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High art on a mug: Art merchandise in China's contemporary art market

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Abstract

This article investigates the interplay between art, commerce and democratization in the contemporary art market. It studies the roles of art merchandise, such as mugs decorated with images of high art, in the contemporary art market in China. Relying on interviews, observations and other qualitative data, this article demonstrates that the merchandising of contemporary art is legitimate in China. The generation of income and promotion of artists and contemporary art generally emerged as important roles that China's art world participants assign to art merchandise. Art merchandise is fitting for these roles in a consumer society. The prevalence of art merchandising in China stems from a lack of state support for contemporary art, and a specific cultural and historical context that makes people more attuned to accept multiples. This article contributes to the sociology of art, the literature on the democratization of art and arts marketing literature.

Keywords

Art market, art merchandise, China, contemporary art, cultural value, democratization, value construction

Introduction

To navigate an art market, one needs to know its conventions (Becker, 1982). For example, displaying prices next to artworks in a gallery signals an excessively commercial orientation, which renders a gallery illegitimate in the eyes of the art world (Bourdieu, 1993; Velthuis, 2005). However, such conventions are not set in stone: recently, scholars have argued that the boundary between commercial and non-commercial orientation in the art world is becoming blurred (Graw, 2009; Molnár, 2018). The cultural value of art

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is increasingly constructed not only through consecrated arbiters of taste, such as curators or art critics (White and White, 1965), but also through more explicitly commercial art market participants, such as auction houses and art fairs (Kharchenkova and Velthuis, 2018; Lee and Lee, 2016; Velthuis, 2012). To shed light on the interplay between art and commerce in the market for contemporary art, this article focuses on art merchandise – mass-produced, tangible objects, such as notebooks, silk scarves, iPhone cases, and mugs – based on preexisting original artworks and often intended for sale.

Zooming in on art merchandise also enables us to deepen our understanding of the democratization of the art world, and to foreground how art market insiders consider broader audiences. Art market research tends to concentrate on unique original artworks (Velthuis and Baia Curioni, 2015; Velthuis and Brandellero, 2018). Scholars often view the market for high art as exclusive, with gatekeepers separating insiders from outsiders and with opportunities to create distinctions of taste and class (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993; Coslor et al., 2020; Velthuis, 2005). In recent years, arts organizations have been under pressure to democratize; to be more inclusive and accessible to broader audiences (Belfiore, 2002; Durrer and Miles, 2009; McIntyre, 2010). This makes it important to study the democratization of high art in relation to the art market.

This article investigates art merchandising as a practice in the contemporary art market. It asks: is art merchandise legitimate, what roles does it play in the art market and why? It examines how art market participants, such as art dealers, artists and collectors of originals, engage with art merchandising. This perspective focusing on art world insiders as opposed to the public is underexplored in studies of merchandise in the creative industries, such as television, music and games, which tend to approach merchandise from a consumer perspective (Barrière and Finkel, 2022; Brooker, 2001; Jordan, 2004).

Empirically, this article focuses on the art world in mainland China, which is instructive for the following reasons. While art merchandise is becoming more common worldwide (Stevens, 2018; Toepler, 2006), merchandising based on the contemporary work of living artists is especially ubiquitous in China. It is plentiful in the shops associated with contemporary art institutions, such as the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), HOW Art Museum, Rockbund Art Museum, and Today Art Museum (Figure 1). Some merchandise is linked to an exhibition, such as tea cups and scotch tape decorated with Xu Bing's Square Word Calligraphy. Other merchandise is adorned with images by superstar artists, such as the iconic 'green dogs' of Zhou Chunya, or with attractive images created by young[1] unestablished artists. Art merchandise is also readily available in tourist shops in art districts like Beijing's '798', in commercial galleries, and online, such as on the Taobao online shopping platform.

This ubiquity of art merchandise in China suggests that art merchandise is not only the domain of deceased Western artists, such as Caravaggio, or Western 'celebrity' artists who investigate commodification, such as Andy Warhol (Drummond, 2006; Hewer et al., 2013; Kerrigan et al., 2011; Schroeder, 2006). Indeed, in China, art school graduation shows sometimes feature students' art merchandise, and some unestablished older artists merchandise their own works (Guo, 2014). Moreover, my fieldwork shows that in China, most artists whose art is merchandised focus on themes other than commerce in their artistic work.[2] These artists and intermediaries make decisions about merchandising, which allow us to understand their approaches to this practice.

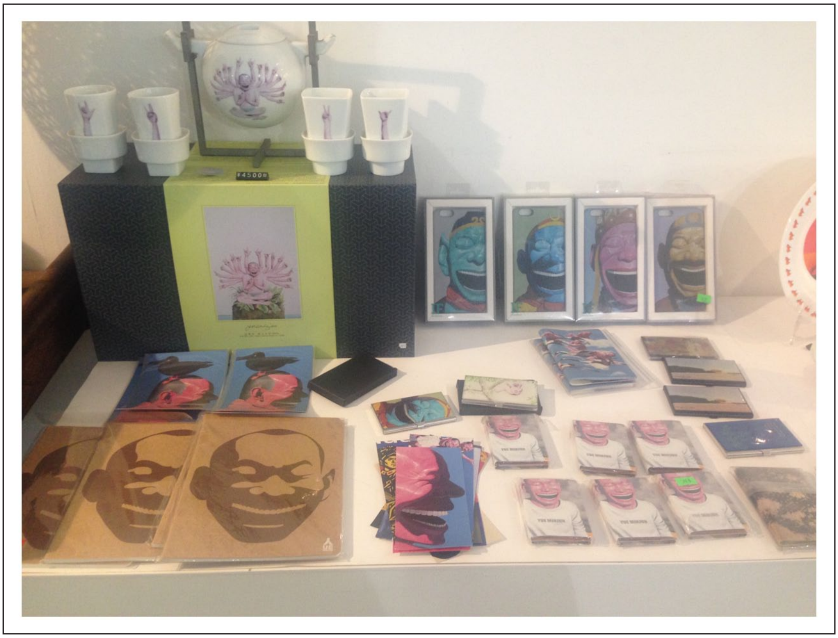

Figure 1. Merchandise decorated with iconic paintings by Yue Minjun sold at the Today Art Museum store, Beijing, 2017. Photo by Svetlana Kharchenkova.

Moreover, the focus on China enables us to consider the impact of the specific local context on art market practices. At the same time, there are many similarities and connections with art worlds and art merchandising abroad. China has also become a prime example of a consumer society, which has been ongoing since the late 1970s when economic reforms unleashed commercialization in various spheres of life, including culture. This makes China an excellent case that can shed light on the practice of art merchandising elsewhere.

In what follows, I show that the merchandising of contemporary art is legitimate in China. The generation of income and promotion of artists and contemporary art generally emerged as important roles that China's art world participants assign to art merchandise. Art merchandise is fitting for these roles in a consumer society. Art merchandise has been especially embraced by art market actors in China due to the lack of state support for contemporary art, such as subsidies or grants, and due to a specific cultural and historical context that makes people more attuned to accept multiples – identical artworks produced in a large number of copies. In the conclusion, I formulate the contributions to the sociology of art, the literature on the democratization of art, and to the arts marketing literature.

Art merchandising as a corrosive practice?

Before discussing art merchandising in China, it is important to outline how existing literature understands art merchandise and its place in the art world. Drummond (2006), who focused on 'traditional works of western art', conceptualized art merchandising as part of consecutive but potentially overlapping stages through which art could travel from the studio to the market: creation, quotation, interpretation, recontextualization and consumption. These stages involve the gradual broadening of access to the images. In this model, art merchandising is classified as ‘commercialization’, which belongs to the recontextualization stage. This model accounts for the posthumous careers of artists such as Caravaggio, where merchandising comes after creation (when their oeuvre is created), quotation (when other artists copy their images, methods, etc.) and interpretation (when their works are framed by critics, curators, etc.) stages. As living artists merchandise their art, commercialization unfolds simultaneously with creation, which raises questions about the legitimacy and roles of merchandise.

Some existing studies lead us to expect that art world participants would consider art merchandising an explicitly commercial and thus corrosive practice, which is to be avoided in the art world. Art merchandising concerns non-limited-edition mass-produced objects, often explicitly intended for sale, which could be viewed as part of a commercial consumer culture, as opposed to unique consecrated original artworks. In addition, art merchandise is often sold in overtly commercial contexts, such as physical or online shops. Such venues are usually avoided in the world of high art, which favours museum-like gallery spaces without references to commerce, such as a cash register or conspicuous price tags (Velthuis, 2005). Indeed, studies of artists who embraced art merchandising have revealed that merchandising corrodes their reputation in the legitimate art world. The artist Thomas Kinkade, a manager of his own artistic brand and producer of various forms of merchandise based on his artworks, possessed considerable economic capital and built a career outside of the legitimate art world, to which gatekeepers denied him access (Schroeder, 2006). Warhol, who is famous for his multiples, is canonized in the high art world; however, he had to fight to establish his artistic reputation amid accusations of commercialization (Kerrigan et al., 2011; Rodner and Kerrigan, 2014). The literature thus implies that the art world considers mass production – be it producing merchandise or producing identical or highly standardized artworks in large quantities – to be too commercial.

On the other hand, studies suggest that art merchandise is a tool to construct the value of art and to disseminate art among wider audiences. Arts marketing scholars conceptualize art merchandise, such as puzzles and mugs, as part of artists’ entrepreneurial marketing and branding (Rodner and Kerrigan, 2014; Schroeder, 2006). As they agree that successful branding and marketing can increase the symbolic and economic value of art (Preece, 2015; Rodner and Kerrigan, 2014), these studies imply that merchandising increases the value of the artist’s originals. In a similar vein, Berger (1972) theorized that reproductions of the image transform the meaning of the original, and although the reproductions destroy the original meaning,

> . . . a process of mystification again enters. The meaning of the original work no longer lies in what it uniquely says but in what it uniquely is. How is its unique existence evaluated and defined in our present culture? It is defined as an object whose value depends upon its rarity.

According to Berger, the reproductions infuse the original artworks with value: the existence of reproductions can signify that the original belongs to the canon.

Drummond (2006) noted that merchandise is directed at a mass audience, and does not require an in-depth understanding of the artworks, which facilitates dissemination. Drummond writes that the general public does not necessarily first encounter Caravaggio in a museum, but that ‘some portion of the public may attend a Caravaggio show *because* it has experienced the Caravaggio brand *outside* the Museum frame’, such as on book covers or in advertising (Drummond, 2006: 95–96). In other words, Drummond suggests that such availability of images may lead to the general public’s engagement with the artist’s original artworks. This echoes Benjamin ([1936] 2010), who, writing more broadly about mechanical reproduction, argued that mechanical reproduction strips an artwork of its ‘aura’, and allows the emergence of mass culture (Benjamin, [1936] 2010). To understand the practice of art merchandising in the contemporary art world, we need to turn to the behaviours and perceptions of its participants, such as collectors of originals, gallerists and artists.

Data and scope

This article triangulates data from different sources. It relies on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted in Beijing and Shanghai between 2012 and 2019, with various participants in China’s contemporary art world, including gallerists (primarily), artists, collectors, museum store managers, art fair organizers, a curator, a manager of an art commerce platform, a museum director and an art journalist. The interviewees were selected through a combination of targeted sampling and snowballing, and by randomly approaching them at art events. To gauge various understandings in the art world, respondents were diverse in terms of career stage, international exposure, and degree of direct involvement with art merchandise. Most of the art dealers who were interviewed cooperated with or represented artists whose work has been merchandised, and, as key intermediaries between producers and consumers, they were especially helpful in understanding the roles of merchandising in the art world. The questions were aimed at teasing out the attitudes and behaviours surrounding art merchandising. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I conducted most interviews in Mandarin Chinese. Two participants were non-Chinese; their interviews were conducted in English, and are cited verbatim.

Interview data were supplemented by Chinese media articles about art merchandise, including interviews with artists and other art market participants. Such media interviews are a useful source of data, because their public character reveals what is considered legitimate in the art world. The data were analysed through several rounds of inductive coding, using Atlas.ti, to determine emerging themes. Moreover, this article relies on participant observations in the Beijing and Shanghai art worlds, including settings where art merchandise was sold, during the period 2012–2019. Together with examining museum and commercial gallery web shops, and online shopping platforms, such as Taobao.com, observations in China were helpful in understanding how widespread the merchandising is, whose art has been merchandised, and how it is sold. I anonymized my interviewees to safeguard their privacy in accordance with the principles of research ethics. I mention real names only when using publicly available data. This article is informed by my larger project on the emergence of the Chinese contemporary art market, which relied on in-depth fieldwork in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

The emic notion of ‘art merchandise’ (*yishu yanshengpin*; literally: ‘art derivatives’) in China primarily refers to mass-produced objects, such as mugs and notebooks based on artworks, but sometimes it can refer to luxury goods, posters and (limited-edition) prints based on originals. This article only discusses objects that are based on an original unique artwork by a living artist active in the world of high art, as opposed to design objects. My interviews focused on cheaper mass-produced objects, such as mugs, as opposed to limited-edition prints or luxury items. However, since the emic notion of ‘art merchandise’ is broader, when this term is used, especially in print media, it is not always possible to distinguish between the different types of ‘merchandise’. Since, to my knowledge, this is the first academic study of art merchandise in China, I do not distinguish between different types of merchandise, produced and sold at different venues. Counterfeit merchandise was excluded because the actors involved and issues of legitimacy of the practice were expected to be different.

My focus is on contemporary art, here understood as art that has emerged in China since the late 1970s, which corresponds to the emic term *dangdai yishu* (for more on definitions of contemporary art in China, see, for example, Wu, 2014: 10).[3] Thus, I exclude art in traditional styles made by living artists, such as traditional calligraphy or ink wash painting. This is because of drastic differences in the public’s interest and knowledge, and in the state’s support, for ‘contemporary’ and traditional art. The traditional art of deceased artists is also outside the scope of this study: while the state encourages state-owned museums of traditional art and artefacts to create merchandise, contemporary art merchandise is produced and sold primarily by private actors (Li, 2016).[4]

The legitimacy of art merchandise

Art merchandise is part of the legitimate contemporary art world in China. Many artists who engage in merchandising do not use it to bypass traditional gatekeepers, such as curators and galleries, or to operate at a distance from the legitimate art world, as Thomas Kinkade did (Schroeder, 2006). For example, Xu Bing, Yue Minjun and Zhou Chunya, whose art has been merchandised, are consecrated by traditional gatekeepers and are among the Chinese contemporary artists with the most symbolic and economic capital (Wu, 2014). Younger artists, Chen Ke and Gao Yu, whose art has been merchandised, work with the prestigious Star Gallery in Beijing. Another artist of their generation, Hao Liang, whose art has been merchandised by the UCCA, has exhibited at top art venues, and is recognized in the high art world in China and internationally.

Art merchandise is embedded in existing art world hierarchies, for example, when it is (co-)designed or sold by traditional tastemakers. My observations and interviews with UCCA and the contemporary art museum, Power Station of Art – a venue for the prestigious Shanghai Biennale – reveal that they design merchandise together with the artists themselves (personal observations, Beijing, September 2018; I25). Some commercial galleries that sell and promote an artist’s original artworks are involved in the merchandising of their art. For example, they sell copyrights, or produce and sell posters, prints, or other merchandise on their websites or in their physical spaces (I25). This also concerns prominent galleries, such as the highly respected ShanghART gallery (Figures 2

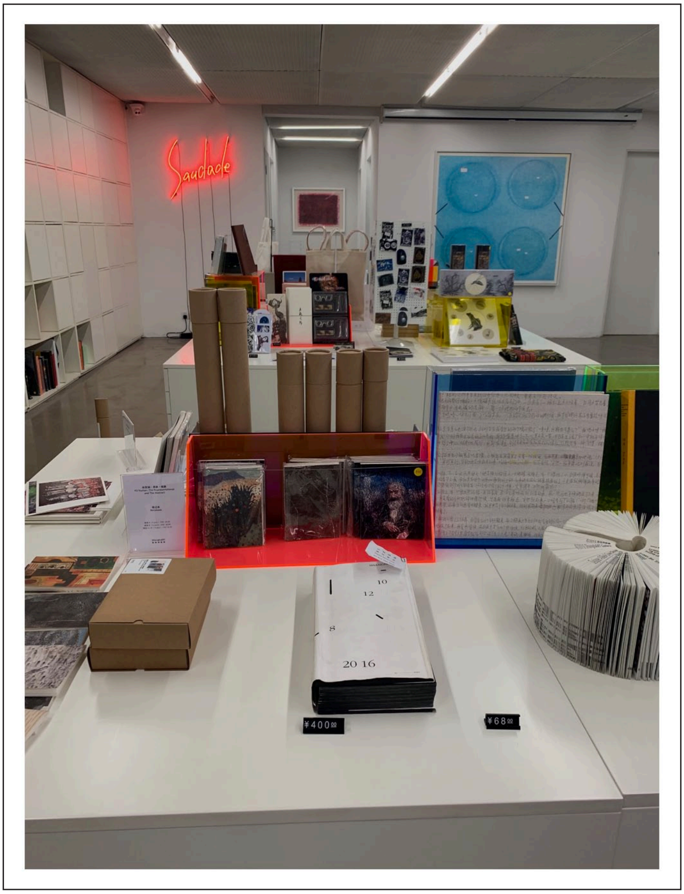

Figure 2. ShanghART gallery, Shanghai, selling merchandise, 2019. Photo by Svetlana Kharchenkova.

and 3), which was among the first commercial contemporary art galleries in China, established in Shanghai in 1996, and was the first Chinese gallery admitted to the world's most prestigious art fair, Art Basel (Basel). In its physical space on the West Bund and on its website, the gallery sells posters, silk scarves, notebooks and canvas bags decorated with artworks by artists that the gallery represents (personal observation, Shanghai, November 2019).[5]

Art world participants clearly distinguish between original art and merchandise. Artworks have a higher economic value than the merchandise based on them. Moreover, artworks are symbolically separated from merchandise: they are sold in different spaces. Whereas original artwork can be found at auctions and in museum-like exhibition halls, art merchandise is displayed and sold in spaces that look like or are online or physical shops. For example, upon entering the ShanghART gallery (West Bund), the visitor first finds themselves in a library/shop, where merchandise is sold, from which they can move

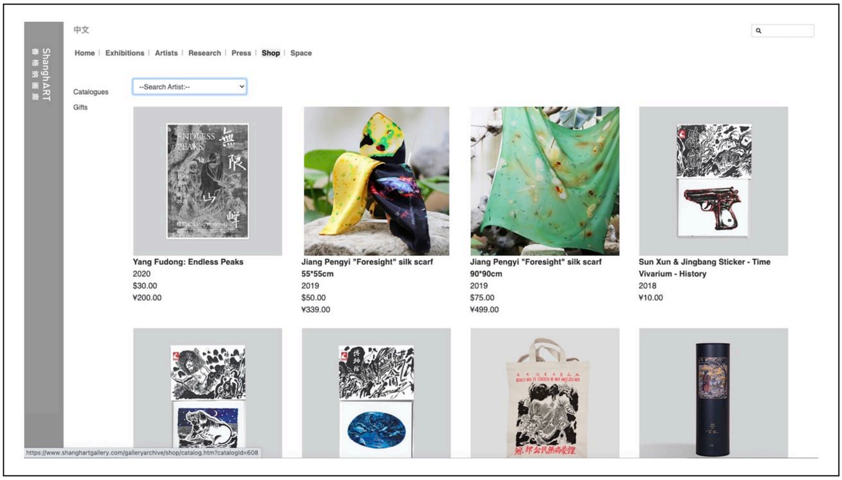
ShanghART
香格纳画廊
中文
Home | Exhibitions | Artists | Research | Press | Shop | Space
Catalogues
Gifts
--Search Artist:--
Yang Fudong: Endless Peaks
2020
$30.00
¥200.00
Jiang Pengyi "Foresight" silk scarf 55*55cm
2019
$50.00
¥339.00
Jiang Pengyi "Foresight" silk scarf 90*90cm
2019
$75.00
¥499.00
Sun Xun & Jingbang Sticker - Time Vivarium - History
2018
¥10.00
https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/shop/catalog.htm?catalogId=608

Figure 3. Screenshot of the online shop of ShanghART gallery, 2022. Photo by Svetlana Kharchenkova.

further inside to the halls where original art is displayed (personal observation, Shanghai, November 2019). Such a separation communicates that original art is more valuable.

Although art merchandising is legitimate in China's art world, some of its participants downplay the practice. Some artists emphasize their playful and passive attitude towards art merchandising and disavow its commercial aspects, in line with Bourdieu's (1993) 'economic world reversed', in which artists' disavowal of economic interests generates economic rewards in the long run (Sina.com.cn, 2012). Some artists distance themselves from the practice they are in fact involved in by calling it 'boring' (I20). But as will become clear from the discussion below, most take art merchandising for granted. Many interviewees were puzzled by my questions about the potentially negative attitudes in the art world. Rather, they spoke positively about merchandising, also when it came to art by unestablished artists. Indeed, as will transpire from the following section, in contrast to Drummond's (2006) model, having symbolic capital is not a prerequisite for art merchandising. For example, artists such as He Wenjue and Chen Fei, whose art has been merchandised and who have modest career profiles, are far less well-known than Xu Bing, Yue Minjun or Zhou Chunya, according to Artfacts database and my own fieldwork. In Drummond's (2006) terms, such artists skip the quotation and/or interpretation stages, and move from creation directly to merchandising. This raises the question about what roles art merchandise assumes in the art world.

The roles of art merchandise

Generating income

Art merchandise enables artists and intermediaries to generate income. For some artists it is a way to make a living, and it is not uncommon for young artists to support themselves by selling art merchandise on Taobao (I25; I28; *Arts & Collections*, 2019). Art merchandise also provides income for intermediaries, including museums and commercial galleries. When I asked an employee of a gallery that sells original artworks and art merchandise whether they would consider working with installations, sculpture or photography, the employee responded negatively:

> Because we have to consider, if we later sign with artists, ideally we should be able to produce reproductions/multiples, the ones that can enter thousands of households, because after all we need profit. (I16)

The modes of cooperation vary. Besides artists selling copyrights under particular conditions to those who make art merchandise, profit can be shared via commission (I24; I25; *Arts & Collections*, 2019). Sometimes official contracts are signed, which can specify a number of copies, an artist's commission, and on which objects the images will be reproduced (Yi, 2012). Concerns about copyright also underline the importance of profit from merchandising. Breach of copyright when producing art merchandise is presented as a serious problem in the media (Jinan Daily, 2012). Wariness of illegal copying is why digital merchandise, such as screensavers, is not developed, and why some museums choose not to sell merchandise online (I25).[6]

Signalling the quality of artworks and artists

Various art world participants in China believe art merchandising to be a tool to construct value for particular artists and artworks. Scholars have noted that art images infuse commodities such as mugs with symbolic value (Hutter, 2015). This is also the case in China: a mug with an image of a painting on it gains new meaning, as it signals artistic taste, and commands a slightly higher price than a simple white mug (Di, 2013; personal observations, Beijing, September 2018). In other words, the image of an artwork increases the economic and symbolic value of a commodity.

At the same time, Chinese art world participants assume that art merchandise helps construct cultural value for the original artwork. Talking about an unestablished artist in his early 30s, with whom they cooperated, one art dealer said:

> An artist does not necessarily have to say, I only make originals, if there are some features of his works that everyone likes, he can also share them with a lot of people. I don't think there is anything bad in it for artists. [. . .] And it's a great way to promote [the artist's] work. A lot of ordinary people will know, this is [the artist's] artwork. (I3)

Collectors also view art merchandise as a means of promotion. An experienced mainland Chinese collector, who had amassed a collection of about 1000 pieces at the time of the interview (2013), said:

> I don't think it's bad for artists. [. . .] Actually, for artists it's a sort of promotion. If an artwork has been reproduced, printed on a T-shirt or on a backpack, it's very good promotion for the artist and for the artwork. [. . .] I really support this. (I22)

In the eyes of such collectors, it is desirable to increase an artist's visibility among the general public through merchandise.

The perceived potential of art merchandise to signal quality is underscored by the fact that it is especially young artists who are interested in art merchandise (I24). One art museum store manager said: 'Young artists are more active, more open, so there are many possible modes of cooperation' (I24). Young artists are more eager not only because they are in greater need of an income from art merchandise, but also because they are in greater need of promotion and building a career than established artists.

Art world participants who engage with art merchandise view it as an additional way to promote artists. It helps create an artist's 'brand' and is used alongside the more traditional system of promoting artists through exhibitions and publications. In China and internationally, there are other signals of artistic quality: a geographical location of a commercial gallery may signal its status, and thus the cultural value of the art shown there. There are also other ways to promote artists: for example, the value of an artist can be constructed by placing their work in an important private collection. Some of these signals are difficult to read and require insider knowledge. Merchandising can also signal cultural value to the public.

Promoting contemporary art in society

Participants of China's art world also see merchandise as a way to promote contemporary art in society. For example, one of the most symbolically and commercially successful Chinese artists, Zhou Chunya, whose artworks from the 'green dog' series have been sold for six-figure (US) dollar prices at auction, explained why he sold the rights to merchandise this series: 'while popularizing contemporary art, I can promote my own paintings' (Sina.com.cn, 2012). Websites of museum shops, such as that of UCCA, proclaim that art merchandise helps 'bring art into daily life'. In the view of China's art world participants, art merchandise makes contemporary art more accessible and helps increase interest among broader audiences.

China's contemporary art world participants consider it important to make art accessible to the public through merchandise, first, because they believe that art would enhance people's lives. Through merchandise they hope to translate an abstract longing for beauty into an interest in contemporary artworks. As one artist, born in 1985, whose art is merchandised, stated:

> Artworks are for the minority, for a small number of collectors, art merchandise is there to satisfy aesthetic needs of the broader audience. (Zheng, 2019).

In a similar vein, an experienced collector of originals said:

> In China we have a lot of people, and everyone has different things they like. But every person has innate yearning for art. It's just when the economic base is not there, they don't realize it, and this potential hasn't been uncovered. Every person longs for beauty. And so if many people can't afford artworks, but they discovered that they find certain things to be fun and artistic, then they buy a mug with so-and-so's artworks on it, they feel it's better than an ordinary mug. And so this inner need is fulfilled. (I22)

Some Chinese collectors engage in conspicuous consumption of art and build private museums or large houses where they display art (personal observations, Beijing, 2013, cf., Veblen, [1899] 2007). However, as the quotation above shows, collectors' attitudes are also inclusive. This attitude resonates with cultural policy assumptions in the United Kingdom, among other places, that people have an intrinsic need for art, and that such engagement can improve the quality of life of ordinary people[7] (Belfiore, 2002; Hesmondhaulgh and Pratt, 2005).

Second, the creation of a broader and more stable consumer base in the local contemporary art world emerges as another important reason to increase access to art. Besides enhancing people's lives, which the museum world and public arts policy in the 'West' are concerned with (Booth, 2014), my interviewees hoped that consuming merchandise would lead to more people consuming originals. As one art dealer, who works with young artists, said:

> . . . Chinese buyers are now maturing, in the beginning buying originals is maybe too expensive, so they buy some decorative works to try it out. [. . .] So you can encourage them to try, to hang it at home . . . (I1)

Art merchandise enables ownership, and respondents like him expressed their hope that art merchandise can be a useful stepping stone towards collecting. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that art merchandise operates on a different level, and unlike owning originals, owning merchandise hardly confers status in the legitimate art world.

Why art merchandise proliferates

The practice of merchandising is firmly embedded in consumer culture (Barrière and Finkel, 2022; Drummond, 2006). The qualities of art merchandise – its commodity character, relatively low price, and multiplicity – enable it to assume the role of generating income and promoting artists and contemporary art. Art merchandise increases access to the image through what one interviewee aptly called 'continuous dissemination' (I25). An original artwork can normally only be accessed in the artist's studio or at an exhibition, which are attended by art world insiders or those already interested in art. Merchandise such as a mug adorned with an art image is sold at multiple venues, is on display for longer than the duration of an exhibition, and is accessible not only for the art world insiders or already interested members of the public, but also for those who visit an art district for a fun day out. If a mug is purchased, the visibility of the image increases further due to the mug's materiality and utility as an object. People who do not have any interest in contemporary art, such as roommates or colleagues, also become exposed to the image. As a result, those with little cultural capital when it comes to contemporary art can discover it and become interested. As a director of a museum store said:

> Art merchandise is an extension of an exhibition. [. . .] Because an exhibition lasts maybe two-to-three months, but the life of art merchandise is longer. And also, this process, from buying to using it or maybe giving it as present, leaves a more lasting impression. (I25)

Existing research offers clues about the mechanisms by which art merchandise fulfils its roles. Scholars have noted that art can be intimidating, and to bring art to the public, the threshold needs to be low. Bourdieu (1980: 238) wrote that ‘the department store is, in a sense, the poor-man’s gallery’ because it presents familiar everyday objects in a familiar, non-intimidating environment. The threshold to encounter art through its reproduction on a commodity, rather than as an original, is lower. Indeed, Benjamin ([1936] 2010) stated that a reproduction ‘enables the original to meet the beholder halfway’. Moreover, scholars have argued that reproduced artistic images, such as those on merchandise, attract the public and signal quality. Drummond (2006) suggested that experiencing an artwork outside the art world institutions – for example, printed on a shawl – may draw new audiences to the artist. This is partly because the existence of copies underscores the value of the original: a reproduction signals that an artwork and an artist are important enough to be merchandized, and are perhaps even canonical (Berger, 1972). Indeed, the value of art can be promoted in society through the dissemination of images, and in consumer societies, images can be disseminated through consumer commodities.

To understand why art merchandise is especially widespread in China, we should turn to the specific structural, historical and cultural context of China’s contemporary art world. The practice of art merchandising is embedded in a structural context where state support for contemporary artists and organizations is lacking. The art world in China is now drastically different from several decades ago. In contrast to the early 1990s, nowadays contemporary art is shown and sold through the infrastructure of galleries, auction houses, and art fairs. Since the late 1970s, and especially the early 1990s, the state has encouraged the development of a market economy, and the art market has been allowed to emerge. However, the cultural policy primarily supports and promotes traditional but not contemporary Chinese art. The government uses traditional culture to strengthen nationalism domestically via television and school education, and to strengthen China’s soft power internationally via Confucius Institutes and the Belt and Road initiative (Ma, 2019; Nye, 2004). In contrast, the state views contemporary art with suspicion. There is no state support for contemporary art in the form of artists’ grants or tax breaks for galleries (Kharchenkova and Velthuis, 2018). Of course, art clusters or organizations could not exist without the authorities’ approval. Some local authorities are also involved in the operation or funding of art districts and art organizations, such as ‘798’ in Beijing, and West Bund in Shanghai. Yet, this does not mean that the state has embraced contemporary art; rather than fostering art and creativity, these spaces and organizations are intended to promote local urban development, boost tourism, and monitor creatives’ activities (Zennaro, 2017; Zhang, 2014). The support available for creative clusters, museums, and other cultural institutions is driven by the desire to increase land value, which is a crucial source of income for local governments (Zennaro, 2017). Moreover, the cities wish to promote themselves as being cosmopolitan and in line with global developments and trends. They invest in infrastructure, such as in museums with stunning architecture, rather than nurturing public interest in, and creation of, contemporary art (Zennaro, 2017).

Subsidies, which are crucial for engaging new audiences, are lacking (Kharchenkova and Velthuis, 2018). Most contemporary art museums are private, and rely on the sale of entrance tickets to meet operating expenses (Kiowski, 2017; Zennaro, 2017). This makes tickets for many of these museums expensive for someone with a regular salary, whereas scholars consider free museum entry to be conductive to democratizing access to art (Lumley, 2005: 8).[8] Indeed, during my fieldwork in China's art world I often heard concerns about the public's ignorance of contemporary art. Even established contemporary artists are not well-known outside the art world due to the marginal status of contemporary art in the country.

Art merchandising offers solutions in this structural context. As state subsidies, fellowships, and grants for contemporary art are lacking, merchandising provides a source of income. As the channels to promote artists to broader audiences are limited, art merchandising becomes one of the ways to signal the quality of artists. Since cultural policy does not support contemporary art, China's art world participants see art merchandising as a good avenue through which to disseminate it. When discussing the legitimacy of art merchandise and artists' cooperation with commercial brands, a Chinese art gallerist explained that because the state and the public are interested in traditional and conservative art, it is necessary to showcase contemporary art through any available means:

> . . . that's why contemporary art absolutely has to search for all kinds of opportunities to be seen. [. . .] So for the promotion of local Chinese contemporary art you have to think of and use all the possible opportunities. Yes. (I1)

The legitimacy of art merchandise is also grounded in culturally and historically formed attitudes to multiples in China. In many ways China's contemporary art world works similarly to the international art world, due to isomorphic tendencies (Kharchenkova, 2017). As is the case internationally, the modernist idea that art should be innovative is the most revered, and the discourse of the importance of originality persists in China (De Kloet and Chow, 2017; Dholakia et al., 2015; Wong, 2013). During my research, Chinese gallerists, collectors, and artists lamented the derivative character of many artworks in the Chinese art world and emphasized the importance for artists to keep developing their original artistic style rather than repeat existing successful styles, whether their own or of another artist (I10; I14).

However, the culturally embedded acceptance of replicas, and the historical experience of Mao's socialism, configure local attitudes towards art merchandising. China's traditional art education methods, which are based on imitation, may have contributed to the acceptance of copying and reproduction in contemporary China (Bosker, 2013). In addition, the socialist background of artists and others, with its attention to the masses, resulted in the open inclusive attitude towards (large-edition) reproductions (Ho, 2013). A curator, who is originally from Europe but has spent many years in China, reflected on why Chinese artists embrace multiples:

> . . . these artists have grown up in a communist country, socialist country, they also somehow are trained to think about masses, you know. I think that is really something which is in their mindset [. . .] Like for example [one of the most economically and symbolically successful Chinese artists], he doesn't need to make money, he has enough, but also, I talked to him and he says, China has so many people and it's nice if someone who doesn't have so much money can afford a nice print by me. So yeah, why not! (I26)

This respondent attributed the openness towards mass consumption of art images to historically ingrained attitudes. Indeed, prints, posters, and other multiples are familiar ways to consume art in China. This was especially so during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) when propaganda posters were a major artistic form (Andrews and Shen, 2012). In the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese society developed the so-called 'Mao fever': Mao's portraits were omnipresent and decorated objects like lighters and watches (Barmé, 1996). This aesthetic is still present in China's society today in the form of Mao nostalgia, for example, in Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants (Li and Zhang, 2016). Such multiples were produced and distributed by the state on a massive scale compared with contemporary art merchandise, which is privately produced and distributed on a much smaller scale. Due to this history, multiples are taken for granted in China; they clearly communicate the cultural value of the images, and are not exclusively associated with commerce. Clearly, this particular cultural and historical background is not a necessary condition for art merchandising, which also exists in countries that do not share Chinese traditional attitudes towards replication or a socialist history. It does, however, make China's art world participants and the public more attuned to large editions of multiples, which in turn contributes to the prevalence of contemporary art merchandise in China.

Conclusion

This article has argued that participants in China's contemporary art world view art merchandising as a way to generate income, promote particular artworks and artists, and bring contemporary art to the public in a consumer society. Art merchandising is particularly prevalent in China because of a lack of state support for contemporary art, and due to the cultural and historical context.

This article contributes, first, to the sociology of art. It highlights the roles of art merchandise in the art market, including the construction and signalling of cultural value. It has shown that contemporary artists can produce art merchandise, which is an overtly commercial practice, and also maintain an artistic reputation. This supports the recent sociology of art literature that suggests that the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial orientation in the art world are becoming blurred (Velthuis, 2012). Moreover, whereas the sociology of art markets tends to focus on the workings of the art worlds (artists, intermediaries, collectors), and on boundary drawing and gatekeeping (e.g. Coslor et al., 2020), this article foregrounds the public. It has demonstrated inclusive attitudes among art world participants, who perceive the democratization of art to be desirable.

Second, this research contributes to the literature on the democratization of art. This literature often focuses on cultural policy and it could lead us to expect a strong role of the state in increasing access to art (Belfiore, 2002). This article highlights the voices of art world participants and shows that when it comes to contemporary art in China, this inclusive agenda is taken up by the art world participants rather than the state. Although past and present political leaders have emphasized the importance of artists serving and learning from the people (Xinhua, 2014), ironically, when it comes to contemporary art, it is the market insiders and not the state who articulate the social mission of bringing art to the people. This article then has demonstrated that commercial organizations and practices can be involved in the democratization of art, which has received little attention in the literature so far (Brandellero, 2020). This research encourages scholars to examine the role of commercial practices and organizations, such as auction houses and (affordable) art fairs, in increasing public access to contemporary art.

Third, this article contributes to the arts marketing literature on art merchandise as it shows that art world participants have motivations to merchandize art besides career development (Schroeder, 2006). It also suggests that Drummond's (2006) model should be adapted for living artists. It shows how the quotation and/or interpretation stages distinguished by Drummond can be compressed or skipped as the artists move directly from creation to merchandising.

This study did not aim to investigate the actual consequences of merchandising for artistic production and consumption, yet it suggests pointers to some dynamics. For instance, as certain types of art, such as visually attractive paintings, and sculpture in bright colours, are more likely to be merchandized (I20; I24; I25), some artists may be incentivized to create them. These types and styles of art may become more widely accessible, due to merchandising, resulting in audiences perceiving them as being canonical. The idea that art merchandise will lead to more buying of originals may be wishful thinking. In the absence of statistics, museum store managers estimate that consumers mostly belong to the middle class, and are primarily women under the age of 40 (I24; I25; *Arts & Collections*, 2019). Despite the perceptions in the field, due to the socio-economic differences between buyers of merchandise and of originals, it seems unlikely that buyers of merchandise would enter the contemporary art market as collectors of originals. It would be worthwhile to investigate the short- and long-term effects of merchandising on artistic production and consumption, and on the careers of artists and intermediaries.

This article, by focusing on China, highlights how specific structural, cultural and historical contexts shape art market practices. Particular cultural and historical configurations make people more attuned to accept multiple copies of artworks, which contribute to the legitimacy of art merchandise. In a situation where state support is lacking, art merchandise helps to generate income, and signal the quality of particular artworks and artists, as well as to promote contemporary art in society. There are indications that art merchandise assumes similar roles in other consumer societies, such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Higgs, 2018; Schroeder, 2006: 91; Stevens, 2018). This study suggests that the proliferation of art merchandise could be especially expected in countries where state support for contemporary artists and art organizations is limited. As state subsidies for contemporary visual art have been lacking or are being eroded across many Asian, European and other countries, we can expect the emergence of new, more explicitly commercial, ways to promote and disseminate art in contexts beyond China.

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Notes

1. ‘Young’ in this article refers to an artist’s age (the generation born in the late 1970s and younger), and ‘unestablished’ refers to career stage.
2. Commercialization is central to some Chinese artists’ artistic practice. Xu Zhen investigates the relationship between art, creativity and commerce, including the commodity character of art. The ‘MadeIn Company’, which he founded, and in turn, launched the XU ZHEN® brand, which makes originals and art merchandise, is often compared with Andy Warhol’s Factory (Xu, 2014).
3. Note that I do not distinguish between artists from ‘within’ and ‘outside’ the official art system (*tizhinei*/*tizhiwai*), because the boundaries are sometimes blurred (Kharchenkova et al., 2015; Zhang, 2014).
4. For example, the Palace Museum, which is a national museum located in the Forbidden City in Beijing, has a popular online Taobao store selling souvenirs inspired by the museum’s collection.
5. ‘Western’ blue chip galleries also have shops. White Cube Bermondsey in London has a bookshop selling publications and limited-edition prints and sculptures (https://whitecube.com/shop, accessed 21 June 2022).
6. This is not unusual in China where poor regulation of copyright protection also plagues other creative industries (Pang, 2012).
7. Such assumptions have been criticized as paternalistic (Booth, 2014).
8. For example, 100 RMB or approximately 14 euros at Yuz Museum, Shanghai.

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