
The Twelve Chinese Zodiacs: Ai Weiwei, Jackie Chan and the Aesthetics, Politics, and Economics of Revisiting a National Wound

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Chinese artist-activist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 and Hong Kong actor and director Jackie Chan 成龍 seem an unlikely pair to be included in an essay, yet, despite the different media through which they express themselves, their respective celebrity status has, in the West, turned them into two of the best-known contemporary Chinese artists. In fact, to many Westerners, Ai Weiwei is to Chinese art what Jackie Chan is to Chinese martial arts cinema.¹ In 2011 Ai Weiwei, who has had more solo exhibitions in Europe and America than any other Chinese artist, was named by the editors of *ArtReview* “the most powerful artist in the world,”² while Jackie Chan has been described as a “star in the Hollywood pantheon . . . the only Chinese figure in popular culture who’s not regarded as some sort of imported novelty” (Wolf). What brings the two together here, however, is that in 2011 and 2012 they made headlines in the U.S. with a new installation and a new movie, respectively, both of which explore the same set of objects: twelve famous bronze heads depicting the animals of the Chinese zodiac. Originally the design of Jesuit scientists residing at the Chinese court during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), these bronze heads functioned as spouts for a complex water clock fountain that was part of an ensemble of European-style palaces inside the Old Summer Palace (*Yuanming yuan* 圓明園, literally ‘Garden of Perfect Brightness’). The Old Summer Palace, a vast complex of buildings and gardens in the vicinity of Beijing where the emperors of the Qing Dynasty resided and handled government affairs, was burned down in 1860 by Anglo-French troops at the end of the Second Opium War (1856-1860). The bronze heads, along with other items from the complex, were looted and vanished. Some of those items, including a number of



bronze zodiac heads, have resurfaced at international art auctions over the past decades, resulting in heated debates in China and elsewhere over their symbolic national value and the handling of stolen artifacts.

Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* (*Dongwu shengxiao/shier shengxiao shoushou* 動物生肖/十二生肖獸首), a larger-than-life interpretation of the original bronze heads, was first exhibited publicly at the São Paulo Biennale in late 2010, and then toured the U.S. and other countries throughout 2011 and 2012 as part of a world tour that is to continue until 2016.³ Jackie Chan's action movie *CZ12* (*Shier shengxiao* 十二生肖), also known as *Chinese Zodiac*, is a fictionalized treasure hunt for the lost zodiac heads. It was released in December 2012 and went on to gross over \$145,000,000 at the Chinese box office, making it the third highest grossing Chinese film in China to date. What motivated these two very different artists to make these historic bronze figures the object of their artistic explorations? In this essay, I will first place Ai's installation and Chan's movie into the context of historical memory and trauma, concepts that in contemporary China are closely linked to the notion of "national humiliation" (*guochi* 國恥). By illustrating that the zodiac heads have been turned into a sign whose semiotic significance has undergone considerable transformation during the past thirty years, I will highlight the complex relationship between art, politics, and consumption in contemporary China. For this purpose, I will draw on the work of both Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Rancière and discuss the degree to which both works need to be understood as symptomatic of post-socialist art and cinema in today's China. Neither Žižek's nor Rancière's work is primarily concerned with China (though Žižek has widely commented on this country and has visited there), yet their work is nevertheless highly relevant to the Chinese condition, as I will show. While Žižek's critical work on the persistence of ideology, in what at times is mistakenly perceived as the post-ideological present, allows us to explore how ideology continues to impact film production and consumption in China. Rancière's work on the ontologically social nature of aesthetics not only highlights the challenges contemporary Chinese political art presents to audiences and critics, but also reinforces its potential for questioning authority.

Jackie Chan's *CZ12* begins with a flashback that briefly recounts the history of the Old Summer Palace. Its construction began in 1709 under emperor Kangxi (reigned 1661–1722) and subsequently was expanded by emperors Yongzheng (1722–1735) and Qianlong (1735–1796). The Old Summer Palace enjoyed a status almost equal to that of the Forbidden City in the heart of old Beijing (Broudehoux 249). Jesuit missionaries, having first come to China during the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644), whose knowledge in astronomy and other sciences gained them imperial patronage, continued to reside at court during the Qing dynasty, even as tolerance toward their religious activities waned. In the 1740s, Qianlong, who had developed a taste for exotic art and architecture, chose Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) to design a group of rococo-style palaces in the northeastern corner of the gardens that became known as the Western Mansions (*Xiyang lou* 西洋樓). Michel Benoist (1715–1774), a Jesuit skilled in hydraulics and mechanics, was commissioned to add a European-style fountain. Combining Chinese mythology with European aesthetics and hydrological technology, his fountain with its sprouting zodiac heads stood at the bottom of a staircase leading to the Hall of Calm Seas (*Haiyan tang* 海宴堂), which formed the nucleus of the ensemble (Li, Dray-Novey and Kong 52–56). Although the European palaces only occupied a fraction of the total complex, they infused the Old Summer Palace with a touch of Occidentalism. Simultaneously, Jesuit accounts of the splendor and beauty of the Chinese gardens had a tremendous impact on the

development of a fashion for Chinese-style gardens in late eighteenth-century Europe (Broudehoux 52). Unfortunately, European admiration for the gardens' wonders did not extend to the members of the Franco-British expeditionary force who were sent to Beijing in 1860 to enforce the ratification of the treaty of Tianjin, which concluded the Second Opium War. Following the murder of a number of French and British diplomats, the Old Summer Palace was set on fire on October 18, destroying almost all of the Chinese pavilions and severely damaging its European structures.

The historic flashback that opens the movie is followed by a rapid succession of scenes from international art auctions where Chinese treasures are auctioned off to international collectors at astronomical prices. This action in turn prompts the CEOs of a fraudulent corporation specializing in the dealing of stolen treasures to commission their top treasure hunter JC, played by Jackie Chan, with locating and stealing the remaining zodiac heads. On his mission to Paris, JC becomes entangled with a group of young Chinese activists who are also trying to find the treasures and return them to the Chinese people. After many spectacular stunts and even more fist fights, JC ends up helping the group in their endeavor; toward the end of the movie, the sale of a resurfaced head is indeed halted because of growing public support for the group's activism. The script, despite its many grotesque subplots, one of which involves the recovery of the remains of a Frenchman involved in the original campaign of 1860 from an island guarded by pirates, is thus partially based on real events. When two of the zodiac heads—the rabbit's and the rat's—once owned by the late French designer Yves Saint Laurent came up for sale at a 2009 Christie's auction in Paris, Cai Mingchao 蔡銘超, adviser to China's National Treasures Fund (*Zhonghua qiangjin lishi haiwai wenwu chuanxiang jijin* 中華搶救流失海外文物專項基金) that seeks to retrieve looted treasures, placed the winning bid—he later refused to pay his bid of forty million dollars. Claiming that he had merely performed his patriotic duty, he told the press that “I think any Chinese person would have stood up at this moment” (“China ‘patriot’”). As a result, Pierre Bergé, Yves Saint Laurent's partner, announced that he would keep the two zodiac heads in his possession. Cai's action rekindled a national debate in China over the whereabouts of their stolen national treasures and led to a state-sponsored search for such relics; this event received considerable TV coverage.

The zodiac heads subsequently remained at the center of public interest, especially in China where, besides the National Treasures Fund, the Poly Group Corporation (*Baoli jituan* 保利集團), a large partially privatized Chinese business group, made the recovery and repatriation of the bronze zodiac heads a top priority.⁴ In fact, Poly Group opened a museum in 1999 on the ninth floor of its Beijing headquarters that now displays, among many other Chinese antique bronzes, the original ox, tiger, monkey, and pig bronze heads, all of which have since been either purchased by Poly Group or donated by wealthy donors with business interests in China—Stanley Ho, a Macau casino tycoon, purchased and donated the pig in 2003 and the horse in 2007. Of the original twelve bronze heads, five remain unaccounted for, namely those of the dragon, the snake, the sheep, the rooster, and the dog. Ai's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* was, according to Ai's own account, conceived in response to the global media hype that evolved around the bronze heads in the wake of the auctions (Ai 57). When unveiled in 2010, his installation presented an interpretative reproduction of the original circle of twelve that attempts to fill the gap of the missing five heads. His interpretations of the five missing bronze zodiacs are stylistically predicated on the seven original heads and incorporate pre-Qing along with other modern aesthetic approaches. Ai Weiwei actually produced two different versions,

one in bronze, whose heads are far larger than the original ones and intended for outdoor display, and a more life-like, gold-plated set for museum display. Both versions stand on stilts and consist of only the heads, which distinguish them from the original ensemble where the heads were mounted on bodies carved out of stone.

I had the opportunity to see Ai's installation in May 2011 when it was on display at the historic Pulitzer Fountain in New York's Grand Army Plaza. The size and beauty of the installation greatly impressed me, yet the display also left me a bit puzzled. Surely Ai Weiwei, a fierce critic of the Chinese government's efforts to monopolize historical discourses and typically suspicious of any form of nationalism or overt patriotism, had not intended for the work to simply be a replica of the original zodiacs, a reminder of the darkest side of Western imperialism. Anticipating audiences' need for interpretive guidance when the statues arrived in London in the summer of 2011, *The Telegraph*, a British newspaper, published "The meaning of Ai Weiwei's 12 Zodiac Heads" (Moore). This article includes Ai's intentions of always wanting to "question notions of real and fake" and his belief that the recent Yves Saint Laurent auction had "complicated the issues about art . . . , resources, looting, about the appreciation of objects," but does not provide any explicit interpretive assistance. Instead, the article focuses on the history of the original zodiacs and the story of their disappearance in the wake of the burning of the gardens. Chinese language news sources, reporting the unveiling of the installation in New York, explained the statues' significance similarly. The *World Journal* (*Shijie xinwen* 世界新聞), North-America's largest Chinese-language daily, reported that the installation "embodied China's tumultuous history of the nineteenth century, the cultural accomplishments of the early Qing, its decline in the wake of the Opium Wars, and the subsequent humiliation" ("Shier shoushou"). Even Sina.com, the globally operating mainland Chinese news portal, reported on the impending opening of the exhibition in New York, adding that it also "confronts the humiliation of having had to cede territory and pay indemnities [as a result of the unequal treaties]" ("Ai Weiwei 'Shier shoushou'"). To both Western and Chinese observers, the wounds left by European imperialism, it seems, remained the key referent in any interpretive attempt regarding Ai Weiwei's bronze heads.

Part of the reason why such interpretive impulses prevail, both in the West and in Chinese speaking communities, can be found in the relatively recent attempts by the Chinese state to deliberately transform the zodiac heads and the site that once housed them into symbols of national humiliation suffered at the hands of Western imperialists. While Deng Xiaoping's era of economic reforms during the 1980s was also a period of relative cultural and academic liberalization, the 4 June 1989 Tiananmen massacre put an abrupt end to the decade's cultural vitality. Many party elders believed that certain Western ideas that had found their way into China during this period misled the students demonstrating on Tiananmen Square and elsewhere in China. As a result, senior officials within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) believed that the party needed to renew its effort in what it called "patriotic education" (*aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu* 愛國主義教育). In a September speech from that year delivered to propaganda department chiefs, Deng Xiaoping, reflecting on the events leading up to June 4, acknowledged that "our gravest failure has been in [political] education. . . . For many of those who participated in the demonstrations and hunger strikes," Deng predicted that "it will take years . . . of education to change their thinking" (Brady 45). The government subsequently increased its investment in building patriotic monuments and renovating those neglected during the 1980s. While government attempts at bolstering national pride and international standing have

in more recent years evolved into a celebration of the achievements of Chinese culture—the opening of the Beijing Olympics with its magnificent celebration of Chinese civilization being a good example—patriotic education within China frequently also emphasizes awareness of national humiliation suffered at the hands of the West and Japan. Particularly throughout the 1990s, patriotic education focused on the memory of invasions, military occupation, unequal treaties, or economic extractions, abuses perpetrated by foreign powers and which came to an end with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 (Callahan 14).

The Old Summer Palace, particularly the ruins of the Western Pavilion, was destined to find a special place within the new agenda of patriotic education. Actually, the aftermath of the suppression of the student 1989 uprising, as Julia Lovell reminds us, fell upon an “auspicious” commemoration, that of the 150th anniversary of the First Opium War (1839-1842); the government, already busy improving tourist sites commemorating the horrors of foreign aggression, soon recognized the palace's potential (Lovell 343-45). If in previous decades the gardens were neglected, efforts begun in the 1980s to halt further deterioration were now increased and the memorial function of the site was exploited.⁵ Schoolchildren were frequently brought in from all over China to view the ruins and, for the 130th anniversary of the palace burning in October 1990, hundreds of Young Pioneers and Youth League members attended a solemn ceremony in front of the former Western Pavilion (Broudehoux 77). In 1997, the celebrations commemorating Britain's return of Hong Kong to China were held in the same location. Meanwhile, the repatriation of relics like the zodiac heads, purchased at considerable cost in international auctions, were celebrated by major Chinese newspapers as “victories against Western imperialism” (85), even if those relics were not often returned to the Old Summer Palace site. Here, several prominent signs in multiple languages were erected, narrating the history of the pillaging and also, more recently, an entire subsection of the park's official website, yuanmingyuanpark.com, has been dedicated to patriotic education. And though many visitors, as Broudehoux points out, are less interested in the site's patriotic significance than in their own imagined romantic association of the ruins (83), the efforts invested in patriotic education have ensured that the memory of imperialist injustices is kept alive.

It is in the context of the CCP's efforts at reshaping the legacy of the Old Summer Palace and its relics that Ai Weiwei's installation assumes meaning. Ai was unable to attend the unveiling of *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* in New York as accusations of tax fraud had led to his arrest in 2011, but he had publicly spoken about his intentions for producing these oversize replicas before his detention. In an interview reproduced in an elaborate catalogue published in conjunction with the installation's international tour, Ai emphasizes that his work is a response to the “political hype” that the Yves Saint Laurent auction created (Ai 57). He discusses the significance of the Old Summer Palace ruins to young artists like himself in the 1970s and 1980s, describing the ruins as a wild desolate space where poets and artists went for poetry readings or for some exposure to the remnants of European architecture (57-59).⁶ Ai also explains that little more than a heap of rubble remains of the ruins because, for decades, local farmers used the remnants as building materials. He finds hypocritical the transformation of the site and the zodiac heads into national monuments: “I think people want to point fingers at others,” he states, and remarks that his “work is always dealing with real and fake, authenticity, what the value is, and how the value relates to the current political and social understandings and misunderstandings” (59).

Scrutiny of what Ai terms “political and social understandings and misunderstandings”

surrounding the Chinese state's views regarding its country's history has been a recurring topic in Ai's work. For example, his smashing of a Han-dynasty urn in 1995, captured in a black-and-white photograph, has been interpreted as a commentary both on the CCP's highly uncomfortable position vis-à-vis China's feudal history and on the state's inability to acknowledge its own role throughout the second part of the twentieth century in destroying historical relics. On the other hand, the adorning of a similar urn with a Coca-Cola logo has become a metaphor for the clash between the consumer-driven consumption of history and the preservation of historical artifacts (Yap). In his making of *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, however, Ai is particularly critical of the ideological appropriation of the objects by the state. To him, the notion of national treasures that need to be repatriated at all costs is highly problematic. "I don't think the zodiac heads are a national treasure," he argues. "They were designed by an Italian, made by a Frenchman, and presented to a Qing-dynasty emperor . . . whose forebears had invaded China. So if we talk about national treasure, what nation are we talking about?" (Ai 56). At the same time, he questions their actual worth as historical artifacts when he writes that "the original heads were a functioning part of that fountain. . . . To remake that as a piece of art . . . is to question the whole act of appreciation and collecting" (59).

As such, Ai's installation *does* evoke questions of the real and the fake as well as explorations of notions of authenticity, as he had hoped, even if his intentions are not immediately apparent to the audience or critic. While Ai is clearly referencing the global historical dimension of the zodiac heads, including their undisputable fate at the hands of imperialist armies, he is not only questioning claims to authority on the part of the Chinese government that is infusing the zodiac heads with retroactive patriotic significance, but also the Western auction houses that have contributed to the monetary inflation of the collectables.

Our attention now shifts to the locations where the zodiacs were exhibited. These locations enable a circulation that both parallels the real heads' trafficking through theft and illicit sales—for example, after their unveiling in São Paulo, they traveled to London—and participates in a global art circus where installations like Ai's replicas are exhibited in unexpected locations, such as a showing in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Exhibiting them where their historical significance is unimportant denotes their inclusion in any multi-local, transregional, or transnational event, and allows the public to be detached from the emotional entanglement in which they have become mired. This was, in fact, an effect envisioned by Ai. Commenting on what he sees as fake patriotism with political intentions elicited by 2009 Paris auction—the Chinese government pressured France to halt the auction—he remarks that "maybe after I deal with the matter through making this artwork, people will reexamine the whole issue" (57).

Through the reconfiguration of the originals by their enlargement and the production of gold-plated versions, allegedly to mock the value that art speculators had attributed to them, Ai wishes to hold the multiple contradictions that the official discourse of patriotism and humiliation has created to public scrutiny. The CCP's appropriation of the zodiacs' symbolism for its own purposes has been so thorough that Ai's wishes to question its discourse of humiliation and to expose the media hype the auctions have created; this questioning often goes unnoticed. Zhang Minghu 張明湖 of the influential Chinese online art forum *99yishu* described the work's intention shortly after it was introduced to the public in São Paulo as follows: "Ai Weiwei by way of his installation hopes to arouse people's attention regarding the ongoing efforts of retrieving the lost zodiac heads" (Zhang Minghu). In Taiwan, a similar interpretative ambiguity prevailed. Art critic and professor at National Taiwan Art University

Zheng Zhigui 鄭治桂 stated on his blog that:

There is no doubt that Ai Weiwei's Twelve Zodiacs were inspired by the bronze zodiac heads pillaged by the Eight-Power Allied Forces when they burnt down the Old Summer Palace. This group of finely crafted toy-like and tame animal heads that had been designed by Western artisans for the Qing emperor has become a pack of wild beasts at the hands of Ai Weiwei, exhibiting a bestiality that in turn is ferocious, reckless, callow, ignorant and even personified evil. (Zheng)

Joan Stanley-Baker, American critic of Chinese art and professor emerita at Tainan National University of the Arts, commented on Zheng's blog that "the scar in the soul of the Chinese that the allied forces inflicted has been burning for a long time. By using civilized [artistic] means, Ai Weiwei finally rose up to give back a sense of pride to the Chinese people and their five-thousand-year long history. Bravo Ai Weiwei! (Stanley-Baker)."⁷

Ai Weiwei's prediction that his installation would entice audiences to "reexamine the whole issue" seems to have been premature. Contrary to Ai's intention to challenge the state's appropriation of the zodiac heads as a symbol of national humiliation, it is precisely the state's new master narrative of national humiliation that audiences, even those who might otherwise be critical of the CCP's role in asserting its own view of history, find confirmed in Ai's zodiac heads. The Chinese state has seemingly turned the bronze zodiacs into what Lydia Liu describes as a "super-sign," a semantic unit the meaning of which is the product of hetero-linguistic coercion backed by formidable colonial or state power (Liu 33-40). Liu has shown how, in the wake of the First Opium War, the British enforced a ban on the Chinese character *yi* 夷, which they insisted on translating as "barbarian." Consequently, any alternative meaning, such as the more neutral "foreigner" that predominated most Qing-dynasty usage of the character, was subdued by the hegemonizing semantic field created by the ban and which lingers today. It is not without irony that it is precisely a symbol so inseparably linked to the Opium Wars and British imperialism that is now performing what might be described as a semiotic act of vengeance. Unlike Britain in the nineteenth century, China is not carrying out this vengeance at gunpoint. Instead, it has in recent years reverted to "softer" modes of semiotic coercion that are nevertheless backed by considerable state power. Of these, the so-called leitmotif or "main melody" cinema (*zhuxuanlü dianying* 主旋律電影) has arguably been the most successful.

Movies like Jackie Chan's *CZ12* have played no small role in turning the bronze zodiacs into the kind of super sign that so vehemently defies alternative associations. During the 1990s, the CCP systematically reconsidered the role cinema played within patriotic education and began to support the production of main melody cinema. Originally conceived as a means to "purify the film market and save films from the 'spiritual pollution' of bourgeois liberalization" (Xiao 160), leitmotif cinema, a genre that typically combines patriotic or didactic themes with Hollywood-style sets and special effects, came to be favored as a frontrunner for the major national film award ceremonies, such as the Huabiao Awards, the Golden Rooster Awards, and the Hundred Flower Awards.

Nomination not only translates into monetary awards, but also guarantees box office revenues, as work units or school youths are often taken to see these films for their patriotic education's worth (Green 341-42).⁸ Xie Jin's 1997 *The Opium War* (*Yapian zhanzheng* 鴉片戰爭), an epic film whose release coincided with the return of Hong Kong to China, is a case in point. With a budget of 15 million dollars, it was the most expensive Chinese film produced at the time; it also became the most successful film that year, accounting for thirty-seven per-

cent of the domestic box office (Callahan 48). *The Opium War* won the 1997 Golden Rooster Award and the 1998 Hundred Flowers Awards for Best Picture and was widely screened at international film festivals.

The Opium War was not the only leitmotif blockbuster that year meant to keep the memory of British imperialism alive. *Red River Valley* (*Hong begu* 紅河谷), by director Feng Xiaoning 馮小寧 about the British invasion of Tibet in 1904, retold Britain's violent attack on Lhasa and the romance between a Chinese girl and a Tibetan herdsman foiled as a result.⁹ It would be wrong, however, to consider movies like *The Opium War* or *Red River Valley* as simple propaganda. *Red River Valley*, especially, succeeded in genuinely exciting its domestic audience and scored a high 7.6 rating on Douban, a popular Chinese social network service that allows users to rank movies on a 0-10 scale and to comment on them. Boasting a total of fifty-three million registered users in 2011, Douban's movie forums function as what Aynne Kokas has termed "blended public sphere," a space that, while not beyond government censorship, functions as a quasi public sphere where users give personal opinions and exhibit their viewing tastes in user-generated forums (Kokas 150–52). As such, Douban provides spontaneous and relatively unedited viewer responses that tend to provide more reliable data on viewer preferences.¹⁰

In a partly deregulated and increasingly competitive Chinese marketplace, largely dominated by Hollywood cinema,¹¹ leitmotif cinema has become emblematic of a condition that cultural critics now tend to refer as "post-socialist" and that is characterized, according to Sheldon Lu, by the "the coexistence of multiple temporalities and modes of production, the symbiosis of capitalism and socialism, and the embodiment of continuities as well as discontinuities." He adds that a "special form of political culture with Chinese characteristics" has meant that Chinese filmmakers, since the 1990s, have had to navigate changes in the studio and distribution systems, and have found themselves simultaneously being accountable to box office demands and to government censors (Lu 211). Their films are expected to be aligned with the goals of patriotic education while being successful with Chinese viewers and, if possible, with international viewers as well. Purification of the film market from the "spiritual pollution of bourgeois liberalization" is achieved by repackaging doctrinal orthodoxy in precisely those bourgeois values leitmotif cinema was meant to combat.

If leitmotif cinema can be considered symptomatic of the post-socialist condition in China in general, it simultaneously is characteristic of a condition that Slavoj Žižek describes as ideological inversion: "When some procedure is denounced as "ideological" par excellence, one can be sure that its inversion is no less ideological" (Žižek, *Ideology* 4). Inversion, in an Althusserian sense, is essential for the workings of ideology (Althusser 100–140), and it is through its promotion of leitmotif cinema that the Chinese state emerges as a guardian of its revolutionary tradition and founding myths and as a champion of economic liberalization and prosperity. The restructuring of the China Film Group Corporation, a behemoth founded in 1949 to control all aspects of Chinese film production and distribution and responsible for the production of leitmotif cinema, exemplifies the Party's attempt to establish mechanisms to safeguard its own interests in the domestic market and to maximize its profitability. The China Film Group Corporation currently oversees China's foremost media corporations as well as dozens of subsidiaries responsible for post-production, equipment leasing, marketing and merchandizing, optical disc manufacture, advertising, property management, and real estate development (Yeh and Davis 40–42).

Jackie Chan's *CZ12* perfectly illustrates that emblematic condition of Chinese leitmotif

cinema in which film-makers consider both the state's political agenda and box office success. Chan, a native of Hong Kong where he became one of the city's most successful actors and producers before conquering Hollywood in the 1990s with martial arts comedies like *Rumble in the Bronx* or *Rush Hour*, has recently turned his attention to the Chinese film market and has produced films with patriotic themes—his 2011 epic *1911* (*Xinbai geming* 辛亥革命) depicting China's first revolution is a good example. Shortly after moving the main office of his production company, JCE Movies, from Hong Kong to Beijing in 2012, Chan was appointed to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, an appointment akin to a symbolic stamp of approval from the political elite in Beijing. On 12 December 2012, the premiere of *CZ12*, a coproduction between JCE and China Film Group, was shown to great acclaim at the Beijing National Indoor Stadium and it was subsequently showered with national awards, including the Huabiao Award for most outstanding coproduction. It went on to become the second-highest-grossing Chinese movie of that year with box office revenue of 22.7 million dollars. Jackie Chan has publicly and frequently vowed that to strengthen China's image abroad (Smith). Not surprisingly China, in *CZ12*, becomes the patron of countries that have suffered similar plunder of their national heritage on account of Western imperialism. More important, however, is the fact that this message is not only heard in China but, by virtue of Jackie Chan's global following, also in cinemas throughout the world. The CCP's annexation of Chan, Jamie Wolf has observed, may turn out to be one of the greatest benefits arising from the Hong Kong reunification with China in 1997 (Wolf). *CZ12* was the most successful movie of 2012 in China; it also went on to break box office records in Malaysia and Singapore and, even though it received bland reviews in the U.S. and Europe, its multi-national cast and the loyalty of Jackie Chan's fans guaranteed its global success, arguably turning it into the first internationally successful leitmotif film.

In China, Jackie Chan had a devout following long before any of his movies were officially distributed, but it is Jackie Chan's appeal as a martial arts actor that typically brings audiences to the cinema. Thus, while some state-affiliated publications emphasized the educational value of Chan's patriotic overtures in *CZ12* (Wang 99-100), most Chinese reviewers were notably vexed by the politicization of what had widely been advertised as Chan's very last martial arts action movie. Acknowledging that Jackie Chan's stunts still manage to gratify his fans, Di Ji-annong 狄建農, for example, finds nothing but ridiculousness in the plots. "I find it difficult to believe how an educated woman studying in France can suddenly . . . turn into a raging chauvinist who alternately uses Chinese, English, and French to force her world view and values on the audience," he comments on the transformation of a female protagonist. "Not even primary school students want to hear that kind of talk" (Di 10). He believes that a movie should convey its message by way of successful cinematography because, if conveyed by way of rigid and insidious dialog, "even an action movie can turn into a propaganda tool. After all, who would want to see Spider Man scale a skyscraper clad in the Stars and Stripes?" (10). Many reviews on Douban, where *CZ12* received a cumulative rating of 6.8, were no less direct. While reviewers generally complemented an aging Jackie Chan on his stunts and acrobatics, much disenchantment was expressed about the plot: "Three words: Totally crappy movie (*dalanpian* 大爛片). Plot was stupid, and the whole patriotism propaganda thing just totally messed it up. Appropriate for audiences younger than ten," was how an angry reviewer put it.¹²

Jackie Chan, however, has remained acutely aware of the larger political and economic significance of the zodiac heads and the movie's patriotic theme. Late in 2012, during a sol-

emn ceremony, Chan donated a set of twelve zodiac replicas originally made for the movie set to the Yuanmingyuan Museum, which for a time displayed them in their original location in the Old Summer Palace, amidst the rubble of the pillaged Western Mansions. During a similar ceremony the following year, French billionaire patriarch François Pinault, owner of the famed Bordeaux vineyard Château Latour and one of the wealthiest men in France, further donated two of the original bronze heads, the rat's and the rabbit's, both of which had been at the center of the Yves Saint Laurent auction in 2009, to China's National Museum. Soon after the ceremony, Pinault, one of whose companies incidentally owns Christie's, announced that Christie's had been granted a license that would enable it to become the first international auction house to operate independently on the Chinese mainland. Victor Hugo's prophesy that "a day will come when France, freed and cleansed, will send back such loot to a despoiled China" has, at least partly, been fulfilled (Broudehoux 59).

Such acts serve as a reminder of the complex relationship between art and politics in contemporary China, a relationship that, on the one hand, continues to be governed by concerns for ideological orthodoxy while, on the other hand, is increasingly subjected to the logic of neo-liberal economics. Žižek's critique of ideology again proves insightful when applied to the phenomenon of the zodiac heads. Precisely because the CCP, Žižek reminds us, is aware that it can no longer assert its discursive hegemony through doctrinal orthodoxy alone, it continues to control the majority in most Chinese companies that forge co-operations with Western investors. As a result, the CCP "can have their cake and eat it: economic liberalization is combined with the continuation of Party rule" (Žižek, *End Times* 440). Ideology thus is no longer an illusion masking reality, but a fantasy that is structuring social reality (Žižek, *Desert of the Real* 12–18). Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals/ Zodiac Heads*, as noted, was partially conceived to unmask this ideological fantasy, to critique the CCP's subversion of the zodiacs for political purposes, and to challenge audience's notions of what is real and what is fake. In light of Žižek's observations concerning the unpredictable workings of ideology, it then seems even more ironic that it was not Ai's zodiac heads, but rather Jackie Chan's *CZ12* that threw, in the words of Comolli and Narboni, "obstacles in the way of ideology" (Comolli and Narboni 62), at least in the eyes of Chinese audiences and of those critics quoted above. Jackie Chan's *CZ12*, a movie that by all counts meets the criteria for films that are "imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form" made these viewers all the more conscious of the farce of the state's ideological project (Comolli and Narboni 61).¹³

Ai's intention was, of course, to disturb ideologically colored narratives, at home and abroad. As he stated, his intention was to question the worth of the original heads whose value and national significance he believed had been grossly inflated by the state's intervention and the subsequent media hype. What Ai intended, then, was what Jacques Rancière has described as the aesthetic practice of political art whereby an artist tries to intervene in the space connecting "aesthetics" and "politics" to question forms of descriptions and interpretations that have supposedly become self-evident (Rancière 77). In fact, Ai Weiwei's reputation among Western critics as China's most important contemporary artist rests precisely on his perceived role as ideological arbitrator of contemporary political and economic realities in China. Speaking about the contemporary significance of his work, Ai claims that "it could be cultural, political, or social, and also it could be art. . . . I always want people to be confused" (Ai 63). This utterance, however, also gives voice to a contradiction inherent in much post-modern politicized art, namely the absence of clear criteria for establishing what Rancière calls "a cor-

respondence between aesthetic virtue and political virtue” (Rancière 57). This contradiction became painfully apparent when one of six sets of Ai’s *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* in gold and bronze, produced for the world tour, went up for auction at London’s Phillips in 2015. Dwarfing the price fetched for the original zodiacs to date sold at auction, Ai’s installations sold for a record 4.4 and 5.4 million dollars respectively (Voien).

The bronze zodiac heads stand as a powerful reminder of China’s fraught relationship with its own modern history and its post-socialist present. They also may be read as a symbol of China’s participation in multi-local processes as well as transregional and transnational interactions that reflect the shifting spaces of contemporary aesthetics, politics, and economics in post-socialist China and beyond. Whether through Jackie Chan’s movie or Ai Weiwei’s installation, the notion is either to confirm or to defy the appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics or the aesthetics of politics. This observation counters the claim that art and politics should not be mixed—they intermix, as Rancière reminds us (Rancière 57-58). Yet it is precisely this realization that reinforces the power of Ai’s installation to disturb the dominant ideology. While Rancière insists on the ontologically social nature of aesthetics, he clearly prioritizes the latter, because he sees aesthetics as the determinant of what presents itself to sensorial experience, thus empowering sensitized artists, critics, and audiences to engage authority through aesthetic means. And while a critic imbued by an exemplary political awareness may interpret either (or both) Ai Weiwei’s or Jackie Chan’s aestheticization of the original zodiacs as a commentary on the at times contradictory realities of China’s socioeconomic order, both artists’ works might, in Rancière’s words, just as easily “be denounced as reactionary nihilism or even considered to be pure formal machines without political content” (57). Witnesses who viewed the burning of the Old Summer Palace reported that the fires that destroyed the splendid gardens continued on for days. It seems that more than a hundred and fifty years later, the smoke that once engulfed the site of the original zodiac heads has still not entirely cleared.

Notes

¹ Note the use of the term “Chinese” in its broadest and most general sense. While Jackie Chan, a native of Hong Kong, in his early movies portrayed a distinct Hong Kong culture, his recent films, as Yiu-Wai Chu has convincingly argued, actively contribute to the formation of a new transnational imaginary of Chineseness that is exported for the consumption of Western audiences and no longer distinguishes between the local and the national (Chu 99).

² In fact, *ArtReview* has continuously ranked him among the top twenty-five most influential artists since 2010 (“Ai Weiwei.”) & (Stevens 54).

³ Other locations included New York, London, Los Angeles, Taipei, Houston, Kiev, Washington, Toronto, Mexico City, Malaga, Paris and Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Because Ai produced multiple sets, exhibitions could be held simultaneously in different locales. For a full exhibition schedule, see the official website:

http://www.zodiacheads.com/world_tour_bronze.html.

⁴ Founded in 1992, Poly Group began as a weapons supplier to the PLA, but has since branched out into international trading, real estate, and the culture industry. It has also become the third-largest auction house in the world, after Christie’s and Sotheby’s (Bowley).

⁵ A debate over the future of the Old Summer Palace had already begun in the 1980s between proponents of renovation, who supported the reconstruction of the gardens as they

were at the peak of their nineteenth century splendor, and supporters of preservation, who advocated for the site to be preserved as a historic relic (Broudehoux 64-68). No final consensus has been reached; while the central government has continued to emphasize the site's importance for patriotic education, it has also tolerated partial rebuilding and the economic exploitation of the site as a tourist attraction.

⁶ Kristina Kleutghen points out that despite popular belief that the garden was irredeemable wreckage after the burning, nineteenth century records indicate that it could have been repaired. After a few feeble restoration attempts by the throne, however, the gardens instead became a seemingly endless source of loot and building materials for local citizens and the court, which made use of the rubble in the building of the New Summer Palace (*Yiheyuan* 颐和园) (Kleutghen 179). This observation does not diminish the initial crime of palace burning, a crime that led Victor Hugo to express his dismay at how this fabled palace was “devastated by two bandits, one called France and the other one England” (Broudehoux 59).

⁷ Zheng's interpretation seems to be inspired mainly by the fact that Ai's heads rest on stilts, and not on real bodies, as in the originals. Both critics seem to confuse the initial burning of the palaces by Franco-British forces with the attack on Beijing by the Eight-Power Allied Forces in the wake of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900.

⁸ Leitmotif films frequently receive preferential theatrical exhibition over foreign ones. In 2010, officials alarmed over the success of the American blockbuster *Avatar*, decided to pull it from over 1,000 theatres nationwide to make room for the Chinese bio-drama *Confucius* (Green 342).

⁹ Like *The Opium War*, *Red River Valley* was showered with prizes at all Chinese national film award ceremonies; it became the second-highest-grossing domestic motion picture of 1997. Neither movie, however, was able to succeed at the international box office. It is in this respect that *CZ12* differs most notably because it became the first leitmotif film with an international reach.

¹⁰ For ratings, see Douban: <http://movie.douban.com/subject/1305182/>. To contextualize the ratings, I give as an example another popular film that year, James Cameron's *Titanic*, explored a major historical event against the backdrop of romance; it set an all-time box office record in China and scored 8.4 on Douban.

¹¹ When James Cameron's *Avatar* hit the Chinese box office, it was described as “the biggest cinematic event in Chinese history” while his *Titanic 3D* enjoyed the highest opening-weekend performance in China ever and stunned industry watchers when it generated more revenue in China than in the U.S. (Tsui).

¹² For ratings and comments, see Douban:

<http://movie.douban.com/subject/4212172/>.

¹³ Comolli's and Narboni's iconic essay on the classification of movies within the framework of authority is included here precisely because the phenomenon of Chinese leitmotif cinema and its reception by a highly sensitized Chinese audience complicates their canonical approach to classification.

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