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Emerging in the East: the Shanghai Biennale's pathways to legitimation, 1996 to 2018

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Abstract

This study examines the 22-year development of the Shanghai Biennale from a localized contemporary art exhibition to an internationally renowned art biennale. Through the lens of organizational legitimacy, this research examines how the Shanghai Biennale negotiated changing external pressures to establish within China and grow into the international art world. Using a mix-methods approach, we first create a unique database of participant nationality and then examine artist and curatorial statements, media reports, and interviews with organizers and curators of the Shanghai Biennale from 1996 to 2018. Our study delineates three periods of the Shanghai Biennale's development: incipient (1996–1998), internationalization (2000–2010), and expanding period (2012–2018). Through these periods we examine the different pathways by which the Shanghai Biennale attained legitimacy first within the local and national Chinese context and then within the Biennale's expansion into the international art scene. We find at the beginning stage of the Shanghai Biennale, establishing local legitimacy was the foremost concern. When the Shanghai Biennale started to diffuse into the global art world in 2000, focus shifted towards remaking the Shanghai Biennale to comply with international perceptions. That said, our research finds both local and international legitimacy requirements remained salient simultaneously, with the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the Chinese State as a critical basis for internationalization and development. In the most recent editions, more local and non-Western features are included in the Shanghai Biennale, signaling the Biennale's efforts of distinguishing itself in the global biennale scene. This research contributes to organizational study by closely examining a cultural organization's ability to negotiate legitimacy requirements in different contexts, but also empirically responds to recent calls for studies on the global development of non-Western biennales.

Keywords: Legitimacy, Globalization, Shanghai Biennale, Contemporary art, China

Introduction

How does a non-Western cultural organization achieve international legitimacy, particularly if legitimacy requirements in local and international contexts are different, even contentious? The emergence of non-Western biennales, i.e., large international art exhibitions held every two years, offers an opportunity to examine the negotiation of

legitimacy within such cultural and socio-political contexts. Since the 1990s, art bien-nales have enjoyed significant international growth, bringing curators, artists, and audi-ences together within a variety of new locations, including outside traditional Western art centers in Europe and the United States. Biennales emerged in cities previously con-sidered peripheral to the global art world, such as Shanghai, Sao Paulo, Gwangju, Johan-nesburg, Istanbul, and Delhi—and these cities proved increasingly important sites for the biennial art scene (Marchart 2014). In consequence of this growth, previous scholar-ship suggests the emergence of important international biennales in non-Western con-texts benefits marginalized artists and accelerates development of an integrated global art world (Enwezor 2008; Rojas-Sotelo 2011). Given the global development of art bien-nales, this research focuses on one important case, the Shanghai Biennale, and examines how the exhibition was established nationally in China first and then as a premier inter-national art event.

In specifying the development stages of the Shanghai Biennale, we examine the requirements of different legitimacy demands at play for both the Chinese and global context. Though ideologically different, both local and international legitimacy helped establish and develop the Shanghai Biennale over its 22-year history. By examining the Shanghai Biennale, we seek to contribute to research on legitimacy by, first, examining how the move from local and national to international brings with it different sets of legitimacy standards, particularly for non-Western cases. Second, as these new inter-national standards interact with previously established local requirements, we examine how an organization negotiates ideological contradictions. We believe this research can provide insights into the pressures on and strategies of non-Western cultural organiza-tions when gaining international validity while still maintaining legitimacy within the local context from which they emerged.

Organizational legitimacy in changing contexts: perception and resource

The concept of legitimacy is frequently seen in scholarship on emerging art markets, movements, or events that seek to gain recognition, especially in non-Western contexts (e.g., Marchart 2014; Kharchenkova 2017). Despite its enduring presence in the litera-ture, defining legitimacy remains a difficult task. In this research, we use the theoretical lens of organizational legitimacy drawing on the institutional tradition (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1991; Zuckerman 1999). We begin by conceptualizing legitimacy with Suchman's (1995) established definition as the "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (1995, p. 574). As Suchman notes, this definition allows for understanding legitimacy as a taken-for-granted social belief as well as a manipulable resource for organizations. This plas-ticity is important for our examination as the Shanghai Biennale was formed via the support of, and constraints imposed by, entities external to the Biennale organizational actors—actors who in turn worked to maintain legitimacy by navigating often compet-ing external beliefs of what was "desirable, proper, or appropriate" organizational action. In this understanding, organizations are fundamentally products of the social system to which they are bound, and organizational actors formulate strategies for foster-ing legitimating perceptions of desirability, propriety, and appropriateness within their

given social system (Suchman 1995; DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1991). Cultural context and pressures, then, determine how the organization is built, how it is run, and simultaneously how it is understood and evaluated (Jepperson 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1991).

If organizations are formed by cultural environments, then the introduction of additional cultural contexts may create additional, potentially contentious, demands on the organization (e.g., Kostova and Zaheer 1999; Lu and Xu 2006). Moreover, as previous research suggests, the actions that help establish an organization are not the same as those that grow the organization (Suchman 1995; DiMaggio 1988). To survive and grow, organizations must identify and address urgent requirements while negotiating secondary concerns (Kostova and Zaheer 1999). The legitimation process of an organization involves continuous redefinitions of legitimacy due to the changes from both the organization itself and the changing contexts the organization encounters (Kostova and Zaheer 1999; Johnson et al. 2006). In this research, we seek to understand if and how legitimacy requirements changed as the Biennale developed within the national context of China and then the international art world.

We propose the growth of the Biennale to encompass international cultural demands, particularly those of the Western art world, requires an understanding of legitimacy that expands with expanding contexts. Johnson et al. (2006) theorize on the movement from local legitimacy to acceptance by broader social systems, and we refer to their stages of growth in our own analysis. They delineate four general expansions: first, an innovation is created to address certain needs and purposes of an organization. Second, local actors validate and align an innovation with dominant cultural beliefs and norms. Third, the locally validated innovation diffuses into new contexts and is accepted by other social actors across these contexts. Fourth, the new object is finally accepted and recognized by a broader social audience in multiple local contexts. Drori and Honig (2013) also argue the fourth stage is where broad consensus and the "taken-for-granted" assumptions that hallmark legitimacy occur. As an innovation moves between these stages, and their consequent broader contexts and different social systems, this research is interested in what demands are required for movement, and how an organization may address the changing demands.

Legitimacy expectations are often signaled by significant actors in the broader community (Zimmerman and Zeitz 2002; Scott 2008). In the art world, institutional recognition is often the foundation on which claims of artistic legitimacy rest (Baumann 2001; Braden 2009, 2021). Key institutions such as auction houses, museums, galleries, and journals, predicate their expertise on the ability to recognize and inform their community on what is legitimate (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993). However, institutional recognition in non-Western countries can wield less influence in defining and endorsing what is, and is not, artistically legitimate on an international stage (Braden 2016). Scholarship often employs the idea of the "core-peripheral hierarchy" to identify this phenomenon, by which skewed international power relations play out culturally (e.g., Buchholz 2018; Velthuis and Brandellero 2018). Countries belonging to traditional art centers in Western Europe and North America, i.e., "core" cultural regions, often have greater power to disseminate and enforce their evaluative standards and choices than institutions situated in "peripheral" cultural regions of the world (Harris 2013). For example,

Wu (2009) finds that important international art fairs, such as Germany's Kassel *Documenta*, offers limited exhibition space to artists from non-Western countries. Likewise, research examining two leading international rankings of contemporary art actors, the ArtReview Power 100 (UK) and the Kunskompass (Germany), found that while such rankings are presented as international evaluations, actors from Western nations such as the US, UK, and Germany were overwhelmingly named: "the most successful international artists belong to a very small number of countries and so do the players who select them, be they institutions or individual actors" (Quemin and van Hest 2015: 191). Such research indicates achieving influence and success within non-Western nations requires either choosing to be consistent with dominant Western artistic values and assessment (Brandellero and Velthuis 2018) or creating a new space for recognition and visibility (Marchart 2014).

A promising arena for creating new recognition space is the emergence of international biennales hosted outside the West (Wei 2013). Important art biennales can now be found on the continents of Asia, Africa, and South America and, in consequence, non-Western growth may bring with it new evaluative standards and ideas (Enwezor 2008; D'Souza 2013; Sassatelli 2017). For example, the Havana Biennale is known for its anticolonial stance and emphases artists from developing regions, particularly Latin America, as well as those from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Morgner 2020).

Focusing on the Shanghai Biennale, this research examines how a country with a relatively young history of contemporary art created a new recognition space. While previous studies on biennales have examined theme and content (e.g., Mersmann 2013), biennales' resistant attitudes towards "art centers" (e.g., Marchart 2014), and discussing the impact of biennales on developing urban economies and culture (e.g., Enwezor 2008), this research focuses on negotiating legitimacy expectations and requirements as a biennale grows from the peripheral local to core international. Drawing from the legitimacy literature, we examine how the most important pressures for organizational legitimacy vary at different stages of the organization's development (Suchman 1995; DiMaggio 1988; Drori and Honig 2013). Previous research describes a process by which local legitimacy aides an organization's establishment, while growth requires broader support and resources. While the focus on different types of legitimacy may shift given organizational needs, different types of legitimacy can develop concurrently (Drori and Honig 2013). As mainland China has its own political, historical, and artistic norms and values, which can differ from the international, particularly Western art world, our examination explores how the Biennale negotiated often contradictory legitimacy standards to eventually become an influential art event in Asia and globally.

In the next section, we offer a short history of the development of Chinese contemporary art in both local and global contexts and how the Shanghai Biennale became a crucial platform for contemporary art in China.

Contemporary art in China

The development of Chinese contemporary art is deeply embedded in China's gradual involvement in the process of twentieth century globalization (Zhang and Frazier 2017). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the political function of art was emphasized through a series of sociopolitical movements (Wang 2009). But with the

end of Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the State's initiation of Reform and Opening-up in 1978, political art was no longer the single landscape in Chinese art scene (Kharchenkova 2017). Avant-garde art practices, like The No Name Group's aesthetic pursuit of "art for art's sake" and the Star Society's emphasis on art's role for critical social commentary marked the emergence of Chinese contemporary art in the late 1970s (Zhou 2020).

Throughout the 1980s, increased overseas travel and a flood of information from the West invoked a "high culture fever" in a more liberal atmosphere of market-economy China (Zhang and Frazier 2017). This enthusiasm gave birth to a new generation of avant-garde artists who embraced Western modern art; experiments with contemporary art began to flourish (Kharchenkova 2017). Up-and-coming artists explored working in new art forms, particularly performance, media, and installation art (Zhou 2020).*'85 New Wava* was a series of self-organized exhibitions and art seminars which spread over China during the 1980s (Mo 2020). Yet, the wave of experimental artistic energy came to a halt in 1989 as the radical China Avant-Garde Exhibition provoked the Chinese State. The exhibition was closed after the chaos evoked by artist Xiao Lu, who fired two shots at her installation work in the Nation Art Museum of China (Zhou 2020). This sensational exhibition became a public challenge to the State's promotion of "Socialist spiritual civilization", where art was expected to reflect patriotism and social harmony (Wang 2009). Subsequently, the State strengthened its control on public exhibitions of contemporary art in mainland China, leading some Chinese contemporary artists to look for professional opportunities abroad, particularly in Western countries where artistic freedom was deemed foundational to artistic expression (Zhang and Frazier 2017). In the 1990s, several overseas exhibitions made Chinese contemporary art, particularly Political Pop and Cynical Realistic styles, popular in Western art markets (Harris 2013)—though, this evoked critiques that Chinese contemporary art was simplified to a superficial expression of political dissent in a post-Cold War context (Mo 2020).

While some Chinese contemporary artists gained influence internationally in the 1990s, contemporary art was prohibited in official Chinese museums. Free artistic expression was strongly curtailed with the State's tightened cultural policy after 1989 (Mo 2020). However, some artistic communities continued to develop contemporary art underground by holding private exhibitions and art sales (DeBevoise 2014). A remarkable case is the first China Guangzhou Biennale in 1992. Launched by a group of art critics, the Guangzhou Biennale was created to bolster the legitimacy of contemporary art within China by establishing a local art market (Zhou 2020). Within the Guangzhou Biennale, artworks of Chinese contemporary artists were both exhibited and sold. However, due to the under-developed organization, sponsors' withdrawal, and government's control, the China Guangzhou Biennale did not manage a second edition (Shan 2011).

The new millennium brought increased interactions not only between the contemporary art and the Chinese State, but also between the Chinese and international art world (Zhang and Frazier 2017). The 3rd Shanghai Biennale in 2000 marked the official recognition of contemporary art, as it was the first exhibition of contemporary art in a national museum since 1989 (Wang 2016). Subsequently, renowned Chinese contemporary artists were invited to distinguished state-sponsored events, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and 2014 APEC Summit (Zhang and Frazier 2017).

Art districts became a more common aspect of Chinese urban scenes (Kharchenkova 2017). By the 2000s, art was considered an investment as well as a mark of status among wealthy Chinese (Harris 2013). Concurrently, the Chinese contemporary art market experienced rapid growth, soon becoming a global market leader in the art world (Wu 2019).

Yet, the Chinese State's increased acceptance did not mean the State forfeited control of the contemporary art world. As Ong (2012) indicates, Chinese authorities retained the right to ban artworks from public exhibitions, including those within auction houses and government-sponsored international art exhibitions, such as the Shanghai Biennale.

In the past 4 decades, the relationship between the Chinese contemporary art circle and government was characterized by conflicts and collaborations due to their respective beliefs of art's purpose (DeBevoise 2014). Artists, art critics, and curators who participated actively in the early practices of Chinese contemporary art since the late 1970s value free expressions of aesthetics and social commentary (Zhou 2020). While, to the Chinese government, art is expected to present a positive national image (Wang 2009). Added to this national context is China's gradual involvement within the global art world, where external, particularly Western, beliefs and standards predominate (Zhang and Frazier 2017).

For this study, we focus on the Shanghai Biennale, the longest running and the first international biennale in China. Becoming internationally influential has been the Shanghai Biennale organization's goal since its inception (Shan 2011; Wang 2016; Mo 2020), and previous research indicates internationalization is important for non-Western biennales to create recognition in the global art world (Mersmann 2013; Lu 2017; Morgner 2020). Consequently, we analyze how organizers of the contemporary art exhibition negotiate different pressures and requirements, and how such legitimacy negotiations shaped the development of the Shanghai Biennale from a national exhibition to an internationally influential art event.

Methodology

In exploring the development and internationalization of the Shanghai Biennale, we first explored the Biennale's participant composition by analyzing the nationalities of contributing artists from 1996 to 2018 [following previous research on international art rankings (Quemin and van Hest 2015; Braden 2016) and studies on internationalization of non-Western exhibitions (Wu 2009; Morner 2020)]. As far as we know, this is the first analysis of the nationality of participants of the Shanghai Biennale, allowing for the first empirical examination of the organization's internationalization over its 22-year history. Second, we examine textual data on the Biennale, including curatorial statements, media reports, and interviews with organizers and curators, enabling us to better understand organizational intentions and responses to external pressures (Enwezor 2008; Marchart 2014). In total, using a mixed-methods design allows for an overview of internationalization as well as contextualizing national and international legitimacy pressures on the Biennale organization, critical social events in China, and the socialist State's changing attitudes towards contemporary art over a 22-year period.

Artist population of the Shanghai Biennale, 1996–2018

Since a complete database of the nationalities of Shanghai Biennale participants does not exist, or is not public, we were required to create the database. Our research population of all artists who participated in the Biennale from 1996 to 2018 comprises 1062 artists and art collectives listed on the official artist roster of the Shanghai Biennale. We complemented the Biennale's records with biographic information on participating artists from "ArtFacts," a database on artists and exhibitions worldwide. Twelve of the artists had no associated information, leaving a final research population of 1050 artists and art collectives.

In examining the internationalization of the Shanghai Biennale, the nationalities of participating artists from 1996 to 2018 were recorded. The Shanghai Biennale's records first designated nationality by birth country, such as with the first Biennale in 1996; however, we note this changed to designating nationality by country of residence by the third Biennale in 2000. That said, we choose to operationalize nationality by birth country of the artists. This choice was informed by the differentiation made by the Shanghai Biennale, which historically has given more significance to birth country when designating artist nationality. For example, though there were three Chinese-born artists living abroad in the 1996 Shanghai Biennale, this was not billed as an international exhibition (Shan 2011).

To obtain an overview of regional participation and its change over time, this study followed Wu's (2009) method of adopting a regional division of North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania to code participating nationalities of artists. Yet, considering the Shanghai Biennale was developed as an important platform to introduce Chinese artists to the world, this study highlights the participation of Chinese artists by further dividing Asia into two categories: China[1] and Asia excluding China.

Artists participation and internationalization of the Shanghai Biennale

Table 1 presents an overall description of artists in each Biennale, including the percentage of international participation per year, 1996 -2018. While the Biennale averaged about 97 artists per year, participation ranged from a minimum of 29 artists in 1996 (inaugural) to a maximum of 254 artists in 2012, the year the Biennale was relocated at the Shanghai Power Station of Art, the first contemporary art museum in China.[2]

Table 1, supplemented by Figure 1, provides an aggregate overview of participating nationalities over time. Here we find Chinese artists were the majority (43.7%), followed by artists from Europe (21.8%), and other Asian countries (14.5%). However, note the precipitous drop in representation of Chinese artists over time. When the Shanghai Biennale began, only Chinese artists were involved (1996–1998). Though Chinese artists represented more than half of the exhibiting population from 2000 to 2004, the percentage of Chinese artists decreased to 41.8% in 2006 and did not rise

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[1] By China, we are referring to a broader geographical concept of "Greater China", which includes Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.

[2] To celebrate the new location, the Shanghai Biennale featured a special exhibition session, "City Pavilions", which invited artists from cities worldwide to present artworks on their urban memories. This special exhibition led to a significant increase in the number of participating artists in 2012.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for the artists of the Shanghai Biennale from 1996 to 2016

	Total number of artists	Percentage of Chinese artists	Percentage of international artists
Year of Biennale			
1996	29	100	0
1998	50	100	0
2000	67	61.2	38.8
2002	68	52.9	47.1
2004	106	59.4	40.6
2006	98	41.8	58.2
2008	60	51.7	48.2
2010	43	48.8	51.2
2012	244	18.9	81.2
2014	121	43	57
2016	91	30.8	69.3
2018	73	28.8	71.2
Total	1050		
Region	**Total number of artists (1996–2018)**	**Percentage of artists (1996–2018)**	
China	459	43.7	
Europe	229	21.8	
North America	120	11.4	
Asia excluding China	152	14.5	
Latin America	56	5.3	
Africa	19	1.8	
Oceania	15	1.4	

above 52% of overall representation again (2006–2018). Indeed, in 2018, the share of Chinese artists in the biennale dropped to 20.9%.

With the decrease of Chinese artists came an increase in international participation. When foreign artists first presented in the Shanghai Biennale in 2000, the percentage of artists from Europe was 10.4%. By 2012, European artists were the largest population in the Biennale (27%). Artists from other Asian countries also experienced an increase in representation. In 2016, the proportion of Asian artists (26.4%) approaches the largest representation, with Chinese artists only slightly larger (30.8%). Artists from North America also experienced an increase, most notably in 2012, when N. American artists peaked as the second largest population (24.6%), closely followed up their European counterparts.

Although the presence of artists from Latin America, Africa, and Oceania is not as pronounced as the other nationalities considered above, there is growth in their participation, specifically in certain years. A breakthrough of artists from Latin America occurred in 2018 when Cuauhtémoc Medina, the first Latino chief curator for the Shanghai Biennale, managed the event. Representing 24.7% of artists in the Biennale that year, Latino artists were the second largest population of artists—the most participation of Latino artists in 12 editions of the Shanghai Biennale.

Overall, these findings represent a clear and consistent trend toward internationalization of the Shanghai Biennale, with an emphasis on Western participation and, more recently, non-Chinese Asian and Latino representation.

To contextualize international participation, we also examine concurrent organizational actions, internal government policies, and external pressures from the art world. The next section offers a qualitative examination of archival data, media reports, and interviews with key persons in the Shanghai Biennale's development. We focus on legitimacy pressures and standards that emerge from the local context and Chinese State as well as from the international art world as the Biennale develops into a global art event. We further document how the Biennale organization choose to address these pressures and requirements through directly changing policies, compromise and concession, or refusal.

Two major sources of data were used. First, the official records of the Shanghai Biennale, which contain mission and curatorial statements for each Biennale. Second, Artron.net, an influential website for art information in China, provided reports on the Shanghai Biennale from both official and art-driven Chinese medias and news outlets, interviews with curators and participating artists, and memoirs from organizers and participants of previous Shanghai Biennales.[3]

The incipient period (1996–1998): the emergence of the Shanghai Biennale

The emergence of the Shanghai Biennale can be situated within a larger strategy of re-introducing contemporary art to mainland China after the tightening of state control in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Wang 2009; Zhang and Frazier 2017). The overall ambition was to develop the Biennale into an internationally influential platform for Chinese contemporary art. However, before internationalization, contemporary art needed to gain legitimacy within the internal, local environment. Following Johnson et al. (2006), the Shanghai Biennale can be understood as an innovation to increase recognition of contemporary art and artists as acceptable in China. Organizers needed to align the Biennale with dominate cultural norms, allowing local actors to understand the exhibition as a legitimate part of the Chinese culture and art world, ultimately leading to official approval from the State and therefore allowing the Shanghai Biennale to continue towards international recognition.

The need for a large-scale exhibition of Chinese contemporary art within China came into focus in the early 1990s. Many prominent Chinese artists were exhibiting abroad and consequently were required to adjust to foreign, often Western, standards. Li Xianting, art critic and promoter of Chinese artists' participation in the 1993 Venice Biennale spoke to this adjustment: "We don't have much choice but to adapt their rules, because this [1993 Venice Biennale] is a Western exhibition" (Wang 2016: 34). In response to these compromises, actors within the Chinese contemporary art community sought to develop a local platform for the exhibition of Chinese contemporary artists, with the ultimate goal of increasing the exhibition power of Chinese art in the global art world.

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[3] Altogether, Artron.net offers about 3000 results mentioning the Shanghai Biennale; from these, we extracted 160 articles focused on the Biennale itself.

According to art critic Wang Lin, also a founding organizer of the Shanghai Biennale, this need directly translated into the birth of the Shanghai Biennale:

In 1990s, Chinese art started to step into the world. Western curators were first interested in Chinese political issues after 1989, then they started to care about other aspects of Chinese art...It was a very nice thing that Archile Bonito Oliva[4] invited Chinese artists in the Venice Biennale, but it also contained a post-colonial trend which could easily result in "othering" Chinese artists...Chinese people should have our own art biennale and we should also invite foreign artists to China, building a two-way communication. So, we visited Shanghai Art Museum to persuade them [the bureaucrats of Shanghai Art Museum] to hold the Shanghai Biennale, establishing a platform for the international dialogue.[5]

The Biennale's establishment required the government's approval. Previous underground exhibitions had sustained a contemporary art movement in China; however, for significant international exchange, a large public museum was necessary. For this, Biennale actors first needed to prove organizational legitimacy according to government standards (Shan 2011). Shanghai was deemed the best location for the Biennale as it was a pioneer in China's Reform and Opening-up. Having experienced a rapid modernization since the 1980s (Wu 2004), Shanghai's open and cosmopolitan image was to be reflected in its artistic and cultural environment (Schilbach 2010). By emphasizing the positive impacts of a biennale on the city's modernization and internationalization, organizers of the Shanghai Biennale managed to win the Shanghai Municipal Government's approval and use of the Shanghai Art Museum.

Though city acceptance was gained, the Shanghai Biennale had yet to garner approval by the central Chinese government. The municipal government asked the Shanghai Art Museum not to publicize the Biennale because of concerns that avant-garde expressions of contemporary art might evoke anger from the central government again (Shan 2011). For the central government to see the Shanghai Biennale as a legitimate organization, the organizer needed to prove the exhibitions would reflect achievements of the Reform and Opening-up and Socialist modernization (Report on the Work of the Government 1995; Schilbach 2010). In other words, the Shanghai Biennale needed the government to perceive its actions as "desirable, proper, or appropriate" (Suchman 1995) via the norms and values of the State.

Considering the skeptical attitudes of the municipal government towards the event, curatorial strategies were cautious and nation-oriented in the nascent period of the Shanghai Biennale. Both the 1996 and 1998 Biennales were positioned as exhibitions for fine arts and called "mei shu zhan" (美术展).[6] The inaugural biennale featured primarily oil paintings, while the second 1998 edition focused on ink art—both art forms recognized by the official State art system (Shan 2011). The focus on traditional mediums in the two Biennales were designed to align with the State's traditional ideas of art and

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[4] Italian art critic and curator, who curated the 45th Venice Biennale in 1993.

[5] Quote from Wang Lin in an interview with *The Artists (Yi Shu Jia)*, a Chinese art magazine in 2010. Wang Lin was asked about his curatorial strategies. Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20101107/n132354.html).

[6] Mei Shu (美术) can be translated to paintings and sculptures, though typically referring to paintings.

ease nervousness about contemporary expressions. According to the official explanation of the Shanghai Biennale, the name of the first exhibition, "Open Space," resonated with the State's initiation of Reform and Opening-up that marked the starting point of China's participation in globalization. Importantly, curators and artists in the first two Biennales were Chinese, though some lived abroad, perhaps indicating efforts to incorporate internationality in the initial Biennales. Additionally, the first Shanghai Biennale included three installation and video artworks from Chinese artists living outside of China. According to Wang Lin, this was a subtle attempt of exhibiting other forms of contemporary art besides paintings:

> *I discussed with them that we can curate an exhibition of oil paintings at first — at least it did not look very contemporary. But in fact, we invited three artists who lived abroad: Chen Zhen, Gu Wenda, and Zhang Jianju to create installation and video arts for the biennale in the name of breaking boundaries in oil paintings. This was actually a strategy to include more contemporary art forms in the official art exhibition. And this was for the first time that installation and video arts were exhibited in an official art museum after so many years since 1989.[7]*

Yet, two of the installation artworks evoked doubts from the government. One work touched upon the sensitive theme of the Culture Revolution, while the other mocked corruption in China. Some of the content of these works were then required to be modified or deleted. When discussing strategies for projecting acceptable and desirable organizational action at this time, Wang Lin said:

> *To achieve a thing in mainland China needs strategies. We first need to insist on the basic things, but with strategies. If the inaugural Shanghai Biennale was cancelled because of sensitive issues, Shanghai Art Museum was unable to make the Biennale continue. Therefore, the first and the second Biennales adopted a slow and cautious move[7].*

In sum, during the incipient stage of the Shanghai Biennale, cautious curatorial strategies helped to create the perception of the Biennale organization as not only acceptable, but beneficial and aligned with the local Shanghai city's as well as national Chinese State's beliefs and goals. The first Biennale allowed for the organization to establish local validation. In the second period, local validation and continued legitimacy strategies allowed for gaining the Chinese State's approval, though with restrictions, and increased global exposure and participation.

The internationalization period (2000–2010): the Shanghai Biennale's emergence in the global art world

With the turn of the twenty-first century, two important developments occurred: the government's official acceptance of the Shanghai Biennale and significant internationalization of the exhibition. As recognition of and participation in the Shanghai Biennale diffused to new contexts, different legitimacy requirements and pressures emerged. Each

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[7] Quoted from a 2010 interview with Wang Lin in *The Artists (Yi Shu Jia)*, a Chinese art magazine. Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20101107/n132354.html).

context asserted its own norm expectations and values on the Biennale organization. As detailed below, this required the organization to strategize how to conform to, balance, or rank the importance of these requirements, particularly when they were in conflict.

In the new century, a series of official cultural policies were released to encourage the development of cultural industries, innovations of art forms and themes, and communication between Chinese and foreign cultures (The Chinese Ministry of Culture 2012). This development was part of a state strategy to increase China's global cultural influence. The new focus aided the Shanghai Biennale to gain support from the State. Organizers positioned the Biennale as an international art exhibition that could showcase Shanghai as an important global city, one of China's reform goals (Wu 2004). The 2000 Shanghai Biennale was consequently promoted by the Shanghai municipal government in official media and its funding was increased, a move ratified by the central government (Shan 2011). This marked the first official recognition of contemporary art in China (Zhu 2007), though the State caveated the artwork must always reflect positive national images (Chinese Ministry of Culture 2012).

As internationalization of the Biennale increased, the government's requirements soon created organizational conflict. During the 2000 Biennale, a disagreement over the selection of artworks arose between Fang Zengxian, director of the Shanghai Art Museum, and Hou Hanru, an international curator for the 3rd Shanghai Biennale. Hou, who developed his curatorial career in Europe and the U.S., preferred artworks with avant-garde features. Fang, a Chinese museum official, was concerned about dissident features in the artworks favored by Hou. Fang insisted on politically neutral standards for selecting artworks, stating:

> *First, no political pop art, political-related artworks are forbidden to be exhibited. Second, do not exhibit artworks which involve weapons like guns and knives, or artworks are related to military. Third, do not support performance art.[8]*

Fang's standards reflected the current politically charged environment. Previous political pop and performance artworks had sarcastically commented on the socio-cultural climate within the country (Zhou 2020). In contrast to artistic independence standards, common in most international biennales, the Shanghai Biennale did not give free reign to curators, encourage avant-garde innovation, or free artistic expression. Officials of the Shanghai Art Museum needed to approve the Biennale's themes and, subsequent to approval, curators were nominated. This was an organizational strategy to prevent curators selecting exhibition themes which may have provoked the State (Shan 2011). Julian Jeynen, a German curator for the 2006 Shanghai Biennale, noted such restrictions were unusual: "Setting specific missions (for curators) is unconventional, it could be a problem because foreign curators may have different opinions about what's the function of arts."[9]

As Western actors joined the Shanghai Biennale organization, tension between government controls on art and the ideology of artistic freedom increased. These conflicts

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[8] Special issue on the development of Chinese contemporary art. Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20160 421/n832082.html).

[9] Quote from the curators' statements, *The Economic Observer* (*Jing Ji Guan Cha Bao)*, a Chinese economic paper reporting on the 2008 Shanghai Biennale. Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20080924/n58257.html).
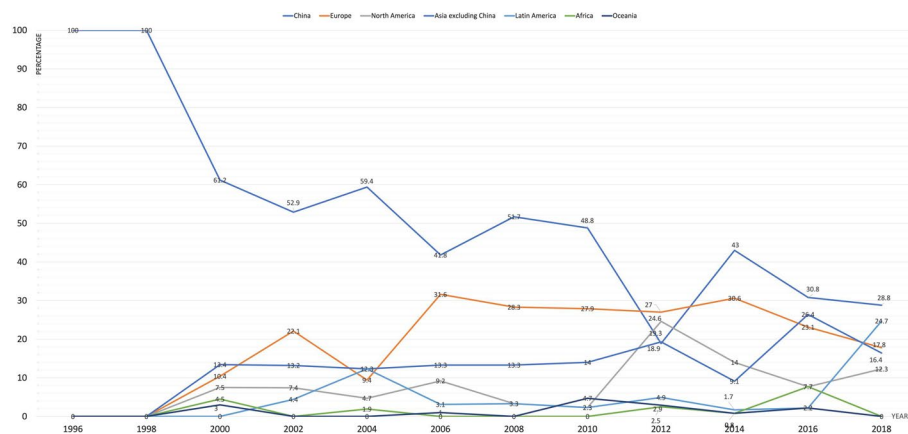
Fig. 1 Participating nationalities in Shanghai Biennale from 1996 to 2018 (N = 1050)

marked important organizational struggles between two ideologies which established the Biennale's legitimacy in different contexts. Within the internal national context, the Biennale organization was aligned with State values. Conflictingly, as norms of artistic freedom predominated the international art world and the Shanghai Biennale invited participation from outside China, pressure mounted for open curatorial choice and unrestricted artistic expression, including political dissent. Though during its establishment, local and national legitimacy was paramount, the Shanghai Biennale's ultimate goal was international recognition as a global platform for Chinese art—a goal shared by the State. Yet, restrictive government requirements threatened this goal by undermining the Biennale's organizational legitimacy as an art exhibition.

The Shanghai Biennale employed three strategic responses to the pressure for greater artistic freedom. First, the type of artforms exhibited were increased, allowing for greater choice in artistic mediums and paralleling practices of other significant biennales of contemporary art (Zhu 2017). In the ground-breaking 2000 Shanghai Biennale, architecture, photography, installation, video, and media art were exhibited alongside the traditional medium of painting (Mo 2020). In subsequent editions of the Biennale, new artforms were also highlighted. For example, the 2002 Biennale "Urban Creation" focused on installations and video artworks of urban architecture; the 2004 Biennale "Techniques of the Visible" focused on video art; and the 2006 Biennale "Hyper Design" centered on the art of design.

Second, the Shanghai Biennale organization increased the involvement of international, particularly Western, actors. In 2000, non-Chinese curators and artists were included in the Shanghai Biennale for the first time. Two international curators, Hou Hanru, a European-based Chinese curator, and Toshio Shimizu, a prestigious Japanese curator and art critic, co-curated the 3rd Shanghai Biennale. Since then, foreign curators, particularly from so-called global "art centers," were frequently employed. For example, Alanna Heiss (U.S.A.) was a chief curator in the 2002 Biennale, with participation from Klaus Biesenbach (U.S.A.) and Yuko Hasegawa (Japan); Sebastian Lopez (Argentina) was a member of the curatorial team of 2004, resulting in a surge in Latino artist participation (see Fig. 1); Wonil Rhee (South Korea), Jonathan Watkins (U.K.), and Gianfranco

Maraniello (Italy) co-curated the 2006 Biennale; and Julian Jeynen (German) and Henk Slager (Netherlands) participated in the Biennale of 2008.

Third, not only did the number of individual artists and curators from Western countries significantly increase (see Fig. 1), but also international collaborations became a significant aspect of the Biennale. Previous research shows the establishment of transnational networks helps emerging art markets earn global recognition (Lee 2017). In 2006, the Shanghai Biennale collaborated with Gwangju Biennale and Singapore Biennale, co-hosting "The Tour of Asian Biennales" to increase global visibility of Asian art. In 2008, five Asian-Pacific biennales (Shanghai, Singapore, Gwangju, Yokohama Triennial, and Sydney) constituted "The Compass of Art," which shared global visitors and international exposure. Zhang Qing, chief curator of the 7th Shanghai Biennale and Vice Director of the Shanghai Art Museum, explained this arrangement:

> *We, organizers of these biennales, prepare this event to respond to the requests of our global audience. As Asian art has become the focus of the world in the time of globalization, there is a group of special audience of Asian biennales. They are top collectors or people associated with big museums and foundations from North America and Europe. To make their trip more convenient, these [Asian] biennales have adjusted schedules for these special guests.[10]*

Here, we can see the Shanghai Biennale organizers' strategy for attracting global audiences was closely related to efforts for increasing the Shanghai Biennale's visibility in North America and Europe, highlighting the importance of the Western art world. This strategy is also found in prior research where non-Western art biennales encourage Western artists' participation and adopt Western curating conventions in order to attain international attention (Lu 2017; Couto and de Fátima 2019). Western attention also has additional support benefits. For example, in 2008, the Shanghai Biennale received European sponsorships from Bank Sarasin (Switzerland), Goethe-Institut (Germany), and Mondriaan Fund (Netherlands).

The above strategies met with some success, particularly as compared to other Chinese biennale organizations who did not negotiate legitimacy strategies aligned with values of artistic freedom. Since the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, more city-based art biennales emerged in mainland China, though few gained the same attention from the global art world. Most notably, the Beijing International Art Biennale is often compared to the Shanghai Biennale. However, the Beijing Biennale restricts mediums to only painting and sculpture, with art contents maintaining strong affiliation with the State's ideological requirements. Arguably because of these restrictions, the Beijing Biennale is less recognized in contemporary art circles both in mainland China and the international art world (Guo 2014a, b).

In summation, the Shanghai Biennale organization continued with official approval and control. To garner this approval, the Biennale was to reflect an international and modern image of the country while also upholding and communicating State values (The Chinese Ministry of Culture 2012). However, this requirement was challenged by

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[10] Zhang Qing was interviewed by *Shanghai Securities News* (*Shanghai Zheng Quan Bao*) about "The Compass of Art" project. Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20080818/n56104.html).

those in the Chinese and international art world. To produce an influential international exhibition which increased Chinese art power in the world (Wang 2016), the Biennale needed to also deal with the ideology of art's free expression, valued by those in the Chinese contemporary art circle and international, particularly Western, art world.

In subsequent years, the Shanghai Biennale establishes itself as a significant international exhibition by further adjusting its development strategies to emphasize uniqueness within the global Biennale scene.

The expanding period (2012–2018): changes in organization and focus

Since the 1990s, the boom of art biennales in both Western and non-Western societies has made international competition fierce (Marchart 2014). For non-Western biennales in recent years, regional focus and features are often highlighted as a curatorial strategy to resist Western art hegemonies and assert regional art power, as well as differentiate the biennales from competition (Clark 2009; Mersmann 2013). Consequently, though Western countries still dominate the global art world, emerging non-Western artists and exhibitions have made local art issues and concerns more urgent in the international art scene (D'Souza 2013; Sassatelli 2017).

That said, becoming internationally influential, a shared goal by many non-Western biennales, often means the inclusion of Western art actors and organizational conventions. The standard of "what is good art" is still held by the Western art world (Couto and de Fátima 2019). Though some non-Western biennales have been criticized as "self-colonial" due to their pursuit of internationality by overly presenting Western artists or losing connections with the local (Lu 2017), this can be seen as an organizational strategy to promote international acceptance and attention. Therefore, "optimal distinctiveness," a balance between conformity to Western art conventions and differentiation from them, is important for the development of current non-Western biennales (Zuckerman 2016a, b).

In China, the last 20 years has brought rapid development of the local cultural industry, including significant growth in contemporary art museums, galleries, auction houses, art districts, and many kinds of art fairs (Zhou 2020). Concurrently, China's increased involvement in international affairs promoted the Chinese government to offer more administrative support to culture providers to improve global influence of Chinese culture and increase the nation's soft power (Report on the Work of the Government 2011, 2014, 2016, 2017). Consequently, since 2000, a flourishing local art scene has allowed Chinese art practitioners increasing independence from Western standards (Lv 2008).

Since 2000, the Shanghai Biennale has also gained significant recognition from the Chinese government as well as from the international community. In its most recent stage, the Shanghai Biennale keeps expanding its influence in both the local and the global context by negotiating legitimacy demands while seeking to distinguish itself amongst growing competition of international biennales worldwide (Zhu 2007). In the final years examined in this study, we identify three significant changes to the Shanghai Biennale organization and focus: increased curatorial freedom; the establishment of the City Project; and an emphasis on non-Western art.

Curatorial choices: negotiating expectations of control and independence

The Shanghai Art Museum was often criticized by both foreign and local art practitioners as too small a venue for large-scale exhibitions like the Shanghai Biennale (Zhao 2008; Guo 2014a, b). In 2012, the Shanghai Biennale was relocated to the Shanghai Power Station of Art, an impressive space originally built for the World Expo 2010. This then became the first national museum dedicated to the exhibition of contemporary art in mainland China. According to Li Lei, director of the Shanghai Art Museum, the establishment and development of the Power Station of Art was one of the major cultural projects of the Shanghai Municipal Government, indicating significant official support for both contemporary art and the Shanghai Biennale (Artron.net 2012). To celebrate this relocation, the theme of the 2012 Shanghai Biennale was "Reactivation," marking a new beginning or rejuvenation.

The relocation provided the Shanghai Biennale space and, in consequence, increased its prospective impact, as Li Xiangyang, secretary of the Organizational Committee of Shanghai Biennale, explained in an interview:

> *Due to the relocation, the available space increases. Consequently, the scale of the Shanghai Biennale expands, the investment on the Biennale increases, and the exhibition period extends.[11]*

Such investment increased the Shanghai Biennale's potential, but also increased expectations that the organization establish and maintain international standing and prestige. To garner greater international support and participation however, the Biennale organization had to establish legitimacy as an independent organization, unrestricted in its choice of the best of avant-garde work. To do this, the Shanghai Biennale needed to demonstrate greater curatorial liberty. As mentioned earlier, curators' choice in exhibition themes and artists were tightly controlled. However, in response to pressures about freedom of choice, in 2014 a new curatorial system was adopted where the chief curator was chosen by committee based on the candidate's submission of curatorial ideas and plans (Zhou 2014). Once selected, the chief curator was given decision rights on the theme and artist choice, grounded in the approved plans. This change, according to Gong Yan, director of the Power Station of Art, is "to give more power to the chief curator(s) so they can achieve their ideas more freely,"[12] paralleling the curatorial system most common in other biennales worldwide. In 2014, when the new curatorial system was adopted, the 10th Shanghai Biennale, "Social Factory," hired the first foreign chief curator, Anselm Franke (Germany).

However, the contents of the Shanghai Biennale were still under cautious control. The government continued to expect art to meet the requirements for Socialist spiritual civilization and therefore to avoid criticism of the Socialist State (Report on the Work of the Government 2011). To accomplish both the requirement for control and freedom of choice and management, the Shanghai Biennale uses the organizational committee as an

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[11] Quote from Li Xiangyang when he was asked about reasons for relocating the Shanghai Biennale. Interview with Public Art (Gong Gong Yi Shu), a Chinese art magazine, in 2013. Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20130711/n475466.html).

[12] Quote from Gong Yan discussing the new curatorial system. Source: https://news.artron.net/20160603/n842585_.html.

oversight committee. The strategy is to choose a chief curator whose curatorial plan and selected artists meet "the government's ideological requirements, national sentiments, and social ethics," as stated by Li Xiangyang, Secretary General of Organizational Committee (2013), who further explained:

> *After all, we have serious requirements about the ideology, we have our own bottom line. Therefore, curatorial plans and the list of selected artists have to be scrutinized by the academic committee and organizational committee.*[13]

Where previously in the Biennale's history conflicts arose around differing expectations, here we see the Shanghai Biennale organization adjusting and negotiating these expectations. Both choosing an international chief curator and the allowance of greater curatorial freedom signaled the Shanghai Biennale's increased artistic independence and alignment with international expectations, allowing the Biennale to seem at least closer to values of independence and freedom of expression (Enwezor 2008). That said, not challenging the State's ideology is still the dominant requirement in organizing the Shanghai Biennale. In summation, after entering the global art scene, the Shanghai Biennale endeavored to increase its significance in the competitive field of global art biennales while maintaining government approval. On the one hand, the Shanghai Biennale has avoided sensitive political issues that would violate the State's ideology, while the curatorial system of the Shanghai Biennale has evolved to be more aligned with international curatorial norms.

Given greater freedom to select the theme and content of the Shanghai Biennale resulted in increased innovation. In the next sections, we examine the Biennale organization's introduction of the special program "City Projects" to encourage Shanghai community involvement, as well as the organization's focus on increasing non-Western curatorial and artistic participation.

The establishment of "City Projects"

Since 2012, "City Projects" was added as a special section to the Shanghai Biennale. "City Projects" was created to recognize the Biennale's expanding networks with influential international art institutions, but also to increase local connections. The inaugural year, the project invited 120 artists from 30 cities worldwide to exhibit works in different Shanghai cultural districts. According to news reports (Arton.net 2013), the establishment of "City Projects" helped advance the Shanghai Biennale's international reputation:

> *The "City Projects" exhibition has contributed to the collaborations between the Shanghai Biennale and other foundations, art museums, curators, municipal institutions in different foreign cities where contemporary art is active. Through these collaborations, the international influence of the Shanghai Biennale and the Shanghai Power Station of Art is increased, generating the Shanghai Biennale more attention and expectations in the global art world..*[14]

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[13] Interview conducted by Public Art (Gong Gong Yi Shu), in which Li Xiangyang answered questions about the development of the Shanghai Biennale. Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20130711/n475466.html).

[14] Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20130530/n456733_.html).

"City Projects" also responds to the Shanghai Municipal Government's expectation for art to reflect the modern and international image of the city (Mo 2020) and the central government's requirement for public cultural projects to benefit local people (The Chinese Ministry of Culture 2012). Activities of "City Projects" extends exhibitions into diverse urban spaces outside the Power Station of Art, "enabl[ing] active dialogues between contemporary art and the booming city of Shanghai."[15] "City Projects" allow the Biennale to not only draw international attention to various cultural and historic landmarks in Shanghai, but also increases public participation in the event. For example, "51 Personae" is one part of the 2016 "City Projects" which invited local residents to share their unique stories and experience with the city via performance art. In 2018, photographs by locals were exhibited in "Your Place (City Project)" to showcase resident feelings and discourse about Shanghai.

Focus on non-Western art

Finally, we note a growing focus on non-Western, particularly Asian art within the most recent Shanghai Biennales. In 2014, the participation of artists from other Asian countries made considerable gains, representing 42% of the Biennale's artists. In the following 2016 and 2018 editions, Asian artists were the largest group. Gong Yan, President of the Power Station of Art, posited the Biennale as a promoter of Asian art power in the international art world and stated the development goal of the museum:

> *[A] new scenario has appeared in the time of globalization, Asia is arising. It is time for us, so called "the East" to gaze to "the West". We need the "South-South Cooperation" more than ever. It is through the collaborations among Asian countries, we can make western countries see our discourse and a more independent pose. We will see this kind of cooperation in the 2016 Shanghai Biennale.[16]*

In 2018, the Mexican curator, Cuauhtémoc Medina, was selected as chief curator for the Biennale "Proregress.[17]" Under Medina's administration, participation by Latin American artists significantly increased. The choice of Medina and focus on Asian artists indicated increased attention by the Biennale's organizers on art from non-Western contexts, as *Art Forum* wrote of the latest two Biennales: "Challenging the legitimacy of Western modernity seems the curatorial logic of the recent two biennales."[18] Enhancing Asian alignments and promoting conversations with other non-Western art powers allows the Shanghai Biennale to expand its influence in the global art world where non-Western regionalism is increasingly valued (Markin 2016).

Both the establishment of "City Projects" and the emphasis of non-Western artists in exhibitions have marked the Shanghai Biennale's efforts of expanding the exhibition's

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[15] The official introduction to the City Projects. Source: Shanghai Biennale's official website (https://www.powerstationofart.com/whats-on/programs/shanghai-bienniale/city-project).

[16] Quote from Gong Yan when asked the question. "What's the new focus of the Power Station of Art" in an interview with Artron.net. Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20151003/n782951_.html).

[17] According Wang Weiwei, an assistant curator in the 2018 Biennale, "proregress," a concept created by E.E. Cummings to criticize Western progressivism, was adopted by the chief curator to reflect the contemporary condition of history and time. Source: https://news.artron.net/20181130/n1036198.html.

[18] Source: Artron.Net (https://news.artron.net/20181121/n1033929.html).

influence in both local and global contexts. Such action is in line with organizational theory on "optimal distinctiveness," whereby once an organization establishes legitimacy by conforming to the practices of other organizations, it then needs to differentiate from these organizations to create a distinct identity (Zuckerman 2016a, b).

Discussions and conclusions

Previous research demonstrates the efforts of non-Western biennales to increase their standing and voice in the global art world (e.g., Mersmann 2013; Enwezor 2008; Rojas-Sotelo 2020). In this article, we contribute to such research by examining an important non-Western exhibition, the Shanghai Biennale. By delineating three stages by which the Shanghai Biennale began, grew, and internationalized (incipient, internationalization, and branding periods), this study examines how the Biennale organization responded to legitimacy requirements encountered as the organization established in China and then expanded to the global art world.

Official recognition was the most urgent task for the Shanghai Biennale during the early stages of development. During this incipient stage (1996–1998), a primary legitimacy requirement for the Shanghai Biennale's initiators was to foster acceptance by the government for contemporary art exhibition in the official Chinese art system. As the infrastructure for contemporary art was underdeveloped in the 1990s, support from the government was crucial for the Shanghai Biennale to form and develop. To meet the government's ideological requirements, organizers of the inaugural and the second edition of the Biennale adopted conservative curatorial strategies, such as including only Chinese artists in the exhibitions, choosing traditional art media, and fitting exhibition themes closely with the State's ideology.

Once official acceptance was established by the turn of the twenty-first century, the Shanghai Biennale entered an internationalization stage, opening to the global art world. In the internationalization period (2000–2010), organizers of the Shanghai Biennale focused on maintaining State acceptance while opening the Biennale to more closely comply with international, particularly Western, standards of artistic freedom. Official support was preserved by cautiously avoiding politically sensitive topics and contemporary art was framed as a means through which to showcase an international image of China. Within this structure, our analysis indicates, from 2000 to 2010, international artists gained significant visibility as the representation of Chinese artists decreased from 61.2 to 48.8%. European artists became the second largest population of represented artists at the Shanghai Biennale, followed by artists from other Asian counties. The Shanghai Biennale also began inviting international curators, creating associations with international art organizations, and collaborating with other Asian-Pacific biennales. Internationalization and less stringent censorship in turn affected the art exhibited, as globally recognized contemporary art forms once avoided by the government, such as photography, architecture, installation, video, and media art, became commonplace at the Shanghai Biennale.

After a decade of international development, the most recent years of the Shanghai Biennale (2012–2018) are marked by greater independence, which can be understood as a strategy through which the organization tries to balance different legitimacy requirements. The newly built Shanghai Power Station of Art became the permanent home of

the Shanghai Biennale in 2012, indicating significant investment and validation by the government. In the same year, the Shanghai Biennale added "City Projects," showcasing the organizers' efforts of expanding international networks while also increasing local features in response to the government's requirement for art to benefit the residential public. Positioning the Biennale as advantageous to the city of Shanghai and Chinese government led to greater support and independence in the Biennale's management, particularly regarding the often-conflicted curatorial system. Previously, curators did not have decision power over the Biennale's themes or artists, leading to tension with international curators who expected freedom of choice. However, since 2014, curators have more agency. Such freedom is made possible through negotiation of conflicting ideologies: while the chief curator has greater autonomy, she or he (and her or his Biennale plan) is chosen by an official organizational committee.

As the curatorial system became more aligned to Western ideology, internationalization has progressed in the organization. Recent primary curators have been internationals, and these new curatorial voices helped the Shanghai Biennale to stand out with a new non-Western approach, particularly in the latest two biennales. The chief curator of the 2016 Shanghai Biennale was the Indian art group Raqs Media Collective and, in 2018, it was Cuauhtémoc Medina, a Mexican art critic and curator. With these curators came greater participation by artists from other Asian countries and Latin American regions.

Overall, examining the 22-year history of the Shanghai Biennale exemplifies how an organization negotiates conflicting ideologies as it establishes legitimacy in different contexts. Legitimacy's ability to diffuse in different contexts enables wide-spread belief (Johnson et al. 2006; Drori and Honig 2013). Accordingly, it is important to understand how spread may be achieved when different, even contrasting legitimacy requirements are encountered in different circles. Our case study of the Shanghai Biennale provides a unique perspective of a cultural organization's ability to negotiate diverse legitimacy requirements while becoming an influential global art exhibition.

Beyond our theoretical contribution, this study offers empirical contributions as well. First, our research responds to recent calls for studies on the global development of biennales (Morgner 2014; Quemin 2015). This study both offers an overview of evolving international participation in the Shanghai Biennale and provides context for this participation and development. As far as we know, this work provides the first public statistical analysis of the nationality of the participants of the Shanghai Biennale, providing the first empirical examination of the organization's internationalization over its 22-year history. Additionally, by also focusing on contextual elements surrounding the establishment of the Shanghai Biennale, this study demonstrates how social factors, such as state support and international and Western paradigms, can shape content, structure, and participation.

Second, this research offers an idea of how at least one important Chinese cultural organization dealt with both Eastern and Western influence. Although previous scholarship has discussed much about Chinese art and artists in diaspora (e.g., Ong 2012; Zhang and Frazier 2017), there is less work on how local Chinese and international standards have interacted and influenced the development of contemporary art organizations in mainland China itself. Previous research on the Shanghai Biennale focuses on

specific editions (e.g., Mo 2020) or special events (e.g., Berghuis 2004). Some Chinese scholars have also studied changes regarding sponsorship, media support, and branding strategies in the development of the Shanghai Biennale (e.g., Zhu 2007, 2017; Shan 2011), though these studies were published almost a decade ago. This study seeks to update such work and capture the important changes occurring in recent editions of the Shanghai Biennale.

Finally, we suggest future research continues examining local distinctiveness as a strategy among non-Western biennales to increase visibility in the global art world (Rojas-Sotelo 2011; Mersmann 2013; Marchart 2014), as this has become a new form of international curatorial convention (Enwezor 2008). A few questions are raised from our findings. For example, how do non-Western exhibitions breakthrough established norms to provide innovations that help biennale's stand apart as important global institutions? Does local distinctiveness in non-Western contexts evince an unchanged hierarchy in the art world because such distinctiveness is not emphasized in Western exhibitions? Such questions offer fertile ground by which to continue studies of non-Western biennales and other important cultural organizations seeking international status.

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