

Quest for the Future:
Constructing Identity in China's Contemporary Art Museums

by

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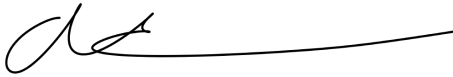
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ABSTRACT

Quest for the Future: Constructing Identity in China's Contemporary Art Museums

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Through the analysis of three Chinese museums' architecture, design, and exhibitions, this thesis examines the recent China Museum Boom and how contemporary art museums undergird the Chinese state's mission to construct a cosmopolitan identity. I analyze how contemporary art museums, such as the Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning, establish a cultural identity for the city and the nation. I then navigate the tensions between the government's focus on promoting regional identity through the museum and the international frameworks used by the museum, seen in the SUPER FUSION 2021 biennale at the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art. Finally, I explore the Meixihu International Culture and Arts Center in Changsha as the museum leverages the spectacle of deconstructivist architecture to create a new visual language of Chinese power and success. This research is a crucial undertaking for critically examining museological and institutional constructions of identity in China.

Keywords: Museum Studies, identity construction, cosmopolitan, Chineseness, deconstructivist architecture, China Museum Boom

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More museums are constructed, and with increasingly 'modern' features; to some extent China resembles, at present, an extraordinary 'museum laboratory.'

—Marzia Varutti, *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation After Mao*

Museums & China: Making Meaning of Objects, Identities, and National Projects

In the stately vitrines of the Shanghai Museum, a voluminous copper pot engraved with intricate detail sits beside a delicate scroll of *shan shui* ink painting and sumptuous Qing Dynasty embroidery. Light leaks from the glass cases into dimly lit galleries [fig. 1], where the museum conveys the effortless calm of regional Jiangnan architecture—with its recognizable simplicity of a black roof against a flat white wall—through the minimalist use of color and line. The ambiance of the exhibit is established through soft colors and even softer lighting, creating an aura of seriousness. Even the virtual tour of *Spring Blowing in the Wind: Jiangnan Culture Art Exhibition* at the Shanghai Museum (23/05/2020-23/08/2020) was set to soft, tinkling piano music, heightening the tone of thoughtful contemplation.¹ *Spring Blowing in the Wind* traces Jiangnan's cultural history, and by extension the history of China's intelligentsia, court, and everyday people. The vitrines encourage audiences to take in each piece one by one: a copper pot or painted scroll treated with the same weight. Museums transform treasure into national history, and hence national identity: “works of art now became witnesses to the presence of ‘genius,’ cultural products marking the course of civilization in nations and individuals.”² A Qing dynasty vase, valued for its aesthetic beauty or market price, metamorphoses into evidence of cultural

¹ 上海博物馆, “春风千里——江南文化艺术展,” accessed April 4, 2023, <http://101.227.180.72:8080/jiangnan/>.

² Carol Duncan, “From the Princely Gallery to the Public Art Museum,” in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Psychology Press, 1995), 256.

heritage in a museum display case. *Behold the evidence of Chinese lineage*, the exhibition seems to beg.

This display is not surprising, as the Chinese government often uses museums to construct and disseminate a cohesive sociopolitical or historical narrative³, especially in the wake of political upheaval.⁴ The history of China is complex and disjointed; exhibitions such as *Spring Blowing in the Wind* neatly subsume it all into a singular narrative of Chinese lineage. But *Spring Blowing in the Wind* is not simply about making sense of history. The exhibit foreword by Museum Director Dr. Yang Zhigang suggests how exhibitions about the past are part of the local government's long-term plan to "Turn Shanghai into an International Cultural Cosmopolis."⁵ Yang says that Jiangnaners are "motivated by their glorious heritage" and "keep going with such inclusiveness, wisdom, and modesty in their pursuit of excellence."⁶ He frames *Spring Blowing in the Wind* as a prescription of the culture (i.e. values, morals, aesthetics) that Jiangnan people should carry with them. Museums do not just illustrate the past, but also construct contemporary identities. Through analyzing the museum—its objects, architecture, and missions—I aim to unravel how China is constructing a new national identity distinct from its ancestral past.

To understand how museums use narratives of China's past to nurture a national identity in the present, it is essential to place them in the context of broader political changes. China has radically transformed within the last few decades, with manufacturing, tech, and infrastructure

³ Marzia Varutti, *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation After Mao* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2014), 159.

⁴ China's Republican Era (1912-1949) saw the massive museumification of palatial treasures. In the chapter "A Brief History of Chinese Museums to 1949," historian Yong Duan notes that the establishment of museums (such as the Forbidden City, the Gallery of Antiquities, the Palace Museum, and the Natural History Museum) followed the fall of the Qing Dynasty as a political gesture to signal the new government's political legitimacy.

⁵ 上海博物馆, "Spring Blowing in the Wind: Jiangnan Culture Art Exhibition," August 23, 2020, <https://www.shanghaimuseum.net/mu/frontend/pg/article/id/E00004097>.

⁶ 上海博物馆, "Spring Blowing in the Wind: Jiangnan Culture Art Exhibition."

development taking root in an increasingly urbanized context. While manufacturing and GDP dominates how the world views China, the nation is shifting that narrative with help from a museum-building boom to present China as a preeminent cultural center. The China Museum Boom has been defined by the exponential increase of museums in China during the last forty years,⁷ a time in which, following widespread industrial development, museum building was taken up by local governments as means to grow cities' infrastructure and regional image. The China Museum Boom is not an unintentional side effect of China's rapid urbanization, but a conscious government effort to guide how cities take shape. The reliance on museums to do so is evidenced by the Chinese government's stated ambitions to increase the country's total number of museums by nearly forty percent over the span of a decade.⁸

To unpack some of the particularities of this museum boom, I analyze how the Chinese government mobilizes new forms of architecture, modes of display, and contemporary art programming to project a cosmopolitan Chinese identity. By cosmopolitan, I mean the superficial sense of appearing to value "openness, mobility, [and] modernity."⁹ History museums have long been a strategy of the Chinese government to establish a national identity; however, the mass investment in contemporary art museums, often in tandem with history museums, is a newer phenomenon. The pairing of contemporary art museums with history museums works to legitimize the current Chinese government by demonstrating its rich historical lineage as well as a modern, future-oriented citizenry. My thesis examines three state-owned contemporary art

⁷ Fenghua Zhang and Pascal Courty, "The China Museum Boom: Soft Power and Cultural Nationalism," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 30–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2019.1709058>.

⁸ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 2.

⁹ Luke Sunderland, "Cosmopolitanism," in *Transnational Modern Languages*, ed. Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan, A Handbook (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 69.

museums in China to investigate how the Chinese state is reconstituting its national identity. While I began with an example from Shanghai, an established urban center with a history of complicated global relations and long-standing cultural institutions, my case studies are located in South (华南) and Southwest (西南) China, areas that more broadly represent the recent urbanization of the nation. In section 1, I analyze how the Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning in Shenzhen establishes a cultural identity for the city—specifically, how the museum both succeeds and fails to establish Shenzhen as a leader in arts and culture. In Section 2, I examine the opposing forces of regional culture and global art trends as seen in the SUPER FUSION 2021 biennale at the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art, during which Chengdu projected itself as the preeminent art center of Southwest China by referring to its artistic history and employing contemporary trends such as the biennale format. Finally, I explore the Meixihu International Culture and Arts Center in Changsha as the museum leverages the spectacle of deconstructivist architecture to create a new visual language of Chinese power and success.

To understand how national identity is being projected by art museums, it is necessary to dig into the ways museums are conceived and curated. This includes considering the larger sociopolitical context that surrounds and infuses the museum as well as the decisions the administration makes amidst that context. These choices include not just art acquisitions or mounting exhibits, but also broader choices of display and architecture. As Museum Studies scholars argue, museums curate narratives that are conscious of and participate in the sociopolitical landscape.¹⁰ In acknowledging the choices of the museum and the contexts that inform those choices, my analysis of these three case studies' programming considers how

¹⁰ Annie Coombes, "Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities," in *Grasping the World* (London: Routledge, 2004).

museums are participating in a grand regional or national narrative, utilizing contemporary art and artists to communicate with the public at large.

To repeat a point from above, the selection and display of objects alone do not make a museum—it is a curation of *experiences* through design and layout. The way art is displayed plays a role in an audience’s interpretation of both art and the world around them. For example, historian Steven Conn notes that long, linear museum corridors reinforce the chronological reading of history.¹¹ Conversely, displays like those at the Shanghai Museum, where individual museum cases confer equal importance to every object, both elevate and flatten all of the objects as the roots of a singular Chinese civilization.¹² In the case studies that follow, my visual analysis of museum design explores how modes of display contribute to the regional cultural landscape and the building of national identity.

The museum experience begins before viewers even walk in the door. Museum Studies scholars note that museum façades employ architectural style to communicate their mission to audiences. For example, history museums like the Nanjing Museum in Nanjing, the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing, and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University, Beijing, use Chinese imperial architecture to communicate the historical contents of the museum and verify the authenticity of their collection.¹³ In whatever style it appears, museum architecture sends a message of seriousness and legitimacy.¹⁴ Through the language of architecture, museums substantiate the government’s claims to its nationhood

¹¹ Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 206.

¹² Varutti, *Museums in China*, 68.

¹³ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 72.

¹⁴ Varutti, *Museums in China*.

and political authority.¹⁵ A semiotic analysis of museum architecture further reveals how state power is marshaled through the museum, providing a way of thinking about space that philosopher Henri Lefebvre describes as “the logic of container *versus* contents.”¹⁶ Throughout this thesis, I follow Lefebvre in analyzing space as a product of systems of power (histories, modes of production, and ideologies), unraveling how design serves power, particularly by acting as a “mediator” to create an “illusion of transparency [that] goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent.”¹⁷ In reading architecture as it swings from invoking a traditional Chinese style to a futuristic, deconstructivist style, I consider how design evokes certain histories, identities, and philosophies while helping contemporary art museums in China telegraph a cosmopolitan identity.

In most cases in China, the goal of museums at the turn of the twentieth century was to educate and reform the populace.¹⁸ This one-sided educational mission ignores the interconnectedness between museums and audiences. As scholar Donald Preziosi argues:

museums are 'performances'—pedagogical and political in nature—whose practitioners are centrally invested in the activity of making the visible legible, thereby personifying objects as the representations of their makers, simultaneously objectifying the people who made them and, in a second order reality that is part of the same historical continuum, objectifying the people who view made objects in their recontextualized museum settings.¹⁹

In plain terms, museum-goers are brought into the experience of the museum and therefore take part in its thoroughly constructed narrative. To illustrate, scholar Sandra Esslinger argues that

¹⁵ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 77.

¹⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1992), 3.

¹⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 27-28.

¹⁸ Varutti, *Museums in China*.

¹⁹ Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2019), 5.

museum viewers not only bear witness to a fabricated history and national identity, but also perform that identity while inside the museum.²⁰ This is not to say that the museum is a coercive force, but that the identity construction within the museum is an active process that goes beyond the art object, collection, or exhibition curation. Thinking through the question of viewership, I consider how audiences impact the role of contemporary art museums in China, asking for whom the museum is constructed, and subsequently, how art is displayed to support the museum's mission.

The idea that China is building a new identity through the museum is not a new one. Specifically, museologist Marzia Varutti argued nearly a decade ago that China is constructing a unified and ethnically diverse national narrative through the museum, specifically history museums. This perspective is supported by other scholars in the field, both domestically in China and abroad. For example, scholar Zhang Fenghua offers empirical evidence in direct support of Varutti's "cultural nationalism hypothesis," citing the abundance of national history museums and the coordinated effort from the Chinese government to support museums as well as the emphasis on making museums accessible to all citizens.²¹

As a white, foreign scholar, I recognize the problematic subjectivity of myself and central scholars writing about Chinese Museums (Varutti, Jacobson, Sanders). To address gaps in my literature, I refer to Chinese researchers, such as Zhang Fenghua, An Laishan, Mao Jiawei, and He Qiliang, whenever possible. Additionally, I consult literature reviews and articles from local Chinese scholars in response to white, foreign research. I also acknowledge the limitations of my

²⁰ Sandra Esslinger, "Performing Identity: The Museal Framing of Nazi Ideology," in *Grasping the World* (London: Routledge, 2004).

²¹ Fenghua Zhang and Pascal Courty, "The China Museum Boom: Soft Power and Cultural Nationalism," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 30–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2019.1709058>.

research sources due to the lack of in-person field experience and the necessity of translation. Any misinterpretations, misunderstandings, or mistranslations are completely my own. Owing to these challenges, I consult as many primary and visual sources, such as images, videos, and virtual tours, as possible. Throughout this project, I refer to the concept of Chinese national identity, meaning identity as manifested within China's borders, and Chineseness, by which I am referring to the myriad of peoples, countries, and cultures that stem from *huaxia* (华夏).²² Although this project analyzes how museums in China construct identity, it does not explicate what it means to be Chinese. I give primacy to the work of Chinese and Asian scholars to inform my understanding of Chineseness, such as anthropologist Andrea Louie's *Chineseness Across Borders*, which interrogates how Chineseness is not a static being, but a constantly evolving and situational experience. In *Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity*, anthropologist Allen Chun brings into focus how the term Chineseness is complicated based on time, place, and/or subject, a specificity that is missing from the English conception of Chineseness. Identity politics are also an important basis for Curator Hou Hanru's work, *On the Mid-Ground*, which explores Chineseness and art throughout the late twentieth century. Hou meaningfully brings in the work of Homi Bhabha to examine how Orientalism is experienced within the contemporary global climate. This scholarship is fundamental to my understanding of how Chineseness is complicated, mobilized, critiqued, and/or ignored through the art object and art institution. Despite these challenges, this research is a crucial undertaking in critically examining museological and institutional constructions of identity.

The role of contemporary art museums is neglected in the literature surrounding the China Museum Boom and museological identity construction, an omission that begs correcting

²² Anthropologist Allen Chun in *Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity* defines *huaxia* as an identity with a shared ancestry in the Xia dynasty, the first (mythical) dynasty of China.

given the way that contemporary art museums are cropping up with increasing frequency throughout the country. My thesis attempts to address this absence. I ask: Why contemporary art museums, and how do they function to construct a national identity? Through the analysis of these three museums' architecture, institutional structures (i.e. design, layout, and ways in which art is displayed), and exhibitions (aimed at particular imagined audiences), I trace how contemporary art museums undergird the Chinese state's mission to construct a cohesive, cosmopolitan Chinese identity.

Model Museum: Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning

Bao'an County in 1950 was nothing special: a rural fishing village in South China [fig. 2], notable only for its geographic proximity to Hong Kong.²³ A few decades later, however, Bao'an County transformed into 800 square miles of new buildings, roads, and huge developments known today as the city of Shenzhen. In today's Shenzhen, skyscrapers tower over landscaped parks and tree-lined streets. The shift from Mao Zedong's de-urbanization policies (1949-1976) to Deng Xiaoping's opening reforms (1978-), such as establishing Shenzhen as a Specialized Economic Zone, re-entered China into the global market economy and abruptly urbanized China's landscape. The city is now a stereotypical metropolis of sprawling glass, concrete, and steel. Scholar Du Juan notes that "all seem to insist that Shenzhen is a city with 'no history' that came from 'nothing,' ... and then transformed 'overnight' into an 'instant city' with 'no intermediary' stages."²⁴ Although dramatized to capture drastic changes in a short period of time, the ways in which people talk about Shenzhen are not far from reality.

²³ Juan Du, "Shenzhen: Urban Myth of a New Chinese City," *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 63, no. 2 (2010), 65.

²⁴ Du, "Shenzhen," 65.

Beginning in the 1980s, millions of people migrated from the countryside into the city in search of new economic opportunities.²⁵ When these domestic migrant populations arrived, they lacked social and historical connections to Shenzhen, and Shenzhen, a newly established city, did not have historical traditions to offer. As scholar Doug Sanders argues, the rapid urbanization, migrant populace, and lack of history “combined to produce an identity crisis.”²⁶ New cities presented a PR problem because citizens did not identify with where they lived. In layman's terms, these new cities lacked personality.

In China, Shenzhen is colloquially known as a “First-Tier City” (一线城市), in company with Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. First-Tier Cities have three defining characteristics: 1) a lot of money (large GDP and thriving economy), 2) a lot of people (densely populated city centers that are viewed as a place of opportunity for migrant workers), and 3) a subjective *je ne sais quoi* that makes a city special (for Shenzhen it is the city's abundant green space, constant development, and hustle culture that fuels its growth). This unofficial ranking signals a distinctive cultural status that has shaped the city's populace. In the midst of economic growth and progressive policies, Shenzhen has birthed a middle class with discerning tastes. “Bright individuals arrive from less wealthy areas armed with tertiary degrees and leave as polished middle-class sophisticates,” notes researcher Jacqueline Elfick, whose study shows how Shenzhen citizens utilize consumption to socially distinguish themselves.²⁷ However, this capitalistic ethos comes at a cost. The glitz of consumerism does not fill the absence of a history

²⁵ Doug Sanders, “The Urban Boom Meets Museums,” *Museum Development in China: Understanding the Building Boom* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), 35.

²⁶ Sanders, “The Urban Boom Meets Museums,” 36.

²⁷ Jacqueline Elfick, “Class Formation and Consumption among Middle-Class Professionals in Shenzhen,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 2011, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cca/>, 188.

and regional identity; hence, for some observers, Shenzhen is disparagingly known as a “desert of culture” (文化沙漠).²⁸

Museums are the perfect solution to Shenzhen’s identity conundrum. Large-scale infrastructural interventions serve the dual purpose of defining the regional skyline and bestowing a national identity to the city, and, by extension, the country. Iconic buildings, such as museums, are built to make the city *known* for something, thereby demonstrating the city’s prosperity while simultaneously attracting more tourists. Varutti also notes that museums are social markers of elitism,²⁹ a quality that makes them popular with Shenzhen’s emerging middle class. Museums in Shenzhen are used for viewers to see and be seen, for audiences to distinguish themselves as a social elite. Importantly, the museum is also a mechanism for telling a range of political narratives. After China joined the market economy in the 1970s, for example, Industrial Museums were established as private investors and state-owned operations wanted to bolster their own image.³⁰ China’s complex history of museum development produced a wide variety of museum types to fulfill the political needs of a given era, whether exhibitions displaying imperial treasures in the nineteenth century to signal the end of the Qing Dynasty or history museums teaching communist education in line with the Cultural Revolution during the late twentieth century. Shenzhen’s utilization of museum infrastructure to construct an identity for the city is a well-established and recognizable method within China.

The architecture of Shenzhen’s Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning (MOCAUP) responds to these needs to project an identity unique to Shenzhen. The museum is

²⁸ Deya Xu, Jiao Shen, and Jian Xu, “Branding a City through Journalism in China: The Example of Shenzhen,” *Journalism* 24, no. 1, January 1, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211004022>, 198.

²⁹ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 55.

³⁰ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 44.

composed of silver contortions of metal and glass arching over a wide plaza [fig. 3]. The façade shifts from soft waves to a geometric point, like the proud bow of a ship. As befits a symbol of the city’s evolution into an economic and cultural center, MOCAUP overlooks the towering skyline of Shenzhen’s Futian Cultural District. Designed by Austrian firm Coop Himmelb(l)au, the architecture of MOCAUP is meant to capture the character of Shenzhen. In constructing MOCAUP, the firm touted the museum’s technological advancements, environmental efficiency, and “dynamic” deconstructivist style. Popularized in the 1980s, deconstructivism is a kind of postmodern architecture that looks like a cubist painting reborn in steel and glass. Coop Himmelb(l)au was an early pioneer of the style, showcased in the seminal 1988 Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture*. MoMA curator Philip Johnson³¹ explains that deconstructivist architecture is informed by and troubles the ordered structure of Soviet Constructivism; in contrast, deconstructivism is “pure form [that] has been disturbed.”³² Wolf D. Prix, co-founder of Coop Himmelb(l)au, says his work has come “closest to so-called deconstructivism,” in its revolutionary aims to “liberate space” and “change architecture radically.”³³ Despite Prix’s endeavor to “to develop a new language” of architecture,³⁴ his projects have been popularly described as brash “‘spectacle’ buildings.”³⁵ Deconstructivism is commonly used for large public infrastructure projects in China (and throughout the world), and

³¹ Philip Johnson was a white supremacist, racist, and anti-semitic. His role as architect and curator at the Museum of Modern Art gave him a privileged position of power and influence within the field of architecture, despite his abhorrent ideology.

³² Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 10.

³³ Tom Ravenscroft, “Coop Himmelb(l)Au Were ‘Closest to the so-Called Deconstructivism’ Says Wolf Prix,” *Dezeen*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.dezeen.com/2022/06/30/wolf-prix-deconstructivism-interview/>.

³⁴ Ravenscroft, “Coop Himmelb(l)Au Were ‘Closest to the so-Called Deconstructivism’ Says Wolf Prix.”

³⁵ Joseph Giovannini, “Cloud, Crystal and Promenade,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2014, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/arts/design/confluence-museum-opens-in-lyon-france.html>.

this enthusiasm for the style makes sense when curators like Johnson uphold deconstructivist buildings as “projections of the future, brave new worlds, utopian fantasies.”³⁶ Recognizable by its organic shapes, contrasting geometric forms, and obsession with glossy finishes, this futuristic style conjures connotations of wealth, prestige, and culture.

Coop Himmelb(l)au promises to create buildings that “are not hermetically closed monuments, but rather open structures that are both receptive of their surroundings and agents for possibilities.”³⁷ Correspondingly, MOCAUP is in conversation with its surroundings. Museum visitors enter the space through a wide, palatial staircase that leads up to the main entrance. The elevated entrance into the museum communicates power, and the elevation from the ground also serves the purpose of creating clear sightlines of the landscape. To the museum’s left is the Civic Center, its iconic yellow and red curved roof defining the Futian Cultural District. From every direction, significant public buildings are visible from MOCAUP, such as the Opera House, Shenzhen Cultural Center, and Youth Activity Hall [fig. 4], situating MOCAUP within the cultural center of the city. Through architectural design and strategic location, MOCAUP works to establish a cultural center for the city to counter its cultureless reputation.

MOCAUP’s layout and design builds on the impressions created by its architecture. Nicknamed “Two Museums” (两馆), MOCAUP takes a two-pronged approach to layout. The Museum of Contemporary Art exhibits contemporary art with typical art programming, biennales, and exhibitions highlighting local and international artists. The Urban Planning Exhibition (also referred to as Planning Exhibition) lays out the history of Shenzhen, Shenzhen’s technological and urban innovations, and fun factoids about why, as one display in the children’s

³⁶ Philip Johnson and Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, 18.

³⁷ Coop Himmelb(l)au, “Method,” accessed November 20, 2022, <https://coop-himmelblau.at/method/>.

education center suggests, Shenzhen is “the best city ever.” Urban planning is not a genre of museum seen in the United States, but it is typical throughout China. MOCAUP’s Urban Planning exhibition demonstrates the need and the attempt to make sense of Shenzhen’s space and give the city a history.

Meanwhile, a future-oriented and global cultural identity is constructed inside the contemporary art museum. “We emulate the international academic level to organize worldwide masterpiece exhibitions, meanwhile continuously provide art and education to the public,” asserts one post on the museum’s official social media page.³⁸ MOCAUP’s ambitious claims are backed up by its robust public programming, exhibiting artists such as Anish Kapoor, Christopher Le Brun, and Su Xinping. Anish Kapoor was MOCAUP’s choice for its first exhibition of an international artist, and an obvious one. The British-Indian artist is known for his glossy, large-scale sculptures and conceptual works, with many international public art commissions, biennales, and solo exhibitions decorating his curriculum vitae. His ultra-refined aesthetic, approachable abstraction, and blue-chip status makes him a perfect figure to validate MOCAUP’s prestige. The eponymous solo exhibition opened in February 2021 with works of sculpture, installation, and architectural models.

During *Anish Kapoor*’s run, MOCAUP’s galleries were differentiated from one another through shocks of red pigment or the sheen of a mirrored finish against the white, windowless space. The hero image for the show, *My Red Homeland* (2003), introduces the show’s motif of the color red. In the work, a twelve-meter dial scrapes and moves thick red wax. As the mechanical arm slowly rotates, the red wax curls, bunches, and accumulates into jagged red

³⁸ 深圳市当代艺术与城市规划馆, “关于两馆,” *Weixin Official Accounts Platform*, February 15, 2023, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzU5NjkyNTYwMg==&mid=100000086&idx=1&sn=5a237516b8b9ec4457cd4111f35e5b51&chksm=7e5a0c9b492d858dc169dcaea00b7b342bdecf38eeae48c16ebdbabde57d6e2ddf5432f82da2#rd.

cliffs. *To Reflect an Intimate Part of the Red* (1981) similarly allows color to speak for itself. Red sculptures erupt from a low white plinth [fig. 5]: a stepped pyramid tilts precariously to one side, knobby spheres jut out from a globe like a raspberry's bottom, and a pointed egg sits off to the side. In the center of the platform, a cadmium yellow sculpture, shaped like a lemon, breaks up the monotony of high-chroma red. Against all of these sculptures is the empty white background of the gallery. White light shines indiscriminately onto the pieces, giving no relief from the whiteness of the space. Following the modernist era, the white-cube aesthetic became a common museological trope. The minimalist approach is now an industry standard and emblematic of museum professionalism. Through its reinforcement of white-cube gallery aesthetics, MOCAUP asserts itself as an “international academic” art museum.

Kapoor's conceptual work centers materiality, yet is ambiguous in concept. For example, the red pigment of *My Red Homeland* does not directly reference Kapoor's personal history as an Indian-British citizen, draw from a contemporary moment, or respond to the importance of the color red in China. In an interview with Museum Director Yan Weixin (颜为昕), Kapoor notes that *My Red Homeland* hopes to inspire questions such as: “Where do we come from? Where are we going? What was the beginning of the world like? What is the end of the world? Where were we before we were born? Where do we go after we die?”³⁹ In not being specific to any one thing in particular, Kapoor leans on audience interaction and general *we* statements to create artistic meaning. Materiality is a way for Kapoor to relate to everyone without saying anything specific. Through his use of mirrors, Kapoor emphasizes the self—self-reflection, meditation, the self's relation to space. In *S-Curve* (2003), a serpentine mirrored wall stands in the center of the gallery

³⁹ 深圳市当代艺术与城市规划馆, “卡普尔展览 | Anish Kapoor × 颜为昕, 跨越距离的对话,” *Weixin Official Accounts Platform*, April 29, 2021, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?_biz=MzU5NjkyNTYwMg==&mid=2247487237&idx=1&sn=63faf4b269403c477d58143c3bc03aba&chksm=fe5a02c8c92d8bde8f649e81aa681c3fd911ea28043a48b8bb1df1a8de8c23564d0400c42bb3#rd.

[fig. 6]. The warped mirror inverts, twists, and sucks in its surroundings. In the context of MOCAUP, where the museum's own architecture parallels Kapoor's curvilinear mirrors, the piece takes on new meaning. By highlighting the formal similarities between the art and the museum's architecture, Kapoor's work acts to legitimize the museum as a serious player in the art field.

In another mirrored piece, an amorphous sculptural mirror cocoons a massive spiral staircase in the central atrium of MOCAUP, known as the Cloud Center [fig. 7]. Practically speaking, the Cloud Center acts as a central access point between the Contemporary Art Museum, the Urban Planning exhibition space, and the commercial space (museum shop and café). In this key museum space, the mirrored sculpture reflects MOCAUP's open-ended symbolic ambitions. Like a cloud passing through the sky, this ambiguous sculptural element can represent anything the viewer wishes and hence acts as a "symbol of the diversity of the Cloud Center."⁴⁰ The futuristic architecture of the space likewise conveys a flexible optimism. Reflecting Lefebvre's argument that design conceals structures of power in space, MOCAUP's airy commons and illuminated interiors give the illusion of openness, and abundant windows create clear sightlines to the cultural district at large, emphasizing, as at the museum entrance, the idea of MOCAUP as an artistic center for Shenzhen. In the Cloud Center as in the rest of the building, the museum signifies and cultivates a particular relationship between the viewer and the city of Shenzhen on behalf of the Chinese state. Explicitly, the government has constructed a physical as well as cultural landscape.

As "open" and "receptive" Coop Himmelb(l)au's architecture claims to be, their work is suspiciously divorced from local context.⁴¹ The Sevastopol Opera and Ballet Theater in Crimea

⁴⁰ 深圳市当代艺术与城市规划馆, "关于两馆."

⁴¹ Coop Himmelb(l)au, "Method."

looks exactly like their buildings in Guadalajara, Mexico, which would also feel at home in the Futian District of Shenzhen. The futuristic deconstructivist style does just that—calls to a future belonging to nowhere in particular. Shenzhen is littered with this ultramodern aesthetic that places it amongst a generic global elite. As Anish Kapoor has observed, “Shenzhen, which represents the future, both in China and in the world, ... represents an upward momentum. ... I think Shenzhen is a very visionary city, with livability and modernity at the same time.”⁴² The museum emulates the finest museums in the world and projects an image of Shenzhen as an economic and cultural global leader. MOCAUP aims high in its ambitions, “aspiring to be one of the most influential institutions within 5 to 10 years,”⁴³ and, in many ways, the museum’s big-name exhibitions and dazzling architecture deliver on its promises. MOCAUP’s deconstructivist architecture does not harken back to China’s cultural past but points to the future, signaling a new age and identity for its people. The proliferation of museums such as MOCAUP in China demonstrates these institutions’ ability to construct new Chinese identity through cultural cachet. However, Shenzhen’s import of the most established, most recognizable, most global artists and architecture leads the city to be indistinguishable, inadvertently fortifying Shenzhen’s lack of unique cultural and regional identity outside of capitalistic ascendancy.

Fuse the Local and the Global: SUPER FUSION 2021 at Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art

Although Sichuan province is reductively written about as “home to giant pandas and mouth-numbing spicy hotpot,” the region has a cultural history spanning centuries.⁴⁴ For

⁴² 深圳市当代艺术与城市规划馆, “卡普尔展览 | Anish Kapoor × 颜为昕, 跨越距离的对话。”

⁴³ 深圳市当代艺术与城市规划馆, “关于两馆。”

⁴⁴ Vivienne Chow, “With the Opening of Two New Museums (and a Biennial), Chengdu Is Positioning Itself as the Art Capital of Southwest China,” *Artnet News*, November 8, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/two-new-museums-chengdu-china-2031489>.

example, its capital, Chengdu, is famously known for Sichuan Opera, a centuries-old genre of theater. The region massively urbanized in the mid-90s with the implementation of the ‘Go West Program,’ in which the government incentivized people to move people to West and Southwest China by relocating funds from coastal regions, like Shanghai, for modernization.⁴⁵ In the process, the mountainous Chengdu transformed into an aspiring First-Tier city. In contrast to other newly constructed cities, like Shenzhen, Chengdu’s modernized landscape is built upon and incorporates its historical past.

As these forces changed the region, the Sichuan provincial and Chengdu local governments addressed the city’s corresponding identity needs through infrastructure. Sichuan’s fourteenth 5-Year Plan officially announced the regional government’s mission to develop more museums.⁴⁶ Nine months after the 5-Year Plan was published, Chengdu established two new museums—The Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art and The Chengdu Tianfu Art Museum—echoing the province’s objectives to “implement a high-quality development plan for museums” and “promote the development of cultural prosperity.”⁴⁷ Both museums opened in November of 2021 with SUPER FUSION 2021, an ambitious biennale of eight themed exhibitions and 272 artists from China and around the world.⁴⁸ The fanfare of a biennale to inaugurate new museums was not serendipity but a concerted effort launched in collaboration with the Chengdu City Culture Broadcasting and Tourism Department. The goal of the showcase

⁴⁵ Annemarie Schneider, “Urban Growth in Chengdu, Western China: Application of Remote Sensing to Assess Planning and Policy Outcomes,” November 19, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1068/b31142>.

⁴⁶ 四川省人民政府, “四川省‘十四五’规划和2035年远景目标纲要(全文),” March 16, 2021, <https://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/10464/10797/2021/3/16/2c8e39641f08499487a9e958384f2278.shtml>.

⁴⁷ 成都市文化广电旅游局, “《四川省‘十四五’文化和旅游发展规划》解读 - 政策解读,” May 9, 2022, http://cdwglj.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwglj/c133196/2022-05/09/content_ed4fdfa80d40430aacbcb4936c0e3994.shtml.

⁴⁸ Biennale Foundation, “2021 Chengdu Biennale: SUPER FUSION,” November 22, 2021, <https://biennialfoundation.org/2021/11/2021-chengdu-biennale-super-fusion/>.

was to “reflect the diverse and responsive nature of Chengdu’s artistic and cultural climate, while boosting the status of the city as a cultural capital.”⁴⁹ In this section, I explore how Chengdu has worked to establish itself as the preeminent art center of Southwest China, focusing on the SUPER FUSION biennale due to the explicit way the Chengdu City Culture Broadcasting and Tourism Department used it to position the museum and the city. I examine the tensions between the provincial government’s focus on promoting regional identity through the museum and the museum’s own reliance on international and globalized art trends such as the biennale format. In examining the architectural style of the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art and the biennale format, I analyze how Chengdu constructs a culture and identity that moves between past and present, local and global.

The city’s ambitions to become a new art hub in Southwest China are evidenced in the museum’s architecture and location. The Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art is part of a larger constellation of institutions within the Chengdu cultural scene. The museum is the newest addition to the Tianfu Art Park, a space where nature, art, and social life intermingle. The sister museum, Chengdu Tianfu Art Museum, focuses on traditional Chinese art while the “Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art ... positions itself as a ‘future-oriented international comprehensive art center,’ according to the museum.”⁵⁰ The relationship between the two museums is obvious from their physical closeness; the two buildings face each other, separated by a quaint man-made lake, apartment complexes, and park⁵¹ [fig. 8]. The museums opened in

⁴⁹ Biennale Foundation, “2021 Chengdu Biennale: SUPER FUSION.”

⁵⁰ Chow, “With the Opening of Two New Museums (and a Biennial), Chengdu Is Positioning Itself as the Art Capital of Southwest China.”

⁵¹ During Xi Jinping’s tour of Chengdu in February, 2018, he encouraged the development of “park cities.” New development following Xi’s directive has focused on blending green space into urban space.

partnership with and are managed by the Chengdu Academy of Fine Art (CAFA), and, together, their missions cover the trifecta of traditional, contemporary, and emerging arts.

The unique blend of old and new is obvious in the layout and architecture of Chengdu and creates an identity wholly unique to Southwest China. Take, for example, the grass roofs of Chengdu’s Museum of Contemporary Art [fig. 9]. From a glance, the slanting roof seems to be constructed of traditional green glazed tiles. Likewise, the black steel supports and flat windows evoke traditional darkwood beams and flat façades. It is as if Chinese architect Liu Jiaken took traditional Chinese architecture and knocked it off its axis. The choices of material—grass, metal, glass—are contemporary, but the inspiration is distinctly Chinese. Unlike Shenzhen’s MOCAUP, which projects a futuristic identity because it has no specific history to draw on, Chengdu’s Museum of Contemporary Art’s architecture mines a cultural heritage because it is readily accessible. In an interview with the architect, Liu affirms that Chinese history is a central inspiration for his work while also arguing that tradition should be paired with innovation, stating, “I disagree with the view that globalization needs to be resisted. ... We should take what is quintessential about different cultures to enrich our own.”⁵² Such attitudes are reflected in his work—as with the museum’s sloped roof made of grass, which merges traditional references with a material common to contemporary eco-futurist styles. Liu’s work harmoniously incorporates old and new, local and global. So too does the city of Chengdu try to brandish modern sensibilities without sacrificing its regional identity.

Echoing Liu’s blended architectural forms, the SUPER FUSION biennale “hopes to fuse the local and the global, the traditional and the avant-garde, the past and the modern, in order to

⁵² Vladimir Belogolovsky, “‘In The 1990s, We All Became Free’: In Conversation with Jiakun Liu of Jiakun Architects,” *ArchDaily*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.archdaily.com/941076/in-the-1990s-we-all-became-free-in-conversation-with-jiakun-liu-of-jiakun-architects>.

present art in its multidimensional, cross-disciplinary aspect, providing an insight into the world of contemporary art in China and overseas.”⁵³ Scholar Michelle Antoinette notes that biennales in China, which took off in the 1990s, have generated crucial cross-cultural artistic exchange; the international exhibitions introduced Chinese art to a global market while also inspiring new forms of Chinese contemporary art.⁵⁴ Such inclusive attitudes are represented in the programming for SUPER FUSION. For a six-month period, the biennale activated the Tianfu Art Park and other exhibition sites throughout the city. The overarching theme of the biennale, as stated in the curatorial statement, was to create “greater dialogue and co-operation between us all.”⁵⁵ Taking literal inspiration from “co-operation,” all of the themed exhibition titles include “co-” (e.g. “Artistic Co-Inspiration”; “Craft Co-Operation”; “Urban Co-Habitation”). SUPER FUSION’s core exhibition was “Polymorphic Co-Existence” at the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art, which addressed “the way in which a rich range of artistic modes and approaches are realized across a variety of dimensions—nation-state, ethnic group, geographical region—and how this process is in a state of constant flux.”⁵⁶

Each artist that participated in “Polymorphic Co-Existence” is a celebrity in the global art market—Anish Kapoor, Olafur Eliasson, Song Dong, and DO HO SUH, to name a few—hinting at the grandness of the biennale. As shown in the documented exhibition images [fig. 10], every artwork is monumental in scale. For example, the light radiating from Carsten Hollster’s giant

⁵³ Biennale Foundation, “2021 Chengdu Biennale: SUPER FUSION.”

⁵⁴ Michelle Antoinette, “Epilogue: ‘My Future Is Not a Dream’: Shifting Worlds of Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions,” *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions, Connectivities and World-Making* (Canberra, ACT: ANU Press, 2014), 241.

⁵⁵ CAFA, “‘Super Fusion: 2021 Chengdu Biennale’ Inaugurates Eight Themed Exhibitions and One International Conference,” November 5, 2022, <https://www.cafa.com.cn/en/news/details/8330989>.

⁵⁶ CAFA, “‘Super Fusion: 2021 Chengdu Biennale’ Inaugurates Eight Themed Exhibitions and One International Conference.”

Decimal Clock (2018) shines onto Tony Cragg’s bulky, organic sculpture, which is paired with a colossal abstract painting. Each artwork could live in its own gallery, be the headliner of its own exhibition; yet, the biennale format crams them all together in a singular showboat. Well-known curator Okwui Enwezor notes that artworks at biennales have to be bigger, better, and brighter to vie for international attention; “these huge works,” he writes, are “the artistic version of genetically modified organisms.”⁵⁷ More than that, biennale art often has a trick to it—something that makes it more than *just painting* or *just sculpture*. For instance, Wang Yuyang’s *Plato’s Cube* (2017) is a cube made of fluorescent light tubes suspended in the air. Motorized arms stretch the cube out of its perfect form, transforming the sculpture into a performance about entropy. Chen Fenwan’s *Lucky Garden* (2020) [fig. 11] takes the phenomenon of mega-art to its zenith. Mirrors on the walls, floors, and ceilings reflect a garden of sprouting hands. The technicolor palette, reflective surfaces, and huge scale make the work impossible to ignore.

This flashy style points to a problem with biennale formats. Enwezor argues, “Today the world-exhibition model—for better or worse—has been readapted into the form of mega-exhibitions such as biennales. ... [T]he mega-exhibition model ... ha[s] financed a way of thinking about contemporary art and globalization at large.”⁵⁸ Enwezor refers to “the world-exhibition model,” a particular museological artifact of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which colonizing countries showed off their advancements to each other while other “exotic” or colonized countries and cultures were ostracized, fetishized, and racialized. Although some imagine that we are far past this racist history, Enwezor points out how the biennale system, which highlights the “haves” from the “have-nots,” is a reiteration of the World’s Fair

⁵⁷ Okwui Enwezor, “Mega-Exhibitions: The Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form,” in *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 157.

⁵⁸ Enwezor, “Mega-Exhibitions,” 149.

model and plays into dominant legacies of power.⁵⁹ This competitive mentality has fueled the scale of contemporary art. Mega-exhibitions, as Enwezor calls them, are a microcosm of globalization. Biennales are used for artists and nations to prove themselves on a global stage. Enwezor acknowledges that mega-exhibitions, like SUPER FUSION, are attempts for institutions to make a positive impact by portraying the city to be cosmopolitan (and therefore global) and boosting the economy and civic pride. Museums imagine “themselves as furthering an alternative view of internationalism” outside of the worn-out and critiqued model of globalism.⁶⁰ Yet Enwezor pushes against this optimistic paradigm of local cultures coalescing with the global for a greater product. He frames the situation differently, arguing that exhibition spaces “position and promote the periphery as a genuine destination of artistic modernity” to “develop greater proximity to institutional patronage of the international artistic sphere but also to acquire and master the language of this international sphere, harvest its surplus resources.”⁶¹ As the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art engages with international frameworks to promote its regional identity and local diversity, Chengdu acquiesces to international systems of power to reap the benefits of global acclaim.

In recognizing how tokenized diversity feeds into global power structures, let us examine *Ethnic Co-Creation*, curated by Wu Hongliang and Xue Jiang. The exhibition showcases twenty Chinese artists addressing multiculturalism and diversity. The conceptual thrust of the show is that diversity inspires artistic creation; the curators state in the curatorial statement that “diverse ethnic cultures [...] have conversely become importantly driving forces for the development of

⁵⁹ Enwezor, “Mega-Exhibitions,” 158.

⁶⁰ Enwezor, “Mega-Exhibitions,” 159.

⁶¹ Enwezor, “Mega-Exhibitions,” 167.

Chinese art.”⁶² The show positions Chengdu as an intermediary in cultural exchange given its geographic and cultural proximity to Tibet and the many ethnic minorities of Sichuan.⁶³

Celebrating diversity and fostering dialogue are important, necessary, and productive. However, the explicit calling out of ethnic minorities in a biennale format takes a more insidious turn when considering China’s history of cultural assimilation, population homogenization, and “internal colonisation.”⁶⁴ For example, Varutti notes that the Chinese government creates policies that tolerate but contain ethnic minorities into the current “Han” Chinese national framework.⁶⁵ China is seemingly multicultural, but the active “construction of the ethnic minority as ‘backward’ and peripheral,” as seen in museums and popular culture, “is instrumental to the production of the Han as ‘central’ and ‘modern.’”⁶⁶ Undoubtedly, the issue of Chinese ethnic identity is fraught (and beyond the scope of this project). More to the point, Varutti argues that Chinese museums highlighting ethnic diversity actually re-incorporate these identities back into the mainstream.⁶⁷ What has been diverse, distinct, maybe even subversive, is assimilated by the institution into a Chinese national identity.

In speaking of diversity, it is important to acknowledge who is not included in SUPER FUSION, despite the active role they play in the art community. The presence of the gay community in Chengdu is a well-known secret, yet not embraced by the Chinese government.

⁶² CAFA, “‘Super Fusion: 2021 Chengdu Biennale’ Inaugurates Eight Themed Exhibitions and One International Conference.”

⁶³ CAFA, “‘Super Fusion: 2021 Chengdu Biennale’ Inaugurates Eight Themed Exhibitions and One International Conference.”

⁶⁴ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 129.

⁶⁵ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 131.

⁶⁶ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 131.

⁶⁷ Varutti, *Museums in China*.

Mǎn dì piāolíng (满地飘零) is a Chinese idiom (成语) literally meaning “scattered everywhere,” like autumn leaves strewn about the forest floor or a discombobulated rush of thoughts on a hectic morning. However, a crude double-meaning of one character transforms the phrase into slang for an abundance of homosexual men, and, while researching this phrase, the first search result that pops up is an internet user asking, “*why are there so many bottoms in Chengdu?* (为什么成都满地飘零?)”⁶⁸ Chengdu’s queer community has grown and thrived following the rise of urbanization. Around the world, queer communities foster creative self-expression. Examples of this can be seen in the mounting underground ballroom scene in Chengdu and other cities in China.⁶⁹ Importantly, the LGBTQ+ community, despite no official acknowledgment, is part of the cultural fabric of Chengdu. It is necessary to account for the role of the queer community as audiences of museums and participators in the cultural landscape, especially as the city situates itself as an artistic center for Southwest China. The absence of the queer community from the SUPER FUSION biennale speaks volumes to the intentionality in constructing a nationally accepted, yet fabricated, diverse and cosmopolitan identity.

Taken at face value, SUPER FUSION and the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art are opportunities to foster both Chengdu’s established art scene with new, contemporary forms that highlight the diversity and history of the area. When read through the lens of architect Liu’s optimistic globalism, the biennale is an example of taking the best of other countries and cultures to further new cultural production in China. However, the critique by Enwezor notes the superficiality of such sentiments and that “the convergence of the local and global now seems only part of the well-turned phrase of an advertisement campaign.”⁷⁰ In this debate, we can see

⁶⁸ xaviii, “为什么成都满地飘零?,” 知乎, July 13, 2019, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/334815693>.

⁶⁹ VICE News, “How China’s Queer Youth Built an Underground Ballroom Scene,” YouTube video, 12:15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYVepff7ucA>.

⁷⁰ Enwezor, “Mega-Exhibitions,” 176.

how China mobilizes the local/global cliché in furthering a cultured, global Chinese identity that does not push against dominant national narratives and mores. China picks and chooses when, where, and how it marshals its ancient, historic, or diverse heritage as it more clearly defines and legitimizes the nation. Similarly, China utilizes modes of modernity—modern architecture, trendy exhibitions, big-name artists—when useful in drawing international attention. In this picking and choosing, China is consciously constructing a Chinese identity that can be simultaneously ancestral, historical, and national as well as modern, cosmopolitan, and transnational.

Spectacle-Space: The Meixihu International Culture and Arts Center

Hunan province was slower to modernize than Shenzhen or Sichuan, but in the 1990s and 2000s, development in Changsha, its capital, quickly skyrocketed. The Hunan provincial government took an uneven approach to modernization, focusing development on metropolitan areas rather than supporting it throughout the rural province.⁷¹ This method was especially successful in Changsha. The local government had the strength and autonomy to implement policies that fostered industrial growth,⁷² and, as a result, the city became one of the “most economically dynamic cities in the country.”⁷³ Currently, Changsha is a tourist site due to its bustling nightlife, ancient history, and political importance, evidenced by the monumental granite statue celebrating Changsha as the birthplace of the political leader Mao Zedong.⁷⁴ Changsha’s

⁷¹ Kyle A. Jaros, “Hunan: The Making of an Urban Champion,” in *China’s Urban Champions*, vol. 4, *The Politics of Spatial Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 80–114, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb1htrn.10>, 80.

⁷² Jaros, “Hunan,” 81.

⁷³ Jaros, “Hunan,” 80.

⁷⁴ A. Cheshmehzangi, *Identity of Cities and City of Identities* (Springer Nature Singapore, 2020), 226.

extensive history traces as far back as the Bronze Age, yet the Changsha Fire of 1938 destroyed any remnants of this ancient past. In the last three decades, Changsha has reemerged as a tourist city, attracting attention through its flourishing food scene, legions of social media influencers (网红)⁷⁵, and new futuristic architecture.

The Meixihu International Culture and Arts Center (MICA), completed in 2019, highlights how Changsha projects futurism through architecture. Built as a sprawling, white, geometric campus overlooking Meixi Lake, the exterior of the museum protrudes out like the body of a spaceship from *Star Trek* [fig. 12]. The smooth white lines curve, lift, and hover over the ground. The otherworldly appearance of the building easily makes it a focal point of the city. The flat, round museum juxtaposes the rigid skyscrapers in the distance or the surrounding Soviet-esque apartment complexes built in the 2000's [fig. 13]. MICA's distinctive architecture establishes it as a major tourist attraction. While all the museums examined in this project (as well as many more within China) utilize architecture as a marketing tactic,⁷⁶ MICA does so with particular zeal. Just as Shenzhen's MOCAUP brandishes Anish Kapoor's name to affirm the museum's superiority, so too does MICA wield the name of starchitect Zaha Hadid. The museum's official website pays more attention to Hadid than it did the artists in their inaugural exhibition,⁷⁷ hyping Hadid's awards, global acclaim, and other notable projects, such as Beijing Daxing Airport. In associating MICA so strongly with Hadid, the museum casts itself as an "international first-class, national leading, largest and most functional cultural and art center in

⁷⁵ Changsha has earned a reputation for its large population of social media influencers (网红) and livestreamers. In a Douyin video (抖音) by verified user 流浪的东子 (抖音号: dongzi1222x), hundreds of livestreamers flood the streets of Changsha at two in the morning.

⁷⁶ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 161.

⁷⁷ 梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, "长沙梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, 将于11月30日首次对外开放!", *Weixin Official Accounts Platform*, November 16, 2019, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/hO6VEHLiHp8kcMF-9VN80g>.

Hunan province.”⁷⁸ Here, architecture is a key social marker of culture, ideas, and identity—perhaps even more so than the art inside the museum. Signaling the explosive advancement of Changsha, MICA is a deconstructivist symbol for a new age in the city.

The inside of MICA is just as imposing as the exterior. The white walls curve four stories in a V-shape toward the ceiling skylight, creating a space-age altar at the center of a wide atrium [fig. 14]. Bright light streams in from the geometrically webbed dome and casts shadows against the rounded inner walls. The grand gestures of the architecture—the monumental scale, sculptural interiors, contrasting light—makes MICA a piece of art in itself.

Scholar Mao Jiawei considers why China is such fertile ground for this particular style of architecture. He analyzes the futuristic architecture of Beijing Daxing International airport, also designed by Hadid. The interior of the airport has a tessellation of white beams, skylights, and LED lights that reflect on the building’s glossy floors. The only respite from the blindingly white architecture is a sculptural inlet of copper waterfalling from the geometric ceiling. In response to the prevalence of neo-futuristic architecture in China, Mao argues that the spread of deconstructivist architecture is not an unexpected phenomenon, but a “historical inevitability” in the aftermath of the 1970’s opening reforms.⁷⁹ Mao claims that this futuristic architecture style “will bring people far-reaching enlightenment” through the marriage of ground-breaking architecture and art.⁸⁰ While Mao does not define what he means by “enlightenment,” I interpret him as suggesting an aspiration for the future—specifically, that architecture can manifest tangible benefits for its citizens and represent the evolving ideologies of the time. In the

⁷⁸ 梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, “长沙梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, 将于11月30日首次对外开放!”

⁷⁹ Jiawei Mao, “The Deconstructive Enlightenment of Daxing International Airport” (3rd International Conference on Architecture: Heritage, Traditions and Innovations (AHTI 2021), (Paris: Atlantis Press, 2021), 232.

⁸⁰ Mao, “The Deconstructive Enlightenment of Daxing International Airport,” 231.

particular case of MICA, the architecture announces *the future is here*. In breaking in style from the surrounding architecture and from Chinese architectural history, Changsha, and, by extension, China, is communicating the arrival of the new, modern, and futuristic. Futurism is an ideal that museums in China strive to embody as symbols of economic and cultural success.⁸¹

By analyzing how modern and futuristic aesthetics come to stand as markers of success, we can better understand the visual language of power in China today. Throughout history, power has visually communicated itself through luxurious materials and styles that allude to other historical powers, i.e. empires, dynasties, and monarchies; and museum architecture specifically has communicated its power by borrowing from the art historical past (*see introduction*). However, the deconstructivist architecture of contemporary art museums in China, such as MICA and Shenzhen's MOCAUP, is deliberately ahistoric and atemporal. These museums do not utilize historically common tropes of prestige like ornate detailing, showy designs, or gilt interiors, perhaps in part because of the connotations between ostentation and government corruption. In 2008, thirteen officials were suspended from their positions and the government barred new construction of government buildings for five years following the so-called White House scandal. The officials were punished for corruption and bribery connected to the construction of a United States White House replica in the impoverished city of Fuyang.⁸² The news made international headlines⁸³ not only for the government corruption, but also for the

⁸¹ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 161.

⁸² "13 Officials Suspended over 'White House' Building Scandal," *China Daily*, July 22, 2009, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/22/content_8459942.htm.

⁸³ See, for instance, "China Bans New Government Buildings in Corruption Curb," *BBC News*, July 23, 2013, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23422985>; Jamil Anderlini, "Beijing Arrests 'White House' Party Chief," | *Financial Times*," June 25, 2008, <https://www.ft.com/content/e2536eee-42d2-11dd-81d0-0000779fd2ac>; and William Wan and Gu Jinglu, "A Restroom That Looks like the U.S. Capitol? Yes, There's One in China.," *Washington Post*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/05/15/a-restroom-that-looks-like-the-u-s-capitol-yes-theres-one-in-china/>.

building's outlandish decor, which included gilt walls and crystal chandeliers. In the years since, extravagant architecture has been perceived as inseparable from collusion and scandal. By visually presenting themselves in ways that diverge from that history, public contemporary art museums are creating a new vernacular of power through the aesthetics of the future and spectacle.

MICA's inaugural exhibition *Flowing Eternity* by the new media team MOTSE also deployed spectacle and futuristic visuals to, as the museum website promises, "bring an unprecedented viewing experience for Changsha citizens."⁸⁴ The inaugural exhibition of any museum sets the tone for the institution, establishing the vibe, tenor, and mission of their programming. MICA's choice of new media art was a way of distinguishing themselves as "the world's 'media art capital.'"⁸⁵ In competing with museums like Shenzhen's MOCAUP as well as other museums around the world, MICA hones in on a specific form of art to differentiate themselves. The choice could also be interpreted as an accommodation to the tastes of Changsha's tourist audience. MOTSE's eye-catching work translates well on social media and provides visuals that can compete with other popular commercial spaces, like malls. While MICA positions themselves as a unique capital for media art, they do so knowing it to be a global museological phenomenon. More critically, this type of exhibition shows how MICA utilizes global trends to communicate its cultural cachet.

The virtual tour of *Flowing Eternity* begins in MICA's expansive central atrium, then leads viewers through the exhibition's seven immersive gallery spaces. Dramatic music plays as the camera pans across a mirrored room in which inflated Xs and Os hang from the ceiling [fig.

⁸⁴ 梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, "长沙梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, 将于11月30日首次对外开放!."

⁸⁵ 梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, "长沙梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, 将于11月30日首次对外开放!."

15] or, in another gallery, technicolor cartoons project on the walls, floor, and ceiling. Following the popularity and commercial success of internationally acclaimed artist Yayoi Kusama, mirrored surfaces and multi-sensory installations have become museological tropes most commonly used to impress museum audiences through immersive spectacular forms. In another of *Flowing Eternity*'s installations, titled *The Birth of Tragedy* (2019), MOTSE continues to reference commercially successful artists: KAWS' teddy bears, Jeff Koons' balloon dogs, and Takashi Murakami's superflat flowers cascade down classical columns filling a dim gallery space [fig. 16]. In this part of the show, MOTSE both pays homage to and turns a critical eye to these art world celebrities' role in determining art markets and the art historical canon.⁸⁶ Ultimately, though, the kitschy work comes off less like a critique and more like a unique photo-op exploiting the highly recognizable forms of other artists.

MICA's advertising for *Flowing Eternity* emphasized architecture rather than art, and, in the end, that priority defined how the exhibition could be experienced. MICA as "spectacle-space" is effective in impressing audiences but draws attention away from the art.⁸⁷ Art critic Hal Foster describes deconstructivist contemporary art museums as "sites of spectacular spectatorship, of touristic awe," intended to "revive" a city rather than inspire artistic reverie.⁸⁸ China's rapid industrialization has given rise to museums that traffic in highly mediated, image-focused experiences. These experiences are encouraged first and foremost by the prevalence of a deconstructivist style of architecture that defines space and telegraphs identity through *appearances* rather than *realities*. As theorist Guy Debord states, "the

⁸⁶ 梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, "长沙梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, 将于11月30日首次对外开放!"

⁸⁷ Larry Shiner, "On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture: The Case of the 'Spectacle' Art Museum," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 1 (2011), 31.

⁸⁸ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime: And Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2003), 41.

contemporary phase of post-industrial society has again shifted from a state of *having* to one of *appearing*. All actual ‘having’ must now draw its prestige and ultimate utility from appearances.”⁸⁹ In other words, MICA substantiates its presence and prestige through deconstructivist architecture, becoming a museum through futurist visuals rather than art programming. MICA illustrates how the construction of identity is reliant on the aesthetics of cultural cachet, futurity, and spectacle.

MICA hinges upon the appearance of fine art aesthetics without the substance of fine art. The museum does not have the curatorial rigor or sheer quantity of artworks at Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art’s SUPER FUSION 2021, nor the sheen of Anish Kapoor’s exhibition at Shenzhen’s MOCAUP. In the years following its inaugural exhibition, MICA has yet to produce an art exhibition to this scale. Amidst this curatorial lull, the building has become a popular site for corporate entertainment. Recent events at the center include a wedding runway show sponsored by Voss Water and a strategy conference for Zhongliang Jiugui Liquor and Beijing Jingtang Liquor Company. MICA’s official social media account actively markets the museum as a venue for corporate events, brand launches, and product promotions.⁹⁰ Pragmatically speaking, this outcome is perhaps not surprising. Public infrastructure projects are conceived, built, and considered successful in terms of government funding mandates rather than artistic mission; new museums are designed around lucrative real estate deals that prioritize revenue rather than a creative vision.⁹¹ Still, it is important to acknowledge the ways that MICA’s

⁸⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Unredacted Word, 2021), 21-22.

⁹⁰ 梅溪湖国际文化艺术中心艺术馆, “艺术馆|商务合作,” *Weixin Official Accounts Platform*, November 16, 2019, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzAxNjExODA0Ng==&mid=2247486487&idx=1&sn=220efaed4207a762f9d74dfd99c85f5&chksm=9bf8f466ac8f7d7038686571b69e768cc279b0e012e2813860838830c9c2f727999ae128325f#d.

⁹¹ Wade Shepard, “Why China Has Hundreds Of Empty ‘Ghost’ Museums,” *Forbes*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2019/06/20/why-china-has-hundreds-of-empty-ghost-museums/>.

programming takes shape (or is absent) in response to a particular historical pressure: the need for Chinese museums to communicate messages of power, culture, and modernity. As the Chinese state aims to project a unified, cosmopolitan Chinese identity through the building of spectacular art museums, the art can become a second thought.

Ultimately, Changsha is left with the spectacle of a trendy contemporary art museum without substance. Some critics may forgive a disappointing museum exhibition in favor of a spectacular architectural display: in the most extreme case is architect Phillip Johnson's brash axiom "if the architecture is as good as in Bilbao, fuck the art!"⁹² MICA is an example in which the ideals that the architecture conveys, such as spectacle and the future, does not need to be substantiated by the art.

Museological Futures

"What will the museum of the future offer to its visitors?" Varutti asks in her 2014 book, *Museums in China*.⁹³ Recent scholarship analyzes how Chinese museums currently offer citizens a history, as evidenced by the Chinese artistic and cultural lineage didactically displayed in the Shanghai Museum. On the other hand, China is looking to the future. In response to changing populations and urbanizing landscapes, contemporary art museums offer citizens increasingly globalized and spectacular exhibitions.

The three case studies in this thesis, which range from 2017 to 2021, reveal how architecture and art programming have catered to new audiences in China while also shaping a cosmopolitan identity for a Chinese citizenry navigating newly urbanized landscapes. In Shenzhen, Chengdu, and Changsha, architecture is a key way of communicating culture, futurity,

⁹² Quoted in Shiner, "On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture," 31.

⁹³ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 163.

and success—not just in museums but other public infrastructure spaces such as airports, subway stations, and libraries. Cities flaunt or emulate world-renowned architects such as Zaha Hadid to demonstrate their world-class status. This particular style is ideal for showing off the government’s power while not provoking criticism. Deconstructivist architecture is flashy without gaudy finishes. The grand spaces inspire awe and touristic attention. The spectacle of architecture is an important part of Chinese museums’ mandate to create icons for the city and define a cosmopolitan identity for its citizens.

Additionally, museums in China are aware of and leverage global art market trends. Much like the spectacular deconstructivist architecture, museums use global art formats and internationally known artists to uphold cultural prestige locally and globally. For example, Shenzhen MOCAUP holds up internationally successful artists to validate their own prestige and the city’s cultural proficiency. Similarly, the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art employs the biennale format to draw international attention to the city as an artistic center. Lastly, MICA’s spectacular displays and references to recognizable artists aim to differentiate the city from other contemporary museums and engage with a touristic audience.

China’s need to appear modern stems from the conflation of modernity, as seen in a particular futuristic aesthetic, with success.⁹⁴ Take, for example, the soaring ceiling at MOCAUP, whose geometric trellises span over the shining Cloud Center [fig. 17]. Shining beams of light shine through the support structure, giving the bright and airy commons an optimistic slant. Yet a closer look at the support beams despoils the illusion of a perfect museum. Patches of mismatched paint, loose wires, and scratched metal of the steel beams haltingly brings the museum back to reality [fig. 18]. While all three of my case-study museums offer spectacle to

⁹⁴ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 161.

construct a cosmopolitan identity, it is important to note where the illusions end, because the slippages reveal the mechanisms of power. Shenzhen's MOCAUP attempts to address the dearth of culture through futuristic architecture and global art forms that fortify Shenzhen's cultureless reputation. Chengdu aims to embrace local diversity through a biennale yet reinforces hoary international systems and reaffirms mainstream national identity instead. And Changsha dons the visuals of futurity through spectacular architecture and interactive exhibitions, but the underwhelming programming fails to uphold the promises of that future.

While the scope of this thesis is temporally and geographically narrow, it nevertheless contributes to understanding how contemporary art museums are spaces of identity construction throughout China. Investigating this dynamic is important as, despite the global repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the China Museum Boom does not seem to be losing steam. On December 28, 2022 (only three months before the completion of this thesis), the Wuhan Qintai Museum opened its doors to the public. The new museum embodies all of the main features of my case studies, from its highly futuristic museum pavilion to its inaugural biennale. The organic waves and flat white surface of the Wuhan Qintai Museum façade [fig. 19] immediately conjure connections of Hadid's dynamic work at MICA in Changsha. In an interview with Curator and Director Chen Yongjin, he states that the "Qintai Pavilion was built in response to urban development and the increasing aesthetic needs of the audience" and "is also an important component in shaping the image of a metropolis."⁹⁵ Recognizing that new museums are continuing to open extends the possibilities for further research on contemporary art museums in China, with opportunities to expand out to other regions.

⁹⁵ 武汉美术馆, "从汉口到琴台, 盛大开馆! | 武汉美术馆馆长寄语," *Weixin Official Accounts Platform*, December 27, 2022, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA5NzMwMzYyMA==&mid=2651611688&idx=1&sn=175d3b67cfe66adba763c859aeb7b65b&chksm=8b5a2f03bc2da61524102ffc2ab13ac1f06fa71ef667f2f5bc72d6de4023be14c6d95aca5da#rd.

Varutti's provocative question on the offerings of future museums continues to be relevant as museums evolve with new architectural styles, art world trends, and sociopolitical contexts. Museums will change, and this moment's fervor for deconstructivist architecture, mega-exhibitions, and spectacular art will most likely look dated within a decade. However, the continuing relevance of this research lies in thinking about how identity construction continues to be a central function within China's museums.

Figures



Figure 1, Virtual Tour Installation Views *Spring Blowing in the Wind: Jiangan Culture Art Exhibition* at the Shanghai Museum, circa 2020. Courtesy of Shanghai Museum.



Figure 2, Bao' An County, circa 1950s.



Figure 3, Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning, circa 2017. Photo credit: Duccio Malagamba.

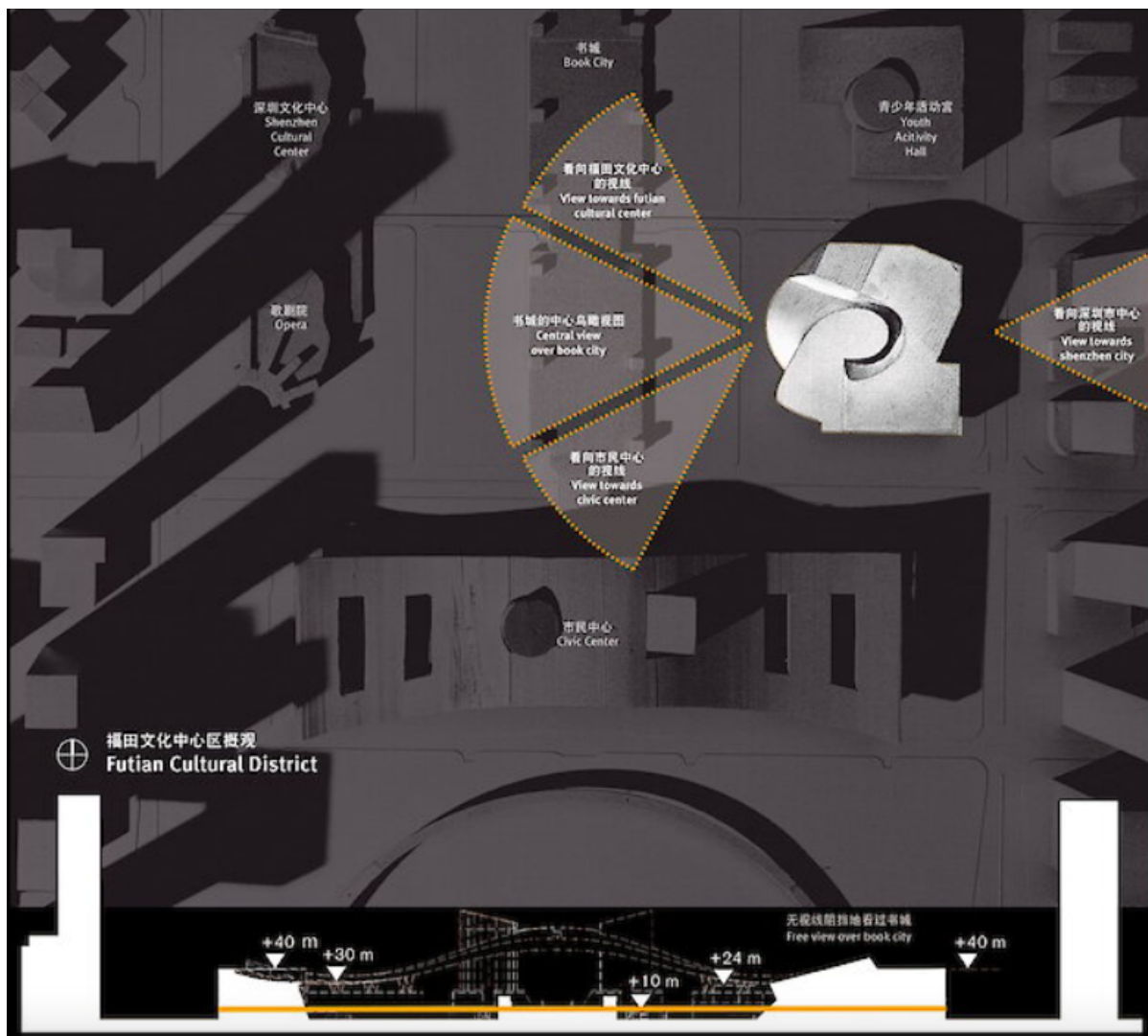


Figure 4, Coop Himmelb(l)au, *Urban Concept — section*, circa 2017. Courtesy of the Coop Himmelb(l)au.



Figure 5, Anish Kapoor, Installation View of *To Reflect an Intimate Part of the Red* (1981) from Anish Kapoor Exhibition at Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning, circa 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6, Anish Kapoor, Installation View of *S-Curve* (2003) from Anish Kapoor Exhibition at Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning, circa 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7, Coop Himmelb(l)au, The Cloud Center at the Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning, circa 2017. Photo credit: Duccio Malagamba.



Figure 8, Liu Jiaken, Aerial view of Tianfu Art Park, circa 2021. Courtesy of 99艺术.



Figure 9, Liu Jiaken, Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art, China, circa 2021. Courtesy of Chengdu City Construction Investment.

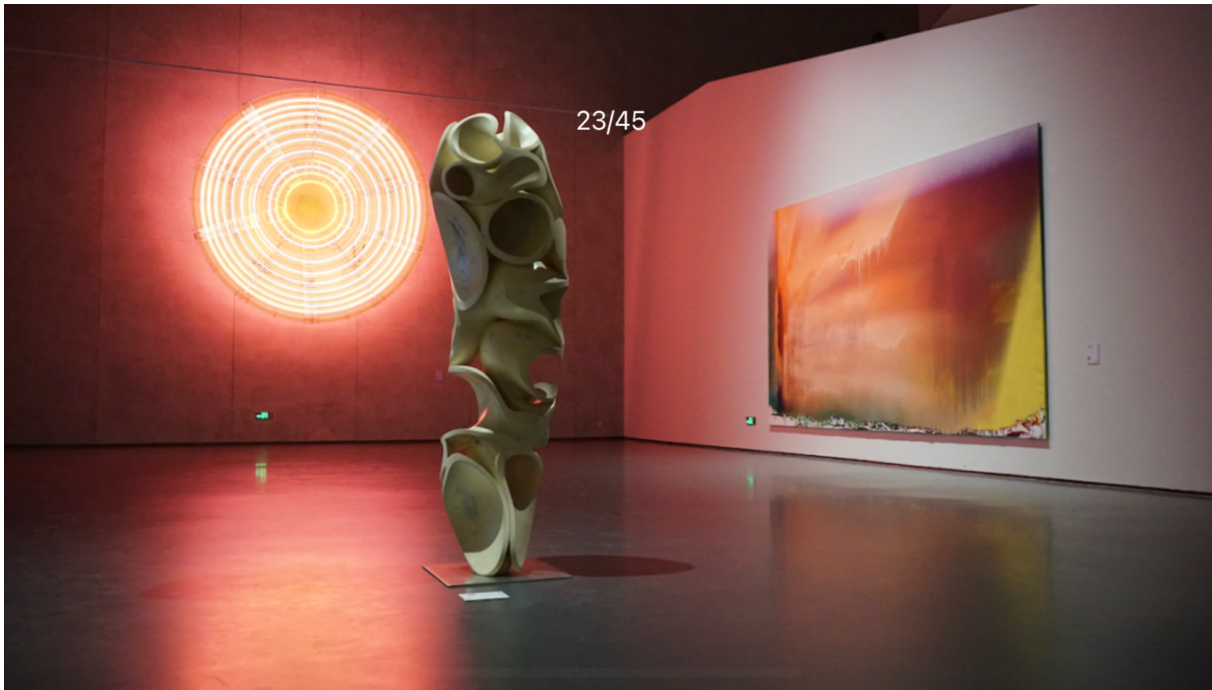


Figure 10, Exhibition view of “Super Fusion—2021 Chengdu Biennale,” circa 2021. Courtesy of Chengdu Academy of Fine Art. Photo credit: Juri Liu.

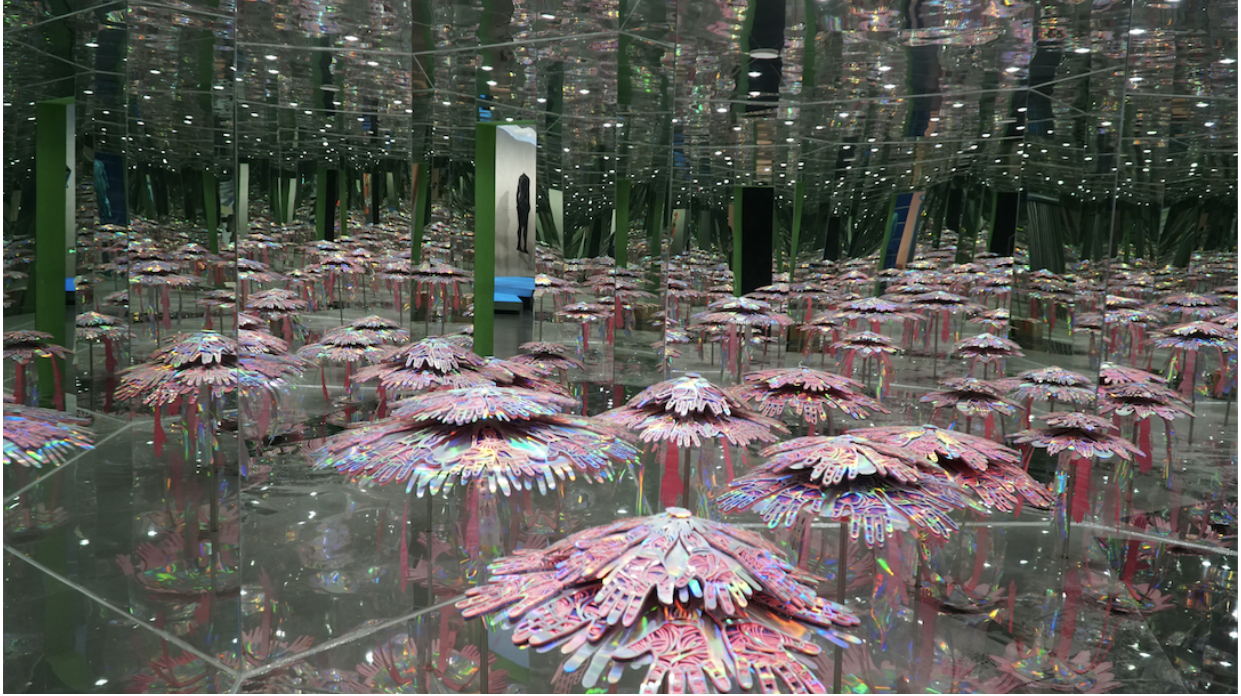


Figure 11, Chen Fenwan, Installation view of *Lucky Garden* (2020), circa 2021. Courtesy of Chengdu Academy of Fine Art.



Figure 12, Zaha Hadid, Meixihu International Culture and Arts Center, circa 2017. Photo credit: Virgile Simon Bertrand.



Figure 13, Meixihu International Culture and Arts Center, screenshot of Baidu Maps, circa 2020.



Figure 14, Zaha Hadid, Meixihu International Culture and Arts Center, circa 2017. Photo credit: Virgile Simon Bertrand.

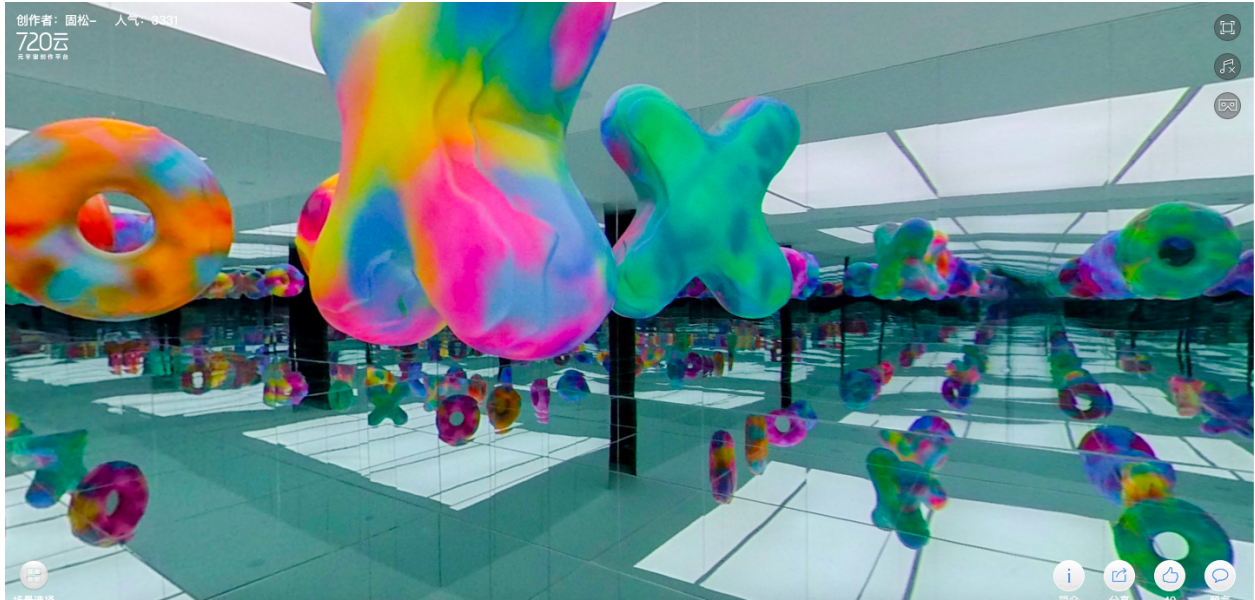


Figure 15, MOTSE, Virtual Tour Installation Views from Meixihu International Culture and Arts Center, circa 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 16, MOTSE, *The Death of Tragedy*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Meixihu International Culture and Arts Center.



Figure 17, Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning, 2017. Photo credit: Dr. Jiajun Xu.



Figure 18, Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning, 2017. Photo credit: Dr. Jiajun Xu.



Figure 19, Atelier Deshaus, Wuhan Qintai Art Museum, circa 2022. Photo credit: Fangfang Tian.

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