**The Branding of Contemporary Chinese Art and its Politics:**

**Unpacking the power discourses of the art market**

**Introduction**

This paper investigates the branding of art movements in the contemporary visual arts market, more particularly the Cynical Pop and Political Pop movements from China. These movements emerged onto the art market during the 1990’s and came to represent contemporary Chinese art to the Western art world, achieving some of the highest prices and dominating the market. The research examines how these movements were marketed and packaged and considers the ideological discourses underpinning these strategies, demonstrating that although they are presented as neutral, socio-political views are circulated through these branding discourses.

The art market is an increasingly valuable sector in the global economy. Estimates indicate that sales amount to $50 billion annually and this figure does not include revenue made from public institutions (Horowitz, 2011). This is a sector that has seen significant changes in the past couple of decades in terms of an unprecedented expansion, demonstrated by a massive growth of 95 percent between 2002 to 2006 (Robertson & Chong, 2008; Artprice, 2009; Mehta, 2009). While there was a contraction in 2008, the art market has stayed buoyant with few lasting effects (Artprice, 2010). One art market trend in particular situates the context of this study: a more global form of demand has appeared in the art market with the emergence of wealthy new collectors from Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East who have focused their cash on the most speculative contemporary signatures of the moment (Robertson & Chong, 2008; Chong, 2010). The most dramatic example has been the expanding role and popularity of Chinese art, where the price index of contemporary art rose 583 percent between 2004 and 2009 (Artpice, 2010). China has now been the contemporary market leader for three years in a row, signaling a massive shift by achieving 41.3 percent of worldwide sales in 2012, accounting for $148 million more than the United States – the former market leader (Artprice, 2012). In the past few years, the international art media has been saturated with articles about this growing market and the dramatic sales prices achieved but there is a dearth of critical research examining this market.

As a ‘hot’ commodity on the art market, it is therefore interesting to examine how the contemporary Chinese art market has developed and been legitimised by examining the production, distribution and consumption of work over the past twenty-five years. As such, we respond to Borgerson and Schroeder’s (2002) call for marketing research to incorporate art historical issues as well as to answering to Dholakia’s (2012, p.223) wider call for an understanding of macro-level studies investigating “ideologies, obfuscations, manipulations and mystifications playing out in markets” to allow for a more critical, holistic perspective in marketing. This research therefore connects to the wider movements in economic sociology to analyse and construct organisational fields and address the social construction of markets of all kinds (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). We argue that this art historical approach allows us to consider how marketing meanings are framed through the political economy and historical dynamics of a market system. The paper contributes to recent research placed in the intersection between the political economy, culture and society by focusing on macro-perspectives of branding (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008; Zhao and Belk, 2008; Kadirov and Varey, 2011; Kravets, 2012). It emphasises the largely unrecognised power relations that frame the marketing of art, whereby successful art movements are positioned as aesthetically representative of innate ‘taste’ when in fact they are largely socially determined by the macro-political context in which they develop. As such, the socio-cultural dimension in which these movements and the artists who create them – both of which are branded by the art market – operate, must be taken into consideration.

The following section summarises current research on the interplay between branding and ideology, particularly in terms of the interaction between art and politics. Next, a brief socio-historical analysis of the art market is undertaken to contextualise the power dynamics at play in the legitimisation of art markets. Then, the Cynical Realist and Political Pop movements are unpacked to reveal the interplay of branding, market forces and political ideologies involved in their development. The account highlights ways that brands promote certain socio-political views, revealing the power discourses behind markets in terms of what is legitimised and what is not. The concluding section reflects on how aesthetic judgments of value are socially constructed, as such brand meaning changes over time and is dependent on context, and considers the implications this has on artists’ careers.

**Branding, Ideology and Art**

Eckhardt and Bengtsson (2009)’s paper on the history of branding in China finds that brands were important agents of consumer culture as early as the 10th century, serving a variety of social purposes and not solely as an instrument of commerce. Indeed, brands were used as symbols to differentiate products and demonstrate their quality and authenticity, holding powerful cultural symbolism, fulfilling an innate human desire for status and stratification. This wider view of branding is used throughout this study in line with O’Reilly’s (2005) call for further consideration of social and cultural issues in developing arts marketing theory and not simply the economic, particularly in terms of the social construction of brands as socially representational texts. Following O’Reilly, we use Holt’s (2004) cultural branding theory in seeking to demonstrate that branding is not a neutral analytical tool but must take into account the wider historical context in which it operates, allowing for a more multifaceted understanding of branding. In this sense, the brand is a “cultural artifact moving through history” (Holt, 2004, p.215). This approach has been widely adopted in studies of consumption, (e.g. Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002; Solomon et al., 2002; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Salzer-Mörling and Strånnegard, 2004; Zhiyan, et al., 2013), examining how consumers construct and perform identities and self-concepts within and in collaboration with brand culture. The brand’s power is found in its role as a storyteller or myth-maker which allows it to connect with the identity projects of consumers; customers buy the product to experience the stories. In this sense, the product is simply a conduit through which customers can experience the stories that the brand tells. Hewer and Brownlie (2009) use this theory to demonstrate how the ‘Nigella brand’ exploits multiple competing positions in circulation around the identity myth of domesticity. Similarly, Kravets (2012) follows the ways in which vodka brands have served as “instruments of the ideological inversion” (Barthes cited in Kravets, p.372), drawing attention to certain stories while concealing others in line with changes in politics, the market and social values. Hewer et al. (2013) extend this line of work by examining ‘brand Warhol,’ unpacking the way in which brands work as cultural constructs “capable of generating value and meaning” (p.187) in line with Boje’s (1991, 1995) notion of the brand as collective storytelling devices. They thus recognise the ways brands draw from and create cultural imaginaries. This paper seeks to complement these studies by adopting a macro socio-historical perspective to deconstruct the societal and political ideas that are communicated by two art movements that have been positioned as representative of contemporary Chinese art in the marketplace. This is found to be an enlightening context of enquiry due to the symbolic nature of works of art, demonstrating how the dynamics of a market system can operate as a mediator of ideology in selecting what is and is not considered worthy of selection for the marketplace. Zhiyan et al.’s (2013) recent book on Chinese brand culture suggests a need for this type of approach to look at how branding adapts to marketing conditions and contributes to public discourse. Indeed, they argue that cultural branding helps move Chinese brands away from commoditization to imbue them with aesthetic and historical significance. There is therefore much to learn from contemporary Chinese artists who have had huge success internationally.

Branding is pervasive in contemporary society and as well as being employed on products or corporations, it has been widely applied to various concepts such as nations (see for example Morgan et al., 2003), nonprofits (Laidler-Kylander, et al., 2007), and individuals such as celebrities (Kerrigan et al., 2011), CEO’s (Bendisch, et al., 2013) and artists (Schroeder, 2005). As O’Reilly (2005) demonstrates, “everything is a brand,” which is why we must try to understand the meanings that are produced, negotiated and circulated through them. Although this paper does not specifically examine nation branding as such, it is useful to consider some recent research in this area, such as: Morgan et al. (2003), O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2000), and Kerrigan et al. (2011), as they reveal the way in which branding is not simply a rational marketing tool but a blatantly political act. This is particularly significant for this paper because of the way the brand under examination (both art movements, as we shall set out, can be considered part of a singular brand as they share similar characteristics and tend to be grouped and shown together) is portrayed as specifically representative of China and all that symbolises. These attempts in managing and circulating perceptions of a nation are shown to be an attempt to “fix a particular idea of the nation” (Kerrigan et al. 2011). Although this is demonstrated to be at best a one-dimensional snapshot portrayal of the nation, it serves to underline the way in which branding can be used to broadcast certain socio-political discourses at the expense of others and it is argued here that this more critical perspective on branding allows for a richer understanding of how brands frame and legitimate our reality. While usually nation branding is undertaken by the nation in question, in this case the simplistic brand image and narrative under analysis was imposed by the Western art world, although, as we shall examine, the brand is now used as a tool for soft power by the Chinese government thus displaying the temporal and dynamic nature of brands. This is in line with Zhao and Belk’s (2008) examination of advertising’s use of political ideology in facilitating social transition, through which new power relations are made to appear natural.

Art has been shown to provide a rich arena to investigate the branding process as it is an arena in which image and symbol drive brand value (O’Reilly, 2005; Schroeder, 2005; Kerrigan et al., 2011). Schroeder’s (1997, 2002, 2005, 2010) work in particular, emphasises the importance of visual communication in our contemporary culture and the relationship between branding and the image. Indeed, as the centrality of the image as a powerful tool for meaning-making in the twenty-first century is acknowledged by business (Schroeder, 2002), it is worth briefly considering the historical relationship between the image and ideology. Art has been used throughout history as a tool for communicating certain ideas and views, as artist Man Ray states: “throughout time painting has alternately been put to the service of the church, the state, arms, individual patronage, nature appreciation, scientific phenomena, anecdote and decoration” (cited in Harrison and Wood, 2006, p.277). This transmission of ideology is most obvious when discussing the relationship between art and propaganda, most famously in Socialist Russia where Trotsky used art as a weapon and not “a mirror, but a hammer: it does not reflect, it shapes” (cited in Harrison and Wood, 2006, p.443). In the contemporary art market, the ‘art for art’s sake’ discourse has come to the fore, disguising any blatant attempts of social control but as we shall see, this does not mean certain socio-political discourses are not in circulation, it just makes them less noticeable. Research in arts marketing has flourished recently, particularly in examining the political economy of art and the relationship between art and commerce (Menger, 1999; Wijnberg & Gemser, 2000; Velthius, 2005; Bradshaw, et al. 2006) but also in engaging with an aesthetic perspective (see for example O’Reilly and Kerrigan’s book on *Marketing the Arts*, 2010). While this provides an important contribution in acknowledging new perspectives for wider discussions on the market, the economy, media, society and culture within the marketing discipline, there has been little consideration of the political and ideological underpinnings of the art market itself and how these values are communicated through the art that is selected for market. This is a significant oversight given the historical association between art and ideology in the form of politics, religion and the market.

According to cultural branding theory then, the power of the myth or story being communicated is not only in its interpretation of reality but also in creating and recreating reality by groups seeking legitimacy. As Thompson (2004) argues, these mythologies serve specific ideological purposes, disseminating a discourse of power. This paper will examine the particular conditions under which Cynical Realism and Political Pop came to dominate the contemporary Chinese art market and the power discourses at play in this phenomenon. As mentioned above, a temporal perspective, characteristic of cultural branding, is therefore necessary to analyse how meaning is produced and circulated on a macro-level. Here, brands are dynamic and multidimensional rather than static, this is particularly important when examining art due to the complexity and contradictions inherent to cultural products in terms of their historical and social contexts. DiMaggio’s (1987) sociological study of the art world supports this view, he finds that social groups (art operates collectively, thus the importance of art ‘movements’) use distinctive forms of cultural expertise to define themselves and to recognise members and outsiders. Shifts and revisions therefore occur in order for the stories in circulation to stay relevant in line with wider social, cultural and political shifts as different groups attain control of the meaning-making. As Berthon et al. (2012) put forward, brand image must be negotiated as it is constantly evolving and as such is always contextual. In relation to art, this is easily verified by looking at the market values for works of art through the centuries and their fluctuation. Artists and movements celebrated in the past are now forgotten and of little value with only a few still communicating successfully and making record-breaking sales. We shall examine the institutional structure of the art world in more detail below to understand the legitimisation structures in place and how these are contextually bound.

**The Visual Arts Market and the Legitimisation of Taste**

Throughout art history, there has always been a hierarchy of taste, with certain movements, styles, artists and works of art celebrated as market leaders. In this sense, we can argue that to some extent these elements have been branded as their reputation and status in society determined the prices they achieved and thus can be considered a measure of their brand equity, gaining the influence to define and dominate the market. Artists and the movements they spearhead have always been selected by the gatekeepers of the art world at the time, whether these be patrons, dealers, curators, critics or collectors. These individuals then collectively label and position the artists and movements as leaders of the market, thereby redefining what is and is not considered ‘good’ art in accordance with their objectives and using them as a short-hand mechanism to represent quality, thereby branding them. Therefore, the taste on which art works are valued is based on subjective cultural, social and historical contexts as set out by O’Reilly (2005) and is thus partial and biased. This relates to Hume’s (1961) discussion of the standard of taste where he argues that while what makes art great is a matter of opinion, some opinions are better than others due to a greater awareness and experience of the works, conventions and genres in question. Bourdieu (1984) examines the issue of taste in detail and argues that although tastes appear to be innate, they are in fact socially conditioned and reflect the dominant power relations. In this sense, he perceives the realm of consumption as an institutionalised field that helps to sustain the existing hierarchy and enforce their distinction over others. Cultural capital is the form in which this power is expressed. It is also necessary here to note Foucault’s work (1991, 1998) on power. As power is everywhere, he tells us, it pervades society and is in constant flux and negotiation, diffused and embodied in discourse and knowledge and reinforced and redefined through societal institutions such as the education system, the media and political and economic ideologies. It is therefore necessary to consider the institutional structures of the art world to understand power relations within it.

It is largely accepted and documented that recognition of art is a social process that cannot be reduced to a reflection of artistic merit and this recognition can wax and wane (Baumann, 2006). Pioneering sociological studies of the art market such as Becker (1982) and Bourdieu (1993) demonstrate that cultural production and reception are acts that are inherently collective, and the legitimation of culture is always achieved collectively. Therefore, in order to understand the nature of cultural production and evaluation, we need to analyse the institutional and social relations of the art world. The art market’s value systems are notoriously complex and despite the art market being an increasingly valuable sector in the global economy, it is the least transparent and least regulated major commercial activity in the world (Buck, 2004). This is a result of the evolution of what is accepted as ‘art,’ the evaluation process through which works of art are recognised today has little or nothing to do with the materials or conventions used to construct them, their value is purely extrinsic. Art historical studies have shown that as the institutionalisation of art has progressed, the strictures and definitions of ‘art’ have been continually stretched from the Impressionists rejection of the academies to conceptual artists’ refutation of all traditional notions of art, complicating how art is both perceived and valued. For example, Wijnberg and Gemser (2000) illustrate this in their study of the Impressionists. They argue that status in the art world is achieved through a collective challenge (thus the importance of movements rather than individual artists who will not have the necessary force needed to overturn these strictures) to the current definitional boundaries in order to reframe innovations as part of the larger art historical discourse and therefore as ‘good’ art (according to the art world experts).

The branding process in art therefore became more significant as the rules around what a work of art could be were relaxed, branding bestowed easily recognisable ‘art’ status. According to George Dickie’s (1971) institutional definition of art, ‘art’ has become a sociological category and therefore anything art schools, museums and artists define as art is considered art regardless of formal definitions. Therefore objects ore even intangible works such as performances could become ‘works of art’ by being placed in the context of art (for example in an art gallery). Since the twentieth century then, the art market has depended upon these highly subjective, socially constructed notions of ‘art’ in its construction and valuation. How art works are defined as such and how they are valued is therefore a complex process involving a range of actors. Today, the endorsement process comprises of a network of experts within both public and private sectors (artists, curators, academics, art teachers, critics, collectors and dealers) who make up a constantly shifting series of subgroups that negotiate the value of a work to decide whether it is worthy of a place in art history (Giuffre, 1999; Velthius, 2005; Rodner and Thomson, 2013). In this sense the endorsement process structures the art market and can be considered an ‘organisational field’ (DiMaggio, 1991) which maps out the range of actors that take an art work from its inception to its final resting place. Due to art being a taste-driven product (Jyrama, 2002), the way in which art is legitimised therefore depends on an institutional consensus based on subjective evaluation. As Currid (2007) discusses, cultural value is not just an economic act but instead part of an intense social process of valorisation and legitimisation which changes through time due to the temporal power shifts in the social structure so, for example, in Western art history, it moved from a system of patronage in the Renaissance, to the Academy system and then in the twentieth century, to the gallery system that currently structures the art world. In each case, the definition of what ‘art’ is changed as the groups responsible for making these definitions shifted.

Although artists and art movements being branded is therefore nothing new, the extent to which these brands are part of the commercial marketplace is. As the art market has grown rapidly in the past couple of decades, with a record level of interest and appetite for contemporary art (Robertson & Chong, 2008), the art ‘industry’ has an ever greater influence on how ‘art’ is viewed. The proliferation of biennales, art fairs, auction sales, blockbuster exhibitions and media hype, predominates in a way that was inconceivable twenty-five years ago (Thompson, 2008). Therefore, while art has always been a commodity, the way art is commodified and the speed of commodification has changed. In a media-driven society, artists require a clear brand position and unique profile to differentiate themselves from the competition (Kerrigan et al., 2011), particularly in the context of the proliferation of high-status events which critics suggest have changed the culture of art-buying. Fairs and auctions have replaced quiet discussions held in the gallery with an experience akin to the shopping mall, where conspicuous consumption and impulsive shopping replaces research as branded, recognisable art is favoured rather than more complex and reflective pieces (Griffin, 2008). Moreover, as the demand for new work increases, the art world expands its borders, looking towards new markets such as those of the emerging BRIC economies where the emergence of wealthy new collectors provides significant opportunities (Artprice, 2007). This commodification process also results in the creation of ‘stars:’ artists such as Hirst, Koons or Murakami whose high mark-ups regularly attract media coverage. They are branded in that their work is instantly recognisable and as such are considered market leaders for their respective movements: Young British Artists, Neo-pop and Superflat, respectively. More recently, Chinese Cynical Realist and Political Pop artists such as Yue Minjun, Wang Gangyi and Zhang Xiaogang, have achieved similar levels of media attention and coverage (see appendix 2 for a brief discussion of their work). This is in line with Dyer’s (1986) seminal study of stars, revealing them to be ‘images’ that are made for profit and constructed as such by a variety of stakeholders. As such the socio-cultural approach to branding allows us to reflect on the artificial nature of these symbolic constructions which Dyer shows to be highly unstable and manipulable despite the fact that we, the public, see them as ‘natural.’ This analysis focuses on the wider art movements these ‘stars’ represent to look at the social construction of the market as a whole.

This study seeks to examine the emergence of the Chinese contemporary art market, particularly the ‘hottest’ sectors of this market namely Cynical Realism and Political Pop to consider the meanings produced and circulated through them. Although most studies of visual arts marketing have focused on the artist as brand manager (Schroeder, 2005; Kerrigan et al., 2011), movements in the art market also operate as brands, specifically concept brands in that they are socially constructed to differentiate one set of artists from another for the purposes of the market. In this sense the idea of a brand as a movement is similar to that of the ‘discourse’ outlined in Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001). They define a discourse as a contextually specific set of knowledge about a social practice or collection of social practices and associated values, legitimations and purposes. As Foucault (1998) argues, discourse transmits and reproduces power. Therefore the analysis presented here is more interested in examining the discourses underpinning the Cynical Realist and Political Pop movements rather than the art per se, in order to examine how these brands were constructed through specific discursive practices which we shall now explore. First, however, we must set out the specifications and boundaries of the study.

**Methodology**

For the purposes of this paper, two types of data were used: historical and art market data for a contextual analysis of the Chinese contemporary art market and ethnographic data, collected in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai. The historical data is primarily derived from art history focusing on Chinese art since the 1950’s, in line with Schroeder’s (2000) call to use art criticism in interpreting visual works. However, press reports, auction records, exhibition reviews and government documentation about the Chinese contemporary art market were also analysed to understand the discourses that have been circulated in the construction of this market since its emergence in the 1980’s. The ethnographic data consisted of participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Joy and Sherry’s study of the contemporary Chinese art market (2004) took a similar two-pronged approach to examine the contours of this art market, although their study is more focused on the structure and workings of the market whereas this study extends this by focusing on the meaning and images circulated through it, particularly on the international art market.

The ethnographic data centered on Hong Kong as it is considered the financial centre of the Chinese art market. Moreover, it is the birthplace for the contemporary Chinese art market (due to the political situation in the mainland, the art had to go through Hong Kong in order to reach the marketplace), allowing for a study of the rise of this market. Beijing, as the political and cultural capital of China and Shanghai, as a key business hub, have since also become important centres in the Chinese contemporary art market. Eleven interviews were undertaken with various Chinese art professionals including artists, dealers, auction house specialists, art critics and historians and curators (see appendix 1 for more details). The interviewees were selected to ensure that participants were linked to the Cynical Realist or Political Pop movements. The artists chosen had achieved a high level of international prominence in terms of their participation in prestigious international events such as Hong Kong Basel art fair or branded art galleries that operate internationally as well as having sold at auction and therefore holding an auction record. This was so that we could consider their reception in the market both within China and internationally. The critics, historian, curators and dealers were of particular interest due to their role in the labeling and dissemination of these movements. Moreover, although all of these are familiar with the Chinese market, some operate internationally and are foreign citizens, providing the international perspective necessary for this research. The aim of conducting these interviews was to gather more of a contextual understanding of the environment in which these artists were operating; particularly as there is still relatively little research on the emergence of Chinese contemporary art, as well as the structures at work in legitimising this market, structures which tend to be largely hidden due to the valuation mechanisms of the art market which operate in order to conceal the commercial side of operations (Menger, 1999). This was even more crucial due to the fact that Chinese political structures played an important part in censoring reports about the development of this market (and indeed, the market itself as we shall examine). The interviews were open-ended (McCracken, 1988) in order to allow for participants’ own reflections, particularly in terms of how they perceive the work to have been represented and received by the market. The study therefore uses a mixture of both historical examples that come through analysis of documents and information and examples that come from the primary data to provide a macro-environmental analysis of these movements. In addition, data was gathered through observation at auctions, art fairs, galleries and studios to further unpick the context in which this work is now produced, shown, sold and distributed in order to triangulate methods. Due to the somewhat controversial political dimension of this study, participants were anonymised by using pseudonyms.

**Unpacking the Cynical Realist and Political Pop Brand**

*Emergence and Distribution of the Brand*

The first officially sanctioned contemporary art show in China, ‘China/Avant-Garde,’ happened in February 1989, before which artists could not show their work as it was ‘unofficial,’ the only official work being in the Realist style preferred by the government and representing the ideology of the socialist regime. As the only time avant-garde artists appeared as a group in the National Gallery, the exhibition has a seminal place in Chinese art history. It represented the pursuit of individual creative expression that broke away from the collective mindset that had existed since the Cultural Revolution, following the tentative liberalisation of the second half of the 1980’s. However, due to the political restrictions in creating and showing work, Chinese contemporary art was still largely an underground movement and foreign diplomats were crucial in allowing artists the use of their houses to show their work at openings that were promoted through word-of-mouth. It was in this underground arts milieu that art critic/curator Li Xianting, generally known as the ‘godfather’ of Chinese contemporary art, first put forth the labels through which the art became known. Throughout, Li played a crucial role in promoting the works of these underground artists to foreign curators, media and collectors. In this way, a small group of key supporters emerged, mainly from the highly educated expatriate community whose values, based on notions of free speech and support of the arts, predetermined their patronage. The ‘China/Avant-Garde’ exhibition was pivotal in that it brought together most of the ‘Stars,’ the Chinese artists who now achieve record prices at auction. It was not without problems however, closing and re-opening twice in the two weeks it was scheduled to run. The show therefore demonstrated that the contemporary Chinese art market could not operate within China and had to be created outside the mainland.

The market was therefore essentially kickstarted by the director of the Hanart gallery, Johnson Chang, based in Hong Kong. He had seen the exhibition and wanted to take it to Hong Kong but due to Tiananmen had to wait for a thaw in restrictions; in 1992 he was finally able to use underhand methods to get the art out under the umbrella of the 1993 Hong Kong arts festival. However, once out, he could not get the work back into mainland China after the show and therefore had to find a market for it. He was thus a pioneer in introducing contemporary Chinese art to the world through international exhibitions in the 1990s in Australia, the United States and at possibly the world’s most prestigious exhibition, the Venice Biennale. The importance of the show’s international exposure during the mid-1990s cannot be over-estimated. It thrust the Cynical Realist and Political Pop movements into the spotlight and lay the foundations for the market, packaging it and marketing it for the Western art world, playing on moral values such as freedom of speech and political protest in constructing the brand of ‘contemporary Chinese art’ that would make the art easily identifiable and attractive as we shall unpack further on.

It was only in the early 2000’s, however, that the contemporary Chinese art market really took off (Artprice, 2009). This explosion of interest was fuelled further by specialised sales (national focus sales) by market leaders such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s. It was at this point that despite the ideologically critical content of some of the art, officials became loathe to curtail a growth industry with prospects for generating both economic and cultural capital. Wanting to cash in (also evidenced in other creative industries such as the film market, see Zhu, 2010), in line with wider economic liberalisation policies, Chinese government officials permitted the dissemination and promotion of the market, both internally and globally (Joy and Sherry, 2004). They also increasingly stressed the importance of the art market as a status symbol and it has become more fashionable for the nouveau-riche to buy art (Vine, 2008; Degot and Yinhua, 2008). This encouraged speculators using art as a financial investment to enter the market, and the market further picked-up in speed when Chinese money came on the market for the first time, buying back some of their heritage (ArtMarketInsight, 2009). Art fairs also grew up in response to this growth, capitalising on these new collectors (Gerlis & Seno, 2011). So while the contemporary Chinese art market started outside of China, there has been a shift in buying power and it has recently profited from a new breed of ultra-wealthy Chinese collectors although, as we shall explore further on, this has had little impact on the framing of the market so far. While the market peaked around 2008, leading Cynical Realist and Political Pop artists still achieve top hammer prices, for example Cynical Realist Zhang Xiaogang got the two best results ($7.6 and 6 million) of any contemporary Asian artist for 2011-12 (Artprice, 2012). Why have these movements been so successful? By using a socio-cultural branding framework we can start to dissect how they were framed and disseminated and why this was so successfully received by the international art world.

*Packaging of the Brand*

As we have seen, due to the export-oriented characteristics of this market, Western curators and collectors (the gatekeepers of the ‘international’ art market) curated and set out the themes by which the movements were classified. In both cases the movements were marketed in line with moral and ideological values such as freedom of speech and political protest. The humorous and ironic take on socio-political issues and events such as Tiananmen Square appealed to the West’s liberal political thinking and conception of the artist as aesthetic tradition-buster. As Brown and Patterson’s (2010) work demonstrates, building a brand narrative is crucial in attracting customers. The strong narrative of the oppressed rising up to express themselves, forms an implicit justification of Western values in terms of capitalism and democracy and emphasises the ideological differences and antagonisms between China and the West. Key motifs such as the ironic use of the imagery of Mao’s propaganda machine and distinctive use of the Communist red colour palate, made the work easily recognisable as ‘typically Chinese’ due to its use of ‘Chinese characteristics.’ However, references to contemporary consumer culture through references such as advertisements and commercial trademarks mean that the work still operates within a Western, non-threatening frame, with just enough of those ‘Chinese characteristics’ to make it exotically appealing.

These movements therefore came to represent the nation to the West (much like other nation-state-labeled art market commodities such as the Young British Artists). We can therefore see how these brands were culturally produced to reflect certain socio-political hegemonic power structures. In this case, there are distinct similarities with Said’s (1978) seminal postmodern notion of Orientalism whereby the Orient is a cultural production rather than a reality; these art brands serve to internalise stereotypes of China, emphasising political differences while downplaying the West’s involvement in their creation and continuing struggles. The movements deal directly with political themes but are distinctive in their refusal to take a stance, which perhaps is why the work was so attractive to the West, the packaging of the discourse could be manipulated to serve the most marketable narrative. Just as Said showed, romanticised images of Asia and the Middle East served an implicit justification for European and American colonial and imperial ambitions; this ‘new’ art market serves to continue to circulate a discourse of ideological superiority. As the political critique is couched in a cynical distance or ironic parody, the reality of the political situation in terms of the Chinese government’s current abuses of power and poor human rights record which the West is complicit in does not need to be directly engaged with. In this sense, in a similar way to which we saw a nation brand operates, the art brand is an artificial construct representing an imaginary, simplistic portrayal of the world. Moreover, as successfully commodified products, the aesthetic opposition the work offers is neutralised which is why the Chinese government itself has now given state approval[[1]](#footnote-1).

*Consumption of the Brand*

Cultural branding has highlighted the importance of mythologies in consumer culture whereby the market draws from mythic archetypes and plotlines that are based on central concerns of the human experience, in order to create appeal (Holt, 2004). These brands have identity value as they are valued for what they symbolise, in the case of Cynical Realism and Political Pop, the myth centers around Western discourses of China in terms of its Communist and Socialist history satisfying contemporary sentiments among the post- or anti-communist 1968 generation. The brand functions as a symbolic device through which consumers can buy into this ideology and identity thus enabling them to make sense of their place in the world and share in the power of the work’s authority. However, this simplistic world view has meant a pigeonholing of the Chinese avant-garde, the discourses that were picked up to be rewarded by the market were those with socially engaging undertones, this is the ‘real’ work produced in China, marginalising any other styles. Even once the Chinese government allowed the market of these works to flourish, the narrative of liberation has continued to be the dominant one, artists breaking free from an oppressive state. These artists are no longer ‘underground,’ they have actually become part of the mainstream but subversion is what is being marketed. Indeed, the artists interviewed expressed a frustration with this constructed image, the wished to express a contemporary vision of themselves beyond their national identity and to be considered ‘good’ artists rather than simply ‘good Chinese artists.’ While they may have played a part in the construction of this brand image, it is now seen as limiting. They see this framing of ‘Chinese art’ as out of touch with contemporary realities in terms of Western curators “picking” works to support their own views of China and Chinese art with little interest in the realities of China, as one dealer suggested “only Westerners are interested in the Chinese political side.” The focus on the ‘Chinese-ness’ allows for the neutralising of the threat of the exotic Socialist ‘Other.’ The very fact that the Chinese government now uses this market as a tool to boost China’s soft power, evidenced, for example, by the fact that the Shanghai Biennial organisers, realising previous events had been criticised for being too conservative, included this ‘non-official’ work to increase its appeal to overseas visitors, demonstrates that the political threat has been defused by market values. The work has been absorbed as part of the expansion of the free market. The vocabulary of these art brands is no longer deemed current in daily life in China (Boers, 2006) and can be directly related to the Che Guevara type of branding and marketing of cool, Communist iconography that is no longer threatening to the West (Vargos Llosa, 2005).

More recently, Western critics have joined in with this blame, somewhat patronisingly suggesting that it is simplistic work that “panders to Western expectations” (Guardian, 2007). As this work has flooded the market, we see a double standard whereby it is now too successful, the work is deemed too ‘commercial,’ a label that has long been regarded as suspicious by the art world (Velthius, 2005). While there may be some truth to this, one artist, for example, discussed giving a Western collector a “hefty ‘contemporary Chinese’ price” demonstrating some double standards at play, this criticism means denying the role of the market in privileging, positioning and distributing this work. The packaging and distribution of the work has been conducted from a non-Chinese perspective, supposedly showing the world that ‘authentic’ Chinese contemporary art is, therefore any subsequent disparagement of the work needs to also consider the discourses and institutional structures that created the marketing narrative. A macro-approach to the art market demonstrates the ideological frameworks at work, and how artists must work within these in order to access the market. Artistic practice is therefore based on the necessity to be positioned by others, in this case the Western art world, rather than the artist’s individual wishes. In this case, the work has been politicised by Western curators and critics according to their own ideological preferences. The tastemaker in the international art market, then, is the Western art world concentrated and in New York and London, as the auction specialist interviewed stated in no uncertain terms: “in terms of artistic creation the West is still tastemaker.” This is reflected in terms of the consumption of Chinese contemporary art in that Chinese collectors continue to buy the work that the West deems ‘important’ and in the structure of the Chinese art world where most of the big galleries in China are run either by foreigners or Chinese citizens educated abroad who are considered to have the necessary expertise, experience and contacts to successfully run a commercial gallery.

The impact of the brand narratives on members of the Chinese art world are therefore widespread. Artists whose work is not as obviously political, suffer on the international market as do dealers who do not show this type of high-impact work, one Hong Kong dealer complained that: “Hong Kong art is quite conceptual so doesn’t sell at auctions and galleries are only interested in mainland art for a quick buck.” This was therefore found to be extremely limiting in terms of the creative freedom the art market claims to encourage. Indeed, as Joy and Sherry (2004) have shown, the market can be manipulated for economic reward, with some of the artists involved in these movements exploiting the situation by flooding the market with their works for commercial gain. In fact, in considering the branding of certain styles or types of art, we can see that the simplistic, recognisable brand narratives disseminated tend to restrict artists as they are expected to produce more of the same rather than show any significant creative developments. This was reflected in the artists’ operations, often having ‘factory’ systems with technicians and assistants mass-producing their work. That fakes are now also rampant is possibly a result of this mass production (see appendix 2). Moreover, by commoditising the art work into a simple product, it avoids any meaningful critical engagement. For example, one dealer selling emerging artists was told to sell these more established works and although she “could make more money, so it was tempting,” she felt that “there’s no original ideas” in that type of work and wants to “champion new styles that represent our present concerns.” In the branding of this art, the politics becomes secondary to market values, it is no longer critical. The speed of commodification of the art market discussed previously, has led to recent condemnation by veteran art critics such as Dave Hickey who has recently announced his departure from the art world due to the fact that “money and celebrity has cast a shadow over the art world which is prohibiting ideas and debates from coming to the fore.” (Helmore and Gallagher, 2012, p.2). The market’s mechanics serve to neutralise any challenge presented by the work. Most exhibitions of Chinese art in the West have therefore been presented as monolithic blockbusters of branded pieces of ‘Chinese art’ that might introduce the West to the artists, but do not advance new readings of their works and rather serve to reiterate the discourse of otherness.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The growing importance of China’s emerging economy is generating enormous attention (Zhao and Belk, 2008; Zhiyan, et al., 2013). Within this, the Chinese art market is one of many growing markets that is worthy of further study, particularly as it starts to overtake the historic market leaders. Joy and Sherry’s (2004) extensive historical analysis of the development of the contemporary Chinese art market demonstrates that the art market model used is Western, as are the criteria used to judge the work; this paper seeks to unpack the implications of this in terms of the type of work that is selected and promoted. As the Chinese art market continues to grow, it will be interesting to follow its development to see whether it continues to follow the prescribed path set in the West or whether it will start to develop its own criteria and values to judge the work produced. Due to the socially constructed nature of the valuation of art discussed above, it can be hypothesised that an emergent Eastern market and the change in power relations this implies could have far reaching consequences on what is deemed ‘authentic’ Chinese art. For the moment however, legitimisation structures lie firmly in the hands of Western art experts. Joy and Sherry (2004) emphasise that any art shown within China is clearly politically accountable in that any gallery or museum is a discourse and exhibitions are utterances within these discourses. We take their study further by examining the international dissemination of this work, or more particularly the two hottest sectors within this market, showing that art works in any market serve as part of a socio-political discourse, not only in China. While their study focuses on the infrastructure in place within China, the actual workings of the Chinese art world and how art has been framed within China; we seek to understand its framing in the international art market, thereby exposing some of the underlying power discourses at work on a more global scale.

This paper has examined the way in which two art movements, labeled Political Pop and Cynical Realism, came to represent Chinese contemporary art to the Western world. A macro-marketing perspective was taken to consider how a market is constructed and the values and ideologies that are in operation within it. The use of socio-cultural branding theory allowed for an analysis of the meanings created and circulated through this art. In this case, the brands were found to have been packaged in order to promote a Western liberal political vision of the world. Somewhat ironically, whilst this viewpoint claims to be based on freedom of expression, and the art branded was labeled as political protest against an authoritative regime; the ideological framework in operation in this market is actually found to restrict freedom of expression in that it limits artistic creativity in only allowing art works with the recognised branded elements (such as Communist iconography or colour choices for example) to access the market. As such, taste, the underlying judgment of value for the art market, is demonstrated to be a hegemonic construct in line with Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis. This paper therefore highlights the need to consider the wider context in which the art market operates, how certain sociopolitical ideas are privileged over others within the market system and how they become naturalised through the branding framework to be used as socially representational texts.

Most of the research to date examining the contemporary visual arts market focuses on the individual marketing of certain artists (e.g. Schroeder, 1997; Kerrigan, et al., 2011) or arts organisations (Baumgarth, 2009), this study shows that a wider macro-marketing approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the significance of other stakeholders involved in their positioning. Although Kottász and Bennett (2013) find that having a personal brand can increase business competence for artists through better control of their careers and distribution channels, their study neglects to consider that often the branding is imposed on them rather than self-produced. Indeed, individual artists have very little power to position themselves in the art market due to the endorsement process the work must go through and as such wider societal structures and the ideological frameworks that underpin them must be taken into account. Furthermore, viewers of the work themselves are confined into certain perspectives or views about the value and message of this work which does not account for the full, varied and sometimes contradictory interpretations that could be made about it or even those that the artist themselves privileged in the creating of the work. Therefore the physical and temporal displacement of a work changes its meaning. Context is everything, thus the need for dynamic studies of branding in terms of how it responds to market dynamics. As Schroeder (2009, p.123) points out “neither managers nor consumers completely control branding process,” it is cultural codes that constrain brands and through these they became ideological referents. Brands favour certain images and stories over others and these are taken by consumers to be natural reflections of the world; the political and ideological discourses framing these stories are not called into question but this study shows that they are present and as such brands operate as essential and powerful tools in social relations.

By way of conclusion, the study raises a few questions for future consideration. This study has been limited to analysing one dominant discourse of power circulated through Cynical Realism and Political Pop but this does not prevent other discourses from being circulated. Indeed further research provides opportunities for examining conflicts and intersections amongst various discourses of power for art movements as they are consumed in different markets. There is also a need for wider studies looking at the relationship between branding and ideologies and how they represent shifting patterns of power relationships. For example, how are other emerging art markets historically and ideologically charged and structured? Moreover we have only looked at two related art movements in the larger art market. How does an analysis of the wider brandscape offer a more nuanced view? As a final note we must acknowledge a limitation of the study; although triangulation of data was achieved, due to the language and cultural barriers, the researcher recognises her role as an apprentice when examining the Chinese contemporary art market and further ethnographic studies conducted within China focusing on the art market are much needed.

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**Appendix 1: List of interviewees**

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| --- | --- |
| Interviewee | Role |
| Bruce | Artist |
| Stephen | Artist / curator / historian |
| Peter | Artist |
| Pacey | Artist |
| Kai | Artist |
| Iris | Dealer (private) |
| Louise | Dealer (private) |
| April | Dealer (private) |
| Amy | Curator (public) / critic |
| Anthony | Consultant / critic / collector |
| Debbie | Auction house specialist |

**Appendix 2: Contemporary fakes on the streets of Beijing in 2007, including Yue Minjun, Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi.**

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Yue Minjun (a Cynical Realist) is best known for oil paintings depicting himself in various settings, frozen in laughter. This signature image has been reproduced in sculpture, watercolour and prints and is perhaps the most recognisable image in contemporary Chinese art. The smile is deformed to mean the opposite of what it normally means, it is not happiness but a mask for real feelings of helplessness. The smile has been variously interpreted as a sort of joke at the absurdity of it all, parodying propaganda posters used in the Cultural Revolution.

Zhang Xiaogang (also a Cynical Realist) is best know for his *Bloodline* series of paintings which show often monochromatic, stylised portraits of Chinese people posing in a stiff manner deliberately reminiscent of family portraits from the 1950s and 60s. Again, on the surface these characters appear calm but they hide great emotional turbulence. The paintings engage with the notion of identity within the Chinese culture of Collectivism by basing the work around the notion of ‘family’ they depict an imagined family tree of unnervingly similar relatives, all distinguished through minute differences.

Wang Gunagyi (who is part of the Political Pop movement) combines propaganda images, Pop art and commercial advertising in his work. His *Great Criticism* series combines the propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution with the brand names of famous western consumer products. Idealised peasants and workers yield pens instead of hammers or shovels and appear to extol the virtues of Coca Cola, Nokia, Swatch, or in this case Danone resulting in absurdity.

The juxtaposition of these works (although copies, they are faithful replicas), demonstrates some of the key characteristics of these movements notably the ironic repurposing of Communist imagery to highlight a cynical view of Chinese society.

1. Zhu (2002) demonstrates a similar effect in the Chinese film industry, both in content and market structure. Economic development was privileged in the adoption of Western market practices, neutralising any ideological content. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)