

The Impact of Uli Sigg and CCAA on Chinese Contemporary Art International Development

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Abstract: This paper provides an overview of the development of contemporary Chinese art, highlighting important milestones such as the 798 Art Zone and the 85 New Wave Movement and examining the impact of globalization on the Chinese art scene. Next, the paper explores the personal background and collection philosophy of Uli Sigg, a prominent art collector who has played a significant role in the development of contemporary Chinese art. Sigg's involvement in the establishment of the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) and his role in connecting foreign capital with Chinese artists are discussed. Additionally, the paper examines the influence of Sigg on the international development of contemporary Chinese art through initiatives such as the M+ Museum and the Sigg Prize. The paper points out that Sigg has made an important contribution to the international recognition and exchange of Chinese contemporary art through exhibitions. Finally, the paper concludes by comparing Sigg's contributions with those of other contemporary Chinese art collectors. It is noted that Sigg's contribution is not only in art collecting but more importantly, in his cross-border thinking and global vision, which has had a profound impact on the development of Chinese contemporary art.

Keywords: Chinese contemporary art, Uli Sigg, CCAA, M+ Museum, globalization

1. Introduction

Contemporary art in China experienced a difficult development in the late 20th century, as China was opened up to explosive Western economic and cultural influences. The establishment of joint ventures with foreign companies also affected the globalization of the art world. Mr. Uli Sigg, initially a businessman and the Swiss Ambassador to China, arrived in China before this cultural shock fully impacted it. With his unique artistic vision and extensive network of contacts, Sigg led Chinese contemporary art into the global spotlight. As the most important collector of Chinese contemporary art, Mr. Sigg established the non-profit organization CCAA in 1997, which became an important incentive for artists and a platform for collecting, preserving, and researching literature and information on Chinese contemporary art. In 2012, Mr. Sigg donated thousands of pieces from his private collection to the M+ Museum in Hong Kong, making it the most representative museum for the study of Chinese contemporary art.

What impact did the Western cultural and economic intervention, represented by Mr. Sigg, have on the development of Chinese art? Did Sigg indirectly or directly influence the establishment of art

districts such as 798? What impact have other Chinese contemporary art collectors had, besides Sigg? This paper aims to use a macroscopic perspective of Chinese contemporary art history and documentary analysis to explore in depth how Sigg has contributed to the development of contemporary art. The paper will analyze five aspects: the history of Chinese contemporary art development, Sigg's collection process and philosophy, the establishment of CCAA, the Overview of the Development of Contemporary Art in China.

2. Important Development Nodes

2.1. Important Developmental Milestones

From the "Cultural Revolution Art" of 1966-78 to the "Post-Cultural Revolution" era, art in China was considered a "political tool" during the Cultural Revolution. After 1978, the exploration of artistic freedom began with the "Anti-Cultural Revolution Model." Qu Leilei, a young painter who participated in the "Star Exhibition," stated in an interview with the first issue of the "Fine Arts" magazine in 1980, "I think the essence of painting art is the painter's self-expression from within, to paint his feelings, joy, and pain from life." The discussion on whether art should "self-express" opened the curtain on the development of contemporary art in China.

In September 1979, the "Star Exhibition," which aimed to focus on China's real problems using Western modern art language, was revoked and then re-exhibited in November [1]. After the "scar art" caused by the Cultural Revolution, the exploration of Western abstractionism, and the baptism of the "Waisen style," the important exhibition "The 6th National Art Exhibition" held by the government for the first time in 1984 was still met with discontent from many artists. Therefore, in 1985, the wave of young art began: the modernist art movement, known as the "85 New Wave." That year, many young artists held different exhibitions and academic discussions across the country, including works combining Western painting techniques and Eastern symbols or traditional Eastern ink painting. As a result, various works emerged, becoming an important step in contemporary art history. The same year, American pop artist Robert Rauschenberg's solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing inspired the Chinese art world, and "rebellion" became a symbol of contemporary art. Installation art represented by Huang Yongping, Xu Bing, Wei Guangqing, Lin Tianmiao, and other artists, performance art represented by "Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain," sculpture, visual art, postmodernism, and feminism rapidly exploded in China at the end of the 20th century.

After entering the new century, Chinese contemporary art gained legitimate status, and several influential art districts were established: Beijing's Dashanzi Art District (later renamed 798 Art District), and Songzhuang [2]. At this point, with its vitality and productivity, contemporary art began to establish a market and even entered auction houses, continually creating new high prices. In 2003, the "How Do You Want to Change China?" contemporary art exhibition curated by Fei Dawei opened at the Pompidou Center in Paris, with nearly 70 Chinese artists participating, marking the official entry of Chinese contemporary art into the world of art exchange.

2.2. The Inevitable Result of Globalization

The development of contemporary art in China cannot be separated from the exchange and reference to Western art, which is an inevitable step under the influence of globalization. The impact of Western art history and the foreign economic changes brought about by China's reform and opening up has led to the integration of Chinese art with contemporary art.

In the first decade of the new century, Chinese society underwent tremendous changes, and contemporary art in China entered a new mode, a phase of rapid self-development. A large amount of international exposure brought "olive branches" to Chinese art, and a large number of foreign-

funded galleries were established during this period: top-tier galleries such as UCCA, Pace Gallery, Gagosian, Malingue, and Lehman [2,3]. They not only provided a broader exhibition platform for contemporary Chinese art, allowing more Chinese artists to have the opportunity to showcase their works internationally, but also promoted the mature development of contemporary art education and business in China through various forms of exhibitions, art activities, and lectures.

3. Uli Sigg

3.1. Personal Background

In 1979, Uli Sigg arrived in China as the Asia-Pacific regional manager of the Swiss Schindler Group to expand business cooperation. Through Sigg's efforts, Schindler established its first Sino-foreign joint venture in China. From 1995 to 1998, Sigg lived in China again as the Swiss Ambassador to China, North Korea, and Mongolia [3]. As one of the few foreigners in the 1990s who deeply understood Chinese culture prompted Sigg to collect Chinese contemporary art actively. Today, Sigg is not only a collector but also a member of the international associations of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Tate Modern and the world's largest collector of Chinese contemporary art.

Sigg's past collecting experience provided him with a unique artistic perspective when he first entered China in the 1980s to understand this unfamiliar developing country. Sigg began observing how contemporary Chinese artists express themselves and their social environment. He spent a long time looking for art pieces that he liked, and in this process, he discovered that no individual or institution systematically collected Chinese contemporary art. This gave him an idea that later became an essential factor in promoting the development of Chinese contemporary art: to collect Chinese contemporary art from a macro-historical perspective. In the late 20th century, when the development of Chinese art was not yet systematic, Sigg visited the studios of over 1,000 artists in China, collected 2,000 pieces of art from over 230 artists, including Ai Weiwei, Zhang Tiehai, Zhang Xiaodong, Lin Tianmiao, and other highly innovative contemporary artists. The works cover various materials such as images, installations, and prints, regarded as the "Encyclopedia of Chinese Contemporary Art." This series of "Sigg Collection" is an extremely valuable and historically significant part of Chinese contemporary art development history [4].

3.2. Establishment of CCAA

In 2016, a new documentary film titled "The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg" directed by German filmmaker Michael Schindhelm was released, which showcased Sigg's simple appearance walking on the streets of Beijing in the 1980s, visiting poor artists' studios, and participating in artistic exchanges and collaborations [4, 5].

Sigg had already become a historical participant in the development of contemporary Chinese art, and in 1997, when contemporary art was still in a semi-underground state in China, he founded the CCAA to vigorously promote noteworthy Chinese contemporary art to the world, to encourage Chinese contemporary artists and recommend Chinese art to renowned international curators such as Harald Szeeman, Alanna Heiss, Hou Hanru (Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs at the San Francisco Art Institute), and Roger Buergel [6]. The CCAA established two awards - the "Artist Award" and the "Critics' Award" - to encourage award-winning artists through cash prizes, exhibitions, and publications, opening the door for Chinese contemporary art to emerge from its semi-underground status. The judging panel consisted of experienced artists actively engaged in the Chinese contemporary art scene and the most influential international museum curators and exhibition organizers. Sigg also participated in the judging panel, providing international, authoritative, and diverse art criticism standards for Chinese artists.

4. Uli Sigg and CCAA's Impact

4.1. Leading Foreign Capital to Promote the Globalization of Chinese Contemporary Artworks

From a macro-historical perspective, it is foreseeable that the development of contemporary art in China has been influenced and guided by foreign capital. Western art has a continuous history of thousands of years and has formed a mature art production and sales system. Although the history of Chinese antiques and ink painting can also be traced back thousands of years, the development of contemporary art and the market in China has been relatively lagging. It was not until the “May 4” New Culture Movement in 1954 that the concept of modern “art” was introduced to China. With the Western art concepts brought back by the “New Youth” who studied abroad in the 1990s, “art” gradually developed in the difficult environment of new China [7]. Sigg, as the most representative and important Western capital intervention, has led Chinese contemporary art to rapidly cross the hundred-year history of “Western contemporary art” in the correct direction.

Under Sigg's introduction, Baron Guy Ullens and Mrs. Myriam Ullens (who is a director of the British TATE Art Gallery) collected a large number of Chinese contemporary art pieces and established the large-scale contemporary art museum UCCA in Beijing's 798 Art Zone in 2007, making significant contributions to cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries and the development of contemporary art in China [8]. To date, UCCA has held a large number of representative exhibitions of Chinese and foreign art, including group exhibitions such as “85 New Wave: The First Contemporary Art Movement in China” (2007), “Vitality: A View of Chinese Contemporary Art” (2008), “Eight Key Figures of the New Century” (2009), “Lawrence Weiner in China” (2016), and solo exhibitions of Chinese and foreign artists such as “Becoming Andy Warhol” (2021), “Retrospective of Diao Deqiang” (2015), and “Qiu Zhijie: Journeys without Arrivals” (2019), among others (many of the solo exhibitions of Chinese artists were curated by the director, Philip Tinari, after 2017). Over the past 16 years, UCCA has played an important role as a bridge in promoting cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries and the development of contemporary art in China [9].

Sigg himself is a true activist in promoting the international development of Chinese art. In an interview for a documentary, Sigg said, “I heard that they only invited a dozen Chinese artists, so I wrote them letters one by one recommending Chinese artists [4].” On June 10, 2009, the 40th Basel Art Fair was held in Switzerland. Compared to 75 galleries from the United States and 56 galleries from Germany, only four galleries from China participated, indicating that Chinese contemporary art still had a long way to go. However, it was surprising to see that an installation piece by an Italian artist was composed of a hundred black-and-white Chinese contemporary art pieces, showing that Chinese contemporary art had indeed gone global. “These all belong to China, and one day I will bring all of my collections back to China,” Sigg said in the documentary “Uli Sigg's Life in China” [4].

4.2. M+ Museum and Sigg Prize

In November 2021, after 15 years of planning, the M+ Museum in Hong Kong opened in the West Kowloon Cultural District. As one of the founders and jury members, Uli Sigg donated his collection of 1,510 contemporary Chinese artworks to the M+ Museum in 2012, including paintings, photography, installations, videos, and performance art. The collection covers various media from the Cultural Revolution, the Anonymous Art Group, the Stars Group, and Chinese contemporary art from 1979 to early 2012, with a value of approximately 1 billion RMB at that time [10]. This donation has made the M+ Museum one of the most significant collectors of Chinese contemporary

art in the world and an essential foundation for the museum's establishment. Furthermore, with the close collaboration between Sigg and M+, the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) became the Sigg Prize in 2018, and it has been under the M+ Museum's auspices since then [11,12].

Compared with the original Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA), the Sigg Prize expands the scope of selection, aiming to highlight and promote the diverse artistic creations and cultural dialogues in the Greater China region. Furthermore, it removes restrictions on the artists' identity and age and is open to artists born or working in the Greater China region [10]. Since its establishment in 2018, the Sigg Prize has become the highest-value award in Chinese contemporary art, with a prize of HKD 500,000 awarded to the winner and all expenses covered by the M+ Museum [10].

In the documentary "Uli Sigg and China," one of the board members of the M+ Museum, Mr. Lo Chung-mau, stated that the collaboration between M+ and CCAA would promote a more systematic and effective means to support further contemporary art practices in the Greater China region based on the 20 years of development in modern art through CCAA.

5. International Development of Contemporary Art in China

5.1. Signs of China's Contemporary Art Moving Towards the International Stage

As mentioned previously, one of the judges of the first CCAA, Harald Szeeman, who was also the curator of the 1999 Venice Biennale, invited 20 Chinese artists to participate in the Venice Biennale. Mr. Szeeman named the exhibition "dAPER Tutto Over All," and the works of Chinese artists were scattered throughout the Giardini, Arsenale, and the Italian Pavilion in Venice. The Biennale was considered to have pushed Chinese contemporary art onto the world stage.

In 2005, the touring exhibition "Mahjong: The Collection of the Swiss National Art Museum" began at the Bern Art Museum and climaxed Sigg's collection of Chinese contemporary art. The "Mahjong" exhibition featured over 200 works by more than 80 artists, divided into twelve themes to deconstruct the development of Chinese art since the end of the 20th century. As the world's first comprehensive exhibition of Chinese contemporary art, "Mahjong" caused an unprecedented sensation in the Western world, with the European art world even considering it the "Bible" for understanding Chinese contemporary art. This was the first major exhibition of Chinese art in the West, and it was shown in five museums around the world: the Bern Art Museum and Holderbank in Switzerland in 2005; the Hamburg Art Museum and the Museum der Moderne Salzburg in Austria in 2006; the Berkeley Art Museum in 2008; and the Pitman Essex Museum in 2009 [13]. Since then, the behavior of Swiss collectors buying Chinese contemporary art has been referred to as the "Mahjong Effect" [13].

In 2008, on the eve of the Beijing Olympics, people rekindled their interest in showcasing Chinese culture and art to the world. This led to a surge in investment in art, and new museums and galleries were established, with greater emphasis on promoting Chinese artists domestically and internationally. Uli Sigg was also invited as a cultural consultant by Mr. De Meuron, the architectural partner of the Beijing National Stadium, and, under Sigg's leadership, he observed the lifestyle of the Chinese masses. Mr. De Meuron said, "I want to build a sports arena for them, not just for the Olympics" [4]. Similarly, the artist Cai Guoqiang was the chief fireworks designer for the Olympics, and his spectacular fireworks display added a vivid touch to the opening ceremony.

The increasing attention paid to Chinese contemporary art during the 2008 Olympics also had a lasting impact on the international art market. Chinese artists' works began to gain greater recognition and demand in the auction market, such as Zhang Xiaogang's work "Bloodline Big Family Series," which sold for RMB 16,800,000 at the Beijing Poly auction in 2009, and Emperor Huizong's "Album of Birds and Animals" (handscroll), collected by the Uli Sigg couple, which was

sold for RMB 61,712,000 to the well-known collector Liu Yiqian. Many Chinese artists' works began to set record sales figures at auctions around the world.

5.2. Other Chinese Contemporary Art Collectors

Mr. Yu Deyao, an Indonesian Chinese, has been collecting Chinese contemporary art since early on. Since 2004, he has formally entered the contemporary art field as an entrepreneur. He has been collecting contemporary Chinese artworks continuously with Chinese contemporary art history as the thread, establishing a significant collection system covering the golden age of Chinese contemporary art development from 1985 to 1995 [14]. In 2007, he founded the Yu Deyao Foundation, and in 2014, he established the Shanghai Yu Deyao Museum [14]. Mr. Yu Deyao and Mr. Uli Sigg both have an outward-looking perspective on Chinese contemporary art, but unlike Mr. Sigg, Mr. Yu Deyao's collection is mainly exhibited on the Chinese mainland.

Mr. Liu Yiqian's collection behavior is guided by his own aesthetic standards and artistic pursuits. He and his wife, Ms. Wang Wei, are the founders of Long Museum, one of the most influential museums in Shanghai. In 1994, they purchased Chen Yifei's oil painting "Mountain Breeze" for 2.86 million yuan, breaking the record for the highest price of Chinese oil paintings then [15]. Mr. Liu Yiqian is committed to collecting works with unique artistic value and innovative spirit. His collection of Chinese contemporary art includes works by many influential Chinese contemporary artists, such as Ai Weiwei, Dai Yi, Zhang Daqian, Wu Guanzhong, and Chen Danqing. With their unique vision and strength, Mr. Liu Yiqian and Ms. Wang Wei continuously select those precious and historically significant artworks and display and preserve them in Long Museum, which they created [15]. Mr. Liu Yiqian also cooperated with German art museums to hold the "Chinese Contemporary Art Exhibition" in 2009, and his collection behavior has promoted the exchange and cooperation between Chinese contemporary art and the international art world.

Compared with other important contemporary art collectors, Mr. Uli Sigg has the largest, most systematic, and most comprehensive collection of Chinese contemporary art. Due to Mr. Sigg's unique background, the Chinese art pieces he collected have had the opportunity to be exhibited for longer periods and more frequently in European countries, thus playing important guiding and promoting role in the development of Chinese contemporary art.

6. Conclusions

This paper provides an in-depth discussion on the international impact of Uli Sigg and the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) on Chinese contemporary art by exploring the development history of Chinese contemporary art, Sigg's personal collection background, and the establishment of CCAA. As the most systematic collector of Chinese contemporary art, Sigg has not only left important research value for the development of Chinese art during this period but also promoted the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art in history by increasing the exposure of Chinese artists and art pieces in Europe. The discussion on Sigg and CCAA, as well as the establishment of the 2019 M+ museum and the improvement of the Sigg Prize, provides the audience with a new perspective to discuss the factors that may affect artistic development and to think about how the world economy promotes cultural and artistic exchange under the influence of globalization.

Through the discussion, it can be concluded that the international promotion role of Uli Sigg in Chinese contemporary art is undeniable, as well as other collectors like Mr. Yu Deyao, who have made important contributions to the protection of Chinese art. However, in the irreversible process of globalization, the development of Chinese art should keep up with the international market, adhere to its own characteristics, and avoid excessive Westernization.

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