

## **Mobility in a decentralizing global art world? A perspective from Chinese artists in Berlin**

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### **Abstract**

Berlin has seen a growing influx of Chinese artists in recent years. This ethnographic study, based on one-and-a-half years of fieldwork in Berlin, examines the centralized structure of the global art world through the lens of Chinese migrant artists in Berlin. General theories of international migration are insufficient to explain the migration patterns of these artists; instead, an understanding of their embeddedness in the art world and Berlin's status as a global art center is necessary. While Chinese artists struggle with marginalization in Berlin's art scene and rely heavily on the Chinese art market for economic sustenance, they find "based in Berlin" an advantageous choice for the career. The centralization of resources, networks, and consecration and symbolic power in the art world motivates many to reside in Berlin. The increasing international mobility of artists does not signify the decentralization of the global art world. Chinese artists' migration to Berlin, and the challenges they encounter, manifest the persistent Euro-American dominance in contemporary art. This research contributes to the anthropology of contemporary art by intersecting migration studies and the global art world.

**KEYWORDS:** artistic mobility, global art world, Chinese migration, decentralization

### **Introduction**

Berlin has witnessed a considerable inflow of Chinese artists and art professionals (gallerists, curators, and museum directors) in the last decade. The most notable example is Ai Weiwei, who later left Germany in 2019, expressing disappointment and accusing the

country and its capital city of being self-centered and plagued by racial discrimination<sup>1</sup>. Unlike Ai, who enjoyed tremendous publicity, most Chinese artists in the city live anonymously, with their artistic creations reaching a limited audience. The growing presence of Chinese artists in Berlin has garnered attention from local media, yet their migratory dynamics and life experiences in the host society remain unexplored by scholars.

The contemporary art worlds exhibit a multitude of global interconnections—artists, institutions, and markets are increasingly circulated and networked on a global scale (Bydler, 2004; Velthuis & Curioni, 2015). Transnational mobility of artists has surged, as they migrate in pursuit of artistic training, travel for art projects and residencies, and seek broader opportunities and visions in the international art scene. Artistic mobility represents a distinctive segment of international migration. The general mechanisms of international migration, such as the political economy model, lifestyle migration, and professional expatriates, are insufficient to explain the migratory practices of Chinese artists in Berlin. Instead, it necessitates considering their embeddedness and integration in the structure of the global art world.

This paper examines the centralized structure of the global art world from the perspective of Chinese artists' migration and marginalized positions in Berlin's local art scene. Here, the term "global art world" does not denote an egalitarian and unitary global art community but, rather, refers to art production, mobilization, and consumption on a global scale. As this study demonstrates, the globalizing circulation of artists does not signify a transformative decentralization of Euro-American dominance in contemporary art. In the aspect of migration, the international mobility of artists is characterized by an imbalance, predominantly following east-to-west and south-to-north migration patterns (Chubb, 2015). In the aspect of market and valorization, despite the growing participation of traditionally marginalized countries like China, Brazil, and India, the recognition and valuation of art from these geo-cultural regions often do not achieve the same level of appreciation outside their borders (Salemink, 2023; Sooudi, 2023). The value of non-Western contemporary art, as suggested by Iain Robertson (2018), is often constructed less on aesthetic qualities but more on external political events and global economic factors.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to the reports on various mass media. "Deutschland ist keine offene Gesellschaft". (2019, August 8). *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/chinesischer-kuenstler-ai-weiwei-verlaesst-berlin-16324700.html>; "Deutsche wollen, dass du Deutsch sprichst", beschwert sich Ai Weiwei. (2020, January 22). *Die Welt*. <https://www.welt.de/vermischtes/article205229247>

The concept of “global art” suggested by Hans Belting (2009) is anticipated to replace the binary center-periphery scheme of hegemonic modernity, and it is envisioned as polycentric and inclusive of discourses from local perspectives. However, it is crucial to remain vigilant regarding the extent to which “global art” may still be perceived through a Western lens, perpetuating an underlying Eurocentric hierarchy of values. Contemporary art continues to be a field marked by distinctive inequalities and power imbalances, serving as a site of status and prestige contestation, where major states wield hegemonic power in shaping and navigating the global art world (Buchholz, 2022; MacKay, 2022). The authority that validates, valorizes, and consecrates contemporary art practices remains predominantly centralized in Euro-American societies, particularly in a few polarized art metropolises.

The core-peripheral dynamics and structural inequalities are not only present between the West and non-West but also within the West itself. As Peterson (2015) points out, the Nordic countries, for example, occupy a dual position as both “privileged Western insiders” and “marginalized outsiders” in relation to the dominant art institutional centers. In conversations with Chinese artists, the term “West” is frequently used but is often implicitly limited to specific countries—namely, the United States, the UK, France, Germany, Switzerland, and occasionally the Netherlands and Italy—where mega-galleries, prestigious museums, influential curators, wealthy collectors, and high-profile art fairs are concentrated. This selective understanding of the “West” further underscores the hierarchies within the global art world, where certain regions hold more symbolic and institutional power than others.

This work starts with investigating the motivations and characteristics of Chinese artists’ migration, showing that this evolving phenomenon must be understood in tandem with the changing political and economic contexts of China and within the configuration of a globalizing art world. The migratory patterns and lifeworld of Berlin-based Chinese artists are examined through three major aspects: the rationales for residing in Berlin, their marginal status within Berlin’s local art scene, and their movements between Germany and China. In conclusion, this paper questions the notion of an increasingly decentralizing and borderless global art world.

### **Ethnographic methods and group profile of Berlin-based Chinese artists**

This study draws from my one-and-a-half years’ ethnographic fieldwork on the topic of “Chinese artists in Berlin” (2021–2023), supplemented by follow-up investigations. To commence, it is crucial to underscore the absence of consensus regarding the definition

of “Chinese”. The term “Chinese” is multifaceted, encompassing cultural, ethnic, historical, and political dimensions. The boundary of the subject group is arbitrarily demarcated. In this study, the term “Chinese artist” specifically refers to artists from mainland China who are engaging in contemporary art.

The definitions of contemporary art and artists are equally contentious. The hierarchical classifications of art arise from the intertwined forces of socio-structural, cultural, and commercial dimensions, which differentiate between fine art and craft (Becker, 1982; DiMaggio, 1987). The concept of “contemporary art” is less self-evident; its complexities must be understood in terms of mindset, aesthetics, institutionalization, and the evolving political and economic contexts of art production and valorization (Enwezor, 2003; Smith, 2010). In addition, Berlin is home to thousands of self-proclaimed artists. To delineate the boundaries of the subject group, this study employs the institutional theory of the art world (Davies, 2015; Dickie, 1974), identifying artists based on their engagement in the systems of production, distribution, and consumption of contemporary art. The Chinese artists participating in this research create artworks that are displayed in art institutions dedicated to contemporary art and collaborate with galleries to distribute their works in the art market.

I have interviewed 32 Chinese artists and engaged in formal and casual conversations with over 50 participants, including gallerists, curators, art museum directors, and art historians. Most of the interviews are conducted in Chinese, with some held in German and English. The majority of participating Chinese artists are classified as “emerging artists”<sup>2</sup>, meaning that regardless of their age and years of practice, they have yet to establish a wide audience and are in the process of building recognition and visibility, with their works being sold only on the primary market. All names appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.

Among the 32 Chinese artists, half were born in the 1980s. Artists in their twenties to early forties collectively account for over 70% of the group. When further categorizing them into four birth-year subgroups (1961–1970; 1971–1980; 1981–1990; 1991–2000), a clear upward trend emerges: the younger the subgroup, the larger its population. In terms of gender, the group exhibits a slight male predominance, with this gender disparity particularly pronounced among older subgroups. For example, of the nine artists born between 1960 and 1980, only two are female, representing just 22.22%. However,

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to the classification given by Artsy. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-primer-digest-2>. Admitting that the categorization of emerging, mid-career, and established artists runs the risk of simple schematization, it nevertheless facilitates the profiling of the subject group.

gender distribution has equalized over time. In the younger subgroups, the number of female artists surpasses that of males, resulting in a more balanced overall gender ratio.

About half of the artists in the group moved to Germany for art education. When including those who studied in other European countries, this proportion reaches approximately 60 %. During the 2010s, 23 artists arrived in Berlin, which reflects the trend of the increasing population of Chinese students studying abroad. Beyond educational pursuits, this period also saw a notable influx of artists relocating for other reasons. A significant factor was the eviction and demolition of art districts in Beijing—such as Heiqiao and Ai Hehua—due to urban planning and administrative reforms. These displacements compelled many artists to migrate domestically and internationally. For those affected, eviction symbolizes the precariousness of their living conditions in China.

Half of the artists have family members in Berlin, including spouses and direct relatives such as parents or children. In fieldwork, I noticed that family concerns, particularly for those with children, often influence artists' decisions to remain in Berlin—even when doing so conflicts with personal preferences. This underscores the need to recognize the artists' multifaceted identities and how these intersecting social roles shape their migration trajectories and career choices, beyond the confines of the professional art world. Nevertheless, this research focuses on the aspect of the art world.

### **Chinese artists as migrants**

In the last decades, China has seen an unprecedented rise in its economy and geopolitical influence, emerging as the world's second largest power. These changes have been reshaping the patterns and experiences of Chinese migration in novel ways. Many Chinese migrants are well-educated and financially secure, turning mobility into a voluntary choice driven by aspiration rather than a necessity for survival or material well-being. The new waves of Chinese migration, characterized by a burgeoning population of migrant students, professional elites, entrepreneurs, and lifestyle tourists, display greater diversity in terms of the social make-up of educational background, social class, regions of origin, occupation, and age (Salazar & Zhang, 2013; Xiang, 2003 & 2016). The evolving patterns of international migration have led to the creation of new forms of communities and networks by Chinese migrants at both local and global levels (Gao, 2006; Liu, 2016). Their migratory practices are extensively characterized by transnationalism, framed in the continuously renewing paradigm of globalization (Guo, 2022; Liu, 2018; Wong, 1997).

Migration has only recently emerged as a critical concept in the discipline of art history, with an increasing focus on the “migratory turn” in contemporary art (Dogramaci & Mersmann, 2019). Some research emphasizes the impacts of migration, transnationalism, and diaspora on artistic production, distribution, and reception, as well as on the development of new art history (Mathur, 2011; Peterson, 2017 & 2019). The migration and post-migration lifeworld of artists are analyzed within the frameworks of ethnicity, acculturation, nationalism, politics, and gender (Le et al., 2015; Vanderwaeren, 2014).

Same as other international migration types, the migration of Chinese artists is shaped by state emigration policies, economic conditions, international politics, and global circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, their moving incentives and patterns are uniquely shaped by the structure of the global art world, where mobility has become a critical part of the professional trajectory. Artists frequently travel across borders to advance art education, exhibit works, and participate in art residencies, all of which are crucial for establishing international networks and enhancing visibility. Therefore, Chinese artists represent a small, yet distinctive, group within the broader phenomenon of Chinese international migration.

In retrospect, the migration of Chinese contemporary artists starting in the 1980s was driven by a multitude of factors, including economic reforms, a growing enthusiasm toward Western contemporary art after decades of cultural isolation, disappointment with Chinese politics, and the absence of a domestic market for contemporary art (DeBevoise, 2014; Wu, 2014). Politics played a significant role in shaping the trajectory of Chinese contemporary art and influencing artists’ mobility. In the aftermath of the 1989 protests, all public activities related to the 1985 New Wave—the first nationwide avant-garde art movement in China—were banned, abruptly ending the relative freedom that had fostered the burgeoning contemporary art scene. This crackdown prompted a significant exodus of avant-garde artists and art critics from China. The transformed cultural climate and heightened political sensitivities subsequently gave rise to art movements such as Political Pop and Cynical Realism, both of which attracted considerable international attention throughout the 1990s (Chang, 1993).

The development of Chinese contemporary art practices, institutions, and markets is intricately linked to the process of globalization (Carter, 2017; Zhang & Frazier, 2017). By the 1990s, the domestic art market infrastructure began to take shape, and international interest in Chinese contemporary art surged. Consequently, many overseas Chinese artists returned to China to capitalize on the burgeoning Chinese market. This development provided Chinese artists with opportunities to remain in China, leveraging local

resources and cultural advantages while actively establishing international networks (Zheng, 1995). Therefore, the changing patterns of Chinese artistic mobility must be examined in conjunction with China's political and economic transformations, as well as the development of Chinese contemporary art history in relation to the globalizing forces. After all, art is not merely a matter of culture, but also of sociopolitics.

The migration motivations identified within the subject group can be primarily categorized into education, family concerns, and dissatisfaction with Chinese society. These factors are often interwoven in individuals' decisions to emigrate. Politics serves as a pervasive force that governs not only public and civic life but also extends into private spheres. Politics is an almost inescapable topic in discussions of Chinese contemporary art. In the international art market, engagement with sociopolitical issues has become a key branding strategy for Chinese contemporary art, often resonating with Western liberal political ideals (Preece, 2014). The Western art world's sympathy for Chinese political dissidence reflects the valorization of political narratives and the emphasis on free expression inherent in liberal democracies (Leduc, 2018). Although this study does not focus on politics as an important driver of migration or as a promotional strategy, it is important to acknowledge that "Chinese politics" is a grand and rather abstract concept.

None of the studied artists explicitly cited disappointment with "Chinese politics" as a direct motivation for emigration. Instead, they recounted personal stories and societal experiences that evoked fear, anxiety, and discontent. For example, artist Yi shared her traumatic experiences in China, where she formerly worked in the theater and film industries. Despite her dedication, she fell victim to the unspoken and exploitative practices of the creative industries, which severely affected her physical health and led to depression. Seeking a fresh start, she transitioned into contemporary art. However, her experiences in the Chinese art scene proved similarly disheartening. Her work was plagiarized by fellow artists and students, and on one occasion, an event organizer sold the copyright of her piece for a Chinese theater festival without her consent. The decisive blow came with the forced demolition of her family home in Xi'an. Without any prior notice, local authorities razed the property after an administrator clandestinely sold it to secure fraudulent state subsidies. The sudden loss left her family homeless. Eventually, she determined to flee from the "hopeless country".

Her story underscores systemic issues within Chinese society and its political framework, including inadequate protection of intellectual property and labor rights, pervasive sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the creative industries, and the obstacles women face in seeking legal recourse. It also highlights corruption within local

governments and the real estate sector, as well as the broader challenges Chinese citizens encounter when defending their housing rights. These political issues manifest in individuals' everyday interactions with society, rather than existing as abstract concepts. Several artists expressed their disillusionment by stating, "This country/society is hopeless," rather than directly condemning Chinese politics. For artists who live in China, politics is experienced as a continuum of events, stories, and actions rather than as a nebulous and intangible term. This perspective invites a critical reexamination of political narratives within contemporary art.

Moreover, family concerns and dissatisfaction with Chinese society are tightly intertwined. In the Chinese context, migration is often a joint family decision (Fong et al., 2014). For the artists who are parents, one primary migration incentive is to ensure better education and upbringing for their children. Artist Fan (interview, August 4, 2022) stated, "My wife and I became very worried when our kid reached kindergarten age (...) we could not accept the idea of our child growing up in such social and educational environments."

Fan's words also convey the discontent with Chinese politics, as politics is deeply ingrained into the education system. Fears of economic precarity, political vulnerability, and social insecurity in China, particularly exacerbated by the Zero-COVID policies during the pandemic, have driven many Chinese artists to leave the country. Since early 2023, Berlin has seen a new influx of Chinese cultural and creative workers. However, the above analysis cannot fully explain why Berlin became the artists' chosen destination. During the fieldwork, many Chinese artists complained about Berlin's awful weather, annoying public transportation, rising living costs, and cultural conservatism. Some voiced the intention to move to places with more favorable living conditions. Despite these complaints, these artists remain in the city. The following analysis explores why these artists find it compelling to live and work in Berlin.

### **Why Berlin? The significance of a global art hub**

I think as an artist, the city you're "based in" is basically a label of you and also the impression others have of you. If you're an artist based in New York, London, or Berlin, people will think that you're trying to get into this thing and you're trying to be serious about your career! (artist Xiao, interview, April 26, 2022)

Berlin is one of the most representative cultural metropolises in Europe, magnetically attracting international creative professionals to cultivate its cultural landscape. The city



is acknowledged as a global center for contemporary art due to its extensive and convenient networks of distinguished art institutions and the presence of world-famous artists, curators, and directors. While Berlin's stagnated economy hinders the formation of a prosperous local art market compared to other art centers like New York and London, its relatively low living costs make it favorable for emerging artists. Berlin has not developed a noteworthy art fair of its own, but prestigious art fairs such as Art Basel and Frieze London are easily accessible. The well-developed infrastructure and internationally connected systems of the local art scene, along with the city's supportive policies for creative cultural workers, make Berlin an attractive destination for international artists.

Artist Qi notes that one of the greatest advantages of living in Berlin is the accessibility of world-class artworks, ranging from the Renaissance to contemporary, as well as the opportunity to visit prestigious exhibitions such as Kassel Documenta and the Venice Biennale. The value of these Western artworks and exhibitions as cultural resources is reinforced by the Euro-American classificatory paradigm of art history, a hierarchy of artistic legitimacy that Chinese artists largely accept. This structural inequality in the geographical distribution of highly regarded cultural resources cannot be easily mitigated by China's economic development, as it is deeply embedded in the historical development of contemporary art. As artist Zan (interview, May 19, 2024) puts it, "The fact is that orthodox or legitimate contemporary art is essentially equivalent to the history of Europe."

Biennales, for instance, function as "hegemonic machines" that connect local art scenes to global networks while also serving as arenas for symbolic struggles over legitimacy (Marchart, 2014). Although Marchart argues that the emergence of biennales in the peripheries has contributed to the decentralization of Western dominance, their global influence, geographical reach, and visibility in international media remain limited. Based on observations, more than half of Berlin-based Chinese artists visited the 2022 Venice Biennale, they took it seriously as a big event in the contemporary art world. However, they seldom visit other regional biennales. Top-tier exhibitions continue to dictate global contemporary art trends, reinforcing the hierarchy within the art world.

In the meantime, the persons and institutions possessing gatekeeping and taste-making power display a gathering tendency. The gatekeepers, including prestigious museums and directors, blue-chip galleries, super curators, and major collectors, exert great influence on how we perceive and evaluate art, guaranteeing global visibility, and controlling access to institutions and networks (An & Cerasi, 2017). These "symbolic power bro-

kers" (Veltuis & Brandellero, 2018), as given by ArtReview's Power 100 ranking, are predominantly based and active in the major Western cities, indicating a geographical centrality. Due to structural inequalities in the global art world, artists from developing countries often encounter significant barriers in accessing essential resources for both livelihood and artistic practice (Sekhar, 2022). Migration—through a shift in territorial embedding—is a crucial strategy for transitioning from the periphery to the core and attaining international recognition.

The core-periphery structure is not only evident on a global scale but also within Western countries and even within a single nation. Chinese artists, for instance, often undertake internal migration within Germany. Artist Kai relocated to Berlin from Kassel after graduation because the city has better resources. Berlin is an important site for him to cultivate social networks. More specifically, artist Xiao (interview, April 26, 2022) mentioned that when the most prolific curators and gallerists come to Germany, Berlin is their first choice. When she lived in Hamburg, no curator or gallerist from outside Germany ever visited her studio, but her new studio in Berlin has already welcomed numerous international guests. Associations with the gatekeepers have led to career-changing outcomes. As illustrated by the case of Xiao, a fast-rising young artist, being "based in Berlin" has created chances for her to be noticed by prominent galleries and allowed her to directly socialize with influential figures. The spatial proximity provided by being based in Berlin can enhance Chinese artists' opportunities to connect with the power nexus of the art world, demonstrating the allure of the center.

Moreover, the identity of being a "Berlin-based artist" is often accentuated in Chinese artists' professional profiles. Berlin's status as an art metropolis translates into symbolic capital within the global cultural fields. This symbolic capital, which is a power of "world-making", consecration, and revelation (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 22), is constructed upon the configurations and norms of the art world. As the global economic and cultural gaps between regions expand along with globalization (Alfasi & Fenster, 2009), the significance of the specific localities perdures. By adopting the label as a "Berlin-based artist", the artists obtain a symbolic signifier that favorably influences their recognition in the art world. As artist Xiao notes, being based in Berlin not only reinforces their global positioning but also lends them greater legitimacy as "serious artists". Thus, the international mobility of artists serves as an embodied manifestation of the global hierarchy of value, a hierarchy built upon the cultural values attributed to different places.

This appreciation for the Berlin-based artist identity shows that in the global field of cultural production, the historically constructed hierarchical status of places maintains its

symbolic superiority. The cities where artists are based exert direct impacts on how they are perceived and valued, even when their works are absent. The symbolic significance of Berlin underpins perceptions of artistic professionalism and success. Therefore, living and working in Berlin is not a matter of voluntary choices. Being aware of the geographical stratification of contemporary art and the disequilibrium in the distribution of resources, the artists perceive migration as advantageous for professional development.

### **Living on the margins: predicaments of being “Chinese artists” in Berlin**

#### Networks barrier

Studies have explored the interaction and tension between immigrant artists and the institutional mechanisms in European multi-ethnic societies. Delhay's (2008) study on the artistic practices of immigrant artists in Amsterdam's local art world exposes the closed nature of the Western art world. Immigrant artists face explicit and implicit rules and mechanisms that regulate entry into the art scene, often to their disadvantage. Bergsgard and Vassenden's (2014) research on the paucity of visible and successful artists of migrant backgrounds in Norway, despite the country's cultural policy initiatives favoring a multi-ethnic society, finds that second-generation migrant artists in the Norwegian dramatic art field are disadvantaged in the mechanisms of selection and visibility.

Similar predicaments are found among Chinese artists in Berlin. Residing in a global art city does not necessarily lead to greater international recognition. Many acknowledge the significant challenges of overcoming their marginalized positions to gain access to the mainstream local art network and its associated resources. Artist Leng reflected on this struggle, stating:

I don't know how, as an Asian artist, you can enter the mainstream art social circles in Berlin. These circles seem too tightly bound from within and closed for outsiders to access. As for how they are formed and what standards they follow, there's no way to navigate it. It's hard. (Interview, May 3, 2022)

Similarly, in a recent conversation with artist Qing (interview, November 9, 2024), I mentioned the developments brought by the growing influx of migrant Chinese artists in Berlin. Responding with sarcasm, he remarked, “Well, they only develop within their own social circles of Chinese.” Expressing skepticism about Chinese artists' possibilities to gain access to the central networks of Berlin's local art scene, he added, “Even those few who have achieved market success in the Western art world are not part of the local core art circle; they are still positioned primarily as ‘Chinese’ artists.” Qing and Leng's

words highlight the perceived exclusivity and opacity of the Berlin art scene, underscoring the difficulties faced by Chinese artists seeking inclusion and recognition.

Social networks play a crucial role in both the career development of artists and the integration processes of migrants in their host societies. Given that the global art world is centralized both territorially and topologically, affiliations with influential institutional networks and agents are critical for the consecration of artists (Perczel & Vedres, 2025). For artists from outside the Western centers to achieve worldwide recognition, their professional career needs to be intermediated through American-European art centers (Buchholz, 2022). Artist Xiao provided an example of how the early success of her German classmate could be attributed, at least in part, to social connections:

As a Chinese artist, it's a bit tougher for me to get noticed by galleries here in Europe compared to, say, a German artist. I don't have any connections or people to vouch for me here, so I'm pretty much on my own, hustling to make a name for myself. But take some of my classmates in Germany, for example, one of them has a grandfather who's a well-known painter. When people see his family background, they're like, "Wow, this guy's got serious cred," and things just seem to fall into place for him much more easily. (Interview, April 26, 2022)

Xiao's example highlights how Western artists with access to supportive networks can enhance their professional prospects. The family transmission of social and cultural capital can reproduce inequality and exacerbate class stratification (Parcel & Hendrix, 2014). When resources are predominantly exchanged within the tightly knit social network, structural inequality and segregation are perpetuated. Similarly, artist Xu emphasized the importance of networking by referencing internationally famous Chinese artist Yan Pei-Ming's career:

Yan Pei-Ming is a socializing genius. He's got really strong connections with the French government and some old aristocratic families. That is chiefly how he managed to get to where he is today. (Interview, April 3, 2022).

While migration to Berlin brings Chinese artists physically closer to a global art hub, it does not automatically grant them access to the privileged networks that dictate artistic legitimacy. As Aerne (2025) argues, the valorization and legitimacy of art depend on the validation of interconnected gatekeepers within the art world's network. This notion is visualized in *Art Network*, a project by network scientist Albert-László Barabási and his research laboratory, which maps the art world's invisible network and reveals its centralization around a dense cluster of North American and major European institutions.

Xu's comment reinforces this perspective, highlighting that for Chinese artists to gain substantial recognition in the Western art scene, establishing strong connections with these influential networks is crucial. However, very few Berlin-based Chinese artists possess ties to powerful agents, and Chinese curators and institutions in Berlin have yet to achieve significant influence. The geographic relocation of Chinese artists may spatially position them within an art center, but it does not dissolve the hierarchical barriers that shape the art world's stratified networks. In other words, the social and institutional boundaries of the art world are far more difficult to traverse than physical distances.

### **Identity paradox**

Being a Chinese artist creates a problematic situation for artistic creations and career development in Berlin. Affiliation with a minor ethnicity, whether voluntary or forced, can marginalize artists within institutional spaces of the cultural industry. As Mercer (1994) suggests, they are often expected to speak for their marginalized communities, making it almost impossible for them to speak as "representatives" of the broader art world in the host society. In this context, the artworks by migrant artists might be depreciated as "culturalized products", with their individual characteristics and artistic competencies overshadowed by the cultural banner of ethnicity, which subsequently hinders their professional potential in the art world. Peterson (2017) also warns that such artworks may reproduce ethnic stereotypes and binary oppositions, leading to the stigmatization of migrant artists due to the fear of "others".

Berlin-based gallerist Ma illustrated how Western audiences and collectors often approach Chinese contemporary art with stereotypical expectations, seeking distinct culturalized or exotic qualities. Citing a recent example, Ma described a solo exhibition by Ya, a gallery-represented artist who has been living in Germany and Norway with her family for several years. The exhibition featured a series of photographic works depicting Norwegian households and landscapes, yet the opening attracted few visitors. Ma explained:

Western audiences are not interested in depictions of Norway or other foreign countries by Chinese artists. Although it might seem disappointing, they still want to see something different and something "Chinese"—in other words, something exotic and visually evocative. This is the reality. There is a renowned Chinese photographer based in France who is deeply familiar with French society, and his ability to capture and interpret it is widely acknowledged in the industry, sometimes even surpassing many French photographers. But his works

on French society are not well received by Western audiences. After all, he is culturally Chinese. (Interview, September 15, 2021)

Ma's account highlights the persistent cultural essentialism that frames how Western audiences gaze at Chinese contemporary art, often limiting appreciation to works that conform to preconceived notions of cultural difference. However, many Chinese artists exhibit skepticism against the ethnic, cultural, and national identification as "Chinese", some are hesitant to assign themselves to the collective identity of "Chinese artists in Berlin". Nevertheless, regardless of their attitudes, they are stubbornly perceived as Chinese by the host society.

The belongingness to ethnic and cultural identity is not voluntary; it is hinged upon the constantly changing societal constraints and must be validated by significant others (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012; Nagel, 1994). To assimilate into multicultural societies, migrants should have the power to define their identities (Svensson et al., 2018), and make stances in the sociocultural field (Du Bois, 2007). However, migrant Chinese artists in Berlin do not possess this power and are arbitrarily framed into the ethnicized and culturalized identity cage. During the interview, artist Zan, who has been living in the Netherlands and Germany for over fifteen years, notes that:

I have never positioned myself as a Chinese artist or an Asian artist. However, in the contemporary art scene in Europe, your identity is very important. Even if you do not adopt a particular one, other people will put such an identity on you. But, if your artwork does not align with the identity being given to you by others, this will create an awkward situation. Others have to make a long detour to understand you. (interview, May 19, 2024)

Larry Shiner (2001, p. 3) points out that, "Art as we have generally understood it is a European invention barely two hundred years old." On this basis, artists with Western European backgrounds face less pressure to prove their authenticity and they are not urged to consistently explain their works within their native cultural contexts. Their artistic practices are less constrained by cultural borders. The freedom of not having their works interpreted through assumed ethnic-cultural frameworks is a privilege afforded to artists originating from the epicenter of contemporary art. The center is a geo-cultural one, it is validated in the canonized narratives of art history.

In contrast, Chinese artists struggle to avoid becoming cultural spectacles in the multicultural city and to be recognized simply as artists rather than as Chinese artists. Artist Hong (interview, April 3, 2022) points out that the mainstream art circle in Berlin would

not pay attention to his works unless he aligns with popular Western discourses from a European standpoint. This situation creates a dilemma for artistic creation. To attract the attention of the local art scene and reach a wider audience, Chinese artists might strategically make their artworks cater to “the ears of the Western art institutions”. However, the practices of adhering to Western values and “playing the Chinese card” have been criticized for being inauthentic imitators of Western art and purposefully misreading and manipulating cultural symbols (Zhang & Frazier, 2015).

Chinese artists in Berlin are caught in such an identity paradox; if they do not relate their art to the Chinese identity, their works are unlikely to be properly understood without arduous endeavors to interpret them within the context of a West-led art historical narrative. However, if they emphasize this identity, they risk being confined to the marginalized group of cultural others. These Chinese artists are less marginalized by their Chineseness than by how the Chineseness is perceived by influential figures and the established rules in the Western art scene. When ethnicity still permeates the perception of non-Western artists’ works, we are not yet prepared to speak of the arrival of “global art”. Global art should not merely involve the inclusion of participants from traditional peripheral regions to conceive art from local perspectives; rather, it should also ensure that these local representatives have the power to transcend cultural labeling and claim globality.

### **Transnational movements: Between art markets and hierarchy of values**

The migrating patterns of the studied group of Chinese artists are characterized by frequent transnational mobility. Aside from short-term stays for artistic activities, some of them have long-term residence experiences in other countries for education and professional activities. However, their trajectories display a converging direction toward countries of central status in the art world, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, but rarely extending to non-Western regions traditionally considered peripheries. The geographical distribution of global art mobility is marked by a distinctive spatial centrality, often ignoring marginal regions. Meanwhile, movements and exchanges between the art world’s peripheries are less common (Marcel, 2013). Connections between them are often bridged through their shared association with the Western art scenes.

Another notable feature of the transnationality of Berlin-based Chinese artists is their regular travel between China and Germany, with many spending weeks or months each year in China. This phenomenon is predominantly induced by the dynamics of the art

markets. Unlike New York and London, which are not only major art hubs but also global financial centers, Berlin's art market potential is subdued. Art market expert Magnus Resch (2016) positions Berlin alongside New York and London as three pivotal art hubs. However, Berlin's galleries, on average, yield the lowest revenue compared to their counterparts in the other two cities. This discrepancy is largely due to the relatively weak demand for art within Germany. According to Art Basel & UBS (2024) report, the German art market accounted for only 2% of the global art market by value in 2023. This is particularly noteworthy given Germany's competitive economy and the presence of a substantial number of galleries and collectors.

The discrepancy between Berlin's status as an art center and its minor position in the art market places internationally ambitious art practitioners in Berlin in plight. While the city serves as an excellent incubator for emerging artists and new galleries, those aspiring to tap into a more lucrative international market find themselves being impelled to expand their economic activities elsewhere. On my visit to a Chinese-operated gallery during the 2021 Berlin Art Week, I heard two gallerists discussing the difficulties posed by the weak purchasing power in the regional market. The German gallerist remarked that venturing outside Berlin to other German or European cities is essential for the gallery's survival.

Several artists mentioned that Berlin's local galleries might tactically collaborate with Chinese artists to gain access to the Chinese art market. Artist Xiao (interview, April 26, 2022), who has been collaborating with three blue-chip European galleries, notes: "They [the European art galleries] think the Chinese art market is attractive, and no one wants to miss out on this big part of the market." Collaborating with Chinese artists helps Western galleries to expand their visibility and influence within the Chinese art scene. Although Western galleries have been incorporating artists from non-Western worlds, particularly emerging artists from the Global South, this inclusion also serves as a strategy for these galleries to penetrate regional markets. This business expansion strategy cannot be read as democratic decentralization.

For Chinese artists, the regular travel back to China is partly driven by their inability to access the international art markets despite being based in an art metropolis. Aside from the sluggish German art market, Velthius' (2013) study identifies the strong home-bias patterns of Berlin galleries in selecting artists they represent. Berlin art galleries continue to prioritize representing artists born in Germany and those residing nearby, demonstrating that globalization has not eliminated the importance of local ties and physical



proximity. Despite the increasing internationalization of the art world, geographic and cultural familiarity remain key factors in shaping gallery representation.

Only seven Chinese artists out of the subject group are represented by Berlin-based galleries. Artist Hong, who has been collaborating with a Chinese-operated gallery in Berlin for eight years, reflected on the challenges faced by Chinese artists: “I was lucky to find a gallery to work with back then. I think for the young Chinese artists who came recently, the situation can be more difficult.” Chinese-operated galleries in Berlin provide a more accessible entry point for Chinese artists. Among the four identified Chinese-operated galleries in the city, fourteen artists from this study have established collaborations with them. These connections are often facilitated within the Chinese art group, reflecting the crucial role of ethnicity-based social ties. At the same time, except for a few artists with established reputations, most of the Chinese artists in Berlin are not optimistic about the prospects of selling their works in Germany or Europe at large. Without the bond built through the representation by Western galleries, most Chinese artists in Berlin have little chance of securing a position in the local art market. Thus, the increasing circulation of artists alone does not necessarily indicate the decentralization of the global art world.

In comparison, the Chinese art market appears more promising. Most of them rely heavily on the potential of the Chinese art market, as Chinese contemporary art is overwhelmingly bought by Chinese buyers (Kharchenkova & Merkus, 2024). Artist Lin pointed out that, “many Berlin-based Chinese artists make money in China, but spend their money and live here” (interview March 16, 2022). Artist Jie who migrated early and grew up in Berlin noted that despite being culturally integrated into German society, most of her works are still sold in China. “If I did not have connections with the Chinese art circles, it would be very hard for me to survive as a professional artist here in Berlin” (interview, May 10, 2020). In this context, transnational movement becomes imperative for artists to maintain networks with China’s art scene.

In the emerging art scenes, the hegemonic Euro-American definitions of quality still “define and bolster local art value and validation” (Sooudi, 2023, p. 200). Gaining experience in a renowned Western art center like Berlin is highly regarded in China, offering significant advantages for career development and market prospects within the Chinese art scene. Over the past two decades, China has established itself as the world’s second-largest art market. However, the flourishing domestic art market in China has not slowed the emigration of artists. Haigui Yishujia, artists with overseas education and work experiences, have emerged as a distinctive and sizable segment in the Chinese art

scene. The designation of Haigui Yishujia serves as a significant marker for the younger generation of Chinese artists in the Chinese art world. This label creates an image of a more liberal and open academic background and a more internationally oriented artistic perspective. It is a privilege conferred by the association with the global art center.

Many Chinese artists adopt the bi-located presence, for example being “based in Beijing and Berlin” simultaneously. Transnational movements allow these Chinese artists to navigate the strengths and weaknesses of both locales: the symbolic power of Berlin and the market power of China. The old West-dominated hierarchy of value in the cultural field persists (Salemink, 2023). Despite the rising geopolitical and economic power of China, the leading roles of Euro-American art centers in shaping the perception and evaluation of contemporary art are not destabilized. The detour through Berlin, a celebrated global art center, enhances the desirability of Chinese artists in the Chinese art scene. The imbalance between China’s status as a leading global economic power and its comparatively periphery position within the global art world further sustains the mechanisms of Chinese art migration.

### **Decentralizing the global art world?**

“Decentralizing the art world” has emerged as a popular discourse in art media with the rise of NFT art and the practices of decentralizing curatorial authority, as exemplified by Documenta Fifteen. However, this discourse is not an idea or transformative force originating in subordinate regions; rather, it is foremost produced and promoted by the Western art centers. As some scholars have argued, the so-called flat and cosmopolitan art world “manifests itself only at the top of the hierarchically structured art field” (Schultheis et al., 2016, p.22). We must be cautious about whether the homogeneous narratives of decentralization will reproduce the centralized authority of creating and validating themes and trends in contemporary art.

A recent study by Lee, Levitt, and Valdivia-Moreno (2024) argues that cultural globalization is contributing to the decentering of the global art world through the increasing circulation and interconnectedness between peripheral regions. While artistic exchange and mobility between cultural peripheries have indeed expanded in the context of globalization, these new circulatory pathways do not evidently signify a fundamental disruption of the global cultural hierarchy or a reconfiguration of the structural mechanisms governing the art world. Art historian Leon Wainwright (2011, p.9) has pointed out that “margins” and “periphery” should not merely be taken in spatial and geographic terms, they are also temporal classification devices that distinguish art recog-

nized as “contemporary” from those as “behind” and “anachronistic”. Decentering should not only be practices that transcend geographical boundaries but also the redistribution of the powers that define, valorize, and consecrate contemporary art—ensuring that regional narratives attain equal legitimacy and recognition within the global discourse.

As the current structures of global and local art worlds are shaped homologically by Europe-America, states outside this system must first play by the established rules before they can initiate transformations (MacKay, 2022). Additionally, as Schneider (2019) points out, we need to remain wary of how far “decentralization” operates as a rhetorical strategy that directs attention away from other social orders. Furthermore, it is important to consider whether it is the center that needs artists from the peripheral art worlds to provide novelty to revitalize itself and whether the marginal art worlds can equally benefit from this collaborative inclusion. Artists may ride the trends while simultaneously being exploited by them.

The migratory practices and experiences of Chinese artists in Berlin illustrate the enduring centralized structure of the global art world. Their relocation is driven by the pursuit of cultural resources, significant networks, symbolic value, and international recognition—elements embedded in Berlin’s status as a global art center. Despite the challenges and disadvantages in terms of social networks, identity, and access to the art market in the host society, these artists consider it crucial to maintain their residence in Berlin. The city’s privileged networks and resources, along with its symbolic power, enhance visibility and international recognition, reinforcing its role as a desirable site for artistic career development. Their migratory practices can be understood as status-seeking endeavors and efforts to conform to the circumstances generated by the unequal power dynamics in the global art world.

The limited access to valuable resources in the host society—such as exhibition opportunities and markets—drives many artists to undertake regular travel to China. The routine cross-border travel to engage with the Chinese art scene, combined with their decision to base themselves in Berlin for better career prospects, demonstrates that economic forces have limited impacts on transforming the global hierarchy of values in cultural fields. Although the works of Berlin-based Chinese artists are primarily sold in the Chinese art market, they are willing to endure the troubles of regular transnational travel between Germany and China to maintain their residence in Berlin. This persistence stems from the symbolic advantages associated with being a “Berlin-based artist”. As

the artists noted, being based in Berlin grants them the perception of being “serious artists”, enhancing their professional profile and credibility within the global art world.

The most entrenched challenge in the process of decentralization is the persistent centralization of interpretative and evaluative authority. While the economic significance of regional art markets, such as China, continues to grow, this shift alone is insufficient to dismantle the deeply embedded centralized configuration of the global art world. The “exclusive agency” of the Western gatekeepers accords the “global” status to art from elsewhere (Juneja, 2023, p.18). As long as non-Western artists remain reliant on Western institutions as intermediaries for accessing and legitimizing international recognition, the existing power asymmetry in the production and validation of artistic value remains largely intact. Chinese artists in Berlin are frequently expected to embody cultural markers rather than being recognized as independent agents shaping contemporary artistic discourse. In this context, they cannot autonomously claim the status of being global, and “becoming global” implicitly requires adherence to the Western modes and systems of art production and evaluation.

One key limitation of this study is that it does not directly engage with the question of whether the global art world is undergoing a process of decentralization. Instead, it emphasizes the persistence of a centralized structure that both motivates Chinese artists to relocate to Berlin and imposes barriers to their access to resources, networks, and international recognition. Decentralization is a long-term process that unfolds across generations, making it crucial to continually theorize and conceptualize its implications within the global art world. Future research should further examine the intersection of migration and de/centralization, particularly by exploring how migration itself can serve as both an indicator and a measuring device of these structural shifts. This paper’s discussions can inform future research on measuring decentralization from the perspective of migrant artists. Key perspectives include: Do international artists still need to relocate to major global art hubs to achieve global recognition and access resources? How easily can they integrate into Western art networks after migration? To what extent can they define their own work without being constrained by culturalized or politicized identities?

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## **Povzetek**

V zadnjih letih Berlin beleži vse večje priseljevanje kitajskih umetnikov. Dana etnografska študija, ki temelji na leto in pol trajajočem terenskem delu v Berlinu, raziskuje centralizirano strukturo globalne umetnosti skozi prizmo kitajskih umetnikov migrantov v Berlinu. Splošne teorije mednarodnih migracij nezadostno pojasnijo migracijske vzorce teh umetnikov, zato je potrebno razumeti njihovo vpetost v umetniški svet in status Berlina kot globalnega umetniškega središča. Čeprav se kitajski umetniki na berlinski umetniški sceni soočajo z marginalizacijo, in so za ekonomsko preživetje močno odvisni od kitajskega umetniškega trga, jim t. i. »baza v Berlinu« predstavljata ugodno karierno izbiro. Centralizacija virov, družbeno omrežje, posvetitev in simbolna moč v svetu umetnosti mnoge motivirajo, da živijo v Berlinu. Naraščajoča mednarodna mobilnost umetnikov še ne pomeni decentralizacije globalnega umetnostnega sveta. Migracije kitajskih umetnikov v Berlin in izzivi, s katerimi se soočajo, kažejo na vztrajno evro-ameriško prevlado v sodobni umetnosti. Ta raziskava prispeva k antropologiji sodobne umetnosti z združevanjem migracijskih študij in raziskovanjem globalnega umetnostnega sveta.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** mobilnost umetnikov, globalni umetnostni svet, kitajske migracije, decentralizacija

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