

THE FACTORY-ASSEMBLIST AND THE SCHOLAR-ARTIST IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CHINESE ART

Alex Burchmore, Melbourne



Terracotta Warriors: Guardians of Immortality, exhibition installation view, NGV International, Melbourne, 2019; image courtesy the NGV, Melbourne; photo: Sean Fennessy





Zhu Jinshi, *The Ship of Time*, 2018, installation views, 'A Fairy Tale in Red Times: Works from the White Rabbit Collection', NGV International, Melbourne, 2019; rice paper, bamboo, cotton thread, 300 x 300 x 1200cm (dimensions variable); White Rabbit Collection, Sydney; images courtesy the NGV, Melbourne; photos: Tom Ross

The art of China is as complex and multifaceted as the country itself, encompassing a broad range of materials and aesthetics that reflect an equally diverse assortment of peoples, philosophies and religions. Nevertheless, certain archetypes continue to shape our understanding of Chinese art and artists, of the past and present, that can obscure this diversity and complexity. The two most persistent of these archetypes, however, clearly illustrate the contradictions inherent in the assumption of a single 'Chinese art'.

Above all, the art and culture of China have long been understood as mass-produced, reflecting a view of the world in which the individual is allegedly subordinate to the collective and in which creative expression is reduced to a finely crafted but uninspired imitation of past models. This archetype has been defined best by German art historian Lothar Ledderose, who proposed that a modular approach, not only to art, but to philosophical ideals, the organisation of society, as well as to written and verbal communication, has been 'the single most important driving force in Chinese social history'.¹ Ledderose supports his argument with a range of case studies, the most compelling of which is undoubtedly that of the Terracotta Warriors created for the tomb of the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huangdi, founder of the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–07 BCE).

At the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), eight of these stately earthenware figures have

been selected for display alongside other treasures of the Qin, Zhou (c. 1046–256 BCE) and Han (207 BCE–220 CE) dynasties, in 'Terracotta Warriors: Guardians of Immortality'. This isn't the first time these contemporary icons of China's ancient culture have made the journey to Australia – in 1982, just eight years after the long-forgotten army was accidentally discovered by farmers in 1974, seven figures were shown at the NGV and four other Australian galleries in a display curated by the late Edmund Capon.²

Yet while that exhibition drew attention to the shock of discovery and the historical revelations attendant on the warriors' excavation, the NGV's Senior Curator of Asian Art Wayne Crothers views the current display as a more creative response to their impact, and an opportunity to reassess their influence for the Chinese art-historical canon. At the same time, he also notes that this exhibition showcases over 170 objects while only 19 were included in the earlier display, making clear the extent to which the association of the warriors with the overwhelming spectacle of quantity remains their primary appeal.³

Spectacle is tempered in 'Terracotta Warriors', however, by the display of the figures in their own vitrines, optically multiplied by the careful placement of mirrors on the rear wall and in front of each case but defiantly alone, standing independent of their brothers-in-arms. This curatorial strategy effectively shifts any association with





Cai Guo-Qiang, *Flow (Cypress)*, 2019, installation view, 'Cai Guo-Qiang: The Transient Landscape', NGV International, Melbourne, 2019; realised in Melbourne, commissioned by the NGV, Melbourne; © Cai Guo-Qiang; © Tobias Titz Photography



Opposite:
Cai Guo-Qiang, *Murmuration (Landscape)*, 2019, installation view,
'Cai Guo-Qiang: The Transient Landscape', NGV International,
Melbourne, 2019; realised in Dehua, Fujian province and Melbourne,
commissioned by the NGV, Melbourne; © Cai Guo-Qiang;
© Tobias Titz Photography

mass production from an artistic to a commercial realm. In the central display of warriors, and especially in the two preceding exhibition spaces, filled with an array of 'ritual objects and ancestral treasures', white walls and spotlit display cases recall the elegant yet pristine shelves of a high-end boutique. While browsing this selection of ancient luxuries, I overheard another gallery-goer remark on the apparent deterioration of contemporary Chinese material culture, declaring to a companion that: 'when you think China now, you think of plastic.' Yet maybe these two categories of mass production aren't as distinct as they might seem and, instead, following Ledderose's logic, point to a cultural substratum of modular organisation – or, perhaps, they simply appeal to our desire to confirm the archetypal association of China with collective conformity.

Elsewhere at the NGV, in 'A Fairy Tale in Red Times', visions of mass production are held in tension with another archetype of Chinese culture: the romantic ideal of the refined scholar-artist, a poet, painter and calligrapher who lives in elegant solitude. Conflict between the multiple and singular is powerfully conveyed by Zhu Jinshi's *The Ship of Time* (2018), a monumental assemblage of 14,000 sheets of *xuan* rice paper, 1800 strips of bamboo and 2000 threads of cotton that takes pride of place among the selection of works from the White Rabbit Collection, Sydney, on loan for this exhibition. Standing within the womb-like cavity of Zhu's installation, all ambient noise is stifled by the massive quantity and material presence of the paper, filling the air with its scent and creating a visceral sense of entombment and cosmic insignificance that recalls Qin Shi Huangdi's subterranean tomb. Yet this momentary isolation from the ebb and flow of life also emulates the contemplative stillness sought by the scholar-artist, allowing the viewer to feel as if they have entered the boundless negative space of an ink landscape.

The scholarly archetype is best expressed, however, in 'Cai Guo-Qiang: The Transient Landscape', a selection of 'gunpowder paintings' and porcelain works created in response to the Terracotta Warriors. The scarred vellum-like hemp paper of *Flow (Cypress)* (2019), for example, encircling a display of Zhou, Qin and Han-dynasty artefacts, like a calligraphic brushstroke captures the

play between white paper and black ink, absence and presence. *Murmuration (Landscape)* (2019), a swirling flock of 10,000 gunpowder-stained porcelain starlings, also creates a tension between agile movement and suspended animation, the soaring weightlessness of flight and a grounding realisation of fragility, heightened by their proximity to the earthbound gravity of the warriors.

Crothers identifies this dialogue as another innovative curatorial approach to the figures, never previously paired with work by a contemporary artist, and an indication of the role that lineage and ancestry play in Chinese art and culture. Yet Cai's work also relates to his personal lineage, and especially his relationship with his father, who he remembers in an interview with *NGV Magazine* as a scholar of painting, calligraphy and poetry, 'puffing out clouds of cigarette smoke while drawing landscapes with a fountain pen on matchboxes'.⁴

This memory, like Zhu's *The Ship of Time*, fuses the monumental and mass-produced with the singular and inspired, equating the spectacular creation of Cai's gunpowder paintings with the intimate act of smoking a cigarette, and the grandeur of scholar-artist ideals with the kitsch appeal of a matchbox landscape. Both works force a realisation of the individual narratives and desires that can be obscured by cultural archetypes (and stereotypes), compelling us to look beyond factory assemblages and ink landscapes towards the diversity of artistic practice suggested by the term 'Chinese art'.

1. Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000, p. 4.
2. Edmund Capon, *Qin Shihuang: Terracotta Warriors and Horses*, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1982. See *Art Monthly Australasia's* September 2019 edition for Steven Miller's tribute to Capon's life and legacy.
3. The author spoke with Wayne Crothers for this article on 30 May 2019.
4. Cai Guo-Qiang, 'Interview with Cai Guo-Qiang', *NGV Magazine*, no. 16, May–June 2019, p. 43.

'Terracotta Warriors: Guardians of Immortality' and 'Cai Guo-Qiang: The Transient Landscape' are on display at NGV International in Melbourne until 13 October 2019; this suite of China shows are accompanied by 'A Fairy Tale in Red Times: Works from the White Rabbit Collection', which closes on 6 October.



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Cover:
Nike Savvas with *Finale: Bouquet* (2019) at
Toi Art, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa
Tongarewa, Wellington; image courtesy Te
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