

Teaching

Cai
Guo-Qiang

ARTIST

CAI Guo-Qiang

(tsai gwo-chiang)

蔡国强



Cai Guo-Qiang

BORN

1957, Quanzhou, China

LIVES & WORKS

New York

THEMES

History
Materials and Process
Symbols

ART MEDIUMS

Sculpture
Installation

“My father is a calligrapher; he makes traditional paintings, and he also studies Chinese history. My home was always full of traditional artists and a love for traditional Chinese art. . . . I wanted to follow the Western tradition of oil painting and sculpture and be influenced by Western thought. Now, looking back, I see I’ve inherited some of my father’s scholarly thinking; Chinese cultural tradition is part of me.”¹

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

Cai Guo-Qiang was born in 1957 in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. Even as a child, he was interested in art and sketched landscapes around his house in watercolor, later using oil paint. In 1984 Cai began using gunpowder in his work, a material invented in China, to create allegorical, sociopolitical commentaries that draw on its associations with ancient medicine, ritual fireworks, and violence. Proficient in a variety of mediums, Cai draws freely from military history, Daoist cosmology, Maoist revolutionary tactics, Buddhist philosophy, and pyrotechnic technology. Cai lived in Japan from 1986 to 1995, after which he moved to New York, where he currently resides. Cai was a core member of the creative team that planned the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan (1996) is an installation that descends from the ceiling in the form of a dragon, culminating at the floor with three running Toyota car engines. An allegorical play on Asia’s rising influence, the work also features contemporary news clippings documenting the rise of China in the age of globalization.

The artist has often used allegory as a point of entry to consider larger issues. For this installation, Genghis Khan’s reputation as a skillful warrior and conqueror of Eurasia was adroitly appropriated, along with the cautionary tale “The Boy Who Cried Wolf,” to address contemporary Western fears of Asian dominance. Asia’s expansionism—an actuality

in terms of the region’s growing economic power—is pointedly, and humorously, emphasized through the artist’s choice of symbolically loaded materials. The work is formed from large branches affixed with inflated sheepskin bags, which were traditionally used by ancient Mongol warriors alternately to hold drinking water and, when inflated, as components of rafts for crossing rivers.

At the lower end of the installation, three Toyota engines remain running, signifying the power of Japanese automobile companies to overtake automakers from the United States. An earlier version, *The Ark of Genghis Khan*, was realized in 1996 for a group exhibition that originated at the Nagoya City Art Museum, which is located near the city of Toyota, where the automaker has its headquarters. As part of the installation, the ephemera that line the gallery wall document the mutual dependence—characterized by attraction and repulsion—between East and West in the era of globalization.

1 Dana Friis-Hansen, Octavio Zaya, Serizawa Takashi, and Cai Guo-Qiang, *Cai Guo-Qiang* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2002), p. 10.



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan*, 1996. 108 sheepskin floats, branches, wooden paddles, rope, three Toyota car engines, and photocopies of various magazine covers and article clippings, dimensions variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Purchased with funds contributed by the International Director's Council and Executive Committee Members: Eli Broad, Elaine Terner Cooper, Beat Curti, Ronnie Heyman, J. Tomilson Hill, Dakis Joannou, Barbara Lane, Robert Mnuchin, Peter Norton, Thomas Walther, and Ginny Williams, with additional funds contributed by Peter Littmann 97.4523

View and Discuss

→ This work is made from unusual materials, including 108 sheepskin floats, branches, wooden paddles, rope, and three Toyota car engines.

Ask students to find these materials in the image. What thoughts do these materials evoke?

→ Cai titled this work *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan* (1996). To understand the title and the work, students will need to know something about these references. Read to your students the section of the text above that explains some of Cai's symbolic references.

With this information, what additional connections can your students make between the title of this work, the installation, and its meaning?

→ Cai uses materials symbolically to comment on contemporary issues. In this work, he employs sheepskins that are traditionally used to keep river rafts afloat (see photo). In Cai's work, these sheepskins have been configured into an abstracted flying dragon, a symbol of China. Compare the photo of the sheepskin raft with Cai's work.



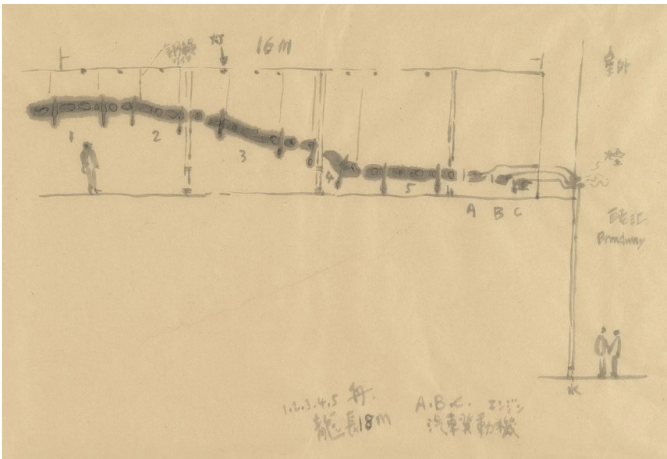
Sheepskin rafts are an ancient means of transportation in northwestern China. Sheepskins are sewn, sealed, inflated, and then fixed with a rope onto sticks.

How has Cai transformed this ancient, traditional means of transportation into something that comments on contemporary global economics and politics?

Classroom Activities

Visualize Through Drawing

Drawing continues to be an important way for Cai to visualize new works. For *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan*, he produced six relatively simple ink-on-paper studies that diagram the forms and various parts of the installation, and he added written notations to further describe his vision.



Cai Guo-Qiang, Study for *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan*, 1996. Ink on paper, 33.1 × 48.3 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Hong Hong Wu 97.4524.5

Have students look carefully at Study for *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan*, and identify places where they can see the preliminary drawings manifested in the final installation.

Plan an Installation

Have students plan their own installation using preliminary drawings to help them envision a novel way to rearrange their classroom. Make a series of sketches to plan a new configuration of classroom furniture (chairs, desks, etc). Decide on the most interesting design, then produce the new arrangement and document the transformation through photographs.

Once the project is complete, talk about how using preliminary drawings was helpful. Then discuss the problems that were encountered during construction that students did not foresee in their preliminary drawings.

Classroom Activities

Use Materials as Symbols

Look closely at the Toyota car engines in *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan*. Cai uses materials symbolically. Discuss how a material can carry multiple meanings. Study common objects, such as a book, a boat, a traffic sign, or a fallen tree.



Installation view, *The Hugo Boss Prize 1996*, Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, 1996

How many possible symbolic meanings can students associate with each object? Challenge them to create individual sculptures that consider these symbolic meanings.

A Class Debate

The transformation of China into a major economic power within a time span of only three decades is often described as one of the greatest economic success stories in modern times. The emergence of China as a major commercial superpower has prompted concern among many U.S. policymakers, who worry that China's rise might result in the relative decline of the United States. Cai's work playfully explores the economic competition between the two countries.

Discuss and debate: Do you think China is an economic threat or ally to the United States?

Resources

Websites

- Cai's Website. <http://www.caiguoqiang.com>.
- The Kennedy Center, "Science Meets Artistry: The Work of Cai Guo-Qiang." https://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/lessons/grade9-12/Science_Meets_Artistry#Overview.

Videos

- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. "Cai Guo-Qiang: *Inopportune: Stage One*." February 22, 2008. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/cai-guo-qiang-inopportune-stage-one>.

Articles

- *Art in the Twenty-First Century*. Season 3, "Cai Guo-Qiang in 'Power.'" September 16, 2005. <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/cai-guo-qiang-in-power-segment>.
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. "Cai Guo-Qiang's *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan*." Accessed August 2, 2019. <https://www.guggenheim.org/conservation/cai-guo-qiangs-cry-dragoncry-wolf-the-ark-of-genghis-khan>.

Books

- Krens, Thomas, and Alexandra Munroe. *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe*. Exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from his given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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