



# ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol.2, No.3 Jul.-Sep., 2024

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**To cite this article:** Shao Qibing, "Resonance and Dissonance: The Artistic Significance of Qi Zhilong in the Context of Globalization," *Art Frontier* 2, no.3 (September 2024): 10-21, <https://doi.org/10.64212/WCKM6919>.

**DOI:** 10.64212/WCKM6919

**ISSN:** 2835-5490

**EISSN:** 2836-841X

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This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

**Website:** [www.artfrontier.org](http://www.artfrontier.org)

**Email:** [artfrontier2023@outlook.com](mailto:artfrontier2023@outlook.com)

**Publishing Frequency:** Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



# Resonance and Dissonance: The Artistic Significance of Qi Zhilong in the Context of Globalization

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## Abstract

After everyone has gained the right to narrate and reconstruct, the worldview is no longer a unified image shaped by dominant powers. Instead, it is a fragmented and dynamically evolving picture, pieced together through the intersubjective interactions of individuals and their mutual reconstructions with existing discourses. This new form of worldview not only serves as the foundation for the emergence of contemporary art but also represents the puzzle that contemporary art must continually reconstruct and reassemble.

## Key Words

Globalization, Chinese contemporary art, Chinese Beauty, temporality, reconstruction

## 1. The Emergence of Chinese Contemporary Art Amidst the Eastward Spread of Western Influence

Since the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese contemporary art has fundamentally shifted away from the socialist art principles that were once rooted in serving the realities of society. With the introduction of contemporary art concepts from Europe and the United States, artists have had to confront the issues and contexts of their society while being limited by their personal experiences and life circumstances. This disjunction and misalignment between ideology and reality led to creating a contemporary art landscape with distinctly Chinese characteristics around the turn of the twentieth century. We can only truly understand how these imported art concepts have been localized within the Chinese social context by recognizing this contemporary context and the humanistic characteristics specific to this era—such as the mental state, lived experiences, and emotional entanglements of the artists behind contemporary art practices. Through such analysis, we can see how, over the past few decades, contemporary art has reflected and contributed to the changes and transformations in Chinese society, as well as the shifts in people's lives and spiritual orientations.

When concepts like freedom, reflection, criticism, and intervention—advocated by leftist artists in Western capitalist societies—were introduced to China, they para-

doxically became the guiding principles and methodologies for artists in socialist China who adhered to right-wing ideologies. This dislocation highlights



Figure 1. Qi Zhilong. *Consumer Images No.16*. Oil on canvas, 200×170cm, 1993.



Figure 2. Qi Zhilong. *China Beauty*. Oil on canvas, 41×33cm, 1995.



Figure 3. Qi Zhilong. *China Beauty*. Oil on canvas, 65×54cm, 1998.

the differentiated expressions of art based on the specific conditions of different societies and the misaligned regeneration of Western art concepts in a new environment. With the rapid growth of China's socialist market economy, artists who embrace Western contemporary art concepts have found relatively free creative spaces and markets for their work in China. This has given these artists a positive attitude and active role in social life and sparked curiosity from Western societies, eager to explore these Chinese contemporary artists who have emerged from a historically ancient and closed environment. Western contemporary artists, like Andy Warhol, have been invited to hold exhibitions in China, and Chinese artists have frequently been invited to participate in exhibitions abroad, creating an increasingly close ecosystem of artistic exchange between China and the West. Domestic media, operating under a relatively relaxed public opinion environment, began to report on these marginal figures outside the official system, gradually exposing them domestically and internationally. Contemporary art has thus increasingly occupied a legitimate position within the artistic discourse of the era, becoming a spiritual barometer of the times. The contemporary artists of this period generally focused on social progress, using their art to engage with and res-

pond to the transformative changes of the era through a unique creative stance and perspective.

Qi Zhilong's distinctive approach lies in the fact that he does not create from a critical standpoint nor treat art as an interventionist remedy for social issues. Instead, he draws from his personal life experiences and observations of society, combining contemporary art concepts with Pop Art forms. His painting series *Consumer Images* exemplifies this approach, reflecting the new spirit of the era brought about by China's reform and opening up. It represents the realization of China's desire for a Western consumer society and serves as a genuine expression of the aspirations for Western material civilization. Of course, from the perspective of the power structure, this still carries a suspicion of intervention. However, from the standpoint of promoting social transformation and influencing the shift in public ideology, it undoubtedly has significant impact and importance. It is precisely because of the presence of a large group of forward-thinking artists that society is gradually being guided toward a new trend of freedom and openness through visual experiences and conceptual innovations. From a sociological perspective, this is precisely the fundamental significance of contemporary art for a society that is transforming.



Figure 4. Qi Zhilong. *China Beauty*. Oil on canvas, 220×180cm, 2007.

## 2. The Differences in Social Context that Led to the Rebirth of Pop Art as Political Pop

In a society long dominated by political rhetoric, where men and women were limited to wearing drab gray,



Figure 5. Qi Zhilong. *China Beauty No.1*. Oil on canvas, 220×180cm, 2008

black, or green military uniforms, people experienced a deep, prolonged deprivation of aesthetic expression.

When the power to choose colors was finally returned to the public, a vibrant flood of color surged across every



Figure 6. Qi Zhilong. *China Beauty No.3*. Oil on canvas, 220×180cm, 2008.

village, field, and street in China. The repressed demand for aesthetic expression erupted like a geyser, and bright,

vivid colors became one of the best ways for individuals to assert their identity and gain a sense of presence.

Kitsch, as an outlet and form of expression for a society where human nature has been repressed for a long time, became a defining feature of a specific era. In Qi Zhilong's *Consumer Images* painting series, the juxtaposition of Mao Zedong's portrait with swimsuit-clad women—two conflicting elements—on the same canvas, along with the bright, large flowers set against flat, solid-colored backgrounds, appears particularly striking. The images of swimsuit models, borrowed from the popular calendars of southern cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou, vividly reflect the intensity of long-suppressed hormones and libido, unleashed as desires returned to the vibrant bodies of individuals. Mao Zedong's portrait serves as a metaphor for the deep historical imprint that remained in the collective memory and consciousness of the people at that time. It also hints at the inherent conflict in Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up policies, where the Four Cardinal Principles were upheld as the underlying political guidelines for social and economic life. The *Consumer Images* series reflects the internal contradictions of that rapidly transforming era, highlighting the tension between people's outward lifestyles, spiritual outlooks, and underlying ideological structures.

The swimsuit-clad women in the *Consumer Images* series not only signify the arrival of an era of material consumption in the Socialism with Chinese Characteristics society but also reflect how the female body, as an object of the male gaze in a patriarchal society, has been adorned with the trappings of consumerism. These women confidently display their bodies, inviting aesthetic appreciation from the male gaze, and in doing so, inject a provocative vitality into the social dynamics of the time. The combination and layering of several socially and historically significant symbols in Qi Zhilong's work represent his initial sociological presentation through visual imagery. The flat, ad-like application of paint and the vibrant colors not only draw from the techniques of Western Pop Art but also perfectly reflect the social landscape of that era—a time when the lingering shadow of authoritarianism was juxtaposed with the crass popular taste of an Eastern society suddenly overtaken by a wave of consumerism. This contradiction between the realities of power and the allure of consumption formed a surreal combination, making the era both thrilling and unfamiliar, simultaneously trendy and vulgar. The presentation of multiple conflicting elements within the same canvas in Qi Zhilong's work not only represents the realities of the time but also carries an ironic undertone, suggesting that real life, much like advertisements, is beautiful and deceptive. This sense of conflict between reality and

illusion creates a particularly surreal effect. The inherent contradictions of that era undoubtedly shape the choice of symbols and forms. Qi Zhilong, as a perceptive observer of history, captures the state of a society in rapid transformation—one that is shifting from poverty and scarcity to a more affluent social scene. This blending of old and new highlights the chaotic and disordered symptoms of the era that pervade every individual's life.

Like the artist himself, a small group of people in the 1980s who could not integrate into the social order were among the first to sense the fresh winds of the new era. They seized the historical opportunity, turning the 1990s into their stage. In the artwork, the combination of various symbols in a conflicting and fragmented manner accurately reflects the rapid social changes of that period. Old ideologies and everyday life remnants still linger in the details, while new concepts and forms from Western societies have already entered public view and daily life through mass media such as television, film, and advertising. The visual experience brought by these new media not only swiftly replaced old notions but also refreshed the social image landscape with novelty, brightness, and rapid shifts. The intense colors in the *Consumer Images* series vividly reflect the social reality of China during that period, where the onslaught of advertising imagery enveloped people. This period saw a clash between old habits and a strong desire for new and novel lifestyles, creating an irreconcilable conflict. The influence spread from the more developed regions in the south to the relatively isolated areas in the north, affecting various aspects of life. From a visual studies perspective, this series of works, employing Pop Art techniques, resonates with the social conditions of that era. It also provides valuable reference material for future academic research in art sociology, offering a form of visual archaeology that can help uncover the spiritual state of a bygone era through painted images.

### 3. The Formation of an Artist's Personal Style Amidst the Tides of History

Looking back at Qi Zhilong's painting career up to now, except for the period around 2017 when he focused on Christian themes, his work has consistently centered on young women as the subject, starting from his graduation project where he painted his girlfriend. Women, as the "second sex", represent not only a gender identity that is constructed but also an object of the male gaze in a patriarchal society. With the rise of feminist discourse and the women's liberation movement, women have increasingly entered various aspects of social life. From a male perspective, women not only embody the artist's



Figure 7. Qi Zhilong. *Bed*. Watercolor pencil on paper, 51×67cm, 2017.

idealized vision of the opposite sex but also serve a social role reflecting historical and societal changes. They focus on the details of change within each historical period. Therefore, whether from a personal or societal perspective, featuring women in art undoubtedly reflects the artist’s genuine and unique artistic viewpoint. By studying the evolution of female figures in his paintings over different periods, one can gain insight into the artist’s evolving perceptions and understandings over time. Additionally, these images serve as valuable iconographic evidence for historical research.

*Chinese Beauty* is a series by Qi Zhilong that has continued for a significant period. By the mid-to-late 1990s, the social scenes and ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s were scarcely felt. The tide of the market economy had swept across the country, permeating everyone’s values and objectives. Almost everyone eagerly and recklessly plunged into the market economy, whether through investment or speculation, to make money quickly and in large amounts. Women, as significant parti-

cipants in the economic life of this period, not only emerged as central figures in factories and markets alongside men but also saw revolutionary moral and ethical concepts replaced by new consumer ideologies. Aesthetic preferences grounded in commercial logic permeated women’s daily lives and values through various advertising media. Women, as consumers and objects of consumption, reflected trends of objectification and self-objectification in an era driven by consumerist ideals. They adorned themselves based on male aesthetic preferences and fashion trends, awaiting attention from male capitalists. Women, evaluating their gender identity within the framework of commodity economics based on their appearance, education, and status, had a clear sense of their value, while sex workers directly sold their bodies in entertainment venues.

Born in the 1960s, Qi Zhilong experienced the harsh political environment and material scarcity of the planned economy during his youth. When the tide of market economy arrived, he felt great joy. However, he

also observed that as the consumer wave rapidly changed the social landscape and made public life more colorful, people quickly became objectified. The harsh realities and the erosion of social conscience left the artist feeling powerless. Consequently, he could only seek some form of self-comfort and social responsibility through his role as a third-party observer in his art. At this time, the only figures he could nostalgically imagine from his own experience and imagination were the youths of the Cultural Revolution. These individuals threw themselves into social practice with reckless abandon for lofty revolutionary ideals, although behind their restless spirits and extreme collective actions few could clearly understand whether their seemingly idealistic behavior had any real justification or if it could truly achieve the grand goal of transforming the world. Nonetheless, at least these young people of that era were idealistic and passionate, filled with romantic aspirations and fervent hopes for the future and the world. By the late 1990s, nearly everyone had forgotten the ideals and romanticism, as well as the humanistic values, and instead adopted material wealth and money as new value coordinates, aiming to achieve the prosperity of secular life through practical actions. This world seemed both mundane and vulgar, but what way was there to change it? As an artist, the only option was to express one's thoughts and intentions through art and to convey one's attitude toward the world through artistic means, even if it was not necessarily correct or effective. Although Qi Zhilong states that he would never truly wish to return to the fervor of that revolutionary era, he detaches from the historical reality and instead nostalgically reflects on the exalted, inspiring spirit from a distance. By romanticizing the idealistic vision, he seeks to heal the societal symptoms he is experiencing rather than becoming one of the unknowing, insensitive masses shaped by the era. This is precisely where the impact and role of art and artists regarding society and the times lie.

When his *Chinese Beauty* series, featuring a consumer society's aesthetic with military hats and uniforms, was presented to those who had lived through the Cultural Revolution, this imagery was initially not well received. The reason was that this visually pleasing representation did not align with their personal, often unpleasant experiences. In other words, the romanticized historical imagery did not match their memories. Although they were protagonists of that turbulent era, it also involved movements such as the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside campaign. Those idealistic and romantic youths were also sent to remote rural areas for labor and re-education. With the issuance of an official document, many young people, still not fully recovered from their

revolutionary zeal, were dispatched to the countryside to undergo re-education by peasants. This stark contrast undoubtedly led these individuals to fall from the heights of idealism into the most miserable circumstances. The significant disparity and the harsh life of deprivation left them with unforgettable memories of suffering. Those who returned to the city later found their youthful years lost. They not only missed the opportunity to acquire new skills but also struggled to reintegrate into the rapidly changing urban environment after years of isolation. For the returning educated youths of that period, the gap between the imagery and their memories was vast; the reality was far harsher than the paintings. However, with the passage of time and changes in the circumstances of the subjects being portrayed, by the 2000s more people could face this imagery with acceptance. Time acts as a remedy, gradually healing past emotional wounds, blurring historical memories, and beautifying and embellishing the past through recollection. This process allows present-day life to emerge from the shadows of the past. From this perspective, Qi Zhilong's imagery provides a profound insight into human nature, as it anticipates how people will imagine and reinterpret history years later. The background of the paintings still employs a flat color technique, which not only directs the viewer's attention more intensely towards the portrait but also isolates the figure as an entity detached from any specific context or situation. This approach metaphorically suggests that the image does not realistically depict a particular scene or history. Instead, it represents an artistic creation born from the artist's imagination.

Indeed, given the postmodern Pop Art ideology, which focuses on reconstructing the meaning of images through appropriation and mixing, this artistic approach is a defining characteristic of Pop Art. Blending political elements with Pop Art style has led to the emergence of a Chinese version of political Pop Art. This is reflected in the creative paradigms of artists like Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, and Yue Minjun, whose works align with Western interpretations of Chinese art phenomena within the postcolonial context. While following the value orientations and artistic lineage of Western civilization, their work is characterized by striking symbolism, which resonates with the expectations of Western civilization towards Eastern societies. The historic event of the early summer of 1989 profoundly impacted the psychology, cognition, and modes of expression of that era's youth. When the idealistic aspirations for social reality had no channel for expression and no opportunity to engage in practical social reform movements, it was undoubtedly frustrating and stifling for idealistic young people. Conse-

quently, in art, this sense of helplessness and discontent could only be expressed in a distorted and subtle manner, reflecting their internal psychological and spiritual struggles.

For Qi Zhilong's works of this period, the military uniforms and hats appear as symbols of psychological compensation for the youth of the era, reflecting a stance of nonconformity. This idealistic imagery, much like the rise of Western Pop Art, involves both a focus on and rebellion against reality, as well as an emphasis on breaking through and innovating within the art system. However, unlike Western artists, the visual symbols in Chinese artists' works carry a more pronounced and resolute political stance. To some art critics of the time, this new mode of expression was seen as a form of compromise, an indication of surrendering resistance. As Huang Zhuan stated in his article "On Cultural Idealism": "In the 1990s, Chinese contemporary art began forming a healthy pattern with certain cultural sophistication and uniqueness. However, it was disheartening to see that the various expressions of decadence and cynicism, as well as the cultural pessimism tinged with end-of-century concerns, had become a repressive force on this positive development, manifesting in a broadly political direction in various international opportunities. What is especially troubling is that while we have yet to complete the formation of our ideal, healthy art market, many tasteless, money-driven, and opportunistic artworks aimed merely at fashion have already seized market positions. We are confronted with a profound cultural sense of loss, having not only abandoned our idols but also the most basic values and ideals."<sup>1</sup> Views like Huang Zhuan's were shared by some art critics of the time, who saw themselves as cultural defenders adhering to their principles in the wake of the political idealism's collapse in 1989. This stance represented their cultural commitment and artistic assertion. However, this vision—rooted in a cultural subjectivity that imposed personal idealistic notions onto artistic practice—was not embraced by the prevailing direction of social art creation.

Each historical period does not progress linearly, moving to the next stage only after reaching a state of completeness. Instead, it is marked by random collisions of various factors, with unpredictable pauses or shifts. Artists focused on cynicism and kitsch in the early 1990s captured the rapidly changing social emotions and responded to them actively and creatively through their art. The main difference between art critics and artists lies in their approaches: critics tend to guide practice from a theoretical perspective, adhering to a predefined ideal plan to achieve their vision, while artists prefer to

start from personal experience and real-world sensations, being more attuned to new trends and the zeitgeist without being bogged down by theoretical constraints. However, Li Xianting, an art critic, demonstrated a more proactive and open attitude, showing sensitivity to new artistic dynamics. He captured the essence of the new era reflected in the work of the Yuanmingyuan artist community in Beijing's urban-rural fringe and actively promoted and advanced it, contributing to the diverse ecology of Chinese contemporary art during that period.

#### **4. At Present, Generating Differentiated Histories Based on Personal Narratives**

In recent years, Qi Zhilong's new works have involved projecting old movie clips onto a stage-like screen, integrating live performances and recitations into the projected images, and recording these interactions on video. This approach involves treating past film footage as cultural artifacts and inserting scenes difficult to revisit or recall into contemporary performance art. It blurs the lines between overlaying current actions onto historical film narratives and defining the temporal hierarchy between virtual images and physical actions in the artwork. The richness and ambiguity of the work's form and medium bring about interpretive ambiguities and difficulties. The novelty of the work's format allows viewers to interpret it differently, leading to markedly different meanings based on individual perceptions and understanding. After fictional films have been socially disseminated, should they continue to be treated as fictional stories, or should they be remembered as historical facts? As Heidegger said "Time can only become time in the context of human existence. Time is temporal; Dasein is not time, but it is temporal. Thus, the existence of temporality implies a reality that is not identical."<sup>2</sup> If viewed as a historical event, it will be interwoven into countless narrative timelines of films on the timeline of the real world. However, every individual lives in the same world; for each person, the time of their real-life experience is both differentiated and limited by their physical existence in society and their immediate environment. Additionally, it varies due to the different ways they encounter overlapping and fragmented film timelines. Thus, time exists for each person as a subjective and differentiated event.

In Qi Zhilong's latest works, the subjective and artistic manipulation of time reflects the operational inherently filled with contemporary philosophical significance regarding time. It explores how art can reveal the effects of time, space, history, and imagery on human consciousness. In Gilles Deleuze's view,



Figure 8. Qi Zhilong. *How Helpless the Mother Must Be!*. Performance video art, 2021.



Figure 9. Qi Zhilong. *The Millennium*. Performance video art, 2022.2.19.

the future is detached from the past's foundation, and the past has also escaped its role as a linear temporal anchor. When time ceases to be an objective privilege of differen-

tiated individuals regarding time. This process gathers individual micro-narratives into a non-identical reality of eras and history. When Qi Zhilong reintroduces past film



Figure 10. Qi Zhilong. *War is Over*. Performance video art, 2022.2.25

timelines into his works, the historical timelines of the past and the present physical timelines are fused through new lenses. Thus, the social reality of time and the individual's subjective experience of time resonate within the present life-space constructed by the artwork. So, setting aside the plots and physical language on the screen and focusing solely on the temporal attributes, his new practice scheme is when time ceases to be an objective physical measure and a priori condition of consciousness, everyone can manipulate the temporality that holds personal significance within their life sphere. Existence becomes a privileged space for thought experiments, and the individual lifetime, once dissolved by materialist historical temporality, engages in personal mini-narratives through historical images stored digitally. Consequently, time acquires a spatial and contemporary nature that blends the virtual with the real.

Certainly, from the perspective of film and television as performative arts and carriers of meaning, whether the works are social documentaries or pure fiction, they are considered cultural facts due to their shared memories among many people. These works are written into social activities and collective memory, exerting long-term influence on the world. The film clips captured by Qi Zhilong are virtual from the standpoint of cinema, but in terms of their impact on human social life, they are both real and realistic. The captured clips are not merely

images but also crystallizations of cultural spirit and phenomena themselves. Moreover, they represent a part of human culture and history that can be digitized and encoded and has the potential for continuous circulation and replication. When Qi Zhilong incorporates film footage into the performance art process, he effectively introduces a historical segment into the contemporary artistic context, allowing historical art archives to participate in the re-creation and reconstruction of art. Conversely, history, in the form of images, is also brought into the new creation of contemporary art as a new medium. The artist's intervention can be seen as both a deconstruction of the original film structure, wherein new narratives impart new meanings to the film, and as an opportunity for individuals in the era of widespread imaging devices to enter a narrative realm using images to reconfigure classics. This process also allows history to contribute to the construction and interpretation of the contemporary world.

After everyone has gained the narrative and reconstructive power, the worldview is no longer a unified image structured by force. Instead, it is a patchwork created from the interactions of individual subjects, reconstructed through engagement with existing discourses, resulting in a blurred image with gaps and dynamic generation. This new paradigm serves as both the foundation for contemporary art and a puzzle that

contemporary art must continuously reconstruct and assemble. Qi Zhilong's series of experimental video works undoubtedly reflect the infinite possibilities of individual micro-narratives in generating new worlds in the multimedia era. This new world moves away from materialism due to digital technology and the re-encoding of micro-narratives.

## 5. Conclusion

Today, the world has changed, and China, having entered a globalized world order, has also transformed the global art landscape. The question of how contemporary Chinese art resonates within the unified global context while highlighting China's unique cultural and social characteristics, as well as the individual artistic differences of its creators, remains an ongoing and important topic for exploration and practice. In Qi Zhilong's recent years

of cross-media and multi-form artistic practice, I see the emergence of new artistic vitality presented by a successful artist continually renewing himself.

QI ZHILONG, born in 1962 in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts' Printmaking Department in 1987. In 1992, he moved to the Yuanmingyuan Artists' Village, where he created a series of works characterized by Political Pop and Gaudy Art styles, such as the *Consumer Images* and *Chinese Girl* series, thus beginning his close association with the history of contemporary Chinese art.

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Translator and Editor: Li Yang

## ENDNOTES

1. Huang Zhuan, "On Cultural Idealism: Regarding the Academic Theme of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Guangzhou Biennale," *Jiangsu Art Monthly*,

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2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

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## 共振與異頻：全球化視野下祁志龍的藝術意義

邵其兵

**摘要：**在人人都具有了敘事和再構的話語權之後，世界圖景不再是由強力所結構的整一畫像，而是由每一個體的主體間互動，在與既有話語結構相互再構中所拼湊的，帶有縫隙與動態生成的模糊畫像。而這一新的圖景式，既作為當代藝術的孕育之基，又是當代藝術要不斷重構、組合的拼圖。

**關鍵詞：**全球化；中國當代藝術；中國女孩；時間性；再構