

Framing Considerations in the PRC: Creating Value in the Contemporary Chinese Art Market¹

Annamma Joy & John F. Sherry Jr

This study of art galleries in the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) uses a political economy approach to examine the contours of the art world and the art market. A Chinese art market based on the Western and Japanese models was created in the early twentieth century, but was abolished in 1949 when the PRC, under Chairman Mao, adopted a socialist framing model on a national scale. Breaking out of this totalizing frame was difficult despite the adoption of market socialism in 1979. The decade between 1979 and 1989 witnessed rapid surges of creativity, which were brought to a full stop by the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. In 1992, however, the national policy of rapid growth gave the cultural industry a sharp nudge. Since the mid-1990s, two trends in the art world have emerged: a collaborative framework for developing contemporary PRC art (including commercial art) for both the internal and external markets; domestic art as a commentary on changing social and cultural values.

Keywords: Contemporary Chinese Art; China Art Market; Political And Cultural Pop Art In China; Art Galleries In China; Art Dealers In China

Introduction

The act of “bursting the frame,” or continuously critiquing and pushing the boundaries in the creation of art, lies at the heart of all avant-garde art (Hughes 1997). Constructing a frame in real or metaphorical terms creates a space for the artwork and, hence, is central to our understanding of art. Contemporary art questions existing assumptions and practices of gallery owners and art dealers, particularly in North America and

Annamma Joy is a Professor in the Department of Marketing at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. John F. Sherry Jr is Professor in the Department of Marketing at the Kellogg School of Business, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. Correspondence to: Annamma Joy, Department of Marketing, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada H3G 1M8. Email: jjoy@jmsb.concordia.ca

Western Europe, who position themselves as framers of this new art (Croizier 1999). In the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC), the act of continually breaking with an aesthetic past over the last 100 years acquires a special meaning because of the country's political history. Most recently, Bryson notes that, in an attempt to be recognized in international circuits, "current aesthetic practices and strategies of Chinese artists are both impressive and without obvious counterpart in the Western context" (Bryson 1999, 53).

In this paper, we suggest that bursting the frame in the PRC constitutes a process of value creation from the viewpoint of artists and art intermediaries (art galleries, curators, etc.) today. There are several elements to be taken into consideration. While the government has had a major say in developing art movements in the country and in running art institutions (Hung 1999), art and politics have become less intertwined (Hanru 1997). Mao's death initially led to mounting campaigns against the art establishment (*Yun Dong* is the term used to refer to such artistic campaigns of the mid-1980s), which created dissent among artists. Today, artists are more concerned with the rapid transformation of traditional neighborhoods, lifestyles, and social values than they are with large-scale political, ideological, and artistic campaigns. More importantly, they do not align themselves against the establishment, but tend to work individually or in small groups. Hung (1999) refers to this as a domestic turn in the art world that has implications for art valuation processes. These artists are allowed to exhibit their work in international galleries abroad and even attend international exhibitions, but they are not driven by the desire to sell their works or garner instant celebrity status overseas as their immediate predecessors in the 1980s were.

In the contemporary art market, it is important to understand how such a (re)framing process occurs at multiple levels. The fact that art is shown in international circuits is an important determinant of value, but to build a reputation the works must have a recognizable currency determined by cultural specialists rather than politicians. The socialist government, which for almost 50 years was the prime mover in the art world in China, has begun to cautiously concede some of its power to market-oriented institutions and forces (Sullivan 1996). Given the emphasis on reducing bureaucracy (Forney and Yatsko 1998), the art world (hitherto predominantly managed by the government) has become more market-oriented. Currently, artists in China feel they have more freedoms than before: they may create what moves them, exhibit their works in private studios or commercial galleries, and participate in national and international exhibits. They even have a voice in the governance of institutions, such as state galleries and museums (Sullivan 1999).

In what follows, we focus primarily on the process of value creation of contemporary visual art from the PRC. While the current market for contemporary Chinese art is limited in terms of consumers, the dollar volume of the market is large and growing (Berkman 1997). In this paper, we provide an ethnographic account of valuation and distribution of PRC art to highlight the hybridization process in developing an art infrastructure—a neglected concept in the international marketing literature (Iyer 1997). While the implicit art-market model used in its development is Western, Deng Xiaoping's call to maintain a "Chinese essence" is *still* of vital concern (Van Dijk

1992a), at least to some groups of artists. Art is a knowledge-based cultural product, and as such will continue to be important to the PRC government. In addition, there is a steady growth in the number of artists who are working on their own or within limited circles who have little to do with the government or the international market. The outcome of engaging in market socialism and in global forces is a hybrid model of distribution and pricing that reflects the specific, albeit rapid, changes that have taken place in the last 20 years in the economy, culture, and polity of the PRC (see also Bhabba 1994; and Hannerz 1987 for an extended discussion of hybridization). Changing political relations, history, cultural institutions, and technology all contribute to the uniqueness of the PRC's contemporary art market (Lie 1997).

Hung (1999) suggests that the defining characteristic of contemporary experimental art is the artist's own self-positioning and re-positioning in a changing society—not style or politics. In his opinion, the opening up of the country to foreign investment and technology led to the Communist party's rapid loss of control over cultural affairs. We take a slightly different view and argue that this disjuncture between politics and culture was gradual, and perhaps became clear only in the mid-1990s. Even in 1996 the young artists we interviewed (who had no connection with or interest in the Cultural Revolution) were never sure about what types of experimentation would be acceptable. However, with the gradual relaxation of censorship, some artists found a new freedom—as critics of society and culture—that has taken them in new directions. Unlike entrepreneurial cultural dissidents who have nothing to say in a political climate of tolerance (Barme 1993), these new artists have plenty to say about the rapid transformations taking place in China today.

We also argue that the creation of the current infrastructure can only be understood against a backdrop of recent history. In order to discuss the development and contours of the current art market, four distinct periods, or transitions, must be identified: the first extends from the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 to 1949; the second, from 1949 to 1976; the third, from Mao's death in late 1976 until the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989; and the final period, from 1989 to the present. The last phase can be further divided into two segments: from 1989 to 1994, a lull period during which multinational organizations seriously evaluated whether they would stay in China; and from 1995 to the present, when accelerated attempts to become a market-oriented society were made. While we emphasize art development processes from 1976 to the present, we also believe that only a historical background can highlight some of the current concerns with the pricing and positioning of contemporary art.

A Political Economy Approach to Art Distribution Networks

In the retailing and distribution literature, the political economy approach is used to study the internal economy and polity of distribution networks: the nature of exchange processes, viable incentive systems, and power and control structures within distribution systems (Arndt 1983). External economy and polity, in turn, guide internal economy and polity. In the PRC, external polity is crucial to the functioning of the internal economy and polity, although rapid transformations are in progress (Lieberthal 1995).

In order to understand the impact of external polity on art distribution networks, we distinguish between the “art world” and the “art market.” The art world refers to the combination of producers (artists), various intermediaries (commercial and non-commercial), and art consumers (Morgan 1998). The art market is a sub-category of this larger classification and includes all units with an explicitly commercial orientation, such as auction houses, commercial galleries, and private art dealers (Sullivan 1995). The key distinction between the two is as follows: the art world represents a universe of discourse of which commerce is only one part, albeit an important one (Plattner 1998). Curators, critics, museums, art journals, commercial and parallel galleries, art dealers, artists, and auction houses comprise a society’s art infrastructure and thus a part of its internal economy and polity.

Since 1979, artists in China have been barraged with foreign ideas and images that have fostered a new and more hybrid sense of identity and community. When Deng Xiaoping opened up the country to outside influences, styles and theories that had long become history in the West became contemporary in the PRC’s context (Hung 1999, 15). Further, the original historical significance of these specific styles in the West was lost in the race to appropriate these new models when an open policy was created. The term “hybridization” is appropriate in this context, and is used in this paper specifically to convey the transformative engagement of the artist and the art world through outside (primarily Western) influences. It also underscores the present- and future-oriented process of invention through complex cultural borrowing from abroad. As Escobar (1995) notes, hybrid cultures are not about fixed identities: Shaped by the movement of people, ideas, and images, they shift constantly between the past, the present, and the future (Appadurai 1996).

The speed of communication across local and global lines has made it possible for PRC artists to access information and images from abroad, bypass traditional modes of obtaining name recognition (through the auspices of the government), and establish themselves through interactions with curators and other artists from abroad. Such independence gives them time and flexibility to create substantive works that in turn foster more autonomy (Hung 1999). In their attempts to break away from the state, some avant-garde artists (e.g., creators of unofficial art such as political pop and cynical realist art)² have colluded with the state to promote a market orientation for the arts, thereby ensuring freedom of expression (Hanru 1997).³ The state, on the other hand, views a market orientation as a mechanism for preserving power, particularly at a time when the country has opened its doors to the outside world. While some contemporary artists already enjoy financial independence, others maintain a safety net by working in government-assigned units where they create official or “safe” art.⁴ There is yet a third group of artists who dissociate themselves completely from the state and who are creating a new art language and art discourse in China, known as “un-unofficial art” (Hanru 1997).⁵ Thus, at present, there are at least three identifiable art forms: (a) official art, which uses traditional ink and wash formats, as well as oils and canvas; (b) unofficial art, which uses ink and wash formats and a whole host of other media; and (c) un-unofficial art, which is primarily evident in installations, video art, and art happenings or art events (Hanru 1997). Electronic media have also assisted in such independent thinking

and acting. However, although new ideas and images have flooded the PRC, electronic media, particularly the Internet, have as yet to become a new vehicle for the management of global ideas and images.

Although Hanru (1997) provides a tiered view of art, he glosses over the fact that experimentalism in art need not be tied to vanguardism as has happened in the West. Hung (1999, 23) argues that, given the particular history of the PRC and its openness to the West after Mao's death, experimentalism can be seen at all three levels—even in official art. While a particular form of experimentalism—iconoclasm—has been associated with the artists who questioned established art traditions (unofficial art), it is not restricted to them. Further, un-unofficial art represents a major break from large-scale ideological artistic campaigns or movements. The most important characteristic of the un-unofficial artists is their desire to dissociate themselves from movements of any kind, particularly those tied to international fame and commercial success. The term “domestic turn” (Hung 1999) suggests that these newer artists are inspired by and concerned with the recent changes—the rapid disappearance of the traditional city and neighborhoods and the changes in human relationships, lifestyle, taste, and values (ibid., 24). While they are allowed to exhibit in galleries overseas and participate in exhibitions abroad, the value of their work is not solely determined by the Western art market. In addition to the above segments there are also artists who work in the Academy and avoid political engagement, as well as artists who are inspired by a popular urban visual culture that continuously absorbs images from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the West (Hung 1999).

The Framing Process: Current Distribution Networks in the PRC

The act of framing, which often evokes images of the material frame around an art object, is about establishing boundaries, creating order, including and excluding (Goffman 1974; Joy 1998, 1999). It is also about imposing a certain direction on a viewer's gaze, circumscribing, regulating, filtering, rejecting, and ultimately exercising power (Duro 1996; Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne 1996). Whether we take into consideration what to frame, the type of material frame, the gallery that exhibits an artwork, or the museum that endorses it, framing emphasizes the autonomy of the artwork while underscoring the importance of the one who frames. It is an ideological signifier of value, edge and border, boundary and limit. Framing is thus a double-edged act of creation: it legitimates an artwork, and also imposes constraints (Nairne 1996). More importantly, framing creates value through what it valorizes and what it chooses to exclude.

In the PRC today, artists have been experimenting with the framing process. In the two decades since China was opened up in 1979, artists have received, appropriated, and reworked the plethora of image-related influences that have affected their hitherto secluded lives. Such reverberations have had a far-reaching impact on their work that is only now beginning to be understood.

Like artists, gallery owners/art dealers, as well as art curators and critics, are important intermediaries in the framing process. Galleries bear some similarities to museums

in that, although they do not possess the power of a museum, they are value-adding vehicles in the creation of art history (Belk 1995; Mieke 1992). However, unlike museums that present objects as having permanency and order, galleries play a more transitory role in art history, for they constitute the first link in the creation of value. Furthermore, since galleries cater directly to an art-acquiring public, they do not have the arms-length relationship normally associated with a museum (Crane 1987). The taint of commerce removes the art from the realm of the sacred (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

In the PRC, more than in any other country in the world, questions about framing and the power of the one who frames have been raised continuously since the turn of the century (Sullivan 1996). In 1911, when the Qing dynasty fell, artists looked first to Japan and then to the West for aesthetic renewal. The *literati* art tradition⁶ (albeit influenced by the West through exposure to Christian paintings particularly during the Ming dynasty) could no longer meet the challenges of the new order (Croizier 1988). Consequently, the frame that many Chinese artists chose during this period was a Western one, although until 1949 the Japanese influence was palpable as well. From 1949 to 1976, under the socialist government established by Mao, this frame was dismantled and replaced by a national and more totalizing frame. This frame was not broken until Mao's death in 1976, after which the country embarked on an economic modernization program (set in motion by Deng Xiaoping).

Even when Western economic models were freely embraced, political control over cultural activities continued. In retrospect, such attempts at framing what is culturally appropriate were at best inadequate and temporary. Once the country was open to outside influences, there was little that could be done to filter the onslaught of images, ideas, and people. For a time after the Tiananmen crackdown (between 1989 and 1992), there was a lull in the public display of avant-garde art. However, in 1992, when Deng Xiaoping gave fresh impetus to economic reforms on his now famous southern tour, rapid changes in the art world and art market ensued. Since the mid-1990s, the framing process has been either an independent, collaborative, or collusive one between artists and the state and between China and the West. Today, the question of positioning art from China leads to a simultaneous consideration of the valuing of such works. While many artists are concerned with providing a social and cultural critique and making a connection with the internal populace, an explicit commercial orientation still holds in the art market as it does in the film industry (Zhu 2002).

Methodology

This study of art galleries and exhibits forms part of a larger study (conducted between 1996 and 1998) on the structure and development of the art market in China. For the purposes of this paper, we use two types of data: historical data, to raise important questions relevant to the art market today; and ethnographic data, primarily collected in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. Our ethnographic approach includes participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual elicitation methods (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). Since current structures can only be understood in the context of the

historical past, we relied quite heavily on the art history of China since the turn of the twentieth century. Art writing and art criticism on the whole are crucial for interpreting visual works, while art documentation is essential for unraveling emergent structures in the art world and art market today (Marcus and Fischer 1995; Plattner 1998; Schroeder 2000).

Hong Kong, Beijing, and Shanghai were chosen because they are pivotal distribution centers for contemporary art today. First, art curators, critics, and savvy dealers are well established in Hong Kong, and its galleries have acted as the main conduits for the new art from China. In the early phases of market orientation, anti-establishment artists were not represented by PRC galleries, so they had to either sell their work to diplomats and foreign visitors or enter into contracts with gallery owners from Hong Kong. As the political and cultural capital of the PRC, Beijing has become central to the creation and dissemination of the new art in the last five decades, first under the socialist regime and, more recently with the opening up of the country, to the outside world (Dal Lago 1999). Shanghai, likewise, has historically been important not just as the business hub of the country but culturally as well. As a key business hub it provides a considerable challenge to Beijing and houses many private art galleries. The city has hosted successful art fairs as well (interview by principal investigator with director of Organizing Committee, Shanghai Art Fair, October 1997).

For all these cities, a list of all types of art galleries and art stores was compiled (see Table 1). Beijing and Shanghai have only a few galleries, but Hong Kong has a number of established galleries, whose status is reflected in their size and layout. Every gallery that deals in contemporary Chinese art in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong (with one exception) participated in the study. Where Mandarin was essential we collected the data with the help of trained interpreters, thus ensuring the use of a bi-gender approach.

We used a hermeneutic analysis, moving from a discussion of the part to the whole (Thompson 1997), both within a specific text and within the entire corpus of interviews. Systematic field notes, journals, and photographs of sites were maintained. Information was regularly shared with participants (member checks), who were very keen on understanding the art scene in the PRC (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). We also used visual elicitation techniques to discuss the artworks with dealers or visitors both informally and formally (Heisley and Levy 1991; McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley 1993).

In gathering the data, it was also important to recognize the difference between informal conversations and formal interviews with individuals, especially with anyone in an official capacity. A formal interview with officials generates formal answers and party-line observations. These same individuals are more forthcoming in off-the-record, lengthy discussions, because they too are keen on learning to be self-sufficient in a context where state-owned enterprises have to be competitive or perish. We tried to maintain as open-ended a format during the interview process as possible (McCracken 1988). We also gathered data through several short interviews opportunistically sampled with art audiences at gallery openings between 1996 and 1998. This was very useful in gaining a better understanding of existing and potential purchasers of contemporary art from the PRC.

Table 1 List of galleries/dealers interviewed

	Place
<i>Name of the Gallery</i>	
1. Hanart Gallery	Hong Kong
2. Plum Blossoms	Hong Kong
3. Alisan Gallery	Hong Kong
4. Schoeni Gallery	Hong Kong
5. Artpreciation Gallery	Hong Kong
6. John Batten Gallery	Hong Kong
7. Marlboro Gallery	Hong Kong
8. Pao Gallery,	Hong Kong
9. China Oil Painting Gallery	Hong Kong
10. Zee Stone Gallery	Hong Kong
11. Gallery 7	Hong Kong (closed)
12. The Rotunda Gallery	Hong Kong
13. Sandra Walters Consultancy	Hong Kong
14. Gallery Lan Kwai Fong	Hong Kong
15. Mandarin Art Gallery	Hong Kong (closed)
16. Galerie Martini	Hong Kong
17. Shangart Gallery	Shanghai
18. Barbizon Art Gallery	Shanghai (interpreter used)
19. J Art Gallery	Shanghai
20. Sun Bird Gallery	Shanghai (interpreter used)
21. Stanney Gallery	Shanghai (interpreter used)
22. Yi Thi Kuan Art Gallery	Shanghai (interpreter used)
23. Mi Qiu Workshop	Shanghai (interpreter used)
24. China National Gallery	Beijing (interpreter used)
25. Red Gate Gallery	Beijing
26. Courtyard Gallery	Beijing
27. New Amsterdam Art Gallery	Beijing
28. Lawrence Wu (dealer)	Beijing
29. London Far East (gallery)	The Hague (Holland)
30. Nikolaus Sonne Fine Arts	Berlin, Germany
<i>Artists/art critics</i>	
Director, Shanghai Art Fair 1997	Shanghai
Gu Wenda, artist, August 1997	New York
Huang Du, art critic, July 1996	Beijing
Wang Keping, 1997	Hong Kong

List of galleries where interviews were conducted with visitors

Plum Blossoms, Hanart Gallery, Schoeni, John Batten, Alisan (Hong Kong), Red Gate Gallery (Beijing) and Shangart Gallery (Shanghai)

While conducting our research, we collected various types of text: family histories, memories, catalogues, brochures, invitations for vernissages, conversations with artists, photographs, and other material artifacts. Because contemporary art requires knowledge and Chinese contemporary art requires a special effort to acquire knowledge, we recognize our roles as apprentices.

To counteract the criticisms of reliability and validity, ethnographers have relied on arguments based on the credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and integrity of researchers in providing an interpretation that is not founded on evasions and misinformation (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf, 1988; Denzin and Lincoln 1994). For the most part, the acceptability of the ethnographic approach is based on prolonged participation and observations, triangulation of methods, and, where possible, debriefing of peers and reflexive journals maintained by the authors.

We begin our discussion of art valuation processes with a historical perspective.

Creating a Narrative: Historical Insights, Framing Activities

Experimenting with a Western Frame: Art Galleries in the Pre-Mao Era (1911–1949)

When the Qing dynasty fell in 1911, many intellectuals and artists went to Japan, the United States, and Europe to study art-making and art history (Li 1989). Many artists used this opportunity to exhibit in foreign art salons, so when they returned to China, they brought back fresh ideas with them. One of them was to open a public art gallery (Sullivan 1996).

At first, Chinese artists had looked to Japan for inspiration (prior to the war with Japan) because of that country's success in incorporating Western aesthetic influences within a Japanese idiom (Croizier 1988). The Lingnan School of Art in southern China absorbed the Western techniques of romanticism and realism (via Japan) in their art, but the Sino-Japanese wars in the 1930s put an end to cultural borrowing from Japan.

Although museums were established in the PRC at around the same time, a distinction was drawn between a "glass box" to display national treasures (Belk 1995) and a private gallery in which to view contemporary artwork. According to Sullivan (1996), even in the 1930s only one gallery qualified as a Western-style gallery, and it was located in the then capital, Nanjing. Subsequently, others were also set up in Shanghai.

Given the long tradition in China of *literati* painting and calligraphy (Kao 1988; Sullivan 1996), artists who used oils or Western techniques to create ink and brush paintings were clearly bursting the frame. Calligraphy could exert such a huge influence on painting because a new upper-class type of painting had emerged in ancient China, wherein the beauty of a painting was judged on the basis of the brush stroke, among other things. While not all calligraphers were painters, it is reasonable to say that all painters were also trained calligraphers (Clunas 1997). A number of Chinese painters were and are convinced that they write their paintings and believe that a written painting is superior to a painted one. It is not surprising then that, during the Cultural Revolution, artists (among other intellectuals) were harassed by the government.

The act of creating the brush stroke (creating the painting) is critical to the essence and impact of the painting (Wang 1994). Consequently, a work of art in China cannot be completely conceptualized and then transcribed onto paper, but rather resides in the interaction between mind, hand, and paper. As a result, the painting cannot be judged only in reference to what is being expressed but must also be evaluated in terms of the actions through which it is made (Gao 1996, 191). Furthermore, given the intellectual

tradition of painting (the *literati* tradition), it is not surprising that these artists also wrote their views in defense of their aesthetic works. Indeed, it was customary for an artist or his patron to invite friends to his home for tea and view his works at the same time. In such a social context it was also not unusual for artists to either defend or critique their works themselves (Sullivan 1996). This practice contrasts strikingly with the Western tradition whereby a third party trained in fine arts critiques the artist's work. In the PRC, unlike in the West, from time immemorial a text has been available alongside a painting for later generations to see and read (Clunas 1997). Text in China is often found within a painting—hence the term “written painting.”

Given such an illustrious painting tradition, the appropriation of Western-art movements, such as post-impressionism, fauvism, and cubism, by Chinese artists trained abroad at the turn of the century was very avant-garde. A break with writing was inevitable, and even the texts that usually accompanied artworks were no longer forthcoming. Often, it was impossible to find venues to exhibit such Western-inspired works, but this did not stop Chinese artists from doing so, sometimes in the most unlikely places: athletic halls, university auditoriums, publishing houses, or even hotels (Sullivan 1996).

In 1929, the new nationalist government established in Nanjing staged the first official art exhibition in the city. In the 1930s, art associations (such as the Storm Society and the Art Wind Society) mounted regular exhibitions of Western-inspired art. Artworks at these exhibits had price tags ranging from a few to several hundred dollars, which suggests the presence of a viable, albeit small, market for Western-style painting composed of both Chinese and Westerners (Sullivan 1996, 59). Shanghai no doubt served as a cultural hub because of its economic importance and its extensive colonial population.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty, realist art⁷ also found great favor among artists who believed in creating a new China (Andrews 1990), but despite the turn toward realism, other styles flourished: impressionism, cubism, surrealism, and fauvism. While some artists, such as Xu Beihong, did not view them as appropriate for China, others saw these new techniques as mechanisms to save China from the pain and humiliation of continuous defeat (Andrews 1994). Lu Xun's introduction of woodcuts into China in the early decades of the twentieth century marked an important breakthrough for the emergent Communist Party, because it provided them with a vehicle to educate the masses (Sullivan 1996). The creation of value, however, was not so much dependent on government intervention as it was on the contentious relationship between artists trained abroad and in China.

In the 1940s, plans were made to institutionalize art exhibits and sales (through the establishment of the Shanghai Municipal Art Gallery), but they were thwarted by the political uncertainties of the period. The Shanghai Municipal Art Gallery eventually came into being under the auspices of the Shanghai Cultural Bureau in 1952 but with an entirely different political agenda (Andrews 1994).

To summarize, in the pre-Mao period, the response of artists to political and social change was rapid and enthusiastic. Turning to Japan and then to the West gave fresh impetus to aesthetic renewal, and many artists felt that traditional *literati* art could no longer meet the challenges of the new order (Cahill 1989). The importation of Western

techniques, the creation of new academies, and the exhibition and interpretation of art all constituted acts of rebellion that broke the traditional frame (Croizier 1988). Much emphasis was placed on staging public exhibits even though little attention was paid to how the pictures were hung. Sullivan (1996, 61) quotes the then-famous art critic Wen Yuanning as saying that the art displays were so poor they did not catch the viewer's attention. According to the same art critic, while design and harmony were addressed in the paintings themselves, they were ignored in the ways in which the paintings were hung. Shanghai was probably the most Western in its orientation and acceptance of different art styles. The value of Western-inspired art was commensurate with the colonial connections of this city.

The break with the *literati* tradition was both swift and dramatic. The frame was broken when a number of younger artists looked to the West for inspiration. What was once a prerogative of the educated elite, who gathered together in private homes to view, discuss, and critique a work of art, was now made available to any passerby via a public exhibit. However, since there was no historical tradition of public viewing for aesthetic pleasure, there was no knowledge of how to enhance such a viewer's gaze. It is not surprising then that, despite rapid Westernization, the idea of a gallery as a locus of elite leisure and consumption was fairly alien.

The end of dynastic rule also meant a radical alteration in the socio-political structure, for although the Guomindong government tried to hold the country together, the seeds of dissent were already sown. The Communist Party, while still a new force in the country, was gradually gaining ground (Lieberthal 1995), and before long the emergent art infrastructure (based on a rejuvenated *literati* tradition as well as a hybrid Western and Japanese inspired tradition) was completely dismantled. Oil and ink paintings created during this period are highly valued today by Asian and Western collectors as evidenced by the price listings in the *Christie's Hong Kong 1996 Auction Catalog* (Christie's 1996): Xu Beihong's hanging scroll *Horse Eating Grass* (realist art in ink and brush, 150 cm × 89.5) estimated to sell between US\$28,000 and \$31,200; Lin Fengmian's *House on Seashore* (impressionist art, 66.5 cm × 67.3), between US\$19,200 and \$23,100; Zhang Daqian's mounted scroll, *Red Peony* (ink and wash, 90.5 cm × 46) between US\$57,700 and \$64,100; and Gao Qifeng's *White Phoenix on a Cinnabar Cliff* (Lingnan school of ink and brush painting, 144.8 cm × 70) between \$US76,900 and \$102,600. The catalogue prices attest to the importance of such works, especially given their scarcity in the current context.

Official Art: The Great Socialist Framing Experiment During the Mao Period (1949–1976)

During the Mao regime, private galleries were absorbed by publishing houses that had become state-owned enterprises (Andrews 1994), and were obliged to display works of artists recognized by the state. Consequently, these galleries exhibited art that represented the ideology of the socialist regime, and not the personal aggrandizement of artists or the sale of their works (Cohen 1987). Not surprisingly, little attention was paid to the hanging of the pictures and all attempts to portray art as an object of desire were totally banned.

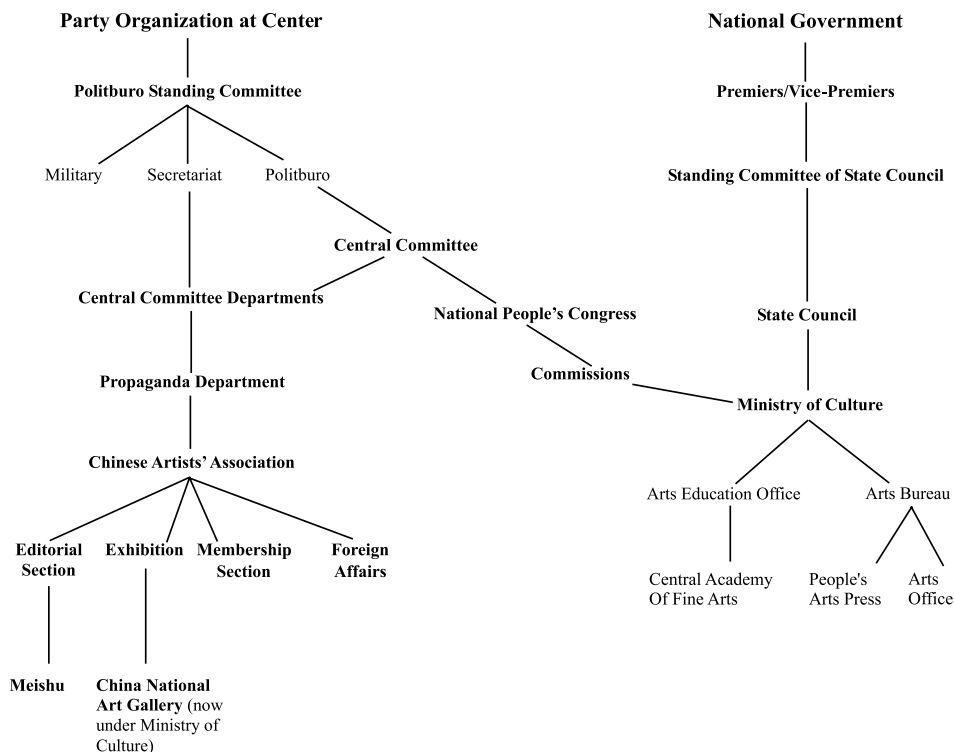


Figure 1 The structure of the art world during the Maoist regime, 1946–1976 (adapted from Andrews 1994).

From 1949 until Mao's death in late 1976, the Communist Party managed to destroy traditional art styles and techniques (*literati* tradition) by systematically re-educating older artists and introducing a new curriculum for younger artists (Andrews 1990). In Mao's cultural policy, art and politics were inseparable. As early as 1942, at his now-famous Yanan Forum on Literature and Art, Mao called for the unity of form and content (Chang 1980). According to Mao, the transformation of the individual under socialism could only happen by eliminating private property and remolding values and beliefs through education, media, literature, and arts (Whyte, Vogel, and Parish 1977). In a system that promulgated egalitarianism and mass participation, markets were viewed as evil (Joy 1990). Figure 1 provides an overview of the structure of the art world during the Mao regime.

The Chinese Artists' Association (CAA) was completely reorganized in 1953 by a key player in the art world, Jiang Feng (Andrews 1994). The CAA was established with the express objective of recruiting, organizing, and re-educating artists who were to serve the PRC through their artistic abilities. The CAA also embarked on the following activities: organizing the study of art theory based on Marxism-Leninism; evaluating the work of artists; sponsoring art exhibitions that promoted party ideals; publishing art journals; promoting exchanges with the USSR and Eastern European countries that shared Marxist ideology; and encouraging the masses to take up art (Croizier 1999). Art academies were set up centrally, such as the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing

(CAFA), which became the model for all other academies in China. The curriculum was centrally controlled, and a heavy emphasis on socialist realism borrowed from the USSR was actively promulgated (Sullivan 1996).

Under the socialist regime, the China National Art Gallery was created in 1965 to hold national exhibits. It was a large gallery of 17,000 square meters, of which 6,000 were devoted entirely to exhibits (Dal Lago 1999). The gallery was originally under the supervision of the Propaganda Department, and is now under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. The China National Art Gallery held many exhibits marking significant turning points in China's history both during and after Mao's death. Although museums existed in the country, the political bureaucracy understood the importance of a national gallery to showcase socialist art. The gallery thus played a seminal role in the exhibition and interpretation of socialist art during that period (interview by principal investigator with curator, National Art Gallery, July 1997).

Although artists were restricted in what they could produce, woodcuts, political cartoons, pictorial magazines, and serial picture stories found immense favor in the party's eyes, because these mediums lent themselves readily to the dissemination of party ideology (Andrews 1994; Lent 1994). Traditional ink and brush paintings had to be sufficiently changed to serve ideological purposes. The artist Fu Baoshi, for instance, used the rising sun in the East to symbolize the dawn of the Mao era in his painting entitled *The Charming Mountains and Rivers*.

Figure painting acquired greater importance than bird and flower or landscape painting (Andrews 1990). Oil paintings found high currency as well, because it was practical to use this medium to promulgate the party line.

Artists enjoyed more freedom of expression in the early years of the socialist regime, from 1949 to 1957, than in the later years. Debates over controversial issues, such as the role of traditional Chinese (*literati*) art in the new society, were published in official art journals such as *Art (Meishu)*. This freedom, however, was soon curtailed when Mao launched his Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 and criticized art schools for failing to implement his cultural policies. This kind of targeted attack, interspersed with periods of respite, continued until the end of the Cultural Revolution (Barmie and Jaivin 1992).

Between 1949 and 1957, artists, compared to other workers, had enjoyed relative freedom and certain privileges, as long as they worked within the confines of socialist ideology (Cohen 1987). For instance, artists who taught in the academies were allowed to hold annual exhibits of their works, which often turned out to be stepping stones for launching national and international exhibits.

Overall, "good" art, also referred to as "healthy" art, included revolutionary art in all its forms. Landscapes and still lifes were deemed "not harmful" art as long as they were produced in moderation. "Harmful" art included nudes, abstractions, expressionist works and any art that was considered "art for art's sake" (Sullivan 1999, 713).

Official Art and the Totalizing Frame: The Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution was a reign of terror: the country experienced a 10-year hiatus in art creation, and history and artists of every ilk came under scrutiny and were punished

(Bonavia 1984). Well-known artists (e.g., Lin Fengmian) would destroy their own works before the Red Guards (Mao's volunteer army of mostly young students) did. As a result, a whole generation of artists was indoctrinated into socialist realist art and grew up with very little knowledge of and training in traditional Chinese art (Laing 1988).

Mao's deification in paintings and exhibitions was characteristic of the period, and anything that countered such veneration was suspect. A key painting that has since acquired historical significance, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* by the artist Liu Chunhua, is an example of socialist realist art: portrayed alone, Mao looms large over the landscape. This painting was used as a pedagogical tool for propagating socialist principles because it received Mao's official endorsement. Nine hundred million copies of this painting were eventually printed and distributed around the country (Andrews 1994, 338).

During this period, the activities of the Ministry of Culture, the Central Propaganda Department, and the various government organizations responsible for promoting art were all abandoned. The Red Guard, controlled by Mao and the Gang of Four, took over the Ministry of Culture and used the National Art Gallery to promote art that they endorsed. They even published their own journal, *Art Storm (Meishu Fenglei)*. Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and the key member of the Gang of Four, was the highest authority on cultural matters. In 1970, as the reconstruction of the government began, plans were made for national exhibitions at the China National Art Gallery, and several were held between 1972 and 1976, all in praise of Chairman Mao (Andrews 1994).

One outcome of creating art for the masses to which artists and students were attentive was the promotion of peasant and New Year paintings. Even here, Jiang Qing had much to say about the selection of the peasant communes and the exhibition of peasant art. In 1972, for instance, she chose peasant art from the village of Huxian to be exhibited at the China National Art Gallery. Attendance was clearly mandatory at this exhibit, which drew two million viewers (Sullivan 1996, 148). The village became the model commune for the rest of rural China, and a gallery was established there (Cohen 1987). Sullivan (1999) notes that in 1998 recent works by Huxian peasants played an important role in the ideological backlash against more avant-garde and experimental works.

To summarize, until Mao's death in 1976, the Ministry of Culture was run by extremists who strictly controlled who became an artist, what was painted, and whose art would be exhibited nationally and internationally. The aesthetic process was clearly defined and artists had no control over what happened to their work. Art, heavily influenced by socialist realist art from Russia, was created to serve the state and educate the masses. This art—red, bright, and beautiful—was promoted nationally, especially when the art and artists deified Chairman Mao (Chang 1993).

The anti-market mentality was very strong; hence the pricing of art was never discussed (Cohen 1987). The value of an artwork depended on its political impact, and only after Deng Xiaoping took control of the country was the totalizing frame even questioned. Today, art produced during the Mao period fetches high sums on the auction market because of its historical rather than aesthetic value (Sullivan 1996). For instance, Fu Baoshi's 1962 ink and wash hanging scroll *Watching a Waterfall* (ink and

brush, 132 cm × 66) was estimated to sell between US\$89,700 and \$115,400 at Christie's 1966 auction in Hong Kong.

Official and Unofficial Art: Breaking Out of the Frame (1976–1989)

In 1976, the deaths of both Mao and Zhou Enlai created a political vacuum. In 1977, Deng Xiaoping took charge and that same year the Cultural Revolution officially ended (Lieberthal 1995). By 1978, artists who had been branded as subversive during the Great Leap Forward of 1958 were rehabilitated, and their professional and social status restored. Jiang Feng was made the chairman of the Chinese Artists' Association and the head of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Andrews 1994). In 1979, partly to normalize art activities, the work of an overseas Chinese artist who created ink and wash paintings was exhibited (a daring move) at the China National Art Gallery.⁸ That same year, another national exhibit of Chinese art was held at the same gallery to commemorate the liberating events following the deaths of both Mao and Zhou Enlai. This particular exhibit proved cathartic because artists unleashed their anguish over the damage caused by the Cultural Revolution in their work. Chang (1993, xvii) describes the art trend arising from the repression of the earlier period as “the art of the wounded” or “scar art” (*fanshi yishu*).

The most important exhibit held at the China National Art Gallery in 1979 under the auspices of the government was the exhibit of dissident art by the now-famous Xing-Xing Group, or Stars Group. That year, a group of intellectuals who were not officially trained as artists hung their paintings on the railings outside the China National Art Gallery. Attempts were made to have the artists remove their paintings from such a public place but to no avail. They were then allowed to show their works in a pavilion in Beihai Park in Beijing (Chang 1993). The following year, Jiang Feng, head of the Chinese Artists' Association, allowed the group to exhibit on the gallery premises, a radical endorsement of dissident art by the government. However, as Sullivan (1989, 6) notes, the real reason was that Jiang Feng thought the exhibit would receive such scant attention that dissident art would be snuffed out altogether. However, this did not happen. The crowds who attended the exhibit were so large that the artists were given a second room to exhibit their works. According to a prominent member of the Stars Group, Wang Keping, “they had 130 paintings, graphics, and sculptures in all. The works themselves were ‘new,’ mostly unheard of in the Chinese context, and full of hidden meanings. Given the overwhelming response from the populace, the government took a hard line and banned all art exhibits that year. Shortly thereafter, the group dispersed, and many of them went abroad” (interviewed by the principal investigator, summer 1997). However, the brave stance of the Stars Group gave fresh impetus to the creation of avant-garde (unofficial) art (Van Dijk 1992b). As Croizier (1999, 493) notes, in the immediate post-Mao context, more than the content was subversive—artists also drew on forbidden modernist styles, cubism and expressionism, as acts of political protest.

Communist Party members were deeply divided over what steps to take to contain the unrest. At the Third National Meeting of the CAA, Jiang Feng once

again emphasized the importance of socialist and peasant art, but Wu Guanzhong, a well-respected Chinese artist, countered by championing artistic freedom (Andrews 1994). *Art (Meishu)*, the official art journal, published his article, and a debate then ensued over the wisdom of suppressing the new art. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping called for a purge of dissidents, and in 1981, banned all exhibits of the new art of the wounded that was gaining prominence (Van Dijk 1992a). Later, Deng Xiaoping changed his tone, and for the next two years allowed more artistic freedom. Thus, both dissident and mainstream art continued to be exhibited.

The important art trends of the mid-80s were “scar art,” “political and cultural pop” (*zhengshi bopu*), “cynical realism” (*wanshi xianshizhuyi*) and “abstract expressionism.”⁹ The other major trend, conceptual art, was spearheaded by two well-respected artists, Gu Wenda and Xu Bing, who had both decided to establish an anti-objectivity and anti-authorship movement (Andrews and Gao 1995). To this end, Xu Bing created an installation that covered the first floor of the China Art Gallery called *Book From the Sky*. He had carved more than 2000 wooden-type elements with nonsense Mandarin-like characters and printed them on long scrolls and in books. Since these words had no meaning, the audience were expected to create their own.

By 1984, Deng Xiaoping had vacillated many times between setting policies allowing artistic freedom and those exercising control. This was partially a response to the remarkable developments occurring in the art world of the time. By the mid-1980s, dadaism and surrealism were having a tremendous impact on many artists throughout the country, and several foreign artists exhibited in Beijing, the most important being Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg (Van Dijk 1992b). The New Wave Movement¹⁰ (*nian yishu qunti*) had caused quite a stir among intellectuals and had even had some impact on the general public (Van Dijk 1992b). Not surprisingly, another government crackdown occurred in 1986, and artistic exchanges with other countries were banned. In 1987 and 1988, there was another lull before the outbreak of violence that ended in the Tiananmen Square massacre.

In early 1989, an art exhibit organized by established art critics Li Xianting and Gao Minglu sparked controversy. This was probably the largest exhibit of emergent art in China, and although it freely appropriated Western styles, members of the artistic community had nevertheless made a bold statement about their future direction (Li 1993). The artists attacked not only bourgeois values and norms but also Mao’s revolutionary ideologies, taking a diametrically opposite view to whatever the propaganda cadres represented. Paradoxically, their artworks were simultaneously radical and apolitical (Kang 2002). Party members, however, could not appreciate the value of such new ideas (Chang 1993), so when one of the exhibitors fired a pistol shot through her work, a threshold had been crossed. The Ministry of Culture stepped in and closed the exhibit, ruling that all further exhibitions had to be approved by them in the future (Van Dijk 1992b).

Common to all art movements from the early 1900s to 1989 was the demystification process. Deng Xiaoping’s phrase “destroy and eradicate superstition” inspired communist reformers to challenge conventional thinking in Chinese culture. Breaking with the local *literati* tradition was one such example although it was facilitated by artists trained

in Europe and Japan. Communism had an appeal precisely because of this revolutionary outlook, but once Mao had come into power, revolutionary thinking had become the new dogma. Nowhere is this more apparent than during the Cultural Revolution where any deviation from the dogma was not tolerated. Artistic creations since 1976 continue this process of demystification even today (Hung 1999).

The year 1989 was a historical milestone: the first major exhibit of dissident art in Beijing, which occurred shortly after the Tiananmen Square massacre, marked the first significant foray by contemporary Chinese artists into the prestigious international circuit. Some of the artists from the Beijing avant-garde exhibit were invited to exhibit at the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris. According to Sandler (1996, 542), the show surveyed “Third-World Art” as never before, called the Western art world’s attention to it, and indicated that a number of participants, PRC artists among them, merited serious consideration.

A key factor in the distribution of contemporary Chinese art during this tumultuous decade was the support of the international community: foreign consuls in Beijing, Western expatriates in China (Dal Lago 1993), and foreign tourists. Before long, these three key segments generated a lot of private sales for Beijing and Shanghai artists (interviews by principal investigator with collectors at the Hanart, Plum Blossoms and Schoeni galleries [Hong Kong], September 1996). Oil paintings were shown and sold abroad, primarily in the US, and hence sales were endorsed by the state because they were a source of foreign exchange. The new ink and brush paintings, as well as the more traditional oil paintings, especially by artists such as Chen Yifei, were sold at high prices to a growing fourth segment—Chinese expatriates in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States (interviews by principal investigator with the owner of the Plum Blossoms [Hong Kong], the Red Gate [Beijing], and Shanghart [Shanghai] galleries, December 1996). Wu-Guanzhong’s (ink and brush as well as oil) paintings, notes Sullivan (1999, 716), fetched high prices in foreign markets. For instance, his ink and wash painting *Paris after 40 Years* was expected to sell for between US\$25,000 and \$40,000 at Christie’s in 1997, while Chen Yifei’s oil painting *Poppy* was estimated between US\$512, 800 and \$615,400 at the very same auction.

Since private and commercial galleries did not exist until 1991, there were no formal mechanisms in place for exhibiting, pricing, and selling artworks in the PRC (Cohen 1987). However, informal sales were rampant. Sullivan (1999, 717) notes that in December 1989 the newspaper *China Daily* reported at least 250 artists in Beijing were trying to sell their work through a foreign friend or agent. The exports of commercial oil paintings were also encouraged to generate foreign currency.

The Tiananmen Square massacre that summer brought the rapid transformations in the art world to a complete halt, and the Central Academy of Fine Arts came under surveillance because of its reputation as a hot bed of radicalism (Barme and Jaivin 1992). The demonstrations were crushed, and the Propaganda Department once again tightened its control over the populace. The New Wave movement in Chinese art was officially denounced as a negative force and anti-socialist in its intent, and, consequently, new attacks on bourgeois liberalism were launched (Sullivan 1996; Van Dijk 1992a, 1992b). The editors of the official art journals who had helped to organize

exhibits were replaced or asked to resign, and many artists went abroad. Grassroots rebellion, it seemed, in Mao's words, could only be contained through the barrel of a gun.

To summarize, the first break in the socialist redistributive system was made by Deng Xiaoping through his economic reforms. By the early 1980s, artists had broken with tradition and created Western-inspired art of many genres (Cahill and Tsao 1995). Too young to be part of the Red Guard or victims of Mao's harassment, the new generation was impressed with post-modern rhetoric (Kang 2002). Meanwhile, Western artists, critics, and curators actively participated in the PRC art world by organizing national and international exhibits, offering curatorial advice, and providing financial support to artists and art institutions. Furthermore, the high profile and visibility of some PRC artists on the international scene, fueled by the West's desire to know the Orient, only accelerated the momentum for the hybridization process (Hanru 1997). Despite granting artists artistic freedom, Deng Xiaoping strongly believed that intellectuals had to be controlled. Thus, it was not surprising that when artists crossed acceptable boundaries the government took immediate steps to crush them.

Official, Academic, and Commercial Art: Reconstructing a Broken Frame (1989–1992)

The periods following the Tiananmen Square massacre were dark days for China, and only a few art exhibits were held between 1989 and 1992. Not until 1992, with Deng Xiaoping's much publicized southern tour and endorsement of economic reform, did more avant-garde works surface publicly (Van Dijk and Schmid 1994). Although dissident art was officially banned, artists continued to create new art forms in their private studios. Government sponsorship of art fairs, starting with the *First Art Fair* held in Guangzhou (1992), heralded a new attitude to art. The participation of galleries and artists in the Guangzhou art fair was an open invitation for outsiders (foreign galleries and museums) to enter the country and develop favorable art-market conditions. Artists were also allowed a say in the pricing of their works, while art critics discussed the importance of corporate support and the development of an art market (Zhu 1996). With little experience in such commercial forays, the local dealers were unsure of their roles. They sought the help of Western dealers or even Western friends (as in the earlier period) who happened to have some knowledge of the contemporary art world.

The participation of the government in such matters also made pricing a difficult matter. Questions of quality, the impact of artworks, and more mundane factors, such as the price of canvas and oils (or whatever materials were used) or the size of the painting, were used as criteria for pricing. New art from China was unquestionably in demand. The collectors were mostly expatriates living in China, foreign tourists, or occasionally, young Chinese collectors from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore (Croizier 1999). With the government offering incentives, it was not long before galleries from Hong Kong and curators from overseas entered the PRC to cull the best emergent works from around the country. Even in the PRC itself, private galleries were beginning to show the new art, although what was being shown was not controversial.

In 1991, the China Oil Painting Gallery (Hong Kong), in conjunction with members of the editorial board of the *Jiangsu Art Monthly* (an art publication in the PRC), hosted the *First Annual Exhibition of Chinese Oil Painting* at the China National Art Gallery in Beijing and the Arts Center in Hong Kong. Based on the success of the first exhibit, the second was held in both Beijing and Hong Kong the following year (interview by the principal investigator with the gallery director in Hong Kong, fall 1997). Most of the paintings were non-controversial in nature despite the use of Western media (Yin 1993).

In sum, immediately after the massacre, government surveillance of the aesthetic process heightened, and safe art was promoted in national exhibits, much to the dismay of critics and curators. Disillusioned, the younger artists continued to create controversial art, even though it was not exhibited (Van Dijk and Schmid 1994). The political fervor of the art groups prior to 1989 seemed to have settled, only to be replaced by the artists' desire for self-expression and individual attempts to establish themselves. Finally, the art fair organized by the government was the first systematic attempt to create an art market for contemporary art. Valuing art proved to be a controversial issue, although participant art dealers at the art fairs had some say in the pricing of their works (interviews by the principal investigator with owner of the Plum Blossoms [Hong Kong], Shanghart [Shanghai], and Red Gate [Beijing] galleries, in 1997).

*Academic, Unofficial and Un-unofficial Art: Collaborative Framing, East and West
(Selected International Exhibits)*

Just as China was once again beginning to attract more foreign investment through multinational joint ventures, Chinese artists were beginning to achieve name recognition on the international art circuits. Market values became the medium for both artists and the government to reinvent themselves. Political leaders started looking to the market as a way of defining their new status in a country rapidly becoming market-oriented (Dal Lago 1999; Hung 1999).

Five types of Chinese art curry favor in the current art market: (1) ink and brush paintings done in a contemporary format and sold in the greater China region (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the PRC) to Chinese and Western collectors; (2) contemporary commercial art, mostly realist or academic oil painting and sculpture that was very popular in the mid-1990s among Chinese and a few Western collectors in both the PRC and abroad; (3) oil paintings by members of the academy, mostly sold in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore to Chinese collectors; (4) contemporary avant-garde art, sold at auctions and galleries to Western collectors mostly in Hong Kong (unofficial art); and (5) art reflecting the current transformations in the country, sold in the PRC and Hong Kong (un-unofficial art) (Hung 1999). In the following section, we focus primarily on the last two categories because one represents the PRC's connections to the international contemporary art market and the other represents national considerations.

In addition to the vanguard art that found favor in the West, since the late 1980s, a few PRC conceptual artists have developed a discourse free of state ideology, which includes installations and videos. Not directed at any political target, their installations

command attention because they focus on—rather than avoid—the imminent problems of society. As Hanru (1997) notes, such artworks demonstrate that art can function as an independent discursive system. These artists no longer react against the Cultural Revolution because so many of them have had little or no experience with what went on in China from 1949 to 1976. And unlike the generation before them, they are fairly well versed in technique and style, the changing concepts of time, space, and hybridity, and are concerned with topical matters, such as the destruction of traditional spaces and architecture.

The art market has encroached into these artists' perspectives, but their responses to it are tinged with possibilities of a new humanism and a different set of aesthetic standards (Hung 1999, 25). New artists, such as Zeng Hao, have created a miniature painting genre called "new imagist," which both critiques and subverts realist paintings. On the one hand, miniatures make it possible to grasp the objects in the painting very quickly because everything in the given space—people and objects—is miniaturized. But, on the other hand, given their miniature size and naïve representation, these images are patently absurd and cause discomfort to the viewer (Hung 1999). Artists are clearly challenging established notions of interiority, subjectivity, and time.

Between 1992 and 1998, several major foreign-curated exhibits of Chinese art were held in Hong Kong, Western Europe, Australia, and the United States. We briefly describe the most important exhibits of the period. Participation in these exhibits created international name recognition for many Chinese artists, which translated into high prices for their works.

Desire for Words (1992)

In 1992, the Hong Kong Arts Center, in conjunction with the Hanart Gallery, hosted *Desire for Words*, an exhibit showcasing the works of two central and controversial avant-garde artists, Gu Wenda and Xu Bing. According to the art critics who coordinated this show, these dynamic and provocative artists have produced some of the most significant works in China's modern art history (Ho 1992). By creating nonsense words, or deconstructing the word, both artists critically questioned the traditional frame, thus challenging the very heart of Chinese culture—calligraphy and the written word.

Both artists now live abroad and continue to push artistic boundaries in their adopted countries: Gu Wenda addresses politico-cultural issues that touch the nerves of modern life (interview with Gu Wenda, August 1997), and Xu Bing questions the validity of human endeavor (Chang 1992). Like those artists who recognize the importance of cultural identity in the art they create overseas, the curators likewise recognized their roles as cultural brokers. In this case, they not only played the role of intermediary to a transnational market, but also to the artists' country of origin, the PRC (Chang 1992).

China's New Art: Post-1989 (1993)

The post-1989 art show hosted by the Hanart Gallery in 1993, in conjunction with the Hong Kong Arts Center, was a sequel to the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* held in Beijing. After being launched in Hong Kong, the works were displayed in various

Western countries, including Australia and New Zealand. The artworks reflected the tensions and trauma that characterized the four years following the Tiananmen Square massacre and the art world's ensuing maturity. The 1993 exhibit declared that the new art from China was not just going to remain underground—it was also going to break new ground. Despite inspiration from Warhol, Rauschenberg, Wyeth, and Dada, the new art, according to art historian Sullivan (1996, 280), was very Chinese in its orientation.

The identifiable art trends in this exhibit are as follows: political pop art, cynical realism, the wounded romantic spirit, abstractionism, emotional bondage, and end game art. As one of the exhibit's curators noted:

The nature of the avant-garde will change with increasing market patronage. Whether the avant-garde will dislodge the orthodox (represented by the art academies and the official line) will, however, depend on the more complex machinery of influence among critical circles and in the international art scene. Humanism and an intense awareness of the cultural predicament of China characterizes the spirit of much of China's new art. In spite of what we might term the "post idealism" of the pop pose, the ironic and irreverent stance of cynical realism, the scars of the wounded, and the retreat into spiritualism and formalism, the new art is coherent within the context of China's current artistic and cultural discourse. (Cited in Chang 1993, vi–vii)

22nd and 23rd International Biennial of Sao Paulo (1994 and 1996)

The artists represented at the 22nd Biennial in Sao Paulo were primarily political pop artists. While pop art had been in vogue prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre, it came back with a new face in the mid-1990s. Chinese pop art, although inspired by American pop art, particularly Warhol, has taken on a different direction with its evaluation of the socialist regime and particularly the Cultural Revolution. As Chang observes, what was "pleasure and joy to the peasants, was not only mass culture, it was the only culture" (Chang 1994, 6). It is out of this reality that pop art has developed.

Chinese pop art is strongly associated with the glamour and theatricality of the Revolution and thrives on three of the art canons developed during the time: redness, brightness, and luminosity (Andrews 1994). But as Gao Minglu argues, "although Political Pop allegorizes the Mao myth, the artists by no means criticize the discourse of power in Mao's communist ideology and propagandist art as many western critics have pointed out. Political pop is a continuation of 'red-humor'—it imitates propagandist and consumer discourse while exhibiting an ambivalence toward the nationalism that pervades Chinese intellectual life" (Gao 1999, 29).

The Venice Biennials (1993 and 1995)

The Venice Biennial is one of the few international exhibits that displays Asian art in a Eurocentric context (McEvelley 1996). In 1993, political pop and cynical realism made their mark on the international scene, with Wang Guangyi (a political/cultural pop artist) garnering much praise (Hill 1993). The search for identity in its many forms (Clair 1995) was the theme of the 1995 Venice Biennial, which showcased three well-known Chinese artists: Zhang Xiaogang, Liu Wei, and Gu Wenda. Zhang and Liu

addressed the issue of “face” (*mianzi*) as an icon of power. Gu Wenda created a life-size gondola with the hair of Venetians (gathered from the Vatican) (interview by the principal investigator with the artist, August 1997).

First and Second Asia-Pacific Triennials (1993 and 1996)

These two highly acclaimed triennials broke ground for contemporary art (McEvilley 1996) because instead of working with two or three key curators, they allowed 42 curators from 15 different countries to display artworks. Both exhibits dealt with the confluence of nationality, collectivity, identity, and the boundaries of contemporary art: what it is and what it is not (Thomas 1997). A strong presence in the Asia-Pacific region is seen as a necessary precursor to exhibits in other international circuits.

Contemporary Works from Fifteen Studios (1996)

Shown at the Munich Art Association Artcircolo in Germany, this exhibit displayed new works from the studios of Chinese artists who had not yet gone abroad and who were seeking new paths in their own country. The intent of the organizers was not so much “to present a representative cross-section of China’s contemporary art scene as to provide a concentrated insight into the creative talent and working environment of a number of artists by selecting various examples of their work” (Lindemann 1996, 119). For the purposes of this show an administration building was converted into an improvised exhibition house, which meant that every artist had a room to exhibit his or her work. The exhibition covered paintings, graphics, video art, photography, performance art, and installation art (Noth 1996).

Faces and Bodies of the Middle Kingdom (Prague, 1996)

The concepts of face and identity are cultural constructs that take on a different meaning in China than in the West. In China face deals with a person’s physical (*lian*) and social faces (*mian*), and losing, gaining, or giving face to another individual are deemed important. Unlike in the West where the identity of the individual is identifiable in the physiognomy, in Chinese art, the identity of the individual has to be garnered through contextual identifiers (Kessner 1997).

China! (1997–1998)

Showcasing the work of several new artists from China, this exhibit traveled to the following places: the Kunstmuseum in Bonn, the Kunstlerhaus in Vienna, the Singapore Art Museum, the Charlottenborg in Copenhagen, the Haus der Kultur der Welt in Berlin, and finally the Galeria Sztuki in Warsaw. Works by 31 new artists were mounted, representing several new schools of art such as political pop, abstract, realist, surrealist, and cynical realist art (Ronte, Smerling, and Weiss 1997).

Five Thousand Years of Chinese Art (1998)

The New York’s Guggenheim show in 1998 featured the *crème de la crème* of Chinese art shown overseas, with a section devoted to contemporary Chinese art. It attracted a

large number of visitors both in New York and in Bilbao. The Deputy Director of Programs at the Guggenheim is quoted as saying that the new Chinese oil painting might even “freshen up” oil painting in the West (cited in Robertson 2000, 8).

Inside/Out: New Chinese Art (1998)

The Asia Society and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (with New York as one of its opening venues) hired the well-known critic Gao Minglu to curate this exhibit of recent experimental art from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the overseas Chinese community. Artists from mainland China now living in the US were also included. The themes of modernity and identity connected the artwork from various geographic locations (Gao 1999, 15).

One of the most important outcomes of these international exhibits is the exposure these artists gain on the international art scene and the consequent development of a market for their work. Initially, the most sought after art was political/cultural pop and cynical realism, as reflected in the pricing of this work. In 1998 Guang Wang Yi’s political/cultural pop canvases were priced at US\$50,000. Today, the works of several other artists, including Gu Wenda and Xu Bing (both described as end game artists by Chang 1993), are sought after by curators and important collectors. Some of these artists have clearly understood the dollar value of their work and exploited the situation as did a number of mainstream artists who flooded the market with their works purely for commercial gain.

To summarize, the systematic introduction of artworks on internationally acclaimed circuits has helped some PRC artists receive name recognition and renown. These exhibits generated much public interest overseas and attracted large audiences. Pricing of artworks was based on international acclaim, and many of the works were sold during these exhibits either to museums or to private collectors. In the process, certain artists effectively colluded with the new state ideology (strong market orientation) to promote their works (unofficial art) (Hanru 1997). Finally, the art market infrastructure in the PRC was greatly enhanced by international exhibits that Western curators had brokered.

Insights into Framing Activities Through the Eyes of Gallery Owners

Just as the international exhibits served to lay the infrastructural foundations of art distribution networks in the PRC, the exhibits organized by galleries in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong helped to routinize the expectations of the new art by a committed clientele and tourists in each of these cities. Both activities simultaneously endorse specific artists and provide pricing strategies commensurate with the artists’ international status. By the same token, the champions of these artists—dealers, curators, and critics—aggrandize themselves. More than in any other country in the world, it is important to consider a gallery or museum in the PRC as a discourse, and an exhibition as an utterance within this discourse (Mieke 1996). Consequently, art galleries and exhibit spaces must be regarded as accountable spaces and, more specifically, politically accountable spaces. Innocence and neutrality are not attributes of these spaces.

Furthermore, art exhibits in permanent spaces, in contrast to culturally nomadic, albeit prestigious spaces, such as international exhibits, are critical to the establishment of permanent distribution networks (Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne 1996). While art galleries specializing in contemporary Chinese art are few and far between, the existing ones in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing have, by their physical presence, announced the coming of age of the PRC's new art. They have contributed to a structure that is reproduced through market signaling and communication among participants. The permanence offered through their "placeness" serves to further buttress and stabilize the local art infrastructure. The following is a brief discussion of all the important galleries in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong whose owners were interviewed for this study in 1996. Since then, many changes have happened in the gallery circuits in these cities.

The Novice Turned Successful Dealer (Beijing)

The Red Gate Gallery, founded in 1991, was one of the first private galleries to be established in the PRC. Its owner had come to China to study language and art, and quickly seized the opportunity to establish himself as a dealer in the country. He states that he sells not dissident but "good-quality art of a non-controversial and avant-garde nature" (interview by principal investigator, August 1996). His customers are primarily foreign tourists, business people, and overseas Chinese who stay at the China World Hotel, where his gallery is located. A younger and more educated local elite is also interested in the art he sells. In his words, he has a "comfortable market in the PRC that requires all his attention" (interview by principal investigator, August 1996). Pricing of his works depends on the reputation of the artist: a work by a reasonably known artist (with at least one solo exhibition) would sell for around US\$2,000. He has a stable of artists who are fairly well-known and many young emerging artists (unofficial and commercial art), all of whom have a unique style. For the longer term, he is considering promoting artists who work with ink and wash paintings. He also works independently of other galleries in the PRC, although he works closely with overseas curators who showcase his artists abroad. He has alliances with galleries in Australia (he is Australian) that work with the artists in his gallery.

Art Historian/Critic and Dealer (Beijing)

The New Amsterdam Consultancy—part gallery and part consulting company—cooperates with curators and art critics overseas to stage exhibits of contemporary art abroad (Europe primarily) and also acts as a research center. Although it represents a limited number of artists, the gallery carefully documents and presents them to the public. The gallery also works with other galleries within and outside the PRC to exhibit and sell contemporary art. Pricing is slightly higher at this gallery than at other galleries in Beijing, because of the fine reputation of the artists represented. Dissident art is also sold by this gallery.

The owner is an art historian and scholar with a passion for art, and does not see himself as a commercial dealer. He positions his gallery as “a mini-museum that deals in contemporary art.” He scours the country to identify talent, and is particular that his artists have a passion for and a commitment to what they are doing rather than to making money. He has been fairly successful in that sense.

Art Critic/Dealer (Beijing)

The Courtyard Gallery in Beijing also showcases contemporary works and is managed by a former art critic. It exhibits more controversial pieces (unofficial art) than the Red Gate Gallery, and prices works on par with the New Amsterdam Consultancy. One of its former managers, an artist from the UK with gallery-related connections overseas, was selected, mostly for political reasons, to help organize an important exhibition, *Beijing/London* in 1999, over the doyen of art, Tsong-Sung Chang, from the Hanart Gallery in Hong Kong (Robertson 2000). She is somewhat reluctant to deal in ink and wash paintings, because she claims to lack knowledge about them.

Risk-Taker and Trend Setter (Shanghai)

Established in 1994, Shanghart was the first gallery in Shanghai to sell contemporary avant-garde art. The gallery’s unique position in the city is due to early entry and to the fact that the owner wishes to show the works of artists in the places where they live. He has an art history background and some experience in art dealing from Switzerland where his family has a dealership. He first came to China to study the Chinese language and culture, then decided to stay. While the feedback he receives from overseas collectors is very important to him, he wants to develop the market close to the artists’ homes. Although he currently sells to Western curators and gallery owners who are scouting for new talent, he is also cultivating a new segment, mostly young Shanghainese who have the money to buy luxury products. The next step, he believes, would be for them to buy art. His pricing varies, but works by reputable artists carry a relatively high price tag; for example, in 1997, a work in charcoal and color pencil (24 cm × 30) by abstract artist Ding Yi cost US\$1,000. The gallery carries new art, both unofficial and un-unofficial.

Conservative Dealer (Shanghai and Hong Kong)

Unlike the Shanghart, the J Gallery, a more recent entrant, primarily exhibits traditional oil paintings and more realist art (mostly official art). The gallery caters mostly to Japanese collectors and business people. The gallery owners receive financial backing from a large Japanese company, so the gallery holds exhibits not only on the gallery premises but also in Japan. The J Gallery is also a framing business, and framing revenues sometimes counterbalance poor art sales. Since the gallery carries works of government-recognized artists, they charge high prices (e.g., US\$5000–\$10,000).

Idealist Turned Dealer (Shanghai)

The Sunbird Gallery is managed by a local artist, idealist, and rebel who currently focuses on turn-of-the-century Chinese oil painters (historical art). He believes that this historically important work should stay in China, but since the locals are neither rich nor knowledgeable about art, his market is external. High prices (e.g., US\$10,000) are charged on the basis of historical value and on the international acclaim of the artist.

Collaborative Art Dealer (Shanghai)

A collaboration between Europe and China, the Mi Qiu Modern Art Workshop was set up in Shanghai in 1996 and promotes Chinese and Western artistic exchange through exhibits and lectures. It possesses an art library as well as a data bank. It exhibits work classified as contemporary art that would not cause much concern to the government (commercial and un-unofficial art).

The Conventional Vendor (Shanghai)

The Barbizon Gallery is a small operation that sells government-approved oil paintings, ink and brush paintings, and sculptures in the more conventional genre (official and more commercial art). The owners also cater to a market, primarily local collectors, in Shanghai, judging by the number of people who are in the gallery on any particular day. The price of an ink painting (e.g., US\$1,000) is much lower than an oil painting (e.g., US\$5,000).

Trendy Exhibitor/Dealer (Shanghai)

More recently, trendy restaurants, such as China 1997 (frequented by foreigners), in collaboration with the Shanghart Gallery, have begun to hang artworks on their premises. This is mutually beneficial because it acts as a calling card for elite consumers to dine in this outlet while at the same time offering the possibility of art sales.

Since 1998, other galleries have sprung up in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Shanghai, but they are not included in this study because interviews were not conducted with the owners.

Prospector and Expert (Hong Kong)

The first Plum Blossoms Gallery was established in Hong Kong in 1987, and the second in Singapore four years later. It played a pivotal role in developing the market for contemporary Chinese art. The gallery's pricing reflects the promotional work done by the gallery and the reputation of its artists. Internationally known artists command from US\$5,000 to \$30,000 for their work. Other elements, such as media used and size of the painting, are also factored in the valuation process.

The owner is a recognized expert on Asian textiles and has assisted well-known museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York, in acquiring high-quality Asian art. The owner sells both avant-garde and less controversial art. He is very pleased with the artists in his galleries, and decided to champion their work after it appeared at the first *Art Fair* in the PRC. He notes:

I liked the style and technique of some of these artists. We have had at least three exhibits for artist Zhu Wei, and he has already a presence in the contemporary art market. His prices have more than doubled. They range from US\$3,000 to roughly US\$25,000. So has Wei-Dong (prices vary from US\$5,000–30,000). The quality that speaks loudest in their works is the[ir] hybridity—the ways in which they can move between the East and the West, between the past and the present. However, will they last the test of time, that cannot be known at the present. (Interview by principal investigator, July 1997)

Niche Strategist and Risk-Taker (Hong Kong)

The Schoeni Gallery opened in 1993 and has since become an established player in the Chinese art market (Binks 1995). Its owner, a hotelier with an eye for art, was the first dealer to sign up artists living on the mainland on an exclusive basis. This gallery sells both unofficial art and official oil paintings, and the price range is similar to that of Plum Blossoms.

Niche Strategist/Tibetan Artifact Dealer (Hong Kong)

Another gallery that specializes in Chinese contemporary art is the Zee Stone Gallery. It sells ink and wash and other media and, more recently, has specialized in Tibetan furniture, carpets, and art. The gallery sells well, especially to foreigners who want “Chinese art” (art that has the look and feel of Chinese culture), but not art made for a tourist market. Prices vary but they can be as expensive as the Plum Blossoms and Schoeni galleries.

The Castelli of Hong Kong (Hong Kong)

With a long-term connection to artists from the PRC, the Hanart Gallery focuses on new and emergent mainland art. The Hanart has two venues, one in Hong Kong since 1977 and the other in Taipei. There was even a venue in Beijing in the early 1990s, but it was closed down for political reasons. With a regular stream of showings and exhibits of PRC artists from the mainland and from overseas, the Hanart Gallery has established itself as the leading gallery for Chinese contemporary art.

The gallery’s dealer is knowledgeable about all current PRC art and is in touch with Chinese artists living abroad. The gallery also entered into a relationship with the Marlborough Fine Art Gallery in London and organized key shows for its stable of artists at the following venues: the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, in 1993; the Fruit Market Gallery Edinburgh, 1996; and the Cornerhouse Gallery, Manchester, 1996. Because of his high profile and the visibility of his artists on the international market, he can

command as much as US\$50,000 for political pop art. The gallery also sells traditional ink and wash paintings, but it is known for promoting more dissident art forms. The dealer has had the help of a successful businessman, David Tang, whose “China Clubs” in Hong Kong and the PRC are full of the new avant-garde art (based on a visit by the principal investigator to China Club, Hong Kong, in 1997).

The owner loves the new and emergent art from China but is equally passionate about its ink and wash tradition. He believes that encouraging traditional Chinese art (calligraphy, music, and painting) will result in a new kind of *literati* or perhaps in a revival of that tradition. While he is very vocal about the lack of freedom suffered by artists and intellectuals in the past, he feels that Chinese artists today have the necessary training and wherewithal to become accomplished artists. “But the younger artists from the art academies who have seen their seniors become world famous are impatient to make money,” he notes (interview by principal investigator, fall 1997). He cannot blame them.

Researcher and Archivist (Hong Kong)

Owned and managed by a respected art dealer in Hong Kong, the Alisan Gallery is more conservative in its choice of exhibits. Although cutting-edge art is shown from time to time, the owner does not often champion dissident art. Chinese contemporary art, careful choice and documentation of Chinese artists—ink and brush and oil painters—are the hallmark of this gallery. The gallery takes special efforts to exhibit works by established Chinese artists living abroad. Pricing is commensurate with the international reputation of the artist.

Early Entrant/Private Dealer (Hong Kong)

The owner, who now has her own art consultancy and works primarily with corporate and institutional collectors, operated the Mandarin Art Gallery, which closed its doors in 1996. By definition, she sells non-controversial contemporary art.

Art Critic/Dealer (Hong Kong)

The Rotunda Gallery is managed by a well-established art critic, who exhibits contemporary art from the PRC and elsewhere in Asia (official, unofficial and un-unofficial art). He is still active in the Hong Kong art scene, although he feels that he does not have the energy to scout and champion new artists. Prices range from low to moderately high depending on the reputation of the artist.

Prestige Builder (Hong Kong)

The representative of the Marlboro Fine Art Gallery in Asia showcases internationally established contemporary artists from the PRC (such as Chen Yifei, who is the first contemporary Chinese artist [not an avant garde artist] to have had a retrospective

exhibition at the new Shanghai Art Museum in 1998). In addition, she tries to develop a market for non-Chinese artists that the Marlboro Gallery represents. The educational role of this gallery is emphasized, although it operates more like an art consultancy than an art gallery. Prices are high but commensurate with the international standing of the gallery. For instance, a Chen Yifei painting (oil painting expert) entitled *Eulogy of the Yellow River* was listed at HK\$600,000–800,000 (roughly US\$70,000–100,000) at a Sotheby auction in 1995. But in 1998 the gallery was promoting the works of avant-garde artists.

Assorted Dealers (Hong Kong)

There are a number of other galleries in Hong Kong that show contemporary art from China, such as the John Batten Gallery, Artpreciation, the China Oil Painting Gallery, and the Galerie Martini. Prestigious private clubs, such as the China Club, host opening events for certain artists in addition to owning a massive collection of contemporary art from the PRC. With the downturn in the economy, however, a number of galleries, such as the Gallery Lan Kwai Fong (which occasionally showed contemporary Chinese art), have closed their doors.

A number of dealers from the West also come to the PRC to buy art or have specialists scout on their behalf for fresh talent. Dealers from the Nikolaus Sonne Fine Arts Gallery in Berlin and from the London Far East Gallery in the Hague noted that the Germans and Dutch have always been very active in the contemporary art scene (interview by principal investigator, July 1998). Lawrence Wu, a connoisseur of Chinese contemporary art, lives both in New York, where he is a dealer, and in Beijing, where he converted one of the older courtyard homes for himself and his family. Since he is an art historian and critic, he is very knowledgeable about Chinese contemporary art (interview by principal investigator, May 1996).

According to Robertson (2000, 13), the Eastern Gallery in Bloomsbury and the Max Prothec, Jack Tilton, and Lehman Maupin galleries in New York are all actively dealing in contemporary Chinese art. The Qing Ping and Lin galleries in Boston and San Francisco also deal in contemporary art from the PRC.

Decision-making in the Art World

Vendor Interactions in Hong Kong

All gallery owners and art dealers recognize their interdependence in developing a new market, and realize that the market depends on a strong and varied vendor presence. In some spaces, a few galleries are adjacent to each other and coordinate their opening events so that the clientele can easily move from one space to another. They also respect each other's spaces, artists, and specialties. No poaching of another gallery's artists is an unwritten rule that is rarely violated despite artists' willingness. Market signaling and communication to compete and cooperate allows them to secure larger market shares.

Costs and Contracts

As in the West, well-known galleries and successful artists do not always see eye-to-eye on the terms of their contracts. Thus, mobility of certain well-established artists is not uncommon. While prices for works by the same artist will not differ between galleries that represent the artist, special favors to collectors or respected clients are not uncommon. When interviewed about the costs of supporting an artist, the director of the Plum Blossoms Gallery had this to say:

The cost of holding an exhibit for an artist varies with the number of catalogs being published, the quality of the layout, and so on. Typically, for a show that involves 1,000 catalogues, the printing costs might be as high as US\$10,000. Opening night costs might vary at around US\$2,000, framing and hanging costs around US\$4,000, publicity around US\$1,000, and layout and photographs might roughly amount to US\$2,000. The costs are factored into the pricing of the art works, of which the artist normally receives 60% or 70% depending on the gallery. (Interview by principal investigator with director of Plum Blossoms Gallery, April 1998)

Seasonality

Exhibits are held during two periods: from early March to June and from September to January. In addition, auctions are held at the end of May and in October. The summer months are not very active, although some tourist sales do take place.

Clients and Collectors: Market Segments

Gallery, museum exhibits, and auctions attract different types of collectors and audiences, respectively. While an increasing number of gallery clients are young, most are over 40, well educated, with higher than average discretionary incomes. They also attend art auctions. The categories described in Table 2 were identified based on observations made at Sotheby's and Christie's auctions in Hong Kong, indigenous auction houses in Beijing and Shanghai, and short interviews with collectors, art dealers, auctioneers, and art critics.

Audience Participation and Consumer Choices

At art openings in Hong Kong and the PRC, a large number of clients are invited by the galleries, with good attendance at these events depending on the gallery in question and the artist who is exhibiting. The timing of these events is often organized around corporate clients who stop by the gallery after work. Some art openings are colorful events with artists being present to meet prospective collectors. Wine and soft drinks are usually served while clients tour the exhibit.

The socially specific construction of the identity of the art dealer and the significance of the sales encounter are among the most compelling activities that we observed.

Table 2 Observable segments in the Chinese contemporary avant-garde market

Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wish to keep abreast of the latest trends. • are art lovers, often friends of artists and frequent studio visitors. • are generally knowledgeable about art, although they are not always collectors.
Risk-takers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wish to acquire the strongest pieces by an artist, even when the artist is relatively unknown. • will visit artist studios and scout around for the best emergent artists and their works. • are uninterested in acquiring “safe” or “decorative” art. • are art lovers but view their collections from an investment perspective as well.
Art Historians and Collectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have considerable knowledge of the arts. • make discerning choices even in the context of contemporary art. • prefer to acquire the strongest and most representative pieces of an established artist. • constitute a sub-segment (Hong Kong) that relies on dealer assistance for their choice.
Systematic Collectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • search meticulously and gradually amass a large and well-researched collection. Often take advice from art experts and art dealers.
Occasional Buyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • love the new trends; because of financial constraints, buy only the occasional piece from an artist of their choice primarily.
Dealers/Collectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • want a personal collection to hold on to, although they may be art dealers themselves. • may have financial backing from businessmen, and hence are unafraid of their choices.
Nouveaux-Riche Collectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have money and want to enhance their status through collecting contemporary art. • are generally not knowledgeable about the art trends and styles; depend on other collectors and art dealers to learn about art trends.

Dealers engage in teaching collectors and other clients about the artist and the artwork. The idea is to cultivate these collectors/clients as friends and establish long-term relationships with them. As a knowledge-based industry, art sales are highly dependent on the cultivation of consumer tastes by the dealers or artists. Those already in place have, through early entry, positioned themselves admirably in terms of securing larger market shares.

All of the gallery's hired help are also trained personnel. As in other service industries, they are front-stage managers, so it is important that clients view them not only as approachable but also as knowledgeable (Bitner 1992). The latest trend in art galleries is to have a major presence on the Internet. Since the market for contemporary art is essentially an external one (overseas Chinese and expatriates), Internet presence is highly essential for global and regional visibility.

Pricing is often high and commensurate with the international reputation of the artist and positioning by art dealers. The most important factors deemed essential to product positioning are as follows:

1. the dramatic and monumental economic, political, and environmental changes in the PRC in the 1990s, which are on a scale unmatched in any other part of the world, and their reflection in the art of the period;
2. a continuous cultural history with superior productions in paintings that extends back 5,000 years;
3. high technical ability in Western artistic tradition (Robertson 2000, 3).

In summary, the art galleries in the PRC and in Hong Kong act much along the lines of galleries in the West. In the PRC, there are restrictions on gallery operations and some owners circumvent some of them by registering in Hong Kong. Promotions of artworks occur through traditional channels, such as advertising in art journals in Hong Kong and overseas, as well as on the Internet.

Problems with Valuing Contemporary Chinese Art

What is peculiar to the art market in any part of the world is that prices only rise. Unlike other goods, art is never discounted, although various mechanisms, such as giving gifts to loyal customers, are used by gallery owners and art dealers. Talking about price may be considered vulgar, but all the galleries we visited in Hong Kong and the PRC listed prices discreetly beside the object/painting or were given when requested. Pricing art is difficult, but prices convey meaning about the value of art. As Prus (1985, 89–90) notes, pricing is a socially derived activity, and the fact that artworks command high prices means that consumers value these objects very highly.

In the general market place, prices send signals and reflect the supply and demand of goods. In the art market, however, it is not the scarcity of the good that drives up the price, but rather a community that establishes a value for the work. Curators and art critics are particularly important in this process, and in all of the international or gallery exhibits discussed above, the work of third parties—primarily art critics and curators—is crucial to the establishment of reputations. This includes not just the reputations of the artists but also of the organizers (curators and gallery owners).

This poses a particular problem with group shows where some established artists are exhibited with newcomers. In the Shangart Gallery, for instance, a few artists were upset by the asking price set by the dealer: because an oil canvas is more expensive to produce than a charcoal work on paper, they felt that one of their large oil canvases should command a higher price than a drawing. It is not only the absolute price that artists are concerned about but also the relative value of their work, which gives them a criterion for maintaining self-esteem. According to the dealer:

The works on paper were by an artist who had already established himself in the international circuit, through overseas exhibitions and work-study programs abroad. When a picture brings in a high price, it provides an artist with a measure of self-esteem. It is also a yardstick by which an artist can feel that he/she is better than others. Thus, prices enable

artists to get some indication of their respective position in the pecking order. (Interview by principal investigator with dealer for Shangart Gallery, September 1998)

However, it takes time to build a reputation, and the asking price at the initial stages is comparatively low, because there is no reasonable criterion by which a work of an unknown artist can be priced very high. It is only through several showings and documentation by art critics and curators that a measure of quality is agreed upon by a community of evaluators. However, art that is too cheap is also viewed suspiciously, because the buyer believes that if art has any merit, it will not be priced like an ordinary commodity. Moulin (1987) found this to be true in galleries in Paris as well, because he notes that high price guarantees aesthetic quality. More recently Rengers and Velthuis (2002) make a similar argument about determinants of contemporary art in Dutch galleries. The director of the Plum Blossoms Gallery in Hong Kong reveals the following about an artist they had launched:

Canvases of the same size are mostly priced the same when an artist is launched. If works are priced differently it sends signals that there are quality differences. That may very well be the case, but it is the market that determines this. Further, the auction market in particular will determine the price of artworks. (Interview by principal investigator with director of the Plum Blossoms Gallery, October 1997)

The auction market for contemporary avant-garde art was a sore point for gallery owners, because auction houses were selling works that had not been previously exhibited in galleries. Thus, the auction houses were acting like galleries themselves. As one rather irate dealer (who did not wish to be named) noted:

Here [Hong Kong and Asia in general] the art market is weird. It does not operate like the market in the West, where galleries first launch artists, and it is only after that auction houses step in. In Hong Kong, an artist can sell at a very high price even without exhibitions, because he or she can start with sales at auctions before being shown by galleries. The auction price will determine what he/she will ask for later. (Interview by principal investigator at Sotheby's auction, fall 1996)

Some changes occurred between 1998 and 1999 because the owner of the Schoeni Gallery notes that the prices of neo-realist painter Wang Yi Dong (whose salon-style oil paintings the gallery showcases) sold at 60% more than the selling price at auction. Galleries in Hong Kong and the PRC that have successfully taken on new talent worry about the high prices of these artists' works. Since prices are not lowered in the art world (it signals poor quality), the question of what the market can support is an important one. A price increase also makes collectors happy, because their investment is guaranteed to grow. Nevertheless, many gallery owners advise collectors that they have to view art like stocks, which can grow rapidly or decline sharply. As Sandler (1996) notes, even in the US, the very high prices of art in the 1970s could not be sustained in the 1980s. The prices at auction therefore had to be lowered.

Gallery owners cultivate a relationship of trust with collectors and would throw them into a panic if they suddenly lowered the value of an artist's work. Good dealers therefore learn to gradually raise prices: They start at a comfortable bracket and only

for very good reasons (many international exhibits, museum purchases, or location in important collections) would they increase prices. However, as one gallery dealer (who did not wish to be named) notes:

Raise prices dramatically when the time is ripe, because it will signal the value of the works to existing and new collectors. It could be done with a new show with a lot of fanfare at the vernissage. (Interview by principal investigator, October 1997)

Artists also require a good PR machine to develop and maintain a high reputation.

The Marlborough Fine Art Gallery in London, probably one of the largest commercial galleries in Europe, has launched the careers of many successful artists. The Managing Director of the Hong Kong office likes to aggressively promote artists, especially after including them in her stable of gallery artists. One of her stars, Chen Yifei (who works in oils), established a name for himself in the 1980s after he received important state commissions. He was subsequently supported by the Hefner Gallery in the US, where he also lived for a while. Since then, many of his works have sold rapidly to important collectors and museums. His works were auctioned by Christie's and Sotheby's in 1998 for a combined total of one million dollars (interview by principal investigator with director, October 1998), and that same year the Shanghai Museum mounted a retrospective of his works. His works were also exhibited in other important museums in Hong Kong and overseas.

As noted earlier, the only mechanism for lowering or freezing art prices is to offer the work as a gift to special collectors. This can take many forms. Often collectors are invited to parties or dinners with the artist present or even given a special visit to the artist's studio. Sometimes other items (Chinese souvenirs) may be offered as a special gift along with the purchase of a painting. Unofficial price discounts of up to 20% may also be offered, and institutions, such as museums, expect to be charged much lower than the going price. This also holds true of companies who invest in art, according to an art consultant who helps create collections for companies in Hong Kong (interview by principal investigator, January 1997).

Concluding Observations and Lessons from the Field

The act of bursting the frame is a continuous activity that acquires new meaning in the PRC context. A historical perspective showed that many acts of framing, (de)framing, and (re)framing took place in the last few decades. In particular, the new impetus given to collaborative framing from curators and galleries outside China is a necessary but insufficient condition to create successful artists and galleries in the twenty-first century.

The entire edifice of art connoisseurship is a well-defined and defended hierarchy of authority with new players learning the rules of the game. The art market emphasizes secrecy and relationship-building with prospective clients and collectors. Knowledge circulation—not unlike the objects that circulate—is controlled and monitored. While price is an important factor, it is relationships with dealers and artists that guide client choices.

This study of Chinese contemporary art exhibits and gallery spaces has yielded three themes that integrate our interpretation of art distribution dynamics with the perceptions and experiences shared by curators and vendors: (a) artistic freedom; (b) authenticity and cultural identity; and (c) atmospherics and ambiance. The changing nature of hybrid art creation based on the changing role of the government has important implications for product positioning and pricing strategies. We will look at each of them in turn.

Artistic Freedom: Implications for Creating Shared Value

The art world in China was long the exclusive domain of an intellectual elite, beginning with the *literati* tradition of painting (Cahill 1989). When the break with tradition, or the modernist movement, occurred in the early twentieth century, it was artists and intellectuals who spearheaded these changes (Kao 1988). It was also artists and intellectuals who moved the country in the directions in which the Communist government wished to proceed (Andrews 1990). During the 30 years of Maoist rule it was only during the Cultural Revolution that artists and intellectuals were perceived as threats to Mao's power, but their role in transforming society was seminal (Sullivan 1996).

When China opened up to the West in 1979 through a program of cautious reforms, the state perceived intellectuals and artists as a real threat, and persecuted them through the constant anti-spiritual-pollution campaigns of Deng Xiaoping. This mistrust of intellectuals eventually culminated in the tragic events of 1989. Far-reaching economic reforms were quickly initiated in 1989 and, consequently, collaborative framing between China and the West was established.

This study suggests that PRC government's withdrawal from the art world marks the first step in a natural progression to a market society. Unfortunately, art organizations, many of which are under the direct authority of cultural bureaus and ministries, face a serious handicap because these high-powered institutions have neither the time nor the resources to help organizations restructure. Thus, although economic responsibilities continue to be pushed down the hierarchy, a dramatic paradigm shift from a command to a market economy cannot be expected to occur in the immediate future. The government still has a say in art matters, but they have relaxed their hold on the art world. Furthermore, while curators and art critics from outside the PRC have hitherto spearheaded the move towards privatizing the art market, local grown talent has recently begun to take over these important responsibilities.

The network of foreign dealers, critics, and curators has helped establish an infrastructure that shapes the positioning and pricing of art in the PRC and overseas. Overseas exhibitions held in reputable museums, galleries, or art biennials promote the reputations of specific artists and in turn raise their visibility in the greater China region. However, this is a two-way process. Without dealers nurturing artists and including them in their respective stables, many Chinese artists would not be noticed by curators and critics.

In the past, whenever intellectuals posed a threat to governance, they were imprisoned, re-educated, or harassed, and as history records, PRC artists have had their fair

share of such misfortunes. Today, artists are able to make their own way in the indigenous and international art worlds. The recent domestic turn in the art market has also led to a greater concern with issues of interiority and subjectivity (Hung 1999). At the same time the commercial art market is growing by leaps and bounds, and cultural production is viewed primarily in monetary terms much the same way that sixth-generation Chinese film makers operate in the film world (Zhu 2002).

Artists and Cultural Identity: Implications for Creating Shared Value

Another important theme that emerged during this study is the pertinence of Chinese identity in the race to become internationally known. Deng Xiaoping's dictum in the early 1980s was to retain Chinese identity despite speedy economic modernization. In the current context, PRC artists have widely embraced all forms of Western techniques and philosophies. Multimedia art is the *modus operandi*, and artists tackle a wide range of issues, from questioning contemporary Western artistic ideas to seeking a balance between tradition and modernity, and rebelling against the social system.

Like their US counterparts, contemporary artists in the PRC are also concerned with difference and discontinuity as mechanisms for challenging ideas of totality and continuity (Sandler 1996, 523). For Chinese artists living abroad, this issue constitutes more than an idea: it is a living reality, an issue that they have to contend with on a regular basis (Fei 1993). Gao Minglu (1999) suggests these artists do not emphasize their Chinese identity nor do they de-emphasize it—this neutrality is expressed rather graphically by his use of the term “post-orientalism.”

In the PRC, the group consciousness of the 1980s was replaced by a heightened sense of individuality, the increased presence of women artists, and the awareness of gender sensibilities. As Huang Du, an art critic in Beijing, notes, “To Chinese artists, appropriation is only a method, its aim is to transcend self and nonself, ... to achieve the modernization of art, and to establish new values” (interview by principal investigator, July 1996). Many contemporary Chinese artists have finally overcome the period of appropriation and deviation, and have entered a new stage of self-discovery.

Finally, collectors (local or foreign) are expected to show a growing preference for PRC art with a strong Chinese sensibility. As Chang, the owner of the Hanart Gallery (Hong Kong), notes:

I want to find art that will define certain aspects of traditional culture, which I think of as high art. I want to show people what I find interesting from the perspective of a traditional connoisseur and what I see in the new art which is not part of that tradition. We are talking as much about international standards as we are about the Chinese contemporary scene. (Chang cited in Robertson 2000, 12)

Atmospherics and Ambiance: Implications for Creating Shared Value

The immediacy and semiotic intensity of gallery exhibits, vernissages, and international exhibits are also important considerations in building distribution networks. While art is still a prerogative of the wealthy and the educated, the frequency and simplicity with

which new art is introduced to the public demonstrates that the outreach today is greater than it was in earlier times. However, unlike the Maoist outreach programs that forced the masses into the galleries, recent attempts have engaged people in visual and other sensory modes. For instance, the owner of the Shanghart Gallery hung some of his artists' works in the lounge of a newly established art deco restaurant in a fashionable district in Shanghai. While the decorative impact cannot be overlooked, the idea is to encourage the city's young trend-setters to ask questions and to initiate intellectual discussion through the possession of such objects. Another venue, the China Club in Hong Kong, houses one of the best collections of contemporary PRC art. Frequented by the city's power brokers, this exclusive club makes possible the concomitant exploration of "taste" as in gustatory pleasures and "taste" as in aesthetic evaluations. The formidable task of educating a new public is clearly less daunting in a setting that hosts regular, voluntary, and informal gatherings outside of home and workplace.

Most recently, the appearance of art galleries on the Internet has become another mechanism for educating consumers (internal and external). Although individual artists in the PRC do not have the same access to the Internet that their counterparts do in the West, the Net has proven to be a useful mechanism for attracting an external market.

Lessons from the Field: Concluding Remarks

In the current race to develop a market for contemporary art, the PRC has widely embraced the Western model of distribution networks. But this model is not useful without analyzing its context. Chinese galleries are not mirror images of their Western counterparts. The operation of art galleries, particularly on the mainland, testifies to the contextual differences that must be accounted for when a country with a great tradition like China modernizes. Despite the many collaborations with curators and art critics from the West, Chinese artists and galleries have been held back by the government. In some instances, artists flirted with danger by re-positioning themselves on the borders (political, cultural, and ideological), incurring at some level the wrath of the political bureaucracy.

Art can be viewed as an intellectual product with subversive potential, as was repeatedly evident to certain citizens and government officials in the exhibits of nudes in the late 1970s, the stagings of the New Wave movement in the mid-1980s, and in the avant-garde show in Beijing in 1989. However, it seems that in moving towards market socialism, the government took a rather erratic approach to artists. At one level, there was oppression, yet at another, artists felt free enough to pursue their aesthetic interests (Hung 1999). The iron hand of the government was not always felt and since the mid-1990s, there were only occasional rumblings of government opposition. Through the championship of knowledgeable overseas curators, especially those from Hong Kong, Belgium, England, Holland, and the US, a conduit was developed to take the emergent art to the international stage, particularly between 1985 and the turn of the century. The wide acceptance of some PRC art trends reflects the use of certain internationally endorsed criteria for evaluating contemporary art in global art circles.

When it made its debut on the world market, political pop was widely acclaimed because the purveyors of taste were already familiar with the language of cultural pop (via Warhol and other important pop artists), as well as with the contours of Chinese history and politics. The special ingredient of PRC politics (the re-creation of Cultural Revolution images in the 90s aimed at disguising such references through commercial trademarks and advertisements) gave this art trend its edge. For PRC artists, the learning process was fast and the appropriation of Western models complete, but with the undeniable seal of Chinese identity. The pricing of their works particularly reflects these entrepreneurial considerations and is also responsible for improving artists' reputations.

Tse, Belk, and Zhou (1989, 459) argue that the PRC is fast becoming a consumer society with consumers developing a taste for luxury goods. The PRC market for luxury brand-name products is growing, and art falls into this zone, although it has a special place within this sector. But only a segment of the newly educated elite (often linked to the political elite of the socialist regime) appreciates and collects contemporary art.

Art galleries and museums are institutions that play a central role in circulating and exhibiting art. They have a long history of participating in the creation and transformation of a cultural edifice through the management of object and knowledge circuitry. While the importance of the state cannot be overlooked, without the introduction of a product and production market (as well as a labor market), the development of the art market would not be possible (Nee and Matthews 1996). In the PRC today, galleries face a tremendous challenge because they have to educate the public in visual literacy before they can reap the benefits of circulating aesthetic objects. With close cooperation and alliances between dealers, critics, curators, auction houses, and artists from the PRC and the West, gradual transformations of distribution networks have been set into motion. Artists from China are no longer applauded for presenting what the West seeks (Chinese motifs or critiques of Mao), because what they have to offer is what Clifford Geertz calls both "a model of and a model for the social reality" that is uniquely theirs.

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Notes

- [1] We use Robertson's (2000) terminology. The term "contemporary Chinese art market" is an international art market term used to describe all art currently made in Greater China.
- [2] Political Pop uses a deconstructionist approach matched with a Pop technique to create works of comic satire, especially targeting political figures such as Mao. The exemplar is Wang Guang Yi. Cynical realism uses a scoundrelly indifferent and mocking attitude in the creation of art works, the exemplars being Liu Wei and Fang Li Jun (Li 1993).

- [3] Some artists, especially those who worked in the “political pop” tradition, used their style to put the PRC on the international art scene. But their freedom from political constraints is based on their manipulation and coordination with the government (Hanru 1997).
- [4] Mostly realistic and academic oil painting and sculpture. It is sometimes referred to as the alternative art market in popular images (Robertson 2000).
- [5] Sometimes referred to as “aesthetically speculative work” (Robertson 2000). These are avant-garde works of art.
- [6] *Literati* art is abstract in orientation.
- [7] However, respected artists at the turn of the century (e.g., Xu-Beihong) believed that art was relevant to the people, that it had to reflect the actual conditions and could help the country emerge from poverty. This is called realist art.
- [8] Zhou Wou-ki is a well-known artist and lives in Paris.
- [9] Scar art: One important artist who participated in the 1989 exhibit was Zhang Xiaogang whose work reflects the tragedy of life in the PRC based on abuse, whether it is self-abuse, abuse inflicted on others or abuse inflicted by others. Political Pop artists (discussed earlier) had a mocking wit and style. Cynical Realists (also discussed earlier) were young artists who were just coming of age in 1989, when the crackdown of artists (and other intellectuals) occurred. They confronted the reality of their own helplessness in their art works. Abstract Expressionist art was perhaps the most maligned art form between 1979 and 1992, because it was art for art’s sake (Chang 1993).
- [10] The term “New Wave Movement” applied to art in the 1980s placed an emphasis on the life experiences of the individual (the view was that the artist’s individual vitality was sapped by life in a collective society—especially under the Mao regime) as an important concern of art. There was also a strong interest in performance art, mostly conceptual in nature.

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