

Voicing the tensions of a democratised culture

China's contemporary cultural revolution





The rest of the world may have to seriously consider how the rise in Chinese power will affect our lives. Western hegemony is waning, and its stewardship of world culture is a mixed bag: freedom and equality are stained with slavery and exploitation; democracy and free votes are mixed with apathy and corruption. This is not to say that any other nation or state would do better, or that other epochs have been all light and purity, but the West may struggle to convince the peoples of the world of its values and, by extension, the rationale for keeping its place as the globe's defining culture. Western culture needs to live up to its own ideals. Part of that will mean convincing the world that these ideals are worthwhile now the era of force is over. The values of individual freedom, free speech and free access to information are key in the development of an educated people with agency; moreover they are inventive drivers within a flourishing civil society. But how certain are we that they are the natural results of technological progress?

China is gathering momentum as an unstoppable force in the modern world, growing its economic and soft-power

influence while simultaneously maintaining the largest army on the planet. If we consider freedom of speech and access to information as central to our lives, thinking of the internet, we may well wonder whether China's example will prove to be the template for our future rather than our industrial past. The winners and losers as a result of China's paradoxical technological boom are evident in cities containing multiplying millionaires adjacent to blinking trinket factories where workers, under pressure, resort to suicide. Perhaps within the nuances of these changes the biggest winners are the Communist Party of China (CPC), a multi-armed regulatory body whose grip on the lives of over a billion individuals has not been weakened by the competing pull of that great Western kraken, the World Wide Web.

Amongst the tectonic cultural forces shifting and grinding for global ascendance are creative voices who through elegant works of art are resisting the central spread of homogeneity that is new China by offering difference and choice within the social templates of what a future human might be.



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...RESISTING THE
CENTRAL SPREAD OF
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History of alternative perspectives in China: Stars Group.

During his lifetime Mao Zedong set out an attitude to art outlawing anything that didn't appeal to the masses and support the official doctrine of the one-party state. Self-expression in art was prohibited. This kind of control is not aimed at artists in particular, but at any dissemination of information which might create new perspectives and therefore weaken state control over the outlook and sympathies of the people. In the digital age contemporary Chinese authorities are trying to control the electronic flow of information by blocking swathes of the internet, mirroring Mao's concerns. The tacit understanding here is that Chinese society is not a homogeneous unit; within the commonalities there are crucial differences that are dangerous enough to necessitate enforced silence.

Infamous for his use of the internet, artist Ai Weiwei is possibly the most obvious combination of both disruptive forces: art and online activity. Ai's father, a poet, was condemned as a rightist under Mao's rules, his life turned upside down and the family sent to labour camps. Artists also fell into this category, individuals who dealt in creativity and alternatives, and who might undermine propaganda or rally people to a cause. The Stars Group emerged out of this background. Beginning in 1979 they fought hard for recognition after being denied a space to show their work, making enemies of local and national officials along the way:

Stars responded by organizing a protest march in the name of individual human rights. Starting out from the Xidan Democracy Wall, the demonstrators made their way to the headquarters of the Peking Municipal Party Committee under the banner 'We Demand Democracy and Artistic Freedom'. Finally, from 23 November to 2 December 1979, the First Stars Exhibition was held in the Huafang Studio in Beihei Park, Beijing. - Zee Stone Gallery

Operating in Beijing until 1983, the group consisted of many artists who would subsequently make their name abroad: Ma Desheng, Huang Rui, Yan Li, Yang Yiping, Wang Keping, Qu Leilei, Mao Lizi, Bo Yun, Zhong Ahcheng, Shao Fei, Li Shuang and Ai Weiwei. In 1983, under increasing pressure from officials, the group disbanded and the leading protagonists left China for global recognition as part of a vibrant creative diaspora:

Speaking from the history of Chinese art, Star painting will indeed be an incident. Many say: Oh, a bunch of young people are still childish. The work is immature, indeed admitted, but as a phenomenon and an event, it plays a very important role in the history of the development of Chinese art. - Qu Leilei, 'Every single star shines independently', news.99ys.com

Known as the June Fourth Incident, the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests are the most famous suppression of democratic activism in China. The protests were student-led and, broadly speaking, demanded greater say in decisions, more freedoms and rights. If the authorities might have flirted with compromise in the past but this quickly evaporated and martial law was declared, partly due to the spread of protests around the country. Armed troops shot between 180 and 10,454 citizens - the discrepancy in these numbers alone is testament to the deep divisions that still exist within a society not ready to bear the realities of an open investigation.

Both Tiananmen Square and Stars Group are subject to restricted internet searches in China, which means some or all relevant information is redacted. In the case of Tiananmen Square, no mention of the protests is visible when searched for in Chinese.

Netizens in China

The internet can be seen as an exaggeration of this





Image: Chunwoo Nam (Left) *Individual Story IV - I am here* (2009), (Previous) *Individual Space II* (2007) Images courtesy of Artist

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...DROVES OF
TECHNOCRATS ARE
EMPLOYED TO SPY...

kind of relationship. It offers people alternative sources and the means to organise and publish information. In this sense it is often thought of as having naturally democratic features, and is also connected to self-expression and personal freedom. The internet's arrival in China in 1994 (after some brief activity in the late 1980s) was met with suspicion by the authorities. At that time their experiences with artists and students had primed them to spring promptly into action to set up their defences and implement restrictions to internet use. Today, a quarter of the world's internet users reside in China, subject to the aforementioned restrictions¹, and e-commerce is increasingly relevant in stabilising the economy.

Golden Shield and the Great Firewall

By 1997 the Chinese government was taking serious measures to block and control the internet. These combined laws and technologies such as the Great Firewall include methods such as IP blocking, DNS filtering and redirection and SSL attacks.

Fostering the sense of being listened to or watched is extremely effective and leads to what is called 'chilled speech'², whereby people's fear of punishment inhibits their free communication. The Great Firewall has allowed China to effectively develop its own easy-to-influence versions of websites, such as Tencent, Alibaba and Baidu. There are also versions of YouTube and Twitter. Finance companies like Zhima Credit assist the government in prosecutions and information gathering (which they claim is voluntary). Sometimes called Golden Shield, many government departments co-operate to share information about users, as well as blocking or controlling webpages. Successfully blocked sites include Facebook, Gmail, Google, YouTube and many more. Drove of technocrats are employed to spy on people and redirect them to pro-government sites and content.

New forms of control: technology

Mara Hvistendahl reports that in China many people are making financial transactions online, and that companies like Zhima Credit are engaging in social ranking and aiding the government with ever greater controls

According to Xinhua, the state news agency, this union of big tech and big government has helped courts punish more than 1.21 million defaulters, who opened their Zhima Credit one day to find their scores plunging. The State Council has signaled that under the national social credit system people will be penalized for the crime of spreading online rumors, among other offenses, and that those deemed 'seriously untrustworthy' can expect to receive substandard services. - Mara Hvistendahl, 'Inside China's Vast New Experiment in Social Ranking', Wired (December 2017)

This useful digital tool is also a handy way for the CPC to guide and influence their citizens, who are increasingly encouraged or required to shop, save and bank in this way.

Censoring the internet

China's suppression of the supposed naturally democratic forces of the internet is a colossal task, and is understood to be model for those states who would like to carry out similarly high levels of control.

An article by Simon Denyer (with contributions from Xu Yau Jingjing), 'China's scary lesson to the world: Censoring the Internet works'³, was featured in the *Washington Post* in 2016, and many of their observations remain concrete almost two years later. The thrust of the article confirmed what many in the know were already aware of, and what has increasingly become a normal fact of life in China: that the authorities there have successfully developed and updated their strategies for controlling the internet

in such a way that trade and what the authorities see as 'benign' use are not interrupted.

Of course the 'normalisation' here is simply another 'truth' in our time of 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth' tendencies. Dong Lishen, senior researcher at the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the State Council, writing in the *South China Morning Post* represented the nuances and sophistication of this normalisation as far back as 2013, supporting the CPC's censorship and security measures, and even asserting that the authorities 'should' or 'must' go further and do more to ensure 'social harmony and lasting political stability'. This raises the frightening possibility that similar strategies might be behind the UK government's current plan to straighten out the internet. More control is always tempting for those who must uphold the law. If China's stance on internet access were to become ascendant over the West's generally permissive attitude, who wouldn't be affected?

China needs a diverse and multi-layered legal system for cyberspace. The National People's Congress and the State Council should formulate administrative rules and regulations. Government departments should develop specific operational procedures and a sound legal system. This can help promote a stable and harmonious community in cyberspace. And, to keep abreast of changes

*in the online world, the relevant authorities should, from time to time, publish white papers or assessment reports to address in a timely fashion any social problems that arise, to ensure the sustained and healthy development of cyberspace. - Dong Lishen, 'Why China needs new internet laws to fight the online rumour-mongers', *South China Morning Post* (20 September, 2013)*

The tone is forceful but civil and measured throughout. Lishen states many times what the government 'should' do, and there is an abundance of terms such as 'safeguard', 'social harmony', and 'stability'. The Machiavellian point is that the authorities are already doing these things, and Lishen's prompts for action can be read as bolstering existing policy. Unless, of course, you read the article as a veiled entreaty for dissent through official media channels, the overtly propagandist tone of stability and harmony might be the result of a tongue planted firmly in a cheek. Such is the manner in which information is shared under an authoritarian regime.

Even assuming its sincerity, however, Lishen's article shows some Western bias and habit, opening with images referencing punishments doled out by the CPC to the Orwellian-termed 'rumour-mongers' who have got on the wrong side of the authorities due to their online activity. A Western reader would naturally expect this



kind of opening gambit to be followed by calls for greater freedom of speech and internet usage. However, regardless of Lishen's actual intentions, to the general Chinese reader the article's encouragement of prison sentences for 'rumour-mongers' highlights the very real moral and compelling topography of contemporary China

China is a nation acutely aware of its history; from Confucius and ancestor worship to stories of the Long March, the cultural thrust of China is that the individual is officially subsumed into society. Bearing in mind that the lot of the average Chinese person has been on an upward trajectory for over thirty years, it is easy to see why propagandist writers like Lishen find an audience amongst those who wish the fast-moving boat to remain unrocked.

Moreover, the compact of a capitalised system is that it regenerates and reproduces consumers, the modern rhetoric of which is centred around individual needs and personal desires. Both of these 'attitudes' are flawed and require re-evaluation moving forward. Denyer describes China's vision of 'internet sovereignty', which is a neat term for heavily censored and controlled use that still allows people and businesses to spend money. This is essential and makes the investment in both the Great Firewall and Golden Shield clearly necessary. China can't just switch off the problem since, as Denyer writes, e-commerce in China accounts for forty per cent of the global total. For Lishen, the CPC has a duty to provide this 'sovereignty' for people, to ensure their safety and wellbeing. He sees the introduction and upholding of laws and restrictions as particularly vital;

While China is still adapting to this new world, internet use is expanding rapidly and an online community has emerged almost out of the blue. Figures show that at the end of 2011 there were more than 500 million internet users on the mainland and 250 million microbloggers. More than 38 per cent of the population had internet access. In this seemingly unfettered world, many people

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**DISSENTING VOICES END
UP FINDING THEIR
AUDIENCE IN THE WEST.**

have gone beyond what is deemed acceptable in a traditional society, where law and order prevail.
- Dong Lishen, *ibid.*

He goes on to correctly quote the many laws passed by the US to ensure that their version of 'safe' is upheld. It's a subtle way of drawing attention to a feeling many countries have of the double standards inherent in US policy, and Western conscience in general. Lishen does not condemn any of these actions but does use them as evidence that China should develop its own approach. It's worth noting that as more and more working-age Chinese people require job, the government needs e-commerce and digital technology to take pressure off the building industry, since its staggering consumption of concrete and building of ghost cities to propel the economy forward has a finite physical limit.

China needs the internet: the connections and money it offers provide upper-working-class and middle-class Chinese people a living. Their ranks have swelled in recent years and they won't be content to labour on building sites on the Mongolian border⁴. These people are increasingly international and if there is change to come it will more than likely be in response to the demands of China's upwardly mobile middle class. Whether these people will care enough about their personal freedoms to risk displeasing the authorities is another matter. Next time you feel smugly rebellious because you have tweeted insults at Theresa May or lampooned Donald Trump in a witty Facebook update, consider that in China 'rumour spreading' on the internet carries a three-year prison sentence:

Defying the state

We might also recall Ai Weiwei's very public use of the internet to voice his dissatisfaction at the regime. Weiwei is just such a problem, pulling out of his part in the 2008 Olympics (Ai was commissioned to design the Bird's Nest Stadium) and protesting at the shoddy building work and government cover-up that, in Ai's view, contributed significantly to the death toll of the tragic Sichuan

earthquake. Weiwei's *Snake Ceiling* and *Remembering*, shown in Japan and Germany, directly recalled and criticised that tragedy and ultimately led to his infamous disappearance, torture, heavy surveillance and finally banishment. Ai now lives in Germany and reports grimly that his mother tells him, when he calls for news: 'Never come back.' It is clear why many dissenting voices end up finding their audience in the West. Weiwei and those like him are just the sort of people Lishen has in mind when he states:

We have to fight against misinformation and comments intended to incite social unrest and infringe on civil rights, in order to protect citizens' right to express their opinions legally. This should be the main aim of internet legislation.
- Dong Lishen, *ibid*.

Perhaps no one has done so much to trespass against such values as Ai Weiwei while still holding on to his life (albeit in a different country, and after being tortured).

Artists are by no means the only ones offering resistance to government controls. If that were the case, there would be little chance of any change at all. Artists can be useful, though, to channel ideas, and like perceptive canaries in a mine they can show us what's not acceptable.

This gives us a clear image of what sort of information is prohibited and what kind of characters are finding themselves on the wrong side of the Chinese authorities.

Qu Leilei, 'A Chinese Artist in Britain'

A contemporary of Ai Weiwei is Qu Leilei, an equally important artist who has made his home in Britain and who is currently showing work at the

Ashmolean (until 15 April 2018). His show 'Qu Leilei: A Chinese artist in Britain' is a wonderful tour de force, showcasing his technical ability, experimentation and sensitivity. At first glance it's hard to see why the work and the man are out of favour with the Chinese authorities, but we have to remember that Qu was previously a (founding) member of the controversial Stars Group, and so he was one of those guiding minds that defined the authorities' cold attitude towards colourful upstart artists and their radical sympathies.

WHICH REACTED AGAINST THE GLOOMY AND AUSTERE PROPAGANDA OF THE STATE.

[W]hile some of the most successful modern Chinese artists, having achieved a popular style or subject-matter, keep on repeating themselves, Qu Leilei, when he has fully explored the possibilities of one form, or subject, moves on to explore another. - Professor Michael Sullivan

The same man whose gentle touch that blends Western and Eastern traditions so masterfully and produced the beautiful images above, owing much to impressionism and Matisse (hardly a call to arms), is also the rabble-rouser and figurehead pictured below marching against the government in 1979 (centre right with yellow placard).

Of course, there was always something radical about impressionism, which reacted against the gloomy and austere propaganda of the state-favoured neoclassicism by switching focus from gods and military heroes (getting the French public ready for violence) and exploring instead ordinary people, pastimes and places. This radicalism is harder to notice, but it's an evident link to early modernism and can also be seen in the portrait series called 'Everyone's Life is Epic'.

Qu is a canny tactician and has shown his work in China as well as in the

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West; his art can be seen both as a kind of ‘rite of survival’ for both humanity in inhumane times and as a call for inclusive togetherness.

Surely the human hand is one of the most difficult things to draw; but not only does he draw hands beautifully; he makes of them a powerful image expressive of thoughts, feelings, humanity, and love.

- Professor Michael Sullivan

This is most evident in Qu’s calmer works, and is a very clever way to generate sympathy for his ideas, like playing moving music over a scene in a film to heighten the emotional kick. Indeed, his close-ups of hands so lovingly portraying platonic bonds bring to mind filmic strategies for inducing catharsis and empathy. Even these works, though, have a hidden violence. The hands clasping one another are desperate and earnest. These are intense images, given extra impact and made cinematic by the grand scale. These motifs - hands, nudes and portraits - have been shown in Beijing. The messages are subtle enough not to attract too much unwanted attention or dredge up sore old grudges.

Danaë is also a wolf in sheep’s clothing, artistically speaking. The passive beauty lying in an almost foetal position on decorative fabric is non-threatening. Her pose and frame are typical of many nudes, absent in much traditional Chinese art, and Qu is here connecting himself to Western art history by tackling the subject.

We might glance at this, take pleasure in her form, and his skill in missing the mythological reference. Almost a veiled threat, Danaë was the wronged mother of Perseus who was shut up in a box with her child by a cruel and power-obsessed authority. She was cast adrift, only to be saved by the gods and raise a great hero who returned to defeat Medusa and the Kraken and who, in true Greek

CHINESE MAGAZINES OMIT REFERENCE TO THESE . . . WORKS.

style, inadvertently destroyed the man who had so desperately tried to get rid of him and his mother. The symbolism of that discreet reference allows a more radical reading to take place.

Qu does almost make more direct work in terms of his unambiguous feelings toward the military and the political overtones in China. The ‘Empires’ series is more like Banksy in concept (if Banksy were a formidable draughtsman with a greater level of sensitivity and a really dangerous background against which to work).

These images are explicit and concern a highly controversial issue in China. They portray the rigidity of thinking required to ‘do your duty’ without question. The reference to the Terracotta army is as much about the literal inert matter as it is about being owned as rigid automaton in service, body and soul, to the empire personified as the emperor.

The work echoes concerns in China that the army, which is said to have more men than any other, should be reduced. The sense of history repeating is simultaneously; humorous, vicious and deeply felt for Chinese viewers. Consider the figure in *The Soldier*, a masculine product of the regime, already redundant in the wars which rage in economies, online and in the soft-power exchanges of aid and trade. Where is the place for these hundreds of thousands of young men? Shall they all be retrained as tech-savvy bureaucrats?

It’s unclear whether this work has been shown in China. Searches show only the less explicit work and the reviews in Chinese magazines omit reference to these more powerful works. Ironically, the variety of the work by this dissident artist allows for a selection to be made suited to the contrasting attitudes and tastes of both Chinese and Western official audiences. In each case, a culture chooses its own.



Image: Qu Lelei, *Balance* (2012), image courtesy of the Ashmolean.

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DENOUNCEMENT OF MANY TRADITIONAL LAYERS

Zhu Wei

Zhu Wei lives and works in Beijing, and his criticism of the regime is intermingled with sharp observations of the culture at large. Zhu is concerned with the break in historical development that the Chinese faced when Mao instigated the Cultural Revolution. This saw the denouncement of many traditional layers of Chinese culture, and included the destruction of art and historical relics, as well as the infamous burning of the Wanli Emperor (Ming Dynasty), whose remains were dug up by the extremist Red Guards, denounced and destroyed.

This kind of ‘purging’ has occurred in Russia and Nazi Germany, and has nothing to do with improving the lives of ordinary people, who are often goaded into destructive acts to preserve those in power. Zhu goes further than this and sees these fractures as damaging the ‘collective unconscious’. We see this kind of madness today in the mass destruction of pre-Islamic art in the Middle-East by extremist groups. At least part of Zhu’s practice is an attempt to re-establish the links between this once-forbidden past and the problematic present. From 8th of Feb to the 24th of March 2018 Zhu Wei is showing work, ‘Virtual Focus’, at the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London.

The Ink and Wash Research Lecture Series is a reflection on tradition. It uses the techniques of ink painting to examine the malaise of a contemporary society, a place in which the government and the individual exist perpetually at odds. These almost generic figures are the receivers of what he refers to as ‘stability maintenance’ - a government trying to create ever more compliant behaviour in its citizens in the bid for social unity. - Zhu Wei: ‘Virtual Focus’, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, 2018

Regarding his experiences of being an artist in China, *Trebuchet* wondered whether Zhu Wei had experienced the ‘constraints’ of Chinese culture? And also whether, as

an international figure, he saw any flaws in the ‘freedoms’ of the West?

Zhu Wei: Forty years ago, the Cultural Revolution in China eradicated the accumulation of our culture and civilisation thoroughly. This eradication does not have any positive meaning; instead, it made us backslide to the Middle Ages in the name of revolution and progress. This kind of retrogression could be catastrophic in any country in the world, even worse than the result of a war. People will be aware of the cruelty of a war, knowing that it’s destined to be a disaster, but the cultural disaster is collective unconscious, and the result of which is that it can happen again at any time, on a greater scale, because people have accumulated the experience for similar movement.

China is inheriting the reins of global power and is becoming ever more relevant in the world. Is that reflected in the attitudes and views of people in China?

It is a rare quality in China to learn from others humbly. After the ten-year baptism of the Cultural Revolution, people are accustomed to false, big and empty talk, and adults will be blushing and even uneasy for several days after telling the truth, as if they are telling a falsehood. In the 1980s, when China had just opened its door to the outside world, we had been modest for a while, but it didn’t take long before people started to think there was nothing good in the Western countries.

The reason is that we are still living in two different times and spaces. On the surface we are seemingly related to each other, but in fact we are on two parallel tracks. For example, before the Reform and Opening-up, political movement was the mainstream. Every Chinese attached importance to ideals and despised wealth. The poorer, the more fashionable, and women would love the poorest ones. At that time Chinese people thought the Western countries did not have ideals; they were too realistic, and too specific, which should be criticised.

In the 1980s, after the Reform and Opening-up, economic movement became the mainstream, the government advocated that the minority should get rich first, and then the entire society began the pursuit of wealth endlessly. People love the richest ones, and people love the rich Western countries. When the Chinese travelled abroad, they found that sometimes people in the Western countries are not so rich, and some even look poor; they ignored that most Westerners have religious beliefs, most Western countries have a balanced developed society, but started to think that the Western countries are too unrealistic, too ideal, so they are seemingly not worth learning from.

Many of your works portray dissatisfied and thoughtful soldiers/officers. Can you explain the middle-class tension in China around the size of the army and the cost of paying for so many soldiers, since the country is not involved in armed conflict?

This is actually common sense, but it is late for us to know it because there is no such education. When I was a soldier, I only knew that the food was too poor and the living conditions were too bad in all aspects. I thought that the government should allocate more money to the military, to improve its pay and conditions. I didn't know that the military had so much money, or that the money from the government is paid by the taxpayers.

The curtain in your work has a dual meaning: this communist reference is undercut with a sense of hope as your use of the colour red is apparently auspicious in Chinese culture. That said, the curtains are often fragmentary and full of holes. Can you explain the tension between those concepts?

China has had little to do with red for thousands of years of her history. In some dynasties, emperors associated themselves with yellow, which represents the dignity and elegance of the royal family, such as the Qing dynasty. Red came from the West, representing communism and revolution and progress. For more than sixty years, until today, red has always been a symbol of the red regime. As an artist, recording accurately the characteristics of the society is an obligation and responsibility.

I became famous when I was twenty-six. It was a good feeling when I was young, but now I think it's a burden because every step of your way you will be noticed by many people, and it will lead to cautiousness and fear of failure. I have given up on quite a few experiments, and some of them might have been really successful.

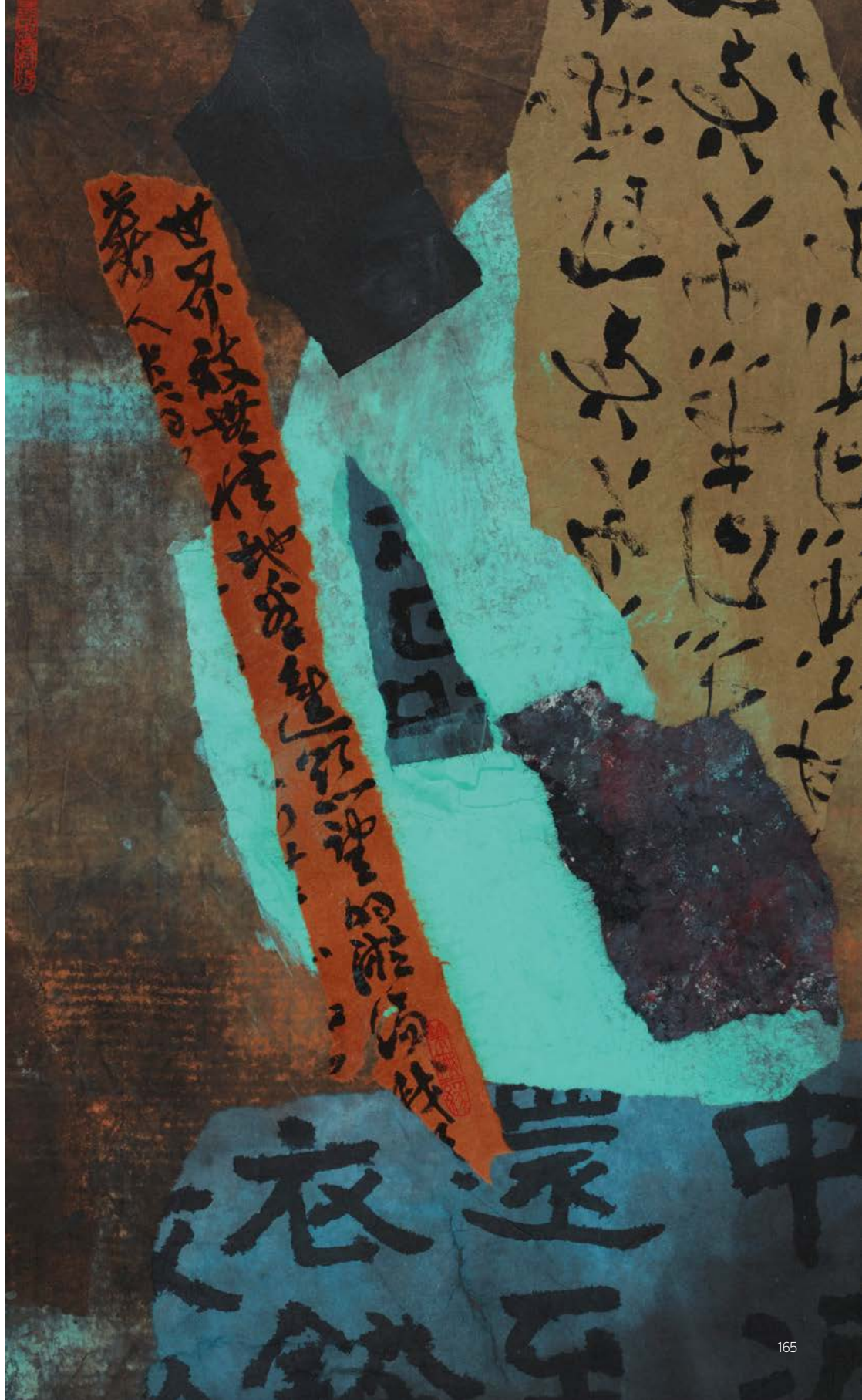
You have created an image of Marx that appears quite sensitive, employing traditional skill, but the feeling of this image and its companion image of Engels is unclear. The faces seem rubbed out or as if they are behind frosted glass. What are your feelings about Marx and his legacy?

Marx is one of the many European philosophers. He is well known in China for his theory and his book *Das Kapital*, and today Marxism-Leninism is still serving as the guiding ideology of this country and guidelines that all people should follow. I'm not a fan of this guy. His theory may be immature and at least in his own country it has been outdated and abandoned. Not following his social theory, Germany is a rich and respected country today. His legacy is an ordinary outdated empty talk, such as the discussion of 'surplus value'.

Your images about dreaming are inspiring. This act of dreaming, relatively unobserved here in Britain (where dreaming is seen just as a side effect of sleep), is a form of transformation. It seems like the freedoms we have, say, access to information over the internet, are a distraction and do not really necessarily help us become better or more free and creative. Do you think that people in both cultures dream too small?

Your question expresses the difference between two civilisations, which is two different dreams. Today in China, even artists and cultural scholars are talking about money and how to make more money. The more you earn, the more successful you are. Freedom is specific here. For example, the more money you have, the more you feel free. You can do whatever you want to do. Of course, the premise is to be alive, and then you can eat, drink, travel, buy real estate, replace cars, replace wife. When 1.4 billion people are pursuing the same game, you can imagine how cruel it is.

Image: Qu Leilei, *Blade of light* (1998), image courtesy of the artist.



As an established painter, what motivates you to continue making art?

The difference between my work and other contemporary art from China is that it is done within a native painting style, a different painting style from the East. It does not synchronise with Western contemporary art, and it has its own characteristics and aesthetic way. My starting point for every creation is to make an innovation. My motivation is to record and leave some things and characteristics of this era.

Chunwoo Nam

In contrast to Zhu Wei, Chunwoo Nam's digital prints have a slightly different tone. As a Korean-American, he uses his cultural plurality, a little distanced from both great powers, to see the negative and positive sides of both Eastern and Western forces, represented by China and America. He was awarded the Grand Prize from the Seoul International Print Biennial 2011 for his 'We Are Here' suite (below). He currently lives and works in the United States.

Nam's series, recently renamed 'Their Globalisation', has been interpreted very differently both as a call for greater integration and as a celebration of blending and interdependence:

One-time cultural enemies locked in a dance of interdependence. Communists and Capitalists dancing around their former ideologies. Cultures becoming intertwined on the constant flow of goods and money. In this suite of prints the Korean artist Chunwoo Nam visualizes this dance of cultures and calls into question the ideologies that held these two cultures apart as enemies for so long. By combining their symbols of power (their flags) and place (Tiananmen Square, Times Square), he creates a view

of these cultures whose dance is shrinking our globe and also our cultural divide. Chunwoo seems to be telling us 'Dance On!' - Clay Street Press

What began as a statement of arrival and positivity, perhaps in line with the quote above, has more recently become disillusioned. The renaming hints at distance and alienation, exemplified by the addition of the striking digital print Chimerica Flag. The dancing figures are gone; behind the familiar Chinese stars is the fractured and persistent US dollar, strangely confined behind what now seem like vertical bars. Money and its circulation is the motor of 'Their Globalisation'.

More recently Nam has explored the internet, in Individual Story VI. The work is more personal and melancholic, but the sensitivity and humanity of Nam's intensions make his practice compelling:

[T]he mecca of popular culture is silenced, reminding us that social class and access to information, finances, and the internet are defining culture in a global economy. American culture, often focused on assimilation, can leave the cultural outsider isolated, as if in a remote field where the masses of people become blades of grass, slowly growing over, engulfing and burying the vestiges of culture that remain in this modern metropolis - Essye Klemmpner, EFA Center, New York

In China there are real obstacles and controls that prevent its netizens from accessing the truth. In America and the West this is largely not the case, but do we care about the truth? What do we do with this information? Do we simply turn away from it towards more palatable narratives? This question put me in mind of one of America's most perceptive writers, Ray Bradbury:

**NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE
SIDES OF BOTH EASTERN AND
WESTERN FORCES**

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LISHEN'S RATIONALISATION OF THE STATE'S INTERVENTIONS

The most important thing to know about Fahrenheit 451 is that it is explicitly not about government censorship. (Bradbury was so firm on this point he once walked out of a UCLA class when his students tried to insist it was so.) The firemen aren't burning books on the orders of some shadowy Big Brother. They're doing it, protagonist Guy Montag is told, because society as a whole turned away from the scary cacophony of knowledge, from the terror of differing opinions and the burden of having to choose between them, from deep and troubling thoughts. - Chris Taylor, 'Fahrenheit 451: Did Bradbury's Dystopia Come True?', mashable.com (6 June 2012)

Bradbury's attitude was infamous, as it didn't fit neatly into the liberal consensus (of the time) that an evil force prevented our great becoming. Rather, as Taylor observes, he felt that we often simply can't be bothered with tough issues and turn away in favour of less testing themes. This, a dig at American popular culture, is a lesson that must not be forgotten when we criticise China's attitude to freedom of information. Nam's works appear to have moved in this direction, tellingly in the works which include his observations on his daughter's assimilation (or lack thereof) to middle American culture.

The freedom we have can be complex and bittersweet, and it is by no means complete. We can be confident, though, that we are better off on our journey to freedom than those in China, who risk being disappeared if they speak out too persistently. Alienation seems to be universal, common to both East and West. The Chinese authorities are keen to draw parallels between their interventions and the American government's when it comes to individual freedom.

The Gift

Simon Denyer, quoting the expert Rogier Creemers, claims that Edward Snowden's revelations about America's internet surveillance are 'the gift that keeps on giving',

preventing the West from taking the moral high ground. China may be restrictive, but America is intrusive.

[A]s revealed by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, the US government has wantonly resorted to various means to monitor the e-mail and internet traffic of citizens, infringing on their basic rights, in an effort to protect national security. - Dong Lishen, ibid.

We can add here recent claims about Russian involvement in election-rigging in the US (largely taken to be internet-based manipulation). We might imagine the CPC mandarins, ever more reassured by their own strategies, secure in the knowledge that no such foreign interference would be possible within their borders. We might also consider Trump's use of Twitter to be very bad

PR for internet freedom among Chinese bureaucrats, especially when he goads North Korea and refers to mass destruction, making the Chinese president appear dignified by comparison.

China can learn from the US experience and never allow anyone or any institution to monitor or eavesdrop on ordinary citizens or infringe on their basic rights on the grounds of national security and social stability. - Dong Lishen, ibid.

It's a point not missed by Lishen, who clearly explains the more palatable laws the US has, compared to China, but then swiftly reminds us that to really protect its people the US has to break those rules and violate those rights. Lishen's rationalisation of the state's interventions, and his sense of being 'at ease' with sanctions and punishments, is justified by a sound, if totalitarian, logic. This version of 'normal' battles for hegemony with what is 'normal' in a faltering West whose credibility is damaged.

Hopes for open horizons

There are two hopeful points to emerge from Lishen's



Image: Qu Lelei, Autumn (2016), image courtesy of the Ashmolean.

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WE MIGHT SEE THAT
ANY DISORDER IS
TRULY NASCENT

article reflected in the Chinese authorities' attitudes and actions. Both are unintentional, and the first requires a clear reversal of his intention to shock the reader:

The rapid development and popularity of the internet has created new problems in the social landscape. Traditionally, people have been defined to a large extent by their professions, titles or class. Such 'labels' create boundaries and exert an unseen pressure on people to help them maintain self-discipline.

- Dong Lishen, *ibid.*

The breakdown of 'classes' and 'types', and the removal of limitations to communication that these caused, is seen as a horror to be controlled, and is applied here to convince us that a lack of conformity to certain types and classes is a lack of self-discipline tantamount to rebellion.

The strategies of the CPC are certainly aimed at reinforcing these categories and ensuring people remain very much in their box. Our optimism may come from simply seeing this breakdown and the further development of this as a positive, allowing people from different jobs, classes and economic areas to create new dialogues and demand new privileges.

The second hopeful point, ironically, makes me think of Mao and requires a little more subversion:

Everything under heaven is in utter chaos; the situation is excellent. - Mao Zedong

Of course, considering the Great Firewall, Golden Shield, the State Internet Information Office and the bureaucrats employed in various dystopian-sounding organisations to manage online activity, we might see that any disorder is truly nascent, an embryo at best, which could yet be stillborn.

Asking the Experts:

Reflection and Conclusions

Reflecting on these pertinent issues, *Trebuchet* asked some experts about their opinions on the issues in this area.

Madeline Earp is the Asia research analyst for *Freedom on the Net*, Freedom House's annual index of global internet freedom. Earp collaborates with local researchers to assess internet access, censorship and user rights in fifteen countries across East, South-east and South Asia, and authored the report's China chapter in 2014 and 2013.

Zixue Tai is the author of 'The Internet in China' and numerous papers on the internet, technology and consumerism in China. Zixue is also associate professor in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Kentucky.

Do you think, as some have said (Ai Weiwei, for example), that eventually the internet in China will inevitably wrest itself free of governmental control? Is there a real sense of dissent in China, or does the regime have the unwieldy internet under control?

Zixue Tai: Many people in the West have made similar arguments in that the internet has not changed anything in China, and it won't do that any time soon. That is misleading and misses the larger issues. The internet has brought about a lot of change within the country already, and will continue to do so down the road. Online tirade, protest and petition can be found online every day, but it focuses mainly on daily issues and matters of concern to the ordinary citizens.

Most people stay away from politics or taboo topics that are classified as sensitive by the state. The government, especially at the local level, has changed a lot in how it deals with citizens in recent years, largely due to popular pulse online. So there has been resistance among the people when issues affect their everyday life.



One example is the expunging of 'low-class' workers by the Beijing municipal government. Its unmerciful and heavy-handed approach caused uproar in the online world, and the Beijing government has changed its approach lately, and has spoken publicly in an effort to appease popular sentiment.

This does not mean that the government will become soft in dealing with similar issues, of course, but it reflects a change in the new environment, and it shows how the anger of the people must be taken into consideration by the authorities.

Madeline Earp: I don't think anything about the internet or freedom is inevitable. If anything, the latest Freedom on the Net research underscores how many political figures around the world are using digital technology to undermine democracy through covert influence, campaigns and cyberattacks.

However, I would say that the internet has made access to all sorts of information and services much easier in China. Controlling that requires a very different level of investment, which, so far, the government has been willing to make. But even then it's not watertight.

Right now, those who look for it can still find content that the authorities would consider subversive. It's just that it's unlikely to hit the mainstream, and leaves those people vulnerable to heavy criminal punishments.

Zixue, in the three years since your paper 'Networked resistance: Digital populism, online activism, and mass dissent in China' appeared in the International Journal of Media and Culture, do you feel the situation in China has improved for the

Zixue Tai: Yes and no. One can find both answers regarding average citizens' access to information, depending on what cues and specifics one is looking for. There is evidence that state censorship of online networks has significantly strengthened in recent years, with the total takeover by the new regime, as seen in a series of regulations and directives on cleansing information online and overseeing conventional (print and broadcast) media.

There have been a number of news reports about the targeting of VPNs in China. VPNs have been used as a common way to bypass information control within China to access overseas websites for years. But people have

noted that it has become harder and harder now to resort to that strategy, as they have become prime targets of official cracking. Also, monitoring has been tightened across popular social media sites and applications in China in the past two to three years. So in this sense, free access to information has suffered. Hence the answer 'no'.

On the other hand, more and more people have become more sophisticated in gaining access to the information they are looking for, and a growing portion of the netizen population has turned tech-savvy in 'climbing the wall' (the Chinese term for using tricks to bypass the Great Firewall). So, when there is a certain type of information a segment of the people would like to get, there are ways of achieving that.

In this regard, Ethan Zuckerman proposes his 'cute cats theory', which claims that social media, by allowing people to share what seems to be mundane information (cats, dogs, what they eat, etc.), cultivates a way of life, and thus poses a great threat to the authoritarian regimes.

Once online networks become embedded in everyday life for ordinary people in China, they become used to the type of information they communicate among themselves, and they will likely invent ways of resistance to official control and government censorship. This is the 'yes' part of the answer.

In Mara Hvistendahl's article 'Inside China's Vast New Experiment in Social Ranking' in *Wired*, credit scores in China are discussed. The writer claims that even old people buying fruit are paying digitally for the goods, which racks up a score. David Harvey has observed that 'debt-encumbered home owners don't strike', and so this raises the question of whether the new financial systems and digital technology might play nicely into ever more strategies for control for the government?

Madeline Earp: These social credit experiments based on online activity are a concerning development. There are no meaningful privacy protections for internet users in China, so the fact that personal data is being compiled on this scale leaves many people vulnerable to leaks and exposure, for a start. And we don't know yet the extent to which political opinion or ethnic or religious identity could factor into credit scores, but it's obviously a concern.

Zixue Tai: That is perhaps a stretch, connecting the easy-pay system to government control. Up to this point, the

development has been unequivocally businesslike. It is a system invented by the few commercial conglomerates to their advantage, and is marketed to the average citizens as a convenience.

Credit has never reached the level of penetration in China as seen in most Western markets, and this idea of smartphone payment suddenly caught on overnight. This is mainly due to the high penetration of smartphone apps in China, dominated by just a few big companies (Alibaba and Tencent).

Because everybody has access to these platforms, and people found out that it's really handy. If the government wanted to use 'debt-encumbered home owners' as a leverage of its information control, then it could easily bite back and could get out of control in bloating the national debt, thereby crashing the economy. That is no small risk that the government will have to think about.

There has been a lot written about internet control in China. Are the people themselves aware of how much restriction there is? And is there actually a real hunger for change?

Madeline Earp: There are dissidents and businessmen who are very aware of the constraints and have to deal with daily inconvenience and risk. Then there are many others who are less aware, or less disrupted. And those in between, including some who encounter restrictions more or less by accident and are driven to dig deeper and find out why they can't access something hosted on Facebook or a news article that is blocked.

There are plenty of people who view information control as a necessary evil, perhaps buying into the state media propaganda that it's a measure to protect China from foreign influence. But I think the pressure point comes when ordinary people find their lives disrupted,

which is happening increasingly often. Someone might criticise a local official, even in a closed chat group, and find themselves subject to an administrative fine. Or the internet might slow down dramatically around a sensitive political event, even though there are so many people who rely on a good connection to conduct daily business. That's not acceptable, and it's not sustainable. So it creates a sense of frustration, which builds over time into hunger for change.

The Chinese authorities talk a lot about double standards from the West, and in particular from the US, around information control (often mentioning Snowden and the revelations about mass surveillance). In your experience, does this line of argument find popular acceptance among Chinese citizens?

Zixue Tai: The answer to this question is not uniform, because the populace is quite diversified, and there is not a homogeneous group of citizens taking the same attitude.

There is certainly a segment of citizens who align themselves very well with government rhetoric and state propaganda. At the same time, there is a significant portion of the people who challenge the government talk. This is especially so among people who have a solid understanding of the West.

A lot of people are aware that the type of information control the Chinese authorities brand is not the same kind of control they experience in China. This stance is particularly common among intellectuals.

One thing of note in the past decade is that there is a special faction of Chinese citizens (the so-called leftists) who become nostalgic for some aspects of the Mao era (for example, social stability, the perceived absence of official corruption, job security, low pollution levels, and so on),



Zhu Wei in his studio. Image courtesy of the KH Gallery.

and they most often side with the Chinese authorities in chastising Western countries on just about anything you can think of. But that remains a small faction, and does not speak for the overall trend.

The majority of the people don't even care much about the presence of information control, as long as they can go about their everyday life. In other words, most people are quite happy the way it is now, and it does not matter that much to them if the government blocks their access to certain types of information. So, the weapon of the government in its ability to enforce information control is to maintain economic growth and prosperity so that the average folks stay focused on their immediate needs and pressing gratifications.

Is there any justifiable argument for the way the CPC control freedom in this way? Are people protected from harmful images or hate speech, for example, or is it really all about quashing any alternative voices?

Madeline Earp: There's no justification for restricting freedom of expression and information, and we know that campaigns to 'clean' the internet aren't successful, because there are still plenty of criminal incidents and unrest and explicit content.

Censorship hasn't had any measurable effect on safety - on the contrary, it means citizens don't trust the information they receive, or can't get information when they need it most. That actually puts more people at risk.

So it's easy for the authorities to play on people's fears that they or their children will be exposed to danger online, but the control we're documenting is clearly the leadership trying to protect itself.

The number of sites or social media accounts catering to political dissidents and religious or minority groups that are shut down in campaigns to clean up supposedly harmful content underlines the fact that the real target of information control is organised opposition.

Taking that into account, what are your hopes for internet freedom and digital technology in China?

Madeline Earp: Obviously I'd love to see the resources that are currently being channelled into monitoring and restricting what people can do with the internet redirected to support improved access and quality of service. Given the tightening controls we've documented under Xi Jinping, I think that's unlikely to happen in the short term!

1. This information is from ChinaDaily.com: 'BEIJING - China has 710 million internet users as of June, accounting for 51.7 percent of its total population, exceeding the global average by 3.1 percent, according to an official report released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) on Wednesday'. Xinhua, 'China's internet users total 710 million', China Daily, 4 August 2016. These statistics are backed up by the China Internet Watch (<https://www.chinainternetwatch.com/whitepaper/china-internet-statistics/>).

2. Definition of 'chilling effect' retrieved 19 October 2011 from yourdictionary.com.

3. See https://www.washingtontimes.com/world/asia-pacific/chinas-scary-lesson-to-the-world-censoring-the-internet-worries/2016/05/23/413a1e78-4ff3-11e5-8bb1-f124443f84dc_story.html?utm_term=.31206f905910.

4. An article on this subject can be viewed here: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-09/21/content_32295740.htm.

5. The article can be seen here: <https://www.wired.com/story/age-of-social-credit/>.

Additional notes:

Madeline Earp's work can be seen here: <https://freedomhouse.org/expert/madeline-earp>. Madeline is currently researching and travelling in the Far East and continues as Senior Analyst at Freedom House in London.

Zixue Tai is contributing to a new book The Routledge Companion to Media and Activism, edited by Professor Graham Meikle, which will be available in mid 2018. His research and recent publications can be seen here: <https://ci.uky.edu/grad/contact/tailzixue>. Zixue continues to lecture at the University of Kentucky.

Image: Zhu Wei, Ink and Wash Research Lectures series (2012). Image courtesy of KH Gallery.



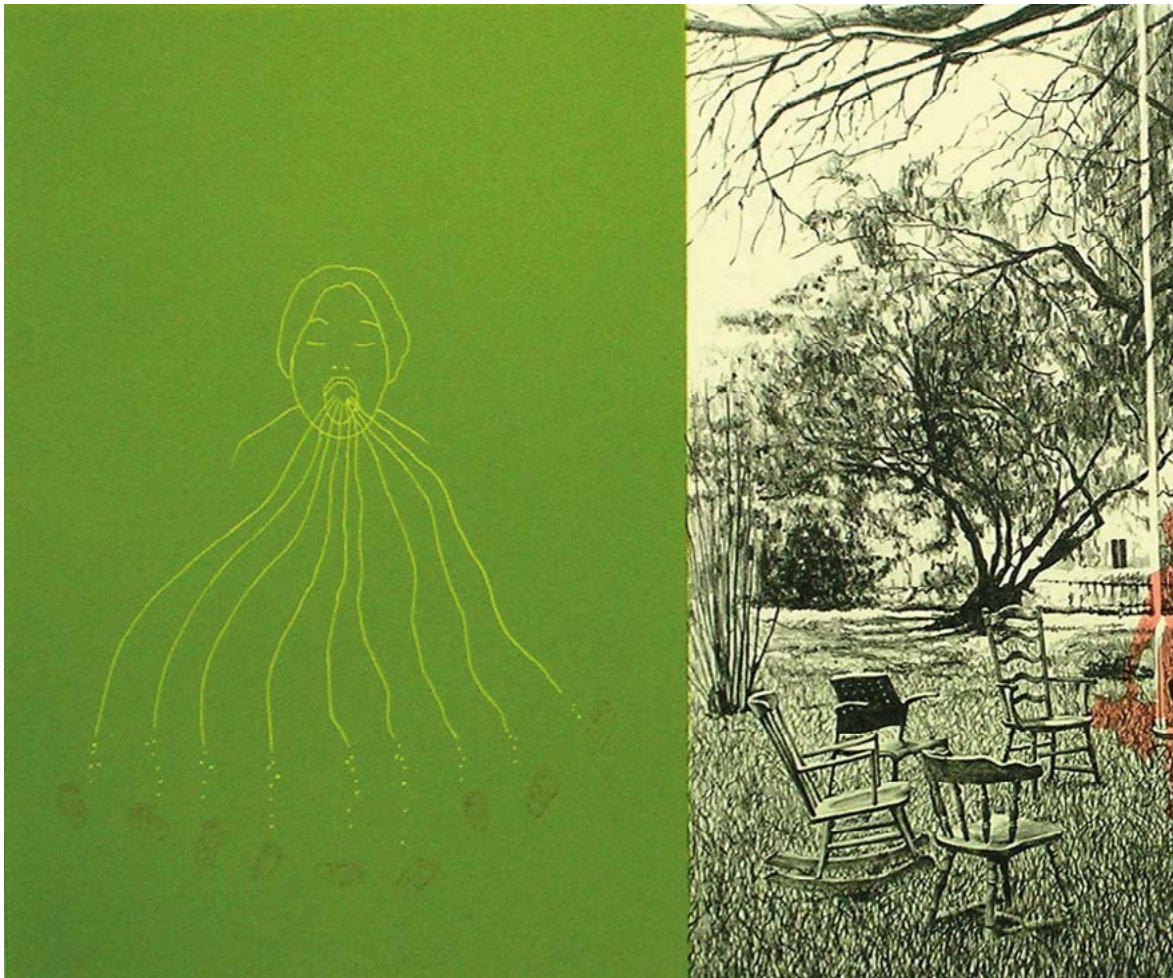


Image: Chunwoo Nam, *Individual Story I* (2007) Image courtesy of the artist

