The Political Pop Art of Wang Guangyi: Metonymic for an Alternative Modernity

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the political pop art of contemporary Chinese artist Wang Guangyi in light contemporaneous shifts within the political, economic, and artistic space of China from 1978 until the present. Through an analysis of the work of art as an historically determined antagonistic aesthetic praxis, this thesis attempts to reveal the sedimented traces of the alternative modernity which the Chinese government is actively attempting to construct. With its evocative juxtaposition of contrasting ideological forms, the artwork of Wang Guangyi seeks to deconstruct the normative and teleological narratives encountered within the dialectic interplay between state sponsored transnational capitalism and Marxist-Leninist communism. An understanding of the discursive structure upon which these dual modernising narratives has been based, and of the fragmented artistic space they have engendered, should serve to enliven the debate concerning the role of cultural production in questioning and revealing narratives of the nation, of the Self, and of modernity.

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Introduction

The artwork of Wang Guangyi 王广义¹ represents a critical juncture in

contemporary Chinese art, and evokes within the viewing subject a potent sense of antagonism, criticism, and deconstructive intent. Yet it also evokes an ironic sense of complicity, for unfolding on the canvas are the parallel gestures of ideological subversion and affirmation which have characterised China's emergence on the world stage in the wake of the reform and opening process. Through an evocative juxtaposition of the ideological forms which characterise China's (re)engagement with modernity, Wang Guangyi has in effect revealed the sedimented traces of the alternative modernity which the government is actively attempting to construct.

Deriving inspiration from the work of Fredric Jameson, the theoretical juncture upon which this thesis rests concerns the attempt to

"keep alive (or to reinvent) assessments of a sociopolitical kind that interrogate the quality of social life itself by way of the text or individual work of art, or hazard an assessment of the political effects of cultural currents or movements with less utilitarianism and a greater sympathy for the dynamics of everyday life than the imprimaturs and indexes of earlier traditions" (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 298).

Similar to the epistemological strategy utilised by Foucault in his series of lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the current project does not wish to start with universal or normative claims regarding the import of its theoretical foundations, but rather begins with the analysis of concrete historical particulars. This movement is not representative of an historicism, as historicism starts with the universal, and subjects these 'claims' to the

¹ Important names, places, movements, and phrases will be indicated in Chinese within the text, where appropriate. They will thereafter be referenced using only the English version.

actual practice of history and movement of time. I shall rather attempt to unconceal the historical traces, or acts of signification, which Wang Guangyi has represented on the canvas. This essay is therefore theoretically interpretative, rather than properly art historical, as the analysis does not conceive of the works of Wang Guangyi as indicative of a modernism or postmodernism which is an "autonomous aesthetic-discursive entity" (Zhang, "Chinese Modernism" 1), but rather as an historically determined aesthetic praxis which unfolds through time. The dearth of literature on contemporary Chinese art and artists predominantly offers summary analyses of the rapid social, cultural, economic, and political changes which have been occurring in China in the wake of the 1978 reform and opening policies, however cogent theoretical analyses of the liminal tapestry of contemporary Chinese society are few and far between. The present work thereby seeks to fill this void, while at the same time remaining cognisant and cautious of the limitations of purportedly 'true' forms of analysis, the aim of which ultimately serves to conceal the possibility for the emergence of novel forms of antagonism and critique.

I am both cautious and reticent to read altogether too much into works of art, seemingly giving them a presence beyond the purview of their intended import or meaning, however to not attempt to do so would be a far graver intellectual erratum. The validity of such an interpretative project is invoked by Roland Barthes, who in his essay "The Death of the Author" argues for the validity of interpretation beyond the historical moment of a works inception, and therefore beyond the Author. The meaning inherent within any work of art is thus contingent upon the multiplicity of responses it engenders, rather than the original intent of the Author. With a few minor substitutions, to suit the particular purpose of artistic criticism, his text reads: "a [work of art] is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the [viewer], not, as was hitherto said, the [artist]. The [viewer] is the space on which all the [visual elements] that make up a [work of art] are inscribed without any of them being lost; a [work of art's] unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 148).

The aim of the present thesis is not therefore to situate Wang's work within an art historical tradition, i.e. to place it conveniently into a movement or juncture in lieu of antecedent and subsequent works of art. Rather, the attempt is to read the visual iconography of the artworks themselves, and weave them into the tapestry of contemporary Chinese society from numerous perspectives. Through an hermeneutical analysis of the emergent aesthetic within political pop art, I have attempted to invoke the possibility of reading the underlying ideological syntax and semiotic shifts within contemporary economic and political discourse. The visual critique brought about within the *Great Criticism Series* thereby seeks to reflect upon contemporary Chinese society in an effort to unconceal the deeper traces of meaning which lie both within socio-political constructs, and also behind them. Only after such an analysis will we be free to return to the work as an historically effected 'thing-in-itself' (*das Ding an sich*), thereby giving the work its presence within an overwhelmingly fragmented, polysemous artistic environment.

Upon first glance, the artwork of Wang Guangyi appears to unequivocally represent and signify the dialectic interplay between the two grand narratives of Marxist-Leninist communism and its concomitant ideological forms on the one hand, and contemporary transnational consumer capitalism on the other.² Through a diachronic analysis of the emergence of an heterogeneous and fragmented Chinese art scene, this essay aims to unconceal from within the economic and political ideological dichotomy portrayed on the canvas the ruminations of a deeper socio-political strategy of ideological intent being propagated by the ruling Chinese Communist Party.

The aesthetic strategies of political pop art serve numerous competing purposes, or may perhaps serve no purpose at all. While a form of semiotic antagonism exists within the works of Wang Guangyi, the argument will not be put forth that his work is directly critical of the political establishment, but rather that it is in a sense complicit with it. The artistic antagonism imbued in the works exists, instead, for the engaged viewer who is forced to confront the dialectic between two competing but ultimately parallel ideologies, both of whom have placed their legitimacy on a discourse of modernisation promulgated by an authoritarian state. The works of Wang Guangyi thereby reveal an alternative modernity unique to China, and the task of the present essay will seek to unconceal the signifying traces of this modernity, and the complicity of Wang Guangyi's political pop art within this newfound modernity. As Gao Minglu evocatively highlights, "the nationalism and materialism of Political Pop, based on transnational political and economic circumstances, share common roots with government policy, and the art is in a position of complicity" (Gao, "Transnational Modernity" 30). In unraveling this complicity, I will seek to reveal the biopolitical production of the individual subject through the unfolding of China's alternative modernity, which is transnational rather than

² Jameson would refer to this newfound state of capitalist development as 'late capitalism', whereas György Luckács calls it 'post-industrial capitalism'.

specifically national, and which I contend is revealed on the canvas in Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism Series*.

I will further argue that Wang Guangyi's works are not entirely conducive to objective classification as representative of the postmodern, for as Jameson asserts, "the postmodern must be characterized as a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace. In the postmodern, then, the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known 'sense of the past' or historicity and collective memory)" (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 309). As will become evident, the works of Wang Guangyi effectively evoke the past not as a means to negate it, but to reveal the rifts within the dual modernising traditions of contemporary China – socialism and capitalism – and to reveal as well the singular, normative, and teleological rhetoric upon which both modernising projects have been based. The ontological Subject has therefore not moved into the beyond, as in the post-structural and postmodern traditions, but has rather been decentred and fragmented. The ontic subject produced within the context of this emergent space inhabits an alternative modernity, which exhibits distinctly autochthonous characteristics, as a reading of the ideological shifts within Chinese political and economic discourse will engender. Political pop art is thereby among the foremost examples of the visual representation of the trajectory of China in the post reform period, serving as a metonymic for China's alternative modernity. The emergence of heterogeneous forms of artistic production³ within China in

³ I use the term production, rather than creation, for the particular reason that I feel all forms of creation are in and of themselves forms of production, which are historically instantiated, yet not necessarily teleologically derived means of effecting 'products' – whether of thought, or of a 'thingly', material nature. This conception of artistic creation as production is derived from the thought of Martin Heidegger, wherein production is a setting forth, or a presencing of the essence of a work, which is rendered in the German as *Herstellung*. By means of clarification, I should note that the present study is not a derivative of the

the 1980s and 1990s had the dual effect of ushering in a polysemous fragmentation of artistic discourse, while at the same time unconcealing the underlying ideological forms upon which the modernising project was based. As such, the nature of the work of art under the ideological throes of both socialism and capitalism engenders an epistemic rupture which cannot be ignored, for inscribed within the process of artistic production lies a narrative analysis of both the limitations and possibilities of modern consumer society.

Heideggerian project of searching for the essence of the work of art and the fundamental ontological ground from which it stems. While on one level one could posit the individual as the *a priori* category from which the authentic work of art stems (which is the phenomenological project of Heidegger), on another, seemingly historicised level (the Foucauldian project), the artist as producer is the historically entailed subject whose works represent in visual form the *Zeitgeist* of a particular temporal moment, and which are ultimately embedded in, and derivative of, the circulation of capital.

Chapter 1 The Trajectory of 20th Century Chinese Art

There exists an artistic and cultural tradition within China of aesthetic politicisation, whereby works of art and literature were directly utilised by intellectuals as well as the political apparatus as a means of disseminating particular ideological forms.⁴ The intellectuals of the period prior to the May Fourth Movement (*wusi yundong* 五四运 动) in 1919 attempted a rupture with traditional forms of power and domination – the *ancien régime* of the Qing Dynasty, foreign economic and political control, and many of the political measures introduced after the Republican revolution of 1911. Through an unmediated intellectual praxis, they emphasised the "primary importance of liberation from the intellectual and social constraints perpetuated by the traditional culture" (Grieder 205).

At the forefront of supporting the modernist trend was the intellectual and political radical Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879–1942), then working in Shanghai after a brief period in Beijing. As one of the major proponents of the New Culture Movement (*xin wenhua yundong* 新文化运动), and the founder of the magazine *The New Youth* (*xin qingnian* 新青年), Chen Duxiu was a significant figure in the promotion of the ideals and

⁴ While not to digress from our topic, an interesting quotation from the Song Dynasty painter Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) delivers a strong invective against artistic forms disjoined from the political sphere, when he states that "politics operating independently of the arts are destined to develop without soul and to increase corruption, and the arts, on the other hand, if operating independently from politics, will lose all contact with reality and will degenerate into superficiality" (Dijk & Schmid 14). Original quotation from Jacques Gernet. *A History of Chinese Civilisation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 34.

nascent political agitation that would eventually lead to the May Fourth Movement.⁵ Along with The New Youth, numerous other scholarly and popular publications flooded the Chinese market during this period, providing the broader intellectual climate in China with access to the ideas and thoughts necessary for enacting a break with their authoritarian past.⁶ Within the New Culture Movement, there was a profound sense that such a break was immanent, and there was a "pervasive mood of 'anti-structuralism' - a preference for reality conceived of in terms of a continuum of energy and transcendent formless forces rather than in terms of eternal orders and structures" (Schwartz 102). The intellectual environment both prior to and after the May Fourth Movement in 1919 was replete with questions of modernisation, identity, and social responsibility, and was rather similar to the intellectual environment which opened up in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 reforms of 1978.⁷ For Wang Guangyi, the reform period was to be a "Chinese Renaissance, by which he meant an historically significant cultural awakening that would impose upon 'the West' a Chinese perspective of the world, and counter the selfabsorption of western cultural imperialism" (Smith 36). While I would argue against such meta-geographical conceptions of an artistic and cultural clash of civilisations (the work

⁵ The magazine moved towards a more Marxist ideological platform during the 1920s, however it was to serve as an exemplary model for critical dialogue and intellectual debate in a period of immense political and social change.

⁶ Numerous journals (both academic and popular) flourished in China after 1915: "Leisure Time" (*xiaoqian di zazhi* 消遣第杂志), "Eastern Miscellany/Magazine" (*dongfang zazhi* 东方杂志), Zhang Shizhao's liberal and reformist "Tiger Magazine" (*jiayin zazhi* 甲寅杂志), "Great China" (*da zhonghua* 大中华), "Science" (*kexue* 科学) and numerous others (cf. Grieder 223).

⁷ While it is beyond the purview of this paper to provide a thorough argument for this case, I would nonetheless hold that a similar attempt to reconfigure the individual subject in the face of a singular totalising discourse did in fact exist – the intellectual and cultural forms promoted by the *ancien regime* of the Qing Dnyasty and early Republican period for the intellectuals prior to and after the May Fourth Movement, and the pervasive Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Maoist period for the intellectuals and artists of the 1980s. Karen Smith has argued briefly in her book *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant Garde Art in New China*, that a curious parallel exists between Europe, specifically Paris, in the early 1900s, and China today.

of Samuel Huntington was quite prevalent in China in the 1980s), the feeling nonetheless permeated Chinese intellectual circles, and was similar indeed to the underlying social antagonism of the period prior to the founding of the PRC.

By the early twentieth century, a select few artists had begun travelling to Europe to study the technical and theoretical developments then prevalent in the west. Exhibitions of Chinese art in Europe were becoming more and more frequent, and exhibitions of the works of Chinese artists working in the Western style (*xihua* 西画) started appearing. Through the influence of scholars and artists such as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培⁸, who along with Chen Duxiu was at the forefront of the New Culture Movement, there arose a rapid renegotiation of the role of art in society. Liu Haisu 刘海粟, who founded the Shanghai Art Academy in 1912, argued for art and artists to critically engage 'modern' Chinese society. The second credo of his manifesto resonated with the modernist concerns of a stifled and existentially cloistered individual subject. He stipulated that:

"we want to fulfill our responsibility of promoting art in a society that is callous, apathetic, desiccated, and decaying. We shall work for the rejuvenation of Chinese art, because we believe art can save present-day Chinese society from confusion and arouse the general public from their dreams" (Danzker 25).

The ultimate aim of the intellectuals, artists, and political revolutionaries was therefore to promulgate novel forms of expressing and denouncing the oppression which was perceived as inhibiting the development of Chinese society. The 1924 exhibition *Exposition Chinoise d'Art Ancien et Moderne* at the Palais du Rhin in Strasbourg represented one of the first major European exhibitions of modern Chinese art,

⁸ Cai Yuanpei studied at the University of Leipzig from 1907 to 1911, and was appointed the first Minister of Education of the Republic of China. Cai appointed Lu Xun as head of the the Section for Art, Culture and Science in the Social Education Office (cf. Danzker 21).

showcasing the works of artists such as Lin Fengmian 林风眠, Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿, and Cai Yuanpei. These artists all subsequently returned to China, bringing with them the ideas and techniques which would to shape the intellectual space of artistic production. Despite this influx of ideas and the rapid cultural exchange, it was not until 1929 that the first official National Art Exhibition took place in Shanghai. Organised by Cai Yuanpei, the exhibition brought together a diverse array of artists and scholars, and showcased both *guohua* 国画 (traditional Chinese painting) and *xihua* 西画 (Western-style oil painting), along with sculpture, architecture, design, and photography. It was the first national recognition of the Chinese artistic community, and was instrumental in the promotion of modern forms of visual representation. The exhibition in Shanghai was to be the first of numerous exhibitions, and would pave the way for a re-interpretation of the role of the artistic sphere within China. The relation between the re-interpretation of visual representation and the promotion of an antagonistic intellectual space is evocatively invoked by Walter Benjamin, when he states that:

"In every true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn. From this it follows that art, which has often been considered refractory to every relation with progress, can provide its true definition. Progress has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences - where the truly new makes itself felt for the first time, with the sobriety of dawn" (Benjamin, "Arcades Project" 474).

The 'truly new' within China concerned the rupture with traditional intellectual and creative narratives, and the move towards a new cultural paradigm outside of the prevailing traditional discourse.

Preeminent among the intellectuals during this period was Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-

1936), pen name of Zhou Shuren 周树人 (See plate 3). After having spent 7 years in

Japan studying medicine, Lu Xun returned to China where he began writing "short stories that describe with anger, compassionate ridicule, and deep sympathy the anguish of lives trapped in the wreckage of a crumbling culture" (Grieder 204). These works of literature set the tone for the revolutionary praxis of the period after the May Fourth Movement, as such stories as *A Madman's Diary (kuangren riji* 狂人日记) and the *True Story of Ah Q*

(*A* Q *zhengzhuan* 阿Q正传) represented the resentment, frustration, delusion, anger, and satirical dejection felt by many towards traditional society. Artistic production took on various forms, however the one which was to have the most lasting impact on the style and content of artistic production within China was the woodblock/woodcut (*shuke* 术刻) movement, and the subsequent adoption of socialist realist art as a means for propelling the masses into collective revolutionary action. The subversive social commentary of Lu Xun's woodblock movement sought to reveal an aesthetic praxis which would engender social and cultural change. For Lu Xun, graphics were the ideal medium for overcoming social constraints, as they represented a form of revolutionary praxis.⁹ Artwork for Lu Xun contained a certain historicity, as he deeply felt that "art belonged to its era and could only be understood in terms of the historical conditions in which it was created"

⁹ Influences on Lu Xun included Käthe Kollwitz, Frans Masereel, and numerous Soviet artists (See plates 1 and 2. Note: All plates, images, and appendices have been removed from this version of the thesis, due to the inability to secure copyright approval. For a complete version of the thesis, please contact the author at james.poborsa@utoronto). Cf. also Laing 1988 and Sullivan 1996. The Woodcut Movement in China began in 1927, and in its initial phases was conceived as an underground, secretive, and subversive movement. Lu Xun would meet with students and colleagues in a back room of a bookshop on Chendu Lu 成都路 in Shanghai, which was run by his close friend Uchiyama Kanzō. For further analysis of the woodblock movement, consult Sullivan, p. 81, and Laing, pp. 10-16; see also plates 4-6. An excellent and detailed analysis of the woodblock movement as a precursor to China's emergent avant-garde in the 1980s can be found in Tang Xiaobing (2008). The rise of the woodblock movement was contingent upon the introduction of western woodblock prints, as well as traditional Chinese prints. Prior to the rise the the woodblock movement, traditional prints encompassed four general categories: illustrations for books directed towards the elite, printed pictures for popular consumption, illustrations for journals, and propaganda or protest prints (Laing 8). For further analysis, consult Julia F. Andrews (1994), pp. 11-33; Shen Kuiyi (2004), pp. 262-291.

(Sullivan 82).¹⁰ In her authoritative study of 20th century Chinese art, *The Winking Owl: Art in the Peoples Republic of China*, Ellen Johnston Laing traces the evolution of Chinese art from the early Republican period through the end of the Cultural Revolution, and provides an excellent discussion of the evolution of the modern Chinese aesthetic, and its embeddedness within politicised forms of social commentary. This movement,¹¹ and the politicised intellectual discourse upon which it was founded was to lead China into a new form of social ordering wherein opposite and Other forms of social ordering were disallowed their presence.

The visual syntax of the woodblock tradition would eventually evolve into the socialist-realist (*shehui xianshi zhuyi* 社会现实主义) posters of the Maoist era, which aimed to promote and visually represent a one-dimensional revolutionary mass consciousness. Particularly important for the development of the socialist-realist aesthetic within China was the promotion of a proletarian art and literature by Mao during at the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art (*Yanan wenyi zuotanhui* 延安文艺座谈会). Artists and writers should work towards understanding the struggles of the proletarian, and should "help them to unite, to make progress, to press ahead with one heart and one mind, to discard what is backward and develop what is revolutionary, and should certainly not do the opposite" (Mao 71). The promotion of an art form which would serve the masses (workers, peasants, soldiers) served to propagate the ideological intent of the Chinese Communist Party (*Zhongguo gongchang dang* 中国共产党, hereafter referred

¹⁰ This conception of an historically embedded aesthetic praxis is similar to the thought of Wang Guangyi concerning his art and role as a social commentator, as will be discussed later.

¹¹ There were numerous other art movements in China during this period. Cf. also also the Proletarian Art Movement and Xu Xingzhi's 许幸之 political and revolutionary conception of artistic production (Sullivan, pp. 82-83).

to as the CCP), with the aim of unifying a collective proletarian consciousness. The propaganda prints (*xuanchuanhua* 宣传画) produced during this period were generally not the work of a single artist, but were often designed by groups of artists working under the aegis of various state bodies: local and provincial party committees, the PLA, and the state publishing houses.¹² While the propaganda posters of the period were in nearly all cases not actually printed with woodblocks, many were nonetheless produced using the artistic style of their woodblock forbearers.¹³ It was this artistic style, with its vivid colours and sharp, defined lines, which Wang Guangyi would inherit (See plates 7-11).

Jiang Jiehong argues that the Cultural Revolution was the foundation for contemporary art in China today, as well as the basis from which the identity of Chinese art derives (Jiang, "Burden or Legacy" 2), and a similar argument can be found in *The Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement* by Tang Xiaobing (2008), who provides further evidence for the historical embeddedness of contemporary Chinese art within the revolutionary tradition. The Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*Zhongguo wuchan jieji wenhua dageming* 中国无产阶级文化大革命), began in 1966 with the *May the Sixteenth Circular*, and officially ended in 1976, according to Hua Guofeng 华国锋 (b. 1921, who was Mao's successor), who stipulated that it lasted until the death of Mao and the downfall of the Gang of Four (*si ren bang* 四

¹² A fair amount of literature exists on the subject of professional artists working in China during the cultural revolution: Liang (1988), Scheck (1975), Min (2003), Sullivan (1996), and Andrews and Shen (1998). For our purposes it will suffice to say that for any artist working professionally, he or she had to work under the provenance of a state body, and was not freely allowed to produce and exhibit 'non-socialist/non-revolutionary' art.

¹³ There were naturally numerous instances where other mediums were used, and other artistic styles/forms were invoked. For a more detailed analysis, see Danzker (2003).

人帮).¹⁴ The Chinese government has officially referred to the Cultural Revolution as the 'ten year turbulence' (*shinian dongluan* 十年动乱) or the 'decade of turmoil' (*shinian dongluan shiqi* 十年动乱时期),¹⁵ in recognition of the chaos unleashed by the unreal attempt at instantiating an utopian socio-cultural space. As an attempt at the rapid production of the proletarian subject through a reorientation of cultural production, the Cultural Revolution sought to 'declare a war against the old world' (*xiang jiu shijie xuanzhan* 向旧世界宣战) in the effort to build a new world, foolheartedly perceived as an utopian socialist society.

The Red Guards were at the helm of the tyrannical promotion of this utopian ideal, and their prevailing ethos can be gleaned from the following excerpt, taken from the then influential journal *Red Flag* (*Hongqi* 红旗):

The revolutionary initiative of the Red Guards has shaken the whole world. ... In the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which was led by Chairman Mao, Red Guards have courageously and steadfastly struggled against those in authority who take the capitalist road, and against all 'ox-demons and snake-spirits (*nuigui sheshen* 牛鬼蛇神); they have become trailblazers in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. ... Red Guards are a new phenomenon on the eastern horizon" (Wang Mingxian 34).¹⁶

The process by which the Red Guards rose up against the 'capitalist roaders' and 'ox-

demons and snake spirits' was initiated by such fervent rhetoric from Mao as 'to rebel is

justified' (zaofan you li 造反有理), and 'a single spark starts a prairie fire' (xinghuo

liaoyuan 星火燎原). While the early phases of the Cultural Revolution were not directly

¹⁴ The Gang of Four consisted of Jiang Qing 江青, Wang Hongwen 王洪文, Zhang Chunqiao 张春桥, and Yao Wenyuan 姚文元.

¹⁵ It has also been referred to in a literary sense as the 'ten years of catastrophe' (*shinian haojie* 十年浩劫). ¹⁶ Original quotation from "*Hongweibing zan* 红卫兵赞 (In Praise of the Red Guards)" in *Hongqi* 红旗 (*Red Flag*). No. 12, 1966. The English translation quoted here can be found in Michael Schoenhals (ed.). *China's Cultural Revolution 1966-1969: Not a Dinner Party*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. 43-45.

inaugurated by the Mao or CCP, Mao was nonetheless paramount in endorsing and promoting the Red Guards. Such slogans further epitomised the revolutionary fervour of the age, leading the Red Guards to rise and eliminate the 'four olds' (*si jiu* 四旧) of Chinese society. In their effort to instantiate a socialist utopia through the negation of cultural plurality and difference, the Red Guards strove to make "the whole country awash in red" (*quanguo shangxia yipian hong* 全国上下一片红), a popular statement visually signifying the audacious endeavour to spread the spectre of socialist ideology across the country, leaving no corner untouched. Such one-dimensional revolutionary fervour was often referred to as the 'red terror' (*hongse kongbu* 红色恐怖), a phrase refleting the wave of anti-intellectual and anti-capitalist zealotry which swept through China during the early phases of the Cultural Revolution (See plates 12 and 13).

The artists and intellectuals of the period were to be rectified along socialist lines, and were to spend one third to one half of the year in the countryside, learning to transform their individualist and incorrect thoughts and attitudes. As a party directive of the period relates:

"Art and literature should serve proletarian politics, the workers, peasants and soldiers, and the socialist and economic base. This correct and sweeping line for the proletarian cultural revolution is laid down by Comrade Mao Tse-Tung. It demands that literary and art workers should revolutionize themselves and become labourers. It also demands that laboring people should become intellectuals, in this way changing culture into a culture of all the working people. The fundamental path for writers and artists to revolutionize themselves and become laborers is to go deep among the workers, peasants and soldiers and unite with the masses. In particular, they should turn to the countryside and serve the 500 million peasants. They should go to rural areas and temper and remold themselves. [Artists in the countryside were to] attach first importance to these things: go deep into life, learn energetically, take part in actual struggles, and remold themselves.

let alone 'experience' the mere superficialities of life or go for the simple purpose of gathering raw materials for creative writing" (Laing 57).¹⁷

In demarcating alterity and forbidding subjective existential inquiry, the state was attempting to reorder the collective consciousness of the populace under its own utopian guidelines. The propaganda art produced during this period was in turn representative of the visual iconography of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat under a Maoist interpretation of Marxism-Leninism (Scheck 57). Sheck further argues that the second phase of the Cultural Revolution saw the emergence of an historical thematic which aimed to legitimate the ongoing process of the Cultural Revolution through an historicised imagery of the proletarian struggle. These socialist realist images of the patriotic masses – the true soldiers of the revolution – were distributed throughout the period, embedding state ideology within the popular consciousness, and spurring the continual revolution of the socialist vanguard. In producing art which was accessible to the masses, the desired outcome was the ability to move them into collective action against whichever forces the CCP deemed inappropriate or ideologically dangerous. A prominent example of such a campaign was the move to criticise the Lin Biao 林彪 and Confucius 孔夫子, both of whom were deemed ideologically antagonistic to the socialist vanguard, with the slogan pi lin pi kong 批林批孔 (Criticise Lin Biao and Confucius). The dictatorship of the proletariat was not to last, however, for as the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, so too did the socialist vanguard and the zealous critique of capitalist modes of production, which opened the way for a new artistic space 'seemingly' disjoined from state influence.

¹⁷ Original quote from "Literary and Art Workers Go to the Countryside to Temper Yourselves!" in *renmin ribao* 人民日报 (cited in Translation). Survey of China Mainland Press No. 3649 (22 February 1966). 1-4.

Chapter 2 Reform and Opening – Neoliberalism and the Reorganisation of the Chinese Economy

Economic liberalisation was set in motion by Deng Xiaoping at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in December of 1978, in an effort to modernise the economy and promote endogenous economic development. At the onset of the reform process, "the CCP's central committee decreed that the period of class struggle was over, and that the CCP would begin to concentrate on economic modernisation as its key task" (Dickson 32). True to this declaration, the decades following 1978 have witnessed a relatively rapid shift away from socialist relations of production towards a neoliberal economic framework,¹⁸ as the vacuous inefficiency which characterised socialist relations of production, conceived in vertical rather than horizontal terms, was reordered along market-centred lines. While the state still maintains vestiges of control over certain industries, the Chinese economy ultimately functions under the rubric of neo-liberal discourse. In the wake of Deng Xiaoping's

¹⁸ The movement towards neo-liberalism in China in the New Era (xin shiqi 新时期) has been marked by relative uneveness, as mass-privatisation (such as that carried out in the former USSR) was not an inherent feature of Chinese economic reform. Rather, a process of dual-track reform was enacted, enabling the gradual dissipation of State Owned Enterprises (SOE) and Town and Village Enterprises (TVE), coupled with gradual privitisation and a diverse array of free market policies. The dual-track reform process sought to rapidly transition the agricultural sector, while the industrial sector remained under the purview of the state. The year 1984 saw the liberalisation of the industrial sector, wherein planned production quotas were reduced from 80 percent to a mere 5 percent by 1993 (Cao et al. 20), however as industrial output increased with liberalisation, there was actually an increase in the number of workers in SOE's by 35 million between the years 1978 and 1993 (Cao 26). Industries run by the state were a potent force for growth during the reform period, and it is important to note that the liberalisation of the industrial sector did not equate to its privatisation, but rather created a formidable engine for domestic growth propelled by state sponsored neoliberal policies. Overall, the dual track reform process has been a remarkable success, in comparison to the experiences of mass privatisation in many other post-communist states. See Lieberman (1997) and Stiglitz (2002) for further analysis of the effects of mass privatisation in post-communist states. As Wang Hui articulates: "This path to reform was generally successful because the functioning of price adjustment served to suppress the monopolistic quality of the traditional system, activated market mechanisms and limited the course of so-called spontaneous privatization" (Wang 52).

'reform and opening' (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) policies, economic development has been relatively asymmetrical, leading to the rise of divergent and diverse temporalities within the economic, political, intellectual and cultural spheres.¹⁹ There have been numerous critics and advocates of the socio-cultural ramifications of neoliberal economic reform and the current modernisation process in China, however we are for our present purposes limited to explicating such reform as a means of reading the work of Wang Guangyi.²⁰ As discussed in the introductory passages, the *Great Criticism Series* seeks to unconceal and analyse the teleological undercurrents within the ideological formations of both socialism and neo-liberalism, and furthermore seeks to critique the passive and indifferent nature by which individual subjects are produced under the throes of the spectacle of consumption in contemporary China. In order to effect the viability of such a critique, an analysis of the means by which reform has been undertaken is of paramount import, so as to situate the critique found in Wang's political pop art within the cyclical nature of transnational capitalism and the biopolitical production of docile bodies.

As previously mentioned, the reform process within China has been characterised by the gradual adoption of liberal market policies, as there was no concrete or comprehensive plan for economic liberalisation when the rhetoric of reform first surfaced in 1978.²¹ As a definitive reform plan had not been formulated within either government or scholarly circles, state intervention and guidance within the transition was perceived as

¹⁹ Such temporal overlaps have produced an unevenness which is particularly evident when one looks at the rural-urban divide, as the distinction between the pre-modern, modern, and postmodern within such geographical boundaries is radically demarcated. Such intellectual and temporal divides also exist within institutions, and particularly within the artistic circles which have emerged in the post-reform period. ²⁰ For further analysis, consult Wang Ning in (Dirlik, 2000), Zhang Xudong (1997, 2008), Wang Hui (2003) and Liu Kang (2000). All authors have from a variety of diverse viewpoints attempted to map out the topography of modern and/or postmodern cultural discourse in contemporary China in the wake of the reform process.

²¹ Consult table 1 for a list of reform objectives during periods after 1978.

the only viable means by which to effect the transition to a market economy with socialist characteristics. As Randall Peerenboom relates, "the state has actively intervened in the Chinese economy and played a key role in setting economic policy"²² (Peerenboom, "China Modernizes" 2), much to the chagrin of modernisation theorists and those advocating regime change as the only viable option for economic development. Between the years 1978 and 1998 the Chinese economy grew at an astonishing rate of roughly 9.7 percent per annum (Lardy 12). In his analysis of the development of the Chinese economy along neoliberal lines, Liew (2005) analyses that the CCP followed the neoliberal market models proscribed by the IMF and World Bank, wherein development was contingent upon adherence to market liberalisation and privatisation, and monetary and fiscal stability. While this may indeed be the case, he further argues that the Party/State directly interfered in the market (and still does today), and thereby produced a form of neoliberalism with specifically Chinese characteristics. Contingent to this process of reform was the guidance of Deng Xiaoping, who during the early phases of reform asserted that:

"If we take the capitalist road, we can enable less than 1 per cent of the people of China to become prosperous, but we definitely cannot resolve the problem of how to make 90 odd per cent of the Chinese people prosperous. Therefore, we have to persist with socialism. According to the socialist principle of distribution according to labour, there will not be a large gap between the rich and the poor. After another 20, 30 years, after developing our forces of production, there will not be a two-class differentiation" (Liew 335).²³

²² This pragmatic development policy, focussing on direct government intervention in the economy, has been referred to as the 'Beijing Consensus', in an act of nomenclature indicative of its similarity to the neoliberal 'Washington Consensus'. For further comparison, see Peerenboom, p. 6.

²³ This quote taken from Deng Xiaoping. *Jianshe you Zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi* 建设有中国特色的社 会主义 (*Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*). Beijing 北京: Renmin chubanshe 人民出版社, 1984.

According to such party rhetoric, direct control by the CCP was thus essential in ensuring even economic development – a rather tenuous logic, but one which has thus far been overwhelmingly successful, particular in comparison with the post-socialist experiences of the former USSR and other regimes. The primary means by which the state has changed the neoliberal paradigm within China has been through its acceptance and promulgation of State Owned Enterprises.²⁴ Throughout the process of economic reform, the state has controlled credit (which can produce distortions in the economy), land, and also holds monopolies over various sectors of industry such as telecommunications, energy, aviation, petrochemicals, transportation, and natural resources. Most scholars within China working on economic development agree on the necessity for a strong state, and reject laissez-faire liberalism from a political perspective, and to a certain extent from an economic perspective (Schambaugh 295). While this may be the case, it does not negate the acceptance of neoliberal economic or political models, which unlike properly *laissez-faire* economic liberalism promotes state intervention as a means to safeguard the market mechanism. As David Harvey (2005) argues, this 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics'25 has effected a transcontinental revolution in the forces of production and consumption, leading to a world more economically, politically, socially, and culturally interconnected.

State intervention in the process of economic reform has therefore been an integral legitimating factor for the continued hegemony of the CCP, even as economic liberalisation has been pursued before political liberalisation, i.e. democratisation.

²⁴ By 2001, state-owned and state-holding enterprises still accounted for 27.3 percent of all enterprises in the industrial sector, and produced 44.4 percent of total industrial output (Liew 332).

²⁵ Sheldon Lu rather amusingly highlights the 'transcontinental gang of four' – Deng Xiaoping in China, Margaret Thather in Great Britain, Ronald Regan in the US, and Paul Volcker at the US Federal Reserve (Lu 197).

Although the state has retained a relatively thorough grasp on non-state actors, within artistic and cultural spheres there has been comparably limited interference. The government has also invested rather heavily in human capital and institutional development, such as civil society organisations and village democracy.²⁶ The development of civil society organisations and village democracy has been integral in legitimating the CCP within the international community, however numerous scholars are rightfully critical of the neoauthoritarian underpinnings of the Chinese state. Pei Minxin, one of the foremost scholars of Chinese economic and political reform in the United States, has delivered a strong critique against Chinese economic transition, and argues that the "degeneration of the Chinese state during the reform era also calls into question the main thesis of developmental neoauthoritarianism: an autocratic regime pursuing market-friendly policies can promote sustained economic growth" (Pei 166). While this thesis may indeed hold truck, there are numerous antithetical positions which posit the effectiveness of the Chinese state in adapting to and regulating socio-economic change. As Barry J. Naughton and Yang Dali argue, "the political system has made significant adaptations to the challenges of an increasingly diverse and marketized society" (Naughton and Yang 6), such that the fragmentation of contemporary China into diverse spheres of social functioning does not represent an inherent crisis of legitimacy for the state. Rather, through adaptive processes and the continued production of a modern

²⁶ Michael Waltzer's definition of civil society relates that "civil society names the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology – that fill this space" (Quoted in Encarnacion 358). Within China, civil society was initially translated as *shimin shehui* 市民社会, which denoted a bourgeois conception of civil society, however this has since been revised to the concept of building a 'civil society with Chinese characteristics'. Since the 1990s, the idea of civil society has been legitimated by both the the intelligentsia and politicians (Yu 48-49). Interestingly, the writings of Jürgen Habermas have been an influential in China, specifically his concept of the 'public sphere' and the development of the intellectual framework upon which civil society institutions are based. For more on civil society within China, see Johnson (2003).

capitalist subject through the disseminaton of neoliberal state ideology, the CCP has ultimately been effective in countering, or at least suppressing, such movements. The invocation of the individual subject produced under the guise of neoliberal economic discourse is evoked by Michel Foucault, who argues that the market, as a site of veridiction, represents the naturally given, true site of production and consumption, such that "the guarantee of perpetual peace is therefore actually commercial globalisation" (Foucault, "Biopolitics" 58). Within this context, liberal and neoliberal discourse serves to produce and maintain the possibility of 'freedom' for the individual subject, by controlling the mechanism of the market and upholding the juridical framework.²⁷

With Deng Xiaoping's insistence that citizens build a modern society predicated on *xiaokang* 小康 (small prosperity, moderate affluence) and the twin goals of an 'all out construction of a society of moderate affluence' (*quanmian jianzhe xiaokang shehui* 全面 建设小康社会) and the 'great revival of the Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴), Chinese citizens during the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a radically inverted logic from the modes of thought (or dwelling) they were previously 'given' by the state. As Wang Hui has articulated, modernisation in China is not simply an economic and technological process, rather it is a "type of thinking through which China's social praxis is understood as a path toward an ontological historical goal, which

²⁷ Neoliberal doctrine seeks to transform liberalism by "dissassociating the market economy from the political principle of laissez-faire" (Foucault, "Biopolitics" 131). As such, the problem for neoliberal theory is not whether or not to interfere in the economy, but rather 'how' to interfere. It is thus a problem of governmentality (Foucault, "Biopolitics" 133). Foucault further highlights the relationship between the juridical and the economic, when he argues that "the juridical gives form to the economic, and the economic would not be what it is without the juridical" (Foucault, "Biopolitics" 163). Within this understanding of the logic of economic rationality, Foucault posits that there is therefore only one form of capitalism, disclosed as a singularity of economic functioning. The task at hand for Foucault concerns inventing a new form of capitalism, disjoined from its singularity as a governmental-economic logic.

in turn fosters an attitude that links existential meaning to the historical period in which one finds oneself" (Wang Hui 148). In light of these ideological shifts, the primary concern of the state was to engender a rapid rise in productive capacity, with the assuredly noble aim of improving living conditions for its populace, while modernising state institutions and infrastructure. However as we have noted above, and as Foucault has very accurately articulated, the production of governable subjectivities under the guise of disenthrallment within neoliberal discourse, has in effect only replaced the economic system, or the means of production, but has not 'set the workers free' from the political apparatus. Rather, a neoauthoritarian framework has arisen whereby the individuals within Chinese society are free for economic productivity, but have essentially been disavowed their political freedom.²⁸ Under neoliberalism, homo α conomicus²⁹ is to be regulated and maintained by the state, just as were the workers, peasants, and soldiers under the previous prevailing ideology. Indeed, without their even knowing it, the very same workers, peasants, and soldiers are the tools by which economic development is to take place, as they unknowingly inscribe their future in directions not of their choosing, as the analysis of Wang's Great Criticism Series will momentarily evoke. Inimically, the intellectual space within which individual subjects are produced under the framework of neoliberal discourse is disavowed its presence, and is set upon by the prevailing ideology, and revealed as a managed, ordered, seemingly progressive social construct.³⁰

²⁸ One could almost classify this as an ontological reduction of the Self to an ideological form, with the erasure of difference and alterity via the state apparatus. For more on neo-authoritarianism in contemporary China, see Wang Hui (2003).

²⁹ I have decided to retain Foucault's usage of homo æconomicus throughout, rather than translate it.

³⁰ For more on the ordering of intellectual and physical space, see Foucault's "*Des Espace Autres*". Originally given as a lecture to a group of architecture students in March 1967, and not meant for

While the reform process was a pragmatic endeavour which has produced an unparalleled level of economic development, there nonetheless exist structures of overt political influence which govern and regulate the process by which individual citizens and non-state actors dwell within society, for "in China...those who control domestic capital are in fact the same as those who control political power" (Wang Hui 186). It is not my aim to criticise or negate the validity of China's extraordinary economic development, nor to argue that the newfound path to modernisation adopted by the government has been an incorrect one. Rather, I am interested in reading the underlying neoliberal and neoauthoritarian logic upon which such development has been based, as a means for adequately representing the *Great Criticism Series* of Wang Guangyi as one of the paramount metonymics of and for its historical moment, which the following analysis of political reform will help to contextualise.

publication, it was published shortly before Foucault's death in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, n°5, Octobre 1984, 46-49. An English translation can be found in Foucault, Michel. *Of Other Spaces* trans. Jay Miscoweic. *Diacritics*. Vol. 16 No. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 22-27. His analysis of the unreal space of the utopia, as well as heterotopia, is particularly prescient in light of our current discussion.

Chapter 3 Political Reform – The Ideological Foundations of Neoauthoritarianism and the Legitimacy of the Chinese State

The historical moment within which Wang Guangyi found himself is often popularly characterised as indicative of China's newfound³¹ modernisation, however as our analysis of the artists and intellectuals during the Republican period has shown, modernising trends have been with China for quite some time. The founding of the CCP in 1949 did not put a halt to modernisation within China, but rather altered its course and underlying logic, as Mao Zedong was committed to modernising Chinese society along socialist, rather than capitalist lines. Mao sought to homogenize the cultural and social imbalances within Chinese society, through the elimination of the 'three differences': between workers and peasants, town and country, and mental and manual labour. As such,

"Mao's socialism [was] a modernization theory opposed to capitalist modernisation. From the perspective of its political impact, Mao's elimination of the 'three differences' in actual practice eliminated the possibility of the existence of a public sphere autonomous from the state. This not only produced a huge structure of unprecedented size and overarching scope, but brought all social activity under the organization of the vanguard party" (Wang Hui 149).³²

The embeddedness of the state within everyday life was the defining characteristic of the Maoist period, which has since 1978 rhetorically, although not actually, disappeared, as the following analysis will discuss. Throughout the reform process, the CCP aimed to build a socialist civilisation from a material and social perspective, and furthered this to

³¹ As an interesting sidenote, Jiang Zemin gave a speecch at the 2002 CCP congress in which he used the word 'new' ninety-seven times, while the word 'class' was mentioned only five times (Nuridsany 7). The entire reform process since 1978 has for the most part been characterised by a shift to 'newer' forms of organisation in all areas of society, except where CCP hegemony is concerned.

³² Wang Hui has further characterised this as an 'antimodern theory of modernization' (Wang Hui 150).

include the achievement of a 'socialist political civilisation' (Yu 48), by which the government meant the realisation of 'democracy and rule of law'. From the beginning, the Chinese government has challenged the concept of adopting normative and teleological frameworks upon which to base national development, and has rather opted for a layered and in cases fragmented path to economic and political reform. This fragmentation into a variety of narratives has been classified by Arif Dirlik as postsocialism, which relates an historical moment in which

"socialism has lost its coherence as a metatheory of politics because of the attenuation of the socialist vision in its historical unfolding; partly because of a perceived need on the part of socialist states to adjust 'actually existing socialism' to the demands of a capitalist world order, but also because of the vernacularization of socialism in its absorption into different national contexts" (Dirlik 364).

As Sheldon Lu argues, the socialist programme promoted by the CCP has facilitated the introduction of capitalist relations of production and consumption into the reform process, in a concerted effort to "use capitalism to develop socialism" (Lu 205). The period between 1977 and 1989 has been referred to as the New Era (*xin shiqi* 新时期), with the subsequent period from 1989 until the present referred to as the Post-Socialist Era (*hou shehui zhuyi* 后社会主义)³³, which is according to Lu a form of 'postmodernity with Chinese characteristics', or a 'post-socialist postmodernity'. Intrinsically related to the emergence of the *Great Criticism Series*, "postsocialism is a cultural logic in accordance with which artists, fillmmakers, and writers negotiate the residual socialist past and the emergent capitalist present to concoct new imaginaries of a transitional

³³ These historical categorisations are put forth by Zhang Xudong (1997 & 2008), however Zhang Yiwu terms the post 1989 period the 'post-New Period' (*hou xin shiqi* 后新时期). For further information consult Zhang Yiwu. *Cong xiandaixing dao houxiandaixing* 从现代性到后现代性 (*From Modernity to Postmodernity*). Nanning 南宁: Guangxi jiaoyu chubanshe 广西教育出版社, 1997. 74-75. This categorisation is also quoted in Sheldon Lu (2007), p. 207.

society" (Lu 208), in negotiating the spectre of ideology which during the reform period permeated the social and political consciousness.

The historical moment within which the works of Wang Guangyi arose witnessed the formation of the Chinese polity conceived as a neo-authoritarian governmental technology, i.e. as both a repressive and ideological state apparatus. While China is not a 'classic authoritarian' state (Perry 10), as the CCP does allow for a certain measure of criticism and dissent, it is nonetheless a neoauthoritarian state predicated upon a logic of ideological control and conformity to regularised patterns of political functioning. It would seem pertinent here to elaborate on Louis Althusser's conception of ideology and ideological state apparatuses, which will help to facilitate an understanding of the tendency of ideological forms to produce, or interpellate subjects attuned to the rhetoric of the ruling ideology. Althusser distinguishes between repressive state apparatuses, which function in and through violence, and ideological state apparatuses, which function through ideology, although I am here primarily concerned with the latter, as this was the main focus of Wang's critique.³⁴ Althusser further proposed three sets of theses on ideology, which will later serve to articulate a conception of art as a form of antagonistic socio-cultural and political praxis. Within the first set of theses, Althusser stipulates that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 36), which he further expands upon by articulating that "what is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real

³⁴ Wang Guangyi is also critiquing the repressive state hegemony of Maoist China, however for our present purposes we limit the discussion to the ideological analysis of the state in its present formation. As will be discussed further on in this essay, Gao Minglu (1998) and Karen Smith (2009) have argued that Wang was at once nostalgic for the discursive greatness of Maoist propaganda rhetoric, while also accepting of the newfound market mentality.

relations in which they live" (Althusser 39). These relations must be interpreted, analysed, and ultimately critiqued, if we are to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the role of artistic praxis in achieving any measure of effective socio-political critique. Following upon this first thesis is a second, which states that "ideology has a material existence" (Althusser 39), and is therefore concerned primarily with actions and praxis. Expanding upon these two initial theses, Althusser now proposes two more, before proceeding to his final, central thesis. "1. There is no practice except by and in an ideology; 2. There is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects" (Althusser 44). These two further elaborations of the structure of ideology lead Althusser to his final thesis, which states that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects, who exist only insofar as they work for the Subject, i.e. the ruling ideology. This Marxist critique of the production of the individual subject under the guise of the ruling ideology serves as a means to reflect upon the historicised nature of aesthetic practice within contemporary China, as subjects to the prevailing ideological trends of the reform era attempted to critique and represent contemporaneous social shifts. The dominant Subject to which I am referring is the CCP, while the subjects interpellated under its guidance are its citizens, particularly the artists who have emerged in the new era.

The artists of the period attempted, each in their own way, a visual reading of the political and ideological rhetoric upon which this newfound engagement with modernity was based, as the opening up and reform policies created an unprecedented ability for intellectuals to create, debate, and to a certain degree challenge the authority of the state. In the wake of the reforms, intellectual networks were reestablished, and literary salons, study groups, semi-official think-tanks and journals were founded (Goldman 501). This

unprecedented ability to criticise the state was, however, governed by a certain measure of official regulation, and the public sphere witnessed the emergent parallel structures of what Tang Tsou has called 'zones of indifference' and 'forbidden zones' (Cf. Tang Tsou 3-66 and Goldman 501). In the former, academics, artists, and writers were allowed a relative degree of intellectual freedom, as long as they did not contravene against the latter, which was representative of criticism of the government and its policies. In the absence of the rule of law (fa zhi 法治)35 there was no overt legal structure within which intellectuals were to abide, thus creating a delicate balance between that which was allowed and that which was disallowed within the sphere of intellectual praxis/discourse, and under the prevailing ideological state apparatuses promoted by the CCP. By way of an example, and one which I will expound upon further on in this essay, Wang was prohibited from exhibiting in China in the aftermath of the China/Avant Garde exhibition in Beijing. His *Black Reason* and *Red Reason* Mao series was seen as ideologically subversive and therefore technically illegal, specifically in light of the confused status of the unstated 'legal' framework within which artists and intellectuals were to operate. The peculiar vagueness of the legal framework was one of the mechanisms through which individual subjects were both allowed and disallowed their presence, creating a relatively

³⁵ It is also important to note that 'rule of law' and 'rule by law' are not distinguished linguistically in Chinese, as both are articulated as *fazhi* 法治. Perhaps ironically, perhaps unfortunately, in a state where rule of/by law is legitimised by the ruling party, and not through an independent judiciary, it would be inconceivable for the government to contravene against the law, as the CCP is responsible for creating and enforcing the law – and can thus can change it at will to suit its purposes. This instrumental imposition of law is therefore liable to being manipulated, in the Leninist sense, as a tool of state repression and coercion. Jiang Zemin adopted a 'socialist rule-of-law state (*yifa zhiguo, jianshe shehui zhuyi fazhi guojia* 依法治国, 建设社会主义法治国家), and interestingly, democracy (*min zhu* 民主) and rule of law (*fazhi* 法治) are thought of synonymously as *minzhu yu fazhi* 民主与法治. After the 1990s, the overarching focus within China has been on 'rule of law', instead of 'rule by law', as a means of safeguarding human rights. For Foucault, in order for the underlying economic logic of neoliberal capitalism to function, the *Rechtsstaat* (rule of law) must be implemented.

grey area within which artistic praxis would proceed. By way of a definition, "rule of law refers to a system in which law is able to impose meaningful restraints on the state and individual members of the ruling elite, as captured in the rhetorically powerful if overly simplistic notions of a government of laws, the supremacy of the law, and equality of all before the law" (Peerenboom "Long March" 2). While there is certainly a functioning legal system in China, which has been instrumental in engendering sustained economic development, there is little evidence of a movement towards the rule of law, and there certainly was not during the period with which we are here concerned.³⁶ While a single party neoauthoritarian state does not negate the conception of rule of law, it is nonetheless not compatible with a liberal democratic conception of rule of law, which posits as immanent an independent judiciary.³⁷ Direct control of the juridical framework by the CCP has therefore been an essential strategy in maintaining an oscillating relationship with the state sponsored reform doctrine, as legal measures have been invoked and revoked to suit the needs of the state, in direct defiance of the protocols insisted upon by the Western institutions (World Bank, IMF) who have been indispensable in promoting economic liberalisation within China.

China's newfound modernisation process has therefore further challenged the "central assumptions of the dominant legitimating narrative of Western states today that combines free markets based on neoliberal economic policies with constitutional democracy, rule of law, good governance, and a liberal interpretation of human rights" (Peerenboom, "China Modernizes" 2). The CCP has also challenged the validity of a

³⁶ While Peerenboom (2002) argues that rule of law will eventually arise within China, Pei Minxin (2007) does not. While not offering a prediction for the future of rule of law within China, it suffices to state that during the periods under investigation here, state adherence to a form of rule of law was tenuous at best. ³⁷ For further analysis, consult Pei Minxin (2007), pp. 65-72, or Randall Peerenboom (2002).

universal human rights framework in addressing the particular concerns of development, especially with regards to the often problematic issue of official corruption. Pei Minxin (2007) has argued that the endemic corruption experienced within China reduces governance and the perception of rule of law, and serves to devolve public support for the party, as well as party legitimacy.³⁸ To couple this trend, Stig Thøgersen argues that "the Party at the ideological level responds to the crisis of legitimacy by presenting itself and its cadres as civilising agents bringing prosperity, science, morality, and social organisation to the villages" (Thøgersen 202). Naturally, the maintenance and promulgation of party legitimacy is of pressing concern for the CCP, and as such, the central government has attached great importance to the maintenance of political hierarchy as a means of maintaining national unity.³⁹ A rigidly hierarchical structure within the processes of party procurement and cadre selection has characterised CCP rule since its inception. During the Maoist period (1949-1977) recruitment hinged upon two

³⁸ According to Transparency International, China ranked 50th out of 54 in terms of corruption. Only Bangladesh, Kenya, Pakistan, and Nigeria ranked lower (Fan and Grossman 1). As defined in Melanie Manion (1997), corruption is "the use of public office to pursue private gain in ways that violate laws and other formal rules" (Fan and Grossman 5). Manion further argues that there are two primary types of corruption in China - extracting bribes and arranging nepotistic favours (tanwu shouhui 贪污受贿), and the misappropriation of public property or public funds for personal benefit (nuovong gongkuan 挪用公款). For further examples of institutional corruption within China, specifically in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour, consult Wedeman (1997). While coruption necessarily exists within China, Fan and Grossman argue that corruption is not necessarily negative in the Chinese context, and that it may actually serve to benefit the economy (given the economic and political situation in China, and the lack of private property and legal rights). Interestingly, in tying the ethico-moral to the preponderance of socialist ideology during the Maoist period, Pei Minxin argues that "the disappearance of ideological norms has removed the 'first normative line of defence' against graft" (Pei, "Is China's Transition Trapped" 7). ³⁹ Regime change and the maintainance of national unity in other post-socialist states has been markedly different. Andrew Walder (2006) outlines four major types of regime change: 1) Central Europe and the Balkan states: anti-communist groups wrested control through direct elections. Privitisation was rapid, but state assets were not appropriated by political elites. 2) Russia and the Ukraine: "the greatest challenge to Soviet rule was from within the (Moscow) Party apparatus" (Walder 18), as the communist party lost elections, privitisation was rapid and plagued by corruption; 3) Former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, etc., where there was little elite turnover and extensive and endemic corruption; 4) China: The party hierarchy has remained unchanged, market reforms have been successful, and there was a commitment to public ownership with no desire for rapid privitisation.

cyclical values – utopian idealism and economic development – with the criteria for enrollment into the party based upon a set of guidelines changing to fit each particular situation. Those recruited based upon the alluring logic of economic development were often individuals 'rehabilitated' from previous persecution during the utopian cycle. This created a position whereby "rather than evolving in a linear fashion, therefore, the CCP remained stuck in recurring cycles of transformation and consolidation in its political and economic policies" (Dickson 31). As a result of this cyclical recruitment process, party recruitment increased immensely during periods of ideological radicalism such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, for during these periods individuals with high levels of education and technical skills were discriminated against, whereas subsequent periods (1978-87 and 1988-96) reversed this trend (Walder 22).⁴⁰

The process of internal party promotion has also been characterised by the fact that CCP leaders have had the unweildy habit of ruling from behind the curtain after the official transition to their successors. By way of a prominent example, Deng Xiaoping had overwhelming authority over Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 and Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳, as Deng "perpetuated the use of informal authority by deferring to the elders and legitimated it by continuing to serve as number one leader even after retiring from all his government and party posts" (Shirk 73). Such direct control over official state policy has been endemic within the reform process. As Yang Dali highlights, "the hierarchical structure of the Chinese government [is] a dynamic, adaptive equilibrium" (Yang and Naughton 22), which permeates numerous facets of the political culture. The embeddedness of this

⁴⁰ For detailed statistics on party recruitment, consult figure 1.4 in Walder, p. 22.

hierarchical structure enforces norms of selection and cadre procurement⁴¹ which signify the demarcation of alterity within the political consciousness, and reveals the imposition of barriers to entry for those who do not conform to the underlying hegemonic discourse of the CCP. As Tony Saich argues, there exists within the CCP a "Leninist tendency to thwart organizational plurality" (Saich 127),⁴² which is further compounded by the fragmentation of the rest of society in the new era.

One of the primary reasons why China has witnessed political change without subsequent regime change is due to the fact that "top-down or elite-oriented approaches to Chinese politics view the regime's dramatic ideological and institutional reorientation as an effort to preempt political opposition by an emerging capitalist class" (Tsai 203), as the rhetoric upon which such endogenous changes are based has prevented real political change from occurring at the bottom.⁴³ The emergent classes have in turn been embedded within the political system, further highlighting the intrinsic embeddedness of the state within the economy, and perpetuating a logic whereby adherence to the state, if not direct membership within the CCP, ensures personal capital accumulation.⁴⁴ Revealing the economic logic surrounding the individual subject's docile adherence to authoritarian

⁴¹ A further mark on state legitimacy is the nomenklatura system, which allows senior Party members to appoint high ranking members of the people's congresses and courts, which in turn limits legal legitimacy. For further analysis of the appointment of party members, see Shirk (1993), pp. 71-73.

⁴² The state is particularly adept at adaptation for three main reasons, according to Pei Minxin. Firstly, the CCP has overcome the challenge of succession; secondly, new social elites have been coopted into the party, particularly the urban intelligentsia, but also private entrepreneurs; thirdly, "the party has exploited nationalist sentiments within the Chinese population to strenghten its own political legitimacy" (Pei, "Is China's Transition Trapped" 3).

⁴³ Although it has certainly not prevented protests or demonstrations, as an estimated 200 occur per day within China. These figures represent the last official disclosure by the authorities in 2006. Source: *Human Rights Watch World Report 2008 (Events of 2007)*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008.

⁴⁴ Numbers of educated individuls wishing to enter the party have been increasing for the past two decades, and by 2003, 50% of university students had filled out membership applications for entrance into the CCP (Walder 24). Following a concerted economic logic, individuals are now flocking to the party, as the embeddedness of the party within the economy allows those who join the party priveleged access to jobs and the connections (*guanxi* 关系) essential for career advancement.

modes of political organisation while enmeshed in capitalist economic pretensions, Bruce Gilley argues that "the CCP continues to shed its communist pretensions and emerges as an authoritarian regime that co-opts most of the population with rapid development and national greatness" (Gilley 125).

While moments of direct state subversion and excoriation have certainly existed, they have for the most part been either quietly or violently suppressed. Some of the most notable expressions of direct anti-establishment activity include the Democracy Wall movement of 1978-1979, wherein ex Red Guards "used the methods they had learned in the Cultural Revolution to express their views against authority: to write wall posters [*da zi bao* 大字报], mimeograph and distribute pamphlets, form groups of like minded people, make speeches, and engage in debates" (Goldman 503).⁴⁵ The June 6th 1989 uprising centred on Tiananmen square is perhaps the most widely known and publicised event within China in the past three decades, and should require no further elucidation. Other less publicised efforts include, but are by no means limited to, the philosopher and intellectual Guo Luoji's successful lawsuit against the CCP,⁴⁶ the numerous lawsuits by rural farmers and rural collectives (cf. Tang Yuen Yuen 2005), urban protests⁴⁷, and the

⁴⁵ An engaging feature of protests within first decade of the 20th century concerns the appropriation of an inverted and subversive logic. The signifiers of revolutionary socialist hegemony and the rhetoric of class struggle have been utilised as a means to critique the system, similar to the strategy adopted by Wang Guangyi. As Elizabeth J. Perry highlights: "Just as protesters during the Maoist era borrowed the then hegemonic language of *class* in pressing their demands, so protesters today adopt the current hegemonic language of *rights* in framing their grievances" (Perry 21).

⁴⁶ After participating in the 1989 Democracy movement, Guo Luoji lost his rights to teach, travel, and write. He invoked the constitution of the People's Republic of China in his successful lawsuit, which states that "all power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people" (Guo 4). As such, power does not legitimately belong to either the party or to individuals (party heads, i.e. Mao or Deng). In effect, he has revealed that the (neo)authoritarian rule of the CCP is technically illegal, under its own constitution. See pp. 9-10 of Guo (1993) for an analysis of why his lawsuit was successful.

⁴⁷ In an effort to circumvent CCP regulations concerning protests and mass demonstrations, disconcerted citizens in Xiamen and Shanghai staged walks (*sanbu* 散步), which were essentially alternate forms of protest marches (*youxing* 游行). In Shanghai, the 'walk' concerned thousands of individuals embarking on

founding of the Chinese Democratic Party (CDP, *zhongguo minzhu dang* 中国民主党) by Zha Jianguo and Xu Wenli.⁴⁸ The latter, in which both men were imprisoned for founding the CDP, represents a form of direct antagonism against an overwhelmingly homogeneous state structure. Such black and white strategies were naturally domed for failure, however as will be argued further on, forms of artistic antagonism such as exist within the work of Wang Guangyi seek to subtly disrupt and deconstruct preconceived notions of socio-cultural, economic, political, and ultimately intellectual hegemony on the part of the CCP.

Interestingly, the concept of incremental democracy, or the act of enlarging political rights through incremental reforms, is gaining truck in China, and is characterised as "socialist democratic politics with Chinese characteristics" (Yu 53).⁴⁹ Village democracy has also been taking place in China since the early 1980s on a trial basis, with the eventual passing of the *Organic Law of Villagers' Committees* by the National People's Congress in 1987 (Kelliher 64), which cemented the right of village elections in the constitution. Although village elections are considered one of the first steps towards inaugurating a thoroughly democratic system within China, numerous discussions regarding the intent of the CCP circulate.⁵⁰ There are two main arguments for

a communal 'shopping trip' to Nanjing Lu 南京路, rather than a 'protest march'. For further analysis, see Gilboy and Read (2008).

⁴⁸ For further analysis of the case of Zha Jianguo, consult Zha Jianying (2007).

⁴⁹ See also Yu, pp. 53-56 for its 6 defining characteristics.

⁵⁰ For further reading on village democracy, see Pei (2007), pp. 72-80; Kelliher (1997); and Shi (1999). As Kelliher intriguingly argues, "the case for village self-government has arisen directly in response to a surge of rural lawlessness" (Kelliher 66). Although this remains outside of the temporal moment of our analysis, it should be noted that ideological change is currently a focus of the elites, and has been spearheaded by Hu Jintao through the promotion of intraparty democracy and 'scientific development'. Democratic elections are currently being carried out in roughly 640 000 villages (Gilboy and Read 154). Regarding the argument of democracy within China as necessarily emergent from market reform, Bruce Dickson posits that "economic development and modernization may facilitate democratization, but not directly and not always immediately. Democratization is not a natural result of economic growth, it is a political process fraught

village self government within the central government. The first relates that elections are essential for the promotion of a more qualified leadership, which Kelliher argues is ultimately not about the rights of people to govern themselves at all, but rather is invoked as a means for the central government to institute control over 'run away' corrupt local governments. It is therefore a reassertion of authority. The second concerns 'the enforcement of state policy' (Kelliher 72-73). Kelliher argues that the motives for installing the Organic Law are for all the wrong reasons, in particular the instrumental reason of controlling the villages and the tangential public relations maneuver of promoting the CCP's image internationally. As regards the possibility for democracy within China in the long run, Pei Minxin has argued that the CCP is caught in the grips of 'authoritarian stagnation', which relates that "China's transition from a quasi-totalitarian political system and state socialist economy to a liberal democracy and market economy has lost momentum; and is trapped in a 'partial reform equilibrium'" (Pei, "Is China's Transition Trapped" 4), whereby the state skillfully and perpetually maintains complete political hegemony.

A further feature of political dissent within China is the idea of "waving the red flag to oppose the red flag", which posits the use Communist or Socialist iconography for enacting political criticism, either verbally, or within works of art. Many protests and confrontations have witnessed 'revolutionary' workers criticising 'reformist' government authorities, where the aim is to use the "language and legacy of the Communist revolution in an effort to shame the Party-state into living up to the promises of its own

with conflict, negotiations, and occasionally setbacks" (Dickson 12), to which he further adds that some scholars see no correspondence within modernization theory between economics and political change – as China has not fallen in line with Huntington's thesis concerning the third wave of democratisation.

'revolutionary tradition'" (Perry 17). While such measures of political agitation certainly exist, within the state apparatus there is the pervasive idea that civic engagement ushers in "a culture of 'anti-politics' born in reaction to the dysfunction of politics. This culture has pushed citizens to divorce themselves from the political realm and instead to devote their energies to their voluntary associations as a means of coping with the difficulties and frustrations of everyday life" (Encarnacion 367), such as civil society organisations. The emergent gulf between the individual and the state is nonetheless a perceived one, as the state continues to biopolitically produce individual subjects through ideological state apparatuses, and in particular through the manipulation of the media.⁵¹

Yet within the rift between the coercive state apparatus and the individual, informal institutions arise which possess the ability of effecting unique forms of sociocultural criticism, foremost among them the avant-garde art scene which emerged in the 1980s. In her analysis of adaptive informal institutions, Kellee S. Tsai relates that institutional subversion occurs when individual actors choose to ignore formal institutions (Tsai 208), while institutional conversion concerns the involvement of bureaucratic collusion and collaboration (such as the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989). In offering a definition of adaptive informal institutions, Tsai states that they "refer to regularized patterns of interaction that emerge in reaction to constraints and opportunities in the formal institutional environment" (Tsai 212). Thus, "in spatial terms, adaptive informal institutions lie between informal practices and formal institutions. [They] are both an effect of innovative coping strategies by everyday actors and an emergent cause of changes in formal institutions" (Tsai 212), and as such, affect the

⁵¹ Media control will be discussed in further detail in chapter 7.

vernacular logics upon which everyday life under the purview of ideological state apparatuses rests.⁵² While adaptive informal institutions within this context is specifically referring to civic organisations and enterprises not directly under the purview of the state, I would extend their scope to include the diverse groups of artists who have emerged during the reform period. Numerous artists who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s sought to challenge and reinterpret their perception of state involvement within their lives, by critically interpreting the historical juncture within which they found themselves in novel and engaging ways.

⁵² Tsai further argues that "if informal practices can elicit formal institutional reforms, then, theoretically, adaptive informal institutions should have the potential to precipitate democratic transitions in autocratic regimes" (Tsai 219).

Chapter 4 Political Pop Art and The Emergence of Heterogeneous Forms of Cultural Production

Universities and art academies were closed during the Cultural Revolution, and would not reopen until 1977, when a wave of eager young students thronged to take the entrance exams which had been forbidden fruit for much of their formative years. Wang Guangyi and other notable artists such as Xu Bing 徐冰, Zhang Xiaogang 张晓刚 and Zhang Peili 张培力 were among the first to enrol and graduate in the early 1980s. For the first time since the Republican Period, the 1980s witnessed the emergence of numerous heterogeneous forms of artistic production, as artists offered an interpretation of their experiences in the previous decades as well as during the reform process, while also providing a critical commentary on China's reengagement with modernisation along capitalist lines. The discursive properties of works of art were no longer bound to the official propagandistic guidelines of the previous era, and artists were free to visually adumbrate their own existential concerns, as engagement with the outside world (and outside ideas) served to facilitate the emergence of novel forms of representation. By the early 1990s, political pop art and thus Wang Guangyi emerged as the embodiment of this discussion. These works would serve as metonymics for their historical moment, seemingly evoking a postmodern nostalgia for the mass revolutionary past, juxtaposed with the emergent consumer forms of the present. Through an unmediated antagonistic artistic praxis, numerous works of art which have emerged from this period have evoked

a form⁵³ which has aimed to critique the social, cultural, political, and economic 'givens' within their historical moment.

As Zhang Xudong has argued, "the breaking of the social, conceptual, and imaginary totality of socialist modernity has resulted in the general disintegration of a real or imagined national political, intellectual, and cultural discourse" (Zhang, "Postsocialism" 3). With the fragmentation of the CCP as the single hegemonic force within socio-cultural discourse and the popular consciousness in the new era, there have arisen diverse intellectual and artistic traditions, as "increasing diversity and a larger society create centrifugal forces in China that undermine the traditional monolithic state structure" (Naughton and Yang 6). This refraction of intellectual discourse away from the dominant ideological narrative promoted by the state, precipitated a perceived devolution of state control over the artistic sphere, and opened a space for the emergence of new artistic movements.

In his analysis of contemporary Chinese artistic movements, Wu Hung 巫鴻 has argued for the importance of an understanding of the role of political movements (*yundong* 运动) in modern Chinese political and artistic culture. "Three major characteristics of a *yundong* include a definite and often practical agenda, a propaganda machine that helps define and spread this agenda, and an organization that helps forge a cohesive front of participants." (Wu 23). This tripartite system for galvanising the masses into action, felt most acutely during the Cultural Revolution, was still in evidence during

⁵³ This form takes shape as method, in the underlying narrative of artistic criticism imbued in the works.

the 1980s, when the '85 Art New Wave (85 yishu xinchao 艺术新朝)⁵⁴ utilised the exact same methodology in developing an organised art movement in China. While the logic upon which such movements may persist as embedded within the consciousness of individual subjects, the capacity for the government to mobilise the masses into action has been significantly diminished, and may even pose a threat to its future legitimacy. As Pei Minxin has argued, the "erosion of the CCP's mass mobilization capacity means that the party no longer can build broad-based social coalitions to pursue its policies and defend itself" (Pei 182), but rather relies on a combination of economic performance, development, and repressive power for maintaining its hegemonic legitimacy. In an inversion of developmental logics, paralleling that of the CCP, the emergent artistic movements of the 1980s carried forth the former mass revolutionary fervour in promoting China's new cultural modernisation. In discussing the 85 New Wave, Karen Smith supports this thesis, wherein she argues that

"if it sounds like this movement led an organised revolt against the old order that was not the case: it was not a rebellion of seditious intent, for whilst artists sought to change outmoded official attitudes towards artistic form and content, they believed their advance to be in line with that of the nation's programme of modernisation" (Smith 19).

The artists were therefore attempting an equally radical break with the recent past which policies within political and economic spheres were then engendering, in a concerted effort to effect a modernisation of the cultural sphere in tandem with the modernisation of the rest of society.

⁵⁴ 85 yishu xinchao 艺术新潮 is also referred to in Chinese simply as 85 xin chao 新潮, and alternatively by Gao Minglu as 85 meishu yundong 85美术运动 (Gao Minglu "Transnational Modernity" 21), and in English variously as the '85 New Wave', '85 Art New Wave', or 'Movement 85', '85 Art Movement', or 'The New Art Movement'.

The term 85 New Wave was the reference given to art in China until the mid 1990s, prior to the adoption of the term 'avant-garde' (*gianwei* in \mathbb{P}), which had, according to Karen Smith, been introduced into the artistic community from the West during the mid 1990s. As the Chinese art scene began opening up to Western art critics and curators, who witnessed "a force of artists from a nation still perceived as being in the grip of a repressive totalitarian regime" (Smith 21), they foisted upon the scene the impression of a radical avant-garde, evocatively expressing the purported alterity of their political repression. As Gao Minglu 高名潞 has argued, the artists of the 1980s (particularly the 85 New Wave) in "responding to a monolithic state ideology searched out a free subjectivity and presented an iconoclastic ideological utopia" (Gao, "Transnational Modernity" 19). Artists within this movement focused their creative energies on uncovering the teleological ideological forms promoted by the state, in an effort to critique the notion that the state was necessarily working in their best interests. As Hou Hanru articulates, "the power of the State institution, in its own interests, 'produces' a purposely misinterpreted conception of reality and endows it with the status of the 'truth', the unique authenticity of the world, making it the official discourse with which an entire society is urged to identify" (Hou 37). Questions of individual and collective identity⁵⁵ were of primary concern for many of these artists, as they sought to render an interpretation of their historicised present.

⁵⁵ A particular concern of many artists was the creation of a specifically 'Chinese' modern art form, defined on its own terms.

The first official⁵⁶ contemporary art exhibition was created by the Stars Group (*xingxing huahui* 星星画会) and was held in 1980 on the top floor of the National Museum of Art, attracting 80 000 visitors in a mere 16 days (Nuridsany 10). In a bid to regain and reinvent their culture,⁵⁷ these artists sought to "make way for freedom of spirit and expression in a society that did not allow original thought or creativity" (Smith 471). The 85 New Wave (85 *yishu xinchao* 艺术新朝) avant-grade artists also exhibited their works at the National Gallery (*zhongguo meishu guan* 中国美术馆) in Beijing in 1985, and the process culminated in the *China/Avant Garde* (*zhongguo xiangdai yishu zhan* 中国现代艺术展) exhibition which took place in 1989, also at the National Gallery in Beijing. It was subsequently temporarily closed down after Xiao Lu 萧鲁 shot at her piece, provoking the unmitigated attention of the authorities at a time of heightened social tensions.⁵⁸

The first major art event not directly supported or controlled by the government was the Guangzhou Biennial (*guangzhou shuangnianzhan* 广州双年展) in 1992, which was followed by the Shanghai Biennial (*shanghai shuangnianzhan* 上海双年展) in 1996. The titles of other major art exhibitions glimmer with post-modern references of irony and indifference, such as *Art for Sale*, held in a department store, and *Post-Sense*

⁵⁶ One of the most prominent unofficial exhibitions to take place during the 1980s was the exhibition 70% *Red, 25% Black, 5% White* at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in 1986, which reflected issues concerning the collective visual memory of the Cultural Revolution.

⁵⁷ Indeed, by 1985, the government was beginning to open up restrictions on cultural production. The magazine *Fine Art in China (zhongguo meishu bao* 中国美术抱) also began its print run during this period (Nuridsany 11).

³⁸ John Clark (1992) presents a detailed analysis of official opposition to the new currents emerging in the Chinese art world in the late 1980s, and discusses the futile attempts by officials to ensure the artistic scene proceeded along approved lines.

Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion in 1999, and Fuck Off^{\$9} in 2000, held at the Eastlink Gallery and curated by Ai Weiwei 艾未未 and Feng Boyi 冯博一. As a testament to the daring atmosphere of the times, during the exhibition Zhu Yu 朱昱 shockingly ate a stillborn fetus. While I am reticent to read too much into this performance piece, the artist himself stated that it was "a deeply artistic act designed to challenge moral, social, and religious taboos", while others have argued that it represented a response to the commercialisation of Chinese art by the Western art market (Nuridsany 16). Nonetheless, such exhibitions reveal that a pervasive mood of socio-cultural and artistic antagonism permeated artistic circles in the decades following economic reform.

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Other prominent art movements/styles to have emerged after the end of the Cultural Revolution include Scar art (*shenghen yishu* 伤痕艺术), exemplified by such artists as Cheng Conglin 程丛林 and Gao Xiaohua 高小华 (see plate 14). The movement was an initial reaction to the trauma and despair brought about by the ravages of the Cultural Revolution, and an important first attempt at reconciling the devolution of the individual subject in the grips of such forced uniformity. Jiang Jiehong has argued that this movement was an "expression of a sentimental humanism" (Jiang, "Burden or Legacy" 6)⁶⁰, which I would extend to relate to an humanistic effort to reassert the rational subject as the primary means of artistic expression, specifically in light of the collective identity of the previous era. The humourous, cynical, and often times garish *Gaudy Art (yansu yishu* 艳俗艺术) of the Luo Brothers (*luoshi xiongdi* 罗氏兄弟; Luo

⁵⁹ The Chinese name for this exhibition was *bu hezuo fangshi* 不合作方式 (An Uncooperative Approach). ⁶⁰ Originally quoted in Gao Minglu's *Zhongguo qianwei yishu* 中國前衛藝術 (1997), p. 57.

Weidong 罗卫东, b. 1963; Luo Weiguo 罗卫国, b. 1964, and Luo Weibing 罗卫兵, b. 1972), although not specifically an art movement (Nuridsany 123), is another attempt at confronting the memory of the Cultural Revolution and Maoist ideology, through the appropriation and juxtaposition of socialist iconography and the symbols of Western consumer culture. Their series Welcoming the Worlds Famous Brands (huanying shijie *mingpai* 欢迎世界名牌), which juxtaposes famous western brands such as Coca Cola with the relatively garish yet auspicious imagery of Chinese new years calendars, is in one respect ideologically somewhat similar in nature to the works of Wang Guangyi, although the Luo Brothers seem to be both humourously trumpeting and critiquing a garish nouveau riche expression of bad taste (See plate 15). Xiamen dada 厦门达达, and the works of such artists Huang Yongping 黄永砯 evoked similar motifs to the Dadaist movement in Europe, and "expressed the artist's mockery of accepted interpretations of history" (Sullivan 274).⁶¹ Cynical Realism (*wanshi xianshi zhuvi* 玩世现实主义), exemplified by the works of Yue Minjun 岳敏君, Fang Lijun 方力钧, and Yang Shaobin 杨少斌, humourously captures the cynical indifference of the contemporary subject to the rapidly changing social environment (See plates 16-18). Cynical Realism further evokes an impassioned protest against the ideology and ideological commitment (Wu 20) which was forced upon artists during the Cultural Revolution.

The works of Zhang Xiaogang 张晓刚 are further indicative of the contemporary embeddedness of the vestigial traces of the Cultural Revolution within the collective memory of Chinese society. In the catalogue to the 1993 exhibition *Chinese Fine Arts in*

⁶¹ See also Niu Jianming, p.140.

has said of his artwork that

"looking back on my work in the last decade or so, I am clear on the fact that I am an 'internal monologue' artist. I made a trip around Europe, and now back in my tiny studio, this feeling is stronger than ever. I could never become a 'cultural' artist, even less an 'experimental' artist. My art comes from my inner experience" (Tinari 410).

Although Zhang stipulates that his art derives solely from internal experience, or that his work is that of an autonomous subject disjoined from the cultural and historical tradition of which he is a part, I would argue that this is indeed not the case. Surely, Zhang is referring to his existential conception of himself as an artist attempting to express deeply personal internal ruminations, however this internal dialogue is itself derived from an historicised and deeply imbedded accumulation of memories and experiences, as later becomes evident in his Big Family series (da jiating 大家庭).⁶² The first appearance of this series in 1993 marks an attempt to visualise the collective memory of the Cultural Revolution through an artistic (re)interpretation of family photographs from the period. Seemingly critiquing the absence of the individual subject during the Cultural Revolution, one can read traces of Zhang's attempt at reasserting the nascent subject of political ontology, which is evoked through the absence of such a subject in the Big Family series (see plates 19 and 20). Zhang has further stated that "to me, the most seductive thing about art is its vagueness, or perhaps one may call it its state of neutrality: through this, I gain greater intimacy with the shadows in my soul, which, like a sphere of bloody flesh, weighs heavily on me, exuding its own scent" (Tinari 410). Weighing so heavily upon the

⁶² This series has also been referred to as the *Bloodline* series, a name given to the series by curator Johnson Chang.

artist are the vestigial traces of the ever present spectre of ideology, and the experience of a past littered with the evocative yet banal rhetoric of collective ideological fervour.

As is becoming increasingly evident form the discussion thus far, one of the foremost leitmotifs of Chinese artistic practice in the 1980s and 1990s has been a critical re-reading of the role of the Cultural Revolution in the construction of contemporary Chinese identity. As Kobena Mercer highlights, "what was often perceived as a critique of communism when exhibited in the West, was a recapitulation of cultural history and an adjustment of cultural identity that encoded dissent from the prevailing direction in which the process of modernisation in China was being driven." (Mercer 27). A rather engaging and theoretically fascinating analysis of much of the critical artistic works which emerged in the 1980s, specifically the works of Yue Minjun and the 1987 painting A Second State by Geng Jianyi 耿建翌 (see plate 21), is put forward by Katie Hill (2007). She argues that many of the works to have emerged during this period evoke a certain measure of hysteria, as artists come to grips with their memories of both the representation (visual iconography of the period – big character posters, crowds waving red flags) and *reality* (fragmented childhoods, 'enforced ideological obeisance') of the Cultural Revolution. Accordingly, the fragmentation of the subject in the grips of the ideological ferment of the Cultural Revolution has produced an hysterical massconsciousness which often confronts its memory of the recent past through irony and ambiguity, gesticulating traces of the postmodern.

Within the midst of this fragmented and energetic artistic environment, political pop art (*zhengzhi bopu yishu* 政治波普艺术) emerged as one of the leading trends in contemporary Chinese art. The emergence of pop art worldwide, and then subsequently

in China, "signaled an epistemological break in the very conception of 'culture' by overturning vertically hierarchical definitions with an horizontally inclusive alternative" (Mercer 8). This critical intellectual stance, reminiscent of a postmodern attempt to destructure normative forms of discourse, is further highlighted by Andreas Huyssen, who argues that "pop in the broadest sense was the context in which a notion of the postmodern first took shape" (Huyssen 188). This refraction away from hierarchical and centrifugal structures of cultural discourse, such as that sanctioned and imposed by the state in the pre-1978 period, in turn reflects the (partial) democratisation of the Chinese art scene in light of the emergent consumer culture, and the renewed dialogue among intellectuals both within and outside of China. Such a reinvigouration of intercultural intellectual discourse offers a means through which meta-geographical boundaries are both delineated, and ultimately surpassed, in a move towards an integrated, globalised and transnational cultural discourse. While I would contend that this is a goal towards which we should be moving, this is not an attempt at a global metanarrative, universal syncretism, or the rejection of alterity, whether cultural, national, political, or theoretical. Rather, the acceptance and promotion of difference and alterity serve to mitigate the seemingly blind adherence to teleologising metanarratives, and offer critical injunctures into historically derived cultural moments. I would further contend that works of art and the thought from which they stem are thoroughly embedded in the historical and temporal moment of their realisation. This sentiment is echoed by Wang Guangyi, when he states that

"I don't understand the notion of 'international' art, and I don't believe people who say that there is an international standard for art. Art relates directly to your environment and background. We have to find a standard for new art within contemporary Chinese culture. Then we'll have something to take to the international aesthetic table" (Smith 73).

This intercultural and transnational dialogue is embodied in political pop and the emergence of the avant garde within China, as a means to "encode gestures of resistance and subversion" (Mercer 15) to the positivistic and hegemonic tendencies within the emergent cultural debates of the 1980s.⁶³

Richard Hamilton offers a definition of pop art which encodes traces of refraction, dispersal, multiplicity, and non-conformity, while embedding these ideas within a seemingly anonymous consumer capitalist society contingent upon mass production and relative banality. He states that "Pop Art is: popular (designed for a mass audience), transient (short-term solution), expendable (easily-forgotten), low cost, mass produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business" (Hamilton 181). Such a definition seeks to destabilise antecedent conceptions of art or culture, bringing art out of the academy by promoting a vernacular conception of cultural production. Both the pop art of the west and the mass revolutionary socialist-realist art of the Cultural Revolution era sought to destabilise the distinction between high and low culture and art, albeit along different lines. The aesthetic upon which both styles were founded shared similar visual characteristics, as "the aesthetic emphasis which western pop gave to the frontal presentation and flatness of unmodulated and unmixed colour that was bound by hard edges, also appears as a distinct feature of Chinese propaganda painting, which adapted elements of flatness and frontal presentation from traditional Chinese New Year prints." (Köppel-Yang 203). Within the Chinese context, Köppel-

⁶³ One of the most notable examples was the emergence of New Enlightenment thought. For further analysis, consult Zhang Xudong (2001).

Yang has further argued that 'pop culture' is in many cases synonymous with a 'culture of the masses' (*qunzhong wenyi* 群众文艺), as the embeddedness of the historical experience of the revolutionary mass consciousness of the Cultural Revolution was transferred to the pop tradition. As was discussed earlier, a mass produced effort towards realising a visual form of modernity had already arisen with the socialist realist tradition, as well as the earlier woodblock movement. This was art 'by the people for the people', and held in relative contempt traditional forms of artistic production. The underlying logic upon which pop art in the west and in China rests is also somewhat different, for while western pop art derives from commercial culture, Chinese pop art derives from mass revolutionary culture. As Liu Kang highlights, it is the revolutionary masses who in the Chinese context are rendered as the 'radical other' within the popular culture of China (Liu, "Popular Culture" 102).

An embeddedness within forms of thought derived from the Maoist period became the defining factor and signifying event for the emergent political pop art. As Wu Hung argues, "although inspired by Western pop art, Chinese political pop identified itself as an integral part of post-Cultural Revolution experimental art, as it represented a deepening stage of deconstructing a previous political culture" (Wu, "Transience" 21). This is further highlighted by Martina Köppel-Yang, who articulates that "a configuration of signs and stylistic elements from [Chinese revolutionary socialist and western pop art] is evident in the work of the artists who emerged in the 1980s within a decade of the end of the Cultural revolution," (Köppel-Yang 199), nearly all of whom were part of the 'new wave' or 'Movement 85' art scene. These artists were particularly inspired by the works and ideas of Andy Warhol,⁶⁴ who became the primary influence for pop art in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This layering of distinct meta-geographical artistic traditions, while initially contextualised in Chinese artistic circles as a form of appropriation or bricolage, exhibited distinctly autochthonous forms of artistic production which could not have arisen from a different socio-cultural context.⁶⁵ Foremost among the artists to emerge at this critical juncture of artistic appropriation and deconstruction was Wang Guangyi, as well as other artists such as Yu Youhan 余友涵, Li Shan 李山, Feng Mengbo 冯梦波, Liu Dahong 刘大鸿, Liu Wei 刘韡, Wang Ziwei 王子卫, and Zhang Xiaogang (See plates 23-27). Within Wang's work, the rigidity of antecedent definitions of culture or high art is called into question, through the invocation of mass produced pop culture iconography as a legitimate means of signification.⁶⁶ The artistic expression of such rapid socio-cultural change is of paramount importance for an understanding of the production of the individual subject under the throes of his or her historical moment, although this does not necessarily mean that the artist or intellectual should in any way remain confined to the production of works which are indicative or evocative of a temporal juncture. Rather, the embeddedness of the author and his ideas in an historical moment is conceived as the primary means by and through which individual

⁶⁴ Andy Warhol's name is rendered in Chinese as *Andi Wohuo* 安迪沃霍. They were also inspired by other western artists, such as Joseph Beuys, Jeff Koons, and Roy Lichtenstein. See Gao Minglu, "*linglei fangfa*" p. 2-3 for more analysis of the styles and artists which have (and have not) influenced contemporary Chinese art and architecture. Warhol's iconic depictions of Mao were influential within China. See plate 22.

⁶⁵ While this may indeed be the case, it is not my aim to articulate an expression of the distinct Chineseness exhibited within the visual culture of China in the 1980s through to the present. I would, however, contend that works which derive from an historicised moment within a particular geographic or cultural boundary, necessarily reveal distinctly contingent experiences which could not have arisen within other geographic or cultural contexts.

⁶⁶ For a similar analysis of the divergence between high and low art in the works of Wahrol and Lichtenstein, see Paoletti (1985), pp. 60-62.

forms of expression arise. These artistic forms need not visually represent the preceding or contemporaneous social, political, economic or cultural trends, but they do nonetheless derive from them. Although many western art critics have discerned that the signifying mechanisms of propaganda art and political imagery are indicative of the inherent 'Chineseness' of contemporary Chinese works of art, such forms of visuality are not a necessary precondition for successful artistic production within China. The pop aesthetic, while critically evocative of China's newfound modernity, is but one signifier for an heterogeneous temporality.

The primary feature of this temporal juncture has been one of refraction, through the critique of normative, teleological structures of thought and the promotion of liminal spaces of intellectual discourse. The utopian dreams of Mao's modernising socialist experiment as well as the purported salvation found within consumer society have both been critiqued with equal measure, and political pop and cynical realism embodied this movement away from a conscious belief in the possibility of an ideological utopia. As artists sought to demarcate and critique the ideological forms weighing upon their intellectual and artistic communities, engaging new perceptions and reinterpretations of the past began to arise. As Michael Sullivan highlights, political pop removed the oppressive power of propaganda art, as the images were now "treated almost affectionately as part of Chinese folk culture, and at the same time mocked into meaninglessness in the manner of Andy Warhol's famous Campbell's soup cans" (Sullivan 279). The youth of the early 1990s began rummaging through their parents closets looking for Mao badges, once signs of unrelenting conformity and ideological homogeneity, in an invocation of their newfound radical alterity. The deconstruction of

political images within the artistic sphere served the dual purpose of freeing the individual subject from the collective memory of the Maoist period, while also allowing the younger generations free reign with their unexperienced authoritarian past.

Political pop has further enlivened the debate concerning the production and consumption of imagery and ideology, as it "unmasks the official visual idiom as ideological marketing and/or mass product" (Guldemond 53).⁶⁷ Hou Hanru further argues that

"Political Pop' and 'Cynical Realism', instead of pursuing the freedom and innovation of art language (it is an essential way of avoiding the constraints of the official, dominant discourse), mix up popular discontents in political and everyday life with market values in order to, with a bigger economical and political safety, achieve further exposure of their depression, while the official ideology is entering a transition towards a new discursive authority which combines market values with totalitarianism." (Hou 40).

The embeddedness of the individual in the transnational circulation of capital, combined with the rapidly changing social and cultural realities surrounding everyday life and the diverse modes of dwelling (cf. Heidegger "Building Dwelling Thinking") encountered in contemporary China, unmasks and decentres the Subject of the prevailing government ideology. Artists working within this environment attempted to convey within their works their impression or understanding of the new world in which they found themselves, or in the words of the existentialists, into which they are thrown (*geworfen*) and must now dwell.

Numerous other artists have selected specifically political motifs within their works, and have sought to critique normative ideological frameworks through a diverse

array of mediums and practices. For example, one could certainly argue that the *Legacy Mantle* series of Sui Jianguo 隋建国 signifies the thoughtless and mindless ideological rhetoric propagated during the Mao period, and the perceived absent centre of political ideology in contemporary China (see plate 28). The headless statues wearing Mao suits could signify either the empty-headed idol himself, or the forced conformity of the era, which disrupted the emergence of individual thought within the artistic sphere. The sculptures of Wang Shugang 王书钢 are also highly evocative of anti-establishment criticism, as monks dipped in the uniformly bright red of Maoist ideology stand hunched, sweeping the ground beneath them as soldiers stand guard with rifles drawn (see plate 29). Such overtly political statements would seemingly signify the embeddedness of political repression and forced conformity expounded by the CCP upon vernacular cultural and religious traditions. The pastiche collages of Xue Song 薛松, reminiscent of early collages of the Dada movement, or the pop art collages of Richard Hamilton, also evoke a critical deconstruction of the images of China's socialist past (see plate 30). One of the earliest to challenge the legitimacy of state ideology was Wu Shanzhuan 吴山专, whose *Red Humour* installation consisted of a nonsensical collage of big character posters (da zi bao 大字报) awash with the red of the revolution (see plate 31). In all of these works, there exists a certain nostalgia, or revulsion at nostalgia, which is nonetheless an historicised turning from a moment which evokes profound memories. Such forms of nostalgia for the forms and imagery of the Cultural Revolution embedded in the collective consciousness, were purposively evoked by Wang Guangyi in an effort to re-invent and recontextualise the profound impact of the Cultural Revolution on the individual subject. Through his interrogation of his historical past, a rather powerful

(postmodern) narrative of nostalgia is evinced by Wang's configuration of the present, through an evocation of his embeddedness in the fraught trajectory of Chinese modernity.

This movement of reflection and refraction, characterised by appropriation and deconstruction, is evocative of the artistic sphere in China during the reform process. The embeddedness of an economic logic predicated upon forms of mass consumption has disjoined the Chinese artistic sphere from a single homogeneous telos, and has engendered unexpected and engaging new artistic forms. In the words of Peter Wollen,

"modernism is being succeeded not by a totalising Western postmodernism, but by a hybrid new aesthetic in which the new corporate forms of communication and display will be constantly confronted by new vernacular forms of invention and expression. Creativity always comes from beneath, it always finds an unexpected and indirect path forward and it always makes use of what it can scavenge by night" (Wollen 209-210).⁶⁸

⁶⁸ This passage is also cited in the introduction to Kobena Mercer's edited volume *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures* (2007), p. 33.

Chapter 5 The Political Pop Art of Wang Guangyi

While the *Great Criticism Series* (*da piping xilie* 大批评系列)⁶⁹ is the primary focus of this paper, in order to grasp the underlying narrative within the series it was first necessary to reveal the contemporaneous political, economic, and artistic developments concurrent with Wang's artistic production. The difficult task of reading through a work of art so as to offer a critical interpretation and engaged cultural commentary is further complicated by the diversity of interpretations possible within any particular work or set of works, and Wang's *Great Criticism Series* is no exception. I will first offer a rather quick biographical sketch and analysis of Wang's artistic progression prior to this series, followed by a detailed analysis of the *Great Criticism Series*, which will afford a greater understanding of the intellectual trajectory of his work, and thus its relevance within the sphere of socio-cultural criticism.

Wang Guangyi was born in 1958 in Haerbin 哈尔滨 in Heilongjiang 黑龙江 province, to an average family comprised for the most part of workers. He was only 9 years old at the commencement of the Cultural Revolution and as a youth became a Little Red Guard, and subsequently a Red Guard. After being branded a 'young intellectual' in 1974 at the age of 17, he was sent to labour in the fields and learn from the peasants. In 1977, when the universities were finally reopened and examinations were reinstated, he applied (three times with rejection) and was eventually accepted to the oil painting department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (*Zhejiang meishu xueyuan* 浙江美术

⁶⁹ Others, notably Gao Minglu (1999), have translated *da piping xilie* 大批评系列 as *Great Castigation Series*. I will retain the translation *Great Criticism Series* throughout.

学院) in Hangzhou 杭州, now named the China Academy of Art (*Zhongguo meishu xueyuan* 中国美术学院). Upon graduation, Wang moved back to Haerbin, where he worked as a secondary school teacher. He founded the Northern Art Group in 1984, and in 1987 founded the first biennial in northern China in Changchun 长春, in the province of Jilin 吉林. His story is one of rags to riches, as the mixture of his idealism and eager enthusiasm for success and fame, combined with the historical moment into which he was thrown and the potent force of the artworks he produced during those moments, culminated in his becoming the principle character (Smith 43) in the emergent avantgarde within China. His artwork is synonymous with the critical reflection and (re)engaged intellectual debate which has opened up in the post 1978 era, and as such holds a primary place not only for the contemporary Chinese art world, but in the annals of art history.

His series of deconstructions of Western artworks and styles in the mid 1980s visually evoked his critical readings of the philosophical texts then entering China, of which he was an avid reader – most notably the works of Heidegger, Hegel, Sartre, and Wittgenstein (Smith 36). His *Frozen Northern Wastelands* series (1985-1986) produced while in Haerbin, and the *Post-Classical* series (1986-1988) produced while in Zhuhai, were indicative of a mind searching to challenge his educational background and invent new categories of representation (see plates 32 and 33). As regards the philosophical ideas then circulating within the intellectual bubble of the Northern Art Group, Wang has stated that "we didn't understand much of the philosophies we read, but we had become aware of the relation of art to society. We believed that through art we could change

people's lives" (Smith 53), a sentiment remarkably similar to the impassioned clarion calls of Liu Haisu or Lu Xun discussed earlier.

The next set of works to emerge were his Red Reason and Black Reason series, many of which began to evoke political motifs, the most notable being Wang's usage of the image of Mao Zedong taken from familiar photographs or paintings. The standard portraits (biaozhunxiang 标准像) of Mao epitomized the era of Wang's youth, and were printed and distributed en masse during the Cultural Revolution (see plate 34). It is estimated that around 900 million posters of Liu Chunhua's 刘春华 painting Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan (Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan 毛主席去安源) were printed (see plate 35) during the Cultural Revolution, and roughly 2.8 billion Mao badges (see plate 36) were also printed and worn as symbolic gestures to both the revolution and to the Great Leader (Jiang, "Burden or Legacy" 16). During the Cultural Revolution, a stunning total of 2.2 billion portraits of Mao were produced between 1966-1976 (Wu 49). Many were of his standard portrait, however there were numerous others which circulated throughout the countryside.⁷⁰ Evoking these well known images of Mao, Wang sought to establish as irrational the uncritical deification of the great leader through a critical de-deification of his image on the canvas, in a bid to move beyond the historical moment of Maoist ideology.⁷¹ As Jiang Jiehong analyses, Wang's Mao Zedong – Hongge 毛泽东红格 (Mao Zedong – Red Grid), "could be a superficial symbol of imprisoning Mao or his autocratic era", or it could allow for the rational analysis and dissection of the Man as idol (Jiang, "Burden or Legacy" 17). Through his dissection of the great leader, Wang was

⁷⁰ For more imagery, see Laing, figures 65-71.

⁷¹ For further analysis of the image of Mao during the Cultural Revolution, consult Jiang (2007), pp. 15-20. For an engaging discussion of Mao's portrait at Tiananmen, consult Wu Hung (2005), pp. 51-84.

attempting to remove the emotional connection to the image of Mao, as he states: "through the image of Mao, I imagined finding a means to demonstrate how it was possible to remove all sense of human emotion" (Smith 63). Ironically, during the China/Avant Garde exhibition in Beijing where Wang first showed these works (see plate 37), the immediate reaction from the visitors was to reignite their fond memories of Mao. In his exhibition catalogue Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the *Twentieth Century*, Wu Hung discusses the heightening personality cult (geren mixin \uparrow 人迷信)⁷² of Mao in the post reform era, who during the Cultural Revolution was represented endearingly as the 'Four Greats' (sige weida 四个伟大) - the Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Commander, and Great Helmsman. Towards the end of the 1980s, "the image of Mao, long since freed from his stifling holy aura and the odium of his destructive policies, became a 'floating sign,' a vehicle for nostalgic reinterpretation, unstated opposition to the status quo, and even satire" (Barmé, "Shades" 15-16). Wu Hung argues that Wang was attempting to rationalise the image of Mao, and quotes a statement made by Wang regarding his Mao AO series that his aim was "to serve as a clearing-house for the dire straits resulting from the lack of logic, a consequence of the widespread humanistic zeal in our artistic circle" (Wu, "Transience" 50).⁷³ With this critical deconstruction, Wang was attempting to restructure and reconfigure both the socialist realist tradition and the representation of Maoist ideology enshrined in the image of Mao, both of which were characterised by an unrelenting humanistic zeal. In an article in September 1987 in Fine Arts in China (zhongguo meishu bao 中国美术抱) Wang

⁷² The Oxford Englich Dictionary defines 'personality cult' as *geren chongbai* 个人崇拜. An excellent analysis of the resurgent personality cult of Mao in the late 1980s and 1990s can be found in Barmé (1996). ⁷³ Originally quoted from Lü Peng. *Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi* 1979-1989, p. 167.

appealed to fellow avant-garde artists to 'expunge' their humanistic zeal (*qingli renwen reqing* 清理人文热情) and provide a measure of rationalistic intellectual engagement with the current intellectual climate. In his clinical deconstructions of Mao's standard portrait, Wang's usage of the grid pattern replicated the same grid pattern which was used by artists during the Cultural Revolution in their initial drawings of Mao, as an underlying guide for proportionately representing his image. As Wu Hung analyses, "what Wang Guangyi did, therefore, was to bring this grid hidden underneath every Mao portrait to the surface, thereby 'rationalizing' the image's historicity and artificiality" (Wu, "Transience" 51). Wang was thus gazing at the irrational spectacle which had unfolded during his youth in a renewed and critically engaged way.⁷⁴

At the height of the Mao fever of the early 1990s, political pop art burst onto the scene. The exponential magnitude of this resurgent Mao fever is highlighted by Barmé (1996), who provides some rather interesting statistics. He relates that "in 1989 a mere 370,000 copies of the official portrait of Mao were printed. In 1990 the number rose dramatically to 22.95 million, of which 19.93 million were sold. In 1991 the number hit 50 million" (Barmé 9).⁷⁵ Wang's usage of Mao's image was thus remarkably timely, however in the aftermath of the *China/Avant Garde* exhibition, Wang was forced to resign from his position at the Zhuhai Painting Institute as a result of his critical

⁷⁴ Interviewing Wang, Nuridsany quotes him as saying of the Cultural Revolution that "it was a time when people thought a lot... the Cultural Revolution opened my eyes" (Nuridsany 54). Wang further related that "I think that the Cultural Revolution was neither good nor bad, but full of significance. This word gives a more precise idea of what it meant for me." (Nuridsany 54). While this may be the case, Nuridsany cautions the reader, as a colleague of his later stated that Wang was ambivalently manipulating their discussion, due to the fact that he was a Westerner. This is, apparently, a well known character trait of Wang Guangyi.

⁷⁵ Also quoted in Wu Hung (1999), p. 52.

interpretation of Mao. He subsequently took up a position at the School of Industrial Design in Wuhan 武汉, Hubei 湖北 province.

At the Guangzhou Biennial a few years later in 1992, Wang exhibited his *Great Criticism Series* for the first time, and the following year in 1993, Wang was one of the first artists to showcase his work at the Venice Biennale, where for the first time his *Great Criticism Series* was on display to a large Western audience (see plate 38). Wang came to develop the concept for the series almost by chance – while drinking a can of Coca-Cola one day as he flipped through a book of socialist propaganda art. In the artists own words:

"I put the can down to turn a page and suddenly, I found that the posturing of the soldier-peasant-workers against the Coca-Cola logo made strong visual sense. The more I looked the more intrigued I became. In content and style, both graphics are the product of two very different cultural backgrounds, each totally embodied in its own fantastic kind of ideology" (Smith 67).

The evocatively juxtaposed imagery immediately struck a chord with Wang, who had been looking for a new direction for his artwork in the aftermath of his Mao series (see plates 39-44).

Unfolding on the canvas in the *Great Criticism Series* is an invective polemic against the overt structures of power and signification which aimed configure the intellectual climate of the early 1990s. Through his deconstructive strategy, Wang attempted to "scan the sedimented traces of modernization within the aesthetic work itself" (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 304), by unconcealing the pervasive rhetoric upon which China's re-engagement with modernity was based. The series cannot be conceived as a critique of a single normative, homogeneous, or universal conceptual or ideological framework, for the aesthetic dimension of the works themselves derives from a temporal overlap of the modernising projects of both socialism and neo-liberalism. Discursively embedded within the works is a form of artistic antagonism, which serves to highlight the teleologising discourses underlying these two dialectically opposed systems. By 'artistic antagonism', I am referring to a critique of the ideological undercurrents within Chinese society, as the signifiers for revolutionary proletarian struggle are set in contradiction to the emergent narrative of the commodity form and the spectacle of consumerism. Within this context, the antagonism lies in the rupture⁷⁶ created between the signifying elements presented on the canvas, and the further perceptive antagonism such imagery evokes in the consumers of these works – the critics, collectors, other artists, and in general anyone interested in thinking about them.

Throughout the *Great Criticism Series*, commensurate with the anti-capitalist imagery of proletarian struggle which appeared during the Cultural Revolution, one notices the representations of the 3 pillars of China's socialist modernity, namely the worker, peasant, and soldier,⁷⁷ and in many cases the little red book of Maoist ideology, officially termed the *Quotations From Chairman Mao* (*Mao zhuxi yulu* 毛主席语录), however often referred to as the *Precious Red Book* (*hong bao shu* 红宝书) or *Little Red Book* (*xiao hong shu* 小红书). Also prominently featured is the bold red of the revolution, which evokes a time when the slogan "The East is Red" (*dongfang hong* 东方红)

⁷⁶ Heidegger would call this form of rupture a 'rift' (*der Riss*), i.e. the bringing forth of the possibility of the work of art from a negative space. Arising out of a rift between the ontological and the ontic, new and original works of art appear which possess the possibility of transporting the viewing subject out of the ordinary and into the open, "out of the realm of the usual" which thereby enables one to "dwell in the truth of the work" ("Art" 40). While I am not concerned with questions of 'truth' at the present moment, as the search for a fundamental ontological ground, i.e. the space wherein truth dwells, is far beyond the import of this paper. What I do find rather engaging and would like to note, however, is that for Heidegger, poetic and thereby artisitc forms do not arise from the ordinary and the traditional, but are rather historically derived and instantiated, and always arise out of a rift, out of the un-concealing of an historicised strife. ⁷⁷ During the Cultural Revolution, the 'five red categories' (*hong wulei* 紅五类) were: workers, peasants, soldiers, revolutionary cadres and martyrs. See Jiang, "Revolution", p. 27 for further analysis.

peppered numerous walls across China. Such imagery is not evoked as a means of highlighting a new dialectic struggle between China and the West, or socialism and capitalism, but rather serves to reveal a deeper line of socio-political questioning, evident in Wang Guangyi's works dating back to the early 1980s.⁷⁸ Wang is attempting to critique the manner in which economic modernity and neo-liberal discourse seek to produce and maintain indifferent, innocuous subjectivities – empty shells of individuals casually marching forward towards their mundane, mass-produced modernity. As one notices throughout the Great Criticism Series, in his "attempt to critique the system, Wang spread randomly printed serial numbers all over the canvas, indicating mass production, the lack of individualism and the interchangeability of the individual" (Christies Catalogue). Throughout, the individual is to all intents and purposes nonexistent, and is rather represented as a reduction to a simple category: a worker, peasant, or soldier.⁷⁹ Richard Vine describes Wang's serial numbers as indicative of government ID numbers and product serial codes, while his use of the colours yellow and red upon the same canvas is in direct contradiction to traditional Chinese colour theory, wherein yellow and red are symbolic of the incompatible elements of earth and fire (Vine 28).

Karen Smith highlights that the "compositions concisely invoked the ideological conflicts taunting a socialist society, which in its drive to modernise was fast succumbing to brand-name mania. The visual harmony of the ideological mix juxtaposed in the

⁷⁸ As mentioned earlier, Wang was heavily influenced by the writings of Martin Heidegger, the existentialists, and numerous other modern western and Chinese intellectuals.

⁷⁹ Ironically, the noble and industrious worker of the former era is now embodied in the figure of the migrant worker (or migrant/floating population, *youmin* 游民), the anonymous subject of Chinese modernisation. A deluge of workers have migrated to the cities in order to fill the surging urban labour bill in the post-reform period, and the movement towards an increased emphasis on urban development, which began in 1984, has greatly increased the income disparity between rural and urban populations, particularly in the aftermath of Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992.

paintings is heightened by the polarity of their apposition." (Smith 66). Indeed, the stark juxtaposition of these ideological forms exhibits the specular grammar of social change, wherein the first ideological form, the propaganda print, serves to both define and modify the newfound consumer capitalist form, while both forms together evoke and promote the unreal utopian space promulgated by the state. Following in the tradition of modern cultural criticism exemplified by Lu Xun, the Great Criticism Series exhibits what Liu Kang has called an "aesthetics of negativity" (Liu, "Aesthetics" 6), whereby the work of art symbolises not so much the negation of Western capitalism, but the negation of its blind acceptance in China, and its incommensurate ability to create a new social hierarchy based solely on wealth and status. This re-institution of a class society is indicative of a mere transfer of 'forms' (socialism to neo-liberalism), and does not represent the instantiation of a more equitable social structure. The negation is enacted through the reformulation of socialist realist art utilising the visual form of western (and specifically American) pop art, and the layering of contrasting cultural forms. This symbolic layering of brand iconography presents a critique of the ironic nature of China's newfound consumer culture, as the ideological positions of these iconic brands overtake the previous ideological positions of Mao and the CCP's socialist iconography. The canvas thereby becomes significant as a visual representation of the tensions inherent in the historical moment of their creation, as divergent and seemingly incongruous ideologies overlap in the formation of a postsocialist China in the throes of neoliberal and neoauthoritarian discourse. Wang has stated that "my place is that of an observer. What I am showing is the confrontation, the meeting, of two civilisations, two worlds, clashing" (Nuridsany 54). When asked if his paintings refer to the clash of two distinct ideologies,

Wang vividly responded by saying "no, two cultures" (Nuridsany 54). I would, however, contend that the prevailing ideology, in line with the thought of Althusser, is the agent which both produces culture and the subjects interpellated from that culture, and that forms of artistic production are embedded in their cultural framework in and through the reproduction of ideology. For Althusser, the 'ultimate condition of production' is the reproduction of the conditions of production, by which he means the cyclical nature of capitalism expounded by Marx. Such an understanding is commensurate with the dictum of neo-liberal discourse, where it is society itself which upholds the ideology of the market.⁸⁰

In such paintings as *Coca-Cola* (*kekou kele* 可口可乐. See plate 45) one notices the three pillars of China's socialist modernity (the worker, peasant, soldier) brandishing a paintbrush, together and as one inscribing their newfound capitalist ideology before them. They are signifiers for the invisible hand of (neo)liberal economic functioning, unaware of both the futures they inscribe, as well as the totalities of which they are intrinsically a part.⁸¹ These three 'characters' of the proletarian vanguard portrayed on the canvas are the inverted signifiers for *homo æconomicus*, which is to say, "someone who responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment" (Foucault 270). They are the unindividualistic individuals who are 'manageable', who can be molded by the economic system, and can be '*laisser-faire*', let

⁸⁰ In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault argues that it is civil society, which is "a concept of governmental technology, or rather, it is the correlate of a technology of government the rational measure of which must be juridically pegged to an economy understood as process of production and exchange" (Foucault 296). ⁸¹ Totality here refers to the members of a society, or economic agents, who are eminently governable – i.e. *homo æconomicus*.

alone,⁸² within the modality of economic functioning, and under the purview of a legal system enacted to further the socio-political forms which it upholds. *Homo æconomicus*, therefore, "is someone who is eminently governable" (Foucault 270). It is, I believe, these 'eminently governable' subjects which Wang is attempting to unconceal in his artworks, in an effort to lay bare the ideological foundations upon which China's current economic prosperity is based.

A Christies sale catalogue rather engagingly describes the critical narrative underlying Wang's work: "While the vigorous gestures of monumental proletarian images of the Mao era have already revealed themselves as a mendaciously colourful facade of an inhumane machinery, Wang attributes the same hypocrisy to Western consumerism" (Christies Catalogue). Wang is therefore attempting to critique the contradictions inherent within the subjects he is portraying, and his aesthetic is certainly a politically charged, and 'mendaciously colourful' one. Yet the aesthetic is also a profoundly positive one, and is not simply reducible to a scathing critique of Western society. Liu Kang has argued that "aesthetic Marxism in China has served the twofold mission of critiquing the intrinsic contradictions of revolutionary hegemony and offering a constructive vision of culture in a postrevolutionary society" (Liu, p. x). In this configuration, aesthetic theory under Chinese Marxism is not simply a representation of bourgeois ideals or discourse, but rather a socio-political tool for (re)enacting revolutionary change. *The Great Criticism Series* is not advocating a return to socialist

⁸² It is worth noting that this '*laisser-faire*' is not a correllate of the letting-be of beings, i.e. it is not an ontological referent which seeks to reveal and allow the presencing of the Being of beings, but is rather a political and economic mode of comprehending the manner in which subjects are interpellated under the purview of neoliberal discourse. For more on the letting-be of beings, see Martin Heidegger, particularly *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit), The Question Concerning Technology (Die Frage nach der Technik)*, and *On The Essence of Truth (Vom Wesen der Wahrheit)*.

forms of political and economic organisation, but is rather seeking to uphold the antagonistic questioning which revolutionary and avant-garde subjectivities necessarily possess.

Many of the paintings in the series exhibit the word NO and the letter R, perhaps signaling the rejection of ideology and revolution, or perhaps signifying a rejection of the blind adherence to the new wave of colonisation by western consumer brands. The paintings which feature the names of Beuys and Warhol (see plates 46 and 47) instead of the usual brand names, are according to Nuridsany not indicative of products in and of themselves, but rather *products imported* into China. They are foreign artistic and ideological appropriations which have displaced the local vernacular ideologies – i.e. the worker, peasant, soldier revolutionary dynamic. Such an invasion of importation reflected "the mood of a people held at siege by change" (Smith 73), and further complicates the dynamic interplay between the two overlapping modernising trends.

While Wang has produced other styles and series' in recent years, it is his *Great Criticism Series* which is the most evocative, and which has entrenched his reputation as a giant of contemporary Chinese cultural discourse. It does seem pertinent, however, to briefly outline some of the work Wang has done recently. Evolving his analysis in the *Great Criticism Series*, Wang's series of *Materialists* sculptures (see plate 48) purges the figures from their attachment to the rhetoric of consumerism on the canvas, and signifies the stalwart proletarian of a bygone age, purportedly unhinged from competing discourses. In a recent series, *Eternal Glory*, the figures of the Cultural Revolution are depicted alone, and in black and white, signifying the demise of a dated and irrelevant Maoist ideology, the gloomy acceptance that the revolution is dead, and that the new

consumerist ideology is firmly entrenched (See plate 49). It would not be until 2002 that a retrospective of numerous of Wang's works were shown at He Xiangning Art Museum (hexiangning meishuguan 何香凝美术馆) in Shenzhen 深圳, along with those of Fang Lijun and Zhang Xiaogang in an exhibition entitled *Image is Power*. Three years later in 2005 he was appointed to the advisory board of the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), established by the same museum.⁸³ His latest series, which exhibited from October 2008 until March 2009 at the Louise Blouin Foundation in London was entitled *Cold War Aesthetics* (see plates 50 and 51),⁸⁴, and featured a series of ruminations upon the sociological and psychological ramifications which the cold war foisted upon the individual. The series built upon his previous black and white reconstructions of the leaflets handed out to the general populace in the early 1960s, instructing what to do in case of war or invasion.⁸⁵ In *Cold War Aesthetics*, Wang has continued the approach of reproducing military training manuals and community information posters disseminated during the late 1950s and early 1960s (Smith 80). Another recent series is entitled The Face of the Believer (see plate 52). Recently, Wang has also moved towards an engagement with installation pieces. In the exhibition Visual Politics: Another Wang Guangyi (which consisted primarily of sculpture and installation pieces), art critic and curator Huang Zhuan divided the work of Wang Guangyi into four distinct stages of artistic production: 'premonition of a crisis in 1989', 'institutional research from 1990 through 1999', 'the mythology of materialism from 2000 through to [2008]', and 'the aesthetics of a cold war from last year through [2008]' (Huo, Shenzhen Daily 2008).

⁸³ Other appointees included Xu Bing, Zhang Peili, and Wang Jianwei 汪建伟.

⁸⁴ Also referred to as the Aesthetics of Cold War.

⁸⁵ For imagery for this Wang Guangyi's *The People's Guide to the War Effort*, see Smith, pp. 80-81.

The primary consumers of Wang Guangyi's works have been western art collectors, who immediately identify and respond to the signifier of the revolutionary propaganda aesthetic as indicative of its authentic 'Chineseness'.⁸⁶ Such images of Mao and critical commentaries on the revolutionary Marxist aesthetic frequently appear in contemporary Chinese art, and often serve to immensely increase sale prices. Not shirking the market, Wang has willingly commercialised his political pop art. Criticism has been levied upon numerous contemporary Chinese artists for specifically seeking to produce works they feel Western art critics and collectors are interested in writing about and purchasing. Such a feeling is in a certain sense inimical to an authentic artistic development, but on the other hand is completely understandable given the inverted logic of the CCP, and the promulgation of capitalist rhetoric. There is currently the view among foreign critics and collectors that the political pop artists of the early 1990s were anti-establishment, and are thus in high demand by foreign art collectors (Nuridsany 9), however such views are inherently simplistic and do not really analyse the underlying trends leading to the development of such artistic traditions. As Wang himself has mentioned, "from the start, I was determined to produce art that was contemporary, Chinese, and that would be accorded international respect. It was not about being a nonconformist, at least, not in a deliberate way" (Smith 69). A work which does demonstrate a markedly non-conformist and anti-establishment stance is Ai Weiwei's 1997 photograph, A Study of Perspective exhibited at the exhibition Fuck Off, in which the artist stands on Tiananmen square giving the middle finger to both the square itself, as

⁸⁶ Until only recently, up to ninety percent of the individuals collecting Wang's work have been from the west.

well as Mao's portrait hanging on Tiananmen (see plate 53).⁸⁷ Nonetheless, such works of art have garnered increasingly high sale prices at international auction houses, and have solidified political pop as a marketable commodity.

The appearance of these increasing returns to scale in postsocialist art evokes what Jameson has called the discursive formation of works of art (or literature) in third world (or developing) nations as mere reflections of an all pervasive 'national allegory'.⁸⁸ These formations of 'symbolic capital' are representative of a commodified 'postmodern' culture, and the diverse subjectivities from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds which overlap and arrive at the historical moment of the sale. Underlying the remarkable power of the work of Wang Guangyi is its symbolic capital, as a theoretical critique of the metanarrative of both socialist and capitalist hegemony, which allows for the reinvigoration of the historically determined analysis of the process of capital formations. This analysis of the work of art as a possessor of symbolic capital allows the work to reveal itself as a socio-cultural critique, or a metonymic for an artistic praxis within an alternative Chinese modernity. When the work of art comes to sale on the market, particularly in the hyper-inflated markets of the contemporary Chinese art world, we are confronted with an inversion of the purportedly avant-garde status of the work. At the moment of the sale, the initial avant-garde work is transformed into a commodity, whose exchange-value is greatly inflated, ironically by the very critique of the capitalist system that the work initially sought to effect. This particular movement is brought about by the entry of the artist into the highly competitive and highly stratified art market. In this

⁸⁷ This series also includes Ai Weiwei giving the finger to the White House, as well as to the viewer.
⁸⁸ Unlike Jameson, I would however argue that *not all* third-world texts/works implicitly evoke the form of a national allegory, but rather that there is a general tendency towards this, in light of the particular temporalities which developing nations inhabit. Once society reaches a further stage of development or modernisation, such tendencies generally tend to dissipate, but never taper off completely.

context, the work of art serves as a use-value for the promulgation of a critical artistic culture, however it would be worth noting the thought of Thomas Keenan here, who argues that all use-values are reduced to an "abstraction [which] is the erasure of difference in the service of likeness or equality" (Keenan 165). Such a position is commensurate with the commodification of both the work of art and its producer, an observation which relegates artistic production and the artist to a form indistinguishable from the commodity. While I would concur that this is indeed the case in the short-term, the long-term effects of an antagonistic artistic praxis supersede the simple relegation of the artwork to a commodity form.

In light of the aforementioned, with Wang's acceptance and eventual rise to a position of prominence in the art world, the works in the short-term revert into a position of signification for processes of capital accumulation, and thereby solidify the discourse of capitalist production as the precondition for (successful) artistic production. Initially, the work itself is willingly transformed by the artist (through his public) into a mass-produced commodity, in an ironic inversion from the perceived visual message of the painting. This determination of political pop is not new, as an oscillating irony within the political pop movement concerns the willing acceptance of the market while at the same time critiquing the market (Wu, "Transience" 23). As Hou Hanru further argues, "its 'avant-gardist' values are rapidly degenerating into normal commodities and cheap tricks of 'tragi-comic performance'" (Hou 40) for consumption by a predominantly western art market.⁸⁹ Underlying this movement from antagonism to acceptance, the artwork is at

⁸⁹ Wang reproduced his *Great Criticism Series* throughout the decade or so spanning the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, as demand for the series had far exceeded the available supply. The works entered into a natural logic of production and consumption in the classical liberal econoime sense, and despite the criticism

once representative of the avant-garde, as well as its antithesis, as the artwork and artist become subsumed under the processes of production and exchange which underlie the ideological foundations of the capitalist system.⁹⁰ The movement of the work of art from a commodity critique, to a process of circulation wherein the critique serves as the precondition (the signifier) for the aesthetic, ensures the perpetuation of capital accumulation for the artist, who is in turn transformed into a capitalist, in and through the means of his/her antagonistic artistic production. The artist, when confronted with a market in which to sell his/her wares, is confronted by his/her "*subjection to the ruling ideology*, or the mastery of its 'practice'" (Althusser 7).

Although confronted with a seemingly dominant ideological form, Wang is not directly criticising the "discourse of power in Mao's Communist ideology and propagandist art" (Gao, "Transnational Modernity" 29), but is rather creating a layered representational critique of the commodity power of such images. Although numerous western scholars have read into political pop art (as well as cynical realism) as indicative of a scathing visual polemic against the ideological underpinnings of the Maoist era, Gao Minglu highlights that these artists are in effect ambivalently satirising the socio-cultural,

levied upon him by the art community regarding his continual production of new varities within the series, one can hardly fault the artist for his willingness to capitalise upon them. The very same art community who was criticing him was ironically, through continual discussion of his works, creating the demand which necessitated his reproduction of the series, in an ironic (but beneficial to the artist) circular logic of production and consumption. Andy Warhol once said that "being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art... and good business is the best art." (Art.view "Bedfellows: Two Artists Who Understand the Beauty of Business" *Economist.com*. 20 Sept. 2009. Web. 21 Sept. 2009). ⁹⁰ While it may sound as though the current critique is decidedly Marxist, or in the service of a Marxist interpretation of the ills of the capitalist system, this is not the case. My focus is rather on the long run sociological undercurrents within the Marxist critique, which is to say, on the 'laws of motion' of capitalism. I hope that the reader will forgive my reservations towards adopting a specifically Marxist or Liberal stance regarding the matter of economic organisation. This textual and philosophical leap, if perhaps logically inconsistent, nonetheless allows for the formation of an alternate hermeneutical analysis of the work of art, disjoined from the specific analyses of either Marxist or (neo)liberal discourse, while still enabling the relevance of both forms, at least philosophically.

for political pop "neutralizes its direct criticism of reality by utilizing its strategy of imitating both propagandist and consumer discourse while exhibiting an ambivalence towards the nationalism that is increasing among Chinese intellectuals" (Gao, "Transnational Modernity" 29). With the Great Criticism Series, Wang sought to reveal the historical moment within which he was then living, creating works of art which would resonate beyond the historical moment of their inception; works which were imbued with a meaningful form of antagonism towards transcendent conceptions of social, political, economic, and cultural existence. The aesthetic undercurrent of the Great Criticism Series therefore seeks to provide a model for an alternative modernity, which sets out to critique the revolutionary fervour of Maoist China, while also critiquing the teleological determinism of modern transnational capitalism. As I have thus far argued, implicit in the Great Criticism Series is a twofold critique of the teleologies of both socialist and capitalist ideology and the formation of concrete subjectivities under the iconography of both ideological systems. This artistic critique ultimately serves as an aesthetic praxis which aims to inscribe the purportedly normative horizons of both socialism and capitalism with a continual questioning of their inherent and assumed positions. This continually oscillating movement, whereby the form of 'ideological criticism' supplants the form of 'ideological adherence' is the temporal moment evoked within the *Great Criticism Series*, as a provocative metonymic for China's astringent reconnection with capitalist modernity.⁹¹

⁹¹ Recall, the series is metonmyically evocative for an historicised present layered with the memories of the Cultural Revolution – the collectivisation of the subject, the mass rallies, propaganda posters, Red Guards, etc.

Chapter 6 Postsocialist Politics and Aesthetic Praxis in Political Pop Art

Postsocialist politics within China have been intricately linked to the rhetorical rise of an 'harmonious society (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), although the phrase would not come into popular usage until after the turn of the century,⁹² when "in 2006 the Sixth Plenary session of the Sixteenth Central Committee passed the Resolution on Constructing a Socialist Harmonious Society" (Yu 49). We have thus far been concerned with unconcealing the ideological syntax which underpinned the formation of such an harmonious society, in an effort to establish, through the works of Wang Guangyi, a more nuanced and theoretically conceptualised critical dialogue. The postsocialist period (1989-2001)⁹³ marked the temporal space within which political pop art was to emerge, and as Zhang Xudong has argued, "an internally differentiated and fragmented notion of the national selfhood, rather than an overarching, cosmopolitan framework of the universal, has become the main source for the collective identity of postsocialist Chinese society" (Zhang, "Postsocialism" 4).

Looking back at the Cultural Revolution, the aestheticisation of everyday life attempted to subvert subjective and individualistic aesthetic practice, with the aim of revealing a normatively focused universal mass consciousness, in dialectical opposition

⁹² The term $he \ \pi$ did not receive government support until after 2000, despite its significance within traditional Chinese society, culture, and politics.

⁹³ Zhang Xudong frames the postsocialist period as starting with the Tiananmen protests on June 6, 1989, and ending with China's entry into the WTO on December 11, 2001 (Zhang, "Postsocialism" 1). I would further contend that it has continued on to the present moment. I should also note that I am relatively wary of classifying historical periods or junctures into neat and tidy periods, which has been the purview of much Marxist historical scholarship. Such a Marxist project also seeks to demarcate and delimit philosophical junctures, the most notable example of which is Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

to the bourgeois consciousness of the emergent consumer culture in the new era. At the critical juncture of 1978, Dengist reforms sought after a policy of "emancipating the mind" (Yu 44), which meant a movement beyond the outdated doctrines of Maoism, and the articulation of a new intellectual discourse which would foster social progress. I would, however, contend that this social progress has not sought after a true emancipation of the mind, but has rather inverted the logic of 'social' progress, or modernisation. This inverted logic was undertaken primarily within the economic sphere, while the dominant political ideological vestiges of the previous era were for the most part retained. In the period directly after the founding of the People's Republic of China, humanism was conceived as a contentious 'western' doctrine, and was therefore severely criticised. Following Deng's strategy for the emancipation of the mind through the inversion of intellectual doctrines, humanism, as a 'people centred principle' (vi ren wei ben 以人为本) became an important facet of party doctrine, and was therefore one of the basic elements of the CCP's 'scientific outlook of development' (kexue fazhanguan 科学 发展观) (Yu 45). Elizabeth J. Perry has argued that the ideological spirit of the Maoist era is being resurrected in contemporary political and economic discourse, as "Mao's techniques of mass mobilization, born in revolutionary struggle but adapted to the tasks of post-revolutionary rule, lie at the heart of Chinese exceptionalism" (Perry, "Farewell to Revolution?" 5-6). This is further evidenced by the propagation of an elite centred cultural discourse by Jiang Zemin, centred around a logic which aimed to configure a normative, universal cultural paradigm within China. Enshrined in the CCP's constitution at the 16th party congress in autumn 2002 were the 'three represents' (sange daibiao $\equiv \uparrow$ 代表) of Jiang Zemin, first articulated during a trip to Guandong province in February

2000 (Fewsmith 1). The three represents are "1) the requirements of the development of China's advanced productive forces; 2) the orientation of the development of China's advanced culture; 3) the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people in China" (Thøgersen 204).⁹⁴ The pronouncement of this anti-antagonistic cultural logic has changed the focus of the party from one which seeks to promote a Leninist vanguard, to one which focusses on an elite centred culture.

Despite the opening up and reform policies, and the purported move towards a pluralistic intellectual space, the state pervasively controls the dissemination of information within China. As Ashley Esarey notes, "rather than presenting a serious challenge to state control, the establishment of market incentives in the media industry has strengthened incentives for the media to propagate the party line" (Esarey 39).⁹⁵ Interestingly, after the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee, in Dec. 1978, Hu Yaobang, then director of the Central Propaganda Department, advocated lifting media restrictions, and argued that the media should be more original and thought provoking. However this was not to be the case, as by the 1990s the state had entrenched its hold over the media. The state adopted diverse strategies for disseminating its ideological messages and ensuring the compliance of the media, as Esarey argues:

"The CCP's new strategy for managing the mass media in the 1990s had four principal components: commercialisation of media operations to allow the use of market resources to 'repackage' media content and party propaganda; introduction of Western-style management techniques concerning personnel and advertising; centralisation of political control over the management of the media; and continued elimination and consolidation of media difficult to

⁹⁴ For a detailed analysis of Jiang Zemin's Three Represents, consult Fewsmith (2003).

⁹⁵ For further analysis of the role of the media in China, consult Tang Wenfang (2006). Joseph Fewsmith (2008) further discusses the hierarchical system of control which exists within the media, as well as the formulaic templates (*tifa* 提法) required for the dissemination of information.

control or those deemed politically vulnerable and easiest to shut down" (Esarey 55).

Through direct intervention in the dissemination of knowledge, the state has sought to erect a barrier between the populace and its overall political objectives. The role of artists and intellectuals in such a closed intellectual space is one of interpretation, criticism, and antagonism. As our analysis has shown, numerous artists have since the 1990s been relatively free to produce works of art which directly critique the state, despite the chagrin which such criticism has evoked from the state. In an open space disjoined from political interference, political pop art represents a form of engaged intellectual praxis which disrupts the dissemination of state controlled ideology.

The first major postmodern intellectual intervention within China was Fredric Jameson's series of lectures in 1985 at Beijing University (*beijing daxue* 北京大学) on the topic of Postmodernism and Cultural Theory (*houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun* 后现 代主义与文化理论).⁹⁶ These lectures opened the question of postmodernism to the Chinese intellectual marketplace, and were exceptionally influential in shaping both the scholarly outlook of numerous intellectuals (notably Tang Xiaobing) and the artistic sphere. The intellectual aesthetic which forms the basis of postmodern discourse⁹⁷ will be discussed in the following chapter, however it suffices now to note that fragmentation and the dislocation of dominant metanarratives signals one of its primary features. The promotion of state sponsored ideology within all sectors of society, while perhaps useful in securing a smooth transition to a more developed society, will likely not last forever.

⁹⁶ This series of lectures was an edited version of Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, which was translated by Tang Xiaobing 唐小兵. Jameson's name is rendered in Chinese as Fu Jiemuxun 弗杰姆逊.

⁹⁷ That is, if postmodern forms of thought can indeed even have a basis or foundation.

As Pei Minxin has argued, "the self-destructive dynamics of predatory authoritarianism pose the most lethal threat to the long-term survival of the CCP" (Pei, "Is China's Transition Trapped" 4), and the disruptive tendencies of cultural movements operating on the fringes of society, or at the boundaries of cultural formations, often have the prescient power of revealing, if not removing, the promotion of hegemonic logics.

The aesthetic dimension of a work of art thus necessarily takes on numerous forms, and occupies numerous positions. Whether one is concerned with a purely autonomous beauty, or with poignant socio-political modes of critique, the aesthetic foundations of a work of art nevertheless lie within a plethora of refracted perceptions, far too numerous to discuss in any depth here. As Liu Kang has articulated, the aesthetic in modern China presents an "imaginary, sensuous, and utopian projection of subjectivity [which] promises to unify logic-reason with sense experience, ontology and ethics with epistemology, and particular individuality with general sociality" (Liu 4). Artistic praxis thereby invokes the formation of diverse subjectivities, through a variety of mediums, while exposing the historically derived contradictions inherent in the philosophical systems the artist is critiquing. The *Great Criticism Series* serves to invoke in the gazing or viewing subject an immediate sense of social and economic critique, and reveals the confrontation between and within the spectres of ideology which hang over contemporary Chinese society. The artworks are socially, culturally, and therefore historically determined objects, imbued with an historical authenticity and an aesthetic texture which transcend the commodifying process, and which ultimately serve as the basis for the promulgation of new critical forms, disjoined from the purported teleology of academic certainty. Historical reality is not displaced in the process of artistic production, nor are

the determinate factors of lived human experience, or what Merleau-Ponty has termed the phenomenology of perception, extricable from the movement of thought which enables the creative process.

Chapter 7 Rethinking the Subject through Aesthetic Praxis

As the discussion has unfolded, it has become increasingly evident that the artwork of Wang Guangyi is an event which seeks to theorize a public identity through the juxtaposition of the visual iconography of both the Cultural Revolution and transnational capitalism. These works are not contingent events, but survive in the form of an historically embedded narrative of mass revolutionary identity. The collective identity foisted upon the populace in the mass revolutionary movement of the Cultural Revolution sought to configure an uncritical political consciousness, and Wang Guangyi's implication in the Cultural Revolution as a Red Guard hoisted upon his shoulders an experience which could not simply be negated. One could argue that his experience with the Red Guards made him critical of the newfound teleological ideological framework which grasped the collective social, cultural, and political consciousness. With the inversion to a neoliberal consumer capitalist ideology, traces of the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution were embedded within the emergent discourse. The subjectivities produced under the purview of such ideological frameworks are beyond the control of the subjective ego, as is evinced by Foucault's discussion in The Birth of Biopolitics.

The discursively embedded traces of antagonism within the *Great Criticism Series*, while seemingly only representing the dialectic interplay between two ideological forms, seeks to evoke visually the decentring of the individual subject caught in the throes of an ideological tautology. While the discussion thus far has rather casually evoked the 'individual subject' as a 'thing' grasped by the ruling ideology and contingent upon its historical moment, we are now finally in a position to theorise the relatedness of the Subject to the dominant political discourse of the CCP. The conception of the autonomous Subject of philosophical inquiry is a complex one, to which we cannot fully do justice here, save for a few minor anecdotal references. The *Meditations* of René Descartes were the first systematic, deductive attempt at reasoning the existence of the autonomous Subject,⁹⁸ which would later find a more complete systematisation in the writings of Immanuel Kant⁹⁹, who offered glimmers of a subject embedded in the

⁹⁸ Descartes posits that the individual is the 'author' of his/her thoughts, which leads him to conclude that he is therefore an existent entity, a subjectivly ruminating subject. In quite possibly one of the most poetic paragraphs in the history of philosophy, Descartes ruminates upon the question of his existence, as to whether he is indeed 'something'. "In that case am not I, at least, something? But I have just said that I have no senses and no body... Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deeiving me... he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind." (Descartes 17). This is the famous "*ie suis, ie existe*" of Descartes, not to be confused with his invocation of *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), which would intriguingly be inverted by Nietzsche in Beyond Good and Evil (Jenseits von Gut und Böse), to sum, ergo cogito (I am, therefore I think), further deepening the debate. The Cartesian analysis is important for our current project as it set in motion an understanding of the production of the Subject, and the individual's role in questioning purportedly objective experience. "Descartes points out [that] it would be impossible to rid ourselves of all the notions which had ever taken root in the mind. The point is that we must refrain from affirming them." (Gibson 83). The visual criticism evoked in the work of Wang Guangyi creates within the viewing subject a measure of refusal – of abstaining from affirming the logic produced by the ruling ideology.

 $^{^{99}}$ Kant theorised a conception of the Self as an embedded appearance, which is given over to the inner sense of the intellect (intellectus): "We must order the determinations of inner sense as appearances in time in just the same way as we order those of outer sense in space; hence if we admit about the latter that we cognize objects by their means only insofar as we are externally affected, then we must also concede that through inner sense we intuit ourseles only as we are internally affected by our selves, i.e., as far as inner intuition is concerned we cognize our own subject only as appearance but not in accordance with what it is in itself" (Kant B 156). This Subject, given over to appearances and determinable in and through time, is contingent upon spontaneous acts of thought, and apperceives itself as contingent upon the unity of external influence. Kant further elaborates in the next paragraph: "The I think expresses the act of determining my existence. The existence is thereby already given, but the way in which I am to determine it, i.e., that manifold that I am to posit in myself as belonging to it, is not vet thereby given. For that self-intuition is required, which is grounded in an *a priori* given form, i.e., time, which is sensible and belongs to the receptivity of the determinable. Now I do not have yet another self-intuition, which would give the determining in me, of the spontaneity of which alone I am conscious, even before the act of determination, in the same way as time gives that which is to be determined, thus I cannot determine my existence as that of a self-active being, rather I merely represent the spontaneity of my thought, i.e., of the

movement of time. The unity of external experience proposed by Kant would form the basis of an historicised reading of the formation of the Subject, through its embeddedness in the moment of its self realisation, which would in turn be critiqued and deepened by G.W.F. Hegel. Evoking an historicised nature of the temporal, Louis Althusser revealed a Marxian-Hegelian concept of time which was ultimately to become influential within the Chinese intellectual and political sphere. Althusser contends that the categories of thought must be "historicized to reveal and understand their nature, their relativity and transitivity" (Althusser, "Reading Capital" 92), and does so through the dialectical analyses Marx had adopted from Hegel. Hegel defined time as 'der daseiende Begriff' (the concept/idea of 'being-there, of Being), relating an eternal, universal essence of the historical totality which creates the Idea, or the form taken by Absolute Spirit. For Althusser, the two essential characteristics of historical time are firstly the homogeneous continuity of time, i.e. the notion that "time can be treated as a continuum in which the dialectical continuity of the process of the development of the Idea is manifest", such that "the moments of the idea exist in a number of historical periods" (Althusser, "Reading Capital" 94). Secondly, Althusser relates the contemporaneity of time, or the category of the historical present, which is essentially the condition of possibility of the first one. There is an internal essence for 'things' in historical time, the traces of which are bound up within the conscious experiences of the individual subjects inhabiting any particular temporal juncture.

While the Subject of modernity sought to instantiate itself as an existential, autonomous being, able to determine its ontological status through conscious inquiry into

determining, and my existence always remains only sensibly determinable, i.e., determinable as the existence of an appearance. Yet this spontaneity is the reason I call myself an **intelligence**" (Kant B 157n).

its distinct mode of Being (its Dasein), the goal of the poststructural and postmodern critique has been to evoke not only the historical embeddedness of the individual subject, but also its fragmentation, its multiplicity, and in many cases its inherent relativity. The poststructural or postmodern decentring of the individual subject is evoked in the writings of numerous authors, from Arendt to Lacan, Lyotard to Barthes, and Benjamin to Jameson. Frederick M. Dolan analyses the political Subject within the thought of Lacan and Arendt, and relates that "both Lacan and Arendt 'decenter' the sovereign subject of intention and will by insisting on the priority of a 'second self,' substantially beyond the control of the intending or willing 'I' or ego and constituted through the thoroughly relativistic, intersubjective medium of discourse." (Dolan 332). Such a decentring enacts a radical break with the traditional Subject of modernity, and instantiates refraction and plurality as fundamental facets of metaphysical inquiry. The 'second self' for Lacan is the unconscious, whereas for Arendt it is a political self. These two distinct Subjects are embedded in the discourse of alterity which the *Great Criticism Series* unconceals, through the layering of the unconsciously embedded traces of a tradition which sought to erase individuality, while producing a thoroughly politicised proletarian subject. This politicised subject, thrown into a modernity inverted along consumer capitalist lines, and dictated and promoted by a neoauthoritarian state, leaves behind within the subject (in our case, Wang Guangyi), a sense of ambivalence and irony - both of which are conveyed on the canvas in equal measure. In either case, the discussion is naturally open to interpretative and at times contradictory analyses – which is in effect the purview of the postmodern. As John Docker argues, the postmodern poetic is one which is "heterogeneous, contradictory, ambivalent, inclusive – including of modernist modes"

(Docker 115). The postmodern thereby attracts and adapts, and is fundamentally inclusive of divergent discourses (including even modernism), so long as they purport to offer a line of questioning which seeks to reveal the inconsistencies of intellectual production. Fredric Jameson has also argued that the lines between post-structuralism and postmodernism are often blurred, and he includes the 'theoretical discourse' of Foucault within his definition of what can be included in postmodernism (Jameson, "PM and Consumer Society" 15).

If we conceive of the artist as an historicised individual thrown into a world disjoined from meaning, certainty, and purpose, how might that artist seek to represent his or her temporal moment? As witnessed within Wang's work, appropriation, deconstruction, and irony characterised both the technical and theoretical underpinnings of his artistic production. In a socio-cultural environment seemingly replete with contrasting and competing discourses, but at the same time presided over by a hegemonic state apparatus intent on propagating its particular conception of 'modernity', a prominent question arises concerning authenticity. To devolve into a debate surrounding what constitutes the 'authentic' would be to embark on another project, but a few words would perhaps help to clarify my position. With the 'death of the Subject' and the end of individualism within the postmodern, we have a theoretical basis of individualism which is both ideological (Jameson, "PM and Consumer Society" 17), and contingent upon a multiplicity of 'viewers/readers' who can deconstruct this ideology. Jameson highlights two positions upon which the argument for the death of the subject is based. The first relates that the bourgeoisie originally arose as the dominant and hegemonic class during the reign of competitive capitalism – or the period of classical liberal economic thought,

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prior to the promotion of the Keynesian welfare state. The second position concerning the death of the subject, termed the 'poststructuralist position', holds that "not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth" (Jameson, "PM and Consumer Society" 17), as there have never been purely autonomous subjects disjoined from socio-cultural forms, or disjoined from their historicised facticity as subjects dwelling in a world. The Marxist and post-Marxist position would further hold that the subject is, in effect, produced through the cyclical structure or logic of capitalism, and is thereby perpetually reproduced in and through the circulation of capital, in a continuous present (Jameson, "PM and Consumer Society 29). I would also contend, along with Foucault (cf. *Des espaces autres*), that in authoritarian socialist regimes the subject is produced under the purview of the hegemonic utopian ideology, which is forcefully spread via the maintenance and production of a revolutionary consciousness. Personal identity, under this view, has always been a philosophical fabrication.

Yet this is not the only logic by which to view the production of the subject. John Docker is critical of Jameson's singular cultural logic and his historicist (not to mention Marxist) methodology, and instead would rather see the purview of postmodernist discourse extended to the discussion of "fields of force, of always-already competing, antagonistic, interacting cultural forms" (Docker 126). While I would happen to disagree with many of the arguments put forth by Docker in his criticism of Jameson, I nonetheless uphold the validity of fragmented narratives within the purview of cultural discourse. Rather than a singular unified logic, in the sense of the Marxist laws of motion of capitalism, I would contend that polysemous forms of cultural production are an inherent facet of socio-cultural discourse, and indeed always have been. In *The Origins of* *Postmodernity*, Perry Anderson evokes a critique of the very the conception of the avantgarde and the postmodern, when he states that:

"Since the seventies, the very idea of an avant-garde, or of individual genius, has fallen under suspicion. Combative, collective movements of innovation have become steadily fewer, and the badge of a novel, self-conscious 'ism' ever rarer. For the universe of the postmodern is not one of delimitation, but intermixture – celebrating the cross-over, the hybrid, the pot-pourri. In this climate, the manifesto becomes outdated, a relic of an assertive purism at variance with the spirit of the age" (Anderson 93).¹⁰⁰

The myth of the genius labouring in the shadows of a dominant or hegemonic cultural environment is a product of a former era, a bygone intellectual relic or a modernist dream. The conceptions of avant-garde and the postmodern thus appear to be at odds, however I would argue that the embeddedness of the former in the latter evokes the possibility of novel forms of creative expression from within an historicised, albeit pluralistic tradition.

The concept of postmodernism within a Chinese context is a rather difficult one to classify, as many scholars have argued that China does not possess the requisite socioeconomic and cultural conditions necessary for 'inhabiting' a post-modern period (Cf. Gao, *"linglei fangfa"* 1-3). Within the purview of post-colonial thought, there is also concern that theoretical modes of analysis 'imported' from the West necessarily carry with them a certain cultural hegemony which limits their import. As I have argued above, while such structures of thought may have arisen within different (meta)-geographical locations (or locations of cultural production), they are by no means limited to those contexts, as the relevance of theory across boundaries of difference must not be delimited within mutually exclusive spheres of intellectual and cultural production. The question of

¹⁰⁰ Also quoted in Pucher (2006).

postmodernity within China in the reform period is further compounded by the fact that China is still in the process of hashing out its own form of modernity, or as Wang Ning has argued, its incomplete modernity. Although this may be the case, Wang Ning has argued that "postmodernism has had no difficulty in coming onto the scene of such an incomplete modernity" (Wang Ning 35). With all the discussion of postmodernism, it might seem evident to the reader that I would wish to classify the works of Wang Guangyi as 'inhabiting the postmodern', however this would not entirely be correct. The Chinese (re)engagement with capitalist modernity during the reform period, and the postsocialist period in particular, is contingent upon an understanding of the formation of a specifically Chinese modernity which is inter-temporal, for as Gao Minglu argues, "Chinese modernity is a consciousness of both transcendent time and reconstructed space with a clear national cultural and political territorial boundary" (Gao "Transnational Modernity" 19).

The question which has in a sense been weighing upon the entire discussion thus far, regards whether or not the work of art, specifically that which purports to be avantgarde, can disjoin itself from the ruling ideology, and whether the viewing subject can disjoin him/herself from the particular teleology of which he/she is a part, in order to view the work of art outside of the historical moment of its conception. Hans-Georg Gadamer has articulated in his hermeneutic investigations of the nature of aesthetics that "the work of art always has its own presence" (Gadamer 95), by which he means that its horizon of applicability is not limited to its contemporaneous nature, but rather extends beyond the finitude of delimited temporal classifiers. The intrinsic structure (or lack thereof) of the postmodern artistic critique therefore seeks to disjoin the work from its historical moment, so that it might occupy a 'timeless present', imbued with historical meaning, yet not limited to its historical or temporal realisation. The moment when the work reaches out 'beyond historical time', as it were, is the moment when it is disjoined from the process of circulation inherent in the movement of capitalism, in which Wang Guangyi is most certainly embedded. Forms of antagonism embedded within aesthetic praxis extend beyond the historical moment of their creation for the viewing subject, embedding traces of intellectual engagement and socio-cultural critique. The viewing subject (i.e. the author of this paper), when confronted with the work of art is at the same time confronted with the consumption of the antagonism within the work itself, which in turn manipulates and changes the idea contained within the historical moment of that antagonism, allowing for continual interpretation of the work of art, and thus its continual relevance. Contained within the consumption of objects is "an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs" (Baudrillard 218), and the manipulation of representation organised into a consumptive, hierarchical totality. The aim of the critic is however, not simply to consume the materiality of objects, or works of art, but rather to consume their difference, and to bring their meaning to bear for us in a novel, critical way.

Conclusion

I have argued that the aesthetic which grounds the underlying ideological framework of contemporary Chinese society in the works of Wang Guangyi signifies and reveals the dialectic interplay of a concealed ideological syntax which aims to reconfigure and rethink the categories upon which Chinese modernity is unfolding. Through the invocation of a fragmented and polyphonic discourse, achieved through a critical deconstruction of the ideological spectre currently hanging over contemporary Chinese society, Wang Guangyi has brought about a critical reevaluation of the role that the ideological undercurrent within postsocialist politics plays in the construction of the contemporary Chinese subject.

The works of Wang Guangyi are visually indicative of an intellectual and cultural space which is new only insofar as it rephrases the semiotic language of contrasting and competing intellectual discourses, in an effort to unconceal the foundation of the contemporary ideological form, legitimated and promoted by the CCP, which in turn legitimates and promotes the CCP, both domestically and internationally. Such a movement does not actually instantiate a truly new intellectual or artistic space, a free space disjoined from an historical temporal moment, but rather produces biopolitically the artistic subjects who inhabit this temporal juncture. The works of Wang Guangyi are therefore not indicative of a movement beyond modernity into postmodernity, but rather represent a movement within an alternative modernity sanctioned by the prevailing ideology and approved by the artist, which deconstructs and rehashes the forms upon which it is based. As has been argued, the dialectic interplay between these competing ideologies cogently represents the existence of a contingent space of intellectual and

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aesthetic praxis, and the works themselves become a powerful metonymic for the

historical moment of China's newfound alternative modernity. As Benjamin so

engagingly articulated in The Arcades Project,

"to thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest" (Benjamin, "Arcades Project" 475).

This tension, evocatively expressed on the canvas in the Great Criticism Series, signifies

a society consuming the ideological spectacle of an alternative modernity which needs to

be thought through, deconstructed, and thoroughly critiqued, if it is ever to move to a

more equitable space.

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