



Courtesy of <http://china.sina.com.tw>

34 Theme: East Asian geopolitics revisited



NEWSLETTER

July 2004 | published by IIAS | free of charge

The tyranny of taste & cultural citizenship

This paper examines the interaction between the 'tyranny of taste' and the art practice of Chinese-Australian artists. In discussing how the production and reception of their artwork are measured against mainstream artistic criteria, I hope to move beyond criticism of the Australian government's multicultural policy and to feature within diaspora studies inquiries on the cultural rights of migrants.

Arts >
Australia

By Wang Yiyan

Pierre Bourdieu argues that critics need to realize that the producers of the value of a work of art are usually other than the artists themselves (1995: 229). I would argue that this is even more the case with migrant artists, especially before they grasp the rules of the 'field' in their adopted society. It is one thing to have a 'multicultural' society where diaspora communities live and thrive; it is quite another for a society's high culture to absorb values and aesthetics from other traditions. The latter, although it happens all the time, takes much longer and remains at the mercy of members of the dominant class who determine the value of works of art.

Migrant artists can at times become agents in initiating changes of taste within the art establishment. They are, however, rarely part of the decision-making process. Although their multicultural or 'exotic' aesthetics may be appreciated, or even valued, the degree to which they are able to attain cultural citizenship and exercise their cultural rights remains questionable. In other words, they may not be able to choose 'styles of language, cultural models, narratives, discourses that people use to make sense of their society, interpret their place in it', according to Gerard Delanty (2002: 66).

Rules of art

Bourdieu posits an analogy between the rules governing art and language. Speakers of a language subscribe to an overarching system; while individual usage varies, individuals are aware of the boundaries of the system which prescribe

acceptable limits on variation. The production and reception of creative art work in a similar way. While artists strive for individuality, their expression must remain within the aesthetic system determined by the class of value producers in a given society. Artists exercise their choice within the system, even when they are deliberately subverting it.

Bourdieu's theory, as he himself explains, is drawn from observing individual artists and writers of similar cultural backgrounds, namely, people who share and understand the implicit aesthetic values of a society. The rules of art, therefore, pose problems to most artists coming from outside that society. For migrant artists, especially those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, life in the new country often begins with a traumatic fall in social standing. Bewilderment over aesthetic choices soon follows, before they realize they have to learn anew systems of cultural signs, linguistic codes, artistic expressions and, sometimes more pertinently, ways to befriend the art establishment.

Exceptions can be found, of course, when notions of beauty or humour coincide. Creative works can be appreciated by audiences from different cultural backgrounds, when 'outside' artists strike a chord with the 'inside' audience. Appreciation, however, may not be based on the understanding of intended messages and references. Unfortunately for migrant artists, acquaintance with the rules may take years to acquire or may never happen.

continued on page 6 >

> Opinion: Yue Tao and Subroto Roy on naughty girls and suicide bombers pp. 4-5

> East Asian geopolitics revisited: Chang Mau-Kwei, Togo Kazuhiko, Phil Deans and Koen de Ceuster on the new self-assertive mood in East Asia pp. 8-11

> Maritime empires: Ann Kumar, Wil Dijk and Harry Knipschild on priests, opium, VOC traders, and early Javanese migrants to Japan, pp. 12-14

> Central Asia between law and lawlessness: Irina Morozova, Delaine Swenson and Ildiko Beller-Hann on legal reform, the Soviet legacy and the politics of customary law, pp. 16-18

> Decolonisation and its discontents: what did regime change bring to the peoples of Southeast Asia? Not much, say participants of a conference on decolonisation and livelihoods at the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, pp. 19-21

> Announcements, pp. 42-45





Hu Ming *Jade Frog*
oil on canvas
110x80cm

Courtesy of the artist and Soho Galleries, Sydney

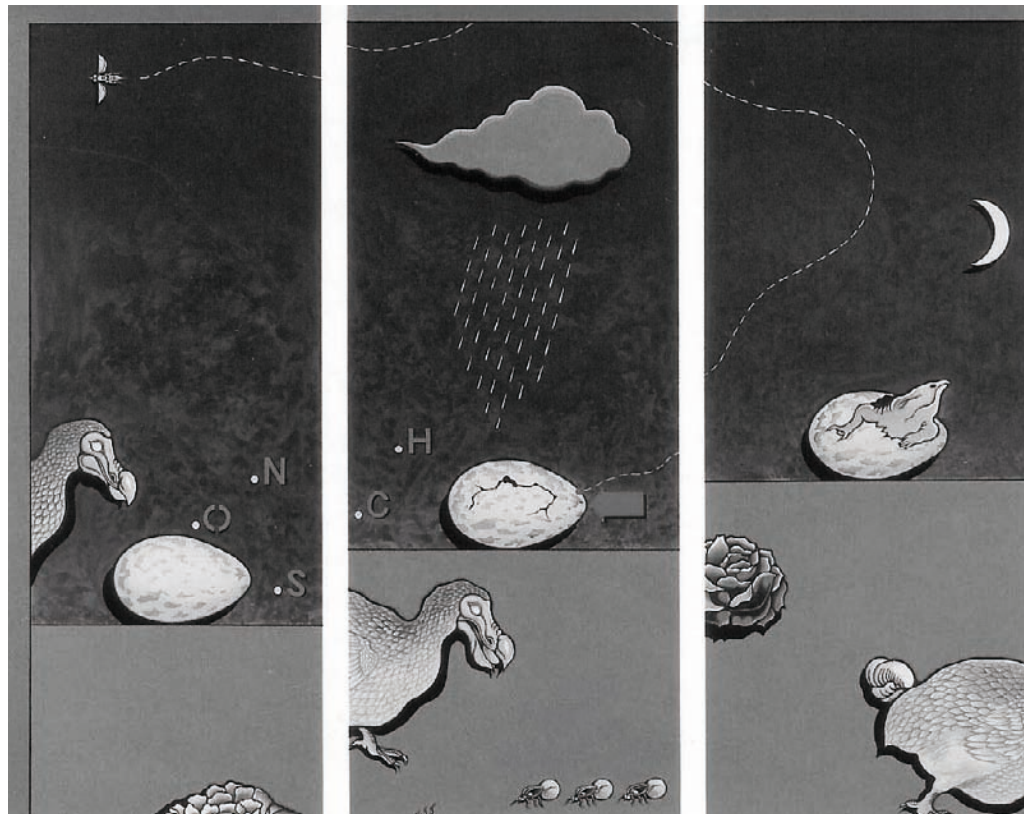
'the choices open to migrant artists are limited – the ethnic artist is subjected to the unwritten rules of art and the tastes of an unfamiliar society'

Zhou Xiaoping *Dancing* 2002 ink on rice paper & on canvas 180 x 280cm



Courtesy of the artist. Private collection

Guan Wei *Dodon't*
1997 acrylic on
canvas 3 parts
127 x 167cm



Courtesy of the artist and Sherman Galleries, Australia

'it is one thing to have a 'multicultural' society where diaspora communities live and thrive; it is quite another for a society's high culture to absorb values and aesthetics from other traditions'

Chinese-Australian artists continue to face and each must find an answer in his or her own artistic language.

While its manifestations vary, 'Chineseness' is a common feature in the works of Chinese-Australian artists. The relationship between their work and Chineseness is often paradoxical: on the one hand, they need to cater to Australian taste, which may or may not welcome overt expressions of Chineseness in visual form; on the other hand, if Chineseness and the element of exotica is totally absent, it is even harder for Chinese-Australian artists to claim space in the Australian art market. The balance is a delicate one, and expressions have to be subtle or innovative. Naturally, the market eventually makes its own selections. One can always eroticise one's Chineseness but it is the art field that decides if one has done so artistically and tastefully.

Opposing McDonald's optimism about the success of Chinese artists in Australia, another art critic, Ben Genocchio at *The Australian* newspaper, notes that Chinese artists remain a closed community. Genocchio believes their lack of interaction with the wider Australian environment will see their popularity dwindle in a few years' time, making them irrelevant to the history of Australian art (Genocchio 2002).

Cultural citizenship

The point here is not whether one agrees with McDonald or with Genocchio, but that Chinese-Australian artists are largely irrelevant to such debates. The field, rather than the artists themselves, will decide whether Australian art history will write Chinese-Australian artists in or leave them out. This is why cultural citizenship is a crucial issue at this point in time – after Australia has given migrants political citizenship, it is time for notions of citizenship to factor in cultural rights and practices.

Gerard Delanty (2002: 66) argues that cultural citizenship has two equally important aspects: the cultural rights of individual citizens and the political institutionalisation of such cultural rights. He places particular emphasis on access to the dominant language – its styles and forms, cultural models, narratives and discourses – the tools people need to make sense of their society, interpret their place in it, determine courses of action and make demands for further political and cultural rights. The learning component of citizenship, Delanty insists, must be seen not only in individual terms but as a medium of social construction, through which individual experience becomes collective learning, ultimately to be realized in social institutions.

Shen Jiawei *Self-Portrait – Suddenly Back*
to 1900 2000 oil on
canvas 165 x 120cm



continued from page 1 >

Many artists from China over the past decade have, however, managed to familiarize themselves with rules of the Australian art field. John McDonald, an Australian art critic, believes that Chinese art is changing the face of Australia. He notes that 'barely a week goes by in Sydney and Melbourne nowadays without a Chinese exhibition or art event, or without Chinese émigrés featuring prominently in some competition or group show' (McDonald 2002: 18). McDonald terms the increasing acceptance of Chineseness in Australia's art establishment 'the Cultural Revolution'.

Diaspora and Chineseness

Alongside the radical changes to their personal and professional lives, the artwork of Chinese migrant artists in Australia has undergone transformation in nearly all respects – from subject matter, media, form, and use of colour, to the very basic techniques of expression and ex-

'artists exercise their choice within the system, even when they are deliberately subverting it'

pression. The greatest change, however, is in the audience – the enormous gap between the expectations of the Chinese authoritarian art establishment and the free market art field of Australia. Needless to say, Chinese migrant artists did not share with the Australian art establishment an understanding of what constitutes art – its production, reception, marketing and social function. How to create art that speaks to the Australian audience is the fundamental challenge

Courtesy of the artist. Private Collection

Guo Jian Trigger
Happy 9 1999 oil on
canvas 180 x 200cm

Courtesy of the artist and Ray Hughes Galleries, Australia. Private collection



Wang Xu Sydney Scene 1996 Chinese ink and colour on rice paper
70 x 130cm. Private collection



In my interviews with Chinese-Australian artists, some stated that language remains the key obstacle to their professional development. Without English competence, they remain unable to exchange ideas with their peers – other than those using the same ethnic language. The importance of English competence in their profession has to do with understanding the rules of art. Without English, the path to professional development is much longer and full of pitfalls, such as inadequate translations and delays in the transmission of ideas and news on cultural events. For the acquisition of new ideas, most artists still rely on Chinese-language materials. In communicating, many still feel desperately trapped and inhibited.

‘if Chineseness and the element of exotica is totally absent, it is even harder for Chinese-Australian artists to claim space in the Australian art market’

The inability to speak English in Australia entails at least a partial deprivation of one’s cultural rights. This is very different from the predicament faced by Chinese ‘diasporic intellectuals’ who cannot speak Chinese (Ang 2001: vii), at least as far as cultural citizenship is concerned. Not speaking Chinese does not keep cosmopolitan, transnational, diasporic intellectuals from actively participating in their chosen areas of social and cultural life in Australian society. Not

speaking English raises innumerable barriers for artists wanting to transcend ethnicity.

Envoi

Australia as an open society has given Chinese migrant artists the space and opportunity to pursue their professional goals. The social policy of multiculturalism encourages cultural interaction and allows artists from different backgrounds to engage in creative work. However, it is important to realize that the choices open to migrant artists are limited – the ethnic artist is subjected to the unwritten rules of art and the tastes of an unfamiliar society.

Cultural citizenship becomes feasible only after migrant artists have survived disadvantaged economic and social positions, and above all, linguistic deprivation. The rules of art and multicultural aesthetics are, for migrant artists, friend and foe. Many Chinese-Australian artists have successfully met the expectations of the art field and have found their own voice while bridging different traditions. And from artistic success, one may indeed aspire to the further attainment of cultural citizenship in their newly adopted home. <

The cover illustration is by Shen Jiawei, *The Third World*. Oil on canvas 259 x 356cm, 2002. I gratefully acknowledge Professor John Clark and Dr Yao Souchou, departments of Art History and Anthropology, University of Sydney, and Dr Margaret Bradstock, department of English, University of New South Wales, for advice and help in preparing this essay.



Wang Xu Woman
1997 charcoal on
paper 57 x 75cm.
Private collection



Wang Xu Sitting Man 2000 acrylic on paper 59 x 84cm. Private collection

References

- Ang, Ien (2001) *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1995) *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Delanty, Gerard (2002) 'Two Conceptions of Cultural Citizenship: A Review of Recent Literature on Culture and Citizenship', *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 1(3): 60-66.
- Genocchio, Benjamin (2002) 'Not All About Mao', *The Australian*. October 12: R21.
- McDonald, John (2002) 'The Cultural Revolution', *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*, December: 18-26.

Wang Yiyang (IIAS research fellow, January-June 2004) teaches modern Chinese literature and cinema at the University of Sydney. Her research interests include modern Chinese literature, social and cultural change in contemporary China, and Chinese diaspora studies. Her book on the contemporary Chinese writer Jia Pingwa is forthcoming from Routledge. yiyang.wang@arts.usyd.edu.au