

Original Paper

Chinese Artists Living Abroad: Art, Cultural Identity and Hybridity

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Abstract

This article will reveal the discussion of identity conflict between past and present Chinese art practice abroad through reflection on the Art works- Trace, and through Homi Bhabha's theory of identity hybridization. It seeks to explore the significance of the individual and its connection to the globalized art theme.

Keywords

chinese artists, abroad, contemporary art, cultural identity, hybridity

1. Introduction

We could suggest, that the topic of identity, has been extensively explored within the history of art (Jones, 2013). This is based on a universal topic which has inspired artists, to create work that explores questions around who we are, or identity (Robertson & McDaniel, 2009). These questions can be guided by the intention to know oneself on two levels: self- publicity and individual consciousness. (Robertson & McDaniel, 2009). Within the field of contemporary art in China, artists such as Xu Bing, Yan Wang Preston have explored the topic of identity through the creation of work that focuses on hybridity (Anderson, 1999), or the sense of hybrid identity that the international experience of living away from their home country has provoked. An example of such work can be observed in the work of innovation of calligraphy and status of river in urban place. Yet, it can be suggested that each of them will be impact my practice. Therefore, I will also introduce my own works - by the enlightenment of these artists to show their ideals about feeling of globalization to respond the theme of hybridity.

2. Method

2.1 Hybridity in Chinese Culture Identity

Cultural identity has long been a new topic in the field of Chinese contemporary art. Starting from the 1990s, when Chinese artists went to the world through the then Chinese avant-garde art, the awakening of their ideas gave their works a strong personal flavor (Jiang, 2007). The atmosphere of showing interest in private life (Gao, 1986) has continued until now. Wu Hong described in “Works and Exhibitions -Wu Hong on Chinese Contemporary Art” that “many Chinese artists have become travelers in the past 10 years, traveling and living in different parts of the world and returning to participate in exhibitions.”

The works of these artists with overseas life experience are often mixed with a considerable flavor of Chinese culture and western culture. Faced with this situation, most scholars believe that it is more appropriate to discuss this phenomenon from the perspective of Chinese contemporary cultural identity, especially to choose Homi Bhabha’s identity theory “The third space” to discuss, which is more in line with the

context of the current globalization theme of interaction (Hou & Gao, 1990). Despite some scholars unwilling to use this theory because that it is inappropriate to put the phenomenon in to the discussion of the colonialism and post colonialism which is Bhabha’s theory background. They believe the culture identity in china, which is full of integration of theory with Western and East, is not a single national culture identity that western thinks (Hou, 1994).

However, I want to focus on using the theory of Homi k Bhabha to explain the creative purpose of Chinses artist who living abroad. There have good historical evidence and works of art to support this view. Began in the 1990s, the western aesthetics generally believed that colonial thought was superior to Chinese art, which made the chinses artist taste orientation at that time too political, catering to western aesthetics and markets (Smith, 2005). Some Chinese artists’ involvement in cultural identity hybridity in their works is a strategy and means to curry favors with the western art market (Zhang & Frazier, 2017). This phenomenon accords with the research background of Bhabha’s theory-the influence of post-colonialism- non-Western cultures are self- shielded,

written in a western way, and dominated by Western words. At the same time, this cultural strategy can be look as artists growing as well, crossing cultural divides, and transforming their cultural experience into effective language to intervene in new social reality (Hou & Gao, 1990). Choosing the latter perspective will more force on the discussion of the artist’s personal cultural identity, and these artworks mixed with different cultures may be analyzed simply from the perspective of “translation and negotiation” in baba’s hybrid identity theory.

Homi k Bhabha’s research believes that every identity can be rewritten and negotiated to give the weak the initiative to rewrite the dominant culture. It indicates a state of integration between two different individuals, thus coping with the anxiety of unknown identity. This means that when these overseas artists receive the knowledge of different local cultures, they may try to convert these foreign

knowledges into their own cognition, thus weakening their unidentified anxiety caused by different cultures. (Homi, 2004)

Especially in the context of globalization in recent years, the Internet, and even high-tech vehicles such as airplanes have expanded the scope of people's activities and made it easier for them to send and receive information (Anderson, 1999). Science and technology have expanded people's perception of the region, thereby reducing the identification of the identity of the location and the environment (He, 2012). This exacerbates the occurrence of heterogeneity in different cultures and arts. Under this phenomenon, artists who travel abroad change their cultural identity through their own initiative and flexibility: while modifying and supplementing their own cultural identity, they draw a line between themselves and others and recognize themselves (He, 2012). This coping strategy makes them reduce the anxiety brought about by identity, while also satisfying their pursuit of the most primitive and pure desire: answering the human instinct about who I am.

2.1.1 The Chinese Artist Examples

The above theory can be illustrated by two artists related to this topic.

Xu Bing. Following the creation of "book of sky" in the 1990s, Xu Bing continued to explore the aesthetic and understanding possibilities of Chinese characters. After immigrating to the United States, he obtained new artistic aesthetic inspiration (Smith, 2005) and created the most influential artistic font work "New English Square Calligraphy".

This artistic font consists of 26 English letters inside, but its appearance is presented in a square structure peculiar to Chinese fonts. Its reading habits are also very consistent with those of China or the West: from left to right, from top to bottom, and from outside to inside (Li, 2014).

This approach, which is based on the cultural background of traditional Chinese calligraphy and can smoothly reset western characters into the Chinese character structure, can prove that artists can smoothly convert foreign cultures such as English into their own cognitive attribution through the basis of local culture, namely Chinese. However, Bing Xu has solved the problem of arts and culture that do not conform to local specifications in different cultural backgrounds (Smith, 2005). It retains the laws of traditional Chinese calligraphy, and at the same time, it also creates a possibility that transcends cultural barriers and expands specific contexts (Jiang, 2007).

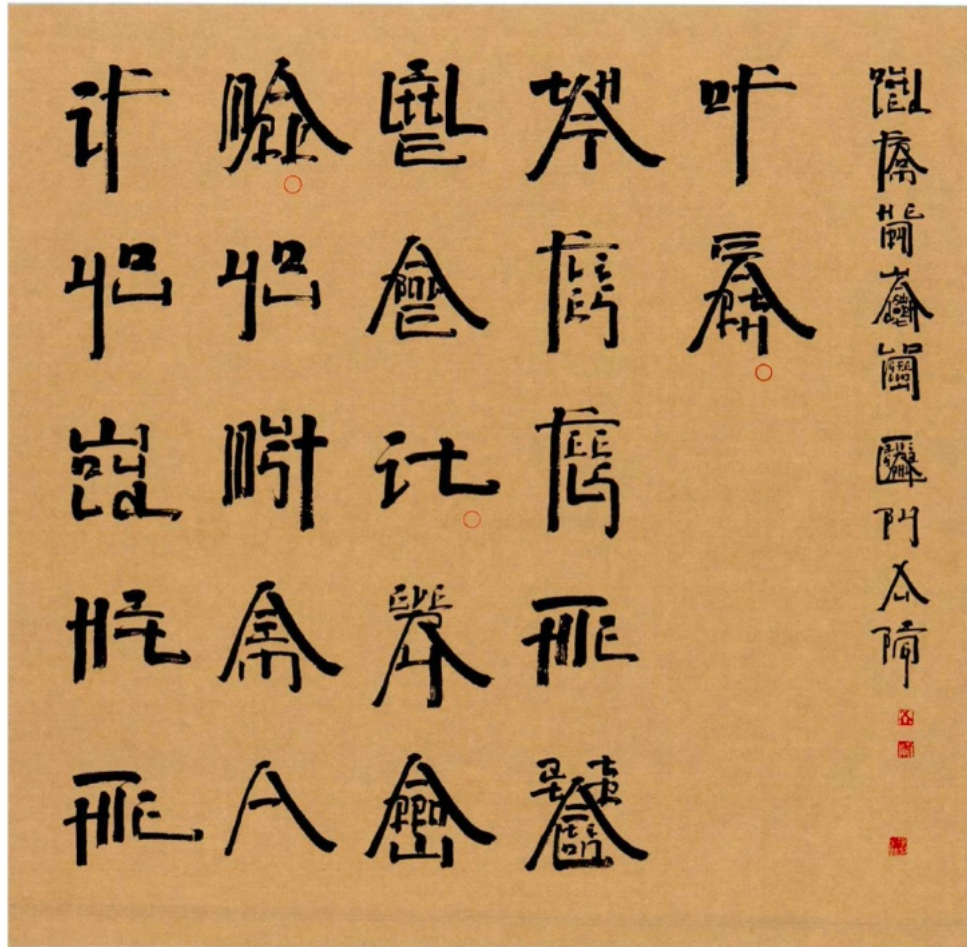


Figure 1. Xu Bing. New English Square Calligraphy – Longfellow’s Warming 2016. (177 x 192 cm)

Yan Wang Preston. Yan Wang Preston’s long-term photography project “Mother River” can also be used as an example of the complexity of cultural identity. This work is a photography that she uses a large-frame film camera to shoot the 6211km long Yangtze River at precise intervals for 4 years.

Her inspiration for creation comes from anxiety about her vague identity. Since she came to Britain to study photography in 2005, she has been reflecting on the influence of Chinese identity on herself. This kind of reflection full of homesickness makes her notice that she can make use of the aesthetic appreciation she learned in the west and re-examine her Chinese identity (Preston & Barth, 2018). Cheattle (2015) commented in his special contribution to the works of Yan Wang Preston and her mother river: “Wang Yan’s life in England, Britain’s land and its natural scenery have all given her more acute observation of China’s land.”

With such new foreign life experience and Chinese roots, she chose to re-show the scenery along the Yangtze River that “mother river” with traditional symbolic significance in China. Examining herself and even the most authentic status quo in modern China, which has been hit by economic shocks.



Figure 2. Yan Wang Preston. Mother river. 2013. Photograph

3. Art Practice: Trace

Enlightened by the above-mentioned artists, it has concept that inspects experience subjects that can be seen in our life. The practice absorbs period drawing skills learned from Chinese paintings and attempt to integrate them into the context of Chinese contemporary art. Also, trees were observed in daily to leave an extremely profound impact on individual art experience.

This practice is a piece of paper which is made from leaves and plants. In addition, there will have an original appearance of the leaves painting on the surface.

Those original materials are noticed from city parks that have mounts of different plants and these “permanent residents” rooted in Birmingham. In addition, the main reason I chose the leaves as a raw material because with inspiring by the photography of Wang Yan Preston as a case study. In this situation, trees have the same territoriality as humans. First, trees are rooted in the soil and can only be found in this place. For that reason, their growth status is affected by soil and climate which are the essential elements to disguise the diverse areas. In south of China, such as Guangzhou, the climate is similar with spring in all four seasons. Besides, the soil in that place is fertile. Secondly, most trees will not change the color of the leaves as the seasons changing. However, in Birmingham, soil and climate characteristics have changed, so it will be more clearly to feel the outlet of temperature and humidity. Therefore, the leaves in Birmingham will turn red in autumn and withering in winter when they turn

yellow. Their states-no change or change, are like symbols of this area (Anderson, 1999). Life in China has imprinted me on an indelible cultural gene, making me a Chinese. When I went abroad and received a different environment in Birmingham, it also transformed a part of me as the life in China. Basically, I am also a Chinese born and raised. However, I am also different from this kind of people because I have a unique memory of Birmingham outside China.

Choosing paper as the main carrier of creation, mainly represents one of my own symbols-an objects that can represent my cultural identity. In my previous art learning experience, the study of Chinese painting occupied most of the time. For this reason, most of this knowledge is applied to paper, that is, painting on the shelf.

Naturally, I am very familiar with the material of paper, so I want to transform the materials between paper and the leaves to expresses the ideal that the changes of diversity and cross-media in my study of contemporary art in Birmingham. For example, chineses artist Xu Bing, who using the brushwork of Chinese calligraphy and combining the western language- English, have created the series of special typefaces created as his own style or a peculiar symbol as himself. Being Inspired for Xu Bing, I have an ideal that using the leaves of the trees that are rooted in Birmingham to imitate the papermaking process of Xuan paper, A reproduced “Xuan paper” which is made in Birmingham specially.

Paintings on paper emphasize the different results of the same process by recreating the original appearance of the leaves. This is the same principle as imitating process of Xuan paper, but the method of re-selecting the leaves is foil sticking in traditional Chinese painting techniques. The attempt that translates Chinese painting techniques into contemporary language is also in line with the theory of cultural transformation between east and west mentioned above. For example, techniques are used to weaken the non-realistic treatment in Chinese paintings and emphasize the realistic texture of leaves.



Figure 3. Artwork: Trace



Figure 4. Artwork: Trace

4. Discussion (Conclusions)

At present, globalization has still become the hottest topic and inevitable trend. In this context, it is more important to study the complexity of Chinese cultural identity. The reason is that cultural diversities can prevent the emergence of identity essentialization, and cause people not stand still, but bravely accept new knowledge and help the Chinese themselves to carry out effective knowledge reconstruction in today's information explosion. (He, 2014)

This reconstruction is conducive to our development in the general environment of contemporary art. Additionally, when everyone realizes that they have different cultural identities, people can have miraculous creativity.

These reflections and process of these creations are all about my past and present explorations of culture and identity, especially impact of miscellaneous: sparks from a combination of two different experiences in my practice. With the reconstruction of Xuan paper in my work, it is also an important way for me to know individual life and even the world.

Acknowledgement

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