

# Is the modernity of Chinese art comparable? An opening of a theoretical space.

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This essay is basically a shortened version of the overall arguments advanced in my 2010 book *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai art of the 1980s and 1990s*. These arguments might also benefit from wider critical exposure.<sup>1</sup>

Can Asian modernity be seen as one of a kind, or are there multiple modernities, with one variation or constitutive subtype being 'Asian' (which would include the 'Chinese')? We can look at two or more art cultures across Asia to see if Chinese modern art is of one kind, or whether it has a similar conceptual and empirical topology to other modernities in Asia, and examine how these art cultures face the same issues over time. Similarity between the Asian cases such as China and Thailand indicates some of the ways in which an *Asian* modernity in art can be mapped that is relatively independent of Euramerican types or models.<sup>2</sup> This is the Asian-centric perspective, and we could repeat it for comparisons with other Asian art cultures, particularly India or Japan. Even if the subject of comparison is with China, it is not in itself a China-centred perspective. The methodological and ideological emphasis on a single country or, at most, binary examinations involving the 'West' may account for the rarity with which such comparison has been carried out until recently in China, with the notable and revealing set of comparisons thrown up by the West Heavens exchanges.<sup>3</sup>

However, where there is no identifiable similarity between Asian modernities in art or between a general model of these and the particular modernity in China, modernity can be seen as a context-specific situation of processes and styles simply transferred from elsewhere and locally adjusted. This is the (up until now) conventional Euramerican position, and is intrinsically Euramerican-centric, whatever modifications may be understood in different kinds of transfer processes.

China and Thailand are particularly suitable for a comparative exercise. Because of the difference in physical scale of the two art cultures and their grounding in quite different broader histories, those similarities once found permit these art-historical cases to be assimilated into a more inclusive type of *other modernity*. The assimilation was all the more reinforced because of these differences, particularly in apparent scale.

<sup>1</sup> John Clark, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai art of the 1980s and 1990s*, Sydney: Power Publications, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Euramerica is a term devised to show that modern civilisation and many of its cultural domains are not the possession of Western Europe and North America, conventionally called the West, nor does origination privilege the originator by ownership, as is the habitual presumption in Euramerica by use of the adjective 'Western'.

<sup>3</sup> West Heavens see [westheavens.net/en](http://westheavens.net/en) is a major project to link the intellectual and art worlds of India and China that has been on-going since 2009.



Figure 1 anonymous, *King Bhumibol*, street poster near Mabungkroong Shopping Mall, Bangkok, January 2008.



Figure 2 Jin Shangyi, *Chairman Mao at the conference in December 1961*, 1961, oil on canvas, 155 x 140 cm.

The core issue is not what is Chinese modernity as such, but how 'Western' modernity in art is relativised by a model derived from an Asian comparison, such as between China and Thailand. This 'Western' modernity can now be seen as one provincial result of cognate processes underway in many cultural discourses, and within the same typological family.

I think we must see later processes such as *globalisation* as epiphenomena of modernity and which should be considered after initial structural consideration of modernity and its types. Comparative understandings of globalisation then assist us in assessing the relationship between exogenous creation and reception, and the circulation of artists and works between culturally exogenous and endogenous sites. The terms *exogenous* and *endogenous* denote notions of causation either external or internal to nationally defined art worlds. For the purpose of comparison one can identify thematic areas in common between many Asian art cultures, such as those of China and Thailand, under the general category of styles and institutions:

- styles
- the dichotomy of *official* and *non-official* art



Figure 3 Qu Leilei, *China Youth*, 1980 [in *The Stars*], oil on canvas, 84.5 x 84.5 cm. Fukuoka: Asian Art Museum.



Figure 4 Vasan Sitthikhet, *Buddha returns to Bangkok*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 400 x 200 cm, present collection unknown.

- neo-traditionalist painting
- women artists and women's art
- mass culture and art
- the structure of artists' lives
- artist commentaries
- sites of reception and exhibitions
- the place of the global.

Since the 1990s, there has also occurred a sharp decoupling of the modern from the contemporary in biennale-type exhibitions. This arose partly from the

exigencies of curatorial practice, and partly from the need to add positional clarity to an exhibition concept. The contemporary was by definition not an historical concept, however much history in lived experience it may have comprised. This historical occlusion can impede comparison across culturally sited art discourses because such discourses have histories that shape the present and resist comparison by a-temporal, spatial or situational difference. The paradox of the curatorial concern with the contemporary is that in its intended overcoming of the constraints of cultural essences by subsuming all art under an amorphous conception of 'contemporary' or 'transnational' practice, the notion of the contemporary reintroduces such essences as the irreducible grounding authority for difference.

### **Underlying theoretical issues**

These issues arise from two intellectual perspectives. One is the search for useful and valid tools for understanding modernity in art beyond Euramerica. This search will establish whether there is merely another kind of modern art in the geographical and cultural fields of the Asian countries examined. Perhaps this modernity might be *other*—a modernity in art which is in some variable or categorical way different in extent or kind from that of Euramerica.

The second issue is more diffuse and intellectually problematic. To slightly re-iterate the argument, is the modernity found in the comparison between Asian art cultures of one kind—in which material has a similar conceptual and empirical topology—or does it just function in a cognate manner over time? Or are these *modernities* different in kind and non-assimilable to variations within some common type? If there is commonality between the cases of China and another Asian culture such as Thailand, does this indicate ways in which an *Asian* modernity in art might be mapped that is not dependent on, or relatively independent of, Euramerican types or models? If there is no similarity, does this mean modernity is a context-specific situation of processes and styles simply transferred from elsewhere and locally adjusted?

However much the exogenous may provide models which were adopted by, or embedded within the endogenous, in known historical cases in Asia the former has by no means always been dominant or hegemonic, chiefly due to the local practice to counter-appropriate from the exogenous. We could, for example, look at a Chinese painting that adopts its compositional structure and very art-historical references from Delacroix's *Liberty leading the people*, but the Chinese artist is picturing himself among the revolutionaries on the right, and the event in question is clearly the Beijing Massacre of 1989.





Figure 5 Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty leading the people* (28<sup>th</sup> July 1830), 1830, oil on canvas, 260 x 325 cm, Paris: Musée du Louvre.



Figure 6 Chen Danqing, *Les Misérables*, 1989, oil on canvas, 44 x 58 inches, Baruch College Gallery.

This counter-appropriation took place despite the degree to which Euramerican-centred frames may have only been able to conceive of the local in terms of central hegemony—only by seeing the terms set by the prior work by Delacroix as determinative of meaning—whereas for the Chinese artist they were simply an art-historical convenience.

In the early twenty-first century we must now set aside the poststructuralist tenets formulated in terms such as: ‘representations only refer to other representations’ or ‘only those claiming interpretive sovereignty from within a discourse are enfranchised to represent its structures’. If such tenets were the case, not only would Chinese and other Asian art discourses be incomparable unless the subject was situated somehow within both discourses at the same time. But further, any lateral comparison made by a third party in a third discourse, say perhaps Australia, would not be intellectually feasible. Even as third parties we should be allowed to make a comparison between the sarcastic take on propaganda poses of a Chinese artist and another Asian, and in this case Thai critique, of the artistic self-consciousness mirrored in a painting style derived from advertising photography.



Figure 7 Qiu Zhijie *Fine*, 1997, photograph.

It does not make any sense in comparative study to compare closely similar types - which might be Chinese modern art - and say ‘European’ modern art, an apposition which assumed some level of comparability dependent on size, cultural longevity or cultural complexity. In fact, since 1949 there are good grounds - such as in the work of Xu Beihong and its later influence - for supposing a good deal of the

cultural complexity of modern Chinese art has been masked by a highly restricted interpretation of modernity and of the kinds of style suitable for a post-revolutionary China. In the case of Xu Beihong's well-known hostility to European modern painting after Van Gogh, the complexity of the materials and the possibilities of art in any particular cultural context have been masked by occluding through deliberate state-intervention the full dynamics of a stylistic discourse until the 1980s. I compared China and Thailand because it is methodologically sensible to choose two art cultures that present like sets of phenomena, but from unlike historical contexts, with few exogenous links. The similarities that do exist focus attention on the endogenous reasons for these, and not because China has followed Thailand (or for that matter Japan or India), or visa versa.

In addition, because of the very real differences in the history and scale of the two art cultures, the generality of those similarities that might permit assimilation to a more inclusive type of other modernity, is all the more reinforced because of these differences. If they were the same or highly similar this would not be the case. Both art cultures exist in a broader exogenous field: the specific international context of late twentieth-century international political, economic and cultural flows. These disparate fields are often singularised and homogenised as the global, and their causal processes as those of globalisation. As earlier studies have shown,<sup>4</sup> however much the exogenous may provide models which were adopted by, or embedded within the endogenous,<sup>5</sup> in known historical cases the former has by no means always been dominant or hegemonic over the latter in local practice, chiefly due to the local practice of counter-appropriation from the exogenous. This was despite the degree to which Euramerican-centred frames may have only been able to conceive of the local in terms of central hegemony.

Maybe Western modernity in art can be relativised and seen as one provincial result of cognate processes underway in many cultural discourses, and within the same typological family. Perhaps this family also includes other avatars, like national modernities, such as Chinese, Indian, Japanese or Thai, or broader agglomerations such as Asian or Latin-American modernities. The last two include both active, causally interrelated histories and parallel, analogical histories. The Asian modernities are much more of a discursive construction than the Latin-American discourses since the causal relations between the Asian modernities are much less closely interlinked, but they are similar in that they propose a common set of issues and constructions. These constructions, predominantly discursive in the Asian cases, can be better seen if we take two art cultures from the same Asian continuum as different in historical background as China and Thailand, because then we have a wider range of variations from which the Asian modernities can be constructed.

<sup>4</sup> For earlier studies up to 2011 please consult John Clark, *Bibliography of modern and contemporary Asian art*.

<sup>5</sup> The terms *exogenous* and *endogenous* indicate notions of causation, either external or internal to nationally defined art worlds.



Figure 8 Sun Lei, *Translucent*, 2009, mixed media, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, MFA graduation exhibition.



Figure 9 Jakapan Vilasineekul, *Mountain in my mind*, 1997, various objects and construction, 560 x 242 124 cm.

We can interrogate the notion of modernities to come up against the issue of whether these are all of the same kind, and if so how they may be grouped. The book *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai art of the 1980s and 1990s* investigates some of the conceptual tools used in evolutionary theory and the identification of species—broadly meaning the subtypes of an existing species, the different kinds of modernity within a general category called ‘Modernities’. We can also consider how different cultural universes may be compared and how evolutionary and genetic models may be applied to interpret the variety of types, taking care to analyse the



differences between biological and cultural sign-systems. Similar artworks may not function in the same way between different societies, and interpretation or definition of an artwork should be placed under various kinds of cultural limitation. These often depend on notions of descent from different sets of cultural values mapped in genealogies, which only become congruent or mix with each other under special historical and artistic conditions. Late, this paper will explore the relevance of notions of cultural mixing and descent from multiple species usually associated with the notion of hybridity.

## Modernities

The general theoretical perspective here surrounds theories of modernity in art, and the question—what are other modernities and how can they be compared? This discussion is about art, its discourses and practices, its meaning-bearing works, and its codes of interpretation. Insofar as these have consequences for, or may serve as representations of, modernity conceived as a structure and position of social forces, then these conclusions about art may have wider extension.

Previous work indicates four basic modes of modern discourse:

1. *Conservative modernity reappraising the past*

A deliberate putting-behind of the past by distancing from an earlier set of artistic tastes, in which process all the monuments of that past are reordered, and where a dialogue with tradition may be achieved via technical exploration and the expression of new subjects.

2. *Heroic modernist innovation*

A conscious awareness by the artist and audience of the constraints on expression or formal exploration is provided through the now-distanced customary media and stylistic formulae, where ideas external to the technical medium or its constituting artistic culture actually interpose, often radically, between the customary and the artist.

3. *Modernism as self-referential discourse*

Formal criticism of art media or forms takes place from inside the art discourse itself, by making the process of art-making the subject of art, where image-signs are allowed free play, and their cultural origin, non-art reference or embedding in a prior or presently nascent system of taste is no longer the determining function of their artistic deployment.

4. *Postmodernism*

The referents of internal criticism through art forms themselves, as knowledge, constitute the subject of art, where any customary or modern element can be quoted as *techne* or form with eclectic freedom, because the teleological necessity for reaction against either has passed.<sup>6</sup>

This schema has many possibilities of variation and application in modern Asian contexts, but it does carry certain implications. Under mode 1, for example, it

<sup>6</sup> These definitions were established in Chapter 2, John Clark, *Modern Asian art*, Craftsman House: Sydney, 1998 and University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, 1998, p. 29 and infra.

means that Neo-traditional art is no longer to be seen as the antithesis of the modern but as its mutually defining pair. An artist's technical deformation of a landscape motif may only obtain visual resonance from the implied pairing with a notion of the Chinese pre-modern and, specifically, Northern Song dynasty landscape conventions.



Figure 10 Liu Guosong, *Snow*, Chinese media on paper, 1966, Zürich: Rietberg Museum.

In mode 2, we can notice many formalist interrogations of conventional, even tabooed, material. This can be with the almost outlandish deployment of a surreal fantasy with scenes of political terror, the visualisation of which is contrary to many received official opinions about the liberatory intent of US foreign policy.

In mode 3, the perpetual formalist self-interrogation of art itself becomes the subject. The artist asks: where is the frame? Where is the linear structure within the nominal subject area? How does the technical manner I deploy affect my understanding of its overall semantic charge?



Figure 11 Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Rainy day with a stranger*, 1991, acid on zinc plate, 105 x 90 cm, location unknown

In mode 4, the teleology implicit in modes 1 to 3 is abandoned and a kind of delirious citation takes the place of formal discourse being subverted by its subjects. The artist can cite Goya's *Third of May 1808* (1814, Prado Museum, Madrid) but turn himself into the victim's face, blow up his reclining head to fill the whole frame, and stick corpses of the executed dead as scabrous excrescences on one side of his head; on the other side, a rose lies in his ear.



Figure 12 Francisco Goya, *1<sup>st</sup> of May 1808 in Madrid*, 1814, oil on canvas, 268 x 347 cm, Madrid: Museo del Prado.



Figure 13 Chatchai Pupia, *A day in life*, 2000, oil on canvas, 180 x 205 cm.

Thinkers such as Baudrillard have illustrated the fundamentally Euramerican-centred nature of these concepts and formulations by supposing that in the absence of political and industrial revolution in the Third World, it is the technical and most exportable features of modernity which touch developing countries. But even he concedes that anthropological analysis shows modernity is never a rupture and goes hand-in-glove with tradition in 'a process of amalgamation and adaptation'.<sup>7</sup> Simply to apply this perspective would produce a kind of interpretive variation in the Asian material of the projected Euramerican theory. The problem is where the modern, or the not-modern, according to Euramerican criteria, is to be found in the non-Euramerican material. One may ask if there are major areas of concordance or dissonance, or whether there are non-art correlates of modernity dominant over artistic modernity, even if according to Euramerican definitions, modernity is present.

The problem for all theories of modernity is to try and keep open the ground of discussion to allow for other modernities to appear. This can mean modernities descriptively *other from* Euramerican modernity but also modernities that actively render *other* the Euramerican modernity. They relativise it and denude it of universal or absolute value.

In his work on other modernities, Gaonkar qualifies the variation between 'lived experience and the embodied character of modernity' across various sites and notes that 'such differences always function within a penumbra of similarities'. Moreover, the double relationship between convergence and divergence, with their counter-intuitive dialectic between similarity and difference, 'makes the site of alternative modernities also the site of double negotiations—between societal modernization and cultural modernity and between hidden capacities for the production of similarity and difference'.<sup>8</sup>

Thus one may apply notions of covering, elision or occlusion to the interpretive prescriptions, in order to examine what they cover and conceal.<sup>9</sup> The notion of occlusion is by no means straightforward. According to what is occluded being modern, the relativised tradition predicting the future, or not-modern, the customary past being excluded because it drags discourse into the past, on the past's terms, the occlusion may pertain to a different modality of interpretation, or to a modernity which is different in kind from the universe where the prescriptive criteria were drawn.

This major issue may be posed as follows: since we derived our notion of modernity in art from the Euramerican model in any case, how would what was

<sup>7</sup> For one such set of criteria or logics see Jean Baudrillard, 'Modernity' (David James [transl.], 1985), *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, vol. xi, no. 3, 1987, 71–72.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of *other* modernities in relation to Euramerican modernities, variously defined, see the special issue of *Public Culture*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1999 which includes the essay by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, 'On alternative modernities', 18.

<sup>9</sup> Some earlier analysis of these problems, with regard to logical *veils* in a different field, may be found in Jacques Lacan, *Four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*, (tr. A. Sheridan), New York: Norton, 1978 (orig. 1973).



occluded be knowable without interpretation in terms of an *a priori*, and Euramerican, concept of modernity? The straightforward, although in methodological consequence by no means simple, answer is to consider the other modernities as having already been present, at least *in statu nascendi*, before the Euramerican *a priori* prescriptions were applied. This is a variation of the well-known but not often fully explored hypothesis that many cultures were actually in the process of developing their own kind of modern societies with specifically modern cultural forms at the time these trajectories were cut off, or at least knocked off their own course into a Euramerican direction, by the world geopolitical situation from the late Euramerican imperial expansion of the 1850s to the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, that is from the Anglo-Chinese First Opium War of 1840 to the fall of the USSR in 1991.

### Implications of evolutionary models

Different types of modernity might be interpreted as types of entities causally linked to their environment via adjustments in their structure and mediated via the flow of information.

Modernity in art is a complex relation of practices, styles, institutions and hermeneutic structures, but its recurrent feature is a reinforcement of practices and styles through, on the one hand, institutional structures of training, artwork generation and distribution—and the confirmation or disconfirmation of any of these structures via interpretative judgements which flow back to the other elements from a variety of critical positions, beginning with the artist's own observations of how a work is received, the application of judgements of taste by curators and patrons and the formation of critical opinion by art media, including art journalists as well as conventional art critics. Perhaps *the* characterising feature of modernity in art is the motility—the potential to change position—and multiplicity of these information flows, rather than the production and reception of work in terms of interpretive judgements much more narrowly defined against public criteria and values having a religious, class-conventional or socially customary definition.

In evolutionary biology, species may be defined as living beings grouped by their ability to exchange reproductive information via the physical transmission and acceptance of their genetic structures. Some scholars have distinguished as many as twenty-two species concepts and place them in an elaborated hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> The process of survival tests, over humanly unimaginable long time spans, confirms or disconfirms random adjustments to survival strategies in various environments, and

<sup>10</sup> Kim Sterelny and Paul E. Griffiths, *Sex and death: An introduction to the philosophy of biology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, distinguish at least five species concepts: *phenetic*, due to intrinsic similarity between organisms; *biological*, due to reproductive isolation; *cohesive*, due to an inclusive group with potential for genetic and/or demographic exchangeability; *ecological*, where species members compete for resources; *phylogenetic* and *evolutionary*, where a lineage of organisms are bounded in time by a speciation event. See R. L. Mayden, 'A hierarchy of species concepts: the denouement in the saga of the species problem', in M. F. Claridge, H. A. Dawah and M. R Wilson (eds), *Species: the units of biodiversity*, Chapman & Hall: London, 1997.

evolutionary speciation is most pronounced when these environments are most limited, such as in areas of isolated climate change, or in environmental isolation in mountainous or island areas.

Transmission of species information takes place over very many repeated generational reproductions, and over long durations. But what these long time scales have now revealed is the notion that speciation from one line of descent is an increasingly untenable proposition. Mayr's concept of punctuated equilibria in biology,<sup>11</sup> and Gould's notion in palaeontology of a Cambrian explosion (and others) have shown that a far more likely scenario is of single lines of descent for long periods of time with multiple speciations, followed by descent of several dominant adapted species thereafter. The perspective this new understanding makes possible is of division among species which exist in parallel but have common derivation, yet whose interlocking similarity is not of the single generational tree along which their origin may be traced, and which necessarily privileges the origination by *early* over *late*. Species are now to be grouped laterally by their common characteristics, not by their common origin. The implication for theories of modernity is that an intervention of one kind by Euramerican modernity is neither predictive of, nor can it serve to adequately classify, other kinds of modernity in which it may have intervened. This is particularly true of Euramerican modernity's Asian interventions in colonial and semi-colonial contexts in the 1850s to 1890s, so often misprised as imitation in Euramerica because of the transfer of Salon Realism and the exhibition and training structures which supported it.



Figure 14 Li Shan, *The Rouge Series*, no.24, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 140 cm.

<sup>11</sup> See Ernst Mayr, *The growth of biological thought: Diversity, evolution and inheritance*, The Belknap Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1982, 617–18, stemming from his earlier work in the 1940s.

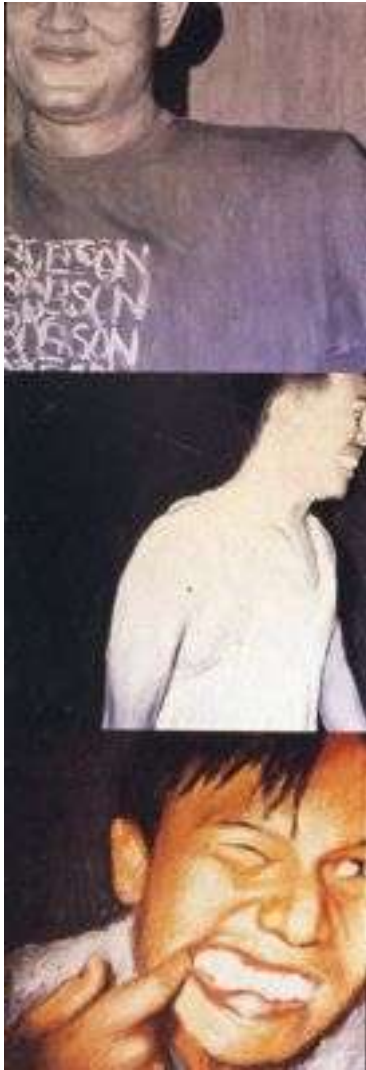


Figure 15 Uttawit Boonyawan, *Title Unknown*, 1999, oil canvas, various dimensions.

As an hermeneutic metaphor for social forms in a world where these have increasingly been brought into contact, this indicates we may understand any particular set of attributes as constituting a *species* by their degrees of commonality. If we used an originating paradigm to set up the identification of a limit condition for all the group of species, this does not mean that we should privilege that originating set once we have used them as an identifier. Indeed, once we set aside the identifier, the relationship between the characters or distinguishing traits of the species so identified may firstly cause a reappraisal of what should be the identifying characteristics for the whole set, including relativising the identifier first used. It should also allow us to regroup or to create subgroups from the species identified so that the identifier first used becomes a special or local set rather than some privileging of its origination, as one might do under the monolineal descent trees of the early Darwinian model.

The implications of this theoretical position for comparing Chinese and other Asian modernities in art in the 1980s and 1990s are significant. It means we can first identify their modernity directly via the criteria given in points one to four above. But we will also then be able to identify common or disparate features between their modernities in the comparison that follows. It is these characteristics that will define what they have in common or differentiates them, not merely as a comparator pair,

but also from the identifying characteristics that enabled them to be brought into a common field of comparison, to be identified on the model of similar species or species of a common genus, in the first place. There really does appear to be a classification in common, perhaps because of the self-consciousness of the artist on the one hand, and an advertising copywriter and layout artist on the other, when the Chinese artist performs for the camera as his female other, or some sports star (like US-Thai golfer Tiger Woods or Chinese-US basketball player Yao Ming) projects himself into the space of all of us, so we, the consumer, can identify with the product he fronts. This way of noticing classificatory characteristics is one of the techniques of cladistics, a method for comparing members of a group of species having a presumed common ancestor.<sup>12</sup>

Should we be able to identify features that group the modernities of these two art cultures as cognate with, but different from, that of Euramerica and other Asian contexts such as Japan, we will have identified a subgrouping within modernity which, because of the range of other features linking and differentiating China and Thailand, we could call Asian. It may be that this group of features will also pull the elements identifying, say, Japanese modernity, towards them, and so further discriminate these away from the Euramerican. Some comparison with other non-Euramerican modernities such as the Australian, although here intended only to be illustrative of a possible case and not to be systematic or thoroughgoing, may indeed pull Australian modernity away from the Euramerican identifiers towards the Asian ones.

It would be interesting indeed to map the recurrence of modernity in art and its discourse over such a wide global distribution in the period 1850 to 1950, and finer divisions can be argued. But this requires a theory of replication in addition to theories of inception and transfer; as such replication would be of two overlying temporal topologies that are not identical. In other words, in addition to knowing how modernity in art was present or potential as part of endogenous discourses and simultaneously understanding how artwork styles and practices, and institutional structures, were transferred from an exogenous level, this requires knowledge of how modernity continued to generate and transform itself through the relation of endogenous and exogenous factors, or what I have suggested elsewhere is a *nested exogeny*.<sup>13</sup>

Much process art, where the audience member becomes an active constituter of meaning in an installation, deals with issues of consumption or sale, and may even be sited in a supermarket or its simulacrous contemporary art museum replica.

<sup>12</sup> For a popular but incisive introduction see Henry Gee, *Deep time: Cladistics, the revolution in evolution*, Fourth Estate: London, 2001, 36–39. He also discusses oppositions between views of evolution as contingent adaptation with blind natural selection and as directed and progressive on p. 114. For a summary of cladistics applied to species based in the philosophy of biology see Sterelny and Griffiths, 1999, 194–201.

<sup>13</sup> See John Clark, 'System and style in the practice of Chinese contemporary art: The disappearing exterior', *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, August 2002, 27.





Figure 16 Rirkrit Tiravaija, *Das Soziale Kapitale*, 1998, installation view.

We may call this the saturation of image spaces or the hyper-relativisation of images, as if modernity's relativisation of the *past* and the *other* is now on such a scale that the functions of visual images as sign-vehicles have changed to substituting for whatever was being relativised. The issue of the simulacrum substituting for reality will not go away as something imposed or transferred from Euramerica. Many societies, and from the 1980s the particular art discourses of China and Thailand, have been so saturated by the volume of images circulated and the density of their range of references, that the very functions of images as direct homologues of or mimetic tokens for the real, have themselves been relativised.

### The artwork

If we are going to look at artworks in two or more different cultures and at some point compare them it may be sensible to establish some frame for what these works might be. The concept of the artwork has long been under art-discursive reformulation from inside artistic practice by artists like Marcel Duchamp. He explicitly proposed an artist-audience collaboration in creativity via the art object (in April 1957 at Houston) where the 'creative act is not performed by the artist alone: the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act'.<sup>14</sup> The audience participant-creator may even be engaged to breathe oxygen in,

<sup>14</sup> See Michel Sanouillet and Elemer Peterson (eds), *The writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Da Capo Press: New York, 1973, 140. Lebel translates from the original English, 'The creative act', to 'Le processus créatif', and includes a subsequent comment by Duchamp: 'trois jour de cirque à Houston où j'ai joué mon rôle de pitre artiste [buffoon artist] aussi bien que possible.' See Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp*, Editions Trianon: Paris, 1959, 56. Lebel also discusses

to make their body into the artwork, or in other cases breathe air out to fill up the inflatable artwork. Artists such as Josef Beuys proposed a separation from notions such as happenings, anti-art, Fluxus, Art Titles and such declarations in the 'action'.<sup>15</sup> This trajectory can be incorporated into performance work where the relic of the artist's intangible presence can be tracked by his shadow on a table maintained in the same relation during the day through the artist moving to block out the sun as it moves.



Figure 17 Chumporn Apisuk, performance at *Asiatopia*, Bangkok, 2000.

Morphy defines art as:

...objects having semantic and/or aesthetic properties that are used for presentational or representational purposes'. Art in this sense embraces a series of polythetic sets in which the objects included in the European set are liable to share some but not all of their attributes with objects included in other sets.<sup>16</sup>

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Duchamp's concept of the ready-made, pp. 35–37. For a later historical discussion of changed concepts of the art object see William Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: Aesthetic object, icon of anti-art?' in Thierry de Duve (ed.), *The definitively unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, MIT Press: Cambridge Mass., 1991, 166-71.

<sup>15</sup> This was marked in his 32nd sequence from the *Siberian symphony*. See 'Interview between Joseph Beuys and Richard Hamilton', 27 February 1972, reprinted in Eva Beuys and Jessyka Wenzel, *Joseph Beuys, Block Beuys*, Schirmer/Mosel, München, 1997, 10. This is the record of Beuys' first one-person exhibition at Hessischen Landesmuseum in 1967.

<sup>16</sup> Morphy, 'The anthropology of art', in Tim Ingold (ed.), *Companion encyclopedia of anthropology*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 655–56. Interestingly, Morphy's preoccupations with how art may be properly defined to allow for anthropological understanding across different cultural constitutions of art, are cognate with notions of modernity in art which allow for redefinition across Euramerican and Asian cultural contexts.

Another theoretical reason for considering this possibility is the extremely Euramerican cultural specificity of theorisations by Bourdieu,<sup>17</sup> or Luhman,<sup>18</sup> and simultaneously the imbrication of these theories in the post-Enlightenment escape or even flight from rational communication understood by Habermas.<sup>19</sup> These ideas were noticed in application to China at least by Tong Shijun.<sup>20</sup>

Bourdieu, for example, premises his analysis of Flaubert on a fiction/reality distinction that requires the articulation of a complex market for cultural goods in nineteenth-century France.<sup>21</sup> Bourdieu's emphasis on literary production encapsulates the culturally-bound Euramerican premise of forgetfulness with regard to the media deployed for a representation. In the process of apparent empowerment through new forms of representation which gives status, or consecrates, modernity in the literary and visual arts in many non-Euramerican countries, and especially in China and Thailand, the notion of a fictional denegation of reality *à la Flaubert* would not be in play.

Bourdieu also opposes pure with commercial art, a distinction used to produce an important diagrammatisation of the position of the European avant-garde.<sup>50</sup> For non-Euramerican modernity this distinction frequently has very little purchase since the commercial art, tied to the goals of the producers of the goods advertised, can appear to have a formally more avant-garde function than some *fine art* works which can be constructed with ease as imitative or kitsch, quite ignoring the local value as the demonstration of an independence of art discourse from politics.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The rules of art: Genesis and structure of the literary field* [orig. *Les Règles de l'art*, S. Emanuel (transl.), 1992], Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> See Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a social system* [orig. *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, Eva M. Knodt (transl.) 1995 ], Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, vol. 1, 'Reason and the rationalization of society', vol. 2, 'Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason' [orig. *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, Thomas McCarthy (transl., intro.), 1981] Heinemann, London, 1984. Habermas' overall view of modernity is found in his essay 'Modernity—an incomplete project' (1980) in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern culture*, Pluto Press, London and Sydney, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> Tong Shijun, *The dialectics of modernization: Habermas and the Chinese discourse of modernization*, Wild Peony, Sydney, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> 'The problem of realism and the "referent" of the literary discourse. What indeed is this discourse which speaks of the social or psychological world *as if it did not speak it*: which *cannot speak* of this world except on condition that it only speak of it as if it did not speak of it, that is, in a *form* which performs, for the author and the reader, a *denegation* (in the Freudian sense of *Verneinung*) of what it expresses?'. See Bourdieu, 1996, 3. Luhmann, 2000, 143, also notes: 'Only within a differentiated distinction between real and a fictional, imagined reality can a specific relationship to reality emerge, for which art seeks different forms.'



Figure 18 Beijing Advertising Billboards, Jin Houjie, 1999, photographed by John Clark.

Either Euramerican concepts of the avant-garde have to be reworked or they only belong to a very culturally specific set of conditions. Bourdieu even sees the opposition of pure and commercial art as defining a field of practice.<sup>22</sup>

In many conditions of patronage and commercial intervention in art practice outside Euramerica, certainly in China, the distinction between pure and commercial does not apply, and oppositions would be on a sliding scale through obligated, contracted and marketed. One even sees this in the variation between obligation to a revolution in 1950s socialist realist art and cynical appeal to an international market for the parodistic imitation of that passed on propaganda art.

<sup>22</sup> 'Even if they are totally opposed in their principles, the two modes of cultural production, "pure" art and "commercial" art, are linked by their very opposition, which acts both objectively, in the space of antagonistic positions, and within minds, in the form of schemas of perception and appreciation which organize all perception in the space of producers and products. And the struggles between holders of antagonistic definitions of both artistic production and the very identity of the artist contribute to determining the production and reproduction of the belief which is both a fundamental condition and an effect of the functioning of the field.' See Bourdieu, 1996, 166.





Figure 19 Luo Guoyin, *Practice Work*, 1957, oil on canvas, from Maximov Training Group Album, 1957.

The opposition is much more likely to be between dignified and efficient kinds of relation to economic opportunity through the purveyance and sale of art objects, and not between pure and commercial art. Even within a notion of the dignified, a notional opposition may exist much more prominently under various conditions of political or social status taboo between orthodox and heterodox, and a field be defined by oppositions more to do with a local definition of cultural style than by relation to economic markets.

Sociologists like Luhmann are more properly concerned with analogues between different parts of a social system or their functioning, than whatever those parts actually function as. He notes that 'what ultimately characterizes society, however, manifests itself in the comparability of its subsystems'. The issue of modernity with which this differentiation in its later nineteenth-century stages cannot help being associated, is one where such subsystems arise in Europe and America, but which can only be seen as emerging much later if at all in many non-Euramerican societies. Does that mean these societies do not have a modern art? Do they have to wait until some series of stages of economic accumulation have been gone through and their concomitant stages of representational discourse? Indeed the whole tenor of the development of modern art in China since the 1920s, and especially in People's China in the 1950s to 1970s, could be seen as the very failure of art to constitute its own subsystem because of arrogation to political domains of codes of authority, which would otherwise have allowed autonomous consecration of art practices and works.

For Luhmann, 'a self-oriented art system searches for "supporting contexts" that leave enough room for its own autonomy and choices'.<sup>23</sup> This is more like a limit condition that art subsystems aspire to, but Luhmann's definition of *supporting contexts* is going to be highly specific to a local culture or its art discourse. If we could find a broader way than the Euramerican historical experience, which defined what the range of those supporting contexts could be, then we would have a much more culturally broad and applicable knowledge of the social subsystem of modern art. We would have to countenance the local through its modernist avatars, even if these could seem like a reworking in a Thai context of a Blaue Reiter expressionism through folk or rural motifs.

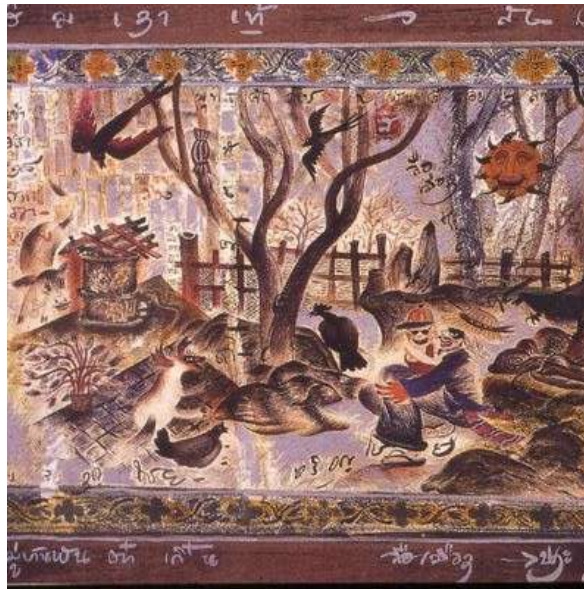


Figure 20 Prasong Luemang, *Title Unknown*, 1989, gouache on paper, 34 x 38 cm.

Art would be assimilated to a new form of communicative action, bringing it into the domain of rational appraisal. Art as communicative action can only partially be in the domain of rational appraisal, even in Euramerica. Habermas' excursus took the understanding of art as a medium for the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. The notion allows us to see in many supporting contexts how art became a special system for talking about the lifeworld by representing it. This even allows for a kind of sentimentality in the punning of installation conventions on a scholarly library shown through a jigsaw puzzle of special book covers that add up to an ink landscape.

<sup>23</sup> Luhmann, 2000, 159.



Figure 21 Lü Shengzhong, *Landscape Study*, 2003, installation, bookshelves, books, originally intended for Chinese Pavilion at Venice Biennale, 2003.

Habermas' concepts also allow for the way art can function as a medium of criticism in many different cultural contexts: 'the rationalized lifeworld makes possible the rise and growth of subsystems whose independent imperatives strike back at it in a destructive fashion.'<sup>24</sup> Habermas is above all concerned with 'cultural impoverishment and fragmentation of everyday consciousness',<sup>25</sup> noting 'there appears the form of post-traditional everyday communication that stands on its own feet, that sets limits to the inner dynamic of independent subsystems, that bursts open encapsulated expert cultures—and thus avoids the dangers of reification and of desolation'. His concepts allow examination of the relationship between modern art discourses and societies undergoing rapid and intense processes of economic growth with accompanying generation of cultural goods as consumer objects.<sup>26</sup>

### Mixed genealogies

Another series of issues concern the amalgamation, or mixing, of differently constituted or differently originating cultural elements in the context of modernity in art. These issues have more broadly been resumed under the notion of *hybridity*. The biological process of hybridisation eliminates descent information through

<sup>24</sup> Habermas, 1984, vol. 1, xxxi. This has the important proviso that 'as the rationality differential between the profane realm of action and a definitely disenchanting culture gets levelled out, the latter will lose the properties that made it capable of taking on ideological functions'. See also Habermas, 1984, vol. 2, 353.

<sup>25</sup> Habermas, 1984, vol. 2, 356

<sup>26</sup> Habermas, 1984, vol. 2, 486–87.



lineages returning together and exchanging characters. A hybrid is the result of reproduction between two species who thereby eliminate by combination the results of the previous genealogies in which discriminable species were located and which expressed different sets of genetic information. Hybrids are thus the boundary or liminal state of species, and for animals in nature are rare and usually sterile. But in plants, hybrids are quite common and designate the incorporation of genes from one species to another, in a process called *introgression*. This can result in the breakdown of the species, but mostly the two originating species retain their integrity alongside the hybrid.<sup>60</sup> Some such sort of relationship to originating species can be seen in the different ways the tradition is referred to in recent ink painting, which can range from ink paintings citing Andrew Wyeth to installations placing ink paintings in a kind of atrium garden.

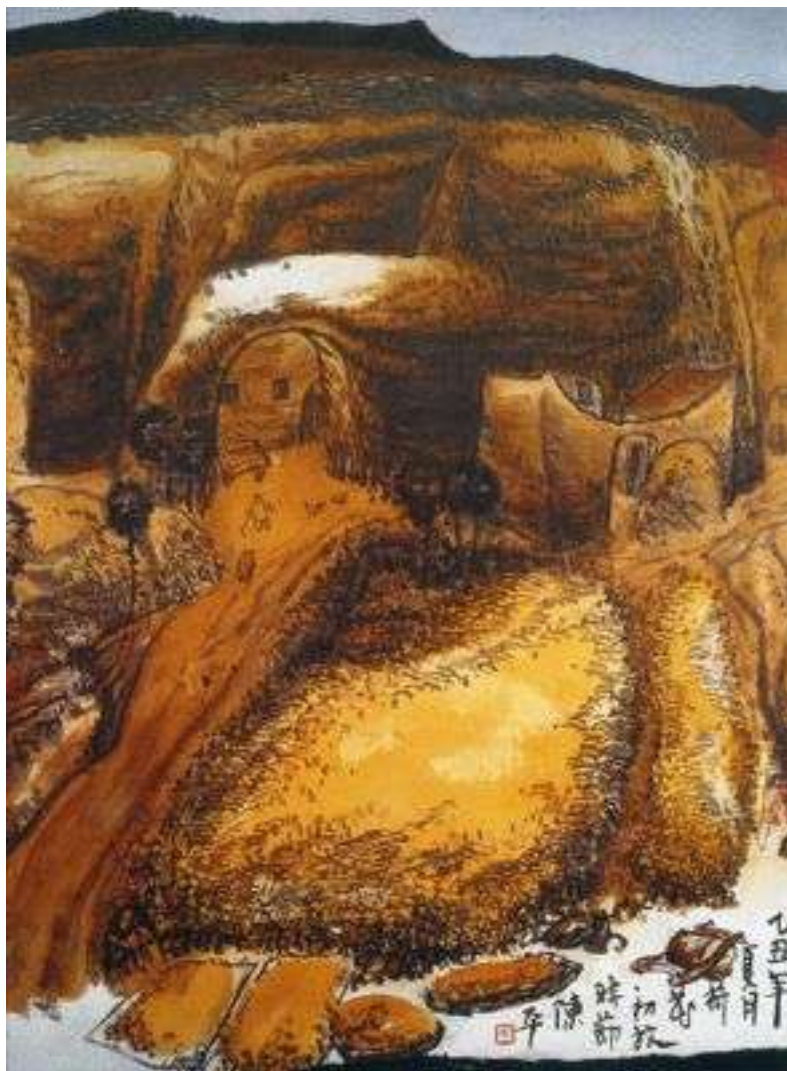


Figure 22 Chen Ping, *Barley Moon Days* [Early Autumn], 1985, Chinese media, 165 x 85 cm.

The human sciences since the mid-nineteenth century have been bedevilled by misrepresentation of persons of geographically discrete cultural origin as distinct races, and assumed that the inherited negative [=environmentally maladjusted] traits passed on through reproduction between them was somehow a sign of a species degeneration that would move in the direction of infertility. Whereas, in



today's terms such reproduction was a broadening and in most cases, even with genetically heritable propensities to physiological disorder, an enrichment of the genetic inheritance between the human types. This inheritance assumed that either side of the genealogies of the parents had in the past been relatively isolated from each other. Furthermore, the human genome revolution has meant that there can be no room for scientific doubt that humanity is one species.

These issues, which should belong to the pre-history of human science, still belong to the archaeology of modern cultures, and particularly when it is assumed some relatively isolated cultures inherit or accept the transfer of styles when they come into contact with cultures that consider themselves to be prior and more developed. This frame applies to modernity in cultural forms including art when it is assumed by most Euramerican commentators, many explicitly, that *advanced* [i.e. Western] *forms* derive from the inventions of *advanced* [i.e. Western] *societies*. The way around this is not to deny or descry cultural difference, nor, *de facto*, the many categories for discriminating this carried by most cultures, but to examine their *in principle* location within a heritage of values – those of the whole species. Recognition of such value in principle, according to Taylor, implies that we have some common way of measuring them.<sup>27</sup>

But the history of transfers between cultures since the mid-nineteenth century seems to be missing from consideration. What is conventionally called Western civilisation now is available as both *techne* and *value* to many cultures not considered Western by themselves, or by the West. This unacknowledged exogenous replication of cultural forms in the absence of its customary endogenous self-privileging has created the interstitial space defined as hybridity against linguistic models by Bhabha.<sup>28</sup> But linguistic conceptions of this space are criticised by others for rendering this reality dependent on the knowledge produced by critical procedures, and for removing the material placement of conflict by evacuating the conditions for a liberatory resistance under conditions of domination. In whichever case, the creative mixing, form-enriching and empowering, of different cultural heritages may be as important a condition of modernity as

<sup>27</sup> 'If all cultures have made a contribution of worth, it cannot be that these are identical, or even embody the same kind of worth. To expect this would be to vastly underestimate the differences. In the end the presumption of worth imagines a universe in which different cultures complement each other with quite different kinds of contribution. This picture not only is compatible with, but demands judgements of, superiority-in-a-certain-respect.' See Charles Taylor, 'The politics of recognition', in Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, (orig.) 1992, 1994, 71. Or, as remarked by S. Sayyid: 'Embracing the logic of the multicultural would mean abandoning certitude and comfort of speaking from the centre. It would mean having to learn new language games.' See his essay, 'Bad faith: anti essentialism, universalism and Islamism', in Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes, 2000, 266.

<sup>28</sup> Bhabha remarks: 'revision of the history of critical theory rests on the notion of cultural difference, not cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is an epistemological object – culture as an object of empirical knowledge – whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as 'knowledgeable' authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification.' See Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, 34.

resistance to any one essentialising tradition or colonial imposition. Whether this is to be seen as *métissage*, a domain of resistance on the part of those who exist with multiple or hybrid identities,<sup>29</sup> a political danger for the threatened losers of the contemporary order or an impure mixing by miscegenation, really depends on the conditions of the viewer as much as the objects viewed or their makers.

To describe objects or persons as having a hybrid identity may be as misleading as colonial ethnic typification.<sup>30</sup> It would be to miss a great deal about the cultural placement of human things and human beings as *modern*, if they were assumed at any technological level to have had single identities, and had not, as Thomas remarks, 'mobilized certain precedents on the one hand, but possessed novelty and distinctiveness on the other'.<sup>31</sup>

In the modern art of China, Thailand and elsewhere in Asia, this last proposition may be relevant. In China the most important kind of cultural ownership can be of images of the family and how they are manipulated; in Thailand it could be the replication of myriad faces of the peasants who never had a portrait before.



Figure 23 Song Dong, *Father and Son I*, 1998, multimedia video, 60 minutes [in *Shi Wo* exhibition]

<sup>29</sup> As indicated by Stuart Hall, 'Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities', in Anthony King (ed.), *Culture, globalization and the world-system*, Macmillan, London, 1991.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Thomas, 'Technologies of conversion: cloth and Christianity in Polynesia', in Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes, 2000, 199.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas, *ibid.*



Figure 24 Vasan Sitthikhet, *Farmers are farmers*, 1998, crayon on paper each 50 x 70 cm (108 pieces).

Structures and institutions are our concern here and not binding narratives of artistic developments, except to facilitate illustration. Our theoretical and empirical goal should be to show that there was another *modern art* in the geographical and cultural field of Asian countries, including China. It will also show that this was an *other* modernity—a modernity in art that was in some variable or categorical way part of a family of Modernities, but which was different in extent or kind from that of Euramerica.

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