GROUNDING THE GLOBAL

PATHWAYS TO ELUCIDATING TENSIONS IN CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART

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Sasha Su-Ling Welland, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

Jenny Lin, *Above Sea: Contemporary Art, Urban Culture, and the Fashioning of Global Shanghai* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2019).

Entangled in a network of regional and transnational powers, the global rise of Chinese contemporary art since the 1990s has invited scholars to rethink ways of narrating the shifting power dynamics surrounding this field. In this article, I designate the phrase *Chinese contemporary art* as referring to the deconstructionist strategies used by generations of Chinese artists who were born or grew up in Mainland China during either the Mao era (1949–76) or the subsequent economic reform period launched in 1978. My emphasis on the multiple sociopolitical time-spaces experienced by generations of Chinese contemporary artists during their young adulthood is a marked departure from the widespread practice of using 1989 as the chief temporal marker for the emergence of this type of art.[1] Discussions of Chinese

1 For instance, see *Art and China after 1989: Theatre of the World*, ed. Alexandra Munroe, Philip Tinari, and Hou Hanru (New York: Guggenheim Museum, October 6, 2017–February 24, 2019), exhibition catalog; Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 126; and Lu Peng, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1990–1999* (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2000).

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contemporary art and globalization—a neoliberal socioeconomic mechanism—have tended to adopt a bird's-eye view of the transnational flow of capital, artworks, and artists across continents, with limited concern for the particular sociogeographic contexts in which such artworks were created.[2] Their tendency to associate the global with *deterritorialization*—an analytical perspective commonly deployed by social and anthropological theorists that deemphasizes the role of geography in the global age[3]—has thus often neglected the question of how global forces affect local territories in ways that are often full of tensions, contradictions, or ironies.

Reinstating the role of geographical or territorial contexts into the study of globalization and Chinese contemporary art helps scholars critically identify how *tension* may act as an analytical angle for the study of power dynamics within this field. By examining Chinese contemporary art in specific territorial contexts of a globalizing nation during the 1990s to 2000s, one can zoom into the structure of the intersecting global and local spaces where Chinese contemporary artists fostered an ambivalent relationship with the Western-led international art scene. Thus far, scholars attentive to post–Cold War intercultural dynamics, including anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, have conceived of an antagonistic relationship between the homogenizing global force and the heterogenizing local force that have rigorously intersected with each another since the collapse of the Communist bloc in 1991.[4] Similarly, political scientist Samuel Huntington asserted that conflict would continue to exist, or even escalate in distinct ways, in the post–Cold War world because of differences across cultures and cultural identities in global politics. Among those differences, Western universalist preten-

2 For instance, see Aihwa Ong, "'What Marco Polo Forgot': Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global," *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 4 (2012): 483; Luís U. Afonso, "*Ut oeconomia Pictura*: How the Global Art Market Is Changing the Dominant Canons," *International Journal of Arts* 2, no. 6 (2012): 53–59; and Curtis L. Carter, "Globalization and Chinese Contemporary Art: West to East, East to West," in *Unsettled Boundaries: Philosophy, Art, Ethics East-West*, ed. Curtis Carter (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2017), 122–27.

3 For instance, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 37–39, 49–53; Jan Aart Scholte, "Beyond the Buzzword: Towards a Critical Theory of Globalization," in *Globalization: Theory and Practice*, ed. Eleonore Kofman and Gillians Young (London: Pinter, 1996), 45; and John Gerard Ruggie, "Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations," *International Organization*, no. 47 (1993): 139–74.

4 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 32.

sions would particularly foster tensions with China because of the latter's increasing cultural assertiveness, economic and military power, and global influence.[5] Considering how global capitalism has likewise drastically transformed the sociocultural and economic landscape of Chinese art scenes, both domestically and internationally, since the 1990s, art historians may likewise question how forms of antagonism have operated as critical, yet modestly explored, analytical tools in art historical investigations.

Indeed, Chinese art practitioners, especially of the 1990s, have uttered their equivocal relationships with global contemporary art as they gained opportunities to showcase their art on the international scene. On the one hand, these contemporary artists were eager to enhance the international visibility of their works. On the other hand, they were deeply concerned over Chinese contemporary art's subordinate position to the West and the racialized politics forced upon them by Western art institutions in the 1990s. Chinese art critics and curators, such as the late Guangzhou-based art historian Huang Zhuan (1958–2016), urged Chinese art professionals to critically reevaluate the essential position of Chinese contemporary art within the larger post–Cold War international art world, instead of simply seeing it as a supplementary component of the leading postcolonial discourses.[6] Internationally based Gao Minglu and Hou Hanru have interpreted how Chinese artists living and working abroad infused aspects of traditional Chinese cultural elements—such as concepts from the philosophical text *Yijing*—or personal transcultural experiences into their works, thereby creating a strategic zone for intervening in the order of a global art world dominated by the West.[7] More recently, art historian Peggy Wang has described Chinese artists' frustrations upon returning to China from invited international art exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale (1993), São Paulo Biennial (1994), and documenta (1997), where they experienced alienation as a result of their marginal position

5 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 20–29, 82–83.

6 See Huang Zhuan, "Preface," in *The First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Huang Zhuan et al. (Guangzhou: Guangdong lingnan meishu chubanshe, 1996), 7–8.

7 See Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space: A Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; New York: Asia Society Galleries; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 186–88.

within the global art world.[8] These narratives have revealed the undeniable truth that sociopolitical tensions were common between Chinese contemporary artists and much of the global arts arena. Since these narratives have mostly focused on tensions generated in deterritorialized spaces, the field needs critical examinations of this problem on territorial grounds.

Turning our attention to the ideological environment of what some scholars have called post-socialist China, we may interpret the operation of tension in another light. By *post-socialist* or *post-socialism*, I mean the uncertain historical situation that historian Arif Dirlik identified for China in 1989, as the Chinese state downplayed socialism as a "metatheory of politics" and launched economic reforms beginning in 1978.[9] As China was transitioning from a Mao-era planned economy to post-Mao marketization in the 1980s–90s, opponents of socialism wishfully anticipated, in Dirlik's words, "the erasure of the last residues of an earlier revolutionary socialism" within China.[10] Ironically, Chinese Communist Party leaders have continued to make recourse to Chinese socialist or Maoist revolutionary discourses over the past two decades, despite the nation's rising position as a shareholder in the global capitalist economy.[11] By exploring how these idiosyncratic discursive environments have reshaped Chinese artists' relationships with the nation's past and present, one may wonder how specific Chinese socialist legacies created yet another layer of tension for Chinese contemporary artists.

TWO APPROACHES TO TENSION

In this context, Sasha Su-Ling Welland's *Experimental Beijing* (2018) and Jenny Lin's *Above Sea* (2019) intervene in the field by examining the role of tension in Chinese contemporary art based in two globalizing cities: Beijing and Shanghai. Specifically, these two books focus on

8 Peggy Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 8, 28, 31–35.

9 Arif Dirlik, "Postsocialism? Reflections on 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 21, no. 1 (1989): 34.

10 Arif Dirlik, "Post-Socialism Revisited: Reflections on the 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,' Its Past, Present, and Future," in *Culture and Social Transformations: Theoretical Framework and Chinese Context*, ed. Tianyu Cao, Xueping Zhong, Kebin Liao, and Ban Wang (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 263.

11 Ibid., 268.

the 1990s–2000s, when China was restructuring its socioeconomy to prepare for its role as a stakeholder in global capitalism. This process was facilitated by the nation's historic entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 and its warrant to host the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics and the Shanghai World Expo 2010.[12] Seeking to engage with China's discourse on globalization—"to enter the world" (*ru shi*)—both authors focus on these two megacities' socioeconomic contexts as they were directed to become China's "global cities" in the 21st century.[13] Welland focuses on the migration of art agents and workers from different parts of China with the intention of crafting a space for themselves in Beijing's burgeoning contemporary art scene.[14] Conversely, Lin investigates how Shanghai's mandate attracted multinational investment funds not only for commercial work but also for the development of its art and cultural sectors.[15] By analyzing Chinese contemporary art in the socioeconomic contexts of two specific cities in the process of global-local reconstructions, these two books ground their studies in the everyday experience of artists instead of in unspecific deterritorial zones.

Experimental Beijing and *Above Sea* contribute to the scholarship of Chinese contemporary art and globalization in two moderate ways. First, through the use of their respective methodologies—Welland's ethnographical field research and Lin's urban cultural research—they shed light on the role of tension in the intersectional global-local spaces of Chinese contemporary art. They illuminate the kinds of multilayered and often conflicting sociopolitical relations that link artists, art professionals, and the state at the regional, national, or transnational levels. Second, by further delving into the way in which the cities' sociocultural histories have been represented in local, national, or transnational art productions, the two authors expand the interpretation of Chinese contemporary art beyond the commonly used post–1989 time frame. Instead, they illustrate the role of sociocultural legacies and memories from the Mao era and the earlier Republican era (1911–49) by critically reconfiguring the parameters of, and the premise for, making and inter-

12 Welland, *Experimental Beijing*, 9, 11 (cited hereafter as *EB*); Lin, *Above Sea*, 2 (cited hereafter as *AS*).

13 *EB*, 11; *AS*, 18.

14 Ibid., 11–12, 26.

15 *AS*, 7–9, 117.

preting this contested field. Despite the books' novel methodological approaches, they only gently attempt to transform their important studies into sophisticated conceptual frameworks. Therefore, both works are afflicted with a sense of missed opportunities to critically theorize how tension could serve as an analytical tool in studying contemporary art, especially art from non-Western regions.

SASHA WELLAND'S FIELD OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

Experimental Beijing demonstrates Welland's aspiration to integrate a rarely used, yet intellectually constructive, mode of ethnographic thinking into art history and gender studies. This integrative model is pivotal for addressing some of her anthropological questions: How did Chinese artists adapt to the changing ideological environment when the Chinese government was radically reconstructing its socialist art system to cope with globalization?[16] How were those "envisioned time-spaces" socially unequal and gendered?[17] How did Chinese contemporary artists, especially women, position themselves "in relation to the nation and the world, the past and the future"?[18] Despite the boldness of this intervention, the book struggles to successfully combine its two methodologically conflicting approaches—ethnography and art history—into one.

Welland began her ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing during her doctoral studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in the early 2000s.[19] As an ethnographer, she does not simply conceive of Chinese contemporary art as a subject comprising individual art objects or landmark events, an approach commonly used in Chinese contemporary art's historiography. Neither does she perceive it as a politically repressive cultural arena being rescued by exhibitions in Europe and America, a perspective often adopted in the mass media.[20] Rather, Welland investigates Chinese contemporary art as a "zone of cultural encounter" where art and non-art agents from different parts of Mainland China and the globe came to define the parameters of the art on the basis of their subject positions relative to other individuals or artistic canons.[21]

16 *EB*, 10.
17 Ibid., 11.
18 Ibid., 10.
19 Ibid., xv.
20 Ibid., 7–9.
21 Ibid., 9–10.

Her peculiar interest in art history as a social arena was informed—to her advantage—by conceptual material from across numerous disciplines. These include art critic Arthur Danto's assertion of seeing art as an *artworld*,[22] sociologist Howard Becker's exploration of layers of collectivity behind the making of art,[23] sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of a "field of cultural production,"[24] and anthropologist Alfred Gell's consideration of art objects as social agents in and of themselves.[25] As a feminist, Welland also earnestly interprets how gender difference has constructed social relations in the Chinese contemporary art world. Her attentiveness to the gender divide as a research subject was informed by the conceptual framework of *nannü youbie* (male/female differentiation), first theorized by "anarchist-feminist writer" He-Yin Zhen at the beginning of the 20th century.[26]

Welland organizes her book into three principal sections. In her words, the first two parts "provide context" for addressing the anthropological questions that she asked earlier.[27] Part I, "Art Worldings," investigates the social-ethnographic implications of transforming a variety of institutional spaces—classrooms, villages, palaces, exhibition halls—that were formerly intended for Chinese socialist revolutions into locales of the global capitalist culture industry.[28] In chapter 1, Welland combines historical narratives of those spaces with a retelling of her personal encounters with different art-related agents on site. Many of these practitioners came to fast-changing Beijing with the goal of reenacting the city's avant-garde artistic tradition, which had emerged in the city beginning in 1979.[29] In chapter 2, Welland focuses on Beijing's citywide urban renewal under the marketization of the 1990s–2000s, in which some of the state-owned industrial spaces on the city's outskirts were reconstructed into private art exhibition halls affiliated with nearby, newly built commercial

22 Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964): 580.
23 Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 35.
24 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
25 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17–19.
26 *EB*, 24–25, 264, 270.
27 Ibid., 26.
28 Ibid., 45.
29 Ibid., 24, 26.

apartment complexes as a strategy to reshape the sociogeographic functions of the neighborhoods.[30] In this context, Welland describes various episodes in which Chinese contemporary artists were commissioned by state-supported real estate developers to create site-specific artworks at those gentrified cultural spaces.[31] By investigating the nested social relations involved, Welland shows how this new form of work partnership completely reversed what had formerly been the oppositional relationship between Chinese contemporary artists and government officials during the 1980s–90s.[32] To some readers, Welland's observations illuminate the instability of Chinese contemporary artists' social role in Beijing's globalization. To others, whose art historical approaches center on canonization, the chapter contains too few visual analyses and critical interpretations of the artworks themselves. Instead, the writing is emblematic of an ethnographer's intervention into contemporary art history, one opposed to the artwork-focused approach of conventional art historians.

Part II, "Zones of Encounter," interprets the social encounters between Chinese artists and international art curators in the early 2000s. Through her role as a Chinese-English interpreter between artists and curators, Welland acquired firsthand experience of the uneven power dynamics in the contemporary art world, where international curators arbitrarily selected artists based on their national identities for global art initiatives.[33] Chapter 3 discusses how Chinese artists were consistently posed with the dilemma of "saying no" to curators, even though a national agenda had apparently been imposed on them.[34] In chapter 4, Welland focuses on an alternative global-local zone by following a group of Chinese female artists from peripheral Chinese localities. These women sought to reclaim authorship of artworks they had created for an itinerant curatorial project entitled The Long March: A Walking Visual Display (2002). In Welland's observation, since this project was curated by two leading Beijing-based Chinese male curators in association with the internationally renowned feminist American artist Judy Chicago, it positioned the geographically and

30 Ibid., 91–93.
31 Ibid., 88–97.
32 Ibid., 97.
33 Ibid., 113, 122.
34 Ibid., 125, 127–29.

socially marginalized participating Chinese female artists within a field of male-dominant and Eurocentric forces.[35] These two chapters uncover the kinds of social contradictions or dilemmas experienced by Chinese artists within the various global-local spaces of contemporary art. Similarly, this portion of the book narrates the social and gender differences in the global-local field through an ethnographer's everyday observations or participations. Critical readers will want to see more structural analysis of the social dynamics within those encounters in a larger anthropological or art historical framework.

As she declares in the introduction, Welland seeks to deconstruct—particularly in Part III, "Feminist Sight Lines"—the binary framework of masculine-hooligan (*liumang*) and feminine (*nüxing*) art that is often used in critiquing Chinese contemporary art.[36] In chapter 5, Welland features a lesser-known artist-teacher named Li Tianpian, whom she met during her Beijing fieldwork from 2001 to 2002. Welland focuses on Li's oil painting *Red Souvenir* (1999), which portrays several women—two of whom are Mao-era beauties, women liberated by Chinese communism, as promoted in the classic Chinese socialist revolutionary film *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961).[37] By recounting Li's reception and memories of the film, Welland lets the artist speak for herself, especially on the question of how past experience has come to shape the artist's way of producing contemporary art. This chapter could have effectively reinforced a critical thesis posed in the introduction: that Chinese contemporary art created by women exemplifies a sense of "historiographical consciousness" that was cultivated because of their peripheral positions within the global feminist art world.[38] However, since the author offers an insufficiently systematic analysis of the mechanisms that cultivated this form of consciousness in the artist's time, readers will not immediately recognize this powerful argument. Rather, what registers is the slightly erratic structure and prose of this chapter.

The two remaining chapters continue to demonstrate Welland's exploration of historiographical consciousness in the art of Chinese women. In chapter 6, Welland cites transcriptions of her conversations

35 Ibid., 135, 175.
36 Ibid., 16.
37 Ibid., 181.
38 Ibid., 27.

with a Beijing-based female performance artist called He Chengyao.[39] By doing so, Welland offers a corpus of textual materials that answers the following questions: Why did He materialize the trauma of her family histories through her performance art in the early 2000s? How has this artistic strategy helped her interrogate the positionality of female artists and their bodies in the male-centered art scene?[40] Welland's prioritization, however, of the ethnographic textual record over analyses of the historical foundation of the artist's works may appear to conventional art historians as a general "oral history" rather than, in Welland's ethnographic words, as providing "everyday witness to these encounters as a way of theorizing about how they reflect and influence sociocultural phenomena on a larger scale."[41] In chapter 7, Welland investigates the anthropological linkages between the art and life of Beijing-trained sculptor Lei Yan. Specifically, she explores how the ephemerality of Lei's sculptural objects created during the 2000s–2010s memorializes her multiple conflicting identities: a woman soldier and military artist of the 1970s, a military nurse during the 1980s' Sino-Vietnamese War, and a deconstructionist female artist working under the shadow of world-famous male contemporary artist Ai Weiwei in the 2000s.[42] By unfolding these identities, Welland illustrates how Lei's works repudiate the standard binary interpretation of gender, earning her the epithet of a "transfeminist artist" (*kuanüxingzhuyi yishujia*) from male Chinese art critics.[43] Yet, the chapter offers only a lyrical discussion of how senses of ephemerality in Lei's sculptures bring back a consciousness of lost lives and distorted histories.[44] It has not clearly explained how Lei's works exemplify—as Welland articulates at the very end of the chapter—a "feminist epistemology of thinking relationally about social hierarchy, aesthetic form, and ideology."[45]

A highly cross-disciplinary work like *Experimental Beijing* would require a methodological and open mind for full appreciation of its many critical interventions. Certainly, this book has cogently called

39 Ibid., 216–24.
40 Ibid., 233.
41 Ibid., 21.
42 Ibid., 240–41.
43 Ibid., 249–50.
44 Ibid., 250–62.
45 Ibid., 263.

attention to the multidirectional and multilayered power relations that confront nonmainstream and powerless Chinese artists.[46] In terms of gender, it advocates a less stereotypical and more nuanced approach to Chinese contemporary women's art, apart from the generic categorization of "feminist art" (*nüxing yishu*) in Chinese contexts. Nevertheless, art history and ethnography have very different disciplinary focuses. As Welland herself notes in the introduction, ethnography is "a form of research based in participant observation."[47] This may explain why the author has included lots of transcripts and descriptions of in-person observations in the book. Art history, however, is commonly known for its critical interpretation of artworks or their surrounding contexts, informed by visual or textual evidence. Because these disciplines hold different perspectives on what constitutes evidence, the methodological tensions present in the book may pose a challenge, obscuring to readers its critical intervention. Moreover, since the author has devoted a minimal effort—perhaps it was not her intention—to offering a structural account of how the feminist artistic strategies in Part III exemplify what she calls "the relational epistemology of ethnography,"[48] it remains uncertain whether this approach can serve as critical theory for research on contemporary art as a whole.

JENNY LIN'S URBAN CULTURALIST PASTICHE

Lin's *Above Sea* also contributes—albeit modestly—to the study of tension in Chinese contemporary art's global-local spaces. Trained as an art historian with expertise in urban critical theories, Lin investigates the social collisions between Shanghai's art and urban design when the city embarked on the journey to become the nation's most cosmopolitan metropolis in the 1990s–2000s.[49] Her exploration of visual art ranges from the socially critical avant-garde paintings by Republican-era artist Pang Xunqin, in the 1930s, to deconstructionist artworks by renowned global Chinese contemporary artists from the 2000s, such as Gu Wenda, Xu Bing, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Ai Weiwei. As for design, Lin examines a wide range of state-supported projects in Shanghai's urban visual culture—shopping malls, fashion, film, exhibitions, and spectacles—that were created to glamorize Shanghai's public image. By juxta-

46 Ibid., 7, 22, 233.
47 Ibid., 21.
48 Ibid., 21.
49 *AS*, 2, 18.

posing socially critical artworks and propagandistic applications of art and urban design, Lin's book illuminates the many roles of visual culture in both concealing and exposing sociopolitical dilemmas embedded in Shanghai's global cosmopolitan image.

Lin divides *Above Sea* into four chapters. Each chapter examines visual art in relation to specific urban consumption in a shared spatial or social context in the 1990s and 2000s. Chapter 1, "From the Ruins of Heaven on Earth," investigates Republican-era art and Mao-era film production involved with Shanghai's *Xintiandi* (New Heaven on Earth), an upscale commercial-cum-residential area redeveloped from a neighborhood in the former French Concession of Shanghai by a Hong Kong–based property company in the early 1990s. Lin's exploration of this architectural site as a focal point of this chapter is indebted to Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. In this work, Benjamin explores how various types of urban consumption in 19th-century Paris's most luxurious commercial spaces, the Arcades, helped produce the experience of modernity.[50] Yet Lin is less focused on Benjamin's interest in the social meanings of architectural material and artifice, examining instead how *Xintiandi*'s 1990s–2000s commercially cosmopolitan image operated as a pastiche through its "pseudo-return" to the romantic notions of hybrid culture—"East meets West" and "old meets new"—of Republican-era Shanghai during the 1920s–30s.[51] Although the chapter does not include any examples of contemporary art, it lays down a broad, eclectic cultural foundation for the research into contradictions between state-supported cultural projects and socially critical art in the remaining chapters of the book.

The next three chapters turn to a contestable zone of artistic production and visual display. Chapter 2, "Shanghai's Art in Fashion," zooms into a transnational luxury fashion brand called Shanghai Tang, which ran a retail store and a café at *Xintiandi* during the 1990s–2000s. Lin analyzes how the brand's corporate operations—through clothing design, tailoring services, and advertising—exhibit a sense of hybridity, since the brand selectively integrated elements of Old Shanghai's extravagant style of the 1920s–30s with the fashion modes of the 1966–76 Cultural Revolution.[52] Chapter 3, "Biennialization-as-Banalization," examines the

50 See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1999).

51 *AS*, 26–27.

52 Ibid., 68–71.

sociopolitical dilemma concerning the 2000 government-funded Shanghai Biennale, where the curators' goal of highlighting Shanghai's globalist spirit was eventually superseded by a banal selection of officially approved artworks, mostly from abroad.[53] Chapter 4, "Installing a World City," interprets how large-scale installation spectacles conceived by leading contemporary Chinese artists for Shanghai failed to fulfill the official brief to mythologize the city as a metropolis of cultural diversity and social harmony. Instead, these artworks exposed various socioeconomic contradictions as direct results of Shanghai's globalization.[54]

Above Sea adds modestly to the study of tensions in Chinese contemporary art. It reveals how the Shanghai of the 1990s–2000s bred two modes of creating and displaying contemporary art: one that glorified the mythically glamorous façade of cosmopolitan Shanghai, while the other subverted the sugar-coated realities forged by government authorities. The book shows that these two opposed approaches to art operated in tandem at various levels in the era of Shanghai's globalization. For instance, individually, artist Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), who created a porcelain installation for a 2008 corporate art exhibition sponsored by the multinational fashion brand Christian Dior, previously created installations criticizing China's environmental degradation and the fragility of the nation's globalized networks in its post-Mao modernization.[55] Institutionally, while the Shanghai government proudly sponsored the Shanghai Biennale in 2000, for the first time, independent curators and artists simultaneously organized a subversive exhibition, titled Fuck Off.[56] The book also illustrates the confrontation and confluence between apparently contradictory ideologies among Chinese artists at a national level. For example, the Chinese Communist government once commissioned from internationally renowned contemporary artist Cai Guo-Qiang a firework spectacle honoring the closing of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation's 2001 conference, held in Shanghai. Later, however, Cai turned to socially engaged art aimed at debunking official myths surrounding the propagandistic nature of the state-sponsored Shanghai World Expo, held in 2010.[57] *Above Sea* exam-

53 Ibid., 96–102.
54 Ibid., 117–41.
55 Ibid., 83–90.
56 Ibid., 106–7.
57 Ibid., 132–41.

ines the interplay between contemporary art's capacity to mystify and demystify social realities, illuminating the sociopolitical tensions between these two modes of cultural production within the globalizing urban spaces of Shanghai.

Simultaneously, however, the author's recourse to a constellation approach as a critical framework risks turning the complex histories of art and cultural production into a simple "visual emporium of cosmopolitanism,"[58] or a pastiche of writing itself. One problem associated with the use of this critical framework is that it organizes art historical and urban cultural materials into a sort of schema instead of letting the multilayered contexts surrounding each production and circulation of art speak for itself. For instance, the book eschews any discussion of the stakes for individual Chinese contemporary artists as they collaborated with the Chinese government to instrumentalize contemporary art in globalizing the surfaces of Shanghai. Moreover, the book also offers insufficient explanation of the power dynamics within each official or unofficial scenario where contemporary art was deployed. As was shown by a recent publication, the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was by no means a mere state-funded landmark event intended simply to fulfill the officially approved "hopes of harnessing the local spirit of Shanghai and 1920s–30s *haipai* (Shanghai style)."[59] The event was also intended "to establish itself as an arbiter of contemporary art," intervening in the uneven power dynamics of the global contemporary art world from its marginal position.[60] Furthermore, the book offers scant explanation of the rationales behind artist selections, except for the salient fact that many of them have gone to China's well-established or even canonized global contemporary artists. Lin's art and urban culturalist approach of choosing mostly renowned artists in her research forms a sharp contrast to Welland's ethnographic interest in giving voice to powerless artists who occupy marginal positions in the art world.

58 Chinese Studies scholars use this phrase to describe the eclectic aesthetic reflected in *The Young Companion Pictorial*, a Chinese Republican-period culture magazine that inspired Lin in devising her urban culturalist approach to research. See Paul G. Pickowicz, Kuiyi Shen, and Yingjin Zhang, eds., *Liangyou: Kaleidoscopic Modernity and the Shanghai Global Metropolis, 1926–1945* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1–3, 11.

59 *AS*, 96.

60 John Tain, "Introduction: Uncooperative Contemporaries," in *Uncooperative Contemporaries: Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in 2000* (London: Afterall, 2020), 11.

Disregarding their very different methodological approaches, these two books illustrate an inconvenient truth: Chinese contemporary art history necessitates the employment of non-art historical methodologies—such as ethnography and urban cultural studies—in order to locate and make visible the intangible tensions that linger in global-local spaces. Both methods offer their own contributions, albeit imperfectly, as they ground the discussion of globalization within specific territorial contexts. However, both approaches would require some reworking before they could be utilized as critical apparatuses with broad applications in global contemporary art.