

CULTURE TROUBLE: The Significance of Cultural Context in an Art Historian's Research on Chinese Contemporary Art

The aim of this article is to depict the transdisciplinary method of my authorship, developed while I was working on a dissertation in the field of the history of contemporary art. "Culture Trouble" is a paraphrase of the title of a book by Judith Butler.¹⁾ She discusses the impact of gender on an individual's identity, while the aim of my research was to analyse the influence of native culture on the artwork of selected Chinese women.

My research method is based mostly on those used in the classic history of art, but it also draws deeply from the sociology of culture. My main research tool, on the other hand, is Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality.²⁾ According to Kristeva, all cultural texts, including literary works, scientific studies, and works of art, are meeting points for various earlier ones. They all create specific mosaics composed of heritage – the elements of tradition, both material and immaterial – such as scroll painting and Taoist rituals. All texts exist in relation to other text and / or other kinds of human expression. That is the reason why not only the current political and social situation in the PRC, but also the knowledge of traditional culture, is so significant to read and interpret properly, and then talk about Chinese contemporary art.

¹⁾ Butler (1990).

²⁾ Kristeva (1969)

Today, I would like to demonstrate my research method on the example of selected photographic projects of two artists: Chen Qiulin (born in 1975, in Wanxian, presently within the city of Chongqing, Sichuan) and Liu Ren (born in 1980, in Qinhuangdao, Hebei). The former frequently takes the theme of the poorly thought-out modernisation of cities, towns, and villages in her work. In the ruins of her hometown – Wanxian – which was demolished and all its inhabitants resettled due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, Chen arranged a performance – ‘Farewell Poem’ (2002) – which, in turn, became an inspiration for a series of photographs and a video work. The artist, wearing a proper costume, is seen performing a scene from the opera ‘Farewell My Concubine’ (Bawang Bie Ji) in the rubble of the demolished town. The show is as close to her as the demolished town, because as a child she used to go to opera performances with her grandfather, an avid lover of Sichuan opera. This is the reason why she chose scenes from a well-known opera in the making of a farewell performance to honour Wanxian.³⁾ The artist thus makes a reference to vernacular drama, a symbol of the old culture that is becoming obsolete in modern China as a result of too rapid and expansive modernisation, which has a devastating effect on both the natural environment and society.

The theme of a lonely woman in a white dress among the rubble also appears in her other work. In ‘Solidified Scenery’ (2009), Chen can be seen dressed as a bride wearing a western style wedding dress but with long sleeves, resembling those characteristic of traditional Chinese opera, standing in front of the ruins of a factory destroyed in the earthquake which hit Sichuan in May 2008. Long sleeves in theatre emphasise the artistic expression of the actors and the emotions of the portrayed characters. In this scene, they are hanging in a disorderly fashion.

The artist can also be seen wearing the same outfit in the photograph ‘Old Archway’ (2009). As in ‘Farewell Poem’, here the performer’s outfit is also significant; therefore, it is worth considering its symbolic meaning. In the context of China, white is frequently mistakenly associated with mourning. This wrong interpretation is caused by the word *su*, which means unbleached fabric,⁴⁾ like the coarse, fair grey-brown clothes worn after the loss of a close person. Common western belief persistently associates the colour with the despair felt after the death of a family member or a friend. In the case of

³⁾ Pepper (2009).

⁴⁾ Eberhard (2007: 25-26).

these works, such an interpretation could well be justified, the more so as the woman is wearing pearls, which in Chinese tradition used to symbolise tears and also purity.⁵⁾ This latter meaning of pearls is, however, similar to the meaning of pure whiteness: virginity.⁶⁾ Thus, in the photographs of the artist, two types of imagery – mourning and purity/innocence – overlap. The first complements the image of a ruined cityscape, the other stands in stark contrast to it. The sight of a lonely bride brings about questions as to the fate of her beloved. This illustrates the tragedy of families separated by a (natural) disaster. Chen's works are then also a tribute to the people gone missing, the survivors and their suffering. This is what the artist has to say on the subject:

We cannot avoid natural disasters – life goes on. I made videos and performed in the areas hit by the earthquake as a commemoration and hope that more people will see how people are living in these areas and help them.⁷⁾

The 'Garden' series (2007), which shows workers carrying bunches of peonies, can certainly be seen as an example of such a commemoration. In seven photographs, we see men walking through a city which is undergoing the process of modernisation. They are passing the Yangtze River with its banks regulated with concrete, deteriorating traditional architecture, construction sites and modern skyscrapers. Nowhere, however, can they find a place for peony, considered by the Chinese to be the queen of all flowers.

In classical Chinese art, it symbolised a young woman, and when painted together with lotus, plum and chrysanthemum, it meant spring.⁸⁾ In Chen's work, bunches of these artificial flowers, placed in ceramic vases, can be read in many ways. First and foremost, they represent the old culture, together with its tradition of garden design. They may also be seen as a symbol of Chinese flora. There is no place for such values in a modern city, the new Wanxian, with its name now changed to Wanzhou, where the former gardens have been replaced by parks with artificial plants. Referring to this, the artist uses plastic flowers and imitation porcelain vases in her work. This way,

⁵⁾ Eberhard (2007: 196-197).

⁶⁾ Eberhard (2007: 25-26).

⁷⁾ Pepper (2009).

⁸⁾ Eberhard (2007: 195-196).

she also emphasizes the unsuccessful modernisation of present-day China, together with its manifestations, like the use of cheap, poor-quality materials in the production of imitation traditional goods, or replacing traditional wooden or brick architecture with stark, homogenous apartment blocks, and office towers and old gardens with artificial plazas.

References to traditional Chinese opera can also be found in the works of Liu Ren. Her photographic series 'Peony Pavilion. The Garden' and 'Peony Pavilion. Exquisite Dream' from 2008 are the quintessence of *kawaii*, an art form which originated in Japanese popular culture, characterised by excessive cuteness and girlishness. *Kawaii* is also connected with the production of cute gadgets: accessories indispensable to any teenager.

The 'Peony Pavilion. Exquisite Dream' series shows a pair of dancers performing scenes from the opera of the same title. Their scenery is the sky, and clouds are the stage under their feet. Over their heads, there is a rainbow. The entire display is immensely cute. Pink is the dominant colour, and it comes in many hues; the dancer's clothes are pastel, while their surroundings are more vivid. This is what the first four photographs in the series look like. The last, on the other hand, is an image of pink liquid with air bubbles inside in which we can see scenes from previous photographs. Are they parallel worlds or are they memories? The author does not give us a straight answer, but instead leaves the viewer rather intrigued with such a finale.

Oneiric world is the main theme of all Liu Ren's works. An earlier project, 'Paradise' (2006), offers a visualisation of her idea of this heavenly place. The artist is seen transforming into an angel with white wings, on one occasion dancing as a multiplied figure at one of the gates of the Forbidden City and, on another, as a colossus looking from inside its walls at smog-coated modern Beijing. The forms of her works are a reference to traditional painting. They include panoramas inspired by horizontal scrolls as well as images inscribed in a circle or an oval such as, for example, the inked leaves that were meant to be placed in the albums of Chinese collectors. The artist uses the same forms in her other series such as 'The Journey with a Cow' (2010).

In this series, Liu Ren makes a multi-level reference to ink painting, through the form of a leaf meant to be placed in a special collector's album, and also through the content. Each work contains iconographic motifs from ancient art: a water lily, a rock, cranes, carp, a cricket, butterflies, dragonflies, a snake, and a blooming plum tree. The main theme is a reference to a series of ten paintings from the Song dynasty which show a story of a herder and an ox. On her eponymous journey through the pages of an album, the artist

is seen walking in a black overcoat accompanied by a black cloud, which looks like streaks of ink dissolving in water. The background is white, and the plants and animals are coloured, which recalls ink painting. The cow from the title appears in two photographs, once in the form of a calf and on the other: the whole herd.

There are no separate words in the Chinese language for a cow, an ox, and a bull. The animal used to be employed in the cultivation of land in China, and, because of this, it was greatly respected. At different times in history, the consumption of beef was forbidden by imperial charter. The animal came to symbolise spring and, even more importantly, strength. It was associated with the element of water.⁹⁾ Liu Ren's project is a tribute to the Buddhist teachings of Zen, according to which the herder trying to harness the ox is a metaphor for the heart and the animal for character. Their plight, pictured in ten scenes, represents the long process of concentration in Buddhist practice, which leads to enlightenment and liberty.¹⁰⁾ Diana Freundl comments on the works of the artist in this context:

“Completed during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the visual narrative of the ox and herder is a metaphor for the taming of physical senses in pursuit of a true Buddha nature. ‘My Journey with the Ox’, is a personal re-interpretation of the original series by Liu Ren, who places herself as the ox herder in the story. Mimicking the 10 passages from Kuo Yan, Liu Ren's character is read as a character analysis through the teachings, and questions gender roles in traditional cultural and religious texts.”¹¹⁾

Liu Ren's ‘The Journey with Cow’ combines simplicity of form with deep philosophical meaning.

Both artists draw from the rich cultural heritage of China. Chen Qiulin uses symbolic objects to illustrate contemporary problems, while Liu Ren makes direct references to classical philosophy, religion, and art in her work. My article does not exhaust the list of cultural references in their work, but it helps justify the thesis which says that to be able to read and interpret Chinese contemporary art properly, and then to discuss it, it is not enough to know the Chinese language, history, and current reality of the People's

⁹⁾ Eberhard (2007: 289-290).

¹⁰⁾ Jiang (2010).

¹¹⁾ Freundl (2011).

Republic of China. To be able to do that one needs to have knowledge in the field of cultural heritage, both material and immaterial.

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1. Chen Qiulin, Farewell Poem, 2007. Courtesy of the artist and A Thousand Plateaus Art Space. Copyright Chen Qiulin



2. Chen Qiulin, Garden, 2007. Courtesy of the artist and A Thousand Plateaus Art Space. Copyright Chen Qiulin



3 & 4 . Liu Ren, *The Journey with a Cow*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist