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CHANGE IN CHINA: A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION?

ALEXIS KOUZMINE KARAVAÏEFF & GAO QIANG (GAO BROTHERS) INTERVIEWS BY CHRIS PAUL

FEATURES

Change in China: a cause for celebration?

With new party leaders, observers wonder whether censorship or liberalisation is on the agenda. By **Chris Gill**

As Communist China makes only its second voluntary leadership change, from Hu Jintao and his peers to a new batch of leaders under Xi Jinping, there are hopes among intellectuals and the art world that Xi will prove more liberal than his predecessors.

The handover process is protracted and began formally at the 18th Party Congress, last month. Xi was first named chairman of the Communist Party, then will take the titles of military head and president by March. Li Keqiang will take the number two position of prime minister.

Little is known of Xi's plans, but speculation that censorship might be loosening was rife as an exhibition featuring photographs of former political campaigners Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang was allowed to go ahead at the Great Hall of the People during the congress. (Zhao was arrested after the Tiananmen Square massacre, and was placed under house arrest until his death.) It is widely believed that this indicates Xi will usher in a reformist regime. However, "he is no Chinese Gorbachev," Yao Jian Fu, a former official and writer, told the Voice of America news agency.

Censorship and oppression

In the years after the 1989 Tiananmen uprising, critical voices in Chinese society have faced censorship and oppression. Nobel Peace Prize winner and human rights activist Liu Xiaobo is still in jail, while his wife, the poet and photographer Liu Xia, remains under house arrest. Meanwhile, Ai Weiwei, who was under house arrest, convicted on tax charges, and still has his passport confiscated, drew parallels in his blog between himself, the disgraced politician Bo Xilai and the blind civil rights lawyer Chen Guangcheng, who fled to the US in May. "We are three very different examples: you can be a high party member or a humble fighter for rights or a recognised artist. But we all have one thing in common: none of us have been dealt with through fair play, open trials and open discussion," Ai wrote.

It has emerged that nervous officials told galleries to take down a number of works at the SH Contemporary art fair in Shanghai (7-9 September). Censored works included *Outer Space Project 7*, 2008, a large c-print that featured a map of China, by the controversial Gao Brothers. "IFA Gallery, and several other art galleries, experienced particularly strict censorship," says Alexis Kouzmine-Karavaieff, the director of the Shanghai-based IFA Gallery.

An image of the Gao Brothers' work and another censored work had been published in the fair catalogue. "It could not be released and the organisers had to republish thousands of copies," says Kouzmine-Karavaieff. The problem appears to have been a combination of the timing around the Party Congress and the artists' use of national symbols.

Undeterred, Kouzmine-Karavaieff says that his gallery is organising "Sensor Ship", an exhibition planned for 2013 that will present research on this topic. The show is to be held next year. "It is very difficult to say what will be the changes in the art scene in China – if there will be any – during Xi Jinping's era," he says. "Xi is considered to be a reformer and more in the liberal trend, in line with general developments in China since Deng Xiaoping. But, as in the past, there is an ongoing struggle between conservatives and reformers, and it may be that there is a need to satisfy the conservative, nationalist factions [by censoring sensitive topics]."

> *"Nervous officials told galleries to take down works at the SH Contemporary art fair"*

Gao Qiang, one of the controversial Gao Brothers, says: "If the system doesn't change, a change of leadership makes no difference." He adds that he intends to carry on regardless, but is mystified by the censorship at SH Contemporary. "I showed the same work recently in Beijing without any problems, so I don't see what was the issue in Shanghai," he says.

Economic miracle, political conservatism

The irony, of course, is that it is China's economic miracle under the Communist Party that has enabled China's contemporary art

At the helm, but steering in which direction? Xi Jinping on a recent trip to Cuba

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The Gao Brothers' *Outer Space Project 7*, 2008 (far left), fell foul of the censors in Shanghai, while Zhang Wang's *Artificial Stone 85*, 2009, is an example of art that doesn't make officials nervous

scene to flourish. In the decade since Hu Jintao took over as president in 2002, China's economy has quadrupled in size, making it second only to that of the US, and it has grown from being the world's fifth-largest exporter to the biggest.

This has led to an explosion in the size of the art market, even for contemporary, international-style art (although fine art and traditional art still lead auction sales figures within China). The Chinese ministry of culture estimates the market was worth Rmb210.8bn ($33.8bn) in 2011, up by 24% on the previous year.

Meanwhile, the arts have received increasing government support, as the Chinese government rapidly builds up the nation's cultural infrastructure. Massive art museums are springing up all over the country, and new projects are announced almost every week. In Shanghai there are the huge new China Art Palace and Power Station of Art (*The Art Newspaper*, October, p17), while several new art museums are due to open in the Xuhui Riviera area in late 2013. They include the private Long Contemporary Art Museum and the private Yuz Museum, while the Minsheng Art Museum will also move to this area. The ongoing building of arts infrastructure follows central government directives to officials to build up the creative industries, and wean the population off its dependence on manufacturing.

China also increasingly recognises the "soft power" of culture. The government has set up the Confucius Institute, its version of the British Council or Goethe Institute, and has opened offices across the globe. Similarly, the country has thousands of foreign-language journalists working for TV channels, newspapers and websites that generally follow the party line. More obvious examples of presenting a public face to foreigners include the grandiose National Museum of China in Beijing.

The problem, some argue, is that the authorities' relationship to art is ambiguous. Ai Weiwei says: "The officials building these structures could just as easily be building hospitals or highways – they are fulfilling their instructions." The actual content of these museums is usually safe, approved work – or non-existent. Officials make sure there is a big show if national leaders are on an inspection tour, but when we visited the I.M. Pei-designed Suzhou Art Museum earlier this year, the doors on the massive complex were firmly closed, and a disgruntled guard in his slippers waved visitors away.

Gary Sigley, a professor of Asian Studies at the University of Western Australia, says: "The Chinese authorities want to have their cake and eat it when it comes to culture and the arts. They see the production of high-quality material – films, books, museums – as a way of keeping the people informed and entertained. Yet they place many restrictions on the kind of content and forms that such cultural products can take, thereby severely limiting creativity. This [dichotomy] is also in turn limiting the Party's ambition to produce cultural material that will appeal to foreigners as part of its efforts to strengthen its cultural 'soft power'."

Ai Weiwei and fellow artist and dissenting voice Zhang Peili (below)

Traditional values

The roller coaster growth in the art market – and the changing times – is also having an effect on art and artists themselves. The contemporary art scene can be split between those who follow international art traditions and who have been seen as rebels for the past two decades: Ai Weiwei, Zhang Huan, Fang Lijun, Feng Mengbo, and many more.

Then there is a much larger group, including artists such as Mi Qin – now the art director of the Dragon Tower (which will be China's tallest building when finished) – who had Western exposure but are now working purely within the local context, often with government funding.

A third group of contemporary artists is emerging. From a younger generation, they often have a Western art education and switch happily between both worlds. These are usually within the sphere of influence of curators such as Gao Shiming, now the head of new media at the China Art Academy. Then there are mavericks, including foreign artists, non-Han Chinese artists, and many female artists (China's art scene is still male-dominated). Aside from contemporary artists, there are two strong groupings who are very powerful in China's art establishment: fine artists and traditional Chinese art practitioners. The late curator Hans van Dyk, who set up China's first contemporary art archive with Ai Weiwei, defined another category: abstract artists, such as Ding Yi. Abstraction is a not particularly well understood art form in China.

With the detention of Ai Weiwei and the sidelining of other artist-critics, such as the Zhang Peili (who was shunted out of his department headship at the China Art Academy when departments were merged earlier this year), the international contemporary Chinese art scene appears directionless and confused. With no obvious leadership the old rebels are slowly integrating into the second group of government-sponsored artists. Only now is it really becoming clear how influential Ai has been over the years, and how censoring him has left a vacuum.

An editorial in the leading Chinese art magazine *Yishu Dandai* said that "with the economic success of art, it is losing its cultural value because contemporary art used to represent real issues, but with the economic involvement, artists are losing independence and freedom of expression is diminished. As China has become the world's second-largest economy, people's life quality has increased, but [the] political system has not developed accordingly. Law, freedom of speech, and the market are all under the control of politics. The artists, who are already economically successful, are pandering to the politicians." Luther Spree, an award-winning German documentary maker, who recently made a film about artists participating in the "Great Way Prevailing: Chinese Contemporary Public Art Exhibition" in Kassel (until 18 February 2013), says that he was surprised how the artists who receive government commissions behaved. "I asked them how many stainless-steel scholar rocks can they make? They just shrugged. They have no interest in the direction of their work. They are all quite wealthy from this business, they have nice cars and big studios," he says.

Part of the problem for the Chinese art world is that the power of the market and of government has no counterweight because of the lack of a strong curatorial tradition in museums and public galleries and the shortage of academic and critical writing. Most critical writing on Chinese art is by foreigners, but as Chinese nationalism increases – witness the territorial dispute with Japan over the Diaoyu islands, and nationalist demonstrations across the country – expats are feeling increasingly uncomfortable.

> *"Privately, some China-based gallerists talk of setting up bases elsewhere in Asia"*

Mark Kitto, a British-born writer, wrote the much-discussed article, "Why I am leaving China" in *Prospect* magazine in August. "The Party has, from its very inception, encouraged strong anti-foreign sentiment. Fevered nationalism is one of its cornerstones…" he says. Privately, some China-based gallerists talk of "parachutes" and setting up bases elsewhere in Asia or other locations.

We are seeing China's most open period since the voyages of the Ming Dynasty treasure fleets of the 14th century, when Chinese influence spread as far as Africa. (An isolationist Ming emperor then decided China should have no further contact with the world, burnt the fleets and records of their travels.)

So what about the new President Xi himself – who must deal with China's current economic slowdown, rising nationalism, corruption scandals and debates over the limits of free speech? In the theatre that is Chinese politics, *The Art Newspaper* had what the government officials described as a *jian mian hui* – literally a "see the face" meeting – with Xi. This was during the now newly-anointed president's brief reign as Party secretary of Shanghai. Xi appeared on stage in front of Shanghai's assembled foreign press, recited a few lines from former president Jiang Zemin's "three represents" theory on political development, smiled like a Cheshire cat – and then exited stage left.

• *For a report on the Long Museum, Shanghai, see p24*

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