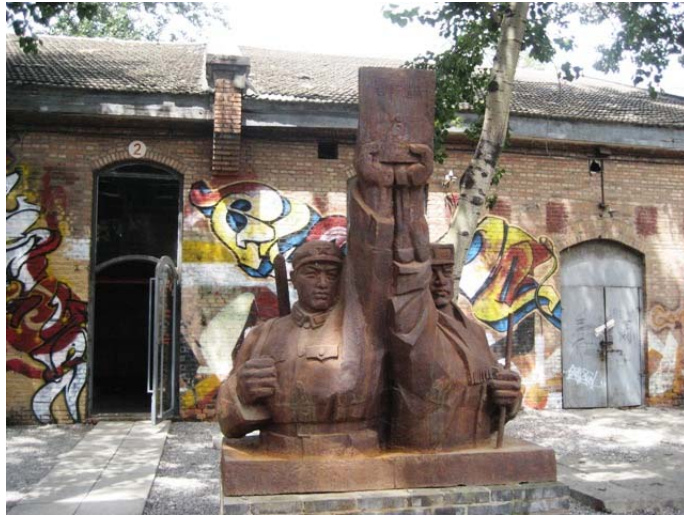


Chinese Contemporary Art as Social and Political Commentary



798 Art District Beijing

Clare Sisisky

Fulbright-Hays Curriculum Project – China 2007

Clare Sisisky

Director and Teacher

Center for the Humanities

Henrico County Public Schools

Richmond, Virginia

Chinese Contemporary Art as Social and Political Commentary
Fulbright-Hays Curriculum Project – China 2007

Components of Curriculum Project

Overview (pages 2-5)

Brief Post-Imperial Chinese History Timeline (6-7)

Chinese Contemporary Art History Timeline and Resources (8-12)

Chinese Contemporary Art as Social and Political Commentary Slide Show (separate)

Student Research and Presentation Assignment Sheet (13-14)

Student Handouts for Research (15-32)

Student Visual Art as American Social Commentary Project Assignment Sheet (33)

Assessment Rubrics (34-35)

Overview of Curriculum Project

Abstract:

This curriculum unit is designed to introduce students to contemporary China both through the exploration and research of current social and political issues and through the examination of Chinese contemporary artists. Teachers begin by providing students with the background on both modern Chinese history and Chinese art history that students will need to proficiently engage in discussions of contemporary art and social issues in China. Teachers then offer students brief exposure to some of the specific works of art that function as political or social commentary in China today. After this exposure, students divide into groups to research one assigned issue and one connected piece of art, producing research notes to document their process and sources. Each group offers their classmates a short presentation on the social or political issue based on their research. Student groups then lead the class in a detailed discussion of how the group's piece of art reflects the issue they just presented and how the art piece could be considered social or political commentary. As students learn more about the challenges facing contemporary Chinese society and the role of the artist in bringing these problems to light, students are asked to reflect on their own society. Students are asked to create a piece of art that is their own social commentary on an issue or challenge in contemporary America which greatly concerns them.

Learning Goals

This curriculum project is designed primarily for high school students in 11th or 12th grade and can be used in a wide range of social studies, art or humanities courses.

Students will:

- further their understanding of the diversity and complexity of China and the Chinese people
- grasp the evolving nature of the Chinese art movements and their direct connection to historical events and schools of thought
- gain exposure to a wide variety of social and political issues that are relevant to contemporary Chinese society
- comprehend the conceptual nature of most post-modern art around the world
- examine the role of the visual artist in a heavily censored society
- evaluate research sources and data in the context of contemporary China
- present organized research on a complex topic
- make connections between the factual data of their research and the visual components of the art
- lead other students in an open-ended discussion
- generate thought provoking questions when leading discussion
- interpret the symbolism and analyze the commentary aspects of the art work
- appreciate the value of visual art in demonstrating the concerns of contemporary Chinese society
- make connections between social issues facing China and those facing the U.S.
- formulate their own ideas and concerns about contemporary challenges in American society
- express these concerns through symbolism and abstraction by creating visual art
- comprehend that all societies in the world have social and political issues that challenge them and have citizens who speak up, create, or act to address the problems posed by these issues

Description of Components

Brief Post-Imperial Chinese History Timeline – this timeline is designed to give students a concise resource for the events of post-imperial Chinese history so that they can understand the historical context for the evolution of Chinese contemporary art and the historical events that have shaped Chinese society today.

Chinese Contemporary Art History Timeline and Resources – the timeline highlights some of the historical developments in Chinese art history since the end of the Cultural Revolution. This timeline can be used as a background reading for the instructor and/or students and should be used in conjunction with the later sections of the post-imperial

Chinese history timeline described above. The last two pages of the timeline highlight some of the online and print resources that give additional background information or that can be used as a general introduction to the topic.

Chinese Contemporary Art as Social and Political Commentary Slide Show – each slide in this slide show is titled with one specific social or political issue facing China today. Each issue is then accompanied by a piece of contemporary art by an acclaimed artist that is in some way a commentary on this issue. Some of the art pieces are highly focused with straightforward connections to and commentary on the issue, while others are more loosely connected and student discussion will be more abstract and open-ended especially regarding the artist’s message, which can even be unclear to the artist himself or herself. This allows students to understand that much of the contemporary art is primarily designed to provoke thought or consideration of the issue/topic in the viewer rather than convey a clear definitive message. The last slide contains all the citations for the images used in the slide show.

Student Research and Presentation Assignment Sheet – the assignment sheet gives a clear outline of the two parts of the initial assignment, research of the issue assigned and the presentation/discussion of the connection between the issue researched by the students and the art piece assigned to that issue. The assignment sheet should guide students through the project but the assignment does require some independent research and preparation. If unfamiliar with online research in the context of modern China, students may need additional preparation or guidance with evaluating sources. Included in the assignment sheet is a list of tips for leading a discussion on a visual image, as leading a substantive discussion rather than giving a simple presentation may be new for some students. The last page of this section also contains the citations for the images.

Student Handouts for Research – these sheets are to be distributed one per group and accompany the assignment sheet described above. Each handout contains one piece of art and one social or political issue for research. The handouts also provide students with a link to one contemporary article on their issue to be used as a starting point. These articles can serve as examples of the types of additional resources students should be

utilizing. In addition, each handout provides a link to a short background piece or biographical sketch of the artist to help students comprehend the context of the art piece's creation.

Student Visual Art as American Social Commentary Project Assignment Sheet –

this assignment sheet outlines for students the concluding aspect of the project. This assignment asks students to use their understanding of the relationship between art and China's contemporary social issues to create a piece of visual, performance or installation art that offers a commentary on their observations and knowledge of social issues facing their own society. This assignment sheet provides students with the guidelines and objectives of this concluding task.

Assessment Rubrics – these rubrics are for the three aspects of the project that can be used as assessments, the research notes on the social issue, the student presentation/discussion for the class, and the creation of an art piece as an American social commentary. The rubrics provide instructors with key aspects of the assignments that may assist in evaluation.

Brief Timeline of Post-Imperial Chinese History

1899-1901 Boxer Rebellion

Chinese peasant rebellion against foreign influences; left imperial government weak.

1911-1912 Chinese Revolution, also called Xinhai Revolution

Chinese nationalists overthrow Imperial government.

1912 Republic of China established

Led by the Chinese Nationalist Party of Kuomintang, headed by Sun Yat Sen.

1917-1923 New Culture Movement

Rejection of traditional Chinese culture and values (especially Confucianism); response to collapse of Imperial system and resulting chaos.

1919 May Fourth Movement

Frustration over Versailles Treaty's designation of Shandong Province to Japan; rise in Chinese nationalism; influence of New Culture Movement led to further rejection of traditional Chinese values and a turn toward Marxism by Chinese intellectuals.

1921 Founding of the Communist Party of China

1927-1949 Chinese Civil War

Fought between the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-Shek and the Communist Party of China; major events include The Long March, a series of retreats by the Communist Party's Red Army, which resulted in the ascent to leadership of Mao Zedong; after uniting from 1937-1945 to resist Japanese invasion during World War II, fighting eventually led to the Kuomintang's final retreat to Taiwan where they established the Republic of China, which is not recognized by the Communist Party of China.

1949 Founding of the People's Republic of China

Under the Communist Party of China and the leadership of Mao Zedong.

1958-1960 The Great Leap Forward

Series of policies under Mao designed to build on communist agricultural collectivization to develop both agriculture and industry in parallel, making use of China's great work force; led to economic disaster and famine resulting in the deaths of between 14-40 million people.

1966-1976 The Cultural Revolution

Mao's attempt to reclaim power in the power struggle resulting from The Great Leap Forward's disastrous effects; specifically wanted to diminish Deng Xiaoping's influence within the Party; officially cited as 'class struggle' aimed at ridding China of 'bourgeois elements'; Red Guards carried out persecution of any deemed a threat to the Communist Party's hold on power and communist ideals including intellectuals, artists, and religious leaders; massive relocation programs sent 'intellectuals' to rural areas and programs designed to eliminate all non-communist elements of society; left the country in social disarray as well as resulting in thousands of deaths and the destruction of vast numbers of cultural artifacts; his cult of personality and the fear of opposing him led Mao to seal his hold on power for a time until the Gang of Four (Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and three of her associates) increased their influence.

- 1972 President Nixon visits China**
- 1976 Death of Mao and removal of the Gang of Four from power**
The death of Mao sped up the Communist Party's internal power struggle and resulted in a brief period of instability and then the increased influence of Deng Xiaoping and his pragmatism; Gang of Four deemed perpetrators of Cultural Revolution.
- 1978-1979 Beijing Spring and the Democracy Wall Movement**
An increase in support for democracy and democratic freedoms as a result of the strict policies of the Cultural Revolution; tolerated when criticisms were focused on the Gang of Four but were suppressed when opposition to the Communist Party in general rose.
- 1978 Deng Xiaoping's Economic Reforms**
Known as "Reform and Opening" in China, these changes in economic policy marked the beginning of China's shift toward a market economy and laid the foundations for the tremendous economic growth in the 1990s and beyond.
- 1979 Establishment of Special Economic Zones**
Deng Xiaoping set up experimental areas with less restrictive economic policies designed to encourage manufacturing for export and direct foreign investment; these zones are eventually expanded due to their success.
- 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests**
Also referred to as the Tiananmen Square Massacre; protests took place primarily in Tiananmen Square in Beijing; participation came primarily from students and others that were initially protesting corruption and inflation. Towards the end of the protest calls for a move towards democracy in China emerged; the Communist Party's violent crackdown on the protests and their following arrest of public dissenters led to many deaths and to tightening of government control on the social and political climate of the country; access to China by foreign press restricted; events seen by many as an indication that economic freedoms would not necessarily lead to political and social freedoms in the form of democracy.
- 1991 First McDonald's in China**
Economic policies continued to liberalize and led to an increase in the number of foreign businesses in China and in the influence of the West, as well as an increase in exports to the global market.
- 2001 China Admitted to the World Trade Organization**
China maintained unprecedented economic growth and established itself as a world player in the global economy by gaining acceptance to the WTO; in the preceding years, President Clinton and other world leaders drop previous requirements for human rights improvements in order to improve trade relationships and acknowledged the place of China as global power.
- 2008 Beijing to Host Olympic Games**

Timeline Source:

"Timeline: China," BBC NEWS Online, April 10, 2008.

Contemporary Chinese Art History – A Timeline and Resources

Adapted and condensed from the “Mainland China Chronology” essay of *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, an exhibition curated by Gao Minglu in association with the Asia Society and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1998. The full length chronology was compiled by Gao Minglu, with contributions by Qian Zhijian, and can be found at <http://www.asiasociety.org/arts/insideout/chronologies.html>.

1977 The Cultural Revolution ends with Mao Zedong's death in October 1976. But the change in leadership does not immediately result in new cultural values. From 1977 to late 1978, artists continue to produce work in the Cultural Revolution style (propaganda posters), substituting new leaders for the former cast of characters. However, a few small-scale group exhibitions organized by artists feature landscape and portrait painting, challenging conventions that demand overt political/ideological subject matter in art.

1978 A January exhibition of French 19th-century rustic landscape painting at the National Gallery, Beijing, contributes to the emergence of a new form of critical realism later in the year. This is the first show of foreign art since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (CR), and parallels an influx of publications on western art.

Intellectuals and the public respond to Deng Xiaoping's reforms with the Beijing Spring Democracy Movement, which flourishes from November 1978 through 1979. Intellectuals challenge the foundations of Maoist ideology with philosophical and cultural debates on humanism and individual freedom. This questioning spirit and the concurrent influx of western aesthetic ideas catalyze several new art movements.

1979 Scar Painting (*Shanghen huihua*) and the Star group (*Xing xing*) emerge as the two most important art movements of 1979. Both aim at criticizing the realities of contemporary China and often portray the Cultural Revolution negatively.

Scar Painting, part of a broader movement called New Realistic Painting, takes its name from a related literary trend. The term refers to the emotional wounds inflicted on the Chinese--especially intellectuals and students by the Cultural Revolution.

The Stars are principally self-taught artists (i.e., not trained in the Academy) and are the first influential avant-garde group, challenging both aesthetic convention and political authority. Their use of formerly banned western styles, from Post-Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism, is an implicit criticism of the status quo. The group's first exhibition, in September 1979, is a provocative display of work hung without official permission on the fence outside the National Gallery, Beijing. After the exhibition is disrupted by the police, the artists post a notice on Democracy Wall and stage a protest march. The Stars' first formal exhibition, held in Beihai Park, Beijing, in November, includes 163 works by 23 nonprofessional artists.

1980 The Stars hold another exhibition at the National Gallery, Beijing, in August, this time with official approval. The primary intention of the group is to criticize authority by emphasizing self-expression, although the show becomes controversial for its overt political content, in particular, Wang Keping's wooden sculpture of Mao as Buddha, a comment on the seeming deification of Mao.

Rustic Realism, a trend of New Realistic Painting which sometimes overlaps with Scar Painting, becomes prominent by year's end. But while the Scars focus on their own experiences of the Cultural Revolution, the Rustics depict the Revolution's impact on ordinary people in rural and border regions. Chen Danqing's *Tibetan Series*, shown in October 1980 at the graduation exhibition the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, and Luo Zhongli's *Father* which wins first prize in the Second National Youth Arts Exhibition in Beijing, are particularly influential examples of Rustic Realism.

1982 Authorities launch the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in early 1982, intended to counteract western influences that they believe are undermining the Chinese people's commitment to Communism. The campaign, which continues through late 1984, targets humanism in philosophy and literature, and condemns three westernizing trends in art that have appeared since the end of the Cultural Revolution: individualistic values, "art for art's sake," and abstraction.

1983 As part of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, authorities denounce the January issue of *Art Monthly*--which contains articles about abstract art--as a contaminating influence. The editorial team is replaced. Even in this oppressive context, however, officially sanctioned presentations of western art continue. Exhibitions of Italian Renaissance art, the work of Picasso and Munch, and French contemporary oil painting are held in Beijing.

1984 The Sixth National Art Exhibition, held in October at the National Gallery, Beijing, resurrects the political themes and propagandist forms of the CR. The retrograde content and style of the exhibition provokes a widespread backlash among artists, especially the young, laying the groundwork for the emergence of the '85 Movement.

1985 A banner year for the Chinese avant-garde. The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign had ended and the government embarks on a series of liberal reforms. Released from the restraints of the previous three years, avant-gardism flourishes across the arts--literature, dance, music, visual art, film--a phenomenon soon to be dubbed the '85 Movement.

In February, the Chinese Writers Association holds its fourth conference in Beijing, denouncing conservatism and calling for freedom of expression. A parallel development occurs in the visual arts with the widespread appearance of unofficial groups--more than 80 across the country, 1985-87--in which artists of the younger generation debate, write, and exhibit. These groups sponsor some 150 events during 1985-86, involving at least 2,250 artists. Openly antagonistic to official culture, they champion individualism, freedom of expression, and a radical overhaul of aesthetic concepts and forms; they reject both Chinese traditional art and socialist realism, deploying instead western modern and postmodern styles such as Surrealism, Dada, Pop, and conceptual art.

Traditional styles are challenged by younger artists. In July, art critic Li Xiaoshan publishes "The End and Death of Chinese Painting" in *Jiangsu Pictorial*. The essay shocks the traditional painting world and inspires fierce debate between members of the old and new generations. A retrospective of Robert Rauschenberg's work opens in November at the National Gallery, Beijing, and has a profound impact on the artists of the '85 Movement. This is the Chinese public's first opportunity to see original works by a contemporary western artist. Rauschenberg delivers a lecture at the Central Academy of Graphic Art in Beijing and participates in a discussion with young artists.

1986 The '85 Movement continues to expand, especially the number of conceptual or anti-art (*fan yishu*) groups. The conceptualists challenge not only propagandist art and traditional academic styles, but new schools of art as well. Their principal goal is to eradicate utopianism, subjectivity, and the artist's hand. Their primary mediums are language and readymade objects. Their conceptual sources are Dada and Chan (Zen) Buddhism; the latter, like Dada, attempts to break free of any doctrine or authority.

Performances, happenings, installations, mixed-media exhibits are held throughout the year by diverse groups from around the country. In November, the Chinese Modern Art Research Committee, an association of about 30 critics, is founded in Beijing, in part as a planning committee for the nationwide avant-garde exhibition.

Student demonstrations are staged in a number of Chinese cities in late 1986. Authorities respond with a campaign against "bourgeois liberalism," targeting all new political and cultural thought. The campaign continues through mid-1988, significantly hampering the activities of the avant-garde.

1987 The '85 Movement is weakening under the dual impact of the government-directed antibourgeois campaign and pressures to produce more commercial work, a result of Deng's 1978 economic measures. The Communist Party of China reduces financial support for art during this period, suggesting to artists that they find commercial outlets for the sale of their work (a formerly illegal practice). Avant-garde art, however, is not a valuable commodity in China. Some important artists begin to move overseas.

1988 The campaign against bourgeois liberalism ends, and some avant-garde activities resume or new ones begin in the autumn and winter.

Solo exhibitions of work by Xu Bing and Lu Shengzhong open at the National Gallery, Beijing, in October. Xu Bing's installation, *Book from the Sky*, consists of books and scrolls fabricated using traditional Chinese printing techniques and paper, and classical typographic styles. The thousands of hand-carved characters, however, were made up by the artist and are completely unintelligible.

1989 After delays due to political circumstances, financial problems, and the forces of conservatism, on February 5 the first nationwide avant-garde art exhibition opens at the National Gallery, Beijing. Entitled *China/Avant-Garde*, the exhibition includes a total of 293 paintings, sculptures, videos, and installations by 186 artists. Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong No. 1* causes a stir, and his Pop Art-influenced style initiates the Political Pop trend of the early 1990s.

China/Avant-Garde is closed twice by authorities during its two-week run. The first closing occurs just hours after the opening, when Xiao Lu and her collaborator Tang Song transform their installation, *Dialogue*, into a performance by firing two gunshots into it. The second closure results from anonymous bomb threats.

Pro-democracy student demonstrations begin in April. Following the June 4 crackdown in Tiananmen Square and the return of conservatism, the national avant-garde exhibition is castigated as a typical example of bourgeois liberalism.

1990 As a result of the post-Tiananmen tightening, as well as ongoing commercial pressures, idealist avant-garde activity in China declines drastically and never fully recovers.

Pockets of avant-gardism remain in the Academy, characterized by a discreet eclecticism combining progressive and conservative forms. Liu Xiaodong, for example, a young teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, holds a solo exhibition of oil painting in May. Considered one of the New Generation painters, Liu's work is typical of 1990s Cynicism or Cynical Realism.

More and more Chinese avant-garde artists leave for friendlier climes, or at least shift their sights to international venues. In fact, even as outlets for their work dwindle at home, international audiences are receptive to their work, and an increasing number of exhibitions feature Chinese avant-garde artists.

1992 The first nationwide avant-garde exhibition since the Tiananmen Incident, *Guangzhou First Oil Painting Biennial*, opens in Guangzhou in November. The show is developed under official policies urging economic expansion; an ideal (and naive) goal of the exhibition's organizers is to increase the value of Chinese avant-garde art in both domestic and international markets. The work of some artists in the *Guangzhou Biennial*--Wang Guangyi, among them--exemplifies Political Pop, a dominant artistic trend in China after Tiananmen, and not especially popular with authorities. Practitioners combine socialist realist or Cultural Revolution imagery with the irreverent sensibility of American Pop Art. Political Pop and Cynical Realist works are in demand on the international exhibition circuit throughout the early 1990s.

1993 The Chinese avant-garde begins producing work that takes as its subject the problems of consumerism and materialism, increasingly evident in Chinese culture under the impact of a globalized economy.

International interest in Chinese avant-garde art heats up, for both ideological and commercial reasons. China's New Art, Post-1989 opens at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in January, then travels to Australia. The exhibition includes more than 200 works by some 50 artists, including paintings, sculptures, and installations, predominantly of the Political Pop and Cynical Realist stripe.

1994 In Shanghai, a new generation of installation artists exhibits in The Stage 1994 held at Huashan Art School in May. The Third Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art Documents held at the library of East China Normal University in Shanghai consists mainly of slides and videos showing installation and performance works. A number of performances and installations are held in private spaces, a phenomenon dubbed Apartment Art. Ma Liuming, Zhu Min, and other young artists stage performances in a private space in the East Village (a suburb of Beijing). It is reported that they are arrested because of the work's erotic content, then forced to move.

1995-1997 In the aftermath of the Cold War, Chinese avant-garde artists have developed a high profile in international art circles but are virtually ignored at home. For international art institutions, the Chinese avant-garde signifies an important underground voice in one of the few remaining Communist countries. On the other hand, China's rapid entrance into the global economy has catapulted Chinese art into the international art market.

"Reality, Today and Tomorrow: An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Art," held in Beijing in 1996, features recent painting, sculpture, installation work, and video by the new generation of artists. In December 1996, however, the large-scale Invitation Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Art is canceled on opening day for unknown reasons.

* * * *

Since the year 2000, the contemporary art movement in China has flourished. Art pieces continue to earn record prices for Chinese art at international auction and the fame and recognition of international exhibition has brought a renewal at home. Tolerated by the authorities because of their international prestige and potential for earning, contemporary artists in China today have created an infrastructure of galleries, studios, and museum space that supports the flourishing communities around the country. Beijing has once again become an artistic center, especially since the creation of the 798 Art Zone or Dashanzi art district. A complex of former factories, this district is now comprised of galleries, bookstores, and studios providing Beijing artists with a home and the Chinese contemporary art scene with an internationally recognized center.

Additional Resources

Online Resources:

Narrated Slideshow from *The Atlantic* that serves as a good introduction to contemporary Chinese art <http://www.theatlantic.com/slideshows/erickson/>

Accompanying article and images from *The Atlantic* by Britta Erickson
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/prem/200707/chinese-art>

Extensive Bibliography of Chinese Contemporary Art from Stanford University
<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/art/china/bibliography.html>

Chinese Avant-garde Art Archive from Cornell University
<http://wason.library.cornell.edu/Wen/index.php>

Chinese Contemporary Art 'Zine
<http://new.artzinechina.com/>

Article from the *New York Times*, January 2007 [full date?], as archived by the Museum of Contemporary Chinese Art
<http://www.88-mocca.org/admin/pdf/nyt%20article%20jan4%20cca.pdf>

Official website of the Beijing 798 Art Zone
<http://www.798art.org/English/>

Print Resources

Tong, Dian. *China! New Art and Artists*. Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing, 2005..

Erickson, Barbara. *On the Edge: Chinese Contemporary Artists Encounter the West*. Beijing: Timezone 8 Publishing, 2005.

Smith, Karen. *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China*. Zurich: Scalo Publishers, 2005.

Eckholm, Erik. *Beijing 798: Reflections on Art, Architecture, and Society in China*. Beijing: Timezone 8 Publishing, 2005.

Social/Political Issue Research and Contemporary Art Presentation:

Assignment Description

All nations and cultures in today's world face social or political challenges or problems and China is no exception. Learning about some of these issues in contemporary China can give us insight into Chinese history, culture, and economic / political development. Examining the lens or perspective of artists also allows us to discuss the role of some artists in societies around the world as observers and commentators.

After viewing the Chinese Contemporary Art as Social and Political Commentary slide show, you will investigate one issue and one piece of visual art in depth. Each group/individual will receive a handout containing:

- Name of social or political issue to research
- Title, artist and medium of art piece
- Image of art piece
- Link to news article as a starting point for researching issue
- Link to article on artist for brief background

Part 1: Research Notes

The social or political issue assigned to you needs further research for this assignment. You have been provided with a link to one article relating to this issue to get you started. You will need to complete further research (finding your own sources) to understand fully the issue facing China today. Your research needs to be documented with organized research notes and a works cited page listing your sources. Choose your sources carefully and be careful not to over-simplify the issue.

Part 2: Presentation

The student handout contains both an image and information about that image and its creator. Each student/group will give a presentation and lead a discussion that will connect the issue you researched and the piece art depicted in the image. Your presentation will first give your classmates an overview of the social/political issue. Then you will show the image of your art piece, giving a very brief biography of the artist as you see relevant for student's comprehension of the piece. The main focus of your presentation will be to lead your classmates in an active discussion of how the art piece could be considered a social or political commentary on the specific issue you presented. A commentary is a specific opinion on an issue; so the art piece is not just about the issue, the artist is often trying to tell the viewer something about the issue, or wants to send the viewer a message. Your job is to lead your classmates in a discussion of how the image and the issue are connected, and what the message is and how it is conveyed. When discussing post-modern art there is often more than one interpretation so there is not necessarily one 'right' answer. A good discussion is not the same as a presentation – it involves everybody's voices. Please see the tip sheet below for assistance in preparing for leading the discussion.

Tips for Leading a Discussion on a Visual Image

- Be well prepared, spend a significant amount of time looking at and thinking about the image beforehand
- Focus on the image
- Ask questions
- Ask specific questions, avoiding general questions like “what do you think?”
- Identify specific details in the image and ask students to interpret or discuss their significance
- If you want to address a more general observation, ask students about their overall impression or the intentions of the artist
- You can ask students to discuss symbolism, color, balance, mood, placement of various aspects of the image – all of these items can be used to draw students’ attention to the purpose of the piece
- Provide students with enough information to interpret the image in its historical context, without telling them everything about the image
- Let students come to their own conclusions, guiding them in the right direction

Student Handouts by Group

Each sheet contains

- Name of social or political issue to research
- Title, artist and medium of art piece
- Image of art piece
- Link to news article as a starting point for researching issue
- Link to article on artist

List of Social or Political Issues (one for each group):

1. Censorship and Exile
2. Urban Demolition and New Construction
3. Political Dissent
4. Cultural Conflict: Increase in Materialism and Westernization
5. Conformity: One Child Policy
6. Urbanization and Alienation
7. Environment: Pace of Industrialization
8. Media Censorship
9. Cultural Change: Generation Gap
10. Conformity: Pressure for Success
11. Role of Women
12. Human Endurance: Poverty and Living Conditions
13. Migrant Workers
14. Pollution and Water Scarcity
15. Displaced Communities – Three Gorges Dam
16. Female Suicide

Group 1

Issue: Censorship and Exile

Artist: Sheng Qi

Art Piece: *Memories (me)*, 2000

Medium: Photograph



Research source for issue: Associated Press. "Censors Tone Down Shanghai's Contemporary Art Show," CNN Online, January 1, 2001.

<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/STYLE/arts/01/01/shanghai.biennale.ap/>

Background source on artist: <http://www.fourfinger.net/>

Group 2

Issue: Urban Demolition and New Construction

Artist: Zhang Dali

Art Piece: *Demolition: Forbidden City, Beijing*, 1998; from the series *Dialogue with Demolition*

Medium: Photograph



Research source for issue: Dyer, Geoff. "China Bulldozes its Urban Heritage.", *Financial Times*, June 16, 2007.

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c7d28d46-1ba7-11dc-bc55-000b5df10621.html>

Background sources on artist: <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/TRAVEL/12/07/beijing.biog/>

Group 3

Issue: Political Dissent

Artist: Tang Zhigang

Art Piece: *Children's Meeting*, 2000; from *Children's Meetings Series*

Medium: Oil on Canvas



Research source for issue: Zhang, Haoyu. "China's Intolerance of Dissent." March 7, 2005, BBC News Online.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4326341.stm>

Background source on artist: http://www.hanart.com/artist.php?artist_number=85

Group 4

Issue: Cultural Conflict: Increase in Materialism and Westernization

Artist: Wang Guangyi

Art Piece: *Prada*, 2005; from the series *Great Criticism*

Medium: Oil on Canvas



Research source for issue: Windle, Charlotte. "China Luxury Industry Prepares for Boom" BBC News Online. 27 September, 2005.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4271970.stm>

Background on artist: http://www.chinesecontemporary.com/wang_guangyi.htm

Group 5

Issue: Conformity; One Child Policy

Artist: Zhang Xiaogang

Art Piece: *Bloodline: Family Portrait II*, 1994; from the series *Bloodlines*

Medium: Oil on Canvas



Research source for issue: Beech, Hannah. "China's Lifestyle Choice." *Time*. July 29, 2001.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,169292,00.html>

Background on artist:

<http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/07/19/talkasia.zhang.script/>

http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/31/arts/design/31zhan.html?_r=1&n=Top%2fReference%2fTimes%20Topics%2fPeople%2fB%2fBarboza%2c%20David&oref=slogin

Group 6

Issue: Urbanization and Alienation

Artist: Gao Brothers

Art Piece: *Sense of Space: Pain*, 2000

Medium: Photography of Installation



Research source for issue: French, Howard. "Big, Gritty Chongqing, City of 12 Million, Is China's Model for Future." *New York Times*, June 1, 2007.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/01/world/asia/01chongqing.html>

Background on artist: www.gaobrothers.net

Group 7

Issue: Environment: Pace of Industrialization

Artist: Fan Lijun

Art Piece: 2006.5.5, 2006

Medium: Oil on Canvas



Research source for issue: Shukman, David. "Addressing China's Climate Challenge." BBC News Online. 2 November, 2006.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/6111528.stm>

Background on artist: <http://www.88-mocca.org/index.php?var=artistdetail&artistid=6&artistname=Fang%20Lijun>

Group 8

Issue: Media Censorship

Artist: Wang Du

Art Piece: *No Comment*, 2001

Medium: Installation



Research source for issue: Luard, Tim. "China's Censored Media Answers Back." BBC News Online. February 23, 2006.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4743274.stm>

Background on artist: <http://www.88-mocca.org/index.php?var=artistdetail&artistid=31&artistname=Wang%20Du>

Group 9

Issue: Cultural Change: Generation Gap

Artist: Zhong Biao

Art Piece: *Shanghai*, 1998

Medium: Charcoal and Oil on Canvas



Research source on issue: Hessler, Peter. "Generation Gap." National Geographic Online Audio Segment. June 6, 2006.

<http://www7.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0606/voices.html>

Background on artist: <http://www.artmap.com.tw/3-pics-ch/03-ch03-zhong-eng.htm#>

Group 10

Issue: Conformity: Pressure to Succeed

Artist: Weng Fen

Art Piece: *Family Aspirations: Academic Degree and Patriotism*, 2003

Medium: Photograph



Research source for issue: Chandler, Clay. "Little Emperors." *CNN Money*. October 4, 2004.

http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2004/10/04/8186784/index.htm

Background on artist: http://www.artstatements.com/artist_dtl.php?id=17

Group 11

Issue: Role of Women

Artist: Lin Tianmiao

Art Piece: *Bound-Unbound*, 1995-1997

Medium: Installation



Research source for issue: Heng, Xie. "The Changing Role and Status of Women in China." Special Issue Paper from The 1990 Institute. February, 1994.

<http://www.1990institute.org/publications/pubs/ISUPAP8.html>

Background on artist: <http://universes-in-universe.de/woven-maze/tianmiao/index.html>

Group 12

Issue: Human Endurance: Poverty and Living Conditions

Artist: Zhang Huan

Art Piece: *12 Square Meters*, 1994

Medium: Performance Installation



Research source for issue: Rosenthal, Elisabeth. "Poverty Spreads and Deepens in China's Cities," *The New York Times*, October 4, 1998.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0DE4DA1038F937A35753C1A96E958260>

Background on artist: <http://www.asiasociety.org/arts/zhanghuan/bio.htm>

Group 13

Issue: Migrant Workers
Artist: Zhang Dali
Art Piece: *Chinese Offspring*
Art Medium: Installation



Research source on issue: Kahn, Joseph. "Chinese Economy's Underside: Abuse of Migrants." *The New York Times*. August 26, 2003.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=9A01E1D61239F935A1575BC0A9659C8B63>

Background on artist: http://www.chinesecontemporary.com/zhang_dali.htm

Group 14

Issue: Pollution and Water Scarcity

Artist: Yin Xiuzhen

Art Piece: *Washing the River*, 1995

Medium: Performance Installation



Research source for issue: Kahn, Joseph and Jim Yardley. "As China Roars, Pollution Reaches Deadly Extremes." *The New York Times*. August 26, 2007.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/26/world/asia/26china.html>

Background on artist: <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?1293>

Group 15

Issue: Displaced Persons due to Three Gorges Dam

Artist: Liu Xiaodong

Art Piece: *Three Gorges: Newly Displaced Population*, 2004

Medium: Painting



Research source for issue: Kennedy, Bruce. "China's Three Gorges Dam." CNN Interactive Online. 2001 [full date – not specified]

<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/china.50/asian.superpower/three.gorges/>

Background source on artist: <http://www.alternativearchive.com/en/news/20060301-3.htm>

Group 16

Issue: Female Suicide

Artist: Zhong Biao

Art Piece: *Don't Let Me Be the Last to Know*, 2004

Medium: Acrylic on Canvas



Research source on issue: Fan, Maureen. "In Rural China, Bitter Way Out." *Washington Post*, May 14, 2007.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/05/14/AR2007051401506.html?nav=emailpage>

Background on artist: <http://www.artmap.com.tw/3-pics-ch/03-ch03-zhong-eng.htm#>

References for Images (in order)

- Sheng Qi; *Memories (me)*, 2000; www.fourfinger.net
- Zhang Dali; *Demolition: Forbidden City, Beijing*, 1998; from the series *Dialogue with Demolition*; <http://www.visitthefrist.org/china/zhang-dali>
- Tang Zhigang; *Children's Meeting*, 2000; from the series *Children's Meetings Series*; <http://www.la-gallery-beijing.com/site-e/artists/tangzhigang/index.htm>
- Wang Guangyi; *Prada*, 2005; from the series *Great Criticism*; http://www.chinesecontemporary.com/wang_guangyi_cv.htm
- Zhang Xiaogang; *Bloodline: Family Portrait II*, 1994; from the series *Bloodlines*; <http://www.visualarts.qld.gov.au/linesofdescent/works/zhang.html#>
- Gao Brothers; *Sense of Space: Pain*, 2000; from the Series *Sense of Space*; <http://www.gaobrothers.net/>
- Fan Lijun; *2006.5.5*, 2006; <http://www.88-mocca.org/index.php?var=artistdetail&artistid=6&artistname=Fang%20Lijun>
- Wang Du; *No Comment*, 2001; <http://www.88-mocca.org/index.php?var=artistdetail&artistid=31&sub=work&artistname=Wang%20Du>
- Zhong Biao; *Shanghai*, 1998; <http://www.zhongbiaoart.com/>
- Weng Fen; *Family Aspirations: Academic Degree and Patriotism*, 2003; [http://www.88-mocca.org/index.php?var=artistdetail&artistid=50&sub=work&artistname=Weng%20Feng%20\(Weng%20Peijun\)](http://www.88-mocca.org/index.php?var=artistdetail&artistid=50&sub=work&artistname=Weng%20Feng%20(Weng%20Peijun))
- Lin Tianmiao; *Bound-Unbound*, 1995-1997; <http://www.pekinfinearts.com/artists/artists.php?id=11&menunum=1&subnum=17&item=1>
- Zhang Huan; *12 Square Meters*, 1994; <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowWork.asp?id=43&iParentID=1>
- Zhang Dali; *Chinese Offspring*, 2005; http://www.chinesecontemporary.com/zhang_dali.htm
- Yin Xiuzhen; *Washing the River*, 1995; <http://china.arts.ubc.ca/ArtistPages/YinXiuZhen/yinxiuzhen.html>
- Liu Xiadong; *Three Gorges: Newly Displaced Population*, 2004; <http://www.asianart.org/threegorgesproject.htm>
- Zhong Biao; *Don't Let Me Be the Last to Know*, 2004; <http://www.zhongbiaoart.com/>

Visual Art as Social Commentary in America Project – Assignment Description

Based on our recent study of the role of the artist as social and political commentator in contemporary China, you are now asked to assume the same role for our own society.

Just as we have looked at some of the social issues facing China, we will look at some of the problems facing contemporary American society. You will use visual or performance art to convey your commentary or opinion on one specific social issue or challenge we face as a nation.

Your task:

- Identify a contemporary social issue or problem you are concerned about
- Research the particular issue to inform yourself of the issue's complexities
- Develop your own thoughts and ideas on the issue into a thoughtful opinion or 'commentary'
- Create a piece of visual, performance, or installation art that conveys this commentary

Things to remember:

- Understanding the issue is essential to developing an informed opinion on the topic.
- Most post-modern art is at least somewhat conceptual – meaning the idea is as important as or more important than creating a visually pleasing piece of art work so you do not have to be a brilliant artist to produce a great project.
- Your art can take many and various forms but will be most compelling when it asks the viewer to think and consider the issue and your commentary – you can do this using symbolism, subtle references, or provoking thought/reaction in the viewer through certain aspects of your piece.
- Performance art does not mean performing arts – if you are confused about what performance art or installation art is, please ask your teacher.

Chinese Contemporary Art as Social and Political Commentary Rubrics

Assessment Rubric: Social Issue Research Notes

Notes

- ___ Notes are easy to read and understand
- ___ Relevant information
- ___ Well developed and substantial
- ___ Connects with presentation
- ___ Evidence of clear understanding of issue

Works Cited

- ___ Correct format
- ___ Correct spacing
- ___ Choice of valid sources

Assessment Rubric: Social Issue Presentation and Chinese Contemporary Art Discussion

Issue Presentation

- ___ Knowledge of subject matter/understanding of issue
- ___ Evidence of research/preparation
- ___ Research presented was relevant to specific issue
- ___ Presentation was within time guidelines

Discussion of Art Piece

- ___ Led class discussion in orderly fashion
- ___ Students were guided to make connections between art/issue
- ___ Asked specific questions demonstrating preparation
- ___ Presenter's comments were related to class discussion

Assessment Rubric: Visual Art as American Social or Political Commentary

Visual Art

- Creativity
- Polished presentation
- Provokes thought in viewer through use of visual symbolism/imagery etc.
- Conceptual in nature (commentary is focus of piece)

Commentary (this may require a written description/explanation or presentation)

- Clear focus on one issue/challenge facing American society
- Evidence of understanding of issue
- Clear message/commentary on issue