Exchange and Display: 
Republics of Taste and the Vision of Elder Statesmen

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This article takes three case studies in which exhibited visual material was—at least by some—deemed unfit for exhibition. Although the circumstances of the complaints differed, all the events produced a sense of unease in the assumptions of cross-cultural initiatives. In one case, the incommensurability across dominant Chinese cultures became evident. In the other instances, a mistrust of the ability of predominantly white cultures to 'view historically' produced a discourse that veered between ethnic particularity and nationally determined socio-political knowledge. I argue that the concept of a republic of taste, which binds together politics, cultural production and a rounded public-for-art, may here be usefully employed outside its eighteenth-century English origins. The term articulates the scale of incommensurability between one public vision and another, and suggests that transnational exhibition cultures need to expect, and acknowledge, the difficulties that arise when clashes occur. The strength of display is that it allows a visual demonstration of the observation that invented nationality and perceptions of ethnicity may arise together and are therefore vulnerable to common misinterpretation. The paper argues that the repeated acknowledgment of this difficulty is one more step towards cross- and intra-cultural understanding and agonistic respect. [1]

Keywords: Hong Kong; republic of taste; public-for-art; censorship

Zunzi’s cartoon banned in Singapore. (Ming Pao Daily News, HK, 2 October 1998)

Artist’s work taken down hours before exhibition—Singapore censors Zunzi’s political cartoons. (Hong Kong Standard, HK, 2 October 1998)

ARX5 Exhibition—HK Zunzi’s artwork taken down off-handedly. (Lianhe Zaobao, Singapore, 5 October 1998)

Satirical Art Out! It’s not funny. (The Straits Times, Singapore, 16 October 1998)

The fifth Artists' Regional Exchange Project, ARX5 (1998–99) was ‘a tripartite residency for fifteen artists’ from Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia, meeting in

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each place for workshops, residencies, exhibition and discussion forums. The initiative was designed to 'stretch the parameters for cultural contact and discourse, challenge accepted exchange processes and enable individuals, groups and audiences to participate in artistic exchange and debate' (ARX History Brief 1998 (briefing document)). In 1998, the collaborating institutions were the Singapore Art Museum, the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Hong Kong Arts Centre. The headlines refer to an incident that occurred in Singapore. The work of a satirical artist from Hong Kong, Zunzi Wong, was removed and destroyed on the opening day of the residency exhibition. He saw it taken down from the walls and placed in bin liners for disposal [2]. The removal, authorised by the management of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), caused fury amongst fellow artists and curatorial representatives of the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Centre (led by its director, artist, and art critic, Oscar Ho) [3].

The chairperson of the ARX5 committee, Margaret Moore, later noted that the 1998 furore was productive, 'tumultuous and triumphant' in that it entailed the actual difficulties of working intra-culturally, which was the whole point of the program (Moore 1998: 31). The defining moment of difficulty, which, I would argue, threatens and validates any process of exchange between equivalent partners, was reached at the point at which the local impossibility of Zunzi's work became apparent to the curators at SAM. Zunzi's computer-generated lampoons of the two elder statesmen of Singaporean politics post-independence, Lee Kuan Yew (Lee Kwong-yiu) and Prime Minister Goh, were considered offensive. He was accused of cultural insensitivity, or, as Moore glosses it, he along with other Hong Kong artists, was 'clearly absorbed by the changing political contexts of [Hong Kong], and its proximity to Singapore' (Moore: 31). Zunzi's own gloss on this decision is that he was 'blamed on the Singaporean side for being insensitive to other people's culture, ... But this has to do with politics not culture' [4]. His reading of that situation
accords with the theoretical position that culture is a malleable conceptual shield for political decision making. His description of his predicament is borne out by the finality of SAM’s decision. Despite Zunzi’s attempts to soften the work (removing the faces from the image, inverting verbal puns in Lee’s and Goh’s names), it was removed. The removal was an extraordinary occurrence in itself, and whether it may be described as a cultural event or a political spectacle is a moot point. Although Moore acknowledges that other artists supported him, her irritation at the way in which the Zunzi incident overshadowed the Singapore opening, as it did subsequent forums in Perth and Hong Kong, is clear. ‘... One could be forgiven for thinking that
little else was produced by way of art in the Singapore event, aside from the absent Zunzi work' [5].

Her irritation is telling. It betrays a suspicion that the removal was neither a performance of anti-artistic brutality (which would constitute a cultural happening) nor a great enough slight on political liberty to warrant the overshadowing of other artists' work. Yet if one concentrates on the defining moment of difficulty as the fulcrum of experienced meaning, the Zunzi incident takes on both mantles: it was a cross-cultural event, and it was also a articulation of the bottom line in the politics of state-funded Singaporean public space. It was a political incident.

Display, Politics and Performance

Zunzi's satirical cartoon performed politics outside the boundaries of his immediate national-political experience. He has done this before on the Web, making cartoons of PRC and Taiwanese leaders as well as of Hong Kong politicians [6]. What becomes obvious (again) through remembering the incident is that the nature of political Chineseness is vastly differently constituted around the region. Across the now porous boundaries between the PRC and the special territory of Hong Kong there is still, it seems, space—at least virtual space—for satire [7]. The political relationships are close enough to culturally permit, if not politically tolerate, familial criticism. Between Hong Kong and Singapore, however, such satirisation of elder statesmen, of—literally in Lee's case—the father of the national order, constituted something outrageous, perhaps even approximating the cross-border satires made in times of conflict. Zunzi argues that this is a political rift, and that it is new to Singapore. Yet his reasoning, which allows the Thai national project to fall under the comfort zone of 'culture', suggests that a known place of significant Chinese citizenship cannot be so lightly absolved (and we should note that Lee has been,
effectively, in power as long as Singapore has been disarticulated from British colonial rule):

If I'm in Thailand, for example, I probably would not draw anything about their Emperor, for that is their culture and I need to respect it. In Singapore, before Lee came to power, there were a lot of cartoons in the newspaper about him. Now, when the Singaporean authority tells you that it is their culture to not comment on a political figure, it would be abnormal to trust them.

The confidence to critique Singapore's nation building strategies, whilst respecting those of Thailand, strongly intimates that Zunzi feels some kind of empathy with the former, but acknowledges his foreignness to the latter. This in turn suggests that the field of Chineseness is at work here. It supplies the confidence but not the facility to actively offend the national space of Singapore. Whereas satire may be, in this case but not in another, cross-culturally possible in the artist's imagination, its physicalisation and performance still articulates an unthinkable assault on actual state-sponsored public space. Zunzi's piece is especially interesting from this perspective, if we consider his medium. He uses the genre of disposable newspaper cartoon and takes it not only to another national space, but also to an art gallery (and, of course, this happens frequently with old cartoons, but not contemporary creations). The complexity of his intervention is one that questions the space as much as it does the political style of Lee and Goh.

As David Clarke writes in his essay on the effect of the museum on its contained objects, 'while some artworks are eager to seek asylum in this no-space, others are unhappy inmates, severed from different—perhaps broader—contexts in which they could have a less purely aesthetic meaning;' (Clarke 1996: 12–13). Zunzi's image is one such unhappy inmate, but its forceful affront refuses to allow the museum to define itself as a 'no-place'. It 'outs' it as a political space with a political bottom line, that is, it is cultural in the precise sense of a definition of the political boundaries of taste and perception.

The other display events that I wish to examine also involve Chinese artists, subjects and spectators, but in different places, spaces and times. As Allen Chun has argued, the common 'Chineseness' of these shows, themes and artists may be irrelevant, given that it is a term that could draw on a conflation of cultural practice and identity. It would then be used to describe national demonstrations of legitimacy, on the one hand, and nostalgia for an imagined place of origin, on the other:

If we, ..., view China as an unambiguous political entity and Chineseness as a feature shared by ethnic Chinese on the basis of discrete traits and traditions, it is really because we are influenced by a homogeneous notion of culture that is essentially modern if not national, in origin. (Chun 1996: 113)

However, the 'ness' of Chineseness already signals a semantic lack of confidence in the coherence of the term. It is a coinage that acknowledges its imperfections and sets out a field in which to make inquiries on its own nature and limits. Aihua Ong
describes the constitutive national and modern parameters of the idea of China, as a ‘bankers’ fantasy’, whilst still acknowledging its power as an ‘alternative modernity’ de-centring Western global hegemonies, through her own juxtaposition of the Chinese media reactions to the Shanghai fire and the Singaporean accounts of Michael Fay’s flogging, as well as her borrowing of Lee Kuan Yew’s cynical phrase for her title: ‘A Momentary Glow of Fraternity’ (Ong 1997: 331–336). Meanwhile, Rey Chow traces the ways in which the term is pinned down by a continuing appeal to tradition and culture—as the ancient origin of identity (Chow 1998). The use of tradition to inscribe glosses of modern fraternity is a common turn in national inventions of cultural borders and inclusions.

Such temporal leaps, moreover, make Chineseness (and publicness for that matter) interesting at all. The terms offer possibilities for meaning, and do not necessarily prioritise culturally determined identity-politics over, say, political context. The ARX5 was a self-consciously cross-cultural generative program. Witlingly or not, it worked between the Chineseness of its regional triangle, the publicness of local political expectations of display, and an almost innocent belief in the inviolability of the artist. Yet the series did not recognise in advance the potential for conflict, or difficulty, in selecting a popular political satirist to go from Hong Kong to Singapore. Zunzi sums it up again: ‘One can’t expect to understand a society or culture by only studying what is hanging on the wall of the museum, but also what is “unable” to hang on the wall’ [8].

Badgering the People

The second and third examples of difficulty that I explore arose through a miscalculation of the museum/gallery audience, as constitutive members of a modern national public. A 1995 show in Brighton, UK, ‘Badgering the People: Mao Badges, a Retrospective’, displayed icons of popular political culture from revolutionary China. The exhibition sought to display how political practice in the 1960s and 1970s in the People’s Republic of China slipp ed in and out of the realm of popular culture, or displaced popular culture altogether. Despite attempts to critique the period, whilst yet acknowledging the objects, problems were evident in the reception of the exhibit. Most recently, in 1999, an exhibition of Mainland Chinese political posters, ‘Picturing Power in the People’s Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution’, in Bloomington, Indiana, USA, found itself under attack for trivialising Taiwanese popular-political memory. With hindsight it may be that the notion of the trivialisation of political memory through kitsch and nostalgia had become too much of a commonplace for the academic curators. These themes are now ‘out there’ at least in academic publications, but how on earth could we expect in 1995, or even in 1999, that popular memory in diaspora would recognise or accept the kitsch of Mao (Benewick & Donald 1996: 28–49)?

All these events started in the exhibition hall or public gallery, but, through the reactions they generated, expanded through the mediated interventions of the intended audience, or their institutional representatives. The difficulties that the exhibitions engendered arose from sharply different historical experiences, from
knowledge gaps not adequately foreseen, and, in sum, from perspectives on politics and art that occupied incommensurate fields of public vision.

Experiencing moments of difficulty is a necessary and productive step in a journey of cross-cultural definition and exchange. It makes such exchange uncomfortable but opens up an agonistic debate on the status of cultural equivalence between participant states and national groups [9]. Reading these debates as agonistic may still be idealistic, however. From the perspectives of those outside powerful fields of public vision, even negotiated conflict is a formation of neo-colonial hegemony. In the following analyses I therefore refer to cultural displays experienced as insults due to the framing of history in material objects. In the light of these reactions, I contend that not only is a transnational term, Chineseness, subject to local, national, and quasi-national negotiation, but also that such negotiation may fail. After all, surely it is the preserve of racism to assume that one necessarily talks successfully to people defined by the self or by others as one’s own. By basing this observation on an analysis of displayed politically nuanced artefacts I simply add a different, materially based observation to the existing debates on Chineseness. I refer to the observations of cultural anthropologists and museologists, whose professional interests in collection and display, coupled with the curator’s requirement of self-reflexivity, give a pragmatic, material shape to the concept of being in public.

Categories developed by art historian Tom Crow (1987) and Craig Clunas (1994, 1996) situate these arguments in a broad conception of public art and display, both as local to its production, and as imported exotica. These writers make use of the notion of a public field of vision which determines what may be seen, how it will be seen, and whether its difficulties will be understood or lost on a public whose vision is locally formed and determined by local interests. Whilst Crow’s work is historically grounded in eighteenth-century England, his analysis is a helpful link in defining the political nature of art on display, as opposed to art for art’s sake. Crow links the English bourgeois political agenda of republicanism, trooped through nostalgia for the Greek polis, with the invention of a ‘republic of taste’ in the elite world of the arts during that period (Crow 1987: 3). He demonstrates that the project of public taste formation is to define the political state through an increased access to culture, which reciprocates by returning to the political a visible accreditation of its status. Art can be seen by those who are, by virtue of their seeing, the politicised public.

Craig Clunas deepens the connection between political visibility and public art, connecting the bourgeois invention of public politics to the national pursuit of Empire. This reminds us of the purpose of collecting imperial art trophies, still housed in galleries across Britain. These material objects once, and in some nostalgic senses still do, fixed the non-local in a permanence meaningful only to the captors, and only accessible to the colonial public-at-home. The colonised were effectively refused access to their own taste cultures through the removal of objects. In the same move, the logic of taste formation denied colonised peoples the political status of a seeing, tasteful public. Time passes, and Clunas also notes that the turn moves round to mock the coloniser with his pathetic fetishisation of the removed objects, which now de-politicise a public that has been outstripped by history:
As the British Empire became more and more remote, souvenirs of the emperor such as the ‘throne of China’ played a greater and greater role in the national imaginary, as nostalgia for one empire slid across into nostalgia for all, and souvenirs of empire became fetishes of consolation. (Clunas 1996: 15)

James Clifford has also argued that museum collections, accumulations and displays constitute an outside and inside of culture. Constructed for consumption by the domestic and international visitor in these different modes of reception: ‘the stuff of contemporary cultural politics, creative and virulent, [is] enacted in the overlapping historical contexts of colonization/decolorization, nation formation/minority assertions, capitalist market expansion/consumer strategies’ (Clifford 1997: 218). He might have added that class differences also constitute an outside and inside in museum practice, as do the politics of race and nation in a multi-ethnic society such as Singapore.

With these factors in mind, the republic of taste is a concept that can usefully travel into the present discussion. When, as in the Zunzi event, one is surprised at the ferocity of censorship, and self-censorship, one needs to take account of competing political ‘republics’, inside and outside the national imaginary, and the degree to which they saturate public space, across cultures. It was likely that the perspective of a well-known lampoonist would fall outside the public vision operating in a national Singaporean institution, and that the result would play out within the economics of taste constructed and maintained by the Singaporean state. The political divisions that have been perceived between English and Chinese educated Chinese Singaporeans only exacerbate the state’s interests in downplaying transnational Chinese criticism of domestic politics (Chua 1998: 194–195).

Pragmatically, Joanna Lee, the Assistant Director of SAM at the time, argued a few months later at the Perth forum that she had to act strategically, in the local public interest. She intimated that if she and her team had allowed the defining difficulty to overwhelm their political judgement they would have faced a closed gallery, rather than a single empty wall. In denying space to political lampoon she could save space for the very concept of public access. At least that was the tenor of her retrospective justification. However, given that 14 out of 15 participating artists signed a letter in protest at the action, it would appear that Lee’s public vision was narrower than the expectations of the artistic community would warrant. Moore’s reference to artists ‘clearly absorbed by .. political contexts and the proximity of Singapore’ forgets to add that by activating international tastes within a local and highly proscribed public taste-space, the proximity was as likely to highlight incommensurable difference as a romantic exchange. Once that incommensurability had been made public by the act of removal, it was unthinkable that media coverage would focus on anything else. In local terms, the shortfall, between SAM’s estimate of the political boundaries of public taste and the alternative tastes supported but not crossed by the other artists, warranted the attention it received. It signalled a political real time, recognition of difficulty, and a claim for Singaporean art practice to push state-defined public vision into the realm of the post-imperial fetish. SAM’s
problem in the ARX exhibit was how to frame a politically sharp lampoon within the context of a publicly funded gallery for a general Singaporean audience. What didactics could Lee possibly have used to soften the political blow, without destroying the image altogether? Would she have needed to foreground the exclusion of Zunzi Wong as a non-Singaporean, and what assumptions would that have made about the work, attitudes and possibilities of domestic artists?

In some perverse way the decision to remove and the (apparent) decision to destroy the work framed it perfectly. Newspapers are trashable by definition, and Zunzi describes himself as ‘60% newspaper person and 40% artist’. The difference being, of course, that the ‘newspaper’ was trashed before the public had ‘read’ it. Thus the political cartoon satirises the whole notion of lasting public art. It demands daily critical attention to the detail of politics, refuting the elitism of a bounded republic of taste as a denial of political process. That is the core of its challenge to the institutional fetish of permanent display. Framing in this case became a dynamic and active sequence of negotiation, aggression and enunciation of home truths.

The Romantic Tale

Oscar Ho defended Zunzi Wong’s right to offend, but he did not lose the perspective on cross-cultural exchange, simultaneous celebration and denial in Moore’s article. At the Perth ARX forum, in June 1999. Ho spoke of cross-cultural initiatives as complicit with a ‘romantic tale’ [10]. In ‘his romance, artistic exchange flowers on the prettier side of global cultural development. It is the stuff of new spaces, new ideas, and new locations imbued with the serendipity of a fairy tale. However, as Ho and Lee demonstrated with their renewed disagreement over the Zunzi event, exchange is not really like that at all. In cultural negotiation and impasse it is difficulty that arises, not as the first moment, but possibly as the defining moment of the process. Should exchange be, then, not so much an easy celebration of diversity as a robust acknowledgement of conflict through cultural forms? That said, how does the framing of material culture allow for a failure in negotiation? Or, as the Filipino artist and critic Marion Pastor Roces suggests in the following quotation, is one party required to present a version of themselves, not just an imperial throne now, in exchange for the process itself?

And so we allow ourselves the illusion that what we have had was the privilege of a fair exchange between equals. To you, Spain, our archipelago, for your gift of civilisation and Christ’s love. And now to you, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Hong Kong, and in fact to you, Australia, our domestic helpers and mail order brides, our fragile female-looking men who work like buffaloes, for the foreign exchange that will allow us to survive the next volcanic eruption, but also allow us to go on thinking ourselves modern. (Roces 1993: 17)

Roces was a contributing artist to an ARX project in 1992/93. This quote sits at the heart of longer comments in a special ARX edition of the journal Eyeline, in which Roces takes pains to clarify the complexities of contemporary art practice in the
Philippines as modern and anti-modern; Filipino, Western and Asian. For Roces, the Filipino artist and art critic survives the modern by conspiring with it in its ever-demanding incarnations of Western aesthetic desire. The economic neo-colonial experience of the Philippines is not that of Singapore, Hong Kong, or Asian Americans or British Chinese. In fact, Roces cites Hong Kong and Singapore as agents of modernity in the exploitation of Filipino physical and sexual labour. Yet what she points to, in her analogy between artistic and other forms of labour, is the pervasive experience of artistic production as a process of historical and cultural negotiation [11]: ‘it is possible that the Filipino intellectual is in a sorrier state than our whores in Japan, whose delusions are likely less magniloquent’ (Roces 1993: 22). This Filipino perspective reminds us again that there may be more at stake than cultural sensitivity or immediate political caution. The process of negotiating culture entails the difficulty of ‘being’ in and between cultures at all. Arguably, these negotiations are especially complex for artists working in multi-ethnic post-colonial sites, which are simultaneously coded as Chinese.

Yet, as Jen Ang contends, being Chinese, speaking Chinese and coding oneself as Chinese are all different identity decisions (Ang 1993: 34–35) [12]. Yao Souchou and Donald Nonini have also argued that Chineseness is a performance (using coffee drinking and the consumption of food as their respective sites), which may be contingent on political economics, sexual politics and the practices of taste (Nonini 1998; Yao 2000). To combine the arguments, one might summarise by saying that eating and drinking Chinese might not, but often does, mean speaking it as well, where ‘speaking’ is a metaphor of local ‘Chinese’ performance, not a description of linguistic competence in Mandarin.

Chua Beng-huat, however, uses the hybridity of food consumption as prima facie evidence of multi-ethnicity in daily life in Singapore, as opposed to state-led ‘racialized boundaries’ in national discourse. His deconstruction of multicultural policy in Singapore pinpoints the means by which eating and speaking may be kept separate from acting in the political sphere. Yao’s, Nonini’s and Chua’s arguments add up again to the observation that performance, in these cases in the realm of the everyday, is historically negotiated. What is peculiarly Chinese in Malaysia may be radically multi-ethnic in the state of Singapore:

Multiracialism and its attendant multiculturalism as national policy enable the state to place itself in a neutral position above the discursively constituted ‘races’ and their respective cultures and derives for itself a high degree of relative autonomy in its exercise of power, while simultaneously insulating itself from claims of entitlement of the people as both racialized collectives and individual citizens. (Chua 1998: 193)

Thus Roces’ address to Hong Kong and Singapore, made partly on behalf of sexualised Filipina labour—of women both like and unlike a Chinese prostitute named Diana in Yao’s case study—be; the question: when exactly is cultural performance specifically Chinese? When may one describe a person’s work as ‘Chinese’, and what assumptions of comparability are made as one does so? China as a floating signifier of a skein of cultural practices, effects and subjective
formations is certainly a concept with currency, but it is a currency of no fixed value, exchange rate or places of use. Culture, whether it be traditional or contemporary in its manifestations, energetic or stagnant in its daily use, passionate or stale in its address to itself and its others, is at least contextual and at most strategic in its politics. And, reading Chen Kuan-hsing to trace more exactly the tenor of Roces' concerns, how does one disconnect cultural practice from the continuing returns to a colonised imaginary?

Unless the cultural imaginary we have been living with can be de-colonised, the vicious circle of colonisation, decolonisation, and decolonisation will continue to move on. (Chen 1998: 2)

**Behind the Scenes at the Museum**

The Zunzi event and the responses to the Brighton and Indiana exhibition offer local recognitions of the politics of display as a 'vicious circle'. The reactions that these objects drew from sectors of the public reflected unease at the rough daily politics of cartoons, posters and political buttons being given space in the gallery. This unease was exacerbated by the partial failure of these exhibitions to address the tension between the plurality of global Chinese tastes and the intersecting and competing tastes of Britain and the USA where the displays were mounted.

In the British case, whilst efforts were made to speak to British Chinese, insufficient care was taken to address the erstwhile colonial audience, still susceptible to the histories that saturate Victorian museums in the UK (Gurian 1991). In the mid-1990s there was a growing proportion of Chinese-themed exhibitions in a Georgian (eighteenth-century) museum and art gallery in Brighton, UK. The exhibitions included permanent displays from ethnographic collections; short-term, outsourced curations, and touring exhibitions of avant-garde painting. The questions that occurred to us as curators revolved around the problems of exhibition. How may one identify appropriate contexts for concerns, histories and understandings that come from discrete cultures? Does the British Chinese audience stand differently in the space from an Anglo or South Asian Brightonian? In short, could we assume a shared public vision in the modern citizenry? If not, how does one frame alternative visions for a hybrid citizenry? For we recognised that the vision of the eighteenth-century academicians, the architects of the republic of taste, had not travelled well into post-imperial Britain.

Their 'public-for-art' knew what it liked, its shared vision assumed that what was art might be easily recognised as such. Their sustaining community shared its vision with the artist in a mutual performance of the social self. What happens, however, when de-colonisation, migration and the renunciation of class leadership have challenged 'sustaining' myths of origin? The first answer in our case seemed to be 'very little'. Our exhibition of recent Chinese material culture could find space only in the ethnographic gallery. It was placed in an autonomous space in the corner of a clean white room, which housed fetishes, masks and ceremonial objects from Nigeria and Tanzania. The only reference to 'things Chinese' was a permanent
collection of temple statues bought in Yunnan and Taiwan in the late twentieth century.

The fact of place cannot be underestimated in considering the ways in which material culture is received in a gallery, and the degree to which it re-institutes the 'vicious circle'. The problem of the British Victorian gallery hosting permanent ethnographic collections had, just previously to 'Badgering the People', been addressed in the same gallery by the British artist Sonia Boyce's *Peepholes* [13]. She covered the cases of fetishes and ceremonial objects with paper. Peepholes were cut into the paper at various height levels. Now the museum visitors were given a different 'vision'. Previously the cases, although carefully arranged, carried objects into groups according to type or origin. Now, each eyehole forced a singular appreciation of the objects. The single eye of the viewer at the peephole had to work hard to take in the individual aesthetic qualities of single works of 'art'. Boyce forced the viewer to work in a phenomenological frame that emphasised the object as singular and discrete from the fact of imperial collection. She took the focus away from the ethnography of the room and the more or less self-conscious Britishness of the viewer (only one object could be viewed at any one time, and then only by one eye belonging to one person). For discrete viewing moments the traces of an imperial past and the contemporary post-imperial descendant came eye to eye.

I mention Boyce's exhibit as I believe, in hindsight, that our own curation would have been wise to take more account of the perversity of the space in which we were working. Our exhibition was of Mao badges and other Mao kitsch. The badges themselves were pinned onto clothes from the period of use, and organised according to the time of production. The suits on which they hung were stretched across metal grids in standing wall cases. In order to 'explain' the badges, and also to de-centre the attraction of the objects themselves, we made a short film [14]. The film used clips and commentary to historicise the periods represented in the collection. Repetitions, contradictions and interruptions in the images of Mao were supposed to ironise, even undermine, his cult status as defined in the badges. The sound track moved from the national anthem to karaoke versions of *The East is Red* to give a sense of the fickleness of cultural-political meaning invested in aural and material culture. The information panels were available in Chinese as well as English. We were happy with our resposible but playful commentary.

At least, we were happy until we read a couple of comments in the visitors' book: 'Is the film a genuine piece of propaganda? And where did you get it?' asked one. 'Why does the exhibition not criticise Mao and the Cultural Revolution?' queried another. These anonymous comments may have been made by writers who did not speak or read Chinese. If so, their lack of access to the inflections in the Chinese versions of the wall commentary (written by a Taiwanese radical activist) [15] meant that they missed out on some implied critiques of the periods under review. For, whatever filmic sophistication and Godardian techniques of political critique failed to achieve, linguistic multiplicity should have made possible. No one identified themselves as British Chinese visitors when recording dissatisfaction or confusion with the exhibit, even though some members of the British Chinese population might have had closer connections (through relatives, recent migration,
diaporic consciousness), and more familiarity (through Chinese and English language summaries published out of Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s) with the events and the brutalities associated with Mao’s rule.

Nevertheless, the comments were made and they reflected the commonly held view of China in the UK, which is generally negative. What we had failed to achieve in the wit of the film, the aural loop of post-Mao karaoke, and even the badge-festooned Mao jackets, was to remember that no one can laugh easily at something they don’t understand. Instead, these visitors criticised what they perceived as a lack of political and cultural sensibility on the part of the curators. The framing of the exhibit was designed to historicise politically loaded material culture in relation to the kitsch of Mao that was rife on the Mainland in the 1990s. We did not, however, take sufficient account of the politics of taste operating in the UK in 1995. Whereas contemporary Mainland culture makes serious jokes about revolutionary cultural formations, the British public has no grounds on which to do so. Our adoption of the ironic tone of Mainland Chinese trends in popular culture backfired in the context of the traumatic versions of revolutionary China most familiar to the concerned British public. Again with hindsight, we needed not to use the distance of irony, developed by Mainland Chinese to deal with the terrible closeness of personal memory. Rather, the British audience, at home in the Victorian museum, needed to be brought much closer to the objects, if they were to have a chance of appreciating the power of Maoist iconography in material culture.

**Picturing Power**

The crises of understanding engendered by Zunzi’s cartoons and the Mao film were connected by their use of irony in a public space highly inflected by past and present regimes of taste and corresponding political agendas. The responding ‘negotiations’ were different but each demonstrated a resistance to ‘foreign’ irony in the critique of political leadership. Zunzi’s lampoon: were too much for the taste of SAM, ‘Badgering the People’ was too much for the post-imperial British conception of the Chinese as silent victims of communist terror, and happy (rather than satiric) conspirators in economic reform and Westernisation.

These instances of difficulty were paralleled by a situation that occurred in 1999 at the SoFa gallery in Bloomington, Indiana. An exhibition, ‘Picturing Power’, was staged of posters of the Cultural Revolution (or at least of the 10 years, 1966–76, commonly bunched together as of the ‘Cultural Revolution’ [16]. The remit of the exhibit was to give public space to the visual culture of the time, again coupled with video footage and background music. The intention was to allow the visitors to feel and realise the power of visual discourse in the politics of revolution, or perhaps, more simply, to acknowledge the politics of culture. Symposia, public talks and memory sessions were organised to accommodate the perspectives of those who found themselves perpetrators, victims, or both, during the period. Speakers remembered the energy, the adrenalin and the great fear engendered by a huge social upheaval [17]. Rae Yang read extracts from her book *Spider Eaters*, where she
describes her complicity in schoolyard killings, and her later disillusionment as a sent-down youth in the countryside (Yarg 1997).

Many of these events took place in the exhibition hall itself, lending the tension of the unspeakable to the clean lines of the posters themselves. There was no intended irony in the organisation of the material, or in the comments of symposia participants. The didactics printed alongside the posters gave brief translations of slogans, some of them violent, and offered an immediate historical context for each image. The audio-visual accompaniment used footage of criticism meetings and rallies, operas and ballets. There was no doubt that the events recorded and re-played here—orchestrated or not—were passionate and deeply violent. The soundtrack ranged from chanting slogans to the rock group ‘Tang Dynasty’ playing The Internationale. Criticisms from visitors focused mainly on the lack of acknowledgment of the posters’ original designers, or on disagreements over the correct translation of the poster texts and slogans [18].

Despite these precautions and statements of objective, public reaction did also include severe criticism. It came from a Taiwanese-American professor at Indiana University. He sent a letter to the local paper, complaining that the exhibit ignored the personal history(ies) of repression that the posters represented. His response, reproduced in full below, turns the didactic around from the Brighton experience. It is a Chinese voice that reprimands a predominantly non-Chinese public for political insensitivity that, given the shifting back and forth from the Mainland to Taiwan in the letter, is really understood as cultural, primarily historical, insensitivity.

‘What color was the Cultural Revolution? What did it look like?’

These are the questions that the exhibition ‘Picturing Power: Posters of China’s Cultural Revolution’ attempted to address. I was deeply troubled by the way the answers were presented in the SoFa Gallery where propaganda posters of glorified political leaders and workers were framed under shining glass while marching songs and videos were played in the background. Slick publications containing colorful upbeat photographs were placed next to Mao’s beautified bronze head sculpture as if the whole gallery had become the shrine of the great communist ideals. There were no blood, no pain, no persecution from that time, which are veiled by merely a word ‘contradiction’ in the show. It is very problematic to neutralize a highly political art form or medium with a focus on aesthetic connoisseurship. ‘Contemporary spectators who did not live through the Cultural Revolution may approach the posters with detached interest and enjoyment,’ according to the brochure. Detached Enjoyment? I found no such quality in this exhibition. Being born and raised in Taiwan, I have no illusion about what propaganda means in our life. Although ruled by the Nationalist Party, the Taiwanese government used to adopt a very similar way of mind control to its mortal enemy, the Communist Party in China. That usually means one party, one principal, and one voice while every slogan is talking about freedom. Only by looking back I realize how a
national machine is capable of mobilizing its people by imposing a standardized belief system. Can one have such amnesia about the function of propaganda in the society and treat it as innocent as the backdrop of memory? I know I can’t afford it. Especially when the battleships and warplanes in the poster ‘We must certainly liberate Taiwan’ are still aiming at my family today.

Arthur Liou [19]

One of the readers of this paper asked, what was new here? The colonial museum, whether a Georgian building housing a Victorian imperial imaginary (as in Brighton), or a reasonably well-funded Mid-West American university gallery (as in Bloomington), is always a ‘problem size’. In the museum, or indeed the art gallery—which, as Mieke Bal has argued, should not be separated from the discourse of the museum, and be thus absorbed into colonial effect—there are known dangers (Bal 1996: 204) [20]. Through the environment of display, or even the expectations engendered by the fact of display, exhibits may re-stage an ‘imperial encounter’, thus displaying the re-colonisation attacked by Chen Kuanhsing (Karp 1991: 374). Or, as John Kuo Wei Tchen has demonstrated, there needs to be graduation in the presentation of local histories that transect with colonial memory and misapprehension. In other words, before irony there must be information:

Part of the basic dialogue to take place in the Remembering New York Chinatown exhibition is a discussion exploring why most Americans do not know that in 1882 the anti-Chinese forces in the United States were able to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act. (Tchen 1992: 293)

Tchen is concerned both to validate the perspectives of people who have been marginalised by the ‘colonial museum’, but also to counteract the ignorance of other citizens; ‘At this point more critical insights begin to challenge simple nostalgia... feelings of mutual respect begin to surface’ (Tchen 1992: 293). Tchen acknowledges the problems, suggests solutions and describes positive outcomes, but he claims neither an end to the continuing problems of the colonial museum, nor a panacea for making history painless, and without difficulty.

So, whilst I greatly appreciate the reader’s comment, I would argue that, just because it is such a common and known problem, we need to rediscover the difficulties of the colonial museum in local and diasporic manifestations. Arthur Liou’s letter, the comments book in Brighton, and the Zunzi event, are articulations of the difficulty of bringing China into the colonial museum and art gallery, but also of assuming that Chineseness will translate from one diasporic site to another. Professor Liou’s concerns are, in particular, not at all straightforward. He critiques not only the very practice of display in reaction to a traumatic period of production, but also reminds the curators that there is a plurality of Chinese memory embodied in their audience. The memories of the Mainland scholars, which were given voice through the symposia associated with the exhibition, were not enough to contextualise these objects. Liou speaks as one who ‘was there’, and emotionally still has memories ‘there’, advising those who were not, and can never be, there, why they
may not make popular history public within the republic of taste operating in contemporary America. The exhibit had sought to say to an American public, China is also human. In the midst of the Cultural Revolution, people were making and enjoying popular culture. Some of it was propagandistic, bombastic and violent, but it was consumed widely, and is still an active fragment in the aesthetic and political memories of Mainland Chinese. Professor Liou's response is, however, that his experience in Taiwan, and bad memories of propaganda during the Kuomintang's one-party rule (Nationalist Party) is commensurate to this and directly associated to it. The histories of Taiwan and the Mainland are different histories but they lie in the same field of Chinese experience.

Embedded in both the exhibition and this letter are assumptions of the locality of Chinese interests and memories. The exhibition prioritised the popular memory of Mainland Chinese in the framing of the posters and other paraphernalia. Liou, as a Taiwanese of that generation, rejects outright the validity of the visual discourse of propaganda as a set of social documents. Notably, he ends on a protective note towards Taiwan, referring to a particularly threatening image of a soldier and bayonet thrusting over the Taiwan Strait, 'We Must Certainly Liberate Taiwan'. It is disturbing that Liou believes that such an image could be misunderstood as anything but threatening, especially in the USA in 1999, where anti-Chinese (and anti-Asian) rhetoric is rampant.

Bloomington was the location of the racially motivated shooting of a Korean postgraduate student in August 1999. Liou's riposte would surely be that this is different. It is not the same. He is right. The propaganda attached to the cult of Mao, or the cult of Chiang Kai-shek, or the respect demanded on behalf of elder statesmen in Singapore, are not the same as, say, the advertising blandishments of corporate America, or the implicit white lens of the bald-headed eagle. Does that mean that the possibility of comparison is unthinkable? Or rather, where is the possibility for comparison sealed off? Liou himself makes a comparison between Taiwan, a small proto-fascist country in the 1960s, and the People's Republic of China, an authoritarian communist megastate in the same decade. If the colonial museum and art gallery can ever graduate into political neutrality it can do so by being furiously difficult, by forcing negotiation with the object, by reminding people that the local effects of culture in one place can produce comments on the location of display, by 'resonance and wonder' (quoted from title, Greenblatt 1991).

Liou's intervention might of course be understood as a contemporary political statement in the face of contemporary Mainland aggression against Taiwan's independence. As an educator and as a Chinese-American, Liou takes responsibility through the letter to educate an 'unknowing' American public into the 'real' experience of propaganda. In so doing, he must refuse another 'real' experience of propaganda in so far as he denies the possibility of observing both the seductions and the explicit violence of aesthetic politics, as they are formed in poster art. His is a powerful letter. It expresses a clearly confident 'public vision', working within an explicitly bounded political republic of taste. In constructing the denial of political culture (as opposed to cultural politics: on the grounds of 'real' memory, Liou returns memory, and the images that contain it, to an extrinsic position outside
culture. This begs the question of what is allowed in the gallery at all, and whether there is a danger that defending the gallery against political intrusion plays back into the culture-as-traditionalism that Chow has identified.

Solutions in Impasse

The poster exhibition travelled to Ohio State University the month after its opening in Indiana. It was re-curated in a slightly smaller space, but still within the Fine Arts department of a Mid-West university. Here, however, there was more passing traffic, as many students and staff had to pass through the gallery area on their way to work and class each day. In the main hanging room the posters were crowded and populated the walls more densely than in Bloomington. On the external windows and doors to the building, an artist painted bright and simple images that recalled the hand-paintings of the period. Two chalkboards covered with inspirational stories, homilies and political tracts were created and hung in the hallway (and covered with hairspray so they could transcend the dailiness of the ‘real thing’) [21]. The overall effect of the new exhibition was that it was public in a different way. Whereas in Bloomington it was possible to see the power of the poster art as an officially sanctioned version of publicness, politics and community, here there was the sense of the everyday. In Ohio the posters competed with the chalkboards, the business of passing students, the bold window paintings and the revolutionary performances on the video screen. The posters were ‘framed’ as just one part of a dynamic relationship to public discussion, the performance of revolution in the space of the everyday, and the energy of youth. Seen together, these material reminders of politics brought the notion of a public vision on the boundaries of a republic of taste into strong focus. In this exhibition public vision was clearly an active phenomenon. Whereas the posters themselves gave a visual rendition of the political and popular mores of a particular moment, the inventions and emulations on chalkboards and windows pointed to the dialectic of politics in progress [22].

The print runs of the posters were huge and they kept the Shanghai Publishing House busy for several decades. Their effect was made powerful by their relationship to the tangible products of public vision at moments of high energy and crisis: the chalkboards, the window paintings, the rush of high octane change in the political atmosphere. I would have been interested to hear Professor Liou, and the anonymous visitors in Brighton, respond to this second exhibition. It is no more responsible than the first, as I believe the Indian show worked very hard in the didactics to give historical perspective to the display, but it laid out the political business (and busy-ness) more visibly. The Ohio show set out to challenge a republic of taste in the USA that refuses human weakness and passion in the narrative of revolution. Americans were invited to this performance of memory, especially to lend their bodies to its sense of quotidian intensity. This was a show in which those who were 'there' performed 'being there' despite themselves. The critique here would need to take on board the show’s unapologetic, a x d non-recriminatory, statement of ‘inside and outside’, of difference between one (remembered) (Chinese) public vision from the perspective of another.
Zunzi’s cartoons of the Elder Statesmen in Singapore could conceivably be described as inside and outside the republic of taste in Hong Kong. Published on the Web and chosen to represent Hong Kong in ARX5, he has his public. He now has a greater one, by virtue of the cross-cultural performance of a bounded republic of taste that his cartoon provoked. The event, despite its key points of destruction and recrimination, defines a moment of difficulty in the history of cross-cultural display. Although the circumstances of the complaints differed, all the events produced a sense of unease in the assumptions of cross-cultural initiatives. In one case, the incommensurability across nations and territories with nationally articulated Chinese cultures became evident. In the other instances, a mistrust of the ability, or will, of predominantly white cultures to ‘view historically’ produced a discourse that veered between ethnic particularity and nationally determined socio-political knowledge.

Notes

[1] Many thanks to the readers at Communal/Plural, also to Andrea Witcomb, Jeff Wasserstrom, Chen Xiaomei, David Clarke, Zun Zong, Tom Langenbach and Anthony Shelton for their help and advice, and for access to relevant materials in Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Art Gallery at Bloomington Indiana and the Royal Pavilion, Brighton. This paper was given in (almost) this form at a seminar in Tsinghua University, Beijing, June 2000. Thanks to Cao Li for that opportunity.

[2] Zunzi noted in an e-mail diary, via the artist Ray Langenbach, that ‘Less than an hour before the opening, the artist arrived at the Museum and found that 90% of his work had already been dismantled from the wall of the venue. The works were seen totally removed and thrown into a plastic bag, normally [used] for rubbish’ (18 October 1998). He has since communicated to this author the mode of creation: ‘I used my laptop computer to draw a caricature of Lee Kung-yiu and Goh Chok-tong [see the illustrations to this article: all courtesy of the artist]. I blew it up to a mural size, printed it section by section on A4 paper, and reconstructed it on the wall of SAM’ (Zunzi Wong 13 July 2000).

[3] David Clarke describe Oscar Ho as a great example of a new generation of artist-curators in Hong Kong, ‘an artist [who] grew up in this city and therefore takes it as [the] primary frame of reference’ (Clarke 1996: 36). They (Clarke and Ho) have themselves generated exhibitions that pull in private objects from members of the public and, literally, give them space to be noticed as ‘of Hong Kong.


[5] Ibid.

[6] Zunzi's reputation in Hong Kong is based largely on his satirical cartoons of political figures from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong: see, for example, his 1997 work 'Councillor Mud' on http://www.freeway.org.hk/zunzi/mud/(accessed 10 April 2000)

[7] See also Kwai-cheung Lo for a nuanced account of the negotiations of freedoms and attendant silencing strategies that emerge through subtitling in Hong Kong TV since 1997 (Lo 1998).


[11] Thanks to readers' comments for these insights.

[12] There are several possible references he e but this offers a starting point.

[13] 'Born in 1962 in London, Sonia Boyce first achieved critical acclaim as a young figurative artist at the height of the then burgeonin Black (British) Art Movement in the mid-1980s.'
She has exhibited and taught widely using workshops as part of her creative process. In addition to numerous residencies her work can be seen in many national collections throughout the UK.

[14] Chad Wollen, Stephanie Helmerly (Don id), Richard Inskeep, 'Badgering the People' (7°), 1996.
[15] I have not named her, according to a pr or arrangement.
[17] Speakers included: Chen Xiaomei (Ohio), Mobo Gao (Tasmania), Pan Zhongdang (Hong Kong), Carma Hinton (Longbow), Gong Xiaoxia (Radio Free Asia), Liana Zhou (Kinsey).
[18] The identification of poster artists was undertaken in the catalogue to the Guggenheim Exhibition (Shen & Andrews 1998: 228-237).
[20] Hal argues that the dispersal of Rothko’s art amongst many galleries and/or museums was strategic: ‘Semiotically speaking, this omni presence of Rothko sustains a particular strategy of cultural imperialism, namely repetitio.’ (Bal 1996: 204).
[22] Kui-yi Shen has shown how the artists involved in poster production could adapt their work from year to year according to favoured genres and political nuance. ‘Publishing posters before the Cultural Revolution’, paper presented at the Symposium on Visual Art as Cultural Memory in Modern China, Ohio State University, 23 October 1999.

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