



The Great Gallery Wall of China: Mika Mattila's *Chimeras*

China is at a crossroads, caught between a traditional past and a globalised, consumerist future. In *Chimeras*, Mika Mattila dramatises this conflict through the lives of two artists, Wang Guangyi and Liu Gang, and depicts the tribulations that arise in mediating both worlds, writes **Mike Walsh**.

It is nothing new to suggest that China's emergence as an economic power obliges us to come to terms with a nation that is both steeped in tradition and looking towards the future. In this culture, contradictions abound, and startling juxtapositions – such as tai chi classes in front of Cartier signs or fake Tudor villages in the middle of Chinese cities – are easy to come by. It is no wonder, then, that the title of *Chimeras* (Mika Mattila, 2013), which invokes the hybrid beast of mythology, signals that we should expect no easy truths about contemporary China.

Along with works such as Jia Zhangke's *Dong* (2006) and Alison Klayman's *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (2012), Mattila's documentary tackles China through an analysis of contemporary artists who are ambivalent about the social and political

implications of the country embracing the globalised market economy. Yet the artists in *Chimeras* are no critics of the system in the way that Ai is; that would be too simple. Mattila's tactic is to propose a dialectic, contrasting Wang Guangyi, a painter and conceptual artist who began working in the 1980s and now sits atop the Chinese art world, having turned over US\$23 million in 2008,¹ with Liu Gang, a young photographer who is just starting to exhibit in galleries. Wang grew up through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Although he is aware of their catastrophic failings, he recognises his own sensibilities as being forged by the context of

large-scale collective action. Liu, on the other hand, is a product of the one-child policy and is painfully aware that he has no perspective other than that of global consumerism and the

intense expectations of family. To further sharpen the opposition, Wang is a northerner, hailing from Harbin, while Liu is from China's south. The two artists never cross paths – though, in the tradition of associative montage, the process of watching the film is an exercise in constructing connections between the two figures.

Contemporary Chinese have lived through a lot of history. Mattila begins the film with a quote from the eighteenth-century emperor Qianlong asserting that 'outside barbarians' have no hope of understanding Chinese culture, given that the two cultures differ so completely. Things have certainly changed. The art world provides both a convenient microcosm through which to study the effects of globalisation, as well as a sphere in which participants make a living by reflecting self-consciously on those effects. The question arises, however: does modernisation necessarily equate to





Westernisation? The Moët flows like Jacob's Creek at Beijing gallery openings, and the major curators, critics and buyers are clearly Westerners who have descended on The Celestial City, eager to feed the world's appetite for the new.

Mattila initially planned to make his film exclusively about the Chinese art scene, which he claims is now the largest art market in the world.² He explains that he has an aversion to documentaries by Westerners that end up being 'about China', converting every gesture into a signifier of national significance. However he admits that his film couldn't avoid becoming that very thing: 'I thought that's a bit outrageous, that I'm here telling you what China is.'³ Mattila inevitably succumbs to presenting diagnoses of the state of the nation and looks to both artists for zeitgeisty interpretations of contemporary Chinese culture through art. Thus, we hear Liu assert in the film that his photographs form 'a record of our state of mind in this moment', while Wang is framed via his more interventionist background, seeing art as a tool that influences society rather than reflects it.

Both Wang and Liu acknowledge that the world of contemporary art is a heavily globalised one. Wang's early political pop works, notably his *Great Criticism* series, mix heroic socialist imagery with Western logos for Coca-Cola and other products, and are clearly influenced by pop art. In *Chimeras*, he declares that he may have been brainwashed, not just by communist propaganda but also by Western art movements. While it is one thing to badmouth the institutions



of the art world, it is another thing entirely to walk away from them. His work may now be auctioned for millions by Christie's and by Sotheby's, giving him some licence to be a little more bolshie, but as Wang advises one of his cronies, you still know you've arrived once you're exhibited at the Venice Biennale. In contrast, Liu is more resigned to the influences of Western consumer culture; he has never known a society without its ubiquitous presence. At one moment of nervousness in front of the camera, he reflexively reaches for a Coke can. The only weapon that is available to him is ironic distance as he re-photographs advertising images after having wrinkled or added reflections to them.

Nevertheless, both characters are inevitably compromised. In one scene, Wang powerfully declares: 'Art has made me rich and famous but left me disappointed.' He points out that artists are damned both if they are failures and if they are successes, as they fall prey to having their ideas commodified and turned into 'fashionable vulgarities'. He plays ping-pong in his big mansion, smokes fat cigars and contemplates what a

CHIMERAS
 YEAR: 2013
 DIRECTOR:
 MIKA MATTILA
 RUNNING TIME:
 88 MINS

Chinese 'essence' might look like and whether Chinese values might one day become the central values in a new global system. This search for a cultural essence, in both life and art, leads Wang to speculate on the roots of modern Chinese society. Perhaps these roots can be found in living history, he ponders. Wang has gone beyond lamenting the ambiguous legacy of Maoism and nostalgia for its stress on a collective society (albeit one that went spectacularly wrong). At times his search for this essence has pushed him in the direction of nationalism but, finally, it leads him to Buddhist metaphysics as the site of an Eastern tradition – he becomes a Buddhist with a big cigar.

For Liu, the struggles are encapsulated by the expectation that he will respect Chinese traditions – as he puts it: 'If I want to find myself, I need to start from my family.' He is confronted on a daily basis by the importance of filial obligation, which is felt more acutely within families of the one-child-policy era. His parents work in a regional school's canteen and have sacrificed to get him through the prestigious art schools where he has come to the attention of the Moët-drinkers. His father and mother have a down-to-earth belief in art simply as a means of becoming successful. For them, the advancement of the nation comes about, first and foremost, through the material success of the family. Liu feels his distance from them, and from his obligations towards them, in equal measure. He notes that the Chinese 'live for others, families, societies but not ourselves'. He is undoubtedly ambitious, but he has also internalised the lesson that to put oneself at the centre of one's decisions is to be selfish.

On the other side of the equation is Liu's girlfriend, who is pressuring him to get married. The final section of the film is entitled 'The Marriage', and it shows how the joining together of East and West, and of man and woman, are problematic processes. Marriage photography becomes a key motif in the sequences featuring Liu. We see him prowling around tacky theme parks, with the film ironically reframing the brides in their fancy white dresses and the grooms incongruously shoe-horned into tuxedos. There seems to be no better symbol of the alien nature

PREVIOUS SPREAD,
 CLOCKWISE FROM
 LEFT: LIU GANG
 PHOTOGRAPHED
 WITH HIS NEW WIFE;
 WANG GUANGYI
 WITH HIS WORK,
 INCLUDING MAO AO
 AND A PAINTING
 FROM THE GREAT
 CRITICISM SERIES
 (LEFT) AND THE
 THING-IN-ITSELF
 INSTALLATION
 (RIGHT) ALL OTHER
 IMAGES: SCENES
 FROM CHIMERAS

of the global commodity form than Western wedding paraphernalia. Yet, as Liu observes, Chinese culture will eventually absorb all this – and in a way, it already has, as these wedding spectacles are distinctive displays of how international influences have been assimilated into China. *Chimeras* shows how globalisation does not efface cultural differences, but rather brings them into sharper focus as they coexist and collide on a daily basis.

While Liu starts out as the agent of photography, he ends as its object when he agrees to marry, dons his tuxedo and poses for the wedding portraits that contain nary a hint of irony. At the end of the film, Mattila provides us with a rather forlorn denouement: Liu has taken an 'ordinary job' at a cultural centre, and he and his wife now have a baby son. The gap between the rarefied atmosphere of the globalised economy and the everyday life of most Chinese people yawns wide, and Liu, like his parents, has sacrificed for the sake of family, giving up his chance to be part of the global art world. He arrives at a point of resignation, stating that: 'A better life is the kind of life that is impossible.'

Yet Wang and Liu are not the only compromised figures here; we might add Mattila himself to this list. At a drunken dinner party depicted in the film, we watch as Wang suggests with a straight face that every Chinese person who has studied abroad should be executed, and goes on to call out a Beijing university art professor for orientalism – that is, assuming the central place of Western values and then judging Chinese art on those terms.⁴ This charge of orientalism might also be brought to bear on this film. We might ask why documentaries about China but made by Westerners enjoy more wide-ranging exposure on the international film-festival circuit than similar documentaries made by Chinese filmmakers (for example, Yao Hung-i's 2011 documentary *Hometown Boy*, about artist Liu Xiaodong). *Chimeras* was shopped around a number of the world's leading doco project markets, including Canada's Hot Docs and the Sheffield Doc/Fest, demonstrating that the globalised structure of the Chinese art world is reflected in the world of film. The emblematic image here is a silent



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shot of Liu at his gallery opening, staring into space while a Westerner talks nonstop, presumably explaining Liu's own work back to him.

The ambivalence about China's new openness to international influence is evident in the way artists such as Wang criticise the hegemony of the West while simultaneously giving access to Western filmmakers. Liu is notably more reticent, though he has the good sense to know that European documentary makers mean money in the bank. Mattila identifies a willingness among the Chinese to talk in front of cameras, which he attributes to a lack of any tradition of reality television or vérité documentary. However, I am left with a strong suspicion that the extensive access that Mattila was granted can be attributed, in large part, to his status as a foreigner. In one scene, while discussing the one-child policy, one of Liu's family members makes the point that the topic is best dealt with internally and not in front of foreigners. Yet, having given this disclaimer, he goes ahead and discusses it anyway.

This is no criticism of Mattila, who has been based in China for a number of years. *Chimeras* is a beautifully shot and deeply insightful film. The film's complexity stems from its knowledge that there are no simple answers to the contradictory pulls that are experienced within rapidly changing cultures. Art is a business, but it is also an ongoing attempt at finding a synthesis of social contradictions. By the end of the film, Wang finds his resolution in the epic minimalism of Buddhist-inspired installations. Maintaining the contrast,

Liu goes in the other direction towards the cluttered imagery of a consumerist wedding. The chimera is a hybrid beast, suggesting that there can be no easy synthesis of the film's disparate themes and two subjects. They all emerge as irreconcilably split personalities that nevertheless try to mediate between the past and the present, the art world and the social world, and the widening divisions of class and wealth in China.

<http://www.chimerasfilm.com>

Mike Walsh is an associate professor in the Department of Screen and Media at Flinders University, Adelaide. **m**

Endnotes

- ¹ Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore, 'Documentary Spotlights Chinese Artists Wang Guangyi, Liu Gang', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 2013, <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/may/10/entertainment/la-et-mn-chimeras-documentary-china-artists-wang-guangyi-liu-gang-20130509/>>, accessed 15 May 2014.
- ² Mika Mattila, 'Director's Note', *Chimeras* press kit, p. 3.
- ³ Mark Mann, 'HotDocs Picks: A Critical and Unflinching Frame on the Chinese Art World in *Chimeras*', *Blouin Artinfo*, 3 May 2013, <<http://ca.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/898609/hotdocs-picks-a-critical-and-unflinching-frame-on-the-chinese>>, accessed 15 May 2014.
- ⁴ Locally, we need look no further than David Roach and Warwick Ross' 2013 documentary *Red Obsession*, which seems a little scandalised by the effects that nouveau Chinese money is having on the French wine industry.