

Re-framing Tradition in Cai Guo-Qiang's *Project to Extend the Great Wall of
China by 10,000 metres: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993)

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Abstract

Through an analysis of Cai Guo-Qiang's *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000), this Major Research Project (MRP) offers a revisionary definition of tradition that includes the practice of re-inventing, re-framing, and re-enacting traditionally transmitted beliefs, practices, and objects to fit within the needs and desires of a given society. I look specifically at how Cai re-interprets and re-invents the innate physical and aesthetic properties of gunpowder as a dynamic resource to re-construct and re-enact traditional practices, such as Chinese landscape painting and the literati's self-cultivation practices, in a contemporary art context. I consider Cai's use of gunpowder as a mode of engaging with tradition to overcome the lingering effects of colonization, which have suppressed, displaced, and misrepresented tradition as an obsession or fixation to preserve the past.

Keywords: Cai Guo-Qiang; *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*; gunpowder; tradition; destruction; re-enactment; self-disciplined spontaneity; multi-modernity; China; contemporary art

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Introduction

“Being a proud son fostered on 5,000 years of culture, I am on the path of awakening and find myself in direct communion with my forefathers who, laying their mighty palms upon my shoulders, endow me with a sacred strength. In my works, history and my past experiences are incorporated together, merging into one.” - Cai Guo-Qiang¹

In 1993, Cai Guo-Qiang symbolically extended the Great Wall of China with 10 kilometres of gunpowder fuses for his explosion work, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 metres: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* [Fig. 1-4]. Starting at the end of the Great Wall in Jiayunguan, dozens of crew members who had volunteered their time to realize this project placed fuses along a path mapped out by the artist in the Gobi Desert. Once all the fuses were secured in place, the volunteers and onlookers waited anxiously for the first fuse to be lit at nightfall, trusting that not a single fuse was out of place. Suddenly, flames burst into the sky before the onlookers in swift movements. The fiery light brightened the dark, deserted landscape. The sequence of exploding fuses made the flames appear to gradually move across the mountainside. The trail of flames across the landscape created the illusion of a wall, a border, or even a pathway guiding a traveller’s journey that extends beyond the fading horizon. The flames continued to light up the sky, as if they were holding on to the landscape, lingering for another moment longer. The flames slowly diminished and suddenly burnt out one by one, until there was nothing left but a blank landscape and dark night sky once again. The ephemeral, pyrotechnic project only lasted about 15

¹ Cai Guo-Qiang and You Jindong, “Painting with Gunpowder,” *Leonardo* 21, no. 3 (1988): 253.

minutes, yet what remained was the enduring image of a wall of flames burned into the memories of the participants and the gunpowder residue left on the Earth's surface.

Since 1989, Cai has realized approximately 30 explosion projects collectively known as the *Project for Extraterrestrials* (1989 -) series in which he sought to connect these monumental projects to unknowable, external forces by rendering the sky as a bridge between humanity and the universe.² The artist originally intended these explosion projects to be viewed by a fictional alien audience (extraterrestrials) in a cosmological realm beyond our own who could observe, and perhaps question, the motives and desires of human beings who inhabit the Earth. Viewed from a celestial vantage point, these works offer a primal and spiritual experience of the (extra)terrestrial that exists within and beyond the perspective of humans. In his pursuit to connect nature, humanity, and art, he was drawn to “a material that carried an unparalleled aesthetic, metaphorical and physical power: gunpowder.”³ In the explosion series, *Project for Extraterrestrials* (1989 -), Cai harnesses the natural energy of gunpowder, a pyrotechnic substance that is used in festive rituals and is often associated with violence and destruction, to create a site for renewal and re-construction upon the Earth's surface.

² Dana Friis-Hansen, “Survey: Towards a New Methodology in Art,” in *Cai Guo-Qiang* ed. Dana Friis Hansen, Octavio Zaya, and Serizawa Takashi (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 48.

³ Friis-Hansen, “Survey: Towards a New Methodology in Art,” 49.

This Major Research Paper (MRP) offers a critical evaluation of how Cai re-interprets and re-frames the innate aesthetic and physical properties of gunpowder as a dynamic resource to re-construct and re-enact traditional practices, such as Chinese landscape painting, in a contemporary art context.⁴ I consider Cai's use of gunpowder as a mode of engaging with tradition to overcome the lingering effects of colonization, which has suppressed, displaced, and misrepresented tradition as an obsession or fixation to preserve the past. I pose a revisionary understanding and definition of tradition in a period of decolonization and multi-modern, multi-vocal expressions to contribute to the ongoing discourse of tradition in contemporary art.

To determine the ways in which Cai's use of gunpowder re-imagines and re-enacts tradition, I discuss one of his earliest explosion projects in the *Project for Extraterrestrials* series (1989 -), *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 metres: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993, gunpowder and two fuse lines)⁵ which was realized in the Gobi Desert. My discussion of this in-situ explosion project is supported by two additional gunpowder works by Cai that were produced on paper: *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1990, gunpowder and ink on paper)

⁴ This analysis is intended to provide further critical research to the extensive literature already published on the artist. See Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2006, Aiwah Ong, "What Marco Polo Forgot: Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global." *Cultural Anthropology* 53, no. 4 (2012): 471-494, and Wu Hung, "Once Again, Painting as Model: Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang's Gunpowder Painting." In *Wu Hung on Contemporary Chinese Artists*, 9-19. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2009.

⁵ *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 metres: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* will be referred to as *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993) throughout the rest of the MRP for brevity.

[Fig. 5] and *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (2000, gunpowder and ink on paper) [Fig. 6], which offer a permanent counterpoint to his temporary explosion projects.⁶ To create these works, Cai laid stencils on paper, which were punctuated by fuses taped to the surface. He then poured gunpowder over the stencils and covered the surface with cardboard. To reduce the oxygen flow and risk of a fire, he placed rocks on top of the cardboard to weigh it down. Finally, he lit the fuse sparking a chain reaction of mini explosions on the surface of the paper underneath the cardboard and rocks. The cardboard and rocks were then removed to reveal what Cai refers to as a gunpowder painting. The works on paper resemble traditional Chinese ink paintings but demonstrate how the destructive power of gunpowder can become a source of creation.

Cai's gunpowder paintings are also often referred to as "think pieces" because they function as a visual articulation of his preliminary ideas.⁷ For example, *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1990) functions like a preliminary sketch or proposal for his in-situ explosion project that was realized at the Great Wall of China three years later. Whereas *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (2000) might be considered a "post-performance painting"⁸ because it was made seven years later and offers a retrospective analysis of the in-situ explosion

⁶ For brevity, the two works on paper will be referred to as: *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1990) and *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (2000) respectively.

⁷ Wu Hung, "Once Again, Painting as Model: Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang's Gunpowder Painting," in *Wu Hung on Contemporary Chinese Artists* ed. Wu Hung (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2009), 10.

⁸ Wu Hung, "Once Again, Painting as Model: Reflections on Cai Guo-Qiang's Gunpowder Painting," 18.

project. Overall, the relationship between the artist's gunpowder paintings and his explosion projects reveals the thoughtful development of his visual methodologies.

From 1981 to 1985, Cai studied set design and theatre production at the Shanghai Drama Institute. Cai explains that the theatre program formed the foundation of his artistic practice because he learned how his work could be revealed through time and space.⁹ This understanding grew from a practice of developing proposals, managing budgets, and searching for new ways to make art that engaged audiences.¹⁰ The knowledge and experience Cai gained from the Shanghai Drama Institute helped build the foundation of his artistic practice. Cai's *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, and 2000) can be understood as a development of ideas that require meticulous planning, organization, and communication in order to be realized. All three works should therefore be considered as a conceptual whole that reflects his artistic practice, rather than as singular, independent works.

In chapter one, *Reframing Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art*, I discuss how Cai's *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000) fits within an ongoing multi-disciplinary discussion of the revisionary definitions of tradition and responds to the demands of an emergent global art world during the 1990s that compelled many working Chinese artists to negotiate their cultural

⁹ Cai Guo-Qiang, "Interview: Octavio Zaya in conversation with Cai," in *Cai Guo-Qiang* ed. Dana Friis Hansen, Octavio Zaya, and Serizawa Takashi (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 11.

¹⁰ Cai Guo-Qiang, "Interview: Octavio Zaya in conversation with Cai," 11.

position regarding the subject of tradition. This chapter analyzes how artists engage in transmitting traditional beliefs, practices, and objects as present-day inheritors, or re-enactors through which to consider the ontological and methodological definitions of tradition. I also examine three major socio-political events that took place in China during the twentieth century, which radically repudiated tradition according to dominant political philosophies, including the New Cultural Movement (1916-1924), the newly founded People's Republic of China under the singular rule of the Communist Party of China (1949-1976), and finally the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) organized by the Communist Party of China and Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976). I then reflect upon significant contemporary art exhibitions and symposia that took a revisionary approach to curating Asian contemporary artists and their relationship to tradition, which echo Cai's own attitudes toward tradition.

In chapter two, *Shanshui*: Unrepeatable moments of creation, I compare Cai's careful placement of gunpowder in his explosion projects and gunpowder paintings to the practice of rigorous self-cultivation executed by the literati – a learned group of scholar artists who practised calligraphy and landscape painting in early China. I argue that Cai re-invents this calligraphic tradition of exercising laborious self-cultivation in his artistic practice as a *self-disciplined spontaneity*. This term is defined as a learned expertise of a material or practice that is achieved through precise technical training to create spontaneously. I also compare Cai's use of gunpowder to the methods of the Japanese performance

group, the Gutai, who moved away from naturalistic and illusionistic art and adopted a gestural and materials-based practice that generated new autonomous spaces for creation.¹¹

Finally, in chapter three, Gunpowder: *No Construction, No Destruction*, I discuss the nuanced military, cultural, and political histories of gunpowder that influence present-day viewers' perceptions of this powerful material. I consider Cai's explosion projects and gunpowder paintings as "aestheticized productions of violence"¹² that reveal the duality of gunpowder as a process of construction and destruction. This notion echoes one of Chairman Mao's political slogans, "No Construction, No Destruction," that reflects the dialectics of revolution in modern Chinese history and evokes the repudiation of tradition during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Alongside these socio-political connotations, I also consider gunpowder's ritualistic and everyday functions that Cai alludes to in his explosion projects.

¹¹ Yoshihara Jirō, "Gutai Art Manifesto," in *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, ed. Ming Tiampo and Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013), 18.

¹² Alexandra Munroe, "Cai Guo-Qiang: I want to Believe," in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I want to believe*, ed. Alexandra Munroe and Thomas Krens (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 36.

Re-framing Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art

As a present-day inheritor and re-inventor of tradition, Cai's artistic methodologies reveal a deeper understanding of the active and dynamic traditional practices that he engages with in a contemporary art context. Tradition can be broadly defined as a past practice or belief that is transmitted (i.e. handed down) by a living authority or custodian of the tradition (i.e. elder, teacher, or parent) to a living recipient or benefactor. In modern-day Mandarin, tradition translates to *chuan-tong* (*Chuan* = key component of transmission; *Tong* = connotations of both unity/continuity and governing norm/guide)¹³, which conveys the meaning of "that which is transmitted from the past, which unites and governs or provides guidance to a group or community."¹⁴ These shared and unifying beliefs, practices, and objects are often viewed as being given to recipients unthinkingly, meaning that they are transmitted and practiced with no objections or reconsiderations.¹⁵ However, tradition is continually selected, reconstructed, and re-imagined by successors of the same era who respect its use and function in a collective present. Therefore, tradition has no absolute, original form; it exists in a dynamic "living past."¹⁶

¹³ Sor-Hoon Tan, "The Pragmatic Confucian Approach to Tradition in Modernizing China," *History and Theory* 51, no. 4 (2012): 23.

¹⁴ Sor-Hoon Tan, "The Pragmatic Confucian Approach to Tradition in Modernizing China," 23.

¹⁵ Edward Shils, "Tradition," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13, no. 2 (1971): 122-124.

¹⁶ Hangsheng Zheng, "On Modernity's Changes to Tradition: A Sociological Perspective." *History and Theory* 51 (2012): 109.

Two definitions of tradition proposed by sociologist Hangsheng Zheng¹⁷ support my analysis of Cai's relevance to tradition in *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993), which defies an ontological meaning, but endorses a methodological perspective of tradition. The ontological definition is summarized by Zheng as what is "passed down or inherited by succeeding generations," whereas the methodological definition of tradition is described as "invented culture."¹⁸ The main difference between these two definitions is that "tradition in the ontological sense emphasizes continuity and success in the historical context, whereas its methodological sense highlights the change and reform that have taken place from the past to the present."¹⁹ The former definition favours continuity, whereas the latter favours discontinuities or ruptures. Zheng goes on to describe the relationship between tradition and modernity as a transitive process, in which there is a constant progression towards the "new" modern, which is achieved through the production of new traditions.²⁰ He argues that modernity remains dynamic because collective societies renew tradition and grow from their experiences. Modernity endows tradition with significance.

This is an important notion to understand because it means that tradition and modernity do not exist as polar entities, but rather tradition is coeval with modernity. Art critics and art historians often portray tradition as a reflection or

¹⁷ During his lifetime, Hangsheng Zheng (1936-2014) was Honorary President of the Chinese Association of Sociology, Vice President of Renmin University of China, and Director of the Center for Studies of Sociological Theory and Methods among many other accolades.

¹⁸ Zheng, "On Modernity's Changes to Tradition," 106.

¹⁹ Ibid., 106-107.

²⁰ Ibid., 110.

embodiment of the past in order to differentiate it from modernity. Zheng argues that it is only when *tradition* and *modernity* are contrasted can we then begin to recognize and reflect on them. The multiple iterations of tradition are the results of the different motivations, desires, or projections that occur in the present.²¹ As the transmission of tradition is itself a dynamic process, it echoes Zheng's notions that tradition "is the past that is preserved in modern people's memories, words, and actions, so it is the past functioning in today's world."²² As the re-enactors of these traditions, individuals constantly study, reconfigure, and practice them until this preserved past achieves the status of tradition and becomes the collective memory of a given society.²³

A revisionary definition of tradition would therefore include an act of innovating, modifying and re-enacting traditionally transmitted beliefs, practices, and objects to fit within the needs and desires of a given society. I position Cai's *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000) in relation to this revisionary definition of tradition by arguing that he re-frames the key characteristics of Chinese landscape painting, such as monumentality, through the adoption of a pyrotechnic substance discovered by early Chinese alchemists: gunpowder. I further argue that Cai alters our perspective of gunpowder as a destructive material used primarily for violent ends. Instead he re-positions

²¹ Carol Yinghua Lu, "After Tradition: The Notion of Tradition as a Projection of Subjectivity in Contemporary Art Practice in China," in *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Diana Freundl and Carol Yinghua Lu (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 16.

²² Zheng, "On Modernity's Changes to Tradition," 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, 108.

gunpowder as a source of artistic creation that fits within a contemporary art context and reclaims the everyday or ritualistic functions of gunpowder. In doing so, he is re-interpreting the conventional functions of this material, which in itself is a process of re-shaping history and tradition.

The decision to use gunpowder as a mode of re-framing Chinese landscape painting traditions in a contemporary art context is likely influenced by China's shifting perceptions and acknowledgements of tradition. Tradition in contemporary Chinese society and culture should be considered in relation to three socio-political movements, which affected Chinese artists' long-term repudiation of tradition over the course of the twentieth century.²⁴ These events include the New Cultural Movement (1916-1924), the newly founded People's Republic of China under the singular rule of the Communist Party of China (1949-1976), and finally the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) organized by the Communist Party of China and Chairman Mao. Each of these events provide a socio-political and socio-cultural backdrop to understand the Chinese public's radical discontinuity from the experience of tradition, which associated the past with backwardness and needed to be discarded from the present to advance a modern state.²⁵ Perhaps Chinese artists, like Cai, began to problematize the meaning and function of *tradition* in response to the radical rebuilding and modernization of China.²⁶ The following discussion provides a

²⁴ Lu, "After Tradition," 17.

²⁵ Ibid., 19.

²⁶ Gerald McMaster, supervisory comments, email message to author, April 8th, 2019, OCAD University, Toronto, Canada.

political, social, and cultural context to understand the Chinese public's relationship to tradition and to assess Cai's relationship to tradition after the death of Chairman Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

A Repudiation of the Past

New Cultural Movement (1916-1924)

The New Cultural Movement was an intellectual movement from 1916 to 1924 led by a number of young, modern Chinese thinkers,²⁷ who argued for a move away from Confucian ideas that valued tradition, customs, and convention, and instead appealed to adopt modern Western concepts such as democracy and empirical sciences. Some scholars have even referred to the New Cultural Movement as China's Enlightenment period because it relied on empiricism, science, and rationalism to reorganize society. While many scholars perceive the New Cultural Movement to be a radical, anti-traditionalist movement aimed at destroying Confucian's influence on Chinese society altogether, young intellectuals were not criticizing Confucianism as a whole; they were condemning feudal despotism and autocratic rulers who used Confucius as a talisman to uphold their power and authority.²⁸ Confucius was viewed as a traditionalist who valued the legacy of the past as a source of knowledge and learning.²⁹ Members

²⁷ Such as Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), editor of *New Youth* (*Xinqingnian*) magazine and Hu Shih (1891-1962), a Chinese Nationalist diplomat and scholar.

²⁸ Chen Weiping, "An Analysis of Anti-Traditionalism in the Culture Movement," *Social Sciences in China* 38, no. 2 (2017): 176.

²⁹ Sor-Hoon Tan, "The Pragmatic Confucian Approach to Tradition in Modernizing China," 24.

of the movement acknowledged the historical value of Confucianism, but rejected its use unless traditional practices complemented, rather than impeded, society's progression towards modernity.

Critics of the New Cultural Movement often argue that its members intended to demonize traditional culture. While the New Cultural Movement did have an anti-traditional component, it wanted to approach the study of tradition by applying modern scientific methods.³⁰ They advocated for a *reordering* of national heritage, which meant substituting the authority of Confucian teaching with the authority of empiricism and science.³¹ Members of the New Cultural Movement believed this would initiate an emancipation from the authoritarian values of Confucian learning, advocating that a scientific spirit would provide a new understanding of traditional culture.³² Due to the New Cultural Movement's preoccupation with the idea of progressing Chinese society, they called for a radical intellectual enlightenment, a national cultural awakening, and a repudiation of tradition.³³

The Establishment of the People's Republic of China under the Communist Party of China, (1949-1976) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

³⁰ Weiping, "An Analysis of Anti-Traditionalism in the Culture Movement," 180.

³¹ Ibid., 180.

³² Ibid., 181.

³³ Ibid., 177.

Communist ideology continued to reinforce China's repudiation of the past after establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1946 and also through the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) organized under Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976).³⁴ This new cultural order was aimed at the manipulation, and even the expulsion, of humanities and liberal arts scholars to ensure that communist values and ideals were disseminated to the working-class. The Communist party implemented anti-intellectual reform policies which positioned traditional beliefs, practices, and objects as old, static, and backwards. Mao further accelerated an anti-knowledge and anti-intellectual atmosphere within China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).³⁵ This anti-knowledge revolution meant mobilizing the uneducated, rural working-class population to strike against the wealthy upper classes. The revolution dismissed methodical explorations of tradition and rejected the notion that knowledge of tradition served as an intellectual asset.³⁶ Like members of the New Cultural Movement, they claimed that tradition needed to be eradicated from society in order to allow for new social development toward a modern, progressive state.³⁷

To create a modern Chinese state, the Communist party for instance advocated to eliminate the *Four Olds*: old ideas, old cultures, old habits, and old

³⁴ In 1949, Mao Zedong formally became the leader of the newly formed People's Republic of China (1949-76).

³⁵ Lu, "After Tradition," 17.

³⁶ Ibid., 18.

³⁷ Ibid., 19.

customs.³⁸ The denunciation of the Four Olds was combined with a destruction of physical cultural objects in accordance with one of Mao's most significant doctrines, "There is no construction without destruction."³⁹ The total annihilation of the *Four Olds* and traditional objects are among the Communist Party's revolutionary goals in creating a modernized state. Many historical records and objects were destroyed during this period resulting in a lack of appreciation and respect for traditions and traditional culture. The Communist regime also limited artistic practice to oil paintings depicted in the Social Realist mode to further restrict the type of visual content available to the public and to promote a new visual, historical legacy.⁴⁰ Even after the Cultural Revolution the extreme action taken during the course of the communist movement still continued to make an impact on the national presence of China throughout the 1980s and 1990s.⁴¹

Following Mao's death in 1976, which also marked the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese art scene experienced a period of revitalization. Under the political and economic reforms of Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), who took power in 1978, art academies and galleries reopened their doors to the public. It is generally accepted by scholars that contemporary Chinese art in this context emerged in the late 1970s as a "humanist/idealist...desire for

³⁸ Tomas Plaenkers, "Introduction: Cultural Revolution and Cultural Regression," in *Landscapes of the Chinese Soul: The Enduring Presence of the Cultural Revolution*, trans. John Hart (London: Karnac Books Ltd., 2014), xvi.

³⁹ Mao Zedong quoted in "Circular of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," May 16, 1966.

⁴⁰ Friis-Hansen, "Survey: Towards a New Methodology," 42.

⁴¹ Lu, "After Tradition," 19.

freedom of self-expression” that reacted against the former requirement that “art should take the view of the masses and be entirely subservient to the political aims” of the Chinese Communist Party.⁴² This new art practice paved the way for the next generation of Chinese avant-garde artists to emerge, including Cai, who became collectively known as participants of the '85 New Wave art movement. These artists took advantage of this period of reformation to experiment with modern and contemporary Western art styles and began to re-examine the manifestation of tradition in contemporary life, which was previously forbidden.⁴³ Moreover, many Chinese artists left China in the 1980s and positioned themselves within new cultural contexts seeking to learn modern and postmodern artistic practices.

For example, in 1987, Cai moved to Japan where he began experimenting with gunpowder and developed the first explosion works for his *Project for Extraterrestrials* series (1989 -). Like many Chinese artists working overseas, Cai faced new challenges in negotiating his cultural identity. Chinese contemporary art critic and scholar, Gao Minglu, explains that artists occupying this in-between position “adopted a strategy of neither emphasizing nationalistic cultural characteristics to play the role of minority...nor overtly de-emphasizing their

⁴² Paul Gladston, “Locating Displacement: Envisioning the Complex ‘Diasporization’ of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Negotiating Difference: Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Context*, ed. Birgit Hopfener, Franziska Koch, Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch, and Juliane Noth (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2012), 243.

⁴³ Birgit Hopfener and Franziska Koch, “Introduction,” in *Negotiating Difference: Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Context*, ed. Birgit Hopfener, Franziska Koch, Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch, and Juliane Noth (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2012), 14.

Chinese identity and becoming internationalists.”⁴⁴ This practice of negotiating one’s position in the global art world is especially important to the role of tradition in contemporary art practices. Instead of pressuring Chinese artists to define their subjectivity by either claiming or denouncing tradition, they can present traditional materials as “dimensions of a material language, and as bridges over which different interpretations can cross.”⁴⁵ These acts of cultural exchange required artists to rethink their personal origins depending on the context in which they present their work. Cai’s *Project for Extraterrestrials* series (1989 -) rethinks the role of gunpowder as a “primary substance” in ancient Asian philosophy by extending this foundational concept to other Asian cultures.⁴⁶ This transcultural series bridges together the various countries it has been exhibited in including, South Africa, the Netherlands, Japan, and the United Kingdom by attributing a sense of universality to gunpowder. Cai’s method of rethinking traditional practices and materials in the *Project for Extraterrestrials* series (1989 -) also echoes the curatorial themes of two exhibitions held in North American art institutions, which explored how contemporary Asian artists have (re)negotiated tradition in their own countries.

⁴⁴ Gao Minglu, “Toward a Transnational Modernity,” in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu and Norman Bryson (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 33.

⁴⁵ Gao Minglu, “Toward a Transnational Modernity,” 33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

Exhibitions and Symposia on Tradition in Contemporary Asian Art

Many exemplary exhibitions organized in major western metropolises contribute to the revisionary discourse of tradition in contemporary Asian art practices, including *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia* (1996, Asia Society, Grey Art Gallery & Queens Museum of Art, New York City), and *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art* (2015, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver).⁴⁷ For these two exhibitions, artists were invited to create works of art based on their own interests and position towards the subject of tradition. Both exhibitions negotiated and challenged assumed regional identities of East Asia in order to provide alternative understandings of tradition.

For instance, *Traditions/Tensions* (1996)⁴⁸ highlighted twenty-seven contemporary artists from India, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, and South Korea who re-frame traditional materials such as religious and popular icons, gilded or terra cotta sculptures, and wooden masks in their art-making practices. Tradition is interpreted by some artists as “an inheritance that offers inspiration for their creative imagination,” and for others it is to “redefine and renegotiate tradition through cultural and regional identity in ways that can be challenging, innovative, and provocative.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ See also *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth Century China* (Guggenheim, 1998) and *Past in Reverse: Contemporary Art of East Asia* (San Diego Museum of Art, 2004).

⁴⁸ This exhibition was organized by the Asia Society and was curated by guest curator, Apinan Poshyananda.

⁴⁹ Apinan Poshyananda, “Preface,” in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions & Tensions*, ed. Apinan Poshyananda (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 15.

The exhibition provided a counterpoint to the practice of numerous Western museums and cultural institutions that display archaeological objects and artifacts from non-Western, indigenous societies as if they are the only substitute to represent their authentic visual cultural traditions. These objects are given priority over work produced by living Asian artists and are often removed from their social and cultural contexts.⁵⁰ The multiple artists presented in this exhibition question the old perception of tradition as fixed, timeless, or ancient. Tradition is not interpreted as the opposite of contemporaneity, nor should modernity or globalisation be regarded as a threat to the preservation of tradition.⁵¹ The slash in the exhibition's title, *Traditions/Tensions*, was intended to evoke the dynamic forces, tension, and fluidity between the two terms.⁵² These two terms indeed reflect the creative essence of tradition for contemporary Asian artists, like Cai, working from home and across the globe.

An exhibition organized almost twenty years later, *Unscrolled: Reframing Traditions in Chinese Contemporary Art* (2015) offers a critical point of comparison to the themes presented by *Traditions/Tensions* (1996).⁵³ *Unscrolled* explores the resurgence of tradition in contemporary art as a source of aesthetic interventions employed by contemporary Asian artists as “an agent of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁵¹ Poshyananda, “Preface,” 15.

⁵² Vishakha N. Desai, “Foreword,” in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions & Tensions*, ed. Apinan Poshyananda (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 13.

⁵³ This exhibition was presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery and was co-curated by Diana Freundl and Carol Yinghua Lu.

[new] artistic expression.”⁵⁴ Ten Chinese artists were featured in the exhibition including Jennifer Wen Ma, Liu Jianhua, Xu Bing, and Ai Weiwei, who each adopted a range of materials and techniques as a mode of revitalizing tradition in a contemporary context. For example, Jennifer Wen Ma investigates the aesthetics of traditional Chinese painting in her large-scale installation *Black Beauty: A Living Totem* (2014) [Fig. 7-8], which belongs to a larger series that “experiments with the materiality of ink.”⁵⁵ Wen Ma paints the leaves and stem of a live plant with ink creating a “petrified landscape”⁵⁶ that yields to the agency of time and sprouts green buds during the course of the exhibition. This installation work invites a dialogue between the past and present and is attributed to classical Chinese landscape paintings, which often symbolized the passage of time.⁵⁷

Unscrolled departs for a moment from the understanding of tradition as dichotomous with modernity to consider a continuation of tradition in modernity and contemporaneity that is expressed through an experimentation of traditional material.⁵⁸ Dr. Thomas J. Berghuis, a contributing author to the exhibition catalogue, argues that the contemporary works in the exhibition do not mark a

⁵⁴ Diana Freundl, “Reframing Tradition,” in *Unscrolled: Reframing Traditions in Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Diana Freundl and Carol Yinghua Lu (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 22.

⁵⁵ “Jennifer Wen Ma,” in *Unscrolled: Reframing Traditions in Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Diana Freundl and Carol Yinghua Lu (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 83.

⁵⁶ “Jennifer Wen Ma,” *Unscrolled*, 83.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁸ Dr. Thomas J. Berghuis, “Traditions without Tensions: Medium and Form in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Unscrolled: Reframing Traditions in Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Diana Freundl and Carol Yinghua Lu (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 30-33.

particular “tension” or break from the past, but rather they allow for the “intermediality of forms”⁵⁹ in which calligraphy and ink, offer alternative avenues of experimentation to take on new, contemporary forms. Although Cai’s gunpowder paintings were not exhibited in *Unscrolled*, his use of gunpowder still reflects Berghuis’ notion that traditional materials offer new modes of art-making in a contemporary art.

To provide further context on the investigation of tradition in contemporary Chinese art, Hong Kong’s art museum M+, located in the West Kowloon Cultural District, organized a symposium in 2012 called *Ink Art in the Framework of a Contemporary Museum* as part of their ongoing panel series, M+ Matters. This symposium contributed to the revisionary discourse of tradition through a discussion of the liberation of ink art from the boundaries of tradition in contemporary artistic experimentation since the ’85 New Wave Movement and into the present.⁶⁰

Among a number of featured presentations from artists, curators, and scholars invited to the symposium, Wu Hung presented a talk titled, “Negotiating with Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art: Three Strategies.”⁶¹ In his speech, Wu identifies three particular strategies that contemporary Chinese artists have developed to negotiate with tradition as a means of demonstrating their own

⁵⁹ Berghuis, “Traditions without Tensions,” 33.

⁶⁰ Wu Hung, “Negotiating with Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art: Three Strategies,” (paper presented at the public symposium *Ink Art in the Framework of Contemporary Museum* organized by M+), Hong Kong, December 13–15, 2012, http://www.mplasmatters.hk/inkart/paper_topic10.php?l=en

⁶¹ Wu Hung is a Professor in Chinese Art History, Director of the Centre of East Asia, and the Consulting Curator of the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago.

contemporaneity: *distilling materiality, translating visuality, and refiguration*.⁶²

First, distilling materiality refers to concentrating symbolic, traditional materials in Chinese culture to their essential elements, such as paper and ink in calligraphy or Chinese landscape painting. Second, translating visuality replaces essential Chinese materials with heterogeneous ones from a different time and place. Third, refiguration restructures the source material of an existing object to re-orient the viewer's perception of said object in such a way that "re-figures" their sense of reality.⁶³ Wu's talk at M+'s symposium provides an alternative approach to understanding the art historical discourse surrounding the subject of negotiating tradition in contemporary art practices.

Each of these three strategies, distilling materiality, translating visuality, and refiguration, outlined by Wu are also echoed in Cai's re-enactment of tradition in his *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000). Cai reduces gunpowder to its pure form in *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (2000), by placing raw, unrefined gunpowder onto the paper to produce his gunpowder paintings, which are essentially artistic manifestations of the natural material. Cai also translates classical Chinese landscape painting imagery by incorporating gunpowder and explosions with the traditional material of ink. And finally, he reconfigures our customary perceptions of gunpowder by blurring the lines between the material's ritualistic and destructive functions.

⁶² Wu Hung, "Negotiating with Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art," 2012 http://www.mplusmatters.hk/inkart/paper_topic10.php?l=en

⁶³ Ibid.

Growing up, Cai initially rebelled against the example of his father who was an artist scholar working in a state-run bookstore and practiced ink painting and calligraphy. While Cai learned calligraphic and painting skills from his father, the young artist began to gravitate towards Western artistic styles and modes of production following the end of the Cultural Revolution, instead of replicating tradition-bound practices employed by his father.⁶⁴ As Cai's artistic career developed, his attitude towards the notion of tradition also shifted. In an interview Cai recalled, "Now, looking back, I see I've inherited some of my father's scholarly thinking; Chinese cultural tradition is a part of me."⁶⁵ Instead of repressing his cultural history, Cai re-imagined and re-invented traditional artistic practices in China to create new modes of art-making as a contemporary Chinese artist.

⁶⁴ Friis-Hansen, "Survey: Towards a New Methodology in Art," 42.

⁶⁵ Cai Guo-Qiang, "Interview: Octavia Zaya in conversation with Cai," 10.

Shanshui: Spontaneous moments of creation

Cai's explosion project and gunpowder drawings, the *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000) re-invents and re-enacts traditional Chinese landscape painting, or *shanshui*,⁶⁶ by East Asian scholar-artists. The production of this series echoes the self-cultivation and gestural performativity of educated, scholar-officials, the literati, who have practised both calligraphy, painting, literature, and music since the first century CE. A regimented and repetitive practice of continuously replicating calligraphic forms until the singular movements of their hand and brush are ingrained into their bodily memory is a key requirement for this. After years of calligraphic and *shanshui* painting exercises, these repetitive brushstrokes turn into a self-disciplined spontaneity to create their desired forms. Form and spontaneity were regarded as a manifestation of the artist's character and in many ways were deemed more important than the actual content of the painting's composition.⁶⁷ As the essence of ancient Chinese literati art traditions, these practices embody what I call a *self-disciplined spontaneity*.⁶⁸ This term denotes the self-cultivation of the literati who achieved a proficiency and mastery of their brush and ink application in order to derive a spontaneous creative energy in their art-making practices.

⁶⁶ *Shanshui* is a style of Chinese landscape painting that literally means a painting of the mountains and the water.

⁶⁷ Wen C. Fong, "Of Nature and Art," *Asian Art* ed. Brown and Hutton, (Oxford: Blackwell Publication, 2006), 281.

⁶⁸ Soyang Park, Supervisory Meeting, December 12, 2018, OCAD University, Toronto, Canada.

A self-disciplined spontaneity is reframed in Cai's *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000) through a careful, yet not entirely precise, arrangement of gunpowder onto a designated surface. After years of dedicated practice, the artist spreads gunpowder onto the surface in controlled movements to create the desired lines and forms that he envisions. Unlike the literati, Cai outsources a sense of spontaneity from the properties of gunpowder in his explosion projects. The results of the explosion are in many ways out of the artist's control and the final product is **unrepeatable**, like those brushstrokes of the literati painters. His methodical placement of the explosive material combined with its reactive properties reflects the qualities of self-disciplined spontaneity in the literati's artistic practices.

To create *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (2000, gunpowder and ink on paper), Cai laid stencils on paper, which were punctuated by fuses taped to the surface. He then carefully distributed gunpowder over and around the stencils to create the intended lines and forms. Like the literati's quick flicks of their brush, Cai scatters gunpowder in precise, calculated, and singular movements. To reduce the oxygen flow and risk of a fire, Cai covered the gunpowder and stencils with cardboard and rocks to weigh it down. The completion of these preliminary steps generates a space for **spontaneous creation**, which Cai outsources from gunpowder's innate properties. This moment of calm, right before ignition, "denotes both a great silence and a ceremonial expectation" before the rupture of

spontaneous explosions on paper.⁶⁹ Whereas the literati's spontaneity occurs during the moment of applying ink in measured and precise movements with their brush onto the canvas. Finally, Cai lit the fuse sparking a chain reaction of explosions across the surface of the paper, underneath the cardboard and rocks, revealing the gunpowder painting. The explosions are unrepeatable and spontaneous, thus continuing the literati's tradition of calligraphy and painting practices, yet re-framing them in a contemporary art context to designate a visual translation. In a nutshell, Cai's *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000) demonstrates a re-enactment of the literati's artistic practices through a self-disciplined spontaneity, however, he re-invents this tradition by using an unconventional artistic material, gunpowder.

In addition to re-inventing a self-disciplined spontaneity *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993, explosion project in the Gobi Desert) re-imagines and re-frames a sense of monumentality through the re-enactment of multi-perspectives, which allows viewers to contemplate an "indefinability of nature"⁷⁰ within the actual landscape. To contextualize these ideas, let us refer to a classic *shanshui* painting, *Travellers among Mountains and Streams*, by Fan Kuan, a Song Dynasty artist, in the early 11th century [Fig. 11]. This painting achieves a sense of monumentality through three distinct compositional planes or spaces in the painting: the foreground, middleground, and background. The foreground is

⁶⁹ Shiyan Li, "Analysing works of Cai Guo-Qiang in relation to ancient Chinese concepts," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 1-2 (2016): 72.

⁷⁰ Soyang Park, Supervisory Meeting, Dec. 12, 2018, OCAD University, Toronto, Canada.

defined by a low-lying group of rocks. A pathway appears behind the rocks and signals the transition into the middleground, which is consumed by rocky cliffs and trees. A mist veils the transition to the background from the middleground. The giant mountain in the background directs the viewer's line of sight upwards to convey the sense of monumentality presented by this landscape and also an indefinability of nature that is rooted in Daoism. Fan Kuan's use of three distinct spaces and multiple viewpoints creates a panoramic expansiveness. It is a result of transcending a singular perspective and summoning a famous multi-perspective, or birds-eye view, in an ideal landscape to capture the "indefinable vastness"⁷¹ of the landscape, which cannot be perceived by the human eye. The viewer's eye ascends upwards in Fan Kuan's painting to contemplate the monumentality expressed by this painted mountain-scape.

Comparatively, a sense of expansive monumentality is conveyed in Cai's *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993) by the trail of blazing flames creating a fiery, illusionistic wall across the dark, expansive, and empty Gobi Desert, near the end of the Great Wall in Jiayunguan, expanding the spectators' vision of the landscape. The length of the explosion project also enhances a sense of monumentality because it continues past the horizon and the viewer's line of sight [Fig. 3]. According to Cai, *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993) was originally conceived to be viewed from a celestial vantage point, which is inaccessible to the perspectives of the spectators who stood on the ground near

⁷¹ Soyang Park, Supervisory Comments, email message to author, April 6, 2019, OCAD University, Toronto, Canada.

the Great Wall.⁷² That is, the 40,000 audience members who witnessed the live explosion project, in 1993, stood on a hill near the Great Wall's barrier station at Jiayuguan.⁷³ A decade earlier, Cai spent a few weeks every summer from 1982 to 1985 travelling across remote regions in China and Tibet to explore his own history, land, and people.⁷⁴ He travelled the ancient Silk Route that was primarily used for transporting trade goods across East Asia into the Middle East and eventually to Europe. During his journeys he visited ancient sites such as the Dun Huang painted caves, the Longmen cave grottoes, and even the city that he would return to for this explosion project, Jiayuguan.⁷⁵ This homecoming reflects the artist's interest in exploring how his cultural roots can be presented as a source for transculturality for both locals and foreigners to understand the explosion project in the vast landscape based on their own cultural experiences.

During the course of the project Takashi Serizawa, one of Cai's technical assistants for this project, notes that due to the vast landscape the flames did not have the same compressed, explosive feeling that one usually finds in Cai's explosion projects. Instead, the fire gently "slithered along the ground with dignity like a gentle dragon."⁷⁶ It is difficult to reconstruct a description of what the spectators witnessed on the night that *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993) was realized. Due to their elevated position near the Great Wall's barrier

⁷² Friis-Hansen, "Survey: New Methodologies Toward Art," 48.

⁷³ Takashi Serizawa, "Focus," in *Cai Guo-Qiang* ed. Dana Friis-Hansen, Octavio Zaya and Takashi Serizawa (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 110.

⁷⁴ Friis-Hansen, "New Methodologies Toward Art," 42.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁶ Serizawa, "Focus," 110.

station, however, it is likely that they were able to view the trail of flames from a multi-perspective. Present-day viewers can also get a sense of this multi-perspective from the photographs that captured the fiery lights in this project [see Fig. 1-3].

In the Gobi Desert, the active explosion project transcends the boundaries between land and sky; the sense of space extends into the infinite, the space of the extraterrestrials – it connects the celestial to the terrestrial.⁷⁷ This transcendence is exemplary of the indefinability of nature in Cai's site-specific project because it creates an overall "conceptual vision of the macrocosmic universe."⁷⁸ Whereas literati artists often blended motifs of nature such as mountains, pine trees, and water ways to express the indefinability of nature, rather than attempt to depict an accurate observed landscape. Evidently, *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993) takes place in an actual landscape, but it elicits a primal experience of nature that echoes the Daoist belief that the human spirit lives in a harmonious existence with nature.⁷⁹ An interconnectedness between humans and nature is revealed to the audience in the actual landscape during the quiet moments before the fuse is lit and the explosion begins. It is in this moment of silence and of *nothingness* that initiates a "mediation in which all the people of the world and

⁷⁷ Friis-Hansen, "Towards a New Methodology of Art," 49.

⁷⁸ Wen C. Fong, "Of Nature and Art," 286.

⁷⁹ Van Thi Diep, "The landscape of the Void: Truth and magic in Chinese landscape painting," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 16, no. 1 (2017): 84.

the Earth itself are involved.”⁸⁰ This likely leads to a spiritual contemplation of the expansive landscape and humanity’s presence within it.

Overall, Cai approaches the historic complexity of *shanshui* landscape painting by re-imagining the traditional tools and materials (brushes, ink, and paper) into gunpowder, fuses, and, in many cases, the actual landscape. He distills gunpowder to a primary substance, translates the viscosity of two-dimensional paintings into three-dimensional explosion projects, and reconfigures the everyday uses, both destructive and ritualistic, of gunpowder to evoke new understandings of the material in a contemporary art context.

A re-invention and re-enactment of traditional *shanshui* landscape painting can be further articulated by the Chinese notion *fa* (method), in which all “individual styles, ideas, and technical discoveries” are measured. In the discipline of Chinese landscape painting, the *fa* implies a method comprised of restrictive rules and techniques, however, an innovative artist must establish their own methods and practices once they have entered the core of the *fa*.⁸¹ Cai already has a rich understanding of literati art practices and *shanshui* landscape painting, but he establishes his own conception of these traditions by re-inventing the traditional materials and re-enacting the rigorous and spontaneous self-disciplined exercises in his *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000).

⁸⁰ Li, “Analysing works of Cai Guo-Qiang in relation to ancient Chinese concepts,” 72.

⁸¹ Wucius Wong, *The Tao of Chinese Landscape Painting: Principles and Methods* (New York: Design Press, 1991), 119.

The application of this unconventional material may also reflect an interest in exploring the inherent possibilities of a material when it is reduced to its primary state. To explain the significance of gunpowder in Cai's artistic methodology, I examine the practices of the Japanese performance group, the Gutai.⁸² In Yoshihara Jirō's "Gutai Art Manifesto" (1956), he declares that Gutai Art does not alter nor distort matter (i.e. paint, metals, earth), instead it gives it life, breath, and animation.⁸³ This artistic philosophy implies a direct connection between artist and material that is not disrupted by intermediary tools, like brushes or palette knives. To liberate painting from its historical constraints, the Gutai embarked on numerous artistic experiments in which they foregrounded a gestural and materials-based practice.⁸⁴ These experiments could be classified as radical approaches to modern art that favoured non-art materials, non-traditional spaces, and spontaneity. Moving away from "naturalistic and illusionistic art,"⁸⁵ the Gutai sought to create a new autonomous space that refused to force materials to exist under human hierarchies that dictated how they should be used by artists.⁸⁶ A fusion of the artist (spirit) and material (matter) provided the opportunity for spaces previously unknown and unexperienced.⁸⁷

Cai's explosion project in the landscape, *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993), echoes the practices of the Gutai because he creates an alternative artistic

⁸² The Gutai was founded by Yoshihara Jirō in 1953.

⁸³ Jirō, "Gutai Art Manifesto," 18.

⁸⁴ Ming Tiampo, "Please draw freely," in *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, ed. Ming Tiampo and Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013), 45.

⁸⁵ Jirō, "Gutai Art Manifesto," 18.

⁸⁶ Tiampo, "Please draw freely," 56.

⁸⁷ Jirō, "Gutai Art Manifesto," 18.

space that removes the boundary between artist (spirit) and gunpowder (matter) to consider the in-between: earth and sky, known and unknown, abstraction and representation, celestial and terrestrial. The blazing flames in *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993) advance into a new, unseen, and innovative space where the artist is able to re-enact and re-frame the traditional practices of the literati towards *shanshui* landscape painting that is not limited to or dictated by ink and brush on paper. This is exactly what Cai has achieved in *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993).

Gunpowder: *No Destruction, No Construction*

The aesthetic and physical powers of gunpowder are employed by Cai in his *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000) to reveal the unknowable creative possibilities and energies that this material possesses. When Cai first began to experiment with gunpowder in 1984, he was trying to distance himself from traditional Chinese art in search of new artistic methodologies that derive energy from nature.⁸⁸ For example, while working in Japan, Cai realized his first outdoor explosion project, *Human Abode: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 1* (1989) [Fig. 12]. The work featured a house-like structure that was originally developed by nomadic people. The explosion took place on the interior of the structure, symbolizing “the origins of human existence, the Big Bang, as well as the eternal legacy passed down over generations.”⁸⁹ As the walls of the structure slowly expanded and contracted, it echoed the “natural rhythms of the universe.”⁹⁰ From this initial investigation into the *Project for Extraterrestrials* series (1989 -), Cai began to incorporate the accidental into his explosion projects by borrowing energy from nature, and specifically used gunpowder, which acted against the “Chinese tradition of highly controlled and premeditated executions of paintings.”⁹¹ Cai employs gunpowder to directly manifest the pure force of

⁸⁸ Cai Guo-Qiang, “Interview: Octavio Zaya in conversation with Cai,” 13.

⁸⁹ Cai Guo-Qiang, “Ninety-nine Tales: Curious Stories from My Journey through the Real and Unseen Worlds,” in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Ladder to the Sky*, ed. Jeffrey Deitch and Rebecca Morse (London: Prestel, 2012), 110.

⁹⁰ Cai Guo-Qiang, “Ninety-nine Tales,” 110.

⁹¹ Miwon Kwon, “The Art of Expenditure,” in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I want to believe*, ed. Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim, 2008), 62-63.

natural energy to become an art form in and of itself. The *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000) explores the explosive nature of gunpowder as a means of both destruction and creation.

Gunpowder is recognized as one of China's earliest inventions that allowed for technological innovations to advance modern artillery warfare across the globe. The explosive material was first discovered in the ninth century by Chinese alchemists attempting to discover new medicines, particularly an elixir for immortality. They conducted various experiments of reducing compounds to their base components to understand their properties.⁹² As a result of these experiments they discovered the first effective formulas for gunpowder, which they called *fire medicine* because it was an accidental discovery in an attempt to create medicine that would extend one's life. In light of this name, Western warfare historians tend to describe the early Chinese state as uninterested in extorting gunpowder for its military capabilities, however, a disinterest towards innovating warfare artillery in China may be explained by the difficulty of combining gunpowder's active ingredients (nitrate, sulfur, and charcoal) in the correct proportions to produce a reactive formula.⁹³ Therefore, gunpowder was not immediately adapted into a form of military warfare until a few centuries later after extensive research and experiments were conducted on this new material.⁹⁴

⁹² Tonio Andrade, "Early Gunpowder Warfare," in *The Gunpowder Age: China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 29.

⁹³ Andrade, "Early Gunpowder Warfare," 31.

⁹⁴ The first recorded recipes of gunpowder used for military purposes are found in the famous military class the *Wu Jing Zong Yao* from 1044. (See Tonio Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*:

While engaging in multiple periods of intense warfare and interstate competition, such as the Ming dynastic transition (1350-1450),⁹⁵ China participated in a “a process of mutual inter-adoption”⁹⁶ between East Asia and Europe. This mutual inter-adoption developed and modified gunpowder weaponry in a collaborative exchange during this period according to military history scholar, Tonio Andrade. However, Western scholars have oversimplified China’s imperial unity and periods of divergence when military innovation slowed down⁹⁷ thus to argue that China’s military history is stagnated and undeveloped. This is to perpetuate the idea of China as an immobile and static state – the opposite of a dynamic and modernizing Western state.

The full title of Cai’s explosion work, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993), immediately evokes ideas of military expansionism or imagination because of its position in relation to the Great Wall of China, which is also a military structure intended to secure and defend the state. However, whether or not Cai intended to suggest this military expansionist connotation it is not the central focus of this MRP. Instead, I intend to examine the history of gunpowder within a military

China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 31)

⁹⁵ Tonio Andrade, “The Crucible: The Song Warring States,” in *The Gunpowder Age: China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 4.

⁹⁶ Andrade, “The Crucible,” 10.

⁹⁷ One of the most significant periods of stagnation that is often quoted by warfare historians is the Great Military Divergence (mid-18th C to early-19th C). This period was defined by peace as the Qing dynasty had subdued enemies in the North, but it allowed British forces to repeatedly defeat the Qing dynasty during the Opium War of 1839-1842. These defeats produced a negative image of China in the eyes of the British and the majority of Western Europe. See Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age* (2016) for more details.

context in order to highlight its multiple meanings in Cai's contemporary art practice.

Cai's use of gunpowder in his explosion projects that take place in the vast landscape echo the military history of gunpowder, allowing us to consider the destructive capabilities that the material acts out in his explosion projects. There is a gentle or silent violence in *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993) illustrated by the blazing explosions that move slowly and discretely across the Gobi Desert, as though they were sneaking up on their enemy. Viewers are seemingly aware of the uncontrollability of the blazing flames that could change course at any moment and cause severe destruction to the earth. Even in his works on paper, *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1990 and 2000) which are created in enclosed spaces, this explosion could cause injury to participants at any moment.

Cai's use of the destructive and creative potentials of gunpowder echoes the political propaganda slogan of Chairman Mao, China's former Communist leader, "There is no construction without destruction,"⁹⁸ which he coined during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). This slogan expresses Mao's revolutionary ideology that favoured a progression toward a new modernity. In other words, this slogan illustrates that the "foundation of a new culture must lie in the demolition or reconfiguration of the past,"⁹⁹ or a denouncement of tradition and

⁹⁸ Mao Zedong quoted in "Circular of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," May 16, 1966.

⁹⁹ Munroe, "Cai Guo-Qiang: I want to believe," 27.

traditional practices. Cai draws from Maoist political ideology and discourse as a means and a resource to (re)negotiate the significance of tradition (which Mao also denounced as I discussed earlier) in his artistic practices through the employment of gunpowder.

The detonation of gunpowder in his explosion projects provides Cai with an opportunity to experiment with destructive processes as a transformative mode of creation in which Cai layers multiple translations of Chinese culture into his explosions on paper and in the landscape. Gunpowder has the capacity to destroy its environment in an instant, but Cai transforms its destructive power into a vision of a striking spectacle or performance in *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993). For a short time, the explosions produced an optical extension of the Great Wall, made from stone and mortar, in a burst of flames and smoke, which might echo China's expansionary vision, but also expands a ritualistic and cultural creation or imagination of the viewers.

That being said, gunpowder also has a long history of everyday use in China to dispel evil spirits and in the style of festive or celebratory fireworks displays that is used abroad as well. Many critics attribute Cai's hometown, the coastal city of Quanzhou in the southeastern province of Fujian, to his fascination of experimenting with gunpowder explosions. According to Cai, every significant social occasion in China from weddings and birth announcements to funerals and political elections are commemorated with firework displays.¹⁰⁰ Coincidentally,

¹⁰⁰ Cai Guo-Qiang, "Interview: Octavio Zaya in conversation with Cai," 14.

across the channel from the Fujian province in Taiwan is an important military base that was used to test out artillery weapons and explosives regularly. This environment exposed Cai to both the festive and violent functions of gunpowder during his youth.

Today, the artist works between the contradicting meanings of gunpowder to position his contemporary explosion projects as “aestheticized productions of violence”¹⁰¹ that actually reject violence and alleviate collective trauma inflicted by terrorist attacks. In the catalogue for Cai’s retrospective at the Guggenheim titled, *Cai Guo-Qiang: I want to believe*, a contributing author, Wang Hui, explains that for many of Cai’s explosion projects there are roughly two sequences of determinative events and their extensions that the artist references:

“The first is the explosion of the atomic bomb and its symbolic inauguration of the Cold War era. The second is 9/11 and China’s rise as a world power as symbols of the arrival of a new era.”¹⁰²

Considering the explosion in the actual landscape, *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* (1993), was made prior to the second sequence, it is clear that this project references the damage caused by the atomic bomb and the rapid development of nuclear weaponry. Cai embeds his explosion projects into this same historical trajectory in order to stimulate collective emotional healing. The chain of

¹⁰¹ Munroe, “Cai Guo-Qiang: I want to believe,” 36.

¹⁰² Wang Hui, “Dialectics of the event” in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I want to believe*, ed. Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 43.

explosions in this explosion project reveal the scars left by history that are etched onto the surface of the earth. These scars function as a reminder of the violence of war and the contradictory duality of gunpowder, which “allows for displays of fireworks, yet also fills bombs and bullets to kill innocent people on a daily basis.”¹⁰³ While gunpowder is frequently associated with modern warfare devices, Cai is motivated to use his artworks as a substitute for weapons.¹⁰⁴ Blurring the boundaries between art and war, he appropriates the destructive qualities of gunpowder to create pyrotechnic displays that seem to take on an energetic life of their own and provoke a sense of wonder rather than fear.

¹⁰³ Wu Hung, “Once Again, Painting as Model,” 11.

¹⁰⁴ Wang Hui, “Dialectics of the event,” 45.

Conclusion: Cai Guo-Qiang, Re-Inventor of Tradition

This MRP has outlined the shifting perceptions and understandings of tradition in Cai's *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10* series (1990, 1993, 2000) to demonstrate how a consideration of the artist's use of gunpowder as a method of re-enacting traditional Chinese art, such as the artistic practices of the literati and *shanshui* landscape painting. Within the context of contemporary Chinese art, this new understanding may allow for a shift towards a revisionary definition and meaning of tradition. Cai re-imagines the iconography of Chinese landscape painting by detonating 10,000 metres of gunpowder in the Gobi Desert to create a trail of blazing flames; he re-enacts the self-disciplined spontaneity of the literati to produce spontaneous, yet controlled gunpowder explosions; and he re-frames the destructive connotations of gunpowder as a source of transformative creation in his explosion projects. His method of re-imagining, re-enacting, and re-framing traditional Chinese practices and materials reflects the fluidity and dynamism of tradition as an important component in contemporary art. His use of gunpowder in his explosion projects on paper and in the landscape serves as a means and a resource to undo previous misconceptions of tradition as a fixation to preserve past practices, beliefs, or objects.

While my discussion here has been limited to a singular artist, this framework of re-inventing and re-enacting could be applied more broadly to other contemporary Asian artists. For example, Jennifer Wen Ma, a Chinese artist that I discussed earlier in chapter one, coats the leaves and stems of over 700 live

plants with traditional Chinese ink in her installation work, *Black Beauty: A Living Totem* (2014), demonstrating not only the potential of this material as a contemporary medium, but also signifying the regrowth and renewal of Chinese artistic traditions in contemporary art. This work re-invents the tradition of depicting changing seasons to convey the passing of time in Chinese landscape paintings by creating a dialogue between the past and the present. During the course of the exhibition in which this work was displayed (*Unscrolled*, Vancouver Art Gallery), some of the live plants succumbed to the pollutants in the ink and deteriorated over time; while others were able to sprout new leaves and even blossom flowers [Fig. 8]. Ma re-enacts traditional Chinese landscape paintings by emphasizing time through the regeneration and degeneration of the plants in *Black Beauty: A Living Totem*.

Both artists, Cai and Ma, negotiate their relationship and connections to tradition based on their own terms, perceptions, and understandings. Their re-enactments of tradition act as a means of negotiating their identities in an international art world, allowing them to take ownership of their own cultural identity and art-making processes. They are the inheritors and re-inventors of Chinese artistic traditions who re-imagine past practices, beliefs, and objects as part of their own living past.

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Appendix A: Figures



Figure 1: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials: No. 10*, 1993, Realized at the Gobi Desert, west of the Great Wall, Jiayuguan, Gansu Province, February 27, 1993, 7:35 p.m., 15 minutes. Gunpowder (600 kg) and two fuse lines (10,000 m each). Explosion length: 10,000 m. Commissioned by P3 art and environment, Tokyo [Ephemeral]. Photo by Masanobu Moriyama, courtesy Cai Studio.



Figure 2: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials: No. 10*, 1993, Realized at the Gobi Desert, west of the Great Wall, Jiayuguan, Gansu Province, February 27, 1993, 7:35 p.m., 15 minutes. Gunpowder (600 kg) and two fuse lines (10,000 m each). Explosion length: 10,000 m. Commissioned by P3 art and environment, Tokyo [Ephemeral]. Photo by Masanobu Moriyama, courtesy Cai Studio



Figure 3: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials: No. 10*, 1993, Realized at the Gobi Desert, west of the Great Wall, Jiayuguan, Gansu Province, February 27, 1993, 7:35 p.m., 15 minutes. Gunpowder (600 kg) and two fuse lines (10,000 m each). Explosion length: 10,000 m. Commissioned by P3 art and environment, Tokyo [Ephemeral]. Photo by Masanobu Moriyama, courtesy Cai Studio.



Figure 4: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials: No. 10*, 1993, Realized at the Gobi Desert, west of the Great Wall, Jiayuguan, Gansu Province, February 27, 1993, 7:35 p.m., 15 minutes. Gunpowder (600 kg) and two fuse lines (10,000 m each). Explosion length: 10,000 m. Commissioned by P3 art and environment, Tokyo [Ephemeral]. Photo by Masanobu Moriyama, courtesy Cai Studio.



Figure 5: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials: No. 10*, 1990, gunpowder and ink on paper (24-page folding album), 33.5 x 320 cm (opened), private collection, photo by André Morin, courtesy Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain.



Figure 6: Cai Guo-Qiang *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 meters: Project for Extraterrestrials: No. 10*, 2000, gunpowder on paper, 300 x 2000 cm, private collection, photo courtesy Cai Studio.



Figure 7: Jennifer Wen Ma, *Black Beauty: A Living Totem*, 2014-2015, 700 live plants, 200 kg of Chinese ink, steel structure, *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada. Photo courtesy of the artist's studio.



Figure 8: Jennifer Wen Ma, *Black Beauty: A Living Totem* (detail), 2014-2015, 700 live plants, 200 kg of Chinese ink, steel structure, *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada. Photo courtesy of the artist's studio.



Figure 9: Fan Kuan, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, ink on paper, 11th century



Figure 10: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Human Abode: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 1*, 1989. Realized at Fussa Minami Park and Kumagawa Shrine, Fussa, Tokyo, November 11, 1989, 2:40 p.m., 2 seconds. Gunpowder (2 kg) and fuse (2 m); hemp tent cloth, wax, twigs, feathers, and rope. Explosion area (size of yurt) 550 x 450 x 250 cm. Commissioned by 89 Tama River Fussa Outdoor Art Exhibition, November 3–19, 1989. Remnants in the collection of the artist (burnt yurt), New York [Ephemeral]. Photo by Wataru Kai, courtesy Cai Studio.