



A Chinese Dream by Wang Jin

Wu Hung

Born in 1962 and first trained in traditional Chinese painting at the prestigious Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts), Wang Jin resigned his teaching post and became a freelance artist in 1992. Since then his many performance and environmental projects have made him one of the most socially engaged experimental artists in his native country. A large group of his projects responds to the rapidly growing capitalist economy in China. Some of them comment on the clash and fusion of new and old values by staging ironic combinations of foreign and Chinese symbols. *Knocking at the Door* (1993) consisted of a group of old bricks from the walls of the Forbidden City, each bearing on its uneven surface a suprealistic depiction of an American currency note. Wang Jin continued to produce such “cash bricks” over the following years and used them to “restore” damaged sections of the palace wall. Other projects in this group comment on the inflation of material desires in contemporary Chinese society. For example, a new slang expression for “making a fast buck” is “stir-frying” (*chao*) money. Wang Jin’s 1995 *Quick Stir-Frying RMB* (Chinese



currency) made the verbal expression literal: He rented a space in a famous night market in central Beijing and set up a food stand. With all the aplomb of a master chef he fried a wokful of coins for his customers. A more ambitious project, *Ice: Central China 96*, involved building a thirty-meter-long ice wall in front of a new shopping center in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province. Frozen inside this translucent wall were over a thousand sought-after commercial goods. The show ended with the audience's spontaneous destruction of the wall to get at the goods, thus turning sheer images into material possessions. (For an introduction to Wang Jin's life and works, see Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* [Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art and University of Chicago, 1999], 86–87, 154–59, 189–90.)

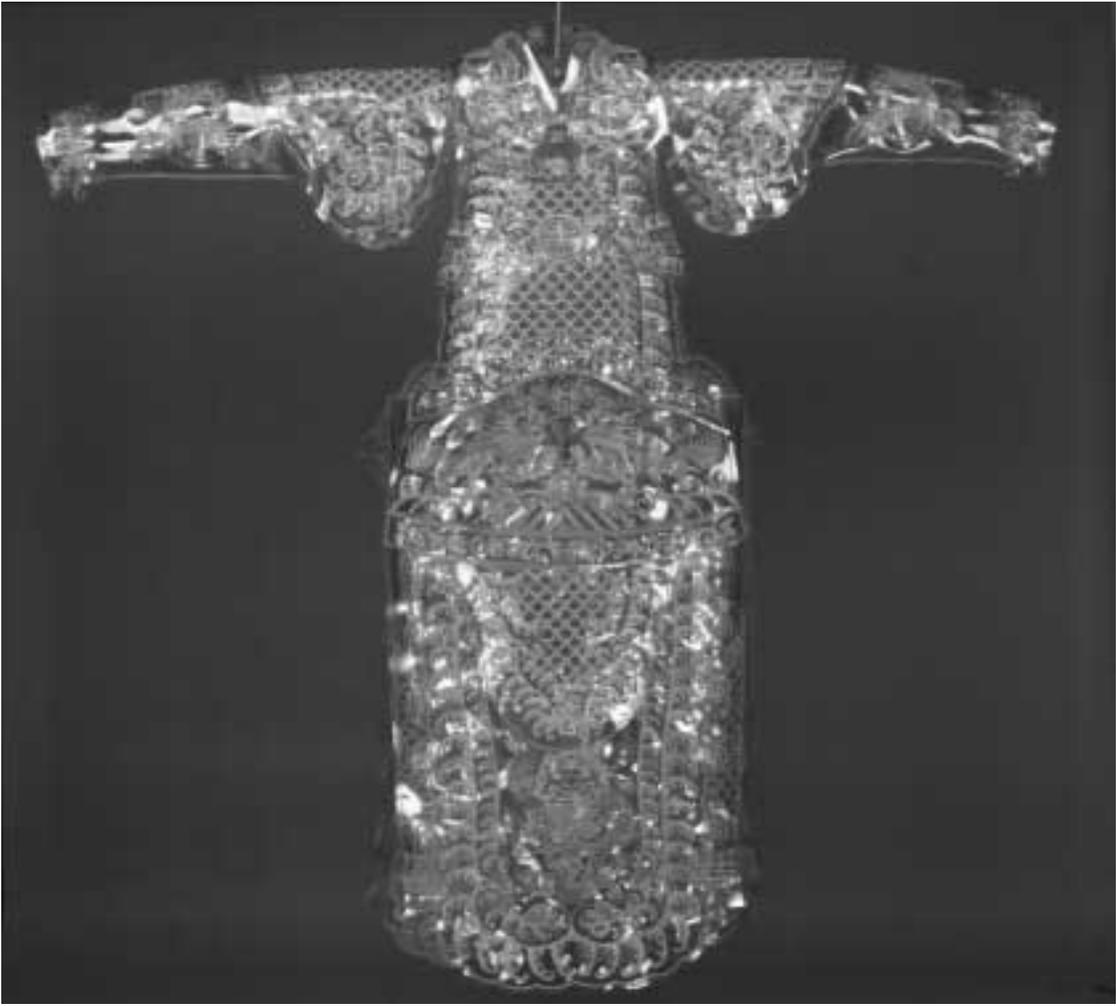
A Chinese Dream (1997–present) represents a new direction of Wang Jin's social critique by focusing on contemporary Chinese art itself. This shift is logical because the practices of this art—its production and circulation, exhibition and collection, reproduction and publication—are all closely related to China's new economic system and to globalization. It is relatively simple to conduct such a critique from the outside, either from outside China or by means of words. But as a visual artist working in China, Wang Jin comments on these practices through an art project first prepared for a domestic exhibition/auction. *A Chinese Dream*, therefore, tests the possibility of his working within the current system of con-

temporary Chinese art while self-consciously reflecting upon this system. This internal position, however, must make the subject and object of his critique interchangeable and thereby runs the risk of being self-parodic, as Wang Jin's ridicule of some general conditions of contemporary Chinese art can and must also be applied to himself. This may explain certain limitations of his critique. As we will see, he most consciously responds to issues of authenticity and commercialization in contemporary Chinese art but is silent about other of its aspects, such as production, reproduction, and collecting. It is worth thinking about the reason for such inconsistency. In this sense, *A Chinese Dream* also offers us an opportunity to reflect upon a self-reflection by a Chinese artist working inside the general operating system of contemporary Chinese art.

This photo essay, therefore, does not simply reiterate the artist's view. Rather, through Wang Jin's project I try to understand both general practices of contemporary Chinese art and the specific practices of an individual artist. In preparing for this essay I have interviewed Wang Jin extensively and studied documents and images related to *A Chinese Dream*, including a large number of photographs taken at different times and places. The selection of the photographs for this essay has little to do with their artistic merit. Rather, the diverse photographic modes or styles of these images help define specific locations of meaning both within Wang Jin's experiment and beyond it.

Picture 1: Presentation

Here, as an isolated physical construct removed from any social situation or narrative context, Wang Jin's *A Chinese Dream* is at its most iconic. Faithfully reproducing the dimensions and design of a Peking Opera costume, Wang has replaced the garment's colorful silk and satin with translucent plastic sheets (PVC). He has retained the fanciful embroidery of the costume but substituted nylon filament for silk thread. The fundamental strategy of the artist is to work with an existing object, duplicating form but substituting matter. Therefore, we cannot analyze this work within an interpretative framework based on *mimesis*, or the relationship between reality and representation, because its method forges a new reality by appropriating an existing one. This new reality is no longer harmonious but is intentionally self-contradictory. In particular, its preindustrial design and industrial material allude to different historical moments and aesthetic sensibilities, and signify simultaneous attachment to and detachment from a particular cultural tradition. Slightly bluish, the costume looks illusory and weightless. (It is actually much heavier than a real silk costume.) Translucent rather than transparent, it is both there and not there, both attracts our eye and diffuses our gaze. On a different level of observation, the composition of the photograph is analogous to a formal portrait, frontal and stable. But the human subject is omitted; the translucency of the remaining costume enhances the feeling of absence and emptiness.



Picture 2: Production

Wang Jin designed *A Chinese Dream*, but he did not make it; it was embroidered in Zhuolu county, Hebei province, by peasant women famous for their fine needlework. This photo, a snapshot taken by the artist himself, shows four women silently working in a farmer's home. None of their faces are clearly visible; their bulky winter clothes contrast with the eerily translucent fabric they work with. It took twenty women a month to embroider a single costume. The making of *A Chinese Dream* thus adopts a prevailing method of production in present-day China, in which an urban entrepreneur hires agricultural laborers to manufacture products according to his design. This mode of production seems again symbolized by the juxtaposition of the costume's preindustrial form and industrial materials. This context also makes apparent that *A Chinese Dream* is actually not a single work by an individual artist (as the previous photograph has led us to believe) but a series of works coproduced by an employer-designer and a group of laborers. Here the employer-designer is a cosmopolitan "avant-garde" artist based in China's capital who frequently travels abroad. The laborers are folk artists in their own right; they have become "laborers" in this specific project because they work purely for money and because they are completely ignorant of the meaning of their work: The reason for embroidering plastic sheets with "fish threads" is utterly beyond their understanding of art. *A Chinese Dream* brings these two groups of contemporary Chinese artists into a single artistic production in which their identities as artists are negotiated and redefined in accordance with their economic relationship.



Wang Jin

Picture 3: Exhibition/Auction

Wang Jin made his first *A Chinese Dream* gown for a special exhibition/auction in Beijing. Organized by the art critic Leng Lin in collaboration with the Sungari International Auction Company, the 1997 event was advertised as a joint venture of intellectuals and businessmen to test the social mobility of art in contemporary China. When invited to submit a work to the event, Wang Jin came up with the plan of making a “fake” Peking Opera costume. The piece sold during the auction for 82,500 RMB or \$10,000.

With little intended artistry, this photo announces the birth of *A Chinese Dream* as an art object. It shows the grand exhibition hall of the auction house, in which Wang Jin’s plastic costume is displayed in a large glass case. A poster in the foreground—“‘97 Auction of Contemporary Chinese Art and Works by Modern Western Masters”—provides this and other works in the exhibition/auction with a global framework of art and commerce. The status of *A Chinese Dream* as a valuable commodity was firmly established—the impressive sale price certified its artistic and economic worth. It was admired as a work of originality, and its significance was discussed in the historical context of Chinese art. It acquired not only an international audience but also an individual authorship; its coauthored production phase retreated into a prehistorical oblivion. From now on, *A Chinese Dream* would be associated only with the name Wang Jin.



中國當代藝術
暨西方現代文獻
作品集
拍賣會

Picture 4: Home Sale

The 1997 exhibition/auction was a “home sale.” The targeted customers were foreigners traveling to China, and indeed *A Chinese Dream* was purchased by one of them. The Chinese and English titles which Wang Jin provided for this work were ironical, conveying a strong sense of “tourist art” and implying the non-Chinese identity of a potential buyer. (The Chinese title is *Hongchen Zhongguo*, or *Material China*.) This self-awareness of the work’s commercial nature explains Wang Jin’s appropriation of a Peking Opera costume. While Peking Opera has not died in China, it has been transformed into a major tourist attraction, staged in old gardens or five-star hotels. The “authentic cultural experience” it offers is entirely about surface: The theater is decorated with plastic flowers and garish paint; the plays are selected to meet the fascination with acrobatic-like fighting scenes and with the characters’ exotic dresses. Making a Peking Opera costume out of a modern, plastic material, Wang Jin captures this spurious notion of “cultural authenticity” in various contemporary China arts.

Going a step further, Wang Jin brought his next version of *A Chinese Dream* to the Imperial Summer Palace, a must-visit spot for every tourist. This photo registers a moment when a crowd of foreign and domestic tourists approach the costume along the famous Long Corridor: Some study it as a curiosity; others walk by without noticing. None take it seriously as art.



Picture 5: Going Global

Wang Jin has made nine versions of *A Chinese Dream*; none of them can be found in China at this moment. Three pieces are touring America, five have entered private collections in Switzerland and France, and one belongs to the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan. A location such as the latter is commonly considered the most ideal by a Chinese artist, not only because it means international recognition but because it fundamentally changes the nature of the work. An exhibition, no matter how important, is temporary, while entering a private collection often means the disappearance of a work from public view. Being collected by an art museum of international stature is a different matter: The work finds a permanent global home and now belongs to humankind. On the part of the museum, an acquisition demands not only money and interest but also faith and commitment; a “notable acquisition” enriches its self-image and generates a sense of victory.

Such a joint triumph of the artist and the museum is gloriously celebrated by a series of photographs of *A Chinese Dream* produced by the Fukuoka Museum after it acquired the work. The stage is set at a tranquil seashore, when the turquoise sky turns orange along the horizon. Against the setting sun the costume becomes almost transparent; only its embroidered patterns are suspended in the air like a miraculous vision. The photographer is clearly taking his cues from the title *A Chinese Dream*. No longer ironic, the title comes to inspire a universal appreciation of beauty.



Picture 6: An Imaginary Return

After all versions of *A Chinese Dream* had gone abroad, an effort was made to reconnect them with China through staged photographic images. In an imaginary return to a fictional origin, these images detached themselves from the actual object(s) to generate a visual field on their own. The photos, as arty as the Fukuoka ones, were made by Chinese photographers and situated Wang Jin's costume(s) in typical Chinese environments. One sequence by Chen Yu takes place in Beihai Park, a former imperial garden in central Beijing. The glowing costume is hung amidst ornamental rocks in front of a lotus pond, a poetic setting endlessly depicted in traditional Chinese painting. This image comes from another sequence, shot outside the wall of the Forbidden City. With some effort, the photographer spotted a portion of this ancient wall that had escaped recent repair. The image is deliberately two-dimensional and dreamlike. The dilapidated appearance of the wall further arouses a sentiment of nostalgia. Enhanced by the gentle bluish hue of the photograph, this ruined wall also supplies a mild sense of tragedy to the two beautiful costumes, one for a man and one for a woman, hanging against it. The pairing of the costumes in this environment evokes the numerous romances in traditional plays and novels. Like the Fukuoka photos, this image takes the costumes' title *A Chinese Dream* literally but interprets it as a dream resurrected from China's historic memory. Thus while such images transform the costume(s) into a different art medium, ideologically they often lead us full circle: Wang Jin created the costumes to deconstruct the "cultural authenticity" of contemporary Chinese art, but in these staged photographs the costumes are used to reconstruct the same "cultural authenticity."



Chen Yu

Picture 7: Reactivating

But an imaginary return can go deeper than a supernatural reconstruction of a historical environment. In a bold move, Wang Jin abolished *A Chinese Dream*'s status as an independent art object when he used it in a performance he undertook in 1998 at the site of the Ming imperial tombs outside Beijing. For the first time the costume was worn, and it was the artist himself who filled this translucent shell. Shi Xiaobing's photograph wonderfully captures the moment when Wang Jin swirled around under the tomb's brooding gate-tower. His disheveled hair floats against the light but his face merges into shadow: Here is an image between day and night, life and death. Stretching both arms open, he seems to be displaying the shimmering costume with its intricate embroidery. No longer holding our gazes, however, the costume focuses our eyes only on the dark body it contains.

Through this performance Wang Jin is able to reclaim *A Chinese Dream* from its social circulation and to reactivate it in a new field of signification. Before this moment *A Chinese Dream* had been functioning exclusively as an art object—a material entity to be displayed and possessed. But its independent objecthood disappeared when the artist reemerged to embody it. Replying to my inquiries about his performance, therefore, Wang Jin never mentioned its intended meaning or symbolism but only talked about his feeling when he put on the costume: Suddenly the plastic material seemed to disappear and expose him, and the embroidered patterns were like brush lines painted on his skin. Vulnerable yet empowered, he began to dance, his inscribed body like a living image.



Shi Xiaobing

Coda: Textualization

This essay has traced the metamorphosis of an art object through a series of sites: production, auction, exhibition, reproduction, and performance. At each site, *A Chinese Dream* assumed a different meaning and appearance, and that meaning and appearance helped to define the site as a social, cultural, and economic construct. The final site to add to the map is this essay—itsself an artistic/art historical endeavor that introduces its own dilemmas.

An artistic project to the extent that it arranges a fresh assembly of images, this essay accomplishes an exhibition in print. As such, it supplements and counters an earlier exhibition I curated at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art in 1999, which featured two of Wang's costumes. The artful presentation and lighting of the exhibition emphasized the gowns' beauty, distinguishing them as "original works of art"—a distinction upon which gallery shows are heavily dependent. But while this presentation made a striking visual impression, it did so at the risk of obscuring the complexity of the work's social content.

The present essay contextualizes this manner of presentation and the conventions of gallery exhibition. In so doing it obeys a different set of conventions, those used in an art historical analysis. Such an analysis requires the transformation of an object into a print image arranged in textual space. In the seven pictures reproduced in this essay, Wang Jin's costume(s) has lost size, volume, color, weight, and most of the other qualities that constitute its materiality. Framed on individual pages, these pictures are paired with text to compose a narrative meant to be both visual and textual. But it is also clear that the visual component is framed by the textual one. The "artistic endeavor" in this case, therefore, is actually a practice in art history, which not only explains images but also produces them.

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