

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perspectives on Asia: is China kitsch?

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Abstract

Due to the introduction of the market economy, in the past four decades China has switched from being a “planned country” – planned economy, planned art – into a domestic version of cultural pluralism. Consumerism has refilled the vacuum left by the retreat of Maoist ideology. However, the overwhelming success of mass culture is sided by the progressive marginalization of the intellectuals or elite, featuring a culture that is kitsch in its ideological twist. In China, present-day cultural constructions provide a forum of debate for the identity of the whole nation, no more traditional, and not yet modern. In other words, consumerism and commercialism, triggered by products of market economy, have generated a cultural consumption of redundant bad taste. Kitsch indeed.¹

Keywords: Avant-garde; kitsch; Maoism; postmodernism; simulacra

I would like to begin this paper by apologizing. My methodological aim is to offer a classified catalogue, though incomplete, of the bad taste which prevails in present-day China. I will term it kitsch. Of course, the “aesthetic scars” of modernity are everywhere around the globe, kitsch belongs to many of us, and all arts have stumbled into it. However, China being the leading topic of the twenty-first century, and being the sad duty of a scholar that of limiting his object of study to a precise and specific object, I chose to analyse the advancing new (China), rather than the static and over-discussed old (the West). I will not analyse literature at large because literary “kitschness” is a too labile concept to fix it into academic definitions, nor will I produce net and rigid definitions. Philosophizing remains cloudy. Instead, because art always reflects the image of contemporaneity, I will gamble on visual kitsch, easier to be translated into examples than lay down general rules for artistic kitsch. I will analyse China through a sociological attitude, which is absolutely personal and subjective, thus I make no claim of objectivity. Also, I am not a sociologist but an average intellectual; nor am I a historian but perhaps an astigmatic chronicler. So to speak, I mean no offense. For what it is worth, the purpose behind the

¹Since banks and means of production, meaning land and industry, belong to the state, one objection that I often receive on the topic is that China is not a market economy. I will not address, in this paper, the discussion on the market economy in China for it is too far from my line of research, which is essentially sociological. In addition, on the matter, it has been written for nearly 40 years. “Socialism with Chinese characteristic” remains an ambiguous expression representing the Chinese model, which is loyalty to the one-Party rule and market-oriented economy. It is a fact that today foreign trade contributes contribute to roughly 70% of China’s GDP, while the total asset of the five state-owned banks accounts for some-more than 30 percent of all banking financial institutions. To some extent, the very same Deng Xiaoping gave the best answer on the subject during his quasi-imperial tour in Southern China (1992): “Planning and market forces are not the essential difference between socialism and capitalism. A planned economy is not the definition of socialism, because there is planning under capitalism; the market economy happens under socialism, too. Planning and market forces are both ways of controlling economic activity.” Market economy is perhaps an improper definition, and yet since 2001 China is a member of the WTO. We should accept the fact that China is in a primary stage of socialism and capitalism as well; due to the relatively low level of material wealth and the high number of the rural population, “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” is a fitting narrative to describe the ideological liaison between socialism and capitalism.

methodological purpose is to sketch the concealed face of the Chinese momentum, and to raise a few doubts on the present course of its history.

When dealing with cultural phenomena, we are dealing with history as well. Ergo, it is necessary to reconstruct the environment in which they arose and on which they have a leverage. To this end, in order to fully comprehend the sense of nowadays Chinese artistic tones, we need to recollect briefly the significance of postmodernity, or more concretely its cultural product, postmodernism indeed. Chiefly, the second half of the twentieth century comes with a general feeling of opposition to the dominant culture as much as modernism did. But while modernism was a minority-elitist culture, postmodernism stands as the thrill of the middle-class, thus popular. Simultaneously, the crisis of humanism is marked by the advent of mass society, mass education, mass culture, a reality peopled with cheap best sellers, and popular taste. We are welcomed to the post-modern age. Undeniably, postmodernity is a mass society. The standard description was already in Irving Howe, in "Mass society and Postmodern Fiction" (1959), where the passage from modernism to postmodernism is described as a world in which man becomes a consumer. The mass-postmodern society is a reality in which class distinctions are less obvious than ever in the past. In which, "traditional centers of authority, like the family, tend to lose some of their binding-power upon human beings." In which, "passivity becomes a widespread social attitude: the feeling that life is a drift over which one has little control and that even when men do have shared autonomous opinions they cannot act them out in common."² The new postmodern sensibility is thus called to discern a society increasingly shapeless and fluid; indeed, the literary structure is anti-romantic, apocalyptic, antirational, and of course anti-humanistic.

Postmodern theory broadly defined sees the world as heterogeneous, composed of a vast plurality of interpretations in which knowledge and truth are contingent and therefore ultimately undecidable. Consequently, the concept of identity becomes fluid and unstable. Read optimistically, the worldview of postmodernity evokes a sense of creative freedom, of seemingly infinite possibilities for the invention of new bits of knowledge, technique, and styles. In a more pessimistic tone, postmodernity involves relativization of expertise, a fragmented universe where everything is interpretation and transient. Postmodernity believes in structures, semiotic signs, and "laws" operating behind the back of the subject, thus it is an assault to the rational subjectivity tied to the Enlightenment, which consequently loses autonomy. Postmodernism, begins with decentering the subject and it ends by declaring the "death of the subject." The fact of the matter is that the decline of the subject in a rationalized and bureaucratic society, under conditions of mass culture, was already there in Max Weber (1864–1920) and the School of Frankfurt. The theory of commodity was already there in Karl Marx (1818–1883) and again the School of Frankfurt (Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse): Objects that arbitrarily acquire exchange value thus can be bought and sold in the market. What we have in the postmodern era is the fulfilment of twentieth century skepticism. The commodification process is the dominant cultural trend accompanying the formation of a postmodern society. Today's commodity is far beyond the sphere of production; commodification becomes a process extending to all realms of culture and subjectivity to the extent that it is hard to say where the commercial institution ends and where the cultural product starts. By way of illustration, Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) embodies the materialistic attitude due to which the uniqueness of art is replaced by its reproduction; more than this, what Duchamp does is to introduce the perhaps most provocative question on the meaning of art: Can we produce artworks which are not works of "art"? Nowadays designer-clothing brands, music, and automobiles have stretched the challenge by using logos that imply a singular identity and a mass consumer at the same time. People fashion themselves through "objects of desire" created by the media, hence, they move within a structure of predictability which is the foundation of commercialism. From this perspective, the (modernist) individual becomes a (postmodern) imitator of existing styles, identities assume a predetermined market character and the distinction between

²"Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction," *Partisan Review* 26 (1959), pp. 420–36. Reprinted in Irving Howe, *The Decline of the New*, ed. Cit., pp. 190–207.

inner self and outer world is no longer visible. Assumption, this one, which takes us to the main hallmark of postmodernity: Postmodernity imitates, it does not create. Jameson (1991) explains the phenomenon as the collapse of boundaries between high and popular culture, in other words, “serious” artistic production and entertainment for mass market becomes one and the same. I will retrieve the argument after further analysis.

The collapse between high and popular culture bears consequences for the representation of reality. Visual imaginary, fictitious reality begin to replace reality, we shall refer to it as “hyperreality” (cf. Baudrillard) a dense world of signs and simulation that becomes more real than the real itself.³ The model would be Disneyland, not just a masterwork of falsification but the apotheosis of consumer society. The concept of hyper-reality is attached to a universe devoid of any relationship to the real, but where the real reappears in illusionary forms. So to speak, the audience is called to admire the perfection of the fake and believe in a fantasy compared to which reality is inferior, thus a better “reality” that, like Gulliver, never existed. Computer technology, visual media in general (TV, radio, and video games) have the capacity of obliterating space and time and recreate a digital-virtual space and time where reality is replaced by simulations (TV series). While in the U.S.A., travelling between San Francisco and Los Angeles, Umberto Eco (1932–2016) was able to visit a few three-dimensional wax versions of Leonardo’s *Last Supper*. A sweet voice on the record reminds the visitors that the original is in Milan, that Italy is far away and they might never go to Italy. Yet it is not a big loss, as the original is now ruined unable to offer the same spiritual emotion otherwise given by the three-dimensional copy. Somewhere along the line, Umberto Eco refers to it as “false authenticity.” He alludes to a museum in Buna Park, Los Angeles, the Palace of Living Arts, in which life-size great masterpieces of painting are reproduced. In the last room is shown a very well-done copy of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, made in marble by a Florentine artisan. The pavement, on which the sculpture stands, is made of stones that come from the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, thus the reproduced sculpture in Los Angeles has something more than the original housed in Saint Peter’s Basilica, Rome. As it goes, the Palace’s philosophy implies that the copy is even better than the original: The Palace’s philosophy is not, “We are giving you the reproduction so that you will want the original,” but rather, “We are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original.”⁴ I do not rule out the hypothesis that at this stage some of us might have already thrown reality itself into doubt. However, imitation is always kitsch. Benjamin in his famous essay, “The Work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” (1935), gave us a clue without judgement: reproduction replaces the original value with cultural industrialization no longer genuine. He did not see that the encounter between culture and industry produces a trap. And that would be kitsch itself.

Deterioration of taste: kitsch⁵

In an excellent essay on hyper-reality, Umberto Eco writes: “A compulsive imitation prevails where wealth has no history.”⁶ I would not enter the rather philosophical debate on the end of history or

³Jean 1994 offers that media and news have put an end to the credibility of the event because by making a radical use of the message, by parodying the image, by manipulating the fact, they have destroyed its mythology. Reality thus becomes a *mise en scene*. Example among many is the Nicolae Ceausescu trial (25 December 1989), in which defendants that are virtually dead, and dead prisoners (the Rumanian leader and his wife Elena) are shot a second time by a hidden jury, so to meet the needs of the news, and contribute to creating the spectacle of the real. Or the reality of the virtual.

⁴Umberto 1986, p. 16. The Palace of Living Arts closed in 1982.

⁵On Kitsch as sociological category read Umberto Eco, “The Structure of Bad Taste” (reprinted in *The Open Work*, ed. Cit., pp. 180–217); Herman Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch,” in *Kitsch. An Anthology of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1970). For similar ideas on art and mass society see Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture” in *Critical Theory. Selected Essays* (Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2002); Dwight Macdonald, “A Theory of Mass Culture,” in *Mass Culture*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: Free Press, 1964). The essay appears also in *Masscult and Midcult Essays Against the American Grain*, slightly reviewed with the title “Masscult and Midcult” edited by John Summers (New York Review Books, 2011).

⁶Umberto 1986, p. 19.

its regressive nature, nonetheless, it does not require great intellectual effort to depict our epoch as a new barbarian age: excess of population, deforestation, water shortage, animals' extinction, air pollution, uncontrolled immigration, violation of human rights, to name some. Of course, reason had already declared bankruptcy in Auschwitz. At the aesthetic level, in most of the cases, kitsch is what remains. But what is exactly kitsch? The late German philosopher Ludwig Giesz (1916–1985) offers the first definition I came across: “Kitsch is bad taste; kitsch is dilettantism; it is moreover without any originality, or else totally conventional; and it is overloaded with rather primitive, affected and superficial attractions. Given that the conclusion of all these collections of comments is the same – that kitsch is not art.”⁷

Unlike the avant-garde movements, much engaged with a utopian reality often reaching out to the future, kitsch has a natural inclination to the bygone.⁸ Surely an unforeseen effect of the dynamics of industrialization, kitsch is not art but a reminder of the greatness of the art of the past.⁹ Given these premises, the point of departure is clearly America. Interesting to notice that Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) in his famous book *Democracy in America* (1835) had already understood the drives of kitsch, which he names “the hypocrisy of luxury”:

To mimic virtue is of every age; but the hypocrisy of luxury belongs more particularly to the ages of democracy...The productions of artists are more numerous, but the merit of each production is diminished. No longer able to soar to what is great, they cultivate what is pretty and elegant; and appearance is more attended to than reality.¹⁰

The incapacity of striving for what is great and settle for lower “responses” centred on the ability to fabricate beauty, rather than create, is probably what today we would refer as kitsch. A concept that goes with modernity and the rise of the middle class, equivalent with cheap imitation, vulgar souvenirs, and aesthetic advertising. Kitsch is the taste of the middle class, which in the present day composes the vast majority of society; kitsch as the taste of the average consumer, illustrated by the “principle of mediocrity,” which, with the literary critic Matei Călinescu, becomes synonymous with middle-class hedonism, “the desire to consume to the point that consumption becomes a sort of regulating social ideal.”¹¹ Typically, kitsch is the banality of mass-produced ideas, which surrounds us everywhere. Once beauty has lost its claim to uniqueness, beauty becomes a consumption based on imitation and forgery easily fabricated by any artisans. Simultaneously, the kitsch-man is shaped, no

⁷Gillo 1970, p. 156.

⁸The word *kitsch* derives etymologically from the English “sketch.” As the story goes, in the second half of the nineteenth century an American tourist in Munich wishing to buy a cheap picture asked for a “sketch.” Since then, the term is used to identify vulgarity confused with aesthetic experience. Clement Greenberg, in “Avant-garde and Kitsch” (*Partisan Review*, Fall, 1939). Also in Gillo Dorfles, ed. *Cit.*, pp. 116–26) defines it a German term for “Mass Culture;” in his masterwork, Ludwig 1960, perhaps the most important kitsch theorist, explains the word *kitsch* as “artistic rubbish.”

⁹Kitsch is the legacy of modernity. I do not consider modernism and avant-garde as synonymous but I do consider avant-garde movements to belong to the modernist culture. The world of the avant-garde was triggered by modernity. While modernism rendered the avant-garde possible with its critical stance, the avant-garde has an extreme artistic negativism, a systematic anti-aestheticism that the former does not have. Modernism, in fact, attempts an artistic reconstruction, salvation is still possible, it is a limbo between destruction and art. There is between them a relationship of dependence and exclusion more than reciprocity: while modernism asserts the autonomy of art, the avant-garde, despite its iconoclasm, attempts to restore the relationship between life and art. On the other hand, modernist writers such as Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Pirandello have very little, if nothing at all, in common with avant-garde movements such as futurism, dadaism, and surrealism, which due to their status of parody, are the most natural bridge to the artificiality, ambiguity, and kitsch of postmodernism. Ergo, while it might be a truism saying that avant-garde and kitsch are both effects of the process of modernization, the premise of avant-garde is high culture, and academicism, while the postulate behind kitsch is the democracy of mass culture. On the dynamics between modernism, avant-garde and kitsch see Matei 1977 the chapter entitled “The Idea of the Avant-Garde,” and Peter 1984.

¹⁰de Alexis 1961, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), vol. II, pp. 59–60.

¹¹Matei 1977, p. 245.

more than a subject with an inadequate idea of what is artistic or beautiful.¹² A moral inept, with atrophied critical sense, since the “culture industry” has reduced him into passivity, who fills the widespread sense of spiritual vacuum with snobbish fashion and effortless enjoyment.¹³ In the end, the aesthetic falsification is a package that contains nothing except for commonplaces. Postmodern art is kitsch, what then is kitsch? Is it bad art? In that case, it has to be discussed as an aesthetic trend. Or false art? In which case, it has to be addressed in ethical terms. Broadly in agreement, kitsch implies a notion of *aesthetic inadequacy*. Either it is all that tries to be “artistic” without genuinely being so, definition applicable to architecture, sculpture, literature, art, TV programmes, furniture, anything virtually subject to aesthetic judgment. Or, it is the combination of items, items and context, to be kitsch: as an example, a real Leonardo’s work hanging inside an elevator. The sense of falsification is rendered by the wrong function: genuine art is used as mere ostentatious decoration in place of an aesthetic experience. I would term kitsch anything that lacks historical depth, in Călinescu’s words the lack of historicity is the effect of boredom: “Kitsch appears as an easy way of ‘killing time,’ as a pleasurable escape from banality of both work and leisure. The fun of kitsch is just the other side of terrible and incompressible boredom.”¹⁴

As working hypothesis, we might consider that the bad taste of the modern age is somewhat connected to mass society, or what Adorno and Horkheimer named “culture industry,” a cultural market with products designed to induce relaxation. But because mass culture is imposed from above, fabricated by technicians for a passive audience, whose participation is limited to the choice of buying or not buying, kitsch becomes a tool of socio-political control. Literature is subject to the same process of homogenization. Books are produced for a largely unified audience: distinction of gender, age, and intellectual status become irrelevant, and gifted writers not to lose their readers resort to commercial technique so to become best-sellers authors. Dwight Macdonald, in the essay “A Theory of Mass Culture” (1953), explained one of the most evident consequences of the assimilation-osmosis process: adultized children and infantile adults: “This merging of the child and grown-up audience means: (1) infantile regression of the latter who unable to cope with the complexity of modern life, escape via kitsch; (2) ‘over-stimulation’ of the former, who grew up too fast.”¹⁵ If we buy the argument, the aesthetic taste is then provided for a uniform audience; the great paradox of postmodern society is that because the overreaching tendency towards massification, even deviance and non-conformist behaviours are easily transformed into marketable items of consumption. But was not postmodernism an alternative to the dominant logic? Leaving aside one of the postmodern dilemmas, let us conclude that mechanized products nurture kitsch. China, paradoxically to say, perhaps one of the most Americanized countries in the world, is no different. Highly urbanized environments, the technological processes of mass-production and mass distribution such as advertising and propaganda, and the widespread growth of communications systems, have produced a philistine culture. But now that China has ceased to be “the other” to become “the same,” China also shares the same accusation of artificiality with which the Western elite has already dealt.

¹²As far as I know, the expression kitsch-man appears for the first time in Herman Broch (1955), the *Kitschmensch* is simply a man of bad taste: “Kitsch could not, in fact, either emerge or prosper without the existence of kitsch-man, the lover of kitsch; as a producer of art he produces kitsch and as a consumer of art is prepared to acquire it and pay quite handsomely for it. In a broad sense art always reflects the image of contemporary man, and if kitsch represents falsehood (it is often so defined, and rightly so), this falsehood falls back on the person in need of it (...).” The essay is translated as “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch” in Gillo 1970, pp. 49–76. In the same edition, see also “Kitsch-man as tourist” by Ludwig Giesz.

¹³On the problem of elite art and mass art insightful research is in: Umberto 1964. The chapter I am referring to is “*La Struttura del cattivo gusto*.” The essay appears again in *The Open Work* (1989), translated by Anna Cancogni with the title “The Structure of Bad Taste.” Eco devotes his attention to the problem of taste in relation to the works of Hermann Broch, Ludwig Giesz, and Dwight McDonald and the analysis of a few classical texts. Given its flirtation with mass culture, kitsch circulates as a mercenary culture capable of eliciting emotional excitement out of an act of imitation.

¹⁴Matei, 1977, p. 248.

¹⁵https://is.muni.cz/el/1421/jaro2008/ESB032/um/5136660/MacDonald_-_A_Theory_of_Mass_Culture.pdf

Chinese kitsch

This is no longer the age of ideology, but that of aesthetic drills: the vulgar customer takes the place once occupied by the loyal comrade. Postmodernity develops into kitsch, an aesthetic moment of disintegration of patriarchal values, a collage of *weltanschauung* assimilated into the global space that China is quickly becoming. As the Maoist regime has failed to realize the communist utopia, the sudden lack of revolutionary utopianism leads to hedonism and its political ideology, liberalism. Thus what we have is a kitsch consciousness involving a private dimension that coexists in an atmosphere of fanciful arrangements with Western cultural elements. Needless to say, the invasion of karaoke bars, pulp fictions, beauty centres, pirated mass culture, is an immense threat for the tradition of Chinese literati. From an ideological point of view, there is a transaction from the collective spirit of the revolutionary years to the public entertainment of KTV and dance parties, which is in unison with the displacement from Maoist asceticism to postmodern hedonism.¹⁶ Otherwise put, the Chinese soul has lost its genuine essence and submitted itself to cosmetic treatment. The epicurean shipwreck is thirty years old; the Chinese literary critic Zhang Zhizhong (张志忠) described the situation this way:

(...) the Chinese reality of the 1990s, the phenomena that surface with the rise of the great tide of the market economy and business: money worship, the sacrifice of principle for profit, the loss of ideas, the disintegration of ethics, (...) it is precisely that the concern for money is far, far greater than the concern for spirit.¹⁷

Present-day China recalls closely the evaluation Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) made of Western modernity, a culture that had assumed an escapist character: “The transformation of personal life into leisure and of leisure into routines supervised to the last detail, into the pleasures of the ball park and the movie, the best seller and the radio, has brought about the disappearance of the inner life.”¹⁸ It seems to me that in the last three decades China moved from the intellectual call for humanism against socialist alienation to the celebration of commodity reflecting a materialist anti-humanism. In the 1990s the debate over the decadence of the humanist spirit was already on the table, so it is that the leading scholar of Chinese literature, Wang Xiaoming (王晓明), had in time exposed the spiritual descent:

The crisis of literature today is already quite apparent. (...) With this all-embracing tide of “commodification” with Chinese characteristics about to practically pull the literary world out by its roots, the discovery is suddenly made that the great majority of people in this society have already long lost interest in literature.¹⁹

In the words of the Australian sinologist Geremie R. Barmé, commercialization in China assumes the resemblance of a religious belief: “During the early 1990s, this vision of the consumer’s paradise, rather than the state religion of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Thought, became the true opiate of the masses.”²⁰ Here I feel a clarification is due. Having China a low per capita GDP and being China still a developing country, the notion of a “consumerist culture” might seem improper. My understanding is that we cannot read consumerism in China based on the household share of GDP. Instead, it is the

¹⁶In the aftermath of Tiananmen 1989 an increasing number of underground directors labelled as Sixth Generation Authors, received global attention for their production – based on Italian neorealism and *cinema verité* – bringing on the screen marginalized individual and the entire spectrum of social experience. The “Sixth Generation authors” and their underground movies represent one of the most efficient attempts to describe the controversial changeover between the two Chinas, to some extent between two ideologies.

¹⁷Xiaoming 1996, p. 176.

¹⁸Max 2002, p. 277.

¹⁹Xiaoming 王晓明 1996. “Kuangye shang de feixu: wenxue he renwen jingshen de weiji” 旷野上的废墟——文学和人文精神的危机 (“Ruining in the wilderness: The crisis of literature and humanist spirit”). In RJXL, 1–2; originally published in Shanghai Wenxue no. 6 (1993).

²⁰Geremie 1999, p. 123.

ideological transaction from the egalitarianism and asceticism of the Maoist era to the hedonism of the post-Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, 1904–1997) epoch. Globalization in China stages itself as consequence of a failed Maoist asceticism or perhaps as consequence of that ideological vacuum hatched in the space vacated by Maoism. Therefore, consumerism, rather than religion for instance, replaced, somehow, the totality promised by ideology. It comes with popular fictions, foreign brands, Western gadgets, and, among others, the need to buy a new iPhone model every 6 months to satisfy a postmodern desire to belong to modernity. Academics engage themselves in business if not quitting the scientific community all together, artists embark on stock market speculation; paradoxically to believe, all of a sudden the masses, and intellectuals along, are not to be educated, but entertained. In historical terms, if not political, the ideological emptiness that Mao's death (毛泽东, 1893–1976) left unsolved has been converted into commodity. The Chinese critic Lu Yingping (卢英平) offers the following honest overview to illustrate the new condition of homelessness:

(...) The status of money has increased expansively, which has left other, non-economic social factors, including the humanist spirit, at a loss. In consequence, we can say that intellectuals have lost their status as “lawmakers” and have not even preserved their status as “explainers” but rather have suddenly become “vagabonds.”²¹

To refill the void created by the retreat of ideology and highlight the numb stage of absence, a nihilist condition, riding the great tide of commodity economy, has swept in. This is the off-shore where postmodernist humanist critics hatch their theoretical discourse. The extreme commercialization of society, the lack of analytical criticism, the immature understanding of new imported Western “post-ism” led, as one critic on the debate put it, to the following paradox: “Problems exist on the mainland, but the questions are asked overseas; the phenomena are in China, but the explanations are given elsewhere.”²² But once it is understood how signified are created, elements of artificiality appear everywhere: emotions, human relation, liberal arts, architecture are transformed into hedonistic pleasantries. As much as Baudrillard reasoned about hyper-reality, I wonder whether in the Chinese case it would be acceptable to discuss about hyper-kitsch. Looking closely, one may argue that save a few exceptions, such as the Great Wall, the oldest living civilization on Earth has not left physically visible traces. The concern is vast and cannot be covered here; suffice to say that China has a non-material concept of history; people not monuments guarantee immortality and continuity to history. Such an understanding, the lack of a material past, leads necessarily towards hyper-reality. The Belgian–Australian literary critic Pierre Ryckmans (1935–2014), better known by his pen name Simon Leys, in a famous essay, “Chinese Attitude towards the Past,” refers to the historical records of the “Preface of the Orchid Pavilion,” written by Wang Xizhi (王羲之, 307–61 AD), possibly the greatest among Chinese calligraphers.²³ At the end of a poetic and cultural gathering, twenty-six guests composed at least one poem each, later collected in a volume whose introduction in 324 characters remains at today an unsurpassed mastery of calligraphy. As the story goes, the text was lost in oblivion until some 300 years later when the Tang Emperor, Taizong, (太宗, 598–649 AD), after much searching and killing, finally found the original manuscript. Duplicates were made, freehanded, carved on stones, engravings incised, copies of copies distributed, until when the Emperor died and the original script buried with him. The notion of hyper-reality, or hyper-kitsch, depending on which side of the ambiguity we stand, acquires ironic significance in 1965 when Guo Moruo (郭沫若, 1892–1978), distinguished scholar and archaeologist, suggested that the original calligraphic-style of the “Orchid pavilion” belongs to a much later date than that of Wang Xizhi lifetime, and thus for all we know the text we nowadays possess might not have been written by Wang Xizhi at all. For our argument, it is symptomatic to think that the most

²¹Lu Yingping 卢英平, “Lifazhe, jieshezhe, youmin” 立法者·解释者·游民 (“Lawmakers, explainers, vagabonds”), in Xiaoming 1996, pp. 181–84.

²²Xiaoming 1996, p. 20.

²³Cf. Leys 2008.

celebrated work in the history of Chinese calligraphy it is actually a copy of a fact (text, artwork) that may, in fact, never have existed.²⁴

Nothing and no one is spared from artistic falsification. Kitsch flirtation with the past produces memories, and memories also become a fetish, or as it has been said elsewhere “fetishes were mistaken for icons.”²⁵ Thus it happens that in a moment of cynicism and parody, revolutionary icons are camouflaged by contemporary consumerism, and the idealism of the revolutionary era is deflated into hand-made objects. History is commercialized, even Mao becomes a gadget on sale at the corner shop. Chinese Political Pop, art movement emerged roughly in the 1990s, is surely the trendsetter. A dislocation from the rhetoric of the Chinese political discourse, a hybrid space in which the quest for modernity leads to an irreverent conjunction between art and politics, and images are forged by the juxtaposition between revolutionary icons and contemporary commodities.²⁶

Besides the over discussed Wang Guanyi’s (王广义) “Great Criticism” (1990–2007), the Luo brothers (罗氏兄弟) are a case in point.²⁷ In a society where it is evident a growing fascination with wealth and luxury, the past is trapped within souvenirs. Standing as a parody of a globalized society, their series of “Untitled” come with Chairman Mao rendered in a new fashion; raising from the Gate of Heavenly Peace, symbol of the Chinese Revolution in the twentieth century, Mao is shaded by symbols of Western consumerism: Coca-Cola, Sprite, Pepsi, cans of Heineken beer, TV set, and similar gadgets. Making the Chinese leader a part of the pop-culture fad is, by any standard, disrespectful for all those who believed in the Maoist utopia, and the Chinese Communist movement as a whole. On the other hand, whether their art is to be interpreted as a celebration of China’s current consumerist culture or a mockery of it, remains unsaid. Surely it is kitschy in its contamination. In Li Shan’s (李山) “The Rouge Series” (1990s), another expression of the development of Chinese avant-garde, the iconographic orthodoxy of Mao is often portrayed as an androgynous figure, whitened and rouged, with a lotus flower. Questioned by a journalist about the series meaning, Li stated: “I painted Mao being transformed from a male Mao, to a female Mao. Everyone saw Mao as a divine god. I wanted to destroy that idea.” And the lotus flower? “The flower does not represent anything. Mao means nothing by himself either. But Mao with the flower means everything!”²⁸ The enigmatic answer does not conceal the intertextuality behind the canvas. The ambiguity of the smiling images recalls the ambivalent significance of the Maoist revolution and the carousel of means through which it was achieved. Cultural and political references are somehow reduced of tone and content, the feminization of a Chinese political totem produces a double stimulation: not just ideology is deprived of value, but it becomes an object of parodic interpretation. However, the Golden Lion of “kitschness” goes without doubt to the 4-metre wide work of contemporary art, the auction record Zeng Fanzhi’s (曾梵志) “The Last Supper” (2001), today one of the most celebrated Asian contemporary pieces of art.²⁹ The sacredness of

²⁴As for the secondary importance of the material aspect of culture in Chinese context and its ‘hyper’ consequences, I have received valuable help from Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (2012). I am also deeply indebted to Fan (2009) for his analysis of Western architecture on Chinese landscape.

²⁵Guidieri and Pellizzi 1981.

²⁶Begun in Hong Kong in 1993 with the exhibition “China’s New Art: Post-1989,” Political Pop allegorizes Chinese heritage in the face of growing globalization. A mixture of American Pop with Chinese Socialist Realism, in many aspects similar to the Russian socialist avant-garde art in the 1970s (Sots Art) in which the Soviet and the West confronted each other through allegorical images of sacral and glamorous. In China, the Cultural Revolution propaganda imagery, such as portraits of Mao Zedong or the Red Guards, is juxtaposed with symbols of globalization the likes of Gucci or Coca-Cola logos. Well-known artists are: Wang Guangyi (王广义, 1957), Li Shan (李山, 1942), Yu Youhan (余友涵, 1943) and indeed the Luo Brothers 罗氏兄弟.

²⁷Born in Nanning, Guangxi, southern province of China, the Luo brothers are: Luo Wei Dong (罗卫东, 1963), Luo Wei Bing (罗卫兵, 1964), and Luo Wei Guo (罗卫国, 1972). Their work is well-known for creating a mix of Chinese folk elements with foreign consumer products. Hence, a recurrent subject is offered by chubby Chinese babies floating above Tiananmen square while eating MacDonald’s burgers.

²⁸<https://asianartnewspaper.com/li-shan/>

²⁹The auction was hosted by Sotheby’s on 5 October 2013, in Hong Kong. The 4-metre wide painting was sold for \$23.3 million to an anonymous private collector.

Leonardo's masterpiece is once more subject to a postmodern abuse, and as already seen in the American case, imitation supplants the real in a game of spurious simulations. In a classroom-like space, the twelve apostles are replaced by young communists wearing white t-shirts and red neckties; they are banqueting with watermelon instead of bread. Judas is played by a schoolboy who, unlike the others is wearing a golden-tie: "The golden tie represents money and Western capitalism, and China only started wearing these ties after the mid-1980s."³⁰ In this light, the crucial act of replacement is also the least evident, namely the painting's final significance. The most defining moment of Western civilization, Judas' betrayal, is traded for an ideological treason: the Chinese switch to the path of capitalism, thus the Communist Party's betrayal of the traditional society. Kitsch by reproducing the past, comes with a form of imitation, it wants to be original but it is marked by similarity rather than difference. Zeng Fanzhi's twelve masked characters, all consuming the same watermelon, well represent the anonymity of a kitsch reproduction.

Hence, we arrive at a challenging theorization that encloses all the above. Simulacra. It is a nearly impossible task to be authentic in an age where everything is reproduced, thereby virtually everything becomes imitation. The search for authenticity is thus extremely problematic in a society in which everything is vulnerable to immediate commodification. Again Baudrillard helps to definite it. "Every universal form is a simulacrum, since it is the simultaneous equivalent of all others."³¹ Illustratively, Helen of Troy would be a simulacrum since Helen was the universal form of beauty; by the same token, present-day trade war between the U.S.A. and China would also be a simulacrum of war since it enacts a substitute for a nuclear conflict, or a Third World War, which did not take place. Somewhere along the line, China with its endless imitations and reproductions has then become the simulacrum of itself, to an extent that the notions of inside vs. outside, China vs. the others, are no longer workable. But the moment China becomes "the same as the others" the infiltration of kitsch, into the confines of Chinese civilization, has both ethical and aesthetic aftermaths. The interplay between kitsch and wealth is fought in the battleground of mass culture; as in a struggle of perpetual adjustment, kitsch aims at producing an immediate effect, easier for the masses to understand, thus in dialectic opposition to the "high culture" proposed by the avant-garde. To be plain, in postmodern societies, the traditional socializing agencies have weakened, the authority is undermined by a world of "commercialized distractions," the major sites of identity formation are now means of consumption, such as media, advertisement technological reproduction. In terms of identity, we define ourselves through acts of consumption, "tell me how much you can spend, I will tell you who you are." Ergo, consumer culture becomes a primary means for the construction of self. Style and fashion offer themselves as a source of incessant changes and highly personalized identities, consumer culture provides a potentially liberating experience, some sort of independence from conformity: "I have blue hair, I have a pink car, I do not pay, I do not talk, I am a singer, I am confused, I am a homosexual, I am a lesbian, I am an artist. I am a migrant, I am a patriot, I am open-minded." In this vein, kitsch stands as resentment towards high culture which in turn is the dissatisfaction with society. According to Dwight MacDonald, mass culture (and kitsch as well since kitsch is its direct off-spring) might not pretend to be art, but convinces the consumer to have experienced culture. And it is democratic: "Mass Culture is a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, and taste, dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes, scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture... Masscult is very, very democratic."³²

I would ask the reader to pay attention to this conceptualization: kitsch is surely a consequence of wealth but is not the consequence of a rise in the cultural magnitude of the elite. Rather, the opposite is true. Popular culture spreads when the elite shrinks, and when Versace becomes Versaci on handbags, the use of the cultural product is meant for a consumption that has nothing to do with an aesthetic experience. In China, the phenomenon of mass culture is a real threat for all those who do not

³⁰<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2013/40th-anniversary-evening-sale-hk0488/lot.48.html>

³¹Jean 1994, p. 64.

³²Dwight 2011, p. 18.

consider kitsch as a surrogate for art. Let us examine, for instance, some of the lowest examples of mass culture, the pseudo-literature of Zhou Wei Hui (周卫慧, 1973) and Mian Mian (棉棉, 1970), female writers who in the 1990s, due to their physical appearance were referred to as beauty writers (*meinü zuojia*). Coco and Hong, are respectively the semi-fictional characters of Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (1999) and Mian Mian's *Candy* (2000), both idlers, pseudo artists looking for fame rather than art, similar to kept women, but with less morality. Economically supported by unemployed well-off boyfriends and further-off parents, children of well-to-do families, they engage themselves in the exercise of dissipating pleasure that has very little contact with the reality. Indeed, when it is reality the dimension they have to deal with, they miserably crack. They do not know much, if nothing at all, of the essence of post-socialist China: their father grew rich overnight, Shanghai is invaded by foreigners once again, Shenzhen advanced to the size of a metropolis, the city is populated by drug dealers, criminals, prostitution, yet light-hearted they drink themselves away. Chinese narrative seems not to have modern history, and yet global identities, international brands, foreign languages, and slangs, are soon embraced by extravagant protagonists. Narrative comes without content, but the writing has the naïve, if not dark, purpose to strip modern China completely bare. Based on a timeworn plot of "rock-and-roll-drug addict-love story," an identity crisis is the climax they cannot possibly reach due to the insignificance of their living narrative. The texts want to be a cathartic tale of personal liberation, but the seduction they embrace resembles debauchery rather than freedom under socialism. "Searching for answers" characters, they have no questions. Skipped is the catastrophe of Chinese modern history, they cannot remember it, they did not see it, their present in most cases is not made out of history, but possibilities. They play with love, experiment the maze of sexuality, hardly decode life with silence, they hide behind the curtain of their youth and their ignorance. Somewhat an early practice of feminist engagement, their emotional lives emerge in a larger context of social meaning: taboos, desire, and erotic expression. Yet, the narrative remains too fragile: detached from the sense of dislocation common among returning educated youth, but also detached from the socio-political dynamic of contemporaneity.³³ Hence, I would not have Wei Hui and Mian Mian for an analysis of female sensibility in the Post-new era.³⁴ The ennoblement of female subjectivity, the theory of the body as site of resistance, already present in Wang Anyi (王安忆, 1954), Chen Ran (陈染, 1962), and Lin Bai (林白, 1958), does not apply here. Along the narration we are shown laid-off workers, and floating population standing motionless on the pathway of Shenzhen. Where do they come from? We are not told about the bankruptcy of State-owned factories or the rise of private enterprises consequence of the Open Door Policy; the autodiegetic narrator ignores it, the historical message behind the narrative is lost forever to a degree of literary worthlessness.³⁵ Coco, Hong, and their lovers are idlers, broken figures of a pulp fiction; they arrive in Shenzhen to become movie stars, singers, artists

³³Zhiqing (知青), rusticated youth or educated youth, were middle-high school students, previously involved in the Red Guards Movement (roughly 1966–68), banished to the remote frontiers of China during the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement" (late 1960s). A nation-wide urban-to-rural migration, some 16 million urban youth inspired by tragic heroism and idealism, and in part victims of unemployment issues, moved to the interior of China to modernize the countryside and learn from the peasants ordinary agricultural tasks. Once the higher education was restored some of them went back to the city to finish their education (late 1970s), thus meeting the challenges of readjusting to urban society. Seemingly, the ideological movement changed the fate of a whole generation of Chinese and had far-reaching effects on the history of the People's Republic. On the other hand, it has to be noticed that the most important literary works in contemporary China are written by ex-Zhiqing. For details, see Zuoya曹左雅 2003 and Thomas 1977.

³⁴In the early 1990s, Professor Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 coined the term Post New-Era to mark the new cultural logic properly Chinese, characterized by urban aesthetics and rejection of national allegory. By and large, writers and literary critics privilege urban culture as the unequivocal attitude of the post-rhetoric, and youth alienation as the prevalent form of China in the global context (See Yiwu, Zhang, and Michael Berry, 1997).

³⁵Launched in December 1978, the Open Door Policy is Deng Xiaoping's policy of reform and opening up to the world market (改革开放, pinyin: *Gǎigé kāifàng*). After centuries of forced and limited trade, and after four decades of ideological lockdown, the economic reform is rightly considered as the watershed in Chinese contemporary history. In fine, it is the moment foreign investors, innovative technologies, foreign capital, and intellectual abilities enter China, perhaps changing the course of the twenty-first century.

but end up as criminals, dancing girls, or prostitutes, archetype of that post-socialist China searching for equilibrium. They become transitional people in a transitional zone. Humanity thus seems to be rootless, none of them is able to find a proper dimension in the demanding structure of the urban landscape. In detail, once the socialist model was sided by that of ruthless capitalist practices (accumulation, commodity exchange, and impersonal relation) the cultural symbols previously shared were emptied of their significance before new significance could be found. And precisely this lack of recognition in their fiction pushes their attempt under the level of literature.

Marrying Buddha (Zhou, 2005) does not turn away from the path of ignorance and vanity already traced: a Chinese born pseudo-westernized woman protagonist, divided and contended by two stereotyped men, one Asian, with delicate traits, and a Western one, sexually and economically powerful. Coco is now 29 years old, her dream came true, the West made her rich and famous, the place setting shifted from Shanghai to New York City. But the circus of thousands of characters searching for an author remains the same, they stand in a corner under a cloud of smoke pretending to experience life as they were adolescents. Nick, modern version of Adonis, is 45, Coco is about to become a mother, yet we see them smoking a joint by the bathroom of some New York bar. The plot takes place a few months and days after 9/11, which she declares to have witnessed, yet the most traumatic attack in history on American soil is passed in silence. Instead she goes shopping. The dynamics of contemporaneity are tout court ignored, Coco and her friend Susan reduce the Middle East modern crusade to a burst of male testosterone. The CNN transmits news on the U.S. possible military action in Iraq, the BBC questions nuclear weapons in North Korea, yet Coco switches to MTV. Far from being achieved literature and accomplished characters, there is a layer of vanity wrapping the so-called narrative. Coco-Wei Hui is well aware of what she has become, *a bouquet of tranquilized narcissis*.³⁶ Her spiritual and sexual collapse, rather than awakening, goes together with her infatuation for Western materialism: Prada, Ferrari, Jade, the face of Benjamin Franklin imprinted on the American dollar. She might as well have been born in Putuo Island, but she is more a product of post-modernity than the enlightenment her name is bearer of.³⁷ Narrative is restricted within topics such as menstruation, sex, sex exchange, female orgasm; emotions are transient, reduced to eager desire, love quite too soon fades into familiar affection. Standardized actors dressed up with some exceptionalism, are again auto-destructive, they appear to participate in their lives more with sensation than reflection; tasteless and anonymous, victims of smoke, drinks and sedatives, hence revealing an incomplete, if not absent, process of *bildung*.

Indeed, what we have in both cases is a message that aims at the production of an effect, eminently sensationalism, and escapism. The success of this work, abroad as much as in China, is unequivocally explained by mass culture structural characteristics: a commodity that pleases without exciting, simple content that pretends to polarize attention on intense lyrical tension, on themes of unfulfilled love, general discontent and the liverish emptiness of modern life. But they fail. The lack of growth and self-analysis of its narrator-protagonist is balanced by the shallowness of the content, thus reducing the amplitude of Chinese postmodern literature to a catwalk of clichés. The hypocrisy behind the text, a mix of stereotypes and ignorance, is enough to characterize Wei Hui and Mian Mian as kitsch. But because in China fiction is never just fiction but reality in disguise, the distinction between kitsch and art is a moral and political issue for it concerns the legitimacy of the Party. The risk in the near future is to deal with a literature conforms to the taste of majority, but artistically poor, in other terms, a literature that literature is not, but it is treated as such by the echo of its rebellion.

We need now to address another aspect of Chinese kitsch. Architecture. Europeans arriving in China for the first time, because of some sort of innate historical sensitivity, feel the presence of

³⁶Zhou or Wei Hui 2005, p. 2.

³⁷Mount Putuo is an island southeast of Shanghai, allegedly a Buddhist paradise of scenic beauty, setting of some 40 temples and monasteries. In Chapter 3 the author-character recalls her birth and baptismal ceremony which took place in one of the temples in Putuo Island, christen with the name of Zhi Hui which means "One who has embarked on the path of Wisdom and Enlightenment."

elements out of context. Not surprisingly, kitsch is, in the end, the inability to fully assimilate objects and context. Umberto Eco once more offers a semiotic definition:

I would like to define Kitsch in structural terms, as a styleme that has been abstracted from its original context and inserted into a context whose general structure does not possess the same characters of homogeneity and necessity as the original's, while the result is proposed as a freshly created work capable of stimulating new experiences.³⁸

Thus, kitsch is Cubism applied to Christian art, a duvet cover with Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* on it, a handbag with *Monna Lisa* printed on it. A typical example of un-matching contexts comes from Chinese contemporary architecture. Interesting to notice as the *nouveaux riches'* corruption of taste is a transcultural phenomenon. Tocqueville's experience represents the prototype of artistic deterioration, forgery, pseudo-art:

When I arrived for the first time at New York, by that part of the Atlantic Ocean which is called the Narrows, I was surprised to perceive along the shore, at some distance from the city, a considerable number of little palaces of white marble, several of which were built after the models of ancient architecture. When I went the next day to inspect more closely the building which had particularly attracted my notice, I found that its walls were of whitewashed brick, and its columns of painted wood. All the edifices which I had admired the night before were of the same kind.³⁹

China is no different. New imitations of historical buildings are everywhere, the grandeur of the past, even if it is someone else's past might give the illusion of prestige. Intellectual reference for this architectural trend might be the sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) who explains modern culture with the *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Leisure and consumption for the sake of ostentation imply economic differentiation: "Conspicuous abstention from labor therefore becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement and the conventional index of reputability; and conversely, since application to productive labor is a mark of poverty and subjection, it becomes inconsistent with a reputable standing in the community."⁴⁰ Theory, this one, which well explains Chinese consumption behaviour in the past 30 years. Economic growth and the magnet of materialism have triggered the purchasing of luxury goods, a hedonistic consumption stretching to gratification and pleasure which pretends to shape a more fashionable lifestyle. Western tendency is again entangled with Chinese psychology where advertising wealth is the equivalent of advertising a social status, prestige, reputation, and power. Kitsch then is a recent phenomenon. Kitsch is bad taste and bad taste is lack of proportion. In China, if there is lack of measure, it has nothing to do with the form of the object (building, house, and villa) but rather with history: to adapt Western eighteenth century in the middle of the twentieth century makes little sense.

Architecture offers visual images. Preconceived ideas of beauty are not challenged but piled one upon the other. The city is built according to kitsch rules where excess is not a scandal. Hence, we have neo-Gothic palaces of low-cost production, *fin-de-siècle* mansions that pile up a few metres away from the working-class slums, and old neoclassical villas right behind a twenty-four story building. Corinthian columns, art deco, Victorian decor, Venetian style, and Murano glass shops are the performances projecting China into some sort of European wonderland. We are observing what Umberto Eco in his American journey termed "hand-to-hand battle with history," no more than the attempt to imitate history.⁴¹ The effect produces confusion and desecration; missing is the historical sensitivity Europe is well proud of. On the other hand, the free interpretation of European

³⁸Umberto 1989, p. 201.

³⁹Alexis de Tocqueville ed. Cit., pp. 60–61.

⁴⁰Thorstein 2007, p. 30.

⁴¹U. Eco, "Enchanted Castles" in Umberto 1986, p. 20.

architectural syntax, and the usage of artificial material to create classical effects, reflect an attitude that regards architecture as a business design rather than a form of aesthetic achievement. It seems to me that while it is appropriate to say that the imitation of Western architecture is a way to create an additional visual connection to the West, thus to “the other,” it is equally realistic to say that the coexistence of several trends, all out-of-frame, is fundamentally kitsch.⁴² Chinese megalopoleis as well are dressed with a promiscuous abuse of Western style which leads to anonymity more than kitsch. In Shanghai, the Shanghai World Financial Center was designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox the largest architecture firm in New York City, while Beijing’s modern architectural landmarks, namely the CCTV headquarters, the National Stadium or the “Bird’s Nest,” and the National Grand Theatre or the “Egg,” were designed by European architects.⁴³ The gigantic National Theatre is perhaps the perfect example of the balance between domesticity and otherness. Located just 500 metres away from Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, the core of China as a nation and as a civilization, it comes with an ellipsoid structure with a titanium shell, curved glass, metal mesh, all elements marking the international stand Beijing has assumed. In its late incarnation, high profile projects in China are awarded to Western architects, making Chinese megalopolis a melting pot of world architecture.⁴⁴ The city is concentrated into technological possibilities projecting images of a better future; it would not be a problem in the age of globalization the display of exotic images to encourage entrepreneurship and consumerism, if not for the fact that in China, in developing countries at large, economic globalization comes together with cultural globalization. Ergo, the uniqueness of national identity is necessarily homogenized, no more no less than the postmodern indiscriminate form of colonization. In other words, if market economy sells marketable products, Western architecture sells a lifestyle. In the instance of China, kitsch does not just undermine high culture but the whole of the revolutionary past which is replaced by the promise of a life of abundance. From the standpoint of architecture, kitsch is the response to the sense of spiritual vacuum left by the retreat of Maoism. Specifically, the traditional horizontal skyline of Chinese cities has been replaced by phallic big towers representing the authority of capitalism and somewhat another form of Western invasion. The city structure complies with Henri Lefebvre’s (1905–1991) position on the symbolism behind government buildings:

The arrogant verticality of skyscrapers, and especially of public and state buildings, introduces a phallic or more precisely a phallocratic element into the visual realm; the purpose of this display, of this need to impress, is to convey an impression of authority to each spectator. Verticality and great height have ever been the spatial expression of potentially violent power.⁴⁵

Otherwise stated, the verticality of the new architecture stands as an oppressive power over the old human environment. Precisely, falling under the incessant march of bulldozers is the fate of Chinese cities over the past few decades. Commercial buildings, boutique hotels, rooftop restaurants replace the one-story courtyard and the traditional *hutongs*; concrete, steel, and bricks are the moving backgrounds shaping post-Mao landscape. Longstanding inhabitants are forced to abandon their houses with little pecuniary compensation and relocate out in the outskirts; memories and cultural heritage are torn down to give the city an international standing; isolation, wastage, traffic congestion, and industrial pollution are the consequences of short-sighted urban policy. So it happens that in the past 30 years Beijing has been transformed from a cultural relic into a landscape of stones. As the art critic and historian Hal Foster put it, “postmodern art is allegorical in its stress on ruinous spaces

⁴²On the unappealing form of new classical buildings in China, see Ming 1999; Guan hong 2002; Weicheng 2000.

⁴³CCTV headquarter designed by Rem Koolhaas (1944, Holland); the National Stadium projected by the Swiss architecture firm owned by Jacques Herzog (1950) and Pierre de Meuron (1950); National Grand Theatre planned by the French architect Paul Andreu (1938–2018).

⁴⁴To read about prominent building site in China and their controversy, see Bernard 2005; Thomas 2008 and Xiaoping 2010.

⁴⁵Henri 1991, p. 98.

(as in ephemeral installations),⁴⁶ and so was the significance of Yin Xiuzhen's (尹秀珍) installation *The Ruined City* (1996), on the whole, the allegory of an era. Roof tiles lay motionless and orderly on the ground, they identify Beijing as it once was if viewed from above. Average, familiar, Chinese wooden furniture of the Maoist age are scattered around in a fragmentary assemblage: a bed, a dressing table, a wardrobe, four chairs, a mirror and a washing basin all covered with dust, rubble, and cement powder:

Things changed so fast in 1997. I'd ride my bike to work in the morning and the old houses would still be there, but on my way back they had gone. I made *Ruined City* around that time. I found some of the materials among the demolition rubble in Beijing and some on the streets. I borrowed things from friends and my family, and one of my classmates got his father to lend me several tons of cement powder. The tiles were roof tiles from old demolished homes. I covered the furniture and old household implements with the cement powder. It was as if a cloud of cement and dust had suddenly fallen from the sky, burying our experiences, our emotions and our histories, turning them into spiritual ruins.⁴⁷

Demolition and reconstruction are the Chinese battlefield of the twenty-first century. At the root of this attitude is, of course, the ambition to overcome the gap with the West, to aggressively fight the laws of the market. The natural beauty of the city is wiped out by building sites and foreign firms, thus releasing in its performers an emotional dimension: the fear that the banality of globalization will replace the indigenous elements of Chinese culture. Some will point, and with reason, that my analysis is Platonic; so to speak it moves from an aesthetics of "fake" appearances to "real" realities which in our case is the authenticity of history. Consequently, Beijing, as it stands today, plays out as a fake city, hybrid at most, in a sense that only cities who preserve their historical context can be defined as real. In this aspect, China and America share the same pattern of hyper-reality, virtually there is in both an appropriation of European originals for purposes of reproduction. But because the distinction between authenticity and copy is blurred, the final product cannot be perceived simply as a false copy. I doubt whether in either case, the process of copying can possibly produce culture. Instead, the architectural pastiche evokes kitsch. By and large, culture becomes tantamount to kitsch, something that is good to have or build because the law of the market has decreed it to be so; meanwhile the consumer is relieved from any personal aesthetic judgement, relying on previously provided interpretations.

Conclusion

On a general note, pervasive forces are undermining the conception of self and identity. If we do not want to accept the defeat of the subject, which is our tendency to submit to mass media and technology, the only remedy we have is to act consciously. My analysis might be accused of snobbery. I rather believe that the masses have a negative ascendancy over the taste and judgement of art itself. The triumphs of consumer society, the intervention of commercial principles have a postmodern boomerang effect. On one side, they enlarge the space occupied by popular culture, and on the other side erode the space once occupied by the elite culture. In the past three decades, Chinese fiction clearly indicates that when the classical notion of commodity fetishism stormed over the Chinese landscape a false consciousness took over the idealism of the revolutionary years. In this respect, the "post-everything" period, both radical and apolitical, cannot be adequately comprehended if we ignore its relation to the revolutionary Maoist legacy. According to Professor Liu Kang (刘康), the market has succeeded where Mao has failed: "In contrast to Mao's culture of the masses, the contemporary culture industry, or commercial popular culture, succeeds precisely in producing a social relevance to the everyday life, despite its overt objectives of making profits or commodity fetishism."⁴⁸

⁴⁶Hal 1996, p. 86.

⁴⁷https://www.christies.com/features/Yin_Xiuzhen-5618-1.aspx

⁴⁸Liu 2004, p. 100.

Does China look forward to a return to the preindustrial era? It does not, but criticism is the first weapon against cultural annihilation. China is in the first stage of an epochal transitional phase; it is a juncture in which values, consolidated understandings, literature, art, language, music, and the amalgam of a whole civilization come loose. "All the historical periods in which values undergo a process of disintegration are periods that witness a great flourishing of kitsch," writes Hermann Broch referring to the terminal phase of the Roman Empire and Fascist Europe.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the late professor Walther Killy refers to Kitsch as "art's natural son," in which case kitsch would cease to be coincident with bad taste to become man's unquenchable thirst for illusion. If we agree with this last stance, then kitsch will appear as an aesthetic of self-deception, a permanent mystification, a perpetual flight from the commitments involved in the experience of art. After all, in our contemporaneity, no one is kitsch-free; offering duplicate is what we do, authenticity has become synonymous with old-fashion tradition for those captivated by materialist standards. In the end, the breakdown of the distinction between the copy and the original generates a simulacrum, the world has become a simulacrum show where on stage there is the promise of difference. Concern, this last one, which takes us back to the beginning of the discussion. Postmodernity in its entirety. Today I know much less about postmodernity than when I began to study it. Faust had at least sold his souls to the devil; postmodernity has simply lost it. There cannot be consensus on a target that is on the move. Being postmodernity non-linear, fragmentary, ambiguous, non-self-revealing, blurring, and being culture an expression of history, I truly believe that we are living through an age that is shaking. If we look beyond the Voltairian little garden that we cultivate, there are clouds at the horizon line. No solution has been found to the dramatic condition of underdeveloped countries while the catastrophe of the so-called first-world resides in the empty cultural attitude of societies that have run out of emptiness. When history shakes, scholars must make it new by offering fire and knowledge, daringly as Prometheus did. China is with its cultural constructions a symbol of this postmodernity. Hence, kitsch is not simply an aesthetic taste, but a process of cultural disintegration. Only the act of thinking critically about its own history, thus the recovery of a "sense of history" can pull China back from the pit of hyper-reality into which the nation has fallen. If not, the façade of Disneyland will march on.

Acknowledgements. This paper was written in early May 2020. It was a historical momentum for those who survived. I had found myself in Italy, again, in the very same place where some 15 years earlier I had left. I want to thank my dad, for I lived in his house in the countryside, as a king in his palace. And, I want to thank my mum and brother, for, being myself the first possible COVID-19 case in this part of the world, they shielded me as knights do for their lord.

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⁴⁹In Umberto 2007, p. 407. Also published in Gillo Dorflès, "Notes on the problem of kitsch" ed. Cit., pp. 49–76.

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