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A PRESENTATION BY EUGENE WANG, IN CONJUNCTION WITH CHINA IN ASIA/ASIA IN CHINA

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This presentation by Eugene Wang was delivered in conjunction with a panel CHINA IN ASIA/ASIA IN CHINA: Imagining Asia in Contemporary Chinese Art, organized by Columbia University and Asia Art Archive in America. From the perspective of contemporary visual art practice, this panel will interrogate the role of China in Asia and Asia in China from multiple perspectives.

Acknowledging that the concept of Asia itself is a construct which has been put to multiple purposes in the 20th century, this panel looked at how projects in this Asian space have begun to emerge in the imaginary of contemporary practice in China, particularly in the last five years. This panel also explored how China figures in the imaginary of artists today, and in particular artists working in India, Japan, Korea and Vietnam.

Jane DeBevoise (JD): For our first speaker, I would like to introduce Eugene Wang who is the art historian on the team. Eugene is a professor at Harvard with multiple degrees from multiple universities. He did his first set in China at Fudan University, a BA and MA, and then went on to Harvard, where he did another MA and also a PhD. Eugene is an old friend. In fact the first time we met was in 1998 when you gave a lecture on Huang Yongyu's 'Winking Owl' in conjunction with the Guggenheim show *China: 5000 Years* in 1998. Huang Yongyu, an artist from Hunan who taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, was controversial in China in the 1970s because he painted an owl that winked, but that is another story for another time. We are very pleased to have Eugene here. Thank you very much for coming down to Columbia for this event.

Eugene Wang (EW): Thank you Jane and John for inviting me to this conference/workshop. I am going to talk about how to use this framework—i.e., China and/beyond Asia—to think aloud about what it means to talk about geo-politics. Somehow I feel an equally compelling way of framing this is to think about China-and-Asia geo-politics in terms of continental and cross-continental imagination and our subscription to that model. In any case, I want to quickly set things up by looking at how the West initially imagined the world. Basically there were three continents and Asia was at the top because it was imagined to be a paradise up there.

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ARTISTS, CRITICS, CURATORS, AND OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

Aisha Khalid, Aki Onda, Aki Sasamoto, Alexander Keefe, Alexandra Chang, Alexandra Munroe, Alf Chang, Ali Van, Amy Lien, Amy WOOD, Annysa Ng, Anthony Tino, Anthony Yung, Arin Rungjang, art history, art institutions, artist interviews, Ashley Billingsley, Ashok Sukumaran, Bahar Behbahani, Bahar Behbahani, Bani Abadi, Bani Abidi, Barbara London, Beatrix Pang, Belinda Q. He, Benjamin Moskowitz, Beth Citron, Betsy Damon, Bing Lee, Birgit DONKER, Boon Hui Tan, Boris Groys, Brinda Kumar, Cai Guoqiang, CAMP, Cao Fei, Casey Tang, Chang Chao Tang, Chang



That kind of cognitive model has persisted despite the discovery of North America and the actual mapping of the world. This kind of cognitive mapping still persists in seeing Asia as one big continent. In modern times, that of course caused lots of problems. The deepening of American understanding of Asia started in 1903 with Kakuzo Okakura who later became a curator at the MFA Boston. He published this book called 'The Ideal of the East' in [1904] in which he famously said, 'Asia is one.' Now Okakura has recently had a little revival of interest mainly because he is controversial. His contribution was enormous but some of the ramifications of this [idea of] 'Asia is one' had an unintended dark side as well.

To give some background, [the book] was actually composed on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War and at that time, he could see that there was an Asian sentiment about the way the dichotomies of power were framed...the white peril versus the yellow peril. So the matter was reduced to racial terms. But the good side of this is that Okakura above anyone else had this huge impact in the American imagination of Asia and in teaching the art of tea and aesthetics and so forth. In fact, one would also imagine it had a positive impact on the American culture at the time when there was this whole movement and anxiety about immigration. [There was a] push for a white California, white Australia, white Canada in the beginning of the 20th century. To have 'Asia is one' and to somehow distill an interest in Asia, has a positive side. So I would say [the concept had] a positive side and a negative side.

After Okakura's time, the rest is history. We all know about the war and during the war, 'Asia is one' was exploited cynically, having developed into some sort of Japanese imperialist rhetoric. Up until this day, there are still people who have misgivings about the notion of 'Asia is one.' But in any case, that is how it started, with a problem, but of course, also with hope. In 1947, there was some kind of shared interest among Asian countries to form an "Asian unity." The significant event registering that interest was the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi. The participants included Burma, Indonesia, India, Iran, China. But it didn't quite pan out because it was during the height of the cold war. The ideology was East/West, the East represented by Russia, which is dubiously East, but nonetheless East. Basically the East/West geopolitical map had been reduced to a kind of ideological boundary and that made this Asian unity hard to place along this ideological line.

Then the Korean War and all that [came with it] complicate things even more, so you could say that in the first half of the 20th century, Asian unity is kind of an utopia. It was a condition aspired for by Asians. It would have a hard time being realized because of all these other factors.

In 1958, in my timeline here, there was a very interesting event that people probably didn't pay much attention to, which was that when Mao met in Beijing with the Indonesian president Sukarno, he famously said, 'Actually, the way we need to look at the world now should be three great continents: Asia, Africa, and Latin America.' By that he was seeking some ideological alliance against the West.

I am going to talk about a painting based on that. Currently, I don't know when it started, but if you go online, and look up 'AsiaOne', you come up with a Singapore press holdings portal. In a way, it reverts back to the beginning of the 20th century in envisioning that 'Asia is one.'

Another theme I am going to address today is this provocative framework that Jane and John have proposed and to think about how an art historian thinks along these lines. This framework really has a wonderful way of staging the geopolitics and ethno-politics - which tend to get bundled together, but sometimes should be separate. As an art historian, I find that artists working along these kinds of frameworks tend to work in funny and interesting ways that sometimes seem to go along with this narrative/framework - but sometimes they are actually doing their own thing. On the surface a work might look as if it was about geopolitics/ethno-politics, but in fact it may not be. That is how art complicates things. To go back to that beginning moment, 'Asia is one' is the aesthetic idea behind all these three paintings.

Abanindranath Tagore, *Feast of Lamps*, 1907

Yokoyama Taikan, *Moonlight in the Woods*, ca. 1904

Gao Qifeng, *Crowing in Haze*, 1912

On the left is an Indian painting. In the middle is a Japanese painting. On the right is a Chinese painting. What they have in common is that they are all interested in haze, which in fact is a contourless quality of painting. This is a quality of painting. Actually there is an ideological line behind this. The Japanese felt like they have been following the Chinese for too long, and they reduced the whole of Chinese painting to a matter of contour lines. Chinese art was seen as an art of lines. So from the Japanese point of view, if one wants to catch up with the West, to modernize, one does not paint the contour; one does haze. But that haze has this wonderful, evocative Eastern, sort of spiritual quality, so the Indians got on the bandwagon... they all have a shared hazy aesthetic of being spiritual and so forth.

While they were at it, the Chinese artists who studied in Japan also picked this up and said, we also need this haze. But they needed it for different purposes. China at that time was, as these artists saw it, very dark politically, so they spoke of this dark night and quoted this line from the Classic of Poetry (*Shijing*), which says that the cock crows against haze, which is a way of rousing political activism, meaning 'let's get started working and dispel this haze', which is political rhetoric. Even though they shared this interest in haze, they were driven by different agendas. For the Chinese, this became such a stirring revolutionary rhetoric, that when they formed an assassination society to kill the Qing government officials, that society was called 'Crowing in the Haze.'

Kyōkatsu, *Illustration of a Fierce Russo-Japanese War Battle*, May 1904. Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The next image which is a Japanese print may illustrate the Russo-Japanese war and may respond to what was happening at the time the 'Asia as one' slogan is bandied about. In this print you can see that the Russians and the Japanese are wearing the same uniform. It is pretty confusing and I can only guess. [But if you look closely you will know that the Japanese soldiers are wearing mustaches; they look like Russians. Why? I think it's because they wanted to modernize; and to modernize, they needed to look Western, so in the picture they were depicted as taller and they wore Western mustaches, so you can already see that 'Asia is one' as a political ideology. When it is translated into visual terms, the matter gets quite foggy.

***Epidemic of Pneumonic Plague in Manchuria, People stopped by Chinese troops while trying to escape the epidemic, near the Great Wall of China.* Illustration from French newspaper *Le Petit Journal*. February 12, 1911**

This is how the French depicted the event shortly after 1911 but the situation pictured here reflects how the Chinese soldiers expelled Russian intruders because there was this perceived epidemic and they wanted them out of the Great Wall. From the French point of view, they felt that the Chinese and Japanese were all one. The Great Wall served as this buffer boundary so you can also see the rhetoric of the white peril/yellow peril at odds, at war with each other, so it is pretty much drawn along these ethno-political lines. Next we come quickly to the 1950s after World War II.



Wu Biduan (1926-) & Jin Shangyi (1934-), *Chairman Mao with People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 143 x 156 cm. Courtesy of the artists and Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing

I could spend a whole class talking about this next painting [laughter]. It shows Mao meeting the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Behind this are two key historical events. One is the 1956 or 1957 Suez Canal crisis when the French and English got into this friction with Egypt. Mao hailed the Egyptian leaders as national heroes. In the 1950s, nationalization was the driving force, so Mao was envisioning this political strategy of uniting with the people of Asia, with the people of Africa and Latin America, against the West.

Everything about this painting seems to toe that ideological line - except of course artists have their own interests and sometimes do things that don't entirely toe the line. The heroes at the time should be two persons. One should be the Egyptian and the other should be the Indonesian president whom Mao met. Mao then famously announced his three continent theory. Instead [in this picture] the African person is in the middle. Why? There are two possibilities. One is that for the artist to imagine China being at one with the rest of the world, the better strategy is to accentuate the total otherness. If you put an Arab person here, it would not be as sharp and visually striking, and therefore the diversity, the real global scale, wouldn't have been as obvious or as dramatized. That is one thing. Another thing I would guess is that there was a desire to nationalize oil painting - political nationalization went together with the artistic nationalization which was essentially a Western medium. In any case, two artists collaborated on this painting. One was a wood block printer; the other was an oil painter. What they wanted to do is de-Westernize the oil painting, by creating a lot of flat surfaces and a lot of contour lines. Remember at the beginning of the 20th century, they had embraced the contourless quality. Now they are reinforcing the contour lines, to show the nationality of the Chinese indigenous tradition in the context of oil painting, a Western medium. In any case, I don't know why else the African leader is there, except maybe to accentuate this effect.

Jing Kewen (1965-), *Black*, 2010. Oil on canvas

Now let's jump to contemporary art. If we take this last painting as a cue, that for China, its cross-continental imagination has a strong interest and investment in the African continent, over the Asian continent, then there is something to be said about this very interesting painting done in 2010 by an oil painter Jing Kewen. What is interesting is that the artist dug up photographs of the Mao Years in the 1950s and 1960s. In this painting you see high-ranking officials and national leaders shown with African friends at the Great Wall. The Chinese figures are in Maoist suits but this was done in 2010, which means that it was a quote back to Maoist years. Later, I can discuss the complicated message of all this.



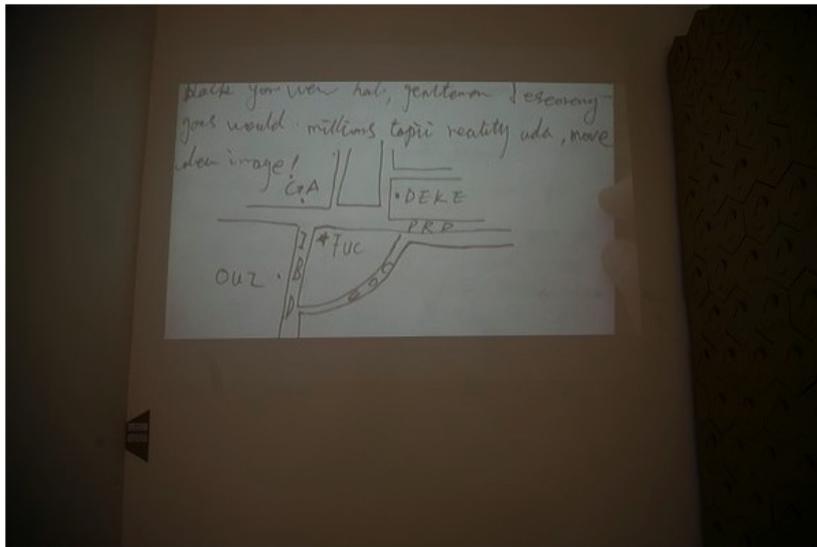
Hu Xiangqian, *Sun*, 2008. Video, Performance, 7:59 min. Courtesy of the artist

The next image is by an artist named Hu Xiangqian who is from Guangzhou and trained as an oil painter. He gave up painting and began hanging out with African friends. There is quite a large population of Africans in Guangzhou. He then began to think it would be pretty cool to be African. So he spent six months sunbathing and had his hair braided in an African way. This in itself is already an interesting statement about what it means for a Chinese artist to have some cross-continental imagination. Here are another two of his works which are very interesting.



Hu Xiangqian. *I'm determined to steer you into the Pacific*, 2005. Video. 4 min. Courtesy of the artist

This work was shot in the part of the island in Guangzhou called Xiaoguyuan. This island has a lot of university campuses and a lot of post-modern architecture which shows China's aspiration to be "with it." Hu Xiangqian did this intriguing performance work in which he pretended that this whole island was a boat. The title of the work is 'I am going to steer the whole island into the Pacific.' In this fascinating image, he is not actually standing on a boat; he is on the land.



Hu Xiangqian, *Delta Diary: From China to England to Indonesia*, 2007-09. Courtesy of the artist

Even more relevant to our theme today, and in a way, to summarize these concerns, is this performance art piece in which for two years, the artist kept a diary in totally unreadable, gibberish English. The title of this piece is *Delta Diary: From China to England to Indonesia*, 2007-2009. In the exhibition of this work, instead of showing the actual diary, the artist showed a video presentation of a page [of the diary] being turned so that it was already a medium representation of another medium so you actually don't know if it was true or not. This work develops out of the artist's frustration with his poor language skills. While doing a residency in England, he became frustrated with his inability to communicate in English. He had a similar experience when he visited Indonesia where he wasn't able to communicate in the local language either. So in response, he decided to create a new ultimately nonsensical language combination. I see this as a kind of very intriguing cross-continental imagination.

These three works offer a brief review of cross-continental imagination, in modern and contemporary art, from the 1950s up to the present day, but I want to leave you with this pair of images. Both feature the Great Wall. I would like us to think about the implications. Thank you very much.

Epidemic of Pneumonic Plague in Manchuria, People stopped by Chinese troops while trying to escape the epidemic, near the Great Wall of China. Illustration from French newspaper *Le Petit Journal*. February 12, 1911

Jing Kewen (1965-), *Black*, 2010. Oil on canvas

Eugene Wang (Ph.D Harvard, 1997) began teaching at the University of Chicago in 1996 before joining the faculty at Harvard University in 1997. He was appointed the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Professor of Asian Art at Harvard in 2005. A Guggenheim Fellow (2005) and recipient of ACLS and Getty grants, he served as the art history associate editor of the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (Macmillan, 2004). His book, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture of Medieval China* (2005) received the Academic Excellence Award from Japan in 2006. His extensive publications cover the entire range of Chinese art history from ancient funerary art to modern and contemporary Chinese art and cinema. He serves on the advisory board of the Center for Advanced Studies, National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and the editorial board of *The Art Bulletin*.