The contemporary art scene in China and in Taiwan, as with their economies or political systems, has leaped forward, literally in gargantuan steps, in unveiling multi-faceted large-scale art works consumed by emotion and political commentary. This special issue of Modern China Studies (plus a subsequent second volume) on "Art and Politics in Today's China and Taiwan" has been a pleasure to organize and edit. Articles range in subject from soldier art to secular Tibetan art, politically critical art, installation art, subway art, and painting poetry. In format, the articles range from analyses of individual artists, autobiographical analyses, comparisons of Taiwanese and Chinese artists, to interviews about collaborative installation art. All articles deal with the issue of politics in art or art as politics.

Seemingly the least political yet highly critical in content is the work of the artistically radical Tibetan thangka painter, Ang Tsherpin Sherpa. Sherpa's works are brilliant and inventive social commentaries on "Western" materialism that seem so contrary and unaligned with Buddhist philosophy focused on mastery of non-duality and non-attachment. Sherpa's paintings are about "global illusionism," combining western and eastern elements that blur yet maintain what the author Katharine Burnett claims is a "subtext of Buddhist compassion."

The two autobiographical manuscripts are riveting documents with different perspectives about artistic survival and growth primarily during the era of China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Shaomin Li adeptly and poignantly relates his experience as a teen art soldier commissioned to paint Mao and survive, winning praise for his work, and thus his life. Despite his lack of remorse for the death of Mao and his production of art works heralding the revolutionary goal, his life took an abrupt 180° turn. He became a political activist and economist promoting capitalism. The second autobiography is by the well-known artist, Xu Bing, who eschewed politics
for art in the safe enclaves of Beijing's prestigious Central Academy of Art. Jesse Coffino and Vivian Xu provide us with a sensitive English translation of what is an intimate and humbling view of Xu Bing's artistic interests, including his service in an "educated youth" detachment and life as a student and artist nurtured in Beijing.

Joan Cohen's and Dany Chan's papers report on art charged with political commentary. Cohen explains the subtle difference in the meaning of "political" between China and the "West," and exposes how different levels of political criticism through art operate in China as opposed to in Taiwan. Ai Weiwei, the celebrated iconoclastic artist working in China today is introduced through several representative art works. These are compared with the uncensored, politically critical portraits of rulers in Taiwan and China by Wu Tien-chang, as well as with other of his highly critical art works. Dany Chan covers Li Chun-yi, an artist born and raised in Taiwan who moved to Hong Kong. This artist's oeuvre transforms Mao Zedong's Communist era poetry into a Song style landscape, initially by outwardly criticizing Mao as a poet and then subtly in later works by deemphasizing the political for a message that aims at a strictly aesthetic interpretation of Mao's poetry as painting.

Li Shi introduces us to the dynamic installation artist, Xiang Yang. Xiang is interested in space and change, between East and West but also between other extreme experiences and events. By constructing large-scale monuments of multi-colored threads that react to a push-pull tension and illusion of movement in space, conceptual and abstract transformations take place, between, for example, the Catholic Pope and Osama Bin Laden or between the U.S. and China. The installation work of Peter Kreider and Zhou Yi poses a different question. Lisa Claypool interviews them about issues arising from the installation of an art work titled "Universal Remote" belonging to Peter Kreider of the US by another, Zhou Yi, in China. The result, as framed by the Chinese artist "is not the physical object we really care about, but a piece of wisdom about mutual reliance learned from this experience."

The analysis by Janet Ng is a rewarding review of just how close politics and art are in the global context of Taipei. The popular picture book, "Underground Railroad" by Jimmy Liao, is transformed into large scale mural tiles decorating the walls of the new MRT. Completed in 2009, the MRT is viewed as one of the most impressive urban rapid mass transit systems in the world. The soap opera wonderland, fantastic characters filling continuous illusionistic spaces up and down staircases and along walls of the underground subway stations are a profound experience that
marks Taipei and Taiwan as new symbols of global power and art.

As may be observed, throughout human history, art and politics have been an odd couple. Politics may define or confine what artists can do, yet art may shape politics and may even topple governments. In both China and Taiwan, artists spearhead social and political changes. Interestingly, while artists may participate in politics, rarely do scholars of political science study or comment on the role of art or artists in politics. We welcome more interdisciplinary studies on the relationship between art and politics, especially by our colleagues in political science.