

# ***The Influence of Dominant Groups on China's Art Collectors and Contemporary Art Curatorial Practices***

**Jialin Zhang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Asia Art Center, Dashanzi 798 Art Zone, No.2 Jiuxiaoqiao Rd., Chaoyang Dist., Beijing, China  
a. jialinzh@foxmail.com

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** With the rapid development of China's economy, contemporary Chinese art has also achieved unprecedented breakthroughs. With the expansion of globalization and as a socialist country with the unique nature of Chinese characteristics, how do the curatorial practices of Chinese contemporary art develop in a complex social environment? This research explores the influence of dominant groups on China's art collectors and contemporary art curatorial practice based on the Frankfurt School's critical theory. Furthermore, the research expands this theory to a broader context of China. The curatorial practices of Chinese contemporary art are deeply controlled by monopoly capital, which influences the aesthetic preferences of the public through the monopoly of popular culture. It borrows the hands of wealthy collectors to manipulate the art market. Political parties set boundaries for artistic creation through strict censorship. On the positive hand, censorship promotes the inheritance of traditional culture. By understanding that there is an invisible hand behind human cultural and artistic activities, to warn that the self-consciousness people believe is usually the result of being influenced by others' language and behavior.

**Keywords:** the Frankfurt school's social theory, monopoly capitalism, political parties, contemporary art, curatorial practices

## **1. Introduction**

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, avant-garde art emerged in response to political and social changes and thrived. The next forty years have witnessed tremendous changes in Chinese politics, society, and culture. However, decades ago, the Chinese contemporary art circle was still in its infancy, and some far-sighted collectors were actively traveling at home and abroad to promote and support its development [1].

Many pioneering works appeared in the 1980s and 1990s when young Chinese artists made great strides. At that time, countless sparks of thought burst out, including some abstract art and performance art, and art groups such as Star Art Group, Cynical Realism, Post-89 New Art, and Political Pop also emerged. The academic has recorded the history of Chinese contemporary art's birth process and witnessed its development [1].

Much research has been done on how politics and capitalism impact people's ideology and Chinese curatorial practices based on Western curatorial theories. However, there is a knowledge gap on the joint influence of the socialist government and the capitalist financial elite, in China's national

conditions, on people's aesthetic preferences, and how the affected collector groups, in turn, affect China's contemporary art curatorial practices.

This research is in light of the Frankfurt School's social theory, which emphasizes the material influence of dominant groups on society. This study expands Frankfurt School's theory to China's context. It combines it with China's national conditions to elaborate the effect of another dominant party besides capitalism, the socialist government, as a supplement. In short, this research discusses the influence of dominant groups on China's art collectors and contemporary art curatorial practices.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Social Theory on Capitalism and Socialism**

Karl Marx argues that all history is the history of class struggle [2]. In Marxism, it is the economic infrastructure that determines the political superstructure. With the development of the relations of production and globalization, when it comes to the early twentieth century, the Frankfurt School's theory gave rise to criticism of Marx's social theory when the nature of production transformed from liberal capitalism to monopoly capitalism [3].

The Frankfurt School's theory argues that in late capitalism, the individual's psyche is shaped by the cultural shifts stemming from the growth and spread of monopoly capitalism. With monopoly capitalism, the development of large-scale administrative structures, and the merging of advertising interests with art and popular culture - each contributes to an environment in which the individual is discouraged from thinking and acting in ways that foster a sense of self-responsibility autonomy [3]. As Corradetti argues, the task of the Frankfurt School's critical theory is to clarify the sociopolitical determinants and explain the limits of analysis of a particular philosophical view [4]. Applying this theory to Chinese society, the factors determining sociopolitics involve socialism.

### **2.2. China's Development of Culture in Contemporary Society**

Socialism in China has a history of almost a century, from the 1890s to the end of the twentieth century. Since the 1980s, however, socialism has had little to do with people's everyday lives due to global capitalism and shows signs of becoming an integral part of a culture of consumption [5]. Therefore, the reform and opening up in the 1980s is a landmark in differentiating contemporary and modern society as globalization has subtly transformed social ideology. This research will focus on analyzing the impact of capitalist cultural manipulation in the context of globalization.

Latham [6] has given a broad overview from a Westerner's perspective of the development of Chinese contemporary famous cultural landscape since the reform and opening up from the perspective of historical and social issues. During this period, popular culture enters Chinese society, constantly colliding and intertwining with traditional Chinese culture. Wu and Wang [7] sort out the stories of avant-garde Chinese art from 1976 until 2006, chronologically describing various art forms and their historical background.

Regarding Socialist Political Censorship, it is not an isolated phenomenon in China. Batycka [8] has expressed a distressed attitude towards the increased attacks against free speech and art expression due to the pandemic since 2020. He gives many examples of censorship of artistic activities in various countries worldwide. Hencz [9] also expressed the negative emotion of censorship by illustrating that censorship is the most common violation of creative freedom. While in this research, there will see a positive aspect of censorship.

### 2.3. Art Collectors and Curatorial Practices

Moureau, Duvaux, and Vidal [10] have done quantitative research on art collectors in France. They give detailed data about the art collectors regarding age, education level, types of collections, sizes, time spent on collection, and financial commitment. They also analyze their collecting motivation and relationships with artists and art institutions. This research helps to understand what role the collectors play in the art scene and how they promote the transactions and sale of art in the market. With a foundation of knowledge based on their research, further study about collectors' influence on curatorial practices make sense.

Gaskill [11] argues that the curatorial role has transformed from behind-the-scenes to a centralized position. Therefore, it plays an active role in display and preservation. Curatorial practice is not limited to art preservation and exhibitions. It includes a series of art-related activities, including art transactions, cross-border projects, art public education, auctions, and auction previews, which are all crucial.

With the development of communication technology, social media enable cultural participants to both explore images of themselves and distribute those images across broad online social networks. Art institutions globally are starting to use social media, such as blogs and vlogs, to engage online participants with new interactive experiences [12]. Stanusch [13] illustrates the influences of how people see art and how it is exhibited in museums. She also mentioned that the museums considered how the exhibitions worked well for Instagram. Nevertheless, she supposes that social media does not bring people more fun because it is always to miss the art when rushing into photo-hunting. The previous studies have discussed how social media changes the curatorial practices of art institutions and the negative attitude of ordinary audiences excessively focusing on social media when seeing art. However, the researchers overlook the power of social media when professionals entirely use it as a vehicle for more profound business and the export of ideas and values.

### 3. Curatorial Practices and China's Social Structure

Curatorial practices refer to the methodologies and standards that support curatorial activities, including research, conservation, and exhibitions, which are the core functions of Museums and art galleries [14]. This essay emphasizes the exhibition of curatorial practice. The presentation of art reflects the interpretation instead of simply seeing or demonstrating [15]. Thus, academics acknowledge that curatorial practices are never value-neutral but power relations embedded [14].

Modern society exposes the public to first-class art, and collectors control artworks. They shape the forms of contemporary curatorial practices and create unique exhibitions which transform the art scene [16]. This essay will start with the social structure of China.

China is a modern socialist country with Chinese characteristics. China has made tremendous economic and social achievements. The capitalist market economy sprouted and developed in China since the reform and opening up [6]. Simultaneously, China keeps the socialist government intervention [17]. Therefore, China's society has two dominant groups: the financial elite and the socialist party, the government.

### 4. Dominant Group I - Financial Elite

The financial elite is the group of people who have solid economic infrastructure. In the past, art was only privileged to a minority group. Art was their lifestyle or entertainment. There was no advertisement for art exhibitions back then, while in modern society, social media has become the primary media, making them easier to contact art [6].

Since the 1980s, the Chinese economy has developed for four decades. There generate two generations of wealthy people [17]. The first generation of rich people succeeded in acquiring

material wealth in the wave of reform and opening up. When they complete the general resource allocation, they embark on the road of art collection. This generation has a strong sense and spiritual connection with traditional Chinese culture. They prefer to collect ancient art, antiques, and modern Chinese art. Nevertheless, the second rich generations, consisting of wealthy kids of the first generation and the newly affluent class, are born in the era of the changes in science-technology and information. This group has grown under the influence of digital images and animations.

## **5. Traditional Culture for the Old Wealthy Generation**

Regarding the first rich generation, traditional culture is rooted in their hearts. In China, traditional culture refers to the value of harmony, benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, honesty, loyalty, filial piety, and so forth [18].

This group of collectors prefers ancient Chinese calligraphy and paintings, especially ink paintings and paintings with evident oriental style and elements. Plus, they concentrate on the religious aspects of the artworks, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, within the paintings. Most of them look at modern pictures in museums and auction previews.

Moreover, once they are willing to buy contemporary artworks, they are concerned about the artists' background, whether they graduated from art school, whether their painting styles have educational value, or whether their techniques were inherited from famous masters.

## **6. Pop Culture for the Young Wealthy Generation**

As for the second rich generation, things have become different. These people are born in the time of mature capitalism in China. Consumerism is the core of this era. According to the Frankfurt School's argument, large-scale companies could produce and distribute in late capitalism through global networks, which finally came into monopoly capitalism [3].

Consequently, the culture of monopoly capitalism becomes the equivalent of a high-sugar diet where people indulge in an entertainment-first lifestyle. The individual is discouraged from thinking and acting in ways in the sense of self-responsibility autonomy. They are immersed in the short-lived dopamine of mobile games, TV dramas, variety shows, and videos. This way, these popular culture and entertainment products are deeply infiltrated into people's aesthetics and cultural ideology. Marcuse argues that sometimes they think they are allowed to realize and pursue their desires but in ways beneficial to the system [3].

In light of this, even cultural and aesthetic discourse power is created by the cultural elite in this society. The mass ideology is also shaped by the cultural elite invisibly [3].

With the development of social media, the influence of popular culture, for example, pop music, fashion, and entertainment programs, plays an essential role in the lifestyle of the young generations. The curation of contemporary art has been deeply influenced by pop culture. There appear many Instagramable art exhibitions that are very famous on social media. Many bloggers come to the exhibitions to take photos and post them on their accounts. These exhibitions have typical characteristics: the images are colorful with strong visual impact, or the character of the painting is an anime image familiar to the young generation in childhood, both based on visual narrative. When they post pictures of the exhibitions, they attract several likes or comments on Instagram, or Xiaohongshu, a popular social media app in China similar to Instagram. Popular culture gives birth to collective common interest with the penetration of advertising and posts on social media. People fear and are prejudiced about their differences in this context, enhancing pop culture's discourse power [3].

In this situation, many exhibitions are curated to appeal to more young people to come and post on social media. Trendy exhibitions have become a new form of curatorial practice. Furthermore,

more art institutions, artists, and even collectors build up their accounts on social media and post artworks on social media. A new curatorial method-online exhibition-comes up.

Under monopoly capitalism, artworks become commodities. The ultimate objective of the curation is to sell. Thus, the preference of the collectors determines the contents of the art exhibitions and the selection of the artist.

Some art collectors are conscious of putting artworks in their houses as part of interior design. They buy an expensive house and decorate it with artwork to add value to the house. In general, the artwork should be beautiful and fit for the home. Some with heavy topics could not be proper options. Besides, young generations do not care about the artists' background, whether they graduate from an art school or not. They buy them just because they like the image. In light of this, visual experience trumps other factors that determine the value of the artwork. Based on this requirement, art fairs have been one of the most popular curatorial practices in recent years. People buy artwork at art fairs, like any commodities in big supermarkets.

## 7. Dominant Group II - Socialist Party

The second dominant group in China is the political party. Works on display require intense political censorship, especially in Beijing, China's political and cultural center. Exhibitions here are more academic, oriental, and prudent. Compared to Shanghai, which is the financial center of China, the shows are trendier and more cosmopolitan.

As the core center of art in the 1980s and 1990s, Beijing carried the most advanced artistic trends, and many arts depicting Chinese society and politics at that time gathered here. In today's society, the previous political or traditional art continues here, changing with the political wind. Contemporary art carries out modern expression and traditional inheritance based on catering to the current political trend [5].

Taking the galleries based in 798 Art Zone, the famous and vital art center in Beijing, as an example, all exhibitions should be reported to the Cultural Law Enforcement Department for permission, and the related personnel should come to investigate during the exhibitions. Once any image or content is improper, the artwork must be replaced. If severe, the exhibition and the gallery will be ordered to close down for rectification.

## 8. Case Study: A7 Young Collectors Summit

A7 Young Collectors Summit was co-hosted by Yongle Auction and 600 Minutes Collection Consulting Firm. It invited seven young collectors currently active in the collection industry to discuss their collection stories, collection methodologies, and the relationship between collections and the times.

The host mentioned that in an interview about art collection ten years ago in 2013, young collectors or the second generation of galleries argued that they would get permission from their parents before they collect any artwork or even buy it secretly because their parents did not accept their aesthetics. Ten years later, the second generation can buy and sell artworks freely. They even could affect their parents, who collected Zao Wou-Ki and Chang Yu.

Among the seven collectors, three are second-generation collectors; one is second-generation of a vehicle firm, five have their artspace, and two operate their own social media art accounts. They shared their stories and attitude about art collection, from which a picture of the collection preferences and perspectives on contemporary art of young Chinese collectors could be drawn.

**Sean** is a digital artist and a blogger of Xiaohongshu. His collection aims to find his favorite artists who share a common language. His Xiaohongshu account shares other good artists not recognized by the art market, which helps the public understand them. He is doing what galleries should do.

However, the content displayed by many art institutions is very obscure, which makes people hard to understand. Thus, he aims to make art get closer to the public. He also mentioned that the issues discussed in the art circle should be transformed from the beauty of form in the past to the influence of digital media and technology on human beings today. Besides, he decided to move forward to the secondary market.

**Pan Yang**, whose father is an ancient art collector and an artist. Art, for him, is a traditional concept; he has difficulty understanding the conceptual and reflective stuff, but he supports her collection.

**Li Na** is a blogger of Xiaohongshu. She likes to criticize and express her attitude, and she does not like the harmony phenomenon in the art circle. Most of her artworks are acquired from the auction market due to her antipathy for bundle sales in gallery transactions.

**Che Xuanqiao** runs an art space only doing pioneering exhibitions such as video and performance art. She relies on intuition when collecting and tries to avoid being swayed by the market.

**Yuan Bing** has an art space as well. She also resists bundle sales and being prioritized by buying power. Yuan mentioned that some auction company is sorting out the artist's creative context and shooting it into a short documentary to help collectors understand the artist behind the work.

**He Juju** is operating her art space. She used to acquire artworks at the secondary market, which she regarded as fair. Generally, the auction house does not take the initiative to guide collectors but respects the choice of collectors and provides academic assistance according to the selection, more like a consultant. They also help collectors contact opportunities for exhibitions after the transaction.

**Zhang Yunjia** is a curator of an art gallery. She argues for judging artists by their creation instead of their business value.

(Source: 600 Minutes Collection Consulting Firm WeChat Official Accounts.) [19]

To conclude, this summit brings some information on the current contemporary art collection. However, this is a minimal sample among collectors. Further research needs to have proceeded. According to the present study, there could draw some conclusions. The original gallery business model is being questioned regarding their obscured curatorial language and inappropriate bundle sale. Instead, social media as a communication platform gives more art practitioners and lovers more opportunities to express their opinions, new curatorial forms come into being, and exhibitions are promoted. Secondly, new curatorial practices, including art fairs and auction houses, have become increasingly popular. Thirdly, young collectors rely more on their intuition, focusing on the visual effects of the paintings and their resonance, and rarely pay attention to the artist's background and traditional cultural connotations such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Furthermore, many collectors gain more exposure for their preferred works by expressing opinions and having more voice on social media. Collectors on the secondary market promote their collections by using artworks as financial instruments. Thus many collectors prefer to acquire artworks at auctions, simultaneously affecting the art market trends.

## 9. Conclusions

This research is based on the theory of the influence of capitalist dominant groups on human ideology in Western socialist theory. It explores the impact of this theory on Chinese society, the dominant groups, including the bourgeois financial elite and socialist political parties, which is the government, on the curatorial practices of Chinese contemporary art. On the one hand, capitalism influences art curatorial practice by dominating economically powerful collectors. On the other hand, socialist parties control the content and form of curatorial practices through strict political censorship.

On the consequences, it is concluded that monopoly capitalism, through the influence of popular culture and globalization, coupled with the development of information technology and the Internet, gives the financial elite more voice, which led the art industry to cater to the tastes of collectors,

especially young generations. Collectors also convey their aesthetic preferences through social media and manipulate the art market, strengthening their right to speak. Social media helps spread popular culture like visually stunning images. In light of this, a closed loop of art guidance and consumption triggered by capitalism is formed.

In terms of the political party, although censorship and control inhibit the creativity of art, it has a positive meaning in protecting and inheriting traditional culture. Censorship is not unique in China but is broadly applied worldwide. It is reasonable to investigate artworks to promise quality and avoid unnecessary troubles. However, the homogenization of art caused by excessive censorship must be vigilant.

This research proposes that contemporary art curatorial practices are influenced and manipulated by art collectors and the monopoly capitalist and socialist governments behind them to remind the public that a series of social activities such as culture, politics, and economy happening in current society, are being controlled and swayed by an invisible hand. People should be conscious of their own and others' language and behavior, and consciously exercise to think independently instead of being swayed by society and others.

This research has some limitations. Firstly, it is impossible to quantify the artistic aesthetic and quality of the artwork. They are subjective and abstract. The study is based on the author's observation in the art industry as an art practitioner and other communications with peers in the art scene. Besides, the A7 young generation summit case study provides a limited sample to reference. It is impossible to cover all art industry. In addition, the manipulation and influence of capitalism and socialist governments on people is subtle, so it is difficult to detect quickly. Therefore, the impact of dominant groups on curatorial practice in the art world seems irrelevant at first thought, and more convincing evidence needs to be found. Consequently, it is hoped that more relevant research will be conducted in-depth.

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## Appendix

To better understand and distinguish different art functional institutions, this article uniformly uses terms such as museum, art gallery, gallery, and art space.

- A **museum** is a national-level large-scale art collection and displays institution that exhibits particular artworks, such as historical relics, ancient art, and antiques.
- **Art galleries** refer to non-profit art institutions with public cultural education and dissemination, research, exhibition, and organization of large-scale public art projects.
- **Galleries** refer to profit-making institutions that display and trade artworks and usually do not have the function of carrying out various public art projects.
- **Artspace** is a private art institution with a gallery function and cross-border projects in multiple fields.
- The **art institution** is the general term for the above institutions.