

Copyleft:  
中国挪用艺术

项苙莘

Copyleft:  
Appropriation Art  
in China

Xiang Liping

## Introduction

I worked on the proposal for an international exhibition about “reproduction,” gathering various grand masters of “appropriation” from China and abroad. During the curation and preparation process for the 10th Shanghai Biennale in 2012, I had a discussion on this topic with Boris Groys, one of the Biennale’s curators. He suggested that I remove the international section, arguing that Chinese appropriation art was sufficient and interesting enough by itself. I initially had some doubts about using “appropriation art,” a terminology rooted in the West, to describe a Chinese artistic phenomenon, but after some consideration I accepted Groys’ suggestion, because appropriation art is already a widely known concept and term, after all, and there’s no need to be overly caught up on its origins.

Simply speaking, appropriation art is a creative approach that involves directly using ready-made objects, images and artworks for artistic production. It originated with the Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism of the early 20th century, gaining prominence in the Pop Art era of the 1960s, and was a notable feature of post-1980s avant-garde art.<sup>1</sup> This “appropriation” approach had an important impact on Chinese contemporary art, and most Chinese artists have employed it to some extent. Chinese artists have not only accepted this Western concept and method without hesitation, they have also continued to develop it creatively.

In contemporary society, the phenomenon of Shanzhai-“copycat”-pervades every sphere, and plagiarism never ends. When we look back at the origins of Chinese contemporary art, the accusation that it worships the West incessantly lingers; when we reflect on the development of Chinese classical art, we may see that relentless imitation of predecessors and following the same old groove are labels that have been commonly placed on Literati painting since the late Qing Dynasty. In light of these facts, one can’t help but wonder: what is the real reason the Western “appropriation” approach seems to fit China so particularly well? Are Chinese really what Westerners accuse us of being-disrespectful of copyright, with no sense of innovation? Are the current phenomena of Shanzhai and artistic plagiarism in China related to the tradition of Linmo-copying-that has historically existed in Chinese art? If Westerners can make attempts at total “appropriation” with no concern for copyright, why can’t Chinese practice Shanzhai, which at least involves making changes to the original work? Will an excess of reproduction and reproduced works affect the continued creative progress of art?

Based on these lines of thought, this exhibition proposes the concept of “Appropriation Art in China” for the first time. Through analyzing creative phenomena related to appropriation in Chinese contemporary art practice, I have expanded and altered the Western concept of appropriation art, integrating appropriation-linmo, a Chinese artistic tradition that has existed since ancient times-and Shanzhai, this phenomenon that is so prominent in the present age, with the intention of elaborating a concept of “Appropriation Art in China” that links the past

---

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia. “Appropriation Art.”

with the present. Appropriation art in China, then, consists of at least three phenomena: linmo, which is related to Chinese traditional art; appropriation, which is related to modern art and the contemporary art of the West; and Shanzhai, which has connections to contemporary society. By looking at the creative practices related to these phenomena within Chinese contemporary art, and by discussing the interactions between different approaches to artistic production and new technologies and materials; repetition and creativity or originality; intellectual property and the sharing and inheritance of knowledge, I attempt to render apparent the differences between the Chinese and Western concepts of appropriation.

The exhibition title, Copyleft, comes from the GNU General Public License (GNU GPL or GPL), which is the most widely used free software licensing agreement, and employs the Copyleft terms of use to guarantee end users that their rights to use, study, share (copy), and modify the software are preserved.<sup>2</sup> Here, Copyleft is used to represent three manifestations of copying (linmo, appropriation, and shanzhai) that occupy a common ground, and signifies both "the right to copy" (or copyright conflict) and "creating a copy" (producing a resemblance).

## Life and Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction

Inspired by Walter Benjamin, my original intention in taking up this topic was to focus on the transformative influence digital reproduction technologies have had on our way of life and our artistic production. In *Illuminations*, Benjamin set the age of mechanical production as a background to explore the ways "art" and its products go through qualitative and quantitative changes, throughout historical processes, due to the development of new tools for artistic production, as well as the way this process permeates the domain of culture, redefining the powers that reside within it. In Benjamin's intellectually incisive introduction, we glimpse the sequences of events whereby various art forms have evolved into their contemporary incarnations, as well as into their more ambiguous, obscure aspects following their integration with scientific technology. The *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), in particular, is Benjamin's most frequently cited essay, and has had enormous influence within the realms of cultural analysis and media theory.<sup>3</sup>

In Plato's day, art was known to possess a sacred might: it did not only drive people to ecstasy, but was also so powerful that it could shake the foundation of cities; therefore, Plato insisted that poets and artists should be exiled. In the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin mourned, art had lost its "aura," its uniqueness. In my 2011 proposal, with an eye to Benjamin's "age of mechanical reproduction," I raised the concept of the "age of digital reproduction," while pondering the question: in the age of digital reproduction, what can art still do for humankind?

---

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, "Copyleft."

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Xu Giling and Lin Zhiming (China: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2004)

In comparison to Benjamin's age of mechanical reproduction, the digital age in which we are presently situated has more advanced scientific technologies and reproductive methods—an updated version of a “reproductive age.” It is unnecessary to mention the ubiquity of the copy/paste functions ctrl+c and ctrl-v in computing; with these technologies, man-made matters can attain a degree of complexity that resembles that of nature, and pass themselves off as organically genuine. We can reproduce life without sexual intercourse, construct virtual 3-D spaces, and bring Pharaohs' tombs and the frescoes inside the Mogao Grottoes into view. We have all seen copies of the Mona Lisa before we visit the Louvre; people around the world, in very different communities, use the same products, from the same brands. Reproduction (duplication, imitation) is our way of life, our means of recreation, and our method of production (like the mass production on an assembly line), and, particularly in the discourse of post-modern art, reproduction is even read as a way of creation.

In the age of digital reproduction, it is not only artists who are masters of “appropriation”; in fact, most of us participate, to some extent, in “Copyleft,” “appropriation,” and Shanzhai—consider the copying and pasting of pictures and texts on the internet, the purchasing of pirate copies of DVDs and replicas, the performances of contestants in various imitation shows wherein they start with imitation and aim at creation... unlike people in the ages of manual or even mechanical reproduction, Netizens of our time often download whatever they find pleasing to their eye, however they wish, even if they never end up consuming it; it does not take up any space, demands no effort, and entails no loss. All essays are plagiarized, and now this does not even take any effort beyond a simple process of “copying” and “pasting”; the crux of the matter is the ease with which information can be “searched,” which requires no more than typing keywords and pressing “enter.” No longer are we required to spend a great deal of time on thousands of hard copy books, for the internet has opened up a vaster, more convenient archive for our perusal. Of course, the search for information and the ability to select what is most relevant is still crucial, and therefore the prominent Italian scholar and writer, Umberto Eco, has stated, “This is not the end of the book ... if you don't know how to read and write, you cannot use a computer.”<sup>4</sup>

It is increasingly clear that the advent and prevalence of technology has altered our modes of thinking and reshaped our behavioral patterns. Technological progress has made what were once exclusive and luxury services available to ordinary households; to take the case of portrait production, ordinary people could rarely afford to hire the services of a professional painter, and film photography used to be a luxurious practice. Today, however, the invention of digital photography has made it possible for almost everyone to take pictures anywhere and anytime, as one pleases, and even to retouch them. Therefore, technology has made the present day into an age of “folk celebrities.”

Back in the heyday of television, Andy Warhol predicted that everyone would have a chance

---

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Philippe de Tonnac, ed. *The is Not the End of Book: A Conversation Between Carrière and Eco*, trans. Wu Yaling (China: Guangxi Normal University Press: 2010)

at fifteen minutes of fame. This is even truer today, as smartphones are omnipresent. In the era of Web 3.0, everyone can release information to the public at any time as long as they have a smartphone, and are guaranteed to be heard so long as the content they produce is relevant or has some “wow” factor. Winning instant fame has become common, even by speaking to street-side vagabonds like the famous Chinese internet celebrity Brother Sharp, who enjoyed popularity for some time. Furthermore, it is not only humans that can rise to fame, but also our pets, echoing the old Chinese saying, “When a man attains the Tao, even his pets ascend to heaven.”

The popularization of technology has, to a considerable extent, satisfied the human tendency to show off. When collectors in ancient China acquired works by famous artists, they would leave remarks in the margins of the paintings. When a painting changed hands and a new collector could find no more space to add remarks, he or she would paste another layer of Xuan paper on top in order to leave a note. This act of leaving comments on paintings by famous artists obviously indicates a desire to “show off” their possession of such a treasure, and to flaunt their taste and elegance, which, moreover, allowed their names to go down in history along with celebrated works and artists. Doesn't today's culture of “following” on the internet closely resemble these ancient Chinese collectors' actions of leaving remarks, stamps, and signatures? People can express their various opinions, writing hyperbolic judgments on the same “famous post,” without wasting any paper or effort, or earning a bad name for damaging public property, as did Qing Dynasty Emperor Qianlong. Besides being able to follow others, people can also make their own “posts,” without being shy about their bad handwriting, as typing will do the trick. Ancient collectors, on the other hand, had to weigh their own hand-writing and literary talents against their desire to leave their commentaries on notable artworks; without any calligraphic training, or any knowledge of poetic proses, how could one dare to willfully scrawl on a precious work? Today, it is quite simple for people to make all kinds of notes and displays regarding, for instance, clothing, cuisine, and any form of social networking-then they can just wait for their friends' “likes” and replies expressing envy, jealousy or hatred, along with the equally inevitable taunts. On this note, “Chuanyuekong” who would prefer to return to simpler times should reflect on how pleasant it would really be for them to travel back to a bygone day, which would require more than a few sacrifices: warm showers, comfortable bedding, and the luxury of air-conditioning, not to mention the almighty internet and smartphones.

Today's internet society has made the acquisition of knowledge exceptionally easy; the transformation from amateur to expert through self-instruction becomes a commonplace, and the internet is swiftly wiping out our learned fortresses of information and confidence. On the plane of reality, the internet has allowed us to easily grasp knowledge and skill, while on the psychological plane, it gradually builds the concept of equality with only minor domination and compliance issues. It is not only the evolution of our devices, but also this change in the nature of information and the confidence we have in it. In *The Wealth of Nations*, the perspicacious Adam Smith observes, “The difference of natural talents in different men, is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of

different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labor.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, due to the omnipresence of technology and the increased reality of leisure time, in the future, the creative spirit of not only the professional but also the amateur will be inspired. The internet can bring together scattered amateurs with shared interests, enabling the realization of any ethos or idea. For instance, Linux and Baidu Baike (Baidu Encyclopedia) allow people with shared interests to complete major joint projects, precisely through these “weak connections.”<sup>6</sup>

Before continuing with the discussion of the age of digital reproduction, we must review the state of affairs in the ages of manual and mechanical reproduction. The master Velázquez can be used as an example: this prominent Spanish court painter completed his masterpiece *Las Meninas*, now at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, back in 1656—a painting centered around the young Princess Margaret, depicting the daily life in the Spanish court. In the same year, Velázquez painted another portrait of Margaret, with almost the same pose, attire and hairstyle, and which he named *Infanta Margarita Teresa in White Dress* (this painting is now held at the Kunsthistorisches Museum). Because of her marriage to Austrian royalty (her husband was the King of Habsburg, Leopold I), her paintings were regularly delivered to the Austrian court, as a report on the princess’s development.

In Velázquez’s age of manual reproduction, no matter how prestigious the status he enjoyed, or how unwilling he might be, he had no choice but to repaint another portrait of the princess, stroke by stroke, when asked—the precise reason he was allowed to live at court, and in such favor. If this were Benjamin’s age of mechanical reproduction, people would simply photograph the princess and then develop an extra copy of the picture to deliver to the Austrian Court. In the present age of digital reproduction, people merely need to take a picture with a digital camera, and send a carbon copy through email, whose scale is even greater, as it costs almost nothing and is convenient to an unprecedented degree.

It is commonly known that the invention of photography almost led to the “death” of painting, and one of its consequences was the reduced necessity for artists to paint directly from nature; now they more frequently go out for site visits, without beginning to paint until after returning to their studios, using photographs they have taken as their source materials (some artists go as far as using a projector to enlarge their photos on a canvas or screen, upon which they paint by tracing the contours of the projection). Then came the advent of internet technology, which allowed artists to search for and download various materials online, without having to physically leave their studios for site visits or to take pictures, when dealing with inconvenient locations or inclement weather; this is the case even outer space, or other places and things that were once impossible to witness or approach. Inevitably, the practice of searching for images online, downloading them, and printing them out for creative use has become prevalent among a significant number of artists. For instance, Zeng Fanzhi used *Snow Leopard*, a photographic work by American photographer Steve Winter, as the source material for his own work, *Leopard*. Another example is Yang Zhenzhong, whose

---

5 A Gan, *Revolution in Production Way*. China: Citic Press, 2009

6 A Gan, *Revolution in Production Way*. China: Citic Press, 2009

*CC Gallery* series consists of images of famous contemporary works of photography, downloaded directly from the internet and boldly printed on scales that match the originals, while labeling each work with information like its original title, size, and even price (i.e., the auction price Yang found by searching online).

Thus, it becomes clear to us that the production and acquisition of an image has become increasingly effortless; the degree of complexity of this production and acquisition, just like the quality of the image, can also impact the effect the image has on its viewers. For example, during the primordial stages of painting, by which I mean the age of primitive mural and cave paintings, most artwork involved depictions of various animal figures, due to the belief that painters could seize the spirits of those animals through their paintings, thereby making their hunting a much easier task. People of that time, then, must have believed that those who could paint possessed some miraculous power. Today, on the other hand, we have become inured to the classic works of history because most of these circulate both on- and offline in the form of replicas, and because almost any kind of image, whether of the universe on a grand scale or of small earthly matters, can be acquired with ease over the internet. From manual reproduction to digital reproduction, rare to the ordinary, difficult to easy, all of these changes have robbed images of the magical power they once possessed. As mentioned previously, most of us have seen the Mona Lisa's famously mysterious smile long before we visit the Louvre, and there even exist various "mocking" versions of Duchamp and Mike Bidlo's works, as well as plenty of DIY versions created by netizens. Meanwhile, the Mona Lisa we see in the Louvre may not be the original, but a replica, a difference that would be undetectable to an amateur.

Turning to the age of mechanical reproduction, consider works like Duchamp's *Fountain*: regardless of how long the urinal had previously existed, the work nevertheless caused wonder, leaving the art world and the public in no small shock, and even a kind of terror. Duchamp's *Fountain* upset the elegance and sophistication of female beauty that Ingres' original work of the same title had conveyed, changed existing aesthetic conventions, smashed the boundaries between art and life, expanded the parameters of art, and brought new meanings into being. Furthermore, the work questioned the novelty-obsessed logic of modern art: does creation only refer to a thorough kind of production that involves dismantling what exists and starting all over? Can a reproducible and replaceable object become a work of art that symbolizes creativity and uniqueness? As Agamben points out, Duchamp "transformed an object from its state of reproducibility and irreplaceability to that of authenticity and uniqueness—at least in a short period of time during which its alienating effect lasted."<sup>7</sup> Speaking of issues of reproduction, replication, and creativity, the city of Paris' Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition titled *Second Hand* in 2011. This exhibition showcased a series of works, produced since the 1960s, that employed reproduction as their primary creative mode. The museum's director, Fabrice Hergott, has stated that "the attempt at confining creativity to the production of a unique work is ignorant... the replicas are more subversive and creative than how they look." Soren Kierkegaard also believed that "the new" doesn't signify the existence

---

7 Giorgio Abamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Du Keke, (China: Terrific Room, 2015): 73

of difference; instead, “the new” implies the difference of non-difference, or the difference that exceeds difference—a kind of difference that remains indistinguishable to us, as it is not related to any existing structural motif.<sup>8</sup> For instance, works like Mike Bidlo’s *Brillo Soap Pad Box* create a new kind of difference, which Kierkegaard called the “difference of non-difference”; therefore, despite being an apparent act of repetition and reproduction, or even plagiarism, it instead becomes an act of creativity.

Baptized by the currents of modern and post-modern art, what has the contemporary public not already witnessed? Today, when identifying an artwork, the public has already learned not to read it as the product of the artist’s manual labor. Meanwhile, in the 19th century, painting and sculpture were still considered extensions of an artist’s body. In traditional art forms like painting and sculpture, people can see the artists’ technique, and the amount of time and effort they have spent on their works. Works of photography, video art and ready-made art, on the other hand, often seem as though the artists did not spend much time or effort on completing them; more often, they are actually produced by assistants or production companies. In contrast, it takes more time for audiences to consume these works, especially works of video art.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, media coverage of various international exhibitions has gradually allowed the public to grasp recent methods of artistic production. Through social networks such as Wechat, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and so on, people can produce photos, videos, and texts that are the equals of post-conceptualist art. Although these Netizens may not even know about, let alone appreciate, contemporary installation art, performance art, or environmental art, they nonetheless make their attempts in ways that resemble the foundations of those artistic practices.<sup>10</sup> Artistic forms like ready-mades, photography, and video are firm proofs of the triviality of image production and the futility of craftsmanship.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is often understandable that an audience should complain about contemporary art: to go to an art museum, they have to pay for tickets, yet what they end up seeing, unexpectedly, are piles of trash and daily commodities whose production does not seem to have taken much time or effort—“stuff” that they could as easily have produced by themselves.

## Three Phenomena of Appropriation Art in China

### 1. *Linmo* Copying in Traditional Chinese Art

Whether in China or the West, past or present, late-comers’ imitation and reverence for the old

---

8 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, Quoted in Boris Groys, *On the New*.

9 Boris Groys, *From Image to Image File-and Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization*.

10 Boris Groys, *Marx After Duchamp, or the Artist’s Two Bodies*.

11 Boris Groys, *On the New*.



masters and their works are universal. *Linmo*<sup>12</sup> is a significant tradition in Chinese paintings, an important method of learning; to *linmo* is to pay one's respects to these predecessors, as well as to express one's personal attitude and taste. Certainly, it is often denounced as an act of conservatism. Western artists also attached importance to their studying and imitating of the masters of previous generations: Gauguin's reproduction of Manet's works seems like an act of love; Van Gogh's imitation of Utagawa Hiroshige tells of his respect and admiration; Cézanne often visited the Louvre just to copy the works of masters-these are stories about which we have never stopped enthusing. Delacroix once marveled that, the more he imitated the works of masters of the classical age, such as Raffael, Dürer, and Rubens, the more he discovered the profundity and exuberance of knowledge that lie in those paintings, and that as much as he tried he could never fully grasp their oeuvres.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, copying-*linmo*-is itself a part of creative production, for production is not a kind of incidental happening, but a slow process of accumulation and fermentation; the perpetual, in-depth investigation of existing artworks over a long period of time is required for creativity to be possible.

Hitherto, *linmo* has not only been a way for Chinese artists to study painting, but also a method to preserve rare works (the court often summoned outstanding painters, by executive authority, to copy and reproduce predecessors' works as backups of the originals), and an important technique for artistic creation. Therefore, most of the prominent artists of ancient China still produced large quantities of works titled "imitating so-and-so" or "copying so-and-so," even after their own style had matured. At *Collecting the World: Pang Laichen and the Xuzhai Collection*, an exhibition held in 2015 by the Nanjing Museum, almost eighty percent of the works displayed were such copies.

Furthermore, Chinese painters have always copied originals quite freely, therefore, latecomers' copies may look not as much like the originals, and may even be very different. For instance, *Han Xizai Evening Banquet* was incessantly copied from the Song to the Qing dynasty; many of these copies were highly reflective of the spirit of their times, often depicting clothes and interior furnishings whose styles were popular during that period, and thus deviating considerably from the original work. Presented in the *Wu School Painting Series: The Art of Tang Yin* exhibition at the Suzhou Museum in 2015, is Tang Yin's copy of *Han Xizai Evening Banquet* that also looked quite different from the original. To name another example: while Dong Qichang, a painter who was skilled at integrating other artists' styles, often imitated in particular the style of Huang Gongwang, he also combined several distinct technical languages drawn from his predecessors. After Dong Qizhang, the practices of copying so-and-so's paintings or imitating so-and-so's brush strokes became prevalent-but to what extent are these actually copies, rather than mere assertions? One thing to consider is that few painters in the age of manual reproduction would have had the opportunity to witness these rare originals with their own eyes, to say nothing of putting the originals on their desks, closely

---

12 Each of "Lin, Mo, Fang, and Ni," the four methods of imitating ancient Chinese painting, has its own emphasis: "Lin" is to learn through observing the gesture, "Mo" is to learn through the pattern, "Fang" is to learn from its form, while "Ni" is to transform it while inheriting the impression.

13 Byung-Chui Han, *Shanzhai: Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch*, Germany: Merve Verlag Berlin, 2011.

examining them and copying them. Perhaps they called their resulting works “copies” out of vanity, wanting to show that they had had the privilege of physically handling an original by some influential artist. On the other hand, those major artists who in fact had the chance to hold original pieces for close reading might end up producing forgeries. For example, Mi Fu frequently took advantage of his reputation as an excellent connoisseur, switching originals with forgeries he had made when others invited him to “appreciate” paintings.<sup>14</sup> Another example is Zhang Daqian, whose collection of more than four thousand paintings is not a dead archive of paintings, but an assembly of classical masters, a living site of exchange and transformation. Zhang Daqian is a “transformer”: he can easily reshape himself when playing the roles of masters of the past, and is fully capable of producing ancient-style works. These artworks not only match up to the written descriptions of vanished artworks whose existence is only known from art bibliographies; they are also lost works that collectors are eager to discover. In these works, he distorted certain parts of the images, leaving his personal stamp on his forgeries. For Chinese, the gift to create a perfect forgery is honorable and symbolic of a refined aesthetic; they do not take the justness of the business transaction or other moral concerns too seriously. This explains why Zhao Xihu praised Mi Fu’s acts of forgery and replacing original artworks with fakes.<sup>15</sup> The acquisition of a work that corresponds to one’s own strengths by relying on one’s personal “ability of artistic appreciation” is justifiable; it is only when the ideas of irreproducibility, inviolability, and the irreplaceability of the original work are emphasized, that these works are debased to the status of mere forgeries. This refreshing method of production through continuous innovation is only feasible in one kind of culture: a culture that does not firmly believe in the rupture and discontinuity of revolutionary forms, but finds certitude in continuity and steady change; a culture that is not about existence and essence, but about process and change.<sup>16</sup>

Examples from the West include master forgers like Han Van Meegeren, who was once sentenced to prison for selling Vermeer’s *Christ with the Adulteress* to the Nazis. After he explained that the painting he had sold was in fact one of his own forgeries, the painting, which had previously enjoyed a prestigious status, immediately found itself in a very different situation: “Yesterday, this painting was still worth millions, with connoisseurs and lovers of art coming here from all over the world for a glance at its beauty; today, it is nothing. Even if people saw it on the side of the street, they would probably just coldly dismiss it! Alas, this painting has never changed! What has, then?”<sup>17</sup> On this note, we should all ask ourselves: without knowing the names of the artists, do we have the courage to praise an artwork that may have been produced by a nobody, or to deny a work that may have come from the hand of the master?

The artistic productions discussed in this section on *Linmo* do not refer to the conventional sense of copying from one painting to another. In fact, the artists are not reproducing the original

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p99.

<sup>16</sup> Byung-Chui Han, *Shanzhai: Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch*, Germany: Merve Verlag Berlin, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Byung-Chui Han, Ibid.

without any alterations, but, by employing new approaches and new media, re-appropriating classical images as brand new experiences, they are opening up and expanding the aesthetic values of traditional art. Nevertheless, as we can see, the “Linmo” approach employed by these artists is to some extent consistent with that of ancient artists: while copying, they are not confined by the original work; instead, they alter and transform it by their own will, sometimes even freely combining the creative styles of different artists. For instance, Yao Jui-chung’s imitation of classical landscape paintings carries more of an auto-biographical character. He frequently inserts his personal experiences and messages into his creative process, integrating different ancient paintings and landscapes according to the need of the picture; he even invented his own “silkworm” stroke. Meanwhile, Yao is also adept at photography, installation, and art theory, engaging with an extensive range of subjects in his works, which furnishes his landscape paintings with expansive visual fields and patterns. He believes that the avant-garde may be the convention of the future, while the conventional may also be the avant-garde of the future.

In addition, against the backdrop of globalization that is led by digitalization, informatization, internetization, and economic integration, and with the global convolutions of contemporary art becoming ever more intricate, traditional Chinese painting no longer holds sway even within its own country, while brushes and ink are no longer indispensable components of the standard by which Shui-mo (Chinese brush painting) is evaluated. Since the 20th century, traditional Chinese painting has been through many formal changes and transformations, with Western art as its frame of reference during every transformation. Nevertheless, despite the trendiness and chicness of Western contemporary art, landscape painting-the most prestigious genre within the school of traditional Chinese painting-still holds irreplaceable meaning in the eyes of Chinese. Whether they are the products of Chinese artists who have emigrated abroad, or local artists born and raised on this land, traditional Chinese painting and landscape painting will always convey for them a certain cultural nostalgia, and spiritual rapport. As traditional landscape art, which reveres placidness, becomes engulfed by the waves of globalization, what sparks will its confrontation with contemporary art-which considers critique its duty-ignite?

By reforming the classical ink paintings of several painters from the Song dynasty, Xia Xiaowan dissected and reconstitutes the space in the paintings layer by layer, and in doing so creates a unique understanding and expression of traditional landscape space, as well as providing a different experience from viewing a flat painting or a 3D sculpture. As a skillful and patient tourist guide, the artist leads viewer on a trip through various regions and seasons, visiting the “mountains and rivers” from the Song dynasty. Although, the artist uses linmo landscape painting from the Song dynasty in the work, it is done without innovation in ink-brush work, surprising the audience with his startling approach.

Replacing the ink from traditional painting and calligraphy with mosquito nails, Chen Chunhao used linmo to recreate, aiming to show the essence of the original paintings, and giving the classical ink paintings a new dynamic appearance. Composed entirely of nails, the image relates to the concept of the printing dot. It is important to view the work from a distance, for if

you are too close to the work, the image will be quite abstract. Only if you can find the suitable distance to view, in between abstract and figurative, can you appreciate the expressive quality the artist has invested into the landscapes.

The artworks of Yu Xuhong are copies of copies of copies, as he always does *linmo* of previously copied paintings, including "Huang Binhong's copy of Shi Xi's copy of Ju Ran's Painting," "Huang Binhong's copy of the Southern Song Dynasty Landscape Painting," and "Huang Binhong's *linmo* of Dai Xiaoben's Painting." Based on his research of "*Gou Gu Fa*," and his understanding of the actual landscapes, he uses a painting style that is loose but not random, relaxed in its exterior appearance but reflecting a clear interior logic, that produces a subtle and enriched painting language.

Peng Wei as well uses traditional techniques in her work; while separate from Chinese traditional landscape painting in a strict sense they still combine the traditional context with contemporary concepts on the paper. Not only the landscape paintings themselves, but in addition the scrolls and albums of these ancient works are produced; what was once the supporting elements for the paintings now becomes the subject in her work. Each part of the work including the silk mounts, jade pool, lattice frame, inscriptions, and scroll boxes are handmade by the artist.

Landscape painting was always used by the ancients as a means to express appreciation and praise for the heavens and earth, however, Yang Yongliang provides a critique of our current reality in his landscape work. The photographs bring together the modern urban landscape with traditional classical landscape forms, to which he adds architectural elements that act like "ripples" in work that virtually eliminate the artistic conception of traditional landscape painting, and express the wantonly destructive course of modern man against nature. In the video work *Rising Mist*, the fog that in the past was always portrayed in poetry and painting as sublime here reveals a ferocious face: it is now smog and environment pollution.

Qiu Zhijie's work *The One-Thousand-Time Copy of Lanting Xu* shows the beauty of calligraphy by way of performance art, but he doesn't allow the audience to appreciate it. It illustrates that repeated copying develops the skills of the artist, but as well highlights that blindly repeating indefinitely will block the pace of innovation. In a large number of repeated copies, the content itself disappeared. The repetitive technique of Qiu Zhijie, as if driven by obsessive compulsive habits, has a ceremonial quality like religious ritual and practice, but at the same time is vain and absurd. With an intersecting of love and hate, he criticizes mere imitation and repetition as only leading to a loss of significance.

The opening act of Ni Youyu's work *Album* was slightly violent, for he reverted coins back into pieces of metal by violently smashing them with a hammer, and then by careful *linmo* painting on the metal created a value greater than the original currency. This seemingly elegant transformation was actually based on differences in currency exchange from the beginning to the end; art creation here can be seen as "service for money."

Although most of the linmo works here are made without water and ink, there is without doubt a development and continuation of the spirit of Chinese traditional painting, with the essence of ink painting reborn in a new context with new media. It is this cultural nostalgia and interest in tradition that provides the profound basis and context for this contemporary Chinese art. Evident from the exhibited artworks, Chinese contemporary artists have injected critical and playful characteristics into the original approaches of traditional landscape painting, as the works can on one hand, draw on traditional Chinese resources, while on the other hand, follow the local cultural context. For Chinese viewers, these works are familiar to them because of the traditional Chinese themes, and the works can inspire them to further investigate the ideas of contemporary art; for Western audiences, with an awareness of contemporary techniques and media, these works can promote news understanding of Chinese culture.

## 2. Appropriation Related to Western Modern, Contemporary Art

In 1912 Picasso glued a piece of oil cloth to the canvas and then one after another added the forms of a guitar, newspaper, and glass bottle. This collage technique became a primary feature of his Synthetic Cubism. Duchamp pioneered ready-made art, with *Fountain* from 1917 considered an iconic example of “appropriation” art. Dada took an anti-rational position resisting a common standard for art, while Kurt Schwitters created the “*Merz*” structures that later provided the foundation for Installation art. In the 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg used the “assemblage” technique that combined found objects like tires and beds with painting, silk-screening, collage, and photography.

After 1960s, as an emerging art production strategy, appropriation techniques appear regularly in post-modern work. The objects of appropriation included not only important historical works of art, but also found images from daily life. The Pop Art artists Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol led in the creation of mass-produced art work. The most representative appropriation art began appearing in the 1980s: Sherrie Levine produced art by directly duplicating the work of other artists, including re-photographing Walker Evans photographic images. Elaine Sturtevant produced works by creating inexact duplications of key works by other artists—Andy Warhol’s *Flowers* series being an example. Appropriation art has been prevalent since the 1990s. Artists used it as a means to question and respond to social issues, not only for concerns related directly to the work itself. Artists using this approach include Christian Marclay, Deborah Kass, Damien Hirst, Genco Gulan, and others.<sup>18</sup>

Western appropriation art draws on these different movements mentioned, using techniques including assemblage and collage, ready-made objects and found images, installation, and collection. Other new techniques are also being explored. As well, as one of the most important approaches in the post-modern art, appropriation is a subversive challenge to the concept of “original creativity” advocated by modernism. By the partial or complete use of the ready-

---

<sup>18</sup> Wikipedia “*Appropriation (art)*”

made found objects or works, appropriation breaks down the boundary between elite art and the mass culture. Through appropriation the meanings associated with the original work are deconstructed while at same time the source material is given new meaning and conceptually altered. An example can be found in the *Clothes Veins Study Series* by Sui Jianguo, considered a seminal work of Chinese appropriation art. Although it appropriated from classic Western sculpture, after modifications and transformation the new work presents the paradox of a Westernized Chinese style, as well as providing strategies for artistic development that works against the inertia caused by old, entrenched ideology. The Chinese Zhong Shan tunic suit used in this work holds the memories from, and is a symbolic reference to, a particular period in Chinese history. The suit is longer commonly worn by the Chinese people, but it will take longer for the suit's lingering force to fade in people's mind. The work *Discobolus: Reversed Space*, presented in this exhibition, is an inverted replica of the classical Greek sculpture *Discobolus* (discus thrower) that is restored with a mirror: the original appearance of the classical *Discobolus* is reflected in the mirror placed behind the work. Here, the artist explores new relationships between time and space in sculptural form, while also giving thought to how to present the concepts of the afterworld and related themes found in traditional Chinese folk culture.

*Adding One Concept on Top of Another* by Shi Yong plays with the relationship between Chinese and Western art and the authority of language: the work is more like a carefully rehearsed one-act play. Borrowing from the legitimizing voice found in Western contemporary art, and using Joseph Kosouth's key conceptual work *One and Three Chairs* as the starting point, he projects the image of a well-dressed Chinese contemporary artist of international style on this important "chair," satirizing the marked impact of the Western voice on Chinese contemporary art and the need for acknowledgement from the West to gain confidence. It is said that when this work was on exhibition in Germany in 1999, Kosouth viewed it, laughed, and praised it.

Boris Groys believes that the ready-made strategy and appropriation practices have undermined intellectual property rights and the author's prerogative, with personal art and cultural achievements made available for unrestricted public use.<sup>19</sup> For example, the heart of Sherrie Levine's art is imitation of masterworks, the original intention being a type of regret over life arriving too late. Because life has come too late, there are no open positions in art history; because life has come too late, there is no chance to promote the development of art. The only thing that can be done is imitation. Based on this reasoning, she copied the paintings of Matisse, De Kooning and the photography of Walker Evans. On one hand, Sherrie Levine changes the material or medium of the artwork being imitated in order to create both similarity and difference; on the other hand, she intended to use this form of copying to highlight that in the languages and forms of art creation, repetition and imitation are constant forces. It also indicates that this is not only the case for the wider history of art but also for individual artists, with even great artists facing difficulties in breaking through the history and reality of

---

<sup>19</sup> Boris Groys, *Marx After Duchamp, or The Artist's Two Bodies*, e-flux New York, www.e-flux.com, 2010

their personal style. The era of the Internet has further weakened intellectual property right, yet increased knowledge sharing. Sherrie Levine copied the Evans work and titled the series *After Walker Evans*, claiming it as her own artwork: in an enviable extension, an individual named Michael Mandiber created the websites [www.AfterWalkerEvans.com](http://www.AfterWalkerEvans.com) and [www.AfterSherrieLevine.com](http://www.AfterSherrieLevine.com) that allow anyone to download the photographs of Walker Evans and Sherrie Levine's copies in high resolution. According to a message on the websites visitors can create their own signatures, and the site explains how to mount and frame the photos in order complete the whole process of authentication. Through the broad reach of the Internet, anyone can have these photographs, signed under their own names, and jointly hold the photographic copyright.

It is precisely because the tactics of appropriation weakened copyright that many legal disputes have occurred. Cai Guoqiang (for his *Rent Collection Courtyard*), as well as Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Richard Prince have all separately been accused of plagiarism, and there is a trend toward more and more frequent accusations. In mid-January 2015, a civil court in Antwerp made a landmark ruling: the artwork of Belgian painter Luc Tuymans constituted an infringement of copyright. His painting *A Belgian Politician* from 2011 shared similarities to an image by the photographer Katrijn Van Giel. Tuymans believed the work was imitation as parody not a copy, but the court rejected this defense. The reason for rejection is that the work lacked obvious humor, it was not a joke-cracking form of art, however to joke or satirize is a key element in the definition of parody.<sup>20</sup> The judgment against Luc Tuymans also send out a signal that this interpretation could be applied broadly, suggesting that artists might have to be more careful in their use of appropriation in the future. In this way, the earlier mentioned *CC Gallery* by Yang Zhenzhong is legal because of obvious ironic humor. He created *CC Gallery* with the intention of producing and selling photograph works by various famous international artists. The production process involved directly downloading online images of contemporary work. On first sight, these images appear to be the work of major artists including Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, Matthew Barney, and others, but the low resolution of the images immediately raised doubts about their authenticity. In this art work, Yang Zhenzhong satirizes on one hand the way artists plagiarize and copy each other, on the other hand, he highlights the lucrative benefit of this system for the galleries.

Picasso once said that, "Good artists copy; great artists steal." T. S. Eliot said: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal." Stravinsky said: "A good composer does not imitate; he steals." These statements suggest the positive role of appropriation as an indispensable method in creation across all arts and cultural fields. But creativity still should be a prerequisite otherwise it will lead to problems of abuse. As the methods of appropriation are widely and repeatedly used, it can become a form of plagiarism, like anonymous Internet "hoaxes" and "spoofs," with these art related instances of plagiarism using the title of "appropriation" to arrive at an explanation, that by unique special powers, provides validity and a rationalization. "Appropriation" is becoming a shortcut to creation and a convenient personal explanation for

---

20 In this context definition of "imitate" is to parody

certain art, which leads to vulgarization of appropriation in this process of abuse. This abuse will degrade the standard of art. Hence, Jaron Lanier in his widely influential book "You Are Not a Gadget" suggests "digitized Maoism" and the "hive mentality" have ruled the virtual world, destroying the principle of the intellectual property rights and degraded standards massively, and that this could even lead to the end of culture potentially.

In the field of appropriation for artistic creation, in addition to the earlier mentioned artists who use Western materials to complete the creative transformation, the following artists use principally Chinese sources to reconsider the possibilities of appropriation.

Both the original work *Rent Collection Courtyard* (1964) and *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* (1999) have significantly influenced the work *Rent: Rent Collection Courtyard* by Li Zhanyang. At the 48th Venice Biennial, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* by Cai Guoqiang extracted the original *Rent Collection Courtyard* from its specific political, cultural, and social background and reset it on foreign soil, as a spatio-temporal dislocation on the international cultural stage. This artwork has qualities best explained with a metaphor from Benjamin: "quotation in my work is like a robber who is hiding on the side of the street, once he meets the target he shows the weapon and he takes their long-held beliefs."<sup>21</sup>

We know that many scenarios presented in the original work *Rent Collection Courtyard* are made up. Liu Wencai was actually liberal and open-minded but portrayed in the work as a tyrant. Many items appearing in *Rent*, including large bamboo baskets, wheelbarrows, table and chairs, folding screens, abacuses, fans, and straw hats, are ready-made objects—an appropriation technique. Based on the two earlier works, Li Zhanyang created the contemporary version, *Rent: Rent Collection Courtyard*. He borrowed scenarios including "rent payment," "the rent check," "rent calculation," and "debt pressure" and replaced the original figures with artists, critics, art dealers, and collectors from the contemporary art world. The central concept of *Rent* for Li Zhanyang is taking; he believes Chinese contemporary art is mostly a process of taking from others. He uses a satirizing allegory to reflect this phenomenon, since the activities of "rent payment," "rent receiving," and "rental inspection" relate to the activities of production, acceptance, and judgement for Chinese contemporary art when facing the Western system and market. If the two earlier version of *Rent Collection Courtyard* unconsciously express a kind of populist spiritual demand of the common people by using fictional stories in the background of class conflict, we can also see that Li Zhanyang expresses another demand for justice and critiques of the hegemony by using fictional stories in the background of new art "classes."<sup>22</sup> His *Rent: Rent Collection Courtyard* not only "rented" the material of *Rent Collection Courtyard*, but also appropriated many "ready-made" works: the *Clothes Vein Studies: Bound Tied Slave* with the head portrait of Sui Jianguo himself, the *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* by Ma Liuming and others, Wang Xingwei imitating Joseph Beuys with a dead rabbit in hand, and so on.

Compared with the grand gesture from Li Zhanyang, the appropriation series *The Mutual*

---

21 Giorgio Abamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Du Keke, (China: Terrific Room, 2015): P127

22 Gao Minglu "Rent as Plot or Rent as Consciousness: Thoughts on Li Zhanyang's *Rent: Rent Collection Courtyard*"



*Undoing and Unity* by Li Qing is a microcosm: he copied “ready-made” images in pairs and then skillfully overlapped the two pictures while the paint was still wet. The final images “appropriate” from each other in the bonding process of the pigment. After overlapping two chosen images, like the actor Zhang Guorong and the character Yu Ji that he played (a famous concubine of a general in Chinese history), a new harmonious diptych image filled with chance and improvisation has been created.

Ni Youyu has always been good at drawing creative inspiration from Chinese art history; his various series utilize different forms of appropriation. *Specimen Cabinet of the Imperial Art Academy* copied an array of birds found in historic paintings. He used the images of the birds as “specimens,” combining them in a painting installation to pay tribute to the skilled but unknown painters. *Guanyin* (Avalokiteśvara, Goddess of Mercy) is a direct copy of the fake antique Guanyin statuettes found in street stalls at low prices. It was transformed into soap sculptures and then passed out to a diverse group of relatives and friends. The *Guanyin* image can be said to have neither aesthetic nor economic value, but rather a value derived by religious worship and ritual.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the people who use the soap will to varying degrees be influenced by this representation of Guanyin. Here we can see the psychological effects of original worship of images as was discussed by Gombrich. In this project, the artist did not directly create work, he just documented and used the forms created by the hands of others, their participation extending his hands.

Hu Qingtai also produces work in collaboration. He received the creation concepts for new work by direct purchase. He made a great effort to persuade his favorite artists to sell their concepts to him, and then followed their instructions, carrying out the concepts to the best of his abilities. During the whole process of the project, he plays a role not unlike the middle-man: he was able to make friends with artists and reach a common view of cooperation and then carry out the plan.

Wang Guanshan copies the clumsy sketches from the candidates for art school and reviews the hardships and the joy of the preparation before the exam. Compared with skillful but unimaginative works, the unprofessional sketches are full of admiration and respect, rough but touching. Reducing a classic sculpture to sketches is like translating Chinese to English and then translating it back to Chinese. The differences between the two Chinese texts would be interesting. It also makes us consider culture transmission which is a process of copying, transplanting, and transformation, like Marxism in China, or the Meiji Reform in Japan, which copied from the Western model. Changes in context transform any particular concept because of differences in cultural backgrounds and the differences of people, all of which vary enormously. The copying of culture and its transplantation can bring huge deviations, and these deviations have led to innovations.

---

23 Lawrence Liang, “The Copy without Original Work-The Work of Love in Mechanical Reproduction” (Academic Journal of China Academy of Art “New Arts” 2013.10) P73.

### 3. *Shanzhai* Related to Current Social Trends

Compared with “appropriation” in the field of art, *Shanzhai* can be considered as the representation of “appropriation” in the economic world. The original meaning of *Shanzhai* is a place setoff with a barrier defense in a mountain forest, but has the additional meaning of a military residence for heroes living in the forest outside the control of the authorities. This latter meaning can be also interpreted as a village stockade where the poor live. The verb derived from “*Shanzhai*” relates to appropriation activities, having a meaning similar to “imitation.” This kind of activity is sometimes called “second generation creation,” with the people who produces and uses *Shanzhai* products referred to as members of the “*Shanzhai* Party.”

Sociologist and folklore expert Ai Jun has a definition for *Shanzhai* products: *Shanzhai* products are produced by some brainy citizens to satisfy a group of people who have a consumption desire for certain products (including cultural products) that they appreciate, but because of their limited financial status or the demands of daily life they cannot afford; this is very common in developing countries whose markets are still growing. In other cases, there are common items that have not been updated in a long time: here, new products that are “fast, easy-to-get, marketable, versatile, and lower priced” are put into the market by the way of “copying, imitating, adapting, borrowing, creating, and improving.” Therefore, it is no accident that *Shanzhai* appears in China, and that *Shanzhai* activities take place in all developing countries.

For example, in the competition found in the early film industry, the large film studios in the United States and Europe spared no effort to invest in a wide variety film production that “imitated” for quick profits. Here, copying is a precisely calculated marketing strategy to maintain control of the old market and at the same time explore new markets. *The Waterer Watered* (*L'Arroseur arrosé*, 1895) was widely considered a Lumiere production; however, Lumiere took many ideas from Edison. But, the Edison Company itself stole from Lubin, the new leader in Philadelphia, and they in turn copied from Edison in retaliation. Later, Vitagraph Studios purchased and copied the films of Lubin, in doing so acquired the Edison films in circulation.

As a result, *The Waterer Watered* emerged in over ten editions. “During this brief boom period, however, since it was in fact so easy to reprint and recirculate, and because of an expanding economy, total production greatly increased. In this instance, there were so many people presenting *The Waterer Watered*, nobody thought of it as a bad situation. If the producers did not want to sell, and you could not get the film you wanted, then you stole it and duplicated it, and if you couldn't steal it, then you remake it.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in China now, one finds in the marketplace the Adidas brand, but as well adivon, dasabi, adidoss, adadas, adibas, and all kinds of variants. In Han Feng's new series *Made in China*, we see Coca-Cola but also Caco-Cola, Pepsi but also Bepsi, Starbucks Coffee but also Sunbucks Coffee: the original brands and their *Shanzhai* versions at the same time. Han Feng has carried out a studious and careful rendering of these *Shanzhai* variants; at a glance, these exquisite images with their fine brushwork create

the illusion of magnificence.

As a code name, *Shanzhai* is widely acknowledged as relating to the development of an unofficial IT industry in Guangdong, but in fact, even at the beginning of the reform period, many of China's high-tech enterprises had already developed routines based on *Shanzhai*. The term was only adapted and gain popularity in China after 2008. The huge influence of the *Shanzhai* phenomenon in China is a matter of timing: firstly, we are in the era when internet technology is almost universal, which allows the *Shanzhai* phenomenon to spread easily. Secondly, China has been experiencing a second growth period and its influence on the world stage is increasing-something that cannot be ignored any longer. Therefore, the criticism of China by Western countries has legitimacy; *Shanzhai* impinges on the copyright of creators, gaining R&D investment savings, allowing *Shanzhai* products to can take market share with lower prices, and ultimately creating unfair and negative competition. Yet, the criticism also belies envy, jealousy and apprehension. If the West can do exact appropriation in art, why can't we make use of *Shanzhai* and other forms of imitation with minor changes? The criticism that Chinese culture is a culture of copying and *Shanzhai*, that it does not respect copyright and original creation, is in part a response to the pressure and threat of development in China. Therefore, *Shanzhai* is a sort of subversive force in the international monopoly of capitalism.

At the present time, the culture of *Shanzhai* is being integrated into daily life and gaining wider application, and this is impacting many cultural industries, including the arrival of *Shanzhai* films, *Shanzhai* stars, live *Shanzhai* Spring Festival shows, *Shanzhai* architecture, *Shanzhai* forums, and so on. All this creates significant challenges for the development of high culture. The *Shanzhai* phenomenon also reflects the individual's desire for celebrity status, with ordinary products striving to be famous brands that are sought after. In early 1995, Zhou Tiehai began to create the *Fake Covers* series: he placed photographs of himself onto mock-up covers of various important international magazines and created the false impression that Chinese contemporary art is continuously creating international scandals with inflammatory speech. In 1996, he created the audio installation *Airport* that simulated the public broadcasting systems used at international airports all over the world, in order to ironically suggest that he was busy running around to important international exhibitions. Zhou Tiehai approach to art production is gaining a wider popularity: for example, the services supplied by wedding planners to new couples now includes printing fake newspapers that are handed out to the relatives and friends on which the news of the happy event is reported like the wedding of British royalty.

The work *LOVE* by Alan Chan is another example: the artist asks the question, who decides the value of LV? Is it Louis Vuitton? Their Milan offices? Is it formed by our own materialism? Who determines the value of the "red, white, and blue" nylon canvas Chan uses? Is it the owners of the grocery shops? The workers on the construction site? Is it just based on our biases? What if we use the "red, white, and blue" nylon canvas to make the LV bags? Would it represent

---

24 Lawrence Liang, "The Copy without Original Work-The Work of Love in Mechanical Reproduction" (Academic Journal of China Academy of Art "New Arts" 2013.10) P76.

luxury fashion? This is reminiscent of a founding principle of the Bauhaus School: "Let us therefore create a new guild to craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between the craftsmen and artists!" Established in the last century, this integrated arts school established many of the foundations from which modern design developed. From the point of its founding, it advocated a belief that the greatest opportunity in the era of mechanic duplication is to allow more people to enjoy everyday objects full of technical and artistic craft that before were only enjoyed by the wealthy class. But the result is apparent: design is used to impart a sense of quality and define high-end products that are sold at even higher prices. Following this the specialized luxury brands reestablished the original idea of exclusivity and privilege for the elite class. We can say that the dream of Bauhaus has failed.<sup>25</sup>

Today, *Shanzhai* has provided us with different opportunities. Since *Shanzhai* can create similarities and duplicates, it can be taken as a form of egalitarianism; on some level it should be considered the realization of social equality. For example, with the Shanzhai mobile phone: people who have low salaries can also enjoy the convenience and pleasure of high- technology, making these products no longer exclusive to the privileged wealthy. Because of "copycatting" of electronic media, many people who could not afford the original DVD films, the cost of admission to the cinema, or new music CDs have chance to appreciate the music played by the international bands or the latest movies produced in Hollywood: an entire strata of society is getting artistic edification this way, and aesthetic appreciation is extended more widely. Shanzhai also drives interesting innovation, like using a cheap Apple skin (200 RMB) on an inexpensive iTouch (1000 RMB) that allows you to make phone calls as if it was an iPhone (4000 RMB).

In my opinion, the *Shanzhai* phenomenon takes three basic forms in China: the first is an anxious effort to achieve quick success and receive immediate benefits through superficial and fraudulent copying without quality control; the second is the thorough imitation and complete duplication of an object based in on an appreciation of the original. The third form is imitation motivated by a similar appreciation but that through a process of change and adjustment in the creation or production process finally emerges as an independent brand. Examples of these forms of *Shanzhai* are easily found around us: most people can achieve only clumsy imitation in the karaoke bars; the candidates on live talent shows demonstrate verisimilar imitation; the excellent singers on "The Voice of China" exceed the original version and create something new starting from a process of imitation.

The first approach represents a behavior that everyone should criticize; it is found in fake products, especially fake foods, where they seek heartlessly to benefit by using the cover of quality goods. As well, there are many examples of this in architecture. For example, a building covered with a "skin" and called the Shanzhai Water Cub results in "kitsch," "vulgar," and "lowbrow" architectural form.<sup>26</sup> Yet, in considering the potential of "kitsch," there are few works that could match *Fried Golden Flowers* by Ye Funa, who has earned the title of "Queen

---

23 See Wang Yan, *the Shanzhai architecture and its sociality*, *World Architecture Review*: 2012.4

of Trash.” The city dwellers yearn for the idyllic life in countryside with its natural beauty, while rural people long to feast on the revelry of city life. Consequently, the townspeople in Shiman Xiang village ignore the beautiful views of Yulong Snow Mountain out their windows and instead decorate their homes with gaudy landscape images, fake jade figurines, and peach tree lanterns made of plastic to demonstrate they are up with the trends.

Jiao Xingtao's *Huicheng Sculpture Group* recreates the offices of a stone sculpture factory in Quyang: the headquarters used to present the sculptural samples. Here, you can see all kinds of sculpture from the East and West, from the heavens to the earth, from the classical to the humorous. The artist created an installation that floats between sculpture and common items, artistic and real space, and the production of art and the activities of business. The scene shows silently the surprising wonder of it all-many kinds of *Shanzhai* sculpture produced from found images that would be despised by professional arts.

Bad taste and vulgar forms are often the first assessments given of *Shanzhai*. But in looking back in history, maybe “bad taste” is not such a bad thing: the boundary between vulgar and the refined is not always clear. Take the refined “novel” as an example, it is now considered literature, but only a short time ago, the novelists were within the group of nine occupations with the lowest social status; what they produced “mislead the young generation” and “drew them towards evil habits.” Tian Rucheng, a writer in Ming Dynasty said in *Dairy from a Tour on West Lake*: “Because of the writing of the novel *All Men are Brothers*, three generations of children have lived like idiots.” *All Men are Brothers* was originally a script for storytelling from the Song dynasty; when it is told with the story-teller's extreme voice it was vulgar, but now it has become one of the great novels in Chinese history, and thus gained the status of being refined. At the end of 18th century the new literary form of the “Gothic novel” emerged; it was in all aspects a total reversal of the standards for “good taste” at the time. Napoleon III struck with his whip the painting *Bathing Women* by Courbet at its unveiling, now it is a highly-valued work in an important collection. Malevich once stated that “in our times, it is now impossible to paint the fat ass of Venus.”

Rimbaud offered a programmatic declaration about bad taste in his work *A Season in Hell* (*Une Saison en enfer*): “I like stupid paintings, the panel in the door, the scenery on the stage, the signboard of the street artists, the advertising board of the hotels, vulgar flowers, outmoded literature, church Latin, dirty novels full of misspelled words, grandmas' favorite literature, fairy tales, children's books, old operas, idiotic songs and rough melodies.” Flaubert has also written: “In order to get so-called bad taste, there must be poetry in your brain; while on the other hand, it seems that reason cannot go along with real poetry.” It is likely that after intellectualism crosses a certain line, the alternative of silliness is needed. Probably we can also say that when good taste passes a particular threshold, it must exist through the support of bad taste. If those who have good taste were willing to spend some time on self-examination, they would find that they are not only unconcerned about art, but also that the purer their good taste, the

---

26 See Wang Yan, *the Shanzhai architecture and its sociality*, *World Architecture Review*: 2012.4

more they are attracted to the objects that should be criticized by the judgement of the good taste. It seems that good taste has a genetic inclination to develop its opposite.<sup>27</sup>

We can see that the oscillation between elegance and vulgarity never stops. Like the transition between academicism and the avant-garde, Chung Chao-kang's work *Post-Academicism* is an exhibition of *Shanzhai* that aimed to satire the high degree of similarity found in contemporary art and to point out the evolution of playfulness and styles: "academicism was always spurned by avant-garde artists, but now the former avant-garde approach has been absorbed into the institution as a new "academicism" studied by art school students. Therefore, it takes time and patience for us to understand the true nature of the "bad taste" found in *Shanzhai*.

The second form of *Shanzhai* stems from admiration. After research, it becomes total duplicating and imitative behavior. The Indian scholar Lawrence Liang once gave the example of an English professor in Bangalore who admired Saul Bellow. One day in a library in Madras he came across a book from Bellow which he had never seen before. Unfortunately, according to the regulations of the library this publication could not be taken out or be copied. This professor sat there, with pen in hand, and with the spirit in his body of a Middle Ages religious scribe, transcribed the entire book. Liang called this "love in the age of mechanical reproduction."<sup>28</sup>

Another example can be found in Shanghai's Songjiang (Thames Town). The design firm in charge of this architectural development project created a replica of a classic British market town in this Shanghai suburb according to the demands of the developer. "It is undeniable that this project shows respect to original source in imitating the confined spaces and fine architectural details. The owner has even copied the original bakery from the British town. In addition to having similar decoration, even the bread in the bakery is custom-made after the original, resulting in a lawsuit from the owner of the original bakery. What we can see in the Thames Town project is the demands of the owner and the goals of the architects reaching a high degree of consistency; the production is no longer the same as earlier *Shanzhai* architecture, which only goes for a similar appearance and the demand for a "picture" of the original."<sup>29</sup>

Another case is the *Shanzhai* Laffitte Castle in Changping. The motivation for its construction is admiration for the 17th century Château Maisons-Laffitte on Seine. This is a grade-A copy. The photographs of Gao Yan in his *Grade A Forgery* series are of models of worldwide famous architecture found in the Beijing World Park. The artist used a very similar lens, photographic composition, and point of the view to realize the transformation of three-dimensional architecture into two-dimensional art, blurring the distinction between the model and the original architecture and creating a document that seems to represent a real building. With this

---

27 Refer to Giorgio Agamben; *The Man without Content*, P26 - 22.

28 Lawrence Liang "The Copy without Original Work-The Work of Love in Mechanical Reproduction" from Academic Journal of China Academy of Art "New Arts" 2013.10, P70.

29 Wang Yan; *Shanzhai Architecture in Limited Conditions: Two Cases*, *Architecture Times*: 2011.03, P40-43.

work the artist has also raised issues concerning documentary photography: must what we see be fact? However, the White House and Tian'anmen buildings in the series *Dreamland* by Qiu Zhijie are not copies of models from "world parks" or the micro-view theme parks created for the tourists. They are the office buildings for primary-level governments in villages and towns that reveal a yearning for developed country status and respect equalling an imperial power.

In the third form the producer carries out deep research and study on the essence and structure of the imitated object. Although it starts in imitation, it ends up in creation. Products like the Seagull (*Haiou*) double-lens reflex camera and the Flying Pigeon (*Feige*) bicycle are still cherished items of people who like vintage and design collectables. Another example is the Tianjin version of the animation cartoon *Tom and Jerry*, where by skillful voice dubbing the daily life story of Tianjiners is told (without any change to the animation frames) to create a completely different narrative for Tom and Jerry. This is a recreation with ideas and plans, and not the same as simply copying a DVD. The cheap copy has always been produced by getting the early original version or filming videos in front of the big screen, but at that moment, the fine content of the original version and the related information or details are not available. Therefore, the content missing from the original version has to be filled by the duplicators themselves.<sup>30</sup> As a result, in copycat productions, we always see subtitles with all kinds of mistakes. By the third stage, if *Shanzhai* behavior hasn't violated the patent or the copyright, it will not be considered illegal. Furthermore, the operation of *Shanzhai* needs less investment for R&D, which is the ideal model for starting a business. That is why Ai Jun defines "Shanzhai culture" as wisdom and innovation from the people; it is the only path available in developing countries for market-oriented economic development. He believes it is a progressive, conscious revolution and an advancement of ideology that fostered the appearance "Shanzhai culture" and made it popular. In a certain sense, the individuals, groups, or organizations that are falling behind or in a more difficult situation are learning, imitating, and improving the products, ideology, and programs from the mainstream. This behavior shows a certain progress and advancement itself.<sup>31</sup> "To copy individually is to follow; widespread copying gives birth to innovation."<sup>32</sup> The development and popularization of new technologies liberates the creativity of the general public, taking steps towards the elimination of the boundary between art and life; possibly it is time to use a more neutral or even appreciative gaze in sizing up *Shanzhai*.

## Conclusion

The eras throughout which *linmo*, appropriation, and *Shanzhai* emerged can be read as a progression. While *linmo* originated during the age of manual reproduction, it nonetheless must rely on manual labor, even in the age of digital reproduction. *Linmo* often gives birth to new media and techniques, and sometimes even evolves from a technical practice into an

---

30 Lawrence Liang "The Copy without Original Work-The Work of Love in Mechanical Reproduction" from Academic Journal of China Academy of Art "New Arts": 2013.10.P74.

31 Refer to the Baidu library, "The definition of Shanzhai products and the conception of the Shanzhai industry"

32 A Gan, *Revolution in Production Way*. China: Citic Press, 2009

act of willful forgery. Born in the age of mechanical reproduction, "appropriation" transforms reproducible objects into artworks with unique qualities, often acquiring new ideas and meanings through reconstruction of the originals. *Shanzhai* came to prominence in the age of digital reproduction; it is rooted in activities of economic production, and is capable of generating new values and a new understanding of democracy. Therefore, *linmo*, appropriation, and *Shanzhai* are all essentially repetition and imitation, the production of similar objects, a form of copyleft that tampers with copyright, and when such imitations are made with too much verisimilitude and seriousness, they eventually lead to the same result: copyright infringement, or violation of the law (when *linmo* becomes forgery.)

To conclude with something interesting: as if it were intended to match the theme of "appropriation," the exhibition title—"Copyleft: Appropriation Art in China" accidentally "appropriates" from my close friend Zhuang Ji (Copyleft) and from Boris Groys' suggestion (Appropriation Art in China). My original thought was that, ideally, this essay would do the same as well, consisting entirely of quotations, but this ended up being too challenging. It was also Walter Benjamin's lifetime goal to "write" a book composed entirely of quotations, but, unfortunately, even that old fellow couldn't manage what would have otherwise no doubt been a fascinating reading experience. In the process of reading it, its audience would have played a game of treasure-hunting, attempting to seek out the origins of various quotations. Texts, stripped of their historical contexts, forcefully inserted into a new text, generating new meanings and effects, and even a degree of subversion—just like those works born out of the practices of *linmo*, appropriation, and *Shanzhai*.

Translation by Gordon Laurin, Alvin Li



中国  
挪用  
艺术

©

COPYLEFT:  
Appropriation Art in China