheng Chongbin's Exhibition History, 1985-2018

The data in this table aims to present the most complete list of Zheng Chongbin's both solo and group exhibitions up until 2018, combining data from multiple versions of the artist's CV, obtained from a number of verified sources simultaneously, including the artist's official website (<http://zhengchongbin.com/biography.html>), his key representative gallery Ink Studio in Beijing (<https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/55-zheng-chongbin/biography/>) as well as Zheng Shengtian Archive at Hong Kong's Asia Art Archive (<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/zheng-shengtian-archive-zheng-chongbin/object/collected-clippings-and-texts-about-zheng-chongbin>).

- Exhibitions in USA
- Exhibitions in Greater China
- Exhibitions in Europe
- Exhibitions in Asia (excluding Greater China)
- Exhibitions in North America (excluding USA)

Year	Exhibition	Venue	Location	Category
1985	National Young Artists Exhibition	National Art Museum of China	Beijing	Group
1985	Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts' Young and Middle-Aged Teachers' Art Exhibition	Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art)	Hangzhou	Group
1987	Contemporary Chinese Painting Exhibition	Japanese art gallery	Osaka	Solo
1987	Zheng Chongbin Art Show	Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art)	Hangzhou	Solo
1987	Zhejiang Academy Faculty Show	Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art)	Hangzhou	Group
1988	Chinese Painting Exhibition	University of Fine Arts (Hochschule für Bildende Künste)	Hamburg	Group
1988	Phoenix	University of Paris VIII (Université Paris VIII)	Paris	Group
1988	Chongbin Zheng	Shanghai Art Museum	Shanghai	Solo
1989	Introduction Show	Bruce Velick Gallery	San Francisco, California	Solo
1989	New Stone Colour Ink Paintings	Riskin-Sinow Gallery	San Francisco, California	Solo

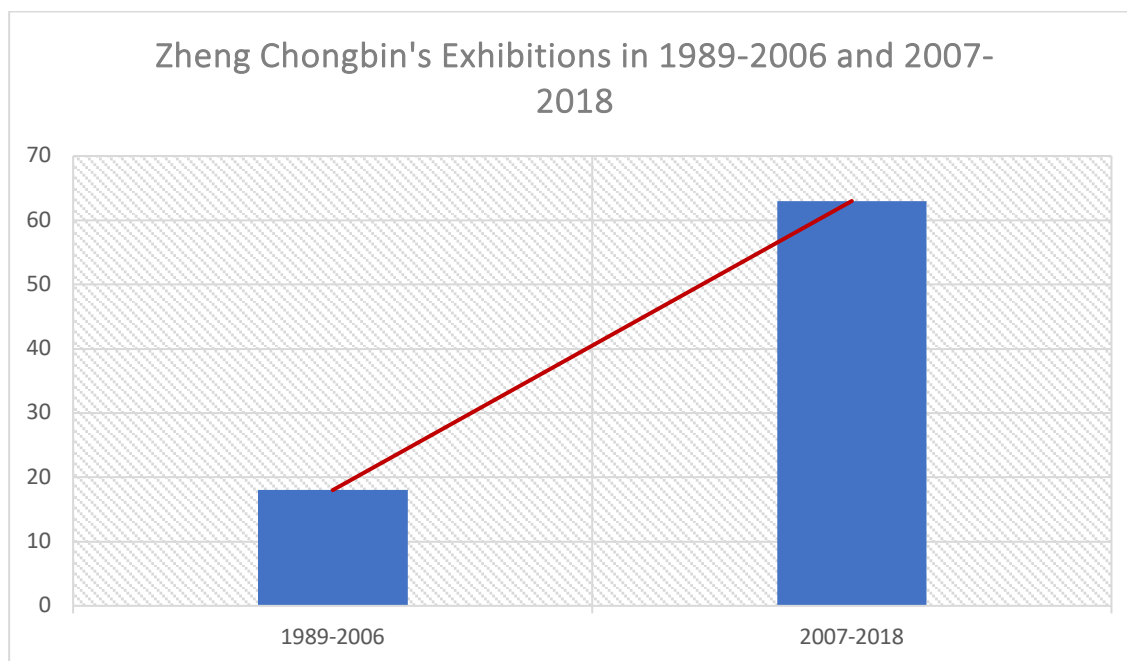
1990	Humanism in the Arts: Painting and Mixed Media Installations	Montgomery Gallery	San Francisco, California	Solo
1991	A Grave Silence: From Hitler to Helms	Ghia Gallery	San Francisco, California	Group
1992	Art from Hangzhou, China	University of Fine Arts (Hochschule für Bildende Künste)	Hamburg	Group
1992	The Object is Bound (The Book as Metaphor)	Stephen Wirtz Gallery	San Francisco, California	Group
1993	Group Six Show	Belcher Studios Gallery	San Francisco, California	Group
1993	Beyond the Written Word	San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art	San Jose, California	Group
1994	Cultural Identities and Immigration: Changing Images of America in the 90s	Oliver Art Centre, California College of Arts and Crafts	Oakland, California	Group
1994	Asian/American American/Asian	Belcher Studios Gallery	San Francisco, California	Group
1995	Perception/Reflection of Asian American Identity	Gallery Concord	Concord, California	Group
1996	Rice/Snails/Pigeons	Meridian Gallery	San Francisco, California	Group
1997	Chongbin Zheng	Hall of Fame Gallery, Bliss Hall, Bronx Community College	New York, New York	Solo
1997	East Meets East in the West	Limn Gallery	San Francisco, California	Solo
1999	From Chinese Ink to Abstraction	Chinese Culture Centre of San Francisco	San Francisco, California	Group
2001	Michael Martin Galleries Group Exhibition	Michael Martin Galleries	San Francisco, California	Group
2003	Subtil(e)	Michael Martin Galleries	San Francisco, California	Group
2005	Dialogue	Michael Martin Galleries	San Francisco, California	Group
2005	Ink and Wash Paintings	Michael Martin Galleries	San Francisco, California	Solo
2007	Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale	New International Convention Centre of Chengdu Century City for the Third Chengdu Biennale	Chengdu	Group
2008	Contemporary Brush and Ink	Mingyuan Art Centre	Shanghai	Group
2008	International Contemporary Ink Art Show	Busan Museum of Modern Art	Busan	Group
2008	21st Century Contemporary Ink	China National Art Institute	Beijing	Group

2008	<i>Poju</i> (Breaking)/Catastrophe – Shanghai Contemporary Ink Salon Show	Sunbow Gallery	Shanghai	Group
2009	Contemporary Ink Painting: Shanghai New Ink Painting Art Exhibition	Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art	Shanghai	Group
2009	In Situ: A Dialogue with Space and Time	River South Art Centre	Shanghai	Group
2009	Calligraffiti: Writing in Contemporary Chinese and Latino Art	Pacific Asia Museum	Pasadena, California	Group
2009	Point and Crosses: Exhibition of Contemporary Painting in China	Shanghai 2010 Art Centre	Shanghai	Group
2010	Zheng Chongbin: Emergent	Valentine Willie Fine Art	Singapore	Solo
2010	Shanghai: Art of the City	Asian Art Museum	San Francisco, California	Group
2010	Ink Code: The Third Taipei International Modern Ink Painting Biennial	National Museum of History for the Third Taipei International Modern Ink Painting Biennial	Taipei	Group
2010	Memories of the Past: Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting	Morlan Gallery, Transylvania University	Lexington, Kentucky	Group
2010	Inaugural Exhibition of Zendai Contemporary Art Exhibition Hall	Zendai Contemporary Art Space	Shanghai	Group
2011	Obtrusive/Elusive: Recent Ink Work of Zheng Chongbin	Haines Gallery	San Francisco, California	Solo
2011	INKquiry: Zheng Chongbin	Ooi Botos Gallery	Hong Kong	Solo
2011	White Ink: Fresharp Artists' Series	Chinese Culture Centre of San Francisco	San Francisco, California	Solo
2011	<i>Xuan</i> , Etc.: Zheng Chongbin, Qiu Zhijie and You Si	Shanghai Gallery of Art	Shanghai	Group
2011	" <i>Wu Ming</i> ", Form is Formless: Chinese Contemporary Abstract Art	Pearl Lam Galleries	Shanghai	Group
2011	N Minutes Video Art Festival: Urban Skin	March Art Production, various venues	Shanghai	Group
2012	Black Wall / White Space	Pao Galleries, Hong Kong Arts Centre	Hong Kong	Solo
2012	Ink Phenomenon: Objects of Perception	Flo Peters Gallery	Hamburg	Solo
2012	Amorphous Geometry	Valentine Willie Fine Art	Singapore	Solo
2012	Negotiating between Light and Ink	Asia Art Centre	Beijing	Solo
2012	Ink Limit	DADE Art Centre	Shanghai	Group

2012	China's Imperial Modern: The Painter's Craft	University of Alberta Museums	Edmonton	Group
2012	Ink: The Art of China	Saatchi Gallery	London	Group
2013	Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form	Ink Studio	Beijing	Solo
2013	The Moment for Ink	Fine Arts Gallery, San Francisco State University	San Francisco, California	Group
2013	Beyond Tradition: Chinese Contemporary Ink	Christie's (private sales exhibition)	New York, New York	Group
2013	Chinese Contemporary Ink – The Beginnings and Beyond	Christie's (private sales exhibition)	Hong Kong	Group
2013	Culture-Mind-Becoming	Palazzo Mora	Venice	Group
2013	Chinese Ink Painting in the United States	Zhejiang Art Museum	Hangzhou	Group
2013	Beyond Abstraction: Explorations in Contemporary Chinese Ink	Poligono Gallery	Marbella	Group
2014	Outside the Lines: New Art from China	RH Contemporary Art	New York, New York	Group
2014	Contemporary Ink	NanHai Art	San Francisco, California	Group
2014	A Fragment in the Course of Time: Landscape of Chinese Ink Art in 1980s	Shanghai Zendai Himalayas Art Museum	Shanghai	Group
2014	Rendering the Future: Chinese Contemporary Ink Painting Exhibition	Asia Art Centre	Beijing	Group
2014	Ink and the Body – Ink and Phenomenology	Ink Studio	Beijing	Group
2014	Shuimo/Water Ink: Enchanted Landscapes	S 2, Sotheby's Gallery	New York, New York	Group
2014	The Matter Becomes Form: Zheng Chongbin and His Ink Medium	Asia Art Centre	Taipei	Solo
2014	Reconstruction Zone	Microsoft China Centre One	Beijing	Solo
2015	Zheng Chongbin: Wall of Skies	Ink Studio	Beijing	Solo
2015	From a Poem to the Sunset: Daimler Art Collection	Daimler Contemporary	Berlin	Group
2015	Personal Structures: Crossing Borders	Pallazzo Bembo	Venice	Group
2015	First Look: Collecting Contemporary at the Asian	Asian Art Museum	San Francisco, California	Group
2016	The Pacific Project: Zheng Chongbin	Orange County Museum of Art	Los Angeles, California	Solo
2016	Zheng Chongbin: Structures	S 2, Sotheby's Gallery	Hong Kong	Solo

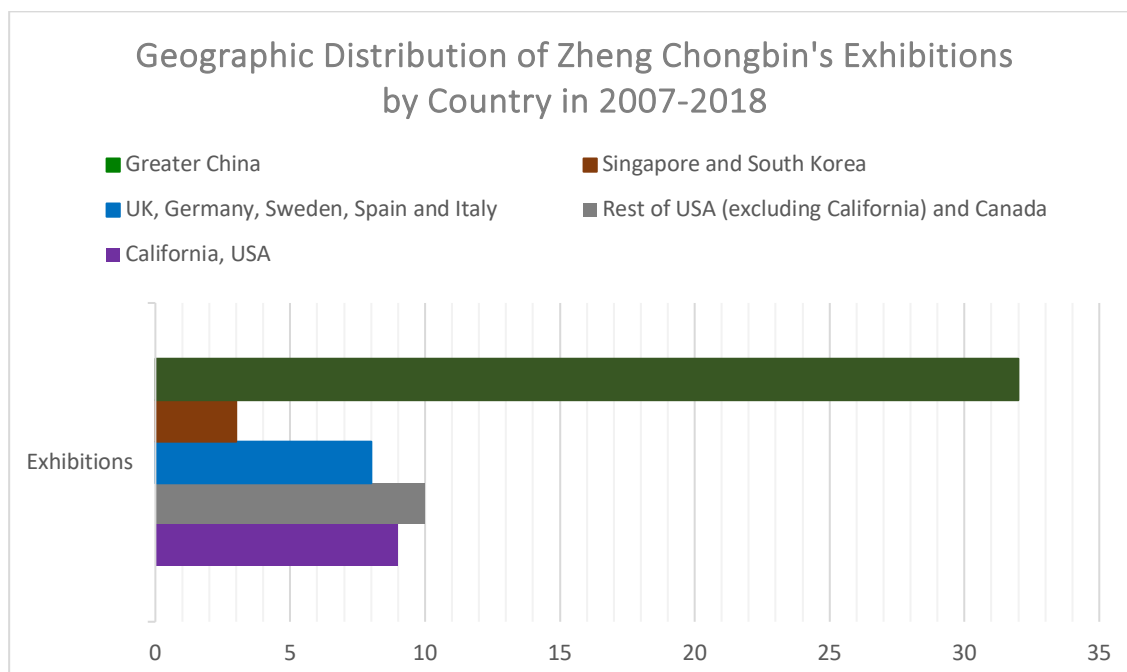
2016	<i>Shan Shui</i> within	Museum of Contemporary Art	Shanghai	Group
2016	Why Not Ask Again: Arguments, Counter-Arguments and Stories – The Eleventh Shanghai Biennale	Power Station of Art for the Eleventh Shanghai Biennale	Shanghai	Group
2017	Boundless: On Going Chinese Ink Art	Art Museum of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute	Chongqing	Group
2017	Zheng Chongbin: Clusters of Memory	Asia Society Texas Centre	Houston, Texas	Solo
2017	Zheng Chongbin: Asymmetric Emergence	Sundaram Tagore Gallery	New York, New York	Solo
2017	Weight of Lightness: Ink Art at M+	M+ Museum	Hong Kong	Group
2017	Chinese Contemporary Art: New Acquisitions for the Daimler Art Collection	Daimler Contemporary	Stuttgart-Mohringen	Group
2017	Different Paths: Explorations in Ink	S 2, Sotheby's Gallery	New York, New York	Group
2017-19	Streams and Mountains without End: Landscape Traditions of China	Metropolitan Museum of Art	New York, New York	Group
2018	Zheng Chongbin: Walking Penumbra	Ink Studio	Beijing	Solo
2018	Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang	Cantor Arts Centre, Stanford University	Stanford, California	Group
2018	Post-Brushwork Era: Chinese Landscapes	Guangdong Museum of Art; Zhejiang Museum of Art	Guangzhou; Hangzhou	Group
2018	Art on theMART	Merchandise Mart	Chicago, Illinois	Group
2018	Mountains and Streams – Eight Chinese Artists in Stockholm	CFHILL Art Space	Stockholm	Group

Graph 1



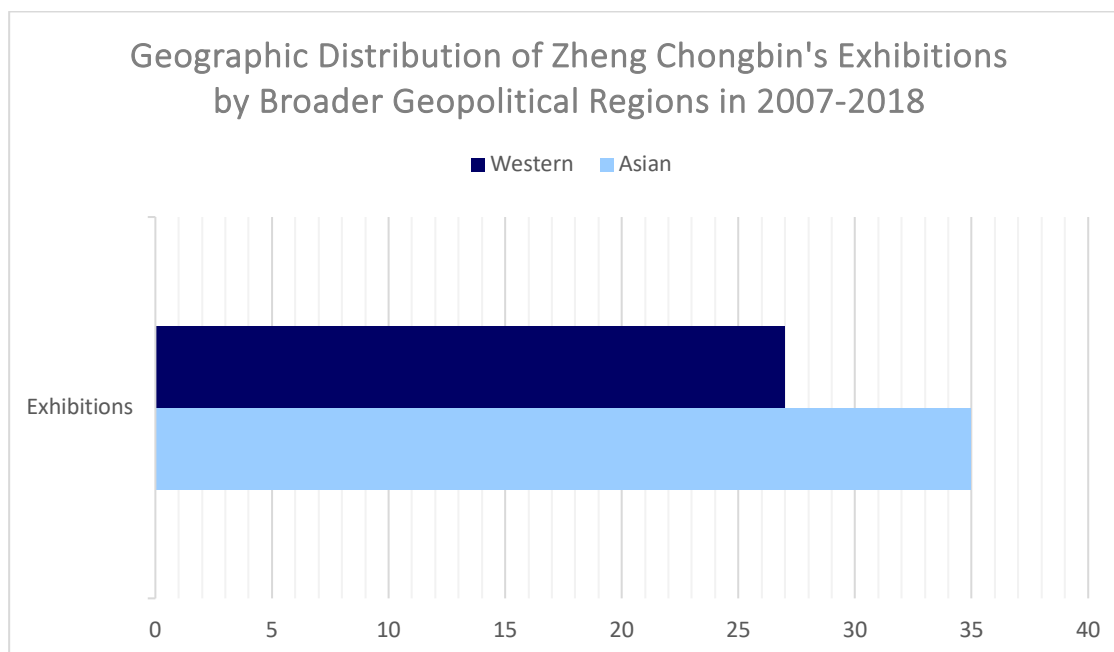
The graph compares the distribution frequency of Zheng Chongbin's exhibitions in the periods 1989-2006, when the artist exhibited predominantly at his residential state of California in the USA, and 2007-2018, when, following the 2007 Third Chengdu Biennale, the artist's exhibitions have spiked up in number, as registered by the graph's trend line, counting numerous show participations outside California.

Graph 2



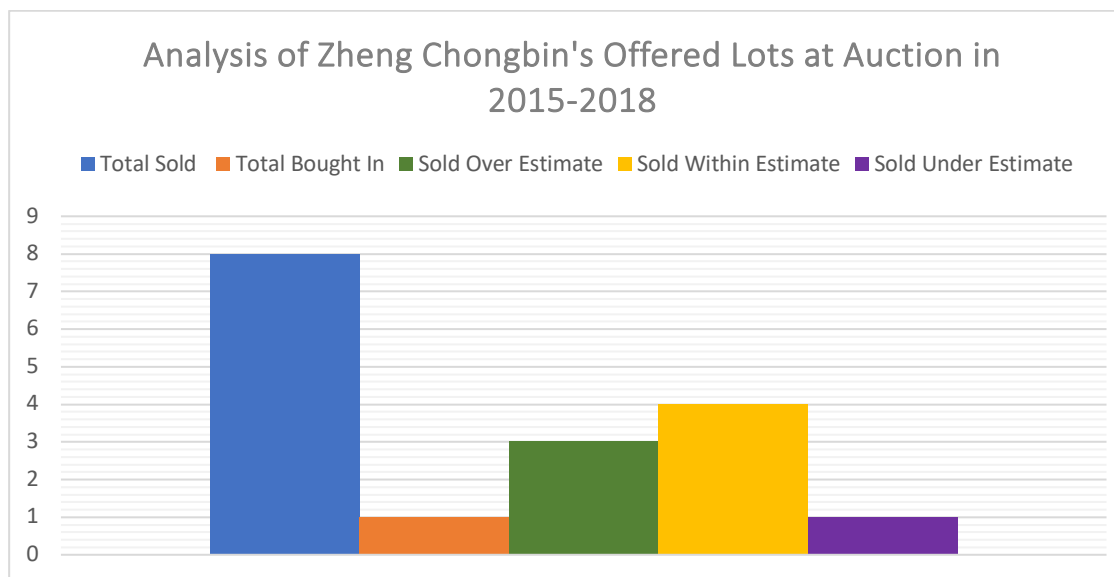
The graph illustrates the quantitative geographic distribution of Zheng Chongbin's exhibitions in 2007-2018 across his residential state of California in the USA, wider North America as well as Europe and Asia.

Graph 3



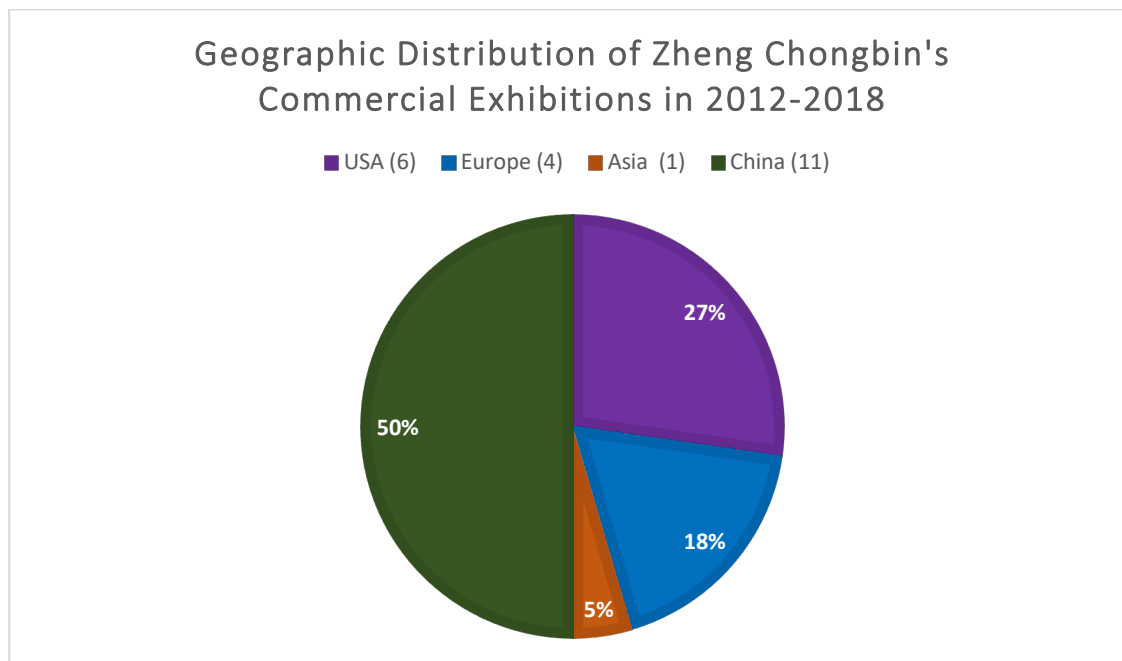
The graph compares the quantitative geographic distribution of Zheng Chongbin's exhibitions in 2007-2018 between the Asian and Western geopolitical regions.

Graph 4



The graph shows Zheng Chongbin's art auction market performance across Sotheby's and Christie's in 2015-2018, based on the comparison amongst sold versus bought-in lots as well as lots that were sold over or within estimate versus lots that fetched reserve price under estimate, sourced from Artnet Price Database.

Graph 5



The graph shows the proportional geographic distribution of Zheng Chongbin's commercial exhibitions in Europe and the USA by comparison with the same-category exhibitions in China and wider Asia between 2012 – the year when the sales category of Chinese Contemporary Ink Art was officially launched on the global art market – and 2018.

Appendix C: Supplementary Catalogue of Zheng Chongbin's 1990s Installation Artworks

The purpose of this Appendix is to illuminate the meaning and the making of Zheng's 1990s installation works, in addition to the case-study examples, discussed in the third and fourth chapters that focus on the artist's oeuvre in the USA before his return to the ink painting practice. The importance of having these works elucidated in detail in this thesis is motivated by the fact that they have largely not yet been interpreted in scholarship and primarily survive as photographic records, held mainly at Kong Chang'an Archive at the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong. This differs from the artist's earlier and later ink works, which, unlike the 1990s installations, survive to the present day and are, therefore, more thoroughly and consistently analysed in literature. Thus, this Appendix, combined with the third and fourth chapters, aims to provide a more complete guide to Zheng's artistic development, amending the gap, revolving around his 1990s installation art phase. Due to copyright restrictions and future publication plans, the information contained in this Appendix is removed.