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Negotiating Socio-Political Considerations within China's Art Scene

- *An Interview-based Study of Ten Chinese
Contemporary Artists*

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“In some of their work, some artists ridicule what is noble, distort the classics. They subvert history and smear the masses and heroes. Some don’t tell right from wrong, don’t distinguish between good and evil, present ugliness as beauty, exaggerate society’s dark side. Some are salacious, indulge in kitsch, are of low taste and have gradually turned their work into cash cows, or into ecstasy pills for sensual stimulation. Some invent things and write without basis. Their work is shoddy and strained, they have created cultural garbage”.

(Xi Jinping in Boehler and Piao 2015, 1)

“If you want to be a pure artist in China, you have to be a warrior! You must fight with all this unreasonableness in your own way. I feel that my way of fighting back is quite strategic. I see myself as a survivor, and, through all of the small things that I do, I try to change this closed environment. I do this little by little, step by step, like the water makes changes in the earth, do you know what I mean!?! I am trying to create a better art environment and a better world”.

(Participant 06, 2019)

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Abstract (English)

In times of globalization, whether it relates to economic and cultural exchanges or to mutual interests of solving global crises, there is an increasing need for productive cross-border collaborations. For such collaborations to be successful, knowledge regarding other people's perspectives and circumstances is essential. In this thesis, artists' narratives are viewed as resources capable of conveying such knowledge.

The aim of this master's thesis was to explore what it may be like to be and work as a Chinese contemporary artist in 2019. The topic was studied in two stages; First, perspectives and experiences of ten artists were explored through face-to-face interviews during October and December 2019. Second, the artists' responses were analyzed in light of supplementary literature regarding broader historical, political, social, economic and cultural contexts within the Chinese society and art scene. The participants' perspectives and experiences were studied through a theoretical framework differentiating between *resources* (i.e. individual or contextual, materialistic or non-materialistic assets which the participants used to improve their circumstances and achieve higher levels of well-being) and *deficits* (i.e. individual or contextual, materialistic or non-materialistic limitations which hindered the participants from using these resources).

The results indicate that the artists' possibilities to experience their situations as positive, largely depended on their capacities to gain, maintain and foster resources. When this capacity was high, they seemed to cope better with deficits and challenges in their everyday lives. As such, the access to usable resources appeared essential for their experiences as artists.

Although based on data from a small sample-group, this study may provide knowledge regarding how to protect and/or improve conditions for Chinese contemporary artists. This is done by first identifying different resources and deficits, and then exploring their roles in the artists' quests for positive experiences and well-being.

Abstrakt (Norsk)

I en globalisert tid, enten det gjelder økonomisk og kulturell utveksling eller gjensidige interesser for å løse globale kriser, finnes det et økende behov for produktive samarbeid over landegrensene. For at slike samarbeid skal være vellykkede, er kunnskap om andre menneskers perspektiver og omstendigheter essensiell. I denne oppgaven blir kunstneres narrativ sett på som ressurser i stand til å formidle slik kunnskap.

Målet med denne masteroppgaven var å utforske hvordan det kan være å leve og arbeide som en kinesisk samtidskunstner i 2019. Temaet ble studert i to trinn; Først ble ti kunstneres perspektiver og opplevelser utforsket gjennom personlige intervjuer i løpet av oktober og desember 2019. Deretter ble kunstnernes svar analysert i lys av supplerende litteratur med hensyn til bredere historiske, politiske, sosiale, økonomiske og kulturelle kontekster innen det kinesiske samfunnet og kunstscenen. Deltakernes perspektiver og opplevelser ble studert gjennom et teoretisk rammeverk som skiller mellom *ressurser* (dvs. individuelle eller kontekstuelle, materialistiske eller ikke-materialistiske midler som deltakerne brukte for å forbedre sine omstendigheter og oppnå høyere velvære) og *hinder* (dvs. individuelle eller kontekstuelle, materialistiske eller ikke-materialistiske begrensninger som hindret deltakerne fra å bruke disse ressursene).

Resultatene indikerer at kunstnernes muligheter til å oppleve situasjonene sine som positive, i stor grad var avhengig av deres kapasitet til å skaffe, opprettholde og fremme ressurser. Når denne kapasiteten var høy så de ut til å takle hinder og utfordringer i hverdagen bedre. Som sådan virket tilgangen på brukbare ressurser avgjørende for deres opplevelser som kunstnere.

Selv om studien er basert på data fra en liten gruppe deltakere, kan den bidra med kunnskap om hvordan man kan beskytte og/eller forbedre forholdene for kinesiske samtidskunstnere. Dette oppnås ved å først identifisere forskjellige ressurser og hinder og deretter utforske deres roller i kunstnernes søken etter positive opplevelser og velvære.

Foreword

During the autumn of 2009 and spring of 2010, I lived in Kunming, southwest China, where I had the pleasure to meet and work with various Chinese and Scandinavian artists. One day, I was invited by a Chinese friend to visit a photo exhibition. My friend told me in English that I had to be discrete since the contents of the exhibition was quite “bold” and “not socially accepted”. We arrived at a big warehouse where the artist had hung photographs of himself flipping off various Chinese official buildings, and it became obvious why this exhibition was held in secret and why I had been asked to be discrete. The large warehouse was quiet, yet filled with people who were silently nodding, exchanging looks and examining the photographs, whilst simultaneously keeping a watchful eye on the entrance. After a short while, we left and went to a nearby tea house. My friend talked for hours about a frustration within the Kunming art community related to art policies, censorship and the recent arrest of a Chinese writer. On the way back to my apartment, I had mixed feelings of admiration and worry for some of the artists I had come to know during my stay in Kunming. I felt humbled and somewhat embarrassed by my previous naïve understanding of the lives and experiences of these artists.

Ever since that day, I have been interested in the conditions within the Chinese art scene. When I started my bachelor-studies in Chinese at the University of Oslo in 2015, I learned that politics is only one of the many aspects that shape the living and working situations of Chinese artists. Studies in Chinese society, culture, history, philosophy, business, literature et cetera, revealed a complex image of the artists’ multi-faceted realities, and although I wanted to explore it further, I had no idea where to start. During my master’s studies (2018-2020), I figured that the best way to learn more about the artists’ situations, may be to let them tell their stories in their own words. This conclusion drove me to, once again, pack my bags and head for Kunming. With a high probability of meeting a completely different art scene from the one I experienced during 2009-2010, I had to “rewire” my brain and dispose of most preconceived ideas regarding Chinese artists’ living and working conditions. This thesis is the result of the qualitative, interview-based study I conducted during my master’s program. In addition to accounts from ten Chinese contemporary artists, various literature has been utilized to further nourish the discussions and enrich the thesis’ overall content. I sincerely hope that the fascination, enthusiasm and inspiration I felt whilst writing it, may rub off on the reader, and that I have managed to adequately portray the participants’ perspectives and experiences in a respectful manner.

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Introduction

Since the millennium shift, the national and global interest in Chinese contemporary art has grown rapidly (Hsieh et al. 2010, 3). Contemporary art has the potential to illuminate and reflect different aspects of the country's cultural, societal, economic and political landscape from a point of view that transcends the frequently offered media-image of China as a business-oriented, authoritarian superpower. This growing popularity regarding Chinese contemporary art may indicate an increasing need to experience and explore China from new perspectives. As representatives of such perspectives, Chinese contemporary artists may play an important role in the shaping of China's international as well as domestic image.

The motivation for choosing the focus of this thesis was mainly related to an idea that contemporary art has the potential to function as an effective tool for communication. For example, it may assist in conveying messages from an artist to an audience, such as when artist activists in Baltimore 2012 addressed epistemic injustices through street art (Sondra Bacharach, 2018), or to encourage people to become more environmentally conscious (Saffron O'Neil and Nicholas Smith, 2014). The point is that we live in a constantly changing, evolving world, yet the distance between people is shrinking as individuals from different countries and cultures are continuously establishing new connections and relationships. When looking at global challenges and crises, such as climate change or pandemics, it becomes clear how dependent we are on stable and productive cross-border collaborations. In this thesis, I suggest that with such a dependency comes a need to elevate our knowledge regarding other people's perspectives, capabilities and circumstances. I propose that contemporary art and the narratives provided by the participants in this study have the potential to convey such knowledge.

In this thesis, I explore what it may be like to be and work as a Chinese contemporary artist in 2019. The topic was studied through two approaches: Firstly, the individual perspectives and experiences of ten Chinese contemporary artists residing in either Oslo, Dali or Kunming, were explored through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews during October and December in 2019. It is important to note that nine out of these ten interviews were conducted in Chinese and have served as oral primary sources for this study. Secondly, the artists' responses were discussed in light of supplementary literature regarding broader historical, political, social, economic and cultural contexts within the Chinese art scene and society.

Within the first approach, the focus was on aspects in the participants' lives that they considered to be especially significant for their overall experiences as artists. Since these aspects could be related either to their individual situations or to broader contexts within their surroundings, it was anticipated that each participant would mention multiple aspects. In order to manage this diverse data, the choice was made to divide the identified aspects into two categories: 1) Aspects mentioned in the form of 'resources', and 2) Aspects mentioned in the form of 'deficits'. These two concepts constitute an essential part of this study's theoretical framework (Chapter 1). In short, this framework combines two theories; a) The stress theory *Conservation of resources* (COR), and b) The health theory *Salutogenesis*. Both theories are used to conceptualize and explain the role of resources in relation to people's health and well-being, and an expansion of the Salutogenic approach is used to conceptualize and explain the term 'deficit'. In this thesis, the term 'resources' is used to identify individual and/or contextual aspects enabling the participants to have positive experiences as artists. For example, an individual resource could be a specific talent, emotion or personal perspective functioning as a driving force for the participant. A contextual resource could be social or economic support, well-established business connections, or the overall effects of globalization, as suggested by this participant:

The biggest resource I can think of is this era we live in where everything moves so fast and the information and culture is so easy to share between people all over the world. It makes it very easy for me to experience other people's worlds, cultures and works.

(Participant 03)

The term 'deficits' is used to identify individual and/or contextual aspects that may hinder the participants from using their resources. A deficit differs from a general hinder or obstacle in the sense that it is directly linked to a resource the participant has. For instance, a participant may have the talent and desire to create art but lack the economic means to buy materials and actualize her/his ideas. In such a case, the lack of money hinders the participant to use her/his artistic talent which she/he considers a resource. Hence, the lack of money is viewed as a deficit.

After identifying the participants' resources and deficits, these were used to discuss three topics that the majority of the participants stressed as particularly significant for their perspectives and experiences as artists; a) family and social life, b) motivation, and c) creative freedom. To discuss these topics in light of resources and deficits was beneficial for understanding what considerations the artists had to take, both as individuals and as part of a larger community, society and/or country. In this sense, the participants' responses functioned as platforms for addressing several challenges that one may face as a Chinese contemporary artist in 2019.

Background – The emergence of Chinese contemporary art

Why Chinese contemporary artists experience their current situations in the way they do, may in several ways be related to conditions and developments within the Chinese art scene. In order to better understand their current situations, it is beneficial to obtain some insight into the development of this scene. Subsequently, a short historic overview regarding important events that seem to have contributed in the shaping of the Chinese art scene from the 1940s until today, is hereby offered.

In the early 1940s, Mao Zedong and the Communist Party ran a political campaign that sparked an ideological mass movement later referred to as the Yan'an Rectification Movement (McDougall 1980; Philip Short 1999). In 1942, driven by the dream of a united China built on nationalistic and communistic values, Mao held a series of speeches wherein he emphasized the importance of civil participation in the resistance towards Japanese invaders (McDougall 1980, 57-58). Mao suggested that literature and art could be used as weapons within this resistance, and that the artists' duty was to convey an image of China and Chinese citizens as resilient, strong and vigorous (*ibid*). Even so, whilst encouraging the people to pick up their pens and brushes, Mao still made it clear that “we must pass strict judgement on works of literature and art that contain antinational, antiscientific, antimass, and antiparty views” (Mao in McDougall 1980, 77). This short, historic flashback is significant for the emergence of Chinese contemporary art, because the Soviet-inspired, mass-produced art Mao allocated, quickly became a standard for revolutionary artistic expression in China. This art form, called *socialist realism*, had the essential function to spread political propaganda and promote party ideologies and became increasingly popular throughout the 1940s and 1950s (Paul Gladston, 2014; Michael Sullivan, 1999). In the shade of its public and governmental support and popularity not many other artistic expressions could grow and evolve – at least not officially.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the tendency to use visual art as a political tool was still strong. Before Deng Xiaoping became the new leader of China's Communist Party (CCP) in 1978, the Chinese art scene had been more or less stuck in frameworks based on Maoist aesthetic norms. When entering the Reform and Opening-period (1976-1989), China started opening up for further international collaborations and developed a more market-focused economy. Sullivan (1999, 715) explains how Deng Xiaoping during this period introduced a series of policies that completely transformed the country's economic and socio-political landscape. These transformations seem to be reflected in developments within the art

scene, as artists found new inspiration in Western expressionism, impressionism and abstract art. Paul Gladston and Katie Hill (2012, 105) suggest that China's previously rather monotonous mode of art production at this point was extended by three new artistic discourses: a) a rebirth of traditional Chinese art, often referred to as national art (国画 *guo hua*), b) art based on a mixture of modern western and traditional Chinese techniques, and c) modern art that was strongly influenced by international postmodernism and western modernism, referred to as Chinese contemporary art (中国当代艺术 *zhongguo dangdai yishu*). One example of artists taking advantage of Deng's new policies and the expanding Chinese art scene, was an avant-garde art group called "the Stars" (星星 *xingxing*) who held an unauthorized exhibition in Beijing in 1979. This was the first time since 1949 that an independent art group gathered in a collective expression that challenged the politicized, aesthetic convention which had dominated the art scene during Mao's regime (Sullivan 1999, 714-715). The group's instant fame inspired the emergence of various new independent art groups around the country (Sullivan 1999, 715).

Throughout the Reform and Opening-period, the Chinese government was busy transforming the trade-market and expanding the private sector. Sullivan (1999, 715) suggests that the government's undivided focus on these reforms, made them unprepared for the rapid developments within the country's artistic communities. Although the old era of an exclusively pro-Party culture within China's art scene had come to an end, the government still turned to policy-making in several attempts to constrain upcoming art trends which moved freely and explosively in all directions. Sullivan (1999, 715) proposes that the authorities' uncertainty and ambivalent attitude regarding these developments was reflected in frequent implementations of new, and re-evaluations of old, cultural policies throughout the 1980s. Despite these policy-reforms, the Chinese art market flourished. Inspired by new techniques, and with an increasingly open access to the international art market and new media platforms, various artists in China started to reflect upon their history and current situations through different expressions. At this point, the Chinese art scene could be compared to a pan full of popcorn which had stood far too long on the stove; as the lid came off, out flew everything.

During the 1980s and 1990s, some artists reflected on the tragedies of the Cultural Revolution (e.g. Zhang Xiaogang 张晓刚), whilst others expressed their feelings regarding the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 (e.g. Yue Minjun 岳敏君) or created cynical replicas of famous

socialist realism art works from the Maoist era (e.g. Wang Guangyi 王广义) (Appendix: Fig. 2). According to Gladston and Hill (2012, 106), the humanistic variation of socialist realism that reflected feelings regarding tragic, historic events, appropriately enough attained the label ‘Scar art’ (伤痕绘画 *shanghen huihua*). Sullivan (2009, 716) suggests that artists expressing themselves through Scar art during the 1980s were not particularly welcomed by the cultural authorities, instead they were condemned as being “negative”. Yet, both Scar art and ‘Cynical realism’ (玩世现实主义 *wanshi xianshi zhuyi*), a satiric and ironic reinvention of socialist realism, contributed in shaping an understanding of Chinese contemporary art that still exists today (Gladston and Hill 2012, 107). Through Cynical realism, Chinese artists started to express criticisms and concerns regarding different social and political practices.

Gladston (2014, 9) claims there has always been a connection between China’s political climate and the directions in which the art scene has developed, and that this connection should be considered an essential contributing factor to why China’s contemporary art scene has the characteristics it has today. Minglu Gao (2012, 211) suggests that the new, politically charged art trends emerging in China during the late twentieth century had such an impact that they set the standard for Western understandings of Chinese contemporary art for years to come. For example, whilst working as a curator during the 1990s, Gao (2012, 211) claims he needed to include Cynical realism and Scar art in his exhibitions in order to attract Western customers who all regarded these genres as stereotypical for Chinese contemporary art.

According to Gao (2012), by the turn of the millennium, Chinese art practitioners were faced with new challenges related to capitalistic interests. Gao (2012, 210) proposes that between the early 2000s and 2012, the Chinese contemporary art market became notably more profit-oriented, something that threatened the innocence of the artists as well as the essence of art in itself. Furthermore, he suggests that collectors, critics, auction houses, even some individual artists, all contributed in advocating the economic values of art at the expense of purely aesthetic values. Gao (2012, 213) claims that “Since the 1990s, major collections of Chinese contemporary art have, for the most part, been built up by foreign collectors. Most of these collections are based on the idea of art as capital and the treating of artworks as though they were stock”. Gao’s (2012) concerns regarding this development are shared by several participants in this study (Chapter 4), yet it should be noted that the capitalization of the art industry is a global phenomenon and should not be considered typical for China alone.

Overview of chapters

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces and explains the theoretical framework and frequently used key concepts. In Chapter 2, the method is described and discussed, and participants, research locations and ethical considerations presented. In Chapter 3, 4 and 5, data collected during the interviews is presented and discussed in light of existing literature. These chapters deal with considerations the participants expressed they had to take in relation to; family and social life (3), motivation (4) and creative freedom (5). Chapter 5 is followed by a final discussion and conclusion, a list of references and an appendix.

Chapter 1: Resources and Deficits in theory

Whilst planning this research project, the intention was to derive insight into the participants' situations that was both interesting in itself, but also useful to improve or protect the contemporary artists' circumstances in a broader context if such a need should arise. A potential approach to accomplish this was to study resources and deficits contributing to, or hindering the participants from, having positive experiences as artists.

This thesis combines two theoretical approaches. Within the first approach, Stevan E. Hobfoll's (1989; 2001; 2018) theory of *conservation of resources* (COR) is used to explain how individuals are motivated to maintain and protect the resources they have at their disposal, as well as to seek out new ones. Hobfoll et al. (2018, 105) divide the term 'resource' into four categories; "object resources (e.g., car, tools for work), condition resources (e.g., employment, tenure, seniority), personal resources (e.g., key skills and personal traits such as self-efficacy and optimism), and energy resources (e.g., credit, knowledge, money)". As such, resources are viewed as materialistic or non-materialistic assets that individuals use to cope with stressful situations. The COR theory further suggests that when these resources are in any way threatened or lost, it elevates the individual's stress-levels. Within the second approach, Aaron Antonovsky's (1979; 1987) health-theory *salutogenesis*, together with the expanded framework developed by Mia Wennerberg (2017), is used to describe how resources may enable individuals to maintain health and well-being even during stressful circumstances. The salutogenic approach is in addition applied in order to explain the relationship between resources and deficits, as well as the differences between *individual* and *contextual* resources and deficits as seen in Wennerberg (2017, 15).

1.1 Conservation of Resources Theory

The COR theory is a widely used theory in research concerning organizational behavior and psychology and has been frequently applied in studies regarding stress – especially work-related stress (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 103). The theory is based on the tenet that individuals in general strive to “obtain, retain, foster, and protect those things they centrally value” (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 104). This tenet is connected to evolution and motivational theory wherein the focus on resources has always been a central part of the human survival instinct and humans’ will to develop and thrive. In addition, Hobfoll et al. (ibid) argue that people tend to create resource reservoirs to improve their chances of overcoming future obstacles or challenges. Another essential tenet of the COR theory is that there are universal resources (e.g. family, health, self-esteem, well-being, and a sense of meaning and purpose) that are valued higher than individual-specific resources (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 104).

COR theory builds on a set of principles and corollaries that allow for testing of specific hypotheses, for instance regarding potential effects of resource gains and losses (Appendix: Fig.3). As such, it has been useful for understanding what value, and role, different resources may have for the participants in this study, as well as how the participants may be affected when experiencing gains/losses of those resources. The first principle of COR theory states that resource loss is more powerful than resource gain since a loss tends to have a greater and more rapid impact on the individual (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 105). The second principle states that people “must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources” (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 105). For example, an individual who will move to a new country may learn a new language to increase her/his chances of finding work. As such, the individual invests in a resource that has a high probability of being useful in the future, thereby lead to additional resources. The third principle states that resource gains become more important in circumstances with high resource-losses (ibid). Consequently, if the previous individual had moved to a new country without learning the language, and circumstances for resource-loss were generally high, the importance of the new language as a resource would increase. The fourth principle states that “When people’s resources are overstretched or exhausted, they enter a defensive mode to preserve the self which is often defensive, aggressive, and may become irrational” (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 106). This is the least researched principle of all COR theory principles, yet it may be highly explanatory when considered in light of self-preservation strategies (ibid). In addition to these four principles, the COR theory includes three

corollaries (Appendix: Fig.3), whereof the first one was particularly relevant during this study's data analysis:

Corollary 1: Those with greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of resource gain. Conversely, individuals and organizations who lack resources are more vulnerable to resource loss and less capable of resource gain. (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 106)

Hobfoll et al. (2018, 107) argue that resources are not static, but greatly affected by circumstantial contexts and environments, as well as their interrelationship with other resources. That is, a specific aspect may be a resource for one individual but not for another, or it may be a resource only during certain circumstances or at a specific time or place. Hobfoll et al. (ibid) explain the nature of resources through the principles of “resource caravans” and “resource caravan passageways”. The concept of resource caravans implies that, since resources often are the results of learned adaptation and nurturance, they tend to travel in packs rather than exist individually. For example, personal resources (e.g. optimism and self-esteem) are highly correlated since they frequently emerge from the same supportive and nurturing conditions (e.g. a supportive family or employer) (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 107). The concept of resource caravan passageways implies that “People’s resources exist in ecological conditions that either foster and nurture or limit and block resource creation and sustenance” (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 106). This means that broader contexts play a major role in how resources are generated, maintained and fostered. For any given set of individuals (e.g. a group of employees or, as in this study, a group of Chinese contemporary artists) resources may reflect conditions within broader organizations and contexts. As such, these contexts create conditioned resource “passageways” for the individuals exposed to them (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 107).

Furthermore, Hobfoll et al. (2018, 108) suggest there is an additional dimension to resource caravans which is related to crossover exchange. They propose that when individuals spend a lot of time together, or exist in similar ecological conditions, a dyadic interindividual transmission of experiences and psychological states may occur. In short, what Hobfoll et al. (2018) suggest is that experiences of, and coping strategies with, the impacts of resources can be rather contagious. This also includes impacts of ‘stressors’ – aspects that contribute to increase an individual’s stress levels. For example, if a family member who usually contributes with a lot of positive energy and harmony in a household suddenly falls severely ill and loses a lot of her/his resources, other family members are likely to react empathically and thereby experience a similar loss of resources. This crossover model involves exchanges of both

resources and engagement, and it is not reserved for individuals but may occur between leaders and followers as well as between organizations and teams (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 110-111).

The COR theory's framework may be of particular relevance for this study since it "emphasizes that the major rules governing how we respond to stress are embedded within shared cultural beliefs" (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 117). In particular, Hobfoll et al. (2018, 117) claim that resource research tends to show different results when conducted in individualistic or collectivist cultures. Whilst resources in individualistic cultures are mainly regarded as contributors to individual well-being, in collectivist cultures they are more frequently viewed as potential group benefits for an integrated whole. For instance, one research study that Hobfoll et al. (2018, 117) refer to, suggests that career paths and attitudes in Chinese work places "should be understood in light of family obligations" (Sun and Pan 2018 in Hobfoll et al. 2018). The role of resources in light of cultural aspects is further discussed in Chapter 3 in this thesis.

Regarding the practical usage of COR theory, Hobfoll et al. (2018, 115) claim that the theory has been valuable in studies wherein the aim has been to outline resources that appear to effectively improve well-being and other aspects of life. This corresponds well with the practical applications of the second theory used as framework for this thesis – salutogenesis.

1.2 Salutogenesis

The salutogenic model of health was coined by Aaron Antonovsky in 1979. It was further developed in 1987 (Antonovsky 1987; Mittelmark et al. 2017) and has in similarity with COR theory been used extensively in health promotion research. Antonovsky developed the salutogenic framework as an alternative approach to health research, which he considered to be more disease-oriented than health-oriented. He saw health (ease) and ill-health (dis-ease) as endpoints on a continuum wherein a person is always to some degree healthy. Antonovsky (1987, xii) asked the question "Why are people located towards the positive end of the health ease/dis-ease continuum, or why do they move towards this end, whatever their location at any given time?". His answer was that a person moving towards health had a strong sense of coherence (SOC) – a general orientation to life based on three core-concepts; comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. When a person with a strong SOC experiences stress-inducing challenges, she/he has access to usable resources that help her/him make sense of what is happening (comprehensibility), is convinced that she/he can use her/his resources to resolve it (manageability), and thereby is motivated to try (meaningfulness). A successful outcome

generates a positive life-experience which strengthens her/his SOC and thereby her/his movement towards health (Antonovsky 1987; Wennerberg 2017).

The main purpose of the present study was not only to identify resources the participants considered essential for having positive experiences as artists, but also to identify aspects and circumstances that may hinder them from using these resources. Therefore, an expansion of the salutogenic framework (Wennerberg, 2017) that fills some gaps regarding such usage-hinders was used. Wennerberg's (2017) research focus was on resources that a group of Swedish informal caregivers used to manage difficult situations with as little adverse effects on their own health and well-being as possible. Whilst mapping her informants' resources, Wennerberg (2017) found that there were certain aspects and circumstances that hindered them from using their resources. She called these usage-hinders *deficits*. On the health continuum, deficits work in the opposite direction as resources (Appendix, Fig.4). They make the challenges that an individual faces "un-comprehensible" and "un-manageable" (Wennerberg 2017, 62). Consequently, any attempts to resolve these challenges are considered meaningless, which creates negative life-experiences and weakens the individual's SOC (ibid).

In order to determine what type of resources and deficits her participants were talking about, Wennerberg (2017, 11-12) categorized them as being either *individual* or *contextual*. Based on this framework, *individual* resources/deficits in the present study should be understood as physical, psychological, emotional or practical strengths/weaknesses derived from the participant her-/himself, such as a good aesthetic sense or a low self-esteem. A *contextual* resource/deficit should be understood as something that comes from outside the participant – something contextually based. Such a deficit may be related to the participant's immediate environment or to larger cultural, social, political, economic and/or historic contexts. As such, a contextual resource may for example be a supportive social network, whilst a contextual deficit may be high living costs hindering the participant to buy necessary working materials.

In accordance with COR theory and Salutogenesis, the theoretical framework for this thesis encompasses a focus on resources that the participants have at their disposal. What are those resources, and how do the participants experience and use them? In addition, the framework is used to identify and explore the nature of deficits that may hinder usage of such resources.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Within this thesis, I ask what it is like to be and work as a Chinese contemporary artist in Oslo, Kunming and Dali in 2019. In order to gain knowledge regarding this topic, an appropriate method to study, describe, contextualize, and gain in-depth insight into individual artists' narratives was needed. David Silverman (2010) and Russel H. Bernard (2006) suggest that qualitative, interview-based research can be particularly suitable when exploring individual narratives. Similarly, Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (2009) state that interview-based research may provide interesting and multi-dimensional data wherein subjective perspectives may be used to enrich and supplement other data regarding a specific topic. Gubrium and Holstein further propose that "Narrative reality is not limited to the mechanics of communication" (2009, 15). In addition to oral accounts, they argue that it is of immense importance that institutional and interactional contexts are considered when conducting narrative analysis (ibid). Based on this literature, the choice was made to approach the research topic through face-to-face interviews, wherein the participants' situations and perspectives could be experienced first-hand. This chapter provides a description of the procedures used to collect and analyze data, as well as offers a rationale for, and critical discussion of, choice of method, participant-group and research locations.

2.1 Method

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with ten Chinese contemporary artists residing in either Oslo (Norway), Kunming or Dali (Yunnan Province, southwest China). During a nine-day field trip to China in December 2019, eight Chinese contemporary artists were interviewed. The frequency was one or two interviews every day, with a few days reserved for planning upcoming interviews and reviewing the ones already conducted. The interviews lasted 45-120 minutes, depending on how much time the participants had at their disposal. By booking one interview in the morning and one in the afternoon, the length of the interviews could be adjusted to fit each participant's individual conversation pace.

The interviews were semi-structured, which may be particularly beneficial when the interviewer has only one chance to meet the participant. The format also allows the interviewer to be in control whilst simultaneously enabling the participants to provide elaborate answers (Bernard 2006, 212). Silverman (2010, 194) proposes that semi-structured interviews should include a set of main questions to maintain a clear structure and guide the interview forward,

whilst simultaneously allow the interviewer to be flexible enough to depart from the interview-guide if an interesting topic emerges. Subsequently, all participants were asked the same set of main questions (Appendix, Fig.1) yet encouraged to speak freely and take their time.

According to Kevin J. O'Brien (2011, 27), the success of an interview largely depends on the interviewer's approach. A major part of the role as interviewer is to try to outline each participant's individual boundaries and adapt the questions accordingly – to “feel the room”. In order to collect in-depth data, an interview technique referred to by Bernard (2006, 217) as *probing* was utilized. The aim of probing is to encourage the participants to provide elaborate answers that may elucidate topics that reach beyond the scope of the main questions. For this technique to work, the interviewer has to be able to recognize when such topics appear, as well as to identify which topics the participant her-/himself stresses as relevant. According to Bernard (2006) and O'Brian (2011), these capacities are vital for a successful interview. Since the aim was to try to capture the participants' narratives in a raw and honest state, it was essential that the participants felt comfortable to speak freely about their perspectives and experiences. To increase the chances of collecting uncensored data, measures were taken to downplay the seriousness and formal connotation of the interviews, for instance by referring to them as mere ‘conversations’ during contact with the participants. In addition, in order to establish a foundation of mutual understanding and trust, extra time was spent on making small talk with the participants prior to each interview.

It was impossible to know beforehand how the participants may react to the questions, therefore a few strategies were applied when designing the interview-guide (Appendix, Fig.1). For example, if a participant would seem reluctant to answer a question, one solution could be to rephrase it (Bernard 2006, 243-244). All questions in the interview-guide initially included the words “you” or “your”, which may force the participants to be subjective and personal in their responses. However, by exchanging these words to a more objective “someone”, the participants' inclination to respond may increase. The idea was that such a strategy may put the mind of a hesitant participant at ease, thus allowing the interview to continue.

Another strategy used whilst designing the questions was to avoid phrasings and words that could be perceived as sensitive or offensive. For instance, question number five (Appendix: Fig.1) is essentially related to ‘freedom of expression’, but since those particular words, in that particular order, are frequently associated with politics and human rights, the participants were

instead asked whether or not they felt free to express themselves in whatever ways they wanted. The intention with this phrasing was to spare the participants the pressure of having to take any definite political stand-points. As such, this strategy was closely linked to the ethical considerations abided throughout this study, whilst it also facilitated the gathering of seemingly sensitive data. Furthermore, with the intention to encourage the participants to provide elaborate responses, as opposed to a simple “Yes” or “No”, the interview questions were designed as ‘open-ended’ (Bernard 2006, 243-244).

2.2 Participants

The ten artists who participated in this study were aged between 25 and 60 years and came from different backgrounds. Some had grown up in wealthy families in the city and had several diplomas from different art academies, whilst others had grown up in rural villages and were self-taught. Some had worked as artists for decades, whilst others were fresh out of art school. There was also a great diversity amongst the participants’ preferences of mediums, techniques and styles (e.g. sculptures, paintings, mixed-media and prints). Out of the ten participants, two were female and eight male. As this study showed no significant differences between the responses from the female and male participants, further focus on gender-based comparisons during the analysis was considered redundant. Despite the participants’ many differences, they shared some traits such as being extremely friendly, open, welcoming and eager to show their art and share their individual stories and perspectives.

2.3 Research Locations

The reason for choosing Oslo and Kunming was mainly based on convenience, whilst the reason for choosing Dali was due to a last-minute recommendation provided by a contact in Kunming. When I had decided on a research topic and methodology, I searched for suitable participants in my hometown Oslo, to test the method and interview techniques before departing for China. During September 2019, social media was used to find two Chinese contemporary artists who resided in Oslo and were willing to participate in the study. After these interviews were conducted, I assessed the method and interview techniques as having been appropriate. Shortly thereafter, a personal contact who was a curator in Kunming was contacted. The curator provided contact information to contemporary artists who lived in the city and might be willing to participate in the study. When in Kunming, I contacted each artist personally and scheduled the interviews. The participants themselves chose the actual place for the interviews. Most frequently the interviews took place in their studios, occasionally in their apartments or at a

café. After one week in Kunming, the curator made contact again and said there was an additional artist in Dali, a few hours north of Kunming, who wanted to participate. Since most interviews in Kunming had already been conducted, it was feasible to visit the participant in Dali before returning to Oslo.

2.4 Language barriers

One of the two interviews in Oslo was conducted in English since the English proficiency level of that participants was sufficient to avoid misunderstandings, whilst the second interview and the interviews in Kunming and Dali were conducted in Mandarin – all participants' mother tongue. Since Mandarin is merely my fourth language, an interpreter I knew personally assisted during the interviews in Kunming and Dali. This interpreter is Chinese, with Mandarin as mother tongue, and also fluent in English. She was thoroughly briefed regarding the scope and purpose of the study beforehand. In addition, she was made aware of her role during the interviews, including instructions to repeat merely what the participant said, without adding or withholding any information. Due to studies in Mandarin during several years, I understood most of what the participants said. Even so, the presence of the interpreter was not redundant, rather the translations functioned as confirmations or disconfirmations of my interpretations. The participants appeared relieved that the Chinese interpreter was present and expressed that they were grateful to be able to speak freely without having to adopt their accounts out of consideration for me.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Before conducting the interviews, ethical guidelines regarding interview-based research had to be considered, and “Norsk senter for forskningsdata” (NSD) (Norwegian Centre for Research Data) was consulted. The NSD supplied information regarding how to handle personal data, which tools to use during the interviews, and whether or not I needed ethical approval for conducting research abroad. After learning about the NSD's registration process, there appeared to be a high risk of not getting the project approved in time for the field trip. Subsequently, the decision was made not to register the project. Instead, the NSD guidelines for unregistered research projects were applied and abided by throughout the research process.

In accordance with these guidelines, no video- or audio-recording was used during the interviews, solely notes on paper and computer. Bernard (2006, 232) states that taking notes is crucial in order to avoid losing or overlooking essential data. According to Silverman (2010,

200), transcriptions of interviews can be extremely time consuming, but since this study's interviews were not recorded, the transcription process had to occur concurrently as the interviews. This procedure may have saved valuable time, yet complicated the process since the questioning, listening, translating and typing had to be done more or less simultaneously. The interpreter's assistance was vital during this process.

Each participant was prior to the interview thoroughly informed regarding the purpose, structure and potential future usage of the research project, both in writing and orally and in English as well as Mandarin. They were also informed regarding their rights to refuse to answer any questions and to end the interview at any point should they wish to do so. Lastly, all participants were assured confidentiality in order to protect their integrity, as well as to enable them to provide honest, uncensored responses. This confidentiality was guarded through omission of data regarding name, age, origin, and other data that may reveal their identities. Instead, each participant was provided with a number between one and ten. To prevent the possibility of tracing a specific quote to a specific participant, these numbers were scrambled after the analysis and do not correspond with the chronological order of the interviews. Moreover, the exact locations and dates of the interviews are not disclosed.

2.6 Analysis

When all data was collected, the transcribed interviews were reviewed and all quotes that seemed to contain resources and deficits were identified, extracted and analyzed separately. After identifying and categorizing the resources and deficits, the quotes were scrutinized to find potential patterns between the participants' responses. Thereafter, the quotes were used to identify what topics the participants seemed to stress as particularly significant for their experiences as Chinese contemporary artist. These topics were; family and social life, motivation and creative freedom. The following quote is used to illustrate how the process of resource identification and analysis proceeded (the same process was used for deficits).

The artistic passion is really my greatest motivation. This, I'm very sure of. Yunnan is a magical place. It is filled with young people who pursue art just for the sake of it, instead of just focusing on money. My friends are all like me, they also think primarily of the art rather than the economic aspects, which makes me feel less alone and more social. I feel so fulfilled in my heart.

(Participant 09)

Within this quote, two resources related to motivation and social life were identified; a) artistic passion working as a strong motivator for the participant, and b) shared ideals with friends and

other artists making the participant feel social, fulfilled and less alone. The artistic passion the participant mentioned was categorized as an individual resource, whilst having shared ideals with friends and other artists was categorized as a contextual resource. When all quotes had been analyzed, and the main topics uniting them identified, examples of the extracted quotes were presented and discussed in light of previous research (Chapter 3-5).

Gubrium and Holstein (2009, 2) argue that there is much information regarding a narrative that may be gathered from sources beyond its textual form. Their approach emphasizes the socially situated practice of storytelling, and how “contexts in which stories are told are as much a part of their reality as the texts themselves” (ibid). Building on Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) approach, the participants’ narratives, although oral, were considered in light of various aspects and circumstances that may have affected the manner in which the participants chose to tell them. For example, aspects related to the interviewer (e.g. appearance, gender, nationality, language, tone, approach, etc.), or to the participant (e.g. mood, personality, experiences, intentions, etc.), may all directly or indirectly have affected what the participants said, how they said it, and what they may have refrained from saying. In addition to such aspects, the participants’ narratives may have been influenced by broader contexts and circumstances, for instance the current political climate, historic events or deep-rooted traditions. Even though it was not possible to identify, thereby consider, all aspects and circumstances that may have affected each participant’s narrative, the notion of their existence and potential effect on data was considered throughout the process of analysis.

2.7 Critical discussion of methodology

O’Brien (2011, 27) proposes that the main strength of interviews is how they may capture “the particular and the vivid”. As such, data from interviews may assist in illuminating nuances and details within a topic, thereby function as an enriching supplement to other sources. O’Brien (2011, 28) suggests that research design should be viewed as an ongoing process wherein discoveries made along the way may be of greater importance than final results. By approaching research in this manner, it may reduce the risk of the interviewer drawing hasty conclusions based on an already fixed hypothesis or preconceived notions regarding a certain topic. However, O’Brien (2011, 32-33) also mentions that interviews indeed have their limitations, and that although they may be of great assistance when identifying theoretical frameworks or reinforcing a specific argument, they are essentially partial. O’Brien (2011, 32) further claims that “few topics can be studied based solely or even mainly on interviews”, and that data from

interviews should therefore always be accompanied by data from written sources. This was the main idea behind the structure and composition of the present study.

One of the limitations with using interviews, is the challenge of asking relevant follow-up questions as the interview proceeds. In this study, that became particularly evident during the analysis when I discovered several potential questions that I wished I had thought of during the interviews instead of a few weeks after. This aspect may have been avoided with a structured interview form which usually includes a protocol with pre-formulated follow-up questions (Silverman 2010, 194). However, a semi-structured interview form enabled an increased openness for whatever topics the participants brought into the conversation, thus allowing for a deeper understanding through spontaneous, topic-specific follow-up questions.

In addition to the interviewer's capability to ask relevant questions, the quality of an interview largely depends on the participant's capacity and willingness to respond. For example, the participant may be caught off guard by the question and respond before thinking it through. Bernard (2006, 241) proposes that the participant may also feel pressured to provide a specific response in order to "please" the interviewer, something that he refers to as "the deference effect". Due to such potential challenges, it is essential that the interviewer is well-prepared regarding aim and potential challenges. At the same time, the interviewer may gain from being flexible enough to alter elements within the interview format in order to maintain a high quality, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the needs and integrity of the participant.

In most research, multiple approaches may be used to study a specific topic. Within this study, two alternative methods of data-collection could have been observations or surveys instead of face-to-face interviews. An approach based on observation may have allowed for an increased perceptivity regarding the participants' contextual circumstances. These circumstances may contribute considerably to the participants' overall experiences as artists and should hence be considered important. Even so, if this study was to be based solely on observations, it would have required that the interviewer was able to interpret these observations in relation to the research questions. In other words, to achieve the main aim of this study – to describe the perspectives and experiences of Chinese contemporary artists from their own viewpoints – would appear a much more difficult task if the possibility of actually talking to them had been excluded. An approach based on surveys, on the other hand, may have solved this problem by enabling the interviewer to ask direct questions about the participants' contextual circumstances

through the surveys. Even though the preparations for a survey may be extensive and time-consuming, when finalized it can be sent to any chosen number of participants, which would have saved time during data-collection and enabled a larger sample-group compared to observations and/or interviews. Nevertheless, surveys are limited to a fixed set of questions, rendering data associated solely with those questions. Hence, the opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding through spontaneous follow-up questions and detailed explanations would have been lost. In addition, had the study been based on surveys, it would not have been possible to consider contextual aspects essential for the analysis (e.g. the participants' body language, tone of voice and immediate, physical surroundings).

Set aside alternative methods for collecting data, other elements in the study could have been altered, which may have rendered different data. For instance, the method could still have been face-to-face interviews, but with a reduced number of participants (e.g. 1-5). This may have allowed an even more detailed, in-depth analysis of each interview within the allocated time-limit. Or, the number of participants could have been increased (e.g. 15-20), which may have limited the time frame for each interview yet allowed for clearer indications of response patterns and perhaps even increased the level of representativeness for the participant-group.

Conclusion

The frequency of the interviews allowed time to review completed interviews whilst data was still fresh, thereby reducing the risk of mixing data from different interviews. The time flexibility also allowed room for probing when a particularly interesting topic was brought into a conversation, which contributed to richer data. The number of participants seemed appropriate considering this study's allocated time limit. Ten participants appeared few enough to allow time for careful within-case analysis, yet many enough to conduct cross-case analysis.

To allow the participants to choose the place for their interview seemed beneficial since all participants appeared to be comforted by being in a familiar setting. Furthermore, the interviews that took place at studios provided an opportunity to see and discuss the participants' art and to observe their artistic processes and working environment first-hand. These observations were valuable as supplementary, contextual data to their narratives. For instance, one of the participants said that his social life and the time he spent with friends was essential for his well-being as an artist. However, the essence of this statement became obvious first after the interview, when I had the opportunity to observe the participant in a social setting, discussing

art and various other topics whilst enjoying the company of his friends. Another example was an interview conducted with an artist who had his studio and office in the same space. The office was filled with awards and diplomas, as well as portfolios, articles and books written about him and his art. So, even though the participant was rather humble and never mentioned his accomplishments, his immediate environment provided a lot of information that, combined with his responses, enhanced the understanding of the participant's situation as a whole.

The main effects of using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions was that each participant had the opportunity to tell their story in their own words. This provided rich and nuanced data that may have been more difficult to attain through structured interviews. In addition, this format allowed for a flexibility that made it easier to abide by ethical obligations towards the participants, and the open-ended questions allowed for diverse and elaborate responses.

Furthermore, I conclude that semi-structured interviews were better suited to explore this study's specific topic than for example surveys and observations. Neither was data limited by precomposed questions as it may have been if based on surveys, nor was it limited by my ability to interpret the participant's situations solely through observations. However, it is worth noting that alternative research methods are not mutually exclusive but can be effectively combined. Even though interviews were the main method for collecting data in this study, observations made during these interviews functioned as valuable, contextual data during the analysis.

Based on O'Brien's (2011) approach to research design, each interview was entered with an open mind intended to enable an unprejudiced conversation. When all interviews had been conducted, all participants but one had been seemingly candid, relaxed, and willing to discuss topics that came up. The exception was one participant who, out of concern for a friend that he mentioned in an example, requested for that part of the interview to be omitted – which it was. Overall, I conclude that the choice of method, the flexibility regarding questions and interviewing techniques, as well as the efforts to create a relaxed and casual atmosphere during the interviews, collectively allowed for rich and interesting data to be collected.

Finally, it should be noted that when analyzing narratives, the account that an individual provides will not be static but dynamic. Gubrium and Holstein (2009, 39) suggest that whilst an account in the form of a text may appear set and fixed, "the "same" account changes in

meaning and in its consequences, depending on speakers' and listeners' purposes and the circumstances” of the situation. As such, it is plausible that the responses from this study’s participants may have been very different at another occasion or during other circumstances.

Chapter 3: Artists’ considerations regarding family and social life

Whilst analyzing the interview data, three topics emerged that the participants were particularly keen to discuss: 1) family and social life, 2) motivation, and 3) creative freedom. In this, and the following two chapters, each topic is explored with regard to considerations that the participants expressed they had to take in their everyday-lives in order to have positive experiences as artists. The participants’ perspectives and experiences associated with each topic are illustrated by quotes and discussed in light of existing literature – starting with considerations regarding family and social life.

Amongst the ten participants, four were married and had children, two were in relationships, two were single, and the remaining two did not disclose whether they had a family/relationship or not. When the participants spoke about their families and social lives, they frequently did so in relation to their working lives. Six participants expressed that they took on different roles in the work place, at home or in social situations, and three of them expressed how obligations connected to these roles frequently interfered with each-other. The following participant expressed having difficulties dividing his focus between family and work. Yet, he also stressed that his family functioned as a great source of warmth and support, making his family appear as simultaneously a resource and a deficit.

Maybe it’s not fair to say this, but family can be a burden for you as an artist. But at the same time, they give warmth and support. This is a huge contradiction. How may one balance it!? It’s the focus rather than the time that I find difficult to divide between my art and my family. I have to compensate between my friends, family and work. [...] Actually, the biggest conversation between artists these days is whether to get kids or not.

(Participant 04)

In order to contextualize, and possibly offer some explanations to, the participants’ perspectives, three studies are discussed in this chapter. The first study (Chen et al., 2014) concerns how gains and losses of resources may affect an individual’s work-family experience. The second study (Xu and Xia, 2014) examines how Chinese family values and structures have shifted

between the 1980s and 2014, whilst the third (Yan, 2010) is used to discuss the development of individualistic values in China from the Maoist era until after the millennium shift.

Zheng Chen et al. (2014) examine the dynamics of work-family relationships amongst 382 employees of Chinese firms over time. The study is based on data collected through surveys on two occasions, one year apart. The purpose was to explore how resource gain and loss, in relation to work as well as family, influenced the employees' work-family experiences. Although Chen et al.'s (2014) study differs from the present study regarding method, sample-size and the participants' occupations, it is utilized to illuminate the role of resources in Chinese people's work-family dynamics. Chen et al. (2014, 293) use a definition of 'resources' similar to the one used in this thesis, which makes it particularly suitable for comparative purposes. Within their study, a resource is defined as "an asset that may be drawn upon when needed to solve a problem or cope with a challenging situation", for example social or economic capital or a personal characteristic such as a high self-esteem (Chen et al. 2014, 293).

According to Chen et al. (2014, 293), the influence of resources becomes particularly eminent when work-family enrichment (WFE) or work-family conflict (WFC) is likely to occur. The construct of WFE suggests that an accumulation of resources within an individual's working role (e.g. a pay raise) may improve the individual's experience in the family role, and vice versa. The construct of WFC, suggests that when both roles compete for the same resources, the individual may have difficulties meeting these demands, which, in turn, may have a negative effect on the individual's experience (Chen et al. 2014, 293).

Chen et al. (2014, 294) further propose that when an individual experiences a gain or loss of resources, it can initiate a spiraling pattern wherein resources either increase or decrease. There is plenty of literature that has contributed with research on resource gain- and loss-spirals (e.g. Hobfoll 2001; Heath et al. 2012; Hobfoll et al. 2018). In COR theory, the spirals are frequently referred to as corollaries that assist in explaining potential effects of, and the dynamics between, patterns of resource gain and loss (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 106). Chen et al. (2014, 294) argue that resource gains and losses should be viewed as independent constructs and, thus, it is fully possible for an individual to experience both a gain-spiral and a loss-spiral simultaneously.

Chen et al. (2014, 298) claim to have anticipated that the work resource gains experienced by the participants at the first survey occasion would weaken the WFC at both the first and second

survey occasion, whilst the work resources losses would weaken the WFE. Their hypothesis was confirmed which led them to conclude that, over time, the work resource gains had a generally positive influence on the dynamics of the participants' work-family experiences, whilst work resource losses had a negative. However, the study also showed that the work resource gains at the first survey occasion, and the family resource gains on the second, were in fact strengthened by WFC. Based on these results, Chen et al. (2014, 298), proposed that there exist complementary factors contributing in maintaining the status quo of the participants' work-family experiences. Furthermore, since the WFC had strengthened the family resource gains by the time of the second survey, Chen et al. (2014, 298) suggested that "unexpected gains may result from individuals having to deal with painful situations". This appeared to be transferrable to the perspectives of one of the present study's participants, whose negative feelings and experiences worked as a creative driving force.

I used to struggle with a lot of social anxiety, pressure and so forth. [...] My feelings of loneliness, misery and dissatisfaction is reflected in a lot of my work. Of course, I create happy and peaceful paintings too, but my negative experiences are definitely the main driving force for my artistic expressions.

(Participant 10)

Whilst the study of Chen et al. (2014) has been used to explore the influence that work-family dynamics may have on Chinese employees, the present study's participants expressed that the considerations they had to take in relation to family were not solely work-related. Several of their considerations were instead related to their understandings of family structures, values and functions, as well as their appraisals of collectivistic and individualistic interests.

Anqi Xu and Yan Xia (2014, 32) states that "Although families around the world bear many similarities in values, strengths and challenge, they all have unique characteristics shaped by their historical, cultural, social and economic context". In China, changes in family structures, values and functions were particularly influenced by the economic development following the Reform and Opening-period (Xu and Xia 2014, 32). Xu and Xia (2014, 48) suggest that the rapidly growing economy, together with various implemented reform-policies, speeded up the urbanization and brought about life-altering social transitions within the Chinese society. Since the 1980s, changes in the job market, education and housing sector provided China's population with new opportunities and choices that they did not have before (ibid).

Xu and Xia (2014, 34) propose there are two dominant Chinese family structures: a) The nuclear family (which appears the largest group) and b) The extended family, defined as multiple generations living together. Yet, Xu and Xia (2014, 34) stress that Chinese nuclear families are somewhat different from Western nuclear families in the sense that they are “not completely independent but anchored within an extended family network” with whom they have continuous physical contact, as well as financial and emotional exchanges. Furthermore, their study suggests that Chinese family members take on different roles than Western family members, for instance by deeming it an obligation to take care of grandchildren whilst the children’s parents are at work (Xu and Xia 2014, 34). Another aspect of Chinese family culture is that the children are expected to care for their own parents when they reach a certain age (ibid). However, Xu and Xia (2014, 40) state that these aspects are not merely cultural but also strengthened by Chinese marital and elderly laws which stipulate the obligations different family members have towards each other. The following two quotes may illustrate the time and energy related impacts that such obligations have on the participants’ individual lives.

In China we are very family-oriented, and the family relations are very important for the Chinese. [...] No matter the pressure you may feel in the morning, you still need to get up and start your day. This particular era is very busy, complicated and chaotic. I need to save my energy to do many different things.

(Participant 04)

As my son was growing up, I had to look after my family, so I didn’t have as much time for my art as I had when I was little. I am still trying to find the balance between family life and art. I also have my parents and my wife’s parents to take care of. So, even though my son is grown up now, the family responsibilities are still there. They actually live right next door, my parents.

(Participant 01)

In addition to cultural traditions and laws, there are practical and economic circumstances that may contribute in shaping Chinese family structures and functions. For instance, Xu and Xia (2014, 36) put forward that child care and after school care is not always available, and if it is, it is usually very expensive. In addition, Xu and Xia (ibid) suggest that “having only one child heightens parents’ concern about child safety”, which is eased by letting relatives rather than strangers care for the child. Another contributing circumstance may be that although China has a rapidly aging population, the elderly care is inadequately institutionalized, which leaves the option of having grandparents live in the same, or nearby, apartment as their children and grandchildren (Xu and Xia 2014, 36).

Whilst claiming that the nuclear family and extended family structures are still the most common in China, Xu and Xia (2014, 39) also propose there is a small, yet noticeable, increase in diverse forms of families, such as single-parent households, cohabitant households, and other forms of nontraditional living arrangements. The family structures amongst the present study's participants were very diverse, which may indicate that the living arrangements Xu and Xia referred to as "nontraditional" in 2014, have become more common. It should be noted, however, that most participants who lived in either single person households, or with a girlfriend/boyfriend, were significantly younger than the participants who had families. As such, the possibility that they will end up as part of a nuclear family later on should not be disregarded. Setting aside considerations related to spouses, children and in-laws, four participants also brought up how their parents had affected, and still affect, their artistic careers. The following two participants described how their parents had expressed concerns regarding the participants' future financial and occupational stability. The first participant, who by the time of the interview had a family of his own, described how his father had forced an art education on him against his will whilst growing up. The second participant, who was single by the time of the interview and a lot younger than the first, expressed how his parents had always been skeptical towards his career choice – something he dealt with by ignoring his parents' concerns.

My father wasn't happy with my choice to go to high school, he preferred me to go to art school since occupational training would grant me a teacher job when I graduated. He therefore cut me off and refused to support me during high school. Due to my father refusing to pay for the tuition, I was forced to go to this art teacher school. But during that education, I felt I wasn't living my dream.

(Participant 02)

My parents are not very supportive of my career choice, but they still gave me permission to proceed as an artist. They often worry whether I will be capable to take care of them when they grow old. 'An art career is not a real career' they say. But I want to walk my own path, and I don't really care about what my parents say.

(Participant 09)

Xu and Xia (2014, 40) suggest that another aspect of the social transition that China's growing economy, urbanization and industrialization brought about, was a shift within individualistic and collective interests. An increased level of freedom and independence, partly brought on by higher living standards and changed housing arrangements, resulted in the growth of individualistic interests (Xu and Xia 2014, 40). A few participants in the present study had made a deliberate choice not to be in a relationship, as they thought this would distract them from pursuing their artistic careers. This may support Xu and Xia's (ibid) statement that there has been a growth in individualistic interests. Yet, some of the participants who had partners

and children, expressed that they found it difficult to prioritize their individual needs when these interfered with those of their families.

It can, however, be difficult to balance my time and energy between my family and my art. Sometimes they want me to have more energy when I am at home, but if I have had a long day I can get a bit crazy. It can be difficult for me to leave the studio as creating art sometimes means more to me than family. This is probably a bit selfish...

(Participant 10)

Whilst arguing that there may be a growth within individualistic interests, Xu and Xia (2014, 41) still claim that Chinese families in general tend to prioritize collective interests over individual, mainly due to the previously mentioned interdependence of financial, emotional and practical support. Overall, Xu and Xia (2014, 48) propose that this interdependence has strengthened the utility of intergenerational relationships, and that despite growing individualistic tendencies in other aspects of the Chinese society, family values are still dominated by collective interests and mutual dependency between family members.

Xu and Xia (2014) emphasize the Reform and Opening-period as a type of catalyst for individualistic tendencies within Chinese society, whilst Yan Yunxiang (2010, 489) suggests that such tendencies existed long before the 1970s. Yan (2010, 491) proposes that during Mao's reign, the Chinese society was transformed through a series of systems outlined by state-sponsored mechanisms; a class label system, household registration system, centralized employment system, and a political dossier system. These systems forced people out of their previous life situations, which evolved around family and community, and into a "universalistic comradeship" that guided people's individual interactions as well as their relationship with the state (Yan 2010, 492). Through such social transformations, together with Mao's art and culture reforms, people were encouraged to prioritize collective interests over individualistic ones (ibid). However, Mao's politics also called for people to reinvent themselves as exemplary citizens, which provided room to explore individual potentials in an otherwise deeply confining collectivist society (Yan 2010, 493). Thus, Mao's efforts to inspire collectivistic thinking, in some respects, ended up inspiring individualistic thinking as well.

Yan (2010, 494) suggests that from the late 1970s until the millennium shift, the individualization process went from taking the form of socialist transformation and communist revolution to being more about privatization and market economy. From the early 2000s, individualization as social transformation developed on two separate levels, whereof one was

concerning changes within individual biography patterns and the other involved changes in social structures that were brought on by institutional reforms, policies and changes within the market economy (Yan 2010, 495). Yan (2010, 500) argues that market-oriented reforms paved the way for an increased awareness regarding individual rights. She claims that “The Chinese individual began to link the self with a set of rights or entitlements, thus expanding the traditional definition of the individual as merely part of a social group” (Yan 2010, 500). In addition to market and economy reforms, an increase in rural-urban labor migration between the 1980s and 2000s also contributed to the development of individualistic interests by affecting family relationships and altering traditional living arrangements (Yan 2010, 498).

Another example of the development of individualistic interests is the “silent sex revolution”. Yan (2010, 503) suggests that after the liberalization of marriage law in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by the implementation of sexual education in schools, led to an increased tolerance towards different sexual orientations. Yan (2010, 504) views this “increasing awareness of sexual knowledge and sexual rights as part of the individual claim to choose freedom and happiness among Chinese individuals”. Overall, Yan’s (2010) study reveals a significantly more complex image of the individualization development in China than the one Xu and Xia (2014) present. Furthermore, Yan’s (2010, 504) proposition that Chinese people have begun to focus more individualistic interests and self-development corresponds well with the present study’ data wherein several participants expressed they were on a quest for self-realization.

Based on the literature by Xu and Xia (2014) and Yan (2010), family structures, values and functions may have significant influence on how an individual experiences and copes with different situations in life. In addition to family-related considerations, five participants in the present study described their perspectives on friendships. Out of those five, one considered it exclusively a resource to have friends with whom he could discuss art, two viewed friendships as simultaneously a resource and a deficit, and two viewed friendships as mere distractions. The following participant described friendships as conditional resources. That is, in order for her friendships to be meaningful, the friends had to share her perspectives on art.

At seven years old, my teacher asked me what my dream was. I answered that I wanted to be an artist. So, what made me keep the passion and follow this dream all these years? Well, it went from being a hobby into being a faith, to finally becoming an idealistic journey. If I hang out with friends, they need to have the art as both a faith, an ideal and a hobby. Otherwise, forget it!

(Participant 07)

The two participants who expressed that they did not consider social connections and friendships a resource, explained that it can be a weakness to depend on other people's support and that it can be difficult to work with other people.

Interviewer: "Do you have a community or social connections that you consider resources?"

I have, but I don't consider them resources. By mixing myself too much with these people, I disappear and become a spare part. When you see yourself as a resource, you become magnetizing, and other people get attracted to you. But if you do the opposite, and look to other people for inspiration and support, you become expendable.

(Participant 04)

What regular people may view as resources can be hinders for me. For example, marriage and having people depending on you. For me, those are rather obstacles than resources. Family can create problems for you, by forcing you to do this or that, yet they are depending on leadership. Even regarding team work, this can be a problem. I therefore keep to myself a lot, but sometimes I have to work with other people even though their way of complicating simple things is very inefficient.

(Participant 02)

It should be noted that although these two participants had similar views regarding the usefulness of social relationships, the first participant had a spouse and children, whilst the second, whom had a lot of negative ideas regarding family and marriage, was single. The latter participant further explained how he had a very spiritual relationship to art, which he considered a great resource. During the interview, he described how he used to hitchhike to different locations and gather inspiration through deep meditation. However, his friends did not always understand or agree with his methods and perspectives.

I have quite few friends, but the ones that I have I often discuss these things with. But they always tell me I'm too extreme. They don't agree with me. They are more engaged in making money and nurturing their relationships. But the respect and happy tone between us is still there. My way of thinking may actually help solve some problems for them.

(Participant 02)

Even though the differences in perspectives between this participant and his friends sometimes led to disagreements, he did not see them as having negative effects on his friendships. Rather, he proposed that his unique way of looking at art, and at life in general, could be used to help his friends solve different problems. In a sense, he thus considered himself to be a resource for his friends. This provided him with confidence, which, in turn, became a resource for him. As such, this may be a good example of how a resource gain spiral may arise, even though the prerequisites for the spiral were based on disagreements.

Conclusion

In concordance with findings from Chen et al. (2014, 293), six participants expressed having difficulties to meet the demands of their family and work roles, especially when those roles competed for the same resources (e.g. time and energy). It should be noted, however, that this appears to be a challenge that many people struggle with and should not be considered typical for artists alone. Chen et al. (2014, 293) also suggested that it was possible to experience both resource gains and losses simultaneously. This appears to correspond with a few of the participant perspectives, wherein they considered their families to be providing support and warmth whilst simultaneously draining them of energy and causing them to lose their focus.

When comparing data from their two surveys, Chen et al. (2014, 298) concluded that individuals may sometimes benefit from having to face difficult situations. Since the present study was based on data from solely one set of interviews, conclusions based on data comparisons cannot be made. Even so, Chen et al.'s (2014) suggestion that a difficult situation may result in a form of resource gain seemed to comply with the views of, at least, one of this study's participants whose negative experiences and emotions assisted in fueling his creativity. Xu and Xia (2014, 41) claimed that Chinese families in general still prioritize collective interests over individual, whilst Yan (2010) proposed that individualization is a complex topic which should be studied in light of broader socio-political, cultural, historic and economic contexts. After studying Yan (2010) and Xu and Xia (2014), I conclude that collective and individual interests may both be of significant value – not only when it comes to family, but within society as a whole. Therefore, I find it somewhat unproductive, perhaps even misleading, to put them up against each-other in the manner that Xu and Xia (2014) do. The challenges of measuring and comparing collectivistic and individualistic interests became even more evident in some of this chapter's presented quotes, wherein participants expressed they had difficulties determining whether, and in which situations, the needs from their families should exceed the importance of their individual needs and artistic ambitions. Whether their perspectives may be interpreted as reflections of a larger underlying conflict between individualism and traditional family values based on collectivism, is difficult to say – especially since the present study is based on what the participants *said* during the interviews, not on what they actually *did*. As such, an observational study may have rendered a different result.

Finally, amongst the participants who talked about their friends and social lives, one described these relationships as vital in order to acquire positive experiences as an artist, whilst two considered social connections and friendships to be either obsolete or resource draining. These

findings have led me to suggest that for this study's participants, friendships were generally not considered a significant source of resources. Instead, in similarity to family relationships, they may constitute a part of the participants lives that cause both resource loss and gain.

Chapter 4: Artists' considerations regarding motivation

Amongst the vast variety in motivational forces that the participants in this study stated as being particularly significant for their individual experiences, the most frequently mentioned were: 1) The opportunity for self-reflection and personal development, and 2) The opportunity to offer one's own perspectives to a larger group of people. In addition to these two forces, the participants' responses revealed an unexpected, collective tendency to approach the topic of motivation by emphasizing a demotivational force related to economic interests within the art industry. When asked the question "What motivates you to work as an artist?", the majority of the participants responded by first stating what should *not* be an artist's main motivation, and then continued by explaining what they meant should be the "true" (真正 zhenzheng) motivational force for any artist. Whilst the opinions regarding what motivations are true were somewhat diverse, the participants appeared to be unanimous in their skepticism towards the idea of having a purely profit-based motivation for creating art. From their perspectives, all Chinese artists, regardless of artistic genre and style, are either motivated by a capitalistic or spiritualistic ideology. As all participants seemed to identify themselves as advocates for the latter category, this chapter is mainly devoted to presenting some literature that may help explain why and how such a collective view may have emerged. In order to separate the considerations that appeared related to motivational forces and those related to demotivational forces, this chapter is divided into two parts: Motivational forces and Demotivational forces.

Motivational forces

Participants advocating the opportunity for self-reflection and personal development as their main motivational force, tended to emphasize the importance of the artistic process, rather than the final results. This became apparent when they described a strong desire to explore their individual identities and emotions through their work.

For me, painting is what centers me in my life. It makes me happy, miserable, afraid and everything in between. Art is my fate. [...] Yet, more importantly, I have a strong need to dive into myself and

discover new aspects of who I am. It is an ongoing, personal experiment rather than a concept-focused approach to art. My view is that the journey is more important than the destination.

(Participant 10)

My core motivation is related to finding out more about who I am. That is my journey. I often come close to answering the question ‘Who am I?’, but then I fall out again. [...] The real value of art is all the diversity. The artists all have different ways of searching for the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’, and they all leave their individual footprints – tracks. Diversity creates value within the road leading to this final question.

(Participant 06)

These two participants saw their work as means to learn more about themselves, wherein their art was used as a tool in an ongoing search for self-definition. Two other participants explained how they used their art as a tool to reflect their surroundings and express ideas and feelings regarding different things.

I reflect the surroundings through my art. I need an exit for my emotions, sentiments and thoughts. The environment gives me inspiration. When I am in an environment, I reflect over my part and role in it, and if the environment changes, my expression changes with it. [...] You could say that it is all connected – the outer environment, my inner environment and my expression.

(Participant 09)

I like to observe and feel the different things in the nature. Like an author who explains these feelings in words, I use my paintings to express and explain things. [...] I combine my understandings of the arts with my understandings and interpretations of the nature. I first want to make myself feel touched by the art, then other people may enjoy it as well. If I don’t feel something for my art, no one else will either. My art works are expressions of my spiritual side, that’s how it is.

(Participant 05)

The participants who advocated the opportunity to convey their perspectives to an audience as their main motivational force, were particularly concerned with reflecting their surroundings in order to explain different matters to, or to inspire and help, other people. These participants tended to emphasize on the significance of their final results and how their art was received by the audience. For instance, the following participant was particularly concerned with how visual art conventionally had been studied and understood. This participant’s motivational force was mainly based on a desire to find new ways to analyze and understand art, thereby influence the perspectives of future generations of artists.

Through my work, I am looking for the original art language. I want to find new reasons and ways for art to exist. [...] If I can provide a new understanding of art, I may contribute with new research and help others.

(Participant 03)

Another participant, who worked as a curator as well as an artist, expressed how his motivation was closely connected to a responsibility, or a duty, to spread the messages of other artists, rather than merely his own.

To be an artist is to be holistic. An artist should be broadcasting the beauty of art and spread the message. [...] I want to help with this – to help spread other artists’ messages. This is why I do not solely focus on my own art. [...] I feel obligated to know these artists – to know what they feel and how they are. It is so valuable, because from the surface you only see the techniques, yet there is always a history and a story behind the expressions.

(Participant 06)

Demotivational forces

Although none of the interview questions were explicitly related to economy, most participants ended up discussing their views regarding using art as a means to turn a profit. The most common response pattern was that the participants started by suggesting that the current profit-focus amongst Chinese artists is a problem, continued to explain why, and ended by stating what they meant art should really be about.

Interviewer: “What motivates you to work as an artist?”

In the beginning, just after graduation, it was mostly money. But after three or four years, I started creating art more and more in order to nurture my passion and be happy. I feel I pursued the true purpose of art. If you think only about making money, you can’t create art. This is basic artist morals; to focus on the creative process rather than profit. During the last two years, I haven’t sold anything. Even so, I am happier now than ever before. Now, I can put my whole heart and soul into the art.

(Participant 09)

Nowadays in China, artists focus too much on money and becoming famous. They are not in a state where they may discover things within themselves. They feel urged to push through in the art market and become stars. This is not the true purpose and motivation for creating art. The real purpose is to give inspiration to the next generation. That is what art should be all about!

(Participant 03)

The participants’ view that the economic focus of art has been, and still is, increasing seems to correspond well with the literature reviewed for this thesis. For example, Gao (2012, 210) suggests that the Chinese art market became increasingly commercial and profit-focused during the early 1990s. He explains that during this era “Chinese contemporary art became subject to the opportunism of the market and the curatorial visions of foreign countries. It became increasingly devoid of content, stylized and fashion driven” (Gao, 2012, 210-211). Gao (2012, 211) also proposes that the modern spirituality that had driven Chinese contemporary artists during the 1980s, faded during the following decade as the power of capitalism, combined with shifts in political structures, forced the artists into submission.

Chunchen Wang (2012, 223) similarly argues that the focus within Chinese contemporary art during the 1990s went from being mainly idealistic, emphasizing artistic values and socio-political criticism, into being mainly commercial and focusing on economic values. In addition, C.Wang (2012, 222) states that even though the responses to Chinese contemporary art vary widely, people's understandings of it are still "strongly influenced by contingent cultural, social and political factors". He further suggests that conflicting ideas regarding the essence of contemporary art have reinforced people's uncertainty concerning its function and meaning within the Chinese society, which have fostered a sense of anxiety amongst its practitioners (C. Wang 2012, 222). Moreover, C. Wang (ibid) proposes that anxiety is often due to isolation, intolerance, narrowness, post-totalitarianism and a lack of confidence. As such, Chinese artists' anxieties are further enhanced by censorships, an increasing commercialization, and "an uncertain ideological unconscious formed through the long-term influences of propaganda and political suppression" (C. Wang 2012, 227).

C. Wang's (2012) reasoning appears to suggest that artists' anxieties may be due to a collective mindset that has been gradually shaped through past socio-political transformations and present conditions within the Chinese society and art scene. May this explain why the participants in the present study expressed themselves in the way they did? In search for more clarity, I considered whether it was possible that the participants' oppositions to financially motivated creativity could be explained by them simply being able to "afford" such views. Most of them seemed to sell their art for relatively high sums, for instance 40 000 Yuan for a painting that had taken a week to paint. Compared to an average salary earned by, for example, a shop clerk, that is an extremely large paycheck for only one week's work. However, the analysis revealed that there were a few participants who were not particularly well-off and who had to find alternative solutions to survive economically. For instance, one of them said he had made a deal with the studio-owner stating that he could work there for free for two years if he repaired the studio roof. Since he was fresh out of art school, he had seized this opportunity which subsequently reduced his living costs considerably. Even though this participant was not as well-off as some of the others, he still shared their views, which may indicate that the participants' economic prerequisites were not determining factors for their perspectives.

Another participant suggested that it is not unusual for newly-rich customers to pay overprices for paintings as a way to launder money. He also proposed that the art market is a speculation

game for investors and business men, which leads to unrealistic prices and a “buyer’s hysteria” that contributes to the aesthetic value of art being transcended by an economic one.

There is too much desire in the art world. The focus is all about money. But this is not true art. Without this temptation, you can become a better artist. There are different kinds of people in society. For instance, artists shouldn’t be businessmen. [...] Once, there was a person who saw my painting in a gallery. He bought it for 5000 Yuan. Then, he had it in his car for a while as he traveled back and forth to Beijing. Afterwards, he came back here and sold it for hundreds of thousands of Yuan. [...] When big investors get involved in the art industry, it ruins the essence of Chinese contemporary art. Many paintings are often just put in a basement to rot.

(Participant 01)

Annamma Joy and John F. Sherry Jr. (2004) propose that the value estimation regarding different types of art, is not only determined by the business sector of the Chinese art industry (i.e. buyers, collectors, auction houses, critics, etc.), but is also strongly influenced by the country’s political system. Joy and Sherry Jr. (2004, 307) explain that in the mid-1990s, the Chinese art market developed in two directions; “a collaborative framework for developing contemporary PRC art (including commercial art) for both the international and external markets”, and “domestic art as a commentary on changing social and cultural values”. In order to burst the existing artistic frame in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Joy and Sherry Jr. (2004, 308) suggest that the process of value creation must once again be based on the viewpoints of art intermediaries and the artists themselves. They argue that the reputation and recognition of an artist and/or an artwork, can be an important determinant of value, but, in order to build such a reputation, the artwork’s value ought to be “determined by cultural specialists rather than politicians” (Joy and Sherry Jr. 2004, 308).

According to Wuwei Li and Sir Michael Keane (2011, 42-43), the market value of a product may be divided into two categories: *use value* and *symbolic value*. Whilst the use value simply refers to the usefulness, or objective function, of the product, the symbolic value appeals to the consumer’s senses through cultural values embedded within the product (ibid). Li and Keane (2011, 42) argue that people generally tend to be more attracted to the utility of a product in times of low-level economic development, and to the symbolic value in times of positive economic developments. Based on Li and Keane’s (2011) reasoning, the value of art, which is essentially symbolic, should therefore increase in times of economic stability and flourishing. This may seem as positive news for the participants cited in this chapter, as each of them respectively argued that the symbolic value of an artwork should be the main focus for a buyer.

Still, their narratives reflected a reality in which both producers and consumers tended to fixate more on price tags and the opportunity to turn a profit.

Two participants went even further and expressed that they saw the commercialization and capitalization of art in China as slowly killing the soul of art. According to them, China's rapidly growing, competitive art industry is driving artists to lose touch with their spirituality and Chinese traditional values. The latter participant additionally suggested that we live in an era with a massive, frequent exchange of information, which decreases people's abilities to think for themselves and search for answers from within.

Due to this excessive economic focus, it is easy to forget to appreciate other people. Many have lost touch with traditional values, such as empathy etc. [...] The art market can become too commercial, which transforms art into pure entertainment without any heart, spirit or soul. [...] As I have worked in this business for a long time, I feel I have the insights to comment on these things.

(Participant 10)

In society today, everyone wants to take something, but no one wants to give. For me, the inner world is more important than the outside world. [...] People are only thinking about making money, and they are in such a hurry. Maybe they are not ready to receive what I want to give them?! [...] I think that nowadays, even within education, the knowledge and all the excessive information that we are receiving each day makes us lose touch with ourselves. It makes you forget how to think and feel for yourself. It makes us detached to our true nature.

(Participant 02)

Whilst considering the participants' views regarding how economic interests interfered with what they meant should be the real focus within the art industry, it may be easy to overlook potential positive effects that the capital rendered by the art industry may have, both on the situations of individual artists as well as on the art scene and Chinese society as a whole. Li and Keane (2011) has been used to provide an example of such positive effects by emphasizing the significance of China's creative industries which contemporary art is essentially a part of. They suggest that in post-industrial societies, the economic structure is shifting from being mainly focused on manufacturing to centering more around innovation and services, and that creative industries are fueled by urban transformation, technological advances and an increased consumption (Li and Keane 2011, 2). When the market grows, the need to produce diversified and individualized goods increase, consequently increasing the demand for innovation and creativity. As such, Li and Keane (2011, 2) argue that "The development of creative industries not only satisfies cultural needs but expands them". For example, advancements in technology have made it possible for artists to work through new, diverse forms of expressions, as well as to display and sell their art on various virtual arenas (Li and Keane 2011, 3).

In addition to creating economic capital, (Li and Keane 2011, 3) claims that creative industries assist in improving cultural and social capital, protecting historical and cultural heritage, and fostering communities. However, for creative industries to maintain such functions, the focus must lie on building creative communities and to attract creative talent (Li and Keane 2011, 4). Therefore, creative industries cannot solely be driven by market demands or political agendas, but “requires the participation of social institutions and non-profit organizations” (Li and Keane 2011, 4).

Another manner in which China’s creative industries may have positive societal effects, is by playing a key role in times of economic crisis, such as the global economic recession in 2008-2009 (Li and Keane 2011, 26-27). Whilst other industries experienced significant economic decline, the creative industries had a remarkable growth curve. Even so, Li and Keane (2011, 29) conclude that China still has a long way to go in terms of transforming its current manufacturing-focused economy into an economy that focuses more on creativity and innovation. Should China succeed in this endeavor, Li and Keane (2011, 29) suggest it could grant the country significant advantages in an increasingly competitive international market.

Although Li and Keane (2011) seem convinced that China benefits from its creative industries in many ways, they admit that these industries have several disadvantages compared to other industries. For instance, they suggest that creative products can be uncertain in terms of demand, since the consumers preferences can shift swiftly – especially when it is a matter of creative goods rather than practical (Li and Keane 2011, 31). In addition, the process of producing creative goods, as opposed to other types of goods, may be longer, thereby increasing the risk of the demand having declined by the time the of the product launch. Another suggested disadvantage is that since China still has an extensive copy culture, wherein creators may easily be robbed of a potential profit if someone else copies their design (Li and Keane 2011, 32). However, for the participants in the present study, this aspect did not seem to be a major concern. One participant explained that he was aware of others copying his work, and even though he did not consider it to be a big deal, he insisted that copy art was not real art.

In Europe you may have lots of individual sculpture art works, but in China it’s usually copies. This is not real art. People in China don’t take copied works seriously. I never got a copyright for my sculptures, so a lot of people copy me. But that’s okay, I’m the original. I put my signature on my real art works.

(Participant 04)

The imbalance between economic interests and aesthetic interests within China's art industry appeared to be the main demotivational force for the participants, therefore a few suggestions regarding solutions that may restore this balance have been considered. Firstly, Li and Keane (2011, 45-46) propose that China's cultural and creative industries are in desperate need for clear, national policies that are fully supported by the government. In addition, Li and Keane (2011, 57-58) suggest there needs to be an attitude shift regarding the importance of object resources versus subject resources. If China aspires to compete in a future global, innovative market, then subject resources in the form of knowledge, wisdom and creativity have to be valued at least as high as object resources such as raw materials and labor.

Similar to Li and Keane (2011), Gao (2012, 216) argue that an attitudinal change towards creative work would be beneficial, both for the practitioners as well as for the entire society. However, Gao (2012, 216) emphasizes more on the need for attitudinal changes on an individual level rather than governmental. For instance, he proposes that each person in a society has a responsibility to practice self-criticism, and that if people were able to see their own roles in society, fewer problems would arise (Gao 2012, 216). Therefore, artists need to become more independent and morally inclined so that they may take responsibility for China's collective culture and society and stay functional when the political and capital system pushes to suppress them (Gao 2012, 218).

Conclusion

Amongst the participants quoted within this chapter, some seemed mainly motivated by how the artistic process allowed them to discover more aspects of their personalities, whilst others by how they may use their art to reflect their surroundings and affect potential audiences. Even though the nature of their motivational forces varied, they all appeared to share the same demotivational force; that the economic and commercial value of art is continuously regarded more important than its aesthetic and symbolic value.

Gao (2012), C. Wang (2012) and Joy and Sherry Jr. (2004), all suggest that this development may be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s when the Chinese society went through numerous socio-political changes and the economy became more market-oriented. According to C. Wang (2012), the shift from an idealistic to an economic focus within the art industry spurred a deep sense of uncertainty and anxiety amongst Chinese artists. If such a suggestion was to be accepted, it may explain the reluctance the participants expressed towards the

commercialization of art. However, based on their generally positive and relaxed tones during the interviews, the participants did not appear to be particularly uncertain nor anxious, but rather they seemed strongly opinionated and eager to protect their occupational integrity.

Li and Keane (2011) suggest that consumers are generally more attracted to a product's use value in times of economic regression, and to its symbolic value in times of economic stability and flourishing. If an art work's value is symbolic rather than functional, this would mean that people may be more inclined to buy art in times of positive economic developments. However, as the reasoning by Gao (2012), C. Wang (2012) and Joy and Sherry Jr. (2004) suggest, positive economic developments may also increase the economic interests in art. Consequently, I would propose that even though the symbolic value of art may increase in times of economic growth, the same conditions may simultaneously cause the significance of an artwork's symbolic value to decrease in relation to its potential to stimulate profit – a proposition that corresponds well with the participants' experiences.

Since the commercialization of art appeared as a major demotivational force for the participants, a few suggestions regarding how to achieve balance between the interests of creative practitioners and the political and economic interests of the government and market were explored; a) to increase the participation of non-profit organizations and social institutions in order to reduce interference from market demands and political agendas (Li and Keane, 2011), b) to implement clearer policies for creative and cultural industries (ibid), and c) to encourage attitudinal changes at an individual level which may grant artists more independence and confidence to advocate their rights to free expression (Gao, 2012). Since the participants appeared to feel limited by already existing policies, the suggestion to solve the situation by adding more policies seems counterproductive. To suggest that the situation could be solved through attitudinal changes within the artists themselves, appears an unfair proposal that merely releases the government, society and artistic institutions from responsibility and leaves it up to the individual artists to cope with the situation. Based on the reviewed literature, the best way to achieve greater balance between political and market driven interests and the creative interests of artists therefore appears to be suggestion "a" – to keep increasing the participation and influence of non-profit organizations, social institutions and other agents within the art market whose ambitions and intentions may better match those of the artists themselves.

Finally, several of the participants in this chapter spoke about the “true” purpose of art, which essentially seemed related to personal and collective development and enlightenment. Although admirable, their perspectives struck me as idealistic, perhaps even romanticized, rather than realistic. Unless an artist possesses other capital, or has additional sources of income, her/his works still need to sell in order for her/him to make a living. This “uncomfortable” truth, made me wonder whether one of the reasons why several participants described the profit-focus within the art market as having a negative influence on their experiences as artists, was because the economic implications regarding artistry as an occupation are essentially unescapable.

Chapter 5: Artists’ considerations regarding creative freedom

When the participants in this study were asked about potential deficits that may hinder them from using their respective resources, many of them responded by sharing their perspectives regarding creative freedom. Six participants approached this topic from a general perspective rather than personal. For instance, by expressing their concerns regarding how China’s art policies, together with a strong pro-party culture, may have constraining effects on artists’ working conditions and the art scene as a whole. The remaining participants expanded on the topic by providing examples of personal experiences wherein limitations on creative freedom had become evident. Within this chapter, creative freedom is explored through a few studies and books that may provide insight into the relationship between creative freedom and political ambitions, as well as illuminate aspects of creative freedom that seem more related to human rights and social development.

As was pointed out in “Introduction”, the relationship between artistic practitioners and the Chinese government has been continuously influenced by shifts in political ideologies as well as social and economic transitions within the society. According to Gladston (2014), the idea of artists having a certain responsibility to represent ideologies of a ruling party, king or emperor is ancient. It is an idea that is still applied in contemporary China, for instance in order to encourage patriotism and loyalty towards the CCP. Gladston (2014, 9) argues that ever since 1949, the CCP remains in control of the country’s public art arenas, and that “all publicly exhibited art in the PRC has been required to conform – explicitly or implicitly under changing political circumstances – to the strategic aims of the country’s ruling Communist Party”.

Yue Zhang (2015, 596) suggests that during the past few decades, China's political, economic and social transformations have influenced the country's culture policy regimes. Similar to Gladston (2014), Zhang (2015, 596) argues that even though cultural professionals have lately attained an increased autonomy, creative freedom in China is still largely constrained as the country's cultural production remains effectively controlled by the government.

How, then, may these circumstances affect individual artists? Joy and Sherry Jr. (2004, 308) suggest that Chinese artists "are more concerned with the rapid transformation of traditional neighborhoods, lifestyles, and social values than they are with large-scale political, ideological, and artistic campaigns". However, based on the participant responses within the present study, Joy and Sherry Jr.'s (2004) statement appears a bit misleading. Within this chapter, I argue that although the politicization of art may not affect each individual artist directly, there are still various limitations on freedom of expression in China that affect the art scene as a whole, thereby also the people who are a part of that scene.

There are limitations for artists. It's a very sad story. Some artists cannot create inside this war. There is definitely a lot of restrictions on freedom of expression within this country. However, me and my friends are doing quite well when it comes to organizing exhibitions nationwide. [...] Still, I always have to explain the limitations related to policies to the artists, which I feel is the most difficult part of my job. Especially regarding the international artists... They are so used to freedom of expression, and I feel sorry for them when they are limited by these restrictions.

(Participant 06)

The propaganda department is very powerful, they can put a lot of money into art that they approve of. The government doesn't have full influence of the Chinese art scene yet. Maybe in the future, maybe not. If they want, I believe they could achieve their goals in a very short period of time.

(Participant 10)

When a certain type of art becomes subject for strong critique, whether that critique comes from official institutions, individual politicians, media or the common public, the artists may end up having to pay the price by reevaluating and changing their expressions. As an example, Thomas J. Berghuis (2012, 138) suggests that due to strong reactions towards the content of several performance art events and exhibitions that took place in the early 2000s, there was a significant increase in self-censorship amongst performance artists in China. Berghuis (2012, 139) argues that this was a direct effect of the Ministry of Culture criticizing artists for creating "violent" art – involving e.g. cruelty and nudity. The directive that the Ministry of Culture issued in 2001 set new standards for public conduct of art practices, which stirred up debates amongst art critics, scholars and the public media (ibid). Berghuis (2012, 141) further claims that the Chinese authorities took advantage of these debates and harsh critique, by using their content to

regenerate public morality and expand cultural capital. For the following participant, the efforts to fit into the government's ideas of what contemporary art should or should not be became too much. As a result, the participant gave up most of his contemporary art projects and instead started doing research regarding new methods of art analysis.

They restrict your way of thinking, but each person has their own thoughts, we can't be pushed into one box. That's why I gave up my old way of painting. I didn't want to be restricted. Maybe one day you may be free to have your own voice and speak your own words. If you want to follow the path that they point out, you can. If you don't, however, then your only option is to do research. The people who blindly follow their path, they are not true and have no heart. I don't really want to object to this path, but nor do I want to follow it myself. The beauty of art should have no borders. That's why I do research instead, because then I don't have to lie.

(Participant 03)

During the interviews, several participants mentioned that China's art policies had become increasingly strict since 2014, yet the participants did not seem to have been affected in the same way or to the same extent. The following two participants agreed that art policies come with certain restrictions, yet they argued that these policies had little or no effects on their individual situations. The latter participant in addition suggested that it is up to each individual to contribute to a better society by focusing on positive aspects rather than negative.

All of my art work is kind of mainstream and beautiful. I don't often paint the dark sides, so I don't have a problem with the freedom or rules or whatever. God is always blessing me. I feel very comfortable and lucky.

(Participant 05)

Interviewer: "Do you feel free to express yourself however you want in your work?"

Yes, definitely. However, complete freedom in any society is not possible. Our thoughts and minds can be completely free, but we are all limited by our bodies. There are always some kinds of restrictions, in all places and circumstances. Everything has both a negative and positive side. If you develop yourself as a more positive part of society, you contribute to a better society. You have to start with yourself.

(Participant 02)

Joy and Sherry Jr. (2004, 308) suggest that Chinese artists have more freedom in the 21st century than ever before in the PRC. Their reason for this suggestion is that artists now "may create what moves them, exhibit their works in private studios or commercial galleries, and participate in national and international exhibits" (Joy and Sherry Jr. 2004, 308). Furthermore, Joy and Sherry Jr. (ibid) propose that the artists now "have a voice in the governance of institutions, such as state galleries and museums". This reasoning appears to correspond with the perspectives of the two previously quoted participants. However, in order to better understand the current situation for Chinese contemporary artists, a comparison based on relativity appears

inadequate. With the intention of finding out how each participant may have been affected on an individual level, I asked them if they had ever experienced feeling the need to change, adopt or censor a project, and, if so, why.

Yes, when I graduated from university I made a painting of two roosters fighting on a snowy mountain. But the university didn't allow me to exhibit it because they drew parallels to a conflict in Tibet, and they interpreted the roosters as the Tibetan people fighting the central government. This was not my intention though. I simply wanted to show the struggles in life. They instead wanted me to display paintings of the school campus. So, I made a few paintings that they accepted.

(Participant 02)

In this example, the participant did not anticipate that his painting would be deemed inappropriate by the university. From the participant's point of view, the painting was not politically charged and had no hidden implications whatsoever, and yet it was interpreted as such by the university faculty. It should be mentioned, however, that the experience described by this participant was rather unique in comparison to how other participants responded to the same question. Most of them expressed that they were either too stubborn to change anything about their art, that they never painted anything that could be considered inappropriate, or that, if they did, they chose not to sell or display it.

Whilst analyzing the participants' responses related to creative freedom in China, no noticeable differences between the perspectives of the eight artists who lived in Kunming or Dali and the two who lived in Oslo were found. Even though the participants in Oslo had lived there for respectively three and ten years, their perspectives did not appear to have changed since they left China. Similar to the Kunming and Dali participants, they too described creative freedom in China as being limited, especially compared to in Oslo where "you can create whatever art you want" (Participant 08) and "the opportunities are endless" (Participants 07). However, even though they both deemed the Oslo artist milieu as being more "tolerant" and "unlimited" than the one in China, they had very different impressions of how this affected them as artists. Whilst Participant 07 expressed relief and gratitude for being able to create art without feeling limited by censorships, taboos and policies, these same limitations used to have a positive effect in the life of Participant 08:

The harsh artist environment in China made me challenge myself to become a more clever and better artist. It forced me to find new ways to express myself. When I moved to Norway, these limitations disappeared, and I was told I could do whatever I wanted. This confused me actually. I guess having no limitations can sometimes be a bad thing.

(Participant 08)

Set aside the previous example, the ten participants' perspectives regarding creative freedom in China appeared to be mainly negative. However, it is important to note that when looking at the developments within the Chinese art scene in recent years, there are also aspects that stand out as positive. For instance, during the past decade, the government has invested massive amounts in the development and expansion of cultural and creative industries. Hsieh et al. (2010) explain how contemporary art may generate major economic profit for auction houses, investors, and other parties in the creative industry. Furthermore, these industries are important as they engage and employ a significant number of people. Li and Keane (2011, 11) agree that China's creative industries generate massive economic profit, whilst adding that these industries can also "promote social cohesion, cultural diversity and human development". Meiqin Wang (2019), another scholar who emphasizes the benefits of creative industries, suggests that they may increase the balance between the economic interests of the government and the creative interests of cultural professionals – at least under the right circumstances. M. Wang (2019) proposes that creative industries may provide opportunities for culture and art practitioners to have influence over the development of new urban spaces. Such opportunities may thereby contribute to the growth of contemporary art communities and constitute an alternative to "those efficient, profitable and manageable spaces produced under the conditions of capitalist urbanization" (M. Wang 2019, 684). The question, then, is whether the government's increased investments in creative industries are to be interpreted as efforts to facilitate collaborations with, and improve the situations for, cultural and creative professionals, or as an attempt to generate economic capital and maintain control over the art industry.

Even though the participants were not unanimous in their perspectives on creative freedom, or regarding how governmental regulations affect their individual situations, many of them expressed that it is vital to have a good understanding of how different art policies work. As the following two quotes may demonstrate, some participants had elaborate strategies for handling challenges related to restrictions and overall structures within the Chinese art industry.

If you just follow the path laid out by others, it can be very easy to be an artist. But from my perspective, it can only be easy if I focus on practical things, on the things I'm doing in the moment. For instance, the galleries usually don't like my art, which is a problem since I may not be able to pay my rent. But I sell some of it to collectors. If you understand the regulations of a country and are able to see these connections, then you can use them to create advantages in big and small matters.
(Participant 02)

Most Chinese contemporary artists know where the line is drawn, and we know when not to cross it. We are all careful. In that sense, the atmosphere in the Chinese contemporary art world may get a bit tense. Everyone can feel this tension. [...] I know the system and I know what type of art I may or may not display. I knew an artist who wanted to display nudity, but that artist had to wait one whole month to get the acceptance from the provincial culture department. And if it is an exhibition with more than one hundred artworks, you have to report to the central government. First after a three-months process, one will know if the exhibition and the artworks are accepted or not. As a curator, I always think of explanations beforehand. This, of course, makes me feel a bit limited in my own expressions, but also in relation to the artists that I am curator for. However, we usually find solutions and loop holes in the system.

(Participant 10)

The quotes from these two participants may be explained through the first corollary in COR theory, which states that “Those with greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of resource gain” (Hobfoll et al. 2018, 106). The knowledge that these participants possessed regarding different regulations and art industry mechanisms appeared a major resource for them. In that sense, when they encountered challenges related to these aspects, this resource made them better equipped to cope with the situation.

The following participant expressed that the art policies are not always clear, which sometimes leaves it up to local authorities to decide for themselves how to interpret the government’s guidelines and decisions. This particular participant was especially concerned with how China’s art policies affect international artists as they come from overseas to present their art, and how that, in turn, can lead to a less multicultural art market.

Exhibitions may be shut down due to inappropriate international art. Last year, they had to cancel an exhibition because the different authorities had dissimilar understandings of the rules. I think that culture exchange should be just that – culture exchange. Politics really shouldn’t have anything to do with this exchange. When you don’t have culture exchange, and you can’t integrate with other cultures, you become very alone and isolated.

(Participant 06)

When discussing creative freedom, it is difficult not to draw parallels to freedom of expression and human rights. Susan J. Henders and Lily Cho (2014, 1-2) suggest that human rights need to be discussed in light of historical, political, cultural and social contexts, both on a national, transnational and individual level. This can be tricky as international agreements and domestic law “tend to express human rights norms in general and abstract terms”, which makes their implementation dependent on place and time specific elaborations and interpretations (Henders and Cho 2014, 3). In other words, human rights, however universal they may seem at times and to some, build on complex frameworks of multiple understandings and experiences, for

example regarding the person who bears the right as well as the person who is obliged to protect the right (ibid). However, Henders and Cho (2014) argue that this does not mean that universal human rights practices should be substituted for self-legitimizing relativism. By analyzing a series of artistic texts and works by writers and artists from different parts of Asia, Henders and Cho (2014) explore how individual human rights subjects may cross nation-state boundaries and challenge the idea of a universal subject of human rights. They suggest that “the arts can constitute new social contexts relevant for human rights through their capacity to encourage audiences and readers to imagine multiple human rights subjectivities as well as diverse commonalities among humans” (Henders and Cho 2014, 7). In short, Henders and Cho’s (2014) reasoning indicates that Chinese artists and writers have the capacity to contribute to the construction of cohesive collective ideas regarding human rights by contesting nation-state boundaries. But is this a purpose that artists should aim to fulfill?

Berghuis (2012, 151) suggests that contemporary art, both in conceptual and experimental form, is capable of provoking actions and reactions within the public. In that sense, artists’ “works not only become vehicles for social recognition but can also be linked to their desire to provoke a social consciousness and responsiveness in dealing with the challenges imposed on Chinese society amidst great social and economic change” (ibid). Gladston and Hill (2012, 101), suggest that “Within the contemporary international art world there is a continuing assumption that the production and display of advanced contemporary art has the potential to and, indeed, should act as a locus for socio-political criticism”. Based on such an assumption, an important role for contemporary art may be to contribute to an open, yet critical, debate regarding different conditions within civil society.

Finally, whatever functions contemporary art in China may serve, or whatever meaning an artwork may have to a specific audience, the participants in the present study appeared more focused on advocating their rights to creative freedom than they were on having philosophical discussions regarding the different functions of art. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked to describe their overall experiences as Chinese contemporary artists. The response from the following participant sums up a lot of the topics that have been discussed throughout this thesis, whilst simultaneously offering a general indication of what it may be like to be, and work as, a Chinese contemporary artist in 2019.

My profession is closely related to both politics, economics, human relations, and so on. [...] The era of contemporary art has just begun, and it needs more generations to develop. For now, the majority of artists may need to work within traditional art forms. This is connected to China's political and economic background. Freedom of expression is rather constrained by our official representatives. So, how may you survive in this gap? The trick is to find your own way and to find a potential exit. Overall, I feel very lucky. [...] I am grateful to be living and working as an artist in this era. I can even have a family, and at the same time do what I love. As contemporary artists, we contribute to balancing a harsh environment.

(Participant 04)

Conclusion

Limitations on creative freedom were the most frequently discussed deficits amongst the participants in this study. Gladston (2014) and Zhang (2015) both argue that the art scene in the PRC, both in the past and present, is largely controlled by the CCP. Meanwhile, Joy and Sherry Jr. (2004) suggest that Chinese artists in the PRC have more freedom now than ever before and that they are less concerned with political ideologies than with, for instance, their individual lifestyles and social values. Although a few of the participants within the present study expressed gratitude for living and working in what they perceived as an opportunistic and exciting era, the majority voiced dissatisfaction regarding how the state continues to interfere with their artistic needs and ambitions. It should be noted, however, that the politicization of art appeared to affect this study's participants in different manners and to different degrees, and two of them expressed that their individual situations were not affected at all.

The relationship between the government and the art scene was further explored from an economic perspective through the functions of China's cultural and creative industries. Hsieh et al. (2010), Li and Keane (2011) and M. Wang (2019) provided examples of how these industries may be of value; a) by generating economic capital, b) by engaging and employing many people, c) by promoting cultural diversity, social cohesion and general human development, and d) by granting art practitioners influence over urban space development, thereby increasing the balance between economic, political and creative interests. Based on the reviewed literature, it appears as if China's creative industries may pose a good example of a mutually beneficial collaboration wherein the government's interests and the interests of art practitioners may be concurrently met – at least when effectively managed.

Considerations regarding creative freedom were further explored in relation to human rights, which, according to Henders and Cho (2014), need to be discussed in light of larger contexts. Henders and Cho (2014), Berghuis (2012) and Gladston and Hill (2012) similarly argued that

art may function as a platform for socio-political criticism, and thereby encourage audiences to reevaluate and reconstruct normative ideas regarding human rights. Their reasoning appeared to correspond well with the perspectives of a few participants in the present study who stated that artists should “contribute to balancing a harsh environment” (participant 04) and try “to create a better art environment and a better world” (participant 06).

Finally, there were various considerations that the participants took in relation to creative freedom. For example, regarding what type of art they could or could not put on display. In addition to practical limitations, several participants expressed that the art policies had negative effects on their emotional lives. These participants expressed the situation as “sad”, “constraining” and “tense”, and as hindering them from being completely free in their creative processes. Nevertheless, the participants, as a collective group, did not strike me as hopeless victims. Nor did they seem to have given up on the idea of a more open and tolerant art industry. Rather, they appeared as optimistic and confident individuals who all shared a remarkable amount of respect and love for the arts, as well as a great sense of authentic, occupational pride.

Final Discussion and Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to explore what it is like to be and work as a Chinese contemporary artist in 2019. Based on data collected for this study, the life of a Chinese contemporary artist may in many ways be extremely rewarding and fulfilling. As a group, the participants seemed happy and content with their lives as well as grateful for being able to support themselves, and in some cases their families, by working with something they were truly passionate about. However, data also revealed various challenges that one may face as a Chinese contemporary artist. Some of these challenges appeared universal, such as difficulties to divide one’s time and energy between family, friends and work, whilst others appeared more context-specific, such as different limitations brought on by constraining art policies.

The participants’ perspectives and experiences were explored by means of an analytical framework distinguishing between resources and deficits. The thesis shows that resources and deficits influenced how the artists coped with challenges related to three reoccurring interview topics; family and social life, motivation, and creative freedom. An interesting discovery from the analysis was that almost all identified resources were individual, such as having a strong

willpower, a passion and love for art or an extensive knowledge regarding the art market, whilst most identified deficits were contextual, such as a profit-oriented art market, constraining art policies or obligations related to traditional family values.

Regarding the topic of family and social life, most participants expressed difficulties to meet resource demands of family and work-roles when these demands existed simultaneously. Some viewed family as mainly a resource, some as mainly a burden/distraction (deficit), and others as simultaneously a resource and a deficit. There were some vague indications that this may be related to a conflict between individualistic and collectivistic interests, yet to verify this indication, more research is required. Amongst the participants who commented on friendships, the general opinion was that these were not considered significant resources, which was unexpected. My surprised reaction to this finding may indicate that I failed to completely rid myself of preconceived ideas regarding Chinese culture prior to the interviews, and instead assumed that friendships, as part of the Chinese relationship-culture (关系 guanxi), would be considered significant resources for the participants.

The participants mentioned two main motivational forces; the opportunity for self-development and the opportunity to address an audience. This was not surprising as such motivational forces are shared by many artists around the world. What did surprise me was the participants' eagerness to discuss a shared demotivational force; the increased profit-focus within the art industry. They described this force through a similar pattern wherein the negative impacts of this force were first explained and then condemned. A shared attitude was that the aesthetic value of art should always transcend the economic value and that a "true" artist should focus on her/his passion rather than potential financial gains. The conflict between economic and aesthetic interests within the art industry should not be considered typical for China, rather it may be regarded a global phenomenon related to economic developments. As such, the essence of the participants' perspectives on this topic were not surprising. However, I did not expect for the participants to emphasize this demotivational force as strongly as they did, nor did I expect for all of them to describe it in such similar terms and speech patterns. Although several attempts were made to explain how an almost identical view on the conflict between economic and aesthetic values may have arisen, I have not been able to find a definite answer.

Based on the literature reviewed for this thesis, it was not surprising that the most frequently discussed deficits amongst the participants were limitations related to creative freedom. In particular, limitations in the form of art policies appeared to affect the participants negatively by reinforcing practical constraints and causing emotional stress related to feelings of suppression. Even so, it should be noted that the impact of these limitations seemed to vary considerably between participants, and a few even expressed they were personally not affected at all. As all participants appeared sincere and direct in their responses and did not seem reluctant towards discussing whatever topic came up, my understanding is that some of them truly did not see art policies as a constraining force within their individual situations. With that said, the few participants who claimed to be unaffected, explicitly said that this was because they never engaged in artistic expressions that may be perceived as offensive. Ironically, their reason for not feeling constrained confirms the existence of limitations on creative freedom.

I have made no major efforts to differentiate between, and compare, the responses from the eight participants who lived in Kunming/Dali and the two who had been living in Oslo for several years. The reason for this is that the analysis did not reveal any significant differences, rather the participants' perspectives and experiences as Chinese contemporary artists seemed to have little to do with where they currently lived. The only difference was that the Oslo participants found their creative freedom to be less limited in Norway than in China. The lack of differences between the participants' narratives was surprising considering Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) suggestion that narratives are deeply context-dependent. Perhaps I failed to ask questions regarding differences between the Norwegian and Chinese art scene, or I was not able to recognize these differences within the participants' responses. Either way, further research regarding this comparative aspect is encouraged as it appears an area in which the present study falls short.

One of the main challenges in this thesis project was to identify resources and deficits within the participants' narratives. As Hobfoll et al. (2018, 113) put it: "in one context a resource might be salient and positive and in another might be salient but negative". The resources and deficits in the present study were therefore identified on the basis of how each participant described her/his individual perspectives and experiences, as well as in relation to each participant's individual context and circumstances. Yet, by looking at the participant responses collectively, a few discoveries were made that may indicate the existence of shared perspectives and experiences. In "Chapter 1", Hobfoll et al.'s (2018, 108) crossover theory was used to explain

how individuals who share the same ecological conditions may adopt each other's resources and stressors. Based on this theory, I suggest that the similar perspectives and reasoning patterns amongst the participants' narratives may be explained by a crossover of resources due to shared ecological conditions. However, this suggestion may be questionable since the group was heterogeneous. The participants lived in three different locations, whereof two in a Western country, and they came from differing age-groups and social backgrounds. It is thus plausible that their experiences regarding past and present events and transformations within society may have affected them very differently. Even so, they were all Chinese contemporary artists, which may indicate that their ecological conditions were somewhat similar, and the crossover theory thereby applicable – at least to some extent.

Based on the reviewed literature and interview data, I propose that it was essential that the participants had access to usable individual and contextual resources to be able to cope with potential challenges. For example, knowledge regarding how different art policies worked allowed for some participants to either find alternative solutions to policy-related complications or to avoid such complications altogether. Another example is the joy and fulfilment that several participants experienced during their creative processes, which functioned as counterweights to aspects they experienced as limiting. In accordance with the first corollary of COR theory, by gaining, maintaining and fostering such resources, the participants appeared better equipped to cope with challenges and deficits in their everyday lives.

The most significant resources appeared to be:

- A passion and love for art and the creative process
- Sufficient knowledge regarding the art industry
- A good understanding of the state-artist relationship and the functions of art policies
- An encouraging sense of purpose and belonging
- A wish and need for self-reflection and personal development
- An idealistic drive to contribute to a “better” artist milieu

The most significant deficits appeared to be:

- Experiencing difficulties to divide one's time and energy between family and work
- Experiencing feelings of discouragement and meaninglessness due to perceiving the art industry as mainly profit-focused.
- Experiencing limitations on creative freedom, inducing feelings of suppression and discouragement

Throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data, I have learned a lot regarding how life may be for a Chinese contemporary artist in 2019. The resources listed above may help illuminate which aspects of the participants' situations ought to be protected and strengthened in order for them to keep having positive experiences as artists, thereby move towards health and well-being on the salutogenic health continuum. The deficits listed above may help illuminate which forces stand in the way of such positive developments. I therefore conclude that as means for revealing such resources and deficits, artist narratives should be considered a major source of knowledge, not only regarding individual perspectives and experiences, but also regarding broader historical, cultural, political, economic and social contexts.

Finally, in order to determine whether the narratives from this study's participants may be considered representative for Chinese contemporary artists in general, further research is needed. This study offers insight into how the access to usable resources and the presence of deficits influenced the participant's overall experiences as artists. Even so, narratives should be regarded as fluid and dynamic in the sense that they depend on the circumstances and contexts in which they are offered and presented. Therefore, in order to use narratives to protect and/or improve conditions for Chinese contemporary artists, they need to be considered in light of supplementary research, preferably including studies of additional sample-groups and data collected through alternative methods.

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Appendix

Fig. 1 – Interview-guide

- 1) What is the main driving force behind your artistic expression?
- 2) What motivates you to work as an artist?
- 3) What resources within yourself or your surroundings are contributing to you having a positive experience as an artist?
- 4) What deficits within yourself or your surroundings are hindering you from having a positive experience as an artist?
- 5) Do you feel free to express yourself however you want?
- 6) Have you ever experienced feeling the need to change, adopt or censor a project?
- 7) What is your overall experience of being, and working as, a Chinese contemporary artist?

Fig. 2 – Art examples

See for instance:

- Zhang, Xiaogang (张晓刚). 1995. "Bloodline: Big Family No3."
- Yue, Minjun (岳敏君). 1995. "The Execution."
- Wang, Guangyi (王广义). 1991-1994. "Great Criticism: Cocoa Cola."

All available at <https://no.pinterest.com> [15 June 2020]

Fig. 3 – The principles and corollaries of COR theory

Principle 1: Primacy of loss principle. Resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain.

Principle 2: Resource investment principle. People must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources.

Principle 3: Gain paradox principle. Resource gain increases in salience in the context of resource loss. That is, when resource loss circumstances are high, resource gains become more important—they gain in value.

Principle 4: Desperation principle. When people's resources are overstretched or exhausted, they enter a defensive mode to preserve the self which is often defensive, aggressive, and may become irrational.

Resource Caravans and Resource Caravan Passageways Principles

Resource caravans: Resources do not exist individually but travel in packs, or caravans, for both individuals and organizations.

Resource caravan passageways: People's resources exist in ecological conditions that either foster and nurture or limit and block resource creation and sustenance.

Corollaries

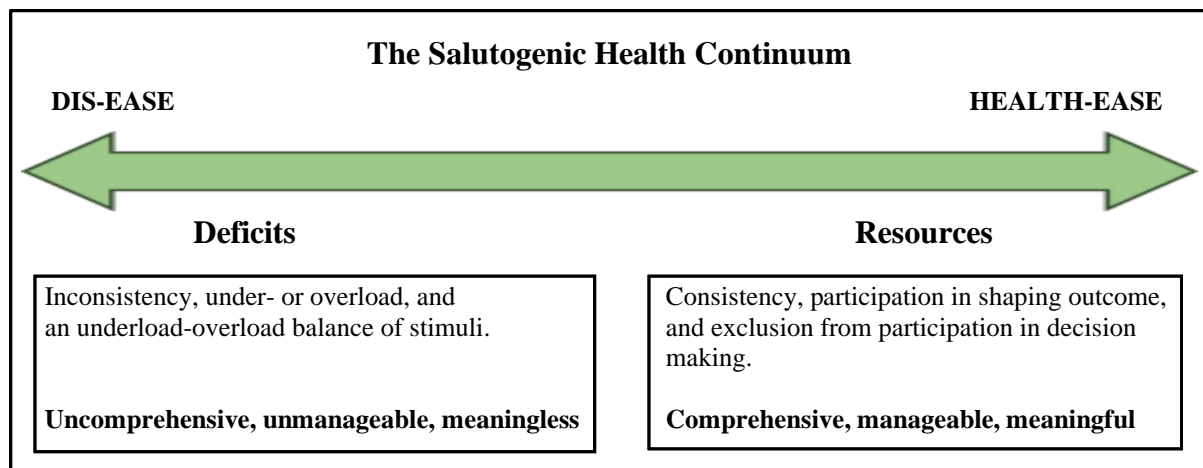
Corollary 1: Those with greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of resource gain. Conversely, individuals and organizations who lack resources are more vulnerable to resource loss and less capable of resource gain.

Corollary 2: Resource loss cycles. Because resource loss is more powerful than resource gain, and because stress occurs when resources are lost, at each iteration of the stress spiral individuals and organizations have fewer resources to offset resource loss, and these loss spirals gain in momentum as well as magnitude.

Corollary 3: Resource gain spirals. Because resource gain is both of less magnitude and slower than resource loss, resource gain spirals tend to be weak and develop slowly.

(Hobfoll et al., 2018, 106)

Fig. 4 – The salutogenic health continuum



(An abbreviated version of Fig. 7, p. 62 in Wennerberg 2017)
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