

798: PROTEST SUBCULTURE AND CREATIVE INDUSTRY

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789: Protest Subculture and Creative Industry

Abstract

The Beijing 798 Art District in China has evolved from oppressed subculture to commercial entity. The argument has now been raised over the nature of the 798 artist community in today's art world. The 798 originated as a subculture of avant-garde artists and now functions as a creative industry. The 798 is depicted by scholars as either a persecuted protest culture or a commodified and marketed Chinese identity. I gathered my research from sources on 798 evolution such as Jeroen de Kloet's article *Social Semiotics*, and Chinese scholars that study the 798's development in terms of China's communist past, most influentially Rey Chow. As a result of my research I discovered the identity of the 798 is a fusion of both commercial and protest. The current role of the 798 is complex, but is unraveled through comparison of past and present 798 works. From the evaluation of these works and their role, one thing becomes evident; that the 798 no longer functions as a subculture. The larger implications of this project lead to a questioning of the nature of a subculture, the definition of an artist community, and the role of the artist in oppressive cultures.

Introduction

The 798 is an artist community in east Beijing, China, that markets itself as a protest subculture¹. The 798 was founded in the late 1980s early 1990s as a subculture by Chinese artists who were rejected by Chinese society, the Chinese government, and formal Chinese art institutions for practicing avant-garde art.² The early 798 artists like Zhang Huan and Wang Guangyi struggled with the role of the protest artist in an oppressive Chinese culture. They and other founding 798 artists used their works to criticize China's perceptions of the avant-garde artist and evaluate the presence of Chinese government in the art world. The 798 continued to function as a protest subculture until the early 2000s. The change from rejected artist community to the 798's current role as a tourist attraction complicates the issue of the 798 as subculture.

The context of the 798 changed as its avant-garde artists began to gain international attention for being oppressed by communist laws. In 2009, after the Beijing Olympics, the 798 no longer actively conflicted with the Chinese government but continued to be understood in terms of "communist oppression". The original 798 artists were concerned with the role of the artist within 1990s Chinese culture, but the present 798 artists have attained the identity (regardless of accuracy) of an artist community being oppressed by the nation-state. Today's 798 artists are faced with issue of how to function as a subcultural protest artist within a commodified entity.

This change in the context of 798's nature becomes a complex issue for scholars and art critics. The 798 still produces works that appear to criticize communism and communist ideology while functioning as a government endorsed creative industry. This

¹ Protest subculture to be defined later.

² Avant-garde work are understood as works that break with the conventions of previous art, and in the case of the 798 are often emulated after Pop art.

divide in theory of the origin and understanding of present purpose of the 798 has created two different theories about the purpose of contemporary 798 art. One such theory is that the 798 artists are oppressed by the government and are expressing the effects of that oppression through communist oriented works. The second theory is that the 798 markets the identity of oppressed Chinese citizen to the global art world as a mean of satisfying its role as a commercial entity.

The 798 has lost the context in which it was created and the status as a subculture, but the argument over the nature of the 798 exists as two sides of the same coin. The 798 dichotomy does not inherently need to exist exclusive of one another. The present 798 can function both as commercial entity and as protest culture.

798 History

In the 1950s, the Dashanzai Art District was a slum for factory workers and their families. As Communist China sought to further define their role in product development and textile manufacturing they turned to Soviet Russia for assistance.³ The Russians called upon occupied East Germany to design and construct a production district in Eastern Beijing. Construction officially concluded in 1957 and the complex was named the 718 District. The 718 signified a celebrated relationship between China and its communist brethren. The 718 was the main factory that produced military grade equipment for the use of the Chinese government and for trade with other countries, such as Russia.⁴

³ Eliot Kiang, "798: Five Glorious Decades," *Reflections on Art, Architecture, and Society in China: Beijing 798*, Beijing, 2004, 32.

⁴ Laura Tan, "Revolutionary Spaces in Globalization: Beijing's Dashanzi Arts District," *Hybrid Entities. Intersections Conference Journal—Graduate Student Conference of Ryerson/York University*, 2005.

The overall design of the 718 District was reminiscent of the German Bauhaus style, which allowed for ample natural light to pour into the buildings. The 718 featured luxury living conditions and the area was prized as a jewel of Communist China, becoming the envy of all other factory workers. The 718 workers had eight-hour days and were given ample living accommodations for themselves and their family. Each housing unit was furnished, rent was affordable, daycare was provided, night classes were offered, and several recreational activities were encouraged.⁵ Within the 718 District the, 798 Factory was a light bulb manufacturing plant. The 798 Factory was also presented to the Chinese people as model for successful Communist China. The workers were hand picked by the Chinese government and many soldiers volunteered to guard the complex. The factories continued to employ and house worker families for almost fifteen years.⁶

In 1967, the 718 District was divided into sub companies so that it could be more easily managed during a time of economic and political turmoil.⁷ In the 1980s through to the early 1990s, the district was essentially shut down due to lack of government support, leading to the unemployment of nearly 100,000 workers. As the laid-off workers fled back to their rural villages or moved elsewhere for employment the factories fell vacant. The task of finding tenants for these buildings was handed over to a real estate agency called Seven- Star Huadian Science and Technology Group.⁸

In the early 1990s the 718 District was gradually shut down, economic ties between the Chinese and the west, mainly America and Europe, began to strengthen.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Eliot Kiang, "798: Five Glorious Decades," 35.

⁷ Jennifer Currier, "Art and power in the new China: An exploration of Beijing's 798 district and its implications for contemporary urbanism," *Town Planning Review* 79, no. 2 (2008): 243.

⁸ Ibid.

During this time a conversation between the east and west developed into a cultural bridge. The new relationship with the west and China allowed a stronger presence of western ideologies and art practices to enter Chinese culture.

Many young artists in China, such as Wang Guangyi, began to experience and practice western avant-garde art. Because the Chinese avant-garde artist's less traditional content or outward anti-communist statements were still considered taboo the Chinese public and art world did not embrace the works of these Chinese avant-garde artists. This initial lack of understanding from the Chinese public led to the ostracizing of these artists. The Chinese government even went so far as to make performance art illegal in western China. The two-pronged attack from both society and the government left the rising population of Chinese avant-garde artists displaced and impoverished. Finding themselves unemployable, the artists sought out affordable living conditions and many turned to Eastern Beijing to live amongst the factory worker slums.⁹

With the shutting down of the 718 District, the 798 Factory was left vacant. The Seven Star Real Estate Company began to lease to young artists, and eventually through word of mouth, the 798 was quickly transformed into an avant-garde artist sub haven.¹⁰ The once prized worker district of the communist government had evolved into a strong avant-garde artist seedbed. The early 798 avant-garde artists created works that questioned the role of the artist in 1990s Chinese culture.

The evolution of the 798 did not go unnoticed by the Chinese government. The Chinese government tried to shut down the 798. In 2004, during one of such effort the

⁹ Eliot Kiang, "798: Five Glorious Decades," 36.

¹⁰ Hung Wu, "Tui-Transfiguration: An Experimental Exhibition at Factory 798," *Reflections on Art, Architecture, and Society in China: Beijing 798*, Beijing, (2004): p. 59.

Chinese government very publicly ordered the Seven-Star Realty Group to stop administering new leases to the artists.¹¹ In response, the artists began subleasing to one another.¹² In 2006 during another effort to eradicate the 798 of the artists, the Chinese government offered to return 10,000 jobs to workers who had lost their jobs when the factories were shut down. This act by the Chinese government was met with public outcry from both the international artist community and several of the high-end investors in the area. It had become obvious to the international public that the 798 was in direct conflict with ‘the Chinese government’.¹³ Thus, the 798 earned its place in the heart of the global community as a refuge of the Chinese political artist.

The 798’s clashes with the Chinese government ceased in 2009 after the Beijing Olympics. Prior to the Olympics the government had tried to shut down the 798 because “it depicted China in an unsavory light”.¹⁴ However, the revenue generated from the 798 during the Olympics enticed the Chinese government and suggests a motive for their present support of the 798 and other creative industries like it. Presently, the 798 is considered by the government to be a popular tourist attraction and shopping district. The function in Chinese culture of the 798 as a tourist site has removed its ability to function as a protest subculture.

The Issue of Subculture

The art of the 798 currently represents the Chinese artists as subcultural renegades

¹¹ Jennifer Currier, "Art and power in the new China: An exploration of Beijing's 798 district and its implications for contemporary urbanism," p. 239.

¹² Eliot Kiang, “798: Five Glorious Decades,” p. 37.

¹³ Eliot Kiang, “798: Five Glorious Decades,” p. 37.

¹⁴ Laura Tan, "Revolutionary Spaces in Globalization: Beijing’s Dashanzi Arts District," 2005.

in direct conflict with traditional communist values. Dick Hebdige in “Subculture and the Meaning of Style” defines a subculture as a group that functions outside of a majority culture. Any group not considered the main populace is identified as a subculture. A symptom of the subculture is the creating of a style specific to a sub group of the population. Subcultures often develop their own style through subversion of common objects or symbols. This style references or criticizes certain parts of the majority populous and the majority ideologies that are considered inherit and deeply imbedded into the culture. The subcultural style is then used to challenge the accepted hegemony, and cause the majority culture to evaluate its ideology.¹⁵

The founding 798 artists closely adhered to Hebdige’s rhetoric of a subculture. The original 798 artists formed their group for the purpose of developing an avant-garde art culture in China. The artists appropriated American and western avant-garde Pop art to subvert mainstream and dominant ideologies in China. This resulted in the creating a style of Chinese political Pop art.¹⁶ This new style recontextualized common Chinese imagery and themes, such as social realist works and commercial logos, to form a criticism of the Chinese hegemony. A Chinese 798 artist who played a vital role to the formation of the 798 as a subculture is Zhang Huan.

Chinese contemporary performance artist Zhang Huan addresses the viewer with the struggles and the abuse of the avant-garde artist in early 1990s Chinese society through his performance work *12 Square Meters (fig. 1)*.¹⁷ Performance art at this point in

¹⁵ Dick Hebdige, "Subculture: The meaning of style," *Critical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1995): 120-124.

¹⁶ Hsiao-peng Lu, “Art, culture, and cultural criticism in Post-new China,” pg. 124.

¹⁷ Frances Richard, “Zhang Huan,” p. 284.

China had been integrated in the early 1980's and was since made illegal in formal art spaces, such as galleries and museums.¹⁸ In his work Huan implicates the need for Chinese artists to form subcultural communities and function in response to government prejudice and lack of societal acceptance.

12 Square Meters, one of Huan's earliest performance works, deals with the plight of the artist in early 1990s Beijing society. In *12 Square Meters* Huan lathered himself in fish oil and honey, and then sat in a dirty public latrine for hours allowing the flies in the restroom to cover and invade his body. After Huan had finished in the latrine he walked into a nearby pond where the dead flies floated to the surface of the water.¹⁹ Huan uses his performance work, *12 Square Meters*, as a metaphor for the abuse and disregard of artists in China.

He chose this specific latrine because it was once reserved for the high-ranking village officials, but had become filthy and neglected by its community much like himself and his fellow artists who were rejected and cast into filth by society. The choice of a latrine also suggests that the value of the Chinese avant-garde style was in such a low regard that it had to be performed in a restroom. The latrine is both a part of and metaphor for the community of artists beginning to form and the state of the present art world. *12 Square Meters* was only witnessed by a handful of viewers and other artists. Huan, however, considers *12 Square Meters* to be his most successful performance work as it helped influence and vocalize the displacement of the artist during the formation of

¹⁸ Eliot Kiang, "798: Five Glorious Decades," p. 40.

¹⁹ Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese experimental art at the end of the twentieth century*.

the 798.²⁰

As the world caught wind of the treatment of Chinese artists, the artist became a martyr to both eastern and western public. These 798 artists and their works gained international recognition. For the oppression of political artists the international public condemned the Chinese government and the Chinese public. The Chinese authority was criticized for their efforts to silence to 798 artists, and the majority Chinese culture reevaluated their ideology about the right to expression and the role of the artist.

The argument can be made that today the 798 has returned to its role within communist China, or as servant of the nation-state. The Chinese government has realized the potential for revenue these creative industries generate for China, and now support areas like the 798. Ultimately, the 798 has been integrated into popular Chinese culture. As is the paradox of subcultural evolution; if the subculture becomes absorbed and re-subverted into the greater populace, then the community no longer functions as a subculture.²¹

The Greater Criticism

Wang Guangyi is a successful and internationally recognized 798 artist and author of *Issues About Art* (2004). Wang has been a resident of the 798 since its conception, and his career and works mirror the progress of the 798 within the global community. From 1991 to 1994, he created a series of works entitled *Great Criticism*. The works in the series positioned popular propaganda images and posters from the Chinese Cultural Revolution in terms of commercial brands of the western world, including Porsche, Disney, and Pepsi. The work *Coca-Cola* (fig. 2) of the *Great Criticism* series establishes

²⁰ Frances Richard, "Zhang Huan," p. 284.

²¹ Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese experimental art at the end of the twentieth century*.

a comparative relationship between the western avant-garde art and its Chinese imitations by focusing on the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution or, as it is commonly referred to, the Chinese Cultural Revolution.²²

The Chinese Cultural Revolution occurred between 1966 and 1976. It was an effort from the younger generation to cleanse the nation of the “Four Olds”: old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas.²³ Under the power of Mao Zedong, a communist theorist and political leader of China, the Chinese Cultural Revolution quickly fell into chaos and led to the murder and torture of those considered “counter-revolutionary” or “bourgeois”. During this time, the role of art in China was strictly regimented to the purposes of social realist propaganda. Which postulated that art was for the benefit of nation-state building, and consistently portrayed Mao as a hero (fig. 3).²⁴ The Chinese Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao Zedong. Historians often criticize the revolution as the most detrimental period in Chinese history.²⁵ Wang utilizes many compelling visual elements from Chinese social realist propaganda to facilitate his commentary about this period in Chinese history.

Coca-Cola features three figures that are easily identifiable to the Chinese Cultural Revolution viewer. The foremost image is of an industrial laborer, most likely male and articulated with his worker uniform (overalls and factory hat). The second figure is a female farmer, often the motif of the female worker in Chinese propaganda

²² Joan Robinson and Richard Baum, *The Cultural Revolution in China*, Penguin books, 1969.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ See Figure 2 for image of Chinese Social Realist Propaganda with Mao as “hero of the people”.

²⁵ Barbara Barnouin, and Changgen Yu. *Ten Years of Turbulence: The Chinese Cultural revolution*, Kegan Paul International Publications, 1993.

were presented as either farmers or nurses.²⁶ The figure furthest from the viewer is identifiable by his military hat as a soldier in the Peoples Liberation Army.²⁷ The three figures have strong muscular forearms and clutch to an oversized pen. The foremost figure, the industrial laborer, holds to his chest a red book that would be easily understood to the Chinese viewer as Mao Zedong's book of poems.²⁸ In the same flat red color as the book, across the bottom right of the work there is the iconic Coca-Cola logo written in stark white. Scattered with random placement across the entire work are ambiguous barcodes in interchangeable black and white.

The three figures clutching the pen bring into the conversation the role of the artist in each of these scenarios. Wang considers that the artist in Maoist Cultural Revolutionary China functions as propagandist. With his work *Coca-Cola* Wang also questions the social and political relations in the early 1990s, around the time of the birth of the 798.²⁹ Wang's work can be interpreted as creating a parallel of Maoist China's social realist propaganda and western advertisement. The seamless incorporation of *Coca-Cola's* logo and Chinese propaganda suggests that western advertiser's objectives can be compared to the role government propaganda. Wang aligns the 'free' world and its marketable goods in relation to traditional communist symbols to further imply the connection between advertisement and propaganda. Both western ads and social realist

²⁶ Women were commonly represented in Chinese Cultural Revolution posters because Mao, the founder of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, emphasized the equality of women within Chinese society.

²⁷ See Figure 4 for example of the three common characters in Chinese Cultural Revolution Propaganda poster.

²⁸ Helen Wang, *Chairman Mao badges: symbols and Slogans of the Cultural Revolution*, British Museum, 2008.

²⁹ Hsiao-peng Lu, "Art, culture, and cultural criticism in Post-new Chin,," *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 124.

propaganda elicit the idea of a 'better way of life' whether it is through use of their product or the idea of filling a role to better the country.³⁰ Placing the artist in either situation as manipulator and tool of industry or nation-state, Wang considers the artist as pivotal to the success of either system's capacity to govern its populace.³¹

In light of being outcast from the formal Chinese art world Wang holds to the avant-garde style of the early 798. Wang begins questioning the role of the artist in 1990s China. Wang suggests the artist serves as a bridge between Chinese history and a developing Chinese modernity. As China becomes more integrated the role of the capitalist Chinese citizen and artist evolves within the petri dish of the western cultural model. The emphasis on the individual is emulated by the displacement of the figures from the Chinese propaganda by juxtapositioning them against a western cultural icon. Wang's argument then becomes a criticism of the avant-garde artist is both rejected and product of a developing Chinese culture through the bridge between commercialism and communism.

Wang's work *Coca-Cola* bears the influence of western avant-garde aesthetics on the Chinese artist. Art critic Hsiao-peng Lu, author of *Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post New Era China* identifies Wang's work as Protest Pop art. Which he argues is a sub-movement of Pop art. Pop art emerged in the western world during the 1950s and served to question the tradition of 'high art' (painting and sculpture) by creating works made from or in reference to popular images, like magazines or logos, also known as "low art". Artist in the Pop art movement often displace images from their

³⁰ David Barboza and O. N., "Schooling the Artists' Republic of China," *New York Time*, 2008.

³¹ *ibid.*

context and allow for new meaning to be deciphered through the images new context.³² Political Pop art follows in the same vein by detaching the meaning or context of an image for the purposes of making the viewer re-evaluating the work in a new context with emphasis on the artist's political motivations. It was not until 1990s with the dawn of the "global capitalism in China and the rest of the world" that the Chinese artists became known for their Pop Art influenced work.³³

The series the *Great Criticism* can be compared to the works of Andy Warhol. In 1973, Andy Warhol created a 15-foot tall larger than life size series of portraits of Chairman Mao, named *Mao*. The works convey an artificially realistic quality and serve as commentary on contemporary celebrity worship. His criticism of the idea of celebrity worship is commented on by the depiction of Mao that Warhol chose to use. The image used for *Mao* was the most circulated picture of the communist leader featuring Mao in the center of the canvas with a "Mona Lisa-esk smile".³⁴ This feature suggests that the popular representation of Mao had become as infamous as the *Mona-Lisa*. Warhol's *Mao* mixes symbols of commercialism and communist authority. Andy Warhol's 1973 *Mao* (fig. 5) aligned painting as commodity and political statement.³⁵

The reproduction of the popular image of Mao by not only China but also the western media highlighted the possible dichotomy an image can maintain. In the case of the Chinese viewer Mao was hero of the people, but within western civilization Mao was

³² Hsiao-peng Lu, "Art, Culture, and cultural criticism in Post-new China," p.125

³³ Jennifer Dyer, "The Metaphysics of the Mundane: Understanding Andy Warhol's Serial Imagery," *Artibus et Historiae* (2004): 37.

³⁴ Ann Goldstein, Anne Rorimer, Lucy R. Lippard, Stephen Melville, and Jeff Wall, *Reconsidering the object of art: 1965-1975*, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

enemy and oppressor. Warhol's *Mao* attempts to remove the potent political propaganda message of the originally social realist work by making the image more feminine through the use of a pastel color palette. Warhol questions the entrance of the "image of pain and power" into the world of western advertisement.³⁶

In comparison to Warhol, Wang waters down the overt communist elements of the social realist imagery with the removal of the workers trade tools. This re-contextualizing of a Chinese Cultural revolution poster in conversation with western materiality (the Coca-Cola logo) emulates Warhol's criticism of "celebrity worship". Both the Cultural Revolution propaganda and the logo become fused with the cultural identity of either western or eastern experience. Wang considers what happens when both identities associated with the images co-exist in a picture plane, much like the merging of Chinese and western cultures in the early 1990s. He strategically places the idea of China playing a role in the global economy by tying China's sordid past with western consumerism.

Today Wang's and other early 798 artist's work is read as a reaction to a communist environment rather than a questioning of the artists place in Chinese culture at the formation of the 798. Critics argue that he aligns Chinese art as characteristically communist or associated with communist oppression by specifically choosing a time of terrible atrocity, the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Wang represents the artist as not a product of an ancient culture but rather as covered in the scars of his nation-state and wronged by communism. The present interpretation of Wang's *Coca-Cola* play directly into negative western conceptions of communist China in an effort to sell the brand of

³⁶ Jennifer Dyer, "The Metaphysics of the Mundane: Understanding Andy Warhol's Serial Imagery," *Artibus et Historiae* (2004): 37.

politically oppressed Chinese art.

The formation of the brand of Chinese artist as oppressed or victim of communism is what a western audience wanted and more importantly what a western audience bought. The change in conceptions about *Coca-Cola* offers a narrative for the evolving role of the 798 in western and Chinese culture. 798 became known to the world for its oppressed nature, but it was not necessarily communism that oppressed Wang and early 798 artists. Rather it was the communist ideas of the role of the artist that caused the 798 to conflict with the Chinese government and public. The global communist packages the identity of the Chinese artist in contemporary 798 as inherently tethered to and wronged by communism. This commodification of the Chinese experience is branded and marketed by the western ideas and the Chinese creative industry.

The Birth of A Creative Industry

An artistic community is defined as a functioning group of artists that come together to create works and develop similar ideas.³⁷ Primarily artist communities have developed in the west. Two examples of the historical tradition of the “artist community” are Montparnasse and SOHO. Montparnasse was a reaction to the travesties of WWII, and became an international center for intellectuals and artists. Many artists in Europe were forced to flee their homes or serve in the military during WWII. After the war these artist relocated to Paris, France, and sought to build a community to expand the world of art.³⁸ Similarly, SOHO was formed with the intention of forming a creative community

³⁷ Tsu-Lung Chou, "Creative Space, Cultural Industry Clusters, and Participation of the State in Beijing," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 53, no. 2. (2012): 212.

³⁸ Jay Winter, *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: The Great War in European cultural history*, Vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

during a time of social hardship. SOHO artists reacted to the Vietnam War, the draft, and the death of many of their peers. SOHO is located in Manhattan, NY and was an ideal artist studio and loft space where important art historical event occurred like the Happenings and Andy Warhol's Factory.³⁹

These communities were created as reaction to events in the western world and based on western ideas of the artist. They developed western foundations of art and created a western tradition of the artist community. A recognized 798 scholar, Dai, argues that the 798 does not adhere to the tradition of the artist community:

The choice for and reconstruction of the 798 is not out of cultural nostalgia not to memorize a special and heated age, it was to copy and import an international and American way of artistic life to China—a SOHO art and living zone with a loft lifestyle.⁴⁰

Dai argues against the popular idea that the 798 originally formed as a reaction to communist Chinese culture. The theory that the 798 artists came together and began to evolve into an artist community like Montparnasse or SOHO is wildly inaccurate for Dai. Rather the 798 artists deliberately decided to create an artist community modeled after a western tradition. This theory removes the "reaction to" narrative and suggests the 798 is an imported product of the western world.⁴¹ The argument that Dai makes does not need to function as opposed to the 798 as a reaction to Chinese communism and culture theory. The divide between the two ideas may appear clean-cut but when combined the theories function to create a stronger understanding of the 798.

³⁹ Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, *The Warhol economy: How fashion, art, and music drive New York City*, Princeton University Press, 2007.

⁴⁰ Jeroen de Kloet, "Created in China and Pak Sheung Chuen's tactics of the mundane." *Social Semiotics* 20, no. 4 (2010): 443.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

Both arguments for the nature of the 798 fail independently, because neither considers the evolution of 798 history. While the more popular narrative is the 798 as a reaction to the oppression in communist history, it is a narrative inflicted on the early 798 rather than generated by its founders. Early 798 artists did deal with the issue of communism but it was on the basis of communism conflicting with western influence and an evolving Chinese culture. Originally, 798 works functioned as a criticism of the art world in China, rather than a consideration of communist history. Neither Dai nor the 798- as reaction to communist oppression theory satisfy the history of the 798.

Dai's theory of the nature of the 798 better describes the current function of the 798 rather than its predecessor. The intentionally boisterous criticism of communist oppression as part of Chinese identity is true of contemporary 798 works. Current 798 artists sell the 798-brand rather than argue for the ideas that the 798 was founded on. The artists continue to market the identity of wronged by communism because it is a product of the Chinese creative industry

Dai also argues that the original 798 artists "imported" a western tradition of the artist community. This argument neglects the nature and function of an artist community. Montparnasse and SOHO were created in reaction to turmoil the artists faced during a time of cultural anxiety. Both Dai's and the 798-reaction arguments falsely identify the cultural tragedy that the 798 is alleged to be a reaction to as the history of Chinese communism. In fact the turmoil that the 798 members faced was a rejection of their identity as avant-garde artists. The early 798 artists were forced into poverty and consequentially into the slums of Beijing. The artist community of the 798 was formed out of a necessity to survive in Chinese culture, rather than as a deliberate decision to

import a western tradition or to commiserate about communism.

The idea that the 798 is not a development of Chinese culture is supported by the ways the 798 artist gained their international recognition. Artist Zhang Huan, one of the founders of the 798, referred to the area of the 798 as the “East Beijing Village” directly aligning it with the East Village in New York City.⁴² Wang Guangyi integrated avant-garde, Pop art style, and commercial icons in his work to attract an international conversation. The ‘798 style’ appropriates western art movements and history and implements them with a function of Chinese protest. The artist community may have evolved from the necessity to form a 798-identity, but the conventions in which the 798 artists conveyed their message was an imported style.

The idea of the 798 not forming as a result of cultural nostalgia that Dai presents holds true in 798 history. The founding members of the 798 had no intention of criticizing communist histories as the central cause of Chinese oppression.⁴³ Rather the 798 artists created the 798 to practice and evolve their avant-garde art. Today the 798 culture markets the 798-brand as Chinese artist oppressed by their nation state. The contemporary 798 identity as political renegade is countered by the government support of the 708 and similar creative industries.

A creative industry is an economic model that functions as seller of services rather than goods.⁴⁴ The 798 today functions as a creative industry and is a vital part of

⁴² Frances Richard, Zhang Huan, *Artforum*, 2008, p. 284.

⁴³ Jiayun Zhuang, "Factory 798: the Site of Nostalgia and its Incontinent Dweller," 2008.

⁴⁴ Jeroen de Kloet, “*Created in China and Pak Sheung Chuen’s tactics of the mundane,*” p.451.

China's plan to go from 'China-made' to 'China-created'.⁴⁵ The stereotype of China as the sweatshop of the world is an image that the quickly growing country is determined to veer away from. One avenue of altering the Chinese reputation is through producing Chinese goods to sell rather than making them for other companies. The 798 brings international investors to Beijing through the art market, and solicits the image of China as a developing nation from a communist past. Galleries are opening up at a rapid pace from international investors to brand names like Nike wanting their own place in the new cultural center.⁴⁶ Beijing has developed thirty other creative spaces similar to the 798, all for different creative purposes.⁴⁷

Chineseness

Interpretations of the 798's origins as a subculture in reaction to communism created a brand for the present creative industry of the 798, what Jeroen de Kloet calls 'Chineseness'. Jeroen de Kloet, author of *Social Semiotics* and scholar in the field of contemporary Chinese history, establishes the idea and purpose of the 798-brand of Chineseness in the following excerpt:

The references to the communist past of 798 constitute a specific articulation of Chineseness, not one related to China's assumed long history or its mythic rural origins, but one connected to its recent past; a past that sells on the global art market... A global art world joins forces with the Chinese authorities to produce this zone of alleged freedom and resistance, with Chineseness as its selling point.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ The idea of 'China-made' versus 'China-created' is based on the Chinese reputation of having a factory-worker economy. China wants to break this mold and become primary creative industry.

⁴⁶ Tsu-Lung Chou, "Creative Space, Cultural Industry Clusters, and Participation of the State in Beijing," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 53, no. 2. (2012): 208.

⁴⁷ Eliot Kiang, "798: Five Glorious Decades," p. 37.

⁴⁸ Jeroen de Kloet, "Created in China and Pak Sheung Chuen's tactics of the mundane," p.456.

Here Kloet argues that the 798 calls upon China's communist past for the purposes of creating a sense of "Chineseness". The Chinese identity is being presented by contemporary Chinese artists as bound to communism instead of the ancient history of China. These works remove the Chinese experience and replace it with a bottled up and commodified version of China.⁴⁹ The 798-brand 'Chineseness' has an inappropriate optimism that neither completely satirizes nor captures the experience of being Chinese or the implication of Chinese history. 798 and creative industries like it in China create works that exploit Chinese communist history and present it to the art world as a kitschy communism.

An artwork that captures this kitschy communism is Zhang Xiaogong's *Red Guards Sculpture* (2008) (fig. 6). *Red Guard Sculpture* depicts two soldiers in the People's Liberation Army from the Chinese Cultural Revolution. They are both made into cartoonish miniatures with animated expressions. The idea of Chineseness is suggested by Xiaogong's sculpture as it neither represents the hardships of the Chinese Cultural Revolution nor does it describe the experience of being Chinese. It functions as an object for consumption based off an idea of oppression.

The 798 is identified and considered a protest artist community. This reputation is challenged when the works do not function for the purpose of challenging an idea or entity. So if this art is not genuine in its purpose, why does it exist? The idea of Chineseness in art exists because it is what sells on the art market.⁵⁰ This kid-friendly communist history is imbedded with the idea of the artist overcoming the oppressive state

⁴⁹ Rey Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a theoretical problem," *boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): 7.

⁵⁰ Barbara Pollack, "The Chinese Art Explosion," *ARTnews* 30 August, 2008.

in a Cinderella story perspective. The western conception of communism as empirically bad and the ideas of the western world saving a people in a time of hardship play into the ego of western consumerism.

Chineseness on both ends of the world implicates a cultural barrier and present stereotyping.⁵¹ Within the idea of the global economy and integrated society where does the trans-Atlantic cultural lag fit in? The 798 artists have found a way to take advantage of the western prejudice of Chinese culture. The Chinese economy and art market are soaring since the integration of 798 as a cultural center. China has taken steps towards completing its transition from being a factory worker economy to a creative industry. The benefits are not one sided, western investors see high returns on artists and galleries from their 798 investments. Museums and galleries attract large audiences when they feature Chinese artists.⁵² The development of the current Chinese culture and economy is founded on an imaginary skeleton of its past. 'Chineseness' is a brand that sells because it is what the western audience wants to hear. It is not the Chinese culture that benefits from this stereotypical artwork but rather the global economy.

Greater Implications

The evolution of the 798 from protest subculture to creative industry complicates the way in which the function of the 798 can be understood. It is best to consider the 798 as being in constant conversation with Chinese culture and society. The communist factory purpose of the 798 was for the proliferation of communist ideals. In the 1990s the 798 was used to create an artist community that could function outside of Chinese culture

⁵¹ Yeh, Michelle. "International theory and the transnational critic: China in the age of multiculturalism." *boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): 196.

⁵² Barbara Pollack, "The Chinese Art Explosion," 2008.

and develop and avant-garde art style. Today the 798 is an enterprise that sells a 798-brand and furthers Chinese capitalism. The role of the protest artist in all of these scenarios advances with Chinese culture and society. So how can we determine a genuine protest artist in present day 798?

Currently 798 artworks feature an element of Chineseness, which often criticizes the government for its communist history. These works appear to be political in nature but function more as commodity or souvenirs of the Chinese experience. The protest status of the 798 artists has been enveloped by the commercial nature of the 798. The Chinese government also funds the current 798 and supports several artist projects, how can an artist function as critic of the government when he is integrated into it? Is there still a true 798 protest artist?

I believe that there are at present 798 protest artists that live and function within the 798, but are consumed and diluted by the 798 Chineseness cultural model. The authentic protest artist of the 798 has again become the subculture, but it is now a subculture of a community that markets itself as a subculture. So how can the 798 genuine protest artist distinguish themselves from the 798 commodity producers?

The presence of a subculture requires a style and development of a philosophy. Until these facets of the authentic 798-protest artist are more clearly defined it will be virtually impossible to identify members of the new subculture. So the history of the 798 artist has changed again; from subcultural oppressed artist, to tool of creative industry, and currently the authentic artist of the 798 stands as victim of industry and undefined subculture.

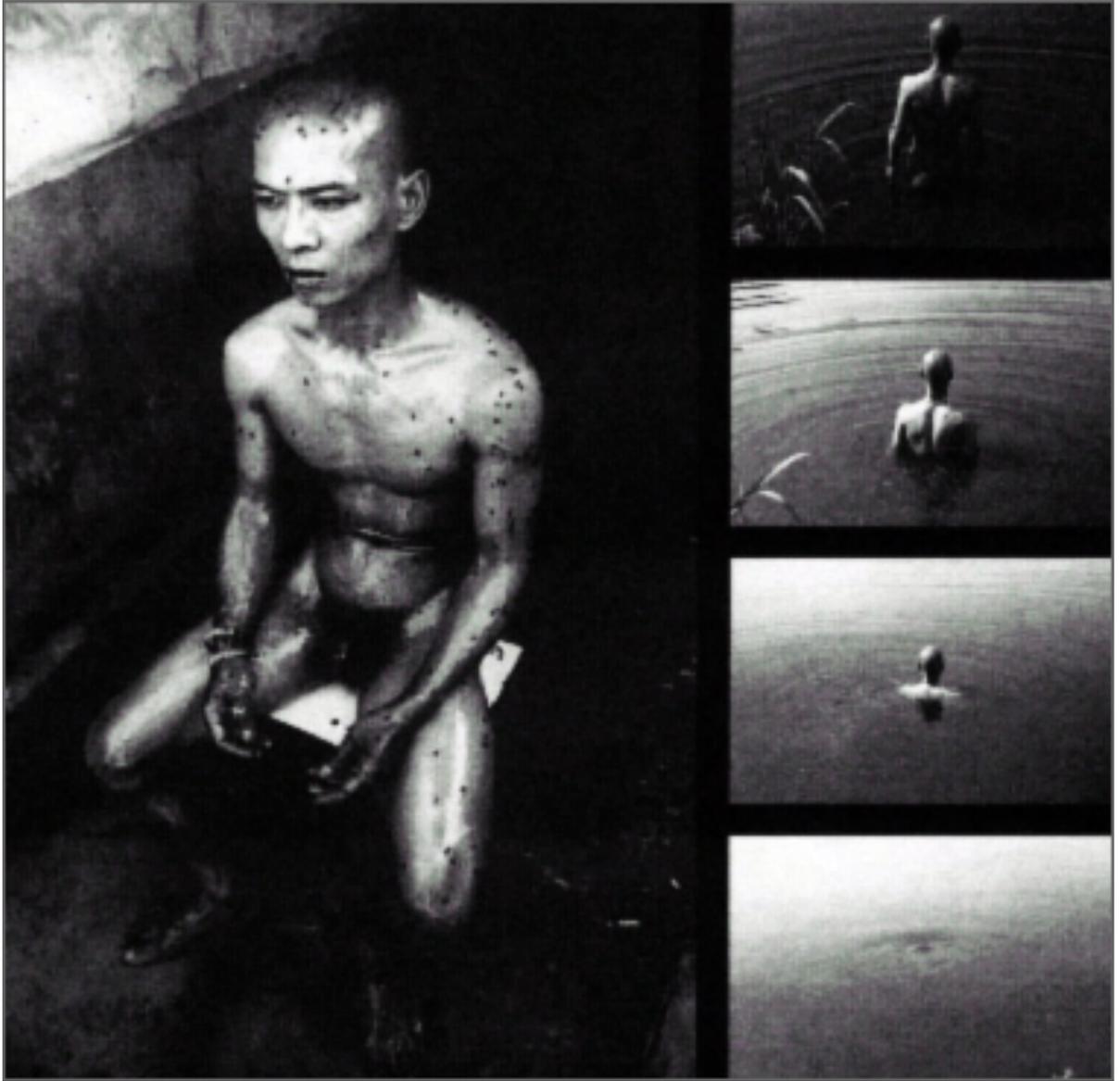


Figure 1: Zhang Huan, *12 Square Meters*, 1994, performance art.



Figure 2: Wang Guangyi, *Coca-Cola* from *Great Criticism Series*, 1993, oil and acrylic.



Figure 3: Chinese Cultural Revolution poster featuring Chairman Mao Zedong as hero of the people.



Figure 4: Traditional Chinese Cultural Revolution poster featuring (left) industrial laborer, (center) soldier in Peoples Liberation Army, (right) female nurse.



Figure 5: Andy Warhol, *Mao*, 1973, silkscreen print.



Figure 6: Zhang Xiaogong, *Red Guards Sculpture*, 2006, painted ceramic.

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