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Review of Doctoral Dissertation of Muchuan Wang
Born 07/12/1974

Title of Dissertation:

**Inner and Outer Relations from the Book of Changes (I Ching):
Contemporary Sculpture with Elements Derived from
Traditional Chinese Culture**

Doctoral Thesis in the Field of Art
in the Discipline of Fine Arts and Art Conservation
at Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wroclaw, Poland,

Author: Muchuan Wang
Promoter: dr hab. Michał Staszczak, prof. ASP
Wrocław,

Review By Marek Ranis

I feel honored to be asked to write a Ph.D. review for Mr. Muchuan Wang at Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wroclaw, Poland, my distinguished Alma Mater. As alumnus and former faculty, it is a privilege to contribute to the program, which over the years since my graduation grew to be one of the leading institutions in Poland and Europe.

In my academic reviews I start with examining the CV of a candidate, this gives me a quick glimpse of the applicant's history and the trajectory of their career. I have to admit that this Mr. Wang's dossier offers a certain challenge. Mr. Wang did not provide a clearly formatted professional curriculum vitae or a resume to give a crucial information about his education, professional development and a timeline of achievements. I was able to find a short note about Mr. Wang education in his Ph.D. questionnaire: MA at Tshingua University in 2007 and BFA at Jilin University of Fine Arts in 2000, however this short entry provides no information about his majors or focus of study.

Lack of an academic standard CV which would include a full list of exhibitions, grants, fellowships, art residencies, publications and reviews creates a bit of concern and is negatively affecting my ability for an in-depth review. For example, there is an obvious gap in activities between Mr. Wang's 2000 BFA and his 2007 MA, then there is a list of exhibitions which starts

in 2019. Provided documentation, so limited in its scope or timeline does not allow me to fully understand and appreciate professional progress and a trajectory of achievements leading to a Doctoral Dissertation of Mr. Wang in 2022.

Included in the portfolio list of professional achievements is features six solo shows, all of them between 2020 and 2022, which gives me an impression of an active two years of artistic production and dissemination. All solo shows were in China and in Poland and majority of the shows were in educational institutions, such art colleges or an art academy. Possibly one would desire to see dissemination in other types of venues as well.

The list of group shows which starts in 2019 gives a more positive picture, with a diverse range of institutions and shows in Korea, Italy and India, yet Mr. Wang does not provide information about a number of participants and if the shows were results of competition, juried or were invitational, curated. More than 25% of the group shows were online, those type of shows have normally lesser gravity as academic and artistic achievements. Perhaps a global pandemic could be seen as a mitigating factor, considering the timeline. Mr. Wang is listing two artistic awards, one in China and one in Japan, and two conference presentation, he also lists several professional workshop that he was participated in as part of professional development.

Mr. Wang provides an additional Description of Didactic Achievements, starting with Excellent Instructor of Far East Asia Art Prize in 2021, awarded by Hongkong Asia Design Association, Hongkong. This is followed by teaching experience at Northern Normal University in Changchun as well as at the Geppert Academy in Wroclaw. This gives a very positive impression that teaching and art instruction play a significant role among Mr. Wang's professional activities. Mr. Wang is stressing a relation between his artistic research and teaching by proving examples of intercultural workshops he has been conducting at the Geppert Academy.

I will now move to the review of the Doctoral Thesis of Mr. Wang: *The Inner and Outer Relations from the Book of Changes (I Ching): Contemporary Sculpture with Elements Derived from Traditional Chinese Culture*

Mr. Wang defines the content of his doctoral thesis as an "artistic research based on experimental studio practice and the resulting artworks. This studio based artistic research contains artistic experiments accompanied with research on related literal and visual sources as well as artists and their works". Mr. Wang is profoundly inspired by inner and outer relations between Yin and Yang and he explores this formally by creating the work, which focuses on confrontational relationship of animals, objects, symbols, abstract forms as well as human figures. His visual investigation is also informed by concept of five elements, this leads him to use a variety of different sculptural materials as well as different forms of expression. The works presented in the portfolio includes: photography, sculpture, drawings, collages and installations. I am going to mostly center on body of work called *Shadow and Light*, which was recognized by Mr. Wang as the focus of this review, however many of the early works seem to be directly connected to the *Shadow and Light* series.

The Chinese traditional culture and in particular *Book Of Changes* are main focus and inspiration for Mr. Wang. His interest in his own cultural heritage and identity is very strongly stated in his paper as well as the desire to confront this tradition and knowledge with his Western experience in Poland.

At the beginning of his dissertation, Mr. Wang provides us with quite extensive introduction to *The Book Of Changes*, *Five Elements Theory* and *Ying and Yang*. He is very clear in pointing out a direct source of inspiration by providing us with the history and philosophical background of this ancient form of observation of nature. In his description of *The Book Of Changes* Mr. Wang quickly introduces examples of his past bodies of work such as *Powers* or *Confronting*, in his own words: "Two aspects of my artistic exploration include conceptual development from the Yin-Yang relation as well as technical and material practice regarding the Five Elements.

The early work presented in the portfolio such as *Confronting*, *Powers*, *Directions and Waving* but also the final series *Light and Shadow* represent broad and diverse formal approaches. The subject of yin and yang is explored through photography, collage, drawing, sculptures in different materials. It seems that Mr. Wang artistic practice is driven by a constant desire to experiment and freely explore the materials and methods of fabrication in search for the best possible language. This freedom and variety experimentations should be praised, yet it sometimes indicates a lack of a cohesive approach to visual vocabulary and gives an impression of early artistic sketches ready to be advanced. The visual abstract language gives the impression of early stages of development. It is obvious that Mr. Wang feels much more comfortable in the traditional figurative and representational forms. The quantity of work produced between 2019 and 2022, considering the global pandemic is impressive but the repetitive mode of juxtaposing of the forms in a physical confrontation might indicate some intellectual limitation of the concept. The constant: "dark and light", "positive and negative", "entity and space", "front and back", "outside and inside", "white and black", etc. creates an impression of a little automatic method, a template of approach. This simple repetitive duality of relationships is limiting a potential deeper or more personal and nuanced interpretation of *The Book of Changes*. In the same time Mr Wang is projecting a lot of meaning onto the individual sculptures or installations, stating that they embody: "relations between mind and body, peacefulness and violence, lowliness and sublime, being and nothing, fineness and roughness, softness and hardness, human and nature, self and others, artist and sculpture, subject and object, and so on."

This, in my opinion, creates an unnecessary and unconvincing overload of meaning and symbolism. For example, the juxtaposing of religion vs. militarism as two opposing forces is unconvincing, in fact they are not necessary in opposition and could not be translated to just peace versus violence. Conceptually, restraining any relationship to this simple dualism of black and white, or good and evil creates a weak and intellectually vulnerable approach to increasingly complex relationships we are experiencing in our world.

On the formal level the freedom of material exploration inspired by Five Elements: Metal, Water, Wood, Fire and Earth provides us, the audience, a pleasant opportunity to see how the artist responds to each material's physical properties, each time creating new expressive quality ranging from perceived permanence of the metal to the ephemeral quality of ice.

The final series of the thesis works, *The Shadow and Light Series* is a continuation of earlier experimentations and Mr. Wang himself describe most the pieces as possibly belonging to his early body of work. From this series, *The Heavy Shadow* metal sculpture stands out as probably most significant and profound work. A large human silhouette, in cast iron, rusty, richly textures reminds me of a powerful work of Ana Mendieta and her self-portraits in the

landscape. Mr. Wang is here inspired by his own shadow in urban landscape and a relationship between his Chinese identity and Polish experience. *Heavy Shadow* in the description of Mr. Wang carries multiple meanings, as he is connected to the Chinese Terracotta Warriors in the tomb of the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty, the work of Antony Gormley and of Professor Michal Staszczak. I still see the stronger relation to Mendieta. In *Silhouette* series, the artist provides a very personal response to the place, its aura and the desire to reconnect with one's roots and identity. The relationship between artist's own body and the cast shadow created by the artist himself in the foreign landscape is probably one of Mr. Wang's best interpretations of *The Book of Changes* and the definition of internal and external forces interplaying in defining his identity and art.

The Lightening Body, with its glowing red light created and interesting connection to the *Heavy Shadow* cast iron sculpture, in Mr. Wang own words : "...the internal red light reveals internal metaphors of darkness and light, death and rebirth, sacrifice and sublimation, destruction and survival. This is also a reflection of the external relations and internal thoughts of Yin and Yang. The *Lightning Body* is obviously connected to *Luminous Man* and *Vanishing Man* as well the *Meeting*. This series of figurative works, which utilizes paper and light and metal mesh continues Mr. Wang attempts to abstract human form, making it much more ephemeral, and giving it a more universal symbolic meaning by playing with internal light, external shell, and juxtaposing the forms in the space .

The collection of work such as *Lightning Powers*, *Direction of Desire* and *Flowing Light* represents direct continuation of early experiments with paper and light; I find the works called *Invader* and *Power and its Shadow and Power of Changes* probably most intriguing and original.

The light silhouettes or cutout shapes of pagodas or tanks bring the possibility of a more interesting interpretation of *The Book of Changes*. It is creating potentially more complex commentary about the religion or political ideology vs. power and militarism or violence. One cannot escape a strong association to the image of the tank on Tiananmen square and singular human figure in front of it: the power of individual human spirit against a power of the state or ideology. In this work, Mr. Wang consciously or unconsciously created a powerful commentary about dark and light forces, the interconnection of ying and yang and *The Book of Changes*. In this series, like no other in the portfolio, one can see it, Chinese culture and politics are clashing with western ideology and influence, the fluidity of meaning and interpretation of religion or political ideology or propaganda are all submerged in the power struggle, driven by internal and external forces of yin and yang . The minimalism of the work, its immediacy and an almost primitive and fast-assembled do-it-yourself quality give the work an almost underground, subversive quality of an image to be censored. The simplicity of gesture in *Power of Changes* has got a similar quality of visually and symbolically utilizing similarities of shapes and forms, playing on the opposition of meanings. In my opinion, in this particular series Mr. Wang is getting closer to his original

intention of a new, original contemporary artistic interpretation of *Book of Changes* in the context of East-West relationships and influences as well as internal politics and culture of contemporary China.

I found the *Firing River* as well as *Mysterious Mirror* works to be in the early stage of development, they provide glimpses of promising light effects and installations concepts, to be further developed conceptually, beyond their materiality.

The portfolio presented by Mr. Wang is impressive in its scope of approaches, the use of materials and number of symbolical interpretations of *Book of Changes*. It feels like this is the beginning of an engaging artistic journey, challenging by its scope and complexity yet promising in its interdisciplinarity and intercultural quality. I believe that the concept of Five Elements as source of inspiration for the use of the material as well as its symbolical meaning was one of the strong qualities of this research and well described in the final conclusion of the artist. Mr. Wang generated for himself a methodology which will inspire his future career, as he is stating: "this study is just the beginning of an ongoing exploration in this direction. It may be a stepping stone for my future artistic career."

Based on reading and analysis of the concept and the realization of her dissertation, and after taking into consideration the creative output, I recommend an academic Ph.D. title in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation be granted to Muchuan Wang

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