



The Creative Climate for Contemporary Artists in China: Told Through Two Major Artworks by Zhang Ding (张鼎)

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Chinese contemporary artists create under two diametrically opposed pressures - Chinese government censorship of any artwork with a provocative or rebellious political message and the international art market's appetite for works that criticize the government and have a souvenir-like 'Chineseness.'

Abstract

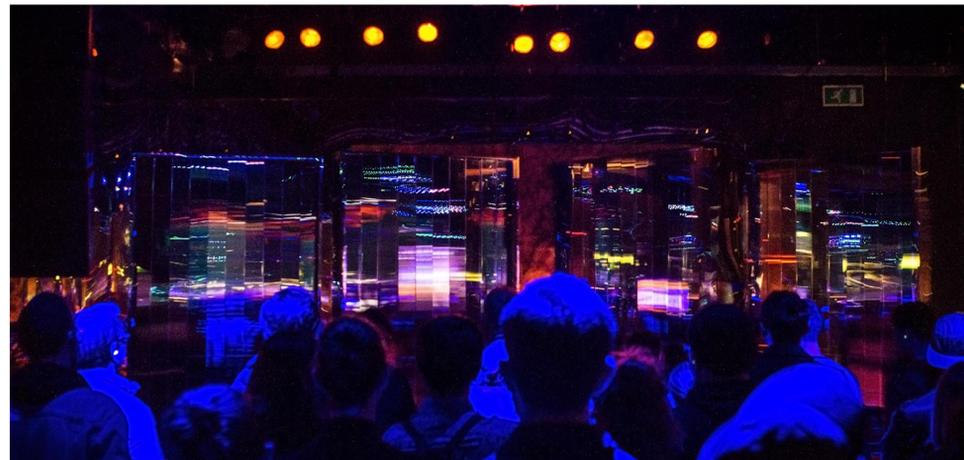
In Articles 35 and 57 of the Chinese Constitution, the Communist Party of China (CCP) grants its people freedom of expression. However, since the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the CCP has closely censored all forms of expression, especially visual art, performance art, and literature. Although censorship pressure has varied since 1949, today contemporary artists in China still create under strict censorship laws. Censorship as a societal issue in China creates questions about how contemporary artists are expressing themselves. Are these artists complicit with the government's authoritarian view of reality? Or in the abstraction of contemporary artwork, are they secretly rebellious? In looking more closely at their situation, it became clear that Chinese contemporary artists are experiencing a wider scope of limiting pressures while creating, including but not limited to government censorship. The question then became, what is the creative climate for contemporary artists in China? The works of artists such as installation artist Zhang Ding (张鼎, b. 1980) make clear that the attitudes of the international art market toward Chinese contemporary art also limits artists in China. This research project explores the limitations under which China's contemporary artists create today, as exemplified by analysis of two major installations by Zhang Ding.

Introduction

- ❖ Contemporary Art began in China in 1979 through the Stars Group, a group of artists united around the same rebellious spirit against the government.
- ❖ Artist Zhang Ding (张鼎) comes from a younger generation.
 - His generation struggles between the identity of Chinese contemporary art set by prior rebellious artists, and the worldwide, freer, more abstract definition of the contemporary artist.
- ❖ 'Chineseness' is defined in this project as traditional references and symbols of Chinese culture in an artwork.

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Enter The Dragon (2015)



- ❖ **CONCEPT:** An artistic concert in London, UK in collaboration with local bands/DJs.
 - Strobe lights and spinning mirrors framed a split stage, where two artists performed music simultaneously, causing chaos.
 - **Inspired by the 1973 Bruce Lee movie, *Enter the Dragon***, one of the first Hong Kong-Hollywood production collaborations.
 - Installation eventually traveled to Shanghai, China for viewing by Chinese audiences.
- ❖ **ANALYSIS:** Zhang dodges and comments on censorship with the installation's abstract quality and by exhibiting in a foreign country.
 - Illustrates the sea of chaos in which Chinese contemporary artists create, filled with rules, expectations, and pressures from inside and outside China.
- ❖ Does Zhang cater just to Westerners, abandoning 'Chineseness' entirely?
 - **Use of mirrors:** audience is a part of the piece's imagery, since audience is a sea of Western faces - a statement on the way the Western eye judges contemporary Chinese art.
 - **Zhang's homage to Bruce Lee**, a cultural icon in both China and the West, **symbolizes a conceptual bridge between 'Chineseness' and 'Westernness.'**
 - Chinese film studio had control over the depiction of Chinese people in Hollywood (previously very racist) for the first time.
 - The inspiration from and relation to this revolutionary movie shows **Zhang does not abandon 'Chineseness,' but celebrates its authentic portrayal to Western audiences, albeit commodified.**

Devouring Time (2016)



- ❖ **CONCEPT:** A gilded prison where an exclusive list of art patron VIP guests participated in a ceremonial meal and art auction, all while locked in the cells; exhibited in Shanghai, China.
 - Video production and photos by Zhang and his team are the only existing commemorations of the installation.
 - Emphasis on specific elements of the piece and not others, possibly to evade the expected censorship with creating a prison installation?
- ❖ **ANALYSIS:** Zhang emphasizes the art auction, commenting on pressure from the international art market to produce work that is overtly rebellious or 'Chinese.' **Artists feel trapped by expectations - Zhang's prison.**
 - Emphasis on the traditional, ceremonial nature of the Chinese meal served during the event.
 - Mocks the art market's desire for 'Chineseness' with this meal.
- ❖ **It is impossible to ignore the theme of prison in the context of censorship in China and Zhang's own arrest in Beijing in 2007.**
 - Zhang does his best to avoid all political references, but the prison itself is certainly a symbol touching on China's censorship-ridden creative atmosphere.

Conclusion

This project demonstrates there are a multitude of pressures limiting the creative agency of contemporary artists in China. While censorship is a real and quite intense pressure for these artists, a concurrent pressure that is equally limiting is the international art world's expectations of Chinese contemporary artwork, specifically 'Chineseness' and evidence of political commentary, and even rebellion.