Inaugural Editorial

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For over thousands of years, knowledge issuing from and cultivated by the Chinese has propagated outwards from China to the benefit of the entire world. Epistemes of Chinese thought and practice have disseminated throughout the sea routes of East Asia, transforming the cultures that they touched. Chinese ingenuity crossed into the great territories of Central Asia and beyond, including Europe, by way of the famous Silk Road. Today China is once again an ascending global force in commodity production, from high technology goods to throwaway trinkets. More profoundly perhaps, Chinese voices are being recognized worldwide for their contributions to the arts—in particular, the domains of film and visual art.

The list of notable Chinese inventions that have impacted the course of world history is extensive; the effects of these inventions abide. Chinese ingenuity has also played an ineffaceable role in the shaping of the condition of modernity. Western modernism, that quintessentially European ideology of commitment to the contents of the ontology of the present, is itself a conglomeration of many non-Western ideas, including Chinese ones. From Sinclair Lewis to Voltaire, from French chinoiserie to English tea drinking, from the Confucian sensibilities of Ezra Pound to the paintings of Mark Tobey, Chineseness as an idea, as a perspective, and as a way of being has consistently infected the definition of modernism.

Just as it is important to note the contributions of Chinese culture on world culture, so much of China’s cultural constitution, including many of its most traditional attributes, have also been shaped by China’s long history of contact with other peoples and cultures. To cite one obvious example is Buddhism, which was decisively introduced to China from India during the reign of Emperor Ming Di. Three points should be made here regarding Buddhism. The first is that as Buddhism consolidated into China, it was both transformed and preempted by Daoism, which saw Buddhism as a challenge to its identity. For example, Daoism incorporated many accommodations to Indo-generated Buddhist ideas, including reincarnation. The second point is that the entry of Buddhism into China was not an entirely passive process, but at times a violent one marked by the persecution of its adherents. The third and most important point is that Buddhism is but one of many important and enduring markers of intercultural exchange within the development of Chinese civilization.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, when European missionaries began to assert themselves as an important presence with proselytizing outposts along the southern shores of China, much of the contact with the West has also been of a terrible nature. China’s complex admixture of
fear and resentment toward the West, on one hand, and admiration and emulation on the other, has characterized and often transfixed China’s perspective on Europe since the advent of the industrial revolution on that continent. In the name of Western civilization, the whole of Chinese society, comprising its cultural, political, and scientific systems of functioning, has been shaken severely and subjected to the dismantling and often ridiculing gaze of the West.

The launch of the Opium Wars in 1840 marks a particularly ignominious moment of painful contact with the Western imperium. Although the ignominy was exacerbated by China’s complacency in terms of its own ancient achievements in culture and science, the effect of 1840 was decisive and exposed China to a new global economic and political situation dominated by the West. 1840 represented as much an awakening from a dream as it did an awakening into a nightmare, in which the West saw the world in increasingly providential terms, as an artefact to be shaped and determined as it saw fit. As Edward Said has argued in *Orientalism* (1978) and which bears repeating once more, the West increasingly saw itself as the only legitimate culture and, on this basis of belief, attempted to install itself as the singular civilization of reference the world over. It did so with the power accrued from a diagnosis of the Other in the ideology of Orientalism, in which European civilizations can be defined in relation to a constructed Eastern Other and in which Europe always holds the dominant hand. The launch of the so-called Opium Wars introduced a distress to the Chinese psyche—hitherto unknown to the Chinese—for its discursive trappings in areas such as judicial and trade language.

In my many visits to China, the view has been frequently put to me that China’s confrontation with Western modernity resulted in a modernity quite different from that of other nations. This insistence on China’s differences from the rest of the world deserves to be problematized, not simply accepted. Differences should not be absolutized and fixed in their authority, to the point of deflecting from the greater common ground that China shares with Africa, the rest of Asia, and the cultures of the non-European Americas. And what is that common ground? It is an historical and cultural territory of a shared problematic relationship to the primacy of the Western narrative. In particular, the insistence on distancing China from poorer parts of the world is to extend the idea of China’s autonomy from the West to that of history itself. To do so ignores the fact that much of the world experienced a shared, albeit differently marked, relationship to Western imperial history. In this regard, China’s 1960s engagement with much of the
world’s formerly colonized peoples, particularly in Africa, is a shining example of a truly progressive and purposeful Chinese perspective. Why set China apart from the formerly colonized peoples of Africa based on quantitative differences regarding degrees of colonization? Often, it seems it is the non-Western world that maintains the aegis of the West, but then this is also one of the salient features of the ideology of Said’s Orientalism.

The historic phenomenon of colonialism casts a huge and painful shadow over much of the world; it gave rise to a diversity of material effects over much of the world that it conquered. The important point to not lose sight of is the fact that postcolonial theory has been produced in all societies into which the imperial force of the West has intruded. From this perspective, China has much in common with not only the many nations of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, but the minoritarian and diasporic populations that also know of racism and oppression from within the territory of Western nations themselves. Thus, there is truth to the statement that the West is nowhere and yet everywhere.

“What is that which has been obscured and repressed since the start of China’s engagement with the Western art world?” professor and author Sarat Maharaj asked of Chinese artists and scholars during his visit to China in 2000. The politically understandable response from many Chinese scholars is that local voices of Chinese culture have been lost under the perceived monolith of international contemporary art. Such a response should include a deeper inquiry, more salient to an understanding of the reasons why the start of the 1980s now represents an Edenic point of beginning for the narrative of contemporary Chinese art. In other words, what happened by the end of the 1970s to cause the eruption of so much art and engagement? How can we understand the historical and cultural processes by which so many art objects, which seemed to spring out of nowhere at the start of the 1980s, came into being? For an initial inquiry, the antecedent decades of the 1960s and ’70s, that is, the period of the so-called Cultural Revolution, can offer valuable insights.

Lord Elgin, the British official who ordered the razing and ransacking of the Summer Palace during the Second Opium War, was reported to have felt a momentary regret over its senseless ruination.¹ This was but one tiny fissure in the then impregnable face of the West that was projected into China. Prior to the First Opium War, Royal Navy captain Charles Elliot incurred the ire of his countrymen when he posted a public notice citing the danger in the illegal trafficking of opium by British merchants, which he claimed “was rapidly staining

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¹ James Bruce, eighth earl of Elgin and twelfth earl of Kincardine (1811–63) was appointed high commissioner and plenipotentiary in China in May 1857 as part of Britain’s efforts to open China and Japan to Western trade. He served as governor-in-chief of Canada from 1847 to 1854.
the British character with deep disgrace.” This was another tiny fissure. Since those contemptible days of the nineteenth century, the fissures have grown into rhizomes and many of the rhizomes have amalgamated into valleys that course through the monolithic term known as the West.

It is true that the modernist narrative of Western art is propelled by the contradictory condition of artistic practice within a capital-fuelled marketplace. Wariness in the face of the marketplace is necessary not only to Chinese artists but also to non-Chinese artists. The potential uprooting and loss of the many collective identities and traditional cultures of the world in the name of a unified aesthetic sensibility is another legitimate concern. However, this does not necessarily mean that there may not be any effective resistance to this homogenizing phenomenon by any particular or local sources.

Today, the productive and destabilizing forces of revolutionary cultural exchange are all bearers of hybridized identities, including Chinese identities. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, “claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity.”

In Régis Debray’s “A Modest Contribution to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Tenth Anniversary,” a reflection on the events of May 1968 in France, Debray put forward the view that leading French artists and intellectuals, including Julia Kristeva and Jean-Luc Godard, have suffered from the cultural misrecognition of China. Debray criticized the French obsession with the thought of Mao Zedong as the obsession of adventurers: “all the Colombuses of modernity thought that behind Godard they were discovering China in Paris, when the fact they were landing in California.” Is it possible that misrecognition goes both ways, from the West as well as from China? Is it possible that both sides are too quick to jump to conclusions regarding the so-called “basic understanding” of one to the other?

As the art world becomes increasingly open to the voices and perspectives of alterity and different communities from around the world, alterity is not simply an accommodative term within the discursive logic of an hypostatized contemporary art world transfixed to the marketplace. To believe so would be to foreclose the possibility that there can ever be a world of art in which genuine dialogue between different communities can take place and affect one another.

A genuine openness to cultural difference cannot begin so long as the signifiers of cultural diversity continue to hold authority over any notion of cultural exchange. Only after claims to cultural fixity are dislodged can a mutual interrogation of traditions and alternative
modes of conduct be possible, and only then can a dialogic democracy be developed, one which is based on the recognition of the authenticity of the other. Until these claims are questioned, the idea of China and the idea of the West will remain totemic terms mutually exotic to one another. As history has repeatedly demonstrated, exoticism is a term soaked in the irreconcilable and the tragic.