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THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUMS IN CHINA: A GENERAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

In the last 30 years, China has been experiencing a major development of the museum system and a proliferation of art museums. This rapid development has seen not only the transformation of public art museums, but also an incredible growth of private collections and the construction of new ones. According to the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, by 2011 there were 3,589 museums in China – one for every 380,000 people (Lu 2014, 206), a number that has continued to grow considerably, reaching 4,165 registered museums in 2015 (Li 2014).

This article aims to offer a diachronic description of the evolution of the art museum system in China after Deng Xiaoping's reform launched in 1978, by highlighting key historical facts which led to the proliferation and development of the sector. In the existing literature on this topic, many reports and articles have been recently produced. These studies often analyse a single case study related to the development of private art collections in China, seen as the real great innovation within the art museum realm (Chun 2014; Zeng 2014; Kioviski 2017; Zennaro 2017). Other studies focus on the institutional changes which have led to this development and are keener to take into account the state-owned art museum system (Wang 2007). However, my aim with this article is to consider the development of the Chinese art museum system as a whole and take into account the parallel development of the privately owned and the state-owned art museum. I argue that this growth, which has been labelled "museumification" (Johnson 2012) was fostered by two forces: the government's new political agenda and the development of private collections. My aim is to analyse how they interact. I will also highlight how this reflects on the way contemporary Chinese art is collected and exhibited.

This article is based on my PhD work, and the analysis provided here is partially based on primary data collected in my field research conducted in China between 2012 and 2014, and partially based on recent literature and published interviews. Therefore, this article presents only a few preliminary results of wider research on

the topic. The majority of my field research was held in first tier cities – Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou – where I interviewed museum stakeholders (approximately 50 museum directors, artists, curators and museum professionals) and made observations on a cluster of art museums (about 30). Therefore, the analysis provided here mainly focuses on these four cities.

During the last few years, after my field research, many new art museums have risen all over the country and we have witnessed the founding of dozens of new ones. As art historian Karen Smith stated: “Nothing in China remains the same” (Smith 2017, 8). Therefore, the results presented here are not definitive, nor exhaustive, because while in recent years new museums have opened in large numbers in second and third tier cities, others have closed or have expanded, and further observation still needs to be done. Nevertheless, my contribution to this field of study aims to analyse some manifestations of the phenomenon, and to offer an overall interpretation of the forces which have led to this incredible development.

Chinese official art system by the 1980s and 1990s

The museum devoted only to art is a relatively novel concept in China, and the first *meishuguan* emerged in the Chinese institutional landscape only in the 20th century, in the 1930s, with the founding of the Jiangsu sheng Meishuguan-Jiangsu Provincial Art Museum in Nanjing (in 1936). The most important *meishuguan* were born thereafter, among them Shanghai Meishuguan-Shanghai Art Museum (1956) in Shanghai and Zhongguo Meishuguan-National Art Museum of China (1963) in Beijing. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, although the government made efforts to provide China with new museums, these were basically dedicated to science and history, the museum having become a “political instrument” (Su 1995, 66) and therefore, the various institutions dealing with art, from production to exhibition, education to circulation, were strictly dependent on the Ministry of Culture, both administratively and economically. In this period, no significant developments in the evolution of the *meishuguan* occurred.

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the official art system had a centralized structure, where official institutions, i.e. *shiye danwei* work units, were organized into an administrative hierarchy and structured into various levels. All these units were non-profit, because they pursued the cultural mission and financially relied on the state, which appointed its officer directors to cover different management roles. Thus, the official art system was, from an internal organizational point of view, divided into levels with a director at the peak of the institutional hierarchy, and with the government and its officials appointing the directors. Above this hierarchy sat the Ministry of Culture, in which the official art institutions, including art galleries and museums, depended on. This centralization

was motivated by the need to control arts and culture, conceived in the socialist way, as instrumental to politics.

Deng Xiaoping's reform launched in 1978 had a very strong impact on this hierarchical structure and in the museum's development itself. In fact, the rapid economic growth of the 1980s provided more financial resources for state museums, and reforms started to change the nature of the *shiye danwei* that moved toward a partial financial autonomy (Zhang 2006, 300). The state reduced funding to the *danwei* which now must seek funding and sponsorships themselves; it inaugurated the process by which the institutional and the commercial functions of the *danwei* begin to clearly separate. By the end of the 1990s, the "cultural industries" came to life, and in 1998 the Ministry of Culture officially established the Culture Industry Bureau, which was in charge of the politics of the cultural market.

The birth of the cultural industries was one of the most important innovations in the political and cultural sphere of contemporary China, because culture (and art) was no longer a franchise of political ideology, but the cultural world become potentially multifaceted. Along with the rapid economic development, capitalist joint ventures and private companies developed so quickly as to put themselves in competition. Among the official intellectual's world, the awareness of this competition in the midst of continuous and extensive social and economic reform was in conflict with official views of culture and art, because the strategic role of culture (and not solely the economy) began to be underlined by competition in the contemporary world, in China and globally.

Following the abovementioned institutional reforms, different typologies of museums have been rising at national, provincial and municipal level, supported directly or indirectly by national and local governments. Indeed, since the early 1980s the development of the museum sector became a key element of the state policy agenda and the foundation of new museums was conceived as a "performance evaluation criteria of government officials", both nationally and locally (Lu 2014, 196). Therefore, I think it is important to highlight that one of the key aspects to consider in understanding the process of growth, which started in the 1980s and has not yet stopped, is the coeval development of state-owned museums and the rapid growth of private collections, as a result of the institutional transformations which gave life to cultural industries.

As Yang Chao, director of the Xi'an meishuguan-Xi'an Art Museum stated in a published interview, the two forces leading the growth of museums are the Chinese government and the development of the private sector (Zheng 2014, 30). The government pushed cultural institutions to assume more of their own financial responsibilities and to answer directly to the demands of the market; as a result, traditional exhibition venues (like public museums) started a renovation process. They were becoming more and more financially independent (or semi-independent) and needed to attract visitors' interest by promoting new kinds of programs and exhibitions to the public. As pointed out by Wu Hung, many public

art spaces traditionally sponsored by the state began to host experimental Chinese art or imported exhibitions of foreign Western art in the 1990s (Wu 2010, 328). This was a great shift in the history of exhibitions in China, which until the mid-1990s saw a sharp separation between official and unofficial art (Wang 2007; Wu 2010).

The National Art Museum of China in Beijing was a forerunner in this respect, by hosting the exhibition *1989 Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan China Avant-Garde exhibition* curated by Gao Minglu. For the first time, the exhibition showed within an official context works from avant-garde artists, and was one of the seminal events in the historical development of contemporary Chinese art. In the early 1990s, exhibitions of experimental art were commonly held in private spaces, and the National Art Museum of China was an innovative place for exhibition at that time. Other national and municipal art museums or galleries were still not ready to directly support this kind of art. A change occurred a few years later, when some of the oldest venues started assigning space for contemporary art to complement their long-running exhibitions. For instance, the First Shanghai Biennale launched in 1996, that was held in the Shanghai Art Museum.

Following the economic development of the coast in the 1990s, state-owned art museums in the south-west regions also started to flourish. Thus, cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen gradually became new cultural hubs, with a number of art museums funded in a short range of time. Some examples in Shanghai are the Liu Haisu Art Museum (opened in 1995) and the Zhu Qizhan Art Museum (opened in 1995) – two monographic museums dedicated to modern artists Liu Haisu and Zhu Qizhan – and the Duolun Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) (opened in 2003). As for Guangzhou we can mention the Guangdong Museum of Art (GDMOA) (opened in 1990) and the Guangzhou Museum of Art (opened in 1995), respectively focussing on modern art and photography, traditional and modern art. Finally, in Shenzhen we can list the Shenzhen Art Museum (in 1987 the former Shenzhen Exhibition Hall, founded in 1976, was renamed such), and the He Xiangning Art Museum (opened in 1997), collecting works by modern artist He Xiangning.

Private collections and “museum fever”

While public museums and the official art system were gradually opening their doors to contemporary works of art, another important institutional change from the 1980s was destined to produce a deep impact on the museum system: the birth of private art museums. Until 1979 private collection of artworks was forbidden, because collecting art was the prerogative of state-owned museums, the only ones in existence. However, a taste for collections had a long history among Chinese amateur collectors, and some had continued to gather objects of minor importance and less artistic value. After 1979 this kind of activity spread rapidly, and many different private collections developed into private museums. Following

the aforementioned reforms, by the 1980s they opened to the public, thus sparking the birth of private museums.

As analysed by the scholar Song Xiangguang, in order to manage this incredible growth and legalize the new private collections, over the years a series of laws was announced by Chinese local and central government, which saw a gradual opening of private collections. In a short span of time we witnessed the “legalization” of private museums, and their recognition by the state (Song 2008, 40-48). In this respect, the museum that paved the way for all private art collections in these years was the Yan Huang Art Gallery (or Yan Huang Art Museum) in Beijing, initiated in 1986 by the artist Huang Zhou, and opened to the public in 1991. This was the first non-governmental art collection to be recognized by the government and to obtain a legal status. Since then, many private art collections followed the example and became public museums.

One important aspect which must not be neglected when analysing the evolution of the art infrastructure system in China is that around the 1990s, in concomitance with the gradual transformation of the official art system, contemporary Chinese art was a growing presence in the international art world. This initially led foreign collectors, and subsequently some Chinese private philanthropists, to collect artworks by emerging Chinese artists. The earliest, and probably the most famous example of a foreign collector, is the Swiss businessman and diplomat Uli Sigg, who since the 1980s had started to put together a vast selection of Chinese artworks. This is the collection that years later, in 2012, he donated to one of the biggest museums of contemporary Chinese art, the museum M+ in Hong Kong (Vigneron 2017). During the same period, the number of galleries selling contemporary Chinese artwork increased, laying foundations for a new art market that would arise in the years following. Some of these galleries were run by non-Chinese curators or owners, for instance, Red Gate Gallery in Beijing, founded in 1991 by Brian Wallace from Australia, and ShangART, in Shanghai, founded by Lorenz Helbling in 1996.

It is in this context of growth that the first contemporary Chinese art museums were born by the end of the 1990s, inaugurating what the Chinese press labelled as “museum fever”. The first ones were the Upriver Gallery in Chengdu, the Dongyu Museum of Art in Chengyang and the Taida Museum of Art in Tianjin, established all in 1998. Even if the history of the three museums is quite short, since they were forced to close after a few years due to bankruptcy, the establishment of the three was an important event because they, in addition to acquiring works, also had large temporary exhibition spaces available to contemporary artists. For example, the Shanghe exhibited artists which today are among the most quoted in the art market, such as Zhang Xiaogang, Zhou Chunya, Fang Lijun and Ye Yongqing.

The second wave of the “fever” took place after the real estate surplus during the years 2001-2004, as highlighted during a personal interview with Wang Nanming, critic, curator and former director of the Himalayas Museum in Shanghai. In those years, big buildings remained unsold and some real estate companies decided to

dedicate those spaces to exhibiting contemporary art. The Today Art Museum in Beijing and the Himalayas Art Museum in Shanghai (formerly the Zendai Museum), for example, were established respectively by two big real estate companies, Anteo Corporation and Zendai Group, respectively, in 2002 and 2005 (Wang 2012). It is worth noting that there is a precise reason why real estate companies are involved in the foundation of new museums, because, as pointed out by Ren Xuefei and Sun Meng, real estate companies, cultural industries and land politics have been strictly connected to the reshaping of urban spaces since the end of the 1990s (Ren and Sun 2012, 508).

The third wave of museum fever can be collocated after 2008 and is characterized by the spread of a new kind of art museum – the *minyong*. The word *minyong* derives from economics, and refers to a new kind of enterprise, which started to spread across China after 2002. To simplify, it can be defined as a public-private partnership in public utilities. This approach of mixing public and private has started to disseminate and extend to other fields, including cultural institutions and naturally, museums were not an exception. Indeed, in 2008, alongside an intense influx of foreign capital for the Olympic games, the museum sector developed more rapidly, reaching its “Golden Age”; *minyong* and private museums saw in this period a booming evolution. Some examples of *minyong*-type museums born around 2008 are Shanghai Yi Art Museum (opened in 2007), Shanghai Rockbund Art Museum (opened in 2010), Beijing Sishang Art Museum (opened in 2010) and Shanghai Minsheng Xiandai Art Museum (opened in 2010). Today, the *minyong* museum, with a mix of state and private management, is the most widespread kind of art museum in China.

These museums generally carry out hybrid activities, halfway between commercial art and non-profit. Being financially independent and having the ability to obtain financing within the private sector, cultural institutions of this type are becoming cultural industries, in which it is difficult to distinguish the commercial purpose from the cultural mission. The nature of non-profit institutions that marked the *shiye danwei* before institutional reforms is greatly weakened by these changes. This situation leads to the observation, already shared by many scholars, that ultimately, many of these new museums, rather than representing the preservation and dissemination of culture, often become a status symbol for the company or private investor which founded them, and an economic and cultural catalyst for local governments. Indeed, if at the turn of the 21st century the government still seems to be prudent in getting involved with contemporary art, around the mid-2000s both the rise of state-owned and private art museums can be seen as the result of a precise cultural strategy, as will be described later in this article.

The convergence of art museums and cultural policies

The encounter between contemporary art and the museum is a rather curious one, and an analysis of the development of the art museum in China would be unthinkable without taking into account the meeting of contemporary art with traditional institutions, which took place around 2000. The works and the artists which until now were excluded from official circuits suddenly began to conquer space in the public culture, and were included in the calendars of major museums, such as the Shanghai Museum of Art. It is a process still working today, where on the one hand, old institutions are renewed and looking for a new place in the contemporary art system, and on the other new institutions are emerging. Museums of contemporary art or the Biennale projects are such examples.

Some of the oldest state-run art museums mentioned above started to open their doors to contemporary artworks in the early 2000s, and in two distinct ways: by acquiring classic works of contemporary art, as will be described later, but more frequently hosting regular, great exhibition projects. As a result, biennales started to flourish in many state-owned *meishuguan*. Great exhibitions organized in that period include the Beijing International Art Biennale, held from 2003 at NAMOC, the Shanghai Biennale held from 2000 at Shanghai Art Museum¹ and the Guangzhou Triennial, held from 2002 at GDMOA. The new openness toward contemporary art can be interpreted as a strategy in response to searching for new opportunities to stay competitive and raising visitors' interest. In a country like China, where public attendance at museums is on average very low, biennales usually attract large audiences, and also stimulate other sectors, like tourism.

As for the artistic contents of these biennale projects, they usually do not closely investigate the controversial debate occurring in contemporary art, but rather function as retrospectives of recent works of art, or surveys on works of art, which have already become classics, or on official orthodox art, as in the abovementioned Beijing Biennale of 2003 (De Nigris 2014, 69-70). The first Guangzhou Triennial, titled *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art*, held in 2003, aimed at creating an historic review as well as an academic interpretation of experimental Chinese art produced since the 1990s. It mainly exhibited works of the experimental art produced in China between 1990 and 2000. This characteristic of being a retrospective of art rather than an exploration of new forms of art seems to be in contrast with the meaning of the biennale, whose role in the contemporary global art world has been to exhibit new trends and to show emerging artists, engaged in a more socially oriented debate. This apparent openness to contemporary art demonstrated by state-owned art museums thus can be interpreted as a strategy

¹ As already mentioned in this text, the first edition of the Biennale was held in 1996, but here I consider the third Shanghai Biennale of 2000 as a turning point in the evolution of the Chinese art infrastructure. See De Nigris 2016, 60-63.

for cultural competitiveness, adopted in order to involve the visitor in more attractive art projects and to endow Chinese cities with modern touristic appeal.

As for the permanent collection, it must be considered the “Achilles heel” of the Chinese art museum system, and the most evident problem today, is to build a specific thematic collection and research it. According to the interviews and observations made during my field research, the majority of the above-mentioned museums generally are keener to collect and exhibit works that have become classics or that belong to orthodox art. With the exception of the Shanghai Contemporary Art Museum or Power Station of Art (PSA) in Shanghai, none of the state-owned art museums of China are totally dedicated to collecting contemporary art. Generally, the permanent collection of the biggest art galleries focuses on modern and traditional art. Most of the works date from the 20th century to the 1980s or early 1990s (rarely), including great masters of traditional ink painting, calligraphy, sculpture, ceramics, folk art, and modern variations on traditional Chinese painting.

The permanent collection of the National Art Museum of China, for example, houses more than 100,000 works representative of various periods of Chinese art history, ranging from the end of the 19th century to the present day. The contemporary art collection includes just a few works, for example Luo Zongli’s oil painting *Father* (1980). The Shenzhen Art Museum also has a range of works in the collection – almost 4,000 – including classics of the 20th century, some contemporary Chinese art collections, and a section dedicated to Shenzhen local art. The contemporary section focusses on works by the most esteemed contemporary Chinese artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, and Wang Guangyi, among others. The permanent collection of the Guangdong Museum of Art also includes more traditional artistic expressions, and in this case, contemporary artworks function as a complement to the main collection; among them are Zhang Dali’s acrylic painting *AK47(P10)* (2009) and Wang Qingsong’s *Follow you* (2013). As for the Shanghai Art Museum collection, there are, again, works by Zhang Xiaogang and Fang Lijun, along with Gu Wenda and Liu Ye.

When it comes to a private art museum’s permanent collection, if one exists, it is generally built according to the personal tastes of the collector, established by domestic business interests, or funded by big corporations investing in art. The Long Museum collection, which has made many acquisitions at international and national art auctions since the 1990s, has put together a wide collection, including works by internationally renowned artists such as Qiu Zhijie, Huang Yongping, and Xu Bing. But Liu Yiqian and his wife Wang Wei’s collection doesn’t seem to be specifically centred on one direction, since it ranges from antiquities, works of art from revolutionary propaganda, as well as contemporary Chinese art. The Long Museum, established in 2012, is “showcasing a meticulously selected version of élite and sovereign Chinese art history” (Chun 2014: 22) and its mission is to acquire and repatriate major historical and contemporary works of art. A mission which

sounds particularly nationalistic, perfectly aligned with the government cultural emphasis on patriotism (Yin 2017: 107). On this issue of re-appropriation, there is another interesting case to note: the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing. The art institution founded in 2007 by Guy and Miriam Ullens in the heart of 798 Factory, was sold in 2017 to a group of Chinese investors, among them one of the main media entrepreneurs in China, Jason Nanchu Jiang. The journal *The Art Newspaper* recently announced: “The UCCA will close for renovation and expansion. The museum will reopen in summer 2018 with a Xu Bing exhibition” (Movius 2017).

There is another interesting phenomenon which can testify the recent interest in contemporary art within the official cultural policy: some existing state museums expanded their space or moved from one location to another, in order to dedicate more space to exhibiting art. This is very coherent with the policy of many ambitious local governments that have been making huge efforts to appear as the new patrons of contemporary artistic practice, thus trying to transform large Chinese cities into cultural hubs, comparable to Paris or London.

The aforementioned National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) for instance has planned an expansion of its structure, launching an international call for the creation of a new exhibition area, located at the Olympic Village in Beijing, close to the Beijing National Stadium (best known as Bird’s Nest). According to Fan Di’an, former director of the museum, the government approved a project of 80,000 square meters, which in July 2013 was awarded to French architect Jean Nouvel (Gill 2008). The museum will house part of the modern and contemporary collection of NAMOC and intends to develop cooperation with international partners.

In December 2008 in Sichuan province it inaugurated another impressive museum complex dedicated to the most representative Chinese living artists: Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Guangyi, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Zhou Chunya, He Duoling, Zhang Peili Wu and Shanzhuan. These artists have not had the opportunity to exhibit their work for years, but now the government of Sichuan province decided to dedicate personal museums in Wangpoyan, a town in the western part of the province. The project was developed from an idea by art historian Lü Peng, and provides a unique complex shaped like an oblong ball, with curved walls that resemble the walls of a river gorge.

The common denominator in these cases can be identified by a new national cultural strategy that has seen the government committed to the use of contemporary art and museums in the will to present – at home and abroad – the uniqueness and greatness of Chinese culture. The combination of the two would seem to be a desire to endow the Chinese city as modern and easily identifiable in the global context of institutions, which can create consensus within the nation. It is a strategy very similar to that adopted, for example, in the shaping of Beijing artistic urbanization, specifically the case of 798 Factory. Born as a spontaneous art district where artists moved to in the late 1990s, by around 2005 it was turned

into an official art district by the local Chinese government, thus becoming a place able to attract tourism – national and international – and to intensively promote shopping and entertainment.

The case of the aforementioned Power Station of Art (PSA) may well represent this political and cultural operation. Housed in an industrial building and home to Expo Shanghai 2010, the museum is situated on the east bank of the Huangpu River, just four kilometres from Republic Square, the commercial and political heart of the city. The PSA is the first state museum of contemporary art in mainland China and has an exhibition area of 150,000 square meters. In August 2011 the ambitious local government decided to convert the pavilion into a museum and destined it to become the new home for the Shanghai Biennale – the historical biennale changed location after the previous eight editions were held at the Shanghai Art Museum. The change of venue is justifiable given the great success of the previous editions of large scale exhibitions, registering a high number of visitors, both Chinese and foreign. The biennale surely provides visibility to the city, also stimulating the tourism sector. The marketing component is also very strong; it is a matter of expressing the cultural and economic potential of a city or even a nation.

These new museums are increasingly taking the form of cultural catalysts, because they are designed as open and dynamic structures, and places of mass culture, where in addition to the display of works of art, they can offer many other appealing aspects: libraries, theatres, cinemas, cafes, shops and restaurants. This marks the birth of what the architect Stefania Suma called “museums of hyper-consumerism” or “those museums that, beyond recalling art people with their exceptional architecture with a strong iconic charge, it also attracts them by inserting a series of side events that [...] stand as consumerism-dedicated places, made even more seductive by their architectural configuration” (Purini, Ciorra, Suma 2008, 95).

In this respect, the rise of many private organizations could also be seen as instrumental to politics, and pertinent to the national cultural agenda which aims to endow modern cities with an accurate selection of contemporary artworks and cultural entertainment. Shanghai again represents the most striking example, with the number of new museums, state-owned or private, having more than doubled from 2008 to 2013 (Kiowski 2017), a growth which intensified after Expo Shanghai 2010 (Zennaro 2017: 65-66). The city offers a wide variety of contemporary art museums, and in addition to the abovementioned PSA, we can cite New China Art Museum, Himalayas, K11, Rockbund, and Yuz Museum, among others. In particular, the local government has directly supported the development of the West Bund Cultural Corridor, by approaching “Liu Yiqian, Wang Wei and Budi Tek and invited them to open their museums on the West Bund” (Kiowski 2017, 54) – the Long Museum (with its two branches) and the Yuz Museum. It is an exorbitant art supply that the state alone would not be able to offer, in terms of costs, above all. This would respond to the government mandate to create cultural space in

urban areas, especially visual art related. This is an operation, as stated by Karen Smith, which starts by building a physical space with appealing architecture, without any interest in the cultural aspect or in what the building is going to host (Smith 2017: 5).

Final consideration

In recent decades, the museum sector in China has been experiencing an unprecedented growth phase, and the phenomenon follows an ongoing process of the renewal of art and museum systems. This renewal has seen the emergence of new institutions and development of old ones. One could interpret the current museum boom as driven by two major forces – the state and the private sector – two realities that often overlap and work in unison, making the museum system a very complex one.

The problem with the quality of art and projects exhibited in these museums is a very central topic; this process of growth contrasts sharply with what should be the cultural institution's mission, which is to preserve the past and the present for the future generations. With new places of art consumption, you are tying to the idea of consumption, and the features that it implies: momentary, ephemeral, wear and elimination. From this picture a strong contradiction between boom and crisis emerges: the construction boom of museums and crises of their meaning. The frenzy in recent years has brought collectors, entrepreneurs, real estate companies and big corporations, but also the government to build new art museums. But the problem is, what are they going to host these places? This remains a central question, which pertains to the sustainability and the cultural commitment of these art institutions.

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