

The Beijing Biennale: The Politics of Chinese Characteristics

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INTRODUCTION

The inauguration of the first Beijing International Art Biennale in the fall of 2003 was a significant official undertaking in China. Sponsored by the Chinese Artists' Association (CAA), an official organization that has dominated the Chinese art world for five decades,¹ in collaboration with many top state ministries, the first Beijing Biennale was brought to the stage by a series of spectacular opening ceremonies that no official art exhibitions in China had ever mounted before.

The first Beijing Biennale, *Originality: Contemporaneity and Locality*, showcased 405 paintings and sculptures by 270 artists from 45 countries, not counting the series of concurring thematic exhibitions in eight other important venues throughout Beijing. Collectively curated by a large committee composed of twenty-seven curators, under the direction of three high-ranking Chinese cultural officials, Feng Yuan, Jin Shangyi, and Liu Dawei,² the Beijing Biennale maintained a strong accent that is particular to the official Chinese art world. In addition, the artists presented in the domestic section were mainly from art academies and art institutions in China, and their works, though diverse in terms of artistic language and subject matter, fell into the category of art that had already been officially sanctioned and often shown in various art exhibitions and magazines since the 1990s. Many works would be familiar to domestic audiences who had been following the kind of art presented at the National Art Work Exhibition.³

This is apparent when we take a quick look at the three winners of the Award for Chinese Young Artists' Work, which is a prize especially set for honouring talented young Chinese artists. *Strolling II*, by Wang Yingsheng, is a diptych painting in Chinese traditional media depicting four life-size urban youth in a realistic manner, with assorted images and symbols extracted from Chinese and European art traditions as the background. The work apparently comments on the current hybridized reality of China, where Eastern and Western cultures and traditions are juxtaposed and freely interact. *Brothers and Sisters*, by Zhang Chenchu, is a set of five oil paintings featuring giant close-ups of the faces of two young women and three men presented in a manner of high verisimilitude. The artist captured five different facial features that seem to express individual personality and innermost feelings without any additional elements. The third winner was *The Chinese Roots*, by art teacher Guo Zhenyu and his twenty-eight students, a large sculpture that resembled the roots of trees, among which numerous human figures can be perceived. This work evokes the expansion of endless offspring and the continuity of centuries-old Chinese history, a very favourable theme in Chinese culture.

Based on international biennales elsewhere, the Beijing Biennale gave all its other awards, including three first rank awards, six second rank awards, and a memorial award, to artists represented in the international section. This section included a roster of impressive names such as Georg Baselitz, Sandro Chia, Sam Francis, Joerg Immendorf, Markus Lupertz, Mimmo Paladino, and Robert Rauschenberg.⁴ The Beijing Biennale even gave Georg Baselitz the first rank award for his 1986 oil painting *Attacking II*, as if to pay belated respect to this German Neo-Expressionist



Wang Yingsheng, *Strolling II*, 2001, ink and wash, colour on silk, 200 x 270 cm. Courtesy of the Beijing Biennale.



Zhang Chenchu, *Brothers and Sisters*, 2001–2002, oil on canvas, 200 x 475 cm. Courtesy of the Beijing Biennale.

master. These artists all have well-established names in the art world, and it is reasonable to speculate that the inclusion of their names was primarily for the purpose of boosting the status of the Beijing Biennale. The presence of these artists, however, inevitably increased the impression that the Biennale was retrospective by featuring art from the recent past rather than the present.

Overall, the first Beijing Biennale emphasized the presentation of figurative work, which has been the orthodox heritage of official Chinese art since 1949. In particular, the domestic section seemed to be a reinforcement of the established artistic merit system that had been promoted by the CAA in the past, one that is grounded in solid realistic/representational techniques and that seeks a combination of artistic innovation and socially meaningful themes. Thus, the Beijing Biennale, even with its many interesting works, and, indeed, its variety of themes and styles, did not entail a close investigation of, or critical engagement with, the most dynamic and controversial issues taking place in the contemporary art world. Considering many active contemporary art practices involve mediums other than painting and sculpture, this may be a necessary price paid by a biennale that only opens itself to these two traditional mediums. Many Chinese artists who have well-established reputations within the contemporary art world seemed to hold a scornful attitude



Guo Zhenyu and others, *The Chinese Roots*, 1999–2003, linen, 400 x 2000 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the Beijing Biennale.

toward the Biennale, seeing it as another version of the National Art Work Exhibition except that it included foreign participants. Some of them even called it “ridiculous” for its rejection of contemporary mediums such as photography, installation, and video.⁵

From my point of view, however, the Biennale deserves an in-depth investigation in order to achieve a critical understanding of the nature of this momentous governmental undertaking in the art domain. It is significant in its own right in being the first international biennale held by the CAA, the major agent of official Chinese art. Fundamentally, it is a move by the CAA to promote not only the kind of art it favours, but also its own status as the conduit of official Chinese art. The Biennale is not simply an exhibition that presents art, but it is one that contains responses and strategies in dealing with new changes emerging in the contemporary art world and the accompanying challenges to the CAA’s authority. In other words, the establishment of the Beijing Biennale involves interactive international and domestic forces and itself is part of the transforming art world in contemporary China.

THE NATIONALISTIC PROPOSAL

The origin of the Beijing Biennale was inseparable from the surging nationalistic mentality in the Chinese cultural domain, as well as the rapid transformation of the Chinese art world. In late 2001, a few members of the CAA, led by the chairman Jin Shangyi, visited the 10th Dacca Biennale in Bangladesh.⁶ Jin was invited to be a member of the Dacca Biennale’s Jury Committee as well as a mediator for the associated international conference. Subsequently, Wang Yong, a senior member of the CAA and the deputy director of the Research Institute of Fine Arts at the China



Georg Baselitz, *Attacking II*, 1986, oil on canvas, 250 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the Beijing Biennale.



Academy of Arts, also visited the Dacca Biennale and gave a presentation at the conference. Carol Lu, in a review of the Beijing Biennale, noted that, “. . . the idea for the first Beijing International Art Biennale was born out of a feeling of being left behind by a less-developed country.”⁷ Soon after their return to China, Wang Yong worked out a proposal and submitted it to the CAA. With the CAA’s approval and support, the proposal was re-submitted to the central government and was ratified as an official project. It is necessary to take a close look at the proposal itself and examine the strategy and language that Wang Yong applied to propose and legitimize the necessity of the biennale project. In this proposal, entitled “Suggestions on Preparing the Beijing International Art Biennale, China,” Wang Yong begins:

Considering the strategic status of China in the development of global culture, if China wants to lead the direction of the cultural development in the contemporary world and contribute to the Eastern renaissance and the progress of human civilization in the twenty-first century, one of the most important cultural strategies to take is to hold a large scale international biennial.⁸

The proposal proceeds in detail through several scenarios, explaining the significance and urgency of holding the Beijing Biennale. The first scenario focuses on issues related to the Dacca Biennale, including government support, institutional sponsorship, the involvement of political leaders, and the increasing international cultural profile achieved by the Dacca Biennale. It emphasized that “most of the developing countries in the East are confronted with the challenges from the economic globalization and the invasion of Western culture,” and “representatives from various nations have come to a common understanding in terms of how to confront the challenges, how to carry on native art traditions, and how to develop Eastern contemporary art.”⁹ It concludes that:

Most artists from developing countries have high expectations for China to have an international art biennial. From my opinion, thinking that a small and not-rich country like Bangladesh has consistently held ten runs of the Biennale, we the magnificent China have every reason to hold the Beijing Biennale in order to live up to the hope of most artists from developing countries.¹⁰

In the second scenario, Wang Yong concentrates on the function of the international biennial. Taking a few well-established ones including the Venice Biennale, the Sao Paulo Biennial, the Sydney Biennial, and the Istanbul Biennial as examples, he argues that the international biennial as a form of art display has become one of the most effective ways of fostering international cultural communication.¹¹ In the third scenario, which is the pivotal part of the proposal, he elaborates what the Beijing Biennale can bring to China. As summarized below, he argues that by holding the Beijing Biennale:

1. China can exert significant influence in the development of a balanced world culture with multicultural tendencies and demonstrate strength in contemporary cultural competition.
2. China can occupy an advantageous position in the global cultural sphere. Chinese artists who have participated in biennials in Western countries often have to struggle with Western curators' ideological or political prejudice. With the Beijing Biennale, we hold the cultural initiative and can decide the exhibition theme, selection, evaluation standard, or "the rules of game."
3. China can promote international cultural exchange. Particularly, we can emphasize contemporary art from vast developing countries, which share similar challenges and opportunities with China in their progress toward modernization.
4. China can further boost Beijing, the political and cultural centre of China, into one of the global contemporary art centers and the base for a new renaissance of Chinese culture and Eastern culture as a whole.¹²

After illuminating the cultural and political significance of holding the Beijing Biennale, Wang Yong does a brief analysis of China's economic strength, Beijing's cultural facilities, art research capacities, and its organizational resources for a large-scale international exhibition. He concludes that with all necessary resources, Beijing is ready to hold its first international art biennial.

In this carefully structured proposal, attention is centred on points that evoke nationalistic sentiment and cultural pride among its readers, the top-ranking officials in the central government. This sentiment corresponds to the revival of Chinese nationalism, and, especially, the surge of cultural nationalism that has been circulating in Chinese society since the 1990s. As many scholars have noted, the Chinese state has greatly promoted cultural nationalism as one way to legitimize and maintain the Communist regime in contemporary China, where tremendous social transformation has occurred, and where Maoist ideology has lost its appeal.¹³ This nationalism, when it comes to official international relationships, is evident in the government's investment in promoting China's global profile, international recognition, and status.¹⁴ The above account might have been the major reason that Wang Yong's proposal was approved and the Beijing Biennale was soon placed on the governmental agenda.

After the proposal gained approval from the central government, the CAA became the executive organization and took full charge of the event. It set up the large curatorial committee that was responsible for deciding the theme and selecting the artwork, as well as the Beijing International Art Biennale Office, which took care of all other concrete operational processes. The Biennale turned into a project that was fully supported by the government and involved the enthusiastic engagement of the official art establishment.

THE POLITICS OF THE INTERNATIONAL BIENNIAL

The international art world has experienced dynamic transformation and reconfiguration since the 1980s, and, particularly, in the 1990s under the impact of rapid globalization, the belief in multiculturalism, and the convenience of transnational travel and information exchange. Most spectacular is the emergence of large-scale exhibitions at the global level. Accompanied by and interrelated with a series of new phenomena in the art world, among them the development of a global curatorial discourse, the increasing collaboration of art and non-art categories such as information technology and computer science and the rise of contemporary art from non-Western countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, this movement has resulted in a proliferation of international exhibitions.¹⁵ A number of international exhibitions located outside of the West, such as the Havana Biennale, the Istanbul Biennial, the Johannesburg Biennale, the Kwangju Biennale, the Shanghai Biennale, and the Yokohama Triennale, have become new sites for the formation and meaning of contemporary art. They are actively diverting attention away from the monopolies of a few well-established Western exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale and documenta in previous years.

International exhibitions, especially in the form of biennials, have become an increasingly popular mode of cultural communication across national boundaries. As pointed out by art critic Michael Brenson, biennials worldwide have brought up pressing issues such as nationalism versus transnationalism, indigenous cultures versus global culture, and handmade traditions versus technological networks and have thus claimed an important status in our contemporary cultural life.¹⁶ In practice, the international biennial is gaining more and more attention from various cultural institutions and art organizations, and its capacity for mobilization is well recognized by its host cities or countries throughout the world. This exhibition format has been considered by many to be an important indicator in determining the status and visibility of art from a particular country or a city within the global map of contemporary art. Simply put, having an international biennial has almost become a symbol that one's culture is contemporary.

The Beijing Biennale should be seen as one among many recent biennials that have been established throughout key cities in the non-Western world that are aiming to promote the visibility of local art and to play a part in contemporary cultural exchanges on an international level. Indeed, the Chinese Ministry of Culture's interest and investment in the international art biennial is a very recent thing; it was first shown in the third Shanghai Biennale, in 2000, in the 2002 Sao Paulo Biennial, and then in the first Chinese pavilion for the fiftieth Venice Biennale, in 2003. It could be surmised that the efforts being invested in biennials are actually active responses to the changing domestic and international landscape of art. More directly, as pointed out by Wang Yong in his proposal, it is a response to the increasingly important status of the international biennial as a promotional forum in today's art circuits.

This interest in an international profile could also be attributed to the new style of government in recent years in China, which is becoming more adaptable and outward looking. Out of a desire to be heard within the international community, China is taking a great interest in participating in all kinds of international activities. This can be perceived as the primary motivation for the authorities to sanction the proposal for the Beijing Biennale as well as other international exhibitions in the past few years. In this sense, I agree with Karen Smith, a close observer of Chinese contemporary art and exhibitions, when she commented that "such exhibition events are part of China's proactive drive to get on cultural track with the rest of the world."¹⁷

This Chinese governmental strategy has been fully embraced by the Beijing Biennale organizers. In all official materials distributed by the CAA informing domestic audiences of its undertaking of the Beijing Biennale, emphasis is placed upon the desire and impetus for China to go global and for Chinese art to be a (significant) part of the global art world. An article entitled “About Art Biennales” in a published brochure for the Biennale contains this paragraph: “Holding a biennial is the symbol of comprehensive national power as well as placing emphasis on the status of a national and local culture.”¹⁸ Giving the Biennale such high status and associating it with national power and national culture, the CAA justifies itself to receive generous funding from the state and is able to establish the Beijing Biennale as a standing program. The article then attributes to the Beijing Biennale many functions—from global to local and from economic to cultural—echoing the government’s interests, either for practical purposes such as potential tourism, or for ideological and cultural ones, such as maintaining its reputation as one of the largest countries in the world and thus enhancing China’s global profile.¹⁹

Among all these proposed functions, what is of particular relevance to the domestic art scene is described as “winning the initiative rights of voices in the cultural circles of the world.”²⁰ This quote expresses a contested issue in Chinese art circles in recent years and refers to the increasing number of Chinese artists who have been invited to show in international exhibitions held outside of China. At the centre of the debate is whether Chinese artists have been fairly presented or merely invited to represent a prefabricated and prejudiced image of Chinese art held by international curators, in particular, Western ones.²¹ One common understanding, agreed upon by differing groups within Chinese art communities, is that to merely participate in international exhibitions is inevitably to fall into the disadvantageous status of being chosen, but holding an international exhibition will provide China with the right to choose its own art and artists. In all press releases and printed materials, the Beijing Biennale has been ascribed significance because of its association with the gaining of this power of initiative and choice.

The desire to have this power—the right not only to be selected, but also to be a sponsor who selects—in forming an international network for cultural communication and exchange has become an important concern for China, evident in its recent efforts to join the international circuit and to be part of the globalized world. As in business and science, the state has demonstrated a commitment to achieving international recognition and to promoting the status of China in other domains. The exceptional efforts invested to win the bids first by Beijing for the 2008 Olympic Games and then by Shanghai for the 2010 World Expo are examples.

This is the point where the CAA meets the interest of the state. In order to further demonstrate and legitimize the necessity of hosting an international event such as the Beijing Biennale, the CAA made a connection between the third Beijing Biennale and the Beijing Olympics: “During the 29th Olympic Games in Beijing, 2008, Beijing will hold the third biennial, which undoubtedly will become a helpful promotion for the realization of the concept of humanistic Olympics. . . . [The] Beijing International Art Biennale will inevitably become an organic component of the cultural construction of the Olympics.”²² It is clear that the CAA’s endeavour to assemble an international biennial has fully brought the trend of nationalistic and cultural sentiment into the art world. In all the statements about the definition, status, and function of the biennial, the CAA apparently aims to create a cultural, political, national, and international significance for its new undertaking.

THE REALITY OF CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Aside from the apparent nationalistic motivation, however, the CAA has its own motivation in establishing the Beijing Biennale, which can be understood only in light of the specific context and power structure of the art world in China. The Beijing Biennale is not merely an exhibition arising from the impetus of cultural nationalism. It is also an attempt to maintain the established power structure within the “official” Chinese art world, where the CAA has traditionally played a major role. It is an effort by the CAA to compete for primacy in the art world against a newly consolidated establishment in contemporary China—the increasingly aggressive presence of various artistic groups formed by independent curators, critics, and the increasing number of artists who have chosen not to have an affiliation with the CAA but who have managed to achieve considerable support from the cultural authorities, local government, or various international art communities.

As is repeatedly emphasized in official press releases and in curators’ interviews, the Beijing Biennale does not adopt the format of the international biennial as a wholesale category. It takes the name, the large scale, and the internationality, hoping to inherit the reputation that the international biennial has gained. In the meantime, it rejects the well-known features of international biennials such as focusing on new and experimental mediums and employing independent star curators. The Beijing Biennale limits itself only to painting and sculpture, and enlists a large collective curatorial committee of thirty members.

As a result, the Beijing Biennale appears rather conservative to both domestic and international contemporary art communities. The most debated aspect of the Beijing Biennale is the inconsistency between its desire for “contemporaneity” and “originality” and its emphasis on two traditional art forms, painting and sculpture. As explained by the organizers, this is a strategy to create an international biennial with Chinese characteristics in order to differentiate it from numerous other international biennials. The coordinator, Tao Qin, explained the organizational strategy:

There are over one hundred biennials around the globe. We hope that the Beijing Biennale can stand out fresh and unique by stressing the importance of painting and sculpture. . . . Because all other biennials focus too much on new forms of contemporary art, we want to be different from them and construct our own characteristics.²³

Certainly, it is easy to point out the arbitrary nature of this account. Painting and sculpture cannot be credited as the creation of China, especially when a large portion of the paintings on show are not even Chinese painting, and sculpture was not regarded as high art until the twentieth century in China. Therefore, painting and sculpture really have nothing that can necessarily be characterized as Chinese.

Another more convincing explanation is an account offered by Wang Yong, which focuses on pragmatic reasons for the emphasis on painting and sculpture:

Other formats—such as performance art and video art—are difficult to control. Beijing is the political centre and is sensitive. Also, ordinary people do not



Liu Liyun, *Landscape Scroll*, 2004, white silk and cotton, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Beijing Biennale.

accept them. After all, this is the first run. We decided to have only painting and sculptures after taking many elements into consideration. We want to be safe and have a try first.²⁴

Remembering that the budget of the biennial comes entirely from the government, it is reasonable to be cautious about political correctness and safety in order to secure further funding. However, the notion that most Chinese audiences only accept painting and sculpture seems questionable. The Chinese population, especially the educated population, has changed significantly, as have their tastes and interests in art. The urban population in China, those who closely connect themselves with new developments of the contemporary world in the areas of culture, fashion, and life styles, is growing very fast. Serious studies on what Chinese audiences really appreciate in art exhibitions have yet to be done.

From a historical point of view, this limitation of medium without thematic or conceptual justification makes the Beijing Biennale appear to be conservative relative to other recently established biennials that often showcase contemporary art, thus lessening its claim to be “contemporary.”²⁵ The most salient characteristic of contemporary art is the disappearance of boundaries between different art formats and the hybridization of whatever mediums or materials are available. Many artists and critics attribute the limitation to the CAA’s outmoded concepts of major exhibitions, its misunderstanding of international biennials, and its position as a state cultural entity. Karen Smith demonstrates her understanding of the CAA’s dilemma in receiving funding from the state, but nonetheless attributes the conservatism to their readiness to surrender to state control. She says:

Responsibility for the resulting mediocrity must rest squarely on the shoulders of the organizing committee, whose vision revealed little grasp of the state of contemporary art, locally or globally, of what to convey to a local audience in meaningful terms about the significance of a biennale in general, or of what this could mean for China and Beijing as an internationally respected city of culture.²⁶



Xia Tian, *National Sorrow*, 2004, steel, 50 x 150 x 130 cm. Courtesy of the Beijing Biennale.

Such criticism is popular among both domestic and international critics who disagreed with the approach of the Biennale. Carol Lu asserts this in more straightforward terms: “The Chinese Artists Association is reputedly conservative, ill-informed, and disapproving of mediums other than painting and sculpture.”²⁷

I am no less suspicious of these convenient accusations against the Beijing Biennale than I am of the Biennale’s own self-congratulatory narrative about its pursuit of a sense of uniqueness among the family of international biennials. Instead of simply seeing the Beijing Biennale as a product of the ignorance of the CAA, I view it as a self-interested and self-protective program carefully planned to meet the needs of this organization itself. The key here is to understand the nature of the CAA not only as a state cultural entity, but also as an established art institution in its own right, an institution that strives to sustain itself and maintain its pre-1990s status as the authority of the Chinese art world.

The choice to focus on painting and sculpture is not made out of ignorance and is not an unconsciously conservative practice. What is really at stake here is not simply art forms, but the creation of a structure whereby the CAA legitimizes itself and exerts its own right. As is well known, the CAA is an organization dominated by artists, most of whom have been trained in an art education system that emphasizes Socialist Realism and values the importance of figurative representation. Painting and sculpture have been the two primary focuses in the various art academies in China, whose graduates have been the recruiting repertoire for the CAA. There are a small number of art critics and art historians in the organization who have long established their taste and receptivity exclusively within the field of painting and sculpture. In other words, we can say that most members of the CAA are versed in evaluating and assessing painting and sculpture. However, when it comes to contemporary art such as video, installation, and performance, they are not well versed in assessing it. This is the essential reason that the CAA would, to the disappointment of thriving domestic contemporary art communities, place a ban on contemporary media in the Beijing Biennale.

Unfortunately, this choice does not seem to take into account the exploration of new initiatives and ideas within contemporary art. On the contrary, it is a result of inward-looking decisions that arise from the desire to maintain the juridical right within the resources of the CAA. The Biennale is constructed as a new platform where established rules of assessment and aesthetic standards can be applied and maintained in spite of a rapidly transforming and reconfigured domestic art world.

Maneuvered as a product of nationalistic sentiment and global desire, the first Beijing Biennale reflected an investment that was shared by some state decision-makers, art officials from the CAA, and many artists. Regrettably, its significance cannot be determined by examining what kind of new art or new concepts of art it introduces. Critical engagement with contemporary art was not the purpose of the first Beijing Biennale. Nevertheless, the Beijing Biennale introduced a new international exhibition format into the very heart of the old art establishment in China, the CAA. From this perspective, many art professionals in China, even those with reservations about the approach of the first Beijing Biennale, seem to possess a positive attitude toward the Biennale itself. For example, independent curator Gu Zhenqing, who curated a concurrent independent show outside the official sites of the Beijing Biennale, put it this way: “The first Beijing Biennale is a good start, as it shows the Beijing municipal government’s support for a biennial. After two or three times’ runs, it is possible for the Beijing Biennale to develop into a real international biennial.”²⁸ Denying that the Beijing Biennale was truly international, Gu nonetheless appreciates the significance of the event itself.²⁹ Gu’s remark echoes what Wang Yong said: “At least we established the Beijing Biennale, and it will live on as an institution subject to reform in the future.”³⁰

Judging from the response that the first Beijing Biennale received, it is clear that the CAA has not yet fully achieved the potential that this new international exhibition could achieve, such as updating its image from a conservative organization, regaining its credibility within an increasingly diverse art world, and genuinely connecting itself to the international art world.³¹ The successful realization of this depends upon whether the CAA can move beyond its long tradition of a self-serving practice, update its fixed perception of the meaning and function of art, and launch a wider view in its representation of contemporary art.

To be fair, this possibility does exist. In the second Beijing Biennale in 2005, works that were included as sculpture but could well be considered installation were featured, and some even won awards. For example, artist Liu Liyun’s *Landscape Scroll*, which won her the Award for Young Chinese Artist (and which created a scandal because her father, Liu Dawei, was one of the chief curators of the Biennale and Head of the CAA), consisted of twenty pieces of low-relief scrolls in various sizes hanging on the wall and soft three-dimensional objects, also in different sizes, suspended above the ground creating an atmosphere of traditional Chinese landscape painting presented with a contemporary sensibility. Another artist, Xia Tian, used metal to create *National Sorrow*, an experimental work that expressed the aesthetic quality of classical freehand brushwork, in particular the so-called *feibai* (flying white), through a combination of various modern metalwork technologies. Therefore, even though, in 2005, the curatorial committee was still advocating emphasis on painting and sculpture as a national characteristic, one has every reason to doubt the sustainability of this claim when non-traditional mediums are increasing their influence in the Chinese art world and, most importantly, when the long-held concept of art itself is being challenged within the CAA itself.

As Beijing is getting ready for the upcoming 2008 Olympics, the CAA is also pulling its efforts together for the third Beijing Biennale. This third Beijing Biennale was scheduled to coincide with, contribute to, and draw momentum from the Olympics. Its concurrence with the Olympics was conceived as early as 2002 when the leading members of the CAA were actively pursuing

the state's sanction and funding to establish the Beijing Biennale as an official project. Certainly, this planned-for connection between the Beijing Biennale and the Olympics was carefully constructed to legitimize the necessity of hosting such an international exhibition and to increase its significance. The theme of the upcoming third Biennale, Colors and Olympism, is apparently an effort that fulfills the promise that the Biennale was also conceived as an integral component of the Olympics.³² We will have to wait to see how much that is truly relevant to art will be invested in this event and to what extent the Beijing Biennale will contribute to the development of contemporary art in China.

Notes

- ¹ Founded in 1949, a few months before the founding of the People's Republic of China, the CAA was established for the Chinese Communist Party to institutionalize disparate artistic groups under a unified political ideology. As the only national organization of artists, art historians, and critics, it is headquartered in the political and cultural center of China, Beijing, and has nationwide branches at every administrative level. For many years, the CAA has been in charge of the production, interpretation, and promotion of art in China, and its dominance has been strongly exerted in the Chinese art world.
- ² Feng Yuan was the director of the Art Bureau at the Ministry of Culture, Jin Shangyi was chairman of the CAA, and Liu Dawei was the executive vice chairman of the CAA.
- ³ The National Art Work Exhibition is the CAA's major exhibition project, which runs once every five years. It has been regarded as the largest and most significant official exhibition in China.
- ⁴ These artists were all brought in by the only foreign curator, Vincenzo Sanfo, so their inclusion very likely has a great deal to do with his personal taste. However, these figures were not new to the Chinese audience at all. They had actually been introduced into China before and they have enjoyed a high reputation and popularity.
- ⁵ Li Shuo, "Art gala debuts in Beijing," *China Daily*, September 12, 2003.
- ⁶ Established in 1981, the Dacca Biennale is also known as the Asian Art Bangladesh Biennale.
- ⁷ Carol Lu, "First Beijing Biennale," *Flash Art* 36 (November/December 2003), 41.
- ⁸ Wang Yong, "Guanyu Chouban Zhongguo Beijing Guoji Yishu Shuangnianzhan de Jianyi" [Suggestions on Planning the Beijing International Art Biennale, China], in *Transplantation and Variation* (Beijing: Chinese People's University Press, 2005), 344.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 345.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 345–46.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 346–47.
- ¹³ For more discussion on this issue, see Guo Yingjie, *Cultural Nationalism In Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity Under Reform* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).
- ¹⁴ For detailed discussions about the revival of Chinese nationalism in the 1990s and its effect in China's international relationships, see Wang Gungwu, *The Revival of Chinese Nationalism* (Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies, 1996) and Zheng Yongnian, *Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China: Modernization, Identity, and International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- ¹⁵ Tim Griffin, "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition," *Artforum* 42, no. 3 (November 2003), 152–67. Also see Charlotte Bydler, *The Global ArtWorld INC: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2004), 96.
- ¹⁶ Michael Brenson, "The Curator's Moment," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (winter 1998): 17.
- ¹⁷ Karen Smith, "Review of the Inaugural Beijing Biennale," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 2, no. 4 (winter 2003), 88–90.
- ¹⁸ *The First Beijing International Art Biennale, China 2003*, official brochure edited by Beijing International Art Biennale Office, 1.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Since the 1990s, a few Chinese curators have mounted some influential exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in the international world and have greatly formed or reshaped western understanding of Chinese art. However, the discussion of this issue in China often refers to exhibitions of Chinese art curated by western curators.
- ²² "Brief Introduction of Beijing International Art Biennale," in *The First Beijing International Art Biennale, China 2003*, 4.
- ²³ Quoted from Li Shuo, "Art Gala Debuts in Beijing," *China Daily*, September 12, 2003.
- ²⁴ Canran, "Shuangnianzhan, Shui Shouyi?" [Biennial, Who Is Benefited?], *Xinwen Zhoukan* [China News Week], 153, October 27, 2003.
- ²⁵ It should be noted here that a medium itself such as painting or sculpture does not necessary equals being conservative. There are other non-conservative international exhibitions focusing on individual mediums, but they often do so to be well focused and to explore innovative ways of a particular medium being practiced.
- ²⁶ Karen Smith, 88.
- ²⁷ Carol Lu, "First Beijing Biennale," *Flash Art*, vol.36 (November/December, 2003), 41.
- ²⁸ Quoted from Fei Banren, "Yibaner shi Kangfen, Yibaner shi Ganga—Zhuanfang Beijing Shuangnianzhan 'Waiweizhan' Duli Cezhanren Gu Zhenqing" [half excitement, half embarrassment—interview with the independent curator Gu Zhenqing, the curator of one concurrent independent exhibition of the Beijing Biennale], *Guoji Xianqu Daobao* [International Herald Leader], December 18, 2003.
- ²⁹ The real international quality, as implied by Gu, means showing artworks of all kinds of contemporary mediums.
- ³⁰ Personal interview with Wang Yong, July 23, 2005.
- ³¹ The inaugural Beijing Biennale does make its appearance in a number of major international art journals such as *Art in America*, *Art Asia Pacific*, *Flash Art*, *Modern Painters*, and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* in 2003. However, all of these publications featured a brief introduction to the show without extensive coverage or in depth discussion, except for Karen Smith's text that appeared in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*.
- ³² This theme was released at the first press conference of the third Beijing Biennale in February 14, 2007.