

A GROUP DANCE THAT NEVER ENDS

A PLURIVERSAL APPROACH TO *CONTINUUM* –
GENERATION BY GENERATION (2017)

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ABSTRACT

How did the exhibition in the Chinese pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale entitled *Continuum – Generation by Generation (buxi 不息)* mobilize the concept of *buxi*, which translates literally as “endlessness” or “never ceasing”? What does it mean to conceive of art, the world, and oneself through the lens of *buxi*, as endlessly intrarelated? This paper delves into this question from a multi-pronged perspective. First, it explains the meaning of *buxi* and analyzes how the show engages with aesthetic, epistemological, social and political implications of art and the world conceived through a contemporary perspective on the concept of “endlessness”. Second, the paper explores how a reading of the show and the artworks – their adopted aesthetic strategies, media, techniques, and materialities – through the lens of *buxi* complicates the critical and aesthetic framework for contemporary art in the global context. Finally, the paper evaluates the engagement with *buxi* – and the respective alternative processual ontology and temporality of art and world – as a useful mode of decolonizing the discipline of art history, even as it emphasizes the importance of adopting a dynamic pluriversal approach that attends to the transcultural relations that shape and reshape the multiplicity of meanings of art in a global framework, its multiple and entangled critical and aesthetic discourses, and the complexity of power structures, and avoids obscuring significant contexts and experiences.

KEYWORDS

Buxi; Decolonial; Entangled; Impermanence; Intrarelated; Pluriversal; Temporal structure of endlessness (*buxi*); Transcultural.

In 2017, the exhibition in the Chinese pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale entitled *Continuum – Generation by Generation* (*buxi* 不息) mobilized the concept of *buxi*, which translates literally as “endlessness” or “never ceasing”. As the show’s curator-cum-artist, Qiu Zhijie, writes, the exhibition’s goal was to “capture the *buxi* energy” and “explain the operating mechanism of *buxi* in Chinese art”.¹ Aligned with the processual ontological principle of the cosmos *Dao*, *buxi* allows for an understanding of the world as “endless” transformational process.² Art, as an intrarelated part of the world, is committed and obliged to understand, articulate, navigate, and mediate *buxi*.

Continuum – Generation by Generation invited visitors to experience art and themselves as participants in an “endless energy field” (不息的能量场 *buxi nengliang chang*) [Fig. 1].³ The show came “alive” through looped images of swirling, bubbling water around embroidered naturalistic rocks, of large rolling waves, sounds of gurgling water and crashing tides, and through an automated animated shadow theater, with puppets of mythical creatures continuously wandering across three screens. Mounted on walls, placed on the floor, shown in vitrines, and suspended from the ceiling, artworks in various scales, media, materials, colors, and techniques were displayed in ways that emphasized their intrarelations.

Traversing and shifting their gaze between artworks near and far, small and large, dark and bright, high and low, and by zooming in and out to details and the broader picture, visitors could potentially perceive themselves as part of this intrarelated structure, as co-constituting a continuous relational space. Tang Nannan’s hyperrealistic sculpture with the title *Morrow Return*⁴ (明还 *ming huan*, 2012 [Fig. 2]) “performed” such visitor-subjects’ intertwine-ment. Easily confused with an actual living visitor, the artwork showed a life-sized young Asian man in contemporary clothing with his torso slightly bent, his arms crossed behind his lower back, engrossing himself in looking at two roundly shaped moving images of the sea. Only by coming closer would exhibition visitors notice that the images of the sea that he was looking at were actually projected from the man’s own eyes.

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Slides provided to the author by Qiu Zhijie.

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Franklin Perkins, *Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy*, in: Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition) (February 29, 2024). Roger T. Ames, *The Great Commentary* (Dazhuan 大傳) and Chinese Natural Cosmology, in: *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 2, 2015, 1–18 (February 29, 2024).

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Qiu Zhijie: *Weinisi yu Zhongguo feiyi de “qiannian zhiyue” | jiangzuo zongshu* 邱志杰：威尼斯与中国非遗的“千年之约” | 讲座综述 (Qiu Zhijie: “A Millennium Promise” between Venice and Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage) (February 29, 2024).

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“Morrow” is a poetic expression for “tomorrow”.



[Fig. 1]

Installation view, Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2017, in: Qiu Zhijie (ed.), *Continuum – Generation by Generation. The 57th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Pavilion China, China Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, May–November 2017* (exh. cat.).



[Fig. 2]
Tang Nannan, *Morrow Return (ming huan)*, 2017, Continuum – Generation by Generation,
The 57th International Art Exhibition, Pavilion of China, Ming Contemporary Art
Museum, Shanghai, March 31, 2017 – June 3, 2018, photo by the author.

What does it mean to conceive of art, the world, and oneself as endlessly intrarelated? This paper delves into this question from a multi-pronged perspective. First, it explains the meaning of *buxi* and analyzes how Qiu Zhijie engages with aesthetic, epistemological, social, and political implications of art and the world conceived through a contemporary perspective on the concept of “endlessness” when conceptualizing the exhibition.

Second, it critiques and provincializes mainstream Euro-American intellectual frameworks and their respective historical and epistemic “truths”, through critically engaging with *buxi* – a concept from an alternative thought tradition – including its respective governing effects, when reading the exhibition and its artworks.⁵ Conventionally, as art historian Pamela Lee explains in her book *Chronophobia*, contemporary art’s relationship to time and temporality since the 1960s conceptual turn in Europe and North America has been universally framed as an attack on modernist self-referential autonomy, modernist medium-specificity, modernist presentness, and the related temporality of containment.⁶ While it is not my intention to suggest a reading of the exhibition *Continuum* and its artworks outside this Euro-American modernist-postmodernist narrative and the related critical and aesthetic framework for contemporary art, I argue for the importance of complicating discourses on contemporary art’s relationship to time and temporality by broadening the repositories of art, cultural, and intellectual histories. By recuperating the multiplicity of art historical concepts, “which have undergone erasure or flattening due to the diffusion of modern disciplinary taxonomies across the globe”,⁷ and by attending to the transcultural interactions, which include connections and frictions, that shape and reshape art and concepts, new questions are asked and knowledge of the multiplicity of art is created. It is through analyses of transcultural histories, of how concepts are reconfigured through connections to multiple sources outside and inside Euro-America, that fresh insights into the multiplicity of meanings of artistic forms, aesthetic strategies, media, techniques, and materiality are gained. Such analysis also enables the formulation of a pluriversal critical framework – that is a “more plausible theoretical scaffolding for the discipline” that “responds to the challenge of cultural plurality”.⁸

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About the necessity to critically engage with the governing effects of alternative concepts in order to avoid romanticization and essentialist, radical diversity, see: Monica Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global? Mediations from the Periphery*, Berlin 2023, and David Graeber’s critique of the “ontological turn” in anthropology: David Graeber, Radical Alterity is just Another Way of Saying “Reality”. A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in: *HAU. Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5/2, 2015, 1–41 (October 4, 2023).

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Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia. On Time in the Arts of the 1960s*, Cambridge, MA 2004.

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Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global?*, 34.

8

Ibid., 22.

Finally, the paper evaluates the engagement with *buxi* – and the respective processual ontology and temporality of art and world – as a useful mode of decolonizing the discipline of art history, while emphasizing the importance of adopting a dynamic pluriversal approach. In contrast to traditional universalist or relativist art historical frameworks, a dynamic pluriversal approach attends to the multiplicity *and* transcultural connections that constitute meanings of art in the global world, and the complexity of power structures involved, and avoids obscuring significant contexts and experiences. It is in this regard that the last section of this paper seeks to understand why a show that, on the one hand, was praised as a successful example of global art history was, on the other hand, heavily criticized by colleagues mainly in but also outside of China as nationalist, traditionalist, or un-contemporary.⁹ Instead of taking

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The show has been criticized as being too close to the official nationalist agenda, as traditionalist and uncontemporary, as provincial, self-referential, and not interested in global issues, as dismissive of individual freedom, and disconnected from contemporary Chinese society. The artists Zhang Peili and Wang Gongxin, among many others in the contemporary Chinese art scene, have been criticizing Qiu Zhijie as being too close to the Communist Party's agenda. Zhang Peili's WeChat Friend Circle Post in response to the exhibition Chong su Zhongguo xinling – Zhongyang meiyuan de sizheng ketang chuang xin 重塑中国心灵—中央美院的思政课堂创新 (Reinventing the Chinese Mind – Innovation in the Civics Classroom of Central Academy of Fine Arts) at Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, summer 2021. As I will explain in greater detail below, *buxi* has in fact been employed by the Chinese government in the context of its nationalist self-strengthening agenda. Xi Jinping, Jianshe Zhongguo tese Zhongguo fengge Zhongguo qipai de kaoguxue, genghao renshi yuanyuanliuchang bodajingshen de Zhonghua wenming 建设中国特色中国风格中国气派的考古学 更好认识源远流长博大精深的中华文明 (Developing an Archaeology with Chinese Te-Se, Chinese Style and Chinese Characteristics, to Understand the Chinese Civilization Better, Which Has a Long History and Is Profound), in: *Qushi* 求是 23, 2020 (September 5, 2021). Further articles that have criticized the exhibition *Continuum* as too close to the official, nationalist discourse of tradition include: Ornella de Nigris, *Continuum – Generation by Generation*. The Representation of Chinese Traditions at the China Pavilion of the 57th Venice Biennale, in: *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 6/2–3, 2019, 343–366; Jenifer Chao, China's Ancient Past in Its Contemporary Art. On the Politics of Time and Nation Branding at the Venice Biennale, in: *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 6/2–3, 2019, 321–341; Richard Vine, Choose Your China. Three Pavilions in Venice, in: *Art in America*, May 19, 2017 (February 29, 2024). Many have criticized the exhibition's inclusion of folk art as un-contemporary, and some have thought the show was provincial. For example: Liang Xing, "Zhongguoguan" dalunzhan: youli shuoli, bie chaocao "中国馆" 大论战：有理说理 别吵吵 (The Great Debate about the "Chinese Pavilion". Be Reasonable. Don't Quarrel), in: *Bei qing yi ping* 北青艺评 (Beijing Youth Art Review), June 17, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Lao Ma, Weishuang Zhongguoguan zheyang de xiaohua haiyao chixu duojiu 威双中国馆这样的笑话还要持续多久 (How Long Will the Joke Like the Chinese Pavilion at Venice Biennale Last), in: *Yishu quan* 艺术圈 (Art Circle), June 7, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Zhang Xiaoling, Neishang: dangdai yishu weihe suxiu? Zhang Xiaoling tan di 57 jie Weinisi Shuangnianzhan 内伤：当代艺术为何速朽？张晓凌谈第 57 届威尼斯双年展 (Internal Injury: Why Does Contemporary Art Decay Rapidly? Zhang Xiaoling on the 57th Venice Biennale), in: *Zhongguo meishu bao* 中国美术报 (Art News of China), June 12, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Chen Xiao, Dong Daozi, Sun Qidong, and Zhang Ying, Yan shuo | Dangdai yishu – wei shangliu jiecheng ershe de gao xiaofei huangyan? 盐说|当代艺术—为上流阶层而设的高消费谎言？ (Contemporary Art. A Consumerist Lie for the Upper Class?), in: *Fenghuang yishu* 凤凰艺术 (Phoenix Art), July 26, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Zhu Qi, Zhu Qi: Minzu de bushi shijie de: guanyu Zhongguoguan de "xiongmao guan" hua 朱其|民族的不是世界的：关于中国馆的“熊猫馆”化 (Zhu Qi: What Is National Is Not International: On the "Giant Panda Pavilionization" of the Chinese Pavilion), in: *Qiren zhidao* 其人之道 (The Way of Humans), June 6, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Chen Ming, Chen Ming: Zheshi dangdai yishu ma? Di 57 jie Weinisi Shuangnianzhan "Zhongguoguan" guan cha 陈明：这是当代艺术吗？第 57 届威尼斯双年展“中国馆”观察 (Chen Ming: Is This Contemporary Art? Observations on Chinese Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale), in: *Zhongguo meishu bao* 中国美术报 (Art News of China), June 6, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Wen Song, Yishu daoke | Wen Song: Dangdai huanxi yishu he Weinisi zhi yao 艺术刀客 | 闻松：当代幻戏艺术和威尼斯之药 (Wen Song: Contemporary Illusionistic Art and the Venetian Medicine), in: *Yishu daoke* 艺术刀客 (Art Swordsman), June 5, 2017 (December 22, 2022). Many people were critical that Qiu Zhijie

sides, a dynamic pluriversal approach not only retains the situatedness of the multiple and transculturally entangled and implicated perspectives that shape and reshape critical discourses and controversies around the exhibition, but seeks to put them in constructive conversations that hold space for reflecting multi-directional implications of individuals¹⁰ and allows for continuously pulling oneself and each other from static positions.¹¹

I. Explaining the Concept of *Buxi* and How Qiu Zhijie Mobilizes It

Buxi was first articulated in the *Great Commentary* (大傳 *Dazhuan*), an important part of the composite *Book of Changes* (易经 *Yijing*),¹²

didn't make space for the individual positions and life experiences of the invited artists and instead centered his perspective on Chinese tradition: Zhang Yingchuan, Shalong | Guanyu Weinisi Shuangnianzhan taolun de taolun, zai "yishu wansui" de zhuti homian... 沙龙|关于威尼斯双年展讨论的讨论 在“艺术万岁”的主题后面... (Salon | A Discussion on the Discussion of Venice Biennale, Behind the Theme of "Viva Arte Viva"...), in: 1314 *Sheji yu yishu* 1314 设计与艺术 (1314 Design and Art), October 12, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Route 66, Weinisi Shuangnianzhan guojiaguan de guaiqiao 威尼斯双年展国家馆的乖巧 (The Cleverness of the Chinese Pavilion at Venice Biennale), in: *Douban* 豆瓣 (Beantalk PRC social networking website), June 15, 2017 (December 22, 2022). Some thought the show was disconnected from contemporary Chinese society: Gu Chengfeng, Huakan | Chuancheng yu dangdaixing de youli – ping di 57 jie Weishuang Zhongguoguan 画刊 | 传承与当代性的游离——评第 57 届威双中国馆 (Art Monthly | Inheritance and Dissociation from Contemporaneity – On the Chinese Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale), in: *Huakan* 画刊 (Art Monthly), September 6, 2017 (December 22, 2022). Zheng Shu, Haishi yaoshuo Weinisi Shuangnianzhan de zuguo-guan 还是要说威尼斯双年展的祖国馆 (We Still Have to Talk About the Chinese Pavilion at Venice Biennale), in: *Yishu biji* 艺殊笔记 (Art Notes), May 25, 2017 (December 22, 2022). This list of negative reviews of the exhibition *Continuum* was compiled and translated with the help of my research assistants Liu Dandan and Wu Xiaofan. Thank you both.

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The concept of multi-directionality is informed by Michael Rothberg's multidirectional approach to Holocaust memory in the global context. Rothberg explains that "the term 'multidirectional memory' was coined as a way of conceptualizing what happens when different histories of extreme violence confront each other in the public sphere". He rejects what he calls "competitive memory", an understanding of memory that privileges certain memories and marginalizes others and instead argues that "memory works productively through negotiation, cross-referencing", and that such a relational approach to memory is not "less memory, but more – even of subordinated memory traditions". He writes: "I argue that collective memories of seemingly distinct histories are not easily separable from each other, but emerge dialogically. For example, not only has memory of the Holocaust served as a vehicle through which other histories of suffering have been articulated, but the emergence of Holocaust memory itself was from the start inflected by histories of slavery, colonialism, and decolonization that at first glance might seem to have little to do with it." However, it is crucial to examine if different memories and histories are put into relation out of political responsibility or with the aim to achieve exoneration. A multidirectional approach to difficult memories and histories is not interested in the conventional categories of perpetrator/victim or bystander, arguing that only if we understand and reflect on how each subject "occupies multiple positions [as perpetrator/victim or bystander] of implication in relation to multiple conflict" can the political responsibility to abolish injustices and forge solidarities with victims arise. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Testimony between History and Memory*, in: *Auschwitz Foundation International Quarterly* 119, 2014 (January 17, 2024); Katie Lawrence, *The Implicated Subject. Dr. Michael Rothberg on Multidirectional Political Responsibility*, March 25, 2021 (January 17, 2024); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, CA 2009; Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford, CA 2019.

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Tim Ingold, *Toward a New Humanism. One World Anthropology*, in: *HAU. Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8/1–2, 2018, 158–172, here 160.

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The composite text of three parts that we conceive as the *Yijing* today was compiled in 125 BCE, during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) when it was canonized as one of the

the foundational cosmological text for Confucian and Daoist Philosophies of Change.¹³ The *Book of Changes* contains the eight trigrams and sixty-four hexagrams – graphic combinations of three and respectively six solid and broken lines stacked upon each other in various combinations – that were used as oracles, and various comments and interpretations of these. The *Great Commentary* (大傳 *Dazhuan*), also called the *Commentary on the Appended Phrases* (繫辭 *Xi Ci*) is considered one of the most important commentaries of the third part of the *Yijing*, the commentaries called *Ten Wings* (十翼 *Shi Yi*), which were added in 300 BCE during the Warren States period (475–221 BCE). Through the addition of the *Ten Wings* and particularly the *Great Commentary* the status of the *Yijing* changed. It was now conceived as a cosmological text with the trigrams and hexagrams understood not as oracles anymore, but as symbols of “cosmic patterns, that visualize and mediate relations between humanity and nature, and the complexity of human life”.¹⁴

Viewed through the lens of *buxi*, the world is understood as a transformational event, generated continuously in autopoietic processes of “self-so-ing” (自然 *ziran*). Originating from *Dao* (道), the transcendent and immanent principle of effect and creation – often translated as “the Way” – the world unfolds through continuous processes of division and differentiation. Initially, the two complementary aspects *Yin* and *Yang* come into being by the first divisional action of the ontological principle *Dao* followed by continuous processes of reciprocal interpenetration, through which *Yin* and *Yang* endlessly multiply, generating the “ten thousand things” (万物 *wan wu*) that constitute the world. *Yin*, the feminine and passively receiving principle, and *Yang*, the masculine and active principle, are the two complementary poles of the circulating life “breath” *Qi*. *Qi* is the transcendental and immanent cosmological energetic life force which generates itself as an expression of the continuous

five Confucian classics. The oldest part of the *Yijing* is the *Zhou Yi*, which was originally used for divination during the time of the Western Zhou (1000–750 BCE). The second part comprises statements about the hexagrams written by King Wen and the Duke of Zhou during the eleventh century BCE and the third part is a body of commentaries called *Ten Wings* (十翼 *shi yi*) which were traditionally assumed to have been written by Confucius, an attribution that has later been contested. Hon Tze-Ki, Chinese Philosophy of Change (*Yijing*), in: Zalta and Nodelman, [The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) (March 9, 2024); Eliot Weinberger, What Is the I Ching?, in: [China File](#), February 25, 2016 (February 29, 2024).

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According to Geir Sigurdsson the *Book of Changes* is the cosmological foundation of conceiving and visualizing reality as a process of continuous change in both dominant traditional Chinese worldviews, namely Daoism as well as in Confucianism. Geir Sigurdsson, *Confucian Propriety and Ritual Learning. A Philosophical Interpretation*, Albany, NY 2015, 36. Roger Ames stresses the significance of the *Yijing* for Chinese intellectual history and culture: “As important as the Daoist and Confucian canons have been in the articulation of Chinese intellectual history and as much as they can be appealed as textual evidence for claims about early Chinese cosmology, perhaps no single text can compete with the *Yijing* 易經 or *Book of Changes* in terms of the sustained interest it has garnered from succeeding generations of China’s literati, and the influence it has had on Chinese self-understanding. The *Yijing* has been and still remains, in every sense, the first among the Chinese classics. Indeed, it is this open-ended classic with its centuries of accruing commentaries that has set the terms of art for Chinese cosmology.” Ames, *The Great Commentary*, 1.

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Hon Tze-Ki, Chinese Philosophy of Change (*Yijing*).

transformational processes of the world and life. Sinologist Irene Eber summarizes the “basic assumption of the *Yijing*” as follows:

Everything is in a constant state of change where absolutisms do not exist. Change occurs as the constant and continuous alternation between *yin* and *yang*, the two basic aspects of existence. Equivalence of these two, or their equitable harmony, is never reached because when approaching such a state, the process is reversed and begins anew. The end of the process of change is, therefore, not the resolution of contradictions, a synthesis as it were, but its continuation and assumption of new forms.¹⁵

With this understanding, “ten thousand things” means that everything that constitutes the world exists only in temporary states of cosmic, self-referential divisional and transformational processes, with their origin in *Dao*. The historian Tze-Ki Hon has called the totality of this endless transformational process “a group dance that never stops”.¹⁶

In his exhibition, Qiu Zhijie introduces the concept of *buxi* as the temporal qualifier of the operating mechanism of the ontological principle of the cosmos *Dao* by explicitly quoting from the Great Commentary part of the Book of Changes: “Generating, generating, never ceasing” (生生之谓易 *sheng sheng zhi wei yi*).¹⁷ In a world operated by *buxi*, everything is constantly changing and impermanent. Impermanence is, in fact, life. In this regard, “the acceptance of human finitude has been identified as the starting point of *Yijing* Philosophy, Philosophy of Change respectively”,¹⁸ and the *Book of Changes* has been conceived as a method to engage with the world as ever-changing, which allows us to cope with impermanence and death.

Even though typically framed as a philosophical approach to mitigating anxieties around death and transience, the *Book of*

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Irene Eber, Foreword, in: Robert Elliott Allinson, *The Philosophical Influences of Mao Zedong. Notations, Reflections and Insights*, London 2020, xiii.

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Hon Tze-Ki, *Chinese Philosophy of Change (Yijing)*.

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This translation is by Perkins, *Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy*. On the label in the exhibition the phrase was translated into English as: “Life and growth: This is the meaning of transformation and change”. Richard John Lynn, scholar of Chinese thought, offers a translation that makes it even clearer that *buxi* “endlessness” is the qualifier of the operating mechanism (*sheng sheng*: generating, generating) of the ontological principle of the cosmos *Dao*. Connecting (生生之谓易 *sheng sheng zhi wei yi*) to the previous sentence 日新之谓盛德 (*ri xin zhi wei sheng de*), he translates: “It is because the *Dao* brings renewal day after day that we refer to it here as “replete virtue” 日新之谓盛德. In its capacity to produce and reproduce we call it “change” 生生之谓易.” Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes. A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, New York 1994.

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Hon Tze-Ki, *Chinese Philosophy of Change (Yijing)*.

Changes was first conceptualized in response to political turmoil during the period of the Western Zhou (1000–750 BCE).¹⁹

The sixty-four hexagrams that make up the *Book of Changes* do not represent the outside world, but are rather traces of the endless process of change, of which the hexagrams are an intrarelated part. Following the logic of the interpenetrating processes of *Yin* and *Yang*, the hexagram groupings of broken and unbroken lines are understood as temporary states and constellations of a world conceived as and by “endless” process. The *Book of Changes* provides instructions on how to read these figures as a way to gain insights into the structures of continuous change and to actively navigate and alleviate these processes of endless change and impermanence.²⁰

The second quote from the *Great Commentary* of the *Yijing* cited by Qiu Zhijie speaks about the relationship between human beings and Heaven, nature, and the cosmological processes, and how one constitutes one’s self as an “exemplary man” (*junzi*) by successfully immersing oneself in the processes that endlessly generate the world. It states: “The movement of the Heavens is constant and full of power thus the enlightened one [君子 *junzi*, in the Confucian sense, a man of virtue who pursues *Dao*, an exemplary person, who seeks to understand the processes]²¹ strengthens and exerts himself ceaselessly and tirelessly” (天行健，君子以自强不息 *Tian xing jian, junzi yi ziqiang bu xi*).²² In other words, human beings and Heaven are in a responsive intrarelation with one another, and human beings who relentlessly pursue *Dao* through self-cultivation practices, such as art, become enlightened *junzi*. In a world governed by change and intrarelatedness, what power structures between human beings and nature/cosmological processes, what understanding of human agency does this quote from the *Yijing*

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About the unstable socio-political context in which the *Yijing* was first conceptualized see: *ibid.*

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Ibid.

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Jason Htet LinThu and Jason M. Campell, *Junzi or the Exemplary Man. An Introduction to the Confucian Gentleman*, an essay compiled from the notes for a short lecture presented to the Esoteika Lodge No. 227 of Oregon on February 18, 2015 (March 9, 2024).

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Qiu Zhijie, Continuum – Generation by Generation, in: id. (ed.), *Continuum – Generation by Generation. The 57th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Pavilion China, China Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, May–November 2017* (exh. cat. accessed in the exhibitions in Shanghai and Beijing), 15–21, here 15. Others have translated the commentary as “Heaven, in its motion, (gives the idea of) strength. The superior man, in accordance with this, nerves himself to ceaseless activity.” James Legge, 乾–Qian (July 29, 2020) or “Heaven moves persistently. A *junzi* uses originating strength not to pause.” Rudolf Ritsema and Shantena Augusto Sabbadini, *The Original I Ching Oracle or The Book of Changes. The Eranos I Ching Project*, London 2005, eBook, n.p. Ames offers a contextualization of the quote: “The *Yijing* defines sagacity as the effective integration of the human experience into the operations of nature: The heavens and the earth are in flux and undergo transformation, and the sagely imitate these processes.” Ames, *The Great Commentary*, 8.

imply?²³ The abovementioned sculpture *Morrow Return* by Tang Nannan can be understood as contemplating this question. The figure observes with seeming interest the images of moving waves that are projected from his own eyes. Yet his posture does not suggest a submissive and integrating attitude but rather a distanced and reflective stance.

Qiu Zhijie's hand-drawn *Map of Buxi* [Fig. 3], which was displayed in the exhibition and discussed in his catalog essay, "provides insights into how 'endlessness' operates in and governs the world".²⁴ The map takes the shape of the *Yin Yang* symbol, also called the *Taiji* diagram (太极图 *taiji tu*). *Taiji*, the "Great Ultimate", presents the origin and principle of the cosmos, the complementary poles, *Yin* and *Yang*, whose "endless" (*buxi*) interaction constitutes everything that exists.

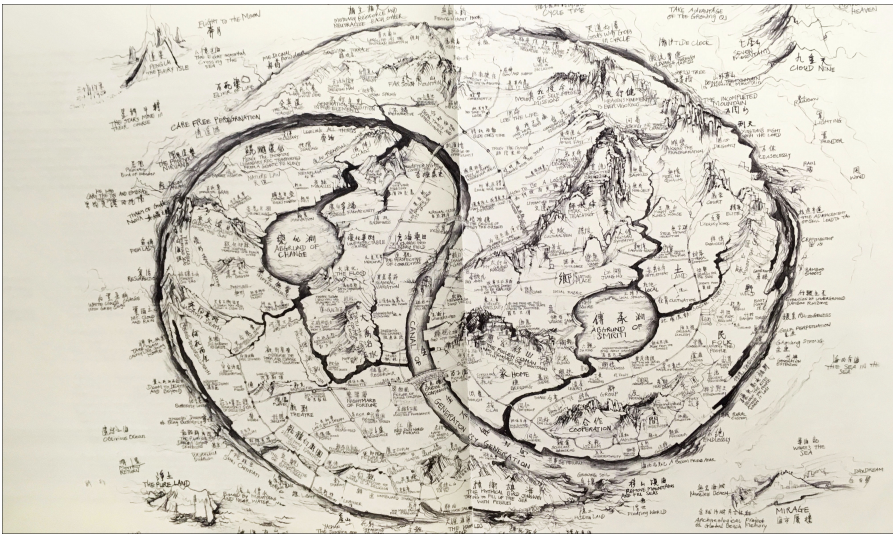
Qiu Zhijie adopts Chinese literati painting conventions in the *Yin and Yang* structured "map" landscape. Viewers encounter mountains, rivers, ponds (called abysses), land, pathways, bridges, and islands named with terms and concepts of, and references to *buxi*, that appear mainly in Chinese with English translations written below. Despite its name, *Map of Buxi* is not a typical, static image that provides information in a representational fashion. It rather comes to life through its vibrating structural lines, the employment of dynamic calligraphic brushstrokes, abbreviations, and the decision to not close the *Yin* and *Yang* shape. On the left, around the "Abgrund [German for 'abyss', a reference to philosopher Martin Heidegger] of Change", philosophies and mythological stories of change are featured; on the right, around the "Abgrund of Succession" – also called the "Abgrund of Smriti [Sanskrit for 'recollection']" – the map focuses on politics, including political mechanisms of *buxi* in China spanning from the elite to the common people. The left side refers mainly to Buddhism and Daoism, while Confucian references dominate the right side of the diagram. "Being towards death" (向无而在 *xiang wu er zai*), which is written on the left side, south-west of the "Abgrund of Change", signifies the impermanence of human beings, like all else, as participants in the endless continuum of change, intrarelated through *Dao*. The inclusion of philosophical and religious terms in other languages such as

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While Ames stresses integration, the meaning of the quote has changed through history and in different political contexts. For example, during the May 4th modernization movement of 1918 the intellectual and author Guo Moruo (1892–1978) interpreted it as combining "both individualism and humanism", because it "sings loudly of the independent spirit and the disciplined personality". Accordingly, it can help one to "purify oneself, enrich oneself, and express oneself", thereby reaching the point of "taking the world as one's duty and sacrificing oneself to save people all around the world". However, Guo explained such a grand sense of social responsibility as an expansion of self, which is tantamount to another, bigger form of self: "to reach the infinite point of one's capacity and wisdom, making it comparable with the greatness of heaven and earth, and even not yield into God". Jianmei Liu, *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature*, New York 2015, 23.

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Label of the map in the exhibition and Qiu Zhijie, Who Still Remembers the Untrammelled Journey? Annotation of the Map of *Buxi*, in: id., Continuum – Generation by Generation, 33–38.



[Fig. 3]

Qiu Zhijie, Map of Buxi (*buxi tu*), 2017, Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th International Art Exhibition, Pavilion of China, Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, March 31, 2017 – June 3, 2018, photo provided by Qiu Zhijie.

German and Sanskrit can be read as an invitation to compare *buxi* with these concepts.

A world intrarelated through *Dao* and operated by impermanence is radically relational. As the scholar of Chinese philosophy Roger T. Ames argues, a substance ontology of discrete things and selves, each of them having its own independent identity and integrity, as understood in classical Greek philosophy, would not only contradict but potentially put the continuum of the world conceptualized as endless transformation process at risk.²⁵

It is in this regard that the self, knowledge, and art are conceived as relational and processual, as being shaped and re-shaped in intrarelation with the world and its cosmological and social processes. The map entry “each person is a field of selves” refers to the Confucian understanding of the self as constituted through various social relationships. Knowledge in this regard does not mean to uncover an assumed unchanging truth behind appearances, but to know how meaning is constituted relationally and contextually. Ames explains: “The beginning of Chinese cosmology is not knowledge” (知识 *zhishi*), it’s “knowing the way” (知道 *zhi dao*).²⁶

In a world conceptualized as intrarelatational structure, a split between reality and appearance, and therefore between the world and art, does not exist. If art is not about representing or constructing an outside world, but rather about enacting and mediating the cosmological and social structures that shape and reshape the world, then literati art articulates this “endless” temporality of art through open and relational forms, modular compositions, dynamic brushstrokes, and abbreviations. Qiu Zhijie opposes the temporalities of “endlessness” (不息 *buxi*) with those of “immortality” (不朽 *buxiu*), arguing that Chinese art is not interested in preservation and mummification, but rather in enabling and guaranteeing. “In the long history of the Chinese tradition”, he explains, “it is not the pursuit of cultural immortality that has inspired our artists and thinkers, but rather the pursuit of the ceaseless endeavor (求不息) and the generative resilience produced by that endeavor which is implicit in the concept of *buxi*.”²⁷

Sinologist and poet Pierre Ryckmans, alias Simon Leys (1935–2014), memorably summarized this idea, writing that, “Permanence does not negate change, it informs change. Continuity is not ensured

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Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Dao De Jing. A Philosophical Translation*, New York 2003, 15, 21, 16. About Ames’ understanding of *Dao* as processual and dynamic see also: Jing Liu, The Temporality of Dao. Permanence and Transience, in: Ian Sullivan and Joshua Mason, *One Corner of the Square. Essays on the Philosophy of Roger T. Ames*, Honolulu 2021, 267–273; Roger T. Ames, ‘Zoetology’. A New Name for an Old Way of Thinking, in: *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 93, 2023, 81–98 (March 10, 2024).

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Appreciating the Chinese Difference. An interview with Roger T. Ames, November 12, 2019 (March 10, 2024).

27

Qiu Zhijie, *Continuum – Generation by Generation* (exh. cat., shorter version provided to the author as a pdf by Qiu Zhijie), 3.

by the immobility of inanimate objects, it is achieved through the fluidity of successive generations.”²⁸ According to Qiu, art through the lens of *buxi* “is an ongoing, tireless project of connectivity”,²⁹ rooted in what he calls “relay baton thinking”.³⁰ “Relay baton thinking” is a central aspect of the traditional Chinese concept of art as self-cultivation,³¹ according to which literati artists ensured the continuum of oneself and the world through various methods of transmitting and intrarelated past, present, and future, such as copying old masters, and citing, commenting on, and annotating works by other artists.³²

Qiu understands art as “an ongoing, tireless project of connectivity”, which resonates with his long-term project of re-conceptualizing traditional ideas of art as self-cultivation, called “Total Art” (总体艺术 *zongti yishu*) and “Guantong art” (贯通 *guantong yishu*). *Guantong*, literally translated, means “the thread that runs through everything” and revisits the traditional Chinese concept of “comprehensive understanding”.³³

What can be understood as answering to the question about power structures and human agency in a world governed by change and intrarelatedness, Qiu Zhijie reconceptualizes the concept of

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Pierre Ryckmans, alias Simon Leys, The Chinese Attitude towards the Past, in: *China Heritage Quarterly* 14, June 2008 (February 29, 2024).

29

Qiu Zhijie, Continuum – Generation by Generation, in: id., Continuum – Generation by Generation (exh. cat., shorter version).

30

Ibid.

31

Concepts of self-cultivation play an important role in Daoism, Buddhism, and most prominently in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. On the topic of self-cultivation see, for example: Marcus Schmücker and Fabian Heubel (eds.), *Dimensionen der Selbstkultivierung. Beiträge des Forums für Asiatische Philosophie*, Freiburg i. Br. 2013. With respect to Chinese art, Tu Wei-ming has referred to Xu Fuguan who has stated that “Confucians and Taoists share the belief that self-cultivation is basic to artistic creativity”. Tu Wei-ming, The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought. An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics, in: Susan Bush and Christian Murck (eds.), *Theories of the Arts in China*, Princeton, NJ 1983, 57. Jean François Billeter has written about calligraphy as a mode of self-cultivation. Jean François Billeter, *The Chinese Art of Writing*, New York 1990.

32

See, for example, Martin J. Powers, The Temporal Logic of Citation in Chinese Painting, in: *Art History* 37/4, September 2014, 744–763.

33

About Qiu Zhijie’s concept of “*guantong* art” see Birgit Hopfener, Tomorrow Things Will Be Different. Qiu Zhijie’s Concept of Keeping Alive through Art, in: *Journal for Cultural Research* 21/1, 2017 (special issue “Art, Society and Contemporary China”, ed. by Paul Gladston), 10–11. *Guantong*, “comprehensive understanding”, has been a central term in Chinese cultural histories of learning and apprehending the world. Antonio S. Cua, scholar of Chinese and comparative philosophy, explains: “The thread that runs through things, [...] intimates the idea that understanding consists in having an insight into the interconnection of all things.” It is in this regard that *guantong* does not in the first place mean understanding a specific content, but instead achieving insights into interconnections. Antonio S. Cua, *Human Nature, Ritual, and History. Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy*, Washington DC 2005, 164. “Total Art” appropriates the *guantong*-premises of interconnectedness and comprehensive understanding, but turns *guantong*’s traditional unifying and integrative function into a critical one.

self-cultivation from a transcultural perspective drawing on various and entangled concepts and histories of “Total Art”.³⁴

In contrast to traditional concepts of self-cultivation, that privileged integrating and unifying practices to ensure the continuity of the world, reality, history, and the self in line with specific metaphysical and moral premises and order, Qiu Zhijie, informed by poststructuralism, conceptualizes self-cultivation as a critical practice. Taking the temporal structure of endlessness as the starting point that nothing is fixed and therefore can potentially be deconstructed, and based on “Total Art”’s ultimate aims of “freedom” and “emancipation”,³⁵ self-cultivation must now be committed to continuous world opening not through affirmation but through critical analyses of historical, epistemological, and social (power) structures.³⁶

In his elaboration of “relay baton thinking”, Qiu Zhijie refers to “Literati Gatherings” (*Yaji*), an inter-generational format of art creation and reception in which

[...] artists often cooperated, one would draw a stone, one would draw a flower, one would replenish grass leaves, and one would write a poem, and then the person who was good at calligraphy wrote this poem on the paper, many works were finished in this way. The artists were also engaged in the game of mutual exchange reaction and making a response, one would write a poem, and another used his rhyme to write a new poem, the game would never stop until the last person failed to answer it. In this game one would consider someone else’s creation as a chance, and it is a way to run the endless flow of energy.³⁷

Or, as he writes further,

³⁴

See my detailed transcultural analysis of Qiu Zhijie’s concept and map of “Total Art”. Birgit Hopfener, Mapping Art History, Relational and Ongoing, in: Qiu Zhijie, *Geography of Knowledge. Maps 2010–2019*, Milan 2020, 42–53.

³⁵

According to the agenda of “Total Art” ‘freedom’ is not given but has to be acquired. It is by critically intervening in social and historical structures, structures of knowledge and regimes of truth that one achieves freedom. Johnson Chang, An Archaeological Position on the Future, in: *A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge*, Singapore 2008, 23.

³⁶

Hopfener, Tomorrow Things Will Be Different, 4–15; ead., Intervention Is the Answer but What Are the Questions? Developing Criteria for a Critical Examination of Qiu Zhijie’s Interventionist Project *A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge*, in: Pauline Bachmann, Melanie Klein, Tomoko Mamine, and Georg Vasold (eds.), *Art/Histories in Transcultural Dynamics. Narratives, Concepts, and Practices at Work, 20th and 21st Centuries*, Paderborn 2017, 229–246. Birgit Hopfener, Between Participatory Engagement and Disciplinary Coercion. A Critique of Calligraphy as a Practice of Performative Meaning Production, in: Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch and Wibke Schrape (eds.), *Moving Signs and Shifting Discourses. Text and Image Relations in East Asian Art*, Weimar (in preparation).

³⁷

Qiu Zhijie Talked About the China Pavilion in Venice Biennale, April 22, 2017 (February 29, 2024).

In the cliff inscriptions at Mount Tai or along the banks of West Lake, generations of poets have felt and expressed a sense of connectivity with poets of both the past and the future. In this sense, Chinese art is a communal act across five thousand years of our collective history, in which each artist both participates and responds: a kind of cross-generational *yaji* gathering.³⁸

Qiu has also used *Yaji*³⁹ as a way to critique the modern museum and to reconceptualize contemporary art exhibitions beyond the decontextualized white cube approach, as dynamic sites that involve visitors intellectually and bodily as intrarelated participants in continuous world-making processes. His close colleagues, the art historians Johnson Chang and Gao Shiming, have made similar suggestions. They stress *Yaji*'s "tactile, immersive experience" in contrast to "the emphasis of the modern museum on passive visuality",⁴⁰ explaining that in contrast to the museums' "emphasis on its function as an edifice of material display", *Yaji* focuses on the gathering aspect, that means "the dynamics generated by the participants and not only on the art being displayed".⁴¹ Qiu, Chang, and Gao mobilize *Yaji* in order to critique "the modern museum, which hastens to historicize (or museum-ize) artworks" and to instead understand art as "living projects", as the literati did.⁴² According to Chang and Gao, literati art's "incorporation of fresh critical responses into old artworks demonstrates an implicit resistance against museumization. With each fresh colophon the artwork's story continues, pending commentary from the next deserving connoisseur."⁴³ Qiu, Chang, and Gao seem primarily interested in re-conceptualizing criticality as an endless and collaborative process of conversations in which artworks function as open processes, articulations, and evidence of and invitations for exchange despite differences. As Qiu Zhijie writes: "*Yaji* gathers people with common interests and

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Qiu Zhijie, Continuum – Generation by Generation, in: *ibid.*, Continuum – Generation by Generation (exh. cat., shorter version), 11.

39

In his curatorial concept, Qiu Zhijie refers to "Literati gathering" (雅集 *yaji*) in combination with two additional concepts of Chinese art and culture presentation – the "theatre" (剧场 *juchang*), and the "temple fair" (庙会 *miaohui*) – that are all related to art and culture conceived as an open process, as being continuously made and remade in collaborative social events. Qiu Zhijie, "I Am Grateful to My Critics", in: *id.*, Continuum – Generation by Generation, 340–352.

40

Tsong-Zung [Chang Johnson Chang] and Gao Shiming, *Yaji Garden. Art under the Sky*, in: Suzanne MacLeod, Tricia Austin, Jonathan Hale, and Oscar Ho Hing-Kay (eds.), *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design. Purpose, Process, Perception*, London 2018, 259–276, here 262.

41

Ibid., 261.

42

Ibid.

43

Ibid., 265.

missions, creating a kind of intertextual work. People are aware of their differences and build common ground. Through continuous reciprocal annotation and communication, creation is the result of mutual inspiration.”⁴⁴

In contrast to traditional *Yaji* gatherings that were exclusive, private meetings, accessible only to the initiated, the intellectual and political elite of traditional China, the exhibition *Continuum* was conceptualized as a public space open to a heterogenous audience.

While participants in premodern “Literati gatherings” engaged with each other’s differences on the basis of shared worldviews, *Continuum* seems to explore how *Yaji*’s temporal structure of “endlessness” potentially allows for plural, even controversial perspectives and engagement in constructive contestations. Like an “endless banquet, which constantly welcomes late-comers” to share food for thought, the exhibition did not end in Venice but was continued with two additional iterations in Beijing and Shanghai in 2019.⁴⁵ By including a variety of negative and positive reviews of the Venice show, the Shanghai edition made frictions in the perception of the show explicitly visible. Newspaper and journal clippings pasted on walls and video-taped interviews displayed on screens provided insights into the conflicts, controversies, and discourses around the exhibition, inviting visitors to take their stance and participate in the discussion and potentially contribute to writing the history of the exhibition [Fig. 4].⁴⁶

II. Complicating Discourses on Contemporary Art’s Relationship to History, Time and Temporality by Reading the Artworks in the Exhibition *Continuum* through the Lens of *Buxi*

Qiu Zhijie’s “Map of Succession of Teachings” (*shicheng tu*) [Fig. 5] is rooted in an understanding of history writing as an “endless”, collaborative approach. The artistic historiographic mapping shows an interconnected, transcultural network of artworks, artists, and thinkers that have directly and indirectly shaped the artistic selves of the artists participating in the show, namely: the contemporary artists Tang Nannan, Wu Jian’an, and Qiu Zhijie, and the folk artists Yao Huifen and Wang Tianwen. Interconnected agents and aspects of social, intellectual, and art histories, and providing insights into the inter-generational, collaborative, and transcultural contacts and exchanges that constitute the artists and the exhibition can be read

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Qiu Zhijie, *Who Still Remembers the Untrammelled Journey*, 33–38. In his curatorial concept, Qiu Zhijie refers to “Literati gathering” (雅集 *yaji*) in combination with two additional concepts of Chinese art and culture presentation.

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Shanghai Ming Contemporary Art Museum, March 31–June 3, 2018, Beijing Times Art Museum, March 31–June 17, 2018.

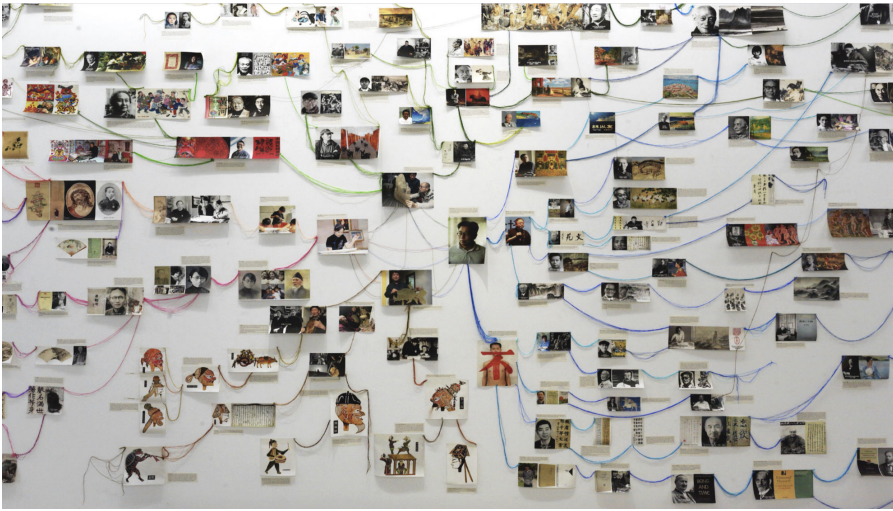
⁴⁶

Some of the clippings are also published in the catalog: Qiu Zhijie, *Continuum – Generation by Generation*, in: id., *Continuum – Generation by Generation*.



[Fig. 4]

Installation view, news clippings of criticisms of the show, Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th International Art Exhibition, Pavilion of China, Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, March 31, 2017 – June 3, 2018, photo by the author.



[Fig. 5]

Qiu Zhijie, Map of Successions of Teachings (*shicheng tu*), Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2017, photo provided by Qiu Zhijie.

as a critical engagement with a longer Chinese tradition of historiographical art rooted in the temporal concept of “endlessness” and its governing effects.⁴⁷ Artists referred to older masters and styles, committing to their duty to “endlessly” continue history and to constitute themselves as part of it. Keeping in mind that the literati artist class, because their members served at the court as scholar officials, were the intellectual, social, and political elite in China, their historiographic art practice had wide reaching political implications. It was not just about writing history but about the “endless” continuation of the world according to certain social, political, cosmological, aesthetic, and moral conventions that everyone was expected to abide by.⁴⁸

In contrast, Qiu Zhijie’s map makes use of the open temporal structure of *buxi* as a way to emphasize and shed light on the temporary nature of narratives as constructed, and as a mode of deconstructing and reconstructing relations of conventionally separated, even divergent fields and agents.⁴⁹ Moreover, the contemporary mobilization of *buxi* can be understood as a mode of critiquing (Western) historicist historiography and the related teleological concept of time. I argue that Qiu’s map challenges the conventional Western model of a temporally and spatially bounded art history. Interconnecting histories and philosophies of different national and cultural traditions, contemporary art and folk art, aspects that mainstream histories would not consider together, the map offers a model of how to re-write art history as an open transcultural narrative.⁵⁰ Qiu Zhijie writes in this regard: “At the same time, the art of

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In literati art in China, history writing was a constitutive element in its production and reception, particularly in the context of the Confucian understanding of literati art as self-cultivation. See: Billeter, *The Chinese Art of Writing*. Creating art by engaging in intra-generational conversations, literati artists had a pronounced historical consciousness and acted as historiographers. I have written in greater detail on Qiu Zhijie’s critical engagement with a Chinese concept of historiographic art here: Birgit Hopfener, Qiu Zhijie as Historian. Media Critique as a Mode of Critical Historical Research, in: *World Art* 5/1, 2015 (special issue “Negotiating Histories”, ed. by Yuko Kikuchi), 39–61 (March 10, 2024).

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History and historiography play a central role in China: “To engage with the Chinese people and their culture is to engage with their history. Their history constitutes their ambiance – the very existence of China. The people, politics and culture in China reside in its history. China is the place where we clearly see that the human being is thoroughly homo historiens. By this I mean that the Chinese people are both shaping and being shaped by history.” Chun-chieh Huang, *Humanism in East Asian Confucian Contexts*, Bielefeld 2010, 125.

49

I have written about Qiu Zhijie’s interest in deconstruction in more detail here: Birgit Hopfener, Qiu Zhijie’s Self-Conception as an Artist – Doing Art in a Critical Historical and Transcultural Perspective, in: *Journal of Art Historiography* 10, 2014 (special issue “Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art. Historiographic Reflections”, ed. by Wenny Teo) (February 29, 2024).

50

For a more detailed analysis of Qiu Zhijie’s interest in mapping as a mode of transcultural history writing, see: Birgit Hopfener, Qiu Zhijie’s Map of Total Art. Mapping as a Practice of Transcultural Intervention, in: Annegret Bergmann, Shao-Lan Hertel, Juliane Noth, Antje Papist-Matsuo, and Wibke Schrape (eds.), *Elegante Zusammenkunft im Gelehrten-garten. Studien zur Ostasiatischen Kunst zu Ehren von Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch* (Elegant Gathering in a Scholar’s Garden. Studies in East Asian Art in Honor of Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch), Weimar 2015, 300–304; Hopfener, Mapping Art History.

one country is described as a response to the art of other countries. It is not presented as a unique and triumphant tradition of one nation, but as the interweaving and merging of several traditions.”⁵¹

He also explains that the map is a critique of the modern Western myth of the individual artist as the origin of art and creativity:

But people may have so deeply indulged in the myth of personal creation since Romanticism that they have forgotten the operation of this vast energy [*buxi*]. [...] As long as they are working, their teachers are not dead. They talk about collaboration: Each individual’s work reflects the creativity of the collaborator in its vicinity. Such a dismantling of the myth of the artist’s individual creation, is an expression of humility. Here, the artist is not portrayed as a God-like figure who opens the heavens and the earth, but as a humble participant in these collaborative energies and inherited powers.⁵²

At the core of the exhibition *Continuum*, in which all of the exhibiting artists were included, was the collaborative multi-media installation *Continuum – Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea* [Fig. 6], which was initially performed, “live”, together with musicians and puppet theater performers from Shanxi province, and later “kept alive” through digital and mechanical animations. The coming alive of images through digital and mechanical animation, live puppet show, and the visitors can be read as a contemporary translation of how traditional art was expected to articulate and mediate the world’s “lively status of impermanence”.⁵³

The script of the performance, collaboratively written by Qiu Zhijie and Tang Nannan, takes three Chinese mythological stories of change, “The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains”, “Jingwei Filling the Sea”, and “Fish Kun Morphs into Bird Peng” as its starting point to tell a new story of transformation. Each screen told one of these three stories, but, as Qiu Zhijie writes: “the imagery is interconnected. Bird Jingwei enters the scene of the Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountain, and helps to move the mountains.”⁵⁴ In both its live and automated versions, puppets only become visible through the interaction between light and dark, or between

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Qiu Zhijie, Qiu Zhijie: ruhe zuo yige quanqiu hua shidai de guojiaguan 邱志杰：如何做一个全球化时代的国家馆 (Qiu Zhijie: How to Create a National Pavilion in an Era of Globalization), in: *Qiu Zhijie gongzuoshi* 邱志杰工作室 (Qiu Zhijie Studio), June 7, 2017 (December 23, 2022).

52

Ibid.; Qiu Zhijie, *Continuum – Generation by Generation*, in: id., *Continuum – Generation by Generation*, 19.

53

Shen Qibin and Qiu Zhijie, Mutual Benefit and Connection. Conversation between Shen Qibin and Qiu Zhijie, in: Shen Qibin (ed.), *Qiu Zhijie. Text-ure*, Hangzhou 2013, 22–33.

54

Ibid.



[Fig. 6]

Qiu Zhijie, Tang Nannan, Wu Jian'an, Yao Huifen and Yao Huiqin and puppet theater performers and musicians, Continuum – Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea. Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2017, photo provided by Qiu Zhijie.

substance and emptiness. That aesthetic choice resonates with an understanding of the world as operated by *buxi*, through endless interactions between the complementary aspects *Yin* and *Yang*. In the automated version of the performance, the mechanics that animate the images on screen are disclosed to the visitors in what can be read as a contemporary mobilization of the traditional concept of “relational knowledge” (知道 *zhi dao*), mentioned above. Such a disclosure critiques assumptions of “objective truth”, by inviting visitors to learn about the conditions that constitute the artwork. Ames, calling this way of knowing “correlative thinking”,⁵⁵ explains “that the only way that you can get knowledge about the world according to this logic is by making correlations between my situation and somebody else’s situation. And in so doing, to try to find the best way, the most productive way, of growing the relationship.”⁵⁶ In the context of the contemporary exhibition *Continuum*, correlative thinking can be read as emphasizing the relationality and situatedness of knowledge understood, I argue, as the precondition for a practice of “collaborative criticality”.⁵⁷

The concept of collaboration adopted by the show can be understood as engaging with “correlative thinking”. *Continuum – Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea* was created by a collaboration comprising folk art masters, puppet theater performers, musicians, and contemporary artists, all of whom are intrarelated parts of the world operated by “endlessness”, but who engage with the world with specific artistic expertise and from specific positions. Ideally, such a relational and situated collaborative practice would facilitate innovative artistic creation, knowledge, collaborative criticality, and constructive social relations and a community of equals. Illustrating the *buxi* commitment to the “relay baton”, *Continuum – Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea* also included students from Academia di belle arti di Venezia, the art academy in Venice, who learned from the puppet masters and continued the puppet performances in the pavilion after the Chinese masters had left.

The installation series *Yashan* (2017) [Fig. 7] – collaboratively created by Wu Jian’an, Yao Huifen, and Yao Huiqin – consists of eight embroidery stretchers – that is, production frames – arranged in a row. Each stretcher shows an embroidered variation of the Southern Song-dynasty (1127–1279) painting by Li Song, *Skeleton Fantasy/Puppet Show*. The images, which are round, like the original painting, but much bigger, all depict the skeleton puppeteer performing for two women with children. While the content and the pictorial elements of the embroideries that make up the installa-

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Ames, *The Great Commentary*, 1.

56

Appreciating the Chinese Difference. An interview with Roger T. Ames, November 12, 2019 (March 10, 2024).

57

I borrow this term from Wayne Modest, National Museum of World Cultures, Rotterdam.



[Fig. 7]

Wu Jian'an, Yao Huifen, and Yao Huiqin, *Yashan*, Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th International Art Exhibition, Pavilion of China, Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, March 31, 2017 – June 3, 2018, photo by the author.

tion are identical with Li Song's painting, the structures and colors that constitute each embroidery vary, displaying a wide variety of embroidery stitches. I see the artists' choice of a frameless medium for the installation, in combination with the aesthetic strategy of the "series", as their engagement with the temporal structure of "endlessness" and "correlative thinking". By moving along the stretchers, and through close, comparative looking, viewers potentially reflect on what constitutes the artwork, and how they may be participants in that meaning-making process.

When read through the lens of *buxi*, the artistic strategy of intermediality (*kua meiti*) adopted in the work differs from its conventional meanings conceptualized in the context of Western art history and theory.⁵⁸ In contrast to European art history, literati art did not consider artistic media as separate and in hierarchical competition with each other. In a world intrarelated through *Dao*, all literati art media, including calligraphy and painting, were understood as having the same source. The ninth-century painting historian Zhang Yanyuan famously argued that painting and writing shared origins; and seventeenth-century literati artist Shi Tao stated, "writing and painting are the two extremes of a single art, and they are accomplished in the same way".⁵⁹ Following the logic of endless change, different media retained fruitful intrarelations. For example, the art historian Wu Hung explains how stone stele, the prime medium of calligraphic inscription, and rubbings, an early cultural reproduction technique, had a symbiotic relationship. Taking rubbings from stelae repeatedly has the long-term effect that inscriptions eventually fade. The stele would "die", but can be re-erected, that means brought to life again, based on a rubbing. Rooted in an endless temporal process, the relation between the media of a stele and a rubbing was reciprocal.⁶⁰

The intermedial translation of the medium of painting to embroidery in the exhibition can be understood in that context, too. Seemingly emphasizing the intrarelatedness between the media of painting and embroidery, not the overall form but rather the inner

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According to Juliane Rebentisch, intermediality in Western contemporary art is a critical engagement with modernist art media. Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt a. M. 2018 [2003], 102.

59

Francois Jullien, *The Great Painting Has no Form, or, On the Nonobject through Painting*, trans. Jane Marie Todd, Chicago/London 2009, 211.

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Wu Hung's work on the objecthood of stele "constructed" by multiple events, namely rubbings, has informed this reading. "What a stele perpetuated was not only the material existence of the old stele but also the cycles of its birth, death, and rebirth. A stele can be defined as an object made of specific material, but its objecthood is often constructed by multiple events, including the notion of an elusive original and the creation of later replacements. A stele is an important source of historical knowledge because of its inscription; however, the practice of reproducing the inscriptions in rubbings inevitably destroys the stele's physical integrity and undermines its historical authority. Objecthood of stele can therefore never be embodied by a single image, rather it must be realized in the struggle between its survival and destruction of an object." Wu Hung, *On Rubbings. Their Materiality and Historicity*, in: Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu (eds.), *Writing and Materiality in China*, Cambridge, MA/London 2003, 29–72.

structures of the pictorial elements of the *Skeleton Fantasy/Puppet Show* artwork, are translated. The various embroidery stitches that make up the images can be understood as an intermedial translation of literati painting's emphasis on articulating and transmitting the world's endless transformational multiplicity through the adoption of a variety of texture brushstrokes (*cun*).

Buxi can also lend embroidery, its technique, materiality, and aesthetics, a particular meaning: the various stitches form different pictorial elements, yet everything is intrarelated through the thread and through the needlework, which resonates with the structure of Chinese processual cosmology's "intrinsic relatedness". Embroidery, like painting, follows a modular logic.⁶¹ Similar to various texture brush strokes in literati painting, embroidery adopts various stitches to create images/world respectively. Choices of texture provide images with a specific character and atmosphere in ways that became conventionalized. In painting, there are different texture strokes for different natural phenomena, like rocks, trees, or moss for example. Artists would constitute their (artistic) self by adopting, interpreting, and combining various conventionalized texture strokes. They enact and articulate creative agency by inscribing themselves in art history, following "relay baton thinking".

In the context of the collaboration between the contemporary artist Wu Jian'an and the embroidery masters Yao Huifen and Yao Huiqin, the variety of stitches was expanded. Yao Huifen explained that she normally uses two to three stitches in her realistic decorative embroideries, but that Wu asked her to employ more than fifty stitches from the canon she refers to and to develop new stitches. Innovation here is achieved through mutual inspiration, through an experimental collaborative intermedial translation from painting to embroidery, through endless transformational processes of recontextualization and recombination.

Ideally, the collaborating artists are aware of their differences, and the hierarchies among themselves, when they commit to collaboratively create an intertextual work through reciprocal interventions. As it seems, the artists of the *Yashan* series all sought innovation through the re-activation of traditions, but from different perspectives. The embroidery master Yao Huifen explained: "The cooperation opened a door for me to see much more possibilities to renew the traditions of Su embroidery",⁶² and Wu Jian'an, one could argue, learned about the embroidery technique and its conceptual potential as a contemporary art medium.

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Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things. Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, Princeton, NJ 2000.

⁶²

Lin Qi, Out of the Shadows, in: *China Daily*, May 29, 2017 (February 29, 2024).

III. A Dynamic Pluriversal Approach to *Continuum – Generation by Generation* and the Controversies around the Exhibition

A dynamic pluriversal approach takes as its starting point the observation that the exhibition was on the one hand praised and on the other hand heavily criticized.⁶³ It seeks to show how *buxi* plays out differently in different contexts, while responding to the complexity of responses to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: “What does it mean to conceive of art, the world, and oneself as endlessly intrarelated?”

A dynamic pluriversal approach avoids the universalization and relativization of a specific meaning and critical perspective, and instead seeks to shed light on the historical, epistemological, and political situatedness of the multiple and entangled meanings and critical/decolonial perspectives that shape and reshape contemporary art as a site of transcultural exchanges and controversy in a global framework. A critical, multi-directional engagement with *buxi* as an alternative ontology and temporality of art and world contributes to the decolonization of the institutionalized conceptual and aesthetic framework of contemporary art by providing an opportunity to apply a pluriversal perspective to an art exhibition.⁶⁴ A dynamic pluriversal framework is informed by Walter Mignolo’s conceptualization of the pluriverse, which rejects Western universalism and the superior position it claims for itself, and engages with “forms of knowledge and meaning exceeding the limited [Western] regulations of epistemology and hermeneutics, [and] names the principles and assumptions upon which pluriverses of meaning are constructed”.⁶⁵ However, a dynamic approach to pluriversality rejects binary thinking, essentialist conceptualizations of difference, and a universal approach to decolonization.⁶⁶ Mignolo conceives the pluriverse as a “world entangled through and by the colonial matrix

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Footnote 9 provides an extensive list of diverse critical voices.

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Shigemi Inaga expresses that he finds it frustrating that books such as *Critical Terms for Art History* by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff “completely disregard Oriental traditions”. In his chapter on representation, for example, David Summer does not refer to non-Western concepts. Shigemi Inaga, *Is Art History Globalizable. A Critical Commentary from a Far Eastern Point of View*, in: James Elkins (ed.), *Is Art History Global?*, New York/London 2006, 249–279.

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Walter Mignolo, Foreword. On Pluriversality and Multipolarity, in: Bernd Reiter (ed.), *Constructing the Pluriverse. The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, Durham, NC 2018, x.

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Suren Pillay’s important critique of the universalization of Latin American decolonial theory is useful here. Alerting us to the differences in decolonial struggles in Africa, that are not about difference but about assimilation, he argues: “To think the problem of colonialism in the present requires a comparative account of the problem of colonialism that embraces both the history of assimilation and the history of difference in a way that survives colonial assimilation.” Id., *The Problem of Colonialism. Assimilation, Difference, and Decolonial Theory in Africa*, in: *Critical Times* 4/3, 2021, 389–416.

of power”,⁶⁷ in which different cosmologies are connected along the power differential of “coloniality, covered up by the rhetorical narrative of modernity”.⁶⁸ In line with Pheng Cheah’s critique of Mignolo, this essay argues that today’s power structures are more complex than Mignolo suggests.⁶⁹ Assuming the world as an open temporal structure of “worlding”,⁷⁰ a dynamic pluriversal approach attends to, makes space for, and sheds light on the transculturally entangled multiplicity and multi-directionality of concepts, image cultures, and the various ways of knowing and being, as well as cosmologies that constitute art in the global framework. The approach is informed by Monica Juneja’s conceptualization of the trans-cultural as an analytical method. This approach

[...] focuses on processes through which forms [and discourses, I would add] emerge in local contexts with circuits of exchange. Contact, interaction, entanglement make the trans-cultural a field constituted relationally, so that asymmetry, as one attribute of relationships (together with categories such as difference, non-equivalence, dissonance) is an element that makes up this field. [...] Our research aims to investigate the multiple ways in which difference is negotiated within contact and encounters, through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, re-historizing and rereading the signs, alternatively through non-communication, rejection or resistance. Exploring the possible range of transactions built into these dynamics works as a safeguard against polar conception[s] of identity and alterity, equally against dichotomies between complete absorption and resistance, which characterize certain kind[s] of postcolonial scholarship.⁷¹

From a Euro-American perspective on critical global art history, the exhibition’s mobilization of *buxi* has been understood and positively evaluated as a mode to transform structures of art history that

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Mignolo, Foreword. On Pluriversality and Multipolarity, xi.

⁶⁸

Ibid.

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Pheng Cheah, *The Limits of Thinking in Decolonial Power Structures*, Townsend Center for the Humanities, November 2006 (February 29, 2024).

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Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham, NC/London 2016, 1–19.

⁷¹

Monica Juneja, Understanding Transculturalism. Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna in conversation, in: Amir Fahim et al. (eds.), *Transcultural Modernisms. Model House Research Group*, Berlin 2013, 22–33.

stood in the way of decolonizing the discipline.⁷² Put simply, the conventional modern, Western, temporal and spatial regime and a hierarchical teleology cannot order or contain a world and art conditioned by “endlessness”. In an intrarelated world, binary thinking, such as center and periphery, self and other, tradition versus modernity, not to mention the logic of othering that is so ingrained in the modern Western structure of thinking and being in the world, must be supplanted by radical relationality and openness.

In such a world, art is not in a representational relation to the world. As an intrarelatational part of the world, understood as continuous process, art is conceived as an ontological force of generating the endless process that is the world, conceived as a continuous process of “worlding”⁷³ and therefore “relieved” of the burden to represent.

Conventional art history conceives of art objects as temporally stable entities that are made sense of by slotting them into chronologically ordered periods and national or regional frameworks, temporally and spatially bounded units of investigations. Art conceived through the lens of *buxi*, though dependent upon traditional Chinese thought, resonates powerfully with recent discourses in art history that emphasize art’s temporal instability as the condition to reconceptualize artworks as agents of alternative anachronic and heterochronic models of history writing and worlding, and world making respectively.⁷⁴

According to this idiom of critique, in a world conceived as endless process, the universalization of specific concepts cannot be successful. While this critique is useful to the Euro-American per-

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Among these voices were, for example: Charles Esche and Annie Fletcher (Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven), who wrote about the show: “Continuum is an important exhibition not only for China but for the art world’s image of itself. The core art world is still dominated by a western-centric, colonial state of mind that seeks to exclude what it can’t subsume and doesn’t understand. The worst commentators on art see their local modernist protocols as the only, universal option for art and artists to follow. Continuum challenges this myopia. It allows contemporary art to flow from different roots, not only the trauma of colonialism and alienation but also traditions that are despised within the modern-colonial matrix. This is surely a liberation for the general possibilities of thinking what art could become. The mostly US commentators who have criticized the show for being aligned to Chinese state policy completely miss two things: one, the critical humor and complexity in much of the work in the pavilion; two, their own complicity with US state policy and its continuous bid for global hegemony in all fields.” Qiu Zhijie, *Continuum – Generation by Generation*, 10. Readings of the exhibition by Kurosawa Hiromi (21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa) and Davide de Quadrio (long term collaborator of Qiu Zhijie and recently director of Museo d’Arte Orientale, Turin) were included in the catalog of the exhibition *Continuum* and in the iteration of the show in Shanghai. See also: Davide de Quadrio, *Dispersing Knowledge. The Case of Qiu Zhijie Curating the China Pavilion in the 2017 Venice Biennale. What We Can Learn from This Artistic and Curatorial Practice*, in: Mary Sherman (ed.), *International Opportunities in the Arts*, Wilmington, DE 2019, 439–450.

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Here the concept of *buxi* can be understood as resonating with “worlding”, an ontological concept of the world as a process of temporalization, conceptualized by literary scholar Pheng Cheah informed by Martin Heidegger. Cheah, *What Is a World?*, 1–19.

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For example: Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions since 1990*, New York/London 2022; Keith Moxey, *What Time Is It in the History of Art?*, in: Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey (eds.), *Time in the History of Art. Temporality, Chronology, Anachrony*, London/New York 2020, 26–42; Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York 2010.

spective, it cannot be universally applied, but rather must be understood primarily through the longer discursive history of critiquing “Western representationalism”.⁷⁵ In the awareness that “Western representationalism” and the critiques of it have been universalized as an effect of Western colonialism and imperialism, a pluriversal approach examines how discourses of art, philosophy, and politics in specific locales have been occupied with specific questions, premises, and assumptions regarding art and its relation to time, temporality, and the world respectively. Adopting a critical historiographical perspective, a pluriversal approach here seeks to understand how specific questions have been or can be articulated in relation to local conceptual histories and socio-political contexts, and in specific transcultural constellations and negotiations.

Even though I am aware that the history that I am going to sketch here is much more complex and needs further unpacking, I argue that the criticism of *buxi* as potentially denying individual freedom can be understood in the context of a longer history of critiquing the obligation to intrarelate.

Frank Perkins argues, from a comparative philosophical perspective, that while European philosophical inquiries into the nature of reality have

tended to center on problems of reconciliation (how ontologically distinct things can interact), Chinese metaphysics has been more concerned with problems of distinction. The most central problems are around the status of individualized things, the relationship between the patterns of nature and specifically human values, and how to understand the ultimate ground of the world in a way that avoids either reification or nihilism. These become problems precisely because of the underlying assumptions of holism and change.⁷⁶

The comparison of different temporal modes of meaning making and subject constitution by the scholar of Chinese and comparative philosophy Hans-Georg Möller is useful in this regard. According to him, a traditional Chinese semiotic paradigm of presence differs significantly from a semiotic structure of representation.⁷⁷ Instead of assuming a dualistic relation between signifier and significant, that is, instead of conceiving the signifier as an arbitrary label attached to things *a posteriori*, a semiotic structure of presence con-

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Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC 2007; Lee, Chronophobia.

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Perkins, *Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy*.

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Hans-Georg Möller, Before and after Representation, in: *Semiotica* 143/1, 2003, 69–77.

ceives of signifier and significant as equally present.⁷⁸ Following the logic of a semiotics of presence, for example, the title (the signifier) of a minister (the signified) did not represent a minister. Instead, it was by assuming – that is, by uniting and becoming one with – the title (the signifier) that “both may be present: the title (the signifier), a minister (the signified) assumes, makes the official function present”.⁷⁹ In other words, according to the logic of a semiotics of presence, signifying practices serve the purpose to involve everything, every fact, and every person thus constituting the world as functional participants in an intrarelational political, social, and even cosmological order. The strong ordering function of this semiotic structure of presence is tightly connected with a concept of reality, according to which everything is conceived as intrarelated, in which “every element of an ordered whole like a member of a family, a minister of state, or a celestial body in the cosmos, had to maintain a certain function”.⁸⁰ Literati art’s function beyond representation can be linked to semiotic assumptions of presence and its respective system and concept of order. Writing calligraphy, or enacting written Chinese characters and their accompanying aesthetic and social values as a recipient, meant to unite with, and by so doing, constitute one’s self as, an intrarelational, functional participant in a certain social and political order, whose continuity in turn was ensured through “functional participatory” practices such as calligraphy. It is evident that against this background, the representational attribution of meaning would have not only severely disturbed the semiotic structure of presence but also existentially threatened the accompanying system of social order. According to Möller, representation was the “‘threat of all threats’ because it would lead to chaos in so far as it would introduce a divergent structure of time and meaning production and in consequence interrupt not only the functioning of the semiotic structure of presence and its respective ordering system”⁸¹ but also the related political order.

Critical Chinese voices of the exhibition’s mobilization of *buxi* as nationalistic and traditionalist and too close to the official political authoritarian agenda have to be understood in the context of how the Chinese government has been coopting discourses of Chinese tradition including *buxi*.

Xi Jinping, current president of the Peoples’ Republic of China, has been using the term “endlessness” (*buxi*) in the context of his nationalist self-strengthening agenda. He has been praising 5000

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Ibid., 75. In the context of Confucianism, this logic served and guaranteed the continuity of a specific administrative and bureaucratic reality and its related social order. According to the Daoist worldview, it ensured the continuity of a physiological and organic reality.

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., 76.

years of civilizational history in China as the “only civilization in the world that has continued since ancient times and has never been interrupted” and “how China’s achievements in various fields are superior and show the innovative spirit of the Chinese nation, advancing with the times and self-strengthening without stopping [endlessly] (自强不息 *zhiqiang buxi*)”.⁸² Conceiving the “field of history and civilization” as a struggle,⁸³ Xi stresses the role of Chinese tradition as a tool to instill “cultural self-confidence” and to enable continuity and continuous rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.⁸⁴ Robert Elliott Allinson would argue that Xi Jinping’s perspective on history and development can be understood as an endless struggle as informed by Mao Zedong, who referred to the “*Yijing* as a model for dialectical development” in order to conceptualize revolution and class struggle as an “endless” process, operated by “endless” change.⁸⁵ Xi Jinping’s interest in *buxi* clearly serves the authoritarian agenda to ensure the continuity of his and the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) power, and to make claims about China’s superiority in the world and in the history of world civilization respectively. The governing effect of a world conceived as endlessly intrarelated, sketched out above, serves him and the CCP well, to involve everyone as a “functional participant” in the prescribed totalitarian social and political order.

The rejection of Qiu Zhijie’s mobilization of *buxi* within China can be understood in this context. Referring to Qiu Zhijie’s larger written and artistic oeuvre, a case can be made for understanding the show’s employment of “endlessness” and “change” – in contrast to the official discourse – as a critical tool of deconstruction, Western critique, decolonization, pluralization, and transculturalization of art, its conceptual histories, and worldviews. However, the question remains if the current political climate in China will allow for such a critical reading of *buxi* to emerge within China. Or, to put

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Xi Jinpin, *Jianshe Zhongguo tese Zhongguo fengge Zhongguo qipai de kaoguxue, genghao renshi yuanyuanliuchang bodajingshen de Zhonghua wenming* 建设中国特色中国风格中国气派的考古学 更好认识源远流长博大精深的中华文明 (Developing an archaeology with Chinese Te-Se, Chinese style and Chinese characteristics, to understand the Chinese civilization better, which has a long history and is profound).

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Allinson, *The Philosophical Influences of Mao Zedong*, 100–102.

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Ibid.

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“Mao’s embrace of dialectics, especially his understanding of the dialectical philosophy of the ancient, Chinese philosophy of the *Yijing*, a philosophy that predated Confucius, is key to understanding the situation of China today and an argument for maintaining its ties to the classical, Chinese contribution to an ethical world. [...] The difference with Hegelian dialectics is that the opposites in Hegel are not characterized by *yin* and *yang*, which are complementary and are not (and should not be construed as) antagonistic. The interaction between *yin* and *yang* is the principle of change. The movement of the *yin* and *yang* is one of reversal. In contrast, the movement of the Hegelian dialectic is that of an upward spiral.” Mao’s dialectics informed by the *Yijing* could be considered even more effective with regards to endless revolution and class struggle, since its end isn’t synthesis but endless change (*buxi*), which Mao, in contrast to the traditional Confucian concept, doesn’t understand as harmonious but as endless struggle. *Ibid.*, 102, 101.

it another way, how further critical historiographical analyses and contextualizations of *buxi* discourses by Qiu Zhijie would have better facilitated a productive critical discourse on *buxi* as an “operating mechanism” in Chinese art.

IV. Conclusion

Instead of dismissing the exhibition mobilization of *buxi* as nationalist, traditionalist, or un-contemporary, this paper suggests employing a dynamic pluriversal perspective to shed light on the complex discourses that constitute *Continuum – Generation by Generation* (*buxi* 不息) and the multiple responses that can be given to the question “What does it mean to conceive of art, the world, and oneself as endlessly intrarelated”? The exhibition, this paper argues, is an ideal case study of how contemporary art in the global framework is a contested field of continuous negotiation. Shaped and reshaped through transcultural exchanges and controversies, engagement with contemporary art demands continuous self-reflection and attendance to the multiple and multi-directional histories, epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies that constitute contemporary art and a pluriversal critical and aesthetic framework(s).

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