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# *Art in China*



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CHINA

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# Art in China

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# Preface

The development of Chinese contemporary art proves that artists, art forms and art works are products of the era they exist in. Since reform and opening-up was launched in the early 1980s, China has joined the global economy and, after long and tough exploration, Chinese art has become a part of the international art scene.

To artists, it's difficult to speed up spiritual development compared to economic development. Embarrassment and dilemmas can't be avoided during the development of Chinese contemporary art. Although some artists wear Western suits, in their thinking they still "wear" Chinese-style Zhongshan suits (For a long period after 1949, Chinese officials wore Zhongshan suits on formal occasions, which was the uniform of Sun Yat-sen, considered the father of modern China). However, the collective development of Chinese artists has become the general trend. Winning international recognition and maintaining a unique style have become Chinese artists' two major objectives.

In fact, the transformation of Chinese culture and art has never been done more completely and urgently than in the last 20 years. After a temporary debate on ideology, Chinese artists found a spiritual time difference with the whole world. Facing this time difference, some of them are carefully looking at it while others stand still and refuse to go forward. However, they have reached an agreement – art is no longer a tool serving politics, nor an iron ruler to educate people. Art is totally determined by the market.

The transformation has happened, which is like an invisible hurricane.



Look around and you can see the changes.

How can the old generation in movie industry imagine that high-cost commercial movies are made in China now and the Hollywood way of making, publicizing and distributing movies has been widely accepted?

Could the painters of the previous generation have anticipated that the image of worker, farmer and soldier holding a hammer, sickle and rifle would be transformed into a pop art image by new visual artists?

Some 30 years ago, Chinese people always seemed to be marching and loudly singing revolutionary songs. And now it seems that everyone can understand rock music and you can hear the sounds of guitars, drum and bass almost everywhere.

It is true that each kind of Chinese contemporary art has developed in a hurry and the eagerness for quick success has caused distortions to art. In 20 years, art in China has experienced development that took over a century in the West.

This process has been very challenging and has posed many threats to our cultural identity.

Foreign capital has entered the Chinese art industry as it plays an increasingly important role in China's booming economy. And some artists have swum into this sea of capital. During the leap, artists will drown if they can't swim; they will be neglected if they can't show talent. The rapid development of the Internet and information technology has broken the closed environment of Chinese artists.

Nobody wants to discuss stepping in or stepping out. Maybe, the big

compromise made by Chinese artists for the sake of business has changed the meaning of art's independence. Thinkers and critics start to criticize what happens to Chinese art and they question that if it is just going to be "second- or third-hand American art."

Is it true? The question can be answered by the work of Cai Guoqiang, a New York-based Chinese artist. It is an old wooden fishing boat skeleton, wrapped with grass thread and struck by 3,000 feather arrows. At the stern of the boat, a red Chinese national flag was blown by a small electric fan. The work is named *Borrow Your Enemy's Arrow*, which tells the story of how one general sent his fleet, full of hundreds of soldiers made of grass, standing on the deck, to attack the enemy on a foggy night. To repel the offensive, the enemy shot thousands of arrows at the fake soldiers, therefore allowing the general to collect the precious weapons. With this metaphor, Cai tries to show the flexible and absorbable characteristics of the Chinese people and their culture. China needs to advocate "Na Lai Zhu Yi," or the philosophy of drawing on the experience of more developed countries, which was noted by Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881-1936).

Nowadays, with too much information, Chinese artists need not only to accept, but also face up to the impact of Western culture. In terms of aesthetics, it's impossible for people to appreciate the old great and perfect figures as the environment for their existence has disappeared. What people see is the grotesque and gaudy urban scenes and lots of incomplete people, who are alien and floating. When Bohemia, Bobos

and "fans" are used to identify people instead of social classes, what on earth is the human being?

The unified mechanism that artists are supported by the nation has become flexible. Taking advantage of this opportunity, art workshops and art tribes are born. This book draws the outlines of the four major art forms – film, vision, music and stage. Each of them is a huge topic that can't be covered completely even by a monograph.

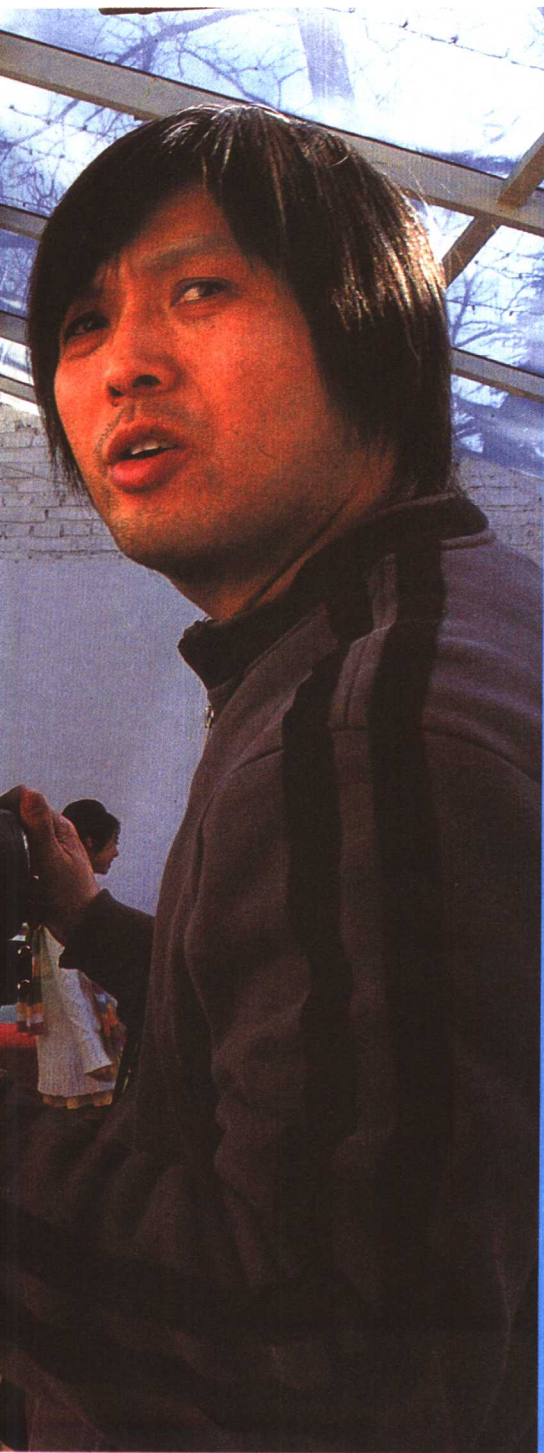
Research of Chinese contemporary art is very passive and lagging compared to its development. The old vocabulary and cognitive methods are outdated compared to the new expressions of art, while the new evaluation system hasn't been established. It's urgent task to establish this system.

When Chinese read the French novelist Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* 20 years ago, most of them were not clear about what the author wanted to say. At that time, literary theorist talked about people's dissimulation with the background of great industrial production, which was noted by Karl Marx. Today, *Nausea* and *Dissimulation* has become the fact and people seldom talk about it.

When writing this brief outline of Chinese contemporary art, the author shows worry about the flourishing market-oriented art industry. During the course of globalization, the intellectual property and individuality is what a Chinese contemporary artist needs to possess. From this point of view, a successful globalization is the selective absorption of globalization.







## The Film

Since the first Chinese film *The Battle of Dingjunshan* was made in 1905, the development of China's film art has experienced many twists and turns – from harmonization with world film in the beginning, to partial and complete isolation later on, and to today's consistency with the trends of world film. However, Chinese filmmakers' efforts haven't won a comprehensive understanding among critics and filmgoers.

China's film industry has returned to the capital-based commercial operation mode, which emphasizes the box office. At the same time, the Hol-

lywood mode – stars, investors and directors who seek balance between them – is widely accepted by China's film industry.

The theme and content of the times, the presentation and communication manners of films have changed dramatically. The tremendous impact of new technology is gradually shown and a new generation of filmmakers is appearing. When film camera is no longer the weapon for a few people, the attack to commercial

films and mainstream films starts. Though the attack hasn't yet broken the city gates, it has made many dents in the city wall. The Internet, as the latest communication medium, provides opportunities for the attack.

The nature of the world of film is also changing. Chinese filmmakers don't put their works in a small scope any more. The Internet makes the world increasingly flat. The new generation of Chinese filmmakers, who like pursuing new trends, have surpassed their seniors in terms of mastering and



A cinema based in Beijing

understanding this free communication. To observe Chinese film, it may be worthier to pay attention to the DV group represented by Jia Zhangke rather than Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Considered as Chinese film's future, they are challenging the traditional film with their strength and confidence.

The popularity of DV films and online videos makes them run neck and neck with commercial films in China. Besides watching commercial films made with huge budgets in the cinema, young people are also enjoying more and more low-cost films. It seems that everybody can be an artist, director, actor/actress, and express themselves through the medium of video.

Everyone with a little knowledge of electronics knowledge can record videos as he/she likes with a mobile phone, DC or DV, edit them roughly and make semi-finished or finished works. Almost everyone has got used to recording and communicating, and they are like many little film factories. If video has any social meaning besides the function of recording, it is getting close to art.

China is becoming the biggest consumer and producer of film culture. Many films or videos become stars that appear quickly and then fade out. The film world, filled with games, jokes, tease and claptrap, is a major aspect of people's lives.

But what is a film? Along with the rest of the world, China is puzzled by this question. If it is just a machine to create box office records, or only exists for business, film will lose its serious meaning and importance in people's lives. Criticizing society, analyzing life and discussing issues once showed the positive role played by film. However, in a business-oriented society, mostly the film shows its consumption function. The mass potential film community is like an unbounded forest though only several big trees can stand tall and upright there — this is the basic situation in China's current film art.



## Senior and Junior: Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke

Someone has said that Zhang Yimou himself is the history of Chinese contemporary film art. The comment shows Zhang's role in connecting Chinese film with the commercial trend of the world film industry. It also indicates that each film of Zhang's marks a significant development in Chinese film.

Having a keen sense of film, and paying continuous attention to both art and business, Zhang has become a master of balancing film's art and business values. He consolidates step by step and makes steady progress. Despite unceasing criticism from home and abroad, he seldom fails.

Zhang's early reputation came from abroad. At that time Chinese audience couldn't totally accept his works about some special conditions of humanity and the unique style connecting both wildness and dreariness. His *Red Sorghum* (winner of the Golden Bear at the 38<sup>th</sup> Berlin Film Festival in 1987), *Ju Dou* (winner of the Luis Bunuel Award at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Cannes Film Festival in 1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (winner of the Silver Lion Award at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival in 1991) are all Chinese-style unusual marriage and love stories. They happen in the turbulent period in Chinese history. In the environment of war, revolution or isolation, what will happen between a man and a woman? As the ethics and morality imposed on people by traditional Chinese culture is stale and weak, lives always display primitive and basic instincts. Zhang made a Chinese version of *Basic Instinct*.



Zhang Yimou is directing *House of Flying Daggers*.

Zhang drew international attention 20 years ago. Considering China a closed and rigid country, foreigners were surprised by the passionate and humane stories and enjoyable Chinese visions in his films. China, shown in Zhang's films, is the land that hasn't been opened to the world for scores of