

# The Multiple Predicaments and Upturns

## of Chinese Contemporary Art

Ai Weiwei

In China, it is only during the last few years that contemporary art has started to openly enter society and the public consciousness. This “improvement” in the cultural environment dawned after a series of unofficial exhibitions (such as *Fuck Off* in 2000), but it was not a result of the vast communist machine granting some ideological approval to contemporary culture. On the contrary, it came after the “reform and opening up” policy was introduced in 1978, and Western material culture and lifestyles began to infiltrate this ancient land. It stemmed from the tentative explorations of a nation of people gradually regaining their self-confidence, and wanting to make a place for themselves in international contemporary culture. Still, the majority of art exhibitions and debates that have taken place these last few years have attracted only a limited audience, comprised mainly of artists and those connected to the art world in some way.

For many years, China lacked the political and social foundations on which contemporary culture could develop, and for several decades contemporary art was regarded by the mainstream as “bourgeois spiritual pollution,” a product of degenerated Western ideals. During that period, culture and art played no active part in social ideology, social reforms lacked the rational attitudes and independent input of intellectuals, and Chinese contemporary art was unable to find a way out of the relatively closed state of “self-regulation.”

This condition could be likened to the psychological state strived for by traditional Chinese scholars who would focus on maintaining their own moral integrity, especially during times of upheaval, in order to evade misfortune. Although Chinese contemporary art is no match for the unprecedented and dynamic social transformations that are taking place in China today, it shows a rich emotional and intellectual expression, reflecting on history and evaluating the possibilities of contemporary life in a way that accurately represents reality. There is little resistance or controversy to be seen here; the majority of works still avoid any socio-political statement or involvement, or rather these statements or involvement tend to be expressed as ambiguity, evasion, self-ridicule, and self-harm, or sometimes as a meditative self-examination process and the maintenance of “one’s own moral integrity.”

Since the 1979 *Stars* exhibition, held a few years after the end of the Cultural Revolution (an event generally regarded as the first open attempt by contemporary artists to win ideological emancipation), Chinese contemporary art has attracted attention in the West and been characterized there as “anti-government.” Even today, when China’s government is no longer what it once was, this kind of Cold War-era simplification still occurs. It is partly the result of making naive judgments about a culture without really understanding the developments and changes it is undergoing, but it is also caused by the complexity, confusion, and divided social reality that lies between China’s socialist ideology and its political and cultural *status quo*.

The standards of Western contemporary art hold sway over discourse in the art world in China. Unsurprisingly, this system, as represented by mainstream art institutions and galleries, collectors, art critics, and cultural production, is at once curious and confused about the new art coming out of China. However, the country’s lengthy period of isolation and

“exotic” otherness has not allowed a true understanding of Chinese contemporary art or a basic interpretation of “what happened where.” In most cases, the presentation and exhibition of Chinese contemporary art in the West is based on brief encounters, a careless or even novelty-seeking mentality. These exhibitions are like remnants and relics washed up by the sea onto a bright sunny beach, but can anyone imagine what terrible disaster landed them there?

In the vast majority of the many East-West cultural exchanges and exhibitions (both official and unofficial) that have taken place in recent years—including the display of work by foreign artists—deceptions caused by the lack of a basic knowledge of Chinese culture have occupied the biggest market. Everything is explained away according to simplistic political and ideological explanations, “grasping the eyebrows and the beard all at once,” as we say, while sanctimonious, hypocritical events that pride themselves on being “politically correct” make selections based solely and absolutely by the standards Western art. A multitude of misinterpretations, and an infatuation with them, has left Chinese contemporary art in a farcical position of “weasels giving birth to rats—each generation worse than the last,” an accurate reflection of the countless predicaments Chinese contemporary art encounters within cultural exchange. We have seen Chinese contemporary art only gradually moving toward a self-confidence and maturity that stems from an understanding of the contemporary world, and the contemplation of one’s own cultural environment.

Over the last century, China has experienced unprecedented political, economic, and cultural change. It is precisely the culture’s adaptability, ambiguity, and capacity for transformation that has given China a tremendous regenerative power. In the past, when China was conquered and ruled by other nations or cultures, it always, even amid tremendous political upheavals, absorbed the traits of those cultures and recovered, becoming a brand new China each time. For example, the Han dynasty exemplified China’s Central Plains (the area around the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River) culture, but during the subsequent Tang dynasty the influence of the growing Persian presence in the Western Regions (an area that included what is now Xinjiang and parts of Central Asia) dominated. The enthusiasm shown by the entire country for this altered Tang culture was really quite bizarre. The Tang dynasty turned everything upside-down, from aesthetic principles to quotidian interests, the spiritual and the material. Artistic styles and forms unrelated to Chinese cultural tradition came to be universally regarded as typical representations of Chinese society. In fact, it was a Western culture identifying with values perceived as similar to its own, a type of identification that created a made-up story of Chinese culture, which gained tacit acceptance. This coexistence of different but complementary ideals, dissolving and integrating, has always affected China’s historical and cultural process.

In the course of the past twenty years, artists in China have been subject to violent political, cultural, and economic upheaval. Following the shift in state power triggered by revolt, there has been a ceaseless ideological revolution. A moribund economy has transformed into a materialist, capitalist society—rich, vital, and full of utopian communist ideals. Though