

ORIGINAIRE - PAVILION OF CHINA

Common Ground - La Biennale di Venezia - 13th International Architecture Exhibition

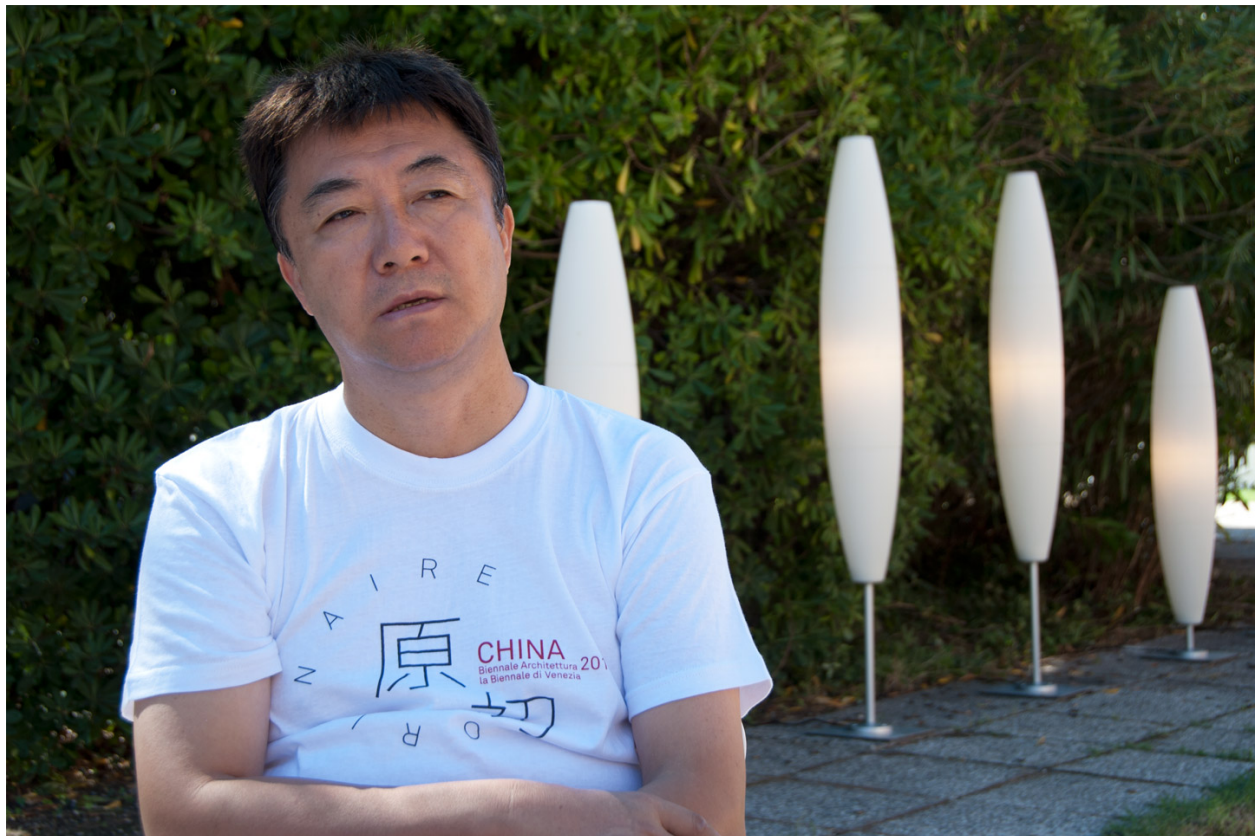
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The legacy of the Chinese Pavilion has been relatively brief, mostly because Chinese national participation in the Biennale only began in 2005. Tucked away in the last long stretch of the Arsenale, hidden behind the spacious Italian pavilion, the Chinese pavilion confronts several interesting spatial conditions. The interior of the pavilion, industrial and claustrophobic, is lined with giant oil tanks that leave only a few narrow passageways to move through. While the pavilion's interior is, in its own right, beautiful, this density makes the exhibition design a challenge. And so, with little open space for intervention, *Originaire* utilizes the long axes left free by the boxy tanks to exhibit installations of five artists/architects.

Suspended above the main passageway is *Sequence*, Shao Weiping's incandescent sectional deconstruction of the Phoenix International Media Center in Beijing. At the head of this dragon-like installation is *Palace in the Sky* by artist Tao Na, a tiled configuration of three layers of images printed on magnets. At the foot of the long axis is *Lightopia*, the LED tower by Xu Dongliang, while parallel to the central passageway is the numeric installation *Variation* by Wei Chunyu. In the garden outside is a sea of square pedestals, garden within a garden.

Of course, much of the exhibition is quintessentially Chinese, incorporating Chinese philosophies and analogies to organize the space. *Originaire*, as the title and the concept of the show, ties the diverse works back to the discourse of originality. In the context of a rapidly developing urbanism in China, it seems self-evident that many of the works would be embedded with these Chinese cultural inflections.



Curator Fang Zhenning

Interview with curator Fang Zhenning

CWZW:

What is the meaning of the title of the exhibition, “Originaire” to you?

FZ:

Before the exhibition of the Chinese Pavilion, [I was thinking about] the reality of things in China. In this limited space, we wanted to put in this kind of reality, which wasn't very easy. The urbanization and developments in China have been occurring so quickly, but there have been problems too. The main title of the Biennale is “Common Ground”, which brought us to think about global relationships, and which we used as our [conceptual] foundation.

So, because of the quick development in China, “Common Ground” is not only relevant to the material world, but also speaks to the spiritual world as well. With “Originaire”, I wanted to show the beauty of beginnings; with mathematics, geometry and art. China has always damaged a lot of beautiful works of architecture: it doesn't protect old ones, while it still constructs new (and ugly) architecture. This is sort of the root of problems, since China does not have an ethic of beauty.

CWZW:

So it's about preservation, in a way?

FZ: Right.



CWZW:

What process/research did you undergo to make your selection for the pavilion?

FZ: All of the installations here were not created only for the Biennale. So, saying “the selection of artists and architects” is inaccurate; it’s more about the selection of the installations. Chipperfield’s architectural theme is about minimalism—there is a similarity between him and myself, since I am interested in minimalist art.

Most of the participants are star architects in China. I like their architectural styles, which are also minimalist. At first, the selection of installations was not what I had imagined, since the participants just wanted to put in architectural models for the exhibition. The participants had some difficulties in making installations for this exhibition, so I tried to inspire them: Can you think about the original source of these installations or your architecture? I did not create these installations; I just inspired them. Everyone knows about Chinese art in the world. But, in China, there is no exhibition of this kind, and I wanted to place [this work] within global view. You can’t really see installations like this in China.

CWZW:

Originaire seems to explore the intersection between art and architecture. How does art play an important role in architecture to you?

FZ:

It’s controversial—the relationship between art and architecture.

Twenty years ago, I was working at this intersection between art and architecture. Since I was living in Japan at the time, I had no opportunity to fulfill these explorations in China. Now that I am in China, I am a curator, moderator and critic, but I am also a teacher at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts. I teach a course about the relationship between art and architecture. If an architect lacks an aesthetic/artistic sense, they cannot make beautiful architecture. It’s part of a global style, [to incorporate] art, architecture, music, dance, theatre.

CWZW:

The Chinese Pavilion (since 2005) is relatively new. How do you place your show “Originaire” as representative of contemporary Chinese architecture, in the context of Venice and an international [architecture] public that comes to the Biennale?

FZ:

I’ve attended every art and architecture Biennale in Venice since 2005. From all these years, I am very aware of the changes in the curation and in the exhibitions themselves. However, I didn’t like the space of the Chinese Pavilion, since it’s very hard to use. But, strangely, when I became the curator of this pavilion, I began to like it.

In China, we can [place the concept of] Common Ground into 基 (base) and 柱 (column). We made this square garden [on the lawn in front of the pavilion] as a base, and the other elements on top represent columns.

CWZW: It seems like these concepts used are metaphorical themes in the Chinese culture of architecture... So this is more of a conceptual representation?

FZ: Yes.

+ EXHIBITION

CWZW:

The space of the Chinese Pavilion is particular. It’s interesting, because it seems like such a huge contrast—the pavilion is so filled with items, and condensed, with little space, whereas the garden is totally open and has so much space. There’s this dialogue between this contrast... Can you talk about your process for designing the exhibition? Since there is such little floorspace, how did you creatively confront the challenge of laying out the exhibition?

FZ:

Outside, there is one important installation—“Square Garden.” I didn’t want to put all installations on the lawn, but instead, I wanted there to be room between them. This installation is very Chinese, since before, we had no real concept of Chinese architecture, whereas Chinese gardens are very well known in the world.

[In the pavilion,] the architecture is not important here; it is the surroundings and environment that, to me, is very important. The space is very long, so I wanted to place two long sticks [like a T-shape on the floorplan] that would fit the space inside. Now we see that the two long installations have a sense of sequence; a relationship between the oil tanks. You'll see the installation "Lightopia", which I put in at the end. Originally, there was no installation at the entrance of the pavilion, but I thought we had a base, we had the long elements, and now I wanted to put in a sort of column.

+ ARCHITECTURE CULTURE... in China

CWZW:

Over the past few years, China has become the grounds for experimental designs of foreign architects. Foreign architects are now constructing new iconic buildings in China. Do you welcome this foreign influence? Or does it incite more nationalism for/pride in local, Chinese architecture?

FZ:

Architectural icons don't exist only in China—they began in New York. Today, it's about a combination. China has become very rich, so it wants architectural icons. It is the process of moving from poor to rich—when they become rich, they (should) review the things that have been done. Chinese architects can learn a lot from foreign architects with projects in China. A lot of architects in China have begun to think about the traditional, cultural parts of Chinese architecture and are putting them in their projects. On one hand, I am a critic working in the world of art and architecture. On the other hand, I am working to protect Chinese culture and promote preserving our traditional urban space.

I used to like things from Western culture, but now I am focusing on researching/analyzing traditional Chinese culture, which has allowed me to learn about modern things from the inside. Ten years ago, I had a completely different view of temporary art and architecture. Now, this has undergone a lot of change. Though you can see a lot of foreign buildings standing, you can still see buildings designed by Chinese architects as well. In an upcoming exhibition that I will have in Mannheim, Germany I will show 100 works of Chinese architects.

So many foreign architects make architecture in China, but as Chinese architects grow, more and more, they will make their own buildings in China.

+ CURATION

CWZW:

David Chipperfield says that "the ambition of *Common Ground* is to reassert the existence of an architectural culture"... What does this "culture of architecture" mean to you?

FZ:

Although Chipperfield has a minimalist style, there are a lot of different styles in the world of architecture. *Common Ground* combines all of these things together. The culture of architecture is not based only on one style—like that of Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe—but instead, it must bear the responsibility of local things as well: environment, history, customs.

