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# Who is on Show? Globalization of Private Contemporary Art Museums in China

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## Abstract

Sociological research on global flows of visual art has primarily investigated artistic presence in the organizations located at the center of the art world. This article shifts the focus to a country outside the traditional center, as it investigates the nationalities of artists who have exhibited at the recently emerged private contemporary art museums in China. It demonstrates that Chinese artists dominate in their exhibitions, which points to a home bias. However, there is also evidence of a cultural hierarchy, with the dominance of a small number of European countries and the USA, and of the regional dominance of East Asian countries. The article demonstrates that a focus on a country outside the center enables us to see the prominence of regional cultural flows in the globalization of visual art. Moreover, it shows that private museums, which are relatively independent of state control, are an important venue to show non-Chinese contemporary artists in present-day China. The increase in non-Chinese artists in exhibitions over time, which is due to the establishment of new private museums, suggests the rising, albeit tentative, centrality of China globally in terms of the importance of its institutions. This article contributes to research on globalization in the sociology of art, and to the understanding of the dynamics of local and transnational cultural flows in contemporary China.

## Keywords

China, contemporary art museums, cultural globalization, cultural periphery, regional flows

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## Introduction

Cultural fields are unequal. In the field of contemporary art, scholars have studied inequalities in how artworks travel across borders (Buchholz, 2018; Quemin, 2006). They point out the existence of geographical dynamics and hierarchies, which make artworks, artists, and galleries from some countries more likely to be exhibited, sold, or accepted at events than others. Velthuis and Baia Curioni (2015: 25) found that ‘a single, unified, integrated global market for contemporary art is not in sight,’ as art does not travel easily. Many of these studies of art world inequalities focus on cultural institutions in Europe and the USA, leaving questions about the dynamics of cultural flows elsewhere (Quemin and van Hest, 2015; Velthuis, 2013). In this article we investigate cultural globalization by concentrating on arts institutions in mainland China.

It is particularly important to study exhibitions at private contemporary art museums in regard to cultural globalization because by collecting and showing art, private museums can legitimize artworks and can shape the future canon (Altshuler, 2007). Scholars have shown that funders of museums have an impact on exhibitions, and that collectors can influence the valorization and even canonization of art (Alexander, 1996; Graw, 2009; Quemin, 2020; for discussion see Kolbe et al., 2022). While private museums are potentially important actors in art valorization, their role in facilitating cultural globalization has not yet been sufficiently explored. In order to understand the extent and dynamics of transnational cultural flows, this article asks the question: What are the nationalities of the artists exhibited at private contemporary art museums in China?

The case of China is illuminating because it is not one of the traditional centers of contemporary art. The recent emergence of private contemporary art museums in China enables us to investigate their role in cultural globalization and institutional dynamics in the global field of contemporary art more generally. Private museums in China are relatively globalized compared with state-owned institutions. Moreover, they are driven by private collectors, are thus more directly related to the market, and are relatively independent of state control. This makes private museums potentially more dynamic, and more indicative of institutional changes, than state-owned museums (Bourdieu, 1996; Buchholz, 2018). Also, studying their exhibitions helps us understand public cultural activities that are not driven by the state, and the possibilities in this regard, in China, in recent years.

In what follows, we draw inspiration from studies on globalization in the contemporary art world (Quemin, 2002, 2006; Velthuis, 2013) and analyze the nationalities of artists based on exhibition data from 23 private contemporary art museums. We show that the majority of artists in solo shows and small group shows at China’s private contemporary art museums are from mainland China. This is followed by artists from the USA, and a small number of European countries, confirming their centrality in the art world. The significant presence in exhibitions of East Asian artists from beyond mainland China points to the importance of regional flows. We also show that private museums of contemporary art are an important venue to exhibit non-Chinese artists in China. Moreover, the increase in non-Chinese artists in exhibitions over time, which is due to the establishment of new museums, suggests the rising, albeit tentative, centrality of China globally in terms of the importance of its institutions. We discuss our contributions to studies on cultural globalization in sociology or art, and to the studies on contemporary culture in China.

## Cultural Globalization in the Art World

The extent of globalization of organizations in the contemporary art world, and the visibility of artists from different geographical locations, have been investigated in the field of sociology of art (Quemin, 2002; Velthuis, 2013). Scholars emphasize the local character of the art world. Velthuis (2013) found a home bias in contemporary commercial art galleries in Amsterdam and Berlin: the galleries in these cities mostly represented Dutch and German artists, respectively. According to Velthuis, the physical proximity enables the emergence of local networks of search, support, and trust, on which actors in the contemporary art world heavily rely. In a similar vein, the majority of artists and galleries represented at the 2013 India Art Fair were from India (Vermeulen, 2015), and Swiss and German galleries had a strong presence at the Art Basel (Basel) art fair (Velthuis and Baia Curioni, 2015). Among the reasons for the home bias are taxes on the import and export of art (Steiner et al., 2013; for the impact of import and export taxation on art in Brazil, see also: Brandellero, 2015). Alongside spatial proximity, cultural proximity is used to explain cultural flows. Cultural proximity theory states that audiences prefer national or regional cultural products due to cultural familiarity (Crane, 2002; Straubhaar, 1991). Scholars have pointed out that consumers of art in both developed and developing countries tend to prefer the art of their compatriots (Renneboog and Spaenjers, 2015). This study looks at the extent of home bias in China, which we expected to be significant, especially because Chinese President Xi Jinping has emphasized Chinese culture and values, and has encouraged the production and consumption of local cultural products since he came to power in 2013.

Researchers have argued that cultural power in the art world is distributed unequally among countries. In particular, scholars have demonstrated the dominance of a small number of European countries and the USA in the art market, and more generally in the art world (Quemin, 2006, 2013; Quemin and van Hest, 2015; van Hest, 2012). They have shown that artists from the USA, the UK, Germany, France, Italy, and Switzerland are the most visible and prevalent on platforms such as the ranking of artists, the *Kunstkompass*, the ranking of the powerful art world players, the *ArtReview* Power 100, France's pre-eminent public collection, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Art Basel art fair, and museums such as the Centre Pompidou, Tate Modern, and MoMA (Quemin, 2006; Quemin and van Hest, 2015). While these studies show the existence of a cultural hierarchy, as Kolbe et al. (2022) observe, there is a lack of such quantitative systematic studies of private art museums. This article is a response to that observation.

The abovementioned studies have focused on commercial (e.g. art fairs) and symbolic (e.g. museums) art institutions in Europe and the USA. It is thus not surprising that scholars have found the dominance of artists from these geographical areas. It is hard to determine the extent to which this dominance is due to their high position in the cultural hierarchy, or to local or regional ties. For example, Yogev and Ergug (2015) interpret Quemin's (2013) findings as the prevalence of the local character in the art market, whilst Quemin (2013) himself interprets them as a hierarchy of central countries over the periphery. In other words, the focus on western organizations can result in flows from the proximate locations and from the center overlapping, which makes it difficult to understand the dynamics. Such a focus on Euro-American organizations is in contrast with the studies of globalization of popular culture, such as television dramas, where scholars

have investigated how products travel from the center to other contexts (Crane, 2002; Lu et al., 2019). In this article we focus on a recent phenomenon – the emerging private museums in China – to investigate how globalization of the art world plays out beyond the traditional centers.

Investigating the context beyond Western Europe and the USA enables us to more clearly distinguish cultural flows emanating from a local country or region from flows emanating from the center. Based on existing research, we hypothesized that art from the central countries, such as the USA, would be strongly present in Chinese private museums (Casanova, 2004; Quemin, 2006; Quemin and van Hest, 2015). We also hypothesized that regional flows into mainland China would be significant, as has been shown for popular culture from East Asia (Shim, 2006). At the same time, we expected them to be partly hindered, due to fluctuating tensions between China and other East Asian countries, which led to, for example, the ban on South Korean popular culture in China from 2016 (Chen, 2017). The quantitative studies focusing on the globalization of visual art outlined earlier do not usually explicitly address how cultural policy impacts cultural flows (Crane, 2002). It is clear that the state can encourage cultural flows from particular countries; or it can limit all or certain cultural flows. The case of Chinese contemporary art museums enables us to understand the situation in China under Xi Jinping.

The focus on China also helps us to investigate institutional dynamics in the global art field. Buchholz (2018) distinguishes two types of a country's centrality in the global field of art: that based on cultural production (the commercial or symbolic success of its contemporary artists), and that based on mediation/consecration (the importance of its commercial or symbolic arts institutions). When it comes to cultural production, China is central in terms of Chinese contemporary artists' global success at auction, but it remains relatively peripheral in terms of artists' global symbolic recognition (Buchholz, 2018; Quemin and van Hest, 2015; van Hest, 2012). In other words, China has become a central country in the economic pole, and has moved closer to the center, but has remained peripheral in the symbolic pole (Buchholz, 2018). When it comes to mediation/consecration, or the importance of a country's arts institutions in the global art field, previous studies refer to China as the periphery. Mainland Chinese auctions make significant sales, but they overwhelmingly sell Chinese art to Chinese buyers, and are thus insignificant in cross-border flows. Overall, mainland Chinese museums and art critics do not enjoy an international reputation.

Both local and global cultural fields, including positions in cultural hierarchies, change over time (Casanova, 2004). Change tends to be faster at the more heteronomous pole of the field; the rise of new consumers is associated with more dynamism (Bourdieu, 1996; Buchholz, 2018). This makes private contemporary art museums particularly revealing sites to study the center–periphery dynamics of mediation/consecration compared with institutions not as directly related to the market, such as the *Kunstkompass* or *Centre Pompidou* (Quemin, 2006).

## **Private Contemporary Art Museums in China**

Scholars have documented the museum boom in China (Ho, 2019; Wong, 2015; Zhang and Courty, 2021). The focus in the literature on Chinese museums tends to be on

state-owned museums, and often on historical and heritage museums, rather than on museums of contemporary visual art (Varutti, 2014). Studies on the international aspects of Chinese museums tend to focus on the state, and its propaganda and cultural diplomacy, which are aimed at strengthening nationalism and soft power, and cultivating a national identity (Shelach-Lavi, 2019; Varutti, 2014; Yin, 2017). In other words, they emphasize power, ideology, and politics. This article shifts attention to other aspects of the relationship of Chinese museums to the global field. We ask questions about the incoming cultural flows to understand the extent of the globalization of Chinese museums. To do so, we focus on private museums of contemporary art.

Private museums of contemporary art emerged recently in China. The average age of museums in our sample was approximately eight years in 2022. Existing studies tend to approach contemporary art museums in China as a new phenomenon and examine their institutionalization. Research on contemporary art museums in China is usually composed of case studies of specific institutions, and often emphasizes their surface characteristics, such as spectacular architecture (De Nigris, 2017; Zennaro, 2017). Studies also focus on the various problems and challenges of these museums, including the lack of long-term strategies, underestimation of financial investment, and overall lack of experience (De Nigris, 2016; Zennaro, 2017). In this article we take private contemporary art museums in China seriously, and we investigate where the artists who are exhibited in them come from. This is in contrast to some journalistic accounts of the museums, and to perceptions of China's art world participants. Private art museums in China are sometimes dismissed by journalists as 'vanity' projects (Movius, 2011). The Chinese art world insiders do not consider contemporary art museums to be 'mature,' or arbiters of taste (Kharchenkova, 2018). This article looks inside the museums, beyond the façade, and asks what these museums actually do, and in particular which artists they exhibit.

Private museums are an excellent avenue to investigate the globalization of Chinese art organizations. Compared with state-owned art museums, which tend to focus on Chinese art, private museums of contemporary art have more links to the international art scene. Many Chinese museums of contemporary art are isomorphic with foreign art museums when it comes to their architectural aesthetics (Zennaro, 2017). Making use of this visual similarity, they strive to obtain legitimacy in the international art world. Most collections of the private contemporary art museums founded in China at least partly have an international focus (*Private Museums Research*, 2024). Originally, the collection of contemporary art in China was sparked by the international success of Chinese art at auction (Kharchenkova and Velthuis, 2015). As younger, cosmopolitan collectors entered the scene, and as older collectors learned more about international art, the collections have become more internationalized.

Chinese private museums of contemporary art are an important venue for the Chinese public to see art. In the post-Mao era, foreign art has been exhibited in China since the 1980s. An exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg was held at the National Art Gallery in Beijing in 1985, and that of Gilbert & George was held at the National Art Gallery, Beijing and the Art Museum, Shanghai, in 1993. Currently, art by non-Chinese artists can be seen at events, such as, for example, the Shanghai Biennale and West Bund Art & Design art fair. The special aspect of private museums is that private collectors, who are consumers and thus direct art market participants, ultimately decide what art is exhibited.

How do exhibitions come about? Different types of private contemporary art museums exist. Many of them are not based on collections, but operate as *kunsthalle*; such museums are not part of this study (De Nigris, 2018). Others are founded by art collectors, who own collections that are usually not permanently on display. Among the motivations of founders of museums in China is prestige, although it is difficult to establish this with certainty (De Nigris, 2018; Velthuis et al., 2023). Many private contemporary art museums in China have no permanent curatorial team. As can be seen from the information on the museums' websites, these museums tend to invite guest curators per exhibition. Some of the founders, such as Wanwan Lei at M WOODS, and Wang Wei at Long Museum, curate exhibitions themselves. Oftentimes museums react to external proposals for exhibitions by curators, commercial galleries, or other actors in the art field. The costs of organizing exhibitions, including, among other things, transportation and installation, are often borne by the funders of the museums. However, artists or their galleries can be partly or fully responsible for the costs. In any case, the founder, who usually also acts as the funder, normally has to greenlight an exhibition, and definitely if they have to bear the costs.

Although private, the museums are not isolated from the state. The Chinese state has embraced the cultural industries as a source of economic growth and innovation (Shan, 2014). Some local governments, such as that of Shanghai, have provided economic stimuli for establishing contemporary museums. Many local governments are led not so much by a desire to promote art, but rather by their aims to increase land value (Zennaro, 2017). The state supports or tolerates the museums, but does not promote contemporary art *per se*. At the same time, scholars have noted that the lack of legal frameworks for private museums in China can result in their instability and closure (for discussion, see Kolbe et al., 2022). It has been well-documented that Xi Jinping has been tightening his control of culture (Movius, 2022b). He calls for the strengthening and supporting of traditional and socialist Chinese culture, and is wary of foreign cultural influence (People.cn, 2022). Private museums are not operated by the state, and may have different motivations to organize particular exhibitions. This raises the question of whether the ratio of foreign to Chinese artists has declined since Xi Jinping became president.

Censorship impacts what can be exhibited in China. Artworks on show at art fairs, biennials, and institutions have to be approved in advance by the authorities, but the rules are opaque (Brady, 2018). It does happen that some artworks are not greenlighted. Approval has to be obtained in advance, yet, in some cases artworks have been removed after the show was opened (Chow, 2022). Reports about an exhibition as a whole, or of all of an artist's work being disallowed, are less common, but this does happen, as in the case of Hung Liu's exhibition, which was cancelled at the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing (Qin, 2019). Moreover, self-censorship by organizers can also play a role. In other words, organizers may not attempt to obtain approval for artists whom they feel have zero chance of being approved. That said, censorship is not easily predictable. For example, a solo show by British artist Sarah Lucas at Red Brick Art Museum was approved by the state despite its sexually explicit visual language.

Some of the private museums in China are short-lived. For example, the Guangdong Times Museum closed in 2022 due to economic difficulties partly caused by the

COVID-19 pandemic (Movius, 2022a). Yuz Museum had to move to a less prestigious location because the government took back the building they had been occupying. The fragility of private art museums is not unique to China, and is a common feature of private contemporary art museums in general, mainly because of financial issues (De Nigris, 2018; Velthuis et al., 2023). The amount of symbolic value a museum can confer on an exhibiting artist, or the taste-making power, varies per museum.

## Data and Methods

This study relies on the database that we compiled in 2023, for which we collected data on all private contemporary art museum exhibitions in mainland China that opened before 2023. We focus on mainland China because of the differing economic, social, political, and cultural circumstances in Macao and Hong Kong.

To determine which museums to include in the study, we have relied on the criteria specified by the research team at the University of Amsterdam ‘The Return of the Medici?’ that studies private contemporary art museums. Their definition of a private art museum is as follows:

an art institution owned or governed by one or several private persons, which receives no or limited public funding, has a permanent collection of modern art and/or contemporary art, and makes this collection accessible to the public, in a building or physical structure, on an ongoing basis (Velthuis et al., 2023: 8).<sup>1</sup>

Based on these criteria, they identified 29 museums in mainland China (Velthuis et al., 2023). From this list we eliminated museums that lacked an official website. This is because official websites were the main source of data, and the availability of websites was necessary to guarantee systematic data collection. Two museums included in this study (HOW Museum Wenzhou, and HOW Museum Shanghai) have no official websites, but they do have an official WeChat account listing past exhibitions. As WeChat is a key platform in China where organizations and businesses present themselves to their audiences, we consider these data as being equivalent to official website data. As a result, 23 museums were included in this study, as presented in Table 1.<sup>2</sup> Our fieldwork demonstrated that art world insiders had no clear recollection of exhibitions at most of the excluded museums, and that they did not consider these museums to be significant; most of these institutions have not been active in recent years.

After selecting museums, we collected information about the nationalities of all artists who participated in the exhibitions that opened in these museums before 2023. The information on exhibitions and participating artists was collected from the museums’ official websites. Usually Chinese and English versions of the websites listed the same exhibitions, however, in the case of several museums, the Chinese version of the website listed more exhibitions than the English one. In these cases we made sure to also include the exhibitions that were mentioned only in the Chinese version.

Official websites often provided no information on an artist’s nationality. In such cases we looked this up elsewhere online, on websites such as ocula.com and baike.baidu.com, or on artists’ individual websites. We determined nationality by the place

**Table 1.** Private museums of contemporary art in China (by year of creation).

	Museum		Established	Founder	City
1	Today Art Museum	今日美术馆	2002	Zhang Baoquan	Beijing
2	Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai	上海当代艺术馆	2005	Mingguang Gong	Shanghai
3	Inside-Out Art Museum	中间美术馆	2008	Xiaohua Huang	Beijing
4	Faurschou Foundation	林冠艺术基金会	2011	Jens Faurschou	Beijing
5	Long Museum Pudong	龙美术馆浦东馆	2012	Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei	Shanghai
6	Parkview Green Museum	桥福当代美术馆	2012	George Wong Kinwah	Beijing
7	Guangdong Contemporary Art Center	广东当代艺术中心	2013	Zilong Huang	Guangzhou
8	Sifang Art Museum	四方当代美术馆	2013	Lu Xun	Nanjing
9	HOW Art Museum Wenzhou	昊美术馆温州馆	2013	Zheng Hao	Wenzhou
10	Long Museum West Bund	龙美术馆西岸馆	2014	Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei	Shanghai
11	M WOODS 798	木木美术馆798馆	2014	Lin Han and Wanwan Lei	Beijing
12	New Century Art Foundation	新世纪当代艺术基金会	2014	Wang Bing	Beijing
13	Red Brick Art Museum	红砖美术馆	2014	Yan Shijie and Cao Mei	Beijing
14	Yuz Museum	余德耀美术馆	2014	Budi Tek	Shanghai
15	Cc Foundation	Cc 基金会	2015	David Chau	Shanghai
16	HOW Art Museum Shanghai	昊美术馆上海馆	2015	Zheng Hao	Shanghai
17	Qiao Space	乔空间	2015	Qiao Zhibing	Shanghai
18	Long Museum Chongqing	龙美术馆重庆馆	2016	Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei	Chongqing
19	M WOODS Hutong	木木美术馆钱粮胡同馆	2019	Lin Han and Wanwan Lei	Beijing
20	TANK Museum	上海油罐艺术中心	2019	Qiao Zhibing	Shanghai
21	He Art Museum	和美术馆	2020	He Jianfeng	Foshan
22	X Museum	X 美术馆	2020	Theresa Tse and Michael Xufu Huang	Beijing
23	Longlati Foundation	Longlati基金会	2021	David Su and Zihao Che	Shanghai

of birth of an artist, which is a common method in the sociology of art (Velthuis, 2013). We recognize that artistic careers are complex, and that some artists live and make art outside of their country of birth. While it was not feasible to collect data on place of residence for all artists, we noticed that a small number of artists lived outside their country of birth or maintained residence in two countries. As only a small number of Chinese artists reside outside of China, if we accounted for the country of residence, the number of artists outside of China would be slightly higher than that shown in our data. For artists' collectives we noted the country where the collective was based rather than the nationalities of individual artists. The vast majority of exhibitions were physical; three exhibitions took place online at M WOODS (2020), X Museum (2022), and TANK Shanghai (2022). Online exhibitions were included in the sample alongside physical exhibitions. The vast majority of artists who exhibited at the museums in our sample were visual artists. However, some of them were, for example, designers or architects. We thus used a broad definition of the term 'artist' to include various creative professions, as long as they were exhibited in the museums under study. As the museums are those of contemporary art, unsurprisingly, they overwhelmingly showed contemporary art of living artists. A small number of artists were deceased (e.g. Nam June Paik), and a small number were traditional artists (e.g. Ming dynasty calligraphers), and were included, for example, because they were in the founders' private collections. As we are interested in exhibitions at private contemporary art museums, all artists were included in the analysis irrespective of whether they were living or deceased, and of the form or style of their art.

We distinguished between three types of exhibitions: solo shows (one artist), small group shows (two to five artists), and large group shows (six or more artists). Solo shows and small group shows are particularly important, because they provide more visibility to artists than large group shows. If an artist had more than one appearance in solo shows or small group exhibitions, they were counted the corresponding number of times. This is because we were interested not in artists' careers, but rather in the amount of exhibitions of artists of different nationalities. Regarding the large group shows, we did not note the nationalities of all participating artists. This was not feasible because the information on the number and names of all participating artists in a large exhibition were often unavailable. Instead, based on the available information, we classified large exhibitions into three categories depending on which artists participated in an exhibition: Chinese and non-Chinese artists, only Chinese artists, and only non-Chinese artists. In order to investigate the longitudinal trends, we noted the years in which each exhibition was opened.

Exhibitions were closely related to collections in a number of ways. Some exhibitions drew on the founders' collections, which was sometimes clearly stated in an exhibition title, for example, 'Collection of Qiao Zhibing | Aesthetics' at TANK Shanghai. In other cases, exhibitions were a way to commission and/or purchase an artist's works for the collection. One interviewee even said that the main purpose of exhibitions at their museum has been to collect some of the featured artworks. An exhibition might give an artist a career boost, which would raise the economic value of their art, which is in turn beneficial for the collector. The question of why particular artists were selected for exhibitions is outside the scope of this article.

While this case study primarily relies on the abovementioned quantitative data, it also benefitted from the first author's long-term fieldwork in the Chinese contemporary art world for a project devoted to studying art-market emergence, which included multiple visits to exhibitions at private contemporary art museums during the period 2012–2023.<sup>3</sup>

## Findings

In Table 2 we present an overview of all exhibitions at the museums that were included in our sample. The total number of exhibitions was 1239. The museums differed significantly in terms of the number of exhibitions held: from only seven exhibitions at Guangdong Contemporary Art Center and M WOODS Hutong, to 593 exhibitions at the Today Art Museum. The differences are partly explained by the differing lifespans and sizes of museums. The Today Art Museum, which has existed longest and has many exhibition halls, also held, by far, the greatest number of exhibitions. However, some museums that have existed for a long time held lower total numbers of exhibitions. For example, The Parkview Green Museum, established in 2012, held only 15 exhibitions. Out of all 1239 exhibitions included in the sample, the majority were solo shows (658 exhibitions), followed by large group exhibitions (353 exhibitions), and small group exhibitions (109 exhibitions).<sup>4</sup> The numbers of artists per exhibition varied widely, from solo shows to shows with over 200 artists at 'Re-View – Opening Exhibition of Long Museum West Bund.' The maximum number could, in fact, have been higher, because for some exhibitions, the total number of artists was unknown, as the participating artists were not specified on the website. The museums showed both internationally unestablished artists, such as Li Guijun, and renowned artists, such as Olafur Eliasson.

Table 3 depicts regions of origin of artists who had a solo show (one artist) or a small group show (two to five artists) at the museums included in our sample. We distinguish these two types of shows here because while solo shows are the most prestigious, the small group shows also provide significant visibility for artists, in contrast to larger group shows. The majority of artists were from mainland China (68.2%). Such a home bias is common in the art world more generally (Velthuis and Baia Curioni, 2015). Personal ties between curators and artists in China are a significant explanatory factor. Moreover, at some museums, the practice of renting space for an exhibition is common. During her fieldwork in the Beijing art world, the first author often heard interviewees complain that museums rented out space to artists for a short time, who then could put a museum exhibition on their *curriculum vitae*. Artists have to pay not only the rent, but also, for example, catalogue costs. Indeed, many solo shows of Chinese artists at Today Art Museum only lasted one or two weeks, according to the information on their website, whereas solo shows by non-Chinese artists were less frequent and tended to last longer. Moreover, the dominance of Chinese artists in exhibitions can be explained by the fact that the artworks produced in China do not have to be transported across the border. Import tax currently amounts to 14.13%. Artworks that are brought into China for a temporary exhibition but not sold there, are exempt from tax, however the museum has to pay a deposit for the duration of the exhibition (WTS Global, 2021; personal interviews, 2023). Some museums that have regular exhibitions with foreign artists

**Table 2.** Total number of exhibitions per museum (by year of creation).

	Solo shows	Small group shows	Large group shows	Uncertain	Total
1 Today Art Museum	333	56	124	80	593
2 Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai	20	6	50	6	82
3 Inside-Out Art Museum	5	6	15	4	30
4 Faurshou Foundation	13	3	1	0	17
5 Long Museum Pudong	11	0	28	5	44
6 Parkview Green Museum	4	3	8	0	15
7 Guangdong Contemporary Art Center	1	1	1	4	7
8 Sifang Art Museum	16	5	9	2	32
9 HOW Art Museum Wenzhou	8	2	10	0	20
10 Long Museum West Bund	66	5	48	13	132
11 M WOODS 798	15	1	8	0	24
12 New Century Art Foundation	10	3	4	0	17
13 Red Brick Art Museum	24	3	11	1	39
14 Yuz Museum	36	1	7	2	46
15 Cc Foundation	18	4	2	0	24
16 HOW Art Museum Shanghai	28	3	7	0	38
17 Qiao Space	6	0	3	0	9
18 Long Museum Chongqing	9	0	2	0	11
19 M WOODS Hutong	5	0	2	0	7
20 TANK Museum	9	0	6	1	16
21 He Art Museum	8	2	2	1	13
22 X Museum	7	1	5	0	13
23 Longlati Foundation	6	4	0	0	10
Total	<b>658</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>1239</b>

**Table 3.** Number and percentage of artists who took part in solo shows and small group shows (per region).

	Solo shows		Small group shows		Solo and small group shows	
	N=646	%	N=268	%	N=914	%
Mainland China	440	68.1	183	68.3	623	68.2
Europe	94	14.6	34	12.7	128	14
North America	50	7.7	17	6.3	67	7.3
Asia excluding Mainland China	40	6.2	27	10.1	67	7.3
Latin America	15	2.3	2	0.7	17	1.9
Middle East	4	0.6	3	1.1	7	0.8
Africa	1	0.2	2	0.7	3	0.3
Australia	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
International art collective	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1

have an agreement with a bank, which takes care of the deposit for a fee. For other museums, a deposit can be sufficiently burdensome to prevent them from exhibiting foreign artists. That the majority of artists are local is in line with findings of research on the India Art Fair held in 2013, where the majority (approximately 60%) of artists were from India (Vermeulen, 2015).

As can be seen further in Table 3, beyond China, the artists came from all continents, although Africa and Australia were hardly represented with 0.3% and 0.1% of all artists, respectively.<sup>5</sup> European artists (14%) were the largest group after mainland Chinese artists, with North American artists (7.3%) and Asian artists outside of mainland China (7.3%) lagging behind. Latin America and the Middle East accounted for 1.9% and 0.8%, respectively.

Table 4 further details the nationalities of artists who had a solo show and a small group show. In this table we list artists' countries of origin for each solo show and small group show, and we specify the numbers of exhibitions per country and percentages. Our data reveal that the USA, the UK, and France were the top three countries of origin for artists after mainland China. Additionally, Germany, Italy and Denmark were in the top 10. This can be explained by the symbolic power of the USA and Western European countries in the international art world. According to the interviewees, for some organizations, ticket revenue is an important consideration, and some saw foreign artists from symbolically strong countries as being easier to market to urban cosmopolitan visitors, which made it an economic decision. At the same time, showing artists from these countries conveys prestige on the museums, which can then help to establish their legitimacy and status (cf., Zhu and Braden, 2022). Additionally, commercial galleries approach museums to organize exhibitions of the artists they represent. Galleries from the USA and other countries with symbolic and economic power in the art world have more resources to arrange shows for their artists in China. Some of the museum founders collaborate with foreign artists because they rely on their networks with foreign actors, or try to establish or strengthen these networks. The other three countries in the top 10 were Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, all located in East Asia. This can be explained by their regional networks and cultural proximity.

We note that Germany was in seventh place; while this is still a high place in the ranking, it is not as high as shown in previous studies (Quemin, 2002, 2006). As these studies focused on institutions based in Western Europe, and some specifically on institutions in German-speaking areas, such as the *Kunstkompass* and *Art Basel*, local (home bias) and regional dynamics may explain the higher ranking of Germany in previous studies. China's case shows that Germany's symbolic capital may not be as high as was previously suggested.

It is noteworthy that many artists were from the USA, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, the countries with which mainland China has been experiencing political tensions. This aligns with Vermeulen's (2015) findings that artists from Pakistan, India's 'political archenemy' as he calls it, were prominently represented at the India Art Fair (2013). However, at least one political event seems to have directly impacted the exhibitions in the private museums – the diplomatic conflict between South Korea and China in 2016, which resulted in a ban on South Korean culture from 2016. A solo show by Sobin Park at Today Art Museum in 2017, and a small group show including Nam June

**Table 4.** Number and percentage of artists who took part in solo shows and small group shows (per nationality).

	Solo shows		Small group shows		Solo and small group shows	
	N=646	%	N=268	%	N=914	%
Mainland China	440	68.1	183	68.3	623	68.2
USA	49	7.6	17	6.3	66	7.2
UK	21	3.3	6	2.2	27	3
France	18	2.8	3	1.1	21	2.3
Japan	16	2.5	2	0.7	18	2
South Korea	10	1.5	8	3	18	2
Germany	11	1.7	6	2.2	17	1.9
Taiwan	8	1.2	9	3.4	17	1.9
Italy	10	1.5	2	0.7	12	1.3
Denmark	5	0.8	6	2.2	11	1.2
Hong Kong	3	0.5	5	1.9	8	0.9
Brazil	6	0.9	1	0.4	7	0.8
Switzerland	4	0.6	3	1.1	7	0.8
Spain	6	0.9	0	0	6	0.7
Argentina	4	0.6	0	0	4	0.4
Netherlands	2	0.3	2	0.7	4	0.4
Austria	1	0.2	3	1.1	4	0.4
Iran	2	0.3	1	0.4	3	0.3
Hungary	2	0.3	1	0.4	3	0.3
Mexico	2	0.3	0	0	2	0.2
Belgium	2	0.3	0	0	2	0.2
Poland	2	0.3	0	0	2	0.2
Norway	2	0.3	0	0	2	0.2
Israel	1	0.2	1	0.4	2	0.2
Iceland	1	0.2	1	0.4	2	0.2
Peru	1	0.2	1	0.4	2	0.2
Ghana	0	0	2	0.7	2	0.2
Pakistan	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Vietnam	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
South Africa	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Haiti	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Estonia	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Luxembourg	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Greece	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Slovakia	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Portugal	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Iraq	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Russia	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Canada	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Australia	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1

(Continued)

**Table 4.** (Continued)

	Solo shows		Small group shows		Solo and small group shows	
	N=646	%	N=268	%	N=914	%
Croatia	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Chile	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Georgia	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
International art collective	1	0.2	0	0	1	0.1
Yugoslavia	0	0	1	0.4	1	0.1
India	0	0	1	0.4	1	0.1
Macao	0	0	1	0.4	1	0.1
Malaysia	0	0	1	0.4	1	0.1
Lebanon	0	0	1	0.4	1	0.1

Paik at HOW Art Museum Shanghai, were the only solo and small group shows of South Korean artists in private contemporary art museums in China after the ban.<sup>6</sup> One interviewee said that when the ban was imposed, their museum had to ‘uninvite’ artists from South Korea and Japan from a group show, because the Ministry of Culture refused to accept their application as long as artists from these countries were participating. The ban on Japanese art was clearly less stringent, as we found that solo or small group shows of Japanese artists took place every year between 2013 and 2022, with the exception of 2016. Although the ban has softened recently, with some Korean films, for example, being screened and streamed again in China, it may still be exerting an influence on the art scene (Wang, 2023).

We found that significant differences in terms of the global character of exhibitions existed among the museums. In Table 5 we ranked the museums based on the percentage of mainland Chinese artists among all artists who took part in solo shows or small group shows at a particular museum. As can be seen from the table, the museums were located across the range, from all of artists being mainland Chinese at Long Museum Pudong, to none of the artists being mainland Chinese at M WOODS Hutong. Both the median and mean proportion of mainland Chinese artists per museum was 52%. This suggests that private museums exhibit a significant number of non-Chinese artists.

The nationality of founders had a limited impact on what was shown at their museums. Although Jens Faurschou is Danish, his Faurschou Foundation exhibited no artists from Denmark. Other founders born outside of China have ethnic ties to China or the Asian region: Budi Tek was from Indonesia, David Su is from Singapore, George Wong Kin-wah was from Hong Kong, as is Wanwan Lei (we were unable to identify the place of birth of Theresa Tse). This did not translate into artists from these places being dominant. Artists from Indonesia and Singapore were not represented at all in the sample. Hong Kong only accounted for 0.9% of artists, and no Hong Kong artists were shown at Parkview Green or M WOODS museums, which were (co-)founded by George Wong Kin-wah and Wanwan Lei, respectively (see Table 4). The majority of museums’

**Table 5.** Proportion of Chinese artists in solo shows and small group shows.

	Museum	%
1	Long Museum Pudong	100
2	New Century Art Foundation	95
3	Long Museum Chongqing	88
4	Today Art Museum	83
5	Inside-Out Art Museum	82
6	Guangdong Contemporary Art Center	75
7	Long Museum West Bund	74
8	He Art Museum	73
9	HOW Art Museum Wenzhou	69
10	HOW Art Museum Shanghai	63
11	Sifang Art Museum	55
12	Cc Foundation	52
13	Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai	43
14	M WOODS 798	37
15	Parkview Green Museum	36
16	Red Brick Art Museum	34
17	Yuz Museum	33
18	Qiao Art Space	33
19	Longlati Foundation	25
20	Faurschou Foundation	23
21	TANK Museum	11
22	X Museum	11
23	M WOODS Hutong	0
	Average	<b>52</b>

founders in our sample were born in mainland China, however, there were significant differences in the extent to which they showed non-Chinese artists. 100% of artists shown at Long Museum Pudong were Chinese, whereas for X Museum only 11% of artists were Chinese (see Table 5). This can be explained by the fact that some founders, such as Michael Xufu Huang, co-founder of X Museum, have ample international experience, including having lived and studied abroad, and being active both socially and in business outside of China, which resulted in a cosmopolitan taste. Moreover, the ratio of Chinese to non-Chinese artists is related to the goals of a museum. On its website, Inside-Out Art Museum (where Chinese artists comprise 82%) emphasizes its focus on Chinese contemporary art (*Inside-Out Art Museum, 2023*), whereas Cc Foundation (where Chinese artists comprise 52%) commits to ‘inclusivity, and cultural equality in the field of contemporary art on a global scale’ and shows ‘emerging Chinese and international artists,’ according to its website (*Cc Foundation, 2023*).

Although some museums mostly exhibit Chinese artists, in their online presence they follow the international conventions of contemporary art museums. All the museums in our sample had both English and Chinese versions of their websites (except HOW Art Museum Wenzhou and HOW Art Museum Shanghai). With a few exceptions, the English

**Table 6.** Types of large group exhibitions.

Type	N= 353	%
Only Chinese artists	134	38
Chinese and non-Chinese artists	119	34
Only non-Chinese artists	35	10
Uncertain	65	18

version was identical to the Chinese version when it came to the exhibitions (however, we found that some exhibitions were mentioned in the Chinese version, but not in the English version of the websites at the Today Art Museum and Guangdong Contemporary Art Centre; the Chinese version of the Sifang Art Museum required a password to gain access). All websites were modern and sleek, in line with contemporary art museum websites internationally. This suggests isomorphic tendencies – to be considered legitimate, internationally, a museum needs to have an English version of the website and a particular website aesthetic (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This is in line with the aesthetic isomorphism of museum architecture noted by Zennaro (2017). Such isomorphism suggests that these museums see themselves as part of the global art world.

Table 6 depicts data on the larger group exhibitions (six or more artists). It shows that exhibitions that included only artists from China were the most common (134 exhibitions, or 38% of the large group exhibitions), followed by exhibitions that included Chinese and non-Chinese artists (119 exhibitions, or 34%). Finally, exhibitions that included only non-Chinese artists were the least common (35 exhibitions, or 10%). The prevalence of mainland Chinese artists is due to local social and trust ties, physical proximity, which means no need to deal with customs and customs duties, and the desire by founders to show Chinese art due to its cultural proximity. At the same time, we see the wish to exhibit Chinese artists alongside their non-Chinese counterparts. This symbolically indicates the cosmopolitan and international standing of both museums and Chinese artists.

When it comes to longitudinal trends, we find that the absolute numbers of non-Chinese artists in solo and small group shows have increased over time, with the exception of a dip in 2020, which was the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 1). The increase was particularly sharp in 2012, 2014, and 2017. Percentage-wise, the ratio of non-Chinese to Chinese artists in solo shows and small group shows increased over time, especially in 2012 and 2017 (see Figure 2). Table 7 shows a breakdown of non-Chinese artists in solo and small group shows, per museum, over time. Today Art Museum has consistently held shows of non-Chinese artists, with numbers growing especially during the period 2012–2015. The Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai and the Faursschou Foundation have also consistently done so over time. In contrast, in recent years the number of shows of non-Chinese artists at these museums has diminished, due to factors including the financial situation of these museums and a significant drop in the number of shows at each of these museums over time.

It is clear that the rise in shows of non-Chinese artists over time is primarily due to the establishment of new museums. Yuz Museum and Red Brick Museum were especially important contributors to this trend during the period 2016–2018. From 2019 onwards the rise in the number of exhibitions of non-Chinese artists has been driven by a larger

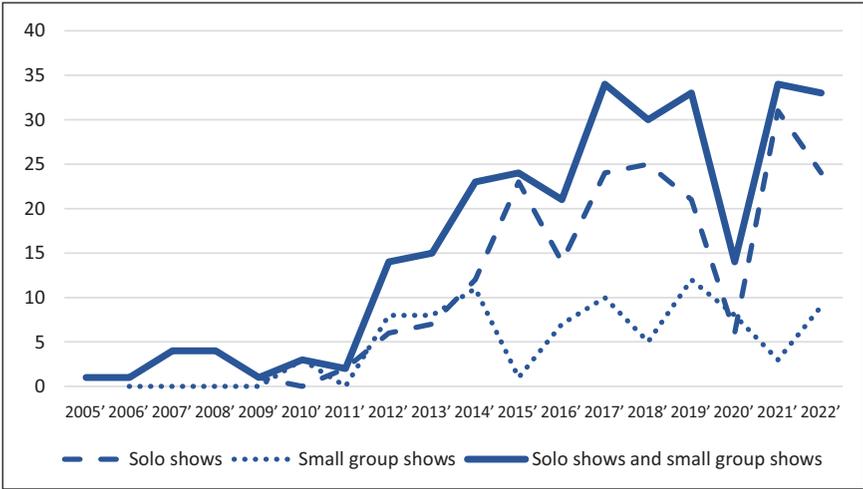


Figure 1. Number of non-Chinese artists in solo shows and small group shows.

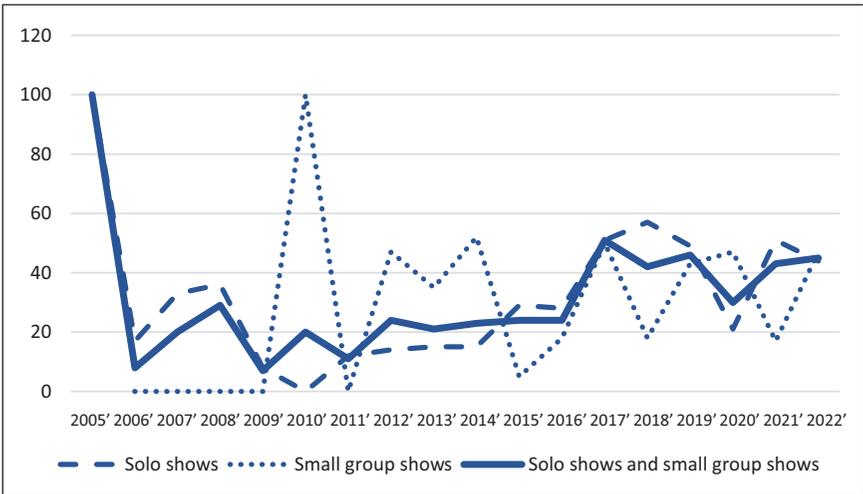


Figure 2. Percentage of non-Chinese artists in solo shows and small group shows.

number of museums, including Long Museum West Bund, Longlati Foundation, Sifang Art Museum, TANK Museum, X Museum, and others. Many of these were established relatively recently. Some of these museums show predominantly non-Chinese artists, and others, even if they show more Chinese artists, show many non-Chinese artists in absolute numbers (see Table 5). These more recent museums have the financial means and the right networks to organize shows of non-Chinese artists.

Thus, contrary to expectations, the period since Xi Jinping has been in power has coincided with fewer, not more, Chinese artists in solo and small group shows in private

**Table 7.** Number of non-Chinese artists in solo shows and small group shows per year per museum (by year of creation).

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
1 Today Art Museum	1	3	3	1			1	7	6	20	11	3	4	5	4	1	2	3	75
2 Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai	1	1	1	1	3	3	1	1	3	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	1		20
3 Inside-Out Art Museum								1	2	2	2	2	1	1	1			1	3
4 Fairschou Foundation								1	2	2	2	2	5	1	1	1			17
5 Long Museum Pudong																			0
6 Parkview Green Museum										2			5		3				10
7 Guangdong Contemporary Art Center																		1	1
8 Sifang Art Museum										1			1		3	6	1	2	13
9 HOW Art Museum Wenzhou								4		1									5
10 Long Museum West Bund									1	1	1	1	2	2	3	1	7	2	20
11 M WOODS 798										1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	12
12 New Century Art Foundation															1				1
13 Red Brick Art Museum											1	6	3	4	1		2	1	23
14 Yuz Museum										2	4	5	7	1	1	1	2	2	24
15 Cc Foundation										1	1	1	2	3	5				12
16 HOW Art Museum Shanghai													1	5	2		4	1	13
17 Qiao Space												2	2						4
18 Long Museum Chongqing																1			1
19 M WOODS Hutong														1	1	1	1	2	5
20 TANK Museum														3		2	3	3	8
21 He Art Museum																2	2	2	4
22 X Museum															1	3	4	4	8
23 Longlati Foundation															2	4	6		12

contemporary art museums. In other words, we are witnessing an increase in incoming global flows in this cultural sector despite the general focus of Xi on emphasizing and promoting Chinese culture. Despite the difficulties of showing foreign art, private museums continue to do so.

## Discussion

In this article we have looked beyond the impressive architectural façades of Chinese private contemporary art museums to analyze whom they exhibit. We have shown that when it comes to exhibitions, Chinese private contemporary art museums have become part of the transnational or global cultural field (Buchholz, 2022; Kuipers, 2011). Non-Chinese artists from all continents have taken part in their exhibitions.

This article contributes to research on globalization in the contemporary art world in the sociology of art. It supports previous findings that territory plays an important role in the contemporary art world. However, whereas scholars have shown that the contemporary art market and art world are western-dominated (Quemin, 2006, 2013; Quemin and van Hest, 2015; van Hest, 2012), this article highlights that mainland Chinese artists are dominant in mainland Chinese private contemporary art museums. This can be explained by a home bias in Chinese museums. This is not unique to China, as the quantitative dominance of local artists was found by scholars at, for example, commercial galleries, and at an art fair outside China (Velthuis, 2013; Vermeulen, 2015). The dominance of local artists suggests a relative lack of globalization. At the same time, a small number of traditional western art centers are also prevalent, albeit at a substantial distance from Chinese artists. Thus, our findings support the existence of a cultural hierarchy, with the USA, France, and the UK as the cultural centers with the most symbolic power. Our findings suggest that for contemporary art, this hierarchy remains stable, as the hierarchy we found corresponds to earlier quantitative research on globalization in contemporary art (Quemin, 2006; Quemin and van Hest, 2015). This contrasts with findings in other contexts and cultural fields, such as high-end cuisine, where new countries are challenging the established hierarchy (Lane, 2019).

Additionally, we find a regional dominance of East Asian countries, despite temporary bans on South Korean and Japanese art. Physical and cultural proximity play a role, as East Asian artists are exhibited more than artists from other Asian countries, Eastern Europe, or Latin America. This confirms the importance of regional cultural flows, which scholars have also found among consumers of popular culture, such as television shows, in China (Gao and Kuipers, 2024). However, it is clear that even regional East Asian artists from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are exhibited less frequently than some European countries and North America. To sum up, we have shown that local artists are by far the most prevalent in exhibitions, but also point to the existence of both western dominance and regional dominance in China's private museums of contemporary art.

This research also contributes to the literature on cultural flows into mainland China, and the roles of the state and the private sector in China's cultural field. We have demonstrated that foreign art is exhibited in China, and its absolute numbers and proportion in relation to Chinese art, have been increasing over time, despite Xi Jinping's focus on

Chinese traditional culture. We have shown that this stems from the emergence of new museums founded by collectors with cosmopolitan taste, and international networks and ambitions. This draws attention in research on Chinese museums away from state influence on culture that centers around nationalism and soft power. Instead, it highlights other dynamics – those driven by private initiatives and revolving around individual economic, cultural, and social capital. The choices the private museum founders make regarding exhibitions can impact the content and value of their collections as well as the value dynamics in the art world. While state institutions control programming, as museums have to apply for approval of their exhibitions, this article clearly demonstrates that it is possible for museums to organize exhibitions of non-Chinese artists in the current cultural climate in mainland China. In this sense, the answer to Zolberg's question of whether private support for cultural institutions presents a threat or a promise for the arts, private museums in China, with their relative autonomy from state influence, can be seen as promise (Zolberg, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

The case of China's private contemporary art museums has enabled us to investigate the structural changes in the global art world, not only in dynamics of cultural production, but also in those of mediation/consecration (Buchholz, 2018). China's private museums show non-Chinese artists from traditionally central countries, and they show a higher percentage of non-Chinese artists than before. This suggests that China is tentatively becoming more central in terms of mediation/consecration. This raises significant questions for future research. Does the increasing (economic/symbolic) importance of a country's artists lead to the increasing importance of a country's (commercial/symbolic) arts institutions? Does the rising importance of a country's (commercial/symbolic) arts institutions lead to the rising (economic/symbolic) importance of the country's artists? Future studies in other contexts could further investigate how different types of centrality (in cultural production and mediation/consecration, economic, and symbolic) are inter-related, and how they impact each other.

We hope that this case study inspires others to research cultural organizations located outside the dominant western countries (cf., Duarte and Pérez-Ibañez, 2023; Fang, 2023; Levitt and Siliunas, 2023). The case of China has allowed us to tease apart the mechanisms of different geographical sources of artistic import. In this case, flows driven by spatial and cultural proximity do not come from the same areas as flows driven by symbolic capital and legitimacy, as is the case in studies focusing on organizations in the USA and Western Europe. This study has shown the importance of incoming regional cultural flows into China, despite historical complexities in East Asia. We expect this finding to be not limited to China, moreover, we expect regional flows to be more present in regions that experience fewer geo-political tensions than East Asia. We argue that recently established art organizations should be taken seriously, despite being located outside the current cultural centers. While some museums strive for diversity in their collections and exhibitions, scholars would do well to promote diversity in the objects of their academic inquiries.

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## Notes

1. Note that museums where the founder, and not the institution, officially owns the collection are included.
2. Longlati Foundation was founded in 2017, but we state the year of founding as 2021, because this is when it started to be housed in the building where exhibitions were held.
3. Additionally, representatives of five museums included in our sample were interviewed by the first author in 2023. The interviews concerned the process of decision-making and criteria for selection of artists, relationships between the collection and the exhibitions, and practical concerns, including costs, customs duties, and censorship. While acknowledging the limited number of interviews, they helped us contextualize the dynamics that emerged from our analysis of quantitative data.
4. We were unable to identify the nature and content of 119 exhibitions, which are listed in the ‘uncertain’ column, as this information was not available on the websites.
5. In the subsequent tables and figures, ‘artists’ is shorthand for an artist-exhibition pair, as artists were counted each time they took part in an exhibition.
6. Solo shows of South Korean artists took place at the South Korean commercial gallery, Arario, in Shanghai.

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