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World Systems Perspectives and Art: A Case Study of the Museum of Contemporary Tibetan Art in the Netherlands

Introduction

As the highest region on Earth, the Tibetan Plateau's unique, often inaccessible geographical location has given rise to a distinct culture. Deeply influenced by Buddhism, Tibetan art has a long-standing tradition, which only recently has been affected by external stimuli. Particularly since the People's Republic of China's (PRC) take-over of Tibet in the 1950s, the influx of new roads, railways, and the immigrants and tourists who came with them, have influenced traditional Tibetan culture. Moreover, the loss of Tibetan autonomy has led to a Western spotlight, both politically and culturally and, one could convincingly argue, Tibetan's weakened political position has in turn strengthened Tibet's global cultural status. Yet, the move to the global stage may itself be a threat to Tibet's cultural autonomy. Maintaining traditional Tibetan culture and identity within the dominant Eurocentric cultural world system is problematic, as much previous scholarship has shown.

Given this concern, this paper attempts two objectives. First, we consider world systems theory with regard to the art world, exploring the idea of appropriation of artistic value by the "legitimate" European assessment of artworks created in the global periphery. However, second, we take a unique approach in this exploration by examining a case study where a peripheral culture is resisting appropriation *within* a cultural core country. Exploring the strategies by which a contemporary Tibetan art museum, established in the Netherlands, promotes its artwork offers a paradoxical case for the idea of appropriation and adds to the understanding of world systems theory through the context of art and culture.

Evaluation of Art from the Cultural Periphery: A World Systems Theory Approach

Since the 1970s, when the concept of globalisation started to gain traction, scholars in the social sciences have focused on the complexity of indigenous

interactions with an aggressively expanding European-centred "world system".¹ Generally, the idea of a world system arose from the observation that the power imbalance between so-called "core" and "peripheral" countries has steadily maintained over time. Dismissing the idea that "developing" countries were modernising in a similar way as core countries had in earlier periods, world systems scholars theorise peripheral countries are structurally constrained to experience development processes that reproduce a secondary status.² For example, the periphery is often the low-wage producer of cheap commodities for export to the core. If peripheral labour is a fraction of the cost of core labour, then, during global market exchange, value is inevitably transferred from periphery to core via this imbalance of labour value. Modernisation, therefore, advances the entire global hierarchical system, rather than advancing a single country.

While several scholars note the importance of prestige goods in the reproduction of the global hierarchy, the world systems' concept of periphery versus core cultures is only intermittently employed to understand the art world in specific.³ Generally, research examining the evaluation of artworks from non-Western nations frequently focuses on the appropriation of value by those who live in culturally central countries. The cultural-core expertise on non-Western artworks often translates to the "discovery" of art in peripheral nations. In examining "the 'anonymous' world of Third World craftsmanship," Price finds that the "Western observer's discriminating eye is often treated as if it were the only means by which an ethnographic object could be elevated to the status of a work of art".⁴ Indeed, Braden finds that among recognized art collectors, those who live in Europe or the United States (i.e., the cultural core) but collect art from peripheral countries receive significantly greater critical recognition.⁵ This finding is evocative given that collecting similar artworks from peripheral regions, while also living in these peripheral regions, results in significantly less international

recognition as a “top” art collector.

The ability to control wide-spread information distribution significantly aids the core in appropriating peripheral aesthetics. The core culture’s control of international media outlets habitually allows emphasising desired content while also controlling how the description, explanation, and historical accounting of this content is presented. This is not to say that more multi-cultural, inclusive representations have not been undertaken in the art world. For example, Lechner and Boli examine the globalising efforts of *documenta*, the contemporary art exhibition in Kassel, Germany - specifically the 2002 show where 80 international art world “practitioners” formed a “critical model” to address realities in African nations.⁶ Yet, even within this example, the global “critical model” is prompted by, considered within, and inevitably (implicitly or explicitly) influenced by the global core (here, Germany).

Several world systems theorists suggest a “world culture” may offer greater equity in artistic valuation, where the definition and valuing of an art object would be subject to global debate and structured on global ideas universally applied.⁷ Theorists such as Malraux (1948; and, in digital extension, Battro 2010), suggest that globalisation may offer a more decontextualised concept of art, an “imagined museum” whereby artworks are removed from their definitional environment and seen only as “products of human creativity”.⁸ While the rise of photography and, more recently, the digital age may move us closer to de-contextualised representations of art and perhaps even a greater shared understanding of meaning, who controls representation and, through extension, evaluation is still a salient concern.

One apprehension about the idea of a rising global culture is that it will largely represent the beliefs and preferences of the dominant cultural core. In modern media, culturally central countries tend to look inward and underrepresent foreign culture. The foreign culture that is represented is often re-fashioned for core cultural consumption. For example, Janssen, Kuipers, and Verboord find that the more central a country is, the

more core-orientated their newspaper coverage of foreign arts and culture becomes.⁹

Given the importance of contextualisation in the global understanding of art, this research looks at a case study where an organisation from a peripheral culture/nation, Tibet, is attempting to control the evaluation of its art *within* the context of the global core. This work has similarities to regional research such as Griswold and Wright, where regional distinction is not only maintained but increased through the education of outsiders in indigenous art (specifically for Griswold and Wright, through literature).¹⁰ The modification of the present research is that we examine a peripheral culture’s attempt to educate “outsiders” within the outsider’s own culture and region. We argue that within the world systems perspective, peripheral artworks will be valued by core cultures. However, a possible means by which to combat appropriation is to have the peripheral culture familiarise core residents on the way in which they should understand and value the artworks.

Case Study: The Museum of Contemporary Tibetan Art in Emmen, the Netherlands

At the end of 2016, the Emmen Municipality in the Eastern part of the Netherlands decided to create a cultural destination and creative industry hub from the defunct Emmen Zoo, one of the city’s former major attractions. Billed as a place for recreation and tourism, but mostly as an incubator for arts, innovation, and creativity, the Creatief Mensenpark (“Creative People Park”) inaugurated with almost 20 organisations, ranging from art galleries to ceramic workshops, theatres to welfare foundations. One of these initiatives is the Museum of Contemporary Tibetan Art (MCTA), housed in the former Zoo Restaurant ‘t Paviljoen (see fig. 01). Opening to the public in June 2017, MCTA is a small operation, principally consisting of two directors, Tashi Norbu and Marjanne Tholen. Tashi Norbu, an artist himself, serves as the artistic director. His role is primarily curatorial, setting the artistic goals for the museum, overseeing the exhibition space, and maintaining connections with the Tibetan artistic community.



Fig. 1 Front Entrance of Museum of Contemporary Tibetan Art in Emmen; the Netherlands

His partner, Marjanne Tholen, is the business director, running the day-to-day operations and serving as the museum's public spokesperson. In addition, the museum is aided by a pool of approximately 20 volunteers that rotate as staff for the museum, welcoming visitors, assisting with tours, and supporting the museum's many workshops.

The MCTA is largely the initiative by Tashi Norbu. Norbu is a Bhutan born Tibetan, first educated in the traditional Tibetan *thangka* style while living in Dharamsala, India. Moving to Ghent, Belgium in 2000, Norbu earned several additional degrees in contemporary European visual arts at the Vrije Academie, Loods 13, and Saint Lucas. In conjunction with running the museum, Norbu is a successful contemporary artist. His artwork is displayed in museums and art galleries across the world, including the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam (NL), Huis van Alijn in Ghent (BE), and the Tibet House in New York (USA). Recently, Norbu's 15-foot-tall artwork *Urban Buddha* was placed in Grant Park's Bridgeport Arts Center in Chicago.

In examining Norbu's life and work, it becomes evident that the realisation of a museum for Tibetan art in Europe is a long-held ambition. Living in the Netherlands since 2007, Norbu's first art gallery and lending art library, 9 Pillars, is in the small Dutch town Wormer, opening in 2010 and still in operation. The current Museum of Contemporary Tibetan Art in Emmen represents a more complete realisation of Norbu's ambition. The museum is divided in two major sections, a commercial gallery and an exhibition space, which is for education and appreciation. The gallery

largely displays and sells artworks by Norbu. In December 2017, he had twenty artworks for sale, ranging in price from 560 € to 9.000 €. The average price of his art is around 2.500 €.

MCTA's exhibition space displays a variety of Tibetan artists. These works, not for sale, consist primarily of paintings, however, also encompass sculpture, Tibetan scroll paintings (*thangka*), and photography. The museum has a small permanent collection, consisting of approximately 25 artworks. Temporary exhibitions offer a rotating array of other Tibetan artists for visitors to experience. The idea behind the museum is to bring Eastern and Western aesthetics into conversation, and the Tibetan artists represented in exhibition demonstrate this exchange. The majority of artworks on display are embedded in the traditional *thangka* style, but, in Norbu's words, combine "Western contemporary elements". The works showcase Tibetan-Buddhist images and texts with Western components. For example, fig. 2 demonstrates a contemporary approach to the traditional *thangka* painting. In this *thangka*, in addition to the traditional image of Buddha, Norbu added coloring and style references to Jackson Pollock, the founder of Action Painting. Rather than using silk brocade, typical for *thangka* style art works, Norbu chose to work with blue cloth styled in Dutch *Delfts Blauw* design.



Fig. 2 Tashi Norbu; Tibetan Thangka in Exile 01; 2013; Dutch fabric, enamel paints on canvas; 168 x 133 cm; Wormer, 9 Pillars Contemporary Art Studio

Thangkas traditionally consist of a Tibetan-Buddhist image painted on fabric and edged with brocade. Working on fabric allows for portability and *thangkas* are created to be rolled up completely, traditionally, so that they may be easily transported for travel. In Norbu's art, the usually common images of divinities, myths, or historical events are replaced by a repetitive image of a Tibetan prayer wheel for example. He displays the Tibetan prayer wheel in a symbolic 8 x 7 configuration, where the eight horizontal rows exemplify the concept of *karma* and the seven vertical rows represent the seven circles of the universe and the seven world wonders. Other artists displayed in the museum, such as Gonkar Gyatso, Sonam Dolma, and Tenzing Rigdol, engage in a similar "East meets West" discourse. These artists combine Tibetan symbols with Western art conventions, which the artists studied at various European and American art institutions. For example, Tulku Jamyang, another artist exhibited at the MCTA, is recognised as a reincarnated Lama from the Nyingma lineage. While trained in traditional Tibetan arts, Jamyang identifies with Western artistic influences such as Marcel Duchamp and Gerhard Richter.

While the combination of Eastern and Western aesthetics is at the core of the museum's mission, promoting the "artistic, cultural, and historical matters of Tibetan Art ... reflecting [the] adjustment of Tibetan Art and culture in the West" (MCTA website, retrieved 7 January 2018), the museum takes this mission further than just artistic content - MCTA also offers an expanding array of special events. Lectures, workshops, and live painting are part of an extensive activity and educational program. For example, on the 9th of December 2017, the Museum hosted one of several live painting occasions. During this event, filmed by the BBC for a documentary on Tibetan art in Europe, Tashi Norbu, accompanied by a small ensemble of classical musicians, created a new work for a live audience. Similar events are scheduled to take place regularly in the museum.

MCTA is also involved with the Tibet Support Group Netherlands, an activist group that promotes Tibetan national independence and political sovereignty. With the Tibet Support Group, the museum organises and

sponsors events to promote and preserve Tibetan culture through art. For instance, in October 2017, a permanent exhibition opened at MCTA, focusing on the "three main life commitments of the Dalai Lama: the promotion of human values [...] inter-religious harmony and the preservation of Tibet's Buddhist culture and Tibet's national environment both of which are under threat of destruction under Chinese occupation".¹¹ Within this promotion effort, the museum actively looks outside the Tibetan community to educate broader European audiences on Tibet's artwork - and the current political situation. Employing an educational program that focuses on engaging wider European audiences allows the museum to promote awareness and support of Tibetan art, culture, and heritage, but also allows the museum to frame outsider, particularly European, perceptions of Tibet. The education programs, then, also serve as a promotional tool to shape European awareness of Tibetan history, as well as promote and influence understandings of the region's current troubled political situation.

Working within the World System: Promoting Peripheral Culture to a Dominate Audience

Working within the dominant cultural system of Northern Europe offers opportunities as well as difficulties for peripheral cultural enterprises such as MCTA. Obviously, the major opportunity offered by engaging the cultural core is the possibility of attaining wide-ranging attention from a wealthy and powerful audience. Yet, as argued earlier, attention from the cultural core comes with the threat of appropriation and possible exploitation and misuse of message. Numerous historical examples have shown that proponents and even creators from peripheral regions are often discounted in lieu of more "legitimate" voices from the dominant core. Tagging peripheral voices as naïve, unsophisticated, provincial, or inexpert allows those from the cultural core to delegitimise original understandings of peripheral art and assert their own aesthetic viewpoints and meanings.

Our interest in MCTA is based in their attempt to circumvent appropriation by controlling the presentation and understanding of their artwork within the cultural

core. Through participant observation, interviews, and content analysis of MCTA's critical coverage, we found two major means by which the staff at MCTA have attempted to safeguard their autonomy and expertise while engaging dominant audiences: 1) the use of Western aesthetic conventions and 2) controlling associated political discourse.

“Borrowing”: Purposeful Use of Western Aesthetic Conventions

MCTA advances a twofold agenda: First, to introduce an array of Tibetan artists to Northern European audiences and, second, to blend traditional Tibetan art with Western elements. Norbu on several occasions proffered that, in the future, the museum will not only host Tibetan artists, but also “other” artists, specifically from Western contemporary art. Aesthetically, the Museum offers art which integrates Western artistic conventions into traditional Tibetan work; see fig. 3 as an example.



Fig. 3 Tashi Norbu; Propaganda and Catharsis; 2017; acrylics on canvas; 120 x 150 cm; Emmen, Museum of Contemporary Tibetan Art

In this artwork, Norbu visibly mixes Eastern and Western aesthetics. Initially, we can discern the image of a Buddha, a primary image within Tibetan culture. However, Norbu uses a painting technique unknown in traditional Tibetan art: action painting. Somewhat

similar to the work of Jackson Pollock, Norbu applies thick, colourful layers of paint, making the Buddha almost three dimensional. Furthermore, the work demonstrates strong influences from post-impressionists, such as the vitality found in the work of Vincent van Gogh, and the conceptualism of abstract-expressionism, reminiscent of Willem de Kooning's artwork.

In general, MCTA's goal of blending Tibetan and Western aesthetics goes beyond merely presenting contemporary Tibetan artwork, but rather serves to engage and familiarise Western audiences. That is, by integrating Western elements within the scope of traditional Tibetan art forms, MCTA offers contemporary Tibetan work as a dialogue between East and West, rather than a dichotomy. The dialogue allows for outsider European audiences to identify their own Western artistic conventions within the artwork before acquainting themselves with the unknown, “foreign” aspects of Tibetan art. This facilitates a soft introduction, where the audience can approach the artworks with immediate recognition and feelings of familiarity, connecting European audiences with the work and, therefore, establishing an immediate sense of cultural common ground. Similarly, bringing contemporary European artists to work with Tibetan artists establishes a kinship between European and Tibetan art worlds, where the artists easily intermix and associate. Overall, rather than presenting Tibetan art as a “new” or “exotic” aesthetic, MCTA seeks to mingle Eastern and Western conventions as a way of promoting Tibetan art's accessibility, familiarity, and, as a consequence, legitimacy with European audiences.

The approach of “borrowing” or using Western conventions within a peripheral region's artistic work is particularly note-worthy given the historic use of “foreign” or “primitive” conventions within Western art. A famous example of this is the 1984/85 exhibition “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The exhibition highlighted the idea that the modernist movement drew inspiration from and, as with Pablo Picasso's first cubist work, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, imitated conventional artistic motifs found in “primitive”

artworks (i.e., the traditional art of culturally peripheral regions). Rather than celebrating these works, the exhibition celebrated the “European eye” that “discovered” and, consequently, “propel[led] these artistic objects to the level of ‘high art’.”¹² Interestingly, the artwork of MCTA also “borrows” cultural motifs, but from the West. While far from claiming a “Tibetan eye,” the use of a culturally dominant region’s aesthetics for the creation of “foreign” Tibetan art may serve to simultaneously connect and disconnect the artwork from the audience in a similar way as with the modern artists - confounding conventions by presenting them unconventionally.

Norbu’s work, along with the explanation given by the artist, offers a possible cultural hybridisation. A term often associated with the work of Homi Bhabha, “hybridity” does not simply insinuate a cross-cultural exchange, as that neglects the underlying inequality of power relations between the dominate and peripheral cultures.¹³ Rather, Bhabha speaks of an international culture not based on exoticism or the diversity of culture, but on the articulation of culture’s multi-vocality. For MCTA, the combination of Eastern and Western aesthetics allows Norbu and the other Tibetan artists to control the dialogue by which their art is understood. Such control is particularly important given that core culture tends to dominate such dialogues. Introducing and defining the dialogue allows these peripheral artists to better control the representation of their artistic objects and, therefore, the explanation and meaning-making that is conferred.

(Dis-)Engaging the Political within Artistic Discourse

In discussing his artwork with the Dutch Buddhist news magazine *Boeddhistisch Dagblad* in early 2017, Norbu maintains he does not engage in a political discourse, nor seeks this within MCTA. However, Norbu’s work, and the artist himself, have been the subject of political agitation. Chinese authorities consider Norbu’s use of yellow umbrellas in his art as a reference to the demonstrations in Hong Kong of 2014, where yellow ribbons and umbrellas were used by some as a sign of solidarity with the protest. Norbu was also briefly

incarcerated in China during 2016 and was almost arrested again days before he was to give a performance in Macao on 5 March 2017.¹⁴

Though not explicitly part of the museum’s mission or rhetoric, MCTA promotes an autonomous Tibet political position. During the opening of the museum on 23 September 2017, Tibetan independence from China was a pervasive topic. The keynote address was given by Tsering Jampa from the International Campaign for Tibet. Jampa used the opportunity to speak about the oppression and destruction of Tibetan culture by the Chinese government. When visiting the museum, leaflets for the Tibet Support Group Netherlands are readily available, touting the aim of supporting the Tibetan people in their efforts towards self-determination. Arguing for democratic freedom for Tibetans, the support group is committed to promoting international recognition of human rights violation in Tibet and view the museum as a platform for this campaign. The support group specifically lauds Norbu as a spokesperson and advocate for maintaining Tibetan culture and heritage in the face of adversity.¹⁵

Using an art organisation as a stage for political resistance is not uncommon in the modern Tibetan diaspora. With the loss of independence in the 1950s, Tibetan artistic expression has become a touchstone for political statement and expression. In trying to oppress this political dialogue, Chinese authorities often label contemporary Tibetan artists as state enemies producing a “degenerate art form”.¹⁶ While Tibetan contemporary artists may find it difficult to separate their art from their homeland’s political struggle, connecting the artwork to a dialogue of peace, liberation, and humanitarianism affords enormous benefits, particularly when presented to Western audiences who tend to highly value efforts for democracy and freedom of expression. Consequently, the Tibetan political struggle provides increased attention for Tibetan artists in Western media, as well as an additional level of socio-political significance and meaning for their art.

MCTA seems to have tapped into the benefits of defining their political ties, while resisting defining their art as overtly political. By explicitly indicating the

museum's political standing, through speakers, associations, educational programs, literature, etc., MCTA engages a pro-Tibet message without labelling their artwork as partisan. This strategy allows others to communicate a political meaning congruent with the museum's ideology but does not sacrifice control over the aesthetic representation and explanation of the artwork. For example, headlines such as "Art that makes Chinese repression forgotten"¹⁷ - one of the many articles written about MCTA - serves to reinforce a political undercurrent in discussions of MCTA's artwork and artists, but without insinuating a meaning about the artwork itself. Such a strategy allows Norbu and the artists of the museum to engage in political discourse without needing to create, label, and defend their work as specifically protest art.

Concluding Remarks

Since the mid-20th century, Tibetan art and culture has received increasing international focus, in large part because of its forced dissolution as an autonomous nation. Global attention helps to garner wide-ranging support and patronage, particularly from Western countries where democracy and autonomy are highly valued. Yet, gaining attention from the cultural core risks the possibility of ceding control of one's message to a more dominant cultural power. Given the often malleable interpretation of artistic products, as well as the historical susceptibility of peripheral cultures to appropriation by dominant cultural interpretations, strategising representation is important.

In recent years, there has been a steady demand for traditional Tibetan art, with rapidly increasing prices at auction. Harris argues that one of the explanations for Tibetan works' increasing value is the result of large-scale removals of cultural objects from Tibet during the absorption of the region into China. Tibetan art, according to Harris, is often treated as religious material, where artistic objects, such as paintings, sculptures, tapestries, etc., are represented as the traditional trappings in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁸ The increase in Tibetan art sales may also be due to a generation of Chinese collectors who are trying to reclaim objects they deem part of their "lost

cultural heritage".¹⁹ Such representations can impede contemporary Tibetan artists, forcing a rhetoric of traditionalism and religious symbolism onto their work.

This paper examines the strategy of one recently-opened artistic organisation attempting to avoid such impediments and maintain control of their artwork's interpretation within a culturally dominant core country. By engaging Western audiences and borrowing Western conventions, MCTA seeks to control the interpretation of their artworks, not by exclaiming the differences between the art styles, but acknowledging and stressing it as a dialogue. Similar to Bhabha's typology, MCTA is not focusing on the exotic or political, but on the articulation of their culture, proposing in their discourse a possible "global culture" where art can create a common ground.²⁰

Endnotes

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Picture Credits

Fig. 1 Naomi Oosterman, 2017

Fig. 2 Tashi Norbu; 9 Pillars Contemporary Art Studio, Wormer

Fig. 3 Tashi Norbu; Museum of Contemporary Tibetan Art, Emmen

Summary

When examining the evaluation of artworks from non-Western nations, research often focuses on the appropriation of value by those who live in culturally central countries over their peripherally located counterparts. Such expertise often translates to the “discovery” of art in peripheral nations. For example, Price (2001: p. 68) examines “the ‘anonymous’ world of Third World craftsmanship” where “Western observer’s discriminating eye is often treated as if it were the only means by which an ethnographic object could be elevated to the status of a work of art.” However, less work explores how non-Western actors exhibit and represent their country’s artwork within a Western context and to Western audiences. The present research uses a case study to explore the way Tibetan artists and curators have established a museum dedicated to Tibetan art in Northern Europe: the Museum of Contemporary Tibetan Art in Emmen, the Netherlands. The mission of this museum is to introduce and promote the “artistic, cultural and historical matters of Tibetan Art [...] reflecting [the] adjustment of Tibetan Art and culture in the West.” This museum is the first in Europe to house and exhibit contemporary Tibetan artworks and officially opened in September 2017. Consequently, our research is the first

to examine this museum and proffer analysis of the museum’s strategies for promoting their artwork. Drawing from a world systems perspective, the overall aim of the research is to provide insight into the representation of culturally peripheral, non-Western art in a culturally dominant, Western context.

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Title

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