


The Role of Art in (De)constructing Silk Road Narratives¹

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In this paper, I use the lens of art and artistic practices assuming that the processes and results of art production, also referred as the epistemic function of art (Holert 2020), are a means of (trans)local and (trans)regional knowledge production. Contemporary art and artistic practice, such as exhibition-making, especially need to be included when investigating local reactions to large-scale infrastructures that are shaping pasts, realities, and futures at various scales.

To understand how artists and other cultural actors increasingly contribute to the (de)construction of local and (trans)regional narratives, experiences, and imaginations, I pose the following three research questions: what is the function of art and artistic practices in constructing and deconstructing narratives that aim to create or contest the transformation of new regional orders? How can we use art and artistic practices to understand transregionalization and its different dimensions? What related knowledge is produced by artworks and exhibitions, and how is it aesthetically perceived?

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Audio-Feature “Mehr als Schienen und Straßen: Kulturelle Begegnungen entlang Chinas Neuer Seidenstraße.” by Susanne Balthasar (in German) featuring the research of Sophia Kidd (chapter 1), Jamila Adeli (chapter 2) and Linda Ammann (chapter 6).

A suitable research object to tackle these questions is the field of cultural politics that is slowly unfolding as a significant state agency in domestic China and its international relations concerning its Belt and Road Initiative. Here, the above mentioned questioned can be narrowed down to the following: What is the role of art and artistic practices in strategic cultural politics, especially in processes of transregionalization we encounter in the current China-led infrastructure-building that is working towards a possible transformation into a new geocultural region—a culturally and economically networked Eurasia and Africa? What narratives emerge and dissolve alongside the construction of the China-led BRI? How do contemporary artists and curators reflect, react to, and interact with the BRI, its cultural politics, and both shared and common cultural heritage?

The artworks and artistic practices I engage with are examples of Chinese cultural heritage, contemporary art, and the artistic practice of exhibition-making in state museums in mainland China. Musealization and the development of cultural industries are manifestations of the infrastructural shift that characterizes the globalizing art field, including the art field in China. Since the Reform and Opening Up of China in 1978, scholars have been witnessing a heightened effort to scan the Chinese past and material culture for museum objects that are contextualized into the museal field (cf. Desvallées and Mairesse 2010) and to culturally and artistically connect to the world, more precisely, to the international art field. This effort is largely connected to a new cultural policy that turned its focus to museum development (Bollo and Zhang 2017) with a new Mid- to Long-Term Museum Development Plan (2011–2020). The plan “intends to open one museum per area of 250,000 inhabitants in order to cover the maximum population in terms of cultural offer, hosting 30,000 temporary exhibitions and attracting one billion visitors annually by 2020.” (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 29). The museum development plan refers to both state and private museums and has laid emphasis on an international appeal and outreach, thereby spurring interest among scholars of Chinese culture, sociology, and museology (Denton 2014, Lu 2014, Varutti 2014).

One of the main reasons for this trend is the specific role of museums in China, especially since Xi Jinping introduced both the Chinese Dream as a new domestic ideology and the Belt and Road Initiative as its implementation tool for connecting with the new Silk Road Regions at various levels and with various actors. In contemporary China, museums are increasingly regarded as a “basis for patriotic education” through the “commemoration and celebration of Chinese history (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 28). Museums, with their (inter)national and local exhibitions, are “required to adapt to the needs of the dynamic market economy, alongside a reconceptualization of cultural heritage values” (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 31). They are state-acknowledged sites and spaces of cultural identity formation

and state ideological assertion (Lu 2014) and, hence, an apt platform to promote the idea of the BRI as one further step within the national rejuvenation of China.

Within the context of the Chinese Dream and the BRI, narratives emerge for both domestic and foreign audiences that increasingly stress the relevance of culture for the success of both the Chinese Dream and the BRI, outlining cultural politics and people-to-people connectivity as a major pillar of the Chinese central government (for further details, see Adeli and Ammann in this volume). This is no surprise, as the recent history of the roles of art in China points towards an infrastructural integration of art, especially contemporary art, into Chinese society: visible, appealing, and connectible with the international art field. Art, in China and elsewhere, is an “excellent means of participating in international contemporary life; it is a means of bringing the world together in a way that is different from politics and economics” (de Nigris 2016). Nevertheless, in being capable of constructing, deconstructing, and conceiving communication about being in the world, art, and—in the broader sense—culture, it is at the same time an important element of diplomacy and is used by governments to interact with their domestic citizens and in international relations. Definitions of cultural diplomacy are vast and varied; for the purpose of my arguments, I align with David Clarke, who defines it as a “policy field, in which states seek to mobilize their cultural resources to achieve foreign policy goals” (Clarke 2020: 1).

1 Art and Narratives: Constructing and Critically Reflecting New Silk Road Realities

Art has a variety of roles and functions: it can be a decorative or aesthetic object, a signifier of identity and power, a political comment, a mirror of a society, or a practice and means of knowledge production. From an art sociological perspective, artworks are means of communication and a medium of observing, reflecting, and criticizing the world and circumstances we live in, produced by individuals of societies to communicate with and reflect upon societies (Becker 1982, Luhmann 1995, Bourdieu 1999). In this reading, artworks are sites, archives, and spaces of knowledge; and of knowledge production, dissemination, and storage. They reflect relations between humans, realities, and the world in an aesthetic, mostly visual and often enigmatic way. In doing so, they constitute a space in which we are asked to critically rethink a phenomenon, to zoom in on a conflict, or to enter a new realm that is sometimes out of our comfort zone. Hence, the production of art and art-related events like exhibitions are a means of (trans)local and (trans)regional knowledge production. Art is, furthermore, a site whence narratives emerge or where they can be embedded; hence, a space where narratives are both constructed

and deconstructed, communicated, and reflected. Against this reading, artists and other art actors, such as curators or museum directors, willingly and unwillingly contribute to the (de)construction of local and (trans)regional narratives, experiences, and imaginations. Based on the fact that the implementation of the BRI in Silk Road regions is dependent on successful people-to-people connections (Kidd 2022, Adeli and Ammann in this volume), the field of cultural politics, including that of cultural heritage, becomes an increasingly significant strategic field for Chinese domestic and international relations.

Artworks with a political dimension (Mouffe 2001) engage with the moments of such encounters and negotiations, as they often depict and comment on the transformation of social and political realities. Some of the artworks and cultural practices I refer to in this paper do belong to the category of art that has a decidedly political dimension (Section 5), whereas others are instrumentalized as a means to underline a political, ideological, and structural agenda (Sections 2, 3, and 4). Artworks with a decidedly political dimension often work against political or social narratives and thereby create critical and unmasking counternarratives. Artworks that are used by political or private actors to support a political or ideological agenda are either fed into a narrative that serves that purpose or contain elements of the narrative that is meant to be communicated visually, thereby forming a visual narrative that accompanies the textual or oral narrative. Thus, artworks either contain, create, or constitute narratives and counternarratives.

As outlined elsewhere (Adeli and Ammann in this volume), I consider narratives as drivers of transformation and transregional developers, especially in the context of larger meta-processes like globalization or the multilateral co-construction of the BRI. Narratives are produced and communicated by different actors for different purposes in the field: by state and governmental actors on a bilateral axis to negotiate the actual project; by media actors that comment on planned and established projects; and by individual actors like activists that react against the transformation of their realities on the ground. Artworks, with or without a political dimension, can be fed into narratives or produce them themselves, either as affirmation or as contestation. The overlap between art and narratives results in the construction and deconstruction of the perceptions of social and political realities, an ability that evolves into a highly effective means of political politics due to its mobile and aesthetic format and configuration, and its supposedly harmless—because artistic—observation of or commentary on current processes of transformation.

In recent years, however, due to the re-emergence of the discipline of art sociology, especially in German-speaking countries, artworks have been increasingly considered and acknowledged as forms of knowledge production, invalidating the notion of art as a merely aesthetic medium. As art historian Tom Holert (2020) argues, art has the capacity to act epistemically. Holert not only highlights art as

epistemic activity but also problematizes art's capacity to produce knowledge in a world that has become not only multicentric but increasingly conscious about asymmetrical power relations and post-empire (Brubaker and Cooper 2023) dynamics. Contemporary art—and here I highlight the crucial practice of exhibition-making—is deeply involved in (de)constructing narratives in the fields of post-coloniality, post-migration, post-Westernization, and South–South cooperation.

Art as a means of knowledge production has also been acknowledged from the perspective of the theory of art: artistic research refines the capacity of art as epistemic knowledge production (Haarmann 2019). Artistic research can be understood as the visualization and so-called comprehensibility (Badura et al. 2015) of the insight that has emerged from the artistic process (cf. Haarmann 2019: 28). Understanding the analytical field of artistic research as a reflective practice, artworks have the capacity to act as a methodological approach to generate insights into patterns of thinking, perceiving, and acting.² Thus, I argue that artworks generate, reflect, and challenge narratives. It is this specific relation of artworks and narratives that I suggest may open a new perspective with regards to mapping the emotional architecture of the BRI in New Silk Road regions via engagement with art. Artworks and art-related practices are both carriers and producers of BRI-related narratives, serving different roles in them, ranging from state propaganda to inner-Chinese regional developers and critical observers of assumed neocolonial practices.

In this paper, I refer to exhibition making as an artistic practice which is deeply tied to the (de)construction of narratives and hence have the power to critique, reflect or constitute certain perspectives and approaches to constructions of realities. The selected exhibition examples are museum exhibitions that address the public. Hence, the context of the displayed narratives makes them even more powerful as museums are decisive state and private actors in societies:

Museums are key players in constructing meaning, asserting individual and collective identities, and institutionalizing heritage. They also act as catalyzers in civil society and contribute to envisioning possible futures. As such, the narratives they put forward have a significant impact on how a particular society presents itself, perceives itself, and projects itself into the future. (Sitzia 2023: 154)

In the following, I provide an overview of examples of artistic practices that demonstrate two different roles of art in the context of the China-led Silk Road narratives: in Sections 2, 3, and 4, cultural heritage, exhibition-making, and the

2 Of course, not every work of art is artistic research and produces knowledge.

positioning of a museum serve as research objects that are analyzed to understand their functions for BRI and Silk Road narratives. In Section 5, three selected works of artist Musquiqui Chihying are introduced to demonstrate art with a political dimension that creates a critical counternarrative to the Chinese Dream and BRI-related narratives.

2 Heritage Diplomacy: Demonstrating State Power through Art

Since cultural heritage has entered discussions on contested present and future geopolitical and geocultural arenas like the rise of the BRICS countries and, thus, the Global South or the recent China-led BRI, heritage matters have been increasingly politicized and evolved into a field of negotiating regional and local notions of belonging, meaning, identity construction, and cultural values (Mozaffari 2020, Čeginskas and Lähdesmäki 2023). Cultural heritage is understood as an “essential element in transmitting values, establishing narratives of historical and contemporary connectivity, and creating subjective and collective identities and a feeling of belonging” (Čeginskas and Lähdesmäki 2023: 1). As a political and diplomatic tool that is activated in a state’s agenda, heritage diplomacy—with regards to heritage *as* diplomacy (Winter 2015)—aims to facilitate cultural cooperation and mutual cultural understanding between different multilateral actors. In this reading, the emphasis lies on people-to-people connectivity and what can be built through it in the present and future.

To tackle the relevance of cultural heritage and its use in cultural politics, I find it helpful to work with the notion of historical statecraft that Maximillian Mayer (2018) has introduced to the discourse on the BRI. Historical statecraft describes the phenomenon of Chinese leadership to increasingly use selective representations of the past to legitimize policy and both construct and reinforce national self-identities: “The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emphasizes the glory of imperial dynasties, the country’s cultural heritage and its philosophical traditions to convey a sense that China has rightfully returned to center stage in world politics” (Mayer 2018: 1217). Since the communication of BRI- and Chinese-Dream-related narratives, historical statecraft has developed into a phenomenon that unfolds its potential especially in relation to cultural heritage matters within and outside China. The thus heightened emphasis and glorification of China’s cultural hegemony seems to serve the purpose of legitimizing a specific political agenda and of actively shaping present cultural and national identities.

Here, the art of conducting state affairs by the use of culture can be described with heritage diplomacy, a contested field which has gained serious attention since the recent rise of the restitution debates between former colonial and postcolonial

countries: “Heritage diplomacy is often connected to geopolitical and economic power in international relations, to identity- and nation-building processes on both the internal and global stage, and to states seeking reconciliation, peace, and transitional justice after conflict” (Čeginskas and Lähdesmäki 2023: 2).

It doesn't come as a surprise that with the communication on the BRI and the Chinese Dream as domestic and foreign politics, the Chinese government has attached the values of tolerance, harmony, peace, and intercultural dialogue (Winter 2022) to the concept of heritage diplomacy. It is exactly these values that Xi Jinping has framed his Belt and Road Initiative with, defining it as a new Silk Road, thereby reviving the notion of the Ancient Silk Road where pasts have been culturally and economically connected. According to Winter, the BRI is the geocultural imaginary of connected pasts, not merely connected by roads but by “a heritage of shared values – harmony, dialogue, mutual respect – around which prosperous shared futures, even a ‘shared destiny’ can be built” (Winter 2023: 133).

One example of how the Chinese government—even several years before the official announcement of the BRI—has been wielding its new soft power as heritage diplomacy (as described above) is the incident of a Christie's art auction of Chinese cultural heritage in Paris in 2009.³ This example demonstrates the interrelatedness and use of heritage diplomacy and historical statecraft. On 25 February 2009, two bronze animal heads of the 18th century, originating from statues of the ancient Summer Palace of the Qing Dynasty in Beijing, were auctioned by Christie's in Paris. They belonged to the private estate of collector Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé but were clearly defined as cultural heritage⁴ looted by British and French troops in 1860 and brought out of China to Europe. Prior to the auction, when the nature of the artifacts was made public, the Chinese government fought to block the auction, as the bronze heads are state-owned and their auction has been considered a further humiliation by the French—a humiliation of China by European colonial forces that started in the mid-1850s and continued for roughly one hundred years. China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) condemned the bronzes' sale and said it would have “serious effects” on Christie's interests in China. SACH attempted to put a halt to the sale by several means, including filing a suit against Christie's. The auction house won and sold

3 In a conversation with Jamila Adeli in this book, art journalist Minh An Szabó de Bucs tells the story of the famous auction at Christie's in detail and contextualizes it in the context of contemporary Chinese museum policy, demonstrating China's presently awakening cultural politics.

4 The heads are the rat and the hare, and they belonged to a series of 12 Chinese zodiac animals formerly adorning a water fountain in the European part of the palace.

the bronze heads to an anonymous telephone bidder for 31.49 million euros. The person refused to pay, on behalf of China and its newly restituted cultural heritage, and identified himself in a press conference held in Beijing as Cai Mingchao, Chinese collector and businessman from Southern China. As was revealed later on, Cai Mingchao was also an advisor to the National Treasures Fund, a government-affiliated NGO founded in 2005 to return looted cultural artifacts to the Chinese government. In 2013, four years after the spectacular auction and bilateral negotiations, both the animal heads were officially restituted by the state of France and have been in the National Museum of Art in Beijing since then.

This incident has had political reverberations both within and outside China. For domestic audiences, the repatriation of the cultural heritage has been celebrated as a national event and denotes one step forward on the path of national rejuvenation. For foreign audiences, the incident demonstrates how China deals with looted art: instead of initiating restitution claims towards former colonial forces like France or Germany, the Chinese government collaborates with private actors and acts through the back door to bring back its cultural heritage. Out of 12 bronze heads, seven have been returned since the looting of the ancient Summer Palace. Almost unnoticed by the West, the Chinese government has been surveilling and scanning the global art market for the past 15 years for their cultural heritage. The rather subtle but powerful coup by the Chinese government during the contested Christie's auction demonstrates the newly awakening and strong cultural self-esteem by state and individual actors in China. It exemplifies how heritage diplomacy has evolved as an implementation tool of the Chinese Dream.

As a concept, the Chinese Dream addresses the Chinese people, promoting the re-claim of a strong and homogeneous Chinese national identity after the "century of national humiliation" by former Western empires such as Great Britain, France, Germany, and Japan. The re-formation of a national Chinese identity draws on the ideas of national identity (a projection site for common values and ideas of living together), a dominant homogeneous national ethnicity, and, to some extent, the rejection of Western values. The trick played at the Christie's art auction demonstrates the newly awakened power of the state in the field of culture: it not only unmasks the absurdity in recent discourses on cultural heritage restitution, with the Chinese state (through the hand of Chinese private collectors) "buying back" looted cultural heritage from former colonial suppressor France, but can also be read as a deliberate act against current Western restitution practices, where former colonial suppressors still try to negotiate in their own favor via the arts and culture (Savoy 2021).

The example of the auction of Chinese cultural heritage demonstrates how important the field of culture and heritage diplomacy is for China. It positions itself as a colonized nation that is currently re-emerging as a global power and publicly fighting asymmetrical power relations with the West.

3 Depoliticizing the BRI through Art: Spectacle of Integration at the National Art Museum of China

Another example of how the Chinese state is using art and artistic practices in the context of its BRI- and Chinese-Dream-related narratives is national exhibition-making. In September 2023, the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing held an exhibition titled “Spectacle of Integration” (Figs. 1, 2). The museum belongs to the category of state museums that are led by the central government of China, more precisely, by the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry of Culture controls and finances all official art institutions, which are, hence, non-profit and entirely dependent on state funding, and their programming is meant to pursue a social mission for society (cf. de Nigris 2016).

All art that is represented by the National Art Museum of China belongs to the category of “official art,” as opposed to “non-official art,” which denotes artworks that are not supported by institutions like the Ministry of Culture and, therefore, not part of the officially perceived Chinese public art field (Wu 2010, de Nigris 2016).

The exhibition was organized by the National Art Museum of China in collaboration with the Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries. It celebrated the 10th anniversary of the BRI by presenting 180 artworks ranging from paintings to drawings, prints, and sculptures by artists from 67 different countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and Oceania. The exhibited artworks belong to the museum and were selected to depict the regional variety and cultural traditions of the countries and regions that participate in the China-led New Silk Road.

The accompanying wall texts of the exhibition introduce the main theme at the exhibition entrance and further group the artworks into geographical regions that are interlinked by BRI projects, with each region displayed in one room. The idea of cultural connectivity is the dominant recurring motif and is strongly emphasized in each section, thereby defining both the museum site and the present exhibition practice as a location and act of transculturality and cultural exchanges: “As a national art gallery tasked with international cultural exchanges, NAMOC, in its active response to the Xi Jinping’s initiative, has over the decade participated in the BRI through fine works of art.” (NAMOC 2023a).

The context and aim of “Spectacle of Integration” is outlined predominantly as an appraisal of the China-led BRI project. The accompanying wall texts do not explicitly explain the exhibition title but leave space for an interpretation that alludes to the celebration of transcultural and intercultural entanglements. Throughout the exhibition, the BRI is portrayed as a “new path to the cooperation and development of countries worldwide” (NAMOC 2023a), as facilitator of the idea of a “community with a shared future for mankind,” and as benevolent to “more

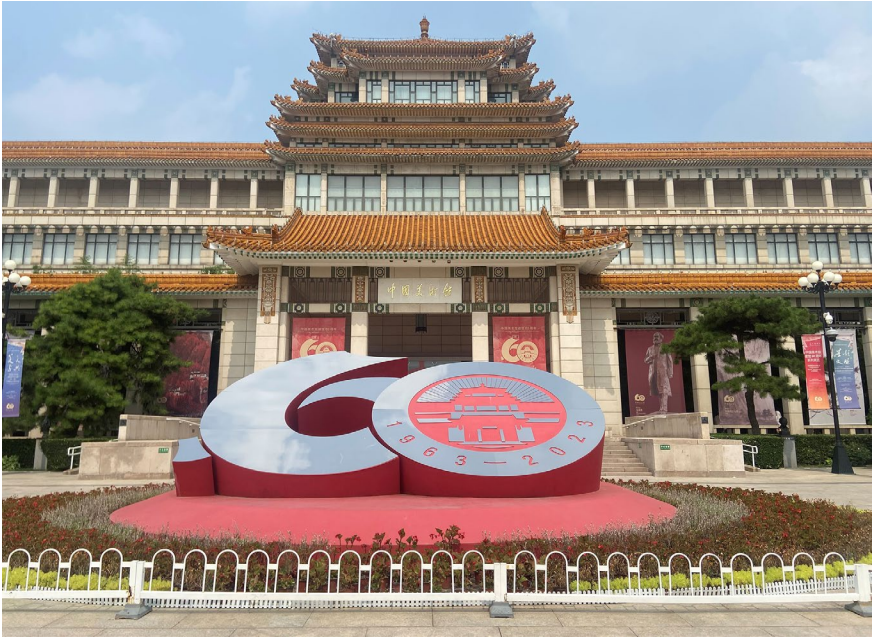


Fig. 1 National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

than 100 countries.” The artworks are described not only as visualizations of the specific artistic character of a region but as the embodiment of mutual respect for their “tolerance and respect for different cultures and their attention to and thinking about the destiny of mankind” (NAMOC 2023a). They are further regarded as the “epitome of the Silk Road spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and reciprocal benefit” (NAMOC 2023a). The introduction to the exhibition concludes with its aim to “strengthen understanding that the BRI countries have towards one another, add luster to the drive for a community with a shared future for mankind through the beauty of integration as displayed in various art forms” (NAMOC 2023a).

The appraisal of the BRI as a reconnecting infrastructure towards a shared future as the main exhibition theme is based on an extensive referral to the Ancient Silk Road and its transcultural impact on the regions involved. The Ancient Silk Road is described as having “originated on Chinese soil” (NAMOC 2023b) and defined as the consequent forerunner for the contemporary initiative (“it made a comeback centuries later” [NAMOC 2023b]) that is also China-led.

The exhibition wall texts at “Spectacles of Integration” clearly allude to the Ancient Silk Road in the mode of “nostalgia, expressing longing for a perceived time when universalism was a norm” and when “a vast global flow of ideas and



Fig. 2 Exhibition view, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

things permitted adventure, romance and knowledge” (Thorsten 2005: 301). The referring to a rather romanticized common humanity and future neglects the fact that Ancient Silk Road regions have also been experiencing intensive times of plunder, bloodshed, and cultural clashes, so the idea of the Ancient Silk Road as “peaceful co-existence of commerce, creeds, and cultures is a selective memory, and throughout history selective memories have been appropriated toward the absolutism of both contextualism and universalism” (Thorsten 2005: 314).

Indeed, the exhibition organizers are using the works on display to depict a rather abstract and nostalgic idea of a universal humankind that is interconnected via trade but respects its cultural differences, emphasizing a narrative that constitutes a longing for belonging to a global community and providing space for imagining a global future.

In juxtaposing works from different countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa, the works exhibited are meant to present and visualize a specific narrative of the BRI: it is portrayed as the natural successor of the Ancient Silk Roads that emerged as a network of trade—one that is responsible for the transcultural architecture of Eurasia, which, in turn, led to a universal humankind. The exhibition seems to aim to open up a space to imagine a future that harmoniously embraces various regions and their cultures in order to create a harmonious global future for mankind. The

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Figs. 3, 5 Exhibition view, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

Fig. 4 Januri, “Many Roads lead to Beijing”, 2021 Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023



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Figs. 6, 7 Zhou Zongkai, “African Dream, Chinese Dream”, 2021, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

concept remains vague when translated into the individual geographical sections of the new Silk Road regions. The juxtaposition of the exhibited artworks seems eclectic, the individual works are geographically grouped into Europe, Asia and Africa without any specific reference to the BRI and without further explanation on the thematic or formal connections between individual works (Figs. 3, 4, 5).

Only few works explicitly refer to the thematic framing of the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the BRI and its related narratives. One of the very rare examples is a large-scale oil painting called “African Dream, Chinese Dream” by Zhou Zongkai from 2021 (Figs. 6, 7). It is not only the size of the painting that makes it stand out immediately from the other works of the exhibition but the composition and depiction of its motif: the arrival or departure of a brand-new train amidst cheerful Africans within an African landscape.

The large painting is one of the most frequented pieces of the exhibition. In a front view, it depicts the celebration of a train that appears newly built and is



Fig. 8 Zhou Zongkai, “African Dream, Chinese Dream” (detail), 2021, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

in the center of the canvas below a red construction. The train is surrounded by chanting and dancing Africans in seemingly local or traditional clothing, their clothes’ colors referring to the Kenyan flag. The people are positioned right and left of the train in dynamic postures. The background opens up with as a vast and rather empty landscape with flocks of wild life animals, newly built train tracks on the right and an airport-like building on the right. The crowd celebrating the inauguration of the train is painted in photorealistic style at the eye level of the viewer (Figs. 8, 9, 10). The mood of the depicted scene is exuberant; confetti in the air underlines this joyful moment.

The monumental size of the painting and its stark red and brown oil colors with even brushwork create a peculiar scenery, equally intense and alienating. On the one hand, the realistic mode of representation of the Kenyans celebrating creates the illusion of a photographic snapshot. On the other hand, the composition of train, architecture, train tracks, animals, and rainbow that are neatly embedded in a vast and flat landscape appears staged. Whereas some viewers were irritated by the depiction of stereotyped Africans, other—especially Chinese—viewers clearly admired the dynamic, almost ecstatic depiction of the people. These viewers were



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Figs. 9, 10 Zhou Zongkai, “African Dream, Chinese Dream” (detail), 2021, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

often posing and taking pictures in front of the painting, a behavior reminiscent of picture stops at sightseeing sites.

Artist Zhou Zongkai appears to have adapted his motif from a press picture (Fig. 11)⁵ that was taken in 2017, seemingly serving as an inspiration for the large canvas. The picture titled “A cargo train sets off on its inaugural journey from Mombasa to Nairobi on the new Chinese-built line” depicts the inauguration of the line. A comparison of press photograph and the canvas suggests that the artist copied the train and the cheering and celebrating crowd of Kenyans as a motif for his artwork. The artwork “African Dream, Chinese Dream” in fact depicts a well-known and Chinese financed and built BRI project in Kenya: the building of a 472-km-long train route between Mombasa and Nairobi, connecting Kenya’s largest cities in five hours.

Completed in 2017, the railway project is Kenya’s largest infrastructure project since independence in 1963 and an integral part of the BRI, 90 percent of it being financed by Chinese loans and ten percent by the Kenyan government. From a local Kenyan perspective, the train project has been regarded as controversial in terms of its financing and operationalization. At present, the train route ends in the middle of nowhere and not, as expected and planned, in Uganda. The Chinese loans were not renewed, as the Chinese government is not convinced about the project’s revenues.

Local resistance against the project has risen since its implementation (Basu and Janiec 2021). Truck drivers in Mombasa have demonstrated against the regulations, as they prohibit the transport of goods via road and oblige their route to be via rails in order to use the newly built train. Once the project was operational, the deep-sea port of Mombasa that was the main site for the clearance of goods was shut down. The Chinese intervention has had considerable destructive effects on the economic situation and the everyday life of coastal dwellers who were dependent on the income and activities that the port had generated (Swaleh 2023).

Not surprisingly, this part of the story around the BRI project has been omitted in the painting. Here, the artist celebrates China’s achievement in Kenya. The painting’s narrative gesture is clearly one that positions the Chinese (train) as the savior of the Kenyan, or even African, future and Dream. Besides omitting negative effects of the China-funded and -led project, the represented elements and humans in Zhou’s painting are reminiscent of a communist style of painting of the 20th century that was used to support or even glorify the socialist ideology and that turned contemporary art into ambassadors and agents of the present

5 Source: <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/2105230/lunatic-express-how-kenyan-colonial-railway> (accessed 15 Dec. 2023).

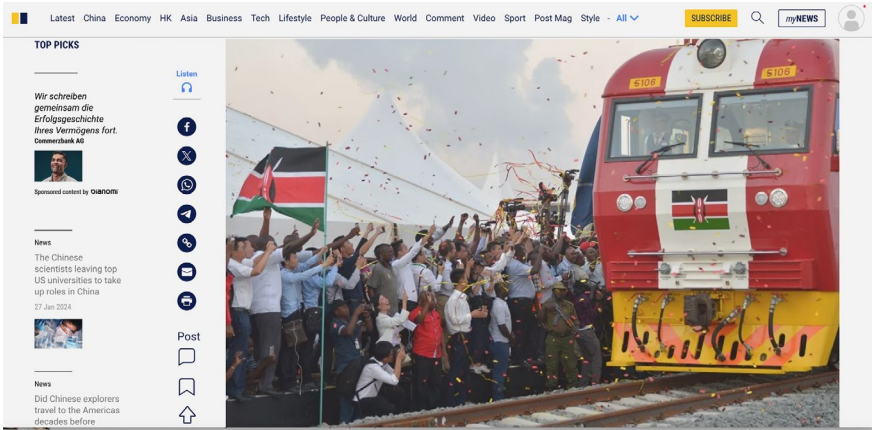


Fig. 11 Screenshot of website, press photo of inauguration of railway project in Kenya 2017

statecraft. BRI projects like the Mombasa–Nairobi railway are considered national events, as they are part of the implementation plan of the Chinese Dream and, thus, facilitate the China-led path to a harmonious mankind and future.

Artist Zhou Zongkai belongs to the group of artists who have been selected for a special governmental training program (cf. China Daily 2019), and his work “African Dream, Chinese Dream” seems to be a direct result of his training. It can be regarded as a recent commission for the museum’s collection, aiming to visualize successful Sino-African connectedness and the accomplishments of Xi Jinping’s government and Chinese workers in Kenya.

The title of the work underlines such a reading. “African Dream, Chinese Dream” evokes the impression of a balanced “dreaming”: a visualization or fulfillment of both African and Chinese visions. Whereas the “Africans” and their “dream” (a new railway) are figuratively present and characterized with joyful ecstasy, the “Chinese Dream” is not pictured directly in the painting. In contrast to the original motif—the photograph of the inauguration on site—there are no Chinese officials present. What is to be perceived from the “Chinese Dream” is the liberating joy of the “Africans,” who are not only represented in stereotypes (with their local costumes and instruments and chanting postures) but also with the absence of semantic referral to their ethnic origin as Kenyans. The title further implies that the concept of an “African Dream” has been put over the Mombasa–Nairobi project, assuming that the Chinese Dream would facilitate an African Dream.

Referencing an actual BRI project situated in Kenya and depicting its inauguration in a way that appears like an act of liberation for African people by the

Chinese government clearly places the work not only into the category of “art recording China’s achievement” (China Daily 2019), as it was put by a Chinese journalist, but as Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism originated in 1920 in various communist countries in Eastern Europe and spread from the former Soviet Union to Poland, the GDR, Cuba, China, and other communist countries. Its topics are the visualization of socialist values and the socialist approach to developing a society and country, often expressed by the depiction of daily routines of workers in factories or on farms in a heroic and monumental, but realistic, style. In general, the chosen subjects’ purpose was to glorify the achievements of socialism and the advantages of the socialist system. Socialist Realism is an important genre of Chinese art in the 20th century, as it was the official and state-approved artistic style during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Since Xi Jinping took office, Socialist Realism seems to be on the rise and, thus, so does the art of state propaganda. According to a press article at China Daily, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has initiated a national project concerning contemporary art as a document of China’s recent achievements in societal, political, and economic matters. In 2016, the government set up a training program for artists to produce “themed, realistic paintings and sculptures that reflect China’s social, cultural and economic accomplishments since the last 40 years” (China Daily 2019). Only one year later, in 2017, approximately 140 artists from China were selected as participants in the training program. The program’s purpose was to teach contemporary artists to create works in the Socialist Realism style to celebrate past, present, and future national events of Chinese accomplishments in the fields of society, economy, and politics. Against the background of China’s art history, it can be argued that this nourishing of what has been described as “official art” (de Nigris 2016) is part of a newly awakening cultural state policy or even political ideology within the framework of the Chinese Dream. The governmental program points not only to the recent reawakening of the state as facilitator, supporter, and legitimizer of art and culture: the topic of the “Spectacle of Integration” and its thematic focus on both the Ancient and the New Silk Road mirror how closely the exhibition programming of the National Museum of Art is aligned with the BRI narrative of art and culture, facilitating people-to-people connectivity and, hence, the co-construction of a shared and harmonious future.

The “Spectacle of Integration” clearly follows a depoliticizing approach to depict the BRI, to praise its concept of respectfully connecting cultures to build a harmonious future in a new geopolitical region that is rich in cultures, and to position China as strong actor within that new geocultural region. In juxtaposing eclectic works with various regional foci that either have belonged to the Ancient Silk Road or belong to the new Silk Road, the National Art Museum of China visually positions itself as facilitator of an assumed new transregional order and



Fig. 12 Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

shared future. The artwork “Many Roads lead to Beijing”, 2021, by Indonesian painter Januri can be regarded as subtle visualization of this claim as it appears to be commissioned by the exhibition organizers for the purpose of the jubilee exhibition (Fig. 12). Januri has participated before in exhibitions that highlight the diplomatic relations between Indonesia and China, his figurative works clearly reminiscent of the style of Socialist Realism.

Artworks like the latter and “African Dream, Chinese Dream,” are works that depict, glorify and emotionalize the recent accomplishments of China in regards to its geocultural strategies. Especially “African Deam, Chinese Dream” glorifies the achievements of socialism and the advantages of the socialist system and emphasizes a positive narrative of the benefits and win-win situations of BRI projects like the Mombasa–Nairobi railway, which has been financed, designed, and built by the Chinese government and people as part of fulfilling the Chinese Dream. The exhibition demonstrates how contemporary art is both used by the state to both politicize and depoliticize the BRI and regarded as a tool to project a positive narrative concerning China’s socialist approach to a powerful position on the global stage.

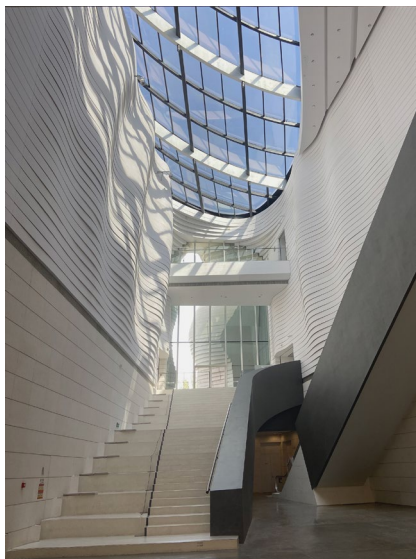
4 Exhibitions as Regional Developer: Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan

Parallel to the self-positioning of the National Art Museum of China in Beijing as a cultural platform and a site for active people-to-people-connectivity, the Chinese government uses art and institutional art practices to construct narratives and

13



14



Figs. 13, 14 Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

support transregional development that emphasizes culture as an important pillar of regional and people-to-people connectivity. With the example of the private Museum of Contemporary Art in Yinchuan (MoCA Yinchuan), I aim to outline the role of exhibitions and their artworks as a communication tool for regional developing organizations that are supported by the local government, collectors, and curators to intellectually invest into the cultural development of a region that becomes increasingly significant for BRI-related narratives.

The museum is located on the outskirts of Yinchuan, the industrial capital of Ningxia, Hui Autonomous Region, with 1.4 million citizens. Yinchuan has a laid-back, rural, and rather harsh atmosphere and is surrounded by the Gobi Desert, the Yellow River, and the Helan Mountains—an environmental context that frames and influences the feel of the city. It is home to 580,000 people of the Hui minority, who are Muslim Chinese and form a large Muslim minority with rich traditions in Ningxia. The Hui’s ancestors are from Persian- and Arab-speaking countries that either share or are close to China’s national borders. Ningxia is a scarcely populated area and a poorer region of China, with 85 percent less annual GDP per citizen than Beijing and Shanghai.

After three years of planning and building, MoCA Yinchuan turned out to be a substantial and extraordinary building with stunning architecture (Figs. 12, 13, 14). It opened as the first contemporary art museum in Northwest China in Yinchuan in 2015, with the exhibition “Dimensions of Civilizations,” which set

Fig. 15 Artists' Residency Area, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023



Fig. 16 Outdoor sculpture area, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023



the tone of the museum's aims and future programming and outreach. MoCA Yinchuan contains three large floors, with six exhibition spaces that add to over 3,000 sqm of overall exhibition space. According to official numbers, the museum attracts 150,000 visitors annually from the region.

The museum area includes a couple of artists' residences (Fig. 15), outdoor sculptures (Fig. 16), and a wetland park (Fig. 17). Both the museum building as well as the immediate soundings were designed by well-known Chinese architects, and the costs were approximately 300 million dollars.

Developed and owned by the Minsheng property group and run by proven art experts, the organizer follows a state-induced and -supported strategy in cooperation with the local government of Yinchuan. From the beginning, the museum was designed to serve one main function: to develop the Ningxia region



Fig. 17 Wetland park, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

into an attractive area for potential citizens and investors in terms of business and culture, one of the major pull factors being the recent emphasis of the Ningxia region as the site of China–Arab exchange, similar to the fruitful economic and cultural relations between China and its Arab neighbors and traders during the period of the Ancient Silk Road.

Although Yinchuan is not known to be an internationally appealing contemporary art hub in need of an internationally appealing contemporary art museum that hosts biennales, the developers of the museum repeatedly emphasized the significant role the city has played in intercultural exchange (cf. Biennial Foundation 2016). The press, the museum, and other involved actors that are responsible for the positioning of MoCA Yinchuan highlight Yinchuan as a historic site of the Ancient Silk Road, looking back on a long history of cultural exchange with Asia and the Middle East. When establishing the museum, the Minsheng property group seemed to align its museum-related strategies to the positioning of the China–Arab States Expo, a biennial political and economic event initiated in 2013 with “Friendship, Cooperation and Win–win Development” (China–Arab States Expo, undated) as the guiding theme. Since then, Yinchuan has largely been known for its China–Arab relations, and the region for its historic relevance to the Ancient Silk Road. The event is “an international exposition at national level cosponsored by the Ministry of Commerce of China, China Council for the Promotion of International Trade and the People’s Government of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region” (China–Arab State Expo, undated). On its website, the China–Arab States Expo summarizes that, to date, it has “attracted 24 Chinese and foreign dignitaries, 318 Chinese and foreign ministerial-level officials and over 6,000 domestic and foreign enterprises from 112 countries and regions. A total of 1,213 cooperation projects have been signed in areas including modern agriculture, high and new

technology, energy and chemicals, bio-pharmacy, equipment manufacturing, infrastructure, 'Internet plus healthcare' and tourism cooperation" (China–Arab State Expo, undated).

Undoubtedly, it can be considered as the key driver of the past and present region's economy and a successful branding for the city of Yinchuan.

Despite its guidance and support by the local government in providing tax incentives and other benefits to private regional developers, MoCA Yinchuan is a private institution open to the public that has been funded and developed by a private real estate company.⁶ The peripheral geographic location, funding scheme, and programming of the museum turns it into an extraordinary, political, and contested space for art and artistic practices. As a domestic and foreign cultural platform, it contains and constructs narratives on geocultural positioning that are in line with Xi Jinping's evocation of the New Silk Road Spirit within the framework of the BRI. Located in the lush wetlands and at the desert border with Gobi, MoCA Yinchuan triggered a controversy in mainland China (Chinnery 2016). The controversy arose not only due to its peripheral location but also due to the thematic orientation of its two prominent collections that needed to fit into the positioning of a museum for contemporary art.

The Ningxia Minsheng Group is a private regional property developer experienced in art-related practices. It developed the museum under a new public-private partnership policy and strategy called BOT (Build–Operate–Transfer)⁷. As a private cultural developer, Minsheng Real Estate has been collaborating with renowned Chinese art actors and local governments. Since 2004, they have been working with Lu Peng, one of China's most influential art curators and art historians. In his function as the deputy director of the Minsheng Group, Lu Peng collaborated with the provincial government to found the museum in Yinchuan and contributed greatly in convincing the city to engage with a private museum project of this size. He was responsible for the curatorial strategy for the permanent collections of the museum. On the one hand, Lu Peng acquired ancient maps by consulting an academic expert, Guo Liang; and on the other hand, he himself formed a collection of early Chinese oil paintings (cf. Chinnery 2016: 6). With

6 For the specific museum policy in China, see the interview with Minh An Szabó de Bucs in this book.

7 The BOT model was introduced in 1980s as a new financing model with private investment that supports the Chinese government in facilitating business infrastructure. BOT limits the involvement of the private sector to building, operating and transferring a publicly funded project and has evolved into the most important factor of China's infrastructure development since its Opening Up policy (cf. Yang, Nisar and Prabhakar 2017).



Fig. 18 Exhibition view, “Visual Adaptation”, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

its primary focus being a contemporary art museum that presents living artists who work on the region and what is related to Ningxia, the Chinese art field has been puzzled about Lu Peng’s choice of permanent museum collections: what are these two collections about, and how are works from the 16th to the 19th century connect to contemporary regional matters?

The permanent collection of ancient maps is presented to the public as a permanent exhibition titled “Outline of the Territory.” It comprises 81 world maps from the 16th to the 19th century and is curated and scientifically accompanied by Guo Liang. The aim of the exhibition is to “explore the cultural communication between late Ming dynasty China and Post-Renaissance Europe in the 17th century” (Chinnery 2016: 7). The contextualization of ancient maps as material objects visualizes the communicational dynamics of the encounters between Chinese and European mapmaking and the science behind each cultural approach. The exhibition focuses on the arguments that the “cultural exchange of cartography between China and the West influenced the art of mapmaking in China” (Introduction to the Exhibition), that mapmaking contributed to early globalization, and, further, that art and artistic practices (including cartography) have always been an integral part of cultural and social exchange. At the inauguration of the exhibition, however, curator Guo Liang referred to a recent diplomatic gift (a German-made Chinese map of 1735) from German chancellor Angela Merkel to president Xi Jinping to emphasize the lasting political significance of cartography (cf. Chinnery 2016: 8).

The second permanent exhibition and collection, “Visual Adaptation,” is the juxtaposition of 200 early Chinese oil paintings from the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) documenting a period in the early years of globalization when European painters collaborated with Chinese Emperors (Fig. 18). “The Jesuit



Fig. 19 *The Portrait of Emperor Qianlong*, 1756, “Visual Adaptation”, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

missionaries came to China in the late 16th century, and they made a great impact on modern Chinese history” (Introduction to the Exhibition), not only in the field of cartography but also in the field of oil painting and imperial portraits. The collection’s most prominent work, *The Portrait of Emperor Qianlong*, is dated to 1756 and is the core piece of the museum (Fig. 19). Experts have described the painting as functioning as a significant cultural and political turning point in early communication between China and the West (Gong 2014), as the Emperor’s attitude towards the European portraits turned out more accepting than historically assumed, shedding new light not only on Chinese art history but also on Emperor Qianlong’s encounter with European missionaries. In fact, MoCA Yinchuan sponsored the recent scientific study that revealed that “Qianlong required artists to be faithful in portraying his imperial visage [...] and asked them not to neglect the imperfection of his left eyebrow” (Chinnery 2016: 10), which elevated it almost to the level of the Palace Museum, a state-owned and -run museum in Beijing.

With such a famous painting and self-funded academic research in a permanent collection, MoCA Yinchuan reveals a more intense relationship between East and West than has been acknowledged in Chinese art history so far. The early transregional and transcultural encounters between China, Europe, and Islamic countries are further expressed in the programming of the museum concerning contemporary art, which forms the third collection of the museum, presented in changing exhibitions.

The museum predominantly highlights contemporary works by artists who are Chinese or Muslim and work on ethnically, regionally, and locally related topics with a strong ecological focus. A recent example is the exhibition titled “Blowing Rolling Rooting – Migration and Residence of Northwest Artists,” which I visited

in September 2023. It displayed 54 works by 26 regional artists from the Northwest of China, their works focusing on the traces, materiality, and trajectory of cultural nomadism that happened in this region (Fig. 20).

The function of MoCA Yinchuan as regional developer is reinforced by its programming and hosting of an international art biennale on site. The Yinchuan Biennale, with extensive collateral programming and international appeal, is another important feature of the museum to exhibit contemporary art and to participate in the global art field, underlining both the museum's international appeal and its relevance for the region. Until now, it has had two editions, each contributing to the Chinese narrative on transregionality and transculturality, thereby focusing on New Silk Road regions, with Islamic countries being at its core. Focal points of both biennales were topics of ecology, sustainability, and cultural encounters. It can be argued that the programming of the museum integrates the BRI narrative of cultural communication and exchange between China, Europe, and Islamic countries, parallel to the topics the China–Eurasia Expo in Yinchuan focuses on.

Parallel to other biennales in the Global South (e.g., the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India), Yinchuan Biennale positions itself as a cosmopolitan and transcultural site that is presently reviving historic entanglements that go back to the Ancient Silk Roads, especially the land routes that started in the Northwest of China. Staging such large exhibitions, especially in areas with poor artistic infrastructures for modern and contemporary art, can be regarded as another practice of developing the museum and, hence, the region as a cultural platform within the BRI context, clearly emphasizing the narrative of a holistic win–win potential for BRI projects.

Especially with the focus on biennales, MoCA Yinchuan participates in artistic, social, and political discourses of the global art scene. Similar to the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, the recent infrastructural shift in the Chinese art field (including the founding and operation of private museums; the cooperation between state, government, and private actors; and its internationalization) elevated exhibition-making to the level of narrative construction, which turned out to be a fruitful site for the implementation of cultural politics.

Art biennales (similar to business expositions) are decisive in branding regions and cities to gain attention both domestically and internationally. Besides contributing to the global artistic discourse from a site-specific position, biennales are considered a tool for place and city branding (Bydler 2004). As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Adeli 2021), the cities the biennales are located in often develop into tourist destinations that are advertised as unusual or undiscovered (at least, for the art world) but crucial for a specific point in history or the present. The atmosphere and cultural identity of such a city are emphasized on the biennale websites and catalogs and, thus, frame the exhibition with a special prominence and significance

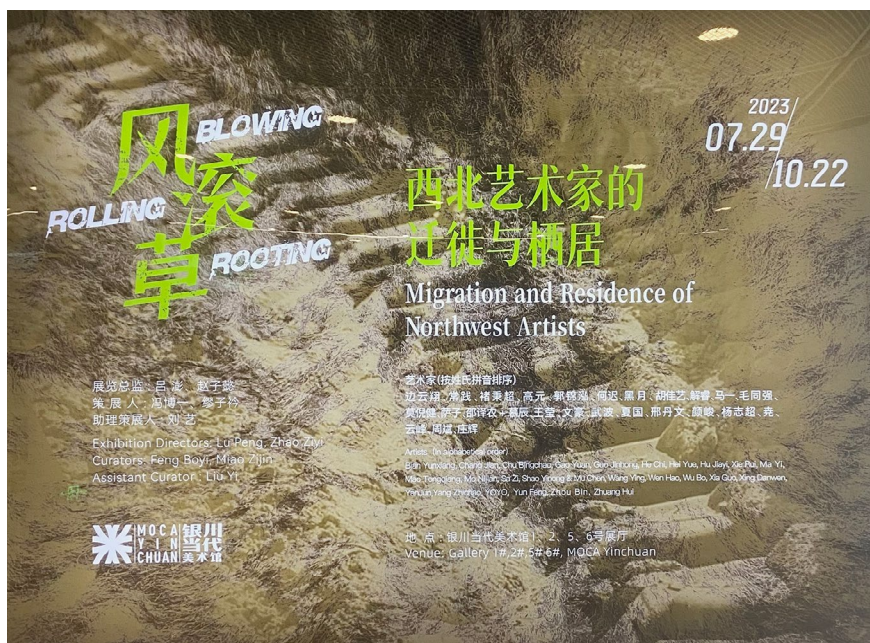


Fig. 20 Exhibition Poster, “Blowing Rolling Rooting - Migration and Residence of Northwest Artists”, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

for both the country and a larger narrative. As already analyzed with the example of the two permanent exhibitions of MoCA Yinchuan, the curatorial concept of collections, exhibitions, and biennales is strategically being embedded into the site specificity of a city, be it social, political, aesthetic, or cultural. Thus, the city and region are an essential point of reference for the interpretation and the content of the art event. Consequently, the selection of the host city of a biennale plays a decisive role and is similar to the strategies of city or destination branding as forms of place branding (Anholt 2008).

The spectacular museum architecture that mirrors and comments on the immediate regional ecologic surroundings of MoCA Yinchuan, as well as the spacious artist’s residencies around the museum building, not only encourages an artistic infrastructure to develop but also attracts tourism and creative industries and, most importantly, localizes transcultural and transregional phenomena in the art field (Adeli 2021) and beyond.

Hence, by initiating an international biennale at MoCY Yinchuan, the Minsheng Group seemingly aimed to attract creative industries to the region: creative industries—especially when ultra-rich Chinese collectors are involved—are considered an important economic pull factor by Chinese local governments and have been

(at least, to date) warmly welcomed, even financially lured, to develop regions off China's east coast (O'Connor and Gu 2006).

In analyzing the museum's self-positioning, I demonstrate the dynamics of how local Chinese art and art institutions implement the narrative of transculturalization of New Silk Road regions that spread from China via Central Asia to Europe. MoCA Yinchuan has been positioned as a cultural platform that aims to facilitate and reflect on cultural communications between China and Islamic countries, often in relation to old and new Silk Road narratives and their historic and contemporary entanglements. Against that background, I argue that art institutions like the MoCA Yinchuan and their artistic programming can be regarded as decisive drivers of regional development within large-scale infrastructures like the BRI, thus revoking the spirit of the Ancient Silk Road as transculturalizing infrastructure. What has become apparent in Sections 3 and 4 is that exhibitions—especially in the form of biennales—are key in the construction and deconstruction of narratives. The curatorial framing of collections, biennales, and exhibitions not only visualizes artistic positions but the notions of cities, sites, and states of mind, unfolding local and regional particularities. Thus, exhibition-making not only serves an aesthetic discourse but needs to be considered as a strategic and political cultural practice in contemporary China.

5 Musquiqui Chihying: Contemporary Art as BRI Counternarrative

Contemporary art found its way into the humanities as an increasingly popular research lens to access social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena (Munder and Wuggenig 2012), indicating the rise of art sociology. This development is clearly connected with the structural transformation process of the international art field that experienced the proliferation of biennales and art fairs into more peripheral areas while simultaneously opening up for artistic practices from the Global South. Art—be it contemporary art or cultural heritage—has developed into a multidisciplinary approach to engage with societies of the Global South and their entanglements with the Global North. It evolved into a practice of understanding, commenting on, and reflecting the world. Art and artistic practices have been increasingly used as a source of and access point to understanding certain local actors and their patterns of thought, practice, and perception, thereby contributing to the dissolution of national or regional boundaries. Art outside the discipline of art history can be regarded less from a work-aesthetic and more from a practice-aesthetic approach, i.e., artistic works in the context of social sciences are no longer explored in terms of their result (work) but, rather, in terms of their process of creation (practice). It is less the material or visual result of the artistic

practice the artist focuses on and more the insights that he or she generates in the process of engaging with his or her topic. In this sense art and artistic practice needs to be understood as an adequate and knowledge-generating scientific lens—a lens that I am applying in the following.

Musquiqui Chihying is a Taiwanese artist living between Berlin and Taipei. In the context of this paper, I characterize his work as artistic research that contributes to critical knowledge production. I have selected three artworks that communicate and reflect the artist's observation and opinion on current cultural politics between China, Europe, and Africa. They belong to a series of works with political dimension that focus on cultural heritage, restitution debates, and present Sino-African cultural relations in the context of the BRI. By analyzing Musquiqui's works, I demonstrate how applying the lens of artistic practice helps gain an understanding of present Chinese cultural politics, of the global negotiation of heritage and looted art, and of the new power structures and interdependencies between China and Africa through an aesthetic or visual language.

The first ("The Cultural Center") and second ("The Sculpture") artworks I discuss in this section were produced in 2018 and were exhibited together at the artist's first solo exhibition of the same year, from August until October, in Beijing. Musquiqui's first solo exhibition in China was titled "I'll Be Back" and presented four interconnected artworks. On the occasion of the exhibition, all the works on display were commissioned by the Ullens Center of Contemporary Art (UCCA) and were part of a series of exhibitions at UCCA called "New Directions," which featured emerging artists in China between 2015 and 2019. UCCA was founded in Beijing in 2007 as a private institution by the Belgian couple Guy and Myriam Ullens. The founding of the museum can be regarded as an early stage of the state's cultural policy plan to internationalize the Chinese art field and to strengthen the Chinese cultural identity by facilitating a permanent home for a decidedly "Chinese Art" collection: as Guy and Myriam Ullens failed to find a European venue willing to exhibit their important collection of contemporary Chinese art, the Chinese government gave them the possibility to set foot into the art field of China and used it as a decisive step forward in internationalizing their cultural politics strategy.

The third artwork by Musquiqui Chihying that I will discuss is titled "The Vitrine" and was developed for the exhibition "On the Faience of Your Eyes" at Gallery Liusa Wang in Paris in 2020, also marking the artist's first exposure in Paris and France. The exhibition featured four new multimedia works, mainly in the form of installations that engage critically with the ancient and contemporary museum policy and the presentation of collections in France, predominantly consisting of looted art, of purchases, plunder, or gift. The point of reference for this exhibition was two historic exhibitions of Oriental objects in Paris (Château de Fontainebleau) and Berlin (Akademie der Künste) in 1929. The latter featured over

a thousand objects of art, making it the pioneering exhibition of works from China. The exhibition at Château de Fontainebleau dates back to the 19th century, when art objects from China, Japan, Cambodia, Korea, and Tibet were on display in the Chinese Museum and the salon of Empress Eugenie, both sites belonging to the Château de Fontainebleau. Whether plundered in war, donated, or acquired, these two exhibitions “reflect how others bring their personal or collective imaginations of an elsewhere to the objects on display” (Galerie Liusa Wang 2020). The artworks of the exhibition critically refer to both exhibition practices in Paris and Berlin and create perspectives on and readings of how exotic objects and looted art have been used to identify and construct “the Other” as the subject of the exhibition.

5.1 “The Cultural Center” (2018)

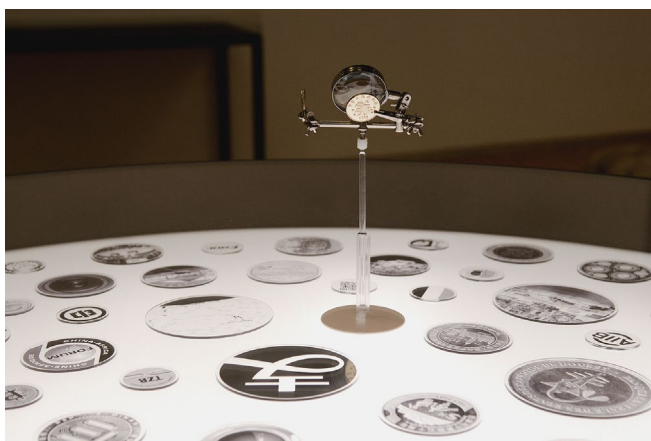
The work “The Cultural Center” (Fig. 21) is a mixed-media installation containing a lightbox table that presents different plates in black and white on a white background. The plates depict different symbols, signs, and photographic excerpts of architectural structures. While some seem immediately familiar, like the logo of the Chinese mobile pay service Alipay (Fig. 22), others need more investigation to understand what they refer to. On top of the table, five silver metal arms are mounted, each holding a golden coin that can be inspected by an attached magnifying lens (Fig. 23).



Fig. 21 Musquiqui Chihying, “The Cultural Center”, 2018, exhibition view at *Step Out of the Strange Light*, 2021



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Fig. 22 Musquiqui Chihying, “The Cultural Center”, 2018, exhibition view at *Step Out of the Strange Light*, 2021

Fig. 23 Musquiqui Chihying, “The Cultural Center”, 2018, exhibition view at *CHINA ⇄ AFRICA Crossing the World Color Line* at Centre Pompidou in Paris

With the juxtaposition of ancient and new coins or coin-like plates referring to Chinese history and the present and their interconnectedness with African states, Musquiqui connects culture, finances, and power in his work. The artist's starting point for this installation is a historic coin that symbolizes early encounters between China and Africa. Musquiqui refers to the recent archaeological discovery of a 600-year-old Chinese Ming-era coin on the Kenyan island of Manda by a team of archeologists from the Chicago Museum. The coin stems from the early 15th century and is a cash coin used mainly for foreign trade. It was fabricated under Yongle, the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, who had sent naval commander Zheng He to explore the world and to demonstrate Chinese power in the first half of the 15th century. The recent discovery of the coin in East Africa depicts materialized proof that China's trade contacts with Africa predated those of Europe. It is also evidence against a dominant historical narrative that the Ming Dynasty isolated itself after 1433 and "let" Christopher Columbus explore the world. The artist refers to the prominent coin, which highlights the early Sino-African relations of the 15th century and uses the finding as a historical reference point to criticize a recent phenomenon: the contemporary economic, financial, and cultural ties between China and Africa.

Musquiqui bridges history and present by inventing a new set of Chinese coins that are mounted on top of the Plexiglas of the table (Fig. 23). Here, we can see five fictitious golden coins that are each stamped with significant cultural institutions situated in African states and funded or built by Chinese companies in the 21st century. Musquiqui uses the Chinese coin as both a reference to a historical narrative that interprets China as an early naval power with close ties to Africa and as a critique or comment on contemporary Chinese cultural politics in Africa.

One of the invented coins depicts the contours of an institution which turns out to be the architecture of the National Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar, Senegal (Fig. 24).

The Museum of Black Civilizations opened in 2018, almost 60 years after Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first President of the Republic of Senegal post-independence, had the idea to build a museum for the histories and legacies of African art and culture in 1966. The vision for the pan-African museum was never realized due to the lack of sufficient funding by the Senegalese state, until China offered to do so. Within the framework of the BRI, China invested majorly in building infrastructure in countries in the Global South, labeling the new economic, social, and cultural connectivity as a win-win situation. Especially with West African States, China has "re-awakened" its cultural relations: it offered to plan and pay for the Museum of Black Civilizations to help fulfil a long-cherished dream and to demonstrate its alignment with other former colonized states:



Fig. 24 Musquiqui Chihying, “The Cultural Center”, 2018, exhibition view at CHINA ⇌ AFRICA Crossing the World Color Line at Centre Pompidou in Paris

Without any risk of reputational damage, China ingeniously offered to build a museum to house the collections of African art that – presumably – everyone knew were held by European and North American museums. Under pressure from the decolonization movement, President Macron made his offer to return African patrimony. With the MBC opening two weeks after the publication of the Restitution Report, Senegal effectively used the Chinese gift to demonstrate that it possessed the infrastructure to keep collections responsibly – in anticipation of restitution by France. (de Jong 2022: 239)

The construction of the museum cost 34 million dollars; it is located in central Dakar and features impressive architecture. Since its inauguration in 2018, it has hosted permanent exhibitions on the human origin in Africa, on the history of masks, on spiritual and religious practices in Africa, and on the history of African slaves in the Americas. The monumental building has the capacity to store and present 18,000 artifacts over 15,000 square meters, but many of the halls are still empty, which sends a distressing signal to the former colonial powers that looted artifacts from African states.

By depicting the architecture of cultural institutions in Africa that are funded and designed by Chinese companies, Musquiqui Chihying criticizes an assumed ownership of past and present culture. Ownership here refers not only to financing the building but also to China’s practice as cultural facilitator and supporter in Africa. Thus, with “The Cultural Center,” the artist critically comments on the

recent cultural politics between China and Africa, which have intensified notably since the BRI on various levels. In producing Chinese commemorative coins, or to be more exact, in inventing a new Chinese currency that adorns itself with the ownership of important, postcolonial African cultural institutions, Musquiqui's installation not only engages with the relation of financial and symbolic capital but projects a future of Chinese cultural hegemony. As national currencies usually depict national achievements, the artistic use of coins points to relevant questions that are already discussed in academic research concerning Chinese cultural politics: in which sense are African cultural institutions—funded and conceptualized by Chinese companies—Chinese achievements? What, exactly, is achieved? Musquiqui implicitly but strongly critiques the boom in Chinese-government-led investment in Africa, a practice that has created global unease about assumed Chinese neo-colonialism within Africa, disguised as cultural exchange and people-to-people connectivity.

5.2 “The Sculpture” (2018)

The installation “The Sculpture” (2018) consists of an experimental video and a large black-and-white print (Fig. 25). The work entails a critique of the European colonial practice of looting artifacts from their place of origin and presenting them as “their” museal objects, including their abuse as inspirational objects for their own practices. In the black-and-white print, Musquiqui Chihying has created an artistic reenactment of French politician and art author Andre Malraux's photographic



Fig. 25 Musquiqui Chihying, “The Sculpture”, 2018, photograph (b & w), C-Print 150 × 150 cm, part of an installation with a 2 channel video (27 min.)

Fig. 26 Musquiqui Chihying, “The Sculpture” (detail), 2018, photograph (b & w), C-Print 150 × 150 cm, part of an installation with a 2 channel video (27 min.)



staging as world art curator. As art historian Walter Grasskamp pointed out in his book *Andre Malraux and His Imaginary Museum*, this magazine photograph of 1954 is a meticulously planned snapshot that captures how the world should see art: as world art. Malraux uses photography as a mobile means of collecting sculptures from all continents over a timespan of three thousand years, eclectically juxtaposing them. In using photography as a medium that dissolves boundaries, he removes the sculptures from their local contexts and places them on double pages of a catalog next to each other to highlight their assumed aesthetic affinities. His compilation of European abstract sculptures juxtaposed with non-European pre-historic works suggests the problematic universalization of the European concept of art. As such, it reveals Malraux’s innovative but colonizing approach to world art as an accessible cultural heritage that belongs to everybody.

In re-enacting this problematic scenario of the European power of interpretation (referred to by Bourdieu as consecration power) over African artifacts, Musquiqui alludes to this moment in European art history and subtly suggests a parallel to the contemporary Chinese practice in cultural politics. For the staging of the print, Musquiqui reenacts himself as Malraux. He is positioned within a black space; loose pages are neatly draped around his shoes. He wears a black suit, smokes a cigarette, and contemplates a piece of paper in his hand. The chosen perspective of the photograph emphasizes a sense and attitude of “overview”: on the ground below him, the viewer recognizes images of African sculptures and various historic and contemporary visual footage. Instead of seeing pages of an art book in the publication press, as we did in the original, we see film stills from the same titled video that accompanies the photograph (Fig. 26). Hence, with his

Chinese phenotypic features, the artist seems to embody China as an actor and puts himself on a level with Malraux, who staged himself as a curator of world art: whereas Malraux arranges the photographs of ancient sculptures of non-Western origin as universal world art, Musquiqui arranges photographic clippings of contemporary institutions in Africa and of African sculptures. We can interpret this as “China” looking at the cultural heritage of Africa and seemingly systematizing it into the order of world heritage.

In the second part of the installation, an experimental video, the narrator explains in an educational mode how African artifacts ended up in European art collections, questions why they are still there, and asks if the privilege to collect and categorize can be separated from power. The last question is enlarged upon introducing Xie Yanshen, a prolific collector of African artifacts. He has collected thousands of objects from various ethnic tribes since the 1990s and exhibited them in his private museum in Lome, Togo. Xie recently donated a large part of his collection to the Chinese National Museum in Beijing, where they remain on display today under the gesture of Chinese–African international understanding:

If we want to develop connections between different peoples in different countries, they first need to understand each other. In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and China-Africa friendly cooperation, I hope I can do my best to let Chinese better know and appreciate Africa. (Xie Yanshen, cited in “Artwork Diplomacy,” Li Jing 2018)

The video is a key element in this series of works, as it not only critically comments on the then common practice of looting African art and assimilating it to European museum practice but also draws parallels between such practices and contemporary collecting practices, exemplified by Swiss and Chinese art collectors. It further poses the eminent question of whether the colonial Western power of appropriation and interpretation is currently replaced by the Chinese and their awakening interest for becoming a cultural hegemony.

With “The Sculpture,” the artist alludes to new Sino-African power relations that go beyond the realm of art and cultural heritage. The picture of the Terminator that emerges from the black emphasizes this reading. Whereas Malraux uses the head of a European sculpture to depict his working atmosphere as the work of thoughts, the metal head references another type of work: The Terminator’s almost indestructible skeleton contains coltan, the rare metal for mobile phones that is exploited in Congo by Chinese and Western companies. The artist implicitly critiques the boom in Chinese-government-led investment in Africa—a current practice that not only creates global unease about assumed Chinese neo-colonialism but also triggers artists from African countries to respond by visualizing the re-emergence of long-known power structures.

5.3 “The Vitrine” (2022)

“The Vitrine” is a three-channel sound installation consisting of broken vitrines, LED lights, and a sound machine (Figs. 27, 28). The installation comprises three vitrines, of dark glass in different shapes, positioned in a room. They resemble the typical heightened glass cases commonly used in museums to present and protect sensitive or precious artifacts. Their glass of all the vitrines is broken, several large pieces lying on the floor as if the incident had just happened; from the empty vitrines come flashes of neon light. The room leaves the viewer with a puzzling feeling of emptiness but is simultaneously filled with light and sound. A voice from the Off recounts the provenance of invisible objects, including jade carvings, enamel pieces, and snuff bottles, focusing on their looting from the old Imperial Summer Palace in Beijing by Europeans in 1860. During the Opium Wars, Chinese cultural heritage was looted by British and French soldiers, brought to Europe, and kept in European museums or even “mounted and gilded in European workshops to be repurposed into lamp stands, among other things, to decorate European homes, later resurfacing in auction sales” (Mo 2022).

“The Vitrine” clearly critiques the continuing colonialist European exhibition practices and withholding of plundered Chinese artifacts, which are still legally displayed in French national museums, kept there for restoration, research, and

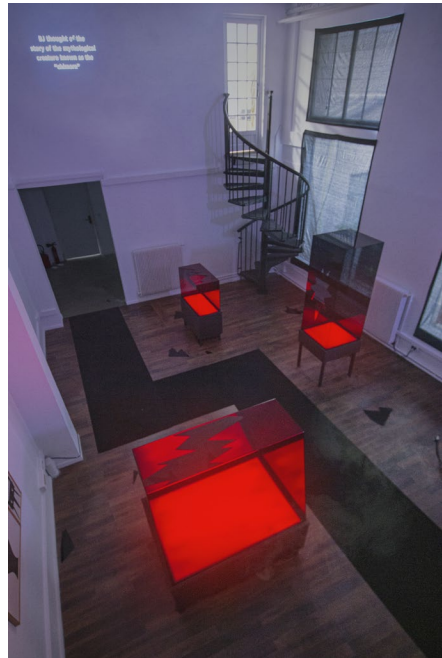


Fig. 27 Musquiqui Chihying, “The Vitrine”, 2022, exhibition view, On the Faience of Your Eyes at Gallery Liusa Wang, Paris



Fig. 28 Musquiqui Chihying, “The Vitrine”, 2022, exhibition view, On the Faience of Your Eyes at Gallery Liusa Wang, Paris

conservation matters and even publicly sold to private collectors. It belongs to Musquiqui’s series of works that revolve around questions of historical and contemporary colonial practices and mindsets which become visible when engaging with culture and art. Together with the other three works of the exhibition at Gallery Liusa Wang, the artist puts emphasis on the continuing significance of cultural tokens in the contemporary cultural politics that is currently unfolding along the China-led BRI.

With its broken glasses and empty showcases, “The Vitrine” alludes to a recurring incident that happened at the Chinese Museum section in one of the most significant French national museums, the Palace of Fontainebleau, a historical royal palace established in 1867 and located 55 kilometers outside of Paris. Here, the plundered Chinese artefacts are still presented like trophies (Fig. 29). Due to its extraordinary architecture and its historical importance (including its artifacts!), it was even designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In March 2015, the Chinese Museum was robbed, with significant imperial pieces being taken from the collection. It wasn’t the first and only case of theft in the Chinese Museum of the Palace of Fontainebleau: already in 1995 and most recently in 2019, precious artworks were stolen from the Chinese Museum. There is a public conception that it is the Chinese who are taking back their cultural heritage and identity—a rather popular conception that has been turned into a recent novel by Grace D. Li titled “The Portrait of a Thief.” Musquiqui visually plays with this perception and



Fig. 29 Chinese Museum in Château de Fontainebleau, Paris, exhibition view

asks—similar to the questions in his video “The Sculpture”, how the artefacts could have ended up in a French museum, not hidden but proudly presented as precious “own” cultural heritage.

“The Vitrine”, like “The Sculpture” and “The Cultural Center”, uses oral counter-narrative and critical questions to reveal asymmetrical power relations in the fields of contemporary heritage and museum diplomacy. With its sound installation, “The Vitrine” transforms the exhibition site into a crime scene in a robbed museum, which not only provides audiences with a starting point to review the problematic Asian collection in Western institutions but also responds to the critics Ariella Azoulay and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung’s review of Wandile Kasibe’s concept of “museums as crime scenes.” (Gallery Liusa Wang 2022). The artwork implies the involvement of strong political forces and a trading network in current repatriation debates, clearly linking it to the contested art auction of Chinese cultural heritage at Christie’s in Paris in 2009 (see Section 2). In his work “The Vitrine,” Musquiqui Chihying again critiques the historic and present European practice of displaying looted art in state museums like trophies and acknowledges China’s experiences with European colonialism. With this installation, he creates the vision of a culturally self-conscious Chinese state that has reawakened to the power of cultural heritage and that aims to regain its cultural hegemony by non-discursive means. Whereas in “The Sculpture”, Musquiqui critiques the

European colonial practice of looting art in African States and presenting them in the European museums, “The Vitrine” refers to the same colonial practices by French troops, plundering royal Chinese Palaces. In “The Cultural Center” the artist projects his criticism to the present and future and alludes to Chinese neo-colonial practices in African States, for example in Senegal, thereby creating an awareness for colonial practices repeating themselves in the moment of the powerful positioning of countries—not territorially, but culturally.

Thus, in the selected works, Musquiqui Chihying comments on and critique both the colonial and the postcolonial relationship between Europe, China, and Africa with the example of museum collections and their legacies, predominantly focusing on cultural heritage. Against the context of the China-led BRI, his artworks further comment on China’s positioning of a new cultural power that is currently paving its way through African states, juxtaposing it with European colonial practices. In general, Musquiqui depicts and comments on the (neo-/post-)colonial practice of collecting and presenting the Other power, thereby criticizing the role of the (neo-/post-)colonial state as narrator of the past, the present, and the future. He thereby artistically visualizes what Pierre Bourdieu coined the accumulation of symbolic capital through financial and cultural capital, a dynamic that refers not merely to the field of art but increasingly to the field of heritage diplomacy.

6 Conclusion

In analyzing museum exhibitions, museum positionings, and individual artworks in China and on Chinese cultural politics, I have demonstrated how the lens of art as an example of cultural practice can be used to understand and re-think the role of art within New Silk Road Regions. Sections 2, 3, and 4 revealed an emerging art policy of the Chinese state in relation to Chinese cultural heritage and contemporary art and art institutions that increasingly serves as an important tool for developing Chinese cultural policy domestically and abroad.

The analysis of the selected exhibitions, museums, and artworks resulted in two major functions of art in BRI- and China-Dream-related narratives: firstly, art exhibitions are sites of narrative construction and confirmation and can be used politically and socially to legitimize certain actions and perceptions. Furthermore, they are drivers of regional development, often employed by the state and local governments to make a region culturally and economically attractive, similar to the ideas and conceptions that constitute place branding.

Secondly, artworks are forms of local knowledge production and are capable of furnishing an understanding of how local, regional, and national realities are constructed, perceived, and negotiated. In addition, art in its political dimension is

able to produce counternarratives and problematize local and global phenomena in a specific, subtle language.

Especially with the example of the exhibition “Spectacle of Integration” and of the curatorial positioning of MoCA Yinchuan, artworks and artistic practices like exhibition-making are constructing and deconstructing ancient and contemporary narratives in the framework of New Silk Road regions. This further reveals the power aspirations of the Chinese state to evolve into a new actor in the global field of culture. The chosen examples suggest looking at and engaging with a new relation between the Chinese state and contemporary art production and practices. Chinese officials have been increasingly active in terms of exercising the state’s symbolic power over cultural matters, domestically and internationally. By developing and transforming its cultural policy in the context of museum development plans, the Chinese state is able to take part in the production of Chinese social reality and perception of it: as a significant actor, the state has the capacity to structure social life and cultural politics, thereby determining values and standards of perception (Kastner 2005). Similar to the artistic movement of Socialist Realism, artworks as well as contemporary exhibition-making in China have become an integral tool to communicate, underline, and legitimize political, social, and cultural agendas and narratives. Since the state has the power to enforce the patterns of perception according to which it aims to be perceived (Kastner 2005), artistic practices supported by the state or what has been earlier described as official art are often used to enforce a political or social ideology like the Chinese Dream and the narratives to implement the BRI. That said, the paper has also demonstrated how artistic counternarratives are deconstructing official narratives. Such a reading refers to the role of art in its function as a counterpoint and mirror to societal transformation.

In concluding this paper, I want to emphasize the significance of art and artistic practices as a methodological approach to engage with and further understand issues related to regional and social knowledge production in the Global South. Sinocentric, Eurocentric or Afrotopian ideas of world realignments emphasize culture and cultural identities as connectivities and disconnectivities between states, regions, localities, and their societies. Large and transregional infrastructure projects that are assumingly forming new geocultural regions, such as the BRI, the European Global Gateway, or the African Union’s cultural policy, increasingly turn towards culture, cultural practices, values, and identities and use them in their politics and various narratives at home and abroad. Hence, in making sense of such transregional transformations and various local reactions to them, I suggest using art as a significant means of knowledge production. Art and artistic practices are not only documents of specific philosophical and aesthetic ways of thinking of and participating in the world: they constitute the field of art that is not only an integral

part of society but overlaps with other societal fields such as politics, economics, education, sustainability, etc. It is simultaneously global and local and heavily entangled with markets and politics. Moreover, recently, the field of art has been highly sensitive to social grievances, injustice, and asymmetrical power relations.

On the occasion of the first Berlin Southern Theory lecture,⁸ Senegalese scientist and author Felwine Sarr presented his lecture “Rewriting the Humanities from Africa: For an Ecology of Knowledge” at the Ethnological Museum, State Museums in Berlin in 2019, where he tackled such a notion of the arts. In his presentation, which took place at the Ethnological State Museum of Berlin (including its history of possessing looted artworks), Sarr points out that knowledge production is still subject to epistemic injustice, which is injustice related to knowledge. Sarr urges the inclusion of non-academic knowledge production to diversify it and to pay tribute to the fact that each society and culture creates its own forms and figurations of knowledge. To understand those forms of knowledge, researchers—despite their disciplines, but especially in critical area studies—need to engage with what local and regional actors create to make sense of their worlds. Sarr further suggests that, in considering art, theater, orality, or bodies as signs of knowledge, we are able to avoid epistemic injustice and to build theory from diversified and multicentric grounds (Sarr 2019). Especially in critical area studies, art and artistic practices as research objects or documents of time have the capacity to contribute to strengthening local knowledge and to creating local theory as multicentric interaction, bearing in mind that genuine contemporary and postcolonial epistemology is based on multicentricity beyond the Global North (Rehbein 2020).

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