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The Chineseness of Huang Yongping and the Risks of Essentialisation

Christine Vial Kayser

Abstract The artist Huang Yongping, born in China in 1954, has lived in France since May 1989 after being invited to participate in the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*. He is still perceived by most people as a Chinese artist as his work is layered with Chinese iconography and philosophical references, inspired by Taoism and Buddhism, and often appears as riddles, or “gōng’àn (公案)”, the enigmatic poetry practiced by Chan masters. The fact that he does not speak French and expresses himself in Chinese further adds an aura of “inscrutability” ascribed to the Chinese language (“*C’est du chinois*” in French means “It’s all Greek to me”). Underlying his choice of themes is a post-colonial/post-modern aim of rebalancing global contemporary art’s geography through the presentation of Chinese culture as eternal and essentialist, which Huang shares with many intellectuals, and which is aligned with the Chinese government’s national and foreign politics. It eschews Huang’s heteroglossia, as well as the many and hybrid subtexts that inform it.

Keywords Huang Yongping · Xiamen dada · Chinese contemporary art · Orientalism · Global art · *Yi jing* · Chan Buddhism · Zen · Sun Tzu

Introduction

Huang Yongping was born in 1954 in the southern town of Xiamen, in Fujian province, a sea-port city of great relevance to the history of Chinese foreign trade—and to Sino-British relationships, as it was one of the five ports opened to opium trade after the Nanjing treaty. Like many artists of his age, Huang accessed university only in 1977, aged 23, upon returning from the countryside where he had

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been sent (Debevoise 2010). A student at the Oil painting department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou—renamed China Academy of Art in 1993—he graduated in 1982. He started his career when Chinese authorities were trying to reconstruct the country after the Cultural Revolution and its disastrous moral, cultural and economical consequences, by opening up to foreign influences—accepting an exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg in Beijing in 1985—as well as to Chinese traditions of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Huang was an avid reader and during the summer 1985 he familiarized himself with Western philosophers and artists—he cites Michel Foucault, Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Cage, Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys as essential influences—and also with Buddhism and Taoism, oftentimes through photocopies that were circulated in intellectual circles. Profoundly sceptical about painting, especially the figurative style that was then promoted by the Academy, and about meta-narratives in general, he participated in the founding of the group *Xiamen Dada* in 1983 that later conceived a series of public action/performances, borrowing from American Neo-Dadaist strategies and Fluxus. A rising star in the burgeoning Chinese avant-garde Huang participated in the landmark exhibition *China Avant-Garde Now* held in February 1989 at the Central China Academy of Art (CAFA), in Beijing. With the group *Xiamen Dada* he designed the logo of the exhibition *No U Turn* and enacted a performance in which the group metaphorically toppled the museum's building by pulling away its pillars.

When Jean-Hubert Martin toured China in search of artists for the upcoming exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* he met Huang Yongping through the Chinese curator Fei Dawei. He chose Huang, together with fellow artists Gu Dexin, whose work fitted the general premises of the exhibition of establishing a dialogue between cultures and between art forms, overcoming delimitations between “high art” and ritual art. As the Tiananmen events unfolded in May-June while Huang was making his works in Paris, he decided not to return to China. His wife, artist Shen Yuan, joined him a year later. He quickly gained visibility on the French art scene and was selected to represent his adopted country at the Venice Biennale in 1999, sharing the pavilion with French artist Jean-Pierre Bertrand. Only in 2000 did he visit China again to participate in the Shanghai Biennale in 2000, and in the Guangzhou Triennial in 2002. He is now exhibited regularly in museums and biennales with a strong global outreach. His works are layered with Chinese iconography and philosophical references, inspired by Taoism and Buddhism, and often appear as riddles, or “gōng'àn (公案)”, the enigmatic poetry practiced by Chan masters. The fact that the artist does not speak French and expresses himself in Chinese further adds an aura of “inscrutability” ascribed to the Chinese language (“*C'est du chinois*” in French means “It's all Greek to me”). The reception of Huang's work thus tends to be marked by an exotic fascination for an “inscrutable and eternal China”, in the writings of Western critics. It is narrowly analysed within the dual premises of the “post-colonial” and the perennial belief in the ontological nature of Chinese culture, by Chinese critics, the first being equated with the latter

in texts by Hou Hanru (Gladston 2014, p. 15).¹ The actual meaning of his endeavour—a contestation of dogma, be it philosophical religious or political—is somewhat eschewed. This paper endeavours to analyse the process and possible aims of what can be called Reverse Orientalism—an essentialisation of Chinese culture by the Chinese, and the risk it entails. As the stated goal is to place contemporary Chinese art on the global art scene, combined with a will to shatter western dominance of the latter, this endeavour appears to be on par with that of the Chinese government, which uses a notion of “perennial China” in its “soft power” policy. Thus Huang’s artistic contribution risks being used for narrow and short-term political purposes, limiting its effective contribution to the advance of culture. In a first part, called “To beat the East with the West”, we shall review Huang’s works and writings regarding his initial appropriations of Dada, John Cage and Marcel Duchamp, as “Chan” Buddhism and his take on the *Yi Jing*, the Taoist *Book of change*, as he endeavoured to reconnect with traditional Chinese culture after the Cultural Revolution. We shall then examine the prevalence of Chinese iconography in the works made after his arrival in France as he decided “To beat the West with the East” in a fight against the “neo-colonial” order. Last we shall examine the exhibition *Amoy/Xiamen*, his first retrospective in France, curated by the artist himself in 2013 in Lyon’s Musée d’Art Contemporain, showing Huang’s emphasis on works which qualify as “chinoiseries”, such as *The Market of Punya*, a fake shop of religious item combined with an elephant, a Buddhist symbol of enlightenment, *Qian* (Fig. 3) a mocked Taoist scroll, and *The Fifty Arms of Guanyin*. In conclusion I advocate a reading of Huang works that exposes and assesses their “heteroglossia”, the several and hybrid subtexts that inform them.

“To Beat the East with the West”

In an undated essay untitled “To beat the West with the East and To beat the East with the West”, cited by Hou Hanru (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 17), Huang explains how he used “the West”, i.e. his exposure to Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Joseph Beuys and Robert Rauschenberg, to resist the Zhejiang Academy’s assumption about what art is, what it looks like and what purpose it may serve. The academy supported a “humanist”—sentimental—figuration in view of healing the “scars” of the Cultural Revolution and of using art to diffuse new social values, a notion Huang strongly opposed, writing in his notebook in 1987: “We must oppose a ‘renaissance’ of any meaning” (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 40).

Between 1986 and 1989 he made performances with Cha Lixiong, Liu Yiling, Lin Chun, Jiao Yaoming, Lin Jiahua, Yu Xiaogang and

¹Paul Gladston pointedly underlines that “by aligning the underlying precepts of postcolonialist discourse with aspects of traditional Chinese non-rationalist cultural thought” those critics (especially Hou Hanru) suspend “any sense of the former’s precedence over the latter”.

Shen Yuan within the collective Xiamen Dada, a name that refers both to his hometown and to the spirit underpinning the actions of the group. The first action, called *The Art event of Burning the exhibited works of Xiamen Dada* (Nov. 1986), consisted in burning in public, works that had been on display in the exhibition *Xiamen Dada*, held from 28 September to 5 October at the Fujian Art Museum. The exhibition itself “consisted not in bringing actual artworks to the museum, but instead of collecting all sorts of construction materials and garbage that had piled up around the museum and moving them into the exhibition hall” (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, pp. 56–58). In November 1987 during the project *Artworks to be dealt as garbage*, actual paintings exhibited in 1983 were thrown into a garbage dump. When the garbage truck arrived and the employees discovered the works, they looked at them and considered taking them. The artists had been hiding with cameras and took pictures of the people, who then attacked them to confiscate the cameras. Huang refers to these actions as an attempt to bypass art institutions preferring to “participate in an impromptu, accidental way, without any plan or purpose” (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 44). In the extract of his essays and diary entries, presented in the catalogue of *House of oracles*, Huang insists on the absolute meaninglessness of his actions, of any pretence for art to have a “healing power” unless it is healed of its own “jargon, categories and concepts” (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, pp 50–52). Performances were at the time unheard of by the authorities, and were then forbidden until the beginning of the 21st century. The artists indeed seem to share Dada’s aim to debunk traditional artistic form through an emphasis on ironic and “scandalous” actions, supported by well-planned communication strategies as well as Dada’s antinationalist spirit. Huang says: “‘To beat the East with the West’ is to oppose a return to pure nationalism” (Hou 2005, II, p. 17). The similitude of *The Art event of Burning the exhibited works of Xiamen Dada* with Robert Morris’ project for the exhibition *When attitudes become form* of 1969 (Fig. 1) is not mentioned, as far as the extracts suggests, nor its kinship with Fluxus events, despite their obvious influence.² One possible reason for this apparent omission is that this essay is not a neutral presentation of Huang’s works but a manifest, which tends to emphasize a breakthrough with the immediate past. Admitting the influence of a pre-war movement was less submissive a gesture than borrowing from western artists of the 1960s. It can also be said that Huang’s iconoclasm was less political than Fluxus’, and closer in spirit to the scepticism of Dada and Duchamp, whom he quotes: “I don’t ascribe to the artist that sort of social role in which he feels obligated to make something, as if he owes something to society. I have a horror of such considerations” (“Duchamp stripped bare...”, 1988, in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 80). By insisting on their common scepticism, Huang placed Dadaism and Duchamp on par with Chan Buddhism, considering them both as expressing “extreme doubt and disbelief” about “reality” (Huang,

²Yet, Huang evokes the influence of Joseph Kosuth (1945-) (Huang in Vergne & Chong, II, 40), and pays tribute to the figure of Joseph Beuys, through works such as *The first phone call to Joseph Beuys after his death* 1991.

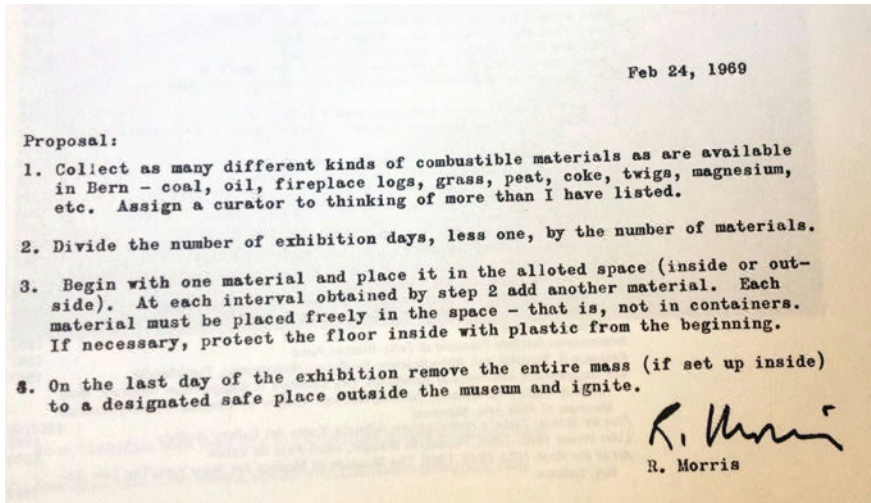


Fig. 1 Robert Morris' proposal, in *Live in your head: When attitudes become form*, exhibition catalogue [Kunsthalle Bern, 22.3–27.4. 1969], Bern, Kunsthalle, 1969, n.p

'Completely empty signifiers' (1988), in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 77), thus implicitly ascribing these European breakthroughs to a Chinese influence. In so doing Huang is following Cage's earlier comments on the relationship between Dada, Duchamp and Zen (Cage cited by Munroe 2009, p. 201). John Cage's contention that Dada lost its "meaninglessness", its "emptiness" overtime, which is why he used Zen rather than Dada (in Munroe 2009, p. 201), also informs Huang's rhetoric as he writes in 1988 that Dada became another "movement" acting "against itself" (Xiamen Dada, in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 76). Huang follows Cage's assumption that Duchamp's spirit and wit was informed by Zen, even though Duchamp had denied any such interest:

What interest me about Duchamp are the qualities, such as the ambiguity of languages (his use of puns), the ability to transform a stone into gold (alchemy), and his hermetic life style. It is also very Eastern (in Chen 2003).³

Huang's works such as *Four Paintings Created according to Random Instructions using Wheel*, 1985, *Large Turntable with Four Wheels*, 1987 and *Roulette wheel with six criteria*, 1988 do emulate Duchamp's idea to use chance "to place something on a canvas, on a piece of paper" (Duchamp and Cabanne 2014, p. 50) without intention, in order to avoid subjectivity, and his *Obligation pour la roulette de Monte-Carlo*, which aim was to "face the machine with a 'mechanical spirit'" (in Troche 2012, p. 30).

³In a conversation with the author of July 2012, Huang conceded that Duchamp most probably had no real interest in Zen.

Yet Huang's works mostly borrow from Cage, as he associates his instructions with the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Book of change* (易經; *Yi Jing*), one of the five founding books of Chinese civilization. For the *Four paintings*, a single wheel bearing the eight trigrams indicates which section of the canvas should be painted, while instructions regarding which specific pigment should be used and with which brush, are determined by the roll of a dice. The 1987 *Large turntable with four wheels* has two separate disks. The smaller one with 64 entries in the shape of the *Yi Jing*'s 64 hexagrams refers to a list of actions such as "make a typewriter" or "try again", while the larger disk's 384 entries (64×6), refers to a second list of similar absurd instructions such as "put books in the refrigerator" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 65–75). The final aim was to conceive art as a succession of independent events: The *Four Paintings* "consisted in making the relationship between the arrangement on the canvas (composition), the choice of pigments, and the intensity of the brushwork independent of one another" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 48). The aim of the *Large turntable* was to do "meaningless things, just as the eye and the brain are 'the buyer' and the 'seller' at the same time" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 67) in order to shatter rationality:

The way that a coin or a di[c]e falls, that the wheel stops at a number [...] as if your eyes were closed, all allow the action to be free from the intervention of judgment made by the eyes and the brain. I believe in the limitations of the brain [...] hence I reflect on the question of "losing oneself" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 50).

The method is borrowed from John Cage's chance music performances such as *Theatre N°1*, 1952, or of his engraved glass box *Not wanting to say anything about Marcel*, of 1969. Cage said he used the *Yi Jing* to shift "from the responsibility to choose to the responsibility to ask" and then by not changing the answers he aimed at "changing himself": "I change myself [...] instead of self-expression, I'm involved in self-alteration" (in Baas 2014, p. 169). Huang refrains from detailing the influence of Cage, insisting that through these endeavours, he pursued "non language/thinking" activities in search of some form of Buddhist enlightenment (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 85). He wanted to emphasise the Buddhist concept of ultimate "emptiness of self" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 48). Referring to a Buddhist maxim, he claims to aim to "cut off the tongue" of dominant discourses, while he "nurtured the tongue" by accepting "the guidance of another" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, I, p. 24 *et seq.*, entry 17), using Western artists and thinkers "as a source of imagination" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 17). Yet Huang is not a practicing Buddhist and is defiant of Mahayana Buddhism in which Buddha is revered "as an idol", qualifying it as "metaphysical verbiage" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 78). His take on Buddhism bears the distinct agnosticism which characterizes western Neo-Buddhism. Yet he stages himself as practicing the divination of the *Yi Jing*, using the traditional method of the yarrow sticks while making the *Large turntable* (Vergne and Chong 2005, I, p. 31). He also insists that those works do not reflect an orthodox use of the *Yi Jing* which is based on "a metaphysical relationship between man and the cosmos" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 48), while, at the same time, he declares to be practicing divination daily

(Notes on augury, 1992, in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 92). These textual and photographic documents portray an essentialist, ontological congruence between Huang's cultural upbringing and Chan Buddhism, or Taoism, made possible by an allegedly unbroken chain of transmission of this philosophy. Furthermore his writings underscore the perceived superiority of Chinese cultural tradition over western models as he refers to Wittgenstein's criticism of language: "The silence of Wittgenstein kept the brackets in their original empty state, but Chan Buddhism did more, it [got] rid of the brackets completely" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 84). A will to posit Buddhism and the *Yi Jing* as sources of his works and as mighty universal knowledge, debunking the weight of modern and post-modern western sources, is thus present from the start. As early as 1988, Huang wrote an essay *Duchamp stripped bare by the Han people*, in order "to stop myself mentioning him again in the future" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 80). It shows Huang determination to reconnect with his own heritage, through his artistic language, without being subdued by Duchamp, even through distorting Duchamp's positions, which he admits:

I got to know Duchamp via a photocopy in Chinese [of Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp by Pierre Cabanne] and some other materials I came across by chance here and there. I consider this kind of 'fragmentation' to be more reliable than 'completeness. I never think that it is a problem that I cannot really understand Duchamp because I don't speak French. What is important is not discovering the real face of Duchamp, but what I actually get of him. I always benefit from all sorts of misunderstandings' and 'distortions' (in Vergne and Chong 2005, I, 40)

In 1994 he made *The Wise man learns from the spider how to spin a web*, comprising a Chinese bamboo cage containing a large live spider, and a table with a photocopy of Cabanne's *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* on it, the very book that was essential for his discovery of Duchamp in 1985. The title, explains Huang, refers to the spider which taught the emperor Fu Xi—the mythic author of the *Book of Change*—how to make a web (so as to catch fish and animals) (in Vergne and Chong 2005, I, pp. 40–41). Duchamp is thus compared to a spider, kept in a cage, that projects its shadow on Huang's notebook, implicitly compared to the *Book of Change*, a work of a major reach and depth.

By borrowing from Western artists and philosophers, Huang wanted to escape Chinese collectivist spirit, to awake "a sense of individual vitality among the young generations" (in Chen 2003). Yet through his writings and archives he simultaneously constructed a narrative in which Buddhism and Taoism are presented as the quintessence of an eternal Chinese culture, and his own "natural" cultural realm, oblivious of the fact that his journey to those traditions was largely made through American "Neo-Zen". As he went to Paris to participate in the exhibition *Les Magiciens de la terre*, western iconography further withers. His works, not only his writings, become suffused with Chinese iconography and "Chinese thoughts [in order] to beat the West with the East" (cited by Hanru 2005, II, p. 17). Huang wants to create "a new internationalism", different from the "so-called internationalism [of the neo-colonial and global order]" (in Jantjes 1998, p. 116) and to place

contemporary art “into a grand background of the ‘Globalization’” (in Chen 2003), i.e. on the global art scene, an endeavour he shared with many artists of his generation.⁴

To Beat the West with the East

Since 1989 Huang’s installations are loaded with allegories taken from Chinese philosophical, religious, artistic and military traditions, partly at the request of Jean-Hubert Martin who curated several seminal exhibitions of the artist’s work and was mostly interested in the Chinese mythology embedded into it: “Huang Yongping’s proposals regarding the Chinese symbols of the snake and the turtle [...] are richly informative and disclose [Chinese] thought, thanks to the original shape that he gives them.”⁵

In *Les Magiciens de la terre*, Huang exhibited a work called *Reptiles*. It is made of two antithetic parts: on the right two washing machines and, spread out on the wall, the supposed end result of this washing of books and newspapers. On the left, these newspapers seem to have coalesced into two enormous turtle shapes, made after the shape of Fujiang tombs,⁶ that appear to be emerging from the wall. Through this juxtaposition Huang may be pointing to the inescapable misunderstanding between cultures, since, in a letter written in 1988, he declares that “cultural exchange means sitting side by side on a bench while remaining incomprehensible to the other.”⁷ As Huang placed some old post-cards showing Chinese people besides such tombs, the works becomes further impenetrable. Similarly Huang conceived a work called *The Bridge* of 1995, on the occasion of an exhibition at the Musée des arts africains et océaniens, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin. *The Bridge* is a glass and iron tunnel in the shape of a snake containing Chinese bronze statuettes from the Cernuschi museum, representing turtles and snakes and Xuanwu, a hybrid of the turtle and the snake. It is a metaphor of the benefits of the harmonious fusion between opposite forces:

⁴In 1986 Gu Wenda similarly stated: “One borrows Western modernism to attack [Chinese] tradition and now one needs to use Chinese tradition to strike against Western modernism” (Dawei 1986, in Wu 2010, p. 111).

⁵“Les propositions de Huang Yongping sur la symbolique chinoise du serpent et de la tortue [...] apparaissent riches en informations et révélateurs d’un mode de pensée, grâce à la forme originale qu’il leur confère.” (Jean-Hubert Martin, Forward, *Huang Yongping*, 1995, p. 13).

⁶De Groot suggests that the custom of building turtle-shaped tombs is a way of placing the grave under the influence of the heavenly warrior Xuanwu, whose symbol is the Black Tortoise. De Groot (1892), *The Religious System of China III*, Brill Archive, pp. 1082–1083 (Wikipedia).

⁷“A mon avis, l’échange culturel, c’est venir s’asseoir côte à côte sur le même banc, tout en restant incompréhensible l’un à l’autre.” (Dawei 1997, p. 9, author’s translation).

By choosing the turtle and the snake, I would like to signify the relationship between on the one hand immobility, passivity, tranquillity and on the other hand movement, vitality and activity. The meeting between those two animals may produce a new chaos, leading not to conflict but to a fusion. In Chinese mythology, the image of the snake coiling around the turtle means harmony, fusion between yin and yang, that generates the world creation.⁸

Gavin Jantjes asked Huang if he saw his work “as a ‘bridge’ between and across borders?” (Jantjes 1998, p. 115), to which the artist replied:

[T]he image of the bridge is a beautiful metaphor [...W]hen you become a bridge you have two [standpoints...] between these two points, there is one that is more stable, your original personality and another point which is less stable, floating. This bridge is always dangerous [... Which is] positive. It creates the possibility to open up something else. (in Jantjes 1998, p. 115).

So *The Bridge* appears as a metaphor for dialogue, harmony, and hybridity. It is placed on top of a previous work called *Theatre of the World*, of 1993, a glass box in the shape of a turtle containing live reptiles and insects, eating each other. The shape that allows viewers to watch the fighting of the animals is allegedly inspired by Foucault’s *Discipline and punish* and the notion of panopticon (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 34). It also refers to a Taoist shamanic practice of placing venomous insects in a jar in order to produce the ultimate poison/remedy, a practice embedded in the hexagram gu (蠱, gǔ), the 18th hexagram of the *Yi Jing*, which means “correcting”, “working on what has been spoiled” (Wilhem 1967). *Gu* is made of two trigrams, the one on top 艮 *gèn*, means the mountain, immobility, and the one below 巽 *xùn*, or wind, suggests chaos and change. *Gu* brings change to a system corrupted by a fixed set of belief, immobile like a mountain, in a situation of strong wind... Hence Huang says:

Is *Theatre of the World* an insect zoo? A test site where various species of the natural world devour one another? A space for observing the activity of “insects”? [...] A cross between a panopticon and the shamanistic practice of keeping insects? A metaphor for the conflicts among different people and cultures? Or rather, a modern representation of the ancient Chinese character *gu*? (in Vergne and Chong 2005, I, p. 34).

This dual work appears as the representation of two world views: one of harmony and hybridity, the other of confrontation and exclusion, and through the *Yi Jing*, as an invitation to change from one to the other. Yet the bridge/snake also signifies power in imperial China and the work can thus appear as an allegory of the concept of “Tianxia”, which means ‘under the sky’, the realm of the emperor, the world of harmony, in contrast to the realm of (Western enlightenment) chaos and barbarity (Zhang 2007, p. 307). This is the take of Philippe Vergne, the then curator

⁸“Par le choix de la tortue et du serpent, je voudrais signifier le rapport entre, d’une part, l’immobilité, la passivité, la tranquillité et, d’autre part, le mouvement, la vitalité, l’activité. La rencontre entre ces deux animaux pourrait produire un nouveau chaos, qui ne se traduise pas par un conflit mais aboutisse à une fusion. Dans la mythologie chinoise, l’image du serpent qui vient s’enrouler autour de la tortue représente l’harmonie, la fusion entre le yin et le yang qui devient moteur de la création du monde.”, “Le Pont” (catalogue des oeuvres exposées, in *Huang Yongping*, 1995, p. 26 (author’s translation).

of the Walker Art Center, who writes that Huang Yongping masterminding raises the question of “whether we are experiencing a transfer of artistic leadership to a new country, a new mythology, a new culture, a new methodology and a new aesthetic” (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 25), which “forces us [Westerners] to realize that it is up to us to change our ways of changing” (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 31). The text reflects the sense of awe which esoteric Chinese references in the work produce on a Western viewer, pointing to his/her “inferiority”, while the wisdom of an “eternal” Chinese philosophy—“a symbolic form”, according to Vergne—, is underpinned.

If this is not Huang’s aim, it may well be its consequence:

My use of Chinese elements [...] might be criticized as somewhat exotic. But [its] aim is not to provoke an aesthetic and blind admiration. On the contrary, I try to show [...] all the difficulties of intercultural communication in today’s world.⁹

Between 1997 (the date of the return of Hong-Kong to China) and 2005 (when China’s GDP becomes fifth in the world, passing England and France after it joined the WTO in 2001) military subtexts become in fact prevalent in Huang Yongping’s works as is shown in the exhibition *House of oracles* of 2005. Some works straightforwardly address conflicts between China and the West: *Da Xian-The Doomsday*, 1997, refers to the return of Hong-Kong to China, while *Bank of sand, Sand of bank*, 2000–2005, concerns the mighty neoclassical building on the Bund in Shanghai, occupied by the Hong-Kong and Shanghai Bank of China (HSBC) between 1923 and 1955, that now houses the government’s Shanghai Pudong Development Bank. *House of oracles* appears as less obviously post-colonial yet the artist’s writings suggest similar aims. It consists in an installation in a tent, the tent in which Huang lived upon arriving in Paris. Philippe Vergne describes it in the catalogue of the eponymous exhibition:

It is composed of an ensemble of instruments, such as [...] a divination table, weapons made out of the pulp of divination books on metal bars, and instruments used for Feng Shui (geomancy). [...] Outside the tent are installed two bulls made of sawhorse and iron plates on which are written divination diagrams. The work [...] relates, according to Huang, to Sun Tzu’s Art of War (VIe- Ve c. B.C.E) (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 30).

Huang himself ascribes to it the Chinese military tactic of “Defining the strategy inside the tent and winning the battle one thousand kilometres away” (in Vergne and Chong 2005, I, p. 24).

The work *One man-Nine animals*, presented at the French Pavilion in Venice 1999 together with French artist Jean-Pierre Bertrand, epitomizes this dual strategy of confrontation and dialogue, between global art and Chinese culture. Huang toppled the pavilion with nine animals inspired by the Chinese Zodiac, placed on huge poles going across the roof, while a Chinese figure on a copper chariot points

⁹ “[Cette] utilisation d’éléments chinois [...] risque d’être critiquée comme une sorte d’exotisme. Mais [cela] ne vise pas à provoquer une admiration esthétique et conformiste. Bien au contraire, j’essaie de montrer [...] toutes les difficultés de communication interculturelle dans le monde d’aujourd’hui.” (in Garcia de la Rosa, 18).

to them, as if directing the horde. This second figure refers to a mythical machine designating the South. The legend narrates that Huangdi, the father of the Han Chinese people and the founder of the Chinese nation, utilized it in a decisive battle against one of the rulers of ancient China (Chong 2005, II, p. 106). Huang describes the experience for the viewer:

When a viewer faces this work [...] from the same place as the copper figurine [...] and looks in the direction in which the figurine's finger is pointing, he or she will see the letters ANCIA [...] on the façade of the building [which means "old"]. As soon as the viewer goes past the chariot, the letters [...] become RANCIA [which means rancid, or "out of fashion"] (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 88).

Only when facing the pavilion does the viewer see "FRANCIA" but also three menacing poles on which Huang "beasts" are placed. When entering the pavilion—in which Jean-Pierre Bertrand conceptual work is displayed—as "soon as he looked up [...] he will see that he is also underneath the same group of beast." (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 89). "This", Huang concludes, "is an allegory about the earth; there is only one earth, and this earth is not for one or two people, but for everybody. This is what we called 'globalization'." (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 90). With this work, Huang wanted to exemplify "dialogue and the impossibility of dialogues, the instrumentality and antagonism that exist in art, and global allegories" (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 89). Catherine Millet, editor of *Art Press*, said that Huang's work "polluted the atmosphere created by Jean-Pierre Bertrand" (cited in Excerpt from 'A Pavilion for two people', 1999, in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 90).

The work appears again to be referencing Sun Tzun principle of war that "The highest form of generalship is to baulk the enemy's plans" (Sun Tzun, ch. 3, point 3). And the critic Hou Hanru duly notes that, according to a Chinese military principle, "the winner is the one who masters the two sides of the battlefield." (Hanru 2010, p. 249).¹⁰ The militant aspect of Huang's work is underlined by his predicate that contrary to "the assumption that art and artworks are detached and have no interests at stake", art works belong "to a world similar to real life or as dangerous as war strategy." (in Vergne and Chong 2005, II, p. 92). While this attempt is understandable as an assertion of the artist's own voice, it suggests that he is but the spokesperson or the contender of a whole nation, in the name of the length of its cultural tradition, and of its previous spoliation, a process which leans towards an essentialist and nationalist view of Chinese culture. This perception is further underpinned by the fact that Huang does not speak French, and once said, quoting Frantz Fanon: "To speak a language is to assume a culture, that's one idea I want to hold onto [...] When you accept a new language it influences your way of thinking, your culture".¹¹

¹⁰Hou Hanru is actually quoting Chen Zhen but discussing both Huang Yongping and Chen Zhen and their ability to master both Eastern and Western codes of conduct.

¹¹Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, White Masks*, London, Paladin Publ., 1970, p. 13, quoted in Gavin Jantjes, p. 117.

Amoy/Xiamen, Fighting Orientalism with Chinoiseries?

For his first retrospective in France in 2013, Huang's choice of works straightforwardly focused on the notion of the post-colonial, through the display of religious statuettes from Xiamen collected by the Dutch scientist J. J. de Groot for the musée Guimet (on loan to the Musée des Confluences, Lyon). The presentation, in the form of fake museum storage, manifested the loss of religious significance that the displacement, from temple to museum, produced on the artworks. The labelling of their provenance as "Amoy", the colonial name of Xiamen, added an explicit critique of colonialism and of its ploughing of local art objects. The prevalence of Chinese references in Huang's works exhibited alongside, leads to the surmise that they oppose post-colonial Orientalism through a counter Orientalism, in which Chinese cosmogony and spirituality appear as wonders. The exhibition display followed a hidden cosmogonist pattern based on Feng Shui: it was made of 11 works—a figure symbolizing the sky plus the earth—organized along two auspicious diagonals, north-south and east-west (Raspail 2013, p. 12, 15). At the end of the east-west diagonal Huang placed *The Market of Punya* of 2007 (Fig. 2), a fake Buddhist paraphernalia shop, in front of which lies an elephant, alongside a dog carrying a plastic sandal. A (white) elephant being a symbol of harmony and happiness in Buddhism (Alexandre 2011, p. 120) and a running dog signifying a "traitor", or "lackey of capitalism", in Chinese communist jargon—a literal translation into English of the pejorative 走狗 (zǒu gǒu)—the piece may stand for the confrontation between genuine faith and the trade of religious merchandises. The installation appears as a conundrum, a riddle, like a Buddhist "gōng'àn (公案)", which exotic edge leads one interviewer to mention the fact that Chinese people are hard working (Huang and Grau 2013, 00' 35"). This reaction manifests strikingly what Pascal Boyer has labelled "the recall" effect, i.e. our tendency to ascribe previous knowledge, and prejudice, to objects which we deem to belong to a specific "domain-concept" (Boyer 2001, p. 2).

At the opposite angle of the room, is a long roll of watercolours on rice paper, called *Qian*, in pinyin with no accent. It shows angels on a flying ladder, some being pushed into the void by devils with forks. It emulates Taoist paintings such as the *Investiture of a Daoist Deity*, dated 1641, from the Metropolitan museum, in which local divinities are presented to the Jade Emperor to be accepted within the official Pantheon accompanied by mythological birds, symbols of renewal. It also

Fig. 2 *The Market of Punya* of 2007, Multimedia, variable dimensions. Artist: Huang Yongping



includes elements taken from Huang's works such as a helicopter and a washing machine, enmeshed with references to Albrecht Dürer, Joseph Beuys. At the beginning of each new episode, the obscure calligraphy of the artist adds a mischievous element. The word "qian" has several possible meanings, one of which is qián (钱) "money". As helicopters and washing machines seem to be transformed into deities, the work is a possible critic of the modern cult for material goods. Yet qián (乾) is also the first hexagram of the *Yi Jing* which means "creativity": "In relation to the universe, the hexagram expresses the strong, creative action of the Deity. In relation to the human world, it denotes the creative action of the holy man or sage, of the ruler or leader of men, who through his power awakens and develops their higher nature" (Wilhem 1967, hexagram 1). *Qian* is perhaps a tribute to art's capacity to unleash powerful energies and lead men out of their torpor. Yet it is only through a search for context that this meaning appears. As it stands, the drawing is simply energetic, confident and... very "Chinese". The same ambiguities affect *Fifty Arms of Guanyin* (1997–2012), whose title and shape refer to the popular Bodhisattva Guanyin, goddess of Mercy, who extended her multiple arms to rescue people from Hell. It is an enlarged version of Duchamp's bottle rack,—the "original" ready-made of 1914 is 64 cm high—, to which Huang attached a 50 or so arms, holding a variety of objects, from Buddhist icons—such as a steel bowl, a lotus flower—to incongruous daily objects—mops, spades, a feather duster and even cameras. As the 'ready-made' structure is taken over by the multiple hands, and their mixture of religious and mundane objects, "the indifference and estrangement of the ready-made is disenchanted and concealed by multiple symbols" says Huang (in Chen 2003). Suggesting that the materialist frenzy that accompanies globalization overcomes a sense of (Buddhist) indifference, he said: "Religion today is not disappearing, it is stepping back. [...] It now has a substitute [...] and this indeed is globalization itself" (Huang and Leydier 2009, p. 46). Yet, the hands, with their typically Chinese gestures and objects, retain their marvellous shine, triggered by the viewer's expectations regarding a Chinese religious icon (Boyer 2001, p. 2) and thus the "lesson" of indifference is lost. In the exhibition *Amoy/Xiamen* it dominated the scene and resonated with the religious statues laid around, producing the very quality of presence which the artist allegedly criticized. Placed at the entrance of the old "Power house" turned "Power station of Art" during the Shanghai Biennale of 2012, a larger version of the work called *The thousand arms of Guanyin* looked like a Chinese tower of Babylon, celebrating the achievements of Chinese economy (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 *Qian*, 2012, Water colour on rice paper and collages. Artist: Huang Yongping



Conclusion

The emphasis on Chinese symbolism in the exhibition *House of oracle* as in *Amoy/Xiamen*, together with Huang Yongping's writings regarding Chinese military strategies, the *Book of Change* and Chan Buddhism, is presented, by the artist, as a warfare against the neo-colonial order, or more generally as an attempt to "hit out at established systems", in order to "allow new energy to emerge", as suggested by the collector Guan Yi (Alexandre 2011, p. 136). Huang's strategy more largely consists in creating doubt within the viewer's systems of certainties, with mischievously obscure metaphors, embedded with political and social comments, as in the works *Qian*, *The Market of Punya* or *Theatre of the world*. He relates this mixture of disclosing and hiding to the very construction of the word metaphor in Chinese:

Metaphor for me is a paradoxical way of expression, hiding something by unveiling. The language becomes as understandable as obscure. The word 'metaphor' in Chinese [yīnyù 隱喻] is composed of two characters, ying and yu. Ying (to dissimulate, bury, hide, keep secret). Yu (to reveal, educate, enlighten, to reason with someone).¹²

Huang's mastering of both Western art vocabulary and Chinese philosophy gives his work a specific edge in this process of disclosing, foreclosing. He relates this strategy to Sun Tzun's military principles, that forsook a frontal approach in favour of shaking the enemy's certainties and moral—"Defining the strategy inside the tent and winning the battle one thousand kilometres away". According to François Jullien, Sun Tzun's method is strikingly efficient in all realms of life:

[The point is] to lure the enemy where and when one wants [...]. To do so [...] one only has to "seduce" and "lure" him: For the enemy "to come on his own will", where one wants, he must be "presented with a profit"; likewise, for him not to go where one do not want, he must be "presented with a danger".¹³

The reception of Huang's works suggests that their recognizable Chinese content acts as a lure for the viewer. Yet their "Chineseness" and the attributes ascribed to Chinese culture—a distinct worldview, the world oldest civilisation, a reservoir of knowledge—tend to change the perception of the work from disbelief and

¹²“La dimension métaphorique [...] est un mouvement qui enrichit et élargit le sens [...] [jusqu'à l'irrationalité, l'absurdité et le chaos. D'autre part la métaphore est pour moi un moyen d'expression paradoxale, c'est-à-dire qu'on cache quelque chose en le dévoilant. Le langage devient alors aussi bien compréhensible qu'obscur. Le mot 'métaphore' en chinois se compose de deux caractères, le Ying et le Yu. 隱 Ying (se dissimuler, se terrer, se cacher, garder secret). 喻 Yu (dévoiler, instruire, éclairer, faire entendre raison à quelqu'un)". (Huang in Garcia de la Rosa, 22–23. author's translation).

¹³“[Il faut attirer l'adversaire] où l'on veut et quand on veut [...]. Pour cela [...] il suffit de le 'séduire' et de l'appâter': pour faire en sorte que l'adversaire 'viene de lui-même', où l'on veut, il faut lui 'tendre un profit'; de même que, pour faire en sorte qu'il ne puisse pas venir là où on ne veut pas qu'il vienne, il faut lui 'tendre un danger'" (Jullien, 215, author's translation). Huang is a great admirer of Jullien's work.

scepticism to an exotic fascination with a world of wonder. In addition, Huang himself poses as the “Chinese wiseman”, through his physical posture and his speaking in Chinese, as he does not speak French, even though he denies being a representative of China (Jantjes 1998, p. 112). This weakens Huang’s position as an artist sceptical about nationalism, fixed identities and metanarratives advocating constant change, and hybridity. It suggests that the Chinese concepts and allegories embedded in his works come from an unbroken and geographically homogenous tradition, that overlooks the hiatus of Chinese 20th century history, the culture of non-Han minorities, the diverging views regarding “Chineseness” among people in Hong-Kong and Taiwan (Chun 1996). It also eschews the fact that its philosophical tradition was constructed through exchanges—with Indian Buddhism for example—and is largely reconstructed today, through western Neo-Buddhism (Clarke 2002, p. 80) and Singaporean Neo-Confucianism for example. The presentation of Chinese culture as pure and unbroken thus, willy-nilly, supports an essentialist and an historical narrative, which is used by the Chinese government as an instrument of “soft-power” (Glaston 2014). Huang Yongping’s *Large turntable with four wheels* was included in the exhibition *Advance through retreat* at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai in 2014, which aim, according to a press release, was “to present [Chinese] artistic positions using traditional media and procedures, such as divination, the game, gambling and traditional [military] strategies—for instance, “advance through retreat”—in order to develop autonomous languages that utter positions of resistance to the assimilating tendency and the power structures generated and maintained by a lingua franca.” (Frogier in *Advance through retreat* 2014). And curator Martina Koepfel-Yang’s writes: “What is especially worth highlighting is the creation of a cultural identity of a new, self-confident, post-WTO-entry China. As a new and economically powerful global player, China seeks to affirm the ‘cultural position of a native culture with an excellent tradition’” (Koepfel-Yang in *Advance through retreat*, 2014). Koepfel-Yang thus ascribes to Huang Yongping’s *Large turntable* the nationalist association between Chinese economic prowess and its cultural tradition, and suppress a post-colonial search of an essentialist “Chineseness”, a position to which many Chinese intellectuals subscribe (Wang 1991; Wenhsin 2000; Zhang 2007; Wang 1991), advocating a return to an “authentic” literary and pictorial Chinese tradition (Zhu 2011, pp. 151–152). In *Time traveller*, another exhibition at RAM, curator Ella Liao presented a work by Huang Yongping’s *Two baits*, 2001 (Fig. 4) in a very different perspective. The work consists in two 7.5 m long shiny fishes, mimetically and wittingly looking

Fig. 4 Huang Yongping *Two Baits*, 2001, Iron, fiberglass, metal sheets, 1200 × 800 × 300 cm. Installation view at Rockbund Museum, Shanghai, 2012



like sardines in paper foil, each holding two baits, one at each end of its body. In the absence of any context, or specific cultural representation, it is unclear whether the fish is hooked (in which case two hooks is one too many) or if the hooks are there to catch the visitor, or both—a double bait in a sense. This wonderful work, both conceptually profound and full of embodied presence, epitomizes the best of Huang Yongping's contribution to global art, asserting that doubt, scepticism—whether Cartesian or Taoist—is an essential tool to keep ideologies at bay.

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