

China's Total Modernity and Its Relation to Art Management

Jiayi Song

*Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, USA
jiayi.song1021@163.com*

Abstract. This article examines the inseparable relationship between China's art institutions and total modernity. The first section analyzes private organizations' operational methods that meaningfully integrate economic and cultural development through commercialization. The following sections discuss public art institutions' focus on cultural enrichment, highlighting the synthesized creative approach of integrating historical and contemporary Chinese artistic traditions and practices. Overall, this paper focuses on art institutions' ability to integrate economically, involve themselves in people's daily lives and stimulate China's total modernity and national well-being. Through field research and on-site observation at UCCA Beijing (Ullens Center for Contemporary Art) and the National Museum of China from June to August 2025, this paper presents vivid and detailed examples with the most recent data, offering an audience's experience of visiting China's art institutions.

Keywords: art management, modernity, Chinese art institutions, Chinese modernization

1. Introduction

Through their constant involvement in people's daily lives, Chinese art institutions serve as a crucial medium for China's progress towards total modernity. According to Gao Minglu [1], a scholar of China's contemporary art, total modernity is an ever-going progression that addresses timely tasks according to the nation's particular needs. It is also an integration of art with social projects, fusing modern environments with culture, aesthetics, and daily life [1].

As a socialist project, Chinese modernization integrates artistic value with public benefits. Art, therefore, does not play a radical and revolutionary role under the Chinese modernist realm to accelerate reformation; in fact, it becomes the bridge to merge unique cultural development with other developing sectors in society to strengthen the bond between each social sector of total modernity, accelerating the economic, innovative, and cultural growth of the nation all at once. Hence, Chinese art differs from its Western counterpart, which often views itself as a subjective and radical form of confronting social inequality, aesthetic domination, and political interference. For instance, the Dada movement, emphasizing the pure nature of language and art, used art as a tool to fight against political propaganda. By contrast, art in the Chinese context is an interactive yet peaceful form of expression, reflecting artists' experiences in their daily lives instead of serving as a weapon to overturn the structure of society.

2. The shortcomings of art merchandising and its solution

Art merchandising is a key strategy in art management since it connects economic benefits to artistic expressions, generating the simultaneous development that is valued by total modernity. However, the limitation of its economic focus reduces the potential for developing cultural contemplation. The simplification of artistic ideas for the purpose of gaining public acceptance of art prevents the development of in-depth cultural expression and national creativity.

2.1. Comparison: art commercialization and art merchandising

Although both art merchandising and commercialization integrate art into society's daily lives and generate economic growth, merchandising offers facile engagement with integration, while art commercialization effectively pushes art and economic development together. In art merchandising, people's attention to art is generated by the products associated with art, instead of their personal resonance with the message carried by artworks. An example of mechanization would be merely printing the image of an artwork on a T-shirt and selling it to gain profit without contextualization. In this case, people's bond with artwork is weak, simply depending on their need for a specific product that coincidentally is associated with art images. One might argue that the image carries the value of that artwork, so one wants to purchase it. However, the process of designing the shirt does not involve creativity and artistic intention. In the long run, that weak connection reduces society's comprehensive ability to appreciate aesthetics and develop creativity, slowing down the progress towards total modernity.

By contrast, art commercialization integrates the values of art and its associated products, making the consumption based on both material and emotional or spiritual motivations. For example, an intentionally designed Tote bag featuring artworks of nature by an artist engaged in environmental activism not only spreads the aesthetic but also emphasizes the eco-friendly value of reusing the same bag and reducing plastic waste. When people purchase such products, they receive both material and spiritual fulfillment. In a pragmatic manner, a visually pleasing product also increases the frequency of people using it in their daily lives, forming the habit of developing an ethical standard and aesthetic familiarity. By contrast, art merchandising has a loosely regulated market mechanism that lacks the art philosophy in product design, and it puts the focus on generating immediate economic outcomes [2]. With commercialization, China's modernization path is not only progressing economically but also comprehensively towards a total modernity. It preserves the artistic context and fosters constant, in-depth spiritual interaction with audiences, who are the actual forces driving China's development.

However, the current operation of art institutions is embracing the mode of merchandising, which prioritizes profit maximization by attracting a broad range of audiences and compressing the design process. Such design processes are ignored in China's cultural development because they are caught between the paradigms of economy and art. However, as the Bauhaus's tenet once stated, modern people, the "new men", with creative and careful designs, should be able to integrate function and form, making economic products aesthetically pleasing, functionally useful, and meaningful in themselves. For art merchandising, the passive reliance on consumers' reactions towards art images places art under the realm of productivity and isolates it from social interactions, hindering the public's development of critical thinking skills and in-depth contemplation, rendering art a representation of vanity and meaningless appearance. For example, in order to increase the consumption of art products, art stores will collect public data, including the reactions about art merchandising from Chinese media articles, using their reliable interviews to evaluate the masses'

purchase preferences and interested contents for future themes [3]. In Kharchenkova's observations in Chinese contemporary art centers like UCCA and Power Station of Art in Beijing and Shanghai, it is revealed that these art operations collaborate with artists to design their art merchandise together [3]. Cultural theorist Walter Benjamin once stated that the reproductions of the original artwork strip the aura of the original [4]. It is not to argue that the reproduction or incorporation of original artworks is harmful to aesthetic development; instead, the message is that the motivation for purchasing artistic products should come from people's spiritual demand instead of the consumerist habit of collecting "souvenirs" or using artistic products as a sign of vanity. After all, Benjamin's emphasis on the original is his appreciation of the efforts and contemplative purity in the original work.

2.2. A beginning act in UCCA

UCCA realizes the potential power of art institutions to merge the forces of cultural and economic modernization, and its operators develop a spiritual interdependent relationship between art institutions and their audiences. To be specific, May Xue became the CEO of UCCA in August 2011, and she established the UCCA Patrons Council and reconfigured the UCCA Store to make it more locally managed [5]. Simultaneously, the on-site art production conveys UCCA's creativity and artistic value to its audiences, and the Patrons Council provides the space for social participants who seek personal enrichment and artistic resonance. In these ways, UCCA immerses into people's lives and forms an interactive and mutually beneficial relationship with its audiences, who support the operation of the art institution and spread the influences of art to a greater Chinese social scale.

3. Commercialization example: private art institution, UCCA

By collaborating with their artists during localization, UCCA Store sells exclusive products for audiences to collect. Those products combine the values of daily use and artistic design. For example, recently, UCCA Store has been selling artist collaboration bags and hats at a reasonable price of 129 CNY, which is much cheaper than similar collaboration products being sold by luxury brands or famous artist collaborations for over 10,000 CNY. In addition, the amusing artistic design and lively colors of those products not only delight audiences' visual experience but also promote Chinese contemporary artists' creativity and uniqueness. The incorporation of artistic visual elements promotes the modernization idea of making aesthetics a kind of lifestyle, shaping Chinese society's aesthetic taste. Moreover, the low cost of collecting those products gives audiences a sense of fulfillment, making their purchase a low-barrier action of supporting local artists and investing in artists' promising careers. This is not only an emotional fulfillment of upgrading daily standards but also an action of showing local pride, reflecting the socialist collectiveness between people and local artists. In this case, the role of art expands beyond economic fuel, which is the limitation of merchandising, and becomes a power to construct an emotionally fulfilled and caring society, which reflects China's unique modernization principle that cares about and depends on the masses. The approach to total modernity, therefore, is expanded from the economic sector to artistic, social well-being, and cultural developments.

To enhance their attraction and impact and establish a unique, interactive modernization culture, UCCA Beijing integrates local Beijing culture by incorporating city promotion into its art products. For instance, UCCA collaborates with its artists to create posters that showcase Beijing's unique architectural and cultural perspectives, including its brutalist buildings from the socialist era, traditional brick houses, local foods, and snacks, among others. There is a famously challenging

drink in Beijing called douzhi – a fermented drink made from beans, and the store places the art poster of that drink at a central spot at eye level on the shelf. There is a sense of playfulness being generated by their teasing design, which also reflects the typical Beijing humor of making fun of douzhi's reputation as a repulsive beverage.

This collaboration with city heritage not only promotes China's local culture to domestic and international audiences, but it also gives value to those who have purchased the artistic products. By collecting the poster, consumers share a collective memory with their familiar culture in the form of art, which is concrete, visually amusing, and easy to maintain. When the consumers display the poster in their home, that poster becomes a symbol of their own identity and memory, and that interactive and collective value is deepening the bond between people's custom and their art lives. In this case, the poster is no longer a merchandised product because, with its carefully intended design, it enriches people's collective memory and artistic expressions.

By meticulously designing the content and placement of art products, UCCA is naturally closing the gap between art brand and audiences, marketing their branding image as humorous, understanding, localized, and creative, which are very appealing to young people and those who are tired of the seriousness in life. This humorous and democratic attitude in art also reflects China's socialist foundation in art creation. In China's post-totalitarian yet still authoritarian society, most contemporary artists wouldn't risk themselves to radically confront political agendas and practice reformative intentions as their Republican or Maoist counterparts did [6]. Similar to the playful reflection of real-life instances and unique local cultures like Beijing douzhi, Chinese contemporary artists' efforts tend to "advocate alternative perceptions about life and everyday experience to challenge those promoted by the authorities and the mainstream media" [6]. By positioning themselves as social and economic contributors, artists engage with people to ease their everyday stress and gain their support and spiritual reliance. In this case, UCCA demonstrates the socialist care through the dialogues between the artistic products and their audiences, proving art to be the medium that integrates social well-being and national development.

However, just as the shortcomings of merchandising have shown, the cultural and philosophical depth and uniqueness of art are important factors in building China's total modernity. Even though private art institutions make their way to meet society's demand, the very nature of their financial requirements limits their potential for cultural enrichment and in-depth artistic contemplation and expression. Yet, the cultural education of the masses is the centerpiece for public art institutions.

4. Public art institution: unique cultural development

4.1. The risk of lacking local voices in art management

The risk of relying on foreign art investors, markets, and forms is reflected by the misinterpretations of Chinese art in the global markets. However, such issue of losing cultural creativity and authenticity can be solved by developing cultural awareness and in-depth understanding of Chinese society assisted by art institutions.

In the early stages, when private art organizations, founded by foreign investors, entered the global art market and gained international attention, the Chinese government recognized their economic value. This brought both benefits and shortcomings to China's cultural modernization. For instance, the Swiss patron-investor-collector, Uli Sigg, promoted Chinese Contemporary Art to the West, and due to his promotional efforts and investments, the market prices of CCA achieved a significant increase, as demonstrated in the case of Ai Weiwei's "Sunflower Seeds" [7]. Despite the promotion success during foreign investment for CCA, the strategy of popularizing Chinese art by

foreign efforts leads to the risk of “manipulating or exploiting the development of non-Western arts by favoring a specific theme or style of art production and overpricing certain artworks in pursuit of high ROI.” [2] When Chinese artists’ creativity is generated for the sake of Western acceptance and commercial profits, the authenticity and artistic depth of their artworks begin to give way to Western audiences’ preferences. Western audiences would view Chinese arts from their point of view and values, which is not beneficial for the development of China’s own cultural uniqueness and enrichment: “Western collectors and curators’ preference for Political Pop and Cynical Realism, clearly visible in the numerous exhibitions organized outside China during this decade, lied in the conveyed image that the artists were fighting against their country’s regime, suffered from its ‘oppression’ and aspired to Western-style ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’” [2]. The actual intention, however, is that the artist carries a sense of absurdity during the creation, which means artworks are not expected to be meaningful, and they are designed to “serve financial interests and the demand for fame” [2]. Western collectors’ distorted interpretation of CCA with their belief system, therefore, simplified the original Chinese content and philosophies embedded in art. The financial-driven motivation also ignores Chinese culture’s authenticity, hindering the cultural modernization during total modernity.

In order to shift the ideological-political interpretation of CCA, it is essential for Chinese authorities to localize the promotion effort of CCA. Socialism informs China’s unique artistic ideology, which defines art as one of the pillars for national modernization. In order to create art based on the Chinese context, it is essential to reach audiences that accept and understand Chinese authentic culture, which should be generated by Chinese efforts. However, it doesn’t mean that China should prevent promoting towards foreign audiences because international recognition is also a signifier of total modernity. The appeal of cultural influences, both domestically and internationally, depends on the depth of artistic contemplation reflected in Chinese art. Therefore, art institutions assume the necessary role of enriching people’s in-depth creativity, and in order to make that creativity authentic, the art management needs to be localized.

UCCA Beijing recognizes the impact of art in total modernity, and “In 2016, a deal for UCCA was finalized, selling it for RMB 100 million to a group of local investors, including Future Edutainment (under Lunar Capital) and Focus Media” [7]. However, only localizing the controlling spectrum to Chinese authorities is not enough to promote total modernity. The cultural development and socialist public experience, embedded in the management principles and aesthetic education, become the key to constructing Chinese modernity. Nowadays, UCCA exhibits Chinese artists’ artworks, providing Chinese and Beijing local cultures through art to the international and domestic audiences.

4.2. National Art Museum of China: an example of generating cultural depth

While commercialization is an effective way of simultaneously developing the economy and cultural depth, its nature of generating profit still prevents the full potential of cultural development, especially cultural and artistic depth in art. In this case, the public art institutions that do not rely on investment and are founded by the government can fully concentrate on cultural exploration and development.

The National Art Museum of China, as a public art institution, performs its artistic responsibility to Chinese society and the national plan, focusing its efforts on strengthening collective heritage, cultural uniqueness, and national pride. The nature of Chinese modernization as a refining process reflects the unique Chinese cultural characteristic as a combination between the past and the modern. In practice, this direction leads public art institutions to not only present modernist Chinese

arts but also convey the cultural heritage of the country to their audiences. Based on China's socialist platform, the mass-oriented nature of art management aims to build a communal aesthetic legacy that not only fosters the creativity of Chinese art but also lays the collective memory and foundation for the nature of Chinese culture [8].

The National Art Museum of China has a free-ticket policy, which allows the art resources and messages to influence more audiences who can easily visit the museum. Unlike UCCA's private foundation that attracts both domestic and international audiences, the National Art Museum of China sets its target on domestic audiences. The age range varies from elders to children, and the official visitor limitation of 6000 people each day reveals the popularity of the national museum and people's appreciation of the aesthetic legacy. Many people from other provinces come to Beijing to visit the National Art Museum of China, revealing the masses' celebration and attention toward traditional culture and legacy being represented by art. In addition, this free and easy access to national aesthetic legacies, embodied in the various kinds of traditional artworks being exhibited in the museum, demonstrates China's socialist purpose of deepening the trust between people and organizations. Even the most valuable and aesthetic cultural resources are shared with the public and the world to appreciate, and this implication not only reflects China's national pride of the local creators, but it also accelerates the influence of domestic culture to the audiences: "It becomes a form of social intervention to be implemented in the public space to raise civic awareness, foster new subjectivities, and stimulate alternative imaginations and collective actions for the betterment of society" [6]. When people witness the unique Chinese arts and cultures, their future creations are rooted in national traditions and philosophies. In the long run, that Chinese creation will develop the unique Chinese modernist culture, forming new awareness and aesthetics in society and completing total modernity.

The public nature of public art institutions also guarantees the visit population, making themselves appeal and visible to more audiences, which means those public institutions are great platforms for spreading Chinese values and cultures. The themes in the exhibitions showcase China's understanding on total modernity with its welcoming and peaceful nature, which are China's international character during the modernization process. For example, the exhibition of "Ode to Peace" was held from July 19th to August 12th (2025) in the museum, presenting the artworks from famous Chinese artists and Western artists like Picasso. The artworks are gathered to commemorate the 80th anniversary of China's victory in the resistance against Japanese aggression and the world's victory over fascism. With this approach, the museum promotes artworks that carry historical value of advocating for peace and their Chinese foundation. The thematic emphasis on inclusivism and hospitality from the Chinese point of view demonstrates China's welcoming principle during the modernization path. The subject of peace also indicates China's consideration of the contemporary global atmosphere of competition. The Chinese artworks being exhibited demonstrate unique Chinese artistic styles, such as traditional Chinese ink painting and meticulous painting. This unique Chinese aesthetic is presented to the people, laying the foundation for China's authentic creativity and aesthetic values. Those in-depth contemplation through artworks are presented by public institutions with their ability of focusing on the content. With its openness to visitors, it tells young audiences about the artistic philosophy in Chinese art, shaping the future generation's creative and contemplative habit.

On the other hand, the choice of exhibiting Picasso's work reflects China's embrace of international collaboration in the modernization process. The national pride and inclusive celebration of Chinese and international aesthetic culture being presented in a public art institution indicate that art is not viewed as a privileged and isolated representation of taste; instead, it is the

incarnation of fusing public well-being, national cultural heritage, and China's modernist openness to the world. Additionally, a café is located inside National Art Museum of China, decorated by modern style. This incorporation of international urban facility inside a local site also demonstrates China's intention of setting art sites as the platform to integrate traditional culture and modernization construction.

5. 798: an example of art space in total modernity

5.1. A space of collective culture

Speaking of simultaneously practicing antique and pioneer cultures, the 798 District in Beijing, where UCCA locates, is a model of demonstrating the unique power of art in carving this exhaustive approach. In order for Chinese artists and people to naturally perform the interaction with their unique culture, art institutions need to provide an intimate familiarity for people and their aesthetic culture. Take 798 art zone as an example, the reason that many Chinese young generations enjoy hanging out and visit 798 is the familiar yet pioneer atmosphere in 798. For those audiences, visiting 798 is not only a delightful relaxation, but it is also an experience that generates nostalgia, forming a sense of belonging.

When looking at 798's construction, one would find that it has largely preserved the Bauhaus-style architecture during its starting age in early 1950s [9]. That German architectural style is China's historical heritage of international foundation. Recently, the exhibition of "Bauhaus Unknown" held by UCCA from May 17th to September 7th (2025) features Chinese artist Chen Ke's artworks that combine the Bauhaus geometrical design with contemporary feminine concepts. This exhibition is an excellent demonstration of the fusion of Beijing's artistic history and contemporary cultures. It inherits the legacy of 798 District's Bauhaus architectural history and showcases Chinese artist's frontier contemplation about feminine topics. At the same time, "by becoming a space of contemporary art, trendy international cafes and cutting edge bookshops, 798 has survived Beijing's prevalent slash-and-burn urbanism and has become a prime real-estate locale" [10]. This gathering of urban cultures broadens 798's appeal toward more social events and daily visits. Being a communal and cultural facility, the operation of 798 contributes to the promotion of China's socialist principle that values people's experience, the cultural and aesthetic education of pioneer and traditional heritage, and the fulfillment of China's economic and innovative improvements.

5.2. A space of social betterment

Art institutions and spaces not only emphasize the cultural traditions, but they also provide the aid to help people to fit in the modernist improving society, preparing new generations for more creative and contemplative skills. Nowadays, many Chinese citizens realize the importance of education as being the stepping stone to climb the social ladder. Some people would describe education as a long-term sunk cost that paves the way for the society's growing need for comprehensive talents. On the other hand, when the society is asking for comprehensive talents, it reflects China's overall development, which means new kinds of abilities are expected for the betterment of the society. The ability to critically think and create is emphasized under this context where China is moving from production to innovation. Art institutions are embedded with the notions of creativity and aesthetic education, and how art institutions operate in order to strengthen their essential value becomes a critical task.

The pioneer tendency of art management reflects art institutions' awareness of the society's concern, and their efforts of building young generations' creative and artistic habits showcase the growing importance of art institutions during China's accelerated path of total modernity. On UCCA's mobile site, there is a separate section directing the user to "UCCA Kids." This deliberate department for children reflects the institution's recognition of aesthetic education for the future generation, as it aims to shape children's acknowledgement of the intersectionality of the nation's future and past. There are painting classes, artists manuals, and artistic utensils being sold on "UCCA Kids." The first class, which is the sample class, costs only 9.9 CNY to attend. Additionally, there is an outdoor painting class in the Temple of Earth (Ditan Park), a traditional Chinese park built in 1530. UCCA is mindful of putting efforts in merging contemporary art education with historical aesthetic. With the intimate observation and interaction with unique Chinese culture and contemporary aesthetic education, the Chineseness in China's total modernity is passed on to the young generations by art institutions.

6. Conclusion

The total modernity goal of China looks for a collective form of progression, emphasizing the development in each sector of the nation. Private art institutions play a significant role in integrating economic and cultural sectors with their potential in producing artistically commercialized products that generate ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual values as well as economic profits. Public art institutions expand the in-depth cultural development by gathering China's historical artworks and exhibiting creative Chinese artworks that are incorporated with China's contemporary values and local cultures. With its wide range of audiences and easy access, public art institutions not only provide domestic audiences with the innovative Chinese culture presented aesthetically but also show international audiences of China's artistic approach and philosophy. The potential impacts of the collaboration of private and public art institutions in China are promising since they greatly integrate people's daily life with art and use art to integrate developing sectors in an effective way, bringing both economic and cultural development and enrichment through operations. Therefore, it is essential that China recognize the value of art institutions in fulfilling the goal of total modernity and provide effective aid to the operations of those creative spaces.

References

- [1] Gao, M. (2011). Total modernity and the avant-garde in twentieth-century Chinese art (Vol. 49). American Library Association. <http://choicereviews.org/review/10.5860/CHOICE.49-1251>
- [2] Ribeiro, C. (2022). Chinese Contemporary Art: Where it comes from, where it goes.
- [3] Kharchenkova, S. (2024). High art on a mug: Art merchandise in China's contemporary art market. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 27(4), 629–647. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231184016>
- [4] Benjamin, W. (1935). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.
- [5] Zheng, J., & Yang, B. (2023). The Brand Operation Strategy of China's Non-Profit Art Museums-The Case Analysis of UCCA Brand Strategy. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 53(6), 375–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2023.2279070>
- [6] Wang, M. (2019). *Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China: Voices from Below* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429457074>
- [7] Wang, S. (2021). Foreign (In)Direct Investment in Chinese Contemporary Art Game: The Case Studies of Uli Sigg, Guy Ullens and beyond, 1989-2013. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 51(5), 291–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2021.1918597>
- [8] Tan, C. (2012). Art for/of the Masses: Revisiting the Communist Legacy in Chinese Art. *Third Text*, 26(2), 177–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2012.663974>

- [9] Shao, L. (2024). Research on the Spatial Renovation Design of the 798 Art District and Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art Guided by Gordon Cullen's Methodology. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 490, 02018. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202449002018>
- [10] Currier, J. (2008). Art and Power in the New China: An Exploration of Beijing's 798 District and Its Implications for Contemporary Urbanism. *Town Planning Review*, 79(2–3), 237–265. <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.79.2-3.6>