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FRENCH ARTIST KILLS OFF CHINESE ALTER EGO, BUT SOME KNEW OF RUSE

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– by Barbara Pollack

Last week, a French artist living in Shanghai named Alexandre Ouairy received a wave of press attention for revealing that he had been exhibiting under the Chinese pseudonym Tao Hongjing for the past decade. According to news reports, he had assumed the pseudonym a decade ago, based on a suggestion by his gallerist, in order to cash in on the market there for Chinese contemporary art, a goldmine unavailable to an artist of French descent living in China. Now, on the eve of two solo shows — at Red Gate Gallery in Beijing and Shun Gallery in Shanghai — Mr. Ouairy was finally coming clean, acknowledging that the whole

masquerade had been a “conceptual art project.”

But an interview with the artist by telephone, and with one of the dealers representing his work, reveals that the news coverage greatly exaggerates the extent of his ruse, and a little market research reveals that his reported success as a Chinese artist is middling at best.

“At the beginning, the first year or two, only the gallery and myself knew that I was Tao Hongjing,” Mr. Ouairy said by phone from Shanghai, “but after that, it was always revealed that this was a project by a French artist.” Brian Wallace, the owner of Red Gate Gallery, which is sponsoring the current exhibition, “Death is Going Home,” said that he had known that Tao Hongjing was the French artist ever since he collected his work almost a decade ago. “Everyone knew that Tao Hongjing was Alexandre Ouairy and that Alexandre Ouairy was Tao Hongjing,” he said.

It is unsurprising that the Western press would leap on a story of a European artist who appeared to adopt a Chinese identity. After all, most recently, Michael Derrick Hudson, an American poet, posed as Yi-Fen Chou to land a coveted spot in this year’s “The Best American Poetry” anthology. But transforming identity is not as easy as it seems, even in China, a country with an unmatched reputation for knockoffs.

Mr. Ouairy, 36, began his project in 2004 when he was a very young struggling artist in Shanghai, having arrived in China from Lyon four years earlier. Though some reports claim that adopting the pseudonym Tao Hongjing jump-started his career, he is not well known, even now, in Chinese art circles. He has shown with galleries in Shanghai, including the short-lived Gallery 1918 and also Studio Rouge, located in Moganshan Lu, the city’s art district. But neither of these establishments carry major weight, nor does Shun Gallery, the artist’s present dealer. In a scene that has expanded exponentially in the past decade with several art fairs and more than six new contemporary art museums in Shanghai alone, Mr. Ouairy remains a minor player, albeit one who claims his work sells for as much as \$30,000.

Several years ago, another Shanghai artist, Xu Zhen, who shows with James Cohan Gallery in New York, famously said, “Anyone can be a Chinese artist — an American can be Zhang Xiaogang,” referring to a top-selling art star, known for his solemn portraits of Cultural Revolution survivors. To underscore his point, Mr. Xu created a company, MadeIn, which produced a show of “contemporary Arab art,” fooling visitors into believing that they were seeing works by Middle Eastern artists.

It is perhaps the ultimate twist that an artist from France, once the bastion of modern art, now thinks he needs to fake a Chinese identity in order to gain recognition and acclaim. This week, Red Gate’s website states that the current exhibition is a “curated show of Tao Hongjing’s work throughout the last 10 years of his lifetime, where he reflects on money, fame and life.” Now that Mr. Ouairy has killed off his alter-ego, it remains to be seen whether either of them will meet with success in this posthumous guise.