



# Contextualizing Cai Guo-Qiang

*The spectacular large-scale installations by transnational Chinese artist, Cai Guo-Qiang, transmit a special ambiguity that creates different allegorical resonances in both the context of a global art world and in a Chinese cultural context. This article discusses the method and impact of Cai's manipulative use of Chineseness in his work.*

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Cai Guo-Qiang (born 1957) is one of the most internationally renowned contemporary Chinese artists, whose work fetches record sales at international auctions. A global performer with early bases in China and Japan, now with a permanent studio in New York, he won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1999, and has exhibited in nearly all the major art centres of the world.<sup>1</sup> He is an extremely versatile artist, especially famous for his large-scale installations and his use of gunpowder and fireworks, recently demonstrated in his capacity as Director of Visual Effects in a number of high-profiled official Chinese events, such as the Beijing Olympics and China's 60<sup>th</sup> National Day Celebration.

This article takes as its point of departure the large-scale retrospective in the Guggenheim Museum in New York in the spring of 2008, subsequently repeated in Beijing during the Olympics.<sup>2</sup> I will discuss some main themes in Cai's work, not primarily as conspicuous aspects of the international or transnational art circuit – the way he is usually approached – but in the specific dual context of his western audiences and the contemporary political and cultural scene in China. My main focus will be on Cai's installations of wolves and on his ongoing appropriation/recreation of a famous sculptural icon of the Mao-era. Both of these resonate with questions and images simultaneously reflected in the Chinese debate on contemporary society, including issues of environment, creativity and national character. Moreover, the installations, exhibitions and explosion events by Cai Guo-Qiang, in China and on the global art scene, have generated critical comments and interpretive approaches from very different groups of art-critics. Altogether, Cai's work and its reception testify to new dimensions in the perennial debate about the changing conceptions of Chineseness, transnationality and "othering" in a globalized world. In order to illustrate the particular methodology – a kind of dialectic,

oscillating somewhere between oxymoron and the complementary – that seems to underlie much of Cai's work, I start out with a presentation of the artist and some of his most famous and representative installations, before zooming in on two specific installations that have special connections to debates and thematic issues within China itself. I discuss the ambiguity they transmit, and the heterogeneous allegorical resonances they create in the context of a global art world and in a Chinese context respectively.

## Cai Guo-Qiang's background

Cai Guo-Qiang was born in Quanzhou, Fujian Province in 1957 as the son of a calligrapher and book-seller. He studied theatre design and stage props in Shanghai before moving to Japan in 1986, where he began to seriously develop the artistic career he already started back in China. At the time Cai left China, the local literature and arts world was dominated by the so-called "search for roots" (Chinese: *xungen*) movement.<sup>3</sup> As a counter reaction to the sudden westernization-craze in the early 1980s, by mid-80s a great number of writers and artists turned to explore Chinese folklore and hitherto marginalized indigenous traditions, a trend that also deeply influenced Cai Guo-Qiang. He has explained that what he found in Japan was indeed China's past, and going to Japan was a way of returning to Chinese traditional culture. In 1995 he moved on to New York, to explore, as he explained, "China's future." (Cai & Wang 2007)

In contrast to other famous-in-the-West Chinese artists, such as Zhang Xiaogang and Yue Minjun, who often ironically play on the socialist past and implicitly comment on the Mao-era, Cai Guo-Qiang in many ways seems to incarnate a timeless Chinese culture. Even when he does refer to Chairman Mao, it is mostly as some kind of exponent of classical Chinese culture. He often uses conspicuous and immediately recognizable symbols of Chineseness (walls, dragons, pine trees,

<sup>1</sup> See [www.caiguoqiang.com](http://www.caiguoqiang.com)

<sup>2</sup> Cai Guo-Qiang: *I Want to Believe*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Feb. 22-May 28, Beijing: Meishuguan Aug. 19-Sept. 2, Guggenheim Bilbao: March 17-Sept. 20 (partly overlapping)

<sup>3</sup> See for example Huot, C. (2000) *China's New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes*. Durham: Duke University Press



gunpowder, myths, *fengshui*, calligraphy and patterns of landscape painting). However, as has been noted by critics, all these signs of national and cultural identity remain contingent on individual perception, and in Cai's installations and performances they become destabilized signifiers whose signified remain open. Cai Guo-Qiang himself is very loquacious and open in explaining his art and its meanings and often refers to his interest in opposing dynamics, as well as his play with different meanings and symbols in his own (Chinese) culture and in the culture of the (western) viewer, discreetly manipulating their conceptions of each other (Friis-Hansen 2002). Indeed, as I discuss below, most of his works are characterized by interpretive ambiguity and seem to emanate at least two diametrically opposite meanings. Cai Guo-Qiang likes to think of himself as a *wenren*, the embodiment of Chinese culture, including within the concept of *wen* (civilized, cultured) the traditional opposing dynamics of both *wu* (military) and *ye* (wild) (Cai & Wang 2007). Despite his 15 years in New York and his long-time status as international artist, he still prefers not to speak English!

The grand retrospective exhibition at the New York Guggenheim in 2008 (by the way, the biggest success in terms of visitors for an exhibition of a visual artist in the history of the Guggenheim) repeated in Beijing later in the summer, was entitled *I Want to Believe* (Chinese: *Wo xiang yao xiangxin*). This title, as explained by the artist, is borrowed from the film and TV-series, *X-Files* (actually Cao formally bought the title-rights from the film company) and indicates both his interest in cosmos, his dreams and beliefs in something beyond and bigger than Earth and mundane life, and the uncertainty and doubt inherent in being human. Yet, to the Chinese viewer of Cai's own generation, this title may also suggest an implicit contrastive hint to a famous poem, "The Answer" (Chinese: "Huida") written back in 1976 by well-known dissident poet Bei Dao in defiance of the Maoist regime and its propaganda. The most striking aspect of the poem is the repeated lines: "I do not believe" (Chinese: "Wo bu xiangxin") (Bei Dao 1980). These lines were often quoted and prominently displayed during the student demonstrations on Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989. This is but one example of a certain duplicity in linguistic or cultural message, often deliberately employed by Cai, but generally lost on a western audience.

The Guggenheim exhibition featured a number of Cai's most famous and remarkable installations. His trademark; gunpowder and pyrotechnics, was represented through scrolls of gunpowder paintings, reminiscent of ink-splash, and through videos of explosion projects

from all over the world. One series entitled *Project for Extraterrestrials*, conceived to be viewed from outer space, include the 1993 "Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10.000 Meters", realized in Gansu Province at Jiayuguan, by adding a ten kilometre gunpowder fuse to the Wall and igniting it. Gunpowder and fireworks, in Chinese *huoyao*, lit. "fire-medicine", with its transformative power, to Cai epitomizes the kind of conceptual and actual opposites that are central to his work: creation and destruction, careful planning and often unpredictable outcome, war and modernity. One of the "four great inventions"<sup>4</sup> of China it is used for festive and celebratory occasions, but also for bombs and destruction in both East and West, a dual theme played out in a number of installations and performances by Cai in places like Taipei, New York and Hiroshima.



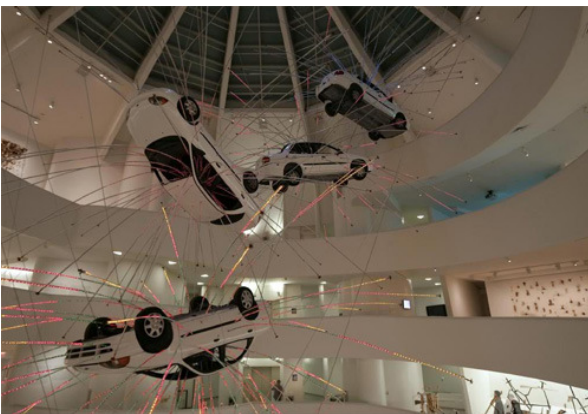
*Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows* (1998)

Cai Guo-Qiang's perhaps most famous single work is *Borrowing the Enemy's Arrows* (Chinese: *Caochuan jie jian* 1998) which now belongs to MOMA. It consists of the frames of an old Chinese fishing boat, suspended, almost floating, in midair, penetrated by three thousand arrows, and with a small Chinese flag at the end of the boat, blown by an electric fan. It has been explained by Cai himself as symbolizing the trauma of cultural conflict and the price of opening up (Friis-Hansen 2007: 26). Western critics have seen it as anything from an expression of Chinese nationalism to showing the general damage of wars or the dangers and challenges of globalization (ibid.). The installation is, to the Chinese viewer, an obvious reference to the legend related in the famous historical narrative, *The Story of the Three*

<sup>4</sup> The compass, gunpowder, paper and printing. Although the expression "four great inventions" originated with Western scholars in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was taken over by the Chinese, and has strong symbolic significance as source of national pride.



*Kingdoms* (Chinese: *San guo yan yi*), in which the brilliant strategist, Zhuge Liang, secured the enemy's arrows for his own army by luring the enemy into firing their arrows into an unmanned straw boat.<sup>5</sup> Seen from this angle, although it may illustrate the pain and wounds inflicted by an intruding force, yet at the same time it ultimately indicates the intelligence and initiative of the seemingly weak receiver. Furthermore – and here I may be speculating too far – the image of China as the wounded, yet floating, boat may to some spectators recall, and imply a subtle rebuttal of, the famous comparison made by Lord Macartney, after his fatal mission to China in 1793, of the Chinese empire to an old ship that may drift some time as a wreck before inevitably being dashed to pieces. (Dawson 1967: 205) Altogether, the installation and its title are typical of Cai's visual and verbal rhetoric, provoking slightly different conceptions in Chinese and western viewers.



*Inopportune: Stage One* (2004)

The theme of the arrows take on further meanings when we move on to two other works: *Inopportune Stage I and II* (Chinese title: *Bu he shi yi*, which suggests something like being misplaced or out of harmony with the times). The first Stage is the amazing, huge, vertical installation of nine white cars suspended from the ceiling, falling downward, each equipped with numerous flashing light rods, like fire arrows, suggesting explosions, perhaps car bombs, or simultaneously beauty (the cars are perfect and unharmed) and terror. "Inopportune Stage II" as a horizontal parallel, shows nine life-size tigers, stuck with arrows, caught in frozen moments of flying, jumping, writhing, angry yet without visible wounds or blood. Here again a Chinese viewer may associate the tiger with the West (since in Chinese mythology the tiger symbolizes West) and probably also be reminded of the well-known story of

<sup>5</sup> A 14th century novel written by Luo Guanzhong, describing historical events dating back to the second century.

the heroic Wu Song from the famous novel *Water Margin* (Chinese: *Shui Hu Zhuan*), who killed a tiger.<sup>6</sup> To the intellectual or art-trained western viewer, however, the image of a body penetrated by arrows might give associations to numerous religious pictures of the sufferings of the Christian martyr, St. Sebastian – suggesting another contrastive East-West subtext. We may go even further. By reflecting on the analogous juxtaposition of the two stages of *Inopportune*, cars and tigers, the parallels of the multitudinous protruding lightning rods and arrows, signifying explosions, attacks and destruction, the spectator may transfer the thus derived dual meanings of arrows on to the installation of *Borrowing the Enemy's Arrows*, and add the idea of explosion to the straw boat. Hence the ambiguity of message is further underscored – and given yet another dimension if we think of the arrows as acupunctural needles with their healing effect (Cai Guo-Qiang's interest in traditional Chinese medicine resonates in a number of other installations). Thus, the juxtaposition of, and the associative links between, such opposing elements as arrows, lightning rods and needles, suggest an almost oxymoron-like box of meanings.



*Inopportune: Stage Two* (2004)

This illustrates one further dimension of the site-specificity characteristic of Cai Guo-Qiang's installations. Though first created for a specific place and time,

<sup>6</sup> *Shui Hu Zhuan* (known in English as *Water Margin* or *Outlaws of the Marsh*) 14th century novel attributed to Shi Nai'an. Wu Song's killing of the tiger is the book's most famous episode, retold by story-tellers over centuries till the present day.





each work may take on extra meanings and uncertainties when it re-appears in new exhibition contexts as part of his steadily expanding artistic universe. Therefore, rather than describing his work as metaphorical, we may look at it in terms of metonymical processes, both as regards the chain of meanings underlying the single installation, and in relation to the dynamics of interaction within the different items at a given exhibition.

### Focus 1: Rent Collection Courtyard

Perhaps the most intricate work at the Guggenheim retrospective exhibition, in terms of intellectual and artistic ramifications, was also outwardly the most straightforward and realist: *The New York's Rent Collection Courtyard* (Chinese: *Niuyue Shou zu yuan*) This ongoing installation, created *in situ* during the exhibition period, was a remake of the *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* (Chinese: *Weinise Shou zu yuan*) which won Cai Guo-Qiang the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1999. This again was an almost exact reproduction of a famous socialist-realist sculptural icon of the Mao-era, *Rent Collection Courtyard* (Chinese: *Shou zu yuan*), originally created by artists from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts back in 1965. Consisting of more than a hundred life-size clay figures in seven tableaux, it is a powerful example of social-realist political art which shows in vivid detail the ragged suffering tenants cruelly exploited by the despotic merchant landlord. The work was commissioned by the Chinese Central Ministry of Propaganda, and sited in the compound of a former landlord. It was officially hailed as a model work during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), and hence recreated in various sizes and versions all over China. A fibreglass version was made in 1974 intended for international exhibitions (Erickson 2001: 54) but not actually shown in the West until 2009, by the German Schirn Kunsthalle, during the Frankfurt Book Fair.



*New York's Rent Collection Courtyard* (2008)

The issues involved in, or generated by, this large-scale but seemingly simple installation, in fact reproduction, by Cai Guo-Qiang are manifold and include questions of authenticity/originality/copying in art works as well as formal copyright, of socialist realism versus postmodernism, of the process of creation and destruction, individual and collective, of timeliness, context and site specificity, of local and global, of the concept of aura, and of course again of different expectations China versus West.

After the Venice Biennale in 1999, the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts decided to sue Cai, along with the Biennale and its main curator, for copyright infringement. In the press release they described the original work like this:

*"[a]n anti-feudal work, created for the masses.....even today is remains a first in internationalization of political art and art's politicization....."*

*As a hyper-realist work of art, the Rent Collection Courtyard is still the most unique, vibrant and largest scale work of its kind ever done. Its complex organization of so many figures into a unified work gives it qualities that are highly literary, borrowing especially from the narrative techniques of illustrated history. It remains perhaps the only work on Chinese soil that is free of western modernist influences, but still highly progressive and creative. Its significance, however, is not limited just to China, but is worldwide in nature." ( May 20, 2000) (Wu 2001: 55)*

The work – which to the western eye appears immediately recognizable as belonging to a western realist sculptural tradition - is thus defined as uniquely Chinese, uncontaminated by western influence, in fact representing the essence of Chinese socialist culture,



and as something that should be displayed for the entire world to see. The Venice Biennale, being perhaps the most prestigious and conspicuous international art exhibition, the focus of global attention, would seem to fulfil precisely the ambitions expressed by the Sichuan Academy. But “appropriated by an overseas Chinese artist”, renamed with the prefix Venice, it becomes simply a case of plagiarism. Beneath some of the rhetoric one may also detect an uncanny sense, on the part of the offended, of socialist art being ridiculed. Despite the fact that the Academy soon withdrew its lawsuit, a heated debate ensued in Chinese media, as to whether Cai Guo-Qiang had violated the rights of individual artists, or just borrowed someone else’s work in order to perform a postmodern work of art, like Andy Warhol and others had done before him (Wu 2001: 57). Indeed, seen from the point of view of modern western art, we may, as David Joselit, discuss Cai’s *Rent Collection Courtyard* as belonging to the tradition of the ready-made, or rather what Cai Guo-Qiang himself has referred to in terms of “cultural readymade” (Cai 2000). According to Joselit, Cai here demonstrated a diasporic revision of the readymade, in the sense that the artist’s position as an ethnically Chinese person based abroad and exhibiting internationally was at stake in how a “cultural readymade” accrued meaning for different audiences (Joselit 2008: 50).



*New York’s Rent Collection Courtyard* (2008)

The question of authenticity versus copying is in this case complicated by several facts. First of all, the original 1964 *Sichuan Rent Collection Courtyard*, explicitly named a model to be imitated, had already been copied and recreated numerous times in China without anyone complaining. On the contrary - this being the very essence of the idea of a model work of art in Cultural Revolution propaganda. Second, in Chinese tradition the dichotomy of original versus copy does not imply

the sharply defined opposites that exist in our post-renaissance western conception. For example, the proliferation of identical Mao-statues during the Cultural Revolution as well as traditional stereotypes of stone sculpture such as temple door-keepers etc. to be found all over China, testify to this (Paludan 2007). Furthermore, the team of sculptors organized by Cai in Venice actually included one of the original artists from Sichuan.

There is no doubt that the *Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard* is a completely different work of art from the first or inaugural *Sichuan Rent Collection Courtyard* and its reproductions. The same but different, and obviously the context is a decisive factor. But what is happening in the space between the original canonical sculptural installation, an icon of socialist realism, hailed as the embodiment of Chinese socialism, created by a collective group of artists – and the avant-gardist, postmodern work created by a highly profiled, individual, transnational artist (in fact a team lead by him) winning the highest prize as an *original* work of art, at the foremost elite artistic competition of the capitalist West? Could *Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard* have won the prize if it had indeed been an “original” piece of art without that particular history? Almost certainly not! And why does it detract from the political, national and aesthetical value of the *Sichuan Rent Collection Courtyard* that it has been appropriated and reproduced in a fundamentally different context? Perhaps it has to do with the loss of *aura*, the special aura radiated by the uniqueness of a work of art, as discussed by Walter Benjamin in his seminal article “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin 1999). Whereas its aura, due to the specific ideology of the socialist model, was not, by the Sichuan Academy, felt to be actually diminished by being reproduced for educational purposes in China, what happened in Venice was not only that it appeared bereft of its original aura, but that it was bestowed with a new and very different kind of aura. As Benjamin argues, traditionally works of high art were often valued as cult, bound to a specific place and time. This has to some extent in modern times been exchanged for exhibition value, implying the possibility of mobility. In our traditional western perception, an original work of art, whether valued as cult or exhibition, would retain its uniqueness even if copied, the copies being merely dismissed as fakes or counterfeit. The *Sichuan Rent Collection Courtyard*, however, would seem to be situated somewhere between cult, exhibition and model/copy. Not so surprising that the involuntary confrontation with a western context, in which the act of copying/recreating takes on its own originality/aura as a conscious post-



modern play with our Western worship of the original, would provoke a reaction from the Sichuan Academy.

How does the always eloquent Cai Guo-Qiang explain his own work? Cai maintains that he was not creating a sculpture, but performing “the making of a sculpture,” his work being a piece of conceptual art using the forms and method of the original model (Zhu 2001: 59). He also claimed that he wanted to “call attention to socialist art that has been quickly forgotten in contemporary culture, and to remind people of the relationship between art and politics and special artistic features of this art” (Zhu 2001: 60). Indeed, the Venice, and later New York versions of *Rent Collection Courtyard* came with detailed presentations of the background and making of the original sculptures in China. And, most significantly, Cai’s *Rent Collection Courtyard* was built on site, so that the very process of moulding the clay, forming the sculptures one by one, was part of the installation as such. Moreover, as the figures dried (they were not burnt), they also started to decay. Thus, Cai’s installation smoulders and vanishes, prompting allegorical resonances referring to the timeliness or ephemeral quality of all things - possibly including the triumph of Chinese communism that it epitomizes. Or again, it may prompt an allusion to a famous quote by Marx: “All that is solid melts in the air.....”

Interestingly, when the New York Guggenheim retrospective was re-staged in Beijing during the Olympics, Cai Guo-Qiang’s version of *Rent Collection Courtyard* was conspicuously missing. Ten years after the Venice Biennale, and more than thirty years after the Cultural Revolution, this sculptural remake was still too controversial, and obviously still perceived as a provocative deconstruction of sacred socialist heritage.<sup>7</sup> Or, as has been suggested by Wang Hui in a comment on the Venice installation, perhaps the sensitivity of the issue of class differences has acquired particular acuteness “given the re-emergence in contemporary Chinese society of divisive social relations.” (Wang Hui 2008: 44)

## Focus 2: Wolves

The second most spectacular installation in the New York Guggenheim retrospective was *Head On* (Chinese: *Zhuang qiang* – colliding with the wall). It was created

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, another exhibition at a private gallery in Beijing, *Gallery Urs Meile*, simultaneously featured a parody of the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, with some figures in the group replaced by famous figures in the Chinese and international art world, among them Cai.

for an exhibition of the same name in Berlin in 2006.<sup>8</sup> It shows a pack of 99 life-sized wolves, dramatically charging and smashing against a transparent plexiglass wall, leaping in the air, linked together in the form of a flying arc. The whole installation exudes a powerful atmosphere of raw, blind energy, perhaps rage, of one-directional aggression. Notably, as the pack-leader and the front wolves crash against the wall and tumble down, they are not depicted as realistically wounded, but still aesthetically unharmed.



*Head On* (2006)

As created for an exhibition in Berlin, this installation at its original showing evoked immediate references to the Berlin Wall.<sup>9</sup> Cai Guo-Qiang himself publicly characterized it in more universal terms as “a symbol of universal human tragedy that results from this blind storming ahead, from the uncompromising way in which we seek to reach our goals.”<sup>10</sup> Western critics have also interpreted it as an image of nature running amok, or as suggesting mindless might aimed at an invisible enemy (Smith 2008). Charles Jencks, author of the seminal book *Critical Modernism: Where is Post-Modernism Going?*, argues for an interpretation of it in the framework of a specific artistic mode he terms “the angry serene.” (Jencks 2007: 142). As the combination of emotional anger and modernization (typified by the angry young men in British art back in the 1950s and 60s) has become completely conventionalized, a new style of anger has emerged (as adopted by for example Damien Hirst in recent works) which is cool, controlled, serene. Jencks sees the 99 wolves – “the ultimate image of herd mentality” - hitting the wall, as the “composed response to the terrors and catastrophes of modernity.” (Jencks 2007: 142)

<sup>8</sup> Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, Aug. 26-Oct.15, 2006

<sup>9</sup> The plexiglass wall was originally realized to the exact height and thickness of the Berlin Wall (*I Want To Believe* 2008: 226)

<sup>10</sup> *db-artmag.de* 2006,04 [www.db-artmag.de/2006/4/e/5/455-2.php](http://www.db-artmag.de/2006/4/e/5/455-2.php)





The general impression of aggression, blindness and herd mentality, and of this installation as a fundamental criticism of civilization in crisis, as perceived by the western viewer, takes on somewhat different, and more contradictory, dimensions, if viewed in the context of other works by the artist. In New York the installation was accompanied by a five-panel long, traditional style scroll entitled "Descending Wolves"<sup>11</sup>. One of Cai's gunpowder creations, strongly reminiscent of classical Chinese ink painting, it shows a pack of wolves descending a mountain wrapped in mist. It conveys a strong sense of natural harmony and aesthetic beauty, which contrasts or complements the sheer power and blind purpose of the installation. In the ambiguous iconography of Cai's oeuvre, the wolf image, especially prominent since 2004, often comes across as a symbol of bravery, courage and power, with the wolf pack as an allegorical representation of collective unity and heroism, something which in the frozen moment of "Head On" transforms into disaster.

The heterogeneity of the wolf image is further underscored if we transpose the contrastive visual concepts created by Cai Guo-Qiang into a recent mainland Chinese discursive context. In 2004, the controversial and extremely popular novel, *Wolf Totem (Lang Tuteng)* by Jiang Rong was published and sparked off an intense and prolonged debate in the Chinese media, including the internet (Jiang 2004, 2008).<sup>12</sup> The debate involved issues of ecology and nature, and of individual versus group, but the focal point became questions of Chinese national character and of China's place in the world.

The novel is set in Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution, and presents the wolf and the wolf pack as the heroic ideal and central agent in the complex interplay between man and nature. The author's main argument, especially as expounded in the crudely formulated afterword/postsript, is that China, and the Han-Chinese national character, is to be compared to the meek and humble sheep that are easily devoured by the brave and merciless wolves. Unless China learns from the wolf (as indeed first the Mongolians, cf. Djengis Khan, and later the West seem to have done) she will lose out in the fierce competition of the globalized world. The book, though strongly criticized by many, came out in more than ten million copies, and was followed up by a number of smaller, best-selling, pamphlets on *The Way of the Wolf* (Chinese: *Lang Dao*), guides to success in business and private life through

emulating the wolf and the organizational structures of the wolf pack.

The immense publicity surrounding the book and the ensuing lupine discourse cannot have escaped Cai Guo-Qiang's attention, and the issues involved will certainly resonate in the majority of (mainland) Chinese spectators confronted with Cai's installation. Whether or not intended by the artist as an overt comment upon this particular novel, *Head On* therefore reaches into a contemporary Chinese culturally demarcated realm, not immediately accessible to the western spectator. As a dramatically powerful spectacle of wolves/individuals linked together in a row, blindly following a leader in what seems a frenzy of attack, only to crash against an invisible wall, the installation immediately suggests the disasters of group mentality and lack of individual reflection. To both Chinese and western (not least German) viewers, this idea would obviously refer to concrete political phenomena in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet this interpretation should be complemented by the more ambiguous signals emanating from the various background discourses at play. An ironic and significant detail, with special reference to the wolf-sheep/West-China problematique in the novel discussed above, is that the stuffed wolves are fabricated (in Cai's hometown Quanzhou in Fujian province) by *sheepskin* (Cai: 2008) So here come 99 sheep in wolves' clothing, created by transnational Chinese-western artist, Cai Guo-Qiang! The number 99 likewise has divergent connotations: In Chinese the cipher 9 appears in mythological connections, and it also often signals the equivalent of "numerous". 9+9 (corresponding to the 9 cars and 9 tigers in the installations *Inopportune I and II*) would therefore, to the Chinese viewer, convey the idea of a multitude. To the western viewer, however, the number 99 may immediately suggest 100 minus 1, thus leaving out, or rather, conspicuously pointing to, the one single, independent, individual who dares to stand alone outside the group. Finally, the image of the wall - be it the Great Wall of China or the Berlin Wall, both fraught with real and symbolic significance - here materialized as invisible yet impenetrable, might stand as metaphor for a mental wall separating East and West.

### Critical Receptions

The combination of the spectacular, the open, the ostensibly message-carrying and yet indeterminate in Cai Guo-Qiang's work, along with its unabashed use of Chineseness in reference to universal themes (in the words of Wang Hui: "Cai uses China as his methodology" Wang 2008: 47), have not only activated a variety

<sup>11</sup> This painting, dating from 2006, was sold in December 2008 at the Ravenel Arts Taipei Auction at \$903,995

<sup>12</sup> The book won the inaugural Asian Man Booker Prize in 2008



of interpretations, but also provoked very different theoretical responses. In view of Cai's conscious manipulation of his role as transnational Chinese artist, it is interesting to compare the responses of the following three groups of critics: Western art critics, western-based or transnational Chinese critics, and Chinese critics writing inside China. Briefly, main themes in the responses of the first group have – not so surprisingly – been a fascination with the exotic, with Chineseness, often combined with a search for political statements or for some kind of clouded reference to commonly accepted expressions of dissidence, i.e. oblique hints to the regime in Beijing. In recent years this has to a certain extent given way to interpretations or descriptions of Cai's work in the language of globalized post-modernism, in recognition of his status as sophisticated member of the contemporary international art circuit. (Zhu 2001: 60-61, Schjeldahl 2008, Smith 2008)

The second group of critics, i.e. the western-based Chinese critics or scholars, fluent in the vocabulary of contemporary western art criticism, have often been actively promoting Cai's image as transnational, post-modern artist. At the same time this group, including people like Gao Minglu and Sheldon Lu, like to present themselves as insiders, uniquely able to see through Cai's manipulative use of Chineseness, and thus seemingly in the position to offer more penetrating analyses than their western colleagues. In short, in their view Cai plays games with westerners who are fascinated by Chinese culture, but don't really understand it. Sheldon Lu, in his discussion on contemporary Chinese art, groups Cai among the international artists who use parody to turn Chinese tradition against itself, in order to reveal and critique conventional manners of thinking about the Chinese and the East (Lu 2004: 174)

As for the third group, domestic critics in mainland China, the reception of Cai's early work was limited in scope, but he became a hot topic with the Venice Biennale in 1999 and his award winning *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, as discussed above. Generally, the tone has moved from a condemnatory one of casting Cai in the role of an overseas Chinese, pandering to the West, selling out of his cultural identity in order to become a representative of postcolonial culture (Wang 2000), to a much more positive one, in which Cai is lauded as a world famous representative of Chinese culture (Wang 2008). This latter view became predominant in 2008 with his involvement in the Olympics Opening and Closing Ceremonies and the solo exhibition at the Beijing *Meishuguan*. It is quite ironic how a number of mainland China critics now practically indulge in Chineseness in their appraisal of Cai, couching his work in

terms like *Dao* (Tao – the Way) or *Kong* (Emptiness) - in contrast to earlier rejection for opposite reasons, and in disregard of all the sophisticated meta-layers of East-West playfulness so ingeniously spotted by their western-based colleagues (Liu 2008). Still, other critics have followed up on precisely that line and seem quite up to date with regard to what has been termed the *post-orientalist* aspect: A veritable Chinese box system of mutual receptions, orientalisms, and parodies of orientalisms, manipulated by transnational identities, endlessly mirroring each other in sophisticated and self-conscious manners.



*Five Golden Rings: Fireworks Project for the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (2008)*

However, there seems to be no paradox or post-orientalism involved, when postmodern, transnational, deliberately ambiguous Cai Guo-Qiang takes on the role of official state artist, consciously representing and promoting the proud and unified Chinese nation, not only in the Olympic Ceremonies, but also as Director of Fireworks Festivities for China's 60<sup>th</sup> National Day, October 2009, the epitome of Communist Party triumph. This is the professional artist and craftsman utilizing his skills in presenting China's powerful image to the world. Although it is certainly possible to separate the persona of Cai the state professional, and that of Cai the postmodern globalized artist, the combination or juxtaposition of the two sides point to something characteristic of his specific brand of contemporary transnational art: namely, that his works, be it installations, explosion events or gunpowder drawings, seem to withstand, or rather defy, the so-called "cultural hybridization" which has been seen by Homi Bhabha and others as the most prominent trend of the globalized world. Cai Guo-Qiang's works, including his cultural ready-mades, are not hybrids. Each of them may cry out for a metaphorical interpretation which they elude, instead suggesting explanations in terms of context dependent metonymies. As I hope to have shown in my discussion





above, cultures do not actually merge in Cai's hands; rather they remain intact, creating impact through interaction and tension within the single work, and through the combined effect of the separate or divergent signals it emanates.

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## Captions

All illustrations included by courtesy of the artist:  
Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957, Quanzhou, China; lives in New York)

*Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows* (1998)  
Wooden boat, canvas sail, arrows, metal, rope, Chinese flag, and electric fan  
Boat: approximately 152.4 x 720 x 230 cm (60 x 283 1/2 x 90 1/2 in.), arrows:  
approximately 62 cm (24 1/2) each  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros in honor of  
Glenn D. Lowry



*Inopportune: Stage One* (2004)

Nine cars and sequenced multichannel light tubes  
 Dimensions variable  
 Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Robert M. Arnold, in honor  
 of the 75th Anniversary of the  
 Seattle Art Museum, 2006

*Inopportune: Stage Two* (2004)

Nine life-sized tiger replicas, arrows, and mountain  
 stage prop. Tigers: papier-mâché,  
 plaster, fiberglass, resin, and painted hide; arrows:  
 brass, threaded bamboo shaft, and  
 feathers; and stage prop: Styrofoam, wood, canvas, and  
 acrylic paint  
 Dimensions variable  
 Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands  
 Photo by Kevin Kenefick, courtesy MASS MoCA

*New York's Rent Collection Courtyard* (2008)

Realized at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, for  
 the exhibition *Cai Guo-Qiang: I  
 Want to Believe*  
 Life-sized sculptures  
 72 life-sized sculptures created on site by Long Xu Li  
 and eight guest artisan sculptors,  
 clay, wire and wood armature, and other props and  
 tools for sculpture, spinning night  
 lamps, facsimile photocopies of documents and  
 photographs related to the *Rent  
 Collection Courtyard* (dated 1965)  
 Artwork not extant; props: collection of the artist

*Head On* (2006)

99 life-sized replicas of wolves and glass wall. Wolves:  
 gauze, resin, and painted hide  
 Dimensions variable  
 Deutsche Bank Collection, commissioned by Deutsche  
 Bank AG  
 Installation view at Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, 2006.  
 Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio

*Five Golden Rings: Fireworks Project for the Opening  
 Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing*

*Olympic Games* (2008)

Realized in Beijing, August 8, 2008  
 Fireworks  
 Commissioned by The International Olympic  
 Committee and The Beijing Organizing  
 Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad  
 Photo by Wang Xiaoxi, courtesy Cai Studio