



Soft Power Asian Perspectives

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Soft Power: Asian Attitude debuted as part of the Asia/Europa Mediations in Poznan, Poland in June 2007, and was opened at the Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art in November 2007. Co-curated by the director of the Zendai MoMA, Shen Qibin, and associate curators Binghui Huangfu and Biljana Ciric, this exhibition was one of the first major overviews of contemporary Asian art in Shanghai. It was a timely exhibition in China considering the growing presence of the region on the global economic and political stage. An exhibition that included twenty-eight artists from thirteen countries, *Soft Power* was an attempt to position China, not only as the window to contemporary Asian cultural and artistic phenomena, but also as a voice of authority to examine contemporary Asian art from an Asian perspective.

The project's conceptual catalyst was the notion that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, rapid and powerful developments in Asia have made it one of the most watched regions in the world. This progress has brought new opportunities as well as challenges to Asian culture and art. With the largest geographical area and the greatest number of countries, the continent is a complex region of political systems, diverse cultures, with a multitude of changes and expeditious development. It is perhaps inevitable that its progress will have an enormous influence on the stability, modification and transformation of global political and economic structures.

The idea of 'Asia' has historically been geographical concept of the West. For 'Asians' however, the notion of 'Asia' remains indistinct. Since the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth-century, the West's expanding forces have propelled radical changes within Asian countries' social structures. Indeed, as a result of the West's colonisation of areas of 'Asia', countries were created that prior to colonisation did not exist for example, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore etc. After the long period of the Cold War,

Asian countries were confronted with modernity articulated by a Western 'language'. Either through embrace or resistance Asian countries began to show 'Western' tendencies in different forms, while at the same time economic prosperity and continuously rising global political status and influences also allowed Asian countries to reinforce and emphasise the notion of self-identity in political, economical and cultural arenas.

As a result, *Soft Power* endeavoured to investigate and analyse Asian cultures through contemporary Asian art, contextualised by its globalised and postmodern environment. It devoted special attention to the ways in which contemporary Asian art manifests its unique cultural roots, despite the predominantly Western context of modernity. The resilience of Asian culture as manifested by Asian contemporary art is considered from the aspect of 'transient forces'—meaning forces that are subtle, beneath-the-surface and potent.

Included in *Soft Power* were works of various media—painting, sculpture, video, installation and performance—dealing with a variety of issues. Confronting the visitor at the entrance of the museum was a conceptual piece by Chinese artist Jin Feng. The work, titled *Yu Qiwei* (2007) made reference to a common crime in Guangdong Province, where pickpockets hide in large suitcases to rummage through other people's suitcases in buses. The title is the name of an actual pickpocket, who at the opening reception of the show crawled into a transparent suitcase, while a group of youths (dressed the same as Yu) mingled with the guests, thus creating a sense of unease exaggerated by their uniformity and incongruity. Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom's *Embryonia* (2007) is a series of photographs showing Thai children dressed in school uniform with their wrists and ankles tied with ribbons in the colours of Thailand's national flag—symbolising the effect on the citizens' mentality, as a result of the country's political instability. Also reflecting on the political state of the country is Sri Lankan artist Chandraguptha Thenuwara's installation *Neo-Barrelism* (2007), where yellow

metal poles used in construction extend from gallery floor to ceiling, to block the viewer's passage and view of abstract paintings on the wall (a reference to the barricades in Sri Lanka's streets due to its political turmoil).

In his curatorial essay, Shen Qibin stated that the exhibition was an attempt to highlight the 'soft power' in Asian culture through art—'soft power' being defined by three aspects—language, attitude and imagination. On a more superficial level, the exhibition revealed an Asian 'nature' of art, in works such as Vasah Sitthiket's *Shadow Play* (2007), a performance using traditional Thai shadow puppets—though it fell short of constructing a critical language that closely analyses (all) the works beyond their apparent cultural identities. As many of the works in the exhibition dealt with the histories and political issues of the artists' countries of origin, one wonders whether it is possible to discuss Asian art beyond the obvious statements on the political and social issues of the region. Perhaps what *Soft Power* achieved was to identify a need for a new Asian art historical language for an understanding of contemporary Asian art beyond Western art history. Such a 'new language' is one that delves further into the history and philosophies of Asian culture—one that does not merely deal with the current conditions as understood via international media—a language whose words and phrases are constructed from individual culture's spirit and emotions. At the moment there is still an overabundance of analyses of contemporary Asian art founded upon (Western) international language, and ironically enough, it is precisely this kind of language that *Soft Power* mostly manifested. For example, during the public artist talks, in a conversation between Chinese artists Qiu Zhijie and Song Dong, Song discussed calligraphy and its influence on his artwork. Calligraphy is an artform that goes back thousands of years, with a complete philosophical and artistic system, but references to such deeply rooted, less obvious influences upon contemporary art were not apparent as the curatorial strategy was more focused on the obvious (again, based on international media language).



Interestingly, some of the most powerful works in the exhibition were those with a degree of subtlety, such as Chinese artist Song Dong's *Cream Painting* (2007), a small rectangular white 'painting' made from smoothed cream. Camouflaged by the white gallery wall, it could easily have been missed by the viewer except for the smell created by the (eventually off) cream. Taiwan artist Chen Chieh-jen's meticulously filmed *The Route* (2006) was a black and white video, interspersing archive film footage with new footage, that documents and comments upon the silent anguish and triumph of dockworkers, presenting a symbolic connection between workers in Liverpool and Taiwan amidst international pressures.

The resonant political overtone of the curatorial concept makes it easy to overlook the artistic aspects of artworks, such as Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen's *Reflections* (2007), a delicate videowork that told a complex story reflecting upon the universal enigma of perception—that seemed somewhat out of

place in *Soft Power*. Rather than achieving a balance among works of such diversity, the curatorial premise allowed the obvious to overpower the subtle. The notions of Asian language, attitude and imagination seemed to resonate more so as slogans, rather than statements successfully delivered visually by the exhibition as a whole. Reminiscent of the red banners one still sees on streets of China today, they expressed the grandeur of a goal without necessarily clarifying the strategies to achieve them. To use the term 'Asia' so broadly was an attempt perhaps by Zendai MoMA (and probably China) to assert authority from a single (Chinese) perspective without much consideration to the specific conditions of the many other different cultures within Asia.

One of the problems of *Soft Power* was its vague interpretation of what it means to be 'Asian'. Other than the nationalities of the artists, the project did not elicit a sensitive editing that articulated why these particular artists and works had been selected.

While there are indeed specific Asian phenomena, there is not one general 'Asian condition'. What was missing is precisely the new language that the exhibition endeavoured to adopt in order to define contemporary Asian art. Such an ambitious goal ran the danger of compromising depth for breadth and unfortunately this was what happened with *Soft Power*. More a smorgasbord of art works from different countries than a considered analysis of artistic phenomena in Asia, it lacked both visually and theoretically, the sort of overall narrative and analytical depth that would allow the viewer to gain an insight into what is currently happening in contemporary Asian art.

Despite its shortcomings, *Soft Power: Asian Attitude* did point to an urgent need for careful studies on Asian contemporary art, especially in the region itself. Ironically, Zendai MoMA's attempt to contextualise the phenomenon of contemporary Chinese art was consequential to China's economic power within



the global arena. This attempt was not so much an outcome of internal confidence, but one rather supported by China's global recognition. That the exhibition *wanted* to avoid, and therefore inevitably compared contemporary Asian with Western art, showed that it still lacked a system to 'tell its own story', hence the over-emphasis of questioning what is 'Asian', resonate with slogans—'language', 'attitude' and 'imagination'. This is a struggle against a current dilemma rather than an assertion of what has existed already—it acknowledges a lack, without comparison, rather than a 'bringing forth', of what has been Asian art's history. Zendai MoMA's *Soft Power* presented a 'will' for change, but it has not yet found the 'right path'.

Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art's opening exhibition which presented the exhibition *85 New Wave*,¹ a movement that represented the beginning of China's cultural transformation and signalling the

birth of Chinese contemporary art, was more effective in the assertion of 'what is Chinese'? During that period, Western influences in art were utilised as a strategy by artists to create a movement, but the ideas were essentially Chinese, full of social and historical concerns. This focused exhibition, that looked inwards rather than broadly outwards, provided a clearer picture and system for understanding contemporary Asian art.

Note

¹ Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing, a not-for-profit, independent art center, one of the first to be developed in China, founded by Belgian industrialists Guy and Myriam Ullens, was opened in November 2007

Soft Power: Asian Attitude

Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai
17 November–28 December 2007

Artists: Lida Abdul, Chen Chiehjen, Heri Dono, Shilpa Gupta, Ho Tzu Nyen, Jin Feng, Jitish Kallat, Reena Kallat, Gulnara Kasmalieva & Muratbek Djumaliev, Will Kwan, Lee Changwon, Owen Leong, Leung Mee Ping, Liu Guangyun, Yukinori Maeda & Yuki Kimura, Qiu Zhijie, Khaled Sabsabi, Shen Shaomin, Vasan Sitthiket, Song Dong, Manit Sriwanichpoom, Su Xinping, Kai Syng Tan, Nan See Tan, Chandraguptha Thenu
Curators: Shen Qibin, Binghui Huangfu and Biljana Ciric